

MIDWASTELAND



A novel by:

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Prologue

In the year 2149, long after the Great Atomic War, the small shambles of city-states that still populated the land investigated newborn children vigorously. By far most of the children tested were well within the boundaries of normal human life. Sometimes, however, the scans turned up something different.

So it was that the first thing most American children ever saw was a government technician rather than their mother or father. For years it went this way, ever since the doctors began to notice the anomalies.

These anomalies presented themselves at birth. The children gave off a heavier than normal level of radiation, often times enough to kill their human mothers. They appeared to be normal at first. But about the time they began speaking new symptoms would appear: uncontrollable rage, hair loss in the males, and the ability to manipulate the radiation that was still in excess levels since the war. "These children, these things, are the single greatest threat to humanity as we know it," declared Juan Nortooga, the Secretary General of the United Nations.

The world community had turned their back on the UN after the war, but to matters of international health they still took note. After all, the UN still employed more doctors than any of the countries or city-states combined. So when the UN released a report recommending that all such anomaly children be quarantined and euthanized, the governments of the world that remained agreed. Some small pockets of resistance sprang up, populated either by remote communities that endured few of the anomalies and thought they could control them, or by groups of anomalies themselves in enclaves outside major population centers. As long as these resisting communities remained small, the recognized governments of the world were reluctant to take action against them. But it was decided that the resistance could never spread beyond those small pockets. And above all else, was one law.

The anomalies must never form an autonomous government of their own.

Chapter 1

As we don't know yet what biological course these anomalies might ultimately take, it would be supremely foolish to allow them to propagate. As members of the human race, these nearly identical creatures that have arose from a mutation in the evolutionary path might seem like our brothers and sisters rather than rivals, and perhaps they are, but we must never take the risk necessary to find out.

They give off a high level of radiation, of that much we are certain. So high, in some cases, that they disintegrate the womb of their hosts as they are born. Imagine if this symptom were to proliferate throughout the entire world population. It would change the way we live, the way we function as a society. It would destroy the very concept of our family structure. Children without mothers and grandmothers. Husbands without wives. When we have to take extreme steps against these anomalies in order to preserve our way of life, it does not mean that those anomalies are victims. It means that we are.

*--Michelle Arencebia, Surgeon General of the United Nations
Unknown date and location*

The Church family was known to be sympathetic to the anomalies, particularly Shawn, who worked for the Chicago reclamation plant and was quite popular in his neighborhood. He was always talking about civil rights, arguing that the UN recommendations were not unlike the laws that persecuted other groups throughout history, such as the Jews or blacks. Shawn spoke about it often, probably too much. He was lighthearted and innocent, unaware that those around him were listening and remembering his words.

The Chicago Anomaly Affairs inspection team was made aware of Shawn's disposition before being dispatched to test his newborn child. They traveled in the company of guardsmen from the Chicago Security Service, who flipped down the visors on their helmets and drew their weapons, bracing themselves on the rundown porch of a shabby home near the city walls. The City Inspector knocked on the front door.

The sound brought Bonnie, Shawn's wife, to answer. She looked haggard, as though she hadn't yet cleaned up since giving birth. After eying them suspiciously she called to her husband and he came to the door. "What do you want?" he asked sharply. Several of the armed men, hearing Shawn's tone, stiffened and raised their weapons. There were metallic sounds, and Shawn smiled at the Guardsmen nearest when he too snapped off the safety on his weapon.

The City Inspector took a step back, nearly falling off of the stoop. He steadied himself and silently handed over the document authorizing the testing for any and all genetic anomalies in the Church's newborn child.

"So," Shawn said after glancing at the paper and handing it back. "You've come to see if my child is a monster. Unfortunately for you, you are required to perform the test at the time of birthing. As you can see, my wife gave birth some time ago."

The City Inspector stepped back up onto the stoop. As he did so, the Guardsmen raised their weapons higher and trained them squarely upon Shawn's chest. They had dealt with men like Shawn in the past and were well trained. It used to be that parents would resist the testing, but not anymore. People had long ago lost their sense of dignity. Still, Shawn was a powerful man.

"Monster," the City Inspector repeated. "You know perfectly well why the testing must be done, just as you were aware of your obligation to inform the City once your wife had gone into labor so that an Inspector could be on hand."

Shawn bristled visibly, but seemed to force another smile. There were stiff penalties for impeding the City's testing of newborns, another method for deterring those inclined to resist. But Shawn must have to deal with city workers constantly taking advantage of their positions, walking the

edge between carrying out their duties and openly provoking punishable behavior amongst non-government citizenry. Stories of such behavior certainly weren't rare.

Shawn sighed. "You'd find that people would be more welcoming if you left your guns at home. You can do your damned test," he said, and then pointed to the Guardsmen. "But they are not allowed inside my home."

"I'm sorry, but they will not allow me to enter without them," the City Inspector said, shaking his head. "And the test must be performed."

"We make a peaceful home here," Shawn insisted. "I will not allow weapons past the door. If your soldiers insist on accompanying you, they must leave their guns on the porch."

The City Inspector held a brief discussion with the nearest Guardsmen. "We'll agree to your request if you give us your word that you will be peaceable. I do not wish for any sort of altercation, regardless the outcome of the test."

"You have my word," Shawn replied. He stepped to the side to allow the City Inspector and Guardsmen through the door.

The City Inspector spoke quickly, trying to soothe Shawn as he led them through the house. "I'm sure you having nothing to fear. There have been very few anomalies in this area and your first son tested normal. It is likely that your newborn will be normal as well."

It appeared to work, as Shawn's voice had less of an edge when he responded. "It is not fear of any results that causes anxiety in me." He walked them through a grungy kitchen in which dishes were strewn everywhere. "Will you sleep soundly tonight, knowing that you have helped violate people's most basic right, the right to procreate? Some of the others don't think you people have any conscience at all, but I do. I think that it eats at you, even if you won't admit it."

The Inspector refused to fall into the trap. What was he supposed to say, that he had long ago set aside his morality when it came to his duty? Would it be better to tell this man, this citizen, that of course he knew what he was doing was wrong, but that right and wrong had no bearing on following orders? He had seen what happened to those that questioned the Mayor, as he called himself. According to the surviving history books, Americans had turned the threat of communism into a witch hunt after World War Two. The Great Atomic War had produced similar results. And just as in those times, everyone was suspicious of everyone else.

Shawn seemed to recognize the City Inspector's reluctance to answer.

"Now I see," Shawn said. "It isn't that you don't have a conscience. You're just afraid to let it show."

"What I'm afraid of, what *most* people are afraid of, is that allowing misguided emotions to drive our decision-making will result in the end of the human race as we know it."

Shawn stopped in front of a closed door and turned around. "If these anomalies are so dangerous and we're the victims, why is it that we're the ones doing all the killing? What is it about being human that gives us a right to live while their lives are taken away so quickly?"

"We don't murder the mothers that bear us."

"In some cases we do," Shawn persisted. "And not all anomaly births injure or kill the mother, as you well know. If they did, you wouldn't need to do this ridiculous test. So tell me again, what gives you the right to kill anomaly children that have done nothing wrong?"

"Our government." The City Inspector pushed past Shawn and walked through the door.

Inside was Bonnie and a young boy, Silas, Shawn's first born, seated upon a filthy couch. Cradled in the boy's arms was an infant in swaddling. Bonnie rose immediately to position herself between the City Inspector and her children. In one swift movement Shawn moved from behind the guardsmen to stand with his wife. They had a brief whispered conversation, throughout which Bonnie appeared to become more and more upset.

The City Inspector sighed. "Step aside and hand us the child so we may get underway."

It took less than twenty minutes to complete the test, though the tense silence blanketing them

all made it seem much longer. First they had to take Geiger counter readings of the entire room, to get a baseline. Then they took readings of the family, to make sure there would be no chance of any interference creating a false positive. By the time they finished scanning the child, the unfortunate reality was clear.

The child was an anomaly.

The City Inspector handed the child to one of the Guardsmen, who swiftly took the child out to their vehicle in the street. Despite Shawn's promise, both parents launched themselves at the Guardsmen in a rage. For all of his caution, Shawn Church obviously didn't know much about the full uniform and weapons detail of Chicago Guardsmen. They had their secondary weapons out in an instant and cut the couple down in a flurry of gunfire. The eldest boy cried out, but he smartly stayed seated on the couch as he watched his parents bleed to death. The City Inspector made a mental note to send along someone from the City Orphanage to pick up the child before turning to walk out the door.

It took a half hour to return to the inner-city where the anomaly quarantine center was located, and a downpour had begun by the time they passed through the security gate and on to the Retention Block. Retention? The City Inspector snorted inwardly as he looked at the word stenciled above the entrance. Is that the purpose of this place, to retain? If so, it does a very poor job of it. Most of the children that enter through this door don't live a week. This is how morality changes, he mused. Something catastrophic happens that alters our way of life, creates a profound shift in our cultural structure, and our definitions of right and wrong struggle to catch up. If it hadn't been for that damned nuclear war, for those madmen that had brought civilization crashing down upon us, I wouldn't be put in the position of having to march newborn children to their deaths. It would be interesting to be able to see what Chicago society would have looked like at this same point in time had there been no war. Though, he supposed, we wouldn't call ourselves Chicagoans. We'd still be American.

"Incoming?"

The City Inspector noticed that he had reached the front desk of the Retention Block. He thought, pondering alternate realities are meaningless. I can wish all I want that I didn't have to do this. In the end, here I am, carrying this infant and signing him into this place where they will catalog him, take a few bio-samples for study, and discard him like so much waste. In my position, I can't afford to think about what ifs and why nots. I just have to do my job and thank any God that might still be out there that my family is healthy and human.

He pressed his thumb into the fingerprint reader on the desk and signed the child in. There was a place on the screen to record the deaths of Bonnie and Shawn Church, and he filled that section out as well. It would take several more hours worth of paperwork at his computer before he'd be done with their deaths, but here he was allowed to keep the events record brief. Internal Review would look over the report and match it with the paperwork he filled out later, and then match that with the reports filed by the Guardsmen. All this was done to make sure that the anomaly testing process remained free from any corruption. There were over a thousand people working in testing, most of them bureaucrats whose only purpose was checking up on the work of others. And all they had to go on were these cross-referenced reports submitted by those in the field. It's a wonder we get anything done at all, the City Inspector thought silently. He looked down at the child. I'll be glad when I can get this thing inside and get the hell out of here.

But once he had been waved past the desk and into the Retention Block, his hopes of escaping quickly and quietly vanished. He saw his boss, Jonathan Thorne, Director of Anomaly Affairs, walking about the bloc, occasionally peering into the nursery stockades. He looked up and quickly walked over.

"Another one?" he asked, wrinkling his nose and peering down at the kennel in the City Inspector's hand. "The Mayor says I'm crazy, but I swear they're coming more quickly these days. I keep telling everyone how much easier this would all be if it were some kind of disease, rather than a mutation. Diseases can be cured. Or better yet, vaccinated out of existence."

The City Inspector didn't respond, knowing better than to interrupt. Thorne was likeable

enough, perhaps even friendly, but he was still a high-ranking member of the government bureaucracy and one had to watch their words around any man in such a position. It would take more fingers and toes than the City Inspector had to count the number of city employees that had lost their positions after speaking out of turn in front of one city authority figure or another. Caution, as the saying went, was the better part of valor.

“Perhaps you can help me with a problem,” Thorne continued. “The Mayor's sister wants a child.”

No further explanation was necessary. The tale of Lindsay Donovan's inability to bear children was well known in Chicago. She had been pregnant with an anomaly only a few years previous, one with a terribly high radiation level. The child was threatening her life until, over her screeching protests, the Mayor had ordered the doctor to perform a Caesarian and to euthanize the anomaly as quickly as possible. In a rather sad bit of irony, the child ceased to emit any radiation once it was dead and Lindsay Donovan survived but with a womb as withered as the fallout-laden countryside. Days later her husband committed suicide.

The City Inspector clearly recalled the Mayor's sister, standing alone and sobbing to herself while Cardinal Grabowski read the mass for the funeral of her husband. Well, not entirely alone. She'd had some family with her. But he remembered clearly that the impression he was left with was that Lindsay Donovan had been alone that day. It was the funeral of nearly everyone she held dear, and it might as well have been the funeral of any future children she'd planned on having as well. Yet the Cardinal refused even to acknowledge the tiny second casket resting to one side; in fact, the Vatican had made it clear that they supported the United Nations position on anomalies, even going so far as to publicly speculate that they did not possess souls. Everyone attending the funeral considered the thing in that miniscule box as a danger to be avoided. But to her, to Lindsay Donovan--not the Mayor's sister but Lindsay Donovan the mother--it was her first and only child. Anomaly or not, human or not, your grief is no different than that of any mother. But no one shares your pain and so you are indeed alone.

Remembering all this, unconsciously picturing her face, the wall around his emotions failed him and he remembered his grief he felt seeing her in pain. He thought about his own children and what it would mean to lose them, to have them swept away before he'd even had a chance to know them. The City Inspector thought about all that, and then recalled how he'd spoken to his wife about his grief, and how she had shared hers with him. He knew that she felt as he did and the sentiment was shared throughout the community. They grieved for Lindsay Donovan as a group, and they came together to share their sadness with one another, finding loving bonds with one another as they did.

But not Lindsay Donovan. She had remained isolated, withdrawn. The grief she bore had to have been worse than theirs, left alone as she was, too high up the food chain as the Mayor's sister to have many true friends, and yet more vulnerable than anyone. As the result of her tragedy she was further isolated, while everyone else was bound closer together. She had become so thoroughly alone that it was evident even from the grainy black and white pictures in the newspaper. She had slipped away from the funeral as quickly as possible. Over the next few days her tears evaporated and by week's end she announced a new city project that would open up several orphanage shelters and counseling centers focusing on those who had experienced family tragedies like hers. The entire city's collective heart broke for her, but no amount of grief or support from the populace could possibly replace what she had lost. She saw the hardliners rejoicing at anomaly death. She saw that, and to her it would be an assault on her deceased child, and as the fear of anomalies deepened, it would drive her further from the community.

When the City Inspector had opened the paper the day after the funeral and had read the stories and seen the pictures, he noted sadly how many people had made a point at the mass to express their condolences for the death of her husband, and how the Cardinal had said he was surely with God now. He had slammed the paper down at the breakfast table and muttered aloud, “That poor woman will hate us forever.”

His wife had looked at him confused. At times she couldn't quite follow him. "Hate us? But we're all mourning with her. How could she possibly hate us?"

"But we only mourn her husband, don't we? We don't even mention her child."

"You mean the anomaly?"

"Yes, that. And because of it, she'll never forgive us."

His wife had waved him off. "You make too much of nothing. She's the Mayor's sister. The city has always been fond of her. Now, the people practically worship her."

And that's why she hates us, he thought. Don't you realize that our reverence for Lindsay Donovan and the simultaneous dismissal of her child is the very reason she feels isolated? And after many weeks and months had passed, they could all see that her pain had worsened when she appeared in public. The brightness in her eyes had gone, stolen away by her sadness. Yet this made the people love her all the more, to see her fighting through depression. No one actually knew her, exchanged knowing glances with her, gossiped over a meal with her, because she refused to connect with anyone else. "She fears connection," he told his wife. "She quakes at the thought of being loved, because she believes that all those whose love she accepts will be taken from her."

And here was Thorne, his boss, peering into this prison of infants because she wanted a child. Why an anomaly? Because her lost child had been one. "Sir," he said carefully. "These children are scheduled to be euthanized. They cannot be adopted."

"Not by common people, no," Thorne nodded. "This has been approved by Mayor Donovan himself, just yesterday. He personally asked me to select a child for his sister."

"Mayor Donovan actually approved that?"

"Yes. God knows why. I've heard whispers around City Hall that the Mayor's sister blamed him personally for the loss of her anomaly child, and that she's been after him to let her do this for some time." Thorne looked around quickly, as though worried that someone else might hear what he'd said. Apparently even men in such high positions had to be cautious when speaking of the Mayor. Looking satisfied, he turned back to the City Inspector and leaned in closely. "I hear she threatened to kill herself last week. Now the Mayor has given in to her request."

The City Inspector said nothing.

"He's asked that I find a suitable child. One that does not give off too strong a radiation level and whose immediate family is deceased." Thorne sighed. "It seems an impossible task. Most of these children are within the safety limits for radiation, but all of them have at least one parent surviving them."

The City Inspector saw his chance to relieve the Church's anomaly from his conscience. "Actually, sir, this child I was bringing in would probably be perfect for Ms. Donovan," he said, holding up the kennel. "It was tested this afternoon and its radiation levels are well within the safety limits."

"I notice you neglected to mention the parents," Thorne said suspiciously.

"Shawn Church and his wife are dead, sir."

"Christ. How did that happen?"

"They attacked the Guardsmen. For our safety they had to be neutralized."

"You would think these people would know better by now," Thorne shook his head. "On the other hand, this may have solved my little problem. How old is the child?"

"One or two days, sir."

Thorne nodded approvingly. "It will need to be tested thoroughly and spend some time in a nursery to make sure it's healthy."

The City Inspector looked around the Retention Block. Glass cribs held the children in tiny rooms that were built to guard against radiation emissions. "Here, sir?"

"I suppose not," Thorne said. "This anomaly is no longer like the rest, is it? I wonder if it has any notion of how close it came to death today."

The City Inspector winced internally. Thorne's words brought back the stark realization that, save for this one child inside the kennel in his arms, none of the twenty or so other living beings in their cells would survive the week. "I can take it over to Northwestern Memorial, sir," he said. It was the closest hospital to City Hall, and it had a radiation poisoning quarantine in which they could place the anomaly for testing.

"That will be fine. I'll inform the Mayor that we have a child for his sister." He pulled out a relay phone, the kind that operated over radio waves and were only used by members of government and the exceptionally wealthy.

With a sigh of relief, the City Inspector turned to walk out the door, but stopped as he remembered something. "Sir?" he asked, turning back and hoping that whoever Thorne was calling hadn't yet picked up the line.

"What is it?"

"The Church's had another child," he said, then adding quickly, "A human child, sir. And we had to leave him at their home after the...incident."

Thorne nodded grimly. "How unfortunate. I'll have someone from the City Orphanage swing by to pick him up this evening." He favored the City Inspector with a smile. "You're a good man. Not everyone would think of their child like that."

"Yes sir, thank you sir," the City Inspector replied. But as he left the Retention Block and drove to the hospital, all he could think of was the bullet-riddled corpses of Shawn and Bonnie Church.

They meant to discourage her, but Lindsay Donovan knew that such discouragement was really coming from her brother, and so she ignored it. Thorne told her that the child had been cleared for to adoption, but he insisted there was no reason to act hastily. He suggested that she spend some time with the child; make sure that she really wanted it. Of course, he didn't refer to him as a child, he simply called him an *it*.

But Lindsay didn't need any time. She had fallen in love with the child as soon as she'd laid eyes on him. "That is going to be my child," she insisted, pointing into the quarantine room.

Thorne looked at her stoically, but that was alright. She could endure his obvious disapproval just as well as she could her brother's. She could endure anything if it meant finally having this child.

"I just want to make sure you're really ready for this," Thorne said.

"The only thing I'm not ready for is continuing this conversation while my child still sits on the other side of the window."

He studied her face for a moment. "Why are you in such a rush?"

"Rush? I've waited nearly three *years* for this day. My brother's exception order says I can take this child home today. That's something he and I have agreed upon. Unless I missed the announcement, I believe you're still his subordinate and required to follow his orders."

"Then you didn't read the exception order closely."

"It said the child need only be proven healthy and of safe radiation levels. Both of those conditions are fulfilled. I don't need anything else."

"Not true," Thorne shook his head. "It also said that the adoption must be certified by the Mayor himself, once the tests have been completed."

"He's agreed to certify the adoption!"

"Yes he has, so long as you spoke with me first."

Lindsay could see in his eyes that he was stubbornly serious. She had dealt with Thorne in the past, and so knew him somewhat, and she had yet to ever see this look in his eyes. It was the look of one with the weight of authority behind their actions. It was a look of dominance.

"What do you know about being a parent, Jonathan," she spat, feeling her blood rush to her face

and make it hot. “You are unmarried and without children! Who do you think you are to deny this child a loving parent?”

“Ah,” Thorne replied evenly. “So your desire to adopt an anomaly stems from concern for its well being. Seeing it in need, knowing what would have happened to it had you not intervened, you selflessly sprung into action and came to its aid.”

She saw instantly how ludicrous the words sounded. She was also painfully aware how detached she felt from them. “I suppose you’re going to tell me that an anomaly doesn’t deserve such treatment?”

“That really isn’t for me to decide. But such a question is moot since that isn’t what’s motivating you anyway.”

“You dare call me a liar?”

“A liar to yourself perhaps. As the Mayor’s sister, and as an activist for the well-being of those who lose family members to anomalies, surely you have seen several such children before this one. And yet you have not tried to rescue all of these children. Nor do I suspect you will rescue any others after today.”

“Why should I? I couldn’t save them all even if I wanted to.”

He smiled. “So who are you really trying to save today?”

Perhaps there was more to Thorne than she had thought. She was surprised by his persistence. While she had no official position within the city government, her relationship to the Mayor was usually enough to scare off anyone who might question her. “Why should anyone need saving? Perhaps I simply wish to share some of my good fortune in life with a child.”

He lost the smile. “Why an anomaly? Why not a healthy human child from one of the adoption centers you yourself helped to found?”

“There are plenty of families willing to adopt those children. I don’t see anyone lining up to help the anomalies.”

“There are others who advocate for anomaly rights. The father of this child, for instance, was quite vociferous in his support for them. I hear there is even something of an enclave outside the city walls for runaway anomalies.”

“Outside the walls? Who knows what kind of life that is?”

“But at least they have a group, a community. There are people inside the walls putting their well-being on the line to try to change the government policy. But who is looking out for you?”

“I have people who care for me,” she said. “Family and friends.”

“None of whom really know you. You have family, but you rarely visit them. The people who you call your friends hardly see you. You attend church, but you sit alone in the front pew, separate from your family. In fact, I can’t think of a single person with whom you’ve had anything other than a purely superfluous relationship in the past couple of years.”

Lindsay was taken aback. He was cutting down everything she said. “I can take care of myself.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Thorne nodded. “And it’s common for people to withdraw from grief for a time. But this has been going on with you for years. And I know why it’s gone on so long.”

“I’m sure you think it’s my fault.”

“No, actually. The fault lies with all of us. Everyone from the Mayor at the top to the ditch diggers at the bottom. We all saw what you were doing, how you were withdrawing further and further, yet we did nothing. And so you’ve remained completely alone, never risking a connection with a single person. And suddenly there’s this adoption request.”

“You say what a terrible thing it is that I’ve been alone, but today you want to deny me when I finally reach out to another person.”

He shook his head. “That’s my point, Ms. Donovan; it’s not a person at all. It’s not human. You can argue all you like that the thing in that nursery deserves a life, love, and the right to pursue

happiness, as they used to say before the war. And perhaps you're right on every point. But what you have to understand is that child is not a member of the community we've been speaking about. It never will be. We are a society of human beings, and that thing is something else."

"That's not true. The genetic differences in them are no more than those of different races. But we don't euthanize every black child in Chicago, now do we?"

"The scientists can talk about common genetic percentages all they like," Thorne said, a dark look crossing his face. "Maintaining that which makes us human has become very important in the years since the war. You've seen what's happened outside the walls. What the wildlife has turned into. And in my work I've seen what these anomalies do to families. I know what your pregnancy did to your body. But believe me, I've seen far, far worse. These things can--"

"Rot their host mothers from the inside out, and even occasionally kill them. I help raise money for the research into these children. Do you really think I'm not familiar with the results of that research?"

"You're familiar with the research, you've experienced some of the tragedy personally, and now you want to adopt an anomaly?"

Finally she saw where he was going with this. "You think my motives are selfish," she said. "You think I'm trying to resurrect my own dead baby."

"To be honest, I don't really care *what* your motives are. The Mayor wants me to make sure you're ready to care for a child. To do that, I have to know why you're suddenly so adamant in adopting this one."

"Simple. I'm done being alone and I have a mother's instinct. This child is within the safety parameters for radiation and is without parents. We seem to be a match."

"Perhaps," said Thorne. "And perhaps you're not accounting for all possible outcomes. Before I can allow you to complete this adoption, I have to know whether you truly want to adopt *this* child, or if any child would suffice."

"How selfish you think I am."

"Not selfish. Just consumed with a grief that has festered for three years unaddressed. If you take possession of this child, I have no doubt that you will care for it as if it were your own. But who will you be doing it for? Do you truly believe that the child deserves the life you're planning on giving it? Or will you be giving it the life your own child would have deserved if it had been human?"

"They both deserve a life. Everyone does."

"If you truly believe that, there are plenty of human children and families in need. Why aren't you helping them?"

"Perhaps I should be. But as you said, I don't really know anyone and none of them know me. Maybe I thought I'd start with someone with whom I'd have a clean slate. Someone who not only didn't know me, but didn't know *of* me, either."

"Of you?"

"You people all think you have some kind of insight into my life just because you see my picture in the paper and read what they say about me. But you can't know someone from a piece of paper, or words written about them. The admiration I receive, it is completely misplaced."

"You think you aren't worthy of admiration."

"Yes I am! But people don't admire me because of the good works I do. They admire me because of the deaths I've endured."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. They might think helping family members left behind by anomaly births is a good work, but they oppose the other things I do. My advocacy for anomaly rights goes unheard, unpublished in the papers, and unapproved by my esteemed brother. If it weren't for the coverage of my husband's funeral, I would be despised by the entire city."

"Perhaps there is more capacity to love and accept in this city than you think."

Her anger flared again. "Don't make me laugh. You're the Director of Anomaly Affairs, you probably spend more time around these children and their parents than anyone else in the city, and you can't bear even referring to them by their names. You use pronouns instead, or a demeaning usage of the word *it*."

"I don't deny my view that they aren't human," Thorne shrugged. "Seeing the damage they can cause, I also don't enjoy being around them. But don't you think that even my mind could be changed?"

"No, Jonathan. I know you well enough to know that when you believe in something as strongly as you do this, the hounds of hell couldn't change your mind. And do you know why?"

"Tell me."

"Because you fear these children. You fear what they might do to their mothers. You fear how they might change what it means to be human. But most of all you fear their ability to manipulate radiation as if it was some kind of satanic witchcraft. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out all fear."

Thorne's face lit up warmly. "John, four eighteen. That is one of my Mother's favorite passages."

"Written by a man that lived over two thousand years ago, and yet he understood people well enough that even today his words speak to us. How difficult must it have been for this imperfect man to write these perfect words? He was writing of the Jews, but even their struggles don't compare to the global genocide we're committing on the anomalies."

"So you're what? The Jesus Christ of our time? Back not to bring salvation to mankind, but these other beings instead?"

"I know I'm no deity. I'm just doing what Christ and the Apostles once did. They changed people's minds, so much so that mankind built a religion around their teachings. They wrote down their words in a book that is more widely read than any other in the world."

"And who will write your book?"

She turned to look back into the nursery. "Perhaps this child will, or else those that will know him."

He nodded. "You've already imagined his future life, haven't you? Pictured what he'll look like when he's older? Imagined what his place in the world might be?"

"Yes, I have."

"And how does he look?"

She blinked a tear away from her eye. "He's beautiful. Strong and respected, but also kind. I see him with his own children, tending to them as a good father should. I see that his wife loves him, and so do his neighbors. I sound silly, but that's what you want. You *want* me to sound silly so that you can deny my application."

"No," Thorne said softly. "What I wanted was to know was that when you pictured your son's future, you saw in it all the things a life might mean for the child, rather than for yourself. A mother does not want her children for any reasons to do with herself. She wants to have them so that they can grow and have fulfilling lives of their own. She might become sentimental as they get older, and perhaps even wish for more time to spend together. But ultimately it is her most fulfilling moment when her children leave the nest and become independent. And because of what you told me, I know now that you are truly a mother and not just a depressed widow. Perhaps more importantly, if anyone would be successful in rearing an anomaly it would be you, as isolated from humanity as you are."

"You say I'm adored and then tell me I'm alone? I think that maybe you're having fun right now. I think that maybe you simply enjoy hurting me."

"I'm approving the adoption."

She stared at him a moment. "Tonight?"

"Tonight, tomorrow, whenever you like. There is no longer anything standing in your way."

In spite of herself, she leaped forward and hugged him. "I don't know what to say. Thank you, I suppose. Thank you."

He hugged her back. "Change my mind. I'm not the closed-minded fool you think I am. My job forbids me to treat anomalies as I would humans, and I've built my beliefs around that job so that I won't be wracked with guilt and remorse, but that doesn't preclude me from greater understanding. All the science on the matter is incomplete, because we've never had an anomaly in our community to watch as they grew up. Those who know the truth about this child will be watching very closely, and when they've watched enough to come to a conclusion, I promise that you will have your own apostles, ready to tell your story to all that will listen. But take this advice: don't let anyone know that your adopted child is an anomaly unless absolutely necessary. Don't make that information public until he's an adult, and then only if he agrees."

She stepped back from him and looked in his eyes. "Here you just told me you don't even think the child is human, but still you're trying to protect him."

"I read the Bible too," he said. "Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it. That's from the Book of Ezra."

"Did you really mean it, that I could take him home tonight?"

"You don't believe me?"

"It just seems a sudden shift in position. A moment ago you told me I might not ever get the child, and now you tell me that he'll be coming home with me this very night."

"Well, moments ago you were hugging me, and now you're suspicious that I'm going to pull the rug out from under you. So you're shifting fairly quickly as well."

"I suppose," she said.

"But take my request seriously. Promise that you'll only tell people about the boy when absolutely necessary. Because you will only bring danger to him otherwise. Can you make me that promise?"

"You have my word."

"When will you sign his discharge papers?" Thorne asked.

"Tonight! I would sign them right now if you had them."

Thorne smiled, and then reached into his pocket. From it he pulled out a folded piece of paper and a pen and handed both to her. She unfolded the paper and saw that it was the discharge form.

"You've already signed it! You were always going to let me have him!"

"No," he shook his head. "Though I was fairly sure you would pass the test, I still had to give it. I just trusted you to be the person I thought you were."

"You don't know me. You even said so yourself."

"Oh, I'm not so sure," he smiled. "Perhaps I *didn't* know you. But now I find that many of my assumptions about you are proven correct, and so it is reasonable to assume my other assumptions are correct as well." He looked her over a moment. "You know, I once spent time with a woman when I was younger."

"Do I remind you of her?"

"A bit perhaps." He paused. "She wasn't quite so good looking, though."

She smiled and signed the discharge form. Thorne spent the next few hours with her, helping her to fill out the rest of the paperwork, putting together a supply pack for the baby and just talking her through the process. She didn't mind his company, surprisingly. Perhaps it was because she was overjoyed about the adoption being approved, but she began to consider how handsome Thorne was. So when they were done that night, and he had helped to load the child and the care package into her car, Lindsay Donovan invited Jonathan Thorne over for dinner. He never left.

Despite such a drastic move, they took things slowly at first. Her place in one of the taller high-rises that still stood was large, even by prewar standards, so he took the guest bedroom. He wasn't able to shed the way he felt about the child immediately. Lindsay understood though, and she helped him

work through it. In fact she was grateful to do so, as it meant that she had people around her home again. The flat used to be a place of silence and solitude. Now, to her delight, it bustled and moved, constantly needing attention. It brought joy to her heart to be needed again, to have good work to do for people with whom she was intimate.

Physical intimacy eventually came with Thorne as well. He was a patient man and caution came naturally to him. He enjoyed the easy times with them and was willing to do the work when things were more difficult. After a surprisingly short time had passed, Lindsay walked in on him in the baby's room where he was standing over the crib, just sort of studying the child as it looked up at him. She took him by the hand, led him to the bedroom, and showed him physically how much she had fallen in love with him.

"Nearly two months since you adopted the child," he managed to pant out once they were done. "And you still haven't named him."

"I just don't want him to end up with the wrong name," she answered, equally breathless. "I've always hated my first name, like it doesn't belong to me. I don't want my child to feel the same way."

"Do you really think a name matters that much?"

She leaned over and kissed him. "How could I answer any way other than yes when your name rolls so sweetly off my tongue?"

He smiled, but refused to let her get away with changing the subject. "Do you at least have some ideas?"

She blushed, but answered evenly. "I was thinking of naming him after you, actually. I was going to ask you, but I never worked up the nerve."

"I don't know," he said, looking sheepish. But then he seemed to brighten. "What if he took my father's name for his first, his biological family's name for his middle, and your last name?"

She shrugged. "What's your father's name?"

"Anton."

"Anton Church Donovan," she said slowly, and then repeated it several times, as if she were trying it out. "It sounds perfect! Powerful, but kind. Like the column of a building." She said the name several more times.

"I think you're right, it is perfect," he said quietly. "But how will you explain to your brother that he has my father's name? There are very few Anton's in Chicago, you know, and the Mayor knows my father well. If you call the boy Anton, your brother will know about us."

"You're right," she said. "I suppose the only thing we can do is get married. That way the boy's name will be a sweet gesture of family loyalty rather than an indication of a sinful living situation."

It wasn't a traditional proposal, but they were both happy and they got married a week later. The wedding melted away any remaining misgivings Thorne had for the child. They both agreed to keep their last names, so Anton was still called Donovan. But there was also no doubt whom his father was, as Thorne instantly became a doting husband and father. He also began to be promoted up through the ranks personally by the Mayor. There was a bit of jealousy to deal with at first, but Thorne's work was always of the highest caliber, and eventually he became the Mayor's personal adviser. They both began to wonder if changing the policy on anomalies might be easier than they'd thought.

But it wasn't. Once he had gotten situated as the Mayor's adviser, and once he thought he'd proven himself in a few mildly important tasks, he tried to broach the subject of anomalies several times. For the first few weeks the Mayor and his cabinet would rarely respond beyond politely dismissing him. Now and then one of them would take the time to patiently explain to him both why he was wrong and why the kinds of questions he was asking were dangerous. But that politeness eventually eroded once Thorne was an established part of the team. He and the Mayor began to converse on the subject openly on their walks throughout City Hall, in full view of other workers. He tried to talk science first, speculating on the implications of the newest genetic research. When that

failed, Thorne tried the behavioral route, trying to rationalize some of the more obtusely bizarre symptoms that anomalies showed, and how they might actually be useful. Since there was little documented psychology on anomalies, it meant only reading a couple of logs on the matter and he was as expert as anyone else on the subject. More so, actually, since Anton was growing older quickly.

"Come on, Patrick," he said one day as they were walking up the Mayor's office. "We're not just talking about a nameless, faceless group of people any longer. We're talking about your nephew."

"That thing isn't my nephew, Jonathan," the Mayor shook his head sadly. "It was an indulgence I took on behalf of my sister."

"But, sir, you've spent some time with Anton. You know him well enough to see how unnecessary some of the harsher laws are."

The Mayor studied him a moment. "Anton's life has a purpose. He was allowed to live so that my sister might not do something drastic, like kill herself. I know you're married to her now, and that you love her, but did she ever tell you that? That she threatened to kill herself if I didn't allow her to adopt Anton?"

"We've discussed it, sir, yes."

"Well then you know the position she put me in. Thank God she's kept the whole thing quiet." Mayor Donovan took a deep breath. "All I can do now is try to salvage the situation so that *some* good comes from all this."

Thorne had known the Mayor for some time now, but for weeks after that conversation he argued with himself over what his brother-in-law might have meant in saying that Anton's life had a purpose. His interest was magnified by the sudden uptick in time the Mayor spent with Anton over the ensuing months. He would come around for dinner once or twice a week, eat and speak with all of them, and then ask Anton to take a walk with him around the surrounding area of the city. Thorne tried to ask Anton about their walks, but all his son would tell him was that they would get candy or ice cream and talk about the city and its people. Lindsay thought that it was a sweet gesture, and took it as a sign that the Mayor might finally be coming around in his thinking about anomalies, or at least Anton. Thorne wasn't convinced and became alarmed at the way Anton began idolizing his Uncle.

One of the evenings when the Mayor had returned Anton from one of their walks, the child, now eight years old, rushed to where he'd been reading the paper. "Father, Father!" he exclaimed. "I know what you are! I know what *we* are!"

Thorne put down his paper and looked quizzically at his son, who was shifting his weight from foot to foot excitedly.

When he didn't answer, Anton continued. "Or is it just Mother who can do it? Uncle said that it can be passed from parent to child, so I assume you can do it too. Uncle told me about it and said I should ask you. So? Can you do it too?"

He was speaking hurriedly, borderline manic. "What are you talking about?" Thorne asked.

"What we can do!" Anton cried. "You must know if you have it!"

Thorne went rigid. Anton was the right age to begin showing signs, but surely his brother-in-law wouldn't spring this on them. "Show me," he said.

At that moment Lindsay had come into the room, surely attracted by all the noise Anton was making. He saw instantly that she'd seen the look on his face. He didn't know how much she'd guessed, but she was already biting her lip and wringing her hands behind her back.

"Sure!" Anton exclaimed. He began looking around the room. "What do you want me to try it on. I'm not too good at it yet and I don't want to break anything expensive."

Thorne still wasn't sure what Anton was going to do, but his heart began thundering in his chest. Lindsay was standing like a statue, looking nervous and watching her son. She was obviously too frightened to speak. Thorne understood how she felt. He wanted this whole thing, these questions, Anton himself, to just go away. But his son was still eagerly awaiting his response.

"How about this coffee cup," Thorne said slowly, reaching to pick it off of the end table. "It's

nearly empty and we have a dozen more.”

Anton smiled broadly. He stepped to the other side of the room and turned to face them, his mother standing and staring even more anxiously and Thorne sitting with an empty coffee cup in his outstretched palm. “Don’t move,” he told them. Then he closed his eyes and rubbed his temples, as he did whenever he was concentrating on something. It was one of those adult gestures he’d adopted that amazed Thorne.

Suddenly Anton opened his eyes, and Lindsay squeaked in fright. His eyes had gone a solid pale orange and the look of determination on his face was terrifying. He stretched out one hand, fingers reaching. The air between them seemed to increase in density and it looked like waves of something clear were flowing through it, the way the air above a flame becomes distorted. Thorne was about to ask what he was doing when the coffee mug in his hand lurched unsteadily into the air. It hung there for a moment, suspended above his palm. Then, as Thorne stared open-mouthed, it slowly floated across the room and landed gently in Anton’s hand.

His eyes returned to normal. When he looked down at the mug in his hand he smiled and looked up at them. “That’s my best yet! I’m going to go practice.” With that, he rushed from the room.

“My God,” Lindsay whispered.

Thorne stood and hugged her, holding her tight. It was getting late and he led her up to their bedroom. Along the way, he said, “Anton told me that your brother was the one who started all this. He said Patrick wanted him to ask us about it.”

“He wouldn’t,” she replied. “Especially not now. They’ve been getting along so well together.”

Thorne paused, trying to decide how to proceed. One of the things he loved about his wife was her ability to expect the best of people. It was what gave her such an open mind and a caring soul. But it also made it very difficult to get her to accept any reality that was different from her optimistic view. If he insisted that her brother had overstepped his bounds and set this on them intentionally, it was likely she would shut down and stonewall any attempt at rational conversation. For this reason the discussion ended, but Thorne was silently furious.

Throughout the night they were occasionally awoken by the sounds of objects falling onto Anton’s floor. Thorne was sure that he was practicing moving other objects. As the night went on the crashes and bangs came with less frequency until, finally, there was silence. Thorne figured Anton must finally have tired and gone to bed.

In the morning they walked to the kitchen together, noticing that the lights were already on. Thorne assumed Anton must already be awake and eating. But when they walked into the room they found Anton at the table with the Mayor and William Koskie, the Defense Director. The man in charge of protecting the city from all threat, including the perceived danger posed by anomalies. “What are you doing here, Sir?” Thorne asked.

Mayor Donovan looked up and smiled. “Ah, you’re finally up.” He stood and clapped Thorne on the back and gave Lindsay a kiss on the cheek. “We were just discussing Anton’s future. Sit, sit.”

Thorne looked over Anton, who was sitting quietly with a serious look on his face. They sat on either side of him and Mayor Donovan returned to his seat next to Koskie.

“He is a very bright boy,” Mayor Donovan continued. Despite the smile, Thorne could tell his boss was choosing his words very carefully. “Very talented. There is so much good he could do, so many options in his life. William here was just talking about some of the challenges we face in city security and how much use Anton could be in his department.”

“We should talk about this later,” Thorne said quickly. “In private, sir.” The conversation he’d had with the Mayor rushed back to him now, and he had a feeling he was about to find out what the Mayor thought Anton’s “purpose” was.

“A boy this smart doesn’t need to be coddled, Jonathan,” the Mayor replied. “He’s perfectly capable of understanding these things. Aren’t you son?”

"Yes" Anton replied, still staring ahead at his uncle, refusing to meet Thorne's eye.

"It isn't a matter of coddling," Thorne said. "He's an eight year old child and we're his parents. If you have thoughts about his future, you can bring them to us." He turned to Koskie. "And you have no business being here at all."

"Relax, Jonathan, I invited him," the Mayor said. "If you want to be angry with someone, then be angry with me. He's only here because we're off to inspect the guardsmen on the wall in an hour."

"I want to know what you've been telling my son, sir."

"I'm not your son," Anton murmured.

Silence penetrated the conversation for several moments before Lindsay said sharply, "What did you just say?"

"I said I'm not his son," Anton repeated. He looked up, not angry but upset to the point of tears. "And I'm not *her* son either, am I? Tell me the truth."

"Yes you are," Lindsay said sharply.

Anton regarded her critically and then turned to Thorne for confirmation.

"Your mother is right," Thorne told him. "You may not be our biological offspring, but you're our son. You will always be our son."

"But, my parents—my real parents—who were they?"

"That's a conversation for later," Thorne said firmly. He rested a hand on his son's heaving shoulder, trying to comfort him. As he did so, he turned back to the Mayor and Koskie. "This was something to be handled within my family, sir. You had no right to intrude like that." He was shaking with anger.

"Careful, Jonathan. You are a good advisor, but do not forget that I make the law in this city. You don't have any rights except those that I choose to bestow upon you."

Thorne took a deep breath. "From now on, if you want to discuss serious matters with Anton, I would like you to consult with me first. I think I'm owed that much, as your aide and his father."

Mayor Donovan sighed. "You make too much of this, Jonathan," he said. "What did I say but the truth? And if you'll recall, you owe this family that you're so protective of entirely to me."

That should do it, Thorne thought silently. And he was right.

"You do not own us!" Lindsay erupted from the table, her chair toppling backwards. "Nor do you own anyone outside your pathetic little circle. Even as you make your little speeches and decrees, opposition springs up from all around you. Dissenters amongst the people, enclaves outside the walls, news of uprisings in other cities, yet you come to our home to tell us we owe all we have to you?"

But the Mayor just laughed darkly. "You see why the boy is so tough, William? My sister and her husband have raised him in their image, and he is the better for it."

"You're right," Koskie nodded. "Whatever they are doing is working. Look at the boy."

They all turned towards Anton. His eyes had dried and he was watching them argue stoically. It was the same look Thorne had seen in the past when he had forced himself to swallow his tears.

"He is strong," Thorne agreed. He took a deep, measured breath. "And when he's of age, this may be an appropriate conversation to have with him. But not now."

The Mayor shook his head. "I'm sorry, but we do not agree. It's impossible to hold back the talent of such a child, and to attempt to do so would only frustrate him and retard his natural ability. I don't even want to think what a lack of disciplined nurturing might mean for his *other* abilities."

Thorne looked up sharply, disbelieving his ears. Surely the Mayor wouldn't reveal what he had done so callously, particularly not in front of Koskie. But when he glanced over at the city's chief defender, there was no look of confusion upon his face. And it was then that Thorne noticed a motley collection of objects on the kitchen table: salt and pepper shakers, a picture frame, a wooden spoon, several crumpled up pieces of paper. He showed them, Thorne thought. I didn't warn him, and now he's showed them.

"I'd like a muffin," Mayor Donovan said to Anton with a smile, as if reading Thorne's thoughts.

Anton turned toward the kitchen counter and stretched his hand out. His eyes glowed orange in an instant and with shocking speed one of the muffins from the plate on the counter zipped into his palm, crumbs tumbling to the floor. He handed the muffin to the Mayor expressionlessly.

"Such a talented boy belongs in the service," Koskie said, giving Thorne a hard look.

The truth was that this was proof of everything he and his wife stood for, that the talents of an anomaly were so useful and needed that the very government hunting them down would employ them as well. Still, Thorne had never imagined that it would be *his* son that would act as that example. He knew Anton better than anyone else, better even than Lindsay, and he had no doubt that he would be an effective member of the City Security Service, but as he'd said, apt or not, that was something for Anton himself to decide when he was of age. Thorne did his best to remain polite but firm as he told the Mayor and Koskie that he would not allow his son to enter the service underage.

They fought back for a while longer, but in the end gave up. Donovan was a despot, and his title of Mayor a joke, but he was still a politician. He knew that if he forced the issue and conscripted Anton against the will of his parents, word would get out and the backlash from the citizenry would be harsh. Still, the Mayor's office suddenly seemed different, dangerous even, and between he and his wife there was the question of exactly how much they could trust their powerful family member. Despite many attempts by Lindsay to reassure him of her brother's good intentions, Thorne remained extremely wary.

Thorne was amazed at how quickly Anton recovered from the encounter that morning. He seemed to accept that they were his parents, even though he wasn't their biological offspring. The only change in his behavior was a constant curiosity about his biological family, about which Thorne knew only a little and Lindsay knew almost nothing. They had decided to tell Anton that his parents had died in an accident. When he would ask for details, Thorne would tell him that they didn't have any. I think I'm doing what's best for him, Thorne thought. But how can I know? What if I'm setting him up for some kind of future breakdown?

Mayor Donovan's visits practically ceased from then on, and after several years Thorne's concerns faded, though he still was far more alert to what was being said and done around City Hall. By the time Anton had entered his teenage years, the development and control of his abilities had progressed amazingly. He was particularly pleased that his son had shown none of the feared behavioral symptoms: no schizophrenia, no violent outbursts, no rebellion against authority. Actually, the only noticeable difference between him and their neighbor's children was that Anton had almost no hair on his body at all, save for a tiny patch of a goatee. But they had explained that as simply a style choice, one that happened to be somewhat in vogue amongst the more accomplished academics. In fact, Anton had truly taken an interest in education, pouring over books, particularly those that had survived the war. Thorne asked him on his sixteenth birthday what he wanted to do for work and was unsurprised when Anton said he was thinking of being a teacher. Thorne couldn't have been more proud of him.

Even the city seemed to be coming along. Thorne might have his reservations about the Mayor, but the government worked hard to clean up and rebuild the city of Chicago. Within the walls there were still many areas that weren't much more than bombed out rubble, but others had been shown a great deal of care and new buildings complete with plumbing and some amenities were sprouting. It meant a great deal of work for Thorne as well, but it was good work and he was happy. It never occurred to him that the happiness of his family would come crashing down in an event that would ignite fear and the thirst for war throughout the world as never before.

It had started so simply when he brought Anton to work one day. Mayor Donovan had invited them to lunch and the topic of Anton's future came up again, but this time the Mayor had simply asked Anton about his plans. Anton had told his uncle of his desire to teach, and Donovan had been fairly accommodating, pressing him only lightly to work instead for the government, telling him that the city would be willing to let him head a special security task force, commanding men of Anton's own

choosing. Anton had replied that he didn't have much interest in joining the CSS, particularly as he'd rarely seen any evidence of a true security threat; even the enclaves of anomalies outside the city rarely stirred any trouble beyond an occasional attack on someone traveling outside the walls. So why should he go into the service?

Mayor Donovan asked him to just keep it in the back of his mind, in case his thoughts on the matter should change. When they got home that evening, everything seemed normal. Anton ate dinner with them and then went to his room to read. Thorne told Lindsay of the conversation at lunch, but she just shrugged and said she was glad their son didn't want to join the service. "My parents were pacifists," she said. "If they were still alive today, I don't think they would support their son."

"And you're married to his chief adviser," Thorne smiled.

"Yes, but they would have like you. I'm sure of it," she responded. His relay phone chimed and she frowned at him. "I told you I don't like them calling on you after hours. Especially during meal times."

But he hardly heard her. The message on his phone was from Mayor Donovan, and it indicated there was an emergency. Apparently one of the anomaly enclaves had managed to scale the walls and attack one of the outskirt neighborhoods. The Chicago Security Service had already responded, but the Mayor wanted to visit the site himself, and he wanted Thorne there as well. Everyone else was already on their way, so Thorne would have to get there himself.

Lindsay couldn't see the message from her seat, but she must have seen the look on his face because she asked, "What happened?"

"An attack," he answered, already moving away from the table and putting on his coat. He stopped at the door and turned to her. "Don't wait up for me, this could take a while."

"Tell me what's going on!"

He smiled to reassure her. "I don't know yet. I'll fill you in tomorrow morning."

But he never told her. She had gone to bed shortly after and when she awoke his side of the bed was empty. After she had gotten Anton off to school and he still wasn't home she began to worry. She retrieved her own relay phone from a cupboard and tried to call him. When he failed to answer she rang her brother. Mayor Donovan's voice was shaking when he told her a car was on its way.

When she arrived, her brother took her to a group of rundown shacks near the wall. Those living in the dwellings, deep in poverty, were standing in makeshift doorways and staring. Her husband's body was sprawled on the ground, part of it on a concrete slab that used to be a sidewalk, and part on the grass next to it. His skin was covered with ugly purple bruises, and there was what looked to be a rusty railroad spike buried through his chest into the ground. His eyes were open and his mouth was frozen in a scream.

"We've detected radiation levels above normal around his body," her brother said solemnly. "An anomaly did this."

Lindsay collapsed into tears at his feet.

Chapter 2:

It is with great sadness that we take these necessary actions against anomaly newborns. This causes some good-hearted people to compare us to the great evils in history, such as the Nazis or the Mao Chinese. They accuse us of genocide, and I can only imagine the strife this causes you and your peers in government throughout the world. But you must remain strong and vigilant, because a failure to contain such a threat to mankind would surely result in a loss of our very way of life.

When our critics make such accusations against us, we must always encourage them to review what little scientific data we have on anomalies. As we do not allow these children to reach any level of physical maturity, we are somewhat limited in what we can know about them, but the information we do have indicates that they destroy the family that bore them and inevitably become violent. We do not release all that we know, for fear that others might carry out vigilante justice upon the afflicted families, but it is sufficed to say that the danger posed to us all is very real. In summary, while we have no authority to enforce it as a matter of law, we advise the governments of the world to contain and euthanize anomaly children without prejudice.

To that effect, in reviewing your report on the attack your city suffered at the hands of an enclave we have found that you took all possible measures to prevent it and find you to be without fault. We have also reviewed your strategy to carry out retribution over the next two years and wish to extend our assistance in any way you deem necessary. The United Nations has little in the way of actual troops since the Atomic War, but we can certainly give public approval of your actions and offer our strategic advice on how to carry out such an operation.

War is not black and white, nor is it clean, and you may have to take actions that go against your nature in order to secure your city and stop the spread of the anomalies. Please be assured that in complying with the United Nations' recommendations, these actions are just and in the best interests of all humanity. Some of the best generals throughout history have been hampered by a misguided conscience. Please don't allow the same to happen to you.

*-Juan Nortooga, letter to Mayor Patrick Donovan of Chicago
United Nations Secretary General
4.04.2166*

Consumption of the news of Jonathan Thorne's murder was not limited to the citizens of Chicago. The United Nations distributed the account of his death throughout the world by relay communiqués. The first organized attack verified to have been committed by a group of anomalies on a human city was used by the UN to boost support for their policy of euthanization. In a matter of days, governments worldwide were tightening the noose on any enclaves in their region.

Their success stories were transmitted city to city and nation to nation by relay phone and satellite messages. Over the next several months, battles broke out all around the planet, carried out by government soldiers or civilian militias. Thousands of anomaly lives were snuffed out, as were many of the lives of those few humans that would protect them. There were few tales of defeat at the onset, as the human armies appeared to take the anomalies completely by surprise. After a brief period, most of the human settlements in the world returned to their policy of relative non-aggression.

But in Chicago the population had been stimulated by the murder of one of their own. They called for an immediate and ongoing reaction from the government, and the Mayor responded. For the first time in over a generation, an organized attack force made up of CSS soldiers left the safety of the city walls and launched a campaign on the enclaves. They had success at first, and returned with stories of small bands of anomalies, loosely organized and easily defeated. As the campaign wore on, however, the anomaly clans began to band together, and rumors began to circulate of an anomaly leader operating west of the city. No one seemed to have any details on this leader, other than that his name

was Scythe.

As the battle raged on and the human losses mounted, troop morale became a concern. The human army began to fight as if they expected each battle to be their last, and the rising death toll did nothing to sway them. William Koskie was a fine strategist, but he lacked the charisma to be a rallying figure for the troops. The Mayor had known this going into the war, however, and so he'd taken care to cultivate a more inspiring figure for his troops, one that would not only be respected, but loved as well. One that was nearly ready for his unveiling.

Inside the Chicago Security Service headquarters near City Hall, Anton Donovan stood among the twenty other men and women in his graduating class. They had finished Officer Training Class. Renowned throughout the school as a brilliant strategist, they had asked him to give a short speech at the ceremony, which was attended by the faculty and the families of the graduates. The irony of all this was not lost on him; he was to give a speech to these humans before leading them in a war against his own kind. Not that many in the audience could appreciate the irony. Only his mother, his uncle, and Security Chief Koskie knew what he was.

Anton had only been half-listening to the commencement speaker thus far, occasionally catching the odd reference to the anomaly threat and how they would all be heroes to humanity and so on. Such speeches played to the lowest common denominator, those ignorant hardliners that said the anomalies were evil and mankind was just. Anton ignored that type of talk, finding it wanting in logic. He didn't think that anomalies as a rule were evil, though he didn't feel any allegiance to them either. His mother had told him over and over again that the genocide being carried out was wrong. Anton was inclined to agree, but he was consumed with another purpose. He had to find his father's killer. Not for some silly notion of revenge, but to ask him or her the question that nobody had asked all those years ago: *why?*

The others had turned in his direction and the professor at the dais was looking at him expectantly. Anton rose and walked to take his place at the dais, adjusting the microphone up to his height.

"We know little about the anomalies," he began. "And yet we know that which is most important, that the enclaves that have banded together outside our walls have attacked us, threatening our very existence. What we as a city endure is no biblical struggle. It isn't a war we wage on behalf of God. It is not economic gain we hope to achieve. Instead, we fight for humanity, for our very species." The words were vinegar in his mouth as he lied, pretending to be human. He didn't hold any grudge against humanity either, though. They were reacting like any species did when facing an evolutionary crisis. They were attacking their rivals, doing all they could to ensure they're survival. But Anton didn't have any true loyalty to them. Joining the CSS was a means to an end, that end being solving the puzzle of his father's death. His only other goal was probably unattainable: finding a way to peacefully end the war. And the only reason he entertained that goal was because it was shared by the only person to whom he *was* loyal: his mother.

"They are humanity's most direct evolutionary rivals," he continued, reading from cards and trying to sound sincere. "Everyone in this room has seen the dangers they pose firsthand, or heard the stories from those that have. As beings with a conscience, we do not revel in the battle we must wage, but we do so with honor, knowing that our families are safer for it. In my time here at the academy, one thing I've learned has stood out from everything else: we do not fight in this cause in order that we may punish a sin, but rather so that many years from now, still here to sin we may be."

As he stepped down from the podium they stood and applauded him. He imagined that any of his fellow students would be swollen with pride at their cheers. Anton felt only pity.

The commencement was over and he went to his uncle, who congratulated him. His mother was crying, as Anton had expected. They left for their home, where his uncle had prepared a small celebration for him.

"Your father would have been very proud of you," his uncle said to him during the celebration.

"I don't know," Anton shook his head. "I remember clearly that he wanted me to be a teacher."

"Only because he knew the kind of leader you can be, son. You have an uncanny ability to read people, and to understand what they want and what they need. That's going to make you a hell of a commander, son. Besides, what do you think you'll be doing now that you're training is complete? You won't just be commanding men in combat, you'll be teaching them to fight."

Anton turned to his uncle. "I don't have many people I can trust with my secret besides mother, but at least you understand." He took a deep breath. "How can you entrust in me a command position when you know what I am? I have heard your speeches. I read the UN reports. I'm an anomaly, yet you're going to allow me to command your men."

"Good is good, and evil is evil," his uncle said. "You're an anomaly, yes, but you're also an anomaly of an anomaly. You don't exhibit the behavioral disorders that plague most of your species and you yearn to aid humanity. How could I stop you from doing so?"

Anton sighed. He had heard such a response from his uncle in the past and it didn't make any more sense today than it had then. It was a direct contradiction to everything they said about anomalies, to trust him so. Their claim was that virtue was not defined by actions or intentions, but inherent in the being itself. It was a massively ignorant stance to take, and the hypocrisy in putting him in allowing him to live was clear, never mind the ridiculousness of offering him a command post.

"But suppose that I became convinced that some of the actions of your government were unnecessary," he continued. "Evil even. Suppose that I refused to comply with an order that I felt was unjust."

His uncle merely smiled. "How could I expect you to carry out an action that you thought was unjust? I trust your sense of honor and morality." The smile vanished. "But I also trust you to understand that what may seem wrong to you might in fact be the morally just choice for humanity. For your mother."

Anton nodded. "Yes sir. I only ask because some say that anomaly newborns have done us no harm, and so deserve no punishment. I wonder how many others like me are killed, when they might never have turned violent against the human majority. Doesn't my very existence suggest that there might be others out there that are like me? Or *could* be like me?"

His uncle looked upon him kindly. "You have a good heart. I don't expect you to understand everything we do or why we do it. But in answer to your question: you're right; we probably are killing off the occasional anomaly of an anomaly like yourself. We don't wish to do it, but it is the unfortunate duty we have in protecting the human race. You've heard what anomaly births do to their hosts. You know why your mother adopted you. Ask yourself: is that something that should be allowed to propagate throughout the world?"

Anton thought about that, and then shook his head. "No. That is the problem. Whether anomalies are universally evil doesn't matter. At the very least, they must be controlled so that they cannot breed entire legions of motherless children. For all the arguments proposed by those supporting anomaly rights, no one seems to have any idea how to fix the birth problem."

"You see? How could I keep one so wise out of a leadership role in our army?" his uncle said.

"Because you're a despot and a liar," Anton said, a broad smile on his face. "All the anomaly supporters say so."

They laughed together. He doesn't realize why I laugh, Anton thought. He thinks I laugh because I don't believe the others when they tell me he's a despotic ruler and diseased with bigotry, when actually I'm laughing at their assumption that I wasn't already well aware of both.

Caleb, one of his friends from the academy joined them, saluting the Mayor before turning to Anton. He was always doing that type of thing, making everything to do with Anton a formality. They had become friends after Anton had broken up a gang of bigger kids that had been picking on Caleb. Since that day Caleb had followed Anton around. "They say you're going to have your own strike force," he said. "Is that true?"

Anton looked at his uncle, who nodded. "That's right."

"And he'll be choosing the members of the team yourself?"

"With some input from his superiors," his uncle said. "But yes, the decision will largely be his."

Caleb stood a little taller. "I'd like to volunteer to be a member of your team, sir."

"Look at you," Anton laughed. "You will find that I am not the kind of superior that requires his soldiers to stand at attention and salute him. You're supposed to be my friend, Caleb, so I must insist that you especially not show me such formality. Besides, you won't be a member of my team. We will be doing the most dangerous work, if my uncle keeps his promises. If you were in my position, would you put me in the midst of such danger?"

"I see," Caleb said. "You don't think I'm capable enough."

"Capable? I'm trying to keep you from harm. I'm trying to be a good friend."

"You're not very good at it," Caleb said. "If you were my friend, you would know that I enlisted to the academy, and that I'm well aware of the dangers involved in the job. And if you were a true leader, you would make use of me, unless you found my talent lacking."

"You're every bit as talented as me. More so, perhaps."

"Then putt me on your roster."

Anton sighed. The manipulation for position had begun. And worse, it had been first perpetrated by his closest companion. "So long as my uncle approves, you have your assignment."

Caleb's face brightened. "You're such a pushover," he laughed. "But you'll be glad you did this. I swear I won't let you down, sir."

"Stop calling me sir," Anton said. "And go tell your parents that I've taken you on my team. I'm sure they'll want to know so they can corner me and try to change my mind."

Caleb smiled and hurried off. Anton's interaction with him drove home just how much things were likely to change. To his men, regardless of whether they had once been his friends or not, he would become a superior officer, their commander. After all, he would be issuing them orders, and they would be going to war together. To them, the chain of command was a survival technique. They would entrust their lives to him, believing that his intellect would keep them safe. But to Anton, he was still just a rookie soldier. He had done well in the academy; exceptionally well, even. His love for history afforded him a great deal of knowledge of prewar battle strategies and tactics. But none of this knowledge changed the fact that he wasn't human. His soldiers would have no idea that their commander, who led them in war made on anomalies, was in fact an anomaly himself. They would have no idea the conflict within him. They wouldn't know that he was fighting on the side of humanity by happenstance rather than any sort of genetic loyalty. They wouldn't realize that, if he could accomplish all he wished, this position would be a temporary one. They would know only their commander, and any friendships that had been building to the point of Anton being able to tell them the truth would be swept away by the sea of war. They had no idea how badly he wished that he had no injustice in his past, no secret to keep hidden, and no puzzle to solve; how he wished that he and Caleb could both just work behind a desk somewhere, raising families and talking of such boring topics as the weather or work. Caleb had stood at attention when asking to be placed on his team, and he had thought he was being respectful, when in reality he had caused Anton's heart to break a little in lament of a future that must be carried out.

And now, surrounded by these supposed well-wishers in the home he shared with his mother, Anton could only think of the anomaly children, whose lives were snuffed out by his uncle's government, just as the future he wanted for himself was being snuffed out, and how both of them were rationalized by necessity. The necessity of the human race's continuation, the necessity of revenge and justice. Was the rationalization true, in either instance? Were the newborn anomalies guilty of anything at all, simply by existing? Was it justice to punish all the enclaves outside of Chicago for the crime of one unidentified anomaly that happened to murder his father? Every human soldier in the

CSS believes they are doing right to carry out this war. Is it possible that the anomalies think they are doing right as well?

But as before, when Anton began to feel any loyalty for the enclaves building within him, the newspaper photo of his father's corpse blazed into his thoughts. No rationalization could make such a brutal, painful murder just. Humanity might be a cold, selfish race, but the anomalies were no better. They were both wrong, to continue this fight, even though Anton understood why they did. There it was again. That question that could resolve all conflicts, more important than any other question. The who's, what's, when's, and where's might start wars, but it was only the *why* that could end them. That's why he had to find out why the anomalies had murdered his father. That act hadn't started this war, but it had pressed it into fervor. If the reason for it could be discovered, perhaps a road to peace could be opened.

"You'll have to learn to accept their respect."

His thoughts evaporated as his uncle spoke. He was still standing beside Anton, studying his face. "I suppose I will. It doesn't come naturally."

"That's one of the reasons they'll love you," his uncle nodded. "There is nothing more alluring than a humble leader. It's a trait I've never been able to fake, no matter how hard I've tried."

"I think it's better to be honest."

"Do you know who else you want on your team?"

He shook his head. "Not everyone, no. I'll want it to be a mix of talents and age. How many soldiers do I get?"

"Sixteen, not including yourself," his uncle said. "They don't have to all be men, but you should limit the number of women to one or two. You were right when you said that being on your team would mean a higher than average degree of danger."

"Some of the best fighters I know are women."

"Why are you hesitating? Isn't this what you want?"

"You know what I want."

"I know why you joined the service, yes. I had rather hoped that the cause of your growth at the academy and your success there had grown beyond morbid curiosity."

"Understanding," Anton corrected him. "It's about understanding the enemy. It's only through understanding that perhaps this war may someday end."

"So tell me, if you find the man that murdered your father—"

"It was not a man," Anton interrupted him. "It was an anomaly."

"Fine, then if you find the anomaly that murdered your father, and if he tells you the answer to your question, will you then be satisfied?"

Anton thought quickly but deeply about his answer. "The goal of any soldier should be to end the war in which he fights. Answering that question is only the first step in that journey."

His uncle nodded. "Then you'll be a soldier for life, because the only way to end this war is to stop anomaly births, and that's impossible."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

"Of course it bothers me. I'm not the bloodthirsty barbarian the dissidents make me out to be. If it were up to me, there would *be* no war. If I had my way there wouldn't be any danger posed by anomalies. But that simply isn't the reality I must deal with."

"What I meant," Anton said. "Is that it must bother you to have me around. If the only way to end the war is to prevent anomaly births, I must be a constant reminder that you will forever struggle. It must pain you every time you lay eyes on me."

"Absolutely not. After seeing what you can do, both in natural talent and your...less natural abilities, I'm just glad to have you on our side."

"I'll have my roster on Koskie's desk tomorrow," Anton said. "And I'll be willing to start whenever you wish." He made to leave but his uncle caught his sleeve.

“Do you even realize how good you can be? How perfectly suited to this job you are?”

“I think maybe everyone is overestimating me.”

“They’re not. If anything they don’t realize your true potential, because they don’t know your secret.”

You’re so sure that my being an anomaly will prove to be a benefit, he thought. But he worried throughout the rest of the party that his uncle was wrong. He had thus far never experienced any lapse in judgment that he could attribute to his being an anomaly, but that didn't mean it wouldn't happen in the future. It was a strange feeling; the very thing that made him so sought after was also what ostracized him. He was scared of the truth and the abilities that went along with it. In the last few years he had learned how to do some amazing things, but he was so afraid of accidentally revealing the truth that he hardly connected with anyone save his mother. Her and a few friends at the academy, of course, but they didn't know the truth. He couldn't tell them. It was their sworn duty to hunt his kind down.

But this would no longer be the academy, and the battles he entered into with his men wouldn't be simulations. How long would it be before, in the heat of battle, someone found out? How long before they turned on him? The truth was that he didn't have any friends, none that knew him anyway. If they did know who he was, *what* he was, the few people he was close to would despise him. He remembered the look on his uncle's face that morning in his kitchen when he had first showed him his levitation trick, the first thing he'd ever learned to do with his radiation powers. He hadn't looked frightened, and he hadn't looked amazed. His uncle, as hard as he'd tried to hide it, had looked revolted. Even now when he had spoken to him, Anton could see the hint of disgust in his eyes.

He decided that night that he didn't want any friends. He didn't belong in a life with friends, because he didn't belong. His life had a purpose, and that was all that he could afford to focus on. That purpose wasn't defending human beings, and it wasn't to act as some kind of emissary for anomalies everywhere. The only true purpose his illegitimate life could serve would be to end the war and bring comfort to his mother.

And if that couldn’t be done, then he would leave this city to live out in the fallout lands with the rest of the animals.

Chapter 3:

One of the things we've noticed while studying anomaly cells is their response to cordyceps, commonly called caterpillar fungus. Some of the military medical texts that survived the war have suggested that the Japanese used to consume cordyceps after the first of the nuclear wars as a way to ward off skin poisoning that resulted from prolonged exposure to low levels of radiation. The effect has been verified in the bio cell cultures. We have begun issuing cordyceps to some of our radiation patients, but as yet we don't know what the results will be.

But more interesting are the reports we get from around the world that these same cordyceps roots are being used amongst women in the anomaly enclaves as well. In fact, it's the only specifics we have on their diet. God knows what else they have to live off of in the wastelands. Protein wouldn't be a problem, so long as they don't mind hunting, but where do they get their greens? Or their calcium?

Beyond such questions of diet, we have to wonder how they organize amongst themselves. Since we can't observe them in person, any guesses we have as to the culture of the anomalies are just that, guesses. Yet from the limited knowledge that can be gleaned from the reports we receive, we know that all the enclaves have developed a type of loose organization, none more so than those outside of your city. The anomalies there appear to have responded to the war you have declared on them by drawing closer together and uniting under this Scythe, whoever he or she is. It's like nothing we've ever seen. Whether they would have done this without the fighting as an impetus we may never know, but somehow word of their organizing seems to have gotten around, because it's happening elsewhere too. All over the world, in fact. How did that happen? Do they actually send emissaries to each other by foot? Throughout the country? There are a million things to kill them along the way if they do, but what else makes sense? The amount of distance they have to travel is enormous, but word is traveling somehow. It's not as if they have relay phones or sat comms, do they?

In the end it doesn't matter. What matters is that they are organizing, and that has to be stopped. Organization will breed a sense of identity and culture. That will turn into some kind of a loose hierarchy. The final step to government will be the quickest of all. No more loose bands of anomaly enclaves, so easily dispersed by your troops. Maybe they begin to coordinate attacks. Perhaps they breed generals and admirals to lead their troops. Or what if they begin to build walls of their own, or more permanent dwellings? What if they begin to build themselves cities? After all, it isn't as if we know much about the areas outside our cities. There are a few trade routes we use, but even there the levels of destruction vary. Some areas are down to rubble, others have standing buildings that look as if they haven't been touched. Some even have working plumbing, though such utilities would quickly breakdown without proper maintenance. It's the same throughout the world. At some point we're going to have to make contact with their settlements, discover where the enclaves are living, and what they have access to.

Our economists talk about the possibility of increased trade revenue whenever we discuss finding anomaly population centers. Can you imagine it? Trading with the enemy of humanity? I cannot, nor can any loyal human, which is why you must do everything within your power to suppress the anomalies outside of your city. The implications of anomaly governments sprouting up all over the planet ought to be obvious, and it all starts with those outside of your city.

*-Juan Nortooga, letter to Mayor Patrick Donovan of Chicago
United Nations Secretary General
6.23.2168*

Upon Anton's entrance into their squad room, applause erupted from the sixteen men that were seated in untidy rows. The applause turned to silence as Koskie followed him in. Today was day one, and Anton was still unaccustomed to taking control, so he let Koskie take the front and proceed with

the formal introductions.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Koskie said. "You've all read the reports in the papers. You know that the attacks outside are coming more frequently, and getting more violent. What you may not know is that both the Mayor and the United Nations have been working on a more aggressive strategy. One that will take the fight to the anomalies and their enclaves once more, not only inside our walls, but outside as well. And as soon as I introduce you to your Captain, it'll be your duty to carry out that fight."

"Well hurry up with it then," Caleb said from the front row, and everyone in the room laughed.

"I understand that most of you know him already," Koskie continued. "But for those of you that don't, this is Captain Anton Donovan, and he'll be taking control of the day to day operations." Koskie turned to Anton. "They're all yours." And then he left.

Anton didn't have much to say, so he simply welcomed them and told them to return to their desks and get organized while he prepared their orders and team assignments for the day. In the back of the squad room was his own office, which he had furnished and organized the day before. He called Caleb over from his desk and led him into his office.

"We have to get them some experience working together," he said, still standing.

"I agree. Some of us have hardly even seen the walls, never mind what lies outside it," Caleb said. "Going out there without some cohesiveness would be suicide."

"I want you to be my second in command," Anton said, turning to look at him.

"If you want, sir. Some of the older men might have a problem with taking their orders from me."

"I'm three months younger than you. If they had a problem taking orders from someone so young, they never would have agreed to this assignment."

"But it's different coming from you, Anton." Caleb's voice was shaky. "Besides, there's only fifteen other men. How much help will you need?"

He was right. With only fifteen men, the logistics certainly didn't require someone to issue Anton's orders for him. But he had another reason for wanting Caleb to be his First Lieutenant. "The other men in the squad think I'm some kind of genius. Those that weren't in academy with us have heard the stories. They'll follow my orders unquestioningly. They won't even think about them."

"That sounds like every commander's dream," Caleb said.

"Only those commander's too arrogant to consider the obvious," Anton replied. "If there's no one questioning my orders, what happens when I'm wrong?"

"Perhaps you won't be."

"That's ridiculous."

"I'll accept the post," Caleb said.

"And you'll be questioned occasionally, but you'll also be smart enough to consider the merit of those questions," Anton said. "Because you will know that the questions will be directed at my orders, not at you, my lieutenant."

The computer on his desk beeped, and the random assignments he had asked it to generate began to spit out of his printer. After the war, the cities of the world had toiled to bring electricity back to their citizens. Government demanded power for much of their basic functions, but such demands paled next to those of the citizens and their computers. Television entertainment might not be what it once was, with such restricted broadcast schedules and no national entertainment companies. But computers didn't rely on a broadcast for entertainment. The worldwide internet was long gone, its infrastructure the first target in each country upon launch of the intercontinental missiles, but still the computer was such a magnetic draw upon people everywhere that the governments of the world dared not fail to meet their citizen's demand for it. So it was that the upper levels of society and a few government agencies still had antiquated computers, scavenged from the rubble. There was even a small Chicago based government network broadcasted via relay signal, although it was so slow that few people ever tried to access it.

The printer was done. Anton scanned over the team assignments, random pairs amongst the squad, and their orders. Each of the pairs of men would be sent to different sections of the city walls to speak with the guardsmen there, learning from their experience, and to view the city's immediate surroundings. Anton would float in between them, checking on their progress and getting their thoughts. He watched Caleb hand out the assignments, uncomfortably noting the looks that crossed the faces of several of the older men. A bearded thirty year old named Owen was the worst, snatching his assignment from Caleb and listing his accomplishments loudly throughout the room before asking Caleb to recount his resume for them all. Anton strode quickly from his office to stand beside Caleb and asked Owen to recount his accomplishments one more time, which he did.

"You're thirty years old and *that's* all you've done," Anton said. He turned to look throughout the squad. "You're all going to have commendations and jacket medals far beyond what you would normally expect. For as long as you can remain alive, you're going to progress in rank at twice the speed of a typical CSS enlistee." He turned to Owen. "But only if you can respect the chain of command. Do you understand?"

Owen nodded and Anton returned to his office. There were no more incidents.

The recent graduates were more respectful, asking the occasional question, or making a remark or two that Anton overheard and logged in his memory. Most of the comments had to do with their assignment for the day. There were murmurs that they wanted a more exciting task. But there was little in the way of regret or anger behind them, and Caleb seemed to quickly settle in to his role, answering their questions and concerns fluidly. By the time they were getting ready to head out, Caleb had become so comfortable that he was no longer glancing nervously to wherever Anton was standing, as he had at first.

The teams got onto four-wheelers and made for the wall. Anton followed Caleb and his partner on to the road, his skin instantly soaked in sweat from the summer heat. He didn't know much about what Chicago weather was like before the war, but the scientists swore up and down that these one-hundred degree July days were normal. Unfortunately, additional layers of lead-lined clothing were still required to avoid skin cancer, thanks to the radiation that lingered in the atmosphere. Anton wore the layers as well, so that no one would become suspicious.

When they had reached the wall and Anton had jumped off his four-wheeler, a mid-ranking guardsman came jogging over from the ladder that led to his post. "Are you Captain Donovan?"

"I am."

"We were notified that you and your men would be coming," the guardsman continued. "You might want to reschedule though, sir. We've had some pretty serious activity down below."

"Show us," Anton said, and they climbed to the top of the wall together.

When he looked over the parapet, he felt his breath slip away. There must be nearly a hundred of them, grouped in small tandems as far as he could see in either direction. There were never more than four or five anomalies in any of the groupings, and they were spaced out from one another. It made for an effective method for avoiding mass casualties.

This wasn't how things were supposed to happen, he thought. His uncle had said the situation was under control, but Anton had never seen or heard of anything like this, either in person or in the briefings they'd given him. I'm supposed to be getting my men acclimated to the wall and what is outside it. They're supposed to see the bombed out buildings, the tattered roads, and the desolate outskirt areas. Perhaps, in the distance, they should have seen the suburbs, those that suffered less destruction because they didn't contain anything that was strategically important.

But that wasn't going to happen today, and from now until the day they died, the view below them would be the one his men associated with any area outside of the wall. He looked at the faces of Caleb and his partner. They were both slack-jawed, staring over the edge of the wall down on the groups of anomalies that were partially hidden as they ducked in and out of the rubble or sat around small fires that occasionally seemed to spring from nowhere. Anton imagined all of his men up and

down the wall with similar expressions on their faces.

“Why aren’t they attacking?” Caleb asked the guardsman. “They’re just sitting there, like they’re waiting for something.”

“We’re not sure,” the guardsmen answered. “They do retaliate if we provoke them, which we stopped doing after losing a couple of men. But we haven’t been able to figure out what they want. They must have some reason for gathering along the wall like this, but there’s not a lot we can do to figure out what it might be. All we have is a rumor going around that they slipped someone inside the walls and are waiting for them to return. I can’t corroborate that, though. It’s not as if we can ask *them*.”

Have you tried, Anton thought silently. Of course not. The idea of communicating with them never even entered your mind.

He looked again over the edge, this time down at the concrete itself. The wall was fairly high up, some two hundred feet or so, but its thickness was what made it so impenetrable. Ten feet of solid concrete meant the scattered entrances or scaling the wall itself were the only hope for getting into the city. While he had still been at the academy, Anton had toured the entrance points of the wall with his uncle, and had been impressed by how much security surrounded them.

No, scaling the walls was the better option, provided the anomalies could keep the guardsmen busy long enough to survive the ascent. He noticed burn marks pocking the outer surface, some looking more aged than others. He asked the guardsman about them, mostly for the benefit of his men.

“They throw fire at us from below whenever they try to scale the wall,” the guardsman explained. “It’s really something. Doesn’t do much damage to the wall, of course, but the bursts prevent us from being able to fire at them as they climb. We have enough men to spread out and get them before they make it to the top anyway.” He looked sheepishly at Anton. “Usually, at least.”

“Would you like me to tell the men to return to the squad room, sir?” Caleb asked him. “Not that they can’t handle what they’re seeing, of course, but the guardsmen are too busy to offer us much insight today.”

“You can contact them via their relay phones,” Anton nodded. “But we’re not going back to the squad room. Tell them to gather here.”

Caleb looked at him curiously. The idea of putting the squad in the midst of this situation had apparently not occurred to him. But Anton realized that with such elite talent, throwing them into this type of situation might actually be the best thing for them. Caleb himself, shocked as he might have been at this first look over the wall, had recovered quickly. Why shouldn’t the other men do as well?

The squad made their way to Anton’s section of the wall and they gathered around him. He saw no sign of incapacitation in any of them. “I realize that this is not what we had planned,” he said to them. “What you’ve seen below may have come as a surprise and it is unfair to expect you to be prepared for battle this soon. Unfortunately we are at war, and war is never fair. It doesn’t wait for you to earn your chops before hitting you with the hard stuff. So pay attention, because after the guardsman fills us in on what they know, we’re going to assist them in clearing out whatever is going on below.”

They merely nodded their heads. Anton realized then that he had picked the right men for his squad. There was no reluctance or regret in his troops. They were eager to carry out his orders.

The guardsman told them what he knew, which wasn’t much. The anomalies had first appeared at daybreak, settling into their small groups for several hours. The guardsmen had braced for an attack, but one never came. Around mid-morning, those in charge on the wall decided to disperse the anomalies with a light attack. The counter-strike had been swift and violent, and then those anomalies within range of the wall had taken shelter in whatever structures were nearby. There hadn’t been much in the way of communication, but somewhere far down the wall a report began to circulate that the anomalies were awaiting one of their people to emerge from inside the city and return home.

What is home to them, Anton thought. Is it some deathtrap of a structure, long ago bombed out and crumbling still? Did they sleep on any manner of bedding, or was a hard floor all that was

available? How did it compare to his own home, with his adopted mother's meals and his expensively furnished bedroom? He had never really put much thought into how well off he was; now, with this examination of what the world looked outside of the walls, he felt guilty for living in such luxury. Those things aren't meant for me, he thought. I'm not supposed to have them. I'm supposed to be living the way the people below us now live. Or not live at all.

The guardsman pointed down to where the anomaly groups were holding up. The nearest was the remains of what looked like a gas station. Its roof was nearly gone, as was the far wall, but there were at least four anomalies lurking inside. As they peered at the structure, bald heads with glowing orange eyes would occasionally peek around corners at them. From the distance, they appeared to be comically small.

As Anton had begun to focus on the structure, he slowly became aware of the difference in scale of radiation levels compared to inside the city. The mutilated landscape below was absolutely rife with excess radiation, as prevalent as the dirt. Within the dirt, even. He could feel it *everywhere*. All of that time spent practicing in his room as a child, those had been mere parlor tricks compared to what he could do if he were to travel outside. While not afraid, he had never had another reason for traveling outside the city other than finding his father's killer. But now that he'd had a small taste, he was anxious to find out what he could do once outside the walls.

His mother's face appeared in his mind, eyes streaking with tears. "Don't go," she was sobbing. "Don't leave me. Don't die."

He had Caleb get the squad lined up in two groups, those with their marksman patches standing and those better with the automatic weapons kneeling in front of them. They began systematically drawing the anomalies out, the snipers making them scatter their cover and the others cutting them down before they could retaliate. The guardsmen that were close enough to watch them looked impressed.

But Anton knew something that they didn't. The marksmen on his squad were good, but they weren't as good as they looked. Anton had been reaching out as discretely as he could, reaching out with his senses, and using the radiation down below to spark small fires and smoke out the anomalies. It was *he* who was really responsible for most of his team's kills, though he dared not let anyone know it. He didn't need any acknowledgment. The looks on the faces of the guardsmen was enough. Yet, even as he was filled with a sense of pride, each anomaly body that fell weighed upon him.

But suddenly something strange began to happen. The more he used his power to draw out targets, the more things got strange. After a while he stopped helping his men completely, instead staring down the row of the anomaly groups in silent wonder. As far as he could see, they were standing together, unmoving. He thought it was his mind tricking him at first, but it looked as if they were all staring directly at him. How are they doing that, he wondered. Can they sense me, the way I can sense the radiation below? Am I putting my men in danger?

Only Caleb noticed the change in his demeanor and followed his gaze. With tact that was typical of him, however, he said nothing and continued issuing directions to the squad. He was doing well, and Anton left them to continue flushing out the anomalies and climbed down off of the wall, shaken by what he had seen.

It was getting dark and he walked back to his four-wheeler to grab a ration from his pack. His mind raced as he chewed. Could the anomalies outside of the wall really sense his presence, or was his mind just playing tricks on him?

From behind one of the shacks near the wall, a small boy clothed in tattered rags slinked out of the shadows. He was small with a head patchy, matted down hair. They looked at each other for a moment before the child spoke. "Why are you wearing that uniform?" he asked. "Did you have to kill to get it?"

"No," said Anton slowly. He walked toward the boy, noticing that he was shivering as the sunlight continued to wane. Whenever gunfire popped from atop the wall, the child would flinch. He

must be from this neighborhood. Maybe his family lives in one of these rundown shacks. Anton tried to offer his hand to the boy, but he merely looked at it quizzically. Instead he reached out with his other hand. "Do you want some food?"

"Yes," the boy said. He reached out cautiously and took a portion of Anton's rations, popping them immediately into his mouth. He looked as though he had missed a few meals lately.

Anton pulled out another ration pack and handed the whole thing over. "You probably shouldn't be out here. When you're done eating I want you to go back to your family."

The boy just stared at him, an odd expression on his face. Did I say something funny, Anton wondered. Perhaps he doesn't have a family. Perhaps they're dead, and he's an orphan. Perhaps he was left alone, like me.

"Do you have someone you can go home to?" Anton asked.

The boy nodded. "That's where I'm trying to go. Won't you help me?"

"What's your name?"

"Zak."

He couldn't just let the boy wander around lost. "Where is your house?"

"Please, just take me with you," the boy pleaded. "Get me out of here and I will find my own way home."

Anton stared at the boy. He noticed that underneath the rags, he had virtually no hair on his arms or legs, and what he had taken for grimy, disheveled hair was actually mostly just dirty scalp. He was probably somewhere near ten years old, thin, and dirty, as though he'd spent some time on the streets. It occurred to him that even in the poorer districts most families would have gathered by nightfall. This child should be inside, hunkered down with his family before the cold temperatures settled in. Even though Anton hadn't spent much time in the poor neighborhoods, he knew something wasn't right. "Where exactly do you want me to take you?" he asked.

The boy stared at him again. Then, without speaking, he pointed towards the wall.

He was an anomaly.

Anton rounded up the squad, ignored their curious looks at the boy, ordered them to go home, and put Zak on the back of his four-wheeler. He drove back into the heart of the city, past the outskirt neighborhoods, over the river, through the commerce district, and up to the quarantine center. The boy followed him willingly, holding his hand as they walked through the doors of the Retention Center. He seemed to trust Anton implicitly, which made him feel all the more guilty for turning him over to Anomaly Affairs. Why doesn't he run, Anton wondered. Can he sense that I'm an anomaly as well, like those below the wall?

The Retention Center was a dark, cold building that always gave him the creeps, though he had no idea why. He hadn't spent much time here, thankfully. But he of course knew what went on there, the killing of anomaly infants. I should have ended up here, he thought. I was never supposed to have this life.

He signed Zak into the station at the desk. The clerk told him that there was a special section of the Retention Center for older anomalies, and Anton led the boy there. Even though he had seen how the infants were housed, he was surprised to see how the holding area for the older anomalies looked exactly like a sparsely furnished prison cell. The boy began to drag his feet as they approached the bars. Anton tightened his grip, forced eventually to drag him through the doors and slamming them shut.

"Do you really think you can hold me in this cell?" Zak asked, sneering.

"Yes, I do."

The boy smiled and extended both hands which began to glow. But the glow faded quickly, and so did the smile.

"This is a facility designed to incarcerate anomalies. Did you really think it wouldn't be radiation free?"

The boy began shouting at him. "You were supposed to take me home," he screamed. "How can you let them kill me?"

Anton frowned. They wouldn't kill the boy. They couldn't. It was against the rules. The reason the city did the testing at birth was because the United Nations did not sanction euthanizing after an anomaly was one month old. They could still be imprisoned and questioned, but not killed, except in battle. For some reason the public that supported the genocide of anomaly children couldn't stomach that of their adolescents. The boy's age would save him. He'd be questioned by the CSS and then they would toss him into prison, where he'd at least eat better than he had wandering the streets.

The kid would be okay, better off than a few hours ago at least. Anton left the cold holding room and returned to the lobby computer, where he keyed in the summary report. Out here in the lobby the air was warm, comfortable. It would have to be, so the clerk wouldn't freeze at night. He wondered exactly what the temperature was back in the holding cell.

Details being rather sparse, his summary report took but a few moments. He wondered for a moment if there was anything else he should do for the boy, but what else was there to do? He had already made sure the kid would get his three meals a day, hadn't he? And life in a cell had to be better than out in the badlands. So why did he feel so guilty?

His relay phone chimed. It was the Mayor's office, requesting his presence immediately.

"I very rarely say this," his uncle said once they were seated in his office. "But I'm impressed. Your first day on the job and your squad helped to dispatch an uprising at the foot of our walls *and* you captured a fugitive anomaly within the city itself. Not bad for a day's work."

Anton thought bitterly about the irony in his uncle's words. He hadn't had to *capture* the anomaly boy. Zak had gone with him willingly, trusting one of his own kind not to betray him. His uncle's words were like a spotlight on his secrets: everything he'd said was from the human point of view, and Anton wasn't human. It cast the purity of his goals into a chasm of falsehood. He was caught in the middle of two equally powerful pulls. An anomaly had killed his human father, and the motive for such a crime was a puzzle that had to be solved if peace were to be possible. But humanity seemed to be every bit as evil and bloodthirsty as they claimed anomalies to be, save that they tended towards murdering only children, where as anomalies apparently preferred adults. Anton wanted his life to mean something. He wanted to help to do right, to do what was just and good. His inability to find anyone good to fight for was beginning to tear him apart.

Anton did what he had always done when those feelings rose in him: he shoved them back down someplace where they wouldn't demand his attention, wouldn't get in the way of what he had to do. Perhaps no one was good. Perhaps there was no such thing as justice. Perhaps there were simply different points of view, rather than any right and wrong. Perhaps there were no good guys anymore, and maybe there never had been. All of that reinforced his notion that concentrating on finding his father's murderer and getting his answers was the only thing on which he could concentrate.

Before he left City Hall, Anton mentioned that Zak had thought he was going to be killed.

"Come on," his uncle laughed. "We'll question him, certainly, but he's too old to be euthanized. He's self-aware. Killing him would be monstrous." He clapped Anton on the back. "You did well today. You fought the enemies of our city and you got this anomaly off the streets and into a facility where he'll be fed and given a bed to sleep on while we learn all we're able to from him. Go out and celebrate with your men. Go home and rest. But whatever you do, hold your head up high tonight."

But he didn't feel proud. He left and took his four-wheeler out to the city wall, driving aimlessly for several hours. He saw his future ahead of him, dreary and unendurable. He wasn't sure he could bear this, sending innocent members of his own kind to rot in prison and suffer at the hands of human interrogators, but he couldn't *not* bear that life either, for it was the only life that afforded him a reasonable opportunity to find his father's killer, explain such a crime, and work towards peace. Still, he would be depressed in life, wishing for relief but denying it to himself. If there were only himself to think about, he could escape today and leave this all behind. But whenever this thought arose he

remembered the weeks after his father's death, how his mother had cried, weeping herself to sleep night after night. She deserved happiness, and though she had tried to tell him differently, Anton knew it was his responsibility to bring that happiness to her. And nothing would make her happier than peace between humans and anomalies.

Anton turned the four-runner away from the wall and sped back to the inner-city. In that moment of grim realization, knowing what a terrible burden his life was going to be, he remembered how comforting his mother had always been. Even though he was older now, she still had her motherly way and he yearned for that feeling now.

She was lying on her bed when he finally made it to the penthouse, watching one of the entertainment channels. Back when he was young he used to curl up next to her and watch the vids. On impulse he did so now, awkwardly noticing how much bigger he was than her, how far past hers his legs reached. She hugged him closely as they watched some old action movie, and if he could have, he would have stayed there with her forever.

Eventually he slipped away into his room and went to bed. He slept in fits, enduring nightmares about battles on the wall and his mother being murdered by anomalies. In past dreams they killed her to force him to join the enclave. But tonight they said they had a different reason: revenge. They told him that they were revenging the death of one of their children, Zak.

He awoke with a start, noting that light was barely breaking through the window, dark and purple. He felt guilty, even though he knew the accusations of his dreams weren't real. They couldn't be real. Feeling silly, he flipped on his computer and logged into the government network. It was painfully slow, but eventually he made it to the prisoner information site. Anton searched for Zak and found that he had been kept at the Retention Center overnight. Anton flipped open his relay phone and called the front desk at the Retention Center and asked about Zak.

"He's still here," the clerk said, sounding bored. "Director Koskie was here, but he left a couple of minutes ago."

"What was he doing there?"

"Interrogation."

"But the boy is okay?" Anton asked, feeling stupid.

"Sure, I guess. I mean, he fought some during the interrogation, but nothing out of the ordinary."

He hung up the phone.

I've never seen an interrogation, Anton thought. I've never been briefed on one. I've never read any government rules or manuals on how they are conducted. So I don't know what *normal* is. I have to go check on the boy. Even if what I find is horrible, and I discover that my own uncle has lied to me, even if because of his betrayal I am no longer able to even look at him let alone follow his orders. Even then, I have to know.

When Anton had arrived at the Retention Center, the clerk took one look at his uniform and waved him through. Zak was curled up on the cot in his cell. Whether he was asleep or had been knocked unconscious Anton couldn't tell, but there were ugly purple bruises all over his face and arms and he was bleeding from several of his fingers where the nails had been removed. His cheek was pressed flat against the pillow-less cot, as if he hadn't had the energy or opportunity to make himself comfortable, but had instead simply fallen asleep wherever he happened to have been laid. But it wasn't any of this that brought tears to his eyes. It was the cold, angry look in the boy's eyes once he had shook him awake. They spoke to him clearer than any words possibly could: this is your fault, you did this to me, and in doing so you are a traitor to your own species.

"Leave me alone," the boy whispered. He winced as he spoke the words. Clearly it hurt even

to talk.

“Zak,” Anton said softly. He helped the boy to sit up, but too fast apparently, and he vomited off to the side of the bed. “Are you alright?”

The boy looked up at him with that same accusatory glare, and when the stench of blood wafted over to Anton upon the boy’s breath, regret spread through his entire body in an instant.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner, Zak. I—“

“You brought me here,” the boy said. “He said you worked for him. That you were helping the city-dwellers to find us and kill us.”

Anton was silent, hanging his head. And then, because shame was too unbearable an emotion to endure, he cultivated the anger within him, feeling it powerfully. “We’re leaving,” he said coldly. “I’m getting you out of here.”

He led the boy by his hand out of the cell and to the front of the Retention Center. In his anger, he almost didn’t notice the desk clerk stand up to block his path.

“Where are you going, sir? Director Koskie said that he would be back for the prisoner in the morning. I can’t allow you to transport him without authorization.”

Anton tightened his grip on the boy’s hand. “Where is Director Koskie taking him?”

“CSS headquarters.”

“For what purpose?”

“Termination, sir. By firing squad.”

Anton shouted in rage and struck out at the clerk, sending her crashing over his desk. Zak jumped back but then came quickly as Anton beckoned him out the door and out to his four-wheeler.

“Get on,” Anton said sharply.

“Why are you doing this?” the boy asked. “I’m an anomaly, remember? You serve the city-dwellers.”

“You have a right to live. A right to see your family again.”

“Didn’t I before?”

Anton didn’t have an answer.

“How is it that someone so strong with the touch can be a traitor to his own kind?” the boy continued. “You have a responsibility to use that power to help us. How can you live here, in one of their cities, while we struggle outside? Do you hate yourself? Your parents? Do you wish for the approval of the city-dwellers?”

“This has nothing to do with approval.”

“Then what is it? Why have you made these bloodthirsty humans your masters?”

“I had human parents. I have human friends. My father was murdered by an anomaly, so the blood thirst must exist in us as well,” he said angrily. Then he reached down and picked Zak up by the armpits and sat him on the four-wheeler before climbing on himself. “I’ll take you outside the walls, but only if you make me a promise.”

“What promise?”

He turned to look at the boy, fully aware that by now the clerk had raised an alarm with the CSS, who were surely on their way. Perhaps they’d even be sending his own squad. “You have to take me where you live.”

“To my family’s home?”

“To where the enclave is. To where the anomalies gather.”

He saw a look of confusion followed by certain understanding play across the boy’s face. “You’re looking for your father’s killer, aren’t you?”

“I have to find whoever is responsible,” he said, wondering why he was saying all of this to a child. Wondering why he hadn’t put the four-wheeler in gear and gotten them the hell out of there.

“You’ve betrayed your entire species, all in order to hunt down the one of them that murdered your *adopted* parent? A human?” The boy looked at him sadly. “Did they even bother to tell you who

your real parents were? What happened to *them*?”

“We have to go,” he said sharply. But the boy’s words rattled around in his head as they sped away from the Retention Center.

His goal was to get them out of the city and beyond the reach of the CSS as soon as possible. Hardly anyone ever came or went through the city wall anymore, but almost all of those that did used the main entrance to the south, since most traffic to and from Chicago these days came from the East Coast, and with the lake lying in that direction, travelers had to go south before they could turn back towards New York or Washington. But that portal consisted of a set of enormous gates, guarded exceptionally well and monitored twenty-four hours a day. Fortunately there were several smaller exits along the walls, and the nearest of them happened to be on the west wall, near where Anton had found Zak.

“Here,” he shouted back at the boy as they raced along. He unclipped his set of handcuffs and passed them back. “When we get off the bike, do your best to make it look as if you’re wearing them.”

They reached the wall and hopped off the bike. Zak had slipped his hands through the cuffs as far as they would go without ever having opened them, and Anton gripped him by the shoulder and led him towards the exit. If all went well, the guards at this exit would believe that Zak was his prisoner. As they approached, two Guardsmen stepped out of their station post and met them near the exit doorway, made of thick steel and locked with a heavy looking mechanism. As they drew near, Zak looked up at him and whispered, “Don’t betray me again, or all three of you will die.”

The Guardsmen looked them over in the dark, stopping when they saw Anton’s uniform and straightening to attention. “Morning, sir. Anything we can do for you?”

“You can open that door, guardsman. I have business on the other side.”

Both guardsmen looked quizzically at Zak, but then one of them shrugged and beckoned them to the door. Anton thanked God that the city had been sending more soldiers out through the walls lately, guessing that without such precedence these guardsmen would have been far more suspicious than they were. Instead, they were already both keying a complicated looking code into the door and lifting a series of heavy manual bolt locks until they snapped into position.

Then, one of the guardsmen turned back to Anton and held out a metallic disc. “You’ll need this, sir, to get back in. When you return, just place it in the slot in the door and it will open. If for whatever reason you believe you are about to be captured or killed, you are required by law to destroy the disc. Do you have any questions, sir?”

“No, thank you guardsman.” He took the disc, noting how similar it looked and felt to computer media, and slipped it into his pocket. He unsheathed his sidearm and poked Zak in the back, hopefully the way one would do to a prisoner. The door swung open and they were just about through it when one of the guardsmen’s relay phones rang. Anton tried to get through the door as quickly as possible, but he heard a shout from the guardsmen behind them.

Someone had called to alert the wall guards of the escaped prisoner and of Anton the traitor.

Shots rang out. In a flurry, Anton released his grip on Zak and spun around to take aim at the guardsmen. Even though all this was happening quickly, he had time to acknowledge that this meant the end of his time living amongst humans. He was an anomaly, and he was about to fire on a human. They would hate him for this. All of them.

But before he could shoot, the heavy wall door slammed shut, shots from the guardsmen sparking off of the metal. He was surprised to see that he was outside the walls, several yards from the door. The metal door began to glow an red, as though it had been heated for casting. He spun around to see Zak, with orange eyes and his hands outstretched.

“Now they cannot follow us,” the boy said quietly.

He had saved Anton from having to kill. So why was he so angry at the boy? Why did he feel betrayed, as though the thought of having that last connection to humanity was elastic and had its hold on him even through those walls, pulling him back constantly? Part of him didn’t want to go back.

Part of him just wanted to make his way out into the wilderness to survive alone for as long as he could manage.

Yet another part of him did want to return someday. That connection was still there, and the other end of the elastic was attached to his mother.

How talented I am, to be able to work myself into this situation where the only one who knows my secret and loves me anyway lives amongst the people that will now hunt me. I have made it so that regardless of whether or not I can complete my task, it is likely I will never have a life that isn't spent utterly alone, as I have made enemies everywhere, even amongst those that might have taken me in.

Silently he walked over to grip Zak's arms and lower them. The door stilled glowed brightly, and likely would for some time, as much radiation as Anton could feel coming from within the metal.

He gripped the boy's hand in his once again and turned to walk away from the wall, a single tear zigzagging down his face.

Chapter 4:

We have received your message informing us of the interrogation you recently conducted and we do indeed urge you to transmit us the transcripts over relay. We have had very little data to work with, but what little we know about how the anomaly language differs from ours is very intriguing.

There seems to be several layers. The first is the human language of their region. Those anomalies outside of Chicago speak English; those outside of Moscow speak Russian; French outside of Quebec City; and so on. There is also their slang, similar to ours, but obviously with different terminology. A third layer of their language appears to be a form of sign language. It's not fully fleshed out signing like ASL or SSL, but there appears to be some kind of coded gesture-based meaning called "zanaking" that incorporates words along with the gestures. They insist there is no such language under interrogation, of course, but even in the limited observation time we've had of this language or code it is clear that the language is very real, and very important. They can tell us otherwise, which actually tells us even more about how important the language is, but any additional knowledge we can gain is vital. After all, in prewar times, one of the common axioms was "know thy enemy", and what more important steps could we take along those lines than being able to decipher their language?

We've wondered if this additional language based in part around gestures and body motion could explain their ability to get a read on our thoughts through our body language. Since the raids we've had more adult captures to study, but their grasp on our language makes it easy for them to hide their own. Maybe they only revert to their gesture language when they're sure no outside presence can watch them. They might even have rules governing such behavior, or perhaps there is simply a general understanding that they should keep this language from us. Whatever the case, the gestures are there and it is imperative that we learn to understand them as well if not better as they seem to understand us.

Along those lines, I was wondering whether you have the equipment to videotape your interrogations in the future. If you do, I must impress upon you my strong desire that you tape future interrogations and send copies of the tapes to my office, either via relay transmission or even physically by vehicle if need be. There may be hints we can derive into their language and psyche that are otherwise not discernable in the written transcripts. And if you have any opportunity to record interactions between anomalies that do not realize they're being taped, you will be well compensated for those recordings by the United Nations. We've seen them make such gestures as salutes, handshakes, and rudimentary signs that clearly have some meaning for them. I believe that our inability to understand those gestures stems solely from an inferior sample size.

One thing we have been able to verify is that they identify they're affiliations with unique gestures. One of the anomaly enclaves outside of New York, for instance, does a variation of the old United States military salute when they greet each other as a way to verify they're from the same clan. They also tend to refer to each other as *brothers* or *sisters*, obviously beyond traditional familial references. They call us *city-dwellers*, as a separate identifier from themselves, but it has also been reported by several sources that they consider themselves human, though a persecuted minority of humanity. They have also been overheard to refer to traitorous humans that do not share our views on the anomaly problem as *brothers* or *sisters*. Is there any better indication that these traitorous humans must be counted amongst the enemy equally?

-Clint Eliason, letter to Mayor Patrick Donovan of Chicago
United Nations Dept. of Anomaly Research
6.22.2168

The fallout lands west of the city didn't look anything like Anton had imagined. As he followed Zak through the rubble-covered streets, they passed all manner of buildings, all of them in disrepair to

varying degrees. The street they were traveling upon was exceptionally wide, perhaps two or three hundred feet in most places, and the structures on either side were high above them on matching bluffs. Anton guessed early on that this must be what the history books called a *highway*, and his suspicion was confirmed several miles later when they passed a scorched sign that said *I290*. He had spent much time during his childhood reading prewar material, and he recalled several maps of the area in and around Chicago. This highway had led through the west side of the city and into the suburbs. Having lived most of his life behind the walls, the highway signs that had survived meant nothing to him, but he memorized them anyway in case he needed a reference later to get home.

At least the weather was cooperating. It was hot under a scorching sun, something like a hundred degrees, and they were bathed in light.

"I'm a little surprised we haven't seen any of your people," he said to the boy. Zak was trudging along ahead, moving easily amongst the rubble, occasionally reaching out through the radiation and tossing debris out of their way. "I thought some of them would have remained behind from yesterday and met us near the wall."

Zak turned to look at him as they continued walking. It was the same look he'd given when they had first met, as if confused why Anton wasn't getting something. He stopped and faced Anton, still for a moment. Then his eyes glowed orange and his fists clenched.

Anton took a step back, alert. "What are you doing?"

"Many times it's easier to do while we're manipulating radiation, or *touching*, as we call it," Zak said.

"Easier to do what?"

"Reach out with your mind and try to sense me. Try to sense the touch I have on the radiation around me."

Anton wasn't sure how he was supposed to do that, but when he closed his eyes and used the part of his mind that was able to sense radiation to reach out in Zak's direction, he found that he could indeed tell that there was a difference in the way the radiation around him felt. "I think I've done it," he said, opening his eyes. "I can tell that something is different around you."

"Good," Zak nodded. "That difference only occurs in those with the touch, anomalies. Now stop focusing on me and tell me what else you feel."

Anton did as the boy instructed.

Now he could feel many of those differences all around them. They were similar to Zak's, but all of them slightly different and unique. There was something like a dozen of them, though it was hard to be exact.

"You see?" Zak said.

"Are they following us?"

"Yes. They picked us up as soon as we left the wall. If you weren't a stranger they'd have approached long ago."

Anton kept reaching out with his mind. They appeared to be traveling in small groups of two or three. Over several minutes, the sense of some of them flashed strongly, indicating that they were using their power for something.

"They're clearing the way for us," Zak said, answering the question Anton hadn't asked. "This far away from the enclave, the beasts are numerous."

When Anton stopped and opened his eyes he was out of breath and had sit down on the pavement. Zak sat next to him.

"I didn't know this type of thing was possible," he managed.

"I'm one of the stronger children when it comes to touching. I've shown other children how to develop their power before," Zak said, and then shrugged. "No reason I can't do the same for you. It comes pretty quickly. Before long you'll feel like you've been able to do these things your whole life."

"It's more than the humans ever feared, isn't it?" Anton shook his head. "Everything they know

about us, even what they only suspect, it's child's play compared to what you can actually do. What *I* can actually do. Isn't it?"

Zak laughed. "That guy that beat me up kept asking me how heavy of an object I could move with my mind. As if that was a major concern compared with the fact that if we hadn't been in that damned cell I could have touched the radiation around his body and focus enough of it on his heart to make it explode. Or to make it simply stop beating. Or to tear it out of his chest cavity with my mind and bring it to rest in my hand."

"Have any of you ever done anything like that to a human?"

"Our enclave has very strict rules when it comes to using our power in the presence of humans. Something such as what I described would only be permitted if I was in mortal peril. All power besides the moving of objects is forbidden in front of humans except in the face of death."

"The punishment for disobeying those rules?"

"It varies," Zak shrugged. "It used to mean exile to the badlands at least. Often times the punishment was death. Now, since Scythe began to gain influence, the punishment for harming humans has lessened."

"There have been attacks in the city."

"Only to rescue one of our own, or else to get something we desperately need. Those missions are ordered by the council itself, after Scythe proposes them." Zak grinned at him. "I was sent in to locate a sibling of one of our leaders, and it's the first time one of us has been captured in months. We've suffered nearly zero casualties in the city so far."

"There will be more," Anton insisted. "More incidents of violence will only make the humans demand more action. Your enclaves might be strong, but I doubt you could resist if they threw their full forces at you, as a matter of sheer numbers."

"They'd have to find us first," the boy replied, his grin widening. "We're very good at hiding, and it's easy for us to move if we have to." He looked off to the west. "We call the city Rownosci."

"Equality?"

"You speak Polish?"

"It's like a second language in Chicago. Do you think it's a coincidence that your enclave uses Polish words too?"

"I suppose not. Nearly all of us *did* come from the city, after all. Or else our parents did."

"Aren't there legacy families?"

"For city-dwellers, the only limit on procreation is the amount of space you have within your walls, which is ample. They've cleansed enough of the land to provide plenty of food. Many are poor, but even they have work with all there is still to do." The boy shook his head. "But not us. We have to be very careful how our population grows. We don't have your cleansed land to grow crops. We have unlimited space, but not unlimited building materials for homes or furnishings. There is much less damage in Rownosci than was done in Chicago, but we are working with far less numbers."

"I see," Anton said. "So your people live together, build a society, but with limitations on having children."

"Some limitations," Zak nodded.

"But that will have to change. Otherwise your people will rebel. I don't know if we're truly human or not, but we're close enough to have inherited their urge to have children and build a family. If your people aren't allowed to breed, where will they get their children?"

Zak laughed again coldly. "We get them from you! My enclave parents aren't my birth parents. But they took me in and gave me a home, like all the families do."

"But they test the children," Anton said. "They test them, and they euthanize the anomalies."

"All life on this planet operates with one goal, to survive." Zak shook his head. "Your city can put in place all the laws in the world, but life will still find a way to propagate."

"I don't know."

"You have all the proof you need right in front of you," Zak said, standing and spreading his arms wide. "Ten years ago, my mother gave birth to me. She passed away shortly after, but not before making my father promise to get me out of the city, to make sure that I lived. Isn't the power of guilt wonderful? He brought me out here himself."

"I thought you said your parents out here weren't your birth parents?"

"They're not. My father was shot trying to return through the walls the next day," Zak said.

"They said he was a traitor to his people."

Anton sighed. "Maybe he was. You know what happened to your mother. You've heard the stories. Our kind...we kill our mothers."

"That's sometimes the case with human mothers. And yes, I personally know what a tragedy that can be. But it doesn't happen as often as you're told. There's something like five thousand of us in Rownosci, and most of our mothers survived our births. Of course, people in Chicago never hear those stories."

"There are some supporters."

"Yes, and most of them are our people." He must have made a face, because Zak continued.

"You didn't think that everyone out here was an anomaly, did you? Some of us are human, too."

"That can't be. How would they survive the effects of the radiation?"

"Well, they can't go outside as much as those with the touch, and they don't live as long as they would inside a cleansed environment like Chicago, and they have to take some anti-radiation medicine that we've developed, but they say it's worth the sacrifice. Those that don't agree live inside the walls and support us from there."

Anton stood up and looked around them. He imagined faces in the windows of the crumbling buildings that surrounded the highway pavement. He pictured them looking at him curiously, as if wondering if he might finally come around to be their ally. Seeing those faces tugged at his chest, even though they were only imaginings. What will you do, they asked. Will you hunt us or help us?

Neither, he thought. It's not *you* I'm hunting, but someone among you. Your eager, innocent faces betray no malice, you children of the atom. It was suffocating, this desire of everyone in his life to have his participation. There is no virtuous option. I don't really support either side, humans that kill anomalies, nor anomalies that kill humans. Even those not following the path of this Scythe character, whoever *he* was, even most of them were guilty of endangering their human mothers. Anton tried to count the number of truly good people he knew. All he could manage was two: Caleb and his mother.

The thought of her brought tears to his eyes. He stood and turned away from the boy. She spoke to him in his mind, whispering comforting words of solace, but that only deepened his shame. Far beyond Caleb, she was all that was good in his life. She was what propelled him on his quest. It was she for whom he sought peace. Even before he'd been born, his mother had imagined him, prayed for him, and in the end raised him.

And he'd left her behind the walls to worry over him. Some son I am, he thought. I wonder if insensitivity is another anomaly trait.

When he had wiped his eyes, Anton turned back to Zak and they resumed walking down the highway. As they did, Anton did his best to bury his emotions somewhere deep within. For him it was a simple matter of deep breaths and mantra like repetitive thought. Hadn't he done this hundreds of times in the past, whenever the subject of his father was brought up? And how did those faces or the memory of his mother impact his future path anyway? He had to do what he had to do, and if he wasn't able to make it back hopefully his mother would forget about him entirely. Maybe she would adopt again. Maybe next time she'll get the child she deserves.

"Anton," Zak said from beside him. "You've looked confused from the moment I met you, as if you're unsure where you belong. As if you didn't feel a part of any group greater than yourself."

"I don't belong anywhere," Anton replied. "Not in this wasteland, not behind any walls."

"But how do you know? You've been outside the walls less than a day. You haven't even visited Rownosci yet."

"I don't fit in anywhere. I'm unique that way. An anomaly raised by humans, loyal to neither."

"You can't live that way, Anton. You won't last long. But you know that, don't you? You've lived less than twenty years, and because of who you are and what you've endured you intend on orchestrating the future such that you're sure not to survive much longer."

He saw where the boy was going. He was pleading his case for the anomaly enclave, weaving in the peril of death should he strike out on his own. Because the only way he could go back inside the walls now would be to force his way in. He was surely a fugitive, as unwelcome as any other anomaly. So if he found that both sides of this war were irreconcilable, his only choices were to join the enclave of anomalies in Rownosci or to strike out on his own in the deep wastelands, where death was all but assured.

"I'm not suicidal," Anton said. "I might not wish to live amongst your people, but that doesn't mean I want to die."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps you just wouldn't mind if you did."

"The only death I fear is one that comes before I can find my father's murderer."

Zak bowed mockingly at him. "Oh, you are *so* brave."

"What do you expect me to say, that I enjoy my life? I *had* a life. I had a future. I wanted to be a teacher, but someone from *your* people made that impossible."

"Nonsense," Zak dismissed his words with a wave of his hand. "How can you lay the blame for your father's death at the feet of all of us? And by the way, they're *your* people, too, whether you like it or not. Until you meet us, how can you judge us? If you spend time among us and discover that we are monsters, then you can go conscious-free out into the wasteland to make whatever life you can out there. But I'm guessing that I'm the first person with the touch that you've ever met, and you gave up everything you had in the walls to rescue me and bring me home."

"That's different. You're a child. You're innocent."

"You don't know that."

"Of course I do. You're a child."

"And?" Zak stopped him and lifted his ragged shirt. Underneath, clearly visible amongst the grime, were more scars and bruises than Anton could hope to count. "Perhaps the children within your walls are not required to fight and defend their people, but out here we are."

"You might have to fight off the wasteland, but nothing you've done could have warranted a death sentence."

"You mean like killing humans? No, I haven't done that. But I've robbed them before. Threatened travelers coming to your city and taken their possessions. Sometimes I've taken their food, water, and clothing, leaving them with nothing. Perhaps they died out here as a result."

"You're doing what you have to do to survive," Anton insisted. "Or else you're following someone else's orders. Either way, you're a child. You're not responsible for anyone's death."

"What do you know about surviving in the wasteland?" Zak was shouting, his fists clenched, but his eyes thankfully lacking any glow. "For all of your training and all of your strength, I could leave you here in the blink of an eye and you wouldn't last two days! You've been out here mere hours, so what say have you in judging the actions of those to whom this place is home?"

Anton took a deep breath. "Perhaps I was wrong."

"But you're still going to follow me, aren't you?"

He could tell from Zak's tone that the boy thought he had him cornered. And to some degree, maybe he was right. Ignorance wasn't a frame of reference, it was a lack of one, so how could Anton judge the anomaly enclave without ever having visited with them? "I trust my intuition," he said. "But I admit I don't have much firsthand experience out here. I'm not making any promises, but I'll give your people a chance to prove me wrong."

"I knew it," Zak said softly. "Despite your self-hatred, you're at least compassionate and rational enough to see for yourself who and what we are. And do you know why? You want to understand yourself. You want a better understanding of who you are."

"Even if that's true, we haven't considered another possibility," Anton said. "Even without my uniform, it'll be fairly obvious that I'm not from the enclave. I think it's likely that your people will simply cut me down as soon as we arrive."

Zak shook his head. "You have such a twisted sense of trust. Do you think I would be taking my rescuer there if I wasn't sure you'd be safe?" He stepped forward and took Anton's arm in his hands. His expression was solemn, his gaze serious, and his lips were pressed into a thin line. After only a moment's hesitation he traced a glowing fingertip across his forearm, leaving behind the shape of an eye transposed on a triangle in faint red lines. "The all seeing eye and the pyramid, one of the symbols of our enclave. It means you are under our protection."

"Where did you get this symbol?" asked Anton. "Isn't it Arabic?"

"They say it's Egyptian, a symbol of protection of the God of the sun. It's also used by those touched around the world to identify one another. That symbol on your arm will allow you entry into any enclave anywhere in the world. It means that no matter what you choose to do, or where you choose to go, you will always have friends amongst those with the touch."

Anton looked into Zak's eyes, and saw there a friend every bit as loyal and trustworthy as Caleb. It was odd to see such an expression on someone so young. He had seen it before, in the mirror in the days after his father had been killed. It was the look of honor, of the passion with which one would pursue their task, which they knew to be just.

How right this poor boy was questioning my judgment of his people.

So as they continued walking, he asked every question he could think to ask about the anomaly enclave. What was daily life like? How were the families structured? What kind of technology did they have available to those living in Rownosci? What defenses had they set up? Was there a leadership hierarchy or some other kind of government? The answers he got were instructive, particularly in what Anton was able to read between the lines of the boy's responses. One of Anton's gifts had always been his intuition in reading others, seeing the conversation from their point of view and guessing what they were trying to convey and what they were leaving out. It made him an adept leader through the academy, because he could understand what his men were afraid to tell him. But it also made him a compassionate listener to those who were too proud to be fully forthcoming. So when Zak described the love and devotion of his adopted family, Anton could also hear in his voice the longing for his true parents and the rest of the family he left behind in Chicago. He knew better than to accept the virtuousness of the leader Scythe at face value, despite Zak's description of many great and honorable deeds. He also was able to sense how angry Zak was at humankind for forcing him out in the badlands, even though he spoke of Rownosci with great pride. No outsider had ever heard these words from Zak's mouth and actually understood what they meant, but with each step they took and each word out of Zak's mouth, Anton felt closer and closer to the boy. By the time darkness was settling in, his heart had broken for Zak a hundred times, and he loved him as if he were a brother. This time he was unable to hide his tears.

"So you'll give us a chance?" Zak asked.

He couldn't decide what to say. The boy was right; Anton couldn't properly judge these people without being among them first. He had to go to Rownosci, not only for himself, but because of that same sense of honor and duty that spurred him on to look for his father's killer. What if all of this could be explained in a way that was palatable to humankind? What if this group of people wasn't the murderous, sociopathic threat humanity thought them to be? What if they could be understood and assimilated into human society but for their prejudices? What if all that was needed was someone with his unique background and lineage to bridge the gap between these two nearly identical species?

But even deeper than that sense of duty was the emergence of hope. Hope that the fighting

could cease. Hope that once it had he might be able to give up the life of the soldier, throw away his isolation and start again where his life had left off before that terrible night a few years back. Hope that he might be able to return to his home, the city, and his mother.

So he had to go. He had to meet with the enclave, understand their lives and their actions, minister to their own prejudices and hatreds. In their identity of inferiority he saw his own, but if that identity was misplaced and could be corrected then the seeds of peace might be sown. If it was within his power to do all of this, didn't he have an obligation to try? As an accidental member of both communities, didn't he owe them as much?

When he regained control of himself he slipped an arm over the boy's shoulder. "How old are you?"

"We don't really keep track of age out here," Zak replied. "Few of us live long enough to die of old age. But based on the seasons I'm somewhere around twelve years old."

"And how many of your people live out here?"

"A couple thousand. It's hard to tell for sure since some of the families live outside of Rownosci."

"Will we reach your people today?"

"No. We'll need to rest soon. It's too dangerous to travel at night."

"Because of the animals?"

"Partly, yes. The snakes tend to hunt at night, as do the bats. Some of the nocturnal insects are particularly nasty. But there are also the raiders."

"Raiders? I've never heard of them."

"That's because they only come out at night and they almost never go near your walls."

"What do you know about them?"

"They're mutants, changed physically and mentally far beyond our differences with the city-dwellers. They live in the northwest and only come south to pillage. Usually they attack those outside our protection, stealing their possessions and their women, and killing the men. But they wouldn't be able to pass up a small group of travelers at night."

"I thought you said your people were protecting us?"

Zak shook his head. "Not enough of them. Not nearly enough. The raiders have guns. Big guns, far more than we have and they seem to have an unlimited amount of ammunition."

"What do they do with your women?"

"We can only guess, as none have ever returned to us from their camps. Rape and slavery seem the most likely candidates."

"Then why doesn't your enclave counterattack? You don't seem to have been dissuaded by our soldiers, and they've *got* to be better armed than anyone out here."

Zak snorted. "You might be surprised. But even so, we'd happily throw ourselves at the raiders, but we can never be sure where they are. We used to send scouts up north to find their camp, but we stopped when none of them returned. And we can't be sure that they wouldn't attack our people if all of our warriors left to seek them out."

"Zak."

"Yes?"

"What does your enclave want? Where do they see all of this fighting going?"

Zak spread his arms wide. "We want equality. We want the same right to live that humanity enjoys. We want to live with humans, away from the danger of the wasteland."

"But why don't you build your own permanent city, with its own walls?"

"Our settlements have always been mobile, but Rownosci is different. They *are* building walls there, and perhaps that settlement will be a permanent one. But what about other enclaves near other human cities? The human cities are already established and have a thousand advantages because of their location and infrastructure. It will take centuries for us to build our own settlements to match

them. And we know the rule the United Nations has declared for anomaly enclaves. We know how they have reacted to the discovery of a ruler out here. All that because of one man. What will they do if they see us erecting walls around our own city?"

"But do they really want equality? Or do they want retribution?"

"Equality."

Anton took a deep breath, picking his words carefully. "Those that are afraid of you will offer certain actions by your people as proof that you can't be brought into their society. Mugging travelers, violence within the walls, and so forth. Do you think your people are truly ready to live harmoniously alongside humankind?"

"We were never *not* ready," Zak said, exasperated. "They are the ones that murder us. They're the reason we have to live out here in the fallout lands with the beasts and raiders. Even the natural human instinct to not harm children has been usurped by their fear. If they can slaughter hundreds of our children, who are defenseless, how can they accept the rest of us who are not?"

"They have the capacity," Anton insisted. "But they have to be relieved of their fear before the door can be opened."

"Is that what you intend to do? Are you no longer consumed with the search for your father's killer?"

"There are two fears the humans have and explaining my father's death is the key to quelling one of them."

Zak peered at him as they continued, but said nothing more until the sun fully set and he announced that they needed to stop for the night.

They came upon a crumbling ramp that led down to the remains of many buildings in various stages of neglect. An enormous green sign on the ground had some symbols upon it that were too charred to be deciphered, but in clear stenciled letters below them it read *Oak Park Avenue*. They clambered down the rubble and walked the streets, Zak leading the way. Eventually they stopped in front of an expansive brick building. On one side was a large grass field, unkempt for years. He wouldn't have understood its purpose but for matching Y-shaped posts on either end of the area. It was an area for sport. Looking up again at the brick building he noted the uniformity of the windows for each of the rooms. Though the roof of the building was no more, it looked as though the rooms were in fair shape. Through one window he even saw an intact blackboard.

"This was a school," Anton murmured.

Zak shrugged. "If you say so. The others will be here shortly. Hopefully they'll have food."

They found the entrance and walked into the building.

"They're going to hate me, aren't they?" Anton asked Zak.

"You've hated yourself for so long that you assume everyone else does as well. They'll be grateful for rescuing me."

"I've killed some of them, though. On the wall the other day. I used what I can do, my touch, to kill them."

"It took all of us some time to adjust," Zak replied. "Even the children, who have a much easier time of it."

"But still, I have killed."

"You were following orders. It wasn't you."

"My fingers pulled the trigger. My power drew them from cover."

Zak shrugged yet again. "So explain it to them, as you have done to me. They'll forgive you, as I have."

We'll see, Anton thought. They may forgive me today, but how about when I find who amongst them murdered my father? What will they think when I suggest that that man is no hero, but a villain who stole away the chance for peace? And what will it take for me to forgive myself, both for deserting humanity who allowed me to live and my treachery to the anomalies who allowed me to be?

But he already knew the answer. Only being the one to reconcile both groups could provide that kind of salvation.

Chapter 5:

We captured an adult anomaly on one of our excursions outside the walls the other day and she said something during her interrogation that I think you need to be aware of. Apparently the enclave outside my city has a system for indoctrinating their children to serve as militia. She was reluctant to give us any details at first, but after a sufficient amount of pain had been applied she was quite forthcoming. Apparently they gather all of the children that reach the age of eight and begin to train them, both in physical warfare and in their abilities, something she called “the touch”. I attended the interrogation personally and, before I could stop myself, I asked her how they could treat their young with such disregard. I could tell by her response that these beings simply have no sense of family, nor love for their children.

But her original statement alerts us to a problem, one that may be of use as a rallying point against the dissenters. The anomalies are building an army, or if not an army then an insurgence. They clearly have some plan of attack brewing. And it will be carried out by a force of children. As best as we can figure, they do this either out of cowardice or the hope that we will waiver in our resolve at the sight of their young on the march.

What other animals on the entire planet do we know of that are willing to sacrifice children that way? The only one I know of is the chimpanzee, who will hold up their own infant to ward off an attack. No wonder their behavioral issues strike us as so backwards. If they share like behaviors with our evolutionary inferiors, it stands to reason that perhaps they are indeed a step backward from us, like a wrong turn in the evolutionary path, spurred unnaturally by the Great Atomic War and its after effects. Until now it has been difficult to instill true fear in the people. The fact of the matter is that despite how different we are, the anomalies *look* like us, and so without some kind of violent reminder the common people don't see the danger we're all in. Until now I made speeches and used the press to keep them vigilant. But an army of children? What could be more revolting?

Before you go thinking me a monster, I don't revel in any of this. The dissenters in my city are still few, but they are growing. The memory of the murder that sparked all of this fades from their minds, and what remains is weakness and complacency. The anomalies have been careful since then. They rarely try to scale the walls anymore, so I've had to falsify some reports in the papers. We thought they would be on the attack. Instead it appears the anomalies are exhibiting patience in their plans.

Yet I don't think they'll wait long. Their actions lately, the things I've seen, they are bizarre. Gatherings along the wall. A kind of reverence for this Scythe character. They've even managed to kidnap my nephew, who was one of our best soldiers. I have sent out a force to look for him, of course, but I fear that none of them might ever return.

Not that I will let that keep me from doing my duty. I've been clear with my men, particularly the elite forces, if they encounter my nephew among the anomalies, their order of shoot to kill stands, despite the risk of death this means for him. In the meantime, I strongly suggest you disseminate information on the anomaly child armies as quickly as possible. At the very least, it ought to curb some of the voices we must constantly shout against.

*-Mayor Patrick Donovan, letter to Juan Nortooga
Office of the Chicago Mayor
7.22.2168*

They had situated themselves in one of the classrooms on the top floor so that the fire they started would release its smoke upwards and into the sky. They sat in silence and waited for the rest of Zak's people to find them. The sky was clear, providing them with a wonderful view of the stars, which twinkled pink and orange because of the radiation in the atmosphere. It had been years since

Anton had stopped and simply looked to the sky, but now he thought it was something everyone should do once in a while. He knew the stars were far off suns, continuous nuclear explosions, just like their own. How ironic that the same thing that had brought such devastation to the entire planet was also the source of such beauty in the sky.

In school they had covered basic science from textbooks that had survived the war and a few newer versions that the city's presses managed to produce. Scientific studies interested him, particularly genetics. The world that remained after the war might be scorched, but most of the knowledge of the prewar times had survived. He would delve into the texts, he would study, and after finishing each book he would write himself a summary so to better remember what he had learned. Usually the prewar books provided the best information, since the newer texts were more plainly biased, particularly in the field of genetics. It was a game the city played, trying to control information and shape the minds of its constituents. For Anton, it was easy to parse out the good information from the bad.

For a long time he had thought of such science as if it existed in a closed box. He extrapolated the examples and theories in the books to the entire universe. But looking up into the sky made him consider just how big that universe was, how many alternate theories there might be, and how many counterexamples to those from the textbooks might exist. People always thought they had their universe figured out, but that couldn't be true. Each different setting, each set of unique circumstances had to be considered on their own, and common theories and laws might not necessarily apply. Never mind that sometimes even the best scientists and teachers simply got things wrong. What might he discover out here, away from the closed box of the city, out in the fallout lands? What other assumptions of his might be proven false?

One of those assumptions already had been, actually. The official story in Chicago was that there were humans inside the walls and anomalies on the outside. But Zak had said that wasn't so, and what reason had he to lie? Then there were the raiders, who Anton had never heard of. This isn't what I expected, he thought, because I had nothing true on which to base my expectations. This world is completely foreign to me.

The thought made him uncomfortable. He hated surprises, preferring to know what would transpire and plan accordingly. And he'd had the trait tracing back to his childhood, when his mother learned not to wrap his birthday gifts for fear that he would suffer any anxiety. Eventually she had simply given up coming up with gift ideas herself entirely, choosing instead to simply ask him what he wanted.

But out here, *everything* was up in the air. None of his assumptions could be relied upon.

The only obvious course of action was to trust Zak to keep him from trouble until he was comfortable. It was another odd feeling, because Anton had placed trust in so few people in his life. Yet the boy had done well, thus far, even coming to his aid back at the wall. And for the first time Anton had a friend with whom he needed no protective guard, no veil behind which his true identity could hide. That's why he could trust more easily than in the city. The hiding was over. And, realizing it suddenly, he felt such a sense of relief. And grateful! He was so grateful for this connection, for the chance to be understood, that it created an emotion within him so strong and dense that it felt as if it had a gravity of its own.

Thanks to Zak's prior instruction, Anton sensed the others approaching long before they entered the room and shuffled around the fire. He noticed at once that they were all dressed in the same black hooded robes that looked as though they were made out of some kind of thin animal skin. Even as he continued to worry over their reaction to his presence, part of him was curious about the material of the robes. Were they rabbit skin? Deer, perhaps? Both animals had gone through minimal mutations according to the teachers back in Chicago, so it was unlikely that the radiation had turned them into predators the way it had stray dogs and the giant spiders. He also wondered why they were dressed that way. He had never heard of anomalies dressing in any kind of uniform. They had always been

described in tattered garments, presumably scavenged from the former communities outside the walls. The result was intimidating, he thought. Uniforms were for soldiers.

But despite his curiosity, Anton kept quiet as they filed in, performed some kind of salute by placing their open palms over their hearts, and then squatted around the fire. There were seven of them. As their robes swayed with their movement, he caught glimpse of the odd dagger or firearm, and he was reminded again how much there was in the fallout lands to scavenge should one have the inclination. Once they had pulled back their hoods he saw that all but one were men. The lone woman might have been pretty if she didn't have a look of brute strength emanating from her powerful frame. Definitely military, Anton thought. They have the same look about them as the men in my squad. No, not my men any longer. Caleb's men, perhaps?

"Zak," one of them said, reaching out and placing a hand on the boy's shoulder. He was massive, with a hard set face and a hairless head.

"Hello, Saint."

The light from the fire was bright, so they all noticed when Anton's head snapped up at the name. "Saint? Are you Catholic?"

Saint smiled, the gesture stretching out his scarred face. "No, though there are some amongst the enclave that practice religion. Saint is short for Cosaint."

Interesting, Anton thought. Cosaint wasn't a name, or at least not a normal one. It was an Irish word meaning *protection* or *protector*. So they made use of both the Polish and Irish languages. That made sense, as those nationalities were common in Chicago. Anton reached his hand around the fire, offering it to Saint, who took it after a moment's hesitation.

"I'm glad you found your way to us. This day has been a long time coming."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Anton replied.

"Our kind doesn't belong behind human walls. Not yet, at least."

Anton looked around. Everyone else was staring at him. Not accusingly, but interested.

"Perhaps someday we'll all be able to live behind those same walls together," Anton said.

"Perhaps. But I think it would be better to be able to live without the walls at all. As long as we are around to compete with the city-dwellers, there is little chance of that happening."

There it was. Anton understood why this soldier had such a bleak view of the future; didn't he sound just like the human soldiers? Those that did the fighting always had the least room for optimism, being too focused on whatever battle might come next. If Anton had any hope of bringing the two groups together, he would have to fight that mentality on both sides of the walls. "Zak tells me you've helped clear the way for us. Thank you."

Saint waved a hand dismissively. "The boy exaggerates. We welcomed the opportunity to put our skills to use. I only wish there had been adversaries more worthy than mere spiders and snakes."

"Well, you have my thanks anyway. The reaction in Chicago would be quite different if mutated animals showed up on their streets."

"They're unaccustomed to such danger," Saint nodded. "Perhaps Scythe can work that into his strategy some day."

"What good would that do? You'd be left with a city filled with dangerous pests and worse."

Saint's eyes twinkled in the firelight. "That is a sight I would welcome. Clearing your city of pests would be a trivial matter. City-dwellers are more difficult."

"It sounds like they're right to fear you," Anton said carefully.

"They have only themselves to blame. They cannot murder so many men, women, and children and expect us not to fight back."

Careful, Anton thought. "You're right. But exterminating every city-dweller would make you every bit as evil as they. Surely you can see the hypocrisy in that."

Saint smiled. "Spoken like someone who has never been forced to live in the fallout lands. But no matter, you will learn soon enough. Scythe has personally requested to meet you. No honor could

be greater.” He nodded towards the other cloaked figures. “As the Straznik, his personal guard, we will escort you to him. I hope for your sake that he likes what you have to say.”

“What does he want with me?” Anton asked, though he thought he knew the answer. It was information about the city they'd be after. The city, and the Chicago Security Service, troop formations, battle plans, whatever might help them wage war on Chicago. “I won't help you kill humans.”

“We shall see.”

But Anton wasn't done. “Do you think you have more right to life than them?”

“They're the ones that started this war,” Saint said. He almost sounded indifferent, until he stood and looked over them all around the fire. “But in the end, we are what come next. We are evolution.”

Anton looked over at Zak, who was still seated and refusing to meet his eyes. “For years they've persecuted your people, your children. It's understandable to want a certain amount of revenge. I understand that thirst.”

“In time that thirst will become your own,” Saint nodded. “I have no doubt of it.”

“If our kind is the next step in evolution, if we're the human's betters, then what are they to you? The humans have caused enough death and sadness for us all. Why not end the war through the decisive victory of peace rather than the messy victory of war?”

“That is something you can ask Scythe, if you dare. My orders are to bring you to him, not to discuss our trials with one who hasn't experienced them first hand.”

Anton knew the words were a challenge: What place do you have to question our motives when you turned your back on your own people. He wanted to answer that it wasn't true, or at least that it wasn't his fault. It wasn't as if he had chosen to be adopted by a human family. But he resisted the urge, inquiring instead, “Your leader, this Scythe, how did he come to power?”

“He came to us some eighteen years ago,” Saint replied, his tone easing.

Anton nodded. “From one of the other enclaves?”

“No. He came from inside your city, as but a child.”

“That's impossible. All of the children are tested. Even if he managed to avoid the test, there's no way he could escape detention in the city for five years.”

“Says the full grown anomaly before me,” Saint replied, cocking his head.

Anton frowned. “My case was unique and unlikely to be repeated.”

“A moot point, for reasons I'll allow Scythe to explain if he chooses.” Saint took a deep breath and reached into his pack. From it he pulled several pieces of dried meat, some grimy looking roots, and a handful of bread. “We'll arrive at Rownosci by midmorning if all goes well tomorrow. Eat, so that you'll sleep and have energy for the day you finally come home.”

“And if I refuse to enter your city? My only obligation is to see this child returned safely.”

“Scythe wishes you to meet with him,” Saint said simply.

“Scythe is your ruler, not mine.”

“And what will you do if you don't come with us?” Zak asked, finally lifting his head. “Strike out on your own in the wastelands? You wouldn't last a week, if that. Until you've seen our city and met our people, then you have not examined the options you have, and I will need to remain with you as one under my protection. Then I'll not have been returned to my home, will I? Saint will go to my family and tell them of the stranger that couldn't be bothered to step foot in the city of his own people, and in doing so killed not only himself but they're son Zak as well. Perhaps they'll dedicate my grave pyre to you. To the stranger, you took our son away because of your sinful pride.”

“I will see you home,” Anton replied darkly. “But only because of the guilt you're choosing to lay upon me.”

“Do not lie to the boy,” Saint said sharply. “You wouldn't have agreed if you didn't think it was the right thing to do. I have learned at least that much about you in our conversation tonight. You may be suffering from ignorance on a great many things, but you're a man of honor. Do not try to

make the child feel guilt by accusing him of doing the same to you.”

Anton's annoyance peaked and he cast aside any concern of offending Saint or anyone else. His words came in a rush, emotion from recent events charging them with electricity that practically crackled. “Do not speak to me about honor. I was going to bring Zak home so that I could meet with your enclave, learn about them, and try to convince them to construct a peace with the humans. I thought I had work to do there, that it had been my calling in life. But now I’m hurt because I see from talking with you that there is no hope for either species. I see that your people are every bit as ignorant and murderous as the humans. I came out here looking for salvation, and I thought that if only the enclave could be convinced to talk instead of fight that I would have a chance, except that you wish not for equality but for retribution. And I can see in your eyes now, as I say these very words, that you do not admire me for exploring the option of peace. Rather, you hate me for it.”

He stood, huffing for breath, unable to meet their eyes or speak any further.

“I don’t hate you,” Saint said. “None of us do. We all understand the stresses of leaving a human city behind. We love you, you’re one of us, you’re our brother, and now that you’re coming home we are filled with joy at the thought of having you finally among us.” He took a deep breath. “And not all those in the enclave share our opinion of city-dwellers. Serving in the Straznik as we have, it is difficult to see any hope in peace. But perhaps you’re right. Perhaps it will be you that convinces the enclave to extend our hand to our human cousins. I hope that you’re right, even though I am almost certain you are not.”

With that, he sat back down and resumed eating, as did the others.

Anton, less angry but still upset, strode out of the room and made his way down the hallway. One of the other Straznik guards followed after him, warning him not to stray too far away from the building. But the warning merely stirred in him a rebellious feeling, so he made his way directly for the main entrance. The street outside looked different in the pitch dark, all shadows and hints of that which was around him, where a few trees blew in the wind and looked as though things that flew might be perched upon their branches if only there were enough light to see them.

He reached out with his senses as Zak had taught him, but felt only the presence of those in the school. The radiation around him felt thick and palpable, as though he could reach out with a hand and scoop it into his palm. He felt the same urge he always endured when detecting strong amounts of radiation: the urge to experiment. He wondered how true Zak’s words earlier had been. Could he do even more than he had already discovered? Would he be more powerful out here, with more radiation around him?

So he stood alongside the school on the street and practiced his skills for a few hours. He was amazed at how much easier it was, and when he returned to the classroom on the top floor to sleep his heart was thundering excitedly. He had levitated an entire mailbox, manufactured a glowing fiery orb of radiation, and ignited several splintered shards of wood he’d found lying nearby. As they prepared to continue their journey early the next morning, he recounted the experience for Zak as Saint listened in, and they both nodded their heads as if understanding how different this all felt now that he was outside.

To Anton’s relief they resumed their trek along the highway they had left behind the day before. The pavement got less and less deteriorated the further west they traveled, eventually looking as though it might be in nearly the same shape as before the war. Further evidence of that particular area not being hit as hard presented itself in the form of standing road signs and nearly intact buildings. But he knew better than to assume that the area was in any way completely free from damage. If it had been, certainly the anomalies would have made their home here instead of further to the west, where the remaining suburban infrastructure would be much less impressive. Anton wondered the question aloud as they walked.

“Why does no one live here?”

“Isn’t it obvious that we once did?” Saint responded. “With our interest in Chicago, this was

the first logical place for us to reside.”

Anton frowned. He hadn't answered the question, rather having only affirmed that the question was a logical one. “That's what I was thinking too. Everything here seems a little bit cleaner; just a bit more organized; far more kept. In fact, I would guess that a relatively large group of people lived around here for quite some time.”

“Yes we did. Until Scythe moved us west to build a city of our own. So you have your answer.”

“You seem to think I've understood something obvious when in fact I'm still only asking questions.”

Zak sighed. “You're thinking like someone who has lived behind walls all their life. We were here for some time. It was the most logical place for us to be. The ideal place for all of us to gather when we wanted to be in one place.” He trailed off, a patient look on his face.

“Sorry,” Anton said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Staying in the place everyone expected us to make our home was too dangerous,” Saint said darkly. “We couldn't stay without building walls or the raiders would tear us to pieces. And we couldn't build walls to keep out the raiders here, because the city-dwellers would have noticed. Even if they weren't able to glimpse our walls from theirs, this area is occasionally used by human travelers. What do you think the city-dwellers would do if they had seen us constructing our walls before they were finished?”

Even though Anton had grown up surrounded by the fear of anomalies, even though he had read the declassified communiqués from the United Nations detailing the prescribed action against any enclave attempting to form an organized society, he felt sick thinking about the war his Uncle would unleash upon these people if they had indeed constructed their walls within sight of Chicago. Why hadn't it bothered him like this before? Was it because back then these anomalies had been faceless beings spoken about in the abstract? In his ignorance, how much had he actually helped to advance the persecution of these people?

“I've seen the look of guilt cross your face far too many times already,” Saint said, favoring Anton with a smile, though on his scarred face it was rather frightening. “If we meant to try and shame you, we could do so easily. We merely wish to educate you on life in the fallout lands. It is the city-dwellers who have written their laws of persecution, not you, and your goals speak far more loudly than any misguided actions you've taken in your past. And even this I say to you not as a comfort, but as another explanation, for out here we have little time for blame.”

“And yet you blame the city-dwellers for everything,” Anton said, shaking his head. “Your people know blame just as surely as they know guilt.”

“And we know reconciliation and forgiveness, too. You seem to lack both for your own self.”

Anton seethed at the words until he realized how true they were. He tried to explain to Saint, to all of them, how guilty he really was. “I've hurt so many people in my life. My adopted father was killed because I hadn't joined the City Security Service and failed to protect him. I've left my adopted mother behind, surely the very last thing for which she would have wished. I've killed some of your people atop the walls, and who knows how many of their family have been caused pain because of what I've done. My entire life has been spent on the wishes and goals of others, and every time I turn around I'm doing harm in the name of those goals. What have I done yet to earn any forgiveness or reconciliation?”

But Saint, Zak, and the other Straznik refused to allow him to wallow in such self-pity. They continued to talk him through his guilt, and Anton came to trust them as he had Caleb and the other men in his squad. Internally he recognized his own surprise at the ease with which he bonded with these relative strangers.

The morning hours passed, the group encountered little resistance beyond the occasional hungry beast, and Anton's perception of Saint and the other Straznik began to change. They were stunningly

adept soldiers, seamlessly combining the manipulation of radiation with their weapons to clear their path of all obstacles. Anton became more and more eager to arrive at Rownosci, his curiosity about the rest of the anomaly citizenry ratcheting upwards.

At the same time he was nervous. Their arrival was bound to cause a stir; such novel occurrences always did in smaller communities. Saint had told Anton that there were a few thousand of them living in Rownosci, a fraction of the human population in Chicago. The only fully grown outsiders they would be used to receiving would be raiders or anomalies from foreign enclaves. The uniform he was still wearing would be instantly recognizable to anyone that had been inside the Chicago walls, and Anton worried that, despite Zak's protection and Saint's assurances, he would be summarily executed upon arrival.

When Saint announced they were only a couple miles from their destination, Anton's anxiety peaked. "*Someone* will object to my presence. Somebody will see this uniform and attack."

"They won't," Saint replied. "And if they did, we would protect you with our lives."

"No you will not. I cannot bear having anyone else's blood on my hands."

"I thought you were past all that," Zak sighed.

The skin of guilt does not shed that easily, Anton thought to himself. "You will not stop anyone who should attack," Anton said sternly. "If you do, I will leave you and refuse to see your Scythe. If I should have to defend myself against the people of your city, I will do so and leave it to God to decide whether I should live or die."

Saint studied him a moment, and then nodded tersely.

On the horizon they saw the faint wisp of smoke from a hundred sources. Anton had no idea how sophisticated the dwellings of Rownosci were, whether they burned their fires for cooking and heat outside or whether the smoke might be coming from unseen chimneys. It had only been a day since he'd left his past home behind, but already he had begun to lose his sense of what constituted normalcy. While he'd lived amongst tall buildings and indoor plumbing, what might await him in the anomaly city he could only guess. Judging by the mostly undamaged state of the houses and buildings that lined the highway they were still traveling, the city might be far more sophisticated than he had expected. Red brick buildings barely showed signs of disrepair. The occasional human or animal carcass still littered gnarled lawns that had long ago been destroyed by the radiation, but there were also some enormous trees and flora periodically within sight. Whether their size was natural or due to an adaptation to this environment he didn't know, but for some reason it sparked the sensation of hope within him. By the time they began to encounter anomalies working or scavenging in the area beside the highway, Anton wasn't thinking of trees, or buildings, or walls, or anomalies, and as they approached the half-completed walls of Rownosci his mind focused sharply.

He thought only of his mother and the tortured look on her face that he imagined she'd had when discovering that he had left her alone to wonder about his safety. He was filled partially with regret, but mostly with love at the way she cared for him, even if that care was only a perception achieved in his imagination. He had to return to her, to let her know that he was alright, to help build some kind of peace where they could be with one another again.

And to do that, he had to first win over the people of Rownosci, these anomalies amongst whom his father's killer likely resided.

Chapter 6:

The laws of the Lord state that we must recognize the one true God as our own, and that we must never do evil. But it seems clear that evil is the only skill these evolutionary mishaps possess. When they tell us stories about their kind throughout the world, usually evoked only with severe physical convincing, those stories detail their pride in horrific violence. They always conclude in threats of further violence against non-anomalies, though who they mean by this other than we humans is unclear. Using these tails as a moral yardstick in judging their species, they are unable to conceive of life without war or existence without violence. What's interesting is that they seem to have no interest in keeping humanity alive for forced labor. One would think that such violent would-be conquerors might wish to rape and pillage, or at the very least enslave those they wish to overtake. But if these anomalies hate anything more than the human race, it is the very concept of enslavement.

So, should we who live in the image of Jesus Christ and the Father see this distaste of the horrific practice of slavery as a glimmer of hope that common ground might be found between our two species? For all those that count themselves amongst the army of God, the only true answer can be no. We might find the appearance of commonality between our two peoples on occasion, but we must always be vigilant against the compassion that arises from such perceptions. Remember always that the devil comes at us not as a wolf laid bare for all to see, but rather as a wolf in sheep's clothing. Their hatred of slavery could very well be a ploy designed so that we might lower our collective guard. Or it might simply be that the anomalies as a people cannot conceive of themselves in the position of power that would allow our enslavement, so thus far they have not had the mental capacity to even consider the notion.

The focus must be on their thirst for violence. A typical threat, this particular case coming from the interrogation of a saboteur in Chicago, is that a day of coordinated attack is coming, one in which horrible vengeance will be visited upon any human living in a settlement that does not recognize anomalies as equals. When questioned about how such a coordinated attack could possibly take place when the enclaves clearly have no method for communicating with one another beyond foot messengers, the prisoner resorted to blustering claims of magical intervention of our own relay beacons and satellites. According to all of our best scientists, such claims are obvious lies, but what is extremely possible is the coordination of the local enclaves in an attack against individual cities, something many anomaly prisoners have claimed is forthcoming.

This prediction of battle may seem like more fanciful blustering until you hear the stories of enclaves consolidating throughout the known world. Perhaps this is the newest trick of the devil: instead of surrounding a lie in truth, now he surrounds a truth in a lie, all in the hope that we will not notice the danger in which we all find ourselves. Regardless, it cannot be in doubt that these creatures have no soul and so are in the dominion of human man as bestowed upon us by our creator. Like all such creatures, they may occasionally stray from the path that we have chosen from them, but the rod of correction will set that right if we raise it against them.

Pope Michael James, Recorded Homily for All Cities: Part 3.9
Office of the New Vatican
7.23.2168

They experienced little of the reaction Anton had feared as the group moved through the gate in the unfinished stone walls and entered Rownosci. Once they encountered the denser population he began to get looks and raised eyebrows as he passed by, along with a flurry of gestures, but those expressions were nearly all that of curiosity rather than hatred.

He followed Saint through cleanly streets lined with relatively well-kept structures of various sizes. Zak ran ahead of them, occasionally whispering to anyone within distance and pointing

excitedly in Anton's direction. Simple observation brought Anton up to speed on daily life in Rownosci: every building consisted of a green lawn with a blossoming garden being tended to by the women, while the men worked on the structures themselves or with tools on benches nearby. It was easy enough to see that everyone was busy doing something, though Anton did note that there didn't seem to be any children other than Zak about.

He heard a smattering of English mixed with Polish, Gaelic, and Spanish. The languages appeared to be used at random with little structure or rule as to what words should be spoken in what language. Several times Anton was sure that he heard the same word repeated within moments, but in two different dialects. Not that they talked all that much. Mostly they used their abbreviated hand gestures and stared at him curiously until he passed, and then returned to their work. It made him uncomfortable to have so many eyes pointed in his direction, so he kept his head pointed forwards and did his best to ignore them.

But as they moved further and further into the enclave, they began to draw more interest. There were more and more figures in black hooded robes, similar but not identical to the Straznik. Also, the buildings, while still constructed low to the ground, began to get larger and more impressive as they walked. There were several street signs still standing, and if Saint hadn't told him earlier that the name of their city was Rownosci, he would have sworn it must be Elmhurst, as that word was written visibly in several places and upon several objects. Along the way, Zak announced that he needed to go on ahead and ran off.

They came to a stop in a large fielded lot before an enormous building. The architecture of the structure reminded Anton of the building they had slept in the night before, and he was sure that this too must be a school, though it was double the size. He couldn't be sure just how big it was, actually, as it stretched backwards far beyond what he could see. It consisted of what looked like four separate wings, each of them connected by a thin glass-covered catwalk. Guards stood at every entrance, while in the lot there grew an enormous garden, the largest Anton had ever seen, and it was filled with females tending to it. One of them, this one in brilliant white shawls inscribed with a complicated looking pattern of orbs and ellipses, walked over and held a whispered conversation with Saint before glancing at Anton and disappearing into the building.

"She didn't look pleased," Anton said once she was out of earshot.

"You're being paranoid."

"Is there anything I should know when meeting with Scythe?"

"You should always tell him the truth," Saint said. "It is one of his greatest skills to detect a lie, and his deepest pleasure punishing the one who tells it."

"Is there any protocol to be followed with him?"

"You mean like the false admiration the city-dwellers have for their Mayor?" Saint asked, smiling at him. "No. We are a small community. There is no need for protocol out here because respect is earned, not demanded. We are a melting pot of races and classes, so we go out of our way to throw out all of our human customs and niceties."

"Then what can I do to get us off on the right foot? How can I get him to listen to me?"

"You are one of us, one of the touched. He will listen to you. Besides, he has been asking for you ever since we learned of your existence that day you appeared atop the wall. Do you think anyone he so sought after wouldn't be able to command his ear? He knows that you may well be the key to ending this war one way or the other."

"He didn't say that."

"Not directly, no," Saint admitted. "But he's hinted as much, and his wife agrees. That may not seem like it means much, since she almost always agrees with him. But she agrees not because she's subservient, but because most of Scythe's decisions are made with her counsel." He turned to Anton, looking slightly embarrassed. "I hope you can keep what I just told you to yourself."

"What?" Anton laughed. "That even your leader consults first with his wife before making any

decisions? That is the case with *all* leaders.” Although as he said it he thought of his Uncle, who was married but whose wife was rarely seen and never heard.

“Not that. That they think you're so important to their goals.”

“Why would that be a secret?” Anton asked. “I have knowledge of the city, particularly in government and security buildings, and I have a detailed knowledge of their troop training, numbers, and response plans. I assumed from the beginning that was the reason your people were after me.”

“It's more than that.”

Anton frowned. It changed how he would approach this meeting with their leader. More than before he had something they wanted, no longer mere plans and strategies, but something personal. He had expected to have to play a dangerous game of proving that he had something too valuable for them to dismiss him altogether, while not actually giving them anything they could use to inflict violence on the humans. Now he wouldn't have to do any of that. Now he had only to figure out what it is that they wanted, both from him and from the world. “What if I'm not willing to provide what he wants from me?”

Saint shrugged. “Then he will be disappointed. But you would still have a place among us. In any case, the point is moot. Those with skills are always needed here.”

“Skills? You mean not all of us have the same abilities?”

“Thankfully, no. Some of what can be done is shared among all of us to some degree, but there are differences, and those with unique abilities are not uncommon.”

“Thankfully?”

“Yes,” Saint replied, with a smile. He turned and indicated the expansive garden bustling with workers. “They say that for years our people lived on the edge of starvation. There was plenty of game to hunt, but most creatures of any size have been altered horrifically by the aftereffects of the war. Many were killed by them. Not from attack, but by one form of food poisoning or another.”

Anton nodded. “The meats sold in Chicago have to be processed several times before being fit for consumption. I've been told that these cleaning mechanisms were amongst the first reconstituted after the war.”

“Lucky for them that they had access to such machinery. Those of us outside the walls did not, and many of us perished. There was a good chance that meat would kill you, but worse was the soil. Ironically, though the plants that had adapted to the radiation were much larger, they were always inedible. We still had plenty of seeds and bulbs for fruits and vegetables, but they couldn't survive germination. The radiation in the soil would inevitably kill them off or twist them into something that could not be consumed.” He pointed at the workers amongst the garden. “That is how the order of the Tog began.”

Tog, Anton thought. More Gaelic, it meant *to take*. For the first time he noticed that all the women that worked before them had the same pattern stitched onto the back of their robes. It was a small orb encircled by entwining ellipses. It was a symbol that everybody understood to mean danger from radiation. It was the symbol of the atom.

And as he watched the women further, he noticed that while they worked on their hands and knees, digging into the loam, they never picked or potted any of the plants, nor the fruit and vegetables they bore. Instead they would crawl amongst them and every once in a while thrust their fists into the dirt, only to pull them back out moments later and perform what looked like a ritualistic movement with their hands being thrown skyward.

“What is that they do with their hands,” Anton asked.

“I thought you would have guessed. The Tog have the ability to extract any amount of radiation that might exist in the soil and fling it elsewhere, where it cannot harm our crops.”

An idea began to tickle the back of Anton's mind, though he couldn't seem to get it to properly form. “How many can do this?”

“It's somewhat rare, but hereditary in nature,” Saint said. “Those with the gift are encouraged

to mate as much as possible.”

“So the amount of tenable land has grown?”

“Yes. We now have nearly twenty acres of clean soil that the enclave maintains. The Tog are in charge of maintaining the soil. They assist in the planting and growing stages, while others do the actual harvesting.”

So they strive to return to Chicago while taking steps towards a permanent residence here in Rownosci. “I take it Scythe isn’t the biggest proponent of the Tog or their gardens?”

“It’s complicated. He needs the food from the gardens for our soldiers. The nutrients that would otherwise be unavailable have helped us to grow strong. But the other two members that make up our Rada, our decision making council, believe that we can avoid war with the city-dwellers altogether by expanding our gardens in secret and thriving in the fallout lands.”

“Are these other two members of the Rada popular within the enclave?”

“Amongst the soldiers, no. But that is starting to change. One of the Rada, named Kobi, has become very popular with our women, and they in turn have begun to influence the men. Scythe has tried to segregate the soldiers from their women as much as possible during the day, but most of the men refuse to live in the barracks once they are wed.”

“Why is Kobi so popular with the women?”

Saint smiled. “Because Kobi is a woman as well. It is she that leads the Tog, and among the Tog is the wife of Scythe. At first the marriage was something of a scandal. Such a political marriage always raises eyebrows. But at the same time most of us realized how much could be accomplished because of such a union between the Rada. They could push through their conjoined wishes, completely sidestepping any political maneuvering. It’s a shame it didn’t turn out that way.”

“And the third Rada?”

“Father Graine, our spiritual leader,” Saint said. He pointed to a large steeple in the distance. “He administers to those that wish to practice faith in the fallout lands. He also acts as moral compass to the Rada.”

“And they talk of peace?”

“Kobi does. So, to a lesser extent, does Father Graine. Though he admits that peace is something we might have to force upon the city-dwellers.”

It was complicated, as Saint had suggested. Everything out here was complicated. His father would know how to simplify things, how to put the puzzle into its proper perspective. Anton did his best to emulate him now. Yes, his father was dead. But with time, perhaps that death might end up meaning something.

The woman in the white robes appeared behind them. “Scythe welcomes you here and thanks you for coming. He is inside, attending a training session of the Straznik, but he asks that you join him.”

“Come,” Saint said.

The inside of the building did indeed resemble another school, albeit one of considerable size. The colors green and white were everywhere. School colors perhaps? He asked Saint.

“That’s as good a guess as any. We don’t make use of them.” He waved Anton towards one of the doors that lined the hallways, beckoning him to look through the window. “The building is another matter.”

Through the window was a classroom. Children sat at desks while an adult lectured to them from a blackboard. It was eerily similar to the schooling that Anton himself had experienced as a child.

“How many children are there?” Anton asked.

“Of school age? Nearly two thousand.”

“What?” Anton asked, shocked. “I thought there were only a couple thousand here *in total*.”

“Including the children, we number nearly five thousand,” Saint replied.

“That’s not possible. That makes almost half of your population children.”

"It's part of a strategy," Saint nodded. "There is power in numbers. Ever since we've been able to support larger population, we've instituted very strict breeding laws. I mentioned them before when we were talking of the Tog, but they certainly aren't the only ones that are encouraged to have as many children as possible." He led them away from the door. "The training area is this way."

Training was done in an enormous gymnasium, complete with stadium style seating and two basketball hoops. There had to have been three-hundred robed figures on the floor, all of them practicing what appeared to be a complicated grappling technique. They looked as though they were all between sixteen and seventeen, except for several adults.

"Is that him?" Anton asked.

"Yes. That is Scythe."

He was at the front of the congregation, barking out a cadence for the students to follow. Tall and frighteningly muscled, he wore long flowing red robes and wherever there was skin visible were tattoos, including on one half of his face. His movements were sharp and quick, and his voice confident and booming. A short shock of white hair topped him. It wasn't that he was working anything inspiring into his cadence, but there was something about his voice and the lack of complication in his speech that Anton found magnetic. He noticed that Saint beside him had swollen involuntarily in his chest and was standing at attention. All those in practice on the were going along in perfect unison with their grappling movement, following Scythe's voice.

There was something else, though. Something different about him, something wrong. Anton couldn't quite put his finger on what it was.

Suddenly something at the far end of the gymnasium happened. There was a flurry of movement and one of the students ended up on his back with another atop him, crashing his fists into the other's head. There were angry shouts, and the rest of the students moved away from them as they continued to roll around on the ground. Scythe walked over to them, peered down for a moment, then snaked out a long arm to swiftly wrap his fist in the robes of the student on top and throw him bodily from his adversary. He barked an order to stop as both students got to their feet. One of them, the one who had been attacked, leaped once more to initiate another fight. Scythe pulled a wicked looking black staff seemingly from nowhere and caught the student square on the jaw. Blood and spittle flew, and the student crumpled to the ground.

"All of you will learn what it means to obey orders," Scythe boomed. "We are a very loosely governed people. But there is only one who can command your obedience in battle, and that is I. As long as you are activated and not off duty, you are required to obey those commands."

Anton noticed how they all listened to him, these teenagers. They drank in his words, beamed at him while one of their own lay unconscious and bleeding beside them. What would they do if someone they didn't know, some outsider, challenged their leaders' words? Anton thought it was likely that they would declare war on such a person.

"Our law requires that you men and women protect our people, not reluctantly but enthusiastically," Scythe continued. His tone turned softer, more reasonable. "The truth is that some of you are going to die. Not due to any fault of your own, but rather because it is a fact of life in the fallout lands. What we're trying to teach you, not only the moves and weapons training, but the concept of the chain of command, it is all meant to keep as many of you alive as possible. If you do not obey orders you risk the lives of those around you. So when you leave here today, go out and act as you wish, play with your friends, worship with your family. But always listen for the voice of your superiors and let your heart yearn to fulfill your duty."

Something about his words and the inflection of his voice struck Anton. It was an almost exact replica in substance, though far more eloquent in style, of the speech he gave at his commencement in the academy. The words were designed to instill not fear, but honor. Coming from a figure like Scythe in this setting, it was obviously manipulative in nature. Had his own words manipulated in the same way? He leaned over to whisper to Saint. "What is the mortality rate of your soldiers?"

"It varies by the month. Five, ten percent."

Anton shook his head. "How much of that is the result of the raiders, and how much the humans?"

Saint smiled ruefully. "About half and half. It didn't used to be that way. Up until a year or so ago, the city-dwellers only killed our infants and the few of us that made it passed their walls. Since they started their offensive, they've killed as many of us as the raiders."

Anton hadn't thought it would be like this. He knew that his uncle had begun to send troops out beyond the walls in the last two years, but they were supposed to be putting down a dangerous resistance. Yet the only soldiers he'd seen, if you could even call them that, were Saint, his small group, and these children in Rownosci. That meant that the so-called resistance being put down was families, women, and these children. Standing in the doorway, looking now at these adolescents training to be soldiers, he realized that any troops that the CSS forces did encounter were likely children themselves. To think that he would be able to usurp this man that protected his people against such a threat was laughable.

The lecture was over. Anton and Saint stepped aside as the students filed out into the hallway, laughing and joking with one another. He was reminded again the strange normalcy this scene represented. They pushed and shoved their way out of sight, and Anton turned back towards the gymnasium to find Scythe in the center of room looking at him and beckoning.

As they drew near, Scythe smiled widely, and Anton thought that he noticed something odd. Sure enough, Anton saw he had several missing teeth when he drew nearer and the image of the eye and pyramid which Zak had put on his arm were well represented in his body decoration. Yet there was something else as well. The closer he got, the more he had the sensation that this man reminded him of somebody he knew.

But for all of his apprehension, Scythe was downright jovial welcoming him. He offered his hand, a decidedly human gesture; Anton recalled how Zak had merely stared when he'd offered his back in Chicago and he wondered where Scythe had picked up the gesture. Scythe proudly pointed out the weapons that had been left behind: staffs, blunted daggers, and throwing knives. Anton listened and then indicated a few firearms off to the side.

"You don't use them in here, I hope."

"Only to teach how to disarm," Scythe answered. "Dead warriors wouldn't be of much use to me."

"I suppose not. Yet you do train them in their use. Where do you get the ammunition?"

Scythe shrugged. "There are plenty of abandoned sporting goods stores out here. Or else we take them from inside the city."

"Or off of dead humans?"

"City-dwellers," Scythe smiled. "We have humans that live and serve here in Rownosci, as you no doubt can tell."

Anton wasn't quite sure what he meant, but then noticed again that odd feeling he had. Why am I getting this sensation that something is off here. He turned back towards Saint, who had been quietly standing to the side. On an impulse, he reached out to get a read on his sense, as Zak had taught him the day before. And then suddenly he got it.

He was completely unable to get any sense from Scythe through the radiation. He thought at first that perhaps the leader was wearing some kind of radiation shielding armor, but then realized how ridiculous the idea was. No, there was no armor blocking his ability to sense Scythe, there was a much simpler explanation.

"You're human," Anton said quietly.

"So are you," Scythe replied. "So are we all. That is what the city-dwellers don't seem to understand. You anomalies might be the next step in evolution, but it is only a step. Even Father Graine believes that."

From the words he got the impression that not everyone in Rownosci thought so. Yet here was Scythe, a human, with none of the touch that the anomalies so revered, leading them and formulating their military strategy. “My God,” Anton whispered. “What did you have to do to earn their trust?”

Scythe shook his head. “You have such a low opinion of the people here. They accepted me when I came among them. What reason would they have to suspect me of treachery?”

“You’re human,” Anton repeated. “They might let them join their enclave, live and serve among the touched, but lead them? Become part of the Rada? They wouldn’t trust like that without some kind of proof of your loyalty. Big proof.” Anton’s felt the pace of his breath quicken.

“Yes, I had to prove myself to them.”

I knew it. “Have you ever taken another human’s life?” Anton asked.

“I have.”

“You’re the military leader of this enclave,” Anton continued. “When did you get that position?”

“What you’re really asking is when did I do whatever it is I did to prove myself to the enclave,” Scythe smiled. “And the answer to that is a little over two years ago.”

Despite himself, Anton reached for his holster and his grip closed around his pistol. He whipped it forward, bringing it to sight between Scythe’s eyes. Or at least, that is what he had intended. Instead the weapon was almost immediately wrenched from his hand. By the time he had brought his empty clutch to eye level, it was empty. Turning his head he saw his weapon resting peacefully in Saint’s outstretched fist.

He’d expected Saint to try and protect Scythe. The speed with which he had done so was startling. Death would come quickly now that he was disarmed, so he closed his eyes and did his best to welcome the darkness.

Instead, he felt a hand on his shoulder, and when he opened his eyes, Scythe’s warm smile greeted him. “I’m sorry, but I wanted to see how you would react,” he said. “I’m very much aware of what happened to your stepfather. All of us in this enclave are. It marked the start of the Chicago soldier’s incursions into the fallout lands. Unfortunately, whoever murdered him has been discreet about the deed.”

Anton shook the hand from his shoulder. “You’re their leader, one of them anyway. You have ways of getting the information I need.”

“I know that based on the time and day of his death, there are few amongst our enclave that could be responsible for your stepfather’s death. I also know that it is unlikely that any of them actually carried out such an act. I have even asked Father Graine to inquire about the matter with the other priests, but they swear that nobody has confessed to such a crime during the sacrament.”

“You’ll forgive me if I’m skeptical of your words, considering they come from the enclave leader who lessens the punishments for attacking humans.”

“As I’ve said, I do not condone the attack of humankind entirely. Only the city-dwellers. Your quest for peace—yes I know about that too—will make you popular amongst the weak-willed here. There are those of us, however, that find such thinking to be dangerous.”

“The goal is equality,” Anton responded. “Ultimately, if the enclave and the city-dwellers can coexist in peace, haven’t you won? Isn’t that the ideal outcome?”

“Ideal, yes, and a fantasy as well. We cannot prudently hope for equality with humanity, because they will not allow it. We cannot prepare for coexistence, because our every waking moment is spent staving off our destruction at their hands. Such wishful thinking as yours is cut by the blade of logic, it sloughs away at its striking, and it then washes away as easily as dirt from the ground. Here, in the fallout lands, hope is not a crop widely consumed. Instead we dine on reality and purpose, where the goal is not an ambiguous and fleeting desire, but to survive the day.”

“Yet there are those here that have hope as well,” Anton persisted.

“We are a free people. We do not require those that live among us to think one way or another.

The only obedience we demand of them is their aid in our survival. So we have our dissenters, certainly. And I will drag them kicking and screaming into a better life.”

“That must be very hard on those people.”

“Life in the fallout lands is all they know. They have grown into a ridiculous sense of comfort here. That city enclosed by those damnable walls represents the only true freedom I can offer these people. Humanity revealed their true selves to me long ago. I have no doubt in my mind that on the whole—well, I would rather those with the touch be in charge.”

There was something behind the words, something unsaid but as obvious as his tattoos. It was then that Anton came to understand that despite the fact that he was human, Scythe *hated* humanity.

“You’re thinking you’ve got me figured out, right?” Scythe smiled. “You think my ability to lead has been colored by my disdain for my own species. And perhaps it has, occasionally. But I’m good at what I do here, and I can make it up to these people, no matter what horrible things my kind has done to them.”

“Perhaps you’re not aware of all those in the city that advocate for anomaly rights,” Anton insisted.

“I know they’re there,” Scythe replied. “My family was among them. As was your stepfather, I hear, and your stepmother as well. I suspect there are even more that are simply too frightened to speak out. But even they fear the anomalies. And as long as Mayor Donovan runs the government, there will never be peace between humans and anomalies. He is a man so consumed by both pride and power that his persecution of those with the touch spreads like a virus, no matter the will of the host. It is difficult to accept, that even those humans that have done us no wrong deserve to be punished, but it is true. Father Graine himself, an anomaly but also a good Catholic—even he says that the devil’s work is done because of the indifference of otherwise righteous men. Even he tells me that those that do not correct evil are evil themselves, and should be treated as no better than the beast we now battle. Perhaps we might accidentally bring violence upon those that would speak in our favor. It is something I do regret.” He frowned in a look of determination. “But if it is unavoidable, the greater good must still be quested.”

Anton said nothing. Scythe, this leader of the enclave, sounded almost exactly like his uncle had the night he’d graduated from the academy. They both had the same notion that they were doing what was necessary, and they both spoke to him of their quests as if he was some skeptical critic. But he wasn’t. He understood them both, understood from where their sense of duty came, and so in a way he came to love Scythe the same way he loved his uncle. It was frustrating, but even more so it was sad. To see two men so consumed with passion in their endeavors that it blinded them to reason and justice, and to see those two men battle indirectly with one another was nearly enough to bring Anton to tears. Just as his uncle had been, Scythe was suspicious of him, careful in how he spoke and what he said, but something told Anton that ultimately he was a good man consumed by his misguided passion, and so could eventually be won over. To, as a human, become a leader of the enclave, he would have had to at the very least be adept at listening to what others wanted and then work to provide for that want. That made his path clear: he had to win over the enclave first, and leverage them upon Scythe. But it would only be after he had become accepted by the enclave that he would be able to discover what crime humanity had committed upon Scythe to cause such hatred.

But for now, he decided a change of topic was in order. “You spoke of Father Graine. What can you tell me about worship here in the enclave?”

“We are part of an order called the Catholic Suns. It’s a Christian order, established in the enclave by several missionaries almost immediately after the war—“

“I’m familiar with the Church’s attempt at institutionalizing Catholicism among the anomalies. I’m far more curious as to how your people can call themselves Catholic when the Vatican insists that anomalies do not possess a soul.”

Scythe’s expression turned cold. “The Papacy is an instrument of God. While there are those

that wield his instrument incorrectly, we simply abide by the Papal throne as it *should* be.”

“Except that Church dogma clearly states that the Pope is the mouthpiece of God, and what he holds to be true on Earth shall be held to be true in Heaven.”

“Your city-dweller friends may have allowed you to question the Church, but I assure you that Father Graine will not.”

Anton spread his arms wide. “I meant no disrespect. I came here to learn about the enclave and to see if a strategy for peace might be viable. For as long as you will have me I will do my best to offer what aid I can and to disrupt you not at all. I think you can expect me to do well on both fronts.”

“If you’ve come to preach peace, Anton Donovan, I see no other outcome besides the sowing of discord throughout the enclave. But you are one of us, and so you are welcome. Leave your peace in your pockets. Live and learn among your brothers and sisters. I would ask of you your advice and knowledge of the city, but I do not require it. If I had my way, we would have no need to wage war on the city-dwellers to begin with.”

“I hope you can find room for me,” Anton said with a gracious nod of his head.

“We’ve constructed our walls to allow for the considerable growth we are encouraging. One of the reasons I chose this area for Rownosci was because damage from the Great Atomic War was minimal here. Most of the houses within our walls are undamaged. Many of them still have working plumbing even, and those with the appropriate talents are even now restoring the local water and gas systems to prewar status. There is any number of houses for you to choose from, though I suggest one on the outskirts near the walls. It is uncommon for those that haven’t been officially initiated into the enclave to live near the center of town, and I would like to avoid as much distraction and controversy as possible.”

“Since I don’t want to cause you any trouble, I’ll do as you suggest. If you wouldn’t mind also providing me with a guide later on, you would have my deepest gratitude. I’m looking forward to meeting with the other Rada, Kobi and Father Graine. I will need assistance in finding their places of business and worship, if you will allow it.”

Scythe studied him critically for a moment, as if trying to decide if he was going to be more trouble than he was worth, but then nodded curtly. He was a strong figure, and his dress and the tattoos were certainly intimidating enough, but Anton was struck by how amicable Scythe continued to be, and how familiar interacting with him felt.

It seemed that very little out here was going to be as he expected.

He couldn’t help but be impressed by the thorough furnishings of the two-story house they had provided. He welcomed the couch and table that stank from lack of use. The bedroom was comfortable: there was a guest room, and a small but complete kitchen. He was able to unpack in minutes, with only his CSS backpack in tow. He stripped and changed into his. A shower would have been nice, but there would be plenty of time for that later, and he was expecting his guide to show up rather quickly.

He looked around the room, feeling that odd sense of familiarity again. This house wasn’t so different from his mother’s condo in Chicago. It was probably even a bit larger. “If they could see this,” he murmured, “they wouldn’t call the anomalies savages.” Even as he said it, he wondered if it was true.

Anton had stridden into the enclave unsure of where to begin, but after his introduction with Scythe he felt he had a focused approach. He would have to deal first with the intellectuals in the enclave, then he would have to specifically win over the women, then the soldiers, and finally the Church. I’m a Catholic by upbringing, he thought. At least on that front I have something more in common with these people than mere biology. But while I might be able to rely on common ground

there, I have to be very careful not to alienate any of the power groups here. Otherwise, how will I ever truly become a part of the enclave? I don't even know if I *have* it in me to join their community. Haven't I told myself over and over again these past years that I'm unique because I don't belong to any group? Having never joined others this way in the past, how will I now—

“Wallowing in self-pity again?” asked Zak from the bedroom doorway, where he had apparently been standing for some time. “I can feel your reservations. The way you're going, perhaps if I hadn't shown up you would resign yourself to your bed and waste away to nothing at all.”

“I'm far too conflicted for you to be able to read my thoughts that way,” Anton said cheerfully. “One cannot climb the obstacles in front of him until he knows that they are there. I'm simply identifying my obstacles.”

“A nice lie, but a lie nonetheless. I don't need to read your thoughts to see the loathing in your body.” He stepped into the room, peering at the uniform he had stripped off and his pistol. “They sent me over to be your guide. Apparently they think that having interacted with you in the past, I will make you more comfortable.” He looked at the signs throughout the room that he had unpacked, and then looked back at him. “What are you waiting for?”

Anton laughed. “I don't even know where I am, Zak.”

“We don't make any maps of Rownosci,” Zak said. “It's small and everyone already knows where everything is. Most of the important structures are taller than the others, so I can point them out to you from the front porch, if you like.”

“Show me.”

They walked to the front door and onto the sidewalk. Zak was young, but as he'd said he knew where everything important was. “This area you're in is one of four common areas, where homes are provided,” Zak said. “This one is called Elmhurst, because of the trees. That spire you see in the distance is the church, where we worship and where Father Graine lives with his family. The taller building next to it is the Council Building, where the Rada meet and where public meetings are held.”

He turned to gaze behind his house, where men worked on what was currently a seven or eight foot barrier. “Are there any schematics or plans for the wall?”

“In the Council Building they have the plans for where the wall will go,” Zak answered.

“Is the wall the only defense the enclave has against the humans and raiders?” asked Anton.

“For now. But once it is completed, it will be a formidable barrier,” Zak said confidently.

“There will be places for sentries and bracing for some of the larger weapons we have scavenged. Soon anyone that approaches will have to face the choice of retreat or total decimation.”

“How nice. Is the wall truly a defense, or is it a thinly disguised offense?”

“I suppose that depends on which side of it you're on, and what you want on the other side,” Zak smiled. “It's this side of the wall where civilization exists, but that which we need and desire is on the outside.”

“That's where you must go to scavenge for weapons, ammunition and most everything else,”

Anton nodded. “Most of which you wouldn't need if you weren't constantly at war.”

“You're right,” Zak said. “But the point is irrelevant. The charming reality is that we *are* at war. Those of you that have lived behind Chicago's walls all your lives might have the luxury of considering options other than war, but we do not. You are so quick to label those of us that focus on physical methods of survival as barbarous, but that focus is what keeps us alive.” Zak pointed out over the walls to the horizon beyond. “Even our scouts don't venture far. Those that choose to make their lives beyond our protection stay close, but more and more it hasn't been close enough. They have the same access to undamaged homes, the same ability to pilfer sporting goods stores for weapons and ammunition. The only differences between them and us are numbers and the fact that when we return from scavenging we now have these walls to protect us. We aren't aware of any other communities besides Rownosci, other than the raider settlement. And Chicago, of course.”

“Have the raiders tried to get past your walls?”

Zak shook his head. "At first they did. Now they mostly focus on those living or scavenging on the outside."

"Are there any guesses on where their settlement is?"

He pointed to the north. "We don't have anything exact. Based on what some of our people were able to gather from records inside Chicago, there used to be an American Naval base near the lake."

"I've heard of it," said Anton. "I always thought it was strange that we never sent anyone to try and gather supplies there."

"It's been over a hundred years, and military installations were obviously targeted in the war. Who knows how much of what was in the base is even usable? Still, that is the most likely location for a base of operations."

"I wish I could get a look at them and see these mutations you've told me about. It is difficult to understand why they would be so differently effected compared to the rest of you."

"I thought it was obvious," said Zak. "Even in Rownosci most of us weren't born in the fallout lands. We are outcasts of Chicago. But as far as we know, the raiders breed amongst themselves and their population is the spawn of the badlands."

"All of the research indicates that radiation effects are strongest before or just after birth. I guess that a population breeding entirely outside of the cleansed areas is likely to exhibit more effects from the radiation, except that I've never heard of anything like the raiders. You would expect to hear *something* similar from those that have passed through the areas to the west or south."

Zak snorted. "You hadn't even heard of the raiders last week. Why shouldn't there be groups similar in the other directions?"

"Travelers don't come from the north, because there's nothing up there. Milwaukee is too small and Minneapolis is too far away. But we get merchants and travelers from St. Louis, Indianapolis, New York, and Washington DC fairly regularly."

"Perhaps. I would emphasize any contact you've had with these travelers, by the way. It ought to make you sound open to those outside of the Chicago population. I'm not supposed to tell you this, but Scythe asked me to steer you away from the other Rada, particularly Father Graine."

Anton smiled ruefully. "I thought such friendly overture was too much to hope for from him."

"If you came away from your meeting thinking him friendly, then I suggest you consider yourself lucky. By all measures it would make no sense for any of our Rada to welcome you. There is too much respect to be lost amidst the enclave."

"Politics reigns even in the fallout lands, I see."

"You're trying to sound wry, but instead you merely come off as foolish. Anytime you deal with a group larger than two you must take politics into consideration. Luckily for you, I don't much care for politics, so I will take you where I think you will do best to visit." He struck off immediately towards the building he had indicated earlier, and Anton followed him. What he hadn't been able to see before was that surrounding the Council Building and the Church was a kind of market, albeit a small one. There were few houses in the area, but a greater number of people. More interesting was the fact that like in Chicago, the defensive walls were well out of sight of the bustling market area. Even here in the enclave the people didn't want to be reminded that they were penned in.

The area was called the *Plaza* because of the open square around which it was built. Zak told him that it was the epicenter of Rownosci; beyond the church and the Council Building there were all the other things a population center required. The school in which he had met Scythe was only a few blocks away, referred to by the locals only as *York*. Food merchants were everywhere, grouped in a circle around a pleasant looking raised oak gazebo, and according to Zak their prices were so low they might as well have given their wares away. This worked well within small, tightly controlled communities like this. All employment came from the Rada government in the form of a small amount of some artificially scarce currency, a combination of former American script and stamped enclave

notes in this case, and they made sure that food and other prices were kept extremely low. This meant that everyone was provided for, with the church and government buildings next to the market so as to cement in the people's minds that their leaders were the ones doing the providing.

Anton looked around the market area from his position and then asked Zak to guide him to the various booths and act as his guide to what was being sold.

"Why?" Zak asked. "You'll recognize most everything here. You don't need me to be your guide."

"You're right," Anton nodded. "But doing so will make me stand out to the locals. Generating interest in myself now will help me when I need their attention later."

Zak turned slowly and gave him a hard look. "I may be a child, but do not think that you can treat me like some mindless tool to be used in your tasks. I do not like the idea of helping you to manipulate my own people."

Anton sighed. "Do I need to remind you that you have a vested interest in this too? What if this seemingly insignificant act is what allows your entire enclave to live in sustainable peace? Would you still take so much umbrage with what I ask?"

Zak seemed to think about that for a moment, and then grinned. "Today will be forever remembered as the day I helped you appear to be an idiot? Somehow that doesn't have the ring of glory to it."

"You're saying you don't think I know what I'm doing?"

"You act like someone who has a plan. I simply wish you trusted me enough to tell me what that plan is."

"If I tell you, will you promise me something?"

"Anything. We're friends now."

"If any part of my plan sounds stupid, you can't be afraid to tell me so. If we're going to trust each other, I have to know that you will be unafraid to tell me where you think I will fail."

"I'm still a child," Zak said. "It is beyond my position to question an adult in such a way."

"Don't begin playing games, Zak. You didn't have any issues with confronting me in Chicago or in the fallout lands. Do us both a favor and speak up when you think you can be helpful."

"While I'm leading you around the Plaza making you look foolish, is there anything else I should be doing?"

"Yes. Every community has not only its powerful people, but its power families as well. I want you to tell me who they are and keep an eye out for any members of those families here in the Plaza."

"Yes, my master," Zak mewed, the sarcasm leaping from his voice.

"I'm here because of you, Zak. Why are you trying to be difficult now?"

"I'm not. And you might be here because of me, but you're certainly not here *for* me. At least not primarily."

"The people here don't know me yet. I'm trying to engineer some trust between myself and them."

"I trust you," Zak said.

"Thank you, but unfortunately I need more. Much more."

Zak had taken him throughout most the Plaza, introducing him to a few of the merchants and making a good show of explaining to him in what they were dealing. It wasn't until they had circled the entire market that Zak tugged on his sleeve and nodded towards a nearby clearing where a group of children watched half a dozen teenagers playing a complicated game using a dark ball and several sticks curved near the bottom. There appeared to be something of a rivalry going amongst two of them who were taking every opportunity to elbow and shove each other in between chasing down the ball.

Every time the fighting began to die down, one of the two boys would blatantly attack the other.

Anton asked Zak who they were, but he just gave a blank look and went back to watching the game. Anton turned to some of the children watching and asked them, but they merely looked him up and down, as if trying to figure out who he was, and shrugged. When he stopped questioning them, he noticed that they began to whisper amongst one another while looking in his direction. Either they could tell that he wasn't from the enclave or Scythe had warned them about his arrival.

Throughout all of this the game continued, as did the fighting between the two boys, but as Anton attracted more and more attention the game began to slow down; several times in the midst of play the kids would stop to sneak glances at him. The two rival boys seemed to realize that there was no longer any danger of losing points in the game and threw themselves at one another. When things began to look like they were getting really rough a couple of the other players finally stepped in and wrenched them apart to the sound of gasps from the audience.

"Say it again! I dare you!" one of the boys shouted as an older girl held him at arm's length. He was thin but muscular, dressed in athletic clothes with a shock of blonde hair on his crown.

"I'll say it again, white top! You're a devo! A devo! Everyone can see it plain, just looking at your head," the other boy shouted. Like most of the other children, his hair had already begun falling out, an obvious contrast to his rival.

"You take it back or I'll beat you bloody!"

Anton whispered to Zak, "Why are they fighting?"

"He called Bryce a *devo*," Zak said, watching the boys closely. "It's a dirty, filthy word."

"What does it mean?"

"It's what some here in the enclave call the children of those with the touch who are human. It's short for devolved."

The other boy threw down his stick and began to stalk away. "Come on. We don't want to play with a devo. Or his family either."

Bryce continued to struggle against the older girl and a younger boy that had joined in holding him back. "Walk away then! Coward!"

"I don't feel the need to defend myself against the slurs of a devo!" shouted the other boy, not even bothering to look around as he continued stalking off. "You can play with the rest of your useless family!"

At this Bryce and the two holding him back stiffened. Then they withdrew from each other and looked shamefully at the ground. The smaller boy kicked at the dirt and sniffled while the other two just hung their heads. Meanwhile the children that had been watching them began to file away back through the market.

"Why are you showing me this?" Anton asked Zak.

"Those three are brothers and sisters. Catalina is the oldest. Bryce is the older boy and Benji is the younger. They are the children of one of the most respected widows in the enclave, a family of scientists."

Anton nodded. "What is this widow's name?"

"Maya."

"The other boy said the whole family was useless. Yet they are one of the most respected?"

"They're scientists," Zak repeated. "They study their fields and contribute to the enclave in the form of knowledge and progress. To a child of two soldiers like Aaron, such contributions are meaningless. His family believes that all out war with the humans is inevitable, and that every member of the enclave should be recruited to fight."

"I see," Anton said. "You've been extremely helpful, Zak, but I'd like you to leave for now. If you can, please meet me at the house tomorrow morning."

Zak nodded and walked back through the market.

Catalina was trying to comfort the little one, Benji, who was violently shoving her away. As she

did so, Bryce stared at her with a look of utter contempt playing across his face.

"It's okay, Benji," she said. "Aaron is an ignorant fool. He is just angry that he too doesn't come from a family as smart as ours."

"Oh, leave him alone," Bryce snarled. "He'd be fine if only he didn't have a devo for a brother."

Catalina turned to him. Anton had the impression that she was going to try and comfort him too, but then all three of them noticed that Anton was watching them.

"What do you want?" asked Bryce.

Anton smiled. "I happen to be looking for smart people. Do you know where I might find any?"

"Perhaps. What type of genius do you require?"

"Science. Genetics, specifically."

"Genetics?" Bryce repeated. "What would a city-dweller like you want with the science of an enclave?"

"I suppose I should be happy you didn't call me worse than city-dweller," Anton grinned. "Enemy and infidel both have a stronger ring to them."

The younger boy, Benji, stepped forward defiantly and regarded him with a cold stare. "Scythe said you would be coming among us, trying to confuse us with your silk tongue."

"I come neither to confuse nor convince," Anton responded. He spread his arms wide. "I have come to learn. But perhaps there are none here willing to take me where there are lessons to be studied."

Bryce grinned. "Where do you wish to go, infidel?"

Benji gave a tiny scoffing hiccup.

"To the home of scientists."

"Which scientists?" Catalina asked while biting her lip. "There are many here in Rownosci."

"Why don't we begin with your mother?" Anton smiled.

"Anyone could tell you where we live," Bryce said.

"Perhaps," Anton said. "But I'd like you take me there yourselves."

"What purpose do you have at our home?"

"I've come to find solutions to my questions. What better place to begin than at the home of a family of scientists?"

"You'll find no solutions from our family," Benji said harshly.

Anton turned to him. "I would settle for theories, then. Surely this supposed family of scientists will at least have that to offer."

"Come on then," Bryce said. He motioned for the others to follow him and they all started off away from the market towards a small hill in the distance. Upon the hill were several large two-story homes. "What is your name, infidel?"

"Anton Donovan."

"Irish," Bryce nodded.

"It's an adopted name," Anton replied. "What about you? Your first names sound Irish, Columbian, and Hebrew."

"We're a little of everything," Bryce smiled. "But our surname is Trudeau, which is French. Our mother is the head scientist reporting to the Rada. She is also the sister to our Aunt Kobi Trudeau, of whom you may have heard."

"Yes," Anton said, inwardly smiling. How lucky that he had managed to strike up this conversation with a family not only influential because of their work in enclave science, but also because they were related to Kobi, the Rada member that had the ears of the women here. "Is it just the four of you in the family, then?"

"We have an older brother, too, but he is not a scientist," Catalina said. "He is one of Scythe's

Straznik.”

Anton stopped. “What is his name?”

They turned to look at him.

“Cosaint,” Bryce said. “But everyone just calls him Saint.”

“Wonderful,” Anton said. “Please, lead the way.”

Saint sat down in the grass next to the training course, panting for breath. There were elms throughout the area, many of them used as part of the obstacle course, so there was plenty of shade. He could see the heart of Rownosci in the distance as he waited for the rest of the Straznik to catch up to the finishing area. The steeple of the church was the tallest, followed by the York school where the older children were trained, and then a small hospital that served as their research facility. From what he was told most of the scientific instruments were of the primary educational variety, but the hospital was different, full of advanced equipment and computers that made him confused just looking at them. That hospital was some distance away from the church, in the opposite direction of the school. Near where the wall was being built. Away from the rest of town.

Where his family belonged.

He heard the rest of his team finally coming up behind him.

“Damn, Saint. What are you, a mountain lion?”

He'd heard similar remarks before, but always took them as compliments. Sometimes he hung back on the training course, just to let them see how fast he was. It was his way of making sure they knew that he was different from the rest of his family.

“Not a mountain lion,” he replied. “More like the tortoise amongst a team of hares.”

They all laughed while catching their breath. The training course was never easy, but in the heat of summer it felt as if you were running, dodging, and climbing through mud.

“What else are we doing today?” asked Bethany. She was one of the few female Straznik, and easily the brightest. If he weren't a couple of years older, Saint was sure it would be she commanding him rather than the other way around.

“Are you in a hurry somewhere?” he asked.

“There was some excitement earlier,” said Bethany.

“We have a visitor,” Saint said. “He is neither the first nor will he be the last.”

“But he was raised in the human's city,” one of the others piped up. “Is he going to help us?”

Saint refrained from answering, idly picking blades of grass instead.

“We want to meet him.”

Saint tossed the grass into the air, watching it flutter and twist in the wind.

“We've heard that he used to be one of their soldiers. With his knowledge we can finally triumph over the city-dwellers and return to our home. We must speak with him.”

Saint sighed. Anton's words about enclave bias towards battle were still ringing in his ears. Now, even more than before, he hated it when his soldiers talked like this, refusing to see any outcome that didn't involve war on the city-dwellers. It was as if they thought that he would look down on them if they too hoped for a peaceful resolution, as if the very idea for war had been his from the beginning and they were afraid of offending him. Though that was in part his fault. It wasn't as if he could come right out and challenge Scythe's words, could he?

“It isn't yet time for us to be done today,” he said. “But when we're done you may seek him out.”

“When will that be?” Bethany asked.

“After you have completed the disarm drills again. Our lack of progress in the skill is unacceptable.”

They groaned. Saint had patiently tried to explain to them in the past that disarming an opponent would allow you to keep them alive. He had tried to explain how much more useful a captive was than a cadaver. Other than Bethany and one or two others, they never seemed to understand.

“Tell us about him,” they persisted. There were nearly twenty of them, and only a few had made the trip to pick up Anton with him.

He sighed again. “Fine. Instead of doing our duty we’ll sit in the grass and I’ll answer your silly questions.”

They sat in front of him and the questions came in a flurry. What did the visitor look like? How gifted with the touch was he? Was he kind, or cruel like most city-dwellers? Was he intelligent? How much information did he have? They came and came and came.

Saint answered what questions he could. It felt like gossip to him, which he despised, but if they wanted answers he would do his best.

“Are you satisfied?” he asked when the questioning began to slow down. “After all, I know little more than any of you.”

“But much more than your telling,” one of them complained. “You’ve met him. Certainly you must be able to tell us what kind of person he is.”

“After meeting him once?” Saint asked. He saw a grasshopper climbing below him, one without any mutations, and snatched it up. “I might as well tell you everything I know about this insect.” With a flick of his finger, he tossed it back into the grass. “Since we no longer are accomplishing anything of use here, you are all free to go.”

Saint watched them leave. Leading a Straznik team was difficult. He would have preferred to be one of them, with someone else giving out the orders. He didn’t like having authority and in fact made it clear that they were to treat him as an equal when not on duty. Clear or not, few of them complied. At least with Bethany he could count on a true companion.

When they were finally gone, he turned back toward the heart of Rownosci. A small group was walking away from the market up the twisted path to where most of the scientists lived, in the direction of his mother’s house. The biggest of them in front had to be Bryce, while Catalina led Benji by the hand. He had spoken with her about that before. Benji was getting too old to be coddled like a child. If his youngest brother was going to follow in his footsteps, something Benji talked about constantly, he was going to have to transition from boy to man just as quickly. Motherly affection was fine for the young, but out in the fallout lands there was no mother or older sister to run to for protection.

The sun was beginning its decline, so he had to squint to see the other man following them. He finally recognized him. It was Anton, the visiting city-dweller. His first day in town and he was coming to their home? It figured. The logical place to start would be amongst the intellectuals, who would be more open to the idea than soldiers or bureaucrats. For some reason I had it in my mind that he would target the Rada first, not the scientists. I wonder if he realizes how foolish that is. He should have gone to Father Graine first. By deferring to the intellectuals, Graine will think he’s snubbing the Faith, and he will turn the visitor into the devil in the eyes of his parishioners. Now, instead of trying to convince a curious population to consider offering an olive branch to the city-dwellers, the entire enclave will be against him.

Saint arose from the grass, took a deep breath, and made a brisk pace down towards his house.

Chapter 7:

Please read this letter from beginning to end and then sign the forms attached. Even if it turns your stomach, to continue in our service this must be done. By now you have all heard the story of your former Commander, the one who assisted in the escape of an anomaly child imprisoned by the city for questioning. What you have not been told is that he too, in fact, is an anomaly, something he went to great lengths to hide from his family and all of us. There have even been reports that he used his radiation powers to attack several CSS officers who were merely trying to get his attention. But in the end, these details are immaterial. He is an adult anomaly, which is all you need to know.

The following order comes directly from the Mayor: Anton Donovan is to be considered an extremely dangerous enemy of all humanity, and is to be killed on sight. As the person charged with keeping our city safe, I cannot stress to you enough the importance of your being complicit with this order. To me, as I'm sure it is to you, the thought of killing this being that I have known for so long is extremely distasteful. I thought he was a friend of mine, as I'm sure did many of you who were handpicked by him to be in his squad. But you must understand how wrong these feelings are, because we believe he will one day attempt to return to our streets and, when he does, you must be prepared to carry out your duty to humanity and the city of Chicago.

If we are correct, and we have very good reason to believe we are, then for the first time in our battle with the anomalies we will one day come face to face with one that we know and recognize. Anton is as smart as he is violent, meaning that it is likely he will try to use this familiarity to his advantage.

But in the event that any of you should be the ones who neutralize this threat to our way of life, you are also ordered to do everything you can to bring us his corpse. This too likely sounds distasteful, particularly as you are as likely to encounter him during one of your excursions beyond the walls as you are in the city.

Attached are forms for you to sign stating that you understand your obligation and commit to carrying out your duty. Please think on this very carefully, because it is a matter of the utmost importance. This may be amongst the most difficult things you ever have to do in your entire life. But you can do it. Your new commander has already agreed and signed his papers, and he was amongst Anton's closest friends.

So when you're signing the papers, and your heart cries out that it is wrong, please know that such feelings are uniquely human, not present in anomalies, and are evidence of the very reason these orders must be carried out.

*-William Koskie, letter to CSS Special Services Squad 01
Chicago Chief of Security
7.24.2168*

Despite the relatively small population of the enclave, segregation in housing was a longstanding tradition. When a child of the enclave had reached the age when they could choose to live on their own, he or she was given a choice of houses based on his function. The soldiers' homes were all in the York area, near where they trained, and they were further encouraged to live in the barracks whenever possible. The farmers and the Tog shared an area near where they maintained their fields for growing and plowing. The Trudeau house was near the center of the area set aside for intellectuals and scientists, and was clearly larger than the homes surrounding it. The front façade was incredibly wide and made of a grey stucco-like material that Anton recognized from wealthy homes in Chicago. Coming up the street he had seen how the house reached nearly as far in depth as it did in width; there had to be twenty different rooms on the inside. There were large windows everywhere and the roof appeared to be fully intact and maintained, rare in any area that had been at all affected by

nuclear fallout. It had to be far more than *any* family in Rownosci would need, and certainly so for a widow and her four children.

Such a large house didn't indicate wealth here in the enclave as it did in Chicago, Anton knew. From what he had observed in the Plaza market there had to be virtually no income disparity amongst the anomalies at all. The size of the house, the decorative windows, the effective roofing all were instead signs of status, probably the only real currency of the enclave. Judging from the Trudeau children's disposition, Anton guessed that this was something thrust upon the family. They showed no signs of haughtiness or that they relished such creature comforts. Nor was there any indication of pride as they led him up to one of the two front doors. If anything they were quieter than they had been, perhaps embarrassed of the size of their home.

All three children walked through the door. Anton stood before the threshold, peering into the house but not stepping into it. Bryce had left the door slightly open behind him, but had now disappeared with the others past the foyer. Anton could hear them talking and opening cabinets. Expensive looking artwork hung on the walls of the foyer and there was a large ornate mirror hanging near the entrance.

Eventually Benji walked slowly back into the foyer and stood near the door. He regarded Anton with the same cold stare he had used back near the Plaza. As Anton gazed back at the boy unflinching, it struck him how different each of this family's children was. Saint was the strong elder sibling. Bryce was the ashamed human, or devo. Catalina was the motherly type. And here was Benji, the youngest and the angriest, staring at him with an unnatural hatred. Such a fragmented family indicated something, though Anton wasn't quite sure what. But there was something wrong here. And Anton knew where that something was likely to originate.

"Is your mother home?" Anton asked.

Benji continued to glare at him.

"My mistake," Anton said. "I thought this was a family of scientists. Now I see that it's a family of mutes."

He didn't react, other than to let his sneer widen.

Anton heard footsteps and looked up to see Catalina walk into the foyer. She looked thoughtfully from Benji back to him, frowning. Then her eyes went wide and Anton looked down just in time to see that Benji had rushed him in a silent attack. He was close, but he was clearly untrained. His arms were flailing about, preparing to strike wildly and without aim in the general vicinity of his groin. Anton reached down and scooped him up in one smooth motion, turning him upside down and holding him at arm's length by the ankle.

"Please," Catalina said quickly. "I'm sorry. He wants to be a soldier, wishes Scythe was his father now that ours is dead. Please, come into the living area."

"Thank you," Anton said. He held Benji up a little higher. "Shall I bring this with us?"

"You must understand, he took father's death very hard. It isn't really his fault, this anger he has."

"He attacked me. With the intent to do real harm, though without the means."

"It isn't his fault," she repeated. "Everything has changed since our father died."

"Really? So he was a peaceful little urchin before the funeral?"

Catalina looked sheepish and didn't answer. She instead turned her eyes upon Benji, still twisting and writhing upside down. "Benji, you know it's wrong to hit. We don't hit our guests."

In response, Benji twisted in Anton's grasp and kicked out with his free foot at his head.

"I take it he was close to your father?"

A look of regret came over her. "No. None of us were. He was a soldier, one of the best. It meant he wasn't around much. We all missed him, but Benji was the youngest, see. He never grew old enough to understand the reason he wasn't here before father died. Please let him down."

Anton smiled. "No."

Her expression turned cold. For the first time, Anton could see a resemblance to Benji. “You can't hold him up forever.”

“Perhaps, though I'm quite strong and he doesn't weigh much,” Anton replied. “But this young man attacked me. I have not been in Rownosci long, but already I know that this is a place of law. It would appear that I must bring him to justice, as you have done nothing to discipline him yourself.”

“This is not your house, it is ours,” she snarled. “What right have you to lecture me on discipline?”

“I'm rather enjoying this,” Anton said. “But I am also tired. You invited me into your home, so please lead the way.”

After a moment's hesitation and another look of pity towards Benji, she beckoned him to follow and walked out of the foyer and into a large kitchen where Bryce was preparing juice drinks. She indicated a chair at the round kitchen table. Benji was still twisting and trying to hit him, so Anton lifted him a little higher and quickly maneuvered his arms such that when he was done Benji's limbs were all pressed against his body, wrapped up tight like a calf in Anton's arms. “You see, Benji? You see how much I appreciate your embrace? Here you've been trying to reach out to me all this time for loving contact, and now I've decided to hug you back. In fact, I'm enjoying this so much, I think our hug might last for hours.”

“Benji doesn't ever hug,” Catalina said, and Anton thought he heard the tone of regret again in her words. “He only hits.”

Anton already understood this. But now Bryce turned to look at them. He and Catalina had similar expressions upon their faces, staring at the way he was containing their brother, unsure of whether they approved or not. Anton smiled at them, and then took his seat, swinging Benji around in a complicated motion that brought him to sit on his lap, but with his arms and legs crossed and once again held tight by Anton's embrace. He was once again completely unable to move, though he struggled constantly.

“You have a beautiful home,” Anton said. “I can't tell you how pleased I am that such an influential family has allowed me to visit them. Particularly a family with such kind children as Benji here.”

Catalina and Bryce exchange looks.

“Would you care for something to drink?” Catalina asked.

“That would be delightful. I see you were planning to serve juice.”

“It's what our mother likes when she gets home,” Catalina said. “She's usually home by now, except when things haven't gone well at the labs. Perhaps it would be better if you came back another time.”

“Oh, no, I don't think so,” Anton said smiling. “I've had to do a great deal of walking lately and it feels good to finally sit down.”

Benji renewed his struggle, trying desperately to bite Anton on the hand. “My sister told you to go, city-dweller!”

“How could I leave such a beautiful house as this? And so big too,” Anton said. “I would very much like to meet and speak with your mother. She and I have a common interest in the sciences.”

At this both Bryce and Catalina's heads snapped to attention.

“She must be very, very smart,” Anton continued. “To have such status in the enclave as she, why, she must just be the best scientist in all of Rownosci.”

Bryce smiled. “At genetics, perhaps. But no one in the enclave understands physics as I do, and Catalina is easily our best botanist.”

“Wonderful. Truly a gifted family,” Anton said. “I'll need your help as well, then. If there are any avenues for peace between anomalies and humanity, I would like to explore them.”

“What do you know of peace, city-dweller?” Benji spat, still kicking furiously. “Every being inside your city thirsts for blood the way a puppy thirsts for its mother's milk.”

"Have you ever been inside my city, Benji?" Anton asked, looking down at him. "I thought not. There are a great many people there who support the rights of your kind. And it certainly seems to me that there is no shortage of soldiers and weapons here in Rownosci. But history is filled with examples of men who were once warriors but then chose a life of peace. Perhaps instead of thinking of me as an outsider to be feared you should think of me the way you think of the children who come here from Chicago, afraid and hoping to learn and teach, as all children do."

"You're not a child, you're the devil!" Benji shrieked.

"Nonsense," Anton said. "I am as much a child as any of the rest when it comes to the ways of the enclave. And no devil would make such an effort to speak the word of peace, not only to intellectuals such as your family, but to the very soldiers that would be used up in yet another senseless war."

"Your message will never make it to the Straznik because you'll never get a chance to speak with them," Benji shouted. "Cosaint wouldn't allow it!"

"Oh, I don't know," said a voice from the foyer. Everyone turned to see Saint stride into the kitchen. He was as impressive looking as Anton remembered, tall and strikingly built in his uniform robes. Nearly every place his skin could be seen there were dark veins and twinkling sweat. His voice carried with it authority, and Anton noticed how the rest of the children backed away slightly to give him the room to walk where he pleased. He was the man of the house, despite the fact that he couldn't be far beyond his early twenties. Still, Anton recognized how the very air had changed in the room, as if Saint's mere presence was enough to give it weight.

He walked to where Anton was standing and peered down at the grip he had on Benji. "Release him," he said, and now his voice was cold. "Now."

"Benji attacked him," Catalina spoke up, her voice an octave higher than it had been before. There was a pleading note in her voice as well, as if begging her brother not to blindly side with his family member in this small conflict. It appeared to have the desired effect.

"What have I told you, Benji?" Saint sighed. "If you continue to bring violence to the world, the world will bring violence back to you. Even you can see how tactically futile it is to strike one twice your size."

"He's a city-dweller!" shouted Benji. "Scythe said he isn't to be trusted."

Saint frowned. "But he also didn't say we ought to be attacking him, either. It isn't as if he can do any harm to the enclave."

"Actually, I can," Anton said. He had to earn both the trust and respect of this family, and he could think of no better way to do so than complete honesty. "There will be some here who are indeed offended by what I seek and the direction I wish this enclave to go. There are some who will lose influence and power. And the truth is that I might be wrong. Perhaps preparing the enclave for peace will ultimately lead to its destruction."

Saint gazed at him thoughtfully. Anton was grateful that there was no sense of outrage or fear in his eyes, just that steady, thoughtful gaze. "I'm sorry Benji, but I won't strike a man of peace in order to reward your violence."

"How can you let him hurt me?" Benji wailed. Fake crying, Anton could tell. Despite his sobs, Benji's eyes were completely dry.

Saint turned his thoughtful gaze upon Benji. "He tells everyone he wants to be a Straznik," he said. "But he has no idea what such a post requires of you in control and temper. He merely wants to hurt others, yet he cries like a newborn the moment anyone but Catalina touches his skin."

Benji's sobs grew louder, and now Anton's arms were wet with real tears.

And yet everyone else in the room seemed to relax. Their brother had not come to Benji's defense, meaning he would be keeping a level head towards the outsider. Anton wondered how many times they had seen the opposite occur, with Saint rushing to the aid of one of his family members to protect them from various harms, either physical or emotional. But both Bryce and Catalina looked

relaxed. Bryce handed out orange juice in clay cups, and Catalina lit a complicated looking cooking kiln with a flick of her wrist. Saint, meanwhile, pulled up a chair next to Anton.

“What do you want here?” asked Saint.

“To speak with your mother,” Anton answered. “And the rest of your family as well.”

He hid it well, but Saint’s discomfort was obvious to Anton. “When she isn’t home before sundown it means she’ll likely be very late,” he said. “She’s been trying to locate other genetic markers for those with the Touch. She thinks that if others can be located, she might be able to minimize the risk to human host mothers.”

“Scythe and the soldier families must *love* that.”

Saint bristled. “You think we don’t? It’s not as if we blindly hope for the death of thousands of human women worldwide. But there certainly are some who think that such effort would be better utilized for other purposes. Besides, even if she did find all the right markers and figure out how to use them to save more humans, it’s not as if they would accept such science and make use of it.”

His displeasure was mirrored in the faces of his siblings. The tension in the room had returned. Catalina’s shoulders hunched up and her lips became a thin white line. Bryce’s head acted like a swivel looking between them, as if not wanting to miss it when one of them eventually struck out at the other. Benji’s sobs turned once more to growls, and he renewed his kicking and twisting.

Catalina saw what Benji was doing and stepped forward. “Benji, stop it! You’ll only get yourself into more trouble!”

But Anton merely smiled at her and she stepped back. “No trouble at all. Benji is being of great help. I haven’t been able to keep up with my exercise since leaving my city, and he is now making sure that I am putting my work in. Training is something that saves lives, and now I see that Benji is concerned for my safety. It’s a heartwarming gesture, one which makes me want to embrace him ever the more.”

Benji emitted a howl of pure rage and began digging the heels of his shoes into Anton’s legs.

“You’re only antagonizing him,” Catalina exclaimed, exasperated.

“Actually, it looks to me as if Benji is the one doing the antagonizing,” Saint sighed. “Our guest has shown far more kindness than is required of him, and the consequences he is issuing to Benji are neither extreme nor unjust. In fact,” he continued, with a quizzical look towards Anton. “He is acting like a parent. I suppose it’s time *somebody* did.”

“That’s for mother to do!” Catalina cried.

“Yes, it is, but she doesn’t do it,” Bryce spoke up. “You do.”

“No!” Benji shouted from Anton’s lap. “Don’t tell the city-dweller about our family!”

Anton tossed Saint a sympathetic look, though he was careful to keep any hint of an apology out of it. Its message was supposed to be one of solidarity: I understand you, I’m with you, and I want to help, but what’s happening here isn’t my doing.

Anton got the impression that Saint understood, as he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We aren’t the best example of a happy enclave family.”

“That is understandable,” Anton said. “Particularly being raised by the scientist widow of a soldier.”

Saint smiled weakly.

“As if there was any difference when he’d been alive,” Bryce said into the silence.

Everyone half-nodded instinctively, other than Benji who raged once more, shouting, “Don’t you talk about Father that way!”

“What did he do to you?” Anton asked them quietly. He stayed motionless, but his eyes kept moving, searching for who was going to answer first.

It was Catalina who finally spoke, ache weighing down her words. “It was what he didn’t do. But it’s difficult to explain.”

“Perhaps Benji is right,” Saint said sternly. “This is a family matter.”

"He needs to know," Catalina replied, just as sternly.

"Why? What use could it be?"

"Because he's here to help us," she said. "And to do that he needs our help, and to talk to us he needs to understand our family."

Bryce snorted. "Best of luck, then. I live here and even *I* don't understand our family most of the time."

"She's right," Anton said. "Whether you like it or not, your family has influence within the enclave. I need not only your assistance with my scientific questions but also in being heard. To do that I will need to know this family as if it were my own."

"Then I'll tell you the truth about our father," Catalina said scornfully. "Though none of the stories are kind and if you have half a heart you will weep for us all."

There was silence for a moment and Anton thought that it was going to have to be he that broke it, until Benji yanked one arm free and pointed a short finger at Catalina. "You," he whispered. "You're a traitor to our people and our family. Scythe will have you exiled."

"Oh, yes dear brother, I'm sure," she replied in spite. She gave a haughty look, but Anton could tell that she was at least a little afraid. Despite this she stalked around the kitchen speaking quickly. "Everyone here in the enclave knows the truth. They saw how it was when he was alive, and they let us know they knew it too. Extra treats in school, better seats in church. No matter that they took from us what we longed for most and shaped him into something cruel and nasty. Never mind that because of their wants and their needs and Scythe's stupid escapades that our father not only was kept from us, but *wanted* to be kept. So here we are, a family filled with the most gifted of our generations. We have the best soldier, the best scientists, and the strongest and most devious brat his age. But what did they say when father died? Sorry for our loss? Our loss occurred years ago, when *they* took him from us. When he volunteered to leave for weeks at a time, leaving us to tend to mother while she wept and refused to leave her bed!"

"Catalina," Saint said.

"And what about what he put *you* through?" she continued. "Getting you up in the morning, holding you back from your lessons as a child to spend all day training to be a soldier, pushing you toward his life even though you didn't want it, shaming you in front of anyone until you agreed to join the Straznik? Or forcing you to fight him in the yard, saying he was teaching you but really he just wanted someone to—"

"Shut up!" shrieked Benji. "He was a great man! A great warrior!"

Catalina whirled on him. "You're old enough to know better than that, Benji. To the rest of the enclave he might have been the great protector, but to us he was a horrible man, a scourge upon our family. Why do you want to pretend otherwise?"

"A great man!" Benji shouted again. "A man who was despised by his own despicable family. All except his most faithful son, me!"

"Father didn't so much as acknowledge you existed," Catalina said. "I never once even heard him speak your name. If you could remember when you were first born, you would know as I do, that he didn't care for any of us, only for himself."

And then she recounted the scene of Benji's birth, here in their very home. The entire family had been present when Maya went in to labor, but after an hour or so their father had left them for the barracks. He'd said he was bored and that he was going to see if there was any work for which to volunteer. In the middle of this, Saint had stepped in and tried to keep his father at their mother's side. But all he received for his trouble were hateful words and the spiteful suggestion that Saint would never be a good Straznik because his priorities had been twisted by his mother. And then their father had stormed out, returning weeks later from an excursion to the walls of Chicago.

"So continue to pretend if you like," Catalina said, weeping openly. "Pretend you loved him, pretend you respected him, but I know the truth."

Anton could feel Benji go limp in his grasp.

"That's right," Catalina pressed. "Even you know it's true, Benji. He was a monster and nothing he did for the enclave will ever make up for what he didn't do for his family."

"That's enough," Saint whispered. "He wasn't perfect, but all of us didn't hate him the way you did."

"I did," Bryce said quietly, and then he burst into tears. "I hated him every time he looked at me the way he did, because I knew he was ashamed of conceiving a devo. Perhaps it was us that killed him."

"Come on," Saint sighed. "He was killed by raiders."

"Yes, but we all wished for him to disappear. I asked God everyday to take him away, and I heard Catalina doing the same. You can pretend you didn't, Cosaint, but I know you did." His face red with emotion, he turned to Anton. "Only Benji didn't show it. Perhaps he didn't hate him as we did. But he should have. That he didn't only means he didn't understand what our father was."

"You must have gotten it worse than the others," Anton said.

"Not really. Cosaint got it worse. A devo like me wasn't worth the old man's time, I guess."

Benji had begun weeping violently. He had stopped trying to break free and now buried his head in Anton's chest.

"Is he okay?" Catalina asked. The scorn on her face had been replaced with worry, and it was a look mirrored on the others' faces as well. Apparently, despite all of their disagreement and fighting, the children did genuinely care for one another.

"He worshipped your father," Anton said. "He wanted to be like him, a warrior of fame in the enclave. He never wanted to follow in your footsteps, Saint; he wanted to follow in your father's. And all this time you hated your father, and Benji was sure you hated him too."

They had obviously never considered such a concept. Grief and guilt spread across their faces like butter on toast, each of them looking sick.

"But we don't hate him at all," Catalina said softly. "He's our brother."

"Yet we hated our own father," Saint said, shaking his head. "It's my fault. I should have seen what was happening to him."

"It isn't your fault," Anton said. "I've had my share of death in my family. It's something you have to have endured to recognize in others."

They all nodded mechanically, though they looked somewhat grateful at his words and for what he'd shown them. Obviously he hadn't planned for things to go as they had. How could he have known about their father? Or that such an intelligent family would be so closed off from each other emotionally? All he had known after talking with them near the market was that they were hungry for something they hadn't had, and that they were troubled and depressed. Benji's anger had been the most obvious, and such anger only comes from a sense that the world was unjust. Where else could one so young have gotten such a notion but in his own home? He had rejected Anton's very presence only moments before, but now his tears soaked the fabric of Anton's shirt.

Such a gift I have, he thought to himself. It was my ability to read and understand people that my Uncle said would make me a great squad commander. After failing at that, here I am using it to expose another family's secrets, and making their youngest cry. I hope I'm helping as much as I think I am. I hope the Trudeau's are better for having me here today, and that they'll help me make things better for all the people of the enclave. I hope I'm not causing them grief for no reason.

And he felt a single tear drop from his eye. He wiped it away with one hand while supporting Benji with the other. "I'm sorry," he said. "For any pain I've caused you here. It was not my intention."

Bryce laughed. "Finally we have someone interested enough in us to show us the flaws in our family and he's apologizing for it."

It's not that I'm interested in your family, Anton thought. I'm one of you now, as interwoven

into your history now as your father. Perhaps that's why it happened so quickly, and perhaps you were too busy to recognize it, but I'm *in* your family now. At least as much as anyone else.

Catalina took Benji from him, and now the boy welcomed her arms. She took him off to bed, leaving Anton alone with Bryce and Saint. Saint looked him over with a smile.

"Your shirt is soaked," he said.

Anton looked down and saw the dark stains from where Benji had wept against his chest. "If it helped make him a little happier, I'll consider his tears holy water."

"Well, when your holy bath is over, I can lend you a shirt. It could be hours before our mother returns home. There's no reason you should be uncomfortable."

"I'll take a shirt then," Anton said. "Though I don't think I have any hope of filling it out the way you do."

"Maybe I'll take you to the course one of these days," Saint said as he led the way to his bedroom. "We can put some muscle on you."

"Perhaps. Although my physical strength might surprise you. It's the other kinds of strength that I could use help with."

"Maybe I can help you with those, as well."

"Yes, maybe you can."

Chapter 8:

Can you imagine living outside the walls of your city? Or the walls of any human settlement that remains? It must be a combination of constant danger and the most disgusting of living conditions. Perhaps they're used to it, these anomalies. They wake up in irradiated filth, go out and hunt for their food or scrounge amongst whatever plant life has survived the fallout, and then they come back to whatever bombed out shelter they reside in and prepare to repeat the process all over again the following day.

Perhaps these conditions have become unbearable even to them, though, and that explains these reports you're receiving of a concentrated settlement of anomalies to the west. It's evidence that this war you and others are waging is necessary. Others have discovered enclaves outside of their cities in the zones least afflicted by the war, though even there such conditions as described above seem to exist. While the travelers who make these reports never view these settlements from anything but an incredible distance, they tend to be sympathetic to the anomalies, which is understandable. When you watch a being that looks like you, talks like you, and in most ways acts as you do, it would be inhuman to *not* feel an instinctual pity for their situation.

We must remind ourselves constantly that these feelings are wrong. It is not inhuman to repress our pity for them, because they themselves are not human. They are the ones that inescapably bring us harm simply by existing, not the other way around. They are the ones that have forced us to seek out and destroy even those that no longer pose an immediate threat through existence. And as those who govern, we must always remember that for every sympathetic traveler or citizen, there are twenty more that share our resolve in keeping humanity safe from this most unholy of dangers. It is those too weak to repress their baser sympathetic emotions that deserve pity, and it is our duty to bring them into the safety of our protection. Remember, if you allow even one moment of mercy to affect your governance, the anomalies will use it to bring the world down around all of us.

So continue with your war, and fear not the rising toll on your soldiers. Nothing which is worth achieving is done so easily, and your contributions to humanity will never be forgotten. Know that the reports you've sent about walls being constructed to the west are not unique, but your response to them can be. And should you be the first to knock down those walls and erase the stain there upon the world, you would be a leader of governments everywhere, with all the influence such a distinction applies.

*-Juan Nortooga, letter to Mayor Patrick Donovan of Chicago
United Nations Secretary General
7.24.2168*

Maya Trudeau didn't want to leave her lab with work unfinished, even though it was something she had to endure nearly every day. The blood work she was doing would have to run over night. Working in genetics here was an immense undertaking; one could do a decent amount of experimental work on plants, or one could do research on the metrics taken on the population of the enclave, but for any serious undertaking, there simply weren't enough biological samples. There was little in the way of botanical metrics because nearly everything they grew was consumed quickly, and genetic tests on the people here were difficult because of the tiny workforce coupled with finicky machinery. Bryce was the closest thing the enclave had to a technician. He had done an incredible job getting things up and running, but still tonight she was delayed due to her lack of equipment.

So why am I still here, she thought. Why don't I just go home? It's unfair to leave the parenting of my children to Catalina and Saint. I love them, and I think they love me, so why don't I go see them? But even as these questions rattled around her thoughts, she sat at one of the lab stations and stared at the wall.

I can't stay here forever, she thought. Things are better now that Brannon is dead, with no more

uncertainty as to whether or not he'd be home that night, whether or not he'd make the effort to speak with any of them and pretend as though he were interested in being their husband and father. There was no love between them, but at least when he was there family had a head, a focal point around which to orientate. Now, despite their nearly universal dislike for the man, now they were floating around aimlessly on a sea of uncertainty. But it was still better that he was gone. Better to float on uncertainty than misery. What a legacy you've left, Brannon, my loveless husband.

She got up and walked through the lab and out the doors, seeing no one else along the way. What would she say even if they had stayed as late as she? The others that worked here didn't have her level of scientific knowledge, which was all she really knew how to talk about. And most of them didn't like the how much control she exerted over what they could study and how much data they were allowed to see. They avoided conversation with her the same as she avoided it with them.

Everything shut down automatically behind her. Technology in the enclave might be limited to what was already found in the buildings they inhabited, but here there were wonderful machines, like computers and motion sensors. Somehow, in all the years it had been uninhabited, most of lesser machinery here had worked from the moment they figured out how to power the building. Not they, she thought, but Bryce. Her own son had been the one who had brought power to the larger facilities, using scavenged generators and fixing them with spare parts when he barely ten years old. She thanked him silently for giving her this facility to work in, remembering how difficult it had been in the past working out of the Council Building. She loved her lab and her work, the experiment on the corn she was currently trying to engineer through selective germination to be more resistant to the radiation outside. Another of her children's triumphs, this time Catalina's. Please live through the night, she thought, thinking of the tiny kernels under the radiation lamp back in her lab. Catalina herself had helped her distinguish which of the stalks were producing the heartiest cobs, and Maya would hate to see her expertise go to waste because she couldn't figure out how to germinate the best kernels. Even walking away from the hospital in the darkness, she pictured the genetic structure of the seeds, their DNA, conjoining and mixing to hopefully create something that placed less burden on the Tog and the harvesters. But with each step she took towards home, the images washed away. Old reflexes and anxiety at arriving on her doorstep came unbidden, and her heart rate picked up a notch, causing her to walk slowly to catch her breath.

As she got close enough to make out her house, so large that it was like a stone accusation of her scientific and familial failures, she saw Catalina's shadow in Benji's room. Probably she was putting him down to sleep for the night. It meant she wouldn't have to endure the sickening likeness he bore to Connor. But looking into the other windows, she noticed that something was wrong. She couldn't quite figure out what it was until it finally came to her: there were too many shadows. She counted three of them, plus Catalina and Benji upstairs made five. She experienced a moment of terror imagining that Connor had come back from the dead to plunge her family in darkness once more, but she took a deep breath and tried to relax. It couldn't be him. But whoever it was, she hadn't invited them to her home, and like any good scientist she didn't appreciate surprises.

She heard laughter from the foyer and her guard immediately went up. Laughter was not something that came naturally in this house. Catalina was back in the kitchen, setting out food and drink on a platter while staring into the sitting room and giggling. She looked up at Maya and her smile vanished. What a wonderful effect I have on my own daughter, she thought, to steal away the only laughter I've heard from her in years. Well, perhaps if I just go to my room and lie down in bed I can avoid whatever surprise lies in wait for me and she can resume her giggling.

She made as if to walk past her toward the stairs, but felt a tug on her shirt.

"Mother," Catalina said. "We've brought home a guest."

"Who?" Maya asked.

"Anton Donovan. The city-dweller."

No, she thought. Half the enclave already hated them for being smarter than everyone else, now

the only person who could actually make them more despised had convinced her children to bring him here.

"Benji wasn't so nice to him, but everything is alright now. He's been waiting for you to get home. Here, take a juice."

"No," Maya said. "I want him out of this house. I'll be in my room until he's gone."

Catalina looked at her with the funny expression she got when trying to work out a puzzle. She obviously wanted her to join the others in the sitting room. Now, just like when she had to reverse engineer her seeds, she was trying to figure out the proper actions to take in the proper order that would result in the desired effect. Well, I'm not one of your plants, so you're going to be very disappointed.

"Mother," Bryce said, walking into the kitchen. He looked quickly at the faces of both his sister and mother. "Please don't be mad. It isn't like Scythe said at all. This man is a *good* man."

"I didn't realize you had been taking your Sunday church lessons so seriously," Maya said, the tone of her voice making Bryce wince. "Has Father Graine taken you on as his apprentice? I imagine he'd have to, your being such an authority on what is good and evil."

Now Bryce and Catalina looked at each other, a nearly imperceptible nod passing between them. Maya knew that they didn't need to speak to one another to agree to gang up on her. They had spent enough time in their own labs together that working in league like this came naturally to them. If she wasn't careful, she could spend hours arguing with them while they ran circles around her.

She sighed. Perhaps I'm getting soft as I get older, she thought. The mere appearance of my children's united front has reversed my decision not to participate in the shaming of my own family. So instead of turning into her room and hiding under the covers, waiting for the problem to go away, she hedged her bets and simply sat down at the kitchen table. She reached out and took a juice from Catalina's tray and sipped it mechanically, not tasting it. So he is here, and he has already turned my children into his puppets. Why would he come here today, his very first day in the enclave? Where would he go next?

Footsteps announced that two more people were coming in from the sitting room. She kept her head down, studying the grains in the wood of the table. Out of her peripheral vision she saw a tanned, muscular forearm rest on the table to her left; it was Cosaint. On her other side appeared a thinner forearm, strong but not built like her son's, and lighter skinned, as though he hadn't spent as much time in the sun the way most in the enclave did.

"You have a beautiful home, Maya," he said. He had a slight accent, nasal in timber and a slight casualness in the quality of his speech that all those that joined the enclave when they were already old enough to speak had. From their studies she knew that it was a remnant of a classic Chicago accent, one that used to be fairly well-known before the Atomic War. But his voice was also kind, strong but soft. It surprised her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But we are not used to having guests. Perhaps if you could come back tomorrow..."

"I don't think so, no," he answered. "I'm learning much from your family tonight, and my hunger for more is intense. Now that you're finally home, I think you might be able to help me."

"I can't imagine what questions you have that I could help with," she answered him. "I'm afraid coming here was a mistake. I'm sorry you've wasted your time."

"How can you know that when I haven't told you my problem?" the city-dweller asked. She still hadn't seen his face, but she felt sure he was smiling slyly at her, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking, and how she was trying to avoid him. "I know what some have been saying about me, and I know how split the enclave is on certain matters of importance. The truth, Maya Trudeau, is that I came to the enclave for a very different reason. But since I've been here, the things that I've learned have opened the door for so many possibilities, and also questions, that I find myself compelled to get them answered. Because I think they can lead to important changes, not only here, but maybe around the world. I think you can help. And now that I know you're family, I know that they can help as

well.”

She took a sip of her juice and shook her head, but still kept it down. “You’ve been in the enclave, what, eighteen hours? And you sit here and tell me that you *know* my family?”

“Yes I do, Maya. Better than you think. Better than even you, perhaps.”

Maya felt the room go cold. Silence pervaded around them, and though her head was still down, she could feel her children’s expressions upon her, stunned by the frank way that the city-dweller had shined a light on the dark truth of their family. She finally lifted her head to look at him, to put out the light with the darkness of her glare, but he had left his chair and was already walking back into the sitting room.

She arose from her seat and stalked after him. “You get back here,” she shouted. “You have no right to come here and spew such vile nonsense.”

He didn’t respond, instead walking to one of the sitting room windows and looking out and up to the sky above. Maya followed him, and the children followed her. Cosaint said something quietly as they walked and the other children laughed with him. She spun around and they fell silent once more. It made her feel guilty. That’s the second time tonight that I’ve snuffed out the laughter of my own children. It had been so long since she heard the sound of happy children that it now sounded strange to her. How sick she must be.

“We sat in here after putting down Benji,” Cosaint said behind her. “So that we wouldn’t keep him up. The walls in the kitchen are so thin, you can hear everything throughout the house.”

“And so that you could be comfortable when talking to this infidel?” Maya spat. “Do you really think he cares if Benji gets his night’s rest?”

“After the exercise he got earlier trying to hurt me, I’m fairly certain that he could sleep through anything,” said the city-dweller. “But it seemed silly to sit on the hard kitchen chairs when this room was available. After all, your house is rather large. I’ve never been in one with such niceties.” He said all this while still looking out the window, and that infuriated her because it was a dismissive gesture. Dismissal wasn’t what she was used to. Shame and guilt were the order of their family these days, and before that it had been abuse and absence.

“You’re a fool,” she bit out. “But don’t feel bad, most people are fools compared to me. You might have your questions, but you’ve come to the wrong place for answers. You have made enemies of the Rada, particularly Scythe and Father Graine, for different reasons. You might have fooled my family into thinking you’re a friend of the enclave, but not me. So now you’ve made an enemy of me too, and I am sister to the only Rada member that isn’t actively working against you. So you see what a mistake it was to come here. Scythe told us why you’re here, this peace mission you’re on. I tell you that you have no idea what you’re talking about, which isn’t surprising since you haven’t had to live beyond your city walls. I have lost my parents because of your city’s laws, I’ve lost my brother to their needle, and I’ve lost my husband to the raiders. I promise you that peace in the fallout lands is not an option.”

He hung his head a moment before turning around slowly. She finally got a good look at him. She was surprised by how young he was, thinking immediately that his voice didn’t match the way he looked. But his eyes were different, and she saw conflict in them; there was the understanding that came with difficult experiences, the kind of determination that was only possible with hope, and yet a sadness so deep that Maya wondered how he could walk around at all without breaking down from depression. Those eyes, she thought, are an abyss I could get lost in, no matter how much younger than I he is.

“Maya,” he said. “No scientist as intelligent as you could close herself to the possibility that her knowledge could bring about advancement and change. How could you refuse to help me bring about peace when you’ve lost so much to war?”

Before she could answer him, Cosaint stepped forward. He spoke in the soft but authoritative voice he had begun using since Connor had died. “Do you remember what I said to you that first night

we met?" he asked the city-dweller. "That I would rather there be no walls around either of our cities at all? We all wish we could have peace, to one degree or another. Even the soldiers. But even Christ knew that he would be crucified. That's why he told people that he came to bring not the olive branch, but the sword.

The city-dweller shook his head. "You know the words, but not the message behind them. Who brought the sword to bear in the bible? It wasn't Christ at all, but the Pharisees. Christ knew that it would take violence before peace could be spread through the new covenant, but you'll notice that none of the violence came from him or his people. I also don't remember the bible verse in which Christ simply gave up his mission. Or where he gave up hope." He smiled. "Besides, I thought you told me you weren't Catholic."

"Don't you look down on him for that," Maya said sharply. "I'm the one that stopped going to mass. Christ was a human, the son of a God that favored humans above all his other creatures. Why should we worship him when he considers us such lowly beings?" Especially when he might be right, she thought silently.

"Man is imperfect, and so he's made the imperfect distinction between human and anomaly." His voice was critical, but not of them individually. He was criticizing them all, for what they had all had a part in creating. "How has it gotten so far that good people believe violence is the only way? How is that even those whose calling is one of knowledge and progress, refuse to even consider either when it comes to the concept of peace? No hope? The very notion is ridiculous."

"I hope you have a better speech prepared for the rest of the enclave, city-dweller. Reverse psychology is a tired tactic, used by those with no respect for their prey." She felt emboldened by the words, as if speaking them confirmed that they were true. And surely, now that she had exposed his actions for what they were, he would become angry enough to show her children that he was just another bully, another uncaring man who would bring back the pain they had lost unless they helped expel him from her home.

But instead of anger, his face had become kind and sympathetic. "I know how you feel. My journey here began from the sadness of death and loss. I know the emptiness and the pain that comes from feeling abandoned by God, by everyone around you. But there's hope in all oblivion."

"Oh really?" Maya smirked. She had been right the first time. He *was* young. And naive. "If you truly believe that, then why are you here? Enclave policy is made in the Council Building, and military strategy comes out of the York building. Yet you come to my house?"

"If you want to convince people of something, you don't first win their politicians," the city-dweller said. "People hate politicians, even the ones they like. They don't trust them, even the ones they helped put into power." He shook his head. "No, you have to win the people first, and let *them* convince the leadership. And since people don't trust those that seek the spotlight, you begin instead with those who shy from it, and are respected."

The word burned her like fire. "Respected? Did you notice that we live at the very edge of the enclave? It's a large house, but did you see what lies outside that window below the sky? It's the wall, something only the newly admitted are forced to endure. I asked to have my lab moved from the Council Building to the hospital, and you can't imagine how quickly they obliged not only my request, but the unspoken requests of my children as well. Do you have any idea how few people I see on any given day? Or how happy that makes the people here? Who here do you think would listen to me?"

But again, it was Cosaint who stepped in and answered, this time for the city-dweller. "Kobi would, for starters. And so would your family. You should have been here before to see Benji. To see how we've misunderstood. I'm as skeptical as you, but what he's shown me, his ability to understand...I think he might be worth hearing out."

"Simple trickery," she spat. "We have some problems as a family, problems that are plain for everyone to see. He used that to trick you all, and you fell for it."

"Oh yes," Catalina said. "We're the smartest family in the enclave, but no one will listen to us

and we get taken in by a slick talking stranger about which we've been warned. I've looked up to you all these years because of your ability to analyze and correlate data. So surely you know better than that."

"That isn't the point," Maya said, and was surprised by the pleading tone in her voice. "Nothing good will come from him being here!"

"Haven't you been listening? Benji hugged him. *Hugged*. And me too," Catalina added.

"Well," Cosaint started. "That was only after he tried to punch him. In the crotch."

Bryce snorted. "To be fair, that's about as high as he can reach."

There was a moment of silence and all three of them burst into laughter. He looked for a moment as if he was going to contain it, but the city-dweller too began to laugh. Maya didn't know what to do. Every time she heard laughter in this house, she despised it and stamped it out, and then she hated herself for doing so. But in spite of all this, this outsider had come into her home and the laughter kept coming back. It reminded her of when each of the children were very young, back when she and Brannon were still new enough to each other that they made the effort to keep their displeasure away from them. With Cosaint it had been the best, his child giggles filling the house as he waddled around exploring every inch of his environment. Catalina had been more subdued, but still she had been full of smiles when she was young. But then when Bryce was born, something happened, and all the fights, and all the tension, and all the anger was no longer hidden. It fell in layers around their home, and it snuffed out the laughter that existed and the laughter that Bryce should have had for himself. Part of it was Brannon being ashamed of his devo son, but really that was just an excuse to stay away. By the time Benji joined the family, Brannon was hardly around and when he was he was insulting Cosaint and Bryce, or shouting at her and Catalina. Maybe that's why Benji acted the way he did, because he'd never had the chance to laugh.

But now, seeing them all laughing, and sure that Benji would be laughing just as hard if he were in the room, the anger in her flared again.

"How dare you come into *my* house and wrap *my* family in your twisted, deceitful web," she said. "Do you think I don't know what you're really trying to do?"

He gave her a look designed to show her that in fact he didn't know what she was talking about, but she wasn't fooled. They had made it very clear when they had told everyone that this city-dweller was going to be coming that he was not absolutely not to be harmed and was under the personal protection of Scythe himself, but they had also warned them that he was not to be trusted. They had said that he might even be a Chicago spy, sent to weaken their resolve with promises of hope and peace so as to keep them unprepared to defend themselves. Maya was dangerously close to finding out how severely they would punish her if she struck him.

"You're an awful, awful person," she said to him. "And you've come here to create discord amongst our people, and first amongst my family."

"If by discord you mean asking questions and trying to find solutions to problems that all sides can live with, then I guess you're right," the city-dweller said. "And it's very likely that it will cause a great number of people here discomfort, anxiety, and pain. But the questions still have to be asked and all options explored, or else we are all nothing but murderers. And I mean on both sides. If I can get a couple of theories proved, and if I can get a couple of important questions answered, then we'll know once and for all whether or not peace with humanity is an option. If there is some kind of common ground that can be reached, and humanity meets those with the touch half way, then everyone is better off, right? And if they refuse to listen and continue murdering our kind when we've shown them it isn't necessary, then we'll know they're evil and we can treat them like villains."

"How about the third possibility that you conveniently left out? What if there *is* no common ground? What if the truth is that our kind and humanity will always be in competition with one another? What if there is no way we can coexist peacefully on this planet?"

"No creature that can think cognitively is incapable of living peacefully with a like creature.

What you're talking about isn't possible. I've lived among humanity, so I know they have the capacity. All that remains is making sure that capacity exists here in the enclave as well. That, and clearing up a few minor inconveniences."

"You're so naive. The barriers to peace aren't minor inconveniences," Maya laughed scornfully.

"Aren't they?" he asked. "Relatively speaking, the situation is very simple. We figure out how to keep anomaly fetuses from harming their human mothers, and there's no longer any reason to euthanize anomaly children. This very enclave proves that living amongst us doesn't kill humans. Bryce, for instance, doesn't seem to suffer any effects."

"He takes anti-radiation medication," she said. "All the humans here do. We developed it years ago."

"But you haven't told the humans in Chicago. Why not?"

"Jesus Chrystus!" she exclaimed and threw up her hands. "Do you not hear what I'm telling you? We *have* tried. They sent three emissary groups to the city when the meds were first synthesized. All three failed to return. We even tried to leave some of it outside the walls where it was sure to be found. It's not as if it's difficult to make. You just take a common fungus we grow in cultures, mix it with a good source of lysine, in this case soy mash, and then ferment it with sugar and something rich in carbohydrates. We use corn cobs. The whole thing takes about a week to make ten gallons and the dosage requirements are only fifty milliliters twice a day. But every effort we've made to tell you people about it results in more of our kind dead. You'll understand if we've decided that getting our message through to the humans is impossible."

"But now you have something you didn't have before," the city-dweller said.

"Oh, really? What's that?"

"Me. I'm an anomaly that was born and raised in Chicago. My uncle is the mayor, I have friends in their military, and I'm somewhat well known there, as is my mother. I can help you, assuming you can help me. But for that to happen, you're going to have to trust me."

She wasn't sure why, but something about this scared the hell out of her. The scientist in her agreed with him; after all, it was true that his situation made getting the humans to listen now had a far greater chance to succeed. But what he needed her to figure out, wasn't it the same thing she had been secretly covering up these past few months? And she couldn't let it out. She couldn't isolate what it was that made anomalies. She couldn't tell them why Cosaint and the others were like her, while Bryce was human. If she did, someone would use that knowledge in the most terrible of ways. So perhaps this city-dweller anomaly thought that he had brought hope for peace to the enclave, but just like laughter in her home, hope was something for her to destroy. She wouldn't do what he needed her to do. She wouldn't be able to answer the questions he needed her to answer. He might be hope, but she was despair. As she always was.

He stepped forward towards her, studying her for a moment, as if trying to read her mind by staring into her eyes. Then he reached out slowly and timidly with one hand and placed it on her shoulder. It felt warm, yet strange, something that was unnatural. She turned her head to stare at it a moment, half expecting a viper's head to be where his hand was. But of course there was no viper's head, only his hand, resting on her shoulder, and now he was squeezing it gently. That was when she lost complete control of herself.

"Don't you dare lay your hands on me," she snarled. In one motion she shoved his hand away and slapped him across the cheek. "You're a succubus!"

"I'm not here to seduce you, and I'm not here to take anything from you," the city-dweller said. He touched his face gingerly. "All I want is your help."

"I don't have any help to give someone like you! That which you seek cannot be obtained, so you might as well go back to your own city. There is no redemption in science here for you. Go back to whoever there is silly enough to care for you. Perhaps then you'll feel better, though to me you'll still be the pest I expelled from my house this day. I know what you are. Jestes diablem."

“Nie jestem diabłem. Ja jestem tylko człowiekiem.”

“Fine, you're not the devil, but you're not a man. You're just a boy.”

“I'm just a boy,” he replied. “But I know your family better than you do. And my mere presence here has you so scared that you can hardly think from being paralyzed. Yet you've given me no reason to give up my hope. If you can give me one good reason why we shouldn't at least try every avenue possible for peace, I would love to hear it.”

He reached out again, timidly at first, but then more sure, squeezing her shoulder again. Then, with one last sympathetic smile, he walked past them all and left.

It left her a bit breathless, another reason to hate him. The things he said were audacious, yet he said them in that reasonable tone of his. She felt silly, having called him the devil. It made her feel even worse, hearing him tell her that there was no devil in him, only a man. He used the Polish word for man, which meant more than just man. It meant human. By implication, he was telling her that she was human as well, something she wasn't sure she believed. She was rude, and on purpose. But he had made a point to be polite, not using slang or more familiar Polish terms, but formal speech. Perhaps it meant that he learned the language late in life, and never spoke it regularly. Or perhaps he had done it on purpose. He's trying to make me look foolish by being polite while I'm trying to be rude, she thought to herself as they all cleaned up the dishes. The lengths to which he'll go to turn everyone, even my family against me are incredible. Her shoulder tingled where he had squeezed it. Scythe was right to warn us about him. And Father Graine was equally right to tell us to be cautious. There is peril in this man, that much is certain. The devil, he comes in sheep's clothing. And this devil comes with his silver tongue and bewitches my family so that they laugh around him, and for that small gift they think he is sent from God, but I know better. He thinks I am weak, probably because of what I allowed Connor to do to us all. But he will know that I am *not* the weak woman he thinks I am. I will not let him rule my family just because I am a horrible mother.

She went into Benji's room to check on him. Somehow he had slept through all the heated discussion, all of the uncivilized shouting. He looked peaceful. She had never seen him look that way. For the first time, he was truly resting. She touched his forehead, and it was cool and comforting.

She had never been so scared as she was right now. Even when Cosaint had announced that he was going to be admitted into the Straznik she hadn't been this terrified. This stranger is coming in, throwing back the drapes she had put up, which might be okay except that he also wants our help in answering questions that we can't answer. If he asks us these questions and we answer them it will kill us. All of us. I've brought so much pain and misery to this family, simply by allowing myself to trust and love, I won't tempt God again by dreaming to hope that we can satisfy this stranger.

She went to bed, but found that she couldn't sleep. She lay there, twisting in sheets left behind by whoever had lived here before the war, and she heard Cosaint, Catalina, and Bryce sharing coffee. They were talking, and laughing too. She tried to picture herself beside them at the kitchen table, but couldn't. Finally sleep came, the day's events catching up with her. But even as the darkness in her eyes became the darkness in her mind, she realized that she didn't belong in her own imaginations of her family's happiness. She felt the moisture on her pillow as she lost consciousness.

Chapter 9:

We know now that the disease isn't reversible. We expected as much, of course, but knowing for certain that there is no cure for those afflicted should do much to ease our conscience.

It's strange, how their genes react when injected with any of the vectors we thought might work as a cure. It's not just that the genes are resistant, it's as if they communicate with any nearby genetic material as well. What exactly these "messages" usually consists of are a short emission of purine bases, adenine and guanine, in a kind of blast in all directions. When this happens, all of the surrounding genes become immediately resistant to whatever we're injecting. It sounds crazy, because genes can't talk to one another. But apparently, to some degree, anomaly genes can. It effectively means that anomaly genes are impervious to all other congenital diseases as they are passed from parent to child.

So, if the condition is permanent, and if the genes that are passed down cannot be altered or corrected in utero, then it is clear that there is no hope for these children at all.

On the other hand, I've been unable to locate anything in their genes that explains the behavioral symptoms that are reported. All the physical markers are there: male-patterned baldness in the Y chromosomes, high-twitch fiber markers across the board, and their metabolic markers are through the roof. That last one must be a byproduct of the genetic resistance. But why are the adult subjects so violent? Why do they tend to face early onset dementia, with hallucinations of mutant devils that steal their children? These questions remain unanswered from a genetic standpoint. Perhaps it's time to consider that their cause might be more nurture than nature.

Or perhaps it's a combination of both. There are past examples of latent genes being activated by behavioral factors.

In any case, we are asking all of the governments with whom we have contact to supply us with all of the data they have collected on the anomalies, particularly any data on either genetics or behavior. There is a theory some of our scientists have that I cannot detail in an open communication, but it could be important. It would allow us to eliminate a specific biological reaction from occurring in the anomalies, without which they would not be able to survive. It isn't something I relish. The implications aren't lost on me. If I can make this phage and engineer it to be airborne contagious, then it can and will be used to destroy every anomaly on the face of the Earth.

Every day I wish that we didn't have to do this, but we do. Now we're only gathering data, but I can probably have something ready for testing within a year or so. Exactly how quickly will depend on how helpful the data we're collecting from around the world is.

God help me, but if we do this, humanity's next generation might not have to face the anomaly question at all.

*--Michelle Arencebia, Surgeon General of the United Nations
Letter to Mayor Patrick Donovan of Chicago
7.25.2168*

The moon was nearly directly above him when Anton finally made it back to the house they had provided him. He had gotten lost along the way, but that was okay since it allowed him time to replay all that had happened and try to take stock of what it meant. There hadn't been many surprises at first, other than Saint belonging to the family, but after Maya had come home he had improvised the entire scene. Still, he thought that it had gone relatively well. Maya had been combative, but after finding out what had happened to her family he could hardly expect anything else. Still, he awoke the next morning with more questions than answers, and the feeling persisted that, while the previous night had been a necessary step in the process, he was still barely closer to achieving his goal than he had been the day before.

It was a familiar feeling. It always felt like this at the beginning of a puzzle. It was as if his cognitive self recognized the steps that needed to be taken, but his soul was impatient for the result he so desired. His mind never stopped piecing together the information he had gathered about Maya's family, because he was sure now that they were the key to his success here. His thoughts raced furiously, trying to understand her and her children; what motivated them; what they wanted; who they loved; what they despised. Normally his mind was free and clear to work through his questions, providing him whatever he needed for his strategy to play out as he wished. But this time there was a problem.

I *like* them, he thought as he was showering. And not the way you like a charming acquaintance. I like them the way I like my mother. The way I liked my father. Which means that I don't like them at all. I love them.

"You can't love them, you just met them," Zak said, watching him get dressed with a smirk. "You're confusing a mixture of respect and pity with stronger emotions."

"You're wrong," Anton answered him. "I can respect a person, regardless of how they treat me. But I've never been able to pity anyone as cruel and nasty as this woman tries to be. Yet I *do* pity her, not just because of the way she blames herself for what's happened to her children, but also because I love her."

"You've come so far, haven't you? From persecuting your own kind, to falling in love with the least worthy among them. And you don't even realize how crazy this all is. You've spent an hour with her."

"It's more than just Maya," Anton said. "It's her children too. Saint, so strong and good, willing to shoulder any responsibility if it helps his family. Catalina, stepping in to fill the void in a family that needed a mother. Bryce, facing ironic prejudice, but still striving for excellence in his craft and contributing beyond the norm."

"I notice you left someone out."

"No, Benji too. So innocent, yet so twisted."

"If you believe he's innocent, it's *you* who is twisted."

"That's my point. I have a blind spot for him, and the rest of them too. I know our age doesn't match up, but I feel as though I'm Saint's father. I think of him as my son."

"Definitely twisted. He's older than you."

Anton laughed. "I'm sure you're aware of how little difference that actually makes. For all his efforts, Saint has been emotionally retarded by the needs of his family. He's incredibly mature in some ways, but all the child in him that had to be ignored is still there. I at least had the opportunity to be juvenile."

"Really? You can't actually think that you're better adjusted than Saint. Do you even remember who you were last week before I found you?"

Anton didn't answer. Instead he was mentally aggregating the questions to which he needed answers. Where did power within the enclave truly rest? Where did that same power rest within the human community in Chicago? Who or what were these raiders the enclave suffered from, and what is it they wanted? Why did anomaly children have such a disastrous effect on human host mothers, but not on anomaly host mothers? What, if anything, could be done to protect human mothers from these effects? If something could be done, how could he make the humans in Chicago aware of it? Were anomalies close enough genetically to be called human?

That last one seemed the least important, but it also provided him with a starting point. He needed to find out what the enclave scientists had discovered.

He had Zak lead him to the hospital Maya had mentioned and asked him to wait outside. Oddly, Maya was not in her lab. Her lone assistant was fluttering around when he arrived, but stopped long enough to introduce himself. His name was John Paul.

"After the pope," he said quickly, turning back to an ancient looking computer. "My birth

parents were devout Catholics, which is what saved my life.”

“Is that right?” Anton asked. “I thought that the Catholic Church had made it clear they supported the UN’s stance on anomalies.”

“True,” John Paul smiled. “But I said my parents were good Catholics, not that they listened to the Catholic Church.”

Anton watched him flit around the lab, checking this and measuring that. He quickly became convinced that it was all a show. Maya might not be here, but she had clearly alerted John Paul that Anton might be stopping in, and now he was using this routine to try to get out of answering any questions.

“I see how busy you are,” Anton said in a tone that mocked the very notion. “It must be especially difficult without your lead geneticist. I only have a few questions, but they’re important and I intend to get them answered. You have two choices. You can decide to be polite and helpful, and answer my questions today. Or, if you’d rather, I can return to this lab day after day, week after week, for as long as it takes for either you or Maya to help me. I’d prefer the former, as I’m a bit anxious for results, but that is entirely up to you.”

John Paul dropped the act and glared at him. “Ask your questions so we can be rid of you. We have important work to do.”

“More important than you know, I think,” said Anton. “Some of the leadership here has made a point to prepare for my arrival. They have suggested to the people that I am to be protected but left alone. I imagine that no matter where I go in the enclave, I will find nothing but immensely busy people with apologies for their inability to help me. One way or another, however, I have a task to complete and I assure you that leaving my questions unanswered is not something I’m prepared to do. You would do well to inform everyone that if I am not helped, the only possible result is war here in the enclave.”

John Paul looked shocked. “You think you can start a civil war here? You are nobody to the enclave. You have no authority here, nor have you done anything to gain any of our respect. There are none who would follow you.”

“I think if that were true, Scythe wouldn’t have had to prepare for my arrival as he did,” said Anton. “And don’t think for a moment that I would keep secret the fact that it was your refusal to answer a few questions that sparked such a war. Do you think either side in the enclave would ever forgive you for that?”

John Paul sat down in a nearby chair, frustrated. “Fine, city-dweller. Ask me your damned questions.”

“The first is simple enough. What have you found in the genetic material of anomalies that differs from humans?”

“You’re clearly not a scientist,” John Paul laughed humorlessly. “To think that such a question is simple is asinine. We’re talking about hundreds, perhaps thousands of genetic abnormalities. Some that are impossibly subtle.”

“You’re right, I’m not a scientist, but I’m educated enough to know that you surely have identified which of the abnormalities play significant roles in our biology. We can start with those.”

“How do I know you’re even qualified to know what my answers will mean? How do I know that you won’t take my responses out of context and use them to convince the ignorant?”

Anton sighed. Then he rattled off what he had learned about genetics from his education in Chicago. Gifted as he was, and coupled with his self-motivated independent study of the subject as a teenager, he spoke for quite a long time, something that he could tell impressed John Paul. Respect replaced scorn in his expression. Rownosci and the surrounding area were far more civilized than the humans in Chicago had expected, and their industrial and scientific applications far more advanced, but with such a limited population those in the enclave were surely specialized in their work. Anton guessed that probably no one else save Maya could have spoken with John Paul about the study of

genetics as he just had. For whatever reason, it seemed to melt away the scientist's spite.

"Fine," he said. "You're well informed. I had to be sure, before I agreed to help you, which I always wanted to do. The scientific community here in Rownosci isn't affected by Scythe's prejudices, after all."

Anton nodded, making an effort not point out how ridiculous this lie was.

"As I said, there are many genetic differences," John Paul continued. He listed several with minor biological effects. "But the one that has the most noticeable effect was also the easiest to find. Maya does all the detailed work, but her summaries are clear. This difference is enormous, by genetics standards. It resides on the first chromosome, which as you surely know is the largest in humans and anomalies alike. It's one of the non-sex chromosomes, which is why both males and females are affected. There is a section of this chromosome that determines brain size, called ASPM. Basically it controls the size and structure of brain matter through a protein called ASP Homolog. In anomalies, the nucleotides for this gene are significantly reorganized, such that the brain is larger in the frontal lobe and slightly smaller in other areas. That, coupled with the reorganization of several architectural components of the brain, is what gives us the ability to manipulate radiation. This same genetic difference also causes radiation to be naturally drawn to anomalies. This is particularly problematic during gestation, when the brain's frontal lobe finally begins to grow in anticipation of birth. Something in the brain causes so much radiation to be drawn into the anomaly fetus that it causes disastrous health conditions on the host mother."

"Human host mother you mean," Anton said.

"No, actually. Those with the touch do have a higher tolerance for radiation in general, but that stems from other genetic differences between us and humans. Still, radiation does have its effects on us as well. Our men almost universally carry the genetic marker for male patterned baldness, and our environment tends to cause that gene to activate sooner than it normally would. In every case of an anomaly birth, regardless of whether or not the host mother is human, there are effects from the high levels of radiation the fetus draws in just prior to birth."

"So how do the women in Rownosci survive?"

"We have a couple of methods to decrease the danger," John Paul said. "Long ago, before we even established our community here, we discovered that eating cordyceps, a mushroom sometimes called *caterpillar fungus*, helps to combat the effects of the radiation. If taken in healthy doses during labor, the host mother rarely exhibits any ill effects save some minor discomfort. Maya herself developed a concoction that makes its delivery more efficient, by simply combining it with a protein mash and carbohydrates. If cordyceps is in short supply, or if the radiation draw of a fetus is particularly bad, we have one of the Tog present to draw away radiation from the fetus and the womb. They are only used as a last resort, however. Limiting the fetus's exposure to radiation at the time of birth greatly retards its abilities once born."

Anton's mind immediately saw a problem in that analysis. "But if the ability to manipulate radiation is controlled by genetic markers, why would denying a fetus radiation exposure for such a small amount of time have any effect? Once it's born, it still has anomaly genes."

"It's difficult to theorize without having personally seen the genome details, but I think that somehow the part of the brain affected by those genes responds with growth when flushed with radiation during birth. Those that had the Tog involved in their birth tend to have smaller frontal lobes than those that did not."

"I take it you test everyone in Rownosci to build a baseline for genetic material?"

"Of course," John Paul said. "Anyone who is either born here or lives among us more than a month is required to get the full battery of our scientific tests: genetic, physical, IQ/intellect, psychological."

"What about human children born to anomalies here in the enclave? Do you test them as well?"

"Devos? Of course we test them," John Paul said, looking surprised. "We have very few

humans here, so we test the devos to help give us a human genetic baseline.”

“And they don’t have any anomaly genes?”

“Absolutely none, which is a shame,” John Paul said. “It would make adult life here in the enclave much easier for them if they did. As it stands, they have a hard time finding mates here, and when they *do* marry it is usually to another devo.”

“I take it prejudice against them is common?”

“Not really. The oldest families here in the enclave aren’t particularly tolerant, of course, and they have a great deal of influence over the community, but most of the adults don’t really care one way or the other. The problem is that without the anomaly genes, devos tend to have a very short life expectancy. They don’t have the same abilities to protect themselves from the wildlife outside the walls, and if the animals don’t get them, radiation poisoning or cancer eventually does. Who would want to bear children with a higher likelihood of such a life?”

“Can nothing be done for them?”

“Well, if they don’t travel outside the town and limit how often they are outside their homes, their life expectancy approaches normal. But who would want to live like that?”

The idea that had begun to form when Saint had first told him about the Tog was back, wiggling once more in the back of his consciousness, tickling his thoughts but refusing to come out. There was something he wasn’t grasping, some hopeful possibility he wasn’t seeing, some question he wasn’t asking. But he wouldn’t get to it by trying to force it out.

“One final question,” he said to the scientist. “This anti-radiation concoction you give to the women to protect them from anomaly fetuses, does it work for human mothers as well?”

“Of course not,” John Paul said sadly. “They would already be taking it before they conceived, yet they always suffer the most horrible effects. Whatever the answer is to ending the death of human host mothers that bear anomaly children, it isn’t cordyceps.”

Zak laughed at him when Anton recounted the entire conversation for him. “You thought it was going to be as easy as fungus? A mushroom that ended a global war?”

“No,” Anton said. “With a puzzle like this, it would be ridiculous if there was such a simple solution. But it could be a part.” He sighed. “I just hope I won’t have to cajole information out of everyone this way.”

“John Paul is a scientist,” Zak said. “He’s smart, independent, and confident. It’s unlikely the others will put up such a fight. Other than the Straznik, of course.”

“It was actually an endearing show of loyalty,” Anton said. “It took the threat of discord here before he was willing to open up. But it wasn’t the enclave he was protecting. It was Maya. He’d rather let me make trouble than help me, but he realizes how much Maya needs her work. And no wonder. The way she’s withdrawn from her family, her work is likely all she has.”

“How delightfully horrible for her,” said Zak. “Finding comfort only in her work on genetics and then going home to her own genetic offspring and ignoring them.”

“What is the schedule for mass in the enclave?”

“You’re going to the Church? To see Father Graine?”

“I’m not sure yet.”

“It’s not far. I’ll take you there tomorrow.”

“Good. Religion is a powerful thing. And the fact that both Chicago and the enclave practice faith might be important. What I can’t understand is how both sides of this conflict can read the bible, hear the words of Christ week after week, and then make plans to kill one another.”

“That question has been around for hundreds of years,” Zak said. He shook his head. “God was foolish to send us his son. No one ever bothered listening to him.”

* * *

Saint ducked and weaved through the trees, leading the others deeper into the small glen just outside Rownosci. They were tracking a small pack of predators. Wolves, or at least the grotesque mutated cousins of wolves, twisted by the same radiation that had twisted these trees into these enormous gnarled things before him. They were far enough out that he no longer recognized the area.

He had continued to push them on, much further than normal. Scythe had canceled their training for the day, but Saint needed to clear his mind from the previous night. Ever since he had met the city-dweller, even beginning that night out in the fallout lands around the fire, Cosaint had been constantly challenged in his convictions. Scythe had instilled in them a sense of trust and duty, one that hadn't wavered in Saint until recently, but even this he'd been warned about. One of these days, Scythe had said on more than one occasion, you will encounter someone who appears to be your friend, who whispers sweet promises of peace and coexistence. But be wary, Scythe had continued, because this friend will actually be your worst enemy, attempting to neutralize you through complacency. Saint had heard those words, and he had believed them. Now he wasn't sure. So he had his team hunting, so that he could think.

Sure enough, they came upon the pack of wolves. The first had appeared up ahead, standing silently and watching them. From years of hunting, they knew that this was a predation technique. The beta male would appear obviously before them, trying to draw their attention while the alpha led an attack from the side. He had the others fan outwards sideways. To disrupt their strategy, Saint immediately lifted his rifle and shot the beta between the eyes. Curiously, instead of making the other animals abandon their approach, it spurred them to haste. The attack came from both sides, but they were dispatched easily. Deaths from animal attack were still fairly common in the enclave, but Saint's team was very, very good. Of course we're good, he thought. Aren't we the same squad my father led years ago?

When they were done, they cut the meat off of the bodies and put it into sacks for the Tog to clean. While the others finished, Bethany caught his eye and tilted her head toward a nearby clearing. When he walked to it, he saw that there was a small creek winding through it. He stooped down with his canteen and filled it. Running water was one of the few trustworthy providers out in the fallout lands. For one reason or another, the radiation couldn't take hold within its molecules, not enough to make it dangerous to him.

Bethany joined him, resting her hand on his back. She had been doing more of that kind of thing recently. It would have been easier if she were one of the Tog, or a scientist like his mother, or even a politician like his aunt. That way they could have pursued the relationship they both wanted without the complication of serving together. Beyond their own recognition of how tricky such a situation would be, Rownosci law was clear that soldiers were not to be romantically involved with one another. Any investigation into their team would turn up their mutual interest in one another, making exhibiting self-control all the more important. They could not risk losing their ranks simply to be with one another.

So she took her hand away when the others followed them and announced that they had finished. Saint sat them around the creek, just to talk with one another. Bonding was an important part of training. They chattered away, several languages mixing as they always did during casual conversation.

"They've done extremely well by you," Bethany said from beside him. She had that sly smile that indicated she was buttering up to him. Something else she had been doing more of lately. She was aggressive in her desire for him and seemed to enjoy the game, as many women did, and in truth so did Saint. She was attractive, and if playful banter was as close as they were allowed to get, that made it every bit as exciting as sex.

But lately she had become even more aggressive, and he was trying to figure out why. Why suddenly toss the rules aside and risk her position in the Straznik? Saint couldn't begin to guess at her motives, but within himself there was a feeling of fleeting opportunity. Why, he wondered. They were both young, weren't they? Lifespans in the fallout lands were on the rise, and though they were both Straznik, they were high enough up the chain that it was likely they wouldn't be in any real danger unless all out war began.

Perhaps that was it. Perhaps Saint realized that the chance for such all out war was becoming more real. Wasn't Scythe's rhetoric ramping up, preparing them for battle? Yet it still seemed more like a far off possibility, not something likely. No one really seemed to think that true war was going to be waged on Chicago, because life was becoming more and more tolerable. Once the walls were completed and the danger from the raiders was finally nullified, what reason did most of them have to make war on Chicago? Other than revenge? Other than wanting to force out the bigots and live alongside humanity there, as they did out here?

That was what worked on most of them, the notion that through war they could achieve equality, not only for the touched, but for humanity as well. But while most of the others ate up that kind of laudable statement, it never rang true to him. He couldn't guess what Scythe's real motives were, but there just wasn't something right when he said those things. It didn't matter. The truth was that Scythe was liked and respected in the enclave, and not just among the soldiers. Even those that disagreed with him called him their friend.

"When you get that far off look in your eyes, I know you're going to say something you think is honorable, but is actually quite stupid," Bethany said, breaking up his thoughts. "Maybe you should just think about how much meat we collected today. Not a bad haul for our day off."

"Have you ever eaten wolf meat?" Saint asked.

"Of course not. It's too tough, barely edible once the Tog are done with it. They say it makes the livestock strong, when the protein is mixed in with their food. Still, I swear that even the cows groan when they are fed wolf meat."

"And this is all we have to show for the day," he sighed.

"It was our day off," she repeated. "We did well. Even Father Graine will be happy. He'll finally have some meat for his dogs."

Saint sighed. The Church's hold on the enclave was a quagmire. For all the appearance of solidarity, Kobi and Scythe were constantly at odds with each other, and Father Graine seemed to take pleasure in supporting their positions in turns, backing one and then the other, depending on the day. He spoke of the Father, and of Christ; of things like love and peace; at times he sounded almost like Kobi herself. Then Scythe would suggest that they expand the number of soldiers they sent to the east, to prepare the path they would take in eventual battle with the city-dwellers, and Father Graine would agree with him. It went against everything the Church ought to stand for, given the words in the holy book. There had been a time, not all that long ago, that Father Graine talked only of peace, and never of war. There were rumors among the scientists that Scythe had offered to make Graine the Bishop of Chicago once the war was over. But nobody dared to ask Father Graine about it directly, fearing for their immortal souls.

Bethany reached out and touched him again, this time not for the pleasure of physical contact, but merely to get his attention. She nodded towards the rest of their team, who were all looking towards them. "They wish to talk to you."

"We have a request," one of them said. "Something only you can do."

Saint stiffened a bit. Despite his fairly loose manner in leading his men, they rarely asked him for anything directly. The few times they had, it had always been to request certain assignments. That was the problem with leading such an elite group; they were unhappy when they were idle.

"Fine," he said to them. "But remember that I barely have any more influence than any of you. I may not be able to get you whatever it is you want." He knew they wouldn't believe him, and part of

him wondered why he even said such things. It's because I don't want any special assignments anymore, he thought. I used to be excited by this work, and the prospect of going out beyond the walls. But today, even though I tried otherwise, all I could think of was my family. I want to go back home, and part of me hopes that Anton is there.

"There's a rumor going around that Scythe is going to send an expeditionary force to Chicago to clear the way for our troops," they said to him. "We want to volunteer to be part of that force."

There it was. In spite of all he had hoped, his soldiers didn't even think about peace. It was as simple as that. They were good men and women, loyal friends, but the truth was they *wanted* to fight. God help us if it's the same with everyone. God help us if Anton never stood a chance here. "I have heard nothing of this expeditionary force," he told them, which wasn't entirely true. "But tell me why you want to volunteer."

"To bring honor to our enclave," one of them responded. "Hasn't Scythe said that's why we fight?"

Saint sighed. He never had understood how Father Graine could stand by while Scythe installed a second religion in the enclave, a kind of cult centered on him. As far as Saint was concerned, both of them were dangerous, Catholicism because it taught that there was a God that would make everything alright, and Scythe's cult because it instilled honor in abject violence. Unfortunately, Saint had to pretend to take them both seriously. What else could he do?

But the result was that whenever anything serious needed to be done that might possibly face public backlash, it was couched in the language of one of these religions. It used to be that these things were done in the name of God, but more and more he heard the evoking of such lofty justifications as honor and dignity. But it was only in the last few years that such justifications had been utilized to commit aggression. The irony of a human using the honor of the enclave to push upon them his plans was apparently obvious only to him.

Yet Scythe had every bit as much power in Rownosci as the other Rada, so Saint had to measure his response carefully. "The honor of the enclave is important to us all," he told them. "How could I not support your request?"

"We must prepare the way for battle," they chorused.

Saint bit the inside of his lip. Words like *must* were dangerous as well. It would make any attempt at subtly opening their minds to other possibilities all the more difficult. Obviously this was something they had already discussed amongst themselves, and on which they had reached some kind of consensus. "Why must it be us that does this job?" he asked them quietly.

"No one has had more success outside the walls than we," one of them spoke up. "The city-dwellers have brought the battle out past their walls, murdering many of us. But our team has not lost a single soldier to them, and we have slain many of theirs."

"This will be different. Then we were a single small force operating outside of their areas of control. If Scythe pursues this course, he won't be able to hide it from them. It will be plainly obvious what it is we are doing. It is unlikely we will have the same level of success as before."

"That may be, but the fact remains that of all the Straznik, our team is the best. Whatever we have been asked to do, we have accomplished it. Isn't it our duty to serve our people in this way?"

"I don't know," Saint said carefully.

"Do you wish for us not to have honor? The time for battle is not far off, so the job will need to be done by somebody. Why not us?"

Because, my friend, I'm not convinced that Scythe's path is the most honorable, he thought silently. "This is all speculation. You're turning rumors into facts, and this entire discussion is irresponsible. Which of you dares to say you know Scythe's plans better than I? Even if these rumors end up being true, it is for our superiors to decide how to best utilize us. Lobbying them for special privileges would be a detestable act."

"Not so detestable that others refrain from it," they countered. "We've seen the others

volunteering for assignments. And the others are hearing it as well. They say it is a matter of weeks, not months, before we will march on Chicago.”

Saint tucked that nugget of information into his memory. He too had heard the rumors, though not from anyone that would be charged with devising battle strategy. But he knew who those people were and he made a mental note to ask them about the plans directly. Because if they were indeed being asked to draw up plans for an attack on Chicago, then they were probably right to assume that the time to implement them would be a matter of weeks. “Even so, he knows best how to use us. No good would come from my meddling in his plans. Battle strategies are a finely tuned, fickle thing. Every team has its role to play in conjunction with every other team. If we lobby to change even such an insignificant detail as one team assignment, the entire campaign could suffer for it. The others may have lobbied for individual assignments that were not part of any overall strategy, but you can be sure that in this case that type of personal interdiction would not be appreciated.”

They gazed back at him with looks that varied from understanding to frustration. But the one that had spoken up earlier, a teenager named Zeke, took a deep breath and said, “If it cannot be done, we will understand and accept any role that we can play.” He reached into his pack and pulled out a nine-millimeter clip, common ammunition in the Straznik. He used his thumb to flick one of the rounds from the clip’s chamber and turned it to Saint so he could glimpse the barely visible cross-pattern etched into the bullet head. “Are these done well?”

The armory itself wouldn’t have been able to do better. Weakening the structure of rounds was common these days. It was a difficult and time consuming task, because if it wasn’t done with care the resulting explosion almost always took with it a few fingers. But it was definitely worth the risk. Weakening the structure of the round at the head caused it to fragment upon impact. This often resulted in buckshot style damage to a target’s insides, while still retaining the accuracy of a chamber round. Normally the armory would simply fleck away bits of the bullet head to achieve this, but Zeke had instead etched four lines into a cross shape on his.

“Yours is different,” said Saint.

“The cross shape still fragments the round, but instead of splitting it into hundreds of tiny pieces it creates only four larger shards. The result should be even greater damage to the internal organs, making exsanguination quicker.”

Zeke peered at the bullet himself a moment before passing it around to the others, who murmured their approval. Saint saw in their talk the respect of fellow soldiers. He recognized it, as he had been on the receiving end of that kind of admiration often. His father had spoken on the matter once years ago, comparing it to the accolades awarded to scientists like his mother. He had also said that whereas matters of science were usually theoretical at best, advances in warfare had tangible, life-saving effects, and so were deserving of even more praise. Pride, Saint thought, was indeed an ugly thing.

He had them return to binding the wolf cadavers and packing them away. Before he could begin to help, Zeke blocked his path and sat him back down, squatting with him. He pulled from his pouch a printout and laid it open for him to see.

Upon it were detailed plans for an operation inside Chicago. Movement plans, attack schedules, and the strategic placement of arms were all in ink. But something was wrong. These weren’t the plans for an all out attack that the rumors suggested.

“Where did you get this?” Saint asked him. “Are you helping with strategic planning now?”

Zeke laughed. “No, but my brother is. He seemed to think that I could help him make recommendations that would stand out from the others. But you see now that I was right. The rumors are true.”

“Tell no one else about this. I am sure these will not be used.”

“It’s true there is no mention of a time line, or even strategy based on the season,” Zeke conceded. “But that might also suggest that the time for battle is so soon that such distinctions aren’t

necessary.”

“Come now,” Saint chuckled. “I didn’t say anything earlier so as not to embarrass you, but even our small governing body creates too much bureaucratic friction for something like this to be implemented in a matter of weeks. Kobi certainly wouldn’t favor it, and I have a hard time believing that Father Graine would back such a plan. Faith is such a drag on quick action.”

Zeke gave him a blank stare before tapping several places on the printout. Saint noticed that everywhere he did there were notes bemoaning the lack of specific information needed for the plans. “The city-dweller,” Zeke said.

“What of him?”

“These plans are the reason he’s here. Scythe is going to press him to fill in the necessary information.”

“I believe he’ll try,” said Saint. “But I don’t think he’ll succeed. I’ve met the man. He strives for peace in a way no one in the enclave ever has. He’s also charismatic. Most of my family has already fallen in love with him.”

“Will you bring him to speak with us?”

“Perhaps. If he’d be willing to talk to us about his time as a soldier, that could be useful,” Saint said. “I can’t promise he will come, though. It’s something I’d have to ask of him.”

Zeke nodded and thanked him.

What am I doing, Saint thought to himself. If I bring Anton to meet with my team, only two outcomes are possible. He will try to convince them to work for peace and either they will listen to him and I will be exiled for sedition, or they will strike him down in front of me.

But he wouldn’t let that happen. The others might react poorly to Anton, either disagreeing civilly or violently, but Saint had sworn to protect him and he would do so, even if it meant exile or death.

He stood up and got them moving back towards the walls. One thing was certain, no matter what his team thought, those plans were not for an invasion. They were something completely different. Saint knew what they looked like, but he had to be mistaken. He lagged behind, lost in his thoughts, until Bethany fell into step with him about a mile from the walls, where they had cleared the trees and brush enough that they could stroll easily along the cracked and unkempt pavement. They were now far enough from the group that any observer would have to strain to make out anything other than their blurry figures.

“Cosaint,” Bethany said quietly.

He turned to look at her but was thrown violently backwards as she leapt upon him, throwing her arms and legs around his body as they fell hard to the ground. He tried to shout out in pain but found his mouth was busy being mashed against hers. When the pain subsided quickly, he kissed her back. All too soon she pulled away from him.

“I thought you didn’t want me,” she said, and there was a flash of anger in her eye. But it was gone quickly, chased away by desire. “I could feel you kissing me back.”

“Perhaps I was just trying to speak while you were busy crashing your lips into mine,” he answered.

“Don’t pretend you didn’t want to.” She leaned forward more gently this time and kissed him again, holding him close. “Perhaps I’ll leave the Straznik soon, so that we can be together.”

Saint didn’t bother responding. She had dropped similar hints before, but he understood Bethany well enough to know how important being a soldier was to her. Such aspirations couldn’t be tossed aside, even for love, without causing massive problems. Besides which, the team needed her. She was an adept soldier and without her the entire dynamic of the group would change for the worse. These same skills offered her many opportunities within the enclave to do a great many things. If she were serious about leaving the Straznik, why hadn’t she already done so? He couldn’t hide his want for her, but for the sake of them both he could control it.

"The city-dweller," said Bethany. "Are you really going to bring him to speak with us?"

"I haven't decided," he said. He pulled an errant strand of hair from her face, but because of the way they were wrapped around each other he missed and poked her in the eye. They laughed together.

"How have I fallen for such a clumsy soldier?" She rubbed her eye and wiped her hand upon her sleeve. "I heard his words around the fire too, you know. We've served Scythe for years, finally working ourselves onto the most respected team in service, and you're considering bringing the peace-advocating city-dweller among us? I know there's a part of you that believes what he says. There's that part in me as well. But if word gets out about this, they'll disband the entire team or worse. And there's no chance that Scythe won't find out."

"Maybe," said Saint. "Perhaps you're overreacting. I never received an order to prevent Anton from speaking with us."

"What makes you think he can change anyone's mind?"

"If you had been in my home last night you wouldn't ask that question. The effect on my family...I can't figure out how he did it. Even Benji became civil."

"A family torn apart by the father that abandoned them. Why shouldn't a strong male figure be able to manipulate their feelings to create loyalty?"

"But it wasn't manipulative," Saint insisted. "We're an intelligent family. One of us would have recognized it if that had been the case. Anton *cares*. Cares about the enclave. Cares about the humans. Cares probably too much for his own good."

"I'm glad he's brought hope for your family to you," she said. "I can see its effect on you, and that effect is good. But don't bring him to the Straznik. That can only end badly."

He unwrapped himself from her gently and stood. After a moment's hesitation he walked away from her. She hurried after him and punched him lightly on the arm. "I wasn't done with you," she said playfully. "You can't leave me that way."

But Saint wasn't in the mood to be playful back. He turned on her, heat rushing to his face. "I know that it's dangerous, but what if he's right? What if there's a real chance for peace? How could I keep him from talking to the soldiers that would be used for a war that might be avoided? If I allowed the danger to keep me from doing what's right, then I'd truly be the coward my father thought me to be."

"Your father was a great but twisted man," she said soothingly. "But he too would have agreed with me."

"That is why I'm so sure I'm right! Why can't you see that?"

"And why can't you see the danger in which he's putting your entire family? This man strolls into the enclave, finds the family most desperate for a father and plays the role well, and now you all follow him around like disciples."

Saint resisted the urge to shove her away, instead counting silently in his head until the anger went away, a technique his aunt had taught him. He fell to the ground, fuming.

"I'm sorry," she said, coming up and standing behind him. She rested her hand on his shoulder, squeezing it lightly. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe he's manipulating us."

"You said that you'd be able to tell, and I think you're right. Whatever he's doing, I'm sure he means well."

"He just seems so *good*," Saint said, peering up at her. "Not just a good father, but good all the way through. Perhaps he's deserving of disciples."

"No. The only man I know that really deserves disciples is you, Cosaint."

In spite of himself, tears flowed from his eyes and he hid his face from her. He hadn't cried in years, since long before his father had died. Perhaps this was part of Anton's power, the ability to cleanse the soul with tears and laughter and screaming and every other emotional response.

"I'll be careful," he managed to sob. "I know how powerful he is and the kind of effect he

could have on us, so I'll be careful. I wouldn't want the entire team to weep as I am. But if you're right, my reaction will be the strongest, because Anton is the father I never had but always dreamed of." He lifted his head and looked towards the walls, seeing the vague outlines of its bustling denizens. "But more and more I hope he's right, and I hope he succeeds. For the sake of us all."

She squatted down and wrapped her arms around him once more, tilting his head so that he could cry into her shoulder. "If it's possible, then I hope for it too. For then there would be no need for soldiers, and my hope for a life with you would become reality."

Chapter 10:

With specific regard to Vatican Proclamation 128, we have received numerous questions and requests for clarification from the Bishops of local parishes throughout the world. In an effort to clarify the Church's position on the anomaly question, we are sending this memo out to all communicated members of the clergy, so that you in turn might pass it on to those in your flock and the office of the Father's wishes be known to all.

Vatican Proclamation 128: The Lord selected human Man to be his most favored creation and He is therefore the only being on Earth that possesses an immortal soul. As all the plants and animals of the world are under Man's domain, and since anomalies are of subhuman stature, it is Man's duty to God to minister to them in such a way that they do not threaten other life. This results in the need for strict but humane population control. Under no circumstances are anomalies to receive any sacrament, though in communities where adults are protected from slaughter they may worship in whatever fashion that community sees fit.

Clarification Request: If the anomalies have come after us, how can the Church be certain that they in fact exist as subhuman entities within Man's domain?

While this might seem a reasonable question to ask, it is easily answered. In Genesis, the basis for our belief in the privilege of Man over every other beast, the only distinction is between Man and all else. Therefore, we can assume that the Lord meant to give us domain over not only every beast and plant that ever was, but those that ever would be as well. There is little debate to be had that the anomalies are indeed something other than human. No matter how alike we might appear to be, we are indeed fundamentally different. Ergo, the anomalies fall within Man's domain to use as He sees fit.

Clarification Request: If the anomalies are but beasts in the service of Man, why are they allowed to worship in our churches or their own?

All the glory of existence belongs to God and it is the duty of all that have the capacity to offer Him our trust, our thanks, and our love. Never before has the world experienced a conscious entity that wasn't human but could worship like one. While the anomalies are a subhuman entity, they still have the capacity to offer thanks and glory to the Lord. It would be an unthinkable act for the Church to prohibit such worship. While we do agree with certain governing bodies that humane population control efforts should be practiced (aren't similar efforts to control predator populations of other beasts also employed?), instances in which an anomaly being has grown to such an age where euthanization is no longer humane, the safe practice of worship is not only accepted by the Papacy, it is encouraged. This was the basis for our missionaries to the enclaves shortly after their discovery and is also our primary rebuttal to any charge that the Vatican has become a mouthpiece for any governing body on Earth.

Clarification Request: If the anomalies are allowed to worship, why are they not allowed partaking in the sacraments?

We do not offer the sacraments to dogs or cattle for the same reason they are not offered to anomalies: because they do not possess a soul. Blessed are the anomalies and every other beast the Lord has created in that they do not suffer the stigma of original sin as Man does, thereby having no need of baptism. The Lord also has never required that the beasts of the world have any understanding of Christ and his loving mission, and as such have no use for the Eucharist. Similarly, there is no need to perform the Last Rights, nor Confession. There should be no need to explain why the sacrament of marriage is denied to them. Despite what we might tell our children to placate them, there is no place in heaven for our pets, nor our livestock. There is also no place in eternity for anomalies.

Despite being the religion of the humans, the Catholic hierarchy was well respected in Rownosci. Wherever Church officers traveled, they were able to command the attention of those around them. This was true even in the Council Building, where there existed tension between Father Graine and those working for the other Rada. So as Deacon Hayden slipped through the door to Kobi Trudeau's wing and into the room where she was holding council with her staff, silence gravitated to him as completely as did their eyes.

"Kobi," Deacon Hayden said quietly. "Father Graine requires your presence."

Her staff members, seated with her around a long table, seemed to hold their collective breath. The tense relationship between the Rada members was well known to everyone in Rownosci, surely none more so than these political staffers. It was an unholy trinity, this Council, where alliances between two against one came fast and dissipated faster. The Church needed the women of the enclave to keep the men righteous, Scythe needed the Church's blessing to act upon his plans without backlash from the community, and Kobi needed the Straznik to protect the women. Everyone seemed to understand the dependence they had upon one another, but Kobi enjoyed more influence than the others. Besides leading the Tog in their most necessary of functions, she also had a close relationship with the scientists through her family and the Straznik through Scythe's wife. This spidery web of influence made her a formidable rival to both Scythe and Father Graine, at once the most measured and volatile political force in Rownosci.

Still, she was always cordial and reacted warmly to the other Rada and their staff. At Deacon Hayden's word, she immediately rose from her seat and dispersed her staffers with a single command. Likewise, the staffers left immediately without a single glance or question. It was a flattering show of deference at first glance, but on more than one occasion she had used similar events to publically suggest that the other Rada were interfering in her work. For this reason Father Graine was always cautious in summoning her, much more so than Scythe, who was less subservient but also less devious.

Kobi was sure she already knew what impetus existed for this request. The city-dweller had not been particularly discreet the past two days, and word of his threats to John Paul had spread throughout the enclave. She knew better than to take such scuttlebutt seriously, though. How exaggerated was the story now that it had passed through so many lips? The city-dweller could certainly cause a disturbance, but it was unlikely that all out civil war in the enclave could be accomplished. That wouldn't keep Father Graine from working himself into a rage, though, and he would almost certainly demand that steps be taken to inoculate the threat he had imagined. This, she considered, was probably what the city-dweller wanted all along. *He* might not be able to affect true conflict within the enclave, but ill-advised action by the Rada certainly could. She surmised that the best course of action would be to ignore this city-dweller altogether. Or, better yet, to listen to his words, take what value they could from them, and then assimilate him into their community. Word had come from Scythe that he was an anomaly that had lived in Chicago until adulthood and that he had even served in their military. With that kind of resume, he would certainly command *some* respect in the enclave. What better way to make use of such a unique individual than befriend him? Or at least treat him cordially, so that he might offer what help he could while opening his mind to their words as well?

As they walked through the halls of the Council Building, out the doors, and across the sun-splashed pavement to the church, Kobi silently counted to ten over and over again, desperately trying to free her mind from the aggravation she felt at Father Graine's summoning. It was a tactic she used often. Like any politician, she had trained herself to respond in measured ways even to the most unendurable offense. I will not give power to those that act wrongly by reacting wrongly, she thought

to herself for the millionth time. Father Graine acts like a cretin, but he is actually every bit as measured as I, only his measurements are for a different concoction. So I will not yield to him by reacting as he wishes. As they walked to the rectory she continued counting.

“Kobi,” Father Graine said with a smirk. He took great pleasure in not referring to her as *Rada* Kobi, as the rest of the enclave did when addressing her. The Rada were free from such formalities, but Graine still had his title of *Father* to command respect, something neither she nor Scythe had. “Thank you for coming. If you’ll please have a seat.”

He sat behind a large cherry wood desk. John Paul was already seated across from him. There was a chair next to John Paul, but she instead chose one of the seats to the side along the wall. It would give her the appearance of an arbiter, and it would annoy Father Graine.

At Father Graine's request, John Paul recounted his meeting with the city-dweller, including the threats of discord if he continued to receive polite refusals to cooperate. “Civil war, that's what he said. Shouldn't he be arrested for sedition?”

It was interesting how the memories and tales of human society still pervaded the enclave. They had no actual police, nor any jail. They were a small enough community that disputes were handled by the parties involved, unless things got really out of hand. Then the Straznik intervened, something no one wanted. But no one was arrested, at least not the way they were in human cities.

But John Paul had apparently had an effect on Father Graine, who rose from his seat and began pacing angrily back and forth. Finally he turned to Kobi. “This man comes into the enclave, is dragged to speak with Scythe, but ignores the Church completely? And you too, Kobi. What have you to say about this city-dwellers lack of respect?”

Kobi did her best to hide it as she took a deep breath and counted quickly to ten again. I say, she thought, that expecting an adult anomaly from Chicago to come groveling at the feet of the enclave leadership was stupid. I also say that when you and Scythe conspired to make the enclave politely hostile to this man over my objections, you turned a perfectly good friend into a potential enemy. She thought all of that, but she didn't say any of it. Instead, she tried to put a concerned look upon her face and said, “Perhaps it would be best if we limit his ability to influence the enclave.”

“I'm glad you agree,” Father Graine said, looking surprised. “But I'm impressed. I thought you were the pacifist of us.”

“I try to do what's best for the enclave,” said Kobi. “If that is sometimes interpreted as pacifism, then so be it.”

Subtlety wasn't Father Graine's forte, so he didn't understand what she was really saying, that pacifism wasn't the hateful thing he thought it was. But he did seem to realize that something was off, to have her agree so quickly. “How do you think we should proceed?” he asked.

“Father Graine, the matter is a simple one. The city-dweller has threatened to stir up discord in Rownosci if he does not get cooperation from the people for whom he has questions. To dismantle this threat we need only accommodate him.”

Father Graine spun on her, glaring the kind of damning glare that only the clergy seemed to manufacture. “There it is! Pacifism! Were it not for men and women better than you, there are a hundred historical tyrants that would have ruled all the world. Hitler! Stalin! Kahn!”

Kobi sighed. “What other course of action is there? If we get in his way as he pursues a completely legitimate, rational goal, then he makes good on his threat. Or we could let him ask his questions and offer him a little bit of our time and an honest answer or two. You have taught us well, to follow in the footsteps of God and Christ. When have they ever shown fear in merely speaking with an adversary?”

“You have absolutely no understanding of God or Christ.”

She sighed again. “You're making entirely too much of this. His threat carries with it no power that we ourselves don't give it. If we choose not to be combative, there will be no one for him to combat. From what I gather, he's trying to solve the birthing problem. What reason have we to not try

to help?"

"You're ignoring what he's actually trying to accomplish."

"Not at all. Jesus Christ was a proponent of peace, and so is this city-dweller. I think that goal is far less dangerous than spurring the city-dwellers throughout the world to rally in attack at a true threat. We continue to get stronger, but if the humans mobilized all of their forces against us, they could still wipe us out completely. Isn't it important that we explore every avenue to avoid that?"

Father Graine looked at her the way a player looks at a chess board. "I think that the United Nations wouldn't allow that to happen. They have to walk a very fine line between acting defensively and appearing too aggressive. They have to deal with a large majority of moderates that believe we are a danger to be controlled but not eradicated."

"That may have been true in the past, but we have both seen how the UN has been inching forward to a hardliner approach at a pace that is nearly imperceptible to the moderate human. It's called a feature creep, something human politicians are very, very good at. They expect within a generation to have moved the moderate position to one of all out war. Violence by the enclaves, as we saw a couple of years ago, will allow that feature creep to move at an exponentially speedier pace."

"You're wrong. No amount of measured pace could afford them public support for an all out war. Even the UN remembers the horrors of war."

"The United Nations continued existing after the Great Atomic War for the sole purpose of stamping out threats to humanity before they got out of control, as happened with nuclear weaponry. They have framed our existence as a threat not unlike nuclear arms. Even now we hear speeches advocating stronger control so that we are not allowed to 'get out of hand'."

"Then they're insane," Father Graine said throwing up his hands. "One murder in one city and they respond by calling for our destruction?"

"Father, you know that isn't what happened. There was one murder *in their walls*. There have been plenty of other crimes committed by those with the touch against humans, including the taking of life. Until the incident two years ago, these crimes had always been committed in the fallout lands, where humans considered us just one of several dangers. But you and Scythe have pushed for more actions within their walls. Every time we do so, we push more of the moderates to the side of the hardliners."

John Paul shifted in his seat, looking uncomfortable as they argued.

"Everything is politics with you," said Father Graine. "I don't concern myself with words like moderate and hardliner. I'm too busy dealing with good and evil, right and wrong, and providence and sin."

"It is a sign that the city-dwellers are ignorant that they don't concern themselves with those same concepts," Kobi said. "But here you have many followers and there are few who do not take the measure of your words. Instead of lashing out against this one minor threat, why don't you allow me to meet with him first? Perhaps I can persuade him to be more civil. And certainly it will allow me to answer his pertinent questions and free the Church from having to be involved with such a dangerous infidel."

"His questions are quite technical," John Paul spoke up. "Genetics and other science. How will you be able to answer these questions?"

"I'm not completely ignorant of science," Kobi said evenly. "And as you know, my sister is one of our top scientists. But besides, I believe the city-dweller will have questions for all of us, save perhaps the Church."

"So he asks all the questions except the one that matters most?" Father Graine sneered. "What reason have you to believe that he does not value his immortal soul?"

Kobi counted to ten while biting the inside of her lip in frustration. "Perhaps he just isn't aware of how important faith is to the enclave," she managed.

"Then he will be made aware," Father Graine said, a hard look on his face. "I will indeed speak

with the city-dweller infidel, and perhaps I shall even try to save his soul from damnation.” He looked over at Kobi and smiled. “But you first. It wouldn't do to have the Church appear to rush to greet him. Better the other Rada speak with him first, and me last.”

One two three four five six seven eight nine ten...

* * *

Anton hadn't been so apprehensive since the day he had enrolled in the CSS academy as he was that next morning. The path he and Zak took through Rownosci to get to the church was heavily populated, and word seemed to travel ahead of them that they were headed in that direction. As they neared the plaza, the church loomed over them like a sentinel. The council building, which was twice the church's size in width, appeared to be several stories shorter in height. It was interesting to note that whenever a worker emerged from the council building, they craned their heads upward to peer at the top of the church steeple.

It wasn't until they had nearly reached the church property that he began to get looks of displeasure. It was like entering an entirely different community, going from one that was curiously indifferent to one of open hostility. These are Father Graine's people, Anton thought. Freedom of thought might exist in the rest of the enclave, but within the invisible boundaries of the church, they operated almost as if they were a hive mind. He did his best to ignore the looks, but they were coming so frequently now that he couldn't look anywhere without having to quickly look in another direction. As they drew closer, the dress changed as well, from casual clothes and the dark robes of the Straznik to light beige shawls that looked like they were made from burlap, and it was from these that he received the withering glares. What do you have to fear from me? All I am trying to accomplish is to bring you peace. Isn't that what your God would want as well? But Anton knew that wasn't what they feared. This church--recognized by *the* Church or not--had clearly adopted the practice of jealously guarding their influence. It was clear that his goals were not the same as those of the Rada. Why shouldn't he expect them to push back?

Zak seemed to sense his apprehension and tried to keep him talking, relying mostly on jokes so lewd that even Anton felt they shouldn't be uttered on church grounds. But he was far too busy taking in his surroundings to respond. With every step closer, one thing became ever clearer: the church was better maintained than any other building in Rownosci. He had been impressed the past few days with the general upkeep of the town, and it wasn't lost on him how wrong the estimations of those in Chicago were about the level of sophistication in the enclave, but the church was something else altogether. He was willing to bet that no structure in all of Chicago was kept as well this, from the cleanliness of the façade, to the way the stained glass windows glimmered, to the lush green of the lawn and shrubbery outside. He commented as much to Zak, who shrugged.

“One of the keys to survival for us has always been diligence. There are two institutions that are excellent at instilling diligence. One is the military. The other is religion.”

Anton searched his mind for a counterexample but couldn't find one. He was right. No other institutions performed the function as well. And if diligence in the fallout lands was as important as Zak said, they would go to great lengths to promote and protect those institutions. This caused him to worry greatly. Not about how the enclave would protect the church, but how the Straznik would protect themselves if they viewed him as a threat.

“You see the attention to detail here,” Zak continued. “All citizens in Rownosci are expected to offer four hours a week in service to either the council building or the church, whichever they choose. Not everyone here is Catholic, but most are, and they usually choose to work on the church grounds.”

Which drew them even further into the institution, Anton realized. It was an ingenious move. Who here could argue against the need for such public service? And tying that service to the church meant that in the people's minds the church hierarchy would be even more closely integrated with the

political leadership. Anton wondered silently if the idea had been Father Graine's. He bet it had been. It might be an elusive concept to the population here, but to an outsider like him it was clear that the effect would be to weave the church leadership into the hierarchy of the government, and all of the power such integration entailed. The church would still have to be careful not to alienate its parishioners, but the outcome was that without tacit church approval, little in the enclave could be done. Hadn't human society sought to distance their governments from religion for that very reason? In this case, Anton was sure it had been a deliberate move on the part of the church. And that meant that this Father Graine was of a level of subtlety and intelligence that would make him too a force with which to be reckoned.

Or was his own dislike for religion causing him to see enemies where none existed? He recalled his mother's speech when he'd once asked why they had to attend mass. "Because tradition expects it of us," she had said. "And because attending mass will teach you one of the most valuable skills one can possess: the ability to extract valuable lessons from the drivel of hypocrites."

He began breathing hard and came to a halt. He had thought less about his mother while in Rownosci than at any other time in his life. Recalling her voice had affected him strongly enough to take his breath away. He hadn't recognized the hole within him these past couple of days, but now realization struck home with the kind of force that only love could compel. He *missed* her. Missed her terribly, in fact. Operating without her guidance was like swimming blind in a vacuum. He had only left her a few days ago, but now he wondered how he had made it even this far without her.

Zak put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "The rectory is this way, behind the church and past the cemetery."

They moved past the iron gates and followed alongside the church into the cemetery. Just outside of the grounds was one of the Tog's gardens. He could see several workers in white robes bent on their hands and knees, digging roughly into the soil before throwing their hands in the air, showering themselves and those nearby in loam. He noticed the difference between their dirty appearance and the regal cleanliness of the church workers in their pristine robes. It was interesting to see how philosophical differences could manifest themselves physically. The willingness to imbue filth was a clear statement to all that witnessed their work, as was how well kept the church was, both in their grounds and their people.

As he took a moment to watch the workers, a tough looking woman in white made her way through the cemetery, clearly heading to his direction. He waited for her to arrive and only half-noticed as Zak faded back towards the plaza. He took in the way she held herself, emanating confidence without any hint of arrogance. She also looked extremely familiar.

"Anton Donovan," she said, performing an abbreviated bow.

"Kobi Trudeau," he replied. "I wasn't expecting to meet you here."

She grinned at him. "Someone so perceptive could indeed cause much havoc here in Rownosci."

"History is full of examples of havoc that resulted in the betterment of all."

"Ah, but we Touched have very little history. And what we have suggests havoc to be an immensely painful endeavor."

"You're speaking of the war, but there is more than one kind of chaos in the world. Christ caused more than his share."

"You can leave the topic of religion for when Father Graine decides to see you," Kobi said, smiling warmly. "He is the one that tends to our souls. My domain is our stomachs."

"I appreciate your speaking openly with me," Anton said. "It seems that most of your people consider me a cancer and would not even acknowledge my existence except when I threaten the host."

She smiled again warmly and said, "Just as everyone in Chicago doesn't believe in their City's stance on anomalies, there is a spectrum of thought here as well. Some of us also believe that the cause of peace is just."

Anton looked back towards the garden. "I would expect nothing less from someone who maintains such beautiful cropland as this. Peace is inherent in a farmer, surrounded as she is by the tranquility of her vegetables."

Kobi frowned. "You have that completely backwards. The farmer is the maintainer of peace in the destructive world of his crops. There are always weeds to be weeded, pests to be driven away, and in our case radiation to battle constantly." She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. "Though I suspect you know that already."

"I do. The key to bringing a farmer's peace is to fully respect the environment and adversaries you battle."

"Then I hope you will be a farmer here in Rownosci. There are many who would use any sign of disrespect to derail your aims altogether."

Anton shook his head. "While I will never disrespect your community here, respect for any individual must be earned, not granted. But intend not to be an outsider for long. I would be a part of your community, as much as it is willing to have me."

"At the very least, that would mean giving over some of your time to public service. In your case, some might also attempt to require service in the Straznik."

"I've spent most of my life in the service of others," Anton said. "Why should I do any different here?"

"I'm certain the enclave would not consider time spent in the CSS to be service."

"Then hypocrisy runs more rampant here than I had expected."

Kobi grinned again, shaking her head. She promised to answer any questions he had for her, but wanted first to show him the garden and introduce him to the Tog workers. Anton did his best to hide it, but he was thrilled. Not only was Kobi taking to him, but he had also planned on trying to learn more about whom the Tog was and how they performed their duty. And here she was facilitating both. In stark contrast to those inside in the church grounds, the Tog were cordial once he'd been introduced. They appeared to be fairly well educated as well, perhaps not as much as Maya and the other scientists were, but when he questioned them about their botanical work they responded as experts would. He learned a great deal about their work and was unsurprised that it was nearly dark by the time Kobi led him back into the council building and up to her office.

There was no one else around, save for a few workers performing their weekly service. When they had settled into their seats beside one another—Kobi had pointedly ignored the chair behind her large desk—Anton noted again the way she carried herself. She looked as though she must be older than her sister, but there was such vibrancy to her appearance that he could have been made to believe that she was in fact younger. It was so different from Maya's used up appearance that it caused his heart to ache momentarily as he thought of her.

"I have met your sister and her children," he said. Beating around the bush wasn't going to work with a woman like this. "You have some incredibly intelligent kin."

"Intelligent, yes, but not happy. Were that I could make them so."

"No person can *make* another happy," he said. "Happiness, like every other emotion, is a choice."

"Not just emotions. Everything is a choice."

Anton nodded. He took a longer look around her office. The large desk was exquisite, the cherry wood reflecting the light from several ornate lamps. There was even some artwork on the walls and a potted plant or two.

"You have a look of pleasant surprise on your face," Kobi said. "The city-dwellers always assume that we live in squalor."

He shrugged. "The only examples they were working from was the area around our walls. Squalor wouldn't begin to describe some of the conditions I've seen there."

"That's one of the reasons we moved so far west," she replied. "Very little here was damaged

directly from the bombs. That which was harmed by the radiation was more easily patched up and put to use. One of the wonderful side effects of having so much available to so few is our tradition of humility for personal possessions. Here in the enclave there is little competition amongst neighbors for niceties. There are exceptions, of course, families that have far more pride than they should, but they are relatively few.”

He thought back to what he had told Zak before venturing into the plaza for the first time. “All communities have their power families and where they can be found there is usually pride. Perhaps it is that pride that is the weed a farmer needs to pull.”

“If you try to do that, you will fail,” she said, shaking her head. “And you will be forced to leave the enclave. It is what I have never been able to understand about my own people here, that we can suffer such a complex of inferiority while also claiming that we are an evolutionary progression of humanity. Perhaps we are simply humanity’s cousin, rather than their offspring, but that notion is a seed that I have never been able to cultivate here. So instead I hint and I insinuate, mostly to the women, hoping that they will plant the seeds in their men for me, the way that the worker bee brings pollen to the stamen.”

Something in her words moved him. He tried for an approving smile but ended up choking on a single tear. “You’re the first person I’ve met here that seems to believe as I do and you speak as if there is little hope.”

“That’s not true,” Kobi said. “I actually see a great deal of hope.”

“But I’m not sure I do,” Anton said. Part of him wanted to relinquish himself to the memories of all the prejudices he had witnessed in Chicago, only a microcosm of humanity worldwide, but a microcosm nonetheless. But as always, when that kind of despair crept into his thoughts, the faces of his mother and father swam before him, spurring him onward. But picturing them had other effects as well.

“I wouldn’t have thought you the type of man to hang his head even before he had attempted his task,” Kobi said. She reached out and rested a hand on his shoulder.

He lifted his head and the images were swept away, replaced by Kobi’s kind face and concerned eyes. “I misspoke. I do indeed have hope that the roots of peace can take hold here. My concern is that I am not up to the task. To me, it has been a lifetime since I left the walls of Chicago, but really it has been only a couple of days. I told you that respect had to be earned and I have done nothing to earn the respect of either the enclave or the wasteland.”

“How is it that one so sure in his principles is also so sure he will fail? Are you like Judas? Do you revere your own beliefs while simultaneously feeling unworthy of them?”

Anton couldn’t figure out a better way to describe how he felt, so he said nothing.

“I’m inclined to take your words at face value,” she pressed. “Because if this is all an act to create within me sympathy for you, you are doing a masterful job.”

Anton wasn’t attempting any ruse. He could see the goal and knew it to be right, but he couldn’t find within himself any reason to be sure that he could accomplish it. The other night he had felt so sure in Maya Trudeau’s home, weaving his words to bring out that which was best in her children. But today, confronted with two hostile power bases and seeing the other so measured in her expectations, he began to think himself audacious to imagine that he could do any better. I was a fool to think I had this in me, he thought. Who am I to the enclave? Who am I to Chicago? Who am I to the world?

Kobi, who’s hand had not left his shoulder, gave him a reassuring pat. “I have seen that look on nearly every person when they are first welcomed into the enclave. I know what you are feeling and that you think that feeling is doubt, but it isn’t. It’s loneliness you feel.”

“You’re wrong,” Anton said. “It’s doubt *and* loneliness. It’s me thinking that I was a fool to attempt this. A fool with almost no one who will help me.”

“Anton, you are obviously confiding in me today because you think I am your friend. I want you to know that regardless of any prior reservations I may have had, a friend I am indeed. Which

means that you are my friend as well, so I can speak to you candidly. You will have those here that will oppose you, particularly at the onset. Scythe, of course, and also Father Graine, and many others as well. But you are most certainly not alone. I will help you as much as I can, because I believe your dream is a good one. And though we are certainly outnumbered, my influence among the people here is not to be discounted.”

He stood and reached out his hand, helping her up from her seat. “Why don't we stretch our legs outside?”

She would probably understand that now he was being manipulative, suggesting that they walk outside where they would be seen together and by implication people would assume that she had decided to back his position. Hopefully she would also understand that it wasn't she he was manipulating, nor the people of the enclave, but only their misconceptions.

Out on the street he asked her many questions about life in Rownosci, how power and influence was wielded, and how new entrants to the enclave were initiated. She told him all about the process, but also about the psychological challenges that had to be overcome, particularly for those younger than most. “It is not unlike the stages that a person goes through upon learning of a terminal illness,” Kobi said. “It is painful to acknowledge the death of a former life in transition to this new one.”

Anton thought about his own case and relayed what he remembered of his childhood to her, including the story of his stepfather, which caused her to blink away tears. He thought that his was a unique case, older as he was compared to most of their adoptees, but also because he had been aware of his difference and been forced to hide it from nearly everyone else. And that wasn't all. No other initiate before had been the adopted nephew of such a high-ranking human politician as Anton, nor had they served in the human's military.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But the effects are plain to me. You are measured, guarded, and disciplined in a way only your unique circumstances could have yielded. And yet you have the same social drive as the rest of us. Those two urges wage a constant battle within your soul. So while you have few friends, you have many acquaintances whose respect you command. You're in control of the outward display of your emotions, and yet inwardly they are a wild and uncontrollable thing.” They walked up to one of the few remaining vendors that hadn't yet closed down for the evening and she paid for a large orange. “Try this. It is the culmination of all my work here, and I would be interested in your opinion on its flavor.”

Anton peeled back the rind and bit into the fruit. A burst of juices flooded his tongue. It was all natural sugar and citrusy tart, a combination to which the fruit grown and processed in Chicago couldn't hope to compare. It was enough to almost make him gasp in pleasure. “I wouldn't have thought such a taste to even exist,” he managed.

“I'm glad you like it, but I also offered it to you for another reason. I can see how simply tasting the fruit has affected you. Imagine how it must be for a child to experience a multitude of life flavors they've never experienced, all the while trying to forget their parents, their home, and everything else they knew. It is something that all of those born outside the enclave must endure.”

“And its effects?”

“In general, I believe it creates a subconscious anger at the city-dwellers. The mind simultaneously revels in all that is new outside of human civilization while also recoiling in horror that it had been deprived of that newness for so long. I believe that the mind then becomes desperate to associate blame for that depravation, and subsequently assigns guilt to the city-dwellers, where that newness was not experienced. It's an alluring form of victim identification. They hold humanity responsible for all that troubles them, even if consciously they realize how wrong such a position is. It's as if we have wrapped our sole identity around the idea that humanity has persecuted us.”

“No,” Anton said. “The people here are not fools and they have enough knowledge of the city to know better. There may be bigots at the United Nations and human government, but they have to know how much support there is for their cause among the common people. How could their

conclusions survive such contradiction?”

“I had a similar thought early on, but I think the answer is that the subconscious just sweeps the contradiction under the mental rug. Whatever opposing thought there might be, on the anomaly question the United Nations is thought of as the mouthpiece of humanity. And not only in Chicago. We get reports from around the world, so we know what goes on elsewhere, and it isn’t pretty. Fortunately, no other human city dealt with anything similar to the polarizing tragedy of your family.”

“How lucky for them,” Anton murmured.

“It’s such a strange case,” Kobi said, shaking her head sadly. “Why would your father have been killed? To date, we have never had any task set in Chicago that required murder or assassination. Some are killed in the fallout lands, certainly, and there is a general acceptance for self-defense, but this was something else. By all accounts, your father wouldn’t have been a target of interest, particularly given his vocal opposition to the hardliners. And everything I’ve read and heard indicates that he wasn’t armed. When someone is murdered, there is always a reason. Sometimes that reason is irrational, like psychopathic illness or bloodlust, but always a reason exists. Your father’s murder has been the subject of great conversation in the enclave these past few years, but never has a reasonable explanation for motive been contrived.”

“What kind of conversation?” Anton asked.

“Everything from official inquiries by the Rada to rumor on the street. We attempted to reconstruct the timeline for that day once, in an attempt to account for all of our people in the area. We gathered the Straznik, everyone that was even remotely close to Chicago that day. But nothing we looked at seemed to add up to a suspect. We couldn’t even come up with a member of the enclave that had been alone in the area and therefore free to commit the crime and lie about it later. Simply put, everyone was as accounted for as could possibly be. Scythe proclaimed that his soldiers had been cleared of the crime and refused to address the matter any further. There was nothing more anyone else could do. If the murder was the work of a conspiracy, nobody is talking and it seems likely we’ll never know for sure what happened. We could have just exiled the entire Straznik team that had scaled the walls that day, but the backlash Scythe would have whipped up would have been fierce, and Father Graine wouldn’t have pursued that option with me anyway. He kept saying that no Catholic anomaly would have committed such a crime and, since nearly all of the Straznik regularly attend mass, there likely had to be another explanation.”

It hadn’t ever occurred to Anton that the enclave would have taken such steps to investigate his father’s death. Scythe was clearly protecting his troops. He thought the most likely scenario was that more than one of the Straznik had been present during the killing and that they were now covering for each other. He said so aloud to Kobi.

“That’s the conclusion I came to as well,” she shrugged. “Given the manner in which he was killed, the only other possible culprit would be a raider, and they *never* go near Chicago.”

“And what about the rest of the enclave?” Anton asked, making an effort to control his emotions as anger and sadness swirled around him. “What conclusions did they reach?”

“It’s like I said, most of those that live here are Catholic, and they listen to Father Graine. Besides which, though most here would not wish for the murder of a human city-dweller, they also don’t mourn the act.” She sighed. “We really are an odd people. We want so desperately to be acknowledged as human, yet we don’t bat an eye at that kind of inhumanity.”

Anton wanted to offer comforting words, but he couldn’t. He knew she was wrong, but he couldn’t figure out how to say so. They might think that they were callous the way Kobi had described, but they weren’t. He recalled how the other night Maya had described repeated attempts to provide her anti-radiation formula to the humans in Chicago. He recalled Zak, who despite his bravado in his cell had refrained from doing violence on the CSS guards, merely using his power to slam shut the wall door instead. Like everything else out here, Anton suspected all that callousness was merely another defense mechanism.

His best guess was that life in the fallout lands, plush as this area might be, was still dangerous and hard. It was likely that so much energy was expended caring what happened to their own people that the anomalies couldn't bear the weight of the human's burden as well.

"You can see the problem now," Kobi said. "To convince the enclave to consider peace, you must first convince them to care for the city-dwellers. And the easiest way to do that would be to get them interested in you, the story of your stepfather, and what happened to him. And to tell that story, you have to walk a careful line between being an interesting nuisance to Scythe and an all out rebel. It is something that has not yet been attempted, even by me."

"Ah, but I'm more determined than ever to succeed," Anton said. "And now I'm beginning to think that I do indeed have a chance."

"What's caused you to change your mind?"

"Because I'm no longer alone. I have you to help me."

"Did I say I would help you?" Kobi asked, a grin playing across her face. "I suppose I did. But let me be clear that I won't do anything that I believe will bring danger to my people."

"If I can, I will bring danger only to myself," Anton said. "I'm here to help, not to harm."

"If you intend to keep my trust, you should tell me what you thought of a moment ago but didn't say."

Anton did his best to organize his thoughts in a way she would be able to understand. "I don't think your people are as flippant to my father's death as they pretend. I think they care very much, but bury that care down someplace that doesn't show physically."

"And the reason they would do so?" Kobi asked. "We do not shame the compassionate here."

"It's a defense mechanism," Anton replied. "There is so much to deal with out here; I think that people only have so much compassion to allocate, so they choose to focus on their own people instead of the city-dwellers. That's why they do not invest emotionally in the plight of those outside of the enclave. They find it less painful to pretend not to care."

Kobi smiled. "I think that someone as good as you simply cannot understand the power of hate. The people here do not hide from their emotions. Far from it, in fact. They *feed* off of them. Why else would Scythe have so many loyal followers?"

Anton tried to form a counterargument, but found that he couldn't. Clearly the hate Kobi spoke of was indeed present. But somehow it seemed only partly real to him. Indifference or not, there clearly was no joy in the enclave for his father's death. So if the hatred existed, it only went so far.

Which means I have a chance, Anton thought.

In Chicago, Mayor Donovan sat at his desk and opened once more the file he had been working on for the past week or so. It was something he hadn't spoken about to anyone else, not even Koskie, or Caleb, upon whom he was increasingly coming to rely. No, this was too important for anyone other than the UN to see before it was approved.

He pictured Anton, his ungrateful nephew, who he had allowed to live, allowed to grow, and then allowed to hold a rank in his military. At the first chance, he had betrayed all of that and left to join the enemy. What did he know about Anton, really? He was an anomaly, so every perception he would base on normal human responses had to be discarded. There was no way to know what he planned to do. It was even possible that he hadn't joined the enemy at all, but had simply left the city and struck out on his own, ashamed of his transgressions.

Right, Donovan thought silently. And tomorrow all the radiation that plagues us will be gone and everything will be wine and roses. No, he's out there somewhere, planning some terrible retribution.

He turned back to his terminal and looked over the document one last time before linking to the

UN satellite and hitting the transmit button.

Let him come, he thought. I'll welcome him with arms of steel, since he withdrew from my arms of flesh. Let him construct his plot. Why should I worry? We will be ready.

Chapter 11:

United Nations Resolution 2231.1.0009: The governing body of the United Nations recognizes and approves the declaration of martial law in Chicago in conjunction with their declaration of war on any anomaly enclaves in that immediate area. All battle tactics are also approved without regard to the Geneva Convention statutes, as the enemy combatants in this case are not part of a national uniformed military, nor are they human. Any anomaly settlements that do not immediately surrender are to be razed.

Should you come across any anomaly settlements that agree to surrender but are found to have any form of hierarchy similar to government in place, you are authorized to work directly with that hierarchy to transition their population into detention. In the event that you come across a settlement particularly well-suited to a human population, you may then work with any friendly anomaly assets to begin moving human populations into the settlements. This may also include forced anomaly labor, but only for use in bringing such a settlement up to human habitation standards. After such work is completed, any and all adult anomalies are to be detained, including their prior leadership.

Any humans living among the anomalies, or those in your city providing any aid to them whatsoever, are hereby declared to also be enemy combatants. These human combatants are to be afforded protection and their lives and freedom should be spared when possible, but any who resist may be dealt with as any other combatant.

The chief condition of any surrender with an anomaly community in your area is their relinquishing one Anton Donovan and one Scythe into your custody. They are to be transported back to Chicago where they will wait for a United Nations Judge Advocate to arrive, at which point they will stand trial for murder, terrorism, and treason.

United Nations Resolution 2231.1.0010: The United Nations, upon review of the plans for the protection of Chicago, hereby requests that all human governments of Earth adopt similar measures. This includes those human states and cities that have had unofficial normalized relations with their local enclaves. Each of these member states and cities are to adopt the Chicago method for creating a war committee charged with the organization of arms and personnel for said state or city. That committee will report to the United Nations for approval of their battle plans. Those human states or cities that refuse to submit their plans for approval to the United Nations but still carry out our recommendations will receive any assistance that we can provide to them upon their request. Any human state or city that does not cease normalized relations with all anomaly populations will be considered an enemy of humanity by the United Nations.

Each war committee is also charged with drawing up plans for detention of their local anomaly populations. If sufficient space and/or materials for that detention cannot be met, due either to availability of space and/or materials in relation to the size of the anomaly population, termination of anomaly lives is authorized by the United Nations. Under no circumstances is termination to be used without legitimate cause. Under no circumstances is termination to be used in numbers that outweigh the legitimate need.

Each war committee will also evaluate the compliance of anomaly populations and reward them proportionately. Those that surrender totally and immediately can be afforded more comfortable detentions than the others. In extreme cases, anomaly leadership that proves amicable and helpful during transition periods may be allowed to live outside of detention, but even in those extreme cases they shall not be allowed to breed or participate in human government.

United Nations Resolution 2231.1.0011: For the purposes of human safety, all United Nations resolution under the 2231 subset are to be kept confidential and viewed only by the recognized government recipient and their immediate aides. Under no circumstances are these communiqués to

fall into the hands of the enemy.

Official Memo of the United Nations to UN Member States
7.27.2168

The next afternoon, bent behind the mechanical file drawer in Rownosci's library, Bryce couldn't help but laugh as Anton struggled with the machine. Bryce told him that the library had been there since before the enclave moved in, along with the file machine. Wasn't Chicago supposed to be technologically superior to the enclave? And yet he was handling this fairly simple machine as if it were all moving too fast for him.

After watching him blunder around for several minutes, Bryce asked if he knew what he was doing. "Look, just bring me the schematics," Anton replied.

"They're right there on the screen! All you have to do is tell the machine to bring it up!"

Anton sighed. "This machinery is different than what I'm used to. I don't know how to bring up the file."

"Who doesn't know how to use a file drawer?"

"Well, me for starters," Anton said. "And as far as I've seen, there's nothing like this in Chicago."

"That's probably because this was an affluent area before the war."

"Bryce, just bring up the file, please. I didn't give you all my Chicago money out of the goodness of my heart."

"It's not like I'll ever be able to use it."

"You don't know that. Maybe someday soon you'll find yourself walking the streets of Chicago."

"Right. And maybe I'll be mayor, too."

Anton drummed his fingers. "Bryce, please just bring up the schematics. It's important."

"I don't know what you think you're going to find. It's just the plans for the wall. You don't need the schematics to see where it's going to go. Just go outside and walk in any direction until you trip over it."

"Are you the one that drew up the plans? Do you know that all they contain is the current wall location?"

"Okay, okay."

He typed something into the machine, causing the gears to whirl and the folders to rotate slowly. Finally they came to a stop and Bryce reached to pull out the wall plans. Anton thumbed through them only long enough to confirm that there were no surprises. The truth was he didn't really care about this document at all. He just wanted to confirm two things. First, that Bryce hadn't been mistaken in saying that all documents, including military were required to have a copy stored in the library and secondly, that he had the authority to retrieve those documents. He handed it back.

"Okay," Bryce said. "Are you done?"

"No," Anton said. "Now how about a search for anything logged in the last few months that could be a battle plan?"

Bryce's head fell slowly. It was the look of one who had been betrayed. "Battle plans," he whispered. "You're using me for sabotage? My mother was right. Jestes diablem."

"No, Bryce, not sabotage," Anton sighed. "But if I'm going have a chance at this, I have to know what Scythe is planning. At the very least I need to make sure I'm not tripping over the Straznik's troop formations."

"That would only happen if you were going back to Chicago," Bryce said suspiciously. "And it doesn't change the fact that if anyone finds out that I did this, I'll be exiled, or worse."

"Then get out of here and I'll do it myself."

"I may be a devo, city-dweller, but that doesn't make me a fool. You have no idea how to operate this machine."

"I'm not as old as your mother, but you would still do well to speak respectfully to your elders," Anton said. Right after he said it Bryce realized that he was speaking the way a father speaks to his son. Or maybe a stepfather to his stepson. So he smiled at Anton to let him know that the feeling was mutual.

"Sorry," Bryce smiled. "But there is another problem. If Scythe's plans are as important and secret as you seem to think, why would he bother keeping a copy of them here?"

"I thought you said it was the law."

"It's a rule. We don't really have *laws*."

"Fine. Just search for anything with the word 'battle'."

He typed quickly. "Nope. Nothing."

"How about 'Chicago'?"

His fingers clicked over the keyboard. "Nic. I don't think there's anything here."

Anton thought hard. "Try 'Donovan'."

"Your last name?"

"Not only mine. Just search for it."

The machine beeped, alerting them to a record found. Its file label on the display was *Assn./Donovan*. Bryce stared at it a moment, half expecting it to just disappear. "It doesn't make sense. If these are supposed to be secret, why would he comply with the rule and keep a copy here? And this filed label doesn't make sense. What's this first word? Association? Assign?"

"We'll have to look to be sure," Anton said. "But I'm willing to bet it stands for *assassination*."

Bryce laughed. "You must be joking. Anything like that would have to be approved by the other Rada." He instructed the system to bring them the file. Instead of handing it over, he flipped through it himself when it had arrived. "Maybe you weren't joking after all."

"It's a plan for the assassination of Chicago's mayor?"

"It's probably just a contingency plan. Or speculative. Something they drew up without any plan to implement."

"You're a scientist," Anton said. "I'm sure you know Ockham's Razor better than I."

"Yes, but in this case the simplest explanation is ridiculous," Bryce said. "If he was going to draw up these plans with the intent of acting on them, why would he risk trouble by logging them here?"

"It's a combination of arrogance and obedience," Anton said. "Arrogance that the enclave will trust him with their safety, no matter what, and obedience to the enclave rules that he follows for fear that the acceptance he has here will vanish if he steps out of line on a technicality. Scythe is human and no matter how much power and influence he has here, he worries that one day he'll wake up and find that it's all been taken from him."

Bryce was going to argue, but then he decided against it. The city-dweller had thus far proven to be both insightful and overwhelmingly correct when it came to reading people in the enclave. "I still don't think I should be showing you this. The Straznik will have my head if they find out."

"It can't be *that* surprising," Anton said. "Patrick Donovan has done more to persecute anomalies than anyone else. The fact that he's in a leadership position only makes an attack that much more likely."

"You don't understand. To do this without the approval of the other Rada would undo everything Scythe has helped to build. He might talk as if he wishes for more power, but the truth is that the structure of the Rada was partly his creation. To circumvent the rules now would be to undo the authority of the Rada in the enclave, something he wouldn't risk."

"Perhaps," Anton said noncommittally.

Bryce studied the city-dweller's face and realized that he had a theory in which Scythe would

take that risk. "What do you know?" Bryce asked. "Or what do you suspect?"

"There is a theory," Anton said. "That my father's murder was exactly the impetus for war the people of Chicago needed, and that it didn't really matter who killed him or why. The idea is that the Mayor and even the United Nations used the crime as an excuse to go beyond what had been the policy of anomaly containment."

"What does that have to do with the enclave?" Bryce asked.

"If Scythe wants to go to war, wants to be able to do so no matter what, the easiest way to ensure that it happens is not to march on Chicago."

Bryce didn't get it. "It isn't?"

"Of course not," Anton said. "It would be far better to get the city-dwellers to be the ones to declare war. All the better if they're the ones to leave the protection of Chicago and march into the fallout lands. Have you considered the strategic differences between an attack on Chicago and the defense of Rownosci? What if Scythe offered so little obstruction to the construction of the wall because it was always a part of his overall strategy?"

"Here I thought you were incredibly insightful. Now I realize that you simply make guesses."

"Try to think like a strategist rather than a scientist. Details are only part of the equation in strategy. You have to think five steps ahead of the present, realize what the likely result is not only of what you're doing, but the reaction to what you're doing, and your reaction to the reaction." He looked over the assassination plans. "How much do you know about the Straznik? How much do you know about their numbers, how they're broken up into teams, and so on?"

"Probably enough for whatever you need me to do."

"Use that knowledge to find me any documents that would indicate how an operation like this would be carried out. Who are the elite teams? Which teams have marksmen? Who is Scythe likely to entrust with this mission?"

Bryce began to run every different search he could come up with. The city-dweller didn't move much, looking over his shoulder the entire time. Sometimes he would look over the documents Bryce retrieved, most of the time he would just ask for a summary. Based on the questions he asked, Bryce guessed that Anton wasn't merely a soldier in the Chicago Security Service. More likely he had been a strategist; a general, perhaps, or maybe a team captain. In fact, he appeared to know more about military maneuvers and tactics than anyone in the enclave, save maybe Scythe. Even Cosaint, who was known to be a gifted strategist, wouldn't have been able to keep up with the way the city-dweller thought. All he seemed to lack was the enclave terminology, which he was picking up with amazing speed.

By the time the light coming through the windows had turned from bright yellow to dark orange, the implications of his searches were obvious. No matter how they shook out the data, the most likely team to be utilized in carrying out the assassination would be Cosaint's. Pointing this out to the city-dweller, Bryce could tell he wasn't surprised. That's when he realized that once he had confirmed that plans for an operation existed, Anton hadn't wanted Bryce to run the searches because he needed answers. Rather, he had wanted Bryce to find those answers, which Anton already knew. You wanted me to know what you know, he thought. More so, you wanted me to come up with the answers you know in such a way that I couldn't think that you were trying to manipulate me, as I accused you of earlier. I know what you want me to do, Anton Donovan, nephew of the target of these assassination plans. You want me to spread this information throughout the enclave. You want to make sure that these plans are anything but secret. I might not be able to sense you the way most here could, but that only makes me trust my sense of you all the more.

And what I know is that you are clearly not as good at reading people as you think. Haven't you seen that since you approached us in the plaza that day that I have been your advocate here? Don't you recognize me as your ally? Even though you haven't let me in on your plan, I won't tell anyone where I got this information. Even if you end up causing such havoc here that Scythe or Father Graine call for

your head, even then I will keep any secret you want, whether you ask me to or not. You may still be rather new here, but I've seen enough to know that you are good. I've seen you operate enough to know that your motives are pure. And I now know you well enough to know that I'd do anything you needed me to do. The only ones I'm interested in protecting beyond your goals is my family and I believe that now you're a part of our family, so what reason would you have to endanger us?

* * *

"I'm sorry if I am interrupting anything important, Father," Scythe said after being admitted into the rectory and shown to a seat in a common room.

Father Graine waved the apology away with his hand. "Late evenings are not made for work. They are for contemplation and prayer."

"I would have your help with both. I know you are a man of God, but I believe the time to push our conflict with the city-dwellers towards its resolution has come."

"Is that right?"

"I believe so, yes. We cannot expect this limbo to go on forever. The longer we wait the more disadvantaged we become."

Father Graine rose from his chair and began pacing slowly. "Isn't this a conversation we should be having with *all* the Rada?"

"You could call Kobi here, if you wish it," Scythe said. "But I fear she would only delay the inevitable."

Father Graine continued pacing silently for a moment, a strained look upon his face. Then his expression changed, as though he had come to a decision. "I'm concerned about our progress as well," he said. "I am indeed a man of God, but even the Lord recognizes that there are times when his flock must take up arms in his name. I don't know if our visitor is a devil in sheep's clothing, but certainly he must be closely watched."

"He could wreck everything I have worked for. He may believe that he is doing right, but that won't stop him from destroying us all."

"Come now," Father Graine chuckled. "By all accounts he is gifted in persuasion, but one man cannot imperil the entire enclave. And it isn't as if peace wouldn't be a welcome thing."

"But he doesn't preach peace, he preaches appeasement! To wish that anomalies and humans could suddenly come together and embrace one another is a wonderful dream, but it's only a dream. True peace will only be accepted by the city-dwellers when it has been thrust upon them by force."

"No, Scythe," Father Graine smiled. "True peace will exist only when all sentient beings on this sinful planet come to accept Christ as their savior and repent for all the harm they have done."

Scythe bit the inside of his lip, waiting for his frustration to subside. Religion was a useful form of social control in the enclave and, more often than not, it benefited him. But there were times when he wished that there were no such thing as Catholicism in the enclave. Belief in God makes the people complacent, he thought silently. Because if resolution could only occur at the whim of the Creator, what use was it attempting to bring it about themselves? Didn't they realize that whatever God might exist made use of them all as his tools? Didn't they know that he *was* doing God's work?

"I've composed a plan that will bring about a culmination to this conflict," he said.

"So I've heard," Father Graine replied.

"And it will render our visitor's aims for naught."

"Will it? The city-dweller's message is a good one. Perhaps you've been too wrapped up in your plans to notice that he has done some good here."

"I didn't expect you to be so easily fooled, Father."

"Not every being in sheep's wool is a devil, my son. Some of them are just sheep."

"All of them are sheep, except the one that is not. The problem is that is usually the last one

you meet, shortly before it devours you completely.”

Father Graine seemed to consider this. “Tell me your plans, Scythe, so that I may see if they are just and deserving of my support.”

Maya walked towards the plaza. She had come home to an empty house, which for some reason had caused her to shake with anxiety. All these years of coming home from her work and doing everything she could to ignore her family, she had no idea that their absence would have affected her like this. But she gathered herself and marched down to the plaza, where she had heard her children sometimes played. They weren’t there. When she asked around the others and managed to cease their talking about some assassination plot rumor that was floating around, she had discovered that they were at the city-dwellers home.

So now she stalked up this hill to get to the house the enclave had provided him, noticing despite her anger that the flora that lined the path were some of her own genetically modified plants. More color, she thought to herself as she walked. It would be prettier if there was a wider variety of color in the plant life here. That shouldn’t be too difficult to accomplish. And then her mind began to run through the allele pairings that affected pedal color, sorting them in order of what she would need to change.

Why am I thinking of these things? What do I care if the pathways are pretty? I travel them only to get to work before the sun rises and back home after the sun sets. I never see the fruit of my work. In fact, this is the first time I’ve seen *these* plants, other than in my lab. She thought furiously that the only reason she was forced to have these thoughts at all was because of this damned intruder.

She looked up and was startled to realize that she had reached the house. Strange noises were coming from within: laughter punctuated by raucous shouts. She reached out and knocked tentatively on the door, careful to be as quiet as possible. Perhaps, if she were lucky, no one would hear and she could simply return home comfortable in the knowledge that she had done her motherly duty.

But the door opened to reveal Benji, who was smiling from ear to ear. “Mother,” he said brightly. And then he turned to run back into the house. Feeling ashamed of her fear, Maya followed him.

Bryce and the city-dweller were seated across from each other, a small folding table between them. Colored tiles were spread in complicated patterns across its surface. They were playing a strategy game called Jong. Looking around the sitting room, she thought that the city-dweller had been shown no courtesy in his dwelling assignment. There was nothing wrong with the house, but it had to be one of the smallest in Rownosci. In any case, neither of them had acknowledged her arrival.

“Don’t bother speaking to them,” Benji said. “I’ve tried a couple of times. They just ignored me.”

“Welcome,” the city-dweller said in a strained voice after shifting a couple of his tiles.

“You are a fool,” Bryce cried out triumphantly. He moved one of his tiles on the table with one hand and gathered up several of the city-dweller’s with the other. “If you wish to concede the game, I’ll agree not to tell the rest of the enclave that I beat you.”

The city-dweller smiled. “I doubt you could keep that promise.”

Maya took a seat in one of the other chairs and Benji knelt down beside her.

“What are you doing here, Mother?” Benji asked. “Shouldn’t you be at home?”

Maya did her best to push her annoyance back down into her gut. Benji had a way of speaking to people that sounded disrespectful, but she knew it wasn’t disrespect that he intended. It was indifference that he showed to pretty much anyone other than Scythe. And Connor, when he had still been alive. Why shouldn’t she seek out her children when they failed to return home at the end of the day? Why shouldn’t she care that they were out here on the outskirts of the enclave, engaged in the

silly games that only children and soldiers played? Playing games wasn't the way a supposedly serious intellectual like Bryce should be engaged in. Perhaps it was his feeling of inadequacy that drove him to play Jong, commonly used by team captains in the Straznik to hone their strategic skills. Humans were not allowed to serve in the Straznik beyond some advisory roles. Devos weren't even allowed those. It's my genes that cause him to seek this out, she thought. Do the horrors I've brought upon my family never cease?

She glanced over at them in time to see the city-dweller shift a couple of the tiles around before sweeping all the rest off of the table and onto the floor. "I win," he said smiling.

Bryce was staring at the tabletop, frowning. "How did I let that happen? I must be an idiot!"

"No," the city-dweller said. "You're just young. And I've been playing this game in Chicago for years."

"They have Jong in Chicago?"

"Of course. How do you think it came to be in Rownosci? Most everything here came from Chicago." He looked over at Maya. "Including most of your people."

"You've only been here a few days and already you've stolen two of my children from me," Maya said. "I come home to an empty house and find that half of my family is here with you."

"But you're here as well," the city-dweller replied. "So now we're all together. All except Saint, who is always late getting home, and Catalina, who is at her lab looking into something for me."

"What do you need a botanist for?"

"I'm solving a puzzle. I believe your fungus mash might be a corner piece."

She laughed. "The mash might be good for warding off radiation poisoning, but you'll find that it isn't a tonic capable of getting two warring parties to the bargaining table."

"Your problem is that you think nothing you do is of any value."

"And yours is overconfidence."

"Perhaps," the city-dweller smiled. "But Bryce now owes me back the money I paid him earlier."

He held out his hand and Bryce reluctantly slapped a wad of American script into it. When she caught his attention he shrugged sheepishly. "He said you'd show up around dinner time."

"And now I'm leaving," Maya said angrily. "And the two of you are coming with me. Or should I add instilling familial obedience to the list of the things my late husband failed to do?"

Both Bryce and Benji wilted under her stare.

But before they could get up and lope out the door, the city-dweller stood from his seat to come and squat in front her. He spoke very softly. She had the impression that his words were meant only for her ears. "You're the smartest person in the enclave. I don't know why yet, but you endure such a level of self-loathing that I'm surprised that you can raise from your bed. It's unwarranted. Do you understand what I'm telling you? Whatever you're blaming yourself for, it isn't your fault."

Maya just stared at him. She shook, unable to tell which emotion caused the tremors. This young man had been here less than a week, but already he was beginning to guess that which she had tried to keep from everyone. "You don't know me," she said quietly. "You're only gift is parlor tricks and an unquenchable thirst for cruelty."

"You know that's not true. Even if your consciousness is screaming it, you have to push past that and get over it. Whatever he did to you, or whatever you imagined you caused him to do to your family, get over it. Because I need your help. I can't explain why, but I am sure that I can't do what I need to do without your help."

"I have no reason to help you," she choked out.

"Yes you do, and if you're not aware of it now, you soon will be. Besides, what is it you so dislike about what I'm trying to do? I've seen enough to know that none of the scientists have any affinity for Scythe or the Straznik. Come to think of it, none of you show a particular amount of loyalty to the Church or the Tog either, save for John Paul, but with a name like his how could anything

else be expected?”

“Peace would be wonderful,” Maya said. “I could work for peace. It’s you I refuse to help.”

“How can someone hate themselves as you do and still be stubborn in their convictions? This isn’t about me. It isn’t even about your children. This affects *everyone*. Would you risk the entire enclave’s future, and the future of the Chicago population, simply to spite me?”

She looked at the ground, saying nothing, giving him no more with which to work.

“I’m going to need your help, Maya Trudeau, and the help of your family too. Very soon I intend to speak in the plaza to all who will listen to me. I am going to give the enclave a reason to believe that mutuality with the humans can be attained. It’d be nice if I had something to back that up.”

“There *is* nothing to back it up.”

“How scientific of you, to make such an absolute claim. Maya, I’m *pleading* with you to help me.”

“I’ll never help you, because you are a horrible person who has insisted on doing nothing except--”

“Except spend one night in your home and reverse years of damage that had been done,” the city-dweller said, annoyed. He turned to look at her children. “I took an impenetrable stone of a boy and drew water from him. I spent less than two days with your disciple of self-loathing and conjured within him enough ego to be surprised when he lost to me in a mild form of competition.”

Hot anger flared within her again and this time she was unable to control herself. She stood abruptly, so much so that the city-dweller toppled from where he’d been squatting and ended up sprawled across the floor. She stood over him, staring down contemptuously. “How dare you! You accuse me of the most hateful crimes! Damaging my children? I have done everything in my power to keep them from harm!” Tears mixed with the heat of her fury, feeling like drips of lava winding their way down her cheek. She was suddenly struck by the urge to flee this place, where her children mocked her and this stranger made the most horrible accusations, horrible because they were true, horrible because she had tried so desperately to *not* poison her children anymore than her silly love of a horrible man already had. She had to flee, because this man was coming close to knowing her completely in a way that she was sure would mean that he owned her, the same way that Connor had owned her, even though he’d had no interest in that ownership.

But even as she stood over him, another thought struck her. He had said that she had a personal interest in stopping the war. At first she hadn’t given any thought to what that could mean, but now, looking down into his beautifully haunting eyes, it hit her. He thought that her Cosaint was going to be the one going on this assassination mission that was making its way through the rumor mill. And he was right, she was sure. Not only because Cosaint’s team had been relied on in the past for the most dangerous missions, and not only because when Connor had led that same team they too had filled that role, but also because this city-dweller thought it to be true, and he seemed to always be right.

And he’ll be killed, she thought. My son will die, I know it. And it’ll be my fault, because I bore him for a man that would drive him into the Straznik. If that happens, I’ll kill myself to avoid poisoning my remaining children any further, but even that won’t help. I’ve tainted their lives forever.

And with tears streaming down her face, Maya stepped over the city-dweller and ran for the door.

Anton picked himself off the floor and dropped into the chair she had occupied. Why is this so difficult? Am I the monster Maya believes me to be? When he looked back up, he found Bryce and Benji both staring at him.

“You’ve been using us?” Bryce asked.

“Yes, but—“

“I thought you actually *cared*,” Bryce snarled. “I knew you had other reasons for being here, but I thought you wanted to help. I loved you, and I thought you loved me back.”

There was such pain in his face that Anton was struck speechless.

Even more than before he questioned whether what he was doing was right. Bryce was wrong, he *did* care. But that didn’t change the fact that he had used Maya’s children to draw her here today. And it didn’t change the way he had manipulated Bryce into making the assassination plans known throughout the enclave, or the way he had Catalina looking into the possible application of the fungus mash to alleviate some of the danger of anomaly births to human mothers, or the way he was going to try to use Saint’s status in the Straznik to encourage their rebellion against Scythe.

His mother’s face swam before him, sympathetic and kind. She smiled at him and said, “Be strong, like the cornerstone of a house. The other blocks might envy you, but they would have no purpose if it were not for you.” Internally he realized that it wasn’t his mother that said these things, but himself, but still it comforted him.

He looked up again and was surprised to see Benji still staring at him. “Don’t you hate me too? Don’t you also want to get as far from me as possible?”

“Hate you?” Benji asked, looking genuinely confused. “I’m not like the others. I don’t hate you for being strong.”

“Strength isn’t measured by how many people you get to run away from you, Benji,” Anton sighed.

“In the enclave it is. You reminded me of my father just now. I think I’ll want to be like you when I grow up.”

“With no frame of reference, I’m not sure what that means. No one in your family seems to like talking about him much.”

“I do,” Benji said. Anton noticed how he stuck his tiny chest out a little as he said it. “My father was a hero. It’d take twenty days to tell you all the stories about him.”

“How about a condensed version?” Anton smiled.

Benji grunted disapprovingly. “I can try.”

Chapter 12:

The reason the United Nations failed in its previous iteration was because they attempted to take on too much power. Thus, it isn't surprising that in our current form, our charter is far less ambitious. Nor does it amaze anyone that those that still choose to affiliate themselves with us are very cautious about relinquishing any control or oversight.

But to some degree that is going to have to change. We remain sensitive to the concerns city and state governments might have about another overreaching international governing body, but what we're requesting now is only a small amount of organizing power and the ability to collaborate by setting up regional UN offices and officers within the territory of each of our members. This will allow for a more uniform approach to the challenges of this new postwar world, particularly on the anomaly problem.

We wouldn't want to risk this sounding like a demand, so please note again that we are *requesting* your consent for this program. You may elect not to participate, and that will in no way affect your current status as a United Nations member, though it should be noted that our ability to respond to requests for assistance will be prioritized to serve those in this program first.

For that reason we are hoping that all the member states will adopt this program and allow us to help you all create peace and perseverance within your borders. It should not leave our memories the war that obliterated the known world all those years ago. It was the world's inability to find commonality that led to the bombs being dropped. What would it say to the rest of the world if you refused to go along with them now?

RE: United Nations Referendum 333.12.1
From the desk of Noah Rothschild, UN Council on Foreign Relations
7.28.2169

When he had made it out to the training course the next morning, Saint saw immediately that something was wrong. His entire team was standing around talking excitedly together, not exactly upset, but not pleased either. They weren't moving and all their shoulders appeared to be hunched in tension. When they spoke they did so chaotically, talking quickly to several others at once, their heads swiveling back and forth.

The only one that appeared to be in control of herself was Bethany, who had just noticed his approach. She walked briskly to meet him. Looking at her face, taut with strain, he knew that he was right: something very bad had happened.

She didn't say anything when they came together. Instead she turned to fall into step with him, and they approached the rest of the group in unison. The only reason to do so was to provide a uniformed front of leadership, the Captain and his second in command. That kind of formality wasn't often expressed and it indicated even more the seriousness of the situation.

As they approached, Zeke moved to the front of the team. They were all quiet and Saint stared at him for a time, knowing that Zeke wanted to speak.

"We are going to be receiving orders," he finally said.

Saint nodded his head but said nothing, silently hoping that Bethany would do the same. She too remained silent and he thought for the hundredth time that she would be every bit as a good a Captain as he.

"We should get them later today," Zeke continued. "My cousin says that we've been selected to go to Chicago and assassinate Mayor Donovan."

Saint thought back to the conversation he'd had with Bryce around the dinner table the night before. The enclave, small as it was, was not immune to gossip, but his brother had been sure that the plans were real. Saint had been sure that his team would be the one selected for the task. Given the

oddly compassionate way Mother had looked at him all night, he was fairly certain that she had come to the same conclusion.

"If those are our orders, then perhaps we should carry them out," Saint said quietly.

"You told us the other day that you were not sure if Scythe's way is the right way," Zeke pressed.

"That's what I said," Saint sighed. "But in the end it doesn't matter. We have to obey orders, the same as every other Straznik team. Even if I thought that he was wrong, there's nothing I could—"

"Of course there is," Zeke snapped. "You could disobey."

Saint stared at him silently, far too interested in this apparent change in eagerness for war to reprimand him for speaking to his superior that way.

But this time Bethany did not mimic his silence. "I thought you *wanted* to march on Chicago?"

"This isn't a march," Zeke said angrily. "It's a vile act, one that will damn our souls if we carry it out! The honor of war cannot be found in sneaky assassinations!"

Saint noted with interest that the concept of honor in war was still there. They apparently made some distinction between a formal war and covert operations. This was something new, since they had carried out that type of mission in the past, though not inside the Chicago walls. Hit and run tactics on traveling merchants weren't uncommon, nor were ambushes of CSS teams traveling too close to Rownosci. What was so different now?

"We want to talk to the city-dweller," Zeke said defiantly.

"If we're getting our orders today, there probably won't be time," Saint said.

"He'll make time."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's *his* city! And *his* Mayor!"

Saint sighed. If you knew him as I do, Saint thought, you would know that Rownosci is every bit his city as Chicago, and the Rada every bit his governance as Mayor Donovan.

"Ask the city-dweller to speak with us," Zeke persisted, almost pleading.

"Why is it so important to you?" Saint asked.

"The Tog say that he is a good man," Zeke said. "And that they believe he can achieve the peace he's proposing. Why shouldn't we hear what he has to say about it?"

Saint was genuinely surprised by what he was hearing. He had recognized all along Anton's plan: associate with the scientific community, then align with the women of the enclave in order to reach the men. And he had thought it a good plan that would work, given enough time. The speed with which change had been reflected in his soldiers was astonishing. How had he done it so quickly?

Anton was knocking down some very entrenched pillars upon which enclave actions were built. If the righteousness of war with Chicago crumbled too, there would be great potential for chaos. To stave off that kind of disaster would require that Anton also erect a new pillar in its place, upon which a sense of purpose for the enclave could rest. Make me do it, Saint thought at Zeke silently. Give me something I cannot refute, because I think it's only with our help that my new friend can complete his task.

"You could talk to him on your own," Bethany said from beside him. "Why risk of bringing him before us all at once?"

"Because then there will be no chance for confusion and misinterpretation," Zeke said quickly.

"And we're the ones who will be most immediately affected if he's successful. Ask him to come to us."

"I think that if Saint did as you ask that we'd lose our assignment even before we received it," Bethany said.

"All the better. Bring him here."

Finally Saint looked at Bethany to see her staring back at him, a hard look on her face. Her expression communicated perfectly her thoughts, that Anton should never be brought before the team,

that it was too great a risk. He turned back to Zeke. "I'll ask him today."

"You can't," Bethany said sharply.

Saint winced at the words, particularly the way the rest of the team's heads snapped sharply to her. Even when she had not agreed with a decision of his in the past, she had always done so in a way that respected his command. Everyone knew how much Saint respected her, how he sought her counsel when he needed it, and they surely also had some inkling of their personal relationship. But this type of contradiction was different.

"You're not in command," Zeke said slowly, looking uncomfortable with the words. "If Saint says yes, then it's yes."

"That's enough," Saint said. He put enough authority into his voice that the others fell silent, including Bethany. "I said I'd ask him, and I will. In the meantime, you are all to go through the course ten extra circuits, as punishment for speaking to your superior the way you have."

The others remained silent as they made their way to the training course. Zeke stayed behind just long enough to say, "I will not fight without a reason," before he too left them.

He turned to Bethany. "Is this an attempt to take power from me?" he said angrily. "You're *my* second in command. I contradict you, not the other way around."

"Save your blustering," Bethany hissed back, clearly struggling to keep from shouting at him. "I don't want your silly command. I want you to recognize how dangerous this is."

"We've already had this discussion. There are reasons both for bringing the city-dweller to meet them and not."

"What reasons? If you bring him out here, Scythe will find out and have you exiled. Or worse."

"No he won't."

"There's no way you could know what he'd do!"

"The same goes for you. But I think that the city-dweller has too much influence now for Scythe to exile us. He's won over the Tog, and he's on his way to winning the soldiers as well. Certainly he has earned *my* respect."

"I remember when my opinion meant something to you as well."

Saint spun on her angrily. "You accuse the city-dweller of manipulating me and then try to make me feel guilty just so you can get your way? You flatly contradicted me in front of the team. You know damn well how dangerous *that* is, the real danger of what a lack of unified command will do to our chances of survival." With that, he spun back around and marched away from her, fuming.

"Hey!" she shouted after him. "I didn't mean it like that! Come back!"

He turned back to her once more. "Lower your voice," he hissed angrily. "I'm trying to explain to you that a Captain and his second have to be unified in front of their team, and here you are shouting for all to hear. I think I'll demote you and make Zeke my lieutenant. Perhaps he's less ignorant than you."

"You don't mean that!"

"Oh yes, I do! You acted stupidly today. More importantly, you can't seem to grasp just *how* stupid you were. Today you created discord on our team. Perhaps it won't matter, but maybe it will. Maybe because of your foolish pride and ego someone on our team will die in battle."

Her eyes went wide and Saint instantly regretted his words. If anyone cared as much about the lives of his team as Saint, it was Bethany. It was what made her so equal in capability to him. She had forgotten that today, but it wasn't as if Saint had never made a similar mistake.

Fortunately her look of shock passed and he watched as she breathed deeply several times, her eyes closed. When they opened once more the anger was gone, replaced by thoughtfulness. "If you insist on bringing him out here, then we should do it when it's least likely to be noticed," she said.

"I agree. When would you suggest?"

She smiled thinly, recognizing that he was asking her opinion specifically to show that he did

value it. "Today," she said. "Preferably this evening, at meal time. With all the commotion, perhaps no one will see that our team and the city-dweller are both missing."

"That makes sense," Saint said. He reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "I hope you know how much I need you. Particularly now."

"You've never needed anyone," she said softly. "But you will always have my help."

"We always said that we wanted to do something to make a difference in the enclave."

"Yes we did. Whether the difference we make is a positive one is something for which we'll be forever judged."

Catalina looked over the garden in front of the York building, noticing the way the strawberry plants she'd helped develop were blossoming with fruit and wishing for the millionth time that her mother would reconsider her silly refusal to collaborate on the crop development portion of her job. In the other direction, just beyond the school, was the wall. It looked funny, because it was clear what it was intended to be, but currently at only six feet high or so it was equally clear that it wouldn't deter anyone yet. The wall had been a source of much talk in Rownosci. The soldiers all hated it while the Tog supported its construction. The rest of the enclave seemed to come down somewhere in the middle.

Fortunately the city-dweller came strolling down the street before long. He walked with confidence, the same way all those that had soldier's training did. He was finally beginning to tan, but he still didn't match the complexion of those that he walked past. If it had been anyone else, she would have thought him to be ill. But not with that sure gait. No sick person walked with such a precise step. She had seen that walk a thousand times; in the Straznik; in her brother; and in her father.

No, not him, she thought. Father walked with more than confidence. Arrogance, I think. And anger. I don't see either in the city-dweller's walk. Only purpose.

He saw her waiting and came quickly over. She stepped back from the garden onto the path so that he wouldn't have to get his feet muddy.

"I don't mind the dirt," he said, as if reading her thoughts. "In fact I like it, particularly in the garden where the Tog has worked their magic."

"You shouldn't call it magic," she said.

"Where I come from, the people there say magic because they fear what we can do. But not me. I look at what the Tog do and I'm amazed. But I'm sure you'll still tell me to use a different word."

"Science," she said. "Or anatomy, or biology. Anything other than magic."

"That's what I expected. Some would say it's a sign of arrogance that a scientist insists on the use of her profession's terminology. Me? I think you're just precise."

"You do realize that my mother now hates you."

He laughed. "She hated me before. Or at least she thinks she did."

"You can't blame her," Catalina said, wondering why she was defending her mother. "She feels used and manipulated, and she thinks that you're doing the same to her children."

"She's correct, but only partly. All people who know each other use each other. All the more so if the manipulator sees value in the one he's manipulating. What she's really mad about is that lots of people manipulate her, but they don't care about her so the manipulation becomes acceptable. Just another meaningless action by another meaningless person. But she can tell that I'm different. She knows I care. *That's* why my manipulation makes her angry."

"That's what Saint said when he heard." It was odd. She had silently agreed with her brother last night, yet tonight she was defending her mother. Why? She despised with nearly every action her mother took. "Saint has more personal complexes than any of us. It's no surprise that he'd say something so stupid."

"You think he's stupid because he's the only one that realizes that my actions aren't betrayal."

"Thinks, not realizes. Because it is betrayal when you don't bother to tell us what you're using us for." Again, why was she saying this? She didn't mean it.

"Didn't I cover this already?" he asked, his eyes narrowing, studying her. "You can't betray someone and love them at the same time."

"That's not true," she responded. "You're no different than my father."

He scowled at her. "When I got your note saying to meet you here, I assumed you had something for me on the fungus I asked you to look at. Since you apparently only want to lie to me, I think I'll be on my way."

No! Don't Leave! The thought was so loud that for a moment she worried he might hear it. This was going badly. She was turning him into an enemy, when she wanted to be his ally. "Please don't go," she said quietly.

"Of course I won't go. Did you really think I would?"

Tears welled in the corner of her eyes and she burst out sobbing. "You *should* leave. Leave me, leave our family, the entire enclave. I've seen what you've done for us, yet I couldn't keep from sniping at you. We don't deserve you. None of us do."

"Does everyone in the enclave hate themselves, or is just your family?" the city-dweller asked.

"It's true," she cried. "The humans aren't wrong. Jesteśmy zwierzętami."

"We're all animals, not just the anomalies," the city-dweller said. He reached out and touched her arm. It was a small gesture, but for some reason it enveloped her in an aura of peace. It said *I understand you, I understand your fear and your sadness, because they are also my own*. "The question is how better than the rest of the animals we choose to be."

"But don't you see? Even pigs love their family, and here I am consorting with my own mother's hated enemy! And I hope you beat her! I hope you win! I am no better than a pig!"

"Ah, but pigs are incredibly smart creatures," he said. And then he laughed. "If you could see what I see, you would laugh too. A young lady who has somehow balanced being a brilliant botanist in an unnaturally harsh environment with caring for her family in the way her own mother ought to have done, and yet you get no respect from her, either for your work as a scientist or as a substitute parent. Does she collaborate with you on your work, as would be natural given the overlap in your fields? I am guessing not. Can you imagine a mother pig dealing so harshly with her own offspring? Could you reason that all this was the piglets fault?"

The picture he painted was so absurd that she smiled despite her best effort not to. "I don't appreciate you calling my mother a pig," she said.

His expression soured. "Don't pretend to misunderstand that which you understand perfectly."

"Maybe I'm not as intelligent as you seem to think I am."

"With your level of self-deprecation, your own intelligence is about the only thing I *wouldn't* trust you to measure."

"Perhaps you're right."

He sighed. "Who is the best botanist in Rownosci?"

"I am."

"Yes you are. That's why you are the lead scientist in your field. Your rank is nearly as high as your mother's. Yet she doesn't treat you as an equal. How are you supposed to interpret the genetics of the plants without her?"

"She doesn't let me see them at all, actually. She makes me request the work for any genetics and then does it herself in her lab."

The city-dweller frowned. "That doesn't make sense. How are you supposed to understand the genetic implications for the work you're doing?"

"She does the work and then writes a summary based on my specific application of the genes."

"That isn't good enough," he insisted. "She's keeping you from being able to branch off in

other areas you hadn't considered because you can't see the full genome. There has to be a million variant mutations you can't have guessed at."

"There's nothing I can do about it. She's the chief scientist in the enclave. She could remove me from my position altogether if she wanted."

"She wouldn't do that."

"She would if I did anything to try and look at the genes she works with."

"But why? Does she think you're smarter? Is she trying to protect her position with the Rada?"

Catalina shook her head. "Mother doesn't care about that. The only possible explanation is that there is something in the genes she doesn't want anyone else to see. It isn't just me she hides them from. Her own assistant doesn't have access to the full genomes. He has to work with whatever snippets she assigns to him."

"But she has to know that she's holding back the progress of the entire enclave. Food sources that you can't produce without the code. Protective measures the Tog can't contemplate without the code. And who knows what else? She's willing to hurt all these people just to protect something in the genetic codes she has?"

"I guess so."

"So what is she hiding?"

"Probably nothing! She's delusional!"

"I don't think so. No delusional person is as calculating as your mother. But tell me why you think so."

"Where to begin? I've already told you that she doesn't let anyone look at any genes. Do you understand the implications of that? We're talking about the single most demonstrably important effect of the Great Atomic War, genetic mutation. It's what gives us The Touch. It's what makes the humans fear us. It's what has transformed the fallout lands into the dangerous place it now is. It's likely what made the Raiders so dangerous. It's so pervasive that we feel its effects every day. We eat the cordyceps fungus, the one you had me look into, to stave off radiation effects. The Tog exists only to keep radiation from mutating the non-mutated crops. Our soldiers use The Touch in battle every day."

"Yes, I understand the importance of the effects of the radiation."

"Then you should realize how ridiculous it is for a single person to study those effects! Her department ought to be ten times its current size, but she refuses to take any other assistants besides John Paul. And she refuses to let anyone else look at the data. That isn't just dangerous. It's *crazy*!"

"What else?"

"It's not just the effects of the radiation that I'm concerned about." She turned and pointed towards the garden. "You see those strawberry plants? Using her genetic summaries, I developed them two or three months ago. And here you see them growing today. Three months later! No mutations, no issues with germination. I've read enough of the pre-war texts to know that no genetic mutation should have a zero failure rate, regardless of whether it was engineered or not."

"Your mother is as competent a geneticist as you are a botanist," the city-dweller said. "If that indicated some kind of danger, she would know about it and act accordingly."

"Not if she's suffering some kind of psychosis," Catalina insisted.

The city-dweller frowned. "Point taken. What else?"

"It isn't just the gene sequences she keeps secret. She won't discuss *anything* beyond very specific questions that our fields require us to ask. No projections. No study of genetic artifacts that might be created using the engineered plants. No questions that have anything to do with implicational theory of the global genetic topography. Whenever I've begun to do that kind of research, I receive a visit from a Rada staffer with some new project that always requires my immediate attention. Or else a controversy is suddenly created by the Church over my work and its trespass into the domain of God."

"And you think that this is your mother's doing?"

"Of course it is! No one else but her reviews my work. Apparently it's all well and good that I

feed this entire enclave, but she'll rely on heaven or government to keep me from *understanding* what I've created."

"Isn't it enough to feed the enclave?"

"Not for me. I'm a scientist. I want to *understand*. And it's important, too, because without studying the possible effects of my work, how can I know that I'm not sacrificing the long term good for an immediate benefit? Isn't that the type of intellectual omission that allowed our ancestors to drop those damnable bombs that started all of this?"

"Is that all?"

"Not completely, no. She also refuses to work with Scythe in any way. When she speaks to the Rada on scientific matters, she ignores him completely. When he requests specific research or study of her, she doesn't even respond. It's been bad enough that he's threatened to have her removed from her position several times, but she knows that the others won't go along with him. But to flatly refuse to even acknowledge one of the Rada is beyond gutsy."

"I'm sure there's an explanation for her actions."

"Undoubtedly, and I'm fairly certain I know how she'd respond if anyone were brave enough to ask her. It's no secret among the scientists here that Scythe is always looking for another weapon to use against the city-dwellers. He's asked most of us to look into one thing or another along those lines. We all refuse, of course. We became scientists for the same reason others become doctors: to help people. Not to assist with war. I have no doubt that he's approached mother the same way he's approached the rest of us, and I'm sure she refused that request the same way she's refused every other request he's made."

"Maybe..."

"But it goes beyond that," Catalina continued. "She hated our father. And I don't mean that as a humorous exaggeration. She absolutely *despised* him. And she nearly threw Saint out of the house when *he* joined the Straznik, just because it was something our father did."

"Shouldn't he be out on his own now anyway?"

"Yes, but he refused his house assignment. With our father dead, he thinks that we need a man in our house. God knows why. But she ignored him for months, just for joining the Straznik. And every time he was promoted, she would go back to ignoring him."

"How is the silence broken? Does she end up apologizing?"

Catalina laughed scornfully. "Mother never apologizes. She's much too proud." She immediately wished she hadn't voiced that last opinion. She felt silly, to be demeaning her family in front of this newcomer, who would surely judge them to be every bit as unworthy of his attention as she had only moments ago. But another part of her also knew that he wouldn't. He was too good to abandon them now, after he had already done so much for them. Why couldn't this city-dweller have been our father? Why does God enjoy torturing our family so much?

"And yet she doesn't appear to be ignoring your brother now," the city-dweller said.

"No, not for the last year or so, after he was injured by the Raiders. Tragedy appears to be the only medium by which our mother can be reached. Saint's team had gone to the north, to see if any clues to the whereabouts of the Raiders base could be found. Apparently they got close enough to be ambushed. When they returned, Saint was unconscious. He'd been stabbed twice and shot once. It was awful, waiting through the night as they tried to heal him. When he was finally conscious, Mother insisted on being the first to see him. She spent the next several days by his bed, refusing to let anyone else feed him or dress his wounds. We thought that maybe she would be different after that."

The city-dweller sighed. "But she wasn't."

"We should have known better. Mother can't get to where she needs to be on her own. We should have tried to help her then, when we had the chance."

"Of course you should have," the city-dweller said quietly. "But you were children. No one can blame you for any of this."

For some reason his words washed over her like a cool breeze. He was saying that she was smart enough to know that she could have done better while acknowledging that it also shouldn't have been her duty to do so. For the first time in a long time, she was filled with the sensation that her family troubles no longer burdened her. They were still there, but they also no longer weighed her down. She felt *clean*. She had the ability now to look at her past, at the decisions she and her family had made, and to judge their worth without guilt. It was an incredible feeling.

So what does that mean? Am I now prepared to act differently if another opportunity arises? Does that make me a better person? I think it does. This man, this newcomer has given me yet another gift. And now, for the first time, I'm not completely convinced that I don't deserve it.

He was looking at her, smiling in a serene way that let her know he could tell what she was thinking as easily as if she had spoken her thoughts aloud. "Anyway, that's what I can tell you," she said, fighting off the feeling of nakedness. "I can give you my observations on the cordyceps fungus, but without the genomes I don't think I can be of much use to you."

"Of course you can," the city-dweller said.

"How?"

"By telling me all the thoughts you kept to yourself because your mother forbade them. She may have denied you access to her work, but I hardly believe that the scientist in you simply cast aside your speculations and theories."

"What scientist could do that?"

"None, I'm sure."

"But they're only theories. Guesses, really."

"That's how most scientific knowledge begins," said the city-dweller. "The process is no different with you than anyone else. Even your mother."

"I know," Catalina said. "Mother loves knowledge. She loves discovery. It's everyone else she hates."

The city-dweller gave her a look that clearly said he didn't trust her analysis, but he only said, "Tell me your theories."

"Well, to understand the theories, you have to understand the problems. It's the only logical place to start."

"Okay then, what are the problems?"

"I already told you one of them. The rate at which new DNA is successfully incorporated into the ecosystem in the fallout lands is extraordinary. It seems beneficial to us because it allows us to produce new crops quickly, but it still shouldn't occur. And it doesn't really *always* occur. Mother's summaries provide me with the physical manifestations for the genes I want to incorporate into the crops, which is how I accomplish selective germination. But any time I've tried to incorporate any specimens that weren't vetted by Mother's summaries, they die almost immediately. All of them."

"Aren't the specimens you're developing designed to be more resistant to the ecology here?" asked the city-dweller. "Wouldn't you expect those not bred that way to fail?"

"Sure, but just as the developed specimens shouldn't succeed a hundred percent of the time, the others shouldn't uniformly fail either," Catalina said. "In ecological terms, it means that the chance that something else is interacting to create the failure rate is absolute."

"Maybe there's some kind of common genetic code," the city-dweller said.

"That was my thought as well. If there was some kind of genetic sequence built into the plants that allowed them to positively interact with the rest of the ecosystem, it would explain the failure and success rates. It might also explain why those plants that succeed are able to adapt to their environment so quickly, since the code to do so would already be built in."

"That sounds reasonable."

"Reasonable?" Catalina cried. "It's not reasonable, it's *absurd*! It would mean that every living thing that exists perpetually in the fallout lands would carry the same common genetic sequences. I

don't think it can be just the plants. It would have to be the animals as well. The microbes. The bacteria. Even you and I."

"I thought that all life on earth carried common genetic code. I've read that the difference between our genes and that of other life-forms is only a fraction of the total code."

"That's true, but all of *that* common code is meaningless. It's throwaway code. It's only there to hold the rest together. We're talking about something different. A common sequence that isn't only present in virtually all life in the fallout lands, but is also *useful*."

"What about the humans?" the city-dweller asked.

"The humans don't have it," she said. "Otherwise they wouldn't need the cordyceps mash on a regular basis."

"Have you told anyone else about this?"

"I mentioned it by accident once while speaking to Father Graine about the flatbread we use for the Eucharist. He thought that maybe I had found evidence of the Holy Spirit."

"Of course he did," the city-dweller smiled. "What other problems have you uncovered?"

"Well, the whole concept of The Touch is problematic. The human's anomaly tests look for a common genetic marker that all anomalies share. And before you ask, it isn't the same common code that I believe occurs in all life in the fallout lands. This sequence they test for is one that we've known about since before Mother even was born, so she can't hide the code. Everyone refers to these genes as the 'anomaly genes', as if they're responsible for all our differences, including the ability to manipulate radiation."

The city-dweller frowned. "Whatever point you're trying to make, I'm not getting it."

Catalina sighed. "Genes *can't* be responsible for giving us The Touch. Not directly, at least. All the genetic codes do is instruct the body how to orientate itself, whether that means the color of our eyes or our resistance to cardiovascular disease."

"Okay, so the genes aren't directly giving us The Touch, they're just instructing it within us somehow?"

"No, no, no. It's more complicated than that."

He shrugged. "I've studied some science, but I'm still a soldier."

"Genes don't simply tell the body what to do and then it magically happens. They code the body to accomplish something through its physiology. Take malaria, for instance. There are a plethora of genetic factors that go into the resistance of the malaria sickness. Those with sickle-cells are more likely to catch the disease. Those deficient in a particular enzyme called G6PD are more susceptible as well. Some gene sequences create blood cells that are innately immune due to their cellular structure, while other sequences make cells particularly efficient in achieving adaptive immunity, which strengthens resistance against all diseases. The point is that it's all physical. Like I told you before, this might all look like magic to someone who doesn't actually understand what is occurring, but it isn't. It's just physiology."

"Which means that something in the genetic sequences of anomalies is causing the body to do something, part of which allows for The Touch," the city-dweller nodded, understanding.

"There is something I read about in one of the school texts. It's called endocrine cellular signaling. Basically it's one of the ways that cells in living beings communicate with one another when they're separated by distance. The cell will emit hormones to alert nearby cells. Pheromones in plants, for instance. And it isn't just the cells of hosts. Single cell organisms like bacteria are capable of endocrine signaling as well. In this way these cells and organisms can control how others behave. Movement, reproduction, other signals, all of these things can be affected by hormones."

"And you think, what, that this signaling can explain The Touch as well?"

"Well, it'd be a nice hypothesis to test. But the two things I'd need to start, an electron microscope and the gene sequences, are both locked up in Mother's lab. I tried to ask her about this theory once. That particular transgression landed me a month of meaningless busy work. But it isn't

just people I'd like to look at. There have been reports by those that travel outside that the animals, particularly those that have suffered mutations, are attracted to those with The Touch. That suggests that whatever is going on in us occurs in the wildlife as well. And if that is the case, then it stands to reason that it's happening in the plant life too."

He was back to looking confused, so she explained.

"If nearly all the animals are interacting through this form of endocrine signaling, then it would be advantageous to the plant life to adapt that capability as well. In evolutionary terms, it would be a requirement to succeed."

"But it's barely been a hundred years since the war," the city-dweller said. "There's no way those genes could spread so quickly. Even locally it'd be hard to believe. Assuming the spread is as quick in plants as animals, you're talking about the genetic dissemination of common material throughout the *planet* in a hundred and twenty years or so."

"It's impossible, I know. Even after we assume that some common genetic material exists to speed up the process, it still doesn't make sense. There is no way that the spread of our kind throughout the world can be solely the result of the exchange of genetic material. And if I'm right about the common genes in plants and animals, the same goes for them."

"So there must be something else occurring to spread these genes," the city-dweller said.

"If I'm right, then yes."

"And you think it is being done through this signaling? Genetic replication through hormones?"

"If you have a better theory I'd love to hear it," Catalina said. "What I need is to be able to look at the genomes to find evidence, but of course I can't. All my evidence is observational and anecdotal. Our ability to sense one another, for example. Or how when we hunt, we find that the animals we're tracking have already assumed their instinctual defensive behavior when we come upon them."

"They probably smell you coming," the city-dweller said.

"Impossible. The Straznik are extremely adept hunters. Humans and creatures that haven't mutated *never* display the defensive postures. Whatever is warning the others that our hunters are approaching, it has something to do with our mutated genes, and it's common in all those with mutations."

"And I assume you've taken into account any physical identifiers they might be using? Enhanced sensory mutations and so on?"

"That wouldn't explain it. Those kinds of advantageous adaptations wouldn't be uniformly spread throughout all the mutated species. I hope you understand that I'm not exaggerating; *all* creatures that have been mutated by nuclear fallout have this trait. At least all those that we've encountered or heard about. All except the Raiders. I can't think of any way for that to have occurred other than genetic replication."

"Which means that somehow our cells are talking to others outside our bodies in a way we aren't intending," the city-dweller said thoughtfully.

"And that is a very big problem. It all comes back to the genes. My mother does an excellent job manipulating genes for our purposes, but what about these larger questions? I can't help but think that figuring out the answers to these problems is important, but she won't allow it. And I think the question of the common genes is part of the answer to *all* of our questions, including yours. I think it might also explain how the Tog does what they do. Depriving the soil of radiation is too simple an answer, because even if the soil were irradiated, how does that explain how the plants that grow there all have the same gene as the mutated wolves? Or the mutated cattle?"

"Or us?" the city-dweller murmured thoughtfully.

"Well, theoretically yes, but almost *every* other living creature on the planet as well. Because from what we've heard, something like ninety-percent of the life that exists today is a mutated version of its former self. If I'm right, all of that life carries in it a common *and* functioning genetic sequence."

The city-dweller's face creased in concentration for a moment, and then it smoothed out as his eyes went wide. "Was your mother always like this? Did she always hide the gene sequences from you and everyone else?"

"No," Catalina said slowly. "It started recently. A couple of years ago, just after I became the lead botanist."

"Do you know what she had been working on when that happened?"

She frowned. "Mother never works on only one thing at a time, but that is when the Rada asked her to begin cataloging the genetic differences between us and humans."

His face lit up as though she had told him something important.

"What? What have you figured out?"

"Nothing for sure yet," the city-dweller said. "But I think she found your common gene sequences."

"What? Why would she want to keep *that* secret?"

"She wouldn't. It's something else. When I know for certain I promise I'll tell you," he said quickly. "You have no idea how much you've helped me just now."

"I've heard you're planning on making some kind of speech."

He studied her for a moment. "For all her animosity, your mother certainly doesn't seem to mind relaying to you the things I've said."

"It was Benji that told me."

He sighed. "Yes, when we've finished here I am going to ask your aunt to help build an audience in the plaza so that I can speak to them."

"Good."

"You don't know yet what I'll say," the city-dweller said. "If I'm right, the things I ask for will be very difficult for some here to fulfill. And some of the truths I reveal may cause a great deal of harm and fear."

"I see what you've done for my family," Catalina said. "We may be the most dysfunctional in the enclave, but the enclave itself is just as dysfunctional. I want you to do for all my people what you've done for us."

He gave her such a look of pride that Catalina felt herself blushing. "I only hope you'll remember these words when you hear everything I have to say. And all that I request."

"Nothing you say could make me forget what you've done for us."

"Emotion has a funny effect on our memory."

"Not mine. I'm a scientist."

"So is your mother."

"When are you going to do it?"

"Soon."

"If it will help speed things up, I can help you break into Mother's lab."

He laughed loudly. "That isn't the only other information I need. I'll have to talk to the Straznik as well. Your brother's team, at the very least."

"Right," she laughed. Then she saw that he was serious. "The only one that makes speeches to the Straznik is Scythe. He'll never let you talk to them."

"I figured," the city-dweller said. "I'll have to be discreet."

"You're going to put my brother in danger, aren't you?"

"Not if I can help it," he said. He looked her in the eye and smiled. "I don't think I could hope to describe how much you've helped me today. Hopefully you won't think I've merely been trying to manipulate you for this information the way your mother and Bryce do."

"No. I understand what you're doing and why you're doing it."

The city-dweller hugged her. "You're a good person, Catalina. If you ever need anything at all, I don't want you to hesitate to ask it of me."

She felt awkward for a moment, but then embraced his embrace. She gripped him tightly, not sure of for how long and not caring either. “You don’t have to thank me, Anton,” she said, and the name also felt awkward to her, but sweet as well, like tangy candy. “It’s enough to be a part of what you’re going to accomplish here. That is all the reward I’ll ever need.”

He smiled at her once more and then left, walking with that same confident gait back towards the Council Building. She followed him with her eyes as he entered, and she imagined him walking up the steps to her aunt’s office. Please help him, Aunt Kobi. Get everyone to come when he speaks if you can.

Saint ran up as she was walking back into the hospital. “Have you seen the city-dweller?” he asked, catching his breath. “I’ve been looking everywhere for him.”

“Last I saw he was going into the Council Building.”

“When was that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe twenty minutes ago. Why?”

He studied her a moment. “I can’t say just yet. But I’ve got to find him.”

“Well, you’d best try the plaza. He can’t have gotten far.”

“Thanks,” he said and immediately turned to leave. “Tell Mother I won’t be around for dinner tonight.”

She reached out and grabbed his sleeve. “Tell me what you’re up to.”

“I told you, I can’t say.” He saw the look on her face. “Believe me, if it was only my secret, I’d have already told you. But this is a confidence I’m sharing with others.”

“Fine.”

“Why did he go to the Council Building? Every time he goes there without seeking out Father Graine first, he makes more and more trouble for himself.”

“He went there to see Kobi,” Catalina said. “To get her to help gather an audience for a speech he’s going to make.”

Saint’s head snapped around. “The only way you could know that is if you had spoken to him just before he went to see her.”

“That’s true.”

“What did you talk to him about?”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t say,” Catalina smirked.

Saint sighed and turned away. He jogged off at a brisk pace in the direction of the plaza. Catalina was fairly certain she knew what was going on. Saint was going to bring Anton to talk with his team. She couldn’t quite tell how she felt about that. She decided to wait and see how it turned out before feeling either way. Instead, she turned back into the hospital to return to work.

Chapter 13:

CSS Security Directive 332: As the result of intelligence we've received regarding a possible large scale attack on Chicago by one or more anomaly enclaves, additional security is to be provided to high-ranking members of the city government. These include Mayor Patrick Donovan, Security Chief Michael Koskie, and all of the aldermen for each ward. Several civilians that have been deemed possible targets of interest for our enemies are also to be protected, including Lindsay Donovan. In most cases, unless otherwise designated by further Security Directives, these duties are to be carried out by CSS regular teams on a rotating basis.

CSS Security Directive 333: The protection of Mayor Patrick Donovan is to become the primary mission of CSS Team A1. These orders are to be carried out immediately upon receipt by Captain Caleb Silverman.

Memo to all CSS Teams
From the desk of Security Chief Michael Koskie
7.28.2169

Anton had expected that someone would stop them on their way out beyond Rownosci's walls, but the streets were obligingly quiet. As Saint and Bethany led him into the surrounding fallout lands, they explained that it was meal time. Anton couldn't help but be reminded of his exit from Chicago with Zak, and the harrowing way Zak had saved him from having to kill the CSS guards that had tried to stop them.

As they walked, he noticed that both Saint and Bethany were fidgeting, their hands constantly moving, either picking at their fingernails or plucking at their robes. Anton wondered if they were breaking any explicit edicts from Scythe in bringing him to meet their team. Even if that were the case, their nervousness was noticeably different. While Saint seemed almost manic in happy anticipation, Bethany's constant frowning and quick suspicious glances told Anton that she hadn't wanted to take this action. Thinking back to that first night around the fire, he recalled that Bethany hadn't spoken with him in the same friendly and open manner as the others.

As a result of their tension, he had already guessed that they would have organized the meeting to take place somewhere indoors, out of sight from anyone watching from the walls. It turned out to be a small two story house near the training course. Bethany entered first. Anton followed her, noting that she had refused to hold the door open for him. Looking back he saw Saint scowling at her back, but then recompose himself when he noticed Anton's gaze. So he's loyal to her, Anton thought, but not so much that he's blind to her faults. It's no wonder he's a military man. His physique aside, he has the perfect mental makeup for command. Strong in his convictions but smart enough to listen to others. Not like Bethany. She looks every bit as strong as Saint, and I'm sure she's smart, but that's probably why he's in command and she's his second.

Her frown deepened as they settled into what was once a living room. The furniture was in tatters, looking as though animals that chewed and burrowed had gotten to it. It was a stark contrast to the homes back behind the walls.

"We wait here," Saint said.

"Fine," Anton replied, sitting in one of the chairs that looked like it might not collapse at its first use.

"Do you know what you're going to say?" Saint asked.

"Not really. I'll need to get their reaction to the assassination orders."

He watched as both of their heads snapped to attention, mouths slightly open. They recovered quickly, but he could tell that they hadn't expected him to be aware of the plans.

“We haven’t actually received the orders yet,” Bethany said. “But they’ve heard rumors. We still don’t know if those plans actually exist, or if we’ll be selected for the mission if they do. The team seems to be apprehensive, though.”

“Is that apprehension out of the ordinary?”

“Absolutely. Until these past couple of days, they practically begged for inclusion in any mission.”

“Interesting,” Anton said. “I hadn’t expected to have that kind of effect so quickly.”

“They don’t want peace, they just don’t want to act in a way they consider dishonorable,” Bethany said, looking annoyed.

Anton stared at her, meeting her glare until she blinked. Ever since she and Saint had found him walking back to the house in Rownosci, she had begun incrementally trying to assert her dominance over him. It had started with looks, moved on to mildly rude speech, and now she was displaying open hostility. He had thus far refrained from challenging her, but that would have to change if it continued when the others arrived.

“What about the Touch,” he asked them. “Are your soldiers particularly strong in it?”

They exchanged looks. “In some skills, yes,” Saint said.

Anton thought back to Catalina’s theory about the anomaly’s ability to manipulate radiation. “Have you noticed anything odd about the Touch when you’re outside the walls? Are there some areas where the Touch is stronger than others? Is there a difference between the ease of using it on living things compared with inanimate objects?”

Bethany frowned. “There are always differences. But that depends on the amount of radiation in the area. Living things emit more than inanimate objects. That’s why it’s easier with them. It’s also why we have less strength as we get near Chicago.”

“An experience we’re hoping to avoid this time around,” Saint said. Then he looked at the floor as Bethany shot him a look.

So they were divided on this as well, Anton thought. Saint seemed to have reached the conclusion that he didn’t want to partake in the assassination, whereas Bethany had not. Looking at her now, Anton was sure that she wasn’t particularly eager about; she just hadn’t reached an internal decision. Maybe it was always this way with her, to ignore any personal feelings she had about her orders and to simply carry them out unthinking.

Anton sat forward in his chair after noticing a small spider making its way across the floor. He reached out through the radiation and plucked it into the air, bringing it near his face where it rotated silently. Its legs were kicking out violently, and Anton recalled how Benji had done the same. Feeling guilty, he lowered the spider gently back to the floor and it scurried off towards a crack in the wall. He thought again about what Catalina had postulated. Had he just reached out with the cells of his body through endocrine signaling to pick the spider up? Did that mean there was a connection formed with the spider, even if it was only temporary? If all cells were capable of endocrine signaling, why was it only the cells of the mutated that could manipulate the radiation? Was it as simple as a genetic trait?

He had wanted to get the others to talk about the Touch and the details of using it in all its varied ways. He had thought that maybe he could learn something from those details, some confirmation of how the Touch was accomplished. But suddenly Saint began to look concerned, and Anton couldn’t help but ask him what was wrong.

“I am worried what you will think of my team if you learn some of the things we have done,” Saint said.

Anton could tell by Bethany’s reaction that on this point they were in agreement. She looked at Saint with such an expression of understanding and solidarity that Anton finally saw in her the same respect that Saint showed her. But it was more than respect. It was unity, and not the kind of unity that normally existed between a commander and his second. And suddenly he recognized it and at the same time understood why either of them was entertaining the notion of rebelling against the danger of the

assassination mission: they were in love. Anton's stomach leapt into his throat. You are in love with each other, which is why neither of you wants to leave the safety of Rownosci any longer. If you could, you would both give up your ranks and make a life with each other doing something less dangerous. And you've brought me here because you think I'm going to try to keep you from going to Chicago. But I'm not. I'm simply going to ask that you take me with.

"You may hear some of our team tell you of past missions in which we have had to kill humans," Catalina said. "And some of them...well..."

"They're very proud," Saint finished for her, also looking uncomfortable. "It isn't their fault. Service in the enclave is something of indoctrination. It isn't that they enjoy the death of others, really. They just revel in their service to the enclave."

"We don't need to excuse our feelings," Bethany snapped.

So you're proud too, Anton thought.

"If we're going to consider peace as an option, those feelings are something we're all going to have to come to terms with," Saint said.

"We're not all as weak as—"

"Enough," Anton said, quietly but with an edge. "Tell me about a time when you had to kill a human."

"The human soldiers began to get too close to Rownosci the past couple of months," Saint said. "We were always careful to drive them off in a way that they wouldn't know we were keeping them from going west. Unfortunately, one of their teams slipped past us and got close enough to see our walls. We couldn't let them return to the others. It would mean a march on Rownosci long before we were prepared to defend against it." Unlike Bethany, his eyes were almost pleading for understanding. "We killed them all."

Bethany stood and kicked her chair. "We *saved* lives that day," she growled. "Many more than we took. We have no reason to feel guilty."

"Of course you do," Anton said. They both stared at him. "What do you want me to say? That taking human lives is okay if it means saving more lives in Rownosci? That kind of sophistry has been used to justify wars throughout history. And it's wrong."

Bethany snorted. "You would rather we simply lay down our arms and welcome death. You wish that we had turned the other cheek, as Christ taught, and accept the destruction of ourselves and all that we love."

"Don't be stupid," Anton said, letting some of his irritation show. "But certainly you didn't take every possible action to try and keep from having to kill them."

She looked to Saint. "*This* is what you bring to our team?"

Saint's eyes welled with tears. "What could we have done? It was either we kill them or our people would be slaughtered."

"How about capturing them and bringing them back here," Anton said quietly. "At the very least you could have allowed them to live here as captives. Perhaps they might even have been converted into emissaries for the enclave. Perhaps you could have shown them such kindness that they would want to return to Chicago on all your behalf."

"How simple you make it sound!" Bethany cried out, throwing her hands up into the air. "Oh yes, how stupid we are. We could have *just* captured armed humans that shoot us on site, without so much as a warning."

Anton looked her in the eye. "Have you ever tried?"

"She's right, it isn't that simple," Saint said. "They consider us vermin and they treat us like every other animal in the fallout lands. And even though we're probably stronger than them, they always outnumber us. It's easy for you to dismiss our actions as callous, but you're wrong. It pains us when we have to kill humans. *All* of us. I can see it in their eyes."

"It's because you connect with the humans in a way they don't reciprocate," Anton nodded.

"You love them the way an abandoned child loves their missing family."

"Now you're the one being stupid," Bethany laughed humorlessly.

"Am I? Ask yourself, if they weren't soldiers, and you saw one of them in distress in the fallout lands, would you stop to help them?"

"No," Bethany said.

"Yes you would," Saint spoke up. He turned to Anton. "Most of us would."

"But why? Why help them if you don't share some kind of connection? You see now, don't you? We're all *human*. That those without mutation have forgotten it doesn't change anything."

"See?" Bethany spun on Saint. "It's just 'turn the other cheek' dressed up with different words."

Anton didn't respond to her, focusing instead on Saint. "You tell me why it is so difficult to accept."

Saint sighed. "What you're asking would be like raising my father from the dead, bringing him to my family's home, and insisting that we all get along. What you're asking people to do is to set aside *years* of oppression. You've made a great deal of progress here in such a short amount of time, but don't underestimate the anger here against the city-dwellers. It's one thing to talk about reconciliation. It's another to actually walk into the church and confess."

"You're saying that actually getting the enclave to be the first to extend its hand is going to be difficult."

"Not difficult!" Saint said. "Damn near impossible! They're killing *children*. That's the block you have to surmount. It'd be one thing if the humans came to them and offered their hand, but to ask them to ignore decades of infanticide? How could you possibly get them to do that?"

"Unfortunately, one of the sides is going to have to be the first."

"Well, it won't be us. All of those deaths, they were *our* infants. Thousands of them, all around the world. What have the humans lost that could compare to that?"

"Bless those who persecute you," Anton said. "Bless them, and do not curse."

Bethany clenched her fists. "We are not Catholics," she snarled. "And you are not a prophet!"

Anton stood up and walked to the window, peering out. "I know they're out there," he said quietly. "Why are you holding them back?"

"Because we aren't convinced that you speaking with them is a good idea yet," Bethany snapped.

"Do you remember what I said that first night, as we sat around the fire?" Anton asked. "I asked you whether you thought that you had more a right to life than the humans."

"And?"

"I am clearly not a spy for the humans. I'm not trying to trick you to soften you up for them. So what could you possibly have to fear from me?"

She appeared to consider that for a moment. Some of the tension eased from her shoulders, but still she glared at him. "You speak well, city-dweller. Just like the human politicians. You might have won Cosaint with your words, but it will take actions to convince *me*."

"Then you'll be convinced soon," Anton said.

"Which tells me nothing," she pressed. "You're going to do what you want. You don't care about what we think. Do you?"

"I'm not here to hurt you."

"So you say."

"Yes I do." Anton turned back to look out the window again.

Saint came up behind him. "You should know that this wasn't entirely my idea. They've been asking to see you since you arrived."

"Really. They probably want me to tell them about Chicago. And the CSS."

"They used to. But it turns out they've been doing a lot of talking lately. Now they suddenly seem to want to hear what else you have to say. About peace. About the humans."

Anton looked at him, seeing how earnest he looked. "What exactly have they said?"

"That perhaps your way is better than Scythe's. That there might be more honor in you than him. And they think you're going to make it so that they don't have to go to Chicago to assassinate their Mayor. Your Uncle. And you know what? I think so too."

Then you're all wrong, Anton thought. "I thought you said that the olive branch would have to come from Chicago," he said.

Bethany stood and joined them. "For true peace? It will. But they think you can stave off Scythe's aggression. Apparently they think you're going to wave some magic wand and then poof! Scythe will disappear."

Anton gave her a hard look. "Don't be glib."

"It's what she does when she feels abandoned," Saint said. She started to bluster, but he cut her off. "It's true. You think you're so much smarter than all of us, just because you're a woman. As if you have some kind of special intuition that makes you better than us."

"That is not true!" she shouted at him.

"Yes it is," Anton said quietly. Outside the window, walking down the gnarled streets came a group of robed figures. It was Saint's team. They had finally allowed them to approach. He was tempted to turn around to get a look at their faces, to see which of them had made the decision. But he already knew who it had been. Bethany might have been placated somewhat, but she wasn't one to give in. Neither was Saint, of course, but for him it wasn't giving in to bring his team and Anton together. It's what he wanted. So now he did turn, and he saw instantly that he was right. He stepped towards Bethany, invading her space, nearly nose to nose. "He's the team's Captain, and yet he defers to you constantly. How do you repay him? With insults. You're so sure you're right about everything that you fail to learn from Saint when it's *you* that needs a lesson."

"Oh, yes, preach to me, city-dweller!" Bethany shouted. "Tell me all the lessons I should learn from you, the boy who hasn't been in the fallout lands a week! Tell me, oh soldier of murderers. Tell me what I can learn from you!"

"You can learn to listen, for starters," Anton said back, calmly but with enough force that she flinched. "I said there are things you could learn from Saint, not me. Although I'm guessing both are true, if you could bury your pride long enough to use that thing between your ears."

"Don't talk to her that way," Saint said, and he stepped between them. "You're a guest here. Do not forget that."

"If I'm a guest then treat me like one," Anton said. He walked around them, taking a seat once more. "You two talk about your team like their pawn pieces on a chess board. I'll speak to them, but they're the ones responsible for their own decisions. They aren't moved around at the will of others. They have a will of their own."

"Do they?" Saint asked, and how he was getting heated as well. "You don't understand the hold that Scythe has over them. They *are* his pawns."

Anton laughed. "You believe that even after the things they've said to you? That's why you need me to convince them. Because I won't treat them like fools."

"It isn't a matter of foolishness!" shouted Bethany, apparently finding her voice once more. "Saint said your gift was understanding people. But now I realize that he's mistaken. You don't understand anything. Or anyone."

"You excuse what they do, because they're following orders," Anton said. He looked them both in the eye in turn. "Your orders."

"Scythe's orders," Saint said pleadingly. "And if you attack Scythe, you won't win them. You can't make them hate Scythe. You can only make them love you."

Anton shook his head. "You still don't get it. I don't make people love me." He looked at them both. "I get them to find the things they love in themselves."

The words were barely out of his mouth when the front door opened and the others walked in.

They filed in silently, not unlike that first night in the school, but there were more of them this time, nearly twice as many. They moved to stand throughout the room, but every one of them oriented themselves in Anton's direction.

"So," Anton said, looking at each of them in turn. "We're finally all together."

They're expressions were hardly discernible under their hoods. They stood at arm's length, surrounding them throughout the room. They were ridged in a way that Anton could tell was something formal.

"They're showing you respect," Bethany said. He realized that she was trying to take back control of this situation by showing him that she knew things that he did not. Anton didn't mind. As long as her snide remarks taught him something then they were okay.

"Hello, city-dweller," one of them said, a tall but young looking boy.

"That's Zeke," Saint said.

Zeke glanced quickly between Bethany and Saint, and then turned back to Anton. "You're here."

"Yes," Bethany said quickly. "We brought him to you."

The looks on their faces showed Anton that they didn't believe she'd had much to do with it.

"Now that we're all here, maybe you should fill me in on what you know."

Saint smiled and nodded, looking pleased. "Admittedly, we don't have all the details yet, but we're supposed to be getting orders soon for the assassination of Mayor Patrick Daley, per the plans you had Bryce help you find. The expectation is that we'll be the shooting team. There's something of a divide over whether that is something we ought to be doing. Whether there is honor in it."

"Wouldn't disobeying an order from Scythe result in all your expulsion?"

"It might. It seems to me that enough people's minds have changed recently that exiling us would probably be impossible. But we certainly would be thrown out of the Straznik."

Anton looked around the room, observing the way they reacted to the words. He saw some fear there, and some uncertainty, but they were overshadowed by a kind of resigned determination. Their faces didn't say that they would follow Anton blindly, or even that they had made up their minds to resolve their doubts, but they did say that whatever decisions were made by the group, they would not allow fear of reprisal to dictate their actions.

It reminded him of his own resolve after his father had been killed. He had decided to join the CSS at his uncle's urging, all in an effort to facilitate his own aims. He had known that sooner or later it was going to mean revealing who he really was to people, and he had also known how dangerous that could turn out to be. But he had proceeded anyway, because he knew it was the right thing to do. Looking around at the faces of these kids, most of them barely at the tail end of their teen years, it was as if he was looking into a mirror.

Still, just because he had chosen to face danger, that didn't mean that these kids should as well.

"You're all very brave," Anton said. "It isn't easy to discard the rituals of the society to which we belong. It's even more difficult to subvert the rules."

"We haven't subverted anything yet," Saint said.

"No? Then why did you bring me out here when there was nobody else on the streets? Why are we meeting here, where no one else can see? Face it, you're rebelling."

"No we are not," Bethany said.

"Of course we are," Saint sighed.

"You said that no one had told you to keep the city-dweller from our team!"

"And that was the truth. But it's obvious Scythe wouldn't approve of this."

"That doesn't make us rebels!"

"You can't fear the consequences of your actions and then argue that there are no consequences," Anton interrupted. "And if you'd take a moment to look around at your team you'd see how seriously they are taking this. Saint too. Which means that apparently the only one that doesn't

understand the gravity of all this is you.”

“I understand perfectly well! I was the one that warned him about bringing you out here.”

Saint looked to Anton. “What about you? You'd get in more trouble than any of us. You aren't even a member of the enclave.”

“I'm not a member of *any* enclave, yours or the human's. It's very liberating to know that no one can kick you out because you belong to nothing.”

They all laughed, and began to ask their questions.

* * *

The house was nearly empty when Catalina set out dinner. It wasn't something she was completely unfamiliar with, being the oldest and in charge. She kind of liked it, in fact, enough that she was fairly sure she wanted to have a family of her own some day. One in which she wouldn't be a surrogate mother, but a real one.

Although it was more than a little troubling that she couldn't even get her siblings to behave. Benji had always been a pain, but at least Bryce would usually brood quietly. Since Anton's arrival, he'd talked more than he had in years, even around the dinner table tonight. It seemed to annoy Benji, which was somewhat a relief in itself. Far better he be annoyed then raging and attacking.

Or maybe not.

“Does it even register somewhere in your traitorous little mind that you're the one that started all of this?” Benji asked Bryce loudly. “Not that any of us are surprised. It's probably just a case of loyalties.”

“Give him so more food, Cat,” Bryce said. “At least when he's stuffing his greedy little face it keeps him from talking.”

“No, no, brother. I'm trying to be understanding. I'm trying to dissect your motives and come to fully comprehend you and all your stupidity, so that I can love you. That's how the city-dweller does it, and you all love him for it.” Benji smiled wickedly. “So all I should have to do to get that same love and respect is point out that a devo like you would be a natural ally for the humans. It's no wonder you've been helping the city-dweller find out Scythe's plans and undermine his entire strategy, including, by the way, your own brother's team. I wonder if you'll feel guilty if he dies, or if you'll celebrate with the humans.”

Catalina watched as Bryce's head drooped. He stopped eating and began shuffling food around on his plate. “You're right,” he murmured. “Even though I yelled at him, I knew what he was doing the entire time. Maybe I am a traitor.” He put his face in his hands and began to cry.

“I can't believe people think you're so smart,” Catalina laughed. “Yes, you only helped Anton because you're an un-mutated human with a subconscious allegiance to the city-dwellers.”

“You think you can prove me wrong?” Benji asked angrily.

“Of course I can,” Catalina said. “Which of us hasn't helped the city-dweller in one way or another? I certainly have. Bryce has. Saint wants to.” She turned to Benji and leveled a finger in his face. “Even you did, when you told him all about Father.”

Benji pounded the table angrily. “I would *never* help him. I thought for a moment that maybe he wasn't as bad as Scythe had said, but now I know that he's even worse. He's trying to undermine the war effort. It's dangerous. It means that he's--”

She reached across the table and slapped him. She could tell that it hurt, his eyes teared up and his lip was quivering. But more than pain she saw the rage in his eyes. More than anger. Pure hatred. This was the old Benji, but she didn't care. “He isn't dangerous!” she shouted. “In fact, he's trying to stop everyone that *is* dangerous. Scythe and his stupid war. Mother and her stupid isolation. The humans and their stupid bigotry. What if he's the only one that can stop it all? And what if the only way he can do it is with our help?” She took a deep breath and lowered her voice, because both Benji

and Bryce were looking at her intensely, so much so that she knew there was no way she could lose their attention now. “The truth is that I don't care about any of that. At least not as much as the other thing the city-dweller is fixing. He's making us a family again. At least, more of a family than we have been for a long time. That's why I'm helping him.”

“You're worse than Bryce,” Benji spat. “At least he wasn't conscious of his treachery.”

“Why can't you see that helping Anton isn't treachery at all? I think he's the best hope we have for our kind, and our family.”

They both stared back at her, eyes wide and mouths open. Had she struck some chord in them without realizing it? No. It wasn't her they were staring at with those expressions. She turned around, following their eyes.

“I'm sorry for being late,” Mother said, standing and staring at her. Catalina expected to see anger, but all she saw was regret.

“You heard what she said,” Benji shouted.

“So?” Mother responded, still staring into Catalina's eyes. “How can you be sure she's wrong?”

Bryce continued to sob.

As uncomfortable as it was, Catalina scooped Benji into her arms and took him into the sitting room. There they sat and watched intently as their mother sat next to Bryce, pulling her chair up close, and hugged him. She was rocking him back and forth, whispering something into his ear. Eventually the sobs stopped and they both got up from the kitchen table.

“What in the world did she say to him?” Benji asked, looking genuinely curious.

“It doesn't matter what she said,” Catalina told him. “It was enough that she made a connection.” She looked into his eyes. “Do you see now?”

He didn't answer. Instead, he kept staring curiously at the kitchen table.

* * *

Saint was confused. He had expected Anton to preach to his team, to convince them that war was wrong and peace was good and all the rest. Over the past two days he had imagined what this meeting would look like over and over again in his mind. He had always pictured Anton standing and everyone else sitting around him as he spoke. They always took in his words, reaching some kind of ethereal enlightenment and deciding together not to fight anymore. Seeing him talking with them so casually, he felt foolish. Anton is not Jesus Christ, he thought. And it was unfair of me to think that he would be.

But still, he had expected Anton to say *something* about their upcoming mission. He was engaging them, earning their respect through his intellect and their hearts with honesty and humor. After a half hour, it was as if he had been one of them for years. They traded war stories, stories of military training, stories of their homes and families, stories of love. But whenever anyone approached the topic of their soon to be orders, he deftly switched the subject.

Other than making friends, Saint was having trouble seeing what Anton was hoping to accomplish. It could have been himself or Bethany speaking with them, for all the good he was doing. The only thing that was really all that different was that he kept hinting at something about how everything was science and, with enough time, even the most difficult questions could be answered. But even when he dropped those vague hints, he immediately changed the subject again, or else told a joke to get them all laughing. Saint didn't laugh, though.

What did Anton know? He'd talked to Bryce and Catalina. Had he learned something from them? Something important, but uncomfortable for the enclave?

Eventually they got impatient, no longer laughing at his jokes or listening to his stories. Zeke reached into his pack and pulled out the same printout he'd shown Saint the other day. Was it one day ago? Two? It felt like a lifetime.

"You've seen this?" Zeke asked Anton.

Anton peered at the plans. "Not this copy," he responded. "The one I saw was more detailed."

Saint looked at Bethany, hoping to look at her in triumph. This was proof that there was a benefit to bringing Anton out here; at the very least they were going to get some additional information. Unfortunately she wasn't looking back at him, focused instead on the printout. She's never seen it, he remembered. I told Zeke not to show anyone else. Only he and I have seen it.

"Saint thought that they were just contingency plans," Zeke continued. "When I showed this to him, he said to forget it, that there was no way they would be used."

Now Bethany turned to him, a cold stare on her face.

"He lied," Anton responded. "Because he didn't want you to worry."

It was an audacious thing to say. He didn't lie to them. He never lied to them. He might have kept a few things from them, but that was his prerogative as their Captain. So what if he had told Zeke not to expect the plans to be implemented? At the time he hadn't been sure that wasn't the case. In fact, strictly speaking, he still wasn't sure. It wasn't right for Anton to call him a liar in front of them. Apparently Zeke agreed.

"Saint doesn't lie and he doesn't try to protect us like that," he said. "Why would you think he'd do that to us now?"

"For many reasons," Anton said. "He's very complicated, which means he complicates everything around him. That includes you. So part of the reason he lied to you was that he had convinced himself that he wasn't sure, even though he knew better. So in a sense, he wasn't really lying to you. He was lying to himself. That, coupled with the fact that he *wanted* it to be not true, along with all the emotional stress he has been under this past week, he thought he was doing what was right. He's as arrogant as Bethany, but in a different way. She never thinks to question her convictions, whereas Saint doesn't question his feelings, which affect his ideas."

"I showed him this," Zeke said again. "And even after the rumors began, still he never acted as though it were true."

"But it was still only rumors to him. Never did he actually have to confront the undeniable reality that your team is going to be headed to Chicago to kill an unarmed human."

"Our orders are never confirmed before we get them. Especially orders that are controversial. He should have taken it as a sign that they were true."

Hopefully now Anton would see why he hadn't responded to the rumor. You couldn't react to information that you didn't trust. It would mean making decisions with horribly inadequate intelligence, something no military mind could allow.

"Actually, that's my fault," Anton said. "He knows that it was his brother spreading the rumor for me. What he didn't know is that between the plans and the analysis I had Bryce run on the Straznik team, I've already confirmed that your team will be the one chosen."

Then Anton looked at him apologetically. Why, Saint thought. I would have done anything you asked. All I wanted you to do was tell me everything.

But Anton had already turned back to Zeke. "The humans and anomalies have a great deal to learn from each other. There's so much that remains unexplained. It would be better to have these explanations, don't you think?"

Zeke smiled. "If we ask you to, will you stop them from making us go to Chicago? Will you keep us from having to kill that man?"

"Those are two very different questions," Anton said, but then his face grew serious. "I haven't decided what to do yet."

Pieklo, Saint thought. Hadn't decided? What the hell was he waiting for? But then he remembered what he'd told Anton not long ago: he couldn't convince anyone in the enclave by attacking Scythe. That included Scythe's ideas. It was better to try and use Scythe's own words against him, in a way that was subtle. So now he looked again at what Anton had said and saw something

different. It wasn't that he hadn't yet decided whether to work against Scythe's assassination orders. He simply hadn't yet decided how.

"What can we do to help?" Zeke asked. "We've heard the stories from the others. The Tog worship you. Even the Church appears to fear you. Tell us, what would you have us do?"

"If it were up to me, I'd have you spending your time farming or working wherever you like, making babies and getting fat," Anton said.

"But you can't," Zeke nodded. "On the other hand, maybe you can do something less grand, but still good. It isn't danger we fear, it's dishonor. Father Graine might be a bureaucrat, but most of us are still Christians. And those of us that aren't, we're still scared that God might exist."

"Please," one of the others said. "We hear that you can read minds. They say that you do miracles, that you might be the second coming. Will you save us?"

Anton smiled sadly. "I can't read minds, I don't do miracles, and I am certainly not the second coming of the savior. And it isn't up to me to save you. Like everyone, you'll have to save yourself."

"Tell us how!"

"By doing what you think is right," Anton said. "That's something you have to determine for yourself. All I can do is tell you my thoughts."

"They're going to send us to Chicago," Zeke said. He was submissive in a way that Saint had never seen from him before, sitting with his head tilted in shame and his arms wide, pleading. "They're going to make us kill a man in cold blood. Even those of us that might survive the trip will be damned eternally. We've seen the plans. Surely you can confirm for us that there is no honor in them at all. Our workers construct the walls so that we can sustain ourselves here in Rownosci, but still Scythe sends us to Chicago to die. What will you do to stop this?"

Saint shook with shock. In all his years leading these young men and women he had never heard them talk like this. Elite soldiers as they were, always they carried themselves with a sort of confident indifference. Seeing how Zeke spoke now, and seeing how the others were just as agitated, Saint knew instantly that it had all been a show. They had mimicked his and Bethany's own indifferent demeanor. It wasn't that they didn't care; they simply looked to them as an example of how they were expected to behave. And all that time he and Bethany had been putting on their own show, trying to protect them from the perceived danger of doubt.

He hung his head then, terribly ashamed of what he'd helped to create. This is how Scythe controls us, he thought. Because that is where the practice of confidence originated. Weren't they told not to show any fear in their expressions during drills? Didn't they specifically practice anticipating a blow without flinching? How could he not see this before?

Because I'm one of them, he realized. Even those in the enclave that were not Straznik were still one of them. It took an outsider to show us the truth, that no amount of military indoctrination could stymie thought. So when Zeke and the others stepped away from their positions to sit around Anton, folding their legs to look up at him from the floor, Saint wanted desperately to sit down with them. Only a warning look from Bethany kept him from acting on this desire.

"They say you are going to address the entire enclave tomorrow in the plaza," Zeke said.

Anton nodded. "I'll address any that will listen."

"I think you're going to change their minds," Zeke continued. "All of them. Even Father Graine. Even Scythe."

Anton shook his head. "Don't overestimate me. I only hope to change enough minds to make some difference. But if you expect Scythe to be moved by my words, or even to attend tomorrow, you may be disappointed."

"He has to be there. How else can you get him to accept peace?"

"The avenue to reconciliation with the humans doesn't travel exclusively through the Straznik," Anton said. "But you need to understand that regardless of what happens tomorrow, I intend to suggest strongly that you all still travel to Chicago."

They all sat back from him, as stunned at the words as Saint.

Zeke leveled a finger at Anton. "You said that *we* were the ones that had to decide. You said that it was up to us to save ourselves. How can you talk to us of peace with the humans and then make us do this hateful thing? What game are you playing?"

"It's not a game," Anton whispered. "I intend to use your mission as a way to bring answers to the humans, to get them to agree to peace with Rownosci."

"No," Zeke said quietly. And then several of the others joined him in saying the word over and over again.

"It must be done," Anton said.

"But they'll kill you!" Zeke cried. "Don't you realize that? They hate you even more than they hate us!"

"I know," Anton said. And then he dropped his head. "Somebody has to try. And it can't be anyone but me. I'll do my best to keep you all from harm. I'll bargain for your lives with my own if I have to. But someone has to do this. For the first time the enclave has something to offer the humans that might placate their fear. No one has as good a chance of delivering that offer as me."

Saint's eyes were as wide as the others. What had Anton figured out? How to save human mothers? He *couldn't* have. Could he? No. If Mother couldn't figure it out, how could Anton? Mother had been working on it for *years*. Anton had only been here a week! It was an absolutely ridiculous thing to claim.

Yet the look in his eyes said that it wasn't ridiculous. It said that he *had* figured it out.

Saint walked to where Anton sat and squatted in front of him. "Are you sure?" he asked quietly.

"Your mother took great pains to hide it from everyone," Anton said. "I haven't proven it yet, but I'm sure."

"You mean she knew?" Saint gasped. "She's known this whole time and didn't tell us? Why would she hide something like that?"

"Because where all I see is hope, she only sees danger," murmured Anton. "And she isn't wrong about the danger. What she has discovered *will* end the war. The only question is whether that end will come as a result of peace or the death of every anomaly on the planet."

Zeke leaned forward from the floor to put his hands on Anton's knees. "If that is true, still we should risk everything to explore peace," he said, that tone of determination back in his voice. "The secret of reaping the greatest enjoyment from life is to live it dangerously."

"Nietzsche," Anton laughed. "Did you know that the humans think the enclave is filled with uneducated scavengers? They're wrong about so many things."

Zeke laughed with him. "But that's what you meant about saving ourselves, isn't it? That we'd have to make the choice of whether to help you deliver this knowledge to the humans, knowledge which can either save us or kill us? We have to willfully give up control over our own destiny by handing the keys to our destruction to the humans and believing that they will also do what is right."

"Yes," Anton nodded. "If you choose not to help me, I will not hate you for it."

"It would be better to know everything you know before we decide," Zeke said.

"I'll tell you what I can," Anton responded. "First I have some questions for you all, which will help me to know that I'm right. Because even with what I think is the truth, the most difficult obstacle will still need to be surmounted. All the death and danger to the humans is the excuse of their fear, but it isn't the cause."

Zeke laughed. "They fear us? They've killed a million times as many of us as we have them, and you say that *they* fear *us*."

"It's because of their fear that they kill," Anton said. "It's because we're different. Built into our evolution, we wish to spread our seed everywhere. The Great Atomic War killed so many. It created millions of acres of land uninhabited by humanity. The humans think they fear that anomalies will come to where they live and replace them, but they don't. The real fear is that when they spread to

someplace new, they will find that you are already there, and that you will not welcome them.”

“But we live with humans *now*,” Zeke said. “We’ve always wanted to live with humans.”

“And does the entire enclave feel as you do?” Anton asked them.

Saint looked around them, seeing them hang their heads in shame. Of course it wasn’t true of everyone. Hadn’t Scythe suggested that one day those with the Touch would rule over the humans? Hadn’t he already said that his plan was to install enclave rule over Chicago? And which of them hadn’t heard the rumblings of supremacy in the oldest families in Rownosci? None of this was a revelation for Saint, but he had never expected his team to share his shame.

“Ask us to defy Scythe and we will,” Saint said quietly into the silence.

“That isn’t for you to say!” Bethany shouted angrily. “You have no right to risk all our reputations!”

He snapped his head in her direction. “Reputations? I’m risking far more than that! And Anton is risking more than any of us!”

“Just because he chooses to die doesn’t mean we have to,” Bethany snarled.

“Have to? No. But we’ll choose it anyway, because it’s the right thing to do.”

Bethany pounded the wall with her fist, leaving a crater and then storming out of the house. The others watched her leave with interested looks on their face, but once she was gone they deferred back to Saint, even Zeke, who apparently was willing to let him take over the speaking role again.

“What other questions do you have?”

“The Straznik uses the Touch more than anyone else,” Anton said. “Even more than the Tog.”

“That’s true,” Saint replied. “But it isn’t a question.”

“I know how it’s done,” Anton continued. “But surely there are details that I’m missing by not being as familiar with it as all of you. When you use the Touch, what happens? How does it feel to you?”

They all looked at him with funny expressions, as if this was something that even he should know. Saint could see their thoughts as plainly as if they were spoken aloud: you’re one of us; you’ve used the Touch too, so how can this be a question you need us to answer? But Saint knew what Anton was really asking.

“You reach out,” he said. “With your mind more than anything physical. You feel for the radiation you need, and then you make the connection.”

“Show me,” Anton said.

Saint closed his eyes, stretched his hand out, and concentrated. As always, he felt a yearning, a desire in his body to connect with his surroundings. There were a seemingly infinite number of these possible connections. He sifted through them, searching for the ones he wanted, and then latched on ferociously. Beckoning with his hand, he called the radiation he had selected to him. He opened his eyes in time to see the sweat on Anton’s cheek slide from his skin and coalesce on his outstretched palm.

“Amazing,” Anton whispered. “To control the Touch with so fine a hand must require tremendous control.”

“That isn’t typical,” Saint frowned, looking at the tiny puddle of water in his hand. “I’m good, one of the best, but such control only exists between two people with the Touch that share a close connection.”

Anton nodded as if he had expected as much. “That makes sense.”

“It does? Why?”

“I’ll make you a deal,” Anton smiled. “You promise that you won’t be embarrassed, and I’ll tell you my theory.”

Saint, confused, nodded his head in agreement.

Anton took a deep breath. “What if anomalies didn’t actually have the Touch at all?”

“Of course we have it,” Saint frowned. “I just showed it to you.”

"All you showed me is that you could pluck moisture from my cheek, simply by willing it to happen," Anton said. "What if along with all the genetic mutations and destruction the atomic bombs created, what if they are responsible for the creation of an entirely new organism, one descended from tiny, single-celled microbes that themselves became horribly mutated? What if those organisms were incapable of surviving on their own? What if they needed to attach themselves to a host to feed in some small way off of them? What if, in return for all of that, they provided a benefit to their hosts in the form of the Touch?"

Saint shook his head. "Where are you getting this from?"

"From what your sister has taught me, and from what your mother refuses to teach me," Anton smiled. "There is a process by which cells and small organisms communicate to each other. What if the ability to control radiation wasn't real? What if all that was really happening was a call and response activity?"

"Do you have any proof of this?"

"Several proofs, actually. First, have you ever wondered why you cannot sense humans the way you can each other? Certainly they are not surrounded by any less radiation than we. In fact, like all living bodies, they *create* radiation. So why would manipulating their radiation be any different than mutated life?"

"You're wrong," Saint sighed. "We've used the Touch as a weapon on humans. We've inflicted direct pain on their bodies."

"I don't think so," Anton shook his head. "I think you used these same organisms that were nearby, so close in fact that you thought they belonged to the humans you attacked. Perhaps it was in the food they ate, or perhaps they breathed in the microbes."

"Maybe..."

"But beyond those times you've attacked a human with the Touch, have you ever been able to feel their location? Or read their disposition? Have you ever been able to do *any* of the things you can do with the Touch when interacting with your own kind?"

"I guess not..."

"And isn't the same true with the animals?" Anton pressed, and now his voice was rising in pitch and volume. "Isn't there a great difference in how you can interact with the mutated animals as opposed to those that are not?"

Saint finally saw where he was going with this. "You think that it isn't the mutated genes that give us the Touch," he said slowly. "You think it's the other way around."

"There is no Touch," Anton said. "Only mutated microbes talking to one another. Those microbes latch on to a host at the time of conception—"

"Like the Holy Spirit?" Zeke piped up.

"No!" Anton shouted angrily. All of them scooted away from him, afraid at the volume of his voice. "I'm sorry. But no, you can't allow that thought to exist, because others will have it and they will use it in the enclave the same way the humans use the description of our mutation as a pandemic." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, calming himself. "These microbes gather in a host at the time of conception. Then, when the host is born, these organisms sense that they are entering a world where there are other organisms with which to connect. So they blast out a zillion powerful cellular messages. Those that have the genetic mutation caused by the microbes are able to withstand those messages without too much danger. But those that don't..."

And *now* Saint finally understood the full implications of the theory, and all the rest of them shared in his comprehension. He knew that to be the case because it wasn't just he that openly wept as the city-dweller continued to describe in excruciating detail the exact way that thousands of human women had died or were horrifically mutilated. Unlike him, most of them had come from Chicago. They knew what the effect of their births had done, but it had always been only some vaguely understandable thing. To know now, in detail, what had happened to their mothers meant feeling all

over again the pain of their deaths or injuries.

So all of them wept openly, including Anton, and including Bethany, who had thought she was listening in full hiding from behind the door, but whose sobs announced that she was there.

“Please!” Zeke cried out eventually, still crying. “Tell us how we can help you end this!”

“Agree to your mission,” Anton managed to get out.

They all agreed, binding the agreement with their shared grief.

Chapter 14:

Anomaly Subject 238: If you let me go, I will take you to the enclave. Then you can see for yourself that we are not the monsters you claim us to be.

U.N. Interrogator (Name Redacted): You know full well that we cannot survive in the fallout lands. You must think us very stupid to fall into your trap.

Anomaly Subject 238: What trap? Your soldiers leave your cities all the time! And we have humans that live with us. There is no danger in seeing the enclave!

U.N. Interrogator (Name Redacted): We are at war. If I were to travel with you to your enclave, I wouldn't just be arrested for allowing you to leave. They would label me a traitor to all of humanity.

Anomaly Subject 238: Then your laws are stupid. You ask me questions, you torture me for answers, but when I offer to show you those answers first hand you refuse. What is it you want me to do?

U.N. Interrogator (Name Redacted): I want you to tell me the truth!

Anomaly Subject 238: Truth cannot be told. It must be experienced. And you have refused to experience it. You don't want truth. You only want control.

*United Nations Interrogation Transcripts: Anomaly Subject 238
(Date Redacted)*

Kobi Trudeau's belly was full as she trudged up the stairs of the Council Building to Scythe's rarely used office on the top floor. She had been planning this meeting of the Rada for more than twenty-four hours and she had made a point of scheduling it for after the dinner meal so that she would be able to eat well before attending. It wasn't something that filled her with pride, but she tended towards anxiety and rashness when it came to making decisions if she was hungry, and this was no time for either. But now her stomach turned as she turned the handle of Scythe's door and she wondered if perhaps she should have held back on that last plate of greens.

She saw immediately that she was the last to arrive. Father Graine was already sitting to one side. Scythe sat behind his desk, looking uncomfortable there, as he always did. Seeing her walk in, he nodded his head in welcome. She knew that, despite his distaste for this office, he would appreciate her requesting that the meeting be held in his domain rather than in the church, or in her office. Scythe always responded well to signs of respect, desperate as he constantly was for the enclave's approval. How did you get to your position, she wondered of him. Your pandering is so obvious that it's laughable. Is it only because we too all search desperately for someone to respect us? It doesn't matter anymore, I suppose. Pandering or not, you don't have nearly as much control over us as you think. You don't even have complete control over the Straznik, do you? Or was that not my nephew I saw leading the city-dweller out into the fallout lands?

She took a breath and thanked them for attending, even though they really didn't have much choice once she'd requested the meeting. Scythe indicated a chair, but she disregarded it, instead pulling a computer printout from behind her back and spreading it out over his desk.

Father Graine looked at it blankly before turning back to her. "What is this?"

Kobi looked from Father Graine to Scythe. "You don't recognize this?" she asked them both.

"No," Father Graine said. "Should I?"

Kobi sighed and turned to Scythe. "I notice that you haven't bothered to deny it."

Father Graine stood up and pointed a finger at her angrily. "Is that why you brought us here? To make accusations?"

She turned to face him. "I remember when I was very young, when the concept of the Rada was first introduced. Before that time there had been no leadership structure at all in the enclave. We survived, but without a governing body we never flourished. And then the people of the enclave heard about this idea that had been had, to create a trinity of power and control and guidance. They immediately adopted the idea and handed over some of their liberty to this governing body, the Rada, because its power resonated with them. Three leaders, all of them equal, all of them with the ability to provide balance to the others so that power over the enclave never would rest solely with one person."

"So that we might act swiftly but rightly," Father Graine finished for her. "This is the power of our council, a structure that has been replicated in enclaves throughout the world."

"I see the respect for this power in all the faces outside of this building," Kobi continued. "It works because not only is the enclave loyal to us, but they perceive us as being loyal to them. I've always thought, no matter whether there were disagreements or not, that their perception was absolutely justified. If that wasn't the case, the people here would sense it and would do something about it. So as long as the Rada continued to exist, it has always been treated with the utmost respect here."

"Of course it has," Father Graine said impatiently, waving a hand at her. "Laws are always the most revered in small communities. We're a small community."

"Not anymore," Kobi said. "Not really. We're large enough now that the type of personal interaction we used to have with our people has largely disappeared. No longer can we leave it to the people to make sure that we remain virtuous. That regretful duty falls upon us. This is something that we've already sensed, even if we haven't consciously recognized it. It is the reason that our offices have become adversarial to one another. It's the reason that deals have begun to be made behind the backs of others."

"You dare to validate your own sins against the Church this way?" sneered Father Graine. "That's what you mean, isn't it? You plan on doing something you know will anger us, so you prepare the way with this meaningless little speech."

"You see?" Kobi smiled. "Even now you graciously prove my point by being combative."

"You will show me some respect!" Father Graine thundered.

"Only as much as you earn," she replied calmly. She regarded them both. "If you two had bothered to tell me what you were planning instead of resorting to backroom deals and secret meetings, I wouldn't have had to print that document out."

Father Graine looked genuinely confused and Kobi realized that he had probably never actually seen the plans before, even if he knew about them in principle. "This document outlines a plan for one of the Straznik teams, my nephew's, to infiltrate the Chicago walls and assassinate their mayor."

Scythe sighed. "You really weren't supposed to see the actual plans," he said.

"Then you shouldn't have logged them."

"Logging that document is the law."

Kobi gave him a hard look. "So is informing me of your plans at the same time you informed Father Graine. As I said, the people of our enclave grant us the power to govern them because they believe in the structure of the Rada. Up until these past few days, I believed that structure to be solid. Now I see that I was wrong and I can't help but wonder what else has been hidden from me."

"This is the city-dweller's fault," Father Graine growled. "He is creating the discord he promised us, so much so that now we are here arguing in our chambers with one another."

Kobi tried desperately to keep from laughing at the ridiculousness of his words. "He arrived this past week," she managed to say with a calm tone. "But this destructive mentality has to have existed long before then." She pointed at the assassination plans. "Certainly *this* wasn't developed in a matter of days, was it? Let's not ignore the problem here, which is that you two have apparently

decided that you don't need my input to move forward with an attempt on a human politician's life."

"What would you have us do?" Father Graine said, a petulant smirk on his face. "Perhaps you think we should seek the city-dweller's council on our plans? Ask him what *he* thinks of our strategy for eliminating his uncle?"

"That's exactly what we should do," Scythe said quietly. "And it's what I intended to do all along."

Father Graine spun on him. "All along? So the council of the church meant nothing!"

"Not nothing," Scythe said. "But not everything. All those who have something of value to contribute should be sought on battle strategy, especially strategy as important as this. What Anton can provide to me on this matter could prove invaluable. He knows more than you think. He knows more than *I* think. He is a powerful weapon, but he needs to be aimed carefully."

"Come on," Father Graine laughed. "He's barely a man. His military rank might give him something slightly more to offer than the others here that came from Chicago, but not *much* more."

"Enough!" Kobi roared. "I called you here to tell you that I won't be a part of any of this. I did it as a matter of courtesy, despite your showing me none. I've already spoken with the Tog leaders and had them send out word of what you're planning. I've also instructed them to do whatever they can to keep their men and children from participating in this."

Father Graine sputtered at her boldness. Scythe, on the other hand, gave her a cold look of begrudging respect.

"I hope you will realize that I have not made this decision lightly. I wrestled with it for these past few days, but I've decided to support Anton in any way I can. Until I see evidence to the contrary, I will move forward with the belief that peace *can* be obtained with the humans. I may not control our soldiers, and I may have no domain over our eternal souls, but I assure that I can keep this enclave from being able to fully make war on the city of Chicago."

"That's true," Scythe whispered. "But can you keep Chicago from making war on us?"

"I don't have to," she answered. "The United Nations does that already."

Scythe shook his head. "Not anymore they don't. They have issued two resolutions that instruct all human cities throughout the planet to make aggressive war on any and all anomaly enclaves. They are authorizing an all out, planet-wide battle."

Kobi shook her head. "They can authorize all they want. The humans are far too divided to offer enough support for an all out war."

"Do not pretend to be so innocent," Father Graine said. "You must have come to realize by now that what Scythe is planning will push the humans far enough to support the war. That's the point."

"Yes, I realize that. What I've been trying to figure out is *why* you're doing this. I said before that I always believed that, despite our differences, you two were both working in the best interests of the enclave. So why this completely destructive act? Surely you're aware that many of our people will die!"

Scythe cleared his throat to get their attention. "My dear Kobi, you are a wonderful person of peace and love and trust. I am none of those things. Still, you should trust me on matters of war. I could try to explain this all to you, but I fear you wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

Scythe shrugged. "Do you know the story of the Reichstag fire?"

"Germany?" Kobi asked, frowning. "Polish communists set their version of the council building afire, coming close to burning it to the ground. That started World War Two, the first of the atomic wars."

"Not quite," Scythe said. "It wasn't Polish communists that lit the fires, it was agents of Hitler in disguise. Hitler realized that he didn't have public support for the war he wanted, so he manufactured that support by creating a public unity in the form of outrage."

Kobi stared at him. "Hitler? You're modeling yourself after *Hitler*?" She turned to Father

Graine. "And you're going along with it!"

"No. This is the first I've heard talk of Hitler."

Scythe chuckled. "It's merely a tactic," he said. "It was used prior to the Reichstag fire, and it's been used since. I am different from Hitler in that I do not intend to rule the world."

"You should take care how you explain things," Father Graine said cautiously. "And whose names you invoke."

"I'll do that."

Father Graine took a deep breath. "I'm not a fool. I may despise war and violence, but if that is the only way the Lord has made available for us to end the madness that is occurring throughout the world, then so be it. This will not be the first time the armies of God have fought in his name. It is the duty of every Christian to defend the kingdom of Earth, just as the angels defend the kingdom of Heaven."

"Amen," Scythe nodded.

"You two are mad!" Kobi exclaimed.

"Calm down," Scythe said sternly. "Your concern was that you would not have an equal input on this matter before any decisions were made. You see now that Father Graine hadn't made up his mind until just now, after you had voiced your displeasure. It would appear that your concern was unfounded, and you now no longer have any justification to attempt any subversion of our plans. We have overruled your objections two to one. As with any other matter, you are expected to support the Council's decision. If you cannot manage that, you can at least remain quiet."

No amount of counting could keep the anger from her voice and appearance. "I will *not* remain quiet. I will tell everyone what you've done." She started to leave, but then thought better of it and turned back to them before she walked out the door. "You should know that the city-dweller has asked for an audience in the plaza tomorrow morning. I intend on making sure that as many people are there as is possible."

"So I'd heard," Scythe replied in a bored tone. "And I'm sure you'll tell him and everyone else there what we've discussed today. But between Father Graine and me, we'll have already prepared most of them to believe that this is merely another Straznik operation. So you'll forgive me if I'm not terribly worried about either you or the city-dweller's actions during your little congregation. No matter what they may think, once the people of Rownosci see the human armies marching towards the walls, they will all unite behind us."

Kobi sighed. "I merely thought you'd consider attending."

"In that case, thank you for telling us," Scythe smiled. "Perhaps I will indeed be there." His expression turned to one more reasonable. "I know what you're thinking right now, Kobi: that I'm an evil, power-hungry warlord who is endangering your kind worldwide. I wonder if you would have that same opinion if I had the Touch? Would it make a difference if I weren't human?"

"Of course not," Kobi said. "I would still think that you were an evil, power-hungry warlord."

Father Graine scoffed, but Scythe merely laughed. "That is because you are not like the bigots I am trying to save you from," he said. "Whatever you think of me, I beg you to remember that I have always served the enclave eagerly. That hasn't changed."

"So you say," Kobi said. She turned to Father Graine. "Will you be coming as well?"

"I should think not. I have no use for the words of an infidel city-dweller that cannot be bothered to attend mass. All the words I need are written in the Bible."

Kobi left and hurried out of the Council Building. She practically ran to her sister's house, searching for Saint, but he was nowhere to be found. Then she began looking for anyone in his team, but noticed that they too were gone. They had to be back from whatever they were doing outside the walls by now. So she turned instead towards the house they had provided for Anton. He told her that when they had returned from the fallout lands there had been a Straznik soldier waiting for them with a message to deliver to Saint. It had been an order to spend the evening in the York Building barracks.

So he'd known, Kobi realized. Scythe had known that Saint had brought Anton to meet with his team. She feared briefly what might be done to him, but then realized the reason for Scythe's keeping him at the barracks. Obviously they would be embarking on their mission to Chicago the next morning. It was the only explanation.

Please don't leave before Anton makes his plea in the plaza, she thought desperately. Please, Saint, delay long enough that something can be done.

The next morning something very strange happened in Rownosci: it appeared as if nearly everyone was up and out on the streets before the sun broke through the horizon, and yet none of them seemed to be going anywhere. There was a palpable din echoing everywhere as people gathered in small groups of six or seven to discuss whether or not they were going to go to the plaza to hear the city-dweller and his message. That there had been no consensus of thought coming from the Rada the evening before had created even more interest. Father Graine had stated firmly at the evening mass that no good Catholic would attend. Word had filtered down from the Straznik that Scythe had not forbade any of his soldiers from attending other than those that had duties to perform. And it was already well known that Kobi and the rest of the Tog had helped to set this whole thing up in the first place.

But of equal interest were whispers of the other effects of the city-dweller's presence. Because of her standing in the enclave, everyone was familiar with the tragedy and familial situation of Maya Trudeau. They had been shocked to hear reports that Benji was like a new child, playing and learning constructively with the other students. And there were rumors coming from the other scientists that Catalina was on the verge of some kind of biological breakthrough. Even Bryce, that quiet and ashamed human child of the great Trudeau family, even he had been bounding about Rownosci the past several days, invigorated and occasionally even cordial. Some of the more devout Catholic parishioners had been suggesting that the city-dweller was the devil, come to woo them with supposed gifts before destroying all their lives completely. Others believed that he was a healer, a saint perhaps, and those people clamored at the thought of being able to speak with him and have him heal all of their ills. So it was that, even though the discussions of whether or not they would go to the plaza continued, before too long nearly everyone found themselves there.

Most of them had heard rumors of the city-dweller's message. They knew that he was an advocate for a peaceful resolution with the humans. But that isn't why they attended. The truth was that, after being told how dangerous or horrible he was by Father Graine and Scythe, they simply could not withstand their own curiosity. If he is the devil, then what does the devil look like? How does he talk? What does he say? If it hadn't been for his detractors, Anton wondered if anyone at all would have shown up around the gazebo in which he stood.

But they had shown up. With nearly a half hour before Anton had intended on beginning his monologue, the plaza was spilling over. Some were at the foot of the gazebo; others were lounging near the merchant's tents which remained vacant; and still others were as far back as the stairs to the Council Building.

Looking around at them, he saw several faces he recognized, and many that surprised him with their attendance. Maya and her family were there. And, of course, Kobi and the Tog sat together near the gazebo in their white shawls. But also he saw Scythe sitting amidst a throng of Straznik, their black robes like an ink in the crowd. And a little later, Saint and his own Straznik team came walking up the path and stood near the back. Rumors had been swirling that they were supposed to have left on whatever this mission to Chicago was. Was it really an assassination, like the Tog said? Or was it just another recon operation, as the Straznik had been saying? Anton knew they weren't sure what to believe, but he could also tell that they had picked up on Scythe's disapproving glare when Saint had

arrived.

And just as Anton had thought that he would begin to address them, the church bell tolled a booming announcement, and Father Graine himself made his way out of the vestibule with the other deacons to stand quietly at the edge of the plaza. The noise of the crowd raised an octave as their heads began to swivel back and forth between Anton and Father Graine in anticipation. They wanted drama, he could tell. And they thought he was going to give it them.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming this morning,” he shouted, trying to be as loud as he could without driving himself hoarse. “Since the Great Atomic War, the world has faced a question such as never before. The humans call us anomalies. We call ourselves those with the Touch, and we call each other brothers and sisters. Across the world we have been driven from our homes and forced to make lives in the fallout lands that the humans have discarded. They have murdered our children and hunted down our families. They have enslaved some of us, and demeaned the rest. They have almost uniformly refused to grant us even a modicum of the rights and pleasures that they enjoy themselves. That is one truth.”

The crowd began whispering to themselves. One truth, he could hear some of them saying. Not one truth, *the* truth. And these weren’t the words of peace. He was reciting for them all the reasons they had for hating the city-dwelling humans. They began to look uncomfortable, as if they could sense that something else was coming.

“But there are other truths that must be recognized,” he continued. “Our kind can be dangerous to the humans when unchecked. How many of their women have we injured or killed? How many of *their* lives have we taken in this war? Which of us can say that we know for certain that our kind is not an evolutionary threat to the un-mutated human? Certainly they have reasons to be afraid, even if those reasons can ultimately be assuaged. Today it is the size of their population that keeps them in a dominant position, but with the growth of Rownosci these past years, which of us can say that this position will not change? These are the questions I have sought to answer, because their answers can be the bridge between our truths and theirs.”

He could see the scientists nodding in agreement. As seekers of knowledge, the idea that knowledge itself could end wars was of course appealing. But, interestingly, he saw that others were offering him approving looks as well. The Tog, of course, but also others that were engineers or fieldworkers.

“And answer some of the questions I have. Others I can only offer theories, but they are strong theories, strong enough that policy can be built upon them. The question is, now that we in the enclave have knowledge that can help to breed peace, do we have the strength to offer it to the humans?”

And now he saw them shaking their heads. Anton knew this was the request they had been expecting from him, to be the first to offer their hands in peace. He also realized that because they had expected it, they would have already formulated in their minds all the arguments against it.

“That is the question that all beings in possession of a soul must ask,” he shouted. “When engaged in conflict with another sentient being, we must ask whether there is any other reasonable alternative to fighting, or if the fight is just. However, this appears to be a question that many here in the enclave have avoided. What thought did you have when you heard the Straznik come home with tales of victorious battle with the human soldiers? Or when the possessions of one of their travelers were forcibly taken from them? What did you think when you heard that my father had been murdered two years ago? Did you think to yourself that these events were sad, but that they were necessary? Or did you rejoice in them out of a sense of vengeance?”

Anger flared in the crowd now, even by the Tog. All the expected retorts poured up at him from unidentifiable sources. They’re the ones that started the war! They’re baby killers! We are only doing what’s necessary! But amid their anger, he could also see their shame. That they were ashamed was a good sign.

“I imagine that most of you didn’t give much thought to this question either way. You were too

busy trying to survive out in the fallout lands, and later in Rownosci. This difficult life didn't allow room for compassion. You had the animals to worry about, and the Raiders, and the humans. The church might teach you to show mercy, but which of you could really afford to do so?"

The tone of his words silenced them and now their shame was palpable. Many of them turned with accusing looks of their own towards Father Graine, as if it were *his* fault for not properly administering to them. Why did you fail us this way, the looks said. Why couldn't you make us more compassionate, so that we wouldn't have to endure this city-dweller's words today?

"I came here to ask many questions, but none more important than this: is this what the enclave is? Are you truly a people without compassion for their evolutionary cousins? You struggle more than the humans, yet you do not allow yourselves to understand the struggles *they* face. Some of you refer to yourselves as the humans' biological superiors, and yet you appear to act exactly as they do. You get this attitude from some of the leadership here in Rownosci, don't you? Except that isn't true. Leadership only exists at the behest of the led. So this attitude isn't theirs, it is yours."

They hung their heads, nearly in unison. Some of them remained tall and proud, like Father Graine and Scythe, but most of the others were looking at the ground, shuffling their feet. Anton knew that if any of them could have left then without being noticed, they would have, so uncomfortable this setting now was. They had thought he would come with a plea, not these horrible accusations.

"Some of you are glad when the humans endure death and struggle. You don't rejoice quietly when they perish. You sing your thanks loud for all to hear. You think that this is a sign that you are proud of your people, but you're wrong. You are showing your own fear, your own hatred, your own incivility, all the same things you claim to despise about the humans. You look down upon the humans that have chosen to live here as lesser creatures, and you dare to label humans born to those with the Touch with such epithets as *devo*. I say to you that all of this harms your people, and that you are as much a danger to Rownosci as any human or Raider army."

"What know you of the dangers we face?" came a shout from one of the Straznik near Scythe. "We did not come here to stand trial before you!"

Anton looked in the speaker's direction a moment before allowing his gaze to sweep them all. "This is the defense of the ignorant. How could I possibly know your people, having lived behind Chicago's walls most of my life? What do I know about your losses? What do I know about your struggle? How dare I see the enclave as anything but a victim of the humans?"

At once the Straznik camp roared their disapproval. "We are not victims!" they shouted, nearly in chorus. "We are strong!"

"Yes you are," Anton nodded. "And you should not apologize for your strength. You make honorable use of it, for the most part. You serve your families in the Straznik, and protect your beautiful home. If you are so adept at staving off the dangers you face, why do you feel the need to crow about them now? You are strong. Why not act strong?"

Scythe was shaking his head sadly, as if Anton had thought that the people would not recognize that he had constructed a corner in which to paint them. But he *did* anticipate that they would recognize it, so he continued quickly.

"But the question isn't so easy, as you surely can tell. Your struggles aren't to be disregarded. They are very real and very important to any compassionate being. If the humans cannot empathize with you, then they are not worthy of peace and you should smite them as the Lord did with his flood when the world became a place too evil to correct. But one way or another, a resolution must come about, because there is not enough room on this Earth for both sides to live separately in peaceful disregard of one another. That means that one side is going to have to step forward and incur the risk of extending its hand to the other. And the sooner that happens, the better, because as each day goes by each side becomes more and more firmly entrenched in this war. I have come to you as one with the Touch who has grown up in the human's city. I tell you that there are many there who support your rights, in degrees as varied as are the opinions here in Rownosci."

He took a deep breath, looking into their faces. He saw the obvious question written on all of their faces. "Why does it have to be you?" he wondered aloud for them. "If there are humans in Chicago who do not agree with the official position, why don't *they* do something about it? Consider the question carefully. Who is it that performs the tests at birth? Who controls the facilities in which your children are kept? It is those in their monarchies of power, not the common people. Yet, as I just told you, leadership only exists at the behest of the led. Governments exist because the people they govern *allow* them to."

They were all nodding their heads again. It was the justification they had always used to allow themselves to feel vindication at the death of the humans, any humans, instead of sorrow. That is the way *all* governments operated, they would think. He had accused them moments ago. Now he must fairly accuse the humans as well.

"I submit to you that though you might face more danger than the humans, you have far more freedom," Anton said. "Consider that you know the dangers you face. They all come from one direction, outside those walls you are building. But who do the humans have to fear? I can tell you, because I lived with them, that they fear *everyone*. Not just you. They fear the other human communities that participated in the Great Atomic War with them. They fear their own leadership. They live in such a state of fear that they are paralyzed, unable to complete the task that I'm asking of you."

They were quiet now, paying rapt attention. Not because they felt flattered by his words, but because they knew they were true. Anton looked over at Father Graine, who was frowning in thought, looking as though he were struggling with some internal conflict. Then at Scythe, whose mouth was pressed into a thin smile, one of begrudging respect, as though he had figured out the game that Anton was playing and was observing it the way a spectator watched a painter working his canvas.

"All of you will remember the story of my adopted father," Anton pressed on. "I was a teenager when it happened, and I had planned on becoming a teacher. Your enclave attacked the outskirts of the city and, though it had never happened before, you took my father's life behind our walls. His body had been covered in bruises, beaten with fists, feet, and whatever debris you had thrown at him. Then, when you were done toying with him, you drove a railroad spike clean through his chest. You gave my family and my city a reason to grieve, and the human leadership a reason to fight."

He watched them recoil from his voice, wincing at the direct way he charged them with the crime. We didn't do that, their eyes pleaded with him. It wasn't me, their individual faces said. And then they began to look around at each other, as if trying to spot the one that had committed the crime.

"For all I know, it could have been any of you that had done this horrible thing, so to me it was all of you. I don't say this to shame you, or to accuse you, or to guilt you into anything. I say it to you so that you will understand the power of these next words: I forgive you. In fact, I forgave you a long time ago. I know that what you've done to me is no less unconscionable than what has been done to you and everyone else in this war. It has gone on for too long, with no end in sight. Leaders on both sides claim that they know the way to end the war through decisive victory. They're lying. All they will manage to create is more pain and more death and more misery. That is why you must recognize that this thing I'm asking you to do, it is not the first step, but the second. I've already taken the first step for both sides, because I am both of you, and I am neither of you, and I forgive you all."

Several people in the crowd jumped when a miserable wail erupted from one side. Anton looked over to see Zak burying his head in his arms. He was reminded that no matter how old he might act, Zak was still a child, and his close proximity to Anton these past days must have made him more susceptible to such strong emotions. Concern swept over him for a moment, but then several others gathered around to console the boy.

"It isn't enough for me to forgive you, unfortunately. You must forgive yourselves. You must release yourself from all the guilt and fear that invades you. I have only been among you a short while, but spending time with those I've met, I know that there is a deep feeling of inferiority and fear here.

One family I happened to meet is filled with the most intelligent and talented children I've ever known, and yet before I arrived they had no idea of their own worth."

And because the stories had swirled throughout the enclave, everyone knew the family of whom he spoke. They craned their necks, looking at Maya and her children, who were sitting stone-faced and rigid.

"This family is a perfect example of one that was torn apart by this war. They lost their father, who you called your hero. And he *was* a hero to the enclave, defending it with his gun and the Touch. He served not only honorably, but eagerly. Has there ever been another Straznik that has approached the defense of his people with such hunger? Even their leader, Scythe, who has done so much to make you strong, never took as much personal risk as did Connor. And then he was gone, taken from all of you by his duty. And after he was gone, his family fell apart from despair. Isn't that a romantic tale?"

Several of them murmured in agreement, remembering their own memories of the man. The Straznik in the crowd roared again, but this time with approval.

Anton lifted his foot up high and slammed it down on the wood of the gazebo, silencing them with the noise. "That story is a lie!" he shouted angrily. The crowd flinched. "Their family had been destroyed long before Connor's death. They had disintegrated because their husband and father had been more interested in going to war than in making a family. Because you chose to fight, you took him from them. You might have thought that this was a necessity, but I will tell you soon why it was not. And the reason it is not comes back to this same tortured family. You took away their father, and they responded by giving you their lives in the pursuit of knowledge. How ironic that it is their knowledge that will end the war that ripped apart their family."

Now their heads craned to look at them again, but this time with looks of curious admiration rather than pity. Scythe did not turn his head. Instead he continued to stare at Anton, his eyes narrow slits.

"The Touch is something most of us possess. It is what makes us unique from the un-mutated humans. We all know that worldwide the humans test their newborns for the genetic markers of the Touch and euthanize those that test positive. Logically, you have come to believe what the humans believe: that it those same genes that are responsible for the Touch, as well as the radiation levels that are so harmful to human mothers. Why would you believe anything different?"

They could tell that he was leading them somewhere. They leaned forward where they stood, or sat forward where they sat to make sure that they could take in his words.

"Since long before the Great Atomic War, the great philosophy of Buddhism has stated that all things in the universe are connected through karma. Karma is an energy that ebbs and flows depending on our deeds. Through this energy, Buddhism tells us that all things are tied together. In Buddhism, this is a metaphysical tie."

Looks of confusion spread throughout the crowd. He knew what they were wondering. What does this have to do with them?

"But what if there was a biological tie as well? One similar to karma, but not metaphysical at all? What if this biological force provides what we call the Touch? What if it is this force that is responsible for shaping our lives from birth and is now the source of so much violence in the world? If the cause of all this were a biological entity rather than mere genetics, then we could exert a greater level of control over it. Your own scientists can tell you about what they've discovered better than I, but I shall try to give you the simplified version of their theory. Because one way or another, they all believe it's true. Even your most revered scientist, Maya Trudeau. In fact, she may be at a point that is now beyond simple belief. She might *know* it to be true."

The crowd murmured, unsure of the implications of what he was saying, but able to understand that it was important. Maya, on the other hand, was still as statuesque as ever, though her face had reddened considerably, whether from anger or embarrassment Anton couldn't be sure.

"The theory goes like this," he continued. "No gene can give a person the ability to control

radiation the way that we can. The very notion is so absurd that it is a wonder anyone believes it, let alone the entire world. Genes can control many things within the body, but outside the body they have no influence. There is another problem as well. All other mutated life that has been examined, to one degree or another, has the Touch too. It is the reason that the mutated wolves are such excellent hunters. It is why the mutated plants have defense mechanisms that respond even before they ought to be able to sense our approach. And that isn't all. If our genes gave us the ability to manipulate radiation, why is that we can only do so with *some* radiation? There is radiation everywhere. Everything that has mass gives off at least some radiation. So why are the humans able to construct clean rooms and jail cells in which the Touch is silent in us?"

The crowd became agitated, talking more loudly among each other. Anton knew what they feared. It was frightening to not understand yourself, who you were, what you were. They had thought that they knew the answers to those questions, but now he was telling them that those answers were false. Or, at the very least, incomplete. It made them afraid, and their fear presented with anger.

One of those near Maya pointed a finger at her. "You knew this!" he shouted in rage. "You knew this and you didn't tell us! What right have you to keep us from the truth?"

Maya didn't bat an eye. She kept staring straight ahead at Anton, her face still showing no emotion. They seemed to take her silence as an admission of guilt and the crowd roared angrily, until Scythe's voice boomed over them all.

"Maya, what have you done?"

The crowd held its collective breath. This is what they had first wanted: conflict. They had thought it would come from Anton and Scythe, or Anton and Father Graine, or Anton and *someone*. But now that it had manifested itself between Maya and Scythe, it would be just as delicious.

Her children moved to circle her, all except Saint, who was nervously biting his lip and looking as if he were about to join them. It was then that Maya finally reacted. She took her children gently by their shoulders and moved them out of the way, back to their original positions, so that they were no longer protecting her. The crowd, though still angry, seemed to register how helpless she looked and refrained from pressing in on her.

She could have quietly denied his accusation, Anton knew. And they probably would have believed her. After all, why should they take his word over hers? But she hadn't refuted him, so they knew that it was true. And when Anton began speaking once more, they turned and listened all the more intensely, waiting for the next revelation to come.

"Those who work with Maya know several things. They know that she is incredibly gifted in the sciences, particularly genetics. They know that she is immensely dedicated both to her work and to the people of Rownosci. No one has done more to improve your lives than she. And they also know that she had better be all those things, because she is the only one who ever sees all of the genetic sequences of the samples that are taken." Anton paused, taking a deep breath. "She discovered something. Something important, but also something she decided was too dangerous for anyone else to see. She was purposefully keeping information from the other scientists that could make use of it. Her daughter, for instance, and also her own assistant. And, by extension, she kept this discovery from everyone else, including the Rada. Maya looks at her family and believes that everything that happened to them is her fault. It is because of this belief that she hid her discovery. There is the potential for both good and bad in it, but she believes that if the knowledge of this discovery comes to the world from her then it can only do harm, because it will have been tainted by her."

There were no murmurs now. They were absolutely silent in their anticipation.

"Her discovery was that the explanation for the Touch and several other biological occurrences in the world are not solely the result of modified gene sequences. She discovered that the mutation that is common in all mutated life is one which allows for a symbiotic relationship to exist between all of us and another organism. This organism is a simple form of life, a single-celled creature, not unlike other amoeba or bacteria. What is unique in this organism is its ability to communicate over incredible

distances through something called signaling. These cells can instruct others like it to perform at its direction through signaling. Because it cannot survive on its own, this organism attaches itself to a capable host and allows that host to direct its signaling. That is what we call the Touch.

“And that is why we can only affect behavior in some radiation rather than all. Because we aren’t really controlling radiation. Rather, we are unconsciously directing these organisms to signal to others the behavior we want them to perform. When we levitate an object, we aren’t actually levitating it at all. We are causing these tiny organisms that surround it to ride the moisture in the air, taking that object with them. When we reach out and sense one another, it isn’t each other we’re actually sensing, but these organisms within each other.”

They continued to look at him in shock.

“As a scientist, Maya understood better than anyone what this meant. Creating a virus that would only infect those with our anomaly genes is very difficult. It requires an immense amount of both skill and luck. But obliterating a single simple organism would be easy. And the reverse is true as well. Creating a phage that would kill any life on the planet that didn’t make use of this symbiotic relationship would also be relatively simple. It could be done in a matter of years rather than generations.

“It was one thing to help to modify the plants and livestock that fed Scythe’s soldiers, but she decided to do everything she could to keep this knowledge from him, lest he make use of it as a tool for war. So she refused to let anyone else see the full genomes.”

Right then the crowd seemed all at once to understand what he was saying. Maya didn’t keep the information from them out of spite. She didn’t do it because she thought that she was better or smarter than them. She had done it for their own protection.

“All by herself she has endured this weight,” Anton spoke into the silence. “The weight of understanding how almost all life on the planet works. Because here is the problem. If the animals and plants that were mutated have a form of the Touch as well, that means that they also have a symbiotic relationship with this new organism. And it means that those that are un-mutated do not. And even if they do not share the ability to signal to each other, they still exist in the same ecosystem. So if either side developed a biological weapon to use against the other side, it would mean the end of all recognizable life on this planet.”

For a moment they stood there stunned. Then they looked in Maya’s direction, not only at her, but at her scientist children as well. Seeing the looks on their faces, they knew that the family believed Anton, and if *they* believed him then it was no longer a belief. It was the truth.

Cries went out in various places in the crowd. Some were of fear, others of sadness. To endure all of this new knowledge was bad enough, but now Anton knew that he had just heaped an understanding of an incredible new danger upon them. They had taken a vindictive pleasure before in finding out that Maya had been hiding something from them. But to find out *why* she had done it, from this they took no glee. So consumed were they by this revelation he had shared with them that they were startled when he spoke again.

“Maya thought the best course of action was to tuck the knowledge away and pretend for as long as possible that it did not exist. But she never considered something. While it will be easier for anyone who knows about these signaling organisms to create a weapon out of them, it will now also be easier to do other things, namely to remove the danger of anomaly births to human mothers. The radiation that is so harmful to them is drawn in by the initial symbiotic connection between the organisms and the fetus just prior to birth. Getting rid of the radiation becomes impossible, even for the Tog. There is too much of it. And treating the radiation with the fungus mash Maya helped produced won’t work either. The harm is still done, and the absence of abundant radiation at the initiation of symbiosis greatly retards the Touch in the child. But what if the Tog were to attempt to remove the radiation while the human mother also ingested some kind of compound that rid her entire body of these organisms, including in the child? The child would still carry the genes that make

symbiosis available, and it could be initiated immediately after birth. We could take measures so that at the time of symbiosis anyone who was nearby would be protected from the resulting influx of radiation. If such a compound could be created, and it is absurd to think that it cannot, then the birthing problem would be solved, and the major impetus for war between us and the humans eliminated.”

Anton lowered his head. Those nearest pressed forward around the gazebo, straining to hear his words.

“We have three options,” Anton said. “Will we act as Maya did? Will we jealously hide away this information? Or will we use the knowledge as a weapon, endangering all life on this planet?” He looked pointedly at Saint and his team, way back at the edge of the crowd. “Or will we do everything possible to share this information with the humans, starting with Chicago?”

Saint saw his gaze and was staring right back and he saw in Saint's eyes complete understanding of what he wanted. It was a sign of his strength that he could be so perceptive with all that had been revealed today. The full explanation of the Touch and how it really worked. What his mother had done. What his family had helped to uncover. Anton was immensely pleased when Saint nodded almost imperceptibly to his unspoken question.

Anton turned back to the rest of them. “What Maya did, she did out of kindness and ignorance. She thought she was protecting you and everything else on Earth. And she never considered how her discovery could be used to solve the birthing problem, giving us and the humans a common avenue for peace. No matter what you thought of her, or how you ignored her, or how you treated her family, she worked only for you.”

Many of them nodded. They understood now. They had come here to see conflict in others, but instead he had shown them the conflict within themselves. Scythe looked impressed, in an amused sort of way. Kobi was smiling at him warmly, clearly pleased with herself for helping him put all this together. Even Father Graine was looking at him with an odd expression of frustrated respect. Anton had lifted Maya up for all to see, showed them what she'd done, and then why she had done it. They might have respected her before, but now they loved her.

“But not you!” Anton shouted into their thoughts, dissipating them quickly. “You have no excuse to act as Maya did. You are not ignorant. And if you choose to hide this knowledge from the humans, then you are not kind. So your choices are only two. Weapons or peace? How many have suffered since the Atomic War? You have seen today an example of how this war can destroy a family, and you've seen how that destruction then propagates further upon an entire society. Look how this war ultimately kept Maya from sharing her work with you! So what will you do? Will you continue down that path, spiraling ever further into complete destruction? Or will you choose hope, take the risks that go along with that hope, and be the side that first moves to bring us all a better life?”

And as he stepped down from the gazebo, they made room for him, as though there were some kind of force surrounding him that pushed them out of the way.

Anton made directly for Maya and her children. They were standing around her, holding one another. Even Benji had his arms wrapped around the rest of his family, and his eyes were puffy from crying. Anton stood there for a moment, just looking at them. They were a family now, more than they had been for a very long time, perhaps more than they had *ever* been. He wanted desperately to go to them, for one of them to turn away from the others and beckon him into their circle.

“Anton,” Kobi said, coming up and laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Rada Kobi,” he said quietly, still looking at Maya's family. For some reason he didn't want to talk to anyone. His mouth was dry from speaking so long and so loudly. But he was also completely emotionally drained. “Thank you for getting so many people here.”

“I had barely anything to do with it,” Kobi said with a wave of her hand. “They came here for you. No matter what they believed, they came here for you.”

Anton turned to look at her, annoyed that she could say something so false after he had just told so much truth. “No, they came here because deep down they want the same thing I want. They just

needed someone help them get past all the baggage both sides have been carrying around.”

“Yes, well, I think we've still got work to do to keep that baggage from piling up.”

Anton took in her expression for the first time and noticed how tight it was. She looked as though she was about to break down completely. He reached up to where her hand still rested on his shoulder and took it in his.

“Saint's team is going to have to leave soon,” she said, smiling gratefully. “He stalled this morning so that they'd have an excuse to come here. But someone is going to make an effort to get them moving, if he isn't already doing so.”

Anton shook his head. “Scythe.”

“You thought perhaps that his mind too would be changed by your words?”

“I had hoped it might. It doesn't matter. I'm not going to stop them from going.”

She looked at him disbelievingly. “You're not?”

“Of course not. I need them to take me with so I can tell the humans what we've discovered.”

“So this whole speech today was just a show? You were going to tell the humans no matter what?”

“Yes I was, but the speech wasn't a show,” Anton said. “Nothing I told the humans would amount to anything without the support of the enclave.”

“It would be better if you stopped them and went alone,” Kobi said. “But I don't think that is a possibility. One way or another, Saint and his team are going to arrive in Chicago. No matter what their intentions, they will almost certainly die, but at least with you they'll have a chance. So that makes what I need to do very clear.”

“What's that?”

“If one of the Rada requests a meeting, the other two must comply,” she said. “Scythe is going to tell Saint to leave. If I call a meeting, he can't do that. But I have to do it right here, right now.”

“Do it,” he said.

She nodded and left. Anton knew that, despite what she'd said, Kobi wanted to do whatever it was going to take to make peace with the humans. She would bargain, cajole, and threaten. And he admired all these things about her, but he needed something different, and he couldn't rely on her to get it for him. That meant that wherever the Rada was going to be getting together, he had to be there as well.

“If you're looking for the others, they're up on the gazebo.”

Anton turned towards the voice. “Zak,” he said.

“And it looks like they're not bothering with the small talk,” Zak smiled. “You better hurry.”

“You helped get people here too, didn't you?” Anton asked. “The soldiers and the women were one thing, but all the others? That had to be you.”

Zak's smile widened, but all he said was, “Go.” And then he too turned and walked away. Anton wanted to call after him, to say goodbye. But there was no time.

He hurried towards the gazebo, arriving just as the three Rada were splitting up. Scythe and Father Graine were already headed off in opposite directions, but Kobi stopped to tell him that they were going to meet in the rectory in an hour and that Kobi had insisted that both Saint and Anton be there.

“One hour from now,” Kobi said. “You're going to have your chance to change things.”

* * *

Unsure of where else to go before going to the rectory, Anton walked back to the house. Catalina was waiting for him there, sitting on a couch when he walked in the door.

“I let myself in. I hope you don't mind.”

“Did my conclusions today surprise you?”

"I just can't believe that I didn't figure it all out myself," she said shaking her head. "Everything together, bound by a new simple organism working in symbiosis."

"It's not exactly a common knowledge concept."

"It's amazing, you know? To think that nearly all life that now exists on this planet makes use of these organisms." She took a deep breath. "None of us should get too excited yet. This is all just theory."

Anton nodded. "I agree. But if it's true..."

"If it's true then you've managed to remove obstruction number one," she sighed. "Then you'll only have a thousand more to go."

"You don't know how these things work, Catalina. It's like dominoes. You'll be amazed to see how quickly all the rest fall if the first is toppled."

"I guess we'll see," she replied.

Anton smiled and sat next to her. He put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. She resisted at first, instinctual behavior from growing up a Trudeau, but then she melted against him. Anton couldn't remember anyone ever touching him like this. It was something that men his age were supposed to do with young women like Catalina. But he'd never had time during his adolescence to discover love. That's probably why he felt so awkward now, despite the fact that Catalina was beautiful.

He pulled away from the embrace, looking her in the eye. "I am going to need your help."

"More help? What is left to do?"

"I need proof in the next hour that I'm right. I need evidence that the symbiotic organism exists."

"In an *hour*?" she gasped. "I doubt that's even possible. Even if it was, Mother has all the equipment I'd need locked up in her lab."

"So go and ask her to open it. And see if you can get her to help you."

"Right," Catalina said sarcastically. "I'll just go to her now that she's found out that all of us told you the things you needed to reveal the secrets she was trying to keep, and I'll ask her to do me a favor. Now that you've been embarrassed in front of the entire enclave, I'd like to dig into the source of that embarrassment. Oh, and won't you help me?"

"Just do it," Anton said. "If she resists, tell her that your brother's life might depend on whether you can get me that evidence."

Catalina sighed. "You're a manipulative son of a bitch, but you're smart. She'll do it for Saint. All the more so after this morning." She gave him a hard look. "You know, she might already know all of this. Did you consider that? And if it means keeping one of us safe, she'd tell you what you want to know herself."

"If that's true, then ask her to meet me in the rectory in half an hour. If not, then I need both of you to get to work on that evidence immediately."

Catalina nodded. Then she reached forward and wrapped her arms around his neck. She kissed him lightly on the lips. Not a kiss of passion, but of love nonetheless. It was a kiss of gratitude. So he kissed her back, also lightly, because he was thankful to her as well. He thought of Maya, trying to decide what their relationship was. She wasn't a second mother. More like an equal. A colleague. A friend, if she would have him. An older friend with a beautiful daughter.

And with his lips pressed gently against Catalina's, he realized that for the first time since his father had been killed, he had a personal reason beyond redemption to complete his tasks and attain his goals. If he could end the war, then perhaps he could bring Catalina to Chicago and start a life there.

If he could end the war. To do that, he'd have to get moving to the rectory.

Chapter 15:

I have arrived in Chicago. They have made great progress here. While we wait for the phage to be produced, they have the capacity to unleash hell on the anomalies here. In the meantime, per your instructions, I will keep watch to make sure that all goes as it should.

*SAT/COM Transmission <Chicago 1.1.0021 to NYC 1.1.0001>
UN Agent Douglas Falasco to Dir. Juan Nortooga
7.29.2169*

Forty-five minutes or so later, the door to Father Graine's personal office opened and Deacon Hayden showed the city-dweller in. Father Graine stood from his chair, but before he could extend his hand in welcome, the city-dweller genuflected and then knelt before him. It was an act of respect with which any Catholic parishioner would be familiar. With all the time the visitor had spent in the enclave and his absence from mass, Father Graine had assumed that he wasn't a believer. And yet here he was, on his knees with his head lowered. So Father Graine reached out with his right hand and placed his palm on the city-dweller's crown. "In the name of the Almighty, I welcome you and I bless you, my child."

"Forgive me Father," the city-dweller said. "For I have sinned."

"How long has it been since your last confession, my son?"

"It has been two years, Father." He looked up. "My adopted parents both practiced the Catholic religion. When my father died my mother lost the faith and we stopped going to mass."

"I didn't realize you were of the flock."

"I was even baptized as an infant. Chicago is very similar to Rownosci with regard to the Church. Everyone goes, even those of other faiths, because the Church is the only religion there that has kept up their houses of worship." He stood and genuflected again. "I'm sorry that I wasn't able to meet you sooner, and under better circumstances."

Father Graine looked him over. "I would have thought that a Catholic would have made an effort to attend mass while he was here."

"While I have a profound respect for you and your faith, Father, I don't know that I can call myself a Catholic. But even if I could, I wouldn't have wanted to disturb the liturgy with my presence."

"Perhaps your father's death caused you to lose your way, as well. If you were still practicing, you would know that the word of God is everywhere, not just in his church."

"Yes, I see it everywhere. And my faith was not permanently shaken by the tragedy I endured. That is why I genuflected and knelt before you. Not as an empty sign of ritual, but a true show of respect."

"I believe you," Father Graine said, and he meant it. "My blessing you was also not an empty ritual, my son."

"Then I pray that God listened to the blessing as well. There are a great many things for which I could make use of divine inspiration."

"Why don't you sit down so we can discuss these things and attain for you the proper inspiration?" Father Graine returned to the plush chair behind his desk, while the city-dweller to the seat he'd been offered. "Your spoke very eloquently today, my son. Though I think that your timing could have been less disruptive."

The city-dweller shrugged. "The time for action was dictated by others, not by me."

"You're trying to keep the Straznik team from journeying to Chicago."

"To assassinate an unarmed human being, yes. I appreciate your allowing Saint to join us today."

Father Graine opened his arms wide, taking in the office. “All are welcome here,” he said. “The house of the Lord is open to all that would visit it.” He smiled. “Do you think he’ll want to be here with you, though? You caused his family a great deal of embarrassment today.”

“It’s not something I wished for, but the story needed to be told.”

“And what will you do now that you’ve told it? You’ve offered up a glimmer of hope to us. What part will you play now?”

“Any part I can, Father. I intend to take an active role in opening the humans’ minds. I think my unique situation offers the best chance to get them to listen.”

Father Graine smiled. “When this is all over, I think that perhaps you should look into joining the clergy.”

“Really?” the city-dweller laughed. “I was under the impression that you thought I was a great Satan.”

“Part of me still does, but I am less sure of it today than I was yesterday. But if you do the good works you describe, how could I still think you the devil? There are many saints in our faith that were once heretics. Why shouldn’t you do as well as them?”

The city-dweller smiled sadly. “If we can get to the point where the Vatican admits anomalies as saints, then my work will be done.”

“Did your adopted parents tell you about your *real* parents?”

“Only that they died in an accident.” The city-dweller coughed to clear his throat. “But it’s the future I’m interested in, Father Graine. Not the past.”

“Do you think that the future doesn’t interest me as well?”

“The future of your parish does, I’m sure. And maybe your concerns are broad enough to encompass the entire enclave, or even those with the Touch around the world. But my interest is with all life, including the humans.”

“Then our interest is mutual, Anton Donovan,” Father Graine smiled. “I am a shepherd of the Lord. It is my duty to look after all of his creations, not just those I find convenient.”

The door opened to reveal Deacon Hayden again. This time he ushered in Kobi and Scythe. Kobi saw the city-dweller sitting in front of the desk and a look of concern played across her face.

“All is well, Kobi,” Father Graine smirked. “The city-dweller did not burst into flames upon entering the rectory and I have thus far refrained from declaring him a witch and setting an inquisition upon him.”

“I’m just surprised to see you both looking so pleased with yourselves,” Kobi said.

“Looks of friendship, I hope,” the city-dweller said. “And the understanding that we are not enemies. None of us are.”

“How could I have laid my hands upon an enemy and not struck in the name of God?” Father Graine said, still grinning. Saint walked in then, with a magnified version of the expression Kobi had had on his face. “Ah, Cosaint. Please have a seat so that we can begin.”

But before Kobi could say anything else, the city-dweller spoke. “I hope you won’t mind waiting just a while longer, because I invited someone else as well. She should be here shortly, and it’s important that we have her input.”

Scythe stepped forward, looking darkly at both the city-dweller and Saint in turn. “We don’t have time to wait, Anton.”

“We can spare a few moments,” Father Graine said. Scythe looked angry but did not argue.

Catalina found her mother in her lab, as she knew she would. It was where Mother went whenever life outside of the hospital became uncomfortable. Catalina understood the feeling. Their labs were their domain. They controlled everything that happened within these rooms. It offered the

scientists a way to take control over some aspect of their lives.

But what was odd was how relaxed her mother looked. Her shoulders sloped downward in an ease that Catalina was sure she'd never seen before. And when she turned to see who had entered the lab, Catalina was shocked to see that her face was no longer wearing its perpetual grimace. She wasn't smiling, but the lack of a frown made it seem as though she was. You understand that Anton gave you a gift today, don't you? He didn't tell your secret to hurt you. He did it to help you, and everyone else too. And by explaining why you kept it, he made it so that the enclave wouldn't hate you for it. You understand that, and Anton knew that you would. That's why he sent me here to get you, because he knew that you would help if you could.

"Are you going to stand there staring at me," her mother said. "Or are you going to tell me what you're doing here?"

"Anton needs your help."

"Yes, I know. I'm putting together what I have for him right now."

Catalina relayed Anton's request, including the hope that she already knew about these symbiotic organisms. As she did so, her mother continued to organize several folders and printouts. When they were both done, she smiled and said that she was going to go see Anton.

"But," Catalina gasped. "Does that mean Anton was right? Do you already have proof of the organisms?"

"Of course," Mother replied. "I buried everyone else's heads in the sand, not my own."

"And you're going to give it to Anton?"

Her mother shrugged. "If he thinks it will help, then yes."

"After all this time, after all of my inquiries, you're just going to hand it over to him?"

"I should have given it to you too. I'm sorry. I just didn't realize that all this could be anything but a danger." She smiled. "Besides, it's not as if it kept you from doing your own research."

"How did you know?"

"Because you're terrible at hiding what you do," Mother laughed. "I'm the lead scientist in Rownosci. I have access to everything being done and logged by all the other scientists. From what you logged, it was easy to tell what you were trying to figure out."

As they talked they had walked out of the lab and onto the path. It suddenly seemed to occur to her mother that she didn't know where to go to meet Anton. She turned and asked Catalina.

"He's with the other Rada in the rectory."

Her mother sighed. "The rectory. He wants me to bring knowledge to a place that celebrates ignorance."

"We used to go to church every Sunday."

"That was your father's doing. I only went along with it to avoid a fight."

"For all the good that did."

Her mother sighed again. "I tried to protect you," she said quietly. "All of you. I tried to make up for forcing your father into your lives."

"What he did wasn't your fault."

"Of course it was. It was my fault for marrying him in the first place."

"If you think that any of us blame you for that, then you're a fool," Catalina said. "The crime you committed wasn't marrying father. We wouldn't have been born if you hadn't. Your only transgression was substituting his withdrawal with your own once he had died. How could you have done that? You knew how much it hurt to have him so disinterested in us. Why would you punish us the same way?"

"I thought that I was poison," her mother whispered. "I thought that if I stayed as far from you as possible, you would be better off."

"How could you think that?" Catalina cried out angrily. "We all wanted your approval so desperately! Surely you saw that in me. And it is even more pronounced in Bryce! How could you not

see the pain you caused us?”

“I know,” her mother said, hanging her head. “I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.”

“There you go again! Don’t you understand what Anton did for us? It’s the same as what he did for you today. He showed us that he understood what you had done, but then he made it clear to all of us *why* you had done it! He healed us, so that you don’t have to be sorry anymore. You did something wrong, but he’s taken away its effects. And he could only do that if he loved us. We have someone now. Not a father, but a friend in all the ways a father should be. And that means for you too! Do you understand? Anton *loves* you as if we had been his family all along!”

The tears flowed strongly now down her mother’s face. “My zbawca,” she said crying. “He has saved my entire family.”

Catalina put her arms around Mother’s neck and pulled her close, not unlike Anton had done back at his house. They hadn’t embraced one another like this for as long as she could remember, but there was none of the awkwardness she had felt with Anton. They were made to hold each other. That’s what true families do.

“Mother,” she said quietly. “May I offer you a suggestion?”

“What is it?”

“When you go to the rectory, try not to refer to Anton as a savior in front of Father Graine. Even in Polish. I don’t think he’d appreciate it.”

Her mother laughed weakly. “But he is, isn’t he? He’s more like Christ than Father Graine could ever hope to be.”

“Yes,” Catalina said. “But let’s hope that he doesn’t have to die for us as Christ did, shall we?”

Back in the Trudeau house, Benji and Bryce sat at the kitchen table drinking juice. They didn’t say anything for a long time, but they both knew the other was waiting for Mother to get home, and hopefully for Anton to follow her. Then one of the other children came by to tell them that there was a meeting between the Rada, the city-dweller, their mother and Saint going on in the rectory. When he had gone, Benji and Bryce stared at one another.

“What do you think they’re meeting about?” Benji asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? Anton is trying to keep the Straznik from going to Chicago.”

“No he isn’t.”

“Of course he is.”

“Then why didn’t he say so in the plaza?” Benji shook his head. “No. They’re going. Anton just wants to go with them.”

Bryce studied his brother thoughtfully. It was absurd to think that Benji, so hateful and devious for so long, could possibly have such insight into someone as good as Anton. But the more he thought about it, he was sure that his brother was correct. “Do you think they’ll let him go with?”

“What can they do to stop him?”

“Scythe won’t like it.”

Benji smiled. “No. That’s why he’ll have to go with as well.”

They all looked up when Maya and Catalina came walking through Father Graine’s door. Anton felt relief wash over him, sure that Maya wouldn’t have shown up if she hadn’t had what he needed. And looking past the apprehension in her eyes and the tension in her face, he could see that it was better than he’d dared to hope for. She had it all and she was going to give it to him.

Her eyes darted around the room, taking in everyone there. She bit her lower lip slightly and

Anton was reminded of how she had reacted at his house. Don't run, he thought desperately. But she wouldn't. Because no matter how uncomfortable this situation was, she had been freed of all the things she had blamed herself for all these many years. He saw in the way she carried herself that a weight had been lifted from her, such a weight that it had set her free. So even though this room was probably the last place she would have chosen to bring Anton what he'd asked for, she would do it anyway.

Maya stood there waiting politely, with Catalina just behind her. Other than Anton, they probably had less status than anyone else in the room, so they showed deference. Father Graine was equally polite, even though he must have been able to read Maya's face every bit as well as Anton, and he asked her if they would take a seat. Maya sat next to Anton, shifting the chair so that it was even closer. Catalina remained standing behind them. Anton wondered what she was thinking after their shared embrace, but before he could turn to look at her, Scythe cleared his throat loudly.

"Well, hopefully that's everyone," he said, looking annoyed. "Although maybe now someone can explain to me why we all had to rush to this meeting this morning."

"I think you already know the answer to that," Kobi said sharply.

"I am still the military commander of the enclave, Kobi, and it is my prerogative to--"

"Send my son or anyone else on a military mission to Chicago without the approval of the other Rada?" Maya spoke up. "No it isn't. And don't look at me like that either. You might think that being a Rada places you above the questioning of the common citizen, but it doesn't. It never has."

Scythe smiled wickedly. "The Rada have already met on this matter. The vote was two to one in favor of letting the mission continue."

"That's why I called this meeting," Anton said. "I think that after what I revealed this morning, perhaps the vote should be taken again. Whether or not to let Saint's team assassinate the Mayor of Chicago."

"Excuse me, Anton, but what is it exactly that you revealed to us?" Scythe chuckled. "All I heard were theories. Interesting theories. And, hell, maybe they're true, but they're still just *theories*."

"That is why I asked Maya to join us," Anton said. "Unless I'm mistaken, she has all the proof you'll need. Between that and what I'm going to assume is a rather radical shift in public support for your war as of today, I think the Rada will have no choice but to suspend any aggressive combat actions until we try to inform the humans of what we've discovered."

Scythe took a deep breath, clearly summoning as much patience as he could. "Thank you, Anton, for everything you've done and all that you're trying to do. But you're far too naive. If this information turns out to be true and you take it to the humans, they will use it to create the very weapon you described this morning. They'll use it to attack us and it will literally destroy all the life on this planet. They control so much more of the population. Not all the enclaves are like Rownosci. Most of them don't have our level of sophistication and technology. Many of them are nothing more than rundown little villages, barely eeking out an existence in this wasteland. Relatively speaking, the humans have *everything*. And you want to hand them a weapon a thousand times more powerful than the nuclear bomb?"

"You overestimate them," Anton insisted. "They are not one. Just like the enclaves vary, so do the human cities. And the only reason that this has gone as far as it has is because neither side talks to the other."

"Anton, we've *tried*," Father Graine said. "Scythe has sent emissaries that haven't returned. Some of our people have tried to contact family members, never to make it back here. Early on, my predecessor sent some of the clergy to try and reason with the humans, and they killed them too. The clergy, Anton."

"I'm not asking you to do anything that I'm not prepared to do myself. That's one of the other reasons I wanted this meeting to take place. Not because I want Saint to stay at home. I want him to take me with." He paused to look at each of the Rada in turn. Kobi approved, of course, and Father Graine displayed a look that Anton was sure meant that he could win his support with the right

argument. But Scythe just stared at him with an odd look upon his face, as though he was trying to figure out what Anton was really trying to accomplish. “When I was a CSS commander, I had a very close friend on my squad. I think that if I can reach him, he’ll get me to the people I need to speak with.”

“That is besides the point,” Scythe said, shaking his head. “If you tag along with Saint’s team, you’ll only increase the likelihood that they’ll be caught. You might have a great deal to offer in terms of knowledge once you’re inside the city, but how much experience do you have scaling Chicago’s walls?”

“You see?” Father Graine said sadly. “As well-intentioned as you might be, we only lose by letting you go. I wish that there was another way, but I cannot see one. I’m no longer so sure that this assassination plan is the best course of action, but without any better to propose, what can I say? I would support your going in an instant if it didn’t put Maya’s son and his team in more danger.”

“And what if I told you I had a way to make it so that Saint’s team was a hundred times more likely to safely get past the Chicago walls with me than without me?”

“Then I’d wonder why you hadn’t told this way to me already,” Scythe growled.

Anton stood up and reached into his pocket, pulling out something wide and thin and metallic. “This disc is used by soldiers that leave Chicago and need to return through one of the doors along the walls. Doors that are virtually unguarded.”

All of them stared at him for several moments.

“You can’t know that your disc will still work,” Scythe said, but everyone could tell that it was a weak argument.

“I know you Scythe,” Anton began.

“Do you? I think that if you knew who I was, you would stop treating me like your enemy.”

“But I do know you. And I *do* know that you’re not my enemy. And I know that no matter how much personal pride you have, you’re not going to let any of your men and women take an unnecessary risk. And perhaps after you see all Maya has and after you hear all that I wish to attempt, perhaps you will decide that the risk still isn’t worth taking. But it’s important that you know everything before making a decision.”

Scythe regarded him thoughtfully. “I would never turn away useful intelligence,” he said slowly. “I don’t think you have enough to convince us, but—“

“But at least you’ll listen?”

“Of course he’ll listen,” Father Graine said. “We all will.”

“And then we will vote again,” Kobi agreed.

“You think you’re going to get a vote too, don’t you,” Scythe said to Anton warily.

“Absolutely not,” Anton shook his head. “You three are the authority here, not me. I’m a visitor. I don’t want to disrupt your laws or your leadership. I want to be one of you.”

“Be one of us?” Father Graine asked. “As a resident anomaly?”

“As a person. As a human, as we surely all are. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? The quest for admittance into humanity?”

“You seem very sure of yourself,” Father Graine said. “Perhaps you better tell us everything.”

Anton nodded. “First I’ll tell you what I know. Then I’ll tell you what I suspect. Yesterday I spoke at great length with Saint’s team.”

“I knew it!” Scythe erupted. He stood and pointed a finger at Saint, who somehow managed to stare straight back at him. “You knew that you were not to involve this city-dweller in our affairs!”

“Did you explicitly instruct anyone not to let Anton speak with their teams?” Kobi asked. “If not, what possible reason do you have to be so angry?”

“No, he’s right,” Anton interrupted. “I knew that what we were doing wouldn’t be appreciated. So did Saint. But we did it anyway, because I wanted to get a sense of their disposition on the task that had been assigned to them. And I wanted to know if peace was something palatable to your soldiers as

well.”

“You deliberately attempted to corrupt my soldiers,” Scythe said out angrily.

“All I did was answer their questions as honestly as I could and ask them a few of my own,” Anton replied. “I notice that you don’t seem all that interested in what they had to say, probably because you’re already aware that they do not approve of your plans. But I’ll tell you what they said. They told me that if they were sent on their mission, they wouldn’t comply with your orders. They said that they would rather choose desertion over murder. And they said that their reason for doing so wasn’t anything that I had said or done, but instead it was because of all the values that *you* had instilled in them. They see no honor in this mission. And they think that you are purposefully trying to provoke more violence.”

“Oh come on,” Scythe said. He sounded frustrated, but the look on his face was all suspicion. “That isn’t what we’re trying to do.”

“Oh no?” Anton said, doing his best to keep an even tone in his voice. This wasn’t the time for frustration. “What strategic value is there in assassinating the political leader of one human city? My uncle is many things, but he most certainly is *not* a great military mind. As smart as you are, I’m sure you know that killing him will change absolutely nothing from a strategic standpoint for either side. Instead, its only effect will be to enrage the human population. Whoever replaces my uncle will have the support of the population to carry out full scale retribution. That will mean marching on Rownosci. That’s why you’ve allowed the walls to be built around the enclave even though everyone knows you want to occupy Chicago. It’s why you haven’t opposed all of the growth here, the science that’s been developed to propel Rownosci to a level of technology far beyond what it was. You have been planning this for some time. You *want* the humans to send their soldiers here, because they have no idea of your level of sophistication. It’s an ambush, plain and simple. You expect them to throw everything they have at you out of anger, and they will. And you know that if you can win that one decisive battle, there will be absolutely nothing left to protect Chicago.”

Scythe stared at him coldly, saying nothing.

“Even supposing that was true,” Father Graine said. “This war has to come to a conclusion sooner or later. If this offers us a strategic advantage for all the reasons you just mentioned, we would be fools not to act.”

“That reasoning has been used by warring parties for hundreds of years,” Anton said. “But look at the company you keep with that kind of thinking. It was used by the Nazis to preemptively attack Russia. It was used when the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on the Japanese. It was used by several aggressor nations in the Middle East to explain why they had to attack first. Do you see what these all have in common? They were horrible acts.” Anton shook his head. “I’m surprised that I have to explain all this to a man of the cloth.”

“Christianity has long recognized that there are times when war is unavoidable.”

“The meek will inherit the Earth, and they will enjoy great peace.”

“Anyone can quote scripture,” Father Graine said. “Including Satan.”

“So I am Satan again,” Anton said. “Except that you know it isn’t true. And the humans are not my imps. They saw a problem and they took action to address it.”

“By killing babies!” Scythe exclaimed.

“They were misguided in their approach, but so are you. They are putting others to death in order to solve their problem. You are going to do the same to solve yours. Can’t you see the correlation?”

“We are responding to violence with violence,” Scythe bit out. “We are not the aggressors here.”

“But to the humans you are,” Anton said. “From their standpoint, the first act of this war was the first woman who died giving birth to an anomaly. That there was no intention to harm by the child is irrelevant. The first danger was to them, not to you.”

"You're playing games with us," Scythe said. "You can't believe that they are acting justly."

"Of course not. I see how foolish their actions are. But I see how foolish yours are too." He turned to Father Graine. "How many of those saints you mentioned attained sainthood through violence? There are a few, but most were martyrs, were they not? Men and women who allowed their lives to end in defense of their faith. Part of that faith is the belief in peace. How can you reconcile your position as a priest with murder?"

Now it was Father Graine's turn to stare at him silently.

"Bottom line," Scythe said quickly. "What are your chances if we let you attempt what you're proposing?"

"It's impossible to say," Anton replied honestly. "There are too many factors that weigh heavily into the equation. Getting inside the walls will be the easy part. After we're in I'll need to get in touch with several people. My contact in the CSS for starters. And probably my mother, as well, as she has some standing among the people there. And eventually my uncle, the mayor, will need to be convinced to open his doors to this information and your people. The chances of completing all of that successfully aren't great, but they are far greater if I don't have to worry about a Straznik team performing an execution on the one man of power in Chicago with whom I have a personal relationship."

"Without any guarantee of success, how can we risk giving the humans such a weapon?" Scythe said.

Maya cleared her throat and they all looked at her. "That question is irrelevant," she said quietly.

Scythe barked out laughing. "Irrelevant? The destruction of all life on the planet? I thought you were our best scientist."

"I am, but I'm only one person. The humans will have entire teams of geneticists working on the same genes that I've analyzed. They'll figure out what I've discovered before too long." Maya looked at Anton. "You're right. We have to tell them."

"Wait," Scythe said. "Why?"

"Because if they discover the truth on their own, they absolutely *will* use it to make the weapon we're all afraid of," Maya said.

"But that doesn't make sense," Father Graine. "If they figure it out, they would know that unleashing such a terrible weapon would be suicide. They'll know that the entire ecosystem would collapse."

"No they won't," Maya said. "Because they'll think the symbiotic organisms only exist in anomalies."

"Yes," Kobi chimed in, nodding her head. "Why would they bother testing any plants or animals for those same traits? The only reason we found out about the common genes is because we hunt those animals and can tell that they're acting as though they can sense us coming."

"You see?" Anton said, more to Scythe than anyone else. "We *have* to tell them. Because if they find out on their own, they'll kill everything out of ignorance. As long as there is a chance that they could come across this information on their own, we have absolutely no choice but to do everything in our power to educate them fully. The good news is that the thing that makes the humans most afraid of us has been solved. I have no doubt at all that the combination of the fungus mash Maya developed and a slight tweaking in how the Tog operates during human labor will solve the birthing problem."

They were silent for several moments, each of them lost in their own thoughts.

"For the first time," Kobi said, breaking the silence. "We have a legitimate shot at ending this war. And not just here, but throughout Earth. We have the knowledge we need to make a better life for both sides. And we know that any other course of action besides full disclosure risks all life on the planet. Let's vote again now to make this official."

It was over quickly. In the end, they all voted against the assassination and for Anton to attempt to make contact with the humans in Chicago and explain what they had discovered. Even Scythe reluctantly agreed.

"Thank you," Anton said. "I'll want to leave immediately. Today. All that remains is for you to decide if Saint's Straznik team will be allowed to support me."

"Yes they will," Scythe said. "And to make sure you succeed, I will join you."

Anton stared at him, trying to decide whether or not he was planning on making trouble once they were away. He wished that Scythe had the Touch so that he could get a read on his emotions. But what choice did he have? "I'm grateful for your help."

"Like I said, we are not enemies," Scythe said. "Whatever you might think of me, I have the interests of this enclave foremost in my thoughts."

"I hope so," Anton said.

They ended the meeting, with Scythe telling Anton to gather his things from the house and meet them at the gate in half an hour. As he was walking down the halls of the rectory toward the front door, Father Graine caught up to him and pulled his sleeve. "Tell me, Anton, what do you plan to do about the Raiders?"

"One thing at a time, Father," Anton responded. "I fear that they are far more dangerous than any of us suppose. Dealing with them without an alliance with the humans would be disastrous."

"I agree," Father Graine said. "What the humans might threaten through ignorance, the Raiders do out of pure evil. I hope you realize that and communicate it to the humans in Chicago. You must convince them that we are not the plague they fear. The Raiders are."

"It's one of the first things I plan to work on with them," Anton said.

"Good," Father Graine said. He reached out with his hand again and made the sign of the cross over Anton's head. "Go with the blessing and protection of God, my son."

Anton was the last to arrive at the gate. Saint's entire team was there, huddled around Scythe, who was speaking to them animatedly. Anton could tell by the way Saint was looking at the ground that some verbal reprimands had been handed out, but judging by the excited looks on the other's faces it hadn't been too serious a tongue-lashing. Maya and Catalina were standing to the side with Kobi, looking calm but nervous. And there, standing by himself, to his surprise, was Zak.

"So you've done it," he said with a smile. "You've turned even the most hard-edged among us towards peace."

"We'll see," Anton said. "They're at least willing to try."

"Catalina told me what happened in the rectory. Do you have your disc to get back inside the walls?"

"Yes."

"Good." He looked to the sky. The sun was nearing its zenith. "You should get moving then. If you go quickly and don't encounter any problems along the way, you ought to be able to make it there by evening."

Anton nodded. Then he held out his hand in a way eerily similar to the afternoon that he and Zak had first met. But this time his young friend didn't hesitate to reach out and grasp it, gripping it firmly.

Saint walked over to them. "Anton."

Anton released Zak's hand and turned. "Saint," he said quietly. "Before we leave, I want you to make me a promise."

"Oh?"

"I have to accept the possibility that our endeavor today might be a complete failure," Anton

said. "There is a chance that even if we make it past the walls into Chicago, they might not allow me any opportunity to speak. They might shoot at us on sight."

"We'll protect you," Saint said firmly.

"No, you won't. If that happens, I plan on buying your team enough time to escape and then surrendering."

"So that we can regroup and rescue you?"

"No. So that you can leave Chicago and try again with a different plan altogether." Anton looked into Saint's eyes. "If I am captured, they will surely interrogate me. I have no doubt that at some point I will speak with my uncle, at which point I will plead our case to him. Hopefully the next attempt will be received better if that happens."

"And if this goes well?"

"It won't," Anton said. "No matter what, at some point I'm going to have to confront the leadership in Chicago and that isn't going to be pleasant. But it's necessary because that's the only way we can construct a peace treaty between Chicago and Rownosci. Do you understand what I'm saying? I'm going to ask them for the hope you described to me the first night we met. Humans and anomalies, living together without any walls between them. An alliance against the real dangers of the fallout lands."

Saint took a deep breath and Anton saw fierce determination in his eyes. "I understand."

"Do not look ahead, Saint," Anton pressed. "We need to move quickly, which means I need all of your focus on getting us to Chicago safely but with speed."

He stood a little taller. "That will not be a problem."

Maya stepped towards him, handing him several printouts of gene sequences and microscope scans, along with all the other proof she'd brought to the rectory. "Thank you, Anton," she said. "I don't think I've said that to you yet, have I?"

Anton smiled. "I don't believe so, no."

"I should have. I was a fool for pushing you away when you were trying to heal my family."

"Healing your family wasn't my intention," he said. "But it was a wonderful side effect."

"I'm grateful for it anyway." She put a hand on his shoulder, just as he had done that first night in her home. "Promise me you'll be careful. And that you'll return to see me soon." And then she hugged him, holding him tight. "You are one of us. You are my fifth child, my third son."

Anton hugged her back. Then she had let go and Catalina stood before him with tears in her eyes.

"If you get yourself killed, I will hate you for it," she said.

"No you won't. Family tradition would dictate that you would hate yourself."

Her eyes flared in anger. "Do not joke like that! I'm trying to tell you I love you and you're playing games with me!"

Anton took her in his arms and held her as closely as Maya had held him. "I'm not playing games."

They parted and checked their equipment and packs. For the first time since arriving in Rownosci, Anton retrieved his CSS-issued pistol and checked the clip, which was still full. He then pulled out his shoulder holster and placed the pistol in its sheath.

And then they left.

Once they were on their way, Anton turned to Scythe. "I wouldn't presume to command your men," he said. "But perhaps once we're inside of Chicago you'll allow me to offer insight into the layout of the city and the people there."

Scythe smiled, his tattooed face wrinkling. "Of course. I'm not a fool."

“No,” Anton nodded. “I don’t know you well, but I know you are no fool.”

“I can’t believe that you’ve got everyone thinking you’re so smart,” Scythe laughed. “And you still haven’t figured it out.”

Anton stopped. “Figured what out?”

Scythe turned to look at him. “I’m a human. I came to the enclave eighteen years ago...”

Anton just shrugged.

“What is your name?”

“You know my name. Anton Donovan.”

“Your full name,” Scythe said. “I’ve heard it. I knew it long before I sent Zak to find you and bring you out of Chicago.”

Anton’s mind reeled. He wondered if Scythe were telling the truth. Had Zak really been there to extricate him from his home to the enclave? Why would he want Anton out of the city so badly? But then he decided that it must be true. What reason did Scythe have to lie to him now?

“Your full name?” Scythe repeated.

“Anton Church Donovan.”

Scythe stepped towards him. “My name is Silas Church,” he said. “I’m your brother.”

And with that, they shared each other’s stories as they continued on to Chicago.

Chapter 16:

By the time this letter reaches you, you will probably already have heard about an attempt some of my people have made to contact the leadership of Chicago. Depending on how successful they were, one of many stories may have been constructed to explain what we have done or tried to do. And while your office has made your position on churches inside anomaly enclaves very clear, I hope you will read this description so that you will have an accurate historical account of what occurred.

Our researchers have discovered something amazing in the fallout lands. A common gene sequence carried by every living mutated plant and animal on Earth results in a relationship between those beings and a single-celled organism. That organism is responsible both for the gift of the Touch and the detrimental health effects on human mothers who bear anomaly children. We have devised a possible solution to the latter problem and are attempting to hand over the knowledge of that solution to the humans in Chicago.

The problem is that this knowledge might also be used to construct a biological weapon capable of wiping out not only the lives of every anomaly on the planet, but also every other mutated form of life that carries the same genetic sequence. The scientists in my enclave of Rownosci tell me that will account for nearly ninety percent of all life on Earth. I am sure I do not have to tell you that releasing such a weapon will guarantee the destruction of not only mutated life, but all other life as well, as the Earth's ecosystem would crumble completely. I know that there is much uncertainty in these times of trial and tribulation, but I am begging you as officers of the Almighty God to do whatever you can to keep anyone from using this weapon and killing us all. The Vatican immediately condemned the use of the nuclear weapons that created all this chaos so long ago. I trust that you will do the same with this new potential weapon, which is infinitely more evil.

Letter from Father Thomas Graine to the Office of the Vatican
7.29.2169

They arrived at Chicago's walls shortly after dusk, when it was dark enough to provide some cover. Along the way, Scythe had given Anton a set of dark black Straznik robes. He wore them now, as they all did, and they provided excellent camouflage. Moving silently but quickly, they crept up to the door from which Anton had emerged only a week before. He slipped the disc the guardsmen had given him that day into the slot and with a soft metallic click the door unlocked. He led them all through and stayed off to one side as they incapacitated the two guards, knocking them unconscious with relatively little noise.

"Where are we going?" Scythe whispered.

Anton had thought long and hard about where to go first once they had arrived. Instinct compelled him to go to his mother, but that was silly. The high-rise was guarded well. Besides, what could she do for him now? "There is a CSS stationhouse on the other side of the river," Anton said instead. "If I can log into the city's network, I should be able to manufacture a distraction to make it easier for us to get into City Hall."

"The other side of the river?" Saint repeated, coming to join them. "Isn't that the heart of the city?"

"Yes," Anton whispered.

"Won't we be spotted?"

"Not if we stick to the side streets and stay off the roads," Anton answered. "It's mostly residential neighborhoods on the way. If we travel through the lots and yards instead of the walkways, we should be able to keep out of sight."

He led them in the direction of the stationhouse.

"How do people live like this?" Saint whispered as they snuck along. The buildings on either

side of them were filthy and in disrepair compared to those in Rownosci. “Doesn’t the leadership here care about their people?”

“The damage was far greater here than where you set up your city,” Anton explained. “It may not look like it, but my uncle actually did a great deal to improve the conditions. It’s more difficult with so many more people.”

“Nonsense,” Scythe said darkly. “There’s a reason why the areas surrounding the affluent neighborhoods are so better maintained. The mayor does only enough to stave off rebellion.”

They crossed the river over an unstable-looking bridge that was obligingly empty of pedestrians and vehicles.

“There,” Anton said as he pointed.

They all stopped and stared at the small, non-descript building. It was nearly entirely dark, indicating that no one was likely inside. Anton continued to look at it, thinking back to last week, when he had first entered the building to take command of his CSS squad.

“Anton,” Saint whispered quietly.

“I know,” he answered. Then he turned to them, pointing to some nearby bushes. “All of you stay here. It’ll be easier for one to sneak in than twenty.” He looked to Scythe for confirmation.

“Be quick,” Scythe nodded. “If you don’t come out in fifteen minutes, we’ll be coming in after you.”

Anton turned and approached the building, doing his best to keep out of the streetlamps while making for the door as directly as possible. Part of him was surprised when he was able to key his old code into the door lock and enter without being cut down in a flurry of gunfire from some unseen guard. The squad room was dark, but still he kept low as he made his way past the rows of chairs and desks to his old office in the back. He turned the handle carefully. It was unlocked. He stepped through the door, turning to shut it behind him.

“I knew you’d come here,” came a soft, familiar voice from behind.

His heart leaped in his throat, but old instincts took over to keep him from jumping. “You didn’t shoot,” Anton said. He turned around, so that he could look Caleb in the eye. “And if you knew I’d be here, where is the rest of the team?”

“Not far,” Caleb said solemnly. He pulled out a wicked looking pistol, a ten-millimeter by the look of it, but this one had an extended clip. “I hope you won’t make me use this.”

“I won’t run,” Anton said.

“You shouldn’t have used the return disc. I had the security system alert me once you had.”

They both stood there, staring at one another for some time. The look Caleb had on his face was stony and blank. Anton could only guess as to what his old lieutenant was thinking. Finally, he sat down behind the desk, taking care to keep the pistol trained the entire time. With his other hand, he pointed at the only other chair in the room.

“Sit.”

Anton did as he was instructed. “What are you planning on doing with me?”

“That depends,” Caleb answered. “I want to know why you’ve come back.”

“You mean you want to know if the traitor anomaly has come back to attack the city that bore him?”

“Are you?”

“No,” Anton replied. He pointed to his pack. “I can show you.”

Caleb seemed to consider whether he was trying to pull some kind of trick, or a weapon, but nodded.

So Anton retrieved all the printouts and scans that Maya had given him. Caleb was smart, so it didn’t take long for him to grasp the evidence. Still he was suspicious. He made Anton prove several times first that he was an anomaly and that he didn’t have any other plans or weapons in his pack. Then he made Anton tell him who he’d brought with him through the walls. Finally, he sighed and put down

his weapon.

"I'm trusting you here, Anton. You were the only person that I looked up to in the academy. I don't know if you even remember it, but you kept a bunch of bullies from picking on me on our first day. I've never known you to do anything that wasn't good and right."

"You're going to help me?" Anton asked, not daring to hope.

Caleb sighed. "Yes."

And then Anton told him what he'd planned. Caleb's squad would pretend to have captured Anton, Scythe, Saint and Bethany. "Anything less and they wouldn't believe that it was everyone," Caleb agreed. Then the squad would take them to directly to City Hall on the pretense that the mayor would want to interrogate the prisoners immediately. Once inside the mayor's chambers they would incapacitate any guards and force Anton's uncle to listen to what he had to say.

"Are you sure the team won't turn on us?" Anton asked.

"Are you kidding? They've been waiting for you this entire time, sure that you had good reason to do what you did." Caleb smiled. "Your mother has been absolutely raising hell since you left."

"I bet."

"We thought the mayor was going to have her locked up."

"What?" Anton asked, startled. "Why?"

"She used what you did to whip up support for the anomalies among the people," Caleb said. "She's got nearly half the people on your side now. They remember who you were and what you were like when they knew you as Anton the CSS officer. The fact that you were an anomaly that entire time proved to a lot of people that much of the propaganda is false."

For some reason, even though it probably wouldn't help them tonight, finding out that he had a great deal of support in Chicago had a profound effect on him. It was as though everything on his body weighed just a little bit less. And the thought of his mother emboldened him as well. It wasn't just for the people of Rownosci that he was doing this. It wasn't just for Catalina, or Saint, or Maya, or Zak. There were people in Chicago to think of too. Like his mother. And like Caleb, as well.

Anton took him out to where the others were holed up. He had to calm Scythe down at first, but then they explained Caleb's plan and everyone agreed to go along with it. Caleb gave Zeke another disc that would allow them to leave Chicago through the wall. Then he used his relay phone to call his squad.

It took more time than Anton wanted as they welcomed him, clapping him on the back and asking him a zillion questions all at once. He promised to talk more with them later once they had more time, but implored them to get on with the plan. So, without locking them into place, Anton and the others allowed them to shackle their wrists. Scythe actually growled at Owen, the older cadet that Anton had had to discipline only days ago, causing him to shake visibly at the sight of the bared teeth and tattoos. But in the end, Scythe too allowed his hands to be fake-bound.

And then they made their way for City Hall, no longer in the shadows, but in the light of the street.

* * *

"So, you ungrateful little urchin," his uncle said when they entered his chambers. "You're back."

Anton looked around the room quickly. Only three armed guards. That shouldn't be a problem for his squad. *Caleb's* squad, he corrected himself. Looking around, the only other people in the room were his uncle and Security Chief Koskie, both of whom were smiling evilly.

His uncle turned to Caleb. "Very good work, young man. Sit them down, if you would."

Caleb nodded gravely and they shoved Anton and the others into chairs, making a wonderful show of keeping their weapons leveled. Anton saw a look pass between his uncle and Koskie, as

though this was something for which they had prepared. Koskie stood up and walked to where Anton sat, looking down at him with a sneer. Then he moved to stand over both Bethany and Saint. He reached out and lifted Bethany's face up with a finger on her chin, looking as though he were revolted touching her. Finally, he reached Scythe. After peering at him thoughtfully as well, Koskie reached back and slapped the enclave leader across the face, grinning at the sound the blow made.

"Scythe," he said darkly. "This has been a long time coming. You've made quite a bit of trouble for us, my friend."

Scythe glared up at him. "And who are you?"

"Michael Koskie," he answered. "I'm the one in charge of keeping your filthy kind out of our city."

"Ah," Scythe smiled. "I can't tell you how pleased I am that you are here, then."

"Not as pleased as I am, I assure you," Koskie responded with another sneer. "It will be a great privilege to wipe your stain from this earth."

Both of them stared for a moment, two military leaders gazing unblinking at one another.

Anton's uncle cleared his throat from behind his desk. "Anton, my nephew," he shook his head. "I gave you so much, and you threw it all away for these things. I always knew that you might not be able to overcome your own biology, but I never thought you would be stupid enough to come home and get yourself caught."

"We all have a destiny to fulfill," Anton said.

"Yes, but you abandoned yours, nephew. I was the maestro of your fate, but you refused to play the notes I wrote for you."

"I found your melody unpalatable," Anton said. "And the harmony I've written far more suitable."

His uncle smiled. "You've been a great burden on me all these years. But despite all your efforts, you will still benefit humanity. We will study you and interrogate you, learn what we can, and then we will destroy you, as should have been done eighteen years ago."

Koskie walked over to where Anton sat once more. "Anton Donovan, you have broken nearly every law against humanity that we have."

"I wasn't aware that I had missed any."

Koskie smacked him across the face. "Do not talk back to me, boy."

"Now!" Scythe shouted, and the entire room erupted in a flurry of movement. All four supposed prisoners sprang from their seats, their shackles clanging uselessly to the floor. Anton heard shouts from all around him, but he was too busy concentrating on disarming Koskie and pinning him to the floor to tell from where they were coming. Caleb's people retrained their weapons on the guards and swiftly took away their weapons after a brief tussle. His uncle had bolted for the door, only to be met there by Saint and Bethany, their hands stretched out and glowing an angry orange. His eyes were wide as he backed away, retreating behind his desk once more.

When the room was still again, Scythe walked over to where Anton had Koskie pressed against the floor and kicked at him violently. "Murderous filth!" he hissed, the quietest shout anyone had ever uttered. "A thousand deaths would be too good for you!"

"Enough," Anton said quietly. He handed Koskie's sidearm to Scythe and allowed the security chief to rise from the ground. "Join your mayor, Koskie."

The other shot him a hateful look, but did as he was told.

Anton smiled. He knew how well this was all proceeding. It was better than he could have ever hoped for.

Both Koskie and his uncle were looking directly at him.

"He knows," Koskie said.

"No, it's something else," his uncle responded. "So why don't you tell us, Anton. Obviously you have some reason for all of this." He looked at Caleb. "For making traitors of your former

compatriots.”

“Your relay phone,” Anton said coldly. “Call my mother and tell her to come here.”

“Ah,” his uncle smiled. “Now I see. Your affection for my sister always did make you weak.”

“Now!” Anton shouted.

His uncle dialed and spoke briefly in the phone, asking only for her to come to his office as Anton watched over him. “There. Your mommy is coming.”

“You’ll gain nothing by mocking me.”

“Tell us what you want,” Koskie spoke up.

“In time.”

They waited in tense silence for the better part of half an hour before the door opened and Lindsay Donovan walked into the room. Her head seemed to swivel on a spring as she took in the entire scene, frozen at the door. Her eyes came to rest on Anton and they went wide with shock. Then she was rushing to him, hugging him, touching him as though she couldn’t believe it was him.

“You’re back! You’re back!”

Anton felt the hole that had resided in him the past week fill up with happiness and love. He hugged her back. “Yes,” he said into her ear. “I’m back.”

She pulled away and looked around again, seeming to finally recognize that something was wrong. She looked at Scythe and Saint, with their weapons pointed at her brother and Koskie. Then she turned to see how Caleb and his team were watching over the guards. Finally she turned back to her brother. “I told you, didn’t I?” she said quietly. “I said that if you didn’t pull back and start treating these people with respect, they would rebel against you. And when Anton left, I told you it would be him that led them back here. And now you see that I was right, and this will be the end of your rule, because you were stupid and arrogant.”

Anton smiled hearing the way she spoke for him. “Mother, thank you, but I have something else in mind besides revenge.” He indicated a chair across from the desk. “And now that we’re all here, why don’t we begin?” He sat next to his mother. Then he pulled the printouts from his pack and spread them on the desk as he gave a general explanation of what they showed.

Though his uncle, always one that thirsted for information, took in what was said, Koskie shook his head the entire time. Finally he banged his fist on the desk. “Do you think we are taken in by these tricks and lies?” he spat. “Our resolve is firm. No matter what you say here today, we are going to hunt down every last one of you and kill you! Now that we know how much dangerous technology you enclave has, it will be all the easier. There is a United Nations representative in all the human nations now. Did you know that? All I have to do is show them what you’ve shown us and we’ll have their backing to obliterate you animals completely!”

Anton turned and looked at him coldly. “Take your threat back immediately or I’ll ask Scythe here to kill you where you sit.”

Koskie’s eyes flared. “You wouldn’t dare! I am the security chief—“

“I don’t care if you’re the second coming of Jesus Christ,” Anton cut him off. “If you make another threat you will die.”

Koskie seemed to think about that for a moment. Then, without any other warning, he launched himself across the desk at Anton with a howl. In an instant Scythe had pulled a small but jagged blade from his robes. He leaped on top of Koskie from behind, reached across, and held the knife firmly against the other’s throat.

“Give me one reason and I’ll do it,” he snarled. “I’d have killed you just now if I didn’t know for certain that my brother would dislike me for it.”

Lindsay’s head snapped around at the words. “Brother?”

Anton nodded and patted her knee. “Yes. I’ll tell you all about it later.” He turned back to Koskie. “Last chance…”

“Fine,” Koskie growled, his eyes flicking nervously towards his throat. “No more threats.”

“Good,” Anton nodded. “Then I can follow up on these printouts and tell you what they mean for both sides. And how we are going to proceed from here.”

Back in Rownosci the streets were eerily quiet. Not that much activity would normally occur at this hour, but nearly every home in the enclave was lit up. Everyone seemed to understand how much hinged on what Anton and the others were to attempt that evening. No one could sleep.

It was no different at the Trudeau house. Maya sat at the kitchen table where she had first spoken with Anton. Bryce sat next to her alongside Catalina, while Kobi stood with Benji in her arms.

“How do you think it’s going?” Bryce asked for what seemed like the millionth time.

Maya resisted the urge to snap at him. Now was not the time for fighting. Her family had endured a lifetime of negative experiences. She would not squander the gift that Anton had given them with petty quarrels. “I’m sure they’ll send someone as soon as they’re able to,” she answered mechanically.

Tears came to Catalina’s eyes. “If they survive long enough to send someone,” she whispered.

“Are you able to sense anything?” Maya asked. It was common knowledge in the enclave that when two people with the Touch became close, they had a far stronger bond than normal. Often times the distance at which they could sense one another increased exponentially.

But Catalina shook her head. “No. All I can tell is that he’s alive. And that there is conflict.”

“What kind of conflict?”

“I can’t tell!” she cried out, and now the tears came freely. “They’re making progress, that much is certain. But he thinks something is wrong. Something has occurred to him that he hadn’t thought of before. It’s making him afraid.”

“Afraid of who?” Kobi asked. “The humans?”

“No,” Catalina shook her head. “It’s him.”

They all looked at her.

Catalina gave a great heaving sob. “He’s becoming afraid of himself.”

“What does that mean?” Kobi asked.

But Catalina only shook her head again and buried her face in her arms.

It was getting late into the night, but none of them were tired, least of all Anton. His body had been tensed for so long that fatigue had come and gone. Now he was running on pure adrenaline, continuing with a detailed explanation of what had been discovered, what it meant, and what could be done to nullify the danger anomalies posed to humans because of it.

Because of his unique circumstances, he knew not just what the human side needed to hear, but how they needed to hear it. They had to understand not only that they could solve the birthing problem, but also he had to create within them an understanding that those in the enclave were not some separate species to be feared. For all intents and purposes they were human. Which meant that they could be treated like humans. This was the most difficult concept to get across, but before too long he could tell that the human guards as well as Caleb’s men understood, and even began nodding their heads at his words. His mother needed little convincing, of course, but she practically glowed with pride as he explained what he’d helped to uncover. His uncle, however, continued to glower at him the entire time. He would never be convinced. But that was okay. Anton didn’t need him to be. His real audience now was the CSS soldiers. They would be the ones to spread the word after this was all over.

Things got more difficult when Anton began to address what he wanted to happen from the

standpoint of government and law. Chicago had been ruled as a monarchy since the time immediately after the war. Anton made it clear that would have to change. He proposed that an interim government be set up, composed of representatives from both the humans and anomalies, with a temporarily strong central figure until such a time as elections could be held. It would have been amusing to see the looks of revulsion on his uncle's and Koskie's faces, if only abbreviated versions of those expressions hadn't shown up on the CSS soldiers as well. It took much passionate speaking before those men finally began to look somewhat comfortable with the idea.

Lastly he addressed the concept of strategic alliance. After hours of talking about their common bond, this idea they seemed to accept fairly quickly. While they would not openly advertise the new relationship between Chicago and the enclave immediately, they also would no longer cooperate with the United Nations or any other government that had not integrated with local anomalies or enclaves. They would be allies, with all the obligations that came with that distinction. He described what he had learned about the Raiders, driving home the idea that this threat was the only reason Chicago and Rownosci's walls would remain standing, and that they would work together to deal with them as necessary. If ever there came a time when the Raiders, either by attrition or peace, were no longer a threat, then the walls would come down and they would all live as openly as American cities had before the war.

"But even while the walls are up," Anton said, addressing everyone in the room. "It must be that anomalies can come to Chicago and leave freely. And humans can do the same in Rownosci. If we are to have a true peace, then we must cast aside the terrible history we have created and forge instead a future built on complete trust. If we do that, in very short time, we will become the strongest city on the planet, because we will mutually benefit one another in both strength and knowledge."

"How can you trust these people," his uncle said quietly. "When they murdered your father?"

Anton pushed back down the response that immediately tried to jump from his mouth. "What matters is that I *do* trust them."

His mother spoke up, "The world is much bigger now than before the war. There is more land available. Population growth isn't a problem any longer. We have room to spread out."

"What you're asking for is impossible. The common people have been afraid for so long—"

"Because you *made* them afraid!" his mother said angrily.

"Whatever. They've still been afraid. You're asking them to cast aside all of that history and allow these people to live along side of them. It can't happen."

Anton looked around at the others in the room. "Just because you are unable doesn't make it so for everyone else." He took a deep breath. "Now, the enclave will have some responsibilities as well. Starting with Chicago, we will pledge to not only assist in permanently solving the birthing problem, but also we'll help to make life better for all of us, in any way that we can. We will never go to war with you again. But this peace cannot end with just your human city and our anomaly enclave. We are emissaries of enclaves everywhere and you are representatives of humanity. It is our duty to educate other cities to what we are doing as expediently as possible."

"More nonsense," his uncle said with a sad shake of his head. "You do not speak for every enclave and we certainly do not speak for all humanity. You cannot guarantee that the other enclaves will cease their attacks any more than I can do the same for human cities."

"But we can try," Anton said. "And we can start with liberal cities that already have some degree of integration with their anomalies. It will be our purpose. Our calling." He looked around the room. "Because we are now one. No longer human and anomaly. We are the same, all human, or else we'll have to make up some other word that will describe our unity. Either way, we will plead our case for this unity to other cities *together*, so that they know that it isn't fake or fleeting. And when others attack us for our peace, as both humans and anomalies certainly will, we will stand and defend one another to the death."

His uncle looked at him, seeming to take all of this in, but it was Caleb who spoke.

“Anton,” he said. “You speak well, and what you say sounds very simple and very good, but Mayor Donovan is right. This will not be clean and easy. We all know the history of our city. This used to be one of the great metropolitan areas in the world, but now it is rubble. No one alive today was around when the bombs fell, but we think of the war every time we step outside our homes. To have anomalies walking around will lead to fear. All our lives we’ve been told that they are a threat. These past few years our battle against them has been ramped up to a near frantic level so that we can be free of this perceived burden. For many humans, our greatest dream is to not have to even think about anomalies, but you’re going to plant them on everyone’s doorstep.”

Anton was reminded again of how fair and intelligent Caleb was. There was no real response to his words that was not an admission that what he’d said was true. Koskie was grinning, thinking that Caleb had thrown an insurmountable roadblock in Anton’s path. But Anton knew how important a development this represented. No longer would he try to convince all the humans in the room. He had Caleb instead, a friendly but staunch human, one that would weigh all arguments and counterarguments fairly.

“You’re right, of course,” he said to his old lieutenant. “It will not be quick and easy. Fear of our evolutionary rivals is rooted too deep within every living creature to be cast aside so simply. We all seek to expand by pushing out the other life that would take up the space we wish to occupy. But that only means that we will need to aggressively educate one another that we are not so different that we are rivals. We are partners. We are one. So our fear of each other can be dismissed.” He spread his hands wide. “Do not think that this has or will be easy on the enclave, either. They have as much history to create fear as humanity. They would argue more so. Their inclination was to attack and create their safety by force, the same as the humans. We all need to understand that this does not make us different, but rather it highlights how similar we are.”

Caleb frowned, but nodded. “I see that you are not asking anything of us that you’ve not also asked of the anomalies. But what assurances do we have that they will not take advantage of our trust and use it to destroy us?”

“It isn’t in their interests to destroy you,” Anton insisted. “Once we begin working together as one, then it is only as one that we can be measured. For the anomalies to use your concessions to dominate you in the future would be as if you used your strongest hand to chop off the other. What good would that do?”

Something clicked within Caleb. Anton could see it in his eyes. “We are one,” he said slowly. “One species. One community. One people.”

Anton nodded. “And in that way, all of our children will take what we will start here and carry it on further. They will become intertwined even more. They will think of new and greater ways to help each other and they will become all the more powerful for it. What greater future could we aspire to for our children?”

Caleb looked down at the printouts on the desk. “The enclave is clearly superior in some ways to Chicago,” he said. “Obviously there are resources and equipment there that have let them do things that we haven’t done here, whether we could have or not. If we agree to all this, part of that agreement will have to be for an open exchange of information. And we’ll have to be allowed to make use of any equipment they have that we do not.”

Anton nodded. “Of course.”

“With no other caveats?”

Anton looked to Scythe, who gave a curt nod.

“And you promise to assist immediately to save our women from the birthing problem?”

“That is something we can begin whenever you want.”

“And you know how to do it?”

“Our understanding of the solution is still new, so it may take some time to perfect the process, but yes.”

“What about laws?”

Anton sighed. He knew this would come up sooner or later. “If we are one people, then our laws can be mostly identical. But just as each human city has its own rules and customs that must be followed by visitors, so it should be between Chicago and Rownosci.”

“They will obey our laws in Chicago and we will obey theirs in their city?” Caleb summarized.

“Yes.”

“And you will help us tell the other human cities about our agreement?”

“Yes.”

“And fight with us against any that goes to war with us over it.”

“Over our agreement or anything else.”

“Okay,” Caleb said, taking a deep breath. “And we have to do all those things as well.”

“Of course.”

“And we also will need to cease the euthanization and incarceration of anomalies.”

“Yes.”

“And release all the anomalies currently imprisoned?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Caleb said. “Is there anything else?”

Anton smiled. “Yes, one more thing. The interim governor will have to be an un-mutated human, so that the people will more easily accept this new agreement.”

“That seems fairly obvious,” Caleb replied.

“Good. Because I want that governor to be you.”

Caleb laughed. “Do you realize that of everything you’ve asked for today, making me interim governor is the least possible? I’m too young for anyone to follow me.”

“That’s what they said about me in Rownosci,” Anton grinned. “But you’re smart. An academy graduate. And you’re a soldier. If you can accept this and lead based on it, then the people will know that it is right.”

Caleb looked uncomfortable as he thought about this for a while. Then he sighed. “I’ll agree to it, but only if the interim term is extremely short. There will have to be elections held as quickly as possible, and I will not be a candidate.”

Anton nodded.

“Excuse me, but do you two think I’m going to allow you to simply take over my city?” Anton’s uncle said angrily. “All your talking and your fake agreements do not mean a thing, because you have not made them with me, and I will *never* make them.” The volume of his voice was rising as he seemed to regain confidence. “This is my city!” he bellowed. “Nothing happens within these walls without my knowledge and permission!”

Anton looked to Caleb. “This will be your city. The decision is yours.”

Caleb nodded and turned to his men. “Both Patrick Donovan and Michael Koskie are to be placed under arrest,” he ordered. “As soon as we are done here they are to be taken to the detention center and placed in separate cells. Tell anyone who questions you on the way that they can contact me by relay phone if they have any question as to the legitimacy of the arrest. If they try to stop you, you have permission to defend yourselves.”

Anton’s uncle and Koskie immediately began shouting.

“Now,” Caleb said. “I need to speak with my men so that we can get the word out about all of this in an organized way. And then I’ll need to make it public by speaking to the people. All of that is going to take some time, a few days at least, so I’d like to put you in protective custody while that happens.”

“They can stay with me,” Anton’s mother said quickly. “All of them. I have plenty of room.”

Caleb smiled and agreed to send a CSS squad to watch over the penthouse.

Anton could not resist walking over to his uncle and tearing away the tape from his mouth. “I

know that it was you who approved my adoption,” he said. “And I believe that you are a misguided person who was trying to do what was right with your laws. I hope that someday your mind can be changed and that you can be released from prison.”

“Don’t talk to me, you failure,” his uncle sneered. “You traitor. You Iago. Judas. I gave you the life you have. I groomed you to earn the respect of humanity. You’ve betrayed me in every way.”

“No,” Anton said. “I’ve done much with the life you allowed me to have. And these things that I’ve done will help to make the memory of you great, because I will tell everyone that it is all because of what you allowed.” He took a deep breath. “But there is something I have to know.”

His uncle’s eyes lit up. “Oh?”

“Was it you that murdered my father?”

“Of course not, you small-minded fool,” his uncle laughed. “I do not kill.” And then his laughter ceased and was replaced by a cruel smile. “I have others kill for me. It was Koskie that drove the stake through your father, even as he begged for your life. And it was my soldiers that shot your insignificant biological father, too.”

Anton stared at him, willing the rage inside to subside, oblivious to anyone else.

“How does that make you feel, traitor?” his uncle jeered. “I killed both of your fathers.”

Anton took a deep breath, reaching back towards his pistol. “Why?” he whispered.

“Why?” his uncle repeated, laughing the word loudly. “Because I wanted you to be a soldier and he was getting in my way. Because he annoyed me with all of his pro-anomaly drivel. Because I didn’t want his kind of weak filth sleeping in the same bed as my sister. What difference does it make? I had him killed because I wanted to.”

Anton heard movement behind him and thought that perhaps one of them was going to leap to keep him from acting in the face of this new information. So he whipped his pistol out and leveled it at his uncle’s forehead. “Why are you telling me this?”

His uncle laughed again. “I thought you’d like to know.”

Caleb stepped into his vision. “Anton, if you shoot him, none of what we discussed today will be possible. Everyone will know that an anomaly assassinated the Mayor of Chicago and they will not listen to the reasons why. They still respect you, but you don’t have enough currency in this city for them to not demand your head if you shoot him. And then they will go to war with the rest of the enclave, no matter what any of us say.”

“Don’t treat him like a child,” Anton’s uncle barked. “He’s a big boy. He knows it’s his moral obligation to avenge his father’s death.”

Anton wanted to pull the trigger. His finger caressed it, pulling it a millimeter, then letting it go, and then pulling it again. His uncle was still smirking madly, his eyes ablaze. I can kill you, he thought to himself. I should kill you. It’s my right to take your life after you’ve caused me so much pain in mine.

But then he thought back to what he had decided at the beginning of all this. He would find out the reason for his father’s death, question the one responsible if he could, because explaining that death would go a long way to quelling the reason that Chicago and the enclave were at war. And he realized that he had accomplished that task. Even better, there were witnesses in the room that had heard his uncle confess to the killing. They would tell others what they heard and soon it would be well known in Chicago what his uncle had done. He had done what he’d set out to do. He had found the one responsible and he had exposed him. And, of course, he had given the hope of peace to both the anomalies and the humans, if only he didn’t now destroy that hope by pulling the trigger.

“No,” Anton said softly. He turned and placed the pistol atop the desk, before looking once more at his uncle. “You won’t derail all that I’ve done here today by goading me into violence. You’ve lost, uncle. All you’ve done in your life has come crumbling around you, because you built it all on the weakness of fear, whereas we have the strength of hope. Your time is over.”

The entire room seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, no individual more so than Caleb. “He will

be put to death, Anton, I assure you,” he promised. “I wish you could be the one to do it, but you can’t. Perhaps if you were human or more loved here you could have.”

Anton heard a click and turned to see his mother training his pistol upon her brother. “I am both human and loved here,” she said. “And these two murdered my husband.”

And then she shot her brother and his security chief, each through the heart.

Catalina lifted her head up from her arms and looked around at the others. “They’re done,” she said.

Everyone else immediately looked at her. None of them had slept, knowing that she would be able to give them *something*. But now they looked apprehensive at her soft voice. Had they been successful?

Maya looked at her pleadingly. “Don’t play with us,” she said. “Just say it. Do we have peace?”

Catalina smiled. And nodded her head.

They erupted around the table with shouts of joy. Kobi said she was going to spread the word to Father Graine and the Council workers. Bryce and Benji went to see if any of the other children were still awake and tell them. Soon it was just Catalina and Maya.

They sat together and talked about the new life they were all going to have and all the wonderful things that would be.

* * *

Kobi and Father Graine walked in circles around the plaza as the sun came up. They kept sneaking glances at the gazebo, as if suddenly expecting Anton to materialize there. The sun rose higher in the sky and they began to hear the noise of their people. Many of them began to funnel into the plaza, setting up their merchant’s tents or entering one of the buildings. But many others just stood around, discussing with one another all that had happened the past week.

“I feel silly,” said Kobi. “But even though everything here is the same as it was yesterday, it seems completely different.”

Father Graine nodded. “It’ll be days before it is all finalized, but I know what you mean.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t like relying on the sense of a young girl in love. Too much can be colored by emotion. When will they send someone back to tell us what is happening?”

“What do the details matter?” Kobi asked. “We have a treaty with the humans. I can be patient for the details.”

“I heard there was a death,” Father Graine said.

“A righteous one,” Kobi nodded. “The wife of a murdered man taking her revenge. More importantly, everyone in the equation was human.”

“Still, it would be better to not have the stain of blood on this day.”

“With all the good that will come from it, I’m not going to complain.”

Father Graine altered their path and changed it so that they came to stand in the gazebo. “We have endured a thousand deaths. You and I have each had a burden placed upon our shoulders because of them. But now we are reborn.”

Kobi put a hand on his shoulder. “That is a good homily, but I think we both know who our savior has been this past week.”

“Without a doubt,” Father Graine nodded. He turned and took in the plaza, which was becoming more and more full of people. There seemed to be something different about them. A new liveliness to their walk, perhaps, or something different about the timber of their speech. In half an

hour I am going to perform the morning mass, he thought to himself. But am I the one that tends to these people's souls? Or am I just a pretender to Anton's throne? He looked up just as the bells of the church began to toll.

"You should probably go," Kobi said.

Father Graine nodded and left for the church.

He had just taken his place at the altar and welcomed the congregation when he saw Maya and her family enter through the vestibule. They hadn't come to mass in years, long enough that they looked around as though confused once they had entered. Father Graine waited for them to find their seat before continuing with the mass. He was distracted the entire time, his thoughts consumed with the return of the Trudeau family to the church. Every time they genuflected, or murmured words along with the rest of the congregation, or when they took the Eucharist in their mouths and drank from the everlasting cup, he was awed. It was as if they had never left the church at all.

Anton, the visitor from Chicago, part human and part anomaly, had not merely given both sides the impossible gift of peace. He had also healed this one family, redeemed them in their own eyes, and lifted them up to God for judgment. And here they sat, proof that God found them worthy of his House and admitted them once more.

* * *

As word traveled the next day of what had been done in Chicago's City Hall, it was picked up quickly by United Nations Agent Douglas Falasco, who had been recently dispatched to the city. He left that morning amid all the confusion for New York, sending no messages ahead and leaving nothing behind.

Chapter 17:

Man has always struggled to learn about himself and his place on this Earth we share with all the other life here. The aftereffects of the Great Atomic War gave us new questions that required new answers, but the struggle remained the same. Our anomaly cousins were one of those questions and we tried to answer it, but our answer was wrong.

It plunged us into dark oblivion. Somewhere deep within us, we all knew that it was wrong. But with our women dying, we acted out of haste. And the anomalies responded, seeking equally incorrect retribution for what we had decided to do. But now we know better. Here in Chicago we have entered into an alliance with the local enclave, and together we have solved the birthing problem.

I hope you can grasp what this means and how important it is. There will be those that will claim that eliminating the danger to our women that can come from anomaly fetuses isn't the only issue. They will claim that crimes have been committed against humanity. They will say that there is still the danger from their higher levels of radiation. They will point to all the many reports of behavioral abominations. You must realize that these are all the tactics of a frightened human population, primarily their leadership. The only reason for testing and euthanizing anomaly children has always been to stop the spread of their kind so as not to alter the very structure of human society with motherless children and husbands without wives. Juan Nortooga, the Secretary General of the United Nations, nearly said these exact words in several speeches these past few years.

What they won't accept, you must. We invite you to come to Chicago and visit us, to see what our union has created, to witness how between our science, the science of the anomalies, and some rather amazing work done by some of their people, we are making sure that every birth, anomaly or human, leaves our women free from danger.

Later, when you're convinced, you can return to your homes and create your own unions. But we do ask that you keep this as far away from the United Nations and any of the more hardliner cities or countries with whom you have normalized relations. In any case, feel free to contact me directly either by satellite message or relay phone. With the winter months soon approaching, I urge you to respond quickly.

Letter from Interim Governor Caleb Ellison to select cities
10.24.2169

Several months later, Anton led Bryce, Catalina, and Maya through the Chicago gate on four-wheelers and into the area where they had been clearing away the ruins and planting more cropland. The land that had once been known as the Great Plains would become so once again under the leadership of a new government in Chicago, an adaptation of Rownosci's Rada. Caleb was now the military leader of Chicago, Lindsay Donovan represented the common interests of the people, and Father Hayden, fresh from his indoctrination as a priest, had left Rownosci behind to assume the role vacated by Cardinal Grobowski, who had left for the Vatican immediately after Caleb had announced his coup d'état.

It had taken a great deal of work to get the ruined buildings out of the way, but now that it had been done, the people of Chicago had taken strongly to exploring the area outside of the walls. With so much vacant space and so much left behind, they ended up with far more materials than they were used to having, and the city flourished every bit as much as the fallout lands surrounding it. Their four-wheelers roared through the sun-splashed plains, tall grass and weeds whipping around them.

But they were not out there for pleasure. There had been reports of a disturbance north of the city, which is the direction in which they turned. Anton, who had taken on an advisory role to the Chicago government, didn't have to be the one to check these things out, but he did it anyway. They were coming more frequently now, and the reports were getting more and more violent.

Anton spotted the place Caleb had told him about. He gently eased off the throttle and brought the entire group to a halt. With a point to the spot, he said, "There."

They got off the four-wheelers and approached what looked like a small ranch house. All around them there were small plots of garden, one vegetable here, and another there. Anton shook his head as they got closer. He'd been working with both Radas from Chicago and Rownosci to encourage the few people that insisted on living outside of the cities to move as close to their protection as possible. For some reason, some people refused.

He understood the desire to live without walls. Hadn't he said as much to Scythe and Saint? But until these Raiders could either be controlled or reasoned with, it was simply too dangerous outside of the cities. And that was only the immediate problem. They had received reports from friendly cities that the United Nations was trying to organize an attack on Chicago and Rownosci, so as to wipe out a heretic threat to all humanity. The world appeared to be split on this issue. The Catholic Church had come out against an attack, although they did believe that quarantine was a fair option. Most of the Muslim and Jewish cities supported open relations with Chicago, stating that they had a great deal to learn from one another. Everyone else seemed to fall somewhere in between.

The gardens thinned as they reached the ranch house, a shaky-looking thing made from rotted wood and patched together with whatever the owner had been able to find nearby. The rancher and his family were inside, literally torn to shreds. It was disturbing enough that Bryce began to gag and had to go back outside. Catalina took his hand, her breathing pattern picking up a tick. Maya, ever the scientist, knelt down and picked through the remains, occasionally putting samples into small glass jars.

"How was it done?" Anton asked her.

"The same as the others," Maya said. "It's a biological agent. Probably injected directly into the blood stream."

"Any idea this time how they could incapacitate them long enough to make the injection?"

Maya shook her head. "There's never enough left behind to study," she said. "Like all the rest, it appears as if whatever the biological agent is, it causes massive amounts of cell structure damage, literally causing cells to break their bonds with one another. It's almost anti-magnetic, the way portions of cells seem to repel one another."

Bryce came back into the ranch house, wiping his mouth. "I found tire treads outside. It looks similar to the others."

"Humvee tracks?" Anton asked.

Bryce nodded his head in confirmation.

"Okay. Let's catalog the deaths and then load the samples onto the four-wheelers."

He went back outside and turned to look to the north. Eventually they were going to have to send soldiers further to find the Raiders base. And Anton was going to have to be a part of that force.

Catalina came up behind him and took his hand again. "You're worried, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"We should visit Saint soon." Her brother had returned to Rownosci and immediately married Bethany.

"Saint needs time with his new wife."

"It must be nice," Catalina said quietly. "To be married."

"Mm hmm."

"What about us? You have a position in the government, as do I. We're the right age. When are we going to get married?"

"You have a way of trivializing the most important things," he murmured.

"I know what you're afraid of," she said, as though he hadn't spoken. "You think that a battle is coming, and this one can't be avoided. And you think that you have to get involved with this battle, not as an adviser, but a soldier. So you don't *want* to get married, even though you love me. You want to

keep your life as free of obligations as possible. That way you can throw yourself at whatever threats present themselves without feeling guilty about leaving behind a wife."

"You say such nice things," he said. "It's a wonder I haven't proposed already."

"You think that if you say things like that, I will get angry and refuse to speak with you. But you're wrong. I'm depending on you. My mother is depending on you too. As is the whole city, and Rownosci too. I'm not stupid. I know that you have a role to play in all of this. But that doesn't make me want you any less."

Despite his best efforts, Anton smiled.

"You think I'm just a silly little girl in love, don't you?" Catalina scowled.

"I think you're the most intelligent, mature young woman I've ever met," Anton said. "I won't commit to anything right this moment, but perhaps we should begin planning a wedding."

That stood there silent for a while, just looking together towards the north as the sun began to turn from midday yellow to afternoon orange.

"I don't mean to pressure you," Catalina whispered.

"Yes you do. It's what women are supposed to do, to force their rambunctious men to settle down."

"What do you know about women?"

"Enough to know that all the women in my life are far better creatures than I."

"No better. Just different and good, as well."

Anton nodded. "We're all different, and we're all the same. Maybe that is the secret on Earth these days."

"What is it about you that you love contradictions so much?"

"I'm an anomaly born to humans that were killed to protect me and then adopted by another human mother who had every reason to hate my kind," he summarized. "Contradiction comes as naturally to me as breathing."

"My mother doesn't like it when you're glib."

"So she's told me."

"She asked me the other day if we were going to get married in a church."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her that I would marry you in a garbage pit if you asked me to."

"See what you've done?" he smiled. "Now if I want to test your devotion to me, I have to come up with something worse than garbage pit nuptials."

"Funny," she said quietly. "Every time I try to explain to you how devoted I am, you push me away with a joke or insult."

"That's how I deal with discomfort," he said. When he saw her face, he added quickly, "It's not you I'm uncomfortable with, it's all this talk of love and devotion. The only person I've ever had that experience with is my mother. It's not something I'm used to."

"I don't want you to ever feel uncomfortable," she said quietly.

"It's something I'll have to get over," Anton said. "Because I do love you."

"Do you think either of us have any idea what we're doing?"

"Absolutely not," he told her.

And then he kissed her.

Two weeks later, Father Hayden married them personally in his chambers.

* * *

In the weeks that followed the wedding, several things happened that would change the world forever. Saint, who had been visiting Chicago for the wedding, presented the Chicago Rada with a plan for reconnaissance on the area directly to the north. It would be a massive undertaking, combining

the military forces of the CSS with the Straznik to carry out a joint mission to find the Raiders base. This was necessary, according to Scythe, because both cities were continuing to receive reports that the UN was getting closer to authorizing their attack, and it would be beneficial to have only one enemy to face at a time, not to mention that if the Raiders really were based out of a former United States military installation, there might be weapons there that we can use.

Both Rada's sought out his council on the plan. He spent a few weeks traveling back and forth between Chicago and Rownosci as he made small but significant alterations. He had Kobi in particular look over what he'd added, as well as his mother. He had insisted that, though the force must be well armed and prepared to fight, they make every effort to communicate and reason with the Raiders before resorting to violence. It was, he noted to both sides, the exact same argument he had made before they had become unified.

"Anton," Kobi said. "I was firmly behind you when you pushed us towards peace with the humans. But this is harder. What the humans did out of a misguided sense of duty, these things seem to do for pleasure and profit. We know now who the humans are, and they know us. But these things are something else. I say this not so that you will change your mind in your requests, but so that you will think about my words. From all reports, there is now conceivable way that we can communicate with the Raiders. We don't even know how *they* communicate, as malformed as their bodies are."

"Personally, I don't believe they can be reasoned with either," Anton agreed. "But it must at least be tried. It would be abhorrent if we were to discard all the lessons that we should have learned through our recent union."

In the end, both sides agreed. Really, how could they argue with him?

The other thing that happened occurred one evening when Anton had returned home from City Hall to find his house full of the smells of a feast and the laughter of all his friends and family. Maya was there, as was Saint, Bethany, Bryce, Caleb, Benji, and his mother. There were balloons and flowers throughout the house, and Anton asked Catalina what was going on.

She kissed him tenderly. Then she took his hand in hers. After holding it for a moment, she pressed his palm against her belly. "We're going to have a baby," she said.

He squeezed her flat stomach, even though she wasn't yet showing. "I'm going to be a father?"

She smiled. "Yes, Anton. So now you have even more reason to fight for us. And a reason to always come home when you can."

He held her close, whispering in her ear, "Do you think our child will carry the anomaly genes?"

"I don't care one way or the other."

"Neither do I," he said with a smile.

And they went to eat with the others, who clapped to congratulate them as they entered the dining room. The cycle of life continued, changed in this small pocket of the world by Anton and his friends, but just as constant as ever. The idea of bringing another life into this world appealed to him. That he was able to do so freely in the city of Chicago, with his human mother alongside his anomaly mother-in-law, was the culmination of everything he'd hoped to accomplish with his life.

Now he could fully concentrate on what came next.