

Center Moon - The Stone Of Cordova

Stephen Gambuti

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Venus lost its gift of supporting its human population, the Sapiens. Earth, the sister planet, was deemed a suitable home for those looking for a retreat from their dying planet. The Parliamentary Federation sent scouting missions ahead to research prospects of migration.

The scouts discovered people already inhabiting Earth. The people of Earth were different. The scouting team called the Earth Crows, which meant "slow-witted".

The Crows lived in simple dwellings of mud and sticks. They had a basic language of their own. The scouts noticed their ability to create beautiful baskets and paintings. The Crows also had a gift for the sculpting of metals. They had lived under one Emperor's Dynasty for centuries. The Crows called their government "The Republic". They seemed simple to the scouts of the Parliamentary Federation but they were quick learners.

The Crows did not know that within the next one hundred revolutions, their world would be almost extinct.

The Parliamentary Federation would send forth a new kind of officer, an officer who only knew how to eat, sleep--and kill for the Parliamentary Council. That officer had one goal: Rid the planet of all Crows. That officer was known as an Enforcer.

Earth would soon host its biggest war: a battle for planetary domination between two races. Not only would there be blood shed on the planet's surface, but also the three moons orbiting Earth would soon be refuge and headquarters to many looking for a last chance of survival.

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Dedication

To Lisa,

the light of my life.

Prologue

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One

"Come on, Jonas. You never let anyone else shoot the stegolizard," Carlen moaned as he just lost another friendly game of Puk. Carlen, the older of the two, pulled his fingers through his deep black hair, which strayed past his ears. He begged Jonas with his hazel eyes for a turn at the stegolizard.

Jonas gave Carlen a crooked smile. His grin did not intentionally look sarcastic, it seemed to be just the way his thin lips curved when he smiled. "Well, well. Big cousin can't take the challenge." Jonas handed Carlen his air gun. "I'll let another one out. This time, hit 'em before he gets away."

"Easy for you to say." Carlen stared down the sight of the air gun waiting for Jonas to release another reptile from the cage.

"There are only two more left. If you miss this time, you're going to hunt them yourself." Jonas flipped his sandy brown hair back away from his eyes as he warned his cousin about missing the shots. They both looked so different, considering that they were first cousins on their mothers' side. The only real similarity they had was in their olive complexions. Jonas lifted the front of the cage, recalling the time his father made him search the woods for two hours looking for stegolizards that had gotten away.

The stegolizard danced frantically until it found its bearings. "When he settles--blast him on the back plates. You should be able to get three good hits before he takes off."

Carlen aimed for the huge bony scales along the reptile's back. He squeezed his gun's trigger, sending a capsule of dye straight toward the animal. The rock behind the lizard splattered with light blue liquid. The startled animal scurried off into the woods. "Just great!" Carlen threw the gun down into the sand.

"You better not join any foot patrols after the Academy. You have the worst hand-eye coordination I've ever seen," Jonas mocked Carlen's ability to handle the air gun as he flashed his tremendously bright green eyes at him.

"Yeah... well, I bet you can't get four shots on that last one." Carlen shook his head, mimicking Jonas.

"You have completely lost your mind." Jonas walked over and picked up the gun. He leaned his tall sturdy body up against the stone wall and rested his elbows on it. Jonas prayed that he would not be embarrassed again. He brushed back his sandy hair with a jerk of his head and eyed the gun sight. He nudged his squared nose into a groove along his weapon. "Go ahead, big mouth. Let 'em go."

Carlen hurried to the cage to release the last lizard. He stumbled over a rock along the way and toppled

into the wire framing. He grabbed the top handle. "Ready?"

A string of sweat trickled down Jonas's temple. If he missed this shot he knew his cousin would never let him hear the end of it. Carlen still harassed him about the time Jonas challenged him to arm wrestling. Jonas boasted for days about how he was going to cause Carlen so much pain that he would not be able to use his arm for an entire round. His older cousin beat him and brought Jonas down so quickly that the table flipped. "Let him go."

Carlen lifted the cage door up and the stegolizard wiggled around in circles. It came to a sudden stop. The confused reptile settled as it slithered its tail.

"Who is the master?" Jonas pulled back on the trigger four consecutive times. Each capsule zipped across the sand, hitting the animal's protective plates along its back. Carlen watched in disbelief as his younger cousin painted four light blue marks on the animal's scales.

Jonas stood straight up and tilted his head with a grin. He could hold his head up with some pride for once. He always beat Carlen at Puk, but it was about the challenge he was just given. He could easily throw this victory in his cousin's face if the need ever arose.

"How? When did you get so good?" Carlen headed over to his cousin.

"I've been practicing. I wanted to impress my father," Jonas responded as he rubbed the air gun clean against his clothing. "Since we'll have plenty of time for Puk, I want to show Dad a thing or two."

"When did he get home?" Carlen gently pulled the gun away from his cousin.

"Last evening. I haven't even seen him though." Jonas walked over to the cage. He lifted it with both hands and brought it towards a small craft. "He said that we would catch up on things once the party was over."

Carlen put the gun in the rear seat of the craft.

Jonas unknowingly plopped the cage down on top of it. "Nice place for the blaster, Carlen." Jonas lifted the side of the cage and slid out the gun. "You have to learn to take care of these weapons." He lifted the air gun and rubbed the nozzle with care. After all, the gun was a gift from his parents and next to his collection of moon rocks, it was his pride and joy. He carefully set the gun in a back corner of the craft.

"It's not a blaster. It's a stupid toy." Carlen defended his actions.

"It's only stupid to you because you can't master it," Jonas snapped and hopped in the driver's seat. "Get in."

Carlen's jaw dropped when he saw Jonas press the ignition switch. "What are you doing?" Carlen hurried over to the driver's side of the craft. "My mother will kill me. She'll kill you. Get out."

"Come on. I promise I'll be careful." Jonas leaned back, showing his cousin that he was not planning to leave the driver's seat. Carlen recognized this for what it was--another challenge.

Carlen figured he would use a diplomatic approach. "Jonas, it's not that I don't trust you but... you know my mother." Carlen leaned into the vehicle. "She explicitly told me not to let you drive. I don't want to upset her."

Jonas' ears perked because it was about his aunt, Cleonia. He hoisted his body out of the seat halfway. "She told you explicitly not to let me drive?" He loved annoying his aunt. She constantly boasted about

how well Carlen did in school every opportunity she could. Jonas, the below average student, knew they were direct digs at his own grades.

"That's right. Now, cousin, you need to move over."

Jonas plopped right back into his seat. "Get in, Carlen. I promise I'll stop before we get back to Tigris. Then you can drive us the rest of the way."

Carlen looked hopeful. "Promise?" He knew that he could easily lift Jonas's lanky body out of the craft but was it really worth the trouble? Carlen believed his cousin would not drive into Tigris. The one thing Carlen liked about Jonas was his honesty. His word was law.

"Promise." Jonas pressed the ignition switch again. He was thankful for Carlen's decision not to get physical. The craft lifted slightly above the ground. Jonas watched as Carlen strapped himself into the seat. Carlen then nodded for Jonas to secure his driver's straps. "Forget it."

The craft doubled its speed as it glided across the sands. Jonas glanced over at his older cousin as he placed his thumbs on two white buttons along the outside of the steering wheel.

"Jonas... please don't," Carlen begged, knowing what was next.

Jonas leaned back and pushed down on the buttons. The craft zipped at six times the speed. "Hey, Carlen. Look." Jonas pointed to a bunch of large rocks sprouting from the ground.

"You didn't tell me you were taking my mom's craft through Stone Maze." Carlen buried his face in his hands.

Jonas laughed as he brought the craft into the cluster of rocks. The domestic craft was being tested fully. Jonas entered the maze, where they were greeted with two large stones directly in front of them. Carlen peeked at that moment and let out a scream. He ducked his head between his shaky knees. Jonas calmly veered the vehicle off to the right, swinging the craft through random arrangements of stones.

"Are you stupid?" Carlen's voice bellowed from under his legs.

Jonas quickly turned the vehicle, barely missing a jagged rock which diagonally shot out of the ground. In his haste, another stone swiped the side of the craft, taking off a rear piece of nicely painted steel. The high of seeing his older cousin squirm quickly vanished.

Carlen's head popped up suddenly. "Moons! My mother is going to kill you--and me." He quickly buried his face back into his lap.

Jonas could not say a word. He knew he'd messed up big. One more pass remained. The opening was straight ahead. Jonas knew the upcoming obstacle because he had taken it before--twice. Unfortunately, he'd wasted two crafts in the process. "Hold on."

The vehicle weaved and dodged in between each stone. The vehicle was exhausting its limits. Before them sat three stones. There was barely enough room for a small-sized craft to squeak past them. Jonas was driving a domestic vehicle, which was a bit larger. With one hand, he clicked on his safety strap. The other he kept firmly on the steering handle. Jonas hugged the door of the craft and went up against the slanted stone walls. The entire vehicle tilted to the side. Jonas zipped through the maze's exit without distraction. The vehicle tipped back into the horizontal position, pouncing the dirt below.

Carlen poked his head up quickly. "Stop. Stop now!"

Jonas released his grip on the handle as the craft slowed down.

"You are a real jerk. Do you know that? A freaking jerk!" Carlen wanted to punch Jonas directly in his pretty-boy face.

The vehicle slowed to a halt. Jonas hopped out of the driver's seat just before it stopped to keep from being hit by his cousin's angry fist. He hit the ground and rolled around in the dirt, jumping gracefully to his feet. "As I promised... you can take it the rest of the way."

Carlen stared at his cousin. "You may be better with a blaster or better driving a craft, but you are not stronger. You are not as smart as me."

Jonas stepped back. He had pushed Carlen to his limit. "Calm down. I am only fooling around. I didn't mean to--"

"Mean to what?" Carlen jumped out of the craft. He started walking closer to his younger cousin. "Mean to ever take anything seriously? You will never make it in the Academy. Never." Carlen clenched a fist.

"Come on. You don't want to do that. Remember last time?" Jonas could not forget the last time. Carlen had knocked out two of his teeth. Jonas always tried to push Carlen's buttons, then regretted it when he pushed too far. They were both only children. They'd grown up closer than most brothers.

"I remember very well. Look what you did to my mother's craft!" Carlen briefly broke his focus on Jonas to show him the damage. "You expect me to take the fall for you? No way." Carlen opened up his fist. "I am not going to hit you, cousin. However, you will drive the vehicle home."

"I can't... my father..."

"You will and you have to. See, if you don't, I'll be forced to remove one tooth from your mouth for every dent that's in that craft."

Jonas noticed the vehicle had more dents than he had teeth. He put his hand over his mouth. "Fine."

He reluctantly hopped into the craft again. Carlen sat next to him.

The city wall appeared along the horizon. Jonas felt his stomach dance involuntarily. *I am so dead. Welcome home, Dad. Now beat me.* Huge wooden gates dressed the city's main entrance. They were always open these days. In a region made mostly of sand and stone, Tigris dominated the land on any map as well as its sister city of Niles.

The Parliamentary Council was on the cusp of eliminating all the threats from the Crow people. Jonas could not understand why the walls remained around Tigris.

Since so many retired officers lived in the city, the Council stopped using Enforcers to guard the walls. Even though his father was home, he would always be on active alert, in case of an attack.

The last attack on Tigris was more than fifteen revolutions ago. Jonas only remembered it from his mother's description. The Crows invaded from three different locations. The primitive people had fought with such heart, but the Crows murdered close to one thousand Sapiens. The advanced technology the Sapiens had possessed was no match for the Crows. However, they grew more intelligent with every generation.

Jonas could not wait to see his dad, Captain Troupe. Many in his village bragged about how heroic he was. Jonas heard thousands of stories about his dad being the sole survivor of large battles and secret missions. The teen longed for his father to dedicate his time to him. Not the Council, not the cause--just him.

"Pull over." Carlen pointed to the gates. "On the side."

"Why?" Jonas figured it was time for his well deserved beating.

"Do it before I pound you." Carlen unclicked his strap.

Jonas brought the craft along the deteriorating wall of the city. He slowed the vehicle down to a halt. How he wished he could drive it straight home and outrun his cousin into the dwelling.

"Get out." Carlen shot Jonas a stern look. "Now. You walk right into those gates and head home."

"What are you doing?" Jonas could not figure out his cousin. He had the perfect opportunity to do whatever he wanted. He could not believe he was letting him off the hook.

"Go to my house and tell my mother I had an accident. Tell her some pebbles caught up into the hover fan and it flipped the vehicle. I will be near that treeline." Carlen pointed to the natural boundary around the city. He took control of the empty driver's seat. "Make sure she knows that I'm okay. Tell her I will need a tow." Carlen shook his head.

Jonas could tell his cousin was not happy about what he was doing. Maybe it was time to start treating him better.

"Enjoy your party. I probably won't be there." Carlen flashed Jonas a sarcastic grin.

"Thanks... Geek." Jonas smiled back and headed through the gates.

Two

The three moons lit up the night sky as they held their orbit over the city of Tigris. The Troupe dwelling rested along the border of the city's most elevated community. Outside along a sandstone wall sat the seventeen-year-old Jonas, staring at the display of bright stars. *One day...* he thought. It was only a few moons away before he would go to the Academy. Then he could assume his father's role. After all, that's what Captain Troupe wanted more than anything, ever since Jonas was born. His father would have shoved him into an Enforcer's uniform sooner if it would fit.

His father dedicated himself to the constant growth of the Parliamentary Council, and earned top ranks with the Enforcement. His job, like all Enforcers, was to eliminate all Crows. For the past fifty years the Council had one primary mission: total world domination.

Jonas always thought there might be a chance that everyone could live together without all the fighting. His master at school explained that even though the Crows imitated the Sapiens in many aspects, including technology, their brains could not reason. Therefore, they would remain primitive and hinder the civilization's advancement. Jonas figured that he could work his way up in the Council and change the way people perceived each other. Until then, he would wear his armor plated clothing and wield his blaster like the rest of them.

Inside the dwelling, there was a gathering going on, celebrating his father's return.

Jonas never cared much for socializing with the adults. He hated the folks who asked a million questions

about school and whether or not he had any girlfriends. He knew they really didn't care and all they were doing was wasting his time. Then his mother's friend was forever trying to fix him up with her daughter, Meegan. She was disgusting. She weighed at least two hundred pounds and never brushed her hair. Yet Jonas always managed to get himself cornered by the nagging lady about how beautiful her little princess was.

No party would be complete without Aunt Cleonia yapping about Carlen. Captain Troupe had used his influence to get Carlen into the Academy. They were very selective and usually admitted only direct family members. That was the Council's way of maintaining loyalty. Cleonia acted as if Captain Troupe had nothing to do with her son's success. Unfortunately for Jonas, Carlen was the kind of kid who did everything right. He always earned the highest honors on the Master's List at school. Aunt Cleonia constantly reminded Jonas of that.

"Hey, son."

Jonas glanced over to see his father walking out of the dwelling. "Hey Dad..." Jonas snapped up. The Enforcer's olive skin had paled immensely during his years in space. He had his son's overpowering green eyes and sandy brown hair, though much more tamed than the teen's.

The biggest asset Jonas inherited was his mother's attractive nose. Captain Troupe's nose was larger and more round. People used to fool with him, calling him a half-breed. Half-breeds were known mixes of Crows and Sapiens. Troupe would just laugh it off.

"At ease, son." Captain Troupe sat next to him. He wrapped his arm around Jonas.

"What's up, Dad?" Jonas never understood why he was so excited to see his father but he was. Maybe it was the fact that he barely ever saw him.

Troupe put his hand on Jonas's knee. "Just wondering why you aren't inside."

"Oh, I'm uh... I'm waiting for Carlen. He said he was coming by." Jonas knew Carlen was not doing anything for quite a long time. It was just an excuse to keep from going inside.

"Okay... You didn't hear about the accident?"

"Yes, sir, I did." Jonas wanted to confess so badly.

Troupe tightened his arm around his son. "We'll have some quality time together before you leave for the upcoming school season." Troupe stood up and stared into the night sky. He pointed to the center moon. "See that moon there? Twenty of us landed our crafts and attempted to capture Cordova. That's where the Republic's Emperor has his main base." The father proceeded with caution. "Only five of us returned from the battle of Cordova."

"Five? Your whole squadron was wiped out again?" Jonas loved it when he heard war stories directly from his dad.

Troupe looked down at the sand. He paused briefly and raised his head again. "So, how's your schooling?"

"We learned all about the other race. The Crows." Jonas stood up. "Before we came here, people with huge foreheads controlled this planet." Jonas used his hands to exaggerate his own forehead.

Troupe stared at the dwelling as the noise of the party grew louder and stole his attention.

"Well... we just took over their planet." Jonas was feeling his father out for his opinions.

Troupe focused on the laughter coming from their home. "We were a more intelligent breed."

"Isn't the Emperor a Crow?" Jonas asked. "He would have to be pretty intelligent." Jonas noticed his father was paying more attention to the sounds of the party than their conversation.

"Look, I have to get back inside. They're having too much fun without me." Troupe patted Jonas on the back.

As his father headed in for the night, a slight whistling sound filled the air. His father looked down at the sand. Nothing was stirring but the sound grew heavier. He stopped and looked around but didn't see anything.

Jonas watched his father enter the dwelling. The teen hoped he would be more important than his father's social life. After all, he did have only a few rounds left before the Academy. Jonas spotted his mother looking out the window. She was probably checking on him. The teen had never seen her so happy.

With the celebration over and the dwelling empty, Jonas laid in bed thinking about his new future. He looked around staring at all the souvenirs his father had acquired from his travels. One shelf was completely filled with different moon rocks. One rock for every moon Captain Troupe has visited. Each one represented at least another month his father hadn't been a part of his life.

A greenish glowing rock rested in the center of his entire collection. It was larger than most of the others. That chunk was from Venus's moon after it collided with an asteroid. The collision sparked the end of Venus's magnetic core. Once the moon had been destroyed, the atmosphere began to dissipate, forcing the Sapiens to live elsewhere.

However, the newest in his collection was a tiny stone. It came from Cordova's Spunk Crater. Jonas did not display it upon his shelves. He kept it in his pocket because he had been showing it off for two days. He promised his father he would create a necklace with it so he could wear it wherever the Academy sent him.

As he rolled the stone between his fingers, his mind began to play tricks on him. He was not sure his father being home was a good thing after all. For the first time he realized that someone would be here to tell him what to do. That meant no more late nights. He would be like all his other friends: "My dad said 'no'." His mother never gave him rules. Jonas cut out the lights, allowing the illumination of the night sky take over.

A light whistling sound came from outside his window. It resembled a cross between wind and a humming bird. It was getting louder and more annoying.

Jonas buried his head into his pillow and wrapped the ends around his ears. He was hoping the whistling would stop. He rolled repeatedly because this sound was becoming more irritating. *What the heck is that?*

Jonas hopped out of bed and went to the window. The sound stopped. It was as if it knew he was there. He looked around the night sky but did not see anything but the moons overhead.

As he walked back towards his bed, a red beam of light brushed the hair on the back of his head. The beam danced in a small circle along his temple as he turned. The laser trailed Jonas as he rested his head into the comfort of his pillow.

Jonas turned over in his bed, unaware he was being tracked by something. When he flipped over, he discovered the red beam of light running across his nose. He quickly noticed a probe, which hovered outside his window.

The machine's intimidating metalwork promised certain destruction. The oversized turret, which sat above its steel body spun back and forth like it was laughing at its victim. Antennae sprouted from the lower portion of its cylinder shaped body.

"Oh no." Jonas ducked under his covers.

Zap!

His pillow blew into fifty pieces. He slipped onto the floor and treaded backwards under his bed. Why was this happening? *Who is doing this?*

"Jonas?" Troupe came smashing through the door with his blaster. "Jonas?"

"Dad?" A voice bellowed from under the bed.

"Son? Are you all right?" The Captain bent down to find Jonas as far under the bed as possible.

"Dad? Watch out!"

The red beam readjusted against the side of Troupe's torso.

Troupe looked up at the probe. "Uh oh..." The way the Captain's eyes rounded signaled his realized defeat.

Slam!

The Captain's stomach exploded.

From his hiding spot, Jonas watched his father's body hit the floor. Troupe's blaster slid under the bed, next to Jonas.

Jonas stared at his father. He could not believe what had just happened. Every dream he ever had was gone. The games of Puk, the stories, and the next few rounds before the Academy were lying on the floor in front of him. His father had beaten these enemies so many times before. How could he be caught off guard? Something had tried to kill him, but it had gotten his father instead.

"Get up on your feet, boy." His father's voice muttered against the floor.

Jonas reached out as far as his arm would stretch. He had his eyes on his father the whole time.

The probe fired, just missing the blaster.

Jonas quickly retracted his arm, catching a couple of deep breaths. He looked back at his dad--he was hoping the probe would not hit him again.

The probe invited itself into the room through the window opening. Tigris had never protected their dwellings with solid windows. Never had an attack come to the most elevated community. The floating machine hovered towards the floor. It was bringing itself closer to the teenager hiding under the bed.

Jonas outstretched his arm until his fingertips touched the end of the blaster. He then quickly snatched it. The teen rolled out into the center of the floor. He stared into the probe's dull black electronic eye. Jonas

suddenly realized he was not shooting stegolizards.

He could see dilation in the lens. The beam that blasted his father was pinpointed on his face. The robotic iris expanded in slight burst and would then shrink to a desired setting as it prepared for its kill.

Jonas lifted the blaster.

The probe aimed, clicked and rotated its guns.

The teen wished this was just a bad game of Puk. Jonas closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger.

His shot slammed into the side of the cylinder shaped body. The turret above trembled like the robot was losing its electronic mind. The killing machine erupted in flames.

The teen wiped the sweat from his eyes and focused on his father. "Dad?" Jonas rolled up to Captain Troupe.

He was lying still with his eyes wide open. His lips quivered as he tried to push words out, "There's so much..."

"Oh, Daddy... Please, Daddy..." Jonas began tucking his father's shirt back in his pants as if he was attempting to put him back together. "Dad!"

"Son... This is my fault... All my fault..." His father's eyes glazed over.

Jonas stared at him. He was speechless. He didn't know whether to hug him or scream. "It's okay, Daddy... It's okay."

Troupe grabbed onto Jonas' pant leg. His grip was strong. "I'm no hero, son... Cordova... Cordova..." The Captain stared into his son's eyes. "So many secrets to share. You must find Str..." Troupe's grip gave way and his hand fell to the floor. His eyes formed a deep dead stare.

"No!" Jonas grabbed him by the shoulders and jerked him back and forth. "Daddy, wake up. Dad?"

The silence of death blanketed over the room. Jonas leaned into his father, clutching his hand.

"Oh my Gods!" a woman's voice shrieked from the doorway. "Why are you allowing this?" She kept throwing her hands up to the sky as if to hit one of the Gods above in hopes they would stop this tragedy.

"Mom..." Jonas ran over to her and wrapped his arms around her. The teen felt worse for his mother than for himself. She had been the dutiful wife waiting all these revolutions to be with her husband. The poor woman always played second best to the Parliamentary Council. All those revolutions of sacrifice amounted to nothing.

The two stood in the doorway with their eyes fixated on Troupe's body. It only took his mother a second to fully realize what had happened to her husband. She started shaking, trembling and twitching.

"No. No. Oh no!" She tried to break away from his grip.

"Mom? Mommy. It's--"

"Get away from me!" His mother broke free as she went to see for herself what had happened.

Jonas watched his mother screaming for Troupe's return. Even though he'd witnessed the whole event, he still could not believe it. His father, who had been away for most of his life, was gone for good. Tears slid

down along his cheeks as his heart went out to his mother. Watching her weep over Troupe's body was more than anyone could bear.

The whistling sound returned. Jonas knew that meant trouble.

"Mom. We have to go. They're coming for us."

His mother ignored his warning as she clung to her husband. She was rocking him back and forth, singing to him.

The whistling sound grew closer.

"Ma?" Jonas yelled, wishing she would get up.

She continued to ignore him.

The sound was right outside the window again.

"Ma?" Jonas ran over and ripped her off Troupe's body. "We need to go. *Now*."

"No. No. I can't leave him." The woman struggled to stay.

"They are going to kill us next. Let's go." With one arm, Jonas flung his mother back into the doorway.

The shadow of the new probe glided along the bedroom wall. Jonas pushed his mother into the hall.

Whack!

The probe fired at him, just missing. Jonas dodged behind his dresser for cover.

Wham! The probe destroyed the entire dresser set.

He hopped up and ran towards his mother where she was crying in the hallway. She kept mumbling something repeatedly. Something about finding a storm.

The probe followed. The sound of the lens was constantly grinding as it was trying to refocus on its target.

Jonas dropped his blaster as he picked up his mother. He hobbled his way down the hall, trying his best to carry her. He was looking around for an escape route. Mini explosions were chasing him. His parents' room seemed the safest place.

Suddenly, whistling sprang down the hall from the living area. Jonas knew he would soon be surrounded. He forced his shoulder through the door and landed on the bedroom floor.

"Mom! Get up!"

She remained curled up in a ball.

"Stop it. It was always just you and me. Now it's still you and me. I can't do this without you," Jonas pleaded.

His mother stopped crying and stared up at him.

"Please, Mommy... You're all I got." Jonas put out his hand.

She stood up slowly, taking it.

The horrid lens clicks of the oncoming probes tapped the air.

"Mom?"

"Your father and I have been hiding--" His mother suddenly flew off the ground. She slammed into the wall and onto the bed. The hole in her back revealed a direct hit by the probe.

"No!" Jonas ran to the bed and dragged his mother to the window. "Come on..."

The teen cradled her into his arms and pushed her through to the outside.

Jonas heaved his body up over the window ledge. He landed face down in the dirt. He discovered his mother leaning up against the wall, holding her side. Her eyes rested upon her son with a glazed stare. "Jonnie? Forgive your father."

"Mom?"

The woman slumped into the dirt.

"Come on, Mom... We have to go." Jonas gracefully lifted her head up to get her attention.

His mother's lifeless body dangled in his arms.

"Oh, no." His face flushed with rage. He stuck his head inside the window.

There were two probes investigating the room. Jonas observed the machines' methodical patterns. He gripped the top of the windowpane. Jonas pulled himself up and swung his strong legs into the dwelling.

The probes pinpointed him immediately. They began firing in random sequences, hoping to hit their moving target.

Jonas hurried through the room and dodged out into the hallway. He lay on the floor staring at his father's blaster. The teen knew that he would meet his parent's fate unless he wiped out these killer machines.

He rolled along the wall trying to gain access to the weapon.

Whack!

An explosion ripped from his parent's room.

Jonas turned to face his attacker. There it was--the biggest probe yet. Unlike the others, it bore a team of five mechanical eyes. Its outer shell was armed with two huge blasters. On its top, the machine had a rotating turret blaster. The blaster's sights trained directly on Jonas.

The blaster was only an arms reach away. The probe was waiting for his next move. Jonas flipped over to the other side of the wall.

Bam!

The wall Jonas was previously leaning against had been blown to rubble. The top turret refocused its guns on his new location within seconds.

This time, Jonas had more of an advantage. When he escaped to the far wall, he managed to pick up his father's blaster. He kept it secretly tucked at his side. He aimed its barrel in the direction of the probe,

then he squeezed the trigger.

Smash!

The blaster tore a hole in the right side of the probe. The mechanical monster was hit but not defeated. It spun around wildly trying to regain control.

Jonas took advantage of the machine's mayhem and ran back down the hallway. He peeked in his parents' room to discover the two probes at a standstill. He raised the blaster and pointed it at the probe furthest away. Dad had always said, shoot the enemy the farthest, first. *Squeeze. Fire.*

Direct hit. The probe blew in twenty tiny directions. The closest probe turned its lens towards the action. It made itself an easier target by keeping its back to the teen.

Jonas fired upon it.

Direct hit! That probe had been turned into flying particles.

Wham!

Jonas was suddenly tossed into the room by a huge blast. Lying on the floor, he turned to find the entire doorway was a skeletal hole. The empty space quickly filled with the monster probe--all three guns trained in his direction.

The monster's electronic eye dilated slowly on its target.

Jonas slowly lifted his blaster. He raised it a little higher with each click of the probe's lens. The probe was tracking his every move as if it were playing a mirror game.

Suddenly, Jonas's forehead had gained the probe's red beam. Feeling the faint heat on his skin, Jonas raised his eyes, noticing he was again a target. It was now or never. He applied pressure to his weapon's trigger. The moisture from two fingers caused a slight slip.

"Come on." Jonas locked his fingers into place.

The probe's side blasters cocked in unison.

Wham! The probe slammed into the wall.

Jonas stared at his steel adversary. He could not believe the machine was still in one piece, less the top turret.

Plop! A silver sphere, the size of a golf ball, was released from the probe. It slowly rolled down towards Jonas.

Jonas did not waste time figuring out what it could be. "Oh, no." He hopped to his feet and jumped out the window. He found himself face to face with his mother's corpse. Jonas grabbed hold of her and tried to lift her. A ticking sound grew from inside the room. He let her down and kissed his mother on her cheek. He wiped his eyes. A steady tone hummed from the room.

Jonas sprang quickly across the sand. At the border of their property stood a sandstone wall. Just as he got over the stone wall, the dwelling sparked in a huge explosion. Parts of the fiery home sailed through the air. The enormous power of the blast lifted him and took Jonas on a horror ride into a nearby field.

Three

Morning light revealed the extent of the damage. Smoke billowed from pockets of the wrecked dwelling. Pieces of a beautiful home were scattered about the yard. Charred memories of a family that was. The long stone wall had large chunks removed from the force of the explosion.

The field was decorated with all kinds of exotic plants. Large rodents with fanged teeth kept scurrying in and out of the newly cut holes in the wall. Next to a solitary piece of sandstone lay Jonas.

He was covered in silt. The back of his shirt was tattered to shreds and soaked with dried blood. His sandy brown hair was scorched in the back. His eyes were sealed shut from the massive swelling of his cheekbones.

"Over here. Mother? Over here," a familiar voice called from the rubble.

"Oh dear. It's Jonas." A woman in her early forties made her way to the beaten teen.

"Is he alive?" Carlen hurried to join the woman.

She knelt down next to Jonas. She began to gently stroke his hair. "Jonas? Honey? Jonas?"

"Mother...I think he's dead."

"Don't be ridiculous, Carlen. Can't you see that he's breathing?"

Jonas started to respond to his Aunt Cleonia's motherly touch. He was calling for his own mother, which sounded like senseless words dribbling from his lips.

"Ooh. Ooh. He's saying something. He's saying something." Carlen pointed at Jonas's mouth. "What's he saying, Mother?"

"Quiet Carlen. I can't hear him." She rubbed his shoulder a bit.

"Ma... Mommy." Jonas squinted at his aunt and could not help but mistake her for his own mother. After all, being sisters, they both had auburn hair, though Cleonia's was a tighter fit around her head. Their light complexion and full, oval-shaped blue eyes could have easily allowed Cleonia to pass for a double, while in his dream.

"Mommy? That's so babyish." Carlen let out a laugh.

"Shut up, you idiot! Don't you take anything seriously? I raised a fool." Aunt Cleonia gently squeezed Jonas's cold hand.

"Mom? No. No. Mom!" Jonas sprung from his deep sleep. The image of his mother rolling over to her death replayed in his mind.

"It's okay, honey. Auntie's here." She grabbed both of his hands.

Jonas sat up slowly, his gaze fixated on the destruction. His eyes were like swollen, dark blue puffballs with slits. *Why did this happen? Where's my mother?* He tried to speak but his words were scrambled. He couldn't think straight. His entire world had been crushed. Of all the people to come to his rescue, he was unlucky enough to get his aunt and Carlen.

"Jonas, what happened?" Carlen sat down next to him.

Jonas just gave him a stoic stare. Carlen looked a bit better through battered eyes. He was able to think of words but not yet capable of putting them in order. His motor skills were slowly returning.

"What happened here?" Carlen thought Jonas had the eyes of a stegolizard but he wasn't about to tell him.

"I don't know, Carlen... someone wanted us dead though." Jonas sucked some air in through his nostrils. "Whoever it was did a good job. Both my parents are dead." Jonas started making odd facial gestures as if he was beginning to cry. "They're both dead."

Aunt Cleonia pulled Jonas in closer to comfort him. "Jonas."

"Get away from me..." Jonas pushed his aunt away forcefully. The last person he wanted to get a hug from was Cleonia. She must be loving this.

"Hey!" Carlen put his hand on Jonas's chest. "Watch it."

Jonas pushed off his cousin's hand. "Don't piss me off, Carlen."

"Carlen, go somewhere," Aunt Cleonia ordered.

"Where, Mother, would you suggest I go?"

"How about to a craft merchant?" Cleonia was clearly still angry about the vehicle. She turned and smiled at her nephew. "Sweetheart... I know you're upset."

"Where are my parents?"

Aunt Cleonia again attempted to soften Jonas by placing her hand on his knee. "We have to stick together now--"

"Where are their bodies?" Jonas wanted to see his folks one last time.

"We had them moved to the medi-center." She wiped her wet eyes as she tried to remain strong and in charge. "We couldn't find you... Now we did. Thank the Gods you are alive."

Jonas studied his aunt closely. He realized how hurt she was, too. Maybe she wasn't all that horrible.

"It's bad enough I lost my sister-in-law... I don't know what I might have done if I'd lost my favorite nephew, too."

Favorite nephew? Where did that come from? Jonas wondered. Usually she only puts me down.

"I know I may be overstepping my bounds, but I would like to ask you to stay with us. At least until the Academy begins. What do you say?"

Jonas just stared at her through his swollen slits. Even though he'd come to the realization that she was not all that bad, he still preferred to live in the pile of rubble where his dwelling once stood.

Cleonia read her nephew's mind. "It's only for a season?"

Jonas turned his attention toward the property where he'd grown up and spent so much of his life. He reached into his pocket searching for his new stone. It had vanished. He fiddled through his other pocket but the stone was gone. Then he shifted his attention on his aunt. "I don't want to go to the Academy."

"Now stop talking silly, dear... this was everything your father dreamed of."

Jonas used all his strength to lift himself up off the ground. He gripped the large sandstone rock and gained his balance.

"Where are you going, honey?"

"I've got to see something." Jonas took a wobbly step toward his yard. He had to find that stone. It was all he had left of his world.

"I think you should stay right here until the ambucare arrives."

"I am not going to any medi-center. I'm fine." Jonas waved her off as he slowly walked over to the rubble.

His aunt continued to call him, but he ignored her. He knew he should take her advice, but he would never admit to it.

When he came to the smoldering area that used to be his room, he looked for any surviving moon rocks. He absolutely needed to find that stone.

"Jonas, what are you doing?"

"Nothing." He didn't feel like telling Carlen what he was looking for.

"Hey, Jonas, what are these?" Carlen was pointing to a pile of small rocks.

"My rocks." Jonas kept his eyes aimlessly on the ground. He kept searching for the only one that mattered.

"What's this one?" Carlen held up the glowing rock from Venus's moon.

"It's nothing. A rock from the mother land." Jonas was so focused that he didn't realize the medics had arrived.

They were standing next to Aunt Cleonia with their gear in hand. "That the boy?"

"Yes, sir. He's still in shock, so please forgive him if he seems testy."

Jonas finally strolled over to his aunt. He broke from his concentration on the ground. He was astonished to see that he'd never heard the medics arrive.

"Hello, son."

"I'm not your son. I'm also not going to the medi-center. I'm fine." Jonas was intent on finding his memento.

"No need to get upset. We'll give you a quick look over and together we will make a decision." The medic smiled. "Fair enough?"

Jonas scanned one more portion of the ground, and there it was, lying where his bed had been. He swiped the stone from the ground and stuffed it deep into his pocket. "Fine." Jonas sat on the portable stool the medics popped open.

"Do you know who his father is?" Aunt Cleonia chimed in.

"Was," Jonas quickly corrected her.

Cleonia wiped her left eye, apparently upset by his comment.

"Actually, I served the same time as your dad... During the early years of the Enforcement."

"Enforcement?" Carlen stepped into the conversation. "What's that?"

The medic looked sternly at Carlen. "Not something I choose to talk about."

"Don't worry about him. Carlen is to be a second year learner at the Academy," Cleonia bragged. "He made the Master's List this year."

"Then he should already know about the Enforcement," the medic said sarcastically.

Jonas released a tiny grin. This guy was cool. He loved watching anything that made Carlen look foolish. Even with the entire trauma that had just entered into his life, Carlen's stupidity made everything better--for the moment.

"Okay, son, this won't hurt a bit." The medic injected a needle through Jonas's arm.

"What's that?" Carlen asked.

"Can't you shut up?" Jonas shot his cousin a dead stare.

"Lay off me, Jonas."

Aunt Cleonia chimed in, "Now, boys--"

"We need to get you to the center, now." The medic was reading the levels on the needle.

"Why? He wants to come home with me. Right, Jonas?"

Jonas looked at Carlen walking around them. "On second thought... I will go to the center."

Evening swooped down upon the Earth as the moons lit up the sky. They were especially bright. The entire grounds of the medi-center were so well illuminated that every shrub was easily visible from the window of Jonas's room.

Jonas lay in his bed that evening staring at Jenco, the second moon. Jenco was the largest of the three satellites that orbited Earth. It would probably have been the first settlement of the Sapiens when they migrated. However, its weak atmosphere was only able to accommodate a small population.

Jonas rubbed the itchy wound on his left arm. He was thinking about the trip he and his father had gone on three rotations ago. It was a special vacation, one that his parents argued over for months afterward. Captain Troupe felt that Jonas should go along on a mission as a present for his thirteenth birthday. His mother tried to protect him from what the second moon had become. As usual, Dad won the fight.

"Jonas?"

"Coming Dad."

"Stay close to me. Even though the Enforcers control this giant rock, there are still dangers around." Captain Troupe grabbed his son by the arm as they walked past three stocky men.

Jonas noticed their foreheads were larger than any he had ever seen. He placed his hand on his own forehead just to make sure his was still normal.

"Come on, son... Let's get inside."

"Why are those people different, Dad?"

"What do you mean?"

Jonas tapped his forehead again. "Are they from a different planet?"

"No, son. They are the Crows."

"The what?"

Ignoring his son's question, he said, "Come on... I'll take you to see the Enforcement's newest space weapon."

Jonas got out of his hospital bed and walked over to the window. He wondered if the all-powerful weapon was still being housed on Jenco.

The whole moon was maintained by the imprisoned Crows and supervised by the Enforcement. Dad said they weren't really slaves. He said they had a choice. They were conflict criminals and had been captured. Their choice was between life on the holding moon, Luna, or repaying a life debt on Jenco.

Jonas knew that no one with any brains would want to be dropped on Luna. The rock was the simplest of the three. No atmosphere. The prisoners were given oxygen bags and lead shoes. However, they either fried or froze to death. Food and shelter did not exist. Being dropped off on Luna was a politically correct way of giving someone the death chamber.

He remembered that trip as if it happened yesterday. He enjoyed being with his father and the other Enforcers. No other boy his age had been to the crater mines or had ever seen moon camps. The moon camps were places where hundreds of Crows slept in the evening. Jonas recalled how horrible the camps smelled. Granted, it was not a vacation like the type his other friends used to go on, but it was still two rounds off from daily schooling.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" A soft voice interrupted his memory.

Jonas turned to see who was talking to him. Standing in the doorway with the hall's manmade light brushing the side of her face was one of the most stunning girls Jonas had ever seen. She was absolutely beautiful. Piercing green eyes with golden red hair illuminated by the moons' reflections. Her body was slender yet muscular.

"Hello."

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" The girl started flipping through a folder. "Mister...?"

"Jonas." He volunteered his name in order to halt her paper search. He was captivated by her presence.

"Mr. Troupe." The girl closed her folder and smiled at Jonas.

Jonas could not take his gaze off her. Then he remembered how he looked. He felt embarrassed and quickly turned his head.

"Mr. Troupe? You need to stay in bed."

"Fine." Jonas strolled over to his bunk with his battered face hidden. Once he was under the cover of the deep shadow that sheltered his bunk, Jonas felt more secure. He sat down and placed his hands on his lap. "So now that you know my name, what's yours?"

"My name is Nurse's Assistant." The girl tilted her head and flashed a stern smile.

"Oh... I get it." Jonas realized this was to remain a business thing.

"Now the medical officer will be in to see you first thing during sun up. So please get a good night's sleep."

"When do I get out of here?"

"Considering the only major injuries you suffered were mostly abrasions, I would hope in two suns' time."

"Great."

The girl had a bewildered look on her face.

"With my aunt, I could easily do a couple of rounds in here." Jonas let out a sarcastic laugh.

The girl responded with a chuckle, tucked her folder under her arm and left the room.

Jonas thought she was the hottest girl he had ever seen. Too bad, she seemed uninterested. However, she did laugh at his joke. He lay down and pulled the sheets up to his waist. The trip to Jenco was still heavy in his memory. Then he remembered what both his parents mentioned before they died. His father talked about a secret and a place called 'Str' and his mother said something about a storm. *What was that all about?*

The door to his room popped open. With her arms wide open, Aunt Cleonia stood in the doorway. "Hello, kiddo."

Four

"Good sun, Aunt Cleonia."

Carlen stayed back behind his mother waiting for his invite inside.

"Hey, Carlen." Jonas felt badly about snapping at him yesterday.

Carlen perked up and walked past his mother. "Hey, Jonas." He handed Jonas a packet.

"What's this?"

"Open it," Cleonia cut in.

Jonas ripped the top of the packet open. He tucked his fingers inside and pulled out a small stack of papers. The one on top was a different color than the rest.

"From the Academy?"

"And I was able to get you into the common house a couple of rounds earlier. So you'll only have to put up with us for about seven suns."

"Thanks." His grin quickly faded from his lips. "I don't think I want to attend the Academy."

"Oh, Jonas. Don't say such a thing. Your father--"

"--dreamed about me following in his footsteps." Jonas rattled the packet a bit.

"Jonas? You have to go. At least give it a try." Cleonia folded her hands together in a pleading gesture.

"Fine. But if I don't like it--"

"--then you can stay with me," his aunt finished.

"Just the incentive you wanted." Carlen laughed.

"Shut up, you idiot." Cleonia forced a laugh so she did not look abusive.

"Make you a deal?" Jonas smiled at his aunt. "I will let you know tomorrow what I want to do."

"There is a bit of family business as well." Cleonia walked over and thumbed through the packet. "Here." She pulled out a paper, which was snuggled in the center of the bunch.

Jonas read the paper. His eyes widened. "Holy--"

"Hopefully that will help you decide." Cleonia tapped Carlen on the shoulder. "We will pick you up tomorrow at half sun. Enjoy the rest of your stay."

"Where are you going? My officer told me I was going home today."

"Unfortunately, they changed your discharge. I would keep you company but we have a ton to do."

Jonas looked at Carlen. As much as he hated to be around him because of the craft incident, he was someone to talk to at least. "How about you, Carlen?"

A gentle knock came on the door.

Jonas noticed it was the nurse's assistant from yesterday.

"Carlen can stay if he wants to," Cleonia said.

Carlen watched the nurse's assistant come in with food and drink.

"Hey, if you want me to stay I will. Anything for my little cousin." Carlen grinned at the girl.

She returned the smile.

Jonas hopped to his feet, noticing the friendly exchange between the two of them. "I asked because I need Carlen to do me a big favor. Huge."

"Anything for you, Jonas." Carlen puffed out his chest hoping to capture her attention.

"Great. Could you find my friends and tell them where I am?"

"Now? Today?" Carlen transformed back into his usual self.

"Well, you did just say you would do anything."

"Fine."

Cleonia gave Jonas a kiss on the cheek. She pointed to the packet. "Put that away."

"Right," Jonas said.

They left Jonas and the nurse's assistant in the room.

As Jonas was putting his packet back together, the nurse's assistant brought his food over to him. She glanced at his face and gently rubbed her finger along his puffy cheekbone. "It has gone down quite a bit."

Jonas loved that she was touching him. He almost wished he was swollen all over. He sat on his bed, fumbling with his papers.

The nurse's assistant looked over at him. "The Academy?"

"Yeah... Not my first choice."

"That's a shame. My father's a master there."

"Really?"

"Really. He teaches the small crafts class."

"Small cra--" Jonas stopped his question, remembering small crafts were ten man battle ships.

"He's really strict."

"You mean in class?"

"No. At home." She giggled and turned away, blushing.

"I really don't want to go, but my dad is kind of making me."

"So tell him you don't want it."

"That's kind of hard... He was killed three days ago."

"I'm sorry." The nurse's assistant prepared his food tray. She brought it over to his bed. "May I ask how?"

"Well, it's the reason I'm here. Something tried to kill us. I can't explain it. They were robotic probes of some sort. They came right into our dwelling and started shooting."

"Oh, Gods." The nurse's assistant sat down next to Jonas on the bunk. "How did you escape?"

Just as Jonas was about to tell the story, a short stocky man walked in the room. He had a pail full of cleaning supplies. His forehead was huge and his face scrunched together. He was definitely a primitive like they'd learned about in class. The parts of skin that came through his clothes had thick hair sprouting out making his dark complexion appear even darker.

The nurse's assistant halted her words and cautiously watched every action of the man.

Jonas leaned over and whispered in the girl's ear. "Who is that?"

"He's the maintenance man," she whispered back, keeping her gaze trained on the man. "A Crow."

The man kept to himself as he wiped down the chrome furniture in the room.

Jonas unknowingly grabbed his packet upside down and the papers fanned out across the floor.

The man tucked his polishing rag in his pocket. He reached down and picked up the colored paper.
"Academy?"

Jonas nodded.

The man shook his head in a dissenting manner.

"What's wrong with the Academy?" the girl demanded.

"Bunch of killers." The man scooped up the rest of the papers and handed them in two piles to Jonas.
"You do not look like a killer."

"I think you need to leave." The nurse's assistant stood up defensively. "Don't make me call Enforcement."

"That's okay. I'm on my way." The man gathered his pail and moseyed out.

Jonas checked to make sure the man was not lingering in the halls. Then he grabbed a cup and filled it with fluid. "What's with him?"

"Those people, if you can call them that, hate us for no reason."

"I learned that we chased them off this planet when we migrated here."

"That's just not true," the girl huffed, and stomped out of the room.

"Sorry." Jonas just sat there, bewildered at her attitude. He could not understand it. His master at second school had taught them all about the Provisional Settlements.

The colonies migrated from their home planet, Venus, in order to escape its withering atmosphere. His master would not lie. Then again, Captain Troupe had always been at odds with his masters.

Jonas recollected a time when his father punched out a master who suggested that there was a small village of Crows and Sapiens living harmoniously.

Jonas lay in his bunk. He was now anxiously awaiting his release tomorrow. The nurse's assistant gave him the cold shoulder the rest of the evening. Maybe Aunt Cleonia's dwelling wouldn't be that bad. After all, it was only for a couple of rounds. Gawking at the empty bed above him, he kept closing his eyes and trying to will himself to sleep. Nothing was working. He reached under his pillow and pulled out his father's stone. Jonas rolled it between his fingers as he hoped for guidance. Maybe he would read over the packet he received. When he put the stone away, he thought the small rock went into his pocket but it fell in between the sheets.

Jonas reached over at his bedside table and seized the papers. He held them opposite the window so he would get the moon's illumination. The light would provide a sufficient reading environment.

The top paper was his curse. The acceptance letter into the Academy. How he wished his father would forgive him if he did not go. Thumbing through the papers, he searched for his parents' trust. The Parliamentary Council always took care of their officers and their families.

While going through the packet, Jonas detected a red dot flickering on the top right corner of the papers. He shuffled the packet up and down but the dot remained in place. Jonas laid the packet down on his bed. The dot flickered on the wall in front of him. *Oh, no*, he thought. Cautiously turning toward the window, he noticed a probe hovering right outside the window opening. It was like the others, which had destroyed his family. This one had its lens locked right on him.

"What do you want from me?" Jonas vaulted onto the floor and quickly rolled against the opposite wall.

Crack! The probe unchained its firepower into the wall. Jonas stared at his bed. The papers from the packet were mixed with all the charred remains of his sleeping area.

Jonas scanned the doorway. It was slightly ajar. He stayed low, sliding himself along the floor, towards his escape. The familiar sound of the clicking lens stung every nerve.

As he slithered along the floor, the red tracer light flickered only a few inches in front of him. The killer robot tried to get aim of its target as the dot drew closer. Jonas wedged his fingers into the door's opening. He pulled it open, flooding the room with light from the hallway. Jonas got up to his knees. He was about to leap into the exit when a shadowy figure blocked the door. The dark man was bearing a long, rod-like weapon.

The figure took the weapon and pierced the probe, pushing it into the wall, knocking its lens to the floor.

Jonas took advantage of the opportunity and fled the room. Curious, the teen looked back to see who his rescuer was. It was the clean up man from earlier in the day.

The man was bashing the evil machine into a useless dented can. He continually hit the probe with his mop until it dropped.

Jonas stood in the doorway, afraid to come back into the room.

"You better run." The man caught his breath as he rubbed his mop handle down with a dirty rag.

"You beat the thing with a mop?" Jonas thought it was some kind of fighting gear the man used.

"These probes have the Republic written all over them." The man wiped his sweaty face with the same rag he'd used to clean the mop. "For some reason, they're after you." The man looked sternly at Jonas. "They will get you if you don't watch yourself."

"Why would they want to kill me?" Jonas figured he was safe in the medi-center.

"Listen. Get your things together and follow me."

For the first time, Jonas, who trusted everybody, was not sure if he should trust this person. He was a Crow.

"Get your things," the man shouted.

Jonas realized that this man had, in fact, just saved his life. He ran over to his bed, discovering that his papers were unsalvageable. He ran to the corner and gathered up some of his belongings. He tossed them into his backpack. Jonas knew more probes were on the way. The teen headed down the hallway.

"Hey!" the man shouted.

"Huh?" Jonas stopped.

The man gestured for Jonas to follow.

Both of them ran down the opposite direction of the narrow hall. Every step had Jonas looking behind him. He was expecting more probes just like he'd experienced at his dwelling. The maintenance man stopped at the end of the hallway. He looked at Jonas and pointed to the bare wall.

"You must keep going."

Jonas grew extremely nervous. Maybe this person was setting him up. There was absolutely nowhere to go. "Where?" Jonas pointed back down the hallway. "There?"

"Here." The man tapped three times on the top right corner of the wall. The entire end of the hallway opened up.

The opening led to a dark, secret corridor. The ceiling dipped low, which only made the passage more eerie.

"At the end, you will find a dracosaur. It will take you where you need to go."

"Where do I need to go?"

"You will be taken to a Safe Zone. There will be many people like me. You will be safe there. I promise."

"Crows?" Jonas asked.

The man heard a clicking sound approaching. "Get outta here. I will come by later."

Jonas stepped into the black passage. He was about to thank the man but before he could get a word out, the wall was slammed shut. He thought he spotted the nurse's assistant poking her head around the corner. He wanted to go back and tell her to run. He hoped the nice Crow would protect her, too.

Jonas glared down the black tunnel. There was no sign of light. He squinted his eyes in hope that his pupils would adjust.

"Oh, great." He started down the corridor using his hands as a guide against the cold wall. He thought about the dracosaur that was supposedly waiting for him. Jonas feared those huge lizards more than the probes. He'd never seen one in person.

The only reference Jonas had about the dracos was from the stories his father used to tell him. In the early years of settlement, the Council ordered all dracos to be terminated. They were dangerous. They would constantly leave huge remains of scaly skin behind, which decomposed and caused disease. Captain Troupe said dracos would eat anything they could get their razor sharp teeth into, including humans. If that was true, then this man was leading Jonas to certain death. *That doesn't make sense*, he thought. *If he wanted me to die, he could've just let the probe finish me off*. Random thoughts clouded his ability to think straight. He would just do as he was instructed.

With every careful step down the tunnel, the air became cooler and more humid. Another thought popped into his head. How would he get to his aunt's dwelling? Was she okay or had the probes visited her, too? Then the most pressing issue. What was the place his parents mentioned?

"Yes." His eyes widened as best they could through the swelling.

A small light flickered further down the tunnel. Jonas prayed that this was the end of the passageway. With each step, the illumination grew larger. *That's it*. He trudged more enthusiastically. He stopped

using his hands to lead him. The ceiling was way too low for an all-out sprint or he would have done so.

He reached the mouth of the tunnel. His escape route brought him to a small hidden swamp at the mountain's foot. Jonas discovered the medi-center sat high up on the mountain. With the three moons floating in the sky, he had plenty of vision. There was one thing missing though. The dracosaur. Maybe that was a good thing.

Jonas could just run to his aunt's dwelling and warn her. That would be the best bet. He did not want to go to a Safe Zone anyway.

A flat sandy plain opened up beyond the swamp. A path could not be too far away. Jonas ripped the hospice band from around his wrist and headed out of the swamp. He carefully went around the water so he would not fall in.

Raaaaaahhhhhh.

Jonas froze at the sound of the faint roar. He shifted his eyes but did not see anything. His next step was extra cautious.

Raaaaaahhhhhh.

Jonas stopped again. *What is that?* The roar was a little stronger this time.

Jonas turned towards a crackling noise in the wooded part of the swamp. Something large was breaking its way through the viney trees. It was headed quickly in his direction.

Raaaahhhhhhh!

"Gods alive!" Jonas watched a huge lizard rumble towards him.

The animal was not stopping. It was in a full charge. Its long bony tail stood straight up in the air. The end of the tail bore a spiny club-like weapon. The lizard's eyes were deep red. Its scales reminded Jonas of ocean waves as they rippled with the steady motion of the beast.

Jonas dove into the murky swamp, saving himself from being trounced. He poked his head out of the brown water. The animal turned around and walked back to where Jonas had stood.

The lizard parked his huge body and stared at the teen with one of its huge, bubble-like eyes. Jonas waited safely in the swamp.

"Are you a dracosaur?" Jonas asked from the security of the swamp.

The giant lizard just kept staring at him through those large spheres in the center of its head.

Jonas stood up in the water and stood in place. "Are you going to take me to the Safe Zone?"

The lizard shifted forward and let out a grunt.

Jonas plopped back down into the water.

They studied each other.

Jonas thought maybe this animal had the ability to understand him. It just responded to his question with a jerk and sound. "The Safe Zone. That's where I need to go."

The animal bared his large mouth. The beast let out a gentle growl.

"You're no beast. You don't even have teeth." Then Jonas thought about his father's stories. *This can't be a dracosaur.*

The lizard plopped its orange-scaled body to the ground. It lay along the water's edge.

Jonas stood up again and slowly approached the animal. The lizard remained in its lazy locale. It was very calm. Jonas held his hands out, demonstrating to the beast that he meant no harm. He advanced cautiously. Jonas admired the animal's beautiful armored plates along his spine. They matched the lizard's exotic tail. Jonas realized this animal was harmless.

He caressed his hand up along its natural armor. "Easy, fella."

The lizard relished the attention and began to roll its eyes back into its head.

"You aren't mean at all." With each stroke along the animal, Jonas gained more courage. "You like me, huh?"

The lizard jerked his head and let out a loud roar. Jonas bolted back into the water. Once safe, he sat up, noticing the animal had not budged.

"Okay... maybe you don't like me." Jonas stood up and wiped his pants free of muck. "What am I supposed to do? Where do I go?"

The lizard started shifting its body from left to right. Its head slightly jerked up and down.

"Oh. You want me to hop on your back."

The lizard answered Jonas by rocking its body with more force.

"I'm right?"

The lizard jerked its head again.

Five

The night sky hid behind the sun as it cracked through the horizon. The moons were vanishing beyond the reddish hue. The land was barren. Few trees dressed the landscape. The only protection the area could count on was the vast hills that encompassed the valley.

Jonas was tucked in between the heavy plates that ran up and down the draco's spine. The animal slowly trotted toward a collection of lights at the base of the hills.

Suddenly the dracosaur stopped. The animal's eyes reddened as it lowered its upper body. Jonas thought it was some sort of an attack stance because it had done the same thing to him at the swamp. The animal scouted the nearby area as if it were hunting something. It began to move again. However, this time it puffed out its armor plates and seemed to crawl more than walk. Jonas quickly regained his balance. He suddenly had more room because the wedge he sat in was not as tight.

As the animal made its way towards the lights, it swayed back and forth, showing off its natural protection. Jonas felt like he was in a large rope swing. He slammed up against the plates with every shift of the drac's spine.

The reason for the animal's strange behavior became very clear. Jonas and the dracosaur were

surrounded by five long-tooths. The sabercats conformed to offensive stances. Jonas knew that meant an attack was eminent. He clutched the drac's plates and buried himself deeper into its back. The sabercats released low, vibrating purrs. They inched closer to their dinner. Jonas could not sit back and become a meal. He recalled that the dracosaur responded to him in the swamp. "Hit them with your tail. Hit them!" Jonas slapped the huge lizard on its back.

The drac opened its mouth and sounded a terrifying roar. The animal leaned back onto its hind legs, rolling Jonas down its back. The huge lizard pounced forward, crushing the sabercat beneath its feet. Jonas wrapped his arms around the animal's rear plates. He prayed to the Gods that he wouldn't fly off his precarious spot. With one swift motion, the angry lizard whipped its club-like tail across the path, sending a sabercat into a nearby tree. The sabercat hit the trunk with such force that it got wedged into it. Jonas could not believe that his animal friend had such tremendous power.

The other sabercats retreated into the woods. The drac regained its stance and grunted loudly. The red in its eyes began to slowly vanish.

Jonas could see a small city notched in the center of the valley. He wondered what was waiting for him. He nervously clung to his sack.

The draco continued its way over a smooth trail as if nothing had happened. Jonas noticed a huge rock wall, which protected the hidden settlement. Above the stone wall, a strand of tangled wires ran the length of the village. The entrance was guarded by two human silhouettes standing in front of it. The draco picked up its pace as it noticed the end of its journey was near.

This must be the Safe Zone, he thought.

"Halt there, drac." One of the men stepped out of the shadows. Jonas could not believe how ugly the guard was.

"It's a Sapien," the other man shouted as he drew his blaster.

The dracosaur came to a sudden stop. It branded its fiercest face and roared at the man with the blaster.

The unarmed man approached Jonas with his arms up in the air to demonstrate to the animal that he meant it no harm. Jonas felt more confident, because he realized his animal friend would defend him. "What do you want?"

"I was sent here," Jonas answered.

"I wasn't talking to you, boy." The guard gestured his partner to come closer with the blaster.

The drac hummed a low-pitched warning.

"How did this Sapien find us?" The man cocked his blaster again as he ignored the drac's sounds.

"I don't know but he will have to be eliminated."

"Eliminated?" Jonas clenched his sack again. He grew nervous because the guards were no longer concerned about the dracosaur. "A man like you sent me here. He told me to come to the Safe Zone."

Both men laughed.

"It's true. He works at the medi-center."

"This Sapien is obviously mentally ill." The guard waved his finger at his partner. "Go ahead, Zeek, kill

him." He stepped aside.

"My pleasure."

Jonas stiffened up suddenly. He could not believe the person at the hospital had set him up.

The man put the blaster right up to Jonas's face. "The only good Sapien is a dead one." The drac released a violent bark and whipped its tail into the guard, knocking his weapon from his hand.

Jonas could not understand why this drac was protecting him. After all, it was a Crow that owned him.

"No!" a dark figure yelled from the road.

Jonas turned to see the man from the medi-center waving his arms.

"Leave him be. The Sapien belongs to me."

Belongs to me? Jonas was not sure if he heard the man correctly. Since when did he belong to anyone?

The guard was holding his bruised hand. "Darden?"

"Yes, it's me. Don't shoot the boy."

"Yeah. Don't shoot the boy," Jonas chimed in defensively.

The guard shot his dark eyes at Jonas again. "Quiet, Sapien."

"No problem," Jonas said with a smile.

"Darden? How do you know this boy?"

"Someone was trying to assassinate him--at the medi-center, of all places." Darden gestured to the dracosaur to lie down.

The drac slowly dipped to the ground. Jonas looked at his new friend, Darden, and understood he had to dismount. Darden approached the dracosaur and patted him on his forehead. "Good girl, Chinka. Good girl."

"Come on, Darden. He can't stay here." The guard joggled his head.

"He won't betray us. I have a feeling about this one. He is not like the others."

"How do you know?" The guard stepped into Darden's face.

Darden turned and smiled at his dracosaur. "Have you ever seen Chinka so protective of someone?" Darden looked at Jonas.

Jonas was so confused that he figured he would ask questions later.

Darden kicked the dracosaur in the rear. "Chinka... Good night." It hopped up and ran off.

"Where is it going?" Jonas asked.

"She needs to always be waiting in the swamps. Her job is to transport any Crows that need a safe place," Darden responded as he led Jonas into the village.

It reminded Jonas of another place he had seen previously. The city was a perfect blend between a spaceport and primitive living. The Crows did their best to emulate Sapien living. There were small dwellings along the outskirts, each holding a single family. Few lights were still burning from earlier that evening. Jonas recollected a trip to the farthest moon, Jenco. This was an exact replica of that.

He knew that these people used to inhabit caves at one time, but the Enforcers flushed them out simply by tossing explosives into them. That would usually wipe out an entire family starting with the babies and ending with the grandparents. The only people awake were the guards.

"We'll stay there for the day." Darden pointed to a large mud dwelling. "At night, you can take off."

"Take off? I don't know how to get back. How would I find my aunt?"

"We will look on the terrain grid before you leave."

Darden approached the round dwelling. He nudged the wooden door open with his hairy knuckles. "Go ahead."

Jonas entered.

As the teen quickly glanced around, he could see many objects that were foreign to him. One wall was decorated with grinded stones that could double as knife blades. They came in many different sizes. He was impressed with the fine craftsmanship each blade had. Some of them had handles carved from thick tree branches. As much technology as the Sapiens had, they could never create such beautiful tools.

"So, what do you think?" Darden stood next to his collection with pride.

"They are cool. How did you get these?" Jonas asked as he glided his fingers along a large blade.

"They are from generations past. My parents' grandparents used them for hunting, cooking and just about anything you can think of," Darden said with obvious pride.

"Are they dead?" Jonas looked at Darden sincerely.

"Well, my grandparents died naturally but..." Darden looked like he was about to cry as his pride ran away.

"Yeah?"

He sucked in a deep breath and wiped his eyes with his hairy hands. "The Sapiens got to my family. I was on an exploration. They were searching for a place they'd heard of. They say it's like the heavens."

"I don't understand." Jonas watched as Darden's lips began to quiver.

"They were on a quest to live without fear. The place is a place called Strom. Ever hear of it?"

Jonas's eyes grew wide. That had to be the place his father and mother were talking about that night. His mother said 'storm' but that had to be the place. "No." He did not trust this man enough to give him a full account of his parent's death.

"Anyway..." Darden sighed. "They were killed by a small group of Enforcers."

Jonas noticed Darden was embracing a wooden figure, which resembled a boy. The man kept patting it. "What's that?"

"A gift from my son."

"You have a son?"

"He was with my family the day they were murdered." Darden twitched.

Jonas felt badly for this man. He'd lost everyone who was close to him. They had a common bond.

"Oh... is this yours?" Darden rearranged a leather purse, which was strapped to his chest. He opened it and pulled out the stone that Jonas's father had given him.

Jonas quickly searched his own pockets. "Where did you get that?"

"You left it behind at the medi-center." Darden's lips curled and he outstretched his hand to give the stone back to Jonas.

A loud knock came at the door. Darden quickly retracted his hand and pushed Jonas into an adjacent room. "Stay there. No person knocks on the door this late at night." Darden headed towards the door but quickly ran back to Jonas. "Hide yourself."

Jonas listened as Darden answered the door cautiously.

Darden began arguing with a man. It sounded just like one of the guards at the village's entrance.

"I had no choice, my friend," the man's voice said.

"Of course you had a choice. Of course you did," Darden's voice fired back angrily.

"He should be here shortly," the man rebutted.

"The boy trusted me. When did you talk to him?" Darden's voice said.

"Shortly after you left the gates."

"I've got to get Jonas out of here." Darden's voice got quieter.

Jonas tilted his head slightly to catch a better listen. He was certain that the other man had called the Old Republic on Darden.

"Forget it. He might be a nice kid, but he is still a Sapien," the man said.

"He's different," Darden pleaded. "Much different."

Jonas frantically scanned the room for a place to hide. The only thing he spotted was a closet and a bed. He walked around the room, making sure not to attract any premature attention.

"I am sorry Darden... He will be handed over to the Old Republic."

Jonas stepped softly over to his bag. He bent down to pick it up.

A loud knock was heard at the main door.

Jonas sprang straight up.

"Here they are now," the voice said joyfully.

"You better not open that door," Darden warned.

"They will kill you too, Darden, if you try and stop them." The man paused to hear more knocking. "Then you will have died for a Sapien."

"So what? This has to stop sometime," Darden said.

"It will stop as soon as you hand the boy over."

Jonas heard the strange man's footsteps approach the doorway. He was growing nervous. They had finally gotten him. This time they would not use probes.

"Darden... The boy is not typical. He is the son of Captain Troupe."

"Troupe?" Anger grew in Darden's voice. "Troupe?"

"Yes. 'The Butcher' himself," the man responded.

Jonas was dumfounded. *How did Darden know my father?* Why did they just refer to his father as a butcher? *What's that supposed to mean?* He discovered another collection of primitive tools, which were spread out along a small table.

"Hello, friend." Another voice joined the conversation.

Jonas's eyes widened as he realized that the Emperor's men had entered the dwelling.

"Where is the boy?" the new voice asked.

"In that room," Darden's voice declared. "Please... Take him."

Jonas could not understand Darden's sudden change of heart. He glanced around the room for a quick way to escape. There was none. Jonas quickly grabbed one of the tools that rested on the table. It was a stone blade. He clutched it by its wooden handle and stared at the bed.

"In here?" The thumping of a hand pressed against the door.

"Yes," Darden confessed. "Before you open it... May I leave?"

"On no, my friend. You will be coming with us."

"But why? I am handing you the boy," Darden pleaded.

"You are still guilty of hiding him in the first place."

The door burst wide open. Two men stood there draped in black cloaks. Their huge foreheads protruded through the overlapping hoods. One had a blaster hidden at his side.

"Where's the boy?"

"He's got to be around here someplace." The man with the weapon started to investigate the room. He lifted his blaster and kicked open a closet door. "Gotcha!"

"You found him?"

"No. Only wishful thinking." The man walked back over to the doorway. "Darden. Get in here."

Darden arrived at the door. "What's the problem now?"

"You said he was in this room." The man held his palm open.

"He was in here. Honest." Darden poked his head into the room.

The other man scanned the walls, noticing there were no windows. "Where could this boy have possibly gone?"

Darden pointed. "Look under the bed."

Both men immediately dropped to their knees. The man with the blaster forced his weapon under the unmade bed.

"Well?" Darden asked.

"Nothing."

"I promise you... the Moon Gods as my witness. The boy was here."

"Save it, Darden." The man fit the nozzle of his weapon directly into the gap under Darden's chin. "I am quite sure the Old Republic will want an explanation."

"Where are you taking me?"

"You will be in the prison camp on Cordova. There the Emperor will deal with you." The man gestured to the guards to take Darden out of the dwelling.

The men led Darden out of the room, slamming the door behind them. The room sat quietly. The only things in it were the bed and an old dresser.

The bed started to shake as the thick covers slid off onto the floor. Jonas emerged from its center, full of sheep's wool. He spit out a wad of stuffing, which had dried his mouth. Jonas pulled the rest of his body from the hole he had cut in the mattress. He covered the bed up once again with all of the covers. Jonas withdrew to the closet and sat down inside on the floor. He pulled the door closed, figuring this would be a safe place until the moons came out tonight. All he had to do was figure out a way past any guards.

Jonas thought he felt something poking him in the side of his leg. He looked around but did not see anything. His mind must have played a trick on him as he remembered that Darden had his father's stone. He needed to get that back. He knew where Darden was going. He would need to get there. If his father had done it, he figured he could, too.

The image of his mother suddenly entered his mind. He thought about her as if she were still alive. He just couldn't get over the fact that she was gone. It didn't seem real. Then, as if he'd been hit in the face with reality's punch, part of him completely understood that he would never see her smile or watch her crazy mannerisms again. He just curled up in the corner of the dark closet and cried himself to sleep.

The day passed without further incident. No one came back into the room. Jonas was so anxious that he could not keep still. Staying in a closet for hours was definitely not comfortable. Jonas had checked out the rest of Darden's dwelling. He lifted a nice little blaster from the Crow's bedroom.

The blaster must have been special. It was half the size of anything Jonas had ever before seen. It had cool inscriptions along the chrome barrels, but he couldn't read them. The words were written in

Crintallo , Crow alphabet. He knew it had to be a keepsake of Darden's. That made it even more worth it. *He turned my butt in--I'll kill him with his own blaster.*

His search also led him to a map, which was very useful--considering he didn't have any idea where the dracosaur had taken him. Jonas looked over the map carefully. The tremendous details of the mountains and the valleys made planning his escape easier.

He located Niles and ran his finger down the parchment scouting for his location. Niles was the city where his aunt lived. Nothing seemed to be marked to help him find it. *There*. Jonas spotted a valley, which was nestled at the bottom of three mountains. In the center of the valley he noticed a tiny dot. *This has to be the Safe Zone* . Jonas then ran his finger along the map until he stopped on a square, which was located on top of one of the mountains. He knew it had to be the medi-center. Thoughts of Darden's betrayal constantly came into his mind.

Jonas just couldn't understand it. One minute the man was protecting him like a son. The next thing, Darden turned him in.

That's it. It had something to do with my father. Jonas remembered that when Darden's friend mentioned his father, Darden switched his loyalty within seconds. *Why does he hate my father? The guy was a hero.* Now he could not wait to get into the Academy and to fulfill his father's destiny.

Jonas charted a route out of the Safe Zone. He laughed every time those words popped into his head. *Safe Zone? What a joke.* He needed to sneak past the guards and work his way up the mountains. He would lay low for the rest of the night. Then he would hike his way towards Niles.

Jonas made his way down the hallway. He approached the front door with caution. He did not want to run into someone guarding the outside. Jonas tightened his sack around his shoulders and had Darden's blaster strapped to his leg with a belt. He was proud of himself because he was able to create a makeshift holster. It was an exact replica of an Enforcer's.

Looking out through the thin panes of glass that ran down the front door, Jonas noticed the area was clear. He knew it was late enough and most people were sleeping at this hour. Even Crows. Jonas slipped outside into the darkness. He dropped to one knee, keeping himself well hidden along the horizon.

He advanced with his back against the dwelling, figuring he could better blend into the night that way. Every couple of steps, he would tap his blaster making sure it was still at his side.

Jonas located a clump of garbage barrels. He used them as a shield. He squinted his eyes to better focus on some silhouettes in the night. How he wished the dracosaur was here. Jonas whispered her name. "Come on, Chinka."

There they were. The same guards that were at the gate last night. The only difference was that instead of two, Jonas saw four. They were armed with heavy-duty weapons. He got the feeling that they were waiting for him. *How am I going to get past these men?* He could not climb over the fence. The post generated currents of electricity that flowed through the links.

Jonas reached down, grabbing a stone. He targeted the furthest part of the wall. He threw the stone with perfect accuracy. It caught the top part of the blockade, sounding an electric buzz. The stone fried instantly.

The guards' focus shifted in the direction of the sound. Three ran towards the far wall. Jonas could not find the fourth. He crouched down behind the garbage.

"Up on your feet, boy," revealed a cold voice from behind him.

Jonas turned around to discover the fourth man, with a blaster pointed at his head.

"Thought we were all stupid? Huh?" The man grabbed hold of Jonas's collar. "My friends on Cordova will be very happy to see you."

"Where's Darden?" Jonas asked as he secretly clenched his fist.

"That traitor will be terminated any day now." The man grinned at Jonas as he stared directly into his eyes. "As for you... I think a little accident is about to happen. I figure your body going to Cordova will be enough." The man cocked his blaster. The sound haunted Jonas. It reminded him of a probe getting ready to fire. His parents' images flashed before him.

"Not today!" Jonas flung his hidden fist straight up into the man's lower jaw.

The man did not expect such strength. He regained his composure and flashed Jonas a bloody grin. "Sorry, Sapien..." He answered Jonas with a swift uppercut to the stomach.

Jonas sucked in any available air his lungs could capture. His face turned a bluish gray and his eyes bulged from their sockets.

"Eat some oxygen, boy." The man stood over Jonas.

Jonas fell to the ground clenching his gut.

"Now eat some of this." The blaster's nozzle was stuffed into Jonas's mouth.

Jonas looked up desperately at his soon-to-be killer.

Again, the blaster was cocked.

Whack!

"Ahhhh!" Jonas flew back into the dirt.

The man's head exploded in multiple directions. Most of the remains were slopped all over Jonas.

Jonas looked up, surprised over the fact that he was still very much alive, amazed to discover his rescuer. "Chinka?"

The dracosaur let out a roar. She was obviously extremely pleased with herself. Jonas looked up at the animal and could not believe the huge lizard answered his thoughts. *How could this possibly be?*

The animal let out another roar and lowered itself to the ground.

Jonas understood the lizard and hopped onto the back of it.

The dracosaur turned around and headed out the gates. The lizard trotted up the hill. The other guards followed as best they could but the dracosaur quickly outran them. Once clear of danger, Chinka slowed and moved to the tree-line of the woods.

"What are you doing, Chinka?" Jonas observed that the animal was stopping. "Chinka?"

The dracosaur lowered itself. Jonas understood the hint. The dracosaur looked at him with her bubble eyes. She let out a low purr and took off into the woods.

"Thanks," Jonas said with disappointment. He didn't want to see the animal go. He was hoping he could get a ride back to Aunt Cleonia's house. Besides, he had grown to like her.

Jonas stood alone along the trail. He figured he needed to make the trip up the hill in order to get his bearings. A rustling noise came from inside the trees. Jonas placed his hand on his stolen blaster. "Who's there?" He squinted and poked his head closer to the woods. The crackling of twigs grew louder. Jonas pulled his weapon from his makeshift holster.

"In here," the soft voice called from a leafy area.

Jonas clicked his blaster back. He would kill anything at a moment's notice. "Who are you?"

"It's me... your friend," the voice stated from the cover of the trees.

Jonas recognized the voice. He didn't know any girls except for the few he talked to in school. "Do I know you?" Jonas raised his head.

"It's Liotta."

"Who is Liotta? I don't know any Liotta." Jonas focused his blaster into the woods. "Come out or I will kill you."

"Why would you shoot the person who came to save you?" the soft voice asked.

"You better get out here now. This is your last chance." Jonas was freaked out. All he wanted to get further away from the Safe Zone, but someone wanted to play a game with him. "I'm gonna count."

"Save your breath." The voice hardened as a dark figure emerged from the tree-line. As she came out the moons' light began to unveil her appearance.

Jonas was taken aback a moment when he realized who it was. *Why would she--?*

"It took me forever to follow you here, then I met this dracosaur. This is the thanks I get for saving you?" The girl shot Jonas a hard look.

"I can't believe it's you. This is incredible." Jonas was extremely ecstatic at the fact that the girl from the medi-center had followed him here. This was the woman of his dreams. "Liotta, huh?"

"Okay. So now you know my name. I'm exhausted because I was traveling all night. We need to get out of here."

Jonas stood there with his lips curled and his eyes moving up and down every part of her body. "So you rescued me?"

"Let's go." She ignored his question and retreated into the woods near the trail.

Jonas hopped to his feet, grabbed his sack and made his way after her. He started moving faster when he heard the other three guards. *I can't believe my nurse saved me.* Jonas was safely out of the Safe Zone and just outside the gate. He aimlessly searched the woods. "Where are you?"

"Over here." Liotta's voice called out.

"Where?"

"Here."

"Where is here?" Jonas bobbed his head up and down, squinting his eyes into the brush.

"Right here... Hurry up."

"I would if I could, but I can't see you." He whipped his head around in response to a snapping sound that came from behind him.

"Stop right there!" a guard said.

Jonas, without thinking, reached for his blaster.

The guard then raised his weapon.

Whack!

The guard's chest blew open as his body flew back. Darden's small weapon packed quite a punch. More than anything Jonas had ever seen used by the Enforcers. Even his father's 3TA didn't have this power.

Jonas just stood there emotionless. His heart raced as his blood pumped rapidly through his body. He began to breathe heavily. His eyes bulged from his forehead as a mixture of shock and nerves quivered up his spine. He'd just killed a man.

"Let's go," Liotta's voice pleaded.

There was no reply from Jonas. Tears slid down his bruised cheek. His innocence had just been tainted.

Liotta jumped out of hiding and rushed over to Jonas. She tugged his arm. "If we don't go now, we will never be able to leave."

He rubbed his hand into his eyes to avoid Liotta from seeing any more water dribbling. "Okay."

Liotta pulled Jonas away. They ran up the trail as fast as they could. Every few feet Jonas would look back, hoping the man would get up. The further they retreated, the more he realized what he had done. This was not part of the plan--he'd just wanted to escape the probes.

Six

The moons' glow started to fade as the sun's rays broke through the early sky. Jonas was sound asleep, near a smoldering campfire. Liotta was leaning against a large rock next to him. She gazed at Jonas while gliding her fingers gently through his hair.

"Why are you suddenly so friendly?" Jonas opened his eyes slowly.

"Just figured I would come and save you."

Jonas pulled himself into a sitting position. "How did you know where I was?"

"Let's just say I was down the hall when the probe attacked you. I saw that maintenance man send you through the wall."

"So you followed me?"

Liotta put her hands together. "Well, I ran home, stole an old blaster from my father and went back to the hospital."

"Did Darden see you?"

"Who?"

"The maintenance man. Did he see you?"

"No way. You're not the only one able to ride a dracosaur."

"That village is a Safe Zone for the Crow people." Jonas looked into Liotta's eyes. "Darden was actually trying to save me. Then something happened."

"It isn't a Safe Zone anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I signaled my father. They should be here any minute to pick us up." Liotta held up a small rectangular device with a red flashing light.

"Why?" Jonas got to his feet. "All these people want is to live peacefully."

Liotta jumped up and stared Jonas stonily. "Give it a break. They tried to kill you. Your friend, Darden, turned you in."

"How do you figure?"

"For starters, he destroyed the probe to win your trust and to make himself a hero." She started pacing and gesturing with her hands. "If you died that night by the probe, then Darden couldn't hand you over and become a hero. It's the oldest trick in the book."

Jonas sat back down on the ground. "I guess you're right. It makes sense."

"Hmmm." She nodded.

"But wait. He's on Cordova. They brought him to Emperor Pernius. He'll be killed for sure."

"That's his problem." Liotta snuggled next to him. "Besides, you'll be in the Academy in a few days."

"Oh, no." Jonas jumped up again. "My aunt!"

"Relax. She's taken care of." Liotta grabbed Jonas by the hand and tugged him back down.

"What?"

"After the attack on you in the hospital, Enforcement went straight to her house to defend them against any further threats."

"Why are the Crows so hell bent on killing me?"

The sounds of small crafts buzzed in the background. "Bye-bye Safe Zone." Liotta hopped up and pulled Jonas with her to get a better look.

Jonas and Liotta ran out to the edge of the woods to find twenty hovercrafts coming their way. In the lead craft stood a man waving frantically.

"That's my dad. Daddy! Over here!" Liotta jumped up and down frantically waving her arms.

"I think he can see you."

"How do you know?"

"He's waving at us."

The lead craft was coming up quickly. Directly behind it were four other crafts with huge cannons on the front. Cannon crafts were built for heavy-duty battle. Each could seat up to ten Enforcers and a dozen laser rods.

Laser rods were inserted into the rear of the cannons and fired at their targets.

Behind those were what appeared to be attack crafts. Attack crafts were usually smaller in design. They were built to transport five Enforcers each. The idea behind their creation was to target opponents swiftly and make a quick retreat.

Jonas and Liotta headed towards the lead craft. Jonas realized something was wrong when her father's wave turned into an up and down motion. It looked like he was trying to push them to the side. Jonas glanced back over his shoulder.

"Oh, Gods. Run. Run, Liotta, run!" Jonas clenched her hand. He jerked her sideways, back into the wooded area.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"What? You don't enjoy holding my hand?" Jonas just kept dragging her deeper into the woods.

Liotta looked back to see hundreds of Crows charging toward the crafts. They were armed with long blasters. Probes were also dispersed into the upcoming battle.

Jonas calmed when he realized that the Crows were not following them. He tugged on her shoulder. "Look. Through here." Jonas pointed in the direction of the conflict.

The two of them observed behind the cover of the leaves. The Crows stopped their advance and started to mount their weapons to the ground. They converted their long blasters into small laser cannons by flipping open small tripods. The probes advanced along the front lines.

Jonas had heard a million stories about the types of battles his father used to be in--Now he would get the opportunity to see one first hand. As the two sides prepared for war, Jonas could not help but think that this happened in order to save him. Liotta had warned him about Darden in the medi-center. He hadn't listened. She'd had her dad pull a few strings to save him. He was about to witness an Enforcement .

With all that was going on, Darden stayed in the back of Jonas's mind. He just couldn't get over Darden's sudden change in attitude. He decided that he needed some sort of an answer. He'd always felt his father was a hero.

Slam! The first shot was fired. Two probes blew apart. Pieces went everywhere, including the wooded area. Three Enforcement crafts hovered quickly to fill the positions of the destroyed probes. Five Enforcers jumped out of the back holding their weapons high. The other five enforcers leaned over the sides of the craft. They fired their blasters at small, huddled groups of the enemy.

The unprotected Crows were ripped apart by the powerful blasts coming from distant larger crafts. The small crafts acted as a clean up crew. What Jonas saw next shattered his illusions of an Enforcement.

Two Enforcers ran down to a defeated team of Crows. Bodies were everywhere. Most of them were dead. However, Jonas noticed a few injured men pleading for their lives. One person had lost his leg and was screaming in pain. The Enforcers approached the men. They did not see Jonas looking on and Liotta was busy keeping an eye on her father as his craft led the attack. One Enforcer shoved his blaster right into the injured Crow's mouth. The sounds of his cries softened into a muffled panic. The enforcer cocked his weapon. He stared at his victim. Without remorse, the Enforcer squeezed the trigger.

"Look... Look at this." Jonas tapped Liotta on the arm.

"What?"

"He just killed that wounded man." Jonas had his eyes still trained on them.

"So?" Liotta had not a care in the world. She was too busy idolizing her father.

"So? So? Aren't they supposed to capture the wounded guys?"

"Yeah... That's what they're supposed to do." Liotta chuckled.

Jonas knew she'd just saved his life, but that statement just turned him off a bit.

The other Enforcer made rounds to the injured, stabbing them into a painful death with his laser blade.

Jonas continued to watch with his mouth hung wide open. He was not watching a battle. He was witnessing a slaughter.

Every pocket of Crows, every probe, was being wiped out one by one. So were the wounded. The strange thing was that the Enforcers suffered minor injuries and put their wounded officers into the crafts. Jonas knew he better keep his mouth closed. After all, they were here to save him.

The smoke started to clear on the battlefield. The air was tainted with the smell of charred flesh. The ground was dressed with various body parts. Jonas had been so anxious to see a battle up close, but now, all that had changed. Seeing the carnage, he wished he had only experienced his father's battle stories, but now he had his own story to pass down.

The crafts rallied together in the center of the field. Enforcers hopped out of their vehicles congratulating each other on their victory.

"Let's go." Liotta pulled Jonas out of the brush.

They hurried over to a small group of officers standing around the lead craft.

"Daddy?" Liotta yelled to her father.

A man in his forties with salt and pepper hair and a thin build waved his hand, acknowledging his daughter.

"Thank you, Father." Liotta took her hand from Jonas's and rushed to her father's side.

"You have quite a bit of explaining to do." Her father stared at her sternly.

"I had no choice. You know who this is, right?" she said, gesturing to Jonas.

"Yup. Captain Troupe's boy." Liotta's father put his hands in his pockets.

"Jonas, this is my father, Master Cling." Liotta hung to her father's arm like the innocent little girl she used to be.

Jonas offered his hand. "Thank you, sir."

He ignored Jonas's hand. "Sorry to hear about your mother. My daughter tells me that you are going into the Academy?"

"Yes, sir." Jonas looked down at the ground. *What about my father? He died, too.*

"We are just waiting for the rest of the battalion to come." Master Cling stared out over the horizon.

Jonas stared at the numerous crafts and officers. "The rest, sir?"

"That's correct. I'll be heading back to Tigris with you two. The remaining groups will end the existence of the Safe Zone."

Jonas stared down the mountain at the small village, realizing the pain and tragedy those people were about to suffer. He knew there were children down there. He started to rethink this soldier business.

Liotta wandered off by some of the officers. She was flirting with the few that were not fearful of her father. Jonas watched wondering what kind of girl she actually was. Liotta was probably a year or two older than he was. She seemed hard for someone her age.

Seven

The craft carrying Jonas, Liotta and her father pulled into a hover bay at the city's Port Earth. The driver cut the vehicle's power. The craft gently descended to a rest on the concrete. Liotta's father hopped out and turned, offering his hand as assistance for Liotta. She grabbed on and hopped down, too. Then Jonas grabbed his bag and slid down the side of the craft.

"Jonas. Honey."

Jonas looked over by the entrance gate to see his aunt running over with her arms outstretched. Walking behind her was Carlen, of course. Jonas waved at them, wondering if his cousin ever left his aunt's shadow.

"Oh thank Gods you are all right." Aunt Cleonia snatched Jonas up into her arms.

Seeing Carlen stare jealously, Jonas flashed him a grin. "Hello, Carlen."

"We have been worried sick. Where did you go?"

"Jonas was kidnapped by the Crows," Liotta chimed in.

"Oh," Cleonia said.

"Well, I wasn't really kidnapped--"

"I had to go and save him." Liotta smiled and wrapped her arms around her father.

Carlen let out a snicker.

Jonas rebounded with a stern look.

"So how does it feel to be saved by a girl?" Carlen had to let it out.

"I am so glad you're okay. Right after the attack at the medi-center, the Council ordered guards to our dwelling." His aunt finally released her tight hug.

"I thought the guy at the medi-center was trying to save me." Jonas brushed back his hair with his fingers.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid. He set you up," Carlen said.

"I know that now, jerk," Jonas admitted. However, he actually believed different.

"Girls, by the way, always save the guys," Liotta said as she tapped Carlen on the shoulder. "Hey, Jonas? Gotta go."

"Really?"

"Yeah... My dad wants to have a long talk with me. He'll probably give me a week of home detention."

"But..."

"I'll see you sometime in the future." Liotta stepped up to Jonas. She made sure her father was not watching and she gave Jonas a peck on the lips. "Bye for now." Liotta slipped a piece of paper into his hand.

Jonas just stood there, his face lit up like the moons. His heart started to race as he watched her float back towards her father.

"Get out. You and her?" Carlen interrupted his moment of bliss.

"She looks like a very nice girl, Jonas." Cleonia added. "Good for you."

"Can we go, Mom?" Carlen asked.

"Shut up, Carlen. You always want to run, run, run. Stupid boy."

Jonas picked up his sack. "It's okay, Aunt Cleonia. Let's get out of here."

Aunt Cleonia wrapped her arm around Jonas and escorted him to a domestic craft, which was waiting to take them back to Niles.

They pulled up to Cleonia's dwelling. It looked like a military camp. There were Enforcers everywhere.

"I hate living like this." Cleonia laughed.

"How long have they been here?" Jonas asked.

"Since the attempt on your life in the medi-center. They figured you were in danger. Putting together the fact that you were attacked at your dwelling, then at the medi-center, the Council figured they could stop any future attacks here," Carlen blurted out.

"Apparently the Crows are after you for some reason," Cleonia added.

"I don't understand why. They already killed my father. He was the hero."

"So they really weren't after your parents. They were after you all along," Carlen stated matter-of-factly.

"That's strange." Aunt Cleonia added, "Why you?"

"I don't understand it myself," Jonas answered.

"Well, at least with all these Enforcers, I don't have to take out the waste retainers. They do it for me." She laughed again.

A few days had passed and Jonas was leaning up against Aunt Cleonia's craft taking aim with Carlen's air gun at the scaly bird which rested in the trees beyond the dwelling. He followed its slow movements through the gun's sights. Jonas gripped the handle a bit and squeezed on the trigger. Blue paint splattered all over the bird's leathery skin.

Jonas figured he could get one more good shot off before losing the animal all together. He tracked it as it flew off into the sky. The teen pumped out another pellet, which just missed the bird. "Damn it!"

"Your problem is that you're aiming directly for the bird," a strange voice from behind called.

Jonas turned to see an Enforcer puffing on a rolled leaf stick. "What am I supposed to aim for?" Jonas replied sarcastically.

"No need to get snippy." The Enforcer moved next to Jonas and put his hand out for the air gun. "May I?"

"I guess." Jonas passed the gun to the officer.

"Watch and try to figure out the secret." The Enforcer leaned up against Cleonia's craft and caught another winged creature in his sights. He applied swift pressure on the trigger. A splotchy blue bird flipped out of the branches and danced wildly to regain control. Once the animal oriented itself, it took to the clouds. The officer aimed the toy weapon into the air but not directly at the creature. He pumped it once again. The bird fell like a rock that smacked against a wall.

"Awesome." Jonas held out his hand, anxious to get his gun back. "Let me try."

The Enforcer went to relinquish the gun but pulled it away. "What did I do?"

Jonas's mouth swung open. "What?"

"What did I do to get that bird?" The Enforcer handed the gun to the teen.

Jonas grabbed it before the officer pulled away. "You aimed ahead. Ahead of the bird's flight pattern."

"Correct." The officer began to demonstrate with his hands. "You see, if you aim at the bird, by the time the pellet reaches it, it will have already flown away. If you aim slightly ahead of the bird, the pellet and the bird will arrive at the same point at the same time."

"Thanks." Jonas leaned back up against the vehicle and aimed towards the trees.

The Enforcer walked away with his eye trained on Jonas. Jonas did not even realize the officer was still watching.

Jonas pretended to pop a pellet into the branches. He imagined a bird flopping out and fluttering its scaly

wings. He waited behind the sight as if the animal was regaining control. Then he tracked it up into the sky. "Bamm. Gotcha." Jonas noticed Cordova was captured in his eyepiece. He stared at it intensely. He kept thinking about Darden in the detention center.

He laid the gun down along the front of the craft. Jonas reached into his pocket hoping to withdraw the stone his father had given him, but it was gone. He glanced toward the gray moon that hung in the late afternoon sky. He started thinking about the stories his father had shared. All the missions he heard about engraved such fine details of Cordova in his head that he could probably create an accurate map with his eyes closed.

Crazy thoughts went through his mind. If only he could get there. Then he remembered about Liotta.

That night the three moons lit the sky. The center one, Cordova, was full, and the other two, Jenco and Lunas, looked like book ends as they were each waning. Luna was the only moon not inhabited by either Crows or Sapiens.

Jonas sat up in bed looking out the window. All he could see were silhouettes of the Enforcers guarding the dwelling.

"Hey, Jonas?" Carlen called out from a dark corner of the room. "I am glad you're okay. I was worried."

Jonas leaned over. "Really?"

"Yeah... you're the closest thing I have to a brother ya know."

"Thanks, Carlen. Same here." Jonas slid to the edge of the bed. "Carlen?"

"Yeah."

"Can I trust you with something?" Jonas looked over at him. "I mean, you really need to keep quiet about it."

"Yeah, sure."

"Is that a 'yeah sure' just to hear what I have to say, or is it for real?"

"Forget it, Jonas. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Jonas sprang out of his bed and walked over to Carlen. "I hate it when you do that. If I didn't tell you then you would go crazy. Don't act like you could care less."

Carlen sat up into the moons' light. "Really. I'm not playing around. Don't tell me." Carlen laid back down in the darkness.

Jonas threw up his hands in disgust and dove back into his bed. He lay down, burying his face in his pillow. He waited a few moments and pulled off the pillow. "Carlen?"

"I said... I don't want to know."

"It's not killing you to find out?"

"Nope."

Jonas started shaking in his bed. He sprang up in his bed. "Okay fine... I'll tell you anyway."

"Cool." Carlen chuckled.

"See, you always do that." Jonas got up and walked over to his cousin. "Always."

Carlen once again sat up into the moons' light. He stared at Jonas, bearing a victorious smirk.

Jonas leaned into Carlen. He glanced out the window, making sure the Enforcers were not within earshot. "I'm going to the Academy in about a week." Then Jonas grew a serious look. "But first I'm going to Cordova."

Carlen popped up from his comfortable position. He pinned Jonas's arms. "Are you crazy? That's not possible."

"I need to go. I need to talk to Darden." Jonas was not sure if he should tell his cousin about the stone that he also wanted. He thought his cousin might belittle him for risking his life over a tiny object like a rock. Jonas could not explain that the stone meant so much more to him. Besides, Darden knew something about Strom, and Jonas needed to get all the information he could.

"Forget it. That's worse than suicide. The Old Republic controls the entire rock. It's a military base. They'll kill you before you land." Carlen released Jonas's arms.

"But I need to talk--"

Carlen cut in. "He will turn you in. Forget it."

"So are you going with me?" Jonas changed the subject.

"Okay." Carlen sat back down abruptly. "My mother is going to kill me."

"Tomorrow we head off to the port. We will slip onto a craft headed towards Jenco."

"Jenco?"

"Yeah. Once we get out of the atmosphere, we can take control over the ship."

"What? You have really gone mad. I've changed my mind. I will be staying here."

"With your mommy?"

Carlen sat up again. "Back off, Jonas. I am not going to kill someone--especially one of our own. I'm staying here."

Jonas decided to try a new approach and not be so challenging. He needed Carlen's help. He suddenly realized he wouldn't get it if every word out of his mouth was a put-down.

"Okay, listen." Jonas paused a moment, thinking about how he would tell his cousin about Strom. "Just before my parents died, they mentioned a place called Strom. I don't know anything about it." Jonas noticed he had his cousin's attention. "You see...This guy Darden *knows* something about this place." Jonas looked deep into Carlen's eyes, trying to read his mind. "I need to speak to him before the Emperor terminates him."

Carlen sat up and played with the two hairs sprouting from his chin. "I still think you're out of your mind."

"Thanks, Carlen. Thanks for nothing." Jonas jumped back into his bed. "Tomorrow I'll go by Liotta's dwelling. She'll know how to do this." Jonas melted into his pillow and closed his eyes. "She's got connections."

"You don't even know where she lives," Carlen barked.

"She gave me her address on a piece of paper. Besides, we'll get the bodyguards to take us."

"What is this 'we' stuff? I said forget it." Carlen rolled over and closed his eyes.

Morning came as the sun led a blazing charge. It was easily one of the hottest days of the season. The Enforcers guarding Aunt Cleonia's dwelling were changing shifts. Carlen had, as usual, been awake for hours.

Jonas put his pants on and shoved his feet into his shoes. He always kept the straps loose so he wouldn't have to constantly strap and unstrap them. He grabbed a shirt and threw it on quickly. He knew that if he sweet-talked Liotta, she would lead him in the direction of a craft.

Aunt Cleonia fixed a late morning meal. She made Jonas's favorite: cactus crumb bread, spunk links and power juice.

"Good sun to you, dear." Aunt Cleonia placed a dish down on the table. "Get some fuel into that growing body."

The one thing that kept bugging him was why his aunt was being so nice to him. She had always acted as if he were a second-class citizen. Lately though, she had treated him like a king. This is the kind of meal his mother used to prepare for him. Plus, suddenly Carlen was constantly being scolded. Jonas felt bad because he knew it was his fault. He should not have let Carlen take the blame for the craft being dented up. However, he got a kick out of seeing Carlen shrink in his skin. He was ranked third in his class at the Academy. He did everything by the rules.

Jonas chowed down his breakfast. With every chew, he kept watching Carlen who was sitting across the table. Carlen seemed extremely interested in his cousin's eating habits.

"You should slow down, Jonas. You eat too fast. Mom hasn't made a breakfast like this for about five seasons. Enjoy it," Carlen stated between chewing.

That confirmed it. His aunt was being exceptionally nice. Did she want some of the credits his father had left him? He thought about that as he gulped down his power juice. *Carlen's father left them plenty of credits when he died.*

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Great," Jonas blurted. "Mom used to make this all the time."

"My mother rarely fixes meals. This is a treat." Carlen went to scoop up another morsel when his mother ripped his plate from the table.

"Nonsense, Carlen. I always cook for you." She smiled at Jonas, looking for his acknowledgement.

"If you want to call sand crackers and grain strands cooking." Carlen laughed as he got up from the table.

"Stop it you, stupid fool," Aunt Cleonia defensively responded.

"Love you too, Mother." Carlen went into the other room. He popped his head back in through the doorway. "Jonas, I *will* be joining you today." Carlen waited for a reaction from his mother but there was none.

Jonas just continued eating his food. He was not affected by the conversation at all. In fact, he could care less.

Moments later, Carlen entered the room with one of the Enforcers. He was carrying a daypack. "Jonas, this is Kiyo. He is going to escort us to Liotta's dwelling."

The officer was over six feet tall. His hair was rough brown. He had deep pitted eyes that could blow holes into anything on which they focused. Then Jonas realized that Kiyo was the officer who'd helped him yesterday.

Jonas looked at Carlen like he was going to kill him.

"Well, isn't this great? Kiyo is going to take us over there in an official craft." Carlen smiled.

Jonas knew Carlen meant well. "Fantastic. When do we leave?"

"Now. If you're ready."

"Let's go." Jonas popped up from his chair. He tossed the last spunk link in his mouth and chugged the power juice. He wiped the excess dribble from his chin.

The boys sat in the rear of the craft. It was definitely official. It lacked all the comforts of a luxury vehicle. The seats were hard. The safety straps were made of tough material. The floorboards were worn.

Using the address she'd given Jonas, the Enforcer led the teens to Liotta's dwelling. Word was that Liotta's father was as popular as Captain Troupe. He'd retired years ago from active duty, and continued service to the Council by teaching the small crafts class.

"So you like Liotta?" Carlen asked Jonas.

"She's cool. A little rough though," Jonas answered.

The Enforcer grinned as he listened to the conversation. Then with a swift grip on the handle, he brought the craft to a quick right turn. The boys jerked against the backrest of the vehicle.

"What are you doing?" Carlen yelled.

"Taking a friendly little ride," the Enforcer barked as he threw the gears into full speed.

Jonas was getting nervous. He felt like he was about to fly out of the craft. He reached over and grabbed hold of the safety strap. As the speed picked up, gravity made it harder to bring the buckles together. Jonas shifted his body weight with one quick jump. He fastened on his strap. He looked over at Carlen who was sitting comfortably next to him. Carlen watched Jonas put his belt on with complete amusement.

He tapped his already fastened strap. "Way ahead of you, cousin."

Jonas acknowledged the fact that Carlen probably had it on before the ride started.

"Sit back guys... we'll be there in a few moments." The officer laughed as he watched the boys hold on to

things for security.

"This is insane," Jonas yelled.

"It's nice to see you're scared of something," Carlen said. "Just think, there is someone who drives crazier than you."

The craft suddenly decelerated. Their bodies were tossed forward. Jonas was thankful he had his strap on now. He would have ended up on his head, next to the Enforcer.

"We have arrived, gentlemen." The Enforcer swung the craft slowly around to the front of the dwelling.

Jonas could not believe his eyes. The dwelling was five times the size of anything he had ever seen. Liotta's place was surrounded by acres of land. The home was in a remote area and the dirt was covered with small green blades. The properties borders were lined with strange looking trees with wide, flat leaves.

"Look at this place, Carlen."

"I've never seen this kind of stuff before. I've read about it though," Carlen said.

"What is it?"

"Grass." The Enforcer answered before Carlen could.

"What is it?" Jonas asked again, due to the loud humming of the craft.

"It's grass. Probably imported from the other side."

Carlen leaned forward. "The other side of what?"

"The other side of the planet. It's loaded with grass and these exotic trees."

Jonas absorbed what the Enforcer just told them. The other side sounded like paradise. Once he graduated the Academy, he would go there. Maybe Liotta could tell him all about this grass stuff. It was truly beautiful.

The craft halted and slowly descended. Jonas hopped out without waiting for the craft to reach the ground and ran up to Liotta's front door. He couldn't wait to see her. Jonas knocked a couple of times. There was no answer.

"Didn't she know we were coming?" Carlen yelled from the craft.

"No. Why?"

"Because she's not answering. That's why."

"Maybe she went to work at the medi-center. I figured we could at least try." Jonas turned to knock again and discovered Liotta in the doorway.

Her face was lit up.

"You are home!"

"I don't have to work today." Liotta looked over at Carlen. "Hi."

"Greetings." Carlen straightened up in his seat as he saluted her.

Jonas felt a touch of jealousy coming over him. Carlen was off limits. Liotta was off limits. The two of them together? *No way. There will be no more greetings going on here.*

"So what brings you here? Miss me?" Liotta's eyes widened.

"No... I, uh... need a favor."

"Oh." Liotta's ego deflated. "What do you need?"

"Do you know of any port that offers trips to Jenco?"

"Excuse me?" Liotta blurted with a chuckle.

"A craft to Jenco?" Jonas smiled at her.

"What's going on, Jonas?" She noticed the Enforcer smoking a leaf stick in the craft. "Come inside." Liotta pulled Jonas in the house.

Jonas leaned up against the wall and gave Liotta a serious look. He trusted her enough to tell her everything, except about the stone. "I have to get to Cordova before I enter the Academy. I figured I would take a craft to Jenco. Once we were off I would claim it and head to Cordova."

Liotta slammed the door shut. "Are you going mad? The Old Republic would shoot you down before you even got into orbit. Claim it? You mean steal it."

"It's something I have to do, Liotta. There is something about my father I need to find out."

"Your father was a hero, Jonas." She rubbed her hands along the side of his head. "You will go to the Academy, too. And you will be a hero, too."

"Ya think so?"

"Remember the maintenance man from the medi-center?" Jonas was about to tell her and hoped she understood. "Well, my father told me about a place called Strom. He barely got the words out and he died. Okay... Then the Crow, Darden, told me about a place his family was searching for. It, too, was called Strom."

"So there is a place called Strom. So what?" Liotta was not comprehending what Jonas was talking about.

"So then Darden turned me in when he heard my father's name and I still don't know anything about Strom." Jonas was getting mildly heated.

"Okay. Come with me." Liotta grabbed Jonas by his fingertips and tugged him across the dwelling into the living space. The walls were covered with pictures of the homeland, and miniatures of small crafts were displayed randomly around the furniture.

"Your father loves the homeland, huh?"

"Never mind that. Actually he hates what the Council has become. He says the Sapiens were at one time a peaceful people." Liotta guided Jonas to a large dome. It was easy to see that it had been made out of bronze or some sort of brown metal. Jonas could tell it was clearly an antique.

Liotta pressed a button, which rested in the top of the dome. The semi-sphere illuminated, converting the bronze dome into a backlit globe.

"That's awesome. What is it?" Jonas trained his eyes on it.

"This is a glap. It's a three dimensional map. Cool, huh?" Liotta grinned at the positive reaction Jonas had. "Let's see. Strom. Strom. Strom." Liotta used her fingers to find this mysterious place.

"Find it?" Jonas hovered over her shoulder.

"Nope." Liotta began to speed up her search. "I can't find it, Jonas." She broke from the glap and looked at Jonas like he'd lost his mind. "There is no such place."

"That's impossible!" Jonas walked away, frustrated. "It's gotta be there. My father wouldn't lie to me."

"I am so sorry, Jonas. It's not there." Liotta gazed upon her friend sadly. She could see the disbelief in his face.

"You gotta help me."

"Going to Cordova is suicide." She knew that was the wrong thing to say.

"I came to you because I needed your help. Apparently you don't want to help me." Jonas turned and opened the door. He was glad he had kept the stone thing to himself.

Liotta watched him as a tear trickled down her soft face.

Jonas made his way back to the craft. "Let's go, Kiyo."

Liotta ran after him. "Wait! Jonas?" She pulled him back into the dwelling.

"Please, not another safety lecture."

"Shut the hell up!" Then quickly changing her tone, "Come with me. You had better promise not to tell anyone. Not even that cousin of yours, Carmen."

"Carlen."

"What?"

"His name is Carlen. He's actually okay."

"Keep quiet. This could get my father in a lot of trouble."

"Fine." Jonas felt like something good was coming.

Liotta grabbed Jonas by the hand and led him down the hallway. She picked up a glow wand, which rested on a small table. When they came to a door at the end, Liotta flung it open and Jonas followed her down the stairs. Along the way, Liotta lit electric lamps with the glow wand.

"This is cool. Where is it leading us to?"

"My father's collection."

The tunnel led the two of them hundreds of feet away from the main dwelling. Liotta stopped and tapped a metal plate with the wand.

"More stairs?" Jonas said.

"They will lead us directly up to Daddy's collection." She gently squeezed his hand. Liotta gracefully tugged on his arm as she guided him up the steps. They came to an entrance, which had the smallest amount of light peeking through the space between the floor and the door. "Remember, not even Carlen can know."

The door squeaked open slowly. The entrance of the room quietly revealed the masterpieces Liotta's father had well hidden. Jonas's mouth watered.

Every small craft ever commissioned by the Council was arranged systematically before his eyes. Liotta waved her hand in the rear corner of the room as if she was displaying a grand trophy. "Three of the Old Republic's fastest, finest and well made crafts."

"Whoa." Jonas was overwhelmed by the sheer size of the room. It was at least twice the size of any port hanger he had ever seen. He did not even hear what Liotta had just said.

"Okay?" Liotta tapped Jonas. "Okay?"

Jonas snapped back into reality. "Okay."

"There." Liotta pointed to one of the Old Republic's crafts. "That's the way to Cordova. It's a current model."

Jonas tilted his head towards her and rolled his gaze slowly into hers. "I think I'm in love."

"Really?" Liotta perked up and tugged on her hair to give it a quick fix.

"Yeah... Look at all these crafts." Jonas wandered around the room aimlessly.

"I see." Liotta dropped her head in embarrassment. She hoped she had not revealed her feelings.

"Why would your dad get in trouble for having these?"

"The Old Republic crafts are off limits. They are supposed to have been destroyed. My father thought they were too beautiful to ruin though."

Jonas admired the way the crafts were finely wrapped in chrome tubes, which twisted up the sides of the vessel. He walked over and serenely ran his hands up and down the handcrafted alloy that made up the craft's shell. Jonas could not believe a race so savage could create something so perfect.

"The craft you are admiring should take us up to Cordova with no problems."

"Us?" Jonas stopped enjoying the ship. "You mean me."

"No, Jonas. It's my father's craft and you must take me with you."

"Come on, Liotta. It is too dangerous. This is something I've got to do." Jonas walked over and placed both hands on her shoulders. "Please."

"Nope." Liotta pushed off Jonas's hands. "Let's go."

She pulled Jonas out of the room and slammed the door shut.

"Come on, Liotta. Can't you understand? This is something I have to do. I don't want to drag anyone else

into it."

Liotta stared into his green eyes and shoved him up against the dark wall, which lined the stairwell. "I am going with you and that's final." She inched her face closer to his.

Jonas gently grabbed her waist and pulled her in even closer. He leaned into her and placed his lips upon hers. His heart raced as his endorphins trickled down to his feet.

Then he broke their connection and opened his eyes to notice hers were still sealed shut. "Okay. You can come along."

Liotta slowly opened her eyes. "I knew you would see things my way." She dragged him along the stairs. "My father leaves on an Academy retreat this evening. He will be away for two rounds."

"So we leave tonight." Jonas lips curled into a smile.

All three moons waned over the city of Niles. Jonas finished stuffing a few more things in his backpack. "Carlen. Carlen?" The teen grinned as he realized his cousin was fast asleep. Jonas carefully made his way over to the door and tugged on the handle with the utmost caution.

A beam of light began to illuminate the dark room as the opening doors widened. Voices chuckling in the hallway meant that Jonas needed to find another route. The Enforcers were everywhere. Jonas figured that, because he heard more than one man's voice, the outside had to be clear. Therefore, he went toward the wall length window.

Jonas tugged back on the curtain. His hunch was correct. But why were the Enforcers in the house? They couldn't detect any probes from in here. He held the thick curtain back and cautiously slipped his body through.

Just as Jonas left, the Enforcer, Kiyo entered the room. He unclipped his blaster, which was strapped at his side. He quietly approached Jonas's bed and quickly whisked away the covers. Kiyo then felt a breeze come across his hard face. He noticed that the curtain was shifted.

Jonas had quietly hotwired one of the Enforcer's crafts. He had zipped through Niles to the outer territory where Liotta lived. He hid the vehicle in the odd-looking trees that decorated her father's property. Jonas hurried to the front door and knocked three times.

Liotta cracked open the door and flashed her eyes around the landscape. "Alone?"

"Of course." Jonas grinned.

Liotta pecked him on the lips and pulled her friend inside with her. "All we need to do is a little preparation and we're on our way." She led Jonas down the dimly lit stairway.

"What do we need to do?" Jonas asked as he watched Liotta tap the glow wand along the lanterns.

"I can't pull the craft out. It's too heavy." She massaged his shoulders. "But a big guy like yourself... "

Jonas came to a sudden halt. "Did you hear something?" He placed his hand on Liotta's stomach to stop her from moving.

"No." She flipped off his hand. "We had better hurry though. The moon's light is perfect. It will change within an hour or so."

They traveled down the tunnel and back up the other stairwell. Liotta pushed open the door. "All we need now is to get some fuel into the craft."

"Cordova... Here we come." Jonas clapped his hands together.

"What exactly are you planning on doing with this Darden guy once you talk to him?" Liotta asked.

"Kill him, of course." Jonas flashed an evil grin.

"No one is going anywhere," a dark voice called from the entrance.

Jonas and Liotta stopped arguing to see Kiyo step out into the light.

"I heard everything. Not only are you two in a heap of trouble, but so is the master teacher. I always thought your father was up to something." The Enforcer drew his blaster and motioned Liotta and Jonas to take a seat.

"Why did you follow me?" Jonas asked as he sat on a short chair near the craft.

"Because you're a Troupe. You may be a boy but you are still a Troupe." The Enforcer cackled.

"Everyone knows Troupes can't be trusted."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jonas cried.

"You'll find out. I'm sure you're a very nice boy. I will signal the authorities and let them know what's happening."

"So now my father gets in trouble?" Liotta approached Kiyo.

The Enforcer cocked his weapon, stopping Liotta's advance. "Very much trouble. I am sorry, young lady. This is a breech in the code." The Enforcer tugged on his necklace and a digital tone beeped. "I am so very sorry, kids." Kiyo waited for his signal to be received, as he stared with a huge sarcastic grin across his face.

Wham!

The officer slumped to the floor.

Carlen popped out from behind him holding a large stone. He looked over at Liotta and Jonas. "Looks like we're all going to Cordova--with an official escort."

Jonas laughed. "Carlen... I can't believe..."

Carlen slowly peeled the blaster from the Enforcer's hands. "He woke me up when he entered our room." He removed Kiyo's restraint straps from the officer's uniform pouch. Carlen bound the officer's hands together.

"Carlen. You aren't the dork I thought you were." Liotta smiled. She walked up to the Enforcer and ripped the transmitter from his neck.

"What the hell are we doing? I didn't want this." Jonas's mood changed. "I didn't want you guys involved."

"Well, cousin. Looks like it's too late."

"What's your plan?" Liotta said as she stepped beside Jonas.

Jonas started pacing back and forth. He was not sure he really had a plan. Now the stakes were higher than he had expected. He had a hostage, two tagalongs and a craft that was highly against code regulations. If he messed up now, the stakes would be tremendous.

"Let's leave him here." Jonas pointed at the Enforcer.

"My father! Jonas, they will seize him," Liotta said.

Jonas came to the realization that not only would Kiyo turn Liotta's father into the Council, but Aunt Cleonia would be in danger as well. "Okay. Kiyo comes with us."

Eight

The craft was dollied outside the storage port. Jonas siphoned bits of fuel from the other vehicles. Carlen studied a map of Cordova's orbit. Astronomical geometry was his favorite subject.

The grid was outdated. It was dated from before the early days of Enforcement. Carlen figured it was still usable since Cordova had not changed much. The only difference was that the center moon's purpose had changed. It went from being a lookout post to a military fortress, which housed the Emperor and the Old Republic.

Liotta sat at her father's old desk writing him a note. She explained why she needed to go with them. She wrote confidently that she would return. Liotta ended her letters like every one she had ever written--she puckered her lips on the bottom of the page.

"That's so stupid." Jonas caught her kissing the paper.

"Shut up. It's for my Dad." Liotta quickly stuffed the note into an envelope and labeled it.

"What did you tell him?" Jonas asked.

"Just good-bye for now."

"I'm thirsty," Jonas licked his parched lips.

"There's a small cold box over there."

Jonas turned to see metallic box sitting in the corner. "Thanks."

"I got it! I got it!" Carlen jumped up and headed over to Liotta. "This map was pretty easy to read. We need to go here. The third ring in from the surface." Carlen pointed to a ring on the grid. "This will take us here." He pointed again to another spot on the surface.

"What's that?" Liotta asked as she sealed the envelope.

"It's the holding area--for prisoners."

Jonas looked over his cousin's shoulder. "That's probably where Darden is." Then he stared at Liotta. "Does your dad have any blasters?"

"Sorry. Just big powerful ships." She smiled.

Carlen put down the map. "I hear something."

"You're crazy," Jonas said.

"No, really. The Enforcer's awake."

"Where is he?" Liotta asked.

Carlen ran over to the craft waiting outside. "I stuffed him in the craft."

Jonas and Liotta followed.

"We have to get going before any more Enforcers come around."

"Let's get this thing up into the air," Jonas yelled.

"I don't know how to fly that particular one." Liotta looked ashamed of the fact that she could not pilot all the vessels in Cling's collection.

"I can do it. Carlen, make sure the officer is secure. Liotta, you sit next to me. My father taught me how to fly when I was about thirteen. I'm sure I'll remember how as soon as I see the controls."

Inside the craft, Jonas was checking out the buttons. There were plenty. He looked behind him to see Carlen sitting uncomfortably next to the bound officer, who had his mouth stuffed with a rag. Liotta sat in the empty seat on Jonas's right.

"Okay. Strap in everybody." Jonas flipped open an ignition panel. He pressed his thumb onto an orange button.

The engines fired up loudly. The craft rumbled as the humming grew louder. Liotta tried talking to him but he could not hear her.

Jonas clenched the huge handles that came up from the floor. He pulled up on them until they were firmly tucked against his groin.

The craft hovered smoothly off the ground. It rested in place for a few moments. Once it gained enough power, the ship blasted into the sky.

The Enforcer stared at Carlen while Jonas brought the craft out of the atmosphere. He started mumbling something.

"What?"

The man mumbled again.

"What?" Carlen put his hand up to his ear. "I can't hear you."

The man glanced down at his mouth hoping Carlen would remove the gag.

"Oh. I guess it's okay now." Carlen pulled the rag out of the officer's mouth.

"You will get shot down in about three minutes."

"No way, man. We have a Crow ship. They'll never know we're in it." Carlen grinned.

"I am not talking about the Crows." The Enforcer grinned.

"Oh, no. You're right." Carlen stood up as best he could. "Jonas? Jonas?" The vibrations forced Carlen back down.

Jonas could not hear him over the humming of the engines.

"Jonas!" Carlen yelled.

Liotta turned to see Carlen trying to get Jonas's attention. She tapped him on the shoulder. When Jonas looked, she pointed him in Carlen's direction.

"What's up, Carlen?" Jonas tilted his ear towards the back.

"The Enforcers are going to shoot us down."

"What?"

Carlen took a deep breath. "The Enforcers are going to shoot us down!"

"Not if we beat them to Cordova." Jonas delivered a thumb's-up.

Suddenly, without any warning, a Parliamentary Craft appeared out of nowhere. It was so large that it filled all the windows of Jonas's craft.

"Oh, crap!"

"Told ya." The Enforcer flashed Carlen a sarcastic grin.

"It's a scare tactic. It's not real," Liotta shouted.

"How is that possible?" Jonas placed his thumbs on the red triggers at the end of the handles.

"Shoot it. Go ahead." Liotta motioned to the triggers.

"Jonas don't," Carlen begged from the rear. "That's big stuff."

"It is very real, son. Bring this thing back before it's too late," Kiyo ordered.

Jonas studied the ship in front of him. He noticed the tail ends of it were waving similar to a flag's corners in the wind. *Real ships don't do that*, he thought. Jonas squeezed the triggers, firing four bursts of intense lasers at the Parliamentary Ship. Nothing happened. The blast went clean through the image. "You were right, Liotta. You were right! It's a freaking hologram." Jonas turned and gave Liotta a quick kiss on the cheek.

Liotta blushed and pecked him back.

"There's no time for that," Carlen jealously stated.

The craft continued its route towards Cordova. They were approaching quickly. None of them realized what a short ride it would be.

"Prepare to land this thing." Liotta noticed the craters were getting closer.

"Where, Liotta, where?" Jonas looked back. "Carlen, where should we land?"

Carlen whipped out the old map. He rapidly scanned its contents with his fingers.

"Carlen?"

"Okay! Okay! I'm looking."

"That's not a hologram." Liotta tapped Jonas's shoulder.

"Huh?" Jonas broke focus from his digital map.

"Look!" Liotta pointed through the window.

"Moons! What is that?"

A huge craft, double the size of their vessel, swarmed over them. It locked in on them. Their craft began to vibrate, accompanied by a loud rattling hum.

"Let me out of here or we'll all be dead!" The Enforcer violently pounded his chair rails.

"Jonas... This guy is freaking out!"

"That's an Old Republic Ship! We are gonna be vaporized if we don't get outta here!" Kiyo yelled.

"Settle down man," Jonas shouted back.

"You settle down, dammit! Are you stupid?" The Enforcer broke a rail, freeing his left arm.

Carlen jumped back but the Enforcer already had him by the throat.

"Let me go or I will kill him."

Carlen looked at Jonas in complete despair. He would have begged for his life but the Enforcer's grip encompassed his Adam's apple.

Jonas stared into the officer's eyes. He could tell by the weathered wrinkles, which dressed his temples, that this man would terminate his cousin in a heartbeat. Then he looked into Carlen's eyes.

"Let the guy go, Jonas. This was a bad idea to begin with," Liotta said.

Jonas lowered his head, hiding his pride. "Release my cousin and I will let you free."

"How about you let me free, then I will release your little cousin?" the Enforcer snarled as he clenched his fingers tighter.

"Actually, he's older," Jonas rebutted, trying to maintain any sense of dignity.

Carlen whimpered.

The beating of the engines overhead grew louder and more intense with every passing moment.

"Liotta... Let him go."

Liotta made her way to the rear of the craft. "Promise you won't hurt us once we let you go."

"I promise. I just want to get us home safely." Kiyo's lips curled up.

The craft suddenly jolted, sending Liotta into Carlen. The force was so great that it caused the officer's

grip to break. Carlen and Liotta went tumbling into the corner.

Jonas was tossed against the control panel. He glanced through the upper window, noticing the large vessel's steel hull was on top of Jonas's craft.

Carlen got to his feet. "They are coming in here. I just know it."

"They aren't coming in here. They are escorting us to their port," the Enforcer said. "That's why I wanted to get out of this contraption. These escort ships do not have any blasters on them. Now let me go."

"That's right," Liotta remembered. "They are designed to pick up all small crafts in orbit." She dusted her clothes.

"What do we do now?" Carlen approached Jonas.

"Nothing. We sneak out once we get to port."

The Enforcer smacked his free arm against his chair. "Yeah, see, smart ass, we won't get that opportunity. We... uh... look a little different. We will stick out like sore thumbs. I would have pulled us away from this Crow taxi." Then he started to unwrap his bonding straps.

"Why couldn't you just do that before?" Carlen looked on.

"'cause I had my hand around your neck."

"Please, don't make me use this." Jonas cautiously neared the Enforcer. He aimed Darden's tiny blaster directly at his face.

"Jonas? What are you doing?" Carlen cried.

"Tie him up, Carlen. Tie him up real good."

"But, Jonas, he can help us," Liotta pleaded as she attempted to block Jonas.

Jonas gently nudged Liotta aside. "Quiet. This man was about to kill my cousin. We may have taken him for a ride to the center moon, but we never thought about killing him. Until now." Jonas inched closer.

The Enforcer stared him down with a stone face. "Put the blaster down, son."

"Oh, now I'm your son. I don't think so." Jonas returned the stony look. "Tie him up, cousin. Make those bonding straps nice and tight."

Liotta was not quite sure what to make of Jonas. She couldn't understand this. This hidden dark side was scaring her. "Jonas, please?"

"Please what? Please let this man turn your father in? Please let this man terminate us?"

Liotta whipped her long hair around, stomping to the front of the craft.

Carlen finished securing the officer to a metal beam, which ran vertically along the wall of the craft.

Jonas lifted his blaster and quickly slammed the butt of his weapon into the side of the officer's head. The Enforcer collapsed along the pole to which he was strapped.

The craft was towed along the moon's orbit for about five minutes. Jonas and Liotta could tell that they were hovering over the rocky surface. Jonas marveled at the city domes, which housed thousands of

dwelling. The illuminated spots along the horizon marked each individual city. Liotta counted thirty-two domes before the space taxi released their craft along the port's runway. At the end of the runway, the largest of all the domes rested. The man-made atmosphere had a light blue tint, imitating the Earth's sky.

"We have arrived." Jonas hopped back into the captain's seat and regained control of the craft.

"We're here? Jonas? We're really here?" Carlen made his way to the front of the craft.

"Sit down, cousin. We're heading into port."

Carlen took the third and final seat in the pilot's area. He glanced back at the officer who was still out cold. Then he stared at Liotta.

She sat quietly in her chair. Carlen was trying to read her mood. The way she looked at the window was not normal. Her tongue was pressing up against her cheek and her usually full lips appeared thin. He understood she was not sightseeing. She just did not want to be bothered with anyone.

A red ring lit up around the dome's rim as the convoy of crafts approached. The sliding bay door opened at the dome's base, allowing the line of vessels to enter.

The craft's landing gear slowly released as the vehicle lowered to the surface. Crow guards came from every corner of the port. They directed the vessel to a landing pad.

"Whoa." Liotta finally made a sound. You could see the Earth's reflection bouncing off her large, green eyes.

"Put these on. Quickly." Jonas pulled a few robes from under his seat.

"Where did you find Republican cloaks?" Carlen asked as he ran his fingers along the fine material.

"Your dad left them here." Trying to soften Liotta's mood, he added, "He must have known that one day your boyfriend would steal one of his crafts."

"I don't have a boyfriend," Liotta snapped as she pulled a robe over her.

"Sorry. Just trying to break the ice a bit."

"You were about to kill an officer, Jonas. Kidnapping, stealing a ship and landing at an enemy's base are things I can handle. But killing an Enforcer?" Liotta flipped her hair again. "He is one of us."

"I had to protect Carlen."

"Whatever." Liotta stood up.

"I don't need protection." Carlen flipped the robes hood over his head.

Liotta tied her sash. "What's your plan now, tough guy?"

"I figured we would wait for the Crows to board, then we would blast them."

Liotta shook her head. "Oh, *that's* a great plan." She looked at the officer. "What are we going to do with this gentleman?"

Jonas got out of his seat and adjusted his robe. "We will use him as a prisoner. Then we will get into the detention area."

"Well... what if he talks?" Carlen added as he adjusted his hood.

"I've got a great idea." Liotta turned, staring Jonas right in the eye. "You go find your Darden person and we will stay right here. If you are not back within a certain amount of time, we will leave without you."

"You'll get killed if the Crows decide to board the craft." Jonas tied his sash and pulled the hood over his head. "We must stick together."

"What are we going to do about the officer?" Liotta noticed the Enforcer mumbling to himself.

"I will take care of it." Jonas flipped his blaster out.

Liotta quickly blocked Jonas from getting any closer.

Carlen ripped the weapon from Jonas's hand. "I will handle this." He stepped up to the officer and rested the blaster on the man's temple.

"Carlen? No!" Jonas pushed Liotta aside.

His cousin gave him a faint look. Jonas could tell he was over the edge. Something snapped.

"Carlen, please... He's an Enforcer," Liotta pleaded.

The officer's eyes rolled towards his temples. He was trying to communicate but still did not have the capabilities to put words together.

"I can protect myself, Jonas... See?"

"Cousin, relax. I know you can. If you hurt this guy, not only will you get dismissed from the Academy, you will get termination."

Carlen dropped his head and focused on the floor. He brought the blaster to his side. "Why were you going to kill him?"

"I wasn't." Jonas walked over to a wall storage container. "I was going to transfer the guy into this." He pulled it open to display a tight cell.

"Oh." Carlen handed the blaster back to Jonas.

"You are both insane!" Liotta smacked Carlen in the face. "I can't believe you would even think of killing that man."

"I... I'm sorry."

Jonas pushed Carlen. "Get your hoods up and wait for me outside. I will be right with you. Just as soon as I put the Enforcer here away."

Liotta was relieved. She too thought that Jonas had been about to terminate the officer.

Carlen fixed up his hood and walked down the ramp.

"I really think we should have stayed right here."

"Liotta... Please go with Carlen." Jonas handed her the blaster. "Keep this in a safe place."

The port was busy. There was a lot of commerce along the docking areas. The place was packed with Crows. It used to be the main military post before the Sapien immigration. With less and less land on Earth, Cordova was quickly becoming a settlement. This port was obviously a place where merchants could hassle customers before they reached their new homes.

Liotta and Carlen were standing ten feet away from the craft. The good thing about their robes was that almost all the common Crows wore them.

A robe's style indicated one's social status. Since most Crows were poor, the simple brown robe with a yellow sash was worn often. The sash was the essential accessory. Yellow sashes were always for the civilians or commons. The purples ones exhibited a military class. The Old Republic had a whole line of robes, which displayed the different ranks.

They were fantastic disguises. There were no voice distinctions between Crows and Sapiens. Just the faces and foreheads were different. Height was not a problem, because Liotta and Carlen were not fully matured yet. Jonas stepped out of the craft wearing the Enforcer's uniform.

"What the hell are you doing?" Liotta barked.

Carlen noticed some Crows had already spotted Jonas. He tugged Liotta by the arm before she could be linked to his cousin. "Leave him be."

"Looks pretty good on me, doesn't it?" Jonas said through tight lips as he winked at Liotta.

"I get it. I get it. He wants to go to the detention block." Carlen was pleased with his reasoning. "Then he will find Darden."

"I guess we have to follow him there," Liotta said as she felt around for the hidden blaster.

Within moments, Republican Guards swarmed around Jonas as he flaunted his stolen uniform. The guards were draped in purple robes with wide black sashes. Patches of gray crescents, which resembled the waning moon, were worn on their right shoulders. They drew silver blasters from inside their cloaks.

"Looks like you got me." Jonas's smile puffed out his cheeks. His eyes showed the hopes he had of finding Darden.

"Down to the floor, Sapien." One guard aimed his weapon.

Jonas nodded in agreement as he slowly went down on his knees.

An impatient guard landed his boot in the back of Jonas's head to speed up the capture. The smile quickly faded from the teen's face. It was at that point he realized he might have made a bad decision.

Carlen held onto Liotta's elbow and pulled her back into the onlooking crowd of merchants and commons. A loud rumbling came from around the port's opening. A transport lowered next to Jonas's craft. Carlen tugged on Liotta's sleeve to get her to move further away.

Five more Republican Guards sprang out from the transport carrying long blasters. They poured into the craft. Only seconds passed before loud bangs were heard, followed by a quick blast.

Jonas's head whipped in the direction of his craft. He knew in his heart that the officer had been captured or even worse, killed.

Liotta glanced at Carlen from underneath her hood. They communicated their concerns without a word.

She shoved Carlen away from the crowd. Carlen responded by taking her hand and dashing to safety.

Jonas watched his foolproof plan rapidly crumble. The one thing that put him at ease was that his friends seemed to be safe. The guards arranged Jonas face down on the ground. The dust from the moon did not taste very good. He heard laughing and cheering coming from the craft. While the teen's wrists were being bound, he shifted his bloodshot pupils back towards his ship.

Three guards walked down the ramp filled with exuberance. Behind them, two more followed, dragging the corpse of their latest trophy.

His captors swiftly lifted Jonas into the air. The Crows had incredible strength.

Carlen and Liotta watched helplessly as Jonas was carried into a Republican Transport. Liotta pointed towards the guards. "We have to find a way to follow that craft."

The transport lifted a meter off the ground. "Looks like we're too late." Carlen tapped Liotta on the shoulder. The craft blended into the horizon.

Jonas was headed for Cordova's military colony. The transport was zipping along quickly. It traveled in and out of domes, over craters and halfway across the rock's surface just while they watched. Inside, Jonas was mentally preparing himself for his encounter with his fair weather friend.

With his hands strapped tightly to the craft's seat, Jonas stared at Kiyo's body, which was wrapped in a foil-like bag. The odor that ran through the vessel confirmed the Enforcer was dead.

In the front, two guards piloted the craft along Cordova. Jonas noticed they were different from the Crows he'd met on Earth. Their skin was grayish in color. Their eyes were glossy and dark red where their lids met their pupils. Jonas could see the effects on them of living in an artificial atmosphere.

The craft zipped down an outdoor corridor protected by huge cannon blasters. The horizon had numerous steel domes. In the center sat the tallest of round structures. Huge beams of light grew larger as the structure opened its bay doors. Jonas stretched out far enough to get a lay of the territory.

The area was familiar to him. It was the side of the moon his father had so often described. In fact, Jonas had such a good mental picture in his head that he could have drawn a map by memory. This was where so many Parliamentary invasions had taken place. He also knew this was not the place where prisoners were held. It was the place where the Emperor resided. This facility was also where the termination process was held.

The transport trembled. A loud humming sound captured everyone's ears. The usually dark insides of the craft had become so bright that Jonas's eyes hurt until his pupils readjusted. Through the back windows, Jonas watched the bay doors slowly close.

How are they ever going to find me? He thought about his cousin and Liotta. *Maybe I should have listened to Liotta's plan.* Jonas could not help but look at the slain officer next to him. He knew his career at the Academy was over. It was completely his fault that Kiyo had lost his life. If he ever returned home, the Council would probably make him pay with his own life.

Nine

The transport lowered to touch the ground. The guards inside the dome swiftly left their posts to greet the

craft. The ones inside put their hoods back over their heads. Jonas thought this was rather strange. The rear hatch steamed open.

Jonas noticed a completely different style of uniform. These Crows wore body armor. In the center, they had their black sashes.

Four guards entered the transport and cuffed the teen's neck with a metal collar. One guard unstrapped Jonas while the other one tugged him as if he were an animal.

Jonas was not even on his feet when he found himself being dragged down the ramp. "Easy..."

"Shut up, Sapien." The guard whacked Jonas with the heel of his palm.

The other two guards hitched a chain to the end of the foil wrap, which covered the dead officer. With one hard jerk, the corpse flipped out of the craft. Jonas was astonished by the monstrous strength these men had.

They dragged Jonas towards a huge entrance hall at the end of the port. The doorway was heavily protected by a guard station. The guards kicked and spit at Jonas as he was being paraded past them. The guards committed horrible acts to the Enforcer's corpse.

I can't believe these animals. What have I done? Jonas thought.

Once past the entranceway, there was a long, gray corridor. Voices of all kinds were heard. They grew louder with every step. Along the way, Jonas discovered doorways without doors, which opened up to small rooms. The guards stopped midway down the corridor and unclipped Jonas's neck cuff. He twisted his head a bit to loosen his stiff neck. Two guards gave him a swift shove into one of the rooms. They laughed a bit and continued down the hall with Kiyo's body.

Jonas picked himself up off the floor. He brushed off his stolen uniform. *Rock dust.* He looked around slightly confused. He didn't understand why they would put him in a room without a lock of some sort. Jonas angled himself so he could see down the hall. No guards around within sight. He inched closer to freedom. He looked the opposite way. *No guards there either.* Jonas cautiously stepped through the doorway.

Zap!

Electrical jolts sprang from every corner of the door. His body danced involuntarily with the high voltage until he was finally thrown to the floor. He remained on his back, lifeless .

It was a good hour before Jonas came around to consciousness. His hair was grayed a bit and his skin seemed to have aged a couple of years. His eyes were set back deep in his head surrounded by broken blood vessels. The teen sat up to better orient himself. His attention was on that stupid doorway. He should have known better than that. His father had always told him stories about the Crows' sucker traps. *If it looks too good to be true... it is.*

A deranged giggle echoed from the cell across the hall. Jonas rose to feet and limped over to see who thought his pain was so humorous. There sat a little man with his hands over his mouth. He was just chuckling to himself. Jonas could tell that not all the man's facilities were functioning. Something was different about him though. Physically.

His demeanor exhibited that he could be either a Crow or a Sapien. His forehead was not as thick as the

others but still very much dominant. His nose was smaller, more squared than round. All Sapiens had smaller features. The main thing Jonas noticed was the man's hair. It was thick black, sprouting wildly from his head. Yet his arms were bare. Crow head, Sapien arms. Jonas studied the older man until he was caught gazing.

The man lowered his hands, discovering Jonas with his piercing eyes. "Is my giggle bothering you?"

"Ah…no." Jonas stepped back, and remembered an electrical door must secure the man as well.

"Don't run, boy. I won't hurt you. I can't hurt you." The man reenacted Jonas being blasted by the electricity. He fell back with unrestrained laughter.

Stepping towards the door Jonas snapped, "Think that's funny? Wait till I get outta here. I'll show you funny."

"Now, now, boy. Relax . I'm only fooling with you."

Jonas sat down, preparing for a conversation. "Why are you here?"

"Like you... was caught." The man giggled a bit.

"I wasn't caught," Jonas said defensively. "This is part of my plan."

The man burst out in small chuckles. "Nice plan."

"I came here to find someone."

"Of your kind, I suspect." The man rubbed his right arm, showing off his physical similarities.

"No, actually. I was caught so they could bring me to this holding prison. With any luck, I will run into him in the galleys."

"Stupid boy. There no galleys. Think this is like a Parliamentary facility? Toss morsels in. Leave you here to die."

Jonas suddenly realized this man was right. All his plans were off track. He was betting on the fact that he would get to at least have contact with Darden. Then he could plot an escape. If he were bound to this room, then he would surely perish. "When do they come with food?"

The man laughed again. "Hungry already, boy?"

"My name is Jonas. No, I'm not hungry. I'm getting out of here."

Sarcasm flowed through the man's voice. "Two guards deliver food. Both have taser keys for doors. No way will you beat them."

"How do you know? You look like someone who's just given up." Jonas stood up and walked away.

"Given up?" The usually jolly man was enraged. Jonas heard a loud crash against the wall. "Listen, you stupid fool! Don't know the life I had. Morsel a day and roof over your soul is better than being bumped around as a half-breed freak!"

Jonas stood up and walked away from the door. He was not interested in this man's story.

"Where'd you go, boy? Show yourself!" The man was angled in his doorway trying to catch a glimpse of

Jonas.

The man rambled on for minutes. Jonas ignored him--until the man started to pique his interest.

"Want help getting out of here? Do you?" he screamed.

Jonas bent towards the door. He saw the man's deranged eyes peering at him.

The man smiled. "Here, boy! Give you solid piece of advice." The man flipped his rags off his back. From shoulder to shoulder and along the length of his spine, the man bore a deep scar that still looked fresh.

Jonas's mouth hung open in horror. The man's back resembled a slab of half-eaten meat. Jonas's first thought was that the poor guy had been attacked by a dracosaur.

"Get good look, boy," the man raged. "Get good look at what happens when you try to get out of here." The man flashed his back for only another second. Then he lifted his rags, revealing scars running in all directions.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." Jonas actually felt ashamed for the first time in his life.

"Think they'd let an innocent man free? Way they saw--all of them--their side and yours, my parents committed crimes. I was to pay for it."

"Your parents?" Jonas empathized.

"I am half-breed, stupid child. No one likes my kind." The man sat back down in front of his door. "Amazes me. They were loving folks. Father with the original colony that migrated to Earth. A good group."

Jonas also sat down. His interest was piqued. "What happened?"

"Then came... second wave." The man stared straight through Jonas as he spoke. "Called themselves the Parliamentary Council. Bastards. Promised Mother's people they'd live together in peace."

"Your mother was a Crow?"

"Course. Back then no labels for anyone. Until the Enforcers were formed."

"Stop!" Jonas put up his hand. He knew it was coming. He did not want to hear anything else bad about his father's life.

"Don't want to hear the rest?" The man got his chuckle back.

"Why are you in a Crow holding prison?" Jonas laughed now. "I mean, if the Council was so bad."

"When you different, no one wants you. Crows have nothing to do with half Sapien. Where they are concerned, am just like you." The man rubbed his arm again.

Jonas leaned forward, looking deep into the man's eyes. "If I get out of here... I promise to take you, too."

"One of the Enforcers? Sorry. Cannot myself trust you."

Jonas suddenly remembered he was in an officer's uniform. He attempted to cover the nameplate. "This is

not mine."

"Sure." The man chuckled.

"Honest. I stole it." Jonas just realized that he'd just asked a man to trust him and in the next sentence admitted he was a thief. "It's a long story."

"Relax, boy. Know it's not yours."

"How can you tell?" Jonas was glad the man believed him.

"Sleeves folded up, pant cuffs wrapped over your heels." The man chuckled loudly. "Deal."

"Huh?" Jonas became confused by the man's last word. "Deal?"

"You escape... May rescue me." The man raised his unibrow and giggled like before.

"Time for bits." A guard standing at the door called to Jonas. "Hey, you. Wake up. Time for bits." The guard was standing in the center of the room, nudging Jonas with his foot.

Jonas shook his head a little, waking himself up. He saw the guard leering over him with a clay dish in his hands. The teen thought about rushing him, but figured he should wait. Now was not the time. He needed a plan. For the moment he would just take the food.

"Come on. Take it." The guard handed the food down to Jonas.

Jonas grabbed the bowl and glanced over at his new friend's cell. He saw the other guard in there doing the same thing. When his friend took the food, the guard delivered a swift kick to the man's side. The man crunched over, dropping his food. Jonas waited for the same. Sure enough... it came. The guard whacked him right in the ribs. The teen dropped his bowl on the ground, shattering the clay pieces.

"Stupid, Sapien." The guard laughed. "Clean up the mess when you're done."

Jonas lay on the floor holding his side. He watched the guards reactivate the doorways. His friend looked at him from across the hall with sadness in his eyes. Jonas looked back with hope in his. He had his plan.

Days passed and Jonas's relationship with his friend, Leo, flourished. His birth name was actually Leonodo, but everyone called him Leo. As each day came and went, their plan became more and more sophisticated. They were just waiting for the perfect time to strike. That time was this evening.

Jonas got the guards used to coming into the room to look for him. He would fake sleeping along the far side of the cell. This way he would not be seen from the doorway. The guard would have to come in quite a bit to hand him his food.

Jonas played up the fact that he was a weak little teenager. He took his daily shot to the ribs with pride. The teen rehearsed the best wails and moans.

Once free, Jonas would search for Darden. They would release as many people as possible, and that would create enough of a distraction for them to get to the port. Leo warned him though. They would need to exit via transport. There was no other way to travel on the moon's surface because of the absence of gravity and atmosphere.

Ten

"Hey, Sapien. Time for bits." The guard stood dominantly over Jonas. "Wake up. Time for bits." The guard nudged him with his foot.

Jonas shook his head, pretending to wake up. He opened his eyes and saw the food plate lurking over him. He reached up to grab it. Once the bowl was in his hands, as usual, the guard raised his knee, preparing to deliver a kick. Jonas dropped the bowl and caught the guard's boot with one hand. He snatched a piece of broken plate, from the other day, out of his sleeve. Jonas lunged the makeshift knife directly into the Crow's groin.

The Crow clutched his blaster but the pain was so unbearable that he could not keep his grip on it. Jonas took advantage of the opportunity and snatched the weapon. He forced the guard to the ground. The teen hopped to his feet, ripping the taser key from his captor's sash.

The other guard responded to the sounds of the struggle. He was making his way toward Jonas's cell when Jonas pointed the key at Leo's doorway and set the lock. The guard was so focused on helping his partner that he did not realize Jonas even had the key. The Republican officer walked right into the electric field and danced violently. He was thrown onto his back. Leo gladly helped him forfeit his blaster and taser key.

Leo saw Jonas standing over the bleeding guard. "He's about dead. Get his armor off or it will be stained."

"Good idea." Jonas stripped the guard. The man was screaming silently for help. Jonas kicked him in the side. "By the way, your bits were disgusting."

The man held his hand out, pleading to Jonas.

"Stupid Crow."

"No need to get nasty. Or personal," Leo said, dressing in his guard's gear.

"These bastards killed my mother." He kicked the man again. "They killed my father." He kicked the man a third time. "They tried to kill me."

"Put personal feelings aside. Came here for reason." Leo giggled as he tied the sash around his waist.

Jonas completed his outfit. He also tossed his Enforcer's uniform on the naked guard. He dragged him to the corner. "Now they will think you are me." He kicked the man a fourth time. "Stupid Sapien." Mocking the dying man.

Leo stepped out of his cell and started dancing about the hall. His giggle was justified. He started twirling with joy and shaking uncontrollably.

"Hey! Calm down. Calm down, Leo." Jonas ran out to the corridor. "Leo? Leo?" Jonas pressed down on Leo's shoulders. "Relax."

"Can't believe it. Am free. Am free. Haven't left room in six revolutions." Leo's giggle trickled into tears.

"We aren't out of here yet. Let's stick to the plan, okay?" Jonas tugged on his friend. He motioned for Leo to follow him down the hall. "We need to find Darden."

The two cautiously glided down the corridor. Jonas quietly called out for his friend. With every cell they

passed, he hoped one would give him a response. As they made their way, Leo noticed symbols on each door. Jonas could not comprehend them. Leo briefly explained that each design represented the order of entry into the cell. The other symbol next to it stood for the crime. Jonas looked over at Leo wishing he could help him read one in particular. The first symbol was similar to a number. It was three tally marks followed by a crescent moon. The one next to it was of a stick figure with curving legs.

Jonas tapped his fingers up against them. "What's that say?" In a whisper.

Giggling, Leo answered, "Three half moons time. Tried to retreat in battle."

Jonas quickly picked up on the language. After all, the Parliamentary number system was more advanced but had the same foundations. It took him a moment to understand the picture. The more he studied it, he could identify a man running from a battle.

While passing each holding area, Jonas was able to notice the symbols. He came across one that had one tally mark and a full circle. He explained his guess to Leo and found that he was correct. The symbol meant that the prisoner had been there only one full moon ago. Not a very long time.

"Hey, Leo?"

"Yes, boy?"

Tapping on the full circle. "Is this the shortest amount of time symbolized?"

"Yes. That person was here since last full moon." Leo chuckled a bit.

All the cackling was starting to get on Jonas's nerves. However, Leo was someone he needed. "That would mean that Darden's cell would probably have the same number. He was captured not even a full round ago."

"Only a round, then assume that doesn't have number yet."

Jonas realized that the cell they were looking for would not have anything labeled on it yet. They had already searched over half the corridor. It would not be long now.

"Darden?" He whispered.

"Who calls?" A sad voice slipped into the halls.

"Darden?" Jonas broke his whisper.

"Who calls?" the monotone voice repeated.

Jonas pinpointed the voice. He angled himself in the doorway until he spotted Darden lying in the corner of his room. He whipped out his taser key and powered down the entrance. Jonas readied his blaster in his other hand because he did not want to be turned in again. As he stepped closer to Darden, all the thoughts he had of killing this man returned. He had to focus on why he was here. He did not risk the lives of himself and his friends to interrogate a dead man. He would restrain himself and use the blaster only as a bargaining tool.

"Hello, Darden." Jonas stood over the man with his weapon aimed right for the Crow's face.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't," Leo warned sarcastically.

"Shut up, Leo!" Jonas kept his eyes trained on Darden.

Darden turned over to discover who was standing over him. When he saw it was Jonas, his face filled with confusion. "Not you."

"Why not me? Friend." Jonas shoved the weapon against Darden's head.

"Kill me if you want. I don't regret what I did. If I had my way I would kill you myself." Darden sat up, ignoring the blaster in his cheek. "You are just like he was."

"Like who?" Jonas asked.

"I am going up before Emperor Pernius for trial tomorrow. He will be pleased to know that you have come to him. Then I will be set free." Darden erected his posture with dignity. He swatted the blaster from his face.

"Like who?" Jonas demanded.

"To think I was going to risk everything for you. A Sapien." If Darden had any fear of Jonas, he did not exhibit it. All the nervous energy transferred into Jonas.

The teen began second-guessing himself for coming to Cordova. "I need to know who, who I am just like?" He cocked the trigger on his blaster. "Why did you hand me over after your friends mentioned my father's name?"

"You really want to know?" Darden stared right into the blaster. "Just like your father. Evil."

Jonas stepped back, extending his arm, ready to blow off Darden's head off. "Evil? I will show you evil!"

"Easy, boy," Leo cautioned from his spot by the door. He then stepped in and put his hand on Jonas's shoulder. "Let's go, boy."

Jonas shrugged the half-breed off.

"You deserve to die just like my son did. They were almost there. Almost to Strom and your father cut them down!" Darden nodded his head up and down rapidly. "That's right. Your father killed an innocent child because he was different."

"You're crazy." A deranged look came over Jonas's face as he tightened his grip on the weapon.

"No. Your father was crazy. That's why the Council let him go." Darden smiled.

Tears began to fill the curves in Jonas's eyelids. His lips quivered. "That's not true. What do you know about Strom?"

"Your father broke code and murdered most of his own men so they wouldn't talk. Your father was known for killing anyone who got in his way. Including my ten year old son."

"He was a hero." The weapon started to tremble in his hand. Jonas cried, "A hero!" Jonas trembled as his blood began to boil. "Tell me about Strom!"

"I'm sorry. He was an evil man, making his way up the ranks. Did he ever tell you about the time he wiped out a whole family of Crows? He also wiped out the team that was with him. His own kind." Darden studied Jonas's reactions. "It's a wonder they didn't assassinate him sooner."

"Strom!" Jonas was coming to the realization that these stories sounded more and more logical. How many missions did he remember his father coming back the sole survivor? The teen stood with the

blaster, ready to take off Darden's head. How he wanted to call him a liar. How he wanted to stick the weapon in this man's deceitful mouth and put his brains on the wall. Instead, he just dropped the weapon to the floor, staring pitifully at the man who had lost his boy at the hands of his 'War Hero Father'.

Darden did not hesitate. He scooped up the blaster and quickly aimed it at Jonas's face.

Jonas wanted to die. His image of his father had always been his strength.

"Duck." Darden pushed Jonas aside with his left foot and unloaded the blaster towards the door. Two guards went down in a matter of seconds.

Leo sprang back in surprise. "My Gods! Didn't see them." He ripped his weapon from his sash and ran back to guard the door. "Are no more."

"There will be." Darden joined Leo at the exit. "Come on, kid."

Jonas remained on the floor where Darden nudged him.

"Jonas, let's go," Darden yelled.

Leo remembered the rest of the plan. He pulled out his taser key and powered down all the electrical fields. He woke prisoners up, banged on the walls and whatever else he could do to create total chaos. "You free! Run to main port."

"Jonas!" Darden noticed that the young Sapien still had not moved. Jonas stayed there, hoping someone would come along and put him out of his misery. Darden went over to him and grabbed his arm. "Today. We will make the world a better place. Besides... your friends need you." Darden gestured to all the inmates running around without direction.

Jonas related 'friends' to his cousin and Liotta. He had to get them off Cordova. They came here for him. Hopefully Carlen was putting the rest of the plan into action.

He grabbed Darden's hand. "I'm fine." He approached the dead guards and stole both of their blasters. "Let's get outta here."

Leo ran over to Jonas with smirk that could slice through metal. "Isn't it glorious?" He roared with laughter.

The corridor was flooded with inmates. They were a combination of Crows, Sapiens and half-breeds. Jonas noticed they were all helping each other with one common goal--survival. He moved to the front of the group and whistled as loud as possible. Everyone quieted down suddenly. "Follow me to freedom."

Everyone cheered and pushed through to the prison entrance, which led to the main port.

The prisoners forced the doors open. Jonas, Darden and Leo stayed back a bit in case the guards were waiting. Blasters from the other side tore through the crazed inmates. The survivors continued being cut down by the guards one by one.

Jonas pointed his weapon at a post that sat high above the entrance. The guards were firing down on the prisoners. Darden noticed it. They both aimed their blasters at the lookout. Jonas squeezed the cold steel trigger, taking the guards by surprise.

Leo let out a number of hoots as he charged the Crows protecting the transport. Jonas could not believe the half-breed's fighting ability. He was glad that he had befriended him. Leo took all three guards out

and turned back to Jonas. "Get that Crow. Let's go!" Leo chuckled at his poetic ability.

Jonas grabbed Darden's elbow and pulled him from the others. Darden resisted and shook his head. "We can't leave yet."

"Why not?" Jonas couldn't understand Darden's refusal.

"We need to help these people."

Jonas observed all the madness. The inmates were fighting for their lives. Jonas had used them as part of his plan. In his heart he knew if they were left behind they would quickly be squelched. "There isn't going to be room for everyone."

"We need to make room. There are four transports over there." Darden gestured towards the crafts. "They will take us right home. These crafts are designed to slide through the atmosphere."

"I can't go right home, Darden." Jonas shook his head. "I have to pick up my friends."

Darden wrapped his arm around Jonas. "Okay. Okay," he said thinking. "You and Leo do what you need to. I will gather some of these people up and head back to Earth." Darden motioned toward the ship Leo was nearby. "Go." Darden suddenly remembered something. "Oh." He reached into his pouch. "This belongs to you." He pulled out the stone.

Jonas went to grab the moon rock from Darden when a huge blast vibrated the port.

Darden tossed the stone back into his pouch. "Get out of here. I'll meet you on the planet."

Jonas wanted that stone but knew it would be useless to him if he was dead. He took off toward the craft.

Jonas had spent the last round of days hating Darden. He forgot why. This Crow was concerned about each of these different people. Crows, Sapiens and half-breeds. Darden wanted to rescue all of them.

"Let's go." Leo ran into the transport.

"I'll see you down there." Darden's weathered cheeks lifted from his smile.

"Where?"

"Outskirts of the Safe Zone. Forget the Academy. Chances are the probes weren't from Emperor Pernius." Darden walked away and rounded up teams of inmates.

Jonas headed over to the transport, discovering Leo in the captain's chair. "Move over."

"Over?" Leo jumped out of his seat. "Yes, sir." He saluted with a cackle.

Jonas analyzed the foreign control system. It was exactly the same as the craft Liotta's father had. Piloting this vessel would be no problem. He pressed his index finger into a blue squared button that rested in the panel's center. A light hum accompanied the vessel's vibration. Leo began laughing and cheerfully clapping his hands against his knees. The craft slowly hovered.

"Leo? Leo?" Jonas set his eyes on the huge bay doors. "We have a problem."

Leo stopped celebrating. He realized that the exit panels could only be opened from the control area. Getting to it would be impossible since there were inmates attempting to overtake it.

"What if we blast it?" Jonas hoped for Leo's approval.

Leo pointed with his thumb. "People will instantly be sucked in space."

"So what should we do?" Jonas was frustrated.

Leo giggled as he squeezed a red trigger, which rested along the back of a shift stick. The transport's blasters fired upon the doors. "Seemed all clear back there." A giggle followed, as bodies of guards and dead inmates floated past the transport and through the fiery hole. "Oops."

Jonas got a kick out of watching the Crow guards float out of the port. "Let's be on our way." Jonas gripped the semi-circular handle while putting as much pressure on the foot pedal as he could muster.

The transport escaped through the freshly mutilated doors, zipping down the cannon filled trail. The teen's concentration was so intense that he did not notice the laser barrels sprouting from the cannon capsules, which lined the trail. The turrets rotated on their axes, attempting to target the fleeing transports.

The huge weapons rattled in rapid succession toward the vessels. One of the cannons connected its blast with one of the other crafts. The force of the explosion lifted Jonas's craft and propelled it farther down the path. His transport was now clear of danger.

Jonas worried that the blown-away transport was Darden's. He had no way of knowing since these crafts did not have any apparent communications instruments. Leo had reinforced that suspicion when he informed Jonas that all ship-to-ship contact was usually made via their hand held units. If Darden had not wanted to save everyone, he would have been safely aboard their vessel.

Jonas had to focus his efforts on getting his cousin and Liotta. He piloted clear across Cordova. They did not encounter any more resistance. Jonas believed the others had a more difficult escape. As the transport approached a grouping of domes, Jonas was scouting the terrain for familiarity. He searched his memory for the sector that held all the landing ports.

Leo pointed out an escort vessel landing in the foreground. "There. Over there."

Jonas quickly shifted his eyes towards the direction the half-breed was giving him. That was it. The sky blue dome, which was larger than the rest. That was the port they were led into when they arrived. Jonas tilted the transport's nose closer to the rocks' surface. The craft was being carefully piloted along the runway towards the indoor city.

"The next part of your plan, boy?" Leo stared out of the window with an intense look.

"If everything works out as planned, we will glide this baby in and my cousin will have the other one fired up." Jonas wrapped his fingers tightly around the steering handle as the transport's ride grew bumpier.

"Gravity stones," Leo remarked.

"The what?"

Leo stopped gazing out the window and turned toward his young friend. "The gravity stones."

"What are gravity stones?" Jonas asked, as his arms were jolting for better control of the craft.

"Don't fight, boy. Stones creating this ride. Power hasn't been decreased."

Jonas did not understand.

"Flat rocks of tremendous size buried under each city. Are designed to simulate Earth's natural gravity. This causes concern for some alarm." Leo's eyebrow went up in the center.

"We didn't get this bumpy ride before."

"Exactly. An escort ship brought you. Those ships get close, huge lead plates slide over stones, modifying gravitational force of the city. Magnifies the pull inside so people do not drift off while bay doors are open."

Jonas was astonished by the amount of knowledge Leo had inside his thick, ugly skull. This news was not what the teen wanted to hear. "Okay. So then?"

"If aren't expecting us, bay doors will not open. If doors do not open, will be pulled into the dome anyway." Leo giggled.

"Come on, Leo... This is serious. We will go through the dome then?" A bead of sweat trickled down Jonas's forehead.

"Not exactly. Domes built to withstand Sapien attack. Most likely disintegrate when we hit." A half chuckle slipped out.

"W-W-What do we do?" Jonas pulled the handle into his chest.

"That won't work."

"I can see that." Jonas's attempt to lift the craft up and out of the runway was failing. He strained his forearms so much that they were getting numb from the heavy vibrations and his consistent pressure.

The city was looming closer. Jonas's face was soaked with wet beads of worry. "Please, come on. Please, come on." The teen tugged so hard, the moisture of his palms caused him to slip off the handle. He flew back in his seat, whacking his skull against the headrest.

Leo chuckled a moment and took over the controls. He raised his thick, hairy index finger, pressing down on the ignition button. Jonas popped up to restart it. Leo threw his palm up against Jonas's chest to hold him off.

"What the hell are you doing?" Jonas grabbed Leo's hand.

"Time to trust, new friend." The craft decelerated, moving steadily to the surface. Leo removed his hand from Jonas's chest. Then he wrapped them around the handle, guiding the transport so it would not crash.

Jonas felt secure. He picked up on Leo's little plan. Leo was bringing the ship down to the surface. He was not doing anything reckless. "Why?"

"Stones will pull us if we are up or down. If down, at least have surface friction, slowing down process of exploding into side of city's steel atmosphere." The mad man smiled, more so to gratify himself.

"What happens next, Galee?" Jonas could not understand why Leo was not laughing. Did he not get the joke?

"Galee?"

"Galee was a master teacher. Very smart. Very famous. It was his theories that launched the migration of the Sapiens," Jonas explained.

"Because of him, Sapiens came to Earth?"

"Right." Jonas grinned.

"Remind me to thank him for my looks." Leo let out a bellow of hard laughter.

"Funny, very funny."

"Least my humor made sense," Leo retorted.

"Okay. So why did we land?" Jonas returned the conversation to its original topic.

"Wait here for escort craft. It dumps the other vessels. We'll have a way in. Stones power lowers." Leo looked at Jonas, hoping the teen understood what he'd just said.

"Gotcha." Jonas sat back. "So I guess all we have to do is wait."

Leo scrunched up in his chair to make himself as comfortable as he could. He closed his eyes and let out a sigh. "Why did you not ask about Strom?"

"What?" Jonas perked up.

"Strom... Leo take you there."

"Really? You know about Strom? Does it exist?"

Leo popped open his eyes and tilted his head towards the teen. "Strom exist, Jonas Troupe. Your father is Troupe?"

"Yes. Yes he was. Strom really exists?" Jonas finally felt as though he was not crazy. Then again, Leo, who was apparently crazy, was the only one who knew about this place.

"Leo takes Jonas home." Leo leaned further back in his seat and released a yawn. "Talk later." He turned away.

Anxiety burned through the teen's body.

Eleven

Jonas and Leo sat patiently waiting for the next escort ship to release a load of vessels. Leo explained that it would be a while longer because escort ships only picked up crafts orbiting Cordova and guided them to this city. This was the moon's only port of entry. Most vessels never made it past Earth's clouds because of the Parliamentary Enforcers. When a surviving Crow vessel was detected, it was pulled in and redirected to this city.

The conversation quieted down a bit. Both Leo and Jonas were extremely tired. They each took turns keeping watch while the other napped. Jonas was exploring the moon through the window, while Leo kicked back in the opposite chair.

Jonas reached into his pocket pretending to retrieve his father's rock. He longed to hold that stone in his hands. He could not believe he had just let Darden take it again. He had gained a certain sense of security with it.

Jonas felt himself getting upset. He tilted his head against the window and glared out at the craters. He placed his palm against the clear plastic and pretended to touch the rocks along Cordova's surface. He

slowly pulled his hand away and wrapped his fingers around an imaginary rock. He thought of his father again. This time the memory was not pleasant.

Jonas closed his eyes as he pictured his father walking through the front door. Captain Troupe was struck in the head with a plate accompanied by his mother screaming.

"How could you?" Her rage increased as she pounded him on the chest.

Jonas never understood what they fought about, but all the bad memories began to fill his mind.

The transport jolted violently along the ground. Jonas strapped himself into his seat, noticing Leo slept right through it. Outside, craters and rocks slid by the window. Jonas could feel the floor rumbling below him. He glanced over at Leo again with a nervous gleam in his eye.

Leo did not even break from his rest. "Relax, boy. It's only the stones pulling us closer to the city." He quickly returned to his dreams.

Jonas had experienced plenty of these pulls while they waited, but this one felt different. Stronger. As the transport glided along the surface, rumbling overhead grew louder and louder. The teen peeked upward through the front window and discovered three small crafts, like Liotta's father's, cruising past them. *This is it.*

Jonas pushed down on the ignition with his palm. The transport hummed and hovered. Even though he did not see the escort ship, he knew it had come. The types of crafts that flew by were loaded with heavy engines. That meant they had to come from home. They needed to be powerful enough to break Earth's gravitational pull. Jonas lifted the handle up and pumped the floor pedal. The transport moved swiftly, and now smoothly, along the runway.

Up ahead he could see the bay doors opening just like the first time he had entered the city. He pumped the pedal harder, not to miss his chance. Leo continued to snore. The largest craft went into the city first, immediately followed by the other two. Jonas brought up the rear as the door's opening began to narrow.

Something did not feel right about the port. There were no merchants selling their garbage. Crows were not crowding the bay area. It was unusually quiet. Jonas watched the crafts settle down slowly. They lowered near the ship that belonged to Liotta's father. The feeling of uneasiness returned. He was praying that Carlen was ready and waiting inside the ship. If something had happened to his friends, he would never forgive himself.

Jonas noticed Republican Guards leaning in the shadows of the port. He realized they were waiting for him. "Leo? Leo, wake up. Wake up." He nudged his half-breed friend with an elbow.

Leo slowly opened his eyes, grinning at Jonas. "Thanks for extra time."

"Forget that. I think we're in trouble." Jonas motioned to the guards.

"Forget them." Leo pointed to the three ships that had docked near his getaway vessel. "Look at them."

Armored guards poured out of both the small ships and formed two solid lines in front of the largest craft. The ramp lowered, revealing ten more guards exiting the huge craft. These guards were not armored. They wore robes.

Their robes were smaller, tighter and colored brightly. Their yellow garments came accessorized with black sashes, which held two-foot swords on one side and fancy blasters on the other. These guards did not wear hoods, either. Their heads were outfitted with purple skullcaps. The backs of the caps had a

colorful assortment of dino feathers dancing up and down their backs. They appeared more like warriors.

"Turn around! Turn around!" Leo barked without a giggle. Jonas knew he was serious. "Ship is carrying the Emperor. Turn around."

"I can't. The door is closed." Leo's excitement was turning Jonas's uneasy feeling into outright panic. "What? What should I do, Leo? What should I do?"

"Turn around."

Jonas wished it was that easy, but the Crows' best soldiers now surrounded his stolen vessel, which had Liotta and Carlen in it.

The guards broke from their lines. They formed in a circular pattern around an empty lot.

"Appears they expect to put this thing down in that spot." Leo put his head down.

The guards aimed their weapons at the transport. They looked like they were about to bring it down themselves.

Leo slowly gripped the metal rod that sprouted from his side of the console. He then gently wrapped his thick knuckles around the red trigger. Jonas noticed this and followed suit.

"Word of advice, boy." Leo's face became stern. "Darden said he would meet us on the planet. This transport has power to get there."

Jonas observed the men getting ready to bring him to his death. A transmission came across the port speakers. "You are defeated. Surrender now and your friends will be spared."

Leo went to squeeze to trigger. Jonas threw his arms up and slapped Leo's hand. "Stop! Please don't." Jonas gave Leo a pleading look.

Leo released the trigger. "Okay."

Boom!

A loud explosion rang out through the bay. The guards below scrambled for cover. Leo started laughing uncontrollably. "Look. One of their ships blew up."

Jonas anxiously glanced around him. *How the hell did that happen?*

They unloaded all their power on it. The ship's pieces blew in all different directions. His gut knotted up. He'd just lost his cousin and the first girl he actually liked.

Jonas's mind started twirling quickly. His father's voice popped in his ears. "Kill the no good bastards. Kill them all." Jonas firmly gripped his blaster control. Darden's voice sprang out loudly. "The most evil man alive." The window filled with images of his mother running for her life. His father presenting him with another moon rock. Darden, saving him from the probe in the hospital. Liotta, laughing. Carlen fighting with Aunt Cleonia.

"Kill them all. Get them before they kill you."

"Get them."

Jonas twitched himself back to reality.

"Kill them, boy." Leo shouted as he sprayed the guards with the ship's blasters.

Jonas squeezed the trigger, sending a powerful blast into the second small craft.

The large craft lifted into the air. Half of the fancy dressed guards hopped on its ramp. The craft spun around facing Jonas and Leo.

"Gods of all." Leo fired upon it. "Damn!" He missed by a mile.

Whack.

The transport they were in flipped sideways. A hole ripped into the rear of the craft. Jonas let go of the controls and held onto his straps. Leo violently hit the roof of the transport, then immediately whacked into the side of the chair. Flames engulfed the vessel's interior. Jonas lay in his chair. The craft descended into the concrete floor. The huge ship redirected its guns toward the crippled transport.

Looking out of the mangled frame that had once held the cockpit window, Jonas could see the ship's turrets pointing and clicking. The only thing he thought of were the probes that had wrecked his life. He rotated his bloodied head to look out of the other mangled frame. Guards were once again advancing in the circular pattern. This time there were less than half the number there had originally been. Beside him was his friend. "Leo." Jonas reached over and moved his hand along the texture of Leo's scalp.

With his other hand, the teen grabbed his hand blaster by the console. Sticking its barrel through the windowpane, Jonas squarely targeted the window of the opposing craft. He squeezed the weapon's trigger with every bit of energy that remained. The Republican craft's cockpit lit up when the blast connected. The vessel dropped straight to the ground.

Jonas unclipped his straps and rolled onto the console. He fit his body through the broken glass and bent frames. The oncoming guards greeted him.

One of the guards pointed his weapon right at Jonas, then he suddenly flew into the side of the transport. Jonas noticed his back was completely blown out. Another guard approached. Jonas lifted his blaster.

"Jonas, it's me," The familiar voice behind the hood said.

Jonas realized Liotta was alive and well. In fact, she had just saved his life. Jonas went to acknowledge her when Liotta sharply turned right and fired at something or someone Jonas could not see. The sound of screams served as proof that another guard had met his fate.

With a sense of protection, Jonas completely pulled himself out of the transport. "Where's Carlen?"

"Around... somewhere." Liotta's smile gleamed from under her disguise. "He's actually quite brave. I was surprised."

Jonas smiled back at her with a new attitude. He stuck his head into the transport and noticed Leo was still lying lifeless. Tears began to leave clean streaks along his dirty face.

"Jonas?" another familiar voice called.

Jonas wiped his face with the back of his hand. He sniffed in any moisture in his nostrils and turned to greet his cousin. "The plan?"

"Don't worry. Got it all worked out. I think," Carlen said.

"How many more guards are there?" Jonas lifted himself to his feet.

"A couple hiding out here and there. They thought we were with them." Carlen laughed. "You should have seen the looks on their faces when we blew up their ship. They turned to look and we pretended to be just as surprised as they were."

Jonas picked up his weapon and headed over to the huge craft. As he advanced towards it, he cocked the trigger. He was heading over to finish the Emperor.

"Jonas, we gotta get outta here." Carlen watched as his cousin approached the ship.

Liotta blasted two more guards that had been hiding on the other side of the transport.

Jonas ripped open the panel of the huge craft. He raised his weapon. "This is from Captain Troupe." Jonas released his energy, his frustrations and, most of all, his blaster on the remaining fancy guards that clung to life inside the damaged vessel. Jonas continued killing them one at a time, without any sign of emotion.

When the smoke cleared from his rampage, Jonas entered the craft. He investigated every inch of it only to discover that the Emperor was, in fact, not aboard. The cockpit smelled like seared flesh. Two pilots sat slumped in their seats. The front of their bodies were charred from his blaster.

"Jonas?" Carlen signaled it was time to go.

Jonas exited the craft wearing one of the guard's skullcaps. Liotta was waiting for him. "Nice cap." She approached Jonas, flipped her hood back and gently kissed him on his lower lip.

Jonas leaned in to get the fullness of her kiss.

"Jonas?" Carlen's voice interrupted.

"What?" he yelled back at his cousin.

"Come here," the distant voice responded.

"Go ahead." Liotta playfully pushed him backward. "Your cousin needs you."

Jonas followed the location of Carlen's voice to find him by the transport. Carlen had pulled Leo from the wreck. "This man is still alive."

Jonas's face glowed.

"What kind of man is this?" Liotta stood behind Jonas. She was very confused.

"He's a Leo. He's alive." Jonas fell to his knees and draped his arms around his friend. "Thank Gods. Leo? Leo?"

Frustrated that Jonas was hugging this strange man, Liotta leaned down.

"Jonas, who is he? He doesn't look like one of us."

Carlen looked into his cousin's eyes. "He's out cold. He isn't responding but he is still breathing."

"We're taking him with us," Jonas insisted.

Carlen agreed. He knew Jonas would take his head off if he didn't. Both teens lifted Leo off the ground and hauled him through the port. Liotta led the group to a small craft on the outskirts of the bay.

"That's a nice one." Jonas grinned, not letting Carlen see the strain of carrying Leo.

Carlen didn't conceal his weakness. "Got it all ready. Rumors were running around that the guards were impounding our ship." Carlen grunted, "This guy is heavy."

"We found something you might find interesting in our craft. Right where the officer was strapped down." Liotta held up a folded piece of parchment. "It must've fallen out of his pocket."

"We'll look at it later." Jonas focused on getting his friend, Leo, into the craft. It was smaller than their last one. Instead of a ramp leading to an entrance, this one had a hatch that opened along the side. "We will barely fit."

"I didn't know you were bringing company," Carlen snapped defensively as he heaved Leo's top half into the hatch.

"Neither did I," Jonas said apologetically. "But I'm glad I met him." Jonas carefully pushed the rest of Leo's injured body through the hatch.

"Are you gonna read this thing or what?" Liotta waved the paper in the air.

"Let's get home first." Jonas focused on Leo. Liotta pouted and stuck the paper back into her pocket. Jonas smiled at her, realizing he had hurt her feelings. "Sorry."

"Okay... Sure you are." Liotta lifted her head with extreme pride as she climbed into the craft. Jonas was just about to hop in, when Liotta popped her head out of the hole. "If you don't read it, you *will* be sorry." She whipped her head around as she went back into the craft.

Jonas climbed into the craft. Carlen, who sealed the hatch behind him, quickly followed him. Carlen bent down so as not to hit his head against the ceiling. He tapped Jonas on the shoulder. Jonas was apparently sitting in his chair. "Mind if I fly?"

"You?" Jonas chuckled but did not budge.

"Yes. Me." Carlen leaned into Jonas' chair. "After all, it was me who found this ship, secured it and studied it."

"Ahem." Liotta coughed for some attention.

"Okay fine. She helped me punch in the coordinates," Carlen confessed.

"Aahhhem!" Liotta rasped again.

"Fine. She stole the ship and brought it in here." Carlen's skin turned red from embarrassment.

Jonas turned to her with an adoring face. "Well, well. I didn't know you were so talented."

Liotta blushed as she always did when Jonas complemented her. She looked away because her face was too easy to read. "My father teaches about small crafts, stupid."

Jonas loved every second of Liotta's denial of her feelings. "Then I think *you* should fly." Jonas stood up halfway, so as not to hit his head. He shuffled down the tight aisle towards the back. Carlen had an opportunistic look upon his face. "Carlen... I will break your arm." Jonas flashed a quick grin. Then he put his right arm on Liotta's shoulder and waved her out of the back seat with the other.

"Fine." Reluctantly she bent halfway and stepped up to the pilot's chair. She sat in the seat, gripping the

controls with a satisfied smile. "Buckle up, boys. We are going for a ride."

"Yahoo!" Jonas shouted.

"Yippee," Carlen added sarcastically.

Jonas fastened Leo in as best he could. The teen reclined the man's backrest as far as it would go. Then Jonas flipped Leo's strap along his waist and clipped the chest harness. *There you go, pal.*

Liotta pressed an orange button with her index finger. The craft lifted off the ground and rotated toward the bay doors.

"How are we going to get outta here?" Carlen sank in his chair when he noticed the doors would not open.

"Not a problem." Liotta squeezed both triggers on the back of each side of the control handle.

A blast of energy sprang out of the craft that was twice the size of any regular laser. A direct hit blew the steel doors off their huge tracks. Flames created a fiery border around the opening. Liotta pushed the red rectangular button on the right side of the control handle. The small craft's engines illuminated. The ship darted out of the bay and down the moon's runway.

"Slow down," Carlen warned as he clutched onto a steel bar alongside his chair.

"Relax. These little crafts make up in speed for what they don't offer in room," Liotta answered as her eyes glowed with excitement. She looked over her shoulder to discover Jonas staring at her with two thumbs up.

The ship cruised down the runway. Liotta tightened her grip, pulled the control handle back and the craft shot straight out into Cordova's atmosphere.

Carlen, feeling more at ease, loosened his grip on the bar. "According to my teacher, you have to--"

"I know. I know," Liotta cut him short. "Slingshot back into Earth's ozone."

Carlen twitched and decided he should just remain quiet. He figured the less he said the smarter he seemed.

"Leo's making noises. He's coming around." Jonas was patting his friend on the head.

The craft orbited the moon at half speed as they noticed a huge spotlight out in the distance. The light was so powerful that its beams shot miles out into space. "When we reach that light we throw this baby into full zone. That will set off the chain reaction, which will propel us into the atmosphere at a fifteen degree mark," Liotta described the slingshot effect.

Jonas thought his ears were playing games with him. *She is a natural. She's terrific.* He forgot about his friend for a moment and kept his attention on what Liotta was doing.

"Oh no." Liotta's excitement faded.

"What? What's happening?" Carlen sat straight up.

Coming in the opposite direction were three Parliamentary fighter crafts. They were racing closer.

Jonas unclipped his straps as he rose in his seat. "Liotta? Dodge them. Get to the light." Jonas knew if she

made it to the light, then their ship would reach enormous speed. Enough to escape.

"If I dodge them, our coordinates will be off mark. Then we will have to orbit again." Liotta remained steady on the controls.

The center fighter fired straight across their stolen craft. The blast just missed its target.

"Oh my Gods. Oh my Gods." Carlen began scratching his head as he always did when he grew nervous. "They are going to kill us."

"Get out of here." Liotta shot Carlen a dead stare. "Jonas, would you please switch seats with your cousin?"

Jonas appeared directly behind her. "Thought you'd never ask." He tapped Carlen on the shoulder. "Up. You heard the lady."

Carlen was so willing, he practically rolled out of his chair. He did not want to stand, so he crouched down and made his way to the back.

Jonas hopped into his cousin's seat and connected his straps. "Where are the--"

"Here." Liotta pointed to the weapons controller.

The weapons seemed awkward to Jonas. The controls were different from the other ones. He did not want to say anything to Liotta just yet. Jonas was fine with letting Carlen look foolish, but he was not about to look that way. He explored the numerous options. *What's this one do?* Jonas lightly pressed a circular purple button. A torpedo blast hurled out of the ship hitting the center fighter. The craft's window was full of flames and debris. "Got it."

"You just blew up one of ours," Carlen claimed.

"Shut up." Jonas kept firing straight out into space.

"What are you doing? The light is coming up," Liotta quipped as she maintained their course.

"Keeping a clear path."

"Once we reach that light we will be moving so fast, we will probably run right into our own blast."

Jonas thought about what Liotta just said and released all the buttons.

The remaining fighters split off and looped around to the rear of the stolen craft. This time they did not give a warning. The closest fighter shot a blast into the rear of the craft. It skimmed the side where the hatch was. Liotta's body jolted. Her forehead hit the main panel. Jonas's face was flung into the side bar that Carlen was holding earlier. Carlen's head whacked the ceiling, knocking him out cold. Leo was still mumbling, unscathed, in his seat.

"Carlen?" Jonas yelled.

Carlen did not respond.

"Carlen? Carlen?" Jonas looked back to see why his cousin was not talking. "I think he's hurt," he stated, looking to Liotta for an answer.

Liotta did not bother to answer. Her mind was too caught up with the upcoming fighter.

Jonas studied her until he realized what she was looking at so intently. "Hold on." He clutched the weapons control and wildly squeezed the triggers. A powerful string of ion beads sprayed the area. One of the blasts connected with the wing of an oncoming fighter. The rest of the Parliamentary ship sharply spun away. The busted wing remained on course. A head-on collision seemed inevitable.

"Oh Gods." Liotta jammed the steering handle straight into the console. The ship's nose lunged at a forty-five degree angle. The wild wing zipped over the stolen craft.

Without missing her mark, Liotta returned the craft on track. The beam of light was just ahead. "That was close."

Jonas slid down in his seat when the craft dipped. He popped up and readjusted himself.

"Hey, Jonas?" Carlen picked himself up, rubbing his head.

Jonas turned, glad to see that his cousin was up off the floor. He burst into laughter when Carlen took his hand away from his head.

"What? What is it?" Carlen stared.

"You look like a Crow." Jonas could not control his emotion. "Your forehead." He put his own hand on his own forehead to show Carlen what he meant.

Liotta broke her concentration for only a moment, to get a glance of Carlen. She pursed her lips, trying to restrain her laughter.

Carlen placed his open palm along his forehead. "Oh great." He felt a huge welt in the center of it that, from Jonas's hysterics, could only mean he really did look like a Crow. He plopped in his seat and made sure to fasten his straps.

The inside of the craft illuminated. Liotta gripped the controls with all the strength her small fingers could muster. She pushed her foot down on the pedals. Less than a second passed when the craft was flung around the moon. The craft moved slightly less than the speed of sound. As it whipped out of Cordova's clutch, the little vessel pierced the Earth's atmosphere at the perfect angle.

The ship's interior basked in the atmosphere's reflective sunlight. Jonas was glad to be back home. He patted Liotta on her back. "Great job."

"Wait till my father gets his hands on me." Liotta's courage shrank. She tried to look at Jonas but her head turned away. "Listen. You can't come back with me." Then she gathered the strength to stare into his eyes. "You can't go to the Academy now either."

"They will never know I killed some of their men." Jonas glanced out the windows admiring the approaching mountains. "Besides, Liotta, I had to do it so we could survive."

"It's more complicated than you think. You have to read the letter."

Jonas's curiosity was piqued. "Well... What did it say?"

"The way I read it... They were planning on assassinating you." Liotta looked toward a valley between some sandy mountain peaks. "There. That's where we'll go."

"Who? Who wants to kill me?" Jonas grabbed her arm. "Where's the paper?"

"Hold on." Liotta tilted her entire body towards the valley while she simultaneously rotated the controls.

"Gotta bring us down."

"How does it look now?" Carlen's voice moaned from the back. The craft headed into a field of blue grass and tall weeds.

Jonas quickly looked and chuckled. "You look fine, Darden. I mean Carlen." He snickered again.

"Very funny. Ha-ha." Carlen tipped his head toward Leo, who was slowly coming around but still not speaking. He got a good look at Leo's features. He touched his own forehead. "Just great."

The craft hovered over a grassy area. The landing gear sprang out along with jets of steam. It settled on top of the long blades of grass, ending the voyage.

"I can't believe my mother is going to see me like this," Carlen whined.

"Where's the letter?" Jonas returned to the topic.

"In my pocket. Hold on." Liotta reached under her robe and pulled out the parchment. Jonas went to grab for it but she teased it back. "Promise me you'll be okay with it. Remember. I do not know who left it. The Crows or the Enforcer."

"Promise." Jonas reached out, grasping the letter. He whipped it open, finding an unorganized group of symbols. He nodded his head confidently. The more he stared at it, the more organized it became. The writing style was similar to the symbols on the walls in the prison. He could definitely make out the 'kill' symbol, which was a stick figure standing over another one that was lying down below it. The other symbol meant boy. It was a circle with a line under it. "It's from the Crows. It looks like they planned on killing me all right."

Liotta placed her hand on his back. "Listen to me..." She began rubbing. "The Crows had no idea you were on that craft."

The accusation Liotta made about the Enforcer penetrated his young mind. Jonas could not conceive the idea that the Parliamentary Council would want to kill him and had killed his parents. Then an idea hit him. He would need to wait for Leo to feel better. He would be able to help him read this letter. He was certain the Crows had written it. However, Liotta was right. The Crows had no idea he was on that craft.

Jonas wondered if Darden had told him the truth. All his life, Jonas looked up to his father. Everything he thought he knew was becoming a lie.

At least a half-day had passed. The craft was now rolled into the brush and covered with sticks and leaves. Leo pointed out the best place to land the craft in order to get close to Strom.

Liotta took off her Crow garb and stuffed it into the vessel. Carlen was adding a few last touches to the camouflaged ship. "Carlen?"

Carlen turned to her.

"What do we do? You and me?" Liotta could not believe she was actually seeking his advice.

"We go home. As awful as that sounds, our parents are worried about us." He stared at Jonas who was kneeling in front of his half-breed friend. "My cousin will have to sort this thing out for himself now."

Liotta tilted her head downward. "Leo doesn't think that letter was written by Crows either. He said the

lines are too perfect. Do you think Jonas will be okay?"

"He will do fine. He always has. Let's go say good bye and get home." Carlen gently swept her towards Jonas and Leo.

"So you guys are really taking off?" Jonas stared at Liotta. "Well, I will be in touch with you as soon as I settle." He stood up, facing them.

"I am going to see you soon." Carlen's cheeks turned soft. His eyes began to glaze.

Jonas wrapped his arms around his cousin. "Thanks, Carlen. You sure aren't the geek I thought you were." Jonas hid his pained face behind Carlen's shoulder.

"Thanks." Carlen pushed Jonas away and smiled. "I can always count on you for kind words." He patted Jonas on the head. "I'll tell my mother that you're safe." Carlen gave Jonas a half salute, turned and walked away.

Liotta stepped in close to Jonas and gently pinched his chin. She brought his mouth close to hers. She rose on her toes, connecting their lips. Liotta kept her eyes closed for only a moment. "Wow."

"Yeah... Wow." Jonas responded with his gaze embedded in hers.

"Wow. Wow. Wow." Leo chuckled from the stone he was sitting on.

Jonas completely ignored him. "Stay with us."

"I can't." Liotta looked down abruptly. "My father--"

Jonas hushed her with his index finger across her lips. "I understand."

"I won't forget you." Liotta stepped back with her eyes fixed on the boy of her dreams. She then turned away and caught up to Carlen.

Leo's laughter ended. "Where they going?" Leo asked as he coughed a bit.

"Home. Back to their lives." Jonas watched them walk away with the utmost envy. Liotta was going home to her father and Carlen to his mother.

Just as they made their way over the hill, Liotta and Carlen returned running and waving their arms. Jonas perked up and tapped Leo.

"What's that about?" Leo stood up to get a better view.

"Run!" Carlen's hands were flailing about wildly. "Jonas, we got trouble." Liotta was right behind him with her blaster in her hands.

"I don't understand this." Jonas squinted and discovered a group of Enforcers not too far behind Carlen and Liotta. "Now I get it." He tugged Leo by his hood, into the brush. "Stay here." Jonas went over to the craft and grabbed two blasters from inside the hatch. He returned and handed one to his half-breed friend.

"Saw us landing. Will be more." Leo let out his signature laugh. "Be ready."

Carlen and Liotta dodged behind a huge rock that sat just over the horizon. They did not have time to join the others. Liotta readied her blaster.

Jonas and Leo hid inside the trees. "My call," Leo stated.

Ten Enforcers forged over the hill, pointing towards the valley. The group headed towards the opposite side of the woods.

"Fire!" Leo yelled as he pumped his weapon with fantastic accuracy. Two Enforcers dropped before their team could catch on to what was happening. The officers scattered into the woods. Liotta took out another officer. Carlen went around to the other side of the rock.

Jonas squatted and cautiously shuffled along the border of the valley. He tried to get up on his opponents without notice. Leo jumped out into the grassy field and screamed wildly. Jonas laughed because he knew Leo was diverting their attention. Leo hopped back into the brush with three Enforcers charging him from across the field. Liotta saw them as open game. She pegged one of them while Jonas took out the other two. There was four more hiding somewhere in the sticks.

"You should've told me to bring my blaster along," Carlen said helplessly. "I could be in the fight."

"Shut up. They're tracking us." Liotta knelt down to the ground. She grabbed Carlen by the collar and brought him down beside her. "Shh! It's too quiet." Her green eyes scouted the surrounding area.

Jonas cautiously waded through the leafy tree branches when he suddenly heard the cocking of a blaster. He stopped and slowly stood up straight. Turning toward the sound, he came face to face with a Parliamentary officer.

"It's gonna be my pleasure to kill Troupe's son." The officer's grin swallowed his square face.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jonas dropped his weapon and put his chest out as if he was going to deflect anything that was going to fly out of the officer's weapon.

"You are just like 'em. Arrogant. You probably thought your father was a hero. Sorry to say--" The officer's jaw swung open as his eyes fried out of his head. He fell forward revealing the back of his skull. It was blasted wide open.

Leo stood behind the fallen officer with a sarcastic look upon his face. "Be happy." Leo laughed and swiftly turned, firing his weapon. Another officer looming in the brush hit the ground with a thump. Leo scurried over to the dead man. "Two down, two to go."

"Let's go." Jonas ran out of the woods. He motioned to Liotta in the direction of the other Enforcers.

Liotta went up against the rock and leaned into it with her back. She looked at Carlen and gestured for him to follow suit. "Stay here." She rolled out onto the open grass.

Carlen spotted an Enforcer, aiming at Liotta from the tree line. "Get outta the way!" He threw his body into Liotta, knocking her to safety.

Liotta turned to find Carlen holding his side. Carlen's eyes penetrated Liotta's. His pupils shifted at his charred upper body and back at his friend. He attempted to say something but trounced on the ground. His hands were severely burned as they blocked most of the blast.

"Oh my Gods. Oh, Carlen." Liotta tossed her weapon aside and rushed over to him. "Come on... Come on." Carlen's glassy eyes went straight through her. "Damn it." Tears covered her dirty cheeks. She leaned over him, noticing his leg was ripped open, too.

The Enforcer who blasted Carlen crept out from the trees, aiming at his newest target.

Jonas spotted Liotta crying over Carlen. "Oh no. Oh no." He whipped up the hill, unloading his weapon's firepower on the creeping Enforcer. The Enforcer flipped backwards into the tree line. Without acknowledging the officer's death, Jonas could only see his cousin. "Carlen? Carlen?"

Liotta turned to Jonas, her eyes puffy, her nose runny. "He's still alive, Jonas... he's still alive."

"How could this have happened?" His lips were quivering. "No. No. No." Jonas consistently shook his head in denial. His hands trembled. He did not know what to do first. He just wanted to rip the world into pieces. Jonas kept switching between rubbing Carlen's face and grabbing hold of his charred hands. "Oh poor Carlen. Poor, poor, Carlen." Jonas snuggled his cousin into his arms and rocked him. He pressed his chest against Carlen's chest.

Liotta watched Jonas as his depression built into anger. Jonas got to his feet, cocked his blaster and walked openly down the field. He approached the Enforcer, who lay motionless along the tree line. Jonas shoved his weapon into the dead officer's mouth and squeezed the trigger five consecutive times. Jonas's features transformed to stone. "Come out, you son of a bitch." Jonas continued along the tree line searching recklessly for the remaining officer.

A laser blast ripped through the dirt before Jonas's feet. The teen raised his gun in a very robotic fashion and consecutively fired straight into the woods. With every step he took, he squeezed the trigger. His ears perked when he heard a moan coming from inside the woods. He followed the sound. The final officer sat clutching his bleeding wrist. Jonas saw his hand, lying separately on the ground next to him. It was still gripping the officer's weapon. The man looked up at Jonas, hoping for his life. Jonas fixed his blaster against the man's forehead. He stared at the officer. "Say hello to my dad for me." Jonas squeezed the trigger. The officer's head quickly detached from his body. Jonas dropped his weapon to the ground. The teen started shaking uncontrollably. "What's happening to me?"

Liotta ran up, wrapping her arms around him. Jonas shrugged her off quickly. He wiped his face dry.

Leo caught up to them. "More on the way. Need to go."

"I am not leaving my cousin." Jonas turned to look up the hill.

"Never make the travel. Needs attention," Leo responded.

"What am I supposed to do? Leave him here?" Jonas snapped at the half-breed.

"I have an idea." Liotta gently placed her hands on Jonas's shoulders. "Come on."

Twelve

After wrapping Carlen's body to keep him warm, Liotta left a note stating Carlen was kidnapped and shot trying to assist the Enforcers in battle. She knew Carlen could not speak right now and the dead officer surely would not be able to tell them the truth. She knew Parliamentary Council code required all injured officers and Sapiens hurt in battle to be transported immediately to a medi-center.

Liotta also wrapped Carlen's stomach with shredded material from their Crow robes. His bleeding stopped but he remained unconscious.

Jonas desperately wanted to take his cousin with him. Leo and Liotta convinced Jonas, after several hours, that Carlen would surely die if he was dragged from place to place.

Though not comfortable with the idea of leaving his cousin behind, he knew they were right. However, he

was certain of two things. First, the Enforcers would make sure Carlen was brought to a medi-center. Second, Aunt Cleonia would never speak to him again. Jonas knew she'd never really liked him from the beginning. All her new hospitality had to be due to the enormous death bonds his father had left behind.

The three started to walk up towards the mountains. "I'll be right back." Jonas broke from the group.

Liotta watched Jonas run back to his cousin. "Jonas, the Enforcers will be along any second."

"Keep moving. Wait for him in the woods." Leo guided Liotta forward while watching Jonas over his shoulder.

"Carlen." Jonas sank to his knees next to his cousin. "Carlen?" He waited but there was no response. Jonas fixed Carlen's hair, which was over his eyes. "Please forgive me, cousin. I don't want to leave you here." Jonas's lips started to quiver. His cheeks twitched. "I just want you to know..." Jonas's tears fell upon his cousin's hair. "...I love you. You and me. We are like brothers, right?"

Carlen lay there unresponsive.

"I know you can't talk to me, but I hope you can hear me." Jonas bent over and wrapped his arms around his cousin. "When does it stop, cousin? All this pain. It has got to stop." Jonas sat up and cleaned his face with his sleeve. He turned to see Leo waving from the woods. The teen let out a chuckle. Leo looked funny flailing his arms around.

"Good bye, cousin. I will see you again someday. I promise. Thank you." Jonas stood up, staring at Carlen. He could not get over the fact that he was actually leaving him.

Jonas ran back up the mountain. "Okay. Let's go."

Leo talked about an old village in a remote part of the desert. He truly believed this was Strom. He also knew what was in store for Jonas once he got there.

Strom was a place for everyone to coexist peacefully. It was about a round's travel on foot. They traveled by night along the Meso River which cut through the Sara Mountains. The only danger they encountered were a pair of wild dracosaur and a pack of sabercats. The dracosaur were easily tamed and used as transportation. The saber cats were slaughtered for food. Liotta was sickened by the thought of eating the twenty-five pound felines. However, her unending hunger and the way Leo fixed them convinced her to try it.

According to the half-breed, they were only an evening's hike away from the village of Strom. Strom was a stronghold of the Alliance.

The Earth was not only split between the Old Republic and the Parliamentary Council, but the third and smallest faction was the Alliance. This growing faction was exactly what its name stated. It consisted of three types of humans: Sapiens, Crows and half-breeds. Leo had discovered it shortly after the Council imprisoned him. Another man in the holding cell had alerted Leo to the Alliance's existence.

"I wonder why my parents didn't tell me about this?" Jonas asked Leo, who was crouching around a campfire, while the teen packed the dracosaur.

"Too young to be trusted." Leo grinned as he shoved a piece of hot saber cat meat into his mouth.

"Strom is best invisible."

"I wonder why they wanted me to know about it?" Jonas blurted as he slipped his blaster into a makeshift holder on the animal's back.

"Didn't tell, you were Troupe's boy. Very secret man." Leo's eyes slid toward the teen, who stopped packing.

Jonas approached Leo and took a seat along the fire. "You knew who my father was?" He glanced over to make sure Liotta was still asleep. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't know until I heard you yelling at Darden." Leo clenched another bunch of meat in his jaws.

Jonas squatted down in front of his half-breed friend. "Was my father a bad man?"

"Good man... No. Bad man... No."

Jonas glared at Leo blankly.

"Your father was a man who did what he had to do in order to protect his family."

"I don't get it." Jonas squinted his eyes.

Leo giggled as the food dribbled down his chin.

"I don't get it, Leo, you lost me." Jonas stood up, shaking his head.

"Wait until tomorrow. Have better understanding." Leo threw his scraps into the fire, creating gray smoke, which choked Liotta awake. Leo watched her twitch and wiggle her nose. He gave Jonas a stern look and put his index finger over his lips. "Not a word."

The sun was breaking through the early morning stars. The moons' images slowly faded into the sky. Leo, Jonas and Liotta approached the peak of a mountain somewhere along the Sara stretch. At the foot of the mountains, the Meso River forked and reconnected, forming an island. The solitary chunk of land was inhabited with primitive stone dwellings. Jonas could barely detect people moving about them. Leo outstretched his arms to introduce the two teens to this mystical village. "Roots are here. In Strom."

Jonas shot Liotta a look of embarrassment. He had no idea why Leo was acting so goofy. It really did not matter much because Liotta fell into hard laughter when Leo started dancing. "Why are you so happy?" Jonas started laughing. "What has gotten into you?"

"Home. Know how long it's been? I'm home." Leo leapt a few times with excitement. "You." He pointed to Jonas. "Home, too."

The three of them headed down to the river's fork. By the time they reached their mark, the sun was bursting through the atmosphere. Crisp white clouds accented the rich blue sky. Jonas was used to fortified cities, prisons and Safe Zones. This village was not protected by a single wall or fence. No guards with weapons to monitor visitors. The small community resembled paradise. Children were playing tag with three-foot lizards.

Liotta smiled as two little girls waved to her from a distance. "What a wonderful world."

"Your world. Your Earth." Leo giggled and motioned to a nearby walking bridge. "Let's see some friends."

Jonas was happy to go. He removed all their gear from the dracosaur and sent them on their way. Because the animals were now tamed, they would be ready to return for service if ever needed. Jonas grabbed Liotta's hand, bringing her along behind him. Leo was walking lightly over the bridge as he hummed a cheerful melody. Every step brought them closer to Strom.

As they completed their passage across the bridge, a bunch of children gathered around them. They stopped when they spotted Jonas and his friends.

"I think they are scared of us," Liotta stated.

"Aren't used to strangers," Leo responded and waved to the children. "Good Sun."

The children waved back.

Their faces ranged in shape and size. Some had thick hair and two eyebrows. Some had small noses with bulging foreheads. Others looked like regular Sapiens, and others were completely Crow. Liotta was astonished by how happy they all seemed.

"My Gods. They are all friends," Jonas said in disbelief.

"Amazing. Little ones do not know difference." Leo chuckled as he started to walk towards a group of dwellings.

"This village is for everyone," Liotta said as she explored her surroundings.

"Like this when I grew up. Strom only one left." Leo pointed to an earthy stone structure. "That is headquarters of Alliance."

Leo made it clear that the structure was their present destination. Liotta and Jonas followed his lead.

They approached the huge dwelling. Leo rapped his knuckles on the door. There was no answer. The half-breed knocked harder. Still no answer.

"No one is in there." A voice came from behind Leo. They turned to see who was speaking. It was a Sapien man, who looked like he was in his late twenties. He was neatly garbed in animal skin pants. His upper body was clothed in an old Enforcer's uniform.

"Oh, I see. Could you please tell us where I might find someone who heads up the Alliance?" Leo seemed more courteous than usual.

"Sure. Follow me." The man turned and led the group down a dirt road. "The only one left is actually the senior-most member. He would've joined the others, but he is too old for scouting."

The group turned a corner and approached another stone dwelling. Leo giggled a bit as he watched the man tap on the door. The man turned the knob, opening the door slightly. He peeked in. "Jada? Jada?"

"Come in," an old voice summoned from behind the door.

The man opened the door and escorted Leo and the teens inside the dwelling. When they walked in, they could feel the warmth of the home. The walls were lined with everything from photographs to antique battle weapons. Along the wall sat a table loaded with all kinds of rocks. It reminded Jonas of the gifts his father used to bring home. Liotta invited herself to look at all the pictures. One caught her attention. It captured her attention so much that she did not notice her friends had already greeted the old man.

"Welcome, travelers. Leo, good to finally see you again." Jada smiled at his old friend. The man in his

twenties whispered in his elder's ear. Jada was a half-breed like Leo. "I see," he said, responding to the whispers. When that conversation ended, the old man looked up at Leo. "You are looking to live in Strom?"

"Hello, Jada. Pleasure to see you." Leo seemed awkward. He was not giggling. He was dead serious and being extremely respectful. "Like to reside here Strom." Leo bowed a bit. "Hold no allegiance to Old Republic or Parliamentary Council." Leo bowed again. "Promise to be much better citizen this time."

"Stop bowing. It's making me ill." The old man eyed Jonas. "What's your story, young man?"

Jonas could not get over how respectful Leo was to this old man. He even noticed Leo's usually broken speech was much better. He also wanted to find out about all that good citizen stuff. "My name is Jonas Troupe, sir. My parents were killed. Someone is trying to kill me. I basically need a place to stay." Jonas did not bow.

"What did you say your last name was?" Jada's thick gray eyebrows lifted curiously upon his huge brow.

"Troupe, sir. I--"

"Jonas, come quick." Liotta stood staring at a picture with her hand over her mouth.

"Excuse me." Jonas gestured he would return in moments. He stepped back into the hall where he noticed Liotta standing with her mouth covered.

"Jonas. Come here." Liotta grabbed him. "Look there." She squeezed his arm. "It's you. That's you."

"Don't be ridiculous Lio..." Jonas' jaw dropped and a tingle ran up his spine. He was staring at himself. "I don't understand. That's me. On this guy's wall."

"It's not you, son." Jada hobbled over with his thick ivory cane. "That's my son." The old man stared at Jonas. "That makes you... my grandson."

"Yeah, right." Jonas gave Liotta a look and rolled his eyes. He thought the old man was crazy. "How could you possibly be my grandfather?" Jonas tapped his forehead showing Jada they were different. Somehow though, deep down, he believed him. That could be the only reason his father had told him about Strom in the first place. Because he knew someone would be here to protect him.

"Big deal. So you gotta nice forehead. That picture was taken when your father was seventeen. I bet you're about that age as well." Jada nodded with confidence. "I heard he was murdered. He and your mother. Damn shame. I must've cried for three rounds straight."

For some reason, Jonas was beginning to believe Jada was telling the truth. He quickly glanced at Liotta for her non-verbal opinion, but she was still focused on the picture. *How could this be possible? How could I be a half-breed?* Jonas turned and looked at the picture again. "But how?"

Jada was trying to read Jonas's thoughts. "You see, your grandmother, my wife, was a Sapien. Your father had her genes."

"But the Academy? He told me you had died when he was a boy." Jonas was getting visibly confused.

"Come with me, son," the old man said as he took Jonas by the hand.

Jonas was reluctant until he noticed that they had identical knuckles. The hairs, the creases, everything. He followed Jada into the galley. The old man fixed Jonas a bright orange drink.

"You must be thirsty." The old man sat on a chair across from Jonas. "I had a feeling this day would come." He looked sternly into the teen's eyes. "Your father sacrificed his life for this village and all of us living in it."

"I don't understand." Jonas chugged a sip of the orange beverage.

"To make sure the Alliance was not discovered by anyone, your father left and joined the Parliamentary Council." Jada slapped his own forehead. "Damned bugs." He returned to the explanation. "Your father decided it would be best to keep things hidden by joining the Enforcers. He became part of their elite squad in order to gain information."

"I still don't understand." Jonas looked more puzzled than before.

"My son was the highest operative the Alliance ever had. He was a spy, Jonas. He would go out on missions with a small squad. That squad was supposed to kill anything different without question. Your dad would go on those missions and terminate his peers." The old man sat up straight. "There were times when the Parliament was right on our heels. Your father would save small villages of innocent people, then have to terminate his fellow officers for the sake of secrecy."

"I think I understand." Jonas was putting pieces together slowly. His grandfather's story was consistent with what Darden had said. Except for the parts about saving innocent people. His father killed Darden's son. Jonas was certain the boy was innocent. "My father killed a young boy. My friend Darden told me that Dad killed his son. He saw it."

"Unfortunately, bad things happen." Jada sighed, knowing this would be tough. "Your father did what he had to do in order to keep an entire civilization in existence. That is no easy task."

"Why didn't he just outwardly command the Alliance?"

Jada poured an orange drink for himself. He snatched a quick sip and continued. "You see, the Parliament has such superior technology that your father was able to secretly protect our existence and stop the Old Republic from finding us at the same time."

"I don't understand."

"The amount of information your father had at his fingertips alerted him to any hints someone was on to us." Jada sipped on his drink with a soft slurp.

"You mean all the communications devices?" Jonas did not see any devices that could transfer data like the Sapiens had. "How did you talk with my father?"

"I never needed to do much of anything. When your father received word about any kind of trouble, he eliminated the threats. We could not communicate with normal devices because the Parliamentary Council would pick up our transmissions." Jada eased back in his seat and pursed his lips. "I remember one time your father actually sent a message through smoke signals." Jada cracked a small smile for himself.

"Where is the Alliance now?" Jonas asked as he finished his drink.

"We spotted a couple of Crow transports landing near here. The troops went out to scout for anything strange. We maintain a peaceful existence through force."

Jonas thought of Darden's transport landing nearby. "Where did they land? When?" Jonas stood up.

"Easy, young man. Our men are checking it out. If the transports seem to mind their business, we will leave them be." The old man tilted his head and studied Jonas. "I had a feeling when I saw you. You are his spitting image."

"I was going into the Academy, too." Jonas took the paper out of his pocket. "Until my friend found this." He threw it on the table.

Jada unfolded it and patted down the wrinkled parchment. He read it over carefully.

"Liotta thinks it came from an Enforcer we were holding." Jonas waited for a response from his grandfather but none came. "I know it's from a Crow."

The old man looked up at Jonas. "They were Republican probes that killed your parents, right?"

"Yes. See, I knew it was the Crows." Jonas smiled.

"Your friend Liotta was right on the mark."

Jonas's smile ran away from his face. "What?"

"This was written by a Sapien. The lines are too perfect. The probes were used to confuse people. The Parliamentary Council killed your parents. An assassination. I am glad you're here. They want you dead, too." Jada folded the note back up and handed it to Jonas. "They have caught on to your father's plan."

"But they accepted me into the Academy. Three rounds early even." Jonas tried to defend his point.

"Sure. Because you survived the probe attacks. They would let you come to them."

"But they gave me bodyguards, too," Jonas exclaimed.

"Yes. To make sure you don't run off. But you did." Jada nodded happily. "Now, tell me all about your little adventure."

Jonas and his newfound grandfather discussed all that happened. They spent several hours together. Liotta and Leo toured the village, while Jonas and Jada continued introducing themselves to each other. The more Jonas learned, the prouder he was of his father. The more Jada learned, the fonder he grew of his grandson.

A Sapien man burst through the front door and shouted for Jonas's grandfather.

Jada looked up when he heard his name. He motioned to Jonas that he would return shortly as he got up from his seat. The old man walked out of the galley and down the hallway to greet the Sapien man.

"Jada. Sir." The man was catching his breath. "We have double trouble."

"How so, Quarp?" Jada asked as he leaned into his cane.

"Well, we scouted the transports that landed. From what we could tell, they are a group of about thirty. All breeds. They apparently escaped Cordova because they came in Crow prison crafts."

Jonas, who was listening, had curls developing in the corners of his lips. He knew this was the group that had escaped with Darden. "They are good people."

Jada turned, surprised to catch Jonas eavesdropping. "How do you know?"

The Sapien man had confusion all over his face.

"I freed them." Jonas grinned.

"You didn't tell me you had gone to Cordova." Jada shook his head with a cross between shame and pride. "You could've gotten killed."

"Darden saved my life while I was in the medi-center," Jonas explained as he moved down the hall to become closer to the discussion. "He also saved me in the prison."

"Who is Darden?" the Sapien man asked.

"He is a friendly Crow. He belongs with us... and the Alliance." Jonas stood firmly.

"Well, your friend brought along another problem." The man coughed, trying to catch his breath. "Landing in the woods behind them were ten Parliamentary cruisers. I am certain they are packed with Enforcers, sir." He trained his eyes on Jada again.

"Oh my. This does sound like a problem." Jada bit his lower lip and played with his beard. "Where are our troops?"

"A handful stayed behind to monitor any signs of aggression. The rest are along our borders just in case."

"The hovers?" Jada asked.

"They are standing ready. We have about six ready to go. The other two we can't fuel." The man seemed to be breathing better.

"We have to save those people, Jada. They will just go back into a prison zone. Besides... My friend is out there," Jonas interjected as he stared at his grandfather.

"Son, if we rescue those prisoners, then they will know of our existence." Jada patted Jonas on the back. "Your heart is in the right place, though."

Jonas felt completely incompetent. His grandfather had just blown off his idea.

"Go and continue to monitor. Let me know when the Enforcers destroy the prisoners and make sure they leave shortly after," Jada ordered. "Keep the hovers ready... just in case."

"Yes, sir." The Sapien man left at once to deliver the command.

Jonas looked over at Leo and Liotta, as they, too, were privy to the conversation. Liotta was shaking her head. She hurried over to Jonas and pulled him aside. "You know I have never been a big fan of those Crows. But you can't just let them get slaughtered like that."

Jonas knew she was right. He also knew Leo was thinking the same thing. "Jada... Grandfather... Sir?"

"Yes, son."

"I'm sorry if I threatened your community's secret existence. I am sorry if my father spent his whole life defending this existence, but remember the man who told me that his son was killed by my father?"

"I told you that came with the territory," Jada tried to reassure his grandson.

"Well, this Darden... that man is the one who lost his son. I need to make things right again." Jonas's

sincerity amazed his grandfather.

"You will stay here."

"No, sir. I won't. After all, if my father hadn't killed this man's son, then I would've never have questioned why he hated him in the first place. Because he hated my father so much, I needed answers. I needed them so bad that I was willing to risk my life and the life of my friends. I freed those men. Darden almost died trying to help them, as he did me. Because they landed here, the Enforcers followed. I have to do what's right." Jonas signaled his friends to follow as he walked out the door.

Jada moved as quickly as he could to stop him. "Jonas, wait. They will find us! You will get killed!"

The Sapien man who delivered the news was still outside the dwelling. Jada yelled to him. "Make sure nothing happens to that boy!"

The man acknowledged his new orders and followed quickly on foot.

Thirteen

Jonas, Leo and Liotta found six of the hovers along the border. Next to them there were nine dracosaur completely covered in man-made armor. Jonas could not believe how fierce they looked. Their backs bore huge two-man seats with leather holsters on each side.

Leo noticed that only one person was tending to them. "There. Easy take."

"You guys grab one of the hovers and I will ride on one of these." Jonas separated himself from his friends. He made certain the guard was not looking and hopped on one of the huge lizards. The animal gave a bit of a struggle but Jonas quickly quelled him by pulling back on a long set of thick ropes, which were attached to horns on either side of the animal's head. He turned to see Leo talking with one of the troops by the hovers.

"Where do you think you're going?" The guard stood next to the dracosaur with his blaster trained on Jonas.

Jonas just grinned at him. "There are some innocent people who are about to get slaughtered. We need to save them."

A twitch ran across the man's cheek. "Are they Alliance folk?"

Jonas thought about this for a moment. He had to be careful now. He had already burned his bridges with his aunt and the Enforcers. If he ruined this, he might lose his relationship with Jada. "No, they are Crows, Sapiens and half-breeds."

"Get off that drac, son. We cannot get involved." The guard lowered his weapon, realizing Jonas was not an enemy. "You're Jada's grandson, right?"

"Yes."

"We heard all about you." The man smiled. "One of the guys told us you had just arrived."

"Well..." Jonas could not help it. He had Darden heavy on his mind and this conversation was a waste of time. "Today is a new day, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"Today the Alliance comes out of hiding. Today we fight for what is right." Jonas kicked the dracosaur in the ribs. A tremendous jolt, which nearly knocked the teen off the animal, started the dracosaur on his way. This particular lizard moved faster than any land craft Jonas had ever used. The man picked himself off the ground and signaled to the others.

Seven troops ran over and mounted their dracs. Six more took the extra seats and threw light cannon blasters over their shoulders. They followed Jonas up the path that led beyond the Sara Mountains.

Leo and Liotta had not yet made their way over to the hovers. They watched as troops jumped into the crafts. Each vehicle, loaded with five troops, headed after the animals over the mountain. Liotta could not get over the fact that these troops were a mixed breed of men.

There was one hover, which sat abandoned. Leo looked at Liotta and his lips curled with delight.

Jonas headed swiftly toward the battle. He knew he was getting closer because the sounds of explosions were gaining volume. He glanced over his shoulder to see a small army of men following his lead. Jonas understood that they were trying to get to him before he revealed the Alliance to anyone. However, he knew that, once revealed, they would fight. Now he needed to make sure the troops only destroyed the Enforcers and not Darden's group.

Men of all breeds working together. This was how he imagined the world should be one day. He was about to not only follow his father's footsteps, he was about to stomp them into a completely new universe.

Jonas led the troops right into the thick of an ongoing battle. The power of the Parliamentary Council was already displaying its awesome firepower. The small valley was a complete war zone. Dismantled transports had been blown apart. Tattered bodies of once hopeful prisoners were lying across the field. Dead Enforcers were scattered behind useless barricades.

Jonas's dracosaur scrambled down the trail toward the fight. The others followed. The additional forces surprised the Enforcers. The troops led their attack on the opposite front of Darden's group. The Sapiens were tightly nestled in the middle, absorbing blasts from both ends. Some Enforcers retreated into their crafts.

"Darden!" Jonas raised his blaster as he stood up on the drac. He did not see his Crow friend anywhere. *Have I come too late?* "Darden!"

"My friend!" a voice ripped from the other side.

Jonas stood up again to see Darden flailing his arms.

Liotta brought the hover down the peak, toward the action. Leo carefully positioned himself behind the cannon. He set the gun sights on the approaching cruiser, which was just about to settle on the grass. He gripped both triggers and applied pressure. The blasters sent a stream of enormous energy into the side of the Parliamentary vessel. The explosion rocked the entire valley.

Jonas waved back at his friend. Then he noticed an Enforcer leaning out of the safety of his craft. The officer was focused on one of the escaped prisoners from Darden's group. Jonas plopped himself into his seat. He pointed his blaster and fired a shot into the back of the Enforcer.

Liotta quickly spun the craft around to avoid being hit by falling debris. The whole thing vibrated as pieces of the broken Parliamentary ship trickled along the hover's side.

Jonas plucked a metal sphere from the drac's saddlebag. His father had introduced him to these spherical bombs when they'd gone to Jenco. He swung the huge lizard around to the side of the Enforcer's craft and tossed the metal ball into the hatch.

The Parliamentary ship went up instantly. Jonas pulled tight on the ropes and slammed his foot into the lizard's side. As he moved across the field, the drac slammed into the ground. Jonas kept moving forward. The teen rolled fifteen feet and noticed his blaster lying next to the dead animal. A hole had blown out a chunk of the drac's side.

Jonas remained on the ground for safety. He heard a familiar clicking sound. Another Enforcer craft turned its turrets on Jonas. He buried his face into the dirt as he refused to witness his own murder.

Whack!

The deadly turret blew into fiery pieces. Jonas looked up to discover a chunk of burnt metal had sliced into the ground next to him. Someone in the distance was screaming his name.

Jonas turned to see Leo jumping up and down in his hover. Smoke was still dribbling from his mounted blaster's nozzle.

Jonas knew it was Leo who'd saved him.

Liotta quickly brought the hover to rest by a nearby group of rocks. She lifted her blaster and jumped for the stones. Leo remained behind his huge gun, taking swipes at anything in a Parliamentary uniform.

Jonas hopped out and ran over to someone who looked like Darden. Sure enough it was.

Darden and six others had parked themselves behind a cluster of downed trees. They were in their own small combat against some Enforcers inching toward them.

"Hey." Jonas tapped his unaware friend on the back.

Darden defensively turned. "Jonas." His face lit up. "See those men?" He pointed to a distant team of fifteen Enforcers. "Those men are planning on driving us out."

"How many of the prisoners are still alive?" Jonas swiped a blaster from a dead Enforcer and readied himself near a branch fork in the trees. He aimed his weapon and fired upon the closest Enforcer.

"Nice shot," Darden complemented Jonas's skill. "This is it. Us and a dozen more on the other side. We're all that's left. Thank the Gods you brought those troops."

"Yeah, they sure helped." Jonas watched the troops close in on the remaining Enforcers. He knew that because he was by Darden, the troops would not shoot him. Between the surviving prisoners and the troops of the Alliance, the Parliamentary officers were easily outnumbered.

Darden blasted two more Enforcers who thought they were sneaking up on his men. "See you later."

A hover blew out five Enforcers taking cover behind a mass of downed tree trunks.

Darden looked at Jonas. "Who are those people?"

Three dracos came up on a couple of officers who were preparing a multi-blaster ground cannon. A multi-blaster had enough power to create a small crater in the ground. Jonas hoped they would make it in time.

One of the dracs dropped suddenly and rolled over, crushing the two troops who operated it. The remaining dracs retreated. Then another fell. The troops who were riding it escaped with minor bruises.

"Jonas!" A scream rang through Jonas's ears. The teen turned to discover an Enforcer gripping Liotta's collar. The officer threw her onto the ground and into the dirt, then jumped on top of her.

Jonas tapped Darden on the shoulder. "Cover me." He raced along the battlefield dodging blaster rounds and hopping over bodies that were at one time fighting for their cause. Liotta noticed he was coming and started to yell to him. She waved her arms in an attempt to stop him. He did not understand this.

He was just about to jump the Enforcer when suddenly, *Crack!* A stick broke over his head from behind him. A portion of the weapon slashed his arm as it split. The teen's mouth shoveled up soil as he fell. Jonas spit the dirt off his tongue. He looked up at his attacker. He wiped his dirty chin and his eyes sharpened. The Sapien from his grandfather's dwelling, Quarp, was bearing down on him. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Killing you. Then I will go back and finish your grandfather off. The Council will reign supreme." Quarp smiled.

"You are--" Jonas cradled his bloody arm tightly.

"--an Enforcer." Quarp looked at the other officer who was holding down Liotta. He chuckled a bit. "I have been on to your father for quite some time."

Jonas's pupils lit up.

"That's why I killed him." The spy's lips grew thin. He seemed proud of himself. "I had to kill your poor little mommy, too. You, though, I must admit. You have been the hardest to kill." Quarp gave Jonas a swift kick in the head.

"No." Liotta struggled.

Jonas turned, revealing a swollen cheekbone. His eyes were like fire.

"See, it was all part of my plan. We expected you. We were not here to destroy your friend Darden. He just got in the way. We were actually coming to finish Jada and his useless Alliance off."

Jonas dropped his head in the dirt. He had been beaten. He wondered who'd been feeding information to this person. Then the puzzle came together in seconds. He turned over to observe Leo firing off his guns on the ship. *But that can't be. He is shooting Enforcers.*

Quarp dug his weapon into the back of Jonas' head. "When you get there, tell your father one thing for me. Gotcha." The Enforcer tightened his trigger finger.

"Leo. Liotta it was Leo," Jonas muttered as he swallowed more dirt.

"Who the hell is Leo?" Quarp asked. "Piece of advice for you. Next time you leave your cousin stranded in the middle of nowhere, kill him first. He will not talk as much."

Every part of Jonas's inner being collapsed. Carlen. It made sense. He always played by the rules. He had to tell them.

Liotta knew that if Carlen had talked, her father was in for it, too. "Jonas!"

Without warning a large thing trounced Quarp from the trees. Wails of pain filled the air over the battle

noises. The Enforcer holding Liotta down released her and ran.

Jonas tilted his head slightly. A large man in a thick robe, wielding a thick staff, kept tearing Quarp into pieces. As the spy attempted to sit up, his head was spun around by another whack of the stick. The blows followed in rapid succession until Quarp was no longer able to rise. His body lay there, lifeless. The man turned toward Jonas.

Jonas squinted his eyes to see who it was, but the man fled before the teen could make him out. Liotta walked over and lifted him by the arm. Jonas looked back at the group of Enforcers putting together the multi-blaster.

The huge weapon came together quickly. The officers pulled along a wooden crate. They pried it open with the end of their blasters. Jonas grew nervous as he noticed the huge portable weapon take aim at a bunch of prisoners fighting from the woods.

Jonas broke away from Liotta and lifted Quarp's blaster off the ground. He advanced on the Enforcers as best he could. The pain in his arm was getting unbearable. His mind fogged as he lost focus of the ground.

Liotta ran up to him and grabbed the blaster. She started pumping shots at the men setting up the multi-blaster. Two officers moved faster to load it as the third protected his group.

Leo noticed Liotta and Jonas on the ground. He swung the cannon around and sent a blast into the crate creating a massive explosion.

Troops swarmed in on the remaining Enforcers, cutting them down methodically. Another explosion rocked the valley. It was the last of the Parliamentary cruisers. The battle was over. Everyone cheered victoriously.

Darden saw it was safe to rise from his spot. He watched the troops roar with delight. The Crow hurried over to Jonas in order to help him with his wounds.

Jonas's pupils kept rolling toward the back of his head. His mind replayed all the important events in his life. He saw his friends at school, his father in uniform and his mother dying. The surrounding area started fading.

Darden leaned over Jonas and reached into his pouch. He took out the stone, gently placing it in Jonas's palm. He closed the teen's hand. "Please, my friend. Take back your stone."

Jonas's eyes flickered as the ends of his lips curled. His head rolled to one side.

Fourteen

Days had passed since the battle had been won by the Alliance. Darden and his group joined the ranks of the troops. The village was well into the process of relocating.

Jonas lay in his grandfather's bed resting for the journey ahead. He was rolling the stone in between his fingers. Liotta had made a necklace out of it for him.

Jonas was unable to stop thinking about his cousin. He knew in his heart that Carlen did what he always expected him to do. However, Jonas still missed him deeply. One day he would catch up to him and apologize for leaving him stranded.

A soft knock tapped at the door.

"Come in."

Liotta poked her head inside the doorway and smiled at Jonas. "I got in touch with my father." She stepped completely into the room. "After he screamed, he decided it would be best to take off." Then she sat on the edge of the bed.

"How did you contact your dad?" Jonas sat up against the headboard.

"Jada let me use his voice box. He said now that the Council knew where they were, it didn't matter if they captured the signal." She lowered her head and began to cry.

"Liotta?"

She ignored him as she buried her hands into her face.

"Liotta? We will get your father. I promise. As soon as we can." Jonas gently placed his hand on her shoulder and gave a comforting squeeze.

Liotta stood up. "I know we will. You know what surprised me the most?"

"What?"

"He actually believed what I did was right." She brushed the matted strands of hair from her moist face. "He said he'd been looking to leave the Academy anyway."

Liotta sniffled and walked out of the room as Jada came into it.

The old man looked down at his grandson. A warm glow came over Jada. "Thank you, Jonas."

"For what?" Jonas sat up with an interest in his grandfather's gratitude.

Jada switched his cane into his other hand. He positioned himself alongside his grandson. "You saved the Alliance. I would've only found out about Quarp once it was too late."

Jonas understood what Jada meant. He tilted his head, observing his grandfather's face. He could see each wrinkle in his face. Jonas was sure every line could tell a story.

"We have spent so many generations in hiding. Hiding from how the world should be. Then my son's son comes and blows the lid off of our way of life." The old man chuckled quietly to himself.

"You will lead us to a safe place. In no time we will bounce back." Jonas straightened up his back. He rested his hand on Jada's knee.

"Actually, Jonas, you will lead this Alliance. I will be there only to mentor you." Jada lifted himself off the bed and twitched his cane to the other hand. "I do not have either the energy or the years to keep up the war that is coming." Jada strolled over to his closet and pulled out his robe. He threw it on and tied the sash. "We have to move now. The Parliamentary Council will be on our heels." The old man left the closet door ajar. He hobbled out of the room.

Jonas remained in bed. He knew he had to get up. What he did not know was how to lead the Alliance into a war. He hoped his grandfather would be able to teach him.

The teen looked at the closet door and recognized something familiar that rested on the wall. The same wooden staff that had beaten Quarp. Jonas hopped out of bed and clutched the staff. He figured out that Jada had been the one to save him and Liotta. Jonas rolled the staff between his palms, hoping he could

learn to use one of these things one day. However, until that day came, Jonas would keep it in a safe place.

Meet Stephen Gambuti

As a Liberal Arts and Communications major in college, I fell in love with Science Fiction and Fantasy. The stories I read provided me with many escapes into magical worlds when I needed some magic in mine.

Born in Paterson, New Jersey, I grew up moving around from place to place as my father's job dictated. During my younger years, I taught myself the art of magic. As I grew older, I built a career performing across the country as a comic magician. For the past ten years I penned low budget screenplays and comic sketches for the local cable channels.

Now married and a father of four, my children brought me back on the magical journeys of space travel, fantasy and the supernatural.

I teach middle school while I write fantasy and science fiction adventures for young adults and teens. I hope that as a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, I can continue to grow in story telling.