

ON DIVIDED BLOOD

By

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INSIDE SLEEPING BEAUTY'S MIND

CHAPTER ONE

December 7th
Beginnings, Montana

The rage and hate filled words of his son shot through Frank Slagel with more pain than the bullet that ripped through the center of his chest and flew him back to the floor of that courtroom. For some reason Frank never felt the pain of that bullet, his mind was too confused. The outer ear noises were loud and meshed together. Hal's panicked voice blared in his ear.

"Dean!" Hal screamed out heart wrenching. "Some one move these people back! Dean!"

"Hal, calm down. I'm fine. I think." Frank could have sworn he had spoken, but he realized the words only flowed from his mind. He tried to move, but his body didn't. He could see the faces, it was like watching everyone through a funnel.

"It's all right." Dean looked into Frank's eyes. "It's OK., Frank's tough. You're tough, Frank. Right? Don't you stop fighting. You hear me?"

"Ok. Something's wrong." Frank thought. "Dean's telling me to fight. Dean? Dean? How bad is this, Dean?" Frank tried to see what Dean was doing. His peripheral vision was shut off. Just as he spotted Ellen, everything went blurry and the voices faded as if drifting away in a tunnel.

Deep and slow Ellen's word's were. "Hold . . . on . . . Frank."

"El?" Suddenly Frank grew confused. "What's happening?"

Fading. Fading.

Darkness.

No more crowd noises, no panic. Only the sound on Dean's lone voice. "We lost his pulse."

Dead quiet.

“Fuck!” Frank’s angry blast echoed in a reverberation over and over then he found himself standing in a blackness. Tilting his head, semi impressed, he nodded and grew angry again. “Fuck.”

It sounded like circuit breakers clicking on, one, two, three and with them came the illumination of fluorescent lights.

Frank spun around, looking about the huge chamber he was in. “Oh wow.” He spoke in awe staring at the rows and rows of armory. He sniffed in the aroma of gunpowder and metal. “Oh, wow. I *am* dead and this is Frank heaven. Look at all these fuckin weapons.” He walked over to one shelf. As if he were a woman looking for a dress on Rodeo drive, Frank grinned and lifted what appeared to be a high tech Bazooka. “I have never seen one like this before.” Just as he was about to try it out, figuring who could he hurt, everyone was already dead, Frank heard the footsteps. He hurriedly put the weapon down and placed on his innocent look.

Around the shelf he walked. He stood tall, looked big, and was a spitting image of his prime days in his cowboy and war movies.

“Hey.” Frank grinned and pointed. “I know you.”

“Hello, Frank.” He walked closer.

“Oh!” Frank smacked himself on his forehead. “Oh, this is great. I know you.”

“Yes, you do.” He smiled. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Wait.” Frank snapped his finger over and over. “Don’t tell me. I know your name.”

“Frank . . .”

“Wait, don’t tell me. I should know this.”

“Yes, you should.”

“But don’t tell me.”

Annoyed the man grumbled. “God, Frank.”

“That’s it. Thanks. God.” Frank nodded. “Wow. Hey, did anyone ever tell you that you look exactly like John Wayne.”

“I am.”

“Am what?” Frank asked.

“John Wayne.”

“No.” Frank shook his head. “You do.”

“Do what?”

“Look like John Wayne.”

“That’s because I am!” He yelled. “I am!”

Frank nodded very passive. “I get it. It’s that ‘I am everything’ thing. Sorry. I get it now.”

John only groaned.

"So I'm dead." Frank started looking at that cool shelf again.

"No." John shook his head. "You're sort of in a limbo, waiting. You're in a coma, and your body needs your spirit to leave for a while so your mind . . . quit playing with the guns, Frank . . . so your mind is not thinking of anything. Pain and sorts. You'll heal better and I told you . . ." John reached out and put the bazooka back. "Quit that. Understand."

"No playing with the guns."

"No, do you understand about the limbo?"

"Yeah. I hang out here until my body can handle my mind."

John nodded impressed. "Very good."

"But I'm not dead?" Frank asked.

"Did I not just tell you that?"

"Just checking. I want to make sure El and the kids don't get upset."

"They won't." John explained. "Your body will state you're alive. You'll stay here, until your body awakens from the coma. In your case . . ." A slight smirk hit his face. "You'll wake up, but, Dean is hitting you with Salicain."

"No."

"Yep." John said pleased. "Thinks it'll help."

"That sucks. So how come I was in a coma before and I was never here?"

"You never were this bad." John replied. "And not everyone gets to hang out here. I guess the powers that be think you're special."

"I am." Frank nodded. "But not *I am* in the same way you are 'I am'. *I am* as in my *I am*. I mean I am . . ."

"Frank!" John snapped.

"Man, yell at me. For God you have . . ."

"I'm John Wayne."

"Same difference. You are 'I am'."

"Frank." John rubbed his eyes. "Listen . . . And put down that gun!"

"All right. Fuck." Frank laid down the souped up M-16. "Is everyone in Heaven this snippy?"

"This isn't heaven."

"It isn't hell."

"Oh, you don't think?" John said sarcasm. "It is for me right now."

"I'm confused."

"When aren't you?"

"Many times. See, I can . . ."

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“Frank.” John stopped him. “This isn’t heaven, this is limbo.”

“OK, OK.” Frank lifted his hand. “Just making sure you aren’t lying to me to stop me from getting antsy while waiting to be judged.”

“Judged?” John asked.

“Yeah, you know. Review my life and shit before I walk through the pearly gates.”

“Frank.” Almost irritated John spoke. “What makes you think you’re getting into heaven.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, for example, how many people did you kill last year?”

“Oh.” Frank grunted out. “That is unfair. That’s my job. Would you blame a post man for delivering a chain letter. Look, you’re here. You kill people.”

“I do not.”

“Do too. What about that flood?” Frank asked.

“What flood.”

“Oh, deny that one. You know. The one that fuckin wiped out everything but Noah and a pair of people or something like that.”

“I didn’t do that. I’m John Wayne.”

“Same difference!”

After letting out a loud frustration growl similar to the one Joe would release, John gave up. “You know what. I’m leaving. I’m not hanging out with you. I’ll check back.” He walked across the armory. “I’m just glad you aren’t here that long. And don’t touch . . .” The blasting ‘boom’ shook everything and John grabbed his ears.

Frank innocently shrugged and replaced the weapon. “Sorry.”

After another grumble, John walked out.

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Duluth, Minnesota

George Hadly had made it to his base in near record time. Fast but not fast enough to see Johnny Slagel before he slipped into emergency surgery. And then it was a matter of waiting.

He waited the hours, wondering what possibly could have taken so long. Questions galore running through his head. A young man whom he had thought no less of a son, was making his escape and was shot within inches of his life. He arrived in a jeep almost dead, but he arrived alone.

“He’s not quite stable.” The Doctor informed George right outside what George would describe as a barbaric hospital set up. “He’ll be there by morning.”

“Then can I fly him back to Quantico?” George asked.

“You have to fly him back to Quantico.” The doctor answered. “We did the best we could. Surgery was raw. The assistant I am training has good steady hands, and that was the saving grace. We were able to remove the bullet by the spine, and we think we did it without any spinal cord injuries. However, the swelling in that area will effect mobility for a while.”

“He was shot in the back?” George asked.

“It was more of a side shot where the bullet embedded itself in the tissue. And he was hit in the thigh. More toward the front. That was what we believe ‘the first shot’, perhaps to stop him, but when Mr. Slagel kept going, the second shot hit him in the side.”

“Is he awake?”

“No. Sedated.” The doctor answered.

“Tomorrow, when he’s stable, will he be conscious then.”

“I’m afraid not. We have to keep him heavily sedated.”

“Damn it.” George said with some frustration. “I have so many questions. Including . . .” His eyes lifted up. “What the hell happened to my daughter.”

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Joe Slagel knew what he was hoping for at that moment. He stood there, facing the far wall of the quantum lab. The evening hours seemed later out there in the quiet. It seemed warmer than when he first walked in there, and that was a good sign. But a lot hinged on his hopes and he’d have to face it sooner or later.

From his chest pocket he pulled out a cigarette. He stared at it with a chuckle, thinking how much the cigarette caused the final straw that led him to the decision. After a debate on whether to smoke, Joe lit it. Fair was fair. No one would know, and with that in mind, he turned around.

“Afraid of what you’d see?” Jason Godrichson asked.

Joe exhaled not only the smoke, but relief and a huge smile on his face lit him up. He rushed to the thin doctor and embraced him. “Afraid of what I wouldn’t see.”

Jason snickered. “I thought it quite humorous when you walked backwards through the quantum Regressionator.”

"You only nodded at me when I told you about the accident." Joe said. "I thought. This son of a bitch isn't gonna heed my warning."

"It took a lot of thought." Jason replied and pulled out his own cigarette. "Then, you know, I thought about the argument you gave on how it was my machine, it was only right. And sitting in that warehouse, I decided. No. I am not ready to die."

"I'm glad you made that decision. It's been a rough couple weeks for me."

Jason smiled. "I was gonna ask you why you waited so long. But . . ." He shrugged. "When all that went down, went down, I realized how much, Joe, you had on your mind."

"You were never far from it."

"You weren't this nice to me four nights ago when I beat your ass in darts."

Joe laughed. "I'm not gonna believe that, you know. You never beat my ass in darts. You have to tell me. I didn't lose anyone I should have, did I?"

"No. I was kind of hoping to find a way so Robbie wouldn't lose his arm. But your stubborn son." Jason shook his head.

"How did you end up doing it?" Joe questioned. "I know that was a concern of yours. Saving yourself without sacrificing another."

"I let things happen naturally without thinking of my death." Jason said. "I found myself to the right of Sgt. Ryder, yet he was still behind me. At that moment when you said, he and I pushed people out, I realized he must have pushed them right by me for my body to be blown to . . . how did you put it, smithereens? Why didn't I get pushed out with everyone else? I'll never know. But I moved to his left, still stayed a bit ahead of him, and when I felt him push. I pushed too. I was thrown quite a bit. The burns on my back are just starting to heal. But I lived." Jason extended his hand. "Thank you, my Friend."

"You're welcome my friend. And boy . . ." Joe whistled. "Do I need you now?"

"You don't have to fill me in. I was in the courtroom. Johnny. Frank."

"Amongst other reasons." Joe murmured.

"Excuse me?"

Joe gave a wave of his hand. "How are you doing? I mean with Grace and all."

Jason gave a slow shake of his head. "I'll do."

"Well." Joe exhaled. "Feel like walking to town with me. I have to get

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home, and I'd like to compare changes with you so I don't sound like an idiot."

"Loved to." Jason walked to the door and opened it. "Only, Joe. How do you know I'll fill you in correctly?"

Joe let out his typical grumble and walked out. But outside he smiled. Right or wrong in his decision to do so, it truly felt good to have his friend back.

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Surprised was an understatement. Dean was floored when he heard the front door open to his home. Sitting in his little office, he checked out his watch, then set down his work, stood up and walked out of his office. "Ellen?" He asked with such surprise.

After hanging her coat on the tree, Ellen shifted her eyes around. "Um, yeah, it's me." She kissed him on the cheek. "Is there any dinner? I'm starved."

"Yeah, on the stove." Dean followed her to the kitchen. "Why are you here?"

"I live here." Ellen took the covered dish from the stove top, and grabbed a fork. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I thought you'd be with Frank."

Ellen snickered. "Frank's unconscious. I've seen him sleep. He's pretty boring. Besides, you're going back later right?"

"Right." Dean nodded. "I just thought, you know, the last time Frank was in a coma you never left his side."

Ellen paused in her eating. "What? When?"

"When we first tried the . . . when Robbie . . . you know what? Never mind." Dean waved his hand. "The ripple."

Curiously, Ellen looked at him. "Must be something in the air. Joe's being weird too."

"Joe has reason."

"Yeah, you're right. Frank. Johnny." Ellen shook her head. "It just was weird, he caught up to me right before I headed home and asked my if it was revealed yet that I shot Bev." She shrugged.

"Joe asked you that?"

"Can you believe that? As if he would forget." Ellen took another bite of her food. "What time are you going back in to the clinic?"

"I don't want to be away from Frank too long. It's too critical. And I

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don't want to rely on Andrea, she just came back."

"Which by the way is an argument of discussion for later. Mr. 'I'm your husband, but I let you suffer thinking Andrea was dead when I knew she was alive.' But like I said, an argument for later." She pointed her fork at him.

Dean just stared for a second, he wasn't going to push the issue.

"Oh, just so you know." Ellen changed the subject. "Joe is not wearing the sling. He's not following doctor's orders."

Dean raised his eyebrows with a murmuring voice. "I have a feeling Joe will never follow doctor's orders."

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing." Dean shook his head.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. No. No I'm not." Dean pointed backwards with his thumb. "Wanna make love?"

Ellen laughed.

"What?" Dean asked. "That's a funny thing to ask?"

"Out of the blue, yes. The kids can't be asleep, it's too early."

"Jenny has them. But if you don't want . . ."

"Sure. Why not." After a shrug, Ellen walked by him.

Mouthing the words, 'sure why not' Dean followed her.

"Dean?" Ellen stopped walking. "One thing. Assure me that Frank will be fine."

"Ellen, you need reassurance from me?" Dean said. "You have a note from him written twenty years in the future. Frank will make it through this, rough battle or not. Why wouldn't he?" Dean questioned. "He's Frank."

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"I am." Frank spoke with arrogance. "But . . ." He lifted a finger to the bearded, grey haired man who sat on a crate across from him. "But not in the same way God is 'I am'. I'm just I am. Understand? What did you say your name was again?"

"Sigmund Freud." He spoke with an accent and made a note on his tablet. "Now tell me . . ."

"Are you named after the dance?"

Dr. Freud tilted his head in wonder. "I do not know of zee dance."

"Yeah. The Freudian slip?"

Dr. Freud blinked. "Zee Freudian Slip is no dance. It is zee term ven

vun makes comment vis-out zee sought. But day meant what day say.”

“Like when I’m angry and I say ‘fuck you’ without thinking.”

“No.”

“What do you mean?” Frank asked.

“Forget it, Frank. Ve vil move on.”

“I’m not a bad dancer, is that why you won’t explain it.”

“Vat does dancing have to do vis zit.”

“The Freudian Slip.”

Dr. Freud grunted, then tried to remain calm. “Now, let us get back to zee God complex you have.”

“I don’t have a complex about God. I like God. He has attitude, but I’d fuckin have attitude too if I had to deal with everybody. I think it’s cool he looks like John Wayne.”

“Vat I am trying to get at is, complex. Do you see yourself as God?” Freud asked.

“No.” Frank explained. “I look nothing like John Wayne. God does.” Frank winked. “Am I moving too fast for you.”

“Frank, God does note look like John Vein.”

“Yeah, he does.” Frank argued. “I saw him. Did you?”

“God? No.”

“So how do you know? God was here.”

“No, Frank. John Vein vas zeer.”

“Same difference.” Frank argued.

“You sink John Vein is God?”

Frank grumbled. “Man, aren’t you paying attention? God looks like John Vein, I mean, Wayne. Fuck, you’re trying to confuse me.”

“No. I am trying to help you.”

“With?” Frank asked.

“Releasing your inner rage before you leave limbo, so sat you can live a peaceful happier life.”

“I live a peaceful, happy life. I have no inner rage.”

“You shoot people. No?”

“You make it sound like I go out fuckin deer hunting.” Frank defended. “I shoot people that are bad. Yeah. Ok, I’ll admit, chasing a fuckin SUT and feeling the power you have in the palm of your hand when they are so stupid they don’t even see it coming. That’s enjoyable. I live peaceful because I do that. And I am happy.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“I’m not?” Frank questioned.

"You carry anger toward your father."

"I do?" Frank asked shocked. "Man." He stood up. "I didn't even know that. About what?"

"Your childhood. How your father, perhaps did not lick you much."

Frank laughed. "I don't remember my father doing that to any of us kids. Was he suppose to?"

"Yes."

Frank nodded in thought. "Is this something I should deal with when I go back?"

"Yes. You must. Approach you father and ask him what zit was sat you did dat caused him not to lick you."

"Maybe I wasn't sweet enough." Frank scratched his head.

"Sink back Frank. Ver you sweet. Vood you lick you if you ver your father?"

"No. But I can't do that to myself."

"Yes, you can." Freud insisted. "Everyone has zee ability to lick zem selves. You can't lick ozers until you lick yourself."

Frank blinked long. "You mean like a dog?"

"Yes."

"Why?" Frank asked. "Is there a reason for it that I don't know about?"

"Licking yourself vil help your life be more satisfying."

With a tightly closed mouth, Frank gave a nod of understanding. "I'll keep that in mind. I just hope El doesn't see me doing it."

"Perhaps if she did, she too could lick you a lot better."

"Ok, now that's a pleasant thought. Thanks." Frank smiled.

"And you'll bring up in lang-zee discussion to you father about licking you."

"Absolutely." Frank gave a thumbs up. "First order of business." He sat back down on his crate. "What else are you here to help me with?"

"Much." Freud smiled. "And I must tell you. You are much ea-zee-are zan I had sought."

"Thanks." Frank arrogantly grinned. "Didn't I tell you, I'm Frank."

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Robbie grinned his boyish smile, flashing it across the dinner table to Katie, who sat prim and proper in her perfect dress. "How do I look?" Robbie asked her running his hand down his tie.

Katie giggled. "You're funny."

"You look handsome." Andrea laid her hand down Robbie's face then set the bowl of salad on the table.

"This is really cool having us get dressed up. Thanks for doing my hair. But, uh, how much longer do we have to wait for Dad? I'm really hungry."

At that moment the door opened.

Andrea smiled and walked to Joe. "We've been awaiting. We have a special dinner planned."

"You do?" Joe asked. "For?"

"Just . . . just for." Andrea sang the words. "How are you, Joe?"

"Good. Good. Better."

"Wash up." Andrea darted off to the kitchen.

Straight to the table Joe walked.

"I'm telling." Robbie said. "You didn't wash up."

"Quiet." Joe grabbed his napkin. "Why are we dressed up?"

"I am dressed up. You are not." Robbie nodded. "Not that you ever dress down, but . . ." He reached and grabbed his glass of milk, staring at it with a smile. "Milk. Man, it's good to have Andrea back. How come you never put milk on the table."

"Shut up, Robert. And where the hell is your arm?" Joe looked at the empty sleeve

"Uh. Dad? I lost it in the explosion."

"Not that. Your prosthetic. You have to be wearing it."

"Andrea took it off." Robbie answered.

"Were you getting a reaction?" Joe questioned.

"To?"

"Christ, Robert, do I have to call you Frank? To the prosthetic. Were you having a reaction, irritation?"

Robbie shrugged. "Not that I know of."

"Then why did she take it off?"

Andrea returned from the kitchen. "He looks better without it."

"Andrea, Danny said . . ."

"Joe, it's so unnatural. God made Robbie one way."

"That's right, with two arms."

"Oh, Joe, it was so rubbery." Andrea gave a fling wave of her hand and smiled at Robbie.

"It is rubbery, Andrea. It's a goddamn rubber arm!" Joe snapped.

"Shh." Andrea held her finger to her lips then pointed to Robbie.

“What!” Joe barked. “He’s not deaf, I’m sitting right next to him. He can hear me.”

“Joe Slagel, may I see you in the kitchen?” Andrea asked and walked away.

Joe remained seated.

“Now!” Andrea blasted.

After grunting at a snickering Robbie, Joe stood up. “And wipe that damn milk mustache off your face.” In a huff he went to the kitchen. “What?”

First Andrea shut the shutters, then the kitchen door. “I know this is a bad day for you.” She spoke calm. “Everything with Johnny. Frank getting shot. You getting shot and where is your sling.”

Joe grumbled and waved her off.

“But, is this a reason to be snapping at everyone?”

“I’m not snapping at everyone, Andrea. I’m merely bitching because my son is supposed to be wearing that prosthetic so he is used to the weight for when he gets his bionic arm.”

“I understand that.”

“So why did you take it off of him?”

“It’s not helping him. Him, Joe.” Andrea saw that Joe wasn’t understanding her. “Answer me this, how long after that boy . . .”

“Man.” Joe corrected.

“Boy.” Andrea stayed firm. “How long after he lost his arm did you and Frank have him out and about?”

“Right away. As soon as he could.”

“And, how long after that did Danny hook him up with the prosthetic?”

“Not long.” Joe answered with a shrug. “Where are you going with this?”

“You tossed him to work. You put on a rubber arm to make him feel and look normal. When in all this did Robbie grieve. Was it when he came home and took it off. Or maybe when he sat in tracking? He lost a limb, Joe. He has to grieve that loss. Robbie never fully grieved that. If he doesn’t, no amount of powerful prosthetic is gonna work for him.” Andrea explained. “His body will not accept the artificial limb, if his mind doesn’t accept the fact that he lost an arm in the first place.”

After a long blink Joe stared at her. “You don’t think he knows he lost his arm.”

“Do not talk down to me, Joe Slagel.”

“What?” Joe tossed his hands up confused. “He knows.”

“Yes, I know he knows. But you made him be independent right away. You made him ignore the fact. Now, he has to face it. Live with out the arm, learn to live without it and face the fact it is not growing back.”

“You want to send the man into depression?” Joe asked. “That’s insane.”

“No, let me explain insane to you.” Andrea pointed. “Insane if what he will feel when the reality hits him. It’s gonna hit him soon, Joe, and I’d rather have it hit him without the depressing sight of that rubber arm.”

“And you think the rubber arm is more depressing than the stump?”

Gasping first, Andrea then growled. “This conversation is over. The children are hungry.”

“The children? Robbie’s a grown man, Andrea.” Joe watched Andrea storm from the kitchen. “Oh.” He spoke to himself. “She better not be using this so she has an excuse to over mother him.” After hearing Andrea’s ‘I heard that.’ Joe gave up and went back to the diningroom table.

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A long gasp of alcohol induced relief came from Hal Slagel’s mouth the second he swallowed that first mouthful of whiskey. He set down the glass, stared at it, lifted it back up and downed the rest. “Better.” He slammed the glass on the table in the empty Hoi-Hoi on the Range saloon. He picked up the bottle and showed it to Elliott. “Having one?”

“No, thank you.” Elliott Ryder shook his head. “Just keeping you company. And should you be drinking so much?”

Hal only raised his eyes, poured another drink, then lit a cigarette.

“And smoking. You’ve been smoking heavily this evening.”

“Good God, Elliott, is there anything else you’d like to nit pick about?”

“It’s just concern.” Elliott stated. “I mean, Captain, a lot has happened with your family. A clear head . . .”

“I’ll have a clear head in the morning. Right now, painless is better.” He sipped his drink. “My brother is lying in a coma, Elliott. My nephew shot him and my father. The honorable Judge Grace literally lost her head in a packed courtroom. I should have just let my brother shoot his son.” Hal finished his drink and reached for the bottle again.

“You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I do.”

"All right. You do." Elliott shook his head with slight smile. "Tomorrow begins the movement of the Texas town."

"I know. And, the phones go back up." Hal lifted his glass. "That's a bonus. Now you can telephone my sister at all hours and have your little talks that you miss so much."

"I really do." Elliott got ready to speak further but paused to yawn. "Excuse me."

"You're tired." Hal said with concern.

"It's been a long day."

Hal looked at his watch. "You're habitually nocturnal. Are you feeling all right?"

"Hungry." Elliott shrugged. "That's about it. I'm sorry, Captain . . ." Elliott glanced down. "I am very sorry I didn't get your nephew."

"You tried. He got away. And if the bullet wounds didn't kill him . . ." Hal paused to take a drink. "Things should get pretty interesting. Especially when George Hadly finds out about his daughter."

"Hopefully, he will think rational instead of with his heart." Elliott watched Hal raise his eyes in a 'don't be ridiculous' manner. "Or maybe not."

"Just as preparations, you will start things with Sgt. Doyle correct?"

"Yes. I will begin. However, keep in mind, I'll do the best I can, but I'll be filling in for Frank. And speaking of which . . ." Elliott stood up. "As much as I enjoyed our talk, I must get some rest. I'm due back in Beginnings by six am."

Hal nodded his understanding. "Goodnight, Elliott." He looked to his drink then back up to a leaving Elliott. "Oh, one more thing. Do me a favor. While filling in for my brother, could you not grow a goatee again? It's very disheartening to me to see you being Frank's mini me."

Elliott smiled, placed his pinky to the corner of his mouth, then after a chuckle walked out.

Murmuring, 'that wasn't funny.' He stared onto his glass and to the alcohol as if the brown liquid held all the answers. And in an essence it did. It gave him the answers on how to forget what had happened with his family. So much had gone down too fast, and a lot was still to happen. Mainly, Hal's concerns were with Frank. What transpired with Johnny was old news to Hal. But the pain Frank had to face, not only over his injuries but over his son weighed heavy on Hal's mind.

Though he projected the air of not liking Frank much, the truth was, Hal loved his brother. Despite what Dean had said, his gut still wrenched

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with worry. Looking at the whiskey and picturing in his mind Frank laying in that hospital room alone, Hal wondered how many more drinks it would take for his mind to settle and not picture that any longer. After estimating it would take more shots than he cared to consume, Hal deducted the better way to ease his mind about Frank.

Go to him.

And Hal did. He stood up, unfazed by his consumption, grabbed his cigarettes and left the bar. He wanted to be by Frank's side. Be there incase Frank came to. If not just so Frank wouldn't be by himself when he woke up, but for the simple fact that Hal would be the first face he saw and perhaps that irritability alone, would cascade him straight on the road to getting well.

CHAPTER TWO

December 8th

“To cop a phrase from my son . . .” Joe stated as he and Jason walked through the cryo lab tunnels. “You’re being a dick.”

“Usually, I would take offense to that remark. But explain to me how I am being a . . . dick?”

“You won’t tell me anything.”

“I assure you Joe, there’s nothing to tell.” Jason explained. “I went into hiding. Limbo of sorts. I told you to act and make decisions as if I were dead. I didn’t want to ripple anything.”

With a ‘hmm’ of disbelief, Joe punched in the code to the communications room. He took a deep whiff of coffee and smiled. “I see our Asian community began things already.”

Danny Hoi peered at Henry then up to Joe and Jason. “Hey, Joe. Welcome back Jason. Good to have you at a meeting again.”

Whispering, ‘I told you’. Jason went to the coffee pot.

Joe wasn’t convinced, he pulled up a chair, checking out the arm that Henry and Danny worked on. “How’s the bionic arm coming?”

Danny nodded. “Good. Getting there, sort of.”

“Still a lot of steps though, Joe.” Henry explained. “We get it to work, then we have to coincide it with the microchip. Program the chip, get Dean to do his skin thing. Then . . . then we have to make sure the brain accepts the microchip. But, we have that covered. We are confident all bugs will be worked out in the test subject.”

“Test subject?” Joe asked.

“Oh, sure, Joe.” Henry answered. “We’re making more than one arm. We don’t want to screw up on Robbie.”

“Of course not.” Joe said. “But how the hell are you gonna test the damn thing. Cut off someone’s arm.” Silence was Joe’s answer, that and watching Henry and Danny give each other a look. “No.”

“But, Joe.” Danny pleaded his case. “It has to be done.”

“Who the hell’s arm are you cutting off?”

Thinking the question was a prelude and weighing factor in his decision, Henry proudly answered. “Bub, the lobotomized savage.”

“No.” Joe said strong. “Absolutely not.”

“But Dean said.” Henry defended.

Joe mocked with a whine. “But Dean said. No! Absolutely not. Find another way. You’re not cutting off the arm. Lobotomized savage or not. You hear? Dean is sick. He’s a sick human being.”

Surprising Joe, Jason leaned into him with a whisper. “Speaking of sick human beings.”

After a ‘huh?’ Joe turned to see Elliott Ryder walk in. “Oh.” Joe grunted in disgust at Jason. “That wasn’t right. Now was that right? I should never of done what I did with you. Morning Elliott.”

“Mr. Slagel.” Elliott gave a nod of acknowledgment to everyone. “I apologize for being late for the meeting.”

“Not a problem.” Joe answered. “Help yourself to some coffee.” Not giving much thought at first to Elliott’s presence at a council meeting, because he was appointed, Joe stopped in revelation. Henry was not on council, yet he was there. Not wanting to make any blubbery Frank style blurts, Joe snapped his finger hard. “Elliott quick. This is an on your feet test. Tell me the government structure and names of all appointed council members.” Joe gave a quick shift of his eyes to a snickering Jason, then returned to Elliott. “Quick.”

“You’re giving me a test?” Elliott asked.

Danny looked curiously. “I never had a test, am I being quizzed?”

Joe ignored him. “Elliott, you’re lagging, so you’re failing.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just surprised.” Elliott finished pouring his coffee. “Basically, main council is Yourself, Jason and Danny. I am on the Bowman’s council with the Captain and Sgt, Owens. The new town will be moving up soon, and they will have a council. However, You are still Commander in Chief for all provinces with the Captain second in that line. And let us not forget Frank is standing council. Am I correct?”

Before Joe could answer, Jason did. “No.”

“No?” Elliott questioned.

Joe grunted. “He’s teasing you, Elliott. You’re correct. Now, that we have quizzed out of the way . . .”

“I didn’t get my quiz, Joe.” Danny interjected.

“Me either.” Henry added.

With a slight roll to his eyes, Joe took his seat. “Christ, can we start?”

Danny raised his hand slightly. “Joe, if I may, before we start? There is something Henry and I need an OK on, so we can start working on the project during the winter when things are slow.”

“What is that?” Joe asked.

"A new dining experience in New Bowman." Danny watched Joe cover his own face and groan. "No, Joe, listen it's brilliant. Ready? I want to open the fist post apocalyptic world . . . Sushi bar."

Slow Joe's hand slid down his face dragging his eyes. "A sushi bar?" He snapped a glare to a laughing Jason and Elliot and they immediately silenced. "A sushi bar?"

"Yes." Danny replied. "I love sushi."

"Me, too." Henry said. "Joe, it would be so cool."

"Where the hell are you gonna get the fresh fish for sushi. Not to mention seaweed." Joe questioned with edge.

"Have that figured out." Danny stated.

"Of course." Joe nodded.

"It will be vegetable sushi and we'll wrap it in grape leaves."

"Uh-huh." Joe nodded. "Christ, Danny. Sushi? What the hell kind of moron gives a rats ass about sushi?"

Hal's voice entered the room at that moment. "Sushi? Did someone say Sushi. Oh, I love sushi."

Joe's hand lifted and fell with a slap. "Need I say more. What the hell are you doing here Hal?"

"I was in town, thought I'd pop by the meeting." Hal took a seat. "Now's what's this about sushi?"

Danny smiled. "We're opening a sushi bar in New Bowman."

"My God, that's wonderful."

"It's idiotic." Joe snapped. "And can we get on with this meeting, please? Thank you." He pulled from his chest pocket a list. "Now . . . phones. Decision."

Cross legs, still amused by the sushi discussion, Jason added his two cents. "I think we should establish them again. We need them with the moving of that town. We can have monitoring to watch society communication, but I also think we've seen the last of the traitors for a bit."

"I'll go with that." Joe looked about the faces for agreement. "Henry, can you get them back up and running fully?"

"That's why I'm here, Joe." Henry answered. "Obviously not to serve on council since I was asked to step down. Not that I am resentful about that. All right, I am, but I'm still not sure on why. Anger sometimes take . . ."

"Henry!" Joe barked. "And you have to even wonder? Christ. Phones go up."

Danny exhaled. "Thank God. Now I can go back to computerized

Danny dollars, it was hell doing it manually.”

“Next.” Joe said loud, not wanting to get into anymore rambling feasts with the two men with perfect hair. “The Texas town.”

“Since I’m here.” Hal interjected. “I might as well take this one. Texas town is starting the move in three days. The first portion making their way up as soon as I send some escorts down. Which I’d like to equip them with phones. They’ve picked Jordan as their relocation. Which is a distance., but too far for inter-community travel They will need tracking.” Hal gave a nod of his head to Danny.

Danny whined. “I wanted to get on the Sushi bar, but . . . I’ll start making preparation for their own tracking station.”

“Good.” Hal said. “I was thinking of borrowing a few of Sgt. Doyle’s men to train them as trackers for when Jordan is up in running.”

“Good thinking.” Joe added. “And what are we doing so far with them.”

Elliott answered. “Setting time up with Sgt. Doyle to go over strategic locations and base locations of the society. Make our own map of them so to speak. They have a food surplus, but their men are going to have to start their own farming division. We can get them started with crops, but they need the skill. Figuring society activity is pretty much nil in the winter like every thing, we’ll train in agriculture then. Plus, I do know Frank is wanting to training them as a defensive line as well as offensive. When he is well.”

“And speaking of Frank.” Joe stated. “Dean said, he’ll hit him with the Salicain sometime today or tomorrow. For a bout a week or so depending on how well he’s . . . Hal, quit smirking . . . healing. He’ll be on light duty for a while, so we’ll still need Elliott.”

“Absolutely.” Hal agreed. “But in keep in mind, right after Christmas sometime, we lose Ellen to her sentencing.”

Joe stared for a second. “All right. What does that have to do with anything. Unless your referring to Frank.”

“No, me.” Hal said. “I’ll need Elliott in New Bowman because of my absence. I’ll be going with Ellen as a sense of protection.”

“You’re going?” Joe questioned.

Elliott turned his chair toward Hal. “You’re going?”

After looking at his father then Elliott, Hal nodded. “Yes. Why?”

Elliott let out a small huff. “Begging your pardon Captain, and meaning no disrespect to your ranking over me, but if anyone from the UWA escorts Dr. Hayes, I’d like it to be me.”

“I’m sure you do.” Hal replied. “And not that I haven’t the utmost

confidence in your ability to protect her . . .”

“So what is the problem?” Elliott asked.

“There is no problem, Elliott.” Hal stayed firm. “I would rather it be me. And lose that green look, this isn’t a romantic getaway I’m talking about.”

“That thought never crossed my mind.” Elliott rebutted. “So why would you bring it up?”

Danny, with an ornery snicker murmured. “Perhaps it was on Hal’s mind.”

“Enough.” Joe halted it before it went any further. “Who Ellen goes with, if anyone will be determined later.”

Henry lifted his hand slightly. “Did either one of you stop to think that maybe her husband would like to be the one to go out there and protect her?”

Hal looked at Henry. “Dean?” He held back the laugh that almost blurted forth. “Thanks for that amusing thought, Henry “

“Oh that isn’t nice.” Henry snapped. “That isn’t very nice at all. Dean was in the military for many . . .”

“I said . . .” Joe raised his voice. “Enough of this. Now can we get on with this meeting? If not, I’m going to leave.”

“Can we have a decision on the sushi bar?” Danny asked.

Joe swung an irritated view Danny’s way. His eyes glared and he readied to blast out, but he didn’t. “Yes. Build your goddamn sushi bar. Just leave me out of it.”

“That’s gonna be hard to do since you have everything to do with its name.” Danny stated.

Confused Joe looked at him. “How in the hell do I have anything to do with, what will it be for this establishment, Hoi’s house of Sushi? Or how about Danny Hoi’s Sushi heaven?”

Danny chuckled. “Cute. But no. In your honor, Joe. It will be called Slagel Sushi.”

Joe only stared at Danny for a second, then figuring the meeting was going nowhere, Joe quietly stood up, grabbed his clipboard and walked out.

^^^

His backtrack step and stop caused a scuff on the carpet and a tiny ‘snap’ of electricity to fly through Billy’s index finger. “Damn it.” Using his foot, he pushed the ajar door of his father’s office open. A room located

close to the kitchen door. He scoffed a laughed and shook his head when he looked inside at Dean. "Dad." He called out.

Nothing.

Dean was asleep. Forehead pressed flat to his desk surface on top of all papers, arms dangling to the side.

"Billy." Ellen whispered turning him from the door. "Leave Daddy alone, he's sleeping."

"That has got to be the most pathetic sight I have ever seen."

"Well, considering you're seven, there's not much to compare."

"You don't think." Billy walked a few feet over to the diningroom table. "That SUT uncle Frank shot in the head was pretty pathetic."

Ellen had to pause in a stare of Billy, taking in his obscure comparison of his sleeping father and exploding head SUT. "Breakfast will be ready in a second. Did you wake Joey and Alex for me?"

"Yes, and they won't get up. I'm sure they will. Of course, there is no motivation, you can't blame them. The education system in Beginnings needs totally restructured."

"Billy . . ."

"When you place someone like Jenny Matoose in charge. I mean, Mom, she does well with small children but . . ."

"Stop." Ellen held up her hand. "Jenny does good."

"You mean 'Well'. She does 'well' Dad always says to use . . ."

Ellen grumbled. "Billy." She stopped him. "Try to act your age. Please."

"Oh, yes. Let me rush to the school, pick up an exciting copy of 'See Spot Run', and race about with a fist full of brilliant color crayons."

"Yes." Ellen smiled. "Why don't you? And could you get Alex and Joey?"

"They'll be out. There's time."

Ellen started to head back to the kitchen.

"Mom. It seems weird not having Nick around anymore." He lifted his spoon and played with it.

Ellen paused before heading in the kitchen in a reflective manner. "Yeah, I miss him too."

"I didn't say I missed him. I just said it was weird."

Rolling her eyes, Ellen tried again to get into the kitchen.

"How's Uncle Frank?"

Sadly Ellen turned again. "He's bad, Bill. But we're confident he's going to pull through. Daddy woke me up last night to say his vitals are

showing signs of his coming out of the coma. So that's good. And we'll hit him with the Salicain so he can get the added rest."

"He's gonna hate that."

"I know."

"Do you think, since he'll be able to hear, see, and not react, that you guys are gonna mess with him?"

"No." Ellen said softly. "I believe we're all more mature than that."

Robbie's laughing entered the livingroom the same time, he did. "I heard that." He shut the door. "Hey, El. Bill."

"Uncle Robbie." Billy lifted the spoon.

Ellen pointed backwards. "I'm going to get breakfast all . . ."

"Go on." Robbie waved and slipped off his coat. "It's cold."

"It's winter." Billy responded.

Robbie walked up behind Billy and kissed him on the top of the head. "Phones are back up. I get to monitor."

"Won't be for long, Uncle Robbie. Really. Dad's gonna get that arm back and you'll be cool."

"Thanks, Bill."

"And speaking of dad. Check out the view of him."

Curiously, Robbie turned and looked at the office. He snickered. "That's pathetic. Dean!" Robbie called. "Dean!"

He too, received no response.

"Billy? Is he all right?"

Billy shrugged. "I guess."

"Man, is he gonna have a red mark." Robbie walked into the kitchen. "Hey, El, can I have coffee?"

"Sure." Ellen reached up and grabbed a mug, then returned to her pan. "What brings you by?"

"Two things." Robbie said. "I can't quite get my hair, not that it matters much because I'll be in the communications room monitoring. But . . . You know me." He took the cup and poured coffee. "Second. El." He took on a saddened tone. "No one made me breakfast. I thought for sure with Andrea back I'd have something. She did leave me a muffin. But that was a muffin. Can you feed me, El?"

Turning from the stove, Ellen smiled. "You know you can eat here. If you do me a favor?"

"What's that?"

"While I get it on the table you get my two up. Don't wake Josh. Mark pulled him last night to help in tracking. Why, I don't know."

“Josh watches the beeps well. Doesn’t know what they mean.” Robbie grinned.

“Where’s your prosthetic?” Ellen asked with an upward motion of her head.

“Oh, Andrea took it from me. Her and Dad were arguing last night, they thought I couldn’t hear. She thinks I need to grieve my arm a little.”

Ellen nodded. “Even though it is not you to dwell on things, you do Robbie.” She poured the eggs into a serving dish. “You got over this very quick. You may very well be over it. But, just prepare in case you aren’t.” She winked. “Besides, can I tell you something? I think you look better without it.”

Robbie laughed in sarcasm. “Oh, yeah, I look really good with one less arm. Let’s face it El.” Robbie’s demeanor dropped. “I look pretty lame either way now.”

“Robbie.” Ellen whispered as she stepped to him. “How can that be? You’re the best looking man in Beginnings. There’s absolutely nothing that can take that away from you. You’re just too good-looking for that.” She kissed him on the cheek. “Get my kids and come eat.”

Robbie lowered his head, Ellen’s words were nice, but they weren’t enough to erase the small rush of bad he felt hit him. But only briefly, he wouldn’t let that feeling stay. Getting himself together, he took his coffee and left the kitchen to get Alexandra and Joey. At the very least he would get to laugh at Alexandra and her morning hair. And as Robbie passed Dean’s office, he caught a glimpse of Dean lifting his head from the desk, a huge red mark on his forehead, hair everywhere. Laughing Robbie gave a thumbs up and ‘thanks’ to Dean for the smile, and sought out the other Hayes with bad hair.

^^^

Through the lense of the binoculars, it still seemed quite in the distance. But even far, the impact of the vision was there and Elliott could distinguish exactly what it was. The spraying upward motion of it brought back a ‘bad timing reflection’ of a childhood vacation to old faithful. He thought of his parents, the good time that they had, and in the midst of that pleasant reminiscent moment, Elliott remembered he wasn’t viewing water, but rather blood.

He cleared his throat, lowered the binoculars and handed them to Dan from security.

"You see?" Dan asked.

"Yes." Elliott replied.

"Figured you'd want informed right away, since you are being the FMM."

"The . . . FMM?" Elliott asked.

"Yeah, Frank Mini Me. That's what everyone's calling you. I think it's a compliment. Anyhow, seeing how you're being the FMM acting head of security, this is your, excuse the pun . . . baby." Dan snickered with a hint of sadism. "Usually Frank is notified and comes up with a plan of action."

"Thank you. Tracking picked them up?"

"Picked them up. Yes." Dan explained. "Seemingly over night. Boy that Josh is good with beeps. Doesn't know what they are, and can't read the readout report worth shit but catches them, you know what I mean?"

"How often does this happen?" Elliott asked.

"They come in waves." Dan answered. "We gain some, lose some, I'm not talking about Beginnings men, I'm talking about them. Almost as if they are reproducing, but everyone but Frank knows that's not the case. They're being moved here. Shipped in. But they seem to make this area a home."

"And Frank handles this?"

"Alone, yeah. No one but Robbie ever wants to help. I mean, Sgt. Ryder. They *are* killer babies."

Elliott kept repeating in his mind with such astonishment. 'Killer babies.'

"Numbers are frighteningly high." Dan explained. "Too high. They're feeding well right now, but if the deer do not keep going out there . . . they try to get in."

"You'll have to excuse me, Dan, since I am not versed in dealing with . . . killer babies."

"Oh, sure no, problem. Why? Do you have questions?"

"Yes. I heard the term before. Always was told to watch out for them. I thought . . . I thought it was a joke."

"Nope." Dan shook his head. "Killer babies."

"Killer babies." Elliott breathed out and stared at the area beyond the field gate. "What exactly is a killer baby?"

"Marcus. But he's been domesticated. Sort of like him only wild, and in the infant stage. However some are reaching toddler, and at their fast growth, won't be long before they hit the adolescent phase. The ones Frank didn't wipe out."

"So we actually have killer babies? Killer toddlers and Killer

adolescents.”

“Yes.” Dan answered. “Vicious things too. Tear you apart. To them you’re a hefty T-bone steak.”

“I see. Now would you say my best direction and course of action can be found out by Robbie?”

“Oh, yeah. Robbie’s almost as good as Frank.” Dan said. “You have to do what Frank does. Have to come up with a way to lower the numbers out there. Keep the numbers down, usually they don’t try to come in because there is enough food.”

“How has Frank handled this in the past?”

“Usually he posts an extra guard on at night or two to keep an eye out incase they try to dig in. Or, you know, pop them off the fence if they fling themselves forward and get fried. They aren’t real bright.”

“I wouldn’t think so.”

“No.” Dan shook his head. “I mean, really, they are only children with a carnivorous killer side. What do they know. But for the most part . . . to keep the numbers down. He hunts them.”

“Frank hunts the killer babies?” Elliott asked.

“Yeah, he’s the only one that seems to have it in him to shoot them. The rest of us . . . yeah, we see what they do, but from behind, with the exception of the leathery skin, they look like babies. So it’s kinda hard to just shoot them. Even though we have to keep telling ourselves they are *killer* babies, to me, personally, they’re children. So, do you think you’ll have a problem?”

“Um, I don’t know.” Elliott said seriously. “But if it’s my job to lower the population, I guess I will, somehow. I’ll talk to Robbie.”

“Good.” Dan gave Elliott a pat on the arm. “And while you’re doing so, you may want to arrange some deer catching to dump out there for food.”

Elliott nodded. “Anything else.”

“Music helps soothe them at night. Calms them. They sing.”

“They sing?” Elliott questioned as Dan started to leave.

“Yes, but only Journey.”

Nodding once more, an ‘I see’, Elliott returned to staring out into the region. “Killer babies that sing Journey songs.” He spoke calm. “Ok.” He whistled. “Why is it . . . only in Beginnings?”

^^^

Despite what he believed to be a gut gnawing distraction, Dean tried to work in his lab. Over his shoulder he'd look, then back to his computer with a huff of disgust. Perhaps it would go away.

A few clicks into his notes, the sound of it made him jump. A ringing phone. Dean picked it up. "Lab." He shook his head. "Yes, I know." He hung up. Again, he looked over his shoulder, returned to his keyboard only to be interrupted with the phone again. "Lab." He breathed out. "Yes, Ellen, for the fourth damn time. I know! I know the phones are working. Now please get back to work. I'm busy." Hanging up, Dean heard the tapping, and figured it was time to face the situation he couldn't pretend wasn't there. "What!" He blasted at Henry who stood across the lab.

"Thank you for acknowledging me, Dean. I've been here ten minutes."

"I know." Dean spun in his chair and refaced his computer. "What do you want?"

"Did you know you had a red mark on your head?"

"Yes." Dean clicked hard on the keys.

"Really, Dean, if that is still remaining from waking up, you should try some moisturizer cream. That might mean your skin is . . ."

"Henry." Dean silenced him, "What is it. I know you aren't here to look at my red mark." Dean covered it with his bangs.

"No, even though it's pretty . . ." Henry wiped the smile from his face when he saw Dean's seriousness. "Fine. The reason I'm here, Dean is a I want to call a truce. We've been friends for many years and I want to put this behind us."

Dean stared for a second, gave a single nod and turned back to his computer. "No."

"I think . . . no?" Henry asked.

"No." Dean continued to work.

"Dean, I'm trying here."

"Yes, and I'm trying to work."

"This is ridiculous, Dean." Henry griped.

"No, Henry. What's ridiculous is the fact that you actually think I want a truce. I don't." Dean finally turned around again. "I want nothing to do with you. I made that clear."

"Harboring grudges is not good."

"Neither is harboring secrets that destroys a man's marriage." Dean snapped. "No. Go. Don't ask again. To me, I don't even know you."

Henry's mouth dropped open. "Fine. I'll go. Be like that. And just so you know. Danny Hoi and I are opening a sushi bar, there was a lot of

debate and I was against it, but after today, I'm for the decision. A sushi named after you."

Dean's hands paused on the keyboard.

"Yeah, Dean. You're name will be in parentheses under the Japanese name we give it. Of course . . ." Henry shrugged. "It will be little sushi, kind of bitter, leaves a nasty taste in your mouth and is pretty hard to swallow." He started to leave but stopped in the door way. "And we're calling it. Futomara. Meaning, big dick."

Dean had heard enough, finally, after closing his mouth, he turned around. Henry was gone and Ellen stepped into the lab. "Hey, El."

"Hey." Upbeat, Ellen stepped inside. "Thanks for taking my calls. Did you know you have a big red mark on your . . ."

"Yes." Dean patted down his bangs.

"Frank blood." Ellen set the two tubes in the rack. "Want me to run it."

"Um, no." Dean shook his head. "I need you to go down to the cryo and check on our embryos."

"OK, the surgical site looked really good on Frank. And are you all right?"

"No." Dean stood up running his fingers through his hair. "Henry was . . ." He stopped when he saw Ellen pointing to her own forehead. "What?"

"Red mark."

Dean grunted and pushed down his bangs again. "Henry was in here wanting a truce."

"I see. And you turned him down."

"Yes. Was I wrong?"

"Only you can say, Dean. I'm not saying let bygones be bygones. I'm not saying be his best drinking buddy. You do what you feel is right. OK? No right or wrong here."

Dean nodded.

"I'll head down." She kissed him on the cheek and started to leave. "Oh." She skid to a stop in the doorway. "He is trying though. Rumor has it he is naming a sushi after you." Ellen smiled. "That's an honor and it's really nice of him. See ya in a bit."

"Ellen . . ." Dean lifted his hand but Ellen slipped out. "Why am I always made out to be the bad guy here." He spoke to himself.

"You aren't." Andrea answered as she walked into the lab. "Not disturbing you, just dropping off." She held up a requisition and a cup of urine. "Fridge?"

“Yes.”

“You have a red mark . . .”

“I know.”

Carrying the cup, and smiling pleasantly, Andrea took it to the fridge. “Not everyone thinks that.”

“Thinks what? Dean asked.

“That you’re a bad guy.”

“Thanks, Andrea.”

“You can’t be all that bad, Dean.” Andrea stated. “All those problems with Henry I heard about, and still he has given you a lovely Japanese name.”

“Andrea . . .”

“Futomara.” Andrea sighed out. “I believe it means wonderful friend or something.” She shrugged and moved to the door. “Say it, Dean. Futomara. It’s beautiful isn’t it. It makes you feel all warm and tingling. Futomara..”

Thinking of the true meaning of Futomara and Andrea’s reaction, Dean cleared his throat. “Perhaps if you’re female.”

“Male. Female. Doesn’t matter. We all need a Futomara. I think I’ll have Robbie write a song using that word. Don’t be surprised if you’re sitting in church and Robbie pops up with a song dedicated to you called Futomara.”

Listening to Andrea proceed to sing the new word on her exit, Dean just gave up and returned to work.

^^^

Happening upon it was exactly what Joe needed. Perhaps it was a sign, or just the pick me up that he was searching for. Whatever the case, it sent him into Frank’s room even just to check on his sleeping son.

Joe wasn’t sentimental, but when it came to things his children made for him, Joe was a pack rat and a sap. He kept things, just like he kept that homemade birthday card Frank gave him. He looked at it as he settled into the chair by Frank’s bed smiling as he did. He read the words inside, written in crayon. ‘For what it’s worth. Happy day of your burth.’ Joe chuckled at the misspelling, even more so at the front of the card. The raw cover art done in crayons. How much time Frank had to put into the picture. In the background was a house. Stick figures with a slight resemblance were in front of it. The name of each person was over the head of their perspective

stick figure. Frank. Robbie. Jimmy. Hal. Dad. Of course, Hal had a huge head and little body. Joe guessed that was subconscious. The birthday cake with burning candles, lots of them, and Frank's stick man holding a hose putting out the flame that seemingly torched Hal.

Joe set that card on the table next to Frank's bed. He probably could have thrown the card away when he received it, but he knew it was from the heart.

"I see you dug that up." Robbie spoke soft as he entered Frank's room.

"Hey." Joe smiled and patted Robbie's hand when it rested on his shoulder. "It's funny,"

"Yeah it is. Of course, Frank didn't intend for it to be funny. Well, except for Hal on fire part. He worked a long time on that." Robbie said. "In fact he was so diligent about finishing it, he even ignored the call from tracking that we had SUTs at the back gate."

"Now see . . ." Joe pointed at the card. "*That* makes this card worth even more. Yes." He sighed out. "Something totally demented about a forty year old man making homemade birthday cards with crayons."

"No, correction, there's something demented about a forty year old man *seriously* making homemade birthday cards with crayons."

Joe chuckled. "True." He shifted his eyes to the bed. "Frank."

"Frank." Robbie looked upon his brother and suddenly he tilted his head and peered closer.

"What's wrong?" Joe asked.

"Look at Frank's face. He almost looks . . . confused."

Joe glanced and nodded. "Yeah he does. Kind of makes you wonder, huh? Where the hell he's at right now."

^^^

"Now, see, I look at you. You're here." Frank explained. "But how did you get here?"

"I was sent." He replied.

"OK. Are you dead, or did someone beam you up. That um, what was his name?" Frank closed his eye and snapped his finger. "Help me out."

"Scottie."

"That's it. Thanks. Are you dead, or did that Scottie beam you up?"

He took a long breath. "It's almost nine years post plague, Frank what do you think?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking. I'm opting for the beaming up answer through. You look good, wait. Yeah. So why are you here. God stopped by, did you know he looks like John Wayne. Some doctor stopped by and now you."

"I'm here to teach you leadership."

"Because you're Captain Kirk."

"Once again . . ." He held up his finger. "I am not Captain Kirk."

"Did you get promoted?"

"No. I . . ."

"You were a Captain a long time. Between you and me . . ." Frank leaned closer. "I would have been pissed."

"How about . . ."

"Then again, my brother Hal's right hand man Sgt. Fuckin Ryder has been a sergeant forever. My brother's a captain. I guess if he wants to promote himself . . ."

"Frank."

"I'll promote you if you want. For what it's worth, How about I call you General Kirk."

"How about this." He remained calm. "Just call me 'Bill'."

"Bill." Frank nodded. "Got it. So you're here to teach me leadership."

"Yes." Bill answered.

"I'm a leader. Never a follower. Wait, isn't that a saying. Never a leader or a follower be."

Bill closed his eyes. "I believe it was, neither a borrower nor a lender be." He saw the look on Frank's face. "What's wrong?"

"That doesn't make sense."

"Yes, it does if you think about it."

"I am. It doesn't. How can you not be a borrower or a lender?"

"It means, make your own money, support yourself."

"What if you need credit because you can't . . ."

"Forget it Frank." Bill halted him.

"Who thought of that saying?" Frank asked.

"It is from William Shakespear's Hamlet."

"William Shakespear. Hey, I know that guy. I taught a class of his." Frank nodded. "Man, he's fucked up in his writing isn't he? How in the world did he ever get published. No one can understand him."

"William Shakes . . ."

"I'm published, you know." Frank sniffed in arrogance. "I wrote a kids book."

“Can we . . .” Bill interrupted. “Just proceed. “My time is limited here.”

“Why? Are you gonna die?” Frank laughed hard at his own humor, then quickly stopped and cleared his throat. “Yes. We can proceed. Teach me leadership.”

“Why don’t we start with you asking questions. Any questions you have.”

After nodding a few times and thinking, Frank snapped his finger. “Got one. OK, I know laser weapons. Now . . . knowing lasers, I know that beam will go on for infinity, right? So what was the secret behind those light saber things that . . .”

“Frank.” Bill held up his hand. “That was Star Wars.”

“OK.” Frank said.

“I was Star Trek.”

“I thought you were Captain Kirk.”

Screaming, Bill grabbed his head. “Frank! Star Wars. Star Trek. I was on Star Trek.”

“OK.”

“You’re not understanding. They are different.”

“Episodes?”

“No!” Bill yelled. “Things. Things. Things! Two totally different things!”

“What was?”

Bill grumbled. “Try another damn question.”

“Man, moody. All right. As a . . .” Frank tilted his head. “Leader. Did you know that guy with the pointy ears . . .”

“Spock.”

“Yeah, Spock. Did you know all along that he was actually the son of the evil guy in the big black helmet.”

Calmly Bill peered at him. “Once again . . . Star Wars. Star Trek.”

“OK.”

“Different! They are Different you asshole!”

“Bill!” Frank snapped back. “Don’t fuckin yell at me. All right. I’m still new to the concept of intercontinental space travel.”

“It’s intergalactic! And ask another question!”

“All right! Fuck!” Frank blasted then calmed down. “Explain why you have to be the one to teach me leadership?”

“Because I showed a strength and I showed a strong leadership. I am to convey some of that to you.”

“If you succeed . . .” Frank lifted a finger. “I won’t have to wear one of those lame leotard outfits like you, will I? Not that it didn’t look pretty good on you, but I don’t think it will work for me. Just an observation. What do you think.”

Bill didn’t. In fact, he didn’t even respond. At that point, he stood up and left.

CHAPTER THREE

Like a Fourth of July sparkler, Hal's flicked cigarette sailed 'end over light' over the porch railing of his father's home. "Layers." He told Elliott.

"Layers." Elliott said with some disbelief. "Layers of teeth."

"Absolutely." Hal nodded. "Why are you having such a hard time with this. They have fangs. They are carnivorous."

"And they are infants."

Hal huffed out. "As odd as it sounds yes. I suppose if raised in the correct environment they can be controlled. But these are wild. So the animal portion of them and the survival mechanism kicks in."

Elliott ran his hand down his face. "Why did I not have this problem to contend with the last time I filled in."

"The last time, Frank wasn't supposed to be out for this long. And . . . there are more."

Elliott nodded. "You've seen one."

"In action. Yes." Hal shuddered. "Cole. Torn to shreds. Body bits and blood spewing forth into the air."

"And you were there during this?" Elliott asked and received a nod. "You killed it then?"

"Good God Elliott, what do you think I am. Heartless? It was an infant." Hal reached for the door. "Frank killed him. And now, it's your job." Walking into the house, Hal almost knocked Robbie over. "Tell him, Robbie."

"Yeah." Robbie said, then smiled. "Tell him what?"

"About the killed babies." Hal spoke.

"Boys." Andrea sung out the word as she entered into the dining area with a casserole dish. "No killer baby talk. Please. And we're going to be eating. Did you boys wash your hands?"

"I only have one." Robbie held up his hand.

Andrea snickered with a crinkle of her nose. "You're so cute." She reached out and pinched his cheek.

Hal rolled his eyes. "I'm washed up, Andrea."

Andrea shook her head. "You were outside smoking."

"Yeah, Hal." Robbie said snide. "You were outside. Wash your hands."

Hal grumbled. "And this is coming from a man who never saw a bath

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before the age of twelve. Excuse me.” Slipping from the conversation, Hal headed toward the hallway, passing his father as he did.

Joe immediately went to the table and sat down. “Smells good. Robert, sit. Elliott, are you joining us?”

“Of course he is, Joe.” Andrea, after pushing Katie in close to the table, took her seat at the same time as Robbie and Elliott. “Sgt. Ryder, explain why Denny can’t be with us today for dinner. I find it disturbing that he can’t eat with his mother.”

“Well, Mrs. Slagel.” Elliott replied. “He’s in a sort of basic training. We like to keep those men initially separate for a couple weeks.”

Joining them at the table, Hal interceded. “And speaking of that, Dad, I would like to take some time to discuss stealing some of Sgt. Doyle’s men and training them. Possible making the UWA maybe the specialty division of the army.”

“Of course you would, Hal.” Joe said with sarcasm. “And we will. Not now. No work shit.” He dished up some food. “We’re eating.”

“We’re praying.” Andrea interjected.

“Christ.” Joe grumbled.

“Joe.” Andrea huffed out. “Robert. Will you?”

“Sure.” Robbie bowed his head. “Bless this food, Amen.”

Singing out a sigh, Andrea reached over and patted Robbie’s back. “Amen. You have such a moving way with words.”

“Christ.” Joe griped. “Can we eat?”

“Andrea?” Robbie asked. “Did you get a chance to check on Jess today?”

“Yes, I did. He’s healing well.” Andrea answered. “It’ll be a while though.”

“Dad?” Hal looked at Joe. “Have you decided what was being done about him since the revelation of his society connection.”

Joe hesitated in his eating. “Didn’t I tell you, Hal, no work talk.”

“Yes, but . . .”

“Hal. No.” Joe was firm.

“I’d like to know.” Hal insisted.

“Fine.” Joe dropped his fork. “Nothing, Nothing will be done with Jess until he’s well enough to be ousted.”

Hal’s eyes widened. “You’re ousting him?”

“Did I say that?” Joe snapped.

“Yes.” Hal replied.

“Well, I meant nothing is being done until he’s well enough to be

ousted if that's the case."

"You can not oust the man."

"Goddamn it, Hal. I'm not discussing this with you. But . . ." Joe pointed his fork at him. "There's a trust factor involved here. Jess broke that. Ask your brother if he trusts Jess the same way he used to. Robert?"

Robbie hem-hawed. "Well he did try to kiss me that . . ."

"Robert. Answer." Joe instructed.

"Not like I used to. I still like him though. He's my friend." Robbie answered.

Andrea let out another signing, 'ah', "And speaking of friends. Did you start that song, Robbie?"

"Um." Robbie shifted his eyes about. "No. But um, I'm thinking about it."

"What song?" Joe asked.

"Oh." Andrea perked up. "I learned a beautiful new word today that means wonderful friend, and Robbie's writing the song."

Joe bobbed his head side by side. "That's nice. What's the word."

"Futomara." Andrea answered.

Elliott coughed.

"Joe." She said sweetly. "You are a futomara to me."

"Thanks." Joe winked.

It was a choking sound Elliott released when the food he inhaled in his shock, lodged in his throat.

With a hard 'slam' Hal whacked Elliott on the back. "Must I remind you to chew your food prior to swallowing."

"Excuse me." Elliott stood up.

Hal looked at Andrea very seriously. "That is a very nice word. Elliott and I know it well from being stationed in Hawaii. And . . . I know Elliott refers to me as a futomara many times. Right, Elliott?"

Elliott looked at the faces awaiting an answer, then he smiled.

Andrea folded her hands. "Elliott. Are we embarrassed to admit that? Why? There's nothing to be ashamed of. A man can admit when he has a futomara in another man."

Elliott's mouth dropped open. "Excuse me, I want to get some milk." After making eye contact with Hal and wondering how he was keeping such a straight face, Elliott flew into the kitchen. Knowing he had to at least get some milk to make honest of his exit. He began to search out the cabinets. Mid search of the one by the sink, Elliott stopped and peered out the kitchen window when he saw Ellen and Dean outside of their home. He

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snickered in amusement at the muffled arguing voices and the violent tug of war they were having over what seemed to be a long, tangled strand of Christmas lights.

^^^

“Asshole!” Ellen screamed at Dean as she stormed into the house with an arm full of Christmas lights.

Alexandra, Billy, and Joey who were making ornaments, looked up on her scream and slam of the door.

The door opened and Dean flew in. “Very mature.”

“Oh, and making me fall wasn’t?” Ellen barked.

“You said ‘let go’. I did.”

“Asshole!” With a violent scream, Ellen threw the entire bundle at Dean smacking them into him.

“Hey! Was that necessary.”

“Yes. In fact . . .” She bent down and grabbed the lights. “Let me do it again.”

“Don’t.” Dean held up a finger. “Don’t you dare.”

Billy let out a small, ‘hmpf’. “Personally, if my spouse spoke down to me like that, I would let him have it again. That’s my opinion.”

“Billy.” Dean snapped. “Enough.”

“Hey.” Ellen whacked him with the lights. “Don’t you yell at him.”

“I quit. You hear that! I quit.” Dean yelled.

”You never started. You tangled my lights.”

“I did no such thing.” Dean said loudly. “*You* tangled your lights.”

“You tangled the lights, Dean, because you didn’t want to put them up.”

“Tangling was you. But if the truth be known. No. No I do not want to put them up. It’s stupid.”

“It’s Christmas.”

“It’s Beginnings.”

“It is the birth of our Lord.”

Dean laughed. “Give me a break. Don’t play that with me. Why, Ellen? Why must you be the only person in Beginnings who decorates their home as if we were still in the commercialized, ‘my lights are better than your lights’ propaganda of Christmas.”

“Because.”

Dean waited. “Because. Because what?”

"Because I want to. And this is my first Christmas in this house. I want to deck it out."

"It's a task, Ellen."

"Frank never complained. Frank hangs my lights every year."

"Well, you're out of luck this year, he's in a coma."

Ellen gasped. "You are so rude. You know what? Fuck you, I'll get someone else to do it. I'll ask Robbie."

Silence.

Ellen opened her mouth a few times in thought. "OK, maybe not Robbie. But I'll get some one. So go sit your grinch ass down and me and my kids will decorate our home for Christmas."

"And what is up with decorating now?"

Ellen ignored him and hummed a Christmas carol.

"Ellen."

"I'm not listening."

"It's early December. Why are we decorating now. They'll be up forever."

"Just until New Years." Ellen said.

"See, that's wrong. If you want to follow tradition you're supposed to leave up the tree until the feast of the Epiphany."

Ellen laughed. "Listen to you trying to sound like you aren't an atheist."

"I'm not an atheist."

"Yes, you are. You don't believe in the birth of our Lord."

"I never said that!" Dean yelled. "I said I don't believe in decorating. Big difference El. Big difference."

"Why are you even arguing this, Dean? You never do. I put up the decorations every year and every year I take them down."

"That's right. And you have to wonder why the lights get tangled. You throw them in a box . . ."

"Dean." Ellen held up her hand. "Yell at me one more time and I'm going next door and telling my father."

Dean scoffed. "Go tell your father, El. Go on."

"I will."

"Go."

"Fine." Ellen flung open the door and stormed outside.

From the floor Billy looked up and shook his head at Dean. "You can be so immature."

Ellen didn't make it far, a few steps from her porch and she stopped when she felt the dampness hit her nose. A snowflake. She held out her hand, palms up and caught another flurry. As if it were the most exciting thing in the world, Ellen started to giggle. She tilted her head way back allowing the increasingly falling snow to pelt her in her face. In her moment, she thought of Frank and how much he loved the snow. The snow was a surprise, because Henry usually posted a bulletin when he knew it was coming. It was nice surprise and it went along with the decorations Ellen so much wanted to put up.

She stood there looking around, imagining a white Christmas. And just as she started to wish for a really snowy winter, Ellen stopped. It hit her. In the midst of a 'blanket of snow' thought, she saw herself alone. In that snow, outside of her home.

The Christmas decorations coming down were a moot point. Tangling them wouldn't be an argument, because Ellen wouldn't be anywhere near her home when the new year came.

Forgetting her argument with Dean, and losing the luster of basking in Joe yelling at him, Ellen turned and went back to her house.

Suddenly the urge to decorate left her and before she could even go into her house, Ellen stopped on the porch and sat on the step. Her face went immediately to her hands.

"You were happy when I came out . . ." Elliott walked closer. "I hope it wasn't seeing me that dampened your mood."

"Elliott." Ellen whispered out. "No. Reality dampened my mood."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"No. But thanks. Nothing really will help."

"I see."

"I just want my happy mood back." Ellen looked up to him as he stood right before her.

"And this reality you won't talk about is prohibiting that?"

"Yes. We were putting up Christmas decorations, Elliott. And arguing. I don't even feel like doing that now, because . . . because not long after Christmas, I'm not going to be here, will I? It's snowing. I'll be out there. Far away. Away from my family. Not protected by Beginnings, and alone."

"Ellen." Elliott leaned down toward her softening his voice. "Yes, you will be from your family. But you will not be far. The Captain and I are making sure of that. Cold. No. Unprotected and alone . . . never."

Slightly, Ellen smiled.

"And it really is some time away. Please do not worry about that now."

Worry about your . . .” Elliott snickered. “Christmas lights?”

Ellen grumbled. “Dean is being a jerk about them. He won’t put them up.” She huffed out in disbelief. “You know, it’s times like this he doesn’t deserve the name Henry gave him of futomara.” Glancing up, she noticed the restrained look on Elliott’s face. “What?”

“Andrea was just using that word.”

“Yes, well, Andrea is in love with that word. She even posted a memo at the clinic suggesting that we should stop, take a moment, and really use that word more often. Because we all need a futomara now and then to . . .” Ellen stopped when Elliott laughed. And Elliott didn’t just laugh, he laughed harder than she had ever heard him. “Elliott?” She slowly stood up. “What in the world is so funny?”

“Would you like to laugh as well?” Elliott asked. “I can guarantee, right now, you will.”

“You can’t.”

“Care to wager?”

Ellen extended her hand to Elliott. “You’re on. Make me laugh.”

“You must keep it a secret or it won’t be so funny.”

“You’re stalling.” Ellen waved him on to hurry. “Go on.” With her sternest of looks, tightly folded arms and bad mood, Ellen determined not to laugh, broke the second Elliott whispered in her ear, the true meaning of the newest rave word of Beginnings.

CHAPTER FOUR

Quantico Marine Headquarters
December 9th

All George could picture in his mind was Johnny. Though stabilized and given an optimistic prognosis, Johnny was still far from out of the woods. It could be days, weeks before Johnny was even well enough to speak. How much worry for Johnny, George had. How much concern for his daughter for whom whose whereabouts he was clueless.

The phone, without ringing, called to him, because he knew a lot of answers could possibly be found just by dialing.

"They knew of the traitor." Steward Lange said as he entered into George's office and caught the leader staring at the phone.

"Excuse me?" George asked.

"They knew there was a traitor, they just didn't know who. That probably was the reason that the phones were down. Now Johnny's gone, the phones are back up." Steward laid some files on George's desk. "We have Jess Boyens number. We could give him a call. Last we knew, things were in progress with him."

George shook his head. "The trouble only went down a couple days ago. Beginnings is going to be closely watching communications. I expect to hear from Jess, soon enough. As soon as the smoke clears some."

"You could call Joe Slagel to ask about Bev."

"And tip him off if Johnny couldn't get her out of there. Johnny was shot. Things got hot. He may not of been able to safely get Bev from Beginnings. She may be there. I don't want to rouse any suspicion. We wait."

"Understandable. Sir . . ." Steward said. "On a similar subjects, the guard says disturbance at the house is up . . ." Steward's mouth paused in its opening when George held up his hand. "Yes?"

"Don't say the name." George instructed. "I don't want my day ruined. Just say . . . IT."

Steward blinked. "Hating to sound disrespectful, but . . . it . . . is demanding to speak to you. Violently demanding."

"Goddamn hell cat. Send word to It that I will be by." George noticed the folders. "And what are these."

"You have to choose a new head of Military. Since Sgt. Doyle's defecting, I believe leaving this alone in your hands is a little much. You have the other things to run. Winter's coming. We've located four new towns that we've brought into our domain. We're receiving resistance from a couple areas. We've not pushed the issue yet. Border conflicts and such with them."

"Why aren't we concentrating on just wiping them out?"

"Because it is only when we trample on their domain. Basically there is no trouble when we leave them alone. And . . . it is becoming increasingly evident that we've still a lot of this side of the country to secure. Since the threat of savages have been wiped out, people now are coming out, so to speak."

"Well, searching them out 'only' is what we'll do. Figure out where they are, target areas and hold off until after winter. Let's concentrate right now on strengthening what we have."

"I one hundred percent agree. The Society took off faster than we originally anticipated."

"How in God's name can you say that?" George asked. "It's eight and a half years after the plague."

"True. But, really it's only been a little over a year since we moved the plan into effect. We got ahead of our projections for the year time frame, it's not in our best interest to lose control of what we have. That's why I suggested those." Steward pointed to the folders. "You also know your plan of action for next spring for the overseas movement. You'll need him for that. The scouting ships are ready. I know you want to launch the scouting movement soon."

"Yes, I do. Of course it would be a lot easier, now, wouldn't it if I just had Beginnings. I wouldn't need the scout ships, I could look on a damn board and see where civilization is over there."

"Fortunately for us, Beginnings hasn't any idea that have that ability."

"That's because they didn't hook the damn thing up correctly." George breathed out. "All right. I'll review your candidates and get back to you on which ones I want to meet."

"Thank you. And I'll go speak to . . . It." Steward walked to the door. Hands moving in a glance of names, George stopped. "Stew."

"Yes." Steward turned around.

George lifted up a folder slowly, it was very thick. With intimidation George raised his eyes. "What were you thinking?"

Steward took a step closer to look at the folder. "Oh, yes, that is . . ."

“Yes, I know.” George interrupted. “No.”

“He has a strong military background. In fact, you know as well as I do, he is responsible for the entire build up of the southern naval region.”

“And he does quite well down there.” George replied. “Away from up here.” He raised his eyebrow. “Up here too many things can slip out.”

“I realize that. But Sgt. Doyle worked for how long with us without knowing . . .”

“No. Good choice, but wrong move. Leave him down there, in the dark.” George handed the folder back and got an agreement nod from Steward. “In the dark.” George whispered softly to himself when Steward left. He rubbed his eyes. “Where an ace in the hole has to be.”

^^^

“And they were numbers more than names, Captain.” Sgt. Timothy Doyle walked, hands behind his back at a slow pace with Hal towards the jeep. “So I am really unable to tell you if we have any one of importance.”

“And you were the head of the military movement.” Hal questioned.

“Yes.” Tim answered. “I designed the training schedule. Attack schedules, Military movement and set ups. But who was in charge of what, I had men who handled that. Occasionally names would come across my desk . . .” He shrugged. “But to be honest I paid no mind. Why?”

“Well. I was hoping being in the service as long as I was, and having some stature in Hawaii, that perhaps I recognized a name or two and we could either incorporate them as well, or use them.”

“As spies?” Tim asked.

“If need be. How dangerous is that?”

“Unlike Beginnings a spy isn’t going to be that easy to spot. You have to remember, the society right now is based on a military strong arm. Building civilization is secondary, right now. They believe that will come. So you have agriculture, technology, medical, transportation, military. And I can tell, the size of recruits is very well into five digits.”

“I see.” Hal exhaled as he took in another look around. “Your men are doing a good job. Moving fast on building up this area.”

“We’re trying. We’re . . . We’re bored.” Tim replied.

“We’ll need your men for the Texas town move. Perhaps that will help some.”

“We look forward to some winter strategy games with General Slagel.”

Hal blinked. "General Slagel?"

"Your brother."

"That asshole." Hal shook his head. "Did he tell you that?"

"Yes."

Hal grumbled. "Call him, Frank."

"But, sir, wouldn't that be disrespectful of a man of his position and caliber."

Pausing to think about what Tim had said, Hal agreed. "You're correct. You, Sgt. Doyle, may call him Frank. The others, yes have them show him the respect that they show you, me and my father." He winked with a nod. "Frank has done a lot. Don't let him know I said that." He began to embark into his jeep and stopped. "One more thing. You will pick out the first fifty men to be trained for the UWA?"

"Yes, sir." Tim nodded. "I will hand pick them for the recruit. However, I would also like to have some sort of training in the UWA style."

"Then you will be more than welcome to join in." Hal told him. "But you will be busy. You know what I have in mind."

"I do."

Bodily dramatic, Hal brought in a loud whiff of air. "Like the onset of a strong winter season, You can smell it in the air, can't you? Lingerin'. Waiting." Hal grinned. "War."

Tim chuckled. "On the verge of boredom, stagnance, and repetition, sometimes we find ourselves on the verge of wishful thinking. Is it the aroma or wishful thinking, Captain?"

"Perhaps a little of both." Hal winked and got into the jeep. "Perhaps not."

^^^

Boulder, Colorado

The young man had spewed forth the forbidden word more than once on his journey. Had he been back in Sanctuary City, he surely would have been made to pay the price. No matter his young age of eighteen or not.

But he couldn't help it. His anger caused the word to slip out. Anger at his stupidity. How did he miss the State called Montana? The people in the town--he was told was in the state of Texas--gave him a map of the country. A map with Cities, mountains, parks. If nothing else that would

give him direction. Or so he thought.

It was cold where he was, and he stared past his campfire to the mountains that deceived him. He swore they were the same mountains in Montana. But somewhere he got lost. Way off course.

In the place called North Dakota he was close. He found the clues he needed that would take him to Utopia. He even found the name of it. Unfortunately he could not match up the spelling with any city name on the map.

But to him, Utopia had to be huge. Hard to miss. How wrong he was. The young man only wished he would of been as rebellious in Sanctuary City as some of his peers were. Sneaking off after hours and reviewing books, keeping fresh the ability to read, instead of fearing repercussions of God for using his eyes and mind for interpreting the forbidden words that were only to be conveyed by the elders.

Reading.

How badly he longed for the ability to know more words. He was the only one of the rebels with the courage to break away. How much the knowledge of words would aid in his courage to seek out Utopia.

He would try again the next day, turning around and taking the road back. It would be slower, the horse didn't move as fast as the cycle he found. And the horse also needed rest.

Though failing at the moment to live up to the name he so proudly gave himself of Christopher Columbus, he was bound to be the great explorer. No matter what or how long, no matter how much a tale, like his namesake, Christopher would search out Utopia until he found it. Found it in a place called Beginnings, Montana.

^^^

So unsure, Elliott walked with Robbie, watching him push what looked like a covered lawnmower. They passed through the gate of sector twenty just outside the fields. "And you are sure . . . this is safe."

"Um . . ." Robbie stopped moving. "Yeah, pretty sure."

"Pretty sure." Elliott set down the huge rabbit cage he carried.

"We're fine. We're close to the gate. Security knows we're here. The can charge up the electric fence like .. ." Robbie paused. "I'd snap but my free hand is occupied." He snickered. "All right. You know the age old saying. To beat your enemy you must know your enemy."

"Yes."

“Well in order for you to be the standing FMM, and conquer the small predators . . .”

“Small predators?”

“PC word for killer babies.” Robbie nodded. “In order for you to be as effective as Frank, you have to know them like Frank. So that is what we will learn first.”

“But we need to get rid of the problem or at least lower the population.”

“We will. First thing first. We can post the extra guard. Keep them fed and so forth.” Robbie pulled the cover off of the contraption he so proudly hid. “Now, for this. Frank’s design. Quite brilliant I think.”

“What is it?” Elliott asked.

“Here I’ll show you. You may find yourself wanting to use it. Can you hand me one of those rabbits please?” Robbie watched Elliott bend down to the cage. “Oh, and if Dean asks, we didn’t have rabbits today. He gets jacked when Frank and I steal his. He does that ‘hunt your own’ thing.”

Bundled in straps, arms and legs tied to his body, the rabbit squirmed as Elliott gave it to Robbie. “Can I ask why you tie them?”

“Sure. Watch.” To the arm of the unit, Robbie brought the rabbit. He laid it in what looked like a scoop. “This is a mini catapult, so to speak. They fit real nice when they are tied up. They can’t jump out and . . . if their little arms and legs are flapping about, it really messes up the aerodynamics of it all. Now for the coolest demonstration.” Robbie walked around the other side of the contraption and wound it up. “Tension is good. See this foot pedal. It ejects . . .” He pointed out into the field. “Now watch.”

A slam of his foot, caused a shift of mechanism and the arm ejected forward sailing the bound bunny high and far in the air towards the high weeds of the field. Just as the rabbit reached center, before gravity could pull it down, a loud rustle of leaves rang out and with a unison loud gurgling, a cloud of flesh shot from the grass and snatched up the bunny mid flight.

Only a small amount of blood spewed up.

“Cool huh?” Robbie grabbed the other rabbit, set it in the arm, pumped it up and shot it. “Again . . .”

Elliott blinked long in shock when he watched the second rabbit disappear. “Oh, my God. Frank invented this to feed them?”

“Um, no.” Robbie shook his head. “Frank invented this for amusement. But I guess it works to send them a snack.”

“This is amazing.” Elliott said in astonishment.

“Yeah. I thought, let you know them visually. Let you get to hear them. See how they run about, um, fifty five miles per hour.”

“They run fifty-five miles per hour? How do you out run them.”

“As best you can. It’s difficult. But it gives a rush. Trust me it’s fun.” Robbie said. “All this killer baby training will help you out.”

“I’m sure. Is there anything vital you need to tell me.”

“Oh, yeah.” Calmly Robbie spoke as he peered out to the field. “Know when to . . . run.”

“Ok.”

“No, Elliott. Run.”

Just as he was about to say ‘OK’ again, Elliott caught through is peripheral vision, the fast motion of a leaving Robbie. Curious, thinking Robbie was joking, he peered back to the field to see the high waves of grass rippling and moving at him at an astronomical speed. “Oh, shit.” He jolted in a spin and took off running. He didn’t look back. The sounds of the gurgling grew louder and with a strong leap, Elliott flew through the gate and slammed it shut. The second it latched, up fast and furious leaped a killer baby. The saliva filled jaws sneered and snipped for Elliott, as its little claws clung to the fence.

“I never say this.” Elliott, eyes on the creature, backed up. “But . . .”

Before he could get the word out, another, then another, slammed their bodies at the gate in an attempt to get in.

“Say it now.” Robbie instructed.

“Fuck.” Elliott stared at the eight babies clinging to the fence, trying to eat their way in.

“Watch this.” Robbie pulled the radio close. “Perimeter twenty up.”

The shift and hum of the electrical current was overshadowed by this sizzle and screams as the eight small predators were zapped, fried, and shot from the fence.

With a chuckle, Robbie gave a swat to Elliott’s back. “Well. Lesson one. Shall we continue?” He turned and walked to the awaiting jeep. “I’ll get the feeding catapult later.”

“Where to now?” Elliott asked.

“Now, you’ll get to meet the ones Frank and I trained.”

Elliott thought at that moment—as he stepped into the jeep—that he had seen it all, but obviously he hadn’t. He was about to see the *trained* killer babies.

^^^

Had Joe been paying attention to the sound of the light tap, he wouldn't have called out his typical 'come in' in immediate response to the knock on the door. Sitting behind his desk, he raised his eyes over the rims of his glasses as the door opened. "Get out."

Dean ignored him and closed the office door. "You do realize, for the leader of this community, you are awfully hard to track down."

"My schedule is posted on the community bulletin board." Joe looked back down the work on his desk. "Just check there."

"Why do you post your schedule on the board?"

"For the morons running around saying, where is Joe? Where is Joe." Again, Joe lifted his eyes when he saw Dean pull up a chair. "What do you want, Dean. I'm a busy man."

"We need to talk, Joe. You know that."

"No. We don't."

"Yes, Joe, we do. You have been blowing me off. We need to talk about . . ."

"Stop." Joe sat up straight then leaned back in his chair. "Before your little ass gets into the reason you're here. I would like to interject a name."

"Go on." Dean nodded.

"Elliott Ryder."

"What about him?" Dean asked.

"Nothing much. Was just thinking about him. That's all. Thinking about his health. I saw him all morning. Looks good. Don't you think?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"Pretty goddamn fit for a man whose test results dictate he should be on his last breath. Just amazes me. Mind over matter." Joe exhaled. "So . . . what is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Dean stared for a moment, hands folded, fingers tapping in a nervous manner. "Nothing. Not important. Just a lot on my mind, that's all. Sorry." He stood up.

"Good." Joe picked up his pencil. "For a minute there I thought you were wanting to talk about your bitch performance last night."

In a halting screech of his shoes, Dean spun around. "Bitch performance?"

"Yes." Joe continued to work, not looking up.

"Why . . . why would you call me a bitch?"

"You weren't acting it last night?" Joe asked.

"No." Dean snapped defensive.

"Everyone says your mood has been pretty borderline bitchy."

"I resent that." Dean said.

"Ben from fabrics was in here yesterday complaining about you."

"Did he also mention he stomped on my foot for supposedly sticking him too hard."

Joe slowly raised his eyes. "Sticking him too hard? Is this any of my business."

"With a needle, Joe."

"Did I say it was anything else?" Joe returned to work. "He came in, said he paid you a compliment and you got violent."

Dean grunted and gave a flinging wave of his hand. "He's over reacting. He took me by surprise, I slipped."

Joe gave another raise of his eyes at Dean.

"Joe . . ."

"Dean." Joe slammed his hand on the desk. "I have work. I don't know what your problem is lately, but last night's performance totally reiterates what people are saying about you."

"What performance?" Dean tossed his hands up in defeat.

"Oh, you don't think you threw a hissy fit last night. What was the shit you were doing about the Christmas lights?"

"Joe. In my defense, your sons and Sgt. Ryder had no business putting those lights up on my house."

"Ellen said you couldn't reach."

A long growl of frustration escaped Dean. "Ellen is full of shit. I didn't want them up."

"If my daughter wants her goddamn house to light up for miles around, then let her house light up. What the hell do you care." Joe said with edge.

"They had no business putting them up. None."

"So you said! Why!"

"Because it's Frank's thing. It's . . ." Dean shook his head slowly. "It's Frank's thing. That's all."

"Dean . . ."

"No, Joe." Dean's voice dropped. "Have you ever seen him doing that? He loves it. Days. He spends days planning those lights. Getting them ready. Trying to do something better than the year before. And . . . and he sings those really stupid songs when he does it. How about the year he blew out the power box for the entire row of house. Or . . . or, the best. Two years ago, just to irk me, he made the chimney into a giant penis of lights."

Joe tilted his head with a reminiscent chuckle. "That's was funny."

"That was Frank. It's his thing. He's gonna be up and moving by Christmas, I guarantee, that's why he's getting the salicain. I just wanted him to have that. It didn't seem right having the light ritual without him."

"Dean." Joe spoke soft. "You're coming across awfully concerned for Frank. Is there something about my son's health you aren't telling me?"

"No." Dean replied. "There's nothing about his health you don't know. I don't know what it is. Probably just all the stuff I have on my mind."

"Did you need to talk about it?"

"You know what? Yes. Yes I do."

"Good, Letting it out is best. And you're in luck. Your very own wife is community counselor. I'm sure she can make time to talk to you today." Joe's head lowered to go back to his work.

Dean's mouth dropped open. "My wife? My . . ." Dean hurried and looked at his watch. "Shit. My wife. Oh, shit." He hurried to the door. "Shit."

Looking up at the sound of Dean's exit, Joe smiled. "Whatever gets the job done."

^^^

The reiteration that he had blown it, came to Dean the second he heard Ellen's laughter seeping from the lab. Stopping to straighten his hair that was tossed about in his run back to the clinic, one hand in pocket, Dean entered the lab with an apologetic look.

Ellen didn't even hear him. She leaned into the main counter, Elliott across from her. A huge smile crossed her face as she giggled like a schoolgirl while watching a small dancing hula girl.

"I had that in my possession forever." Elliott told her. "I thought you may need that to cheer you up, so it is yours. Happy Birthday."

Dean close his eyes. *'Elliott Ryder beat him to the punch.'* "Damn it." He spoke his thoughts out loud.

Ellen looked up. "Hey, Dean."

"El . . ." Dean stepped to the counter. "Look . . ."

"Check out what Elliott gave me. Isn't it great." Ellen flashed a grin to Elliott.

"Swell. Just what the lab needs."

"Dean." Ellen whispered his name. "I think it's a great gift."

Lifting his hand, Dean looked at Elliott as if to give a silent apology. He then turned to Ellen. "So, Elliott was the first to wish you a happy birthday."

"No." Ellen snickered. "Don't be silly. Robbie was."

"Figures." Dean raised his eyebrows. "Then Elliott?" Dean questioned to see where he would fall in the birthday wishes line.

"No. The kids." Ellen explained. "Then Joe and Andrea popped by, and Hal called. Melissa . . ."

"Ellen." Dean halted her. "Sgt. Ryder. Hating to ruin your knight in shining armor moment, can I have a word with my wife alone."

"Yes, Dr. Hayes." Elliott grabbed his bandana from the counter.

Ellen played with the hula girl. "Thank you again."

"You're very welcome. Happy Birthday." Before leaving, Elliott walked around the counter and leaned toward Ellen's cheek to kiss her. He stopped before the deliverance of it when he heard Dean's 'don't.' Embarrassed like, Elliott cleared his throat, smile and nodded a goodbye as an exit.

"Dean?" Ellen asked in curiosity. "What is it."

"El. I'm . . . I am so sorry."

"What?" She snickered. "What for?" She lifted her hula girl. "Can I put this on your desk it will look so cute."

"No. I mean, yeah. Sure. And I'm sorry. Your birthday totally slipped my mind."

"Dean, don't be silly." Ellen set the doll on display. "It's just a birthday."

"It's your birthday."

"So what? Did you think I was mad."

"I hope not."

"Not at all." Ellen moved to him. "I know you're busy. Please don't worry about it. You have the whole day to wish me happy birthday."

"Happy birthday." Dean said less than enthusiastic.

"Gee, thanks."

"No." He grumbled. "I feel bad. And Sgt. Ryder giving you that hula girl only makes me feel worse."

Ellen whistled. "Good thing I didn't show you this." She lifted the chain she wore to expose the small heart diamond pendant.

"Aw. Who?" Dean looked at it.

"Robbie."

"Figures."

"If it makes you feel any better . . ." Ellen inched closer to him laying her hand on his chest. "Frank didn't get me anything."

"Aren't you just funny." Dean's head lowered.

"Dean, really. You are making too much out of this." softly Ellen kissed him. "Why are you so down."

"Because finally, everything is behind us. Bev. Johnny. The mistakes we made in those situations. Finally. And now we have this chance to be that married couple and you're . . ."

"Don't say it." Ellen's demeanor totally changed. "Please don't say it."

"There has to be something we can do. Something." Dean said with desperation.

"There isn't."

"El, not to sound callous. But Grace handed down that decision. Grace is dead. What if we . . ."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "No. The punishment has to be served. Do you understand that? Not just for the sake of any future crimes, but for me, Dean. I have to be punished for me. Does that make sense? I committed a wrong. I have to . . . no, I need to pay. And if even for a short time, I believe having to leave my home, my children and you is one way to pay."

"Then you're not gonna ever pay fully." Dean pulled Ellen closer and dropped his voice. "You may leave your home. And the kids. But I'll be damned, if you're leaving Beginnings without me."

"Then you're damned, Dean." Ellen's voice cracked. "Because whether you or anyone else likes it or not, when I leave Beginnings. I leave one way . . . alone."

^^^

A spit shine without the saliva and Frank stared in amazement at the weapons he had cleaned. "Fuckin unbelievable. Why can't I get my men to do this in Beginnings. Of course . . ." He spoke to himself in the armory. "They *are* the ones doing it. Here, I'm the one that gets stuck. Wait . . ." He scratched his head. "Why?" Frank shrugged. "Nothing else to do I guess. Fuckin God better be happy about how I got his shit in order for him. Whoa, what if he makes me St. Frank. Patron Saint of weapons. Cool." He bobbed his head and reached for another weapon. An older one, a rifle that looked as if it was from the old west. "Oh, yeah, this must be God's favorite piece. Since he looks like John Wayne. But . . . it's shiny enough

doesn't need . . ." Mid extension to return the rifle to the shelf, Frank stopped when he caught his reflection in the glimmering brass. "Oh, fuck." Frank's eyes widened and brought the brass before him as a mirror. "Oh fuck." He grinned, turning his face from side to side looking at himself. Where were the lines on his face? The ones by his eyes, his mouth. His skin looked firmer, unworn. His eyes glistened in youth, and there wasn't a sign of the war struggles in the after plague that he had endured. Gone. No facial hair, his nose was straight, no longer crooked from being busted six times. And what was the most astonishing to him, was there wasn't a single scar, deep or shallow on his face. "I'm young. Hey . . . I look like Keanu Reeves." Frank winked at himself. "I'm pretty hot."

"Frank." The soft female voice called out into the room.

His eyes shifted and he tilted the weapon to catch a glimpse in the reflection of the woman behind him. When he did, the rifle toppled from his hand and shaking, Frank stood up. "Mom." He breathed out and spun. She looked the same as he remembered her. Petite, thick-long black hair that shimmered. Her face an olive complexion with such European beauty.

"Frank." She spoke peaceful and smiled. "Come here."

"Oh, my God." Two steps was all it took and Frank was to his mother. A woman he hadn't touched, seen, or embraced since he was eleven years old. He felt like a child again, only entirely overrun with emotions.

"Good to see you close." She stepped back and winked. "I've been watching. You and your bothers."

"We're doing good."

"No. You're doing great." She held onto his hands staring up at him. "You are so tall."

"I grew since you've seen me last. But I look young. I saw my reflection. I look really young now."

"Everyone does up here." His mother told him.

"This is a gift. Is that why they sent you to me? Everyone else that came in here, was here for a purpose to try to teach me something."

"Me too." She led him to the crates to sit down. "You're going to be going back down, very, very soon Frank. Time to return." She sat down and waited for him to join her. "Our time is limited." Squeezing his hand she looked deeply at him. "So before you go, you have to listen. There is something so very important I have to tell you."

^^^

“Oh, shit.” Robbie sprang up from his seat next to Frank’s bed. “Dean!” he screamed out.

Hal flew closer to the bed. “What’s wrong.”

Still holding Frank’s hand, Robbie’s breath shivered. “Hal, look, look at his eyes. They’re still closed but . . .”

Hal looked closer. “Tears.”

“What’s going on?” Dean raced into the room.

Robbie moved back. “Frank. I think he’s waking up.”

“Dean.” Hal added. “It looks like tears at the creases of his eyes.”

Scurrying around the bed, Dean focused on Frank. His eyes shifted and a single tear ran down his cheek. “He’s waking.” Reaching out quickly to the night stand, Dean flung open the drawer. A prepared syringe rolled his way. As he grabbed, he heard the heart monitor beep stronger, faster, and Frank heaved in a loud breath.

“Dean?” Robbie questioned with worry.

Dean stayed with Frank. Eyes on him, one hand holding his wrist in a pulse taking manner, the other bringing the syringe to the shunt in his arm. “Stay calm, Frank. Your heart has to be calm.” He shook his head and plunged the Salicain into the IV line. “Pulse is too rapid, twenty seconds. Calm. Calm.”

Another deep breath, and with it, Frank’s eyes popped open. His hand ejected over and grasped onto Dean’s wrist. His saddened eyes made a hard contact with him. “Dean.” He spoke raspy and emotional. “Dean . . . my father.”

Before Dean could even respond, Frank’s grip loosened, his eyes closed, and his heart rate dropped to a steady slow pace.

The Salicain kicked in. Dean couldn’t move. He was still locked onto Frank with a confused stare. What Frank meant was not conveyed verbally. The look on Frank’s face, the sound and deliverance of his words, shot through Dean in a heartbreaking understanding that somehow Frank knew about Joe. But how?

CHAPTER FIVE

If efforts of avoidance were cures to illnesses, Dean would be the God of all doctors. He tried, he absolutely tried to avoid going into that one speciality shop in New Bowman. He had to wonder, why it was, that with all the little shops, even sparingly stocked, he had to end up at that one shop.

The woman at the candle store told Dean nothing was new since Ellen was there last. The one clothing place had only dresses, and Dean tossed out of his mind the idea of jewelry. Anything that was for sale in the handmade jewelry store paled to the pendant Robbie had given to Ellen.

Onward. One place left. If Dean wanted to get Ellen something, he had to go in there.

The Unique Boutique. An outlandish accessory shop with items no one really needed but every woman wanted. Always stocked, always with new merchandise. The sign out front even boasted to stop in and see the new line of Hoi-String belts.

What they were Dean hadn't a clue.

Actually, what they had in the shop, Dean didn't know either. He had never even been in there because of one worker. Ben.

Not that he had a problem with Ben, but recently Ben was giving him attitude. Flipping Dean off for no reason, singing Village People as he passed Dean, *'Macho, Macho man. Dean wants to be a macho man. But he can't. He's too small.'*

Dean wondered if it was his imagination, he had a lot on his mind. Standing before the boutique, he took a deep breath as he entered. Maybe since it was the middle of the day, and since Ben was the head seamstress of Beginnings, maybe Ben wouldn't be there.

The bells above the door did a triple ding and Dean walked in. He knew how wrong he was when Ben walked out from behind the back with a disgruntled. 'Oh'.

Dean nodded politely. He just wanted to find Ellen something and get back home.

"Do you need . . . help?" Ben asked snippy.

"Um, no." Dean walked to the far wall.

"Good. Because I wasn't going to help you."

Dean snapped a quick look over his shoulder at Ben, then after telling

himself to just get the gift, he peered at the small, purse size photograph holders on the rack. Not many, but all were in the most God awful colors. Dean was certain Ellen didn't have one of those. Quick gift. Quick escape.

"Hope you plan on purchasing." Snooty, Ben sat down and crossed his legs looking at his fingernails. "I haven't the time to waste on you."

Purple. Dean smiled. It was the same fabric and color as Ellen's purse. Perfect. He lifted it and took it to the counter.

"Will this be all." Ben exhaled as he stood.

"Yes." Dean reached into his back pocket for his Danny dollar card.

"Thirty Danny dollars, please."

"What!" Dean blasted. "Thirty? But the signs says three."

Ben peered. "Must be a typo. They are thirty. Problem?" He raised an eyebrow at Dean.

"That's ridiculous."

"It's the price."

"No, it's not. You're over charging. I'm telling Joe."

Ben snickered. "Are we copying off our wife now? Tattle tale."

"Me?" Dean barked. "You know what . . ."

"Not purchasing?"

"No. I'm purchasing. Ring it up." He handed him the Danny Dollar card.

Nonchalantly, Ben swiped it through the Danny Dollar card machine. Just as he was about to return it to Dean, the machine buzzed, and Ben quickly retracted the card and chuckled. "Denied."

"What!" Dean leaned to the counter. "What do you mean denied. It can't be denied. I should have five hundred Danny Dollars on there."

"Nope. Denied." Ben nearly sang. Then with a swoop up his hand in a childish manner, he held up his thumb and index finger to form a 'L'. He bobbed his head and spoke predominantly immature. "Loser." He pointed at Dean. "Loser. No credit. No purchase. Denied."

"You're an asshole."

"And you're a loser with bad credit."

"You have to give that photograph holder to me. You know the rules. If someone wants something . . ."

"Uh-uh-ah." Ben waved his finger. "Only on necessity items and some entertainment. Not . . . specialty items." He dropped his voice to a fast whisper. "Loser."

"Give me back my card. I'm going to see Danny about this." Dean reached for it.

“Nope.” Ben held it up. “It says card must be destroyed.”

“No it does not. Where?”

“Right there.” Ben pointed to the machine. When Dean tried to peek, Ben pushed the machine from view. “Too late. It’s gone.” Smiling arrogantly, Ben broke the card.

“Hey.” Dean yelled.

“Perhaps . . .” Ben broke the card again. “Next time someone complements your crotch you won’t get so physically hostile. Loser.” He tossed the pieces at Dean.

That was it. Down went Dean’s hand to the counter in a hard slam, the force of which he used to lever himself up in a leap, jump on the counter and springboard a lunge at Ben.

A simple, high pitch feminine shriek escaped Ben right before Dean pummeled him, and his hand reached out with desperation to the silent holdup alarm by the register.

Crashing four feet back into the backroom door, Dean sailed the much larger man.

“You beast! You Beast!” Ben screamed out, holding up his hands while trying to keep his footing.

Too late. Using everything he had, Dean with a loud grunt, grabbed hold of Ben’s shirt tossing him hard to the floor.

Ben hit the floor, sliding on his back across his just waxed linoleum. He brought his hands up defensively when he saw Dean rage his way. “Help!” He screamed out.

Dean landed on him. In a downward swing of his right hand, he grabbed hold of Ben’s shirt, lifted his upper body some from the ground while showing his tightly clenched left fist. “I just . . .” Dean said huffing out of breath. “I just want my photograph holder.”

“Freeze.” The calling of the deep male voice was followed by the unmistakable sound of a clicking gun chamber. “Let him go. Get off the man.” The UWA soldier aimed at Dean.

Dean’s eyes closed. “Shit.” He whispered out, let go of Ben, and slowly stood up. “I just wanted . . .”

“Doesn’t matter. Hands up.” The UWA soldier ordered.

“I’m not armed.”

“I don’t care.” The UWA soldier kept his eyes and aim on Dean while helping Ben to his feet. “Mr. From-Fabrics, are you all right?”

“No.” Ben whimpered out. “Look at my hands.” He showed the soldier. “I’m trembling.” Over dramatic, like Joan Crawford, Ben pointed at

Dean. "And I want this man arrested. He . . . he accosted me." Stepping to Dean, Ben revved back slightly, then daintily with a little force, delivered a grazing fingers slap to the side of Dean's face. "Bastard."

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Sister Mary Agnes Hawthorn. Old school she was, never changing even when Vatican Two told her she could remove the habit. Dean swore she was a hundred years old. Actually, Dean hadn't thought of Sr. Mary Agnes in years, never had a reason to until that moment.

Perhaps it was where he sat, in the old fashioned wooden chair, set center of a large office. Looking at the globe, the books, and listening to the hard soles as they paced around him. There was even a point when Dean worried that a ruler would sail down and crack him in the knuckles. Like in the third grade when he insulted Sr. Mary Elizabeth for her ignorance of a simple microorganism structure.

"Dean." Hal spoke snidely. "Well?"

Dean snapped from his memory. "Well what, Hal? This is absurd. I'm not going through this interrogation again with you."

"You accosted Ben." Hal stayed behind Dean to hide the smirk on his face.

"Again . . . I did not."

"Then why did he press the 'holdup' button."

"Hal." Dean turned some in his chair. "Why does he have a hold up button anyhow. This is New Bowman, it's almost like fearing robbery in the town of Mayberry."

Hal chuckled. "Dean. The man . . ."

"Hal, stop this. I was having a bad day. He ripped up my Danny Dollar card because I stuck him too hard after he made a comment about my crotch yesterday."

In a single long stride, Hal stepped before Dean. "You did what, why?"

Dean cringed. "Like father like son. Hal, all I wanted to do was get Ellen a present. That's it. There's some sort of error with my card, it was denied, he ripped it up, threw it in my face and called me a loser. No. Wait. He held up his thumb and forefinger, *then* he called me a loser."

"So you . . . felt this reason to attack a defenseless shop owner."

Dean grumbled and stood up. "Are we done?"

"Yes, we are. Go on. Dean, did you need to borrow my card until you

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straighten this mess out.”

“No. But thanks.” He moved to the door. “And thanks for giving me a hard time about this for . . .” He looked at his watch. “Forty minutes. Gees.”

“It was fun. I only wish Frank could have been here to instigate you as well.”

Dean paused in his reaching for the door. Slowly he looked back at Hal with a smile that reeked a bit of sadness. “Yeah. Yeah, I do too.”

^^^

‘A needle, like a red hot poker, slipping slowly and painfully through the surface of the skin. Imbedding deeply and delivering a blood destroying acid.’

That was the best description Danny Hoi could give to the wail Nick released in the mechanic building. “Henry.” Danny closed one ear off while trying to work. “Shut that child up.”

“He doesn’t like me, Danny.” Henry held the screaming and squirming baby. “Maybe if you . . .”

“No.” Danny cringed. “He’s gonna cause an aneurism.”

“Oh, my God.” Henry panicked. “Can that happen?”

“I think so. If a baby cries hard enough.”

“Damn Dean.”

“How is a screaming Nick, Dean’s fault.” Danny asked, keeping his eyes on his work trying to concentrate.

“Because it’s Dean and Ellen’s day to have him and he isn’t around. So I’m stuck until they finish working.”

“Can’t you feed him.” Danny spoke loudly over the shrill crying. “I mean . . .” Danny stopped talking when almost instantaneously, Nick’s cry stopped and a happy, baby, ‘ah’ escaped him. Curiously he looked up to see Hector enter the office.

Hector smiled bright and reached for Nick who’s arms extended desperately to him. “Hey, Buddy.” To his arms, he took the baby and Nick clung as if for dear life, biting a kiss to Hector’s cheek. “Did you miss me? Huh?”

Tilted head with an ornery look, Danny pointed his pencil. “Why does your kid like everyone but you, Henry?”

“Because everyone bribes him.” Henry replied.

“With?” Danny asked.

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Hector answered, "Food. We feed him normal, food."

"He shouldn't be eating sweets," Henry stated. "His teeth will rot and dentists are very barbaric in Beginnings."

Hector rolled his eyes. "He has no teeth. And, I'm done early so I'll take him home until Dean and Ellen finish their day."

"Good, thank you." Henry, exasperated, plopped into a chair. "He drains me."

Danny shook his head. "You had him fifteen minutes."

"Yes, can you imagine if I had him longer. I could have a nervous breakdown."

Smiling, Hector moved to the door. "And you'd be stuck in containment. That would be funny, wouldn't it. Talk about a down fall you took." Hector joked. "Leader, head of mechanics, down to lowly resident of the mental containment."

"Hector." Henry snipped. "That isn't funny. Keep it up and I won't throw very good tonight at darts."

"When do you ever?" Hector flashed a grin, gave a wave and walked out.

Danny returned to his work. "What are you gonna do when he hooks up with Misha? I think you'll be lost."

"What are you talking about?" Henry asked. "Hooking up with who?"

"Misha." Danny answered. "When I was in New Bowman she asked about him. She was one of the lesbians. She's thinking of expanding her sexual horizons. Actually she wants a child." Danny shrugged. "And she wanted to keep it in the community, so to speak, UWA. But . . ."

"No way. Why would this woman ask you about him."

"She saw us talking. And I am . . . Danny Hoi." Danny winked. "Interested in him. Hasn't told him. Spoke maybe once or twice to Hector. I don't know if he's conveyed his interest or not. Jealous?"

"No!" Henry barked. "Why would I be jealous. I hope he finds someone. But Hector's not been talking to some New Bowman woman."

Dean's 'Yes, he has', announced his presence in Danny's office. "Misha I think."

Henry gasped. "Look at you being the futomara. How do you know, Mr. Hermit, you never go to Bowman."

"I was just there. I saw them in her dress shop."

"For your information Mr. Smartie Pants, Hector was working." Henry said smug.

"Whatever." Dean shrugged. "Danny there's a problem with my

Danny Dollar card.”

“Can’t help you now, Dean.” Danny lifted papers as if some sort of proof. “I’m really busy. And it’s a dart tournament tonight, I want to finish up.”

“Danny, please this is important. I went to get Ellen a birthday gift and my card was denied.”

Henry laughed. “Maybe if you learned to be a little money conscious your card wouldn’t be denied..”

“Who . . . who asked you?” Dean snapped then looked at Danny. “Can you help, please. I want to get back to Bowman before the shops close. It’s her birthday.”

“You said it was denied?” Danny stood up and walked across the room. “Back here’s the Danny Dollar Enterprise.” He slid open two sliding doors, exposing a room filled with computers and file cabinets.

Dean took in a long blink, “So this is where everyone turns in the hours.”

Henry scoffed. “You want your dollars, yet you know nothing about this system. Serves you right Ben turned you down.”

Dean hurriedly looked at him. “How do you know it was Ben and not . . . Misha.”

“Ben called.” Henry shrugged. “Told me you beat him up. Hal arrested you.”

“He called you that fast?” Dean asked with edge. “What? Is there a connection between you two. Or wait, no. It’s a brotherhood, or shall I say sisterhood.”

Henry’s mouth dropped open.

Danny cleared his throat. “Dean, come on. That wasn’t . . . that wasn’t right.”

Dean nodded. “You’re right. I’m being on edge. Even though I don’t like you, Henry, that was uncalled for and low. I apologize. You can’t help your sexual orientation now.”

“Dean.” Danny corrected as he sat behind the computer. “Do you want the information or not.”

After looking at Henry who flipped him off and mouthed the word, ‘futomara,’ Dean nodded. “Yes, please.”

“All right. Let me have your card for a second.” Danny held out his hand.

“I can’t.” Dean told him. “Ben ripped it up.” He quickly looked at Henry when he heard his laughter.

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Exhaling loudly, Danny tossed up his hands. "I'd have to do big a manual search, Dean. I'm behind as it is. Can I do this tomorrow. I told you there's a tournament tonight."

"Well my wife's birthday ends tonight, Danny. Come on."

"Fine. You owe me." Danny stood up. "Henry, grab one of those favor slips for Dean to fill out."

"Big or little favor?" Henry asked. "I personally would go with huge favor."

"I owe you a favor?" Dean asked with edge. "Just for helping me out with a stupid system you invented."

"Stupid?" Danny stopped reaching for the file cabinet.

"Uh-oh, Dean. Now you have him mad." Henry instigated. "I wouldn't go after Danny, he's no Ben."

Dean swung a view Henry's way. "I'm not getting into a physical confrontation with Danny."

"Because he's the apocalyptic Bruce Lee?" Henry asked.

"No!" Dean snapped. "Henry, stay out of this."

"Dean." Danny was blunt. "You may not like Henry, but I do. He's my friend. If you want to know what's up with your purchase card, I'll tell you. But lose the attitude toward Henry."

Dean's mouth dropped open. He turned to Henry who flashed a grin. "What is this 'pick on Dean' day?"

"Maybe if you were nicer to people, Dean." Henry stated.

"Aren't you one to talk." Dean scoffed. "What? You step down from council, you join the normal working ranks, and all of the sudden you're the everyday hero?"

Henry smiled. "Yeah. Something like that."

"It's an act." Dean argued. "I know you. And I also know two weeks ago, Henry, you were the biggest dick to walk . . ."

Slam. The metal file cabinet brought silence, and holding a folder Danny glared. "You want this info or not?"

Dean shuddered in the shake of his head that added sarcasm to his tone. "That's my folder? That was the big manual search that I owe you a favor for?"

"Hit him with it." Henry edged on. "Go on, Danny."

Dean noticed the too angry of a glare that Danny Hoi gave him. "What?" Dean tossed up his hands. "Why do you have that look in your eyes."

Henry gasped. "Oh, Dean. You are so rude. Not too mention racist."

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That wasn't very nice making a comment about his Asian eyes."

Dean spun in a hard pivot to Henry, pointing as he did. "One more word, asshole . . ."

"Out." Danny opened the file cabinet, returned the file and slammed the drawer. "Out. You have been nothing but attitude with everyone in town for the past couple days. I'm not everyone. And you just reminded me that at next council meeting, I should bring up to Sgt. Ryder, that when someone is arrested in his town, there should be a little bit more stringent of a reprimanding delivered by their leader."

"I give up. Fine." Dean threw out his hands. "Fuck it." Shaking his head, totally disgusted, Dean stormed out.

^^^

As if the dark skies didn't tell Dean he was late, the singing of the song, 'happy birthday' carrying from his house, reiterated it more. Holding a wrapped small package, Dean opened the door just at the end when the cheering began.

Silence.

Running his fingers through his hair, Dean peered through the tops of his eyes to the diningroom filled with not only his children, but the Slagel clan as well, all looking at him. Upon first glance, it was only a family thing, and that was good.

Was the silence that long? Was everyone staring at him for what seemed like an eternity? Hanging up his jacket, Dean stepped to Ellen as the light went on..

"Hey." She smiled and whispered in his ear. "You aren't mad, are you? Andrea wanted to do this."

"No." Dean answered in a 'don't be silly fashion'. "It's your birthday."

"Come on. We're having cake." Ellen grabbed his hand and pulled him to the table.

"Christ, Dean." Joe spoke up. "Where the hell have you been?"

Dean, disgusted, just shook his head and then he noticed it wasn't just a family thing. Josephine sat at the table. He cringed deeply watching her in her slouched manner, drunk, stick her finger in the icing, eat it, then putting it back in for another lick.

Hal leaned into him. "Did you solve the problem?"

"No." Dean grumbled. "I figured something out."

"Yeah." Josephine hiccupped and laughed. "Heard you got beat up by



the queer.”

Mouth dropping open, Dean tossed up his hands. “Does everyone know?”

“Dean.” Ellen spoke soft. “Don’t be embarrassed. Ben is a large man.”

Robbie snickered. “I heard they’re calling him Ben Eastwood now.”

Hal shrugged when Dean looked at him. “Not me. Henry told everyone.”

“Swell.” Dean groaned then noticed Joe peering close to him. “What, Joe?”

“Nothing.” Joe shook his head. “Just that I heard he broke your nose.”

“That’s not what I heard.” Robbie interjected. “I heard he just knocked you in the jaw.”

“Sweet Jesus.” Andrea gasped as she cut the cake. “What in heaven’s for.”

“Crotch thing.” Josephine snipped out in a slur. “Heard it was a ‘whose boys are bigger than whose’ contest.”

“Whatever the case . . .” Andrea flung out her hand in nonchalant manner. “In my heart Dean is the better man. After all, he did inspire the name futomara.”

“If you all . . .” Dean stopped his voice from vocally projecting the end results of a really bad day. “If you’ll just excuse me. Ellen, enjoy your party.”

It was quiet for the second that Dean stormed out, then after Joe, Hal, and Robbie all looked at each other, they shrugged and went back to waiting on their slice of cake.

Ellen knocked once on the bedroom door before she walked in calling out softly. “Dean?” She pushed the door closed with her foot and looked at him sitting on the bed. “I brought you a slice of cake.”

Sadly, Dean looked up and took it. “Thanks.” As soon as he gazed at it he saw the finger streak obviously left by Josephine. “Um, maybe later.” He set it behind him on the bed.

“What’s wrong?” Ellen sat next to him.

“Nothing. No. Everything.” Dean slowly shook his head. “I’m just having a really bad day.”

“Can I help?”

“I wished you could, but you can’t. It’s something I have to deal with.”

---

"I see. Dean, it's not good to hold things back. You and I just learned this."

"I know." Dean closed his eyes tight. "But this . . . this I can't say anything about it. Please, trust me."

"It's eating you up."

"Combined with other things. Yes." Dean, with an exhale, lifted the small gift. "This is why I'm late." He handed it to her. "Happy Birthday."

"Can I open it?" Ellen asked with a smile.

"Yeah. I hope you like it. I went through so much trouble buying you something. The Danny dollar system is screwed. Danny gives me a hard time. Henry is being a bitch. Ben rips up my card." Dean growled. "So I thought. What can I give you? And I thought of that. You and I, we've had some problems. So think of that gift as my symbol that I will be here and I'll always listen to you from here on in."

Ellen unwrapped the gift. It was a small plastic container from the lab. "Oh, Dean." She whispered out in awe. "It's one of the clones of your ear."

"Yeah." Dean lifted a shoulder in a shrug. "I jelled up the fluid so the ear floats really well. It should always look pretty fresh and I sealed the plastic so it won't open."

"This is so great." Ellen kissed him on the cheek. "This is the best present."

"I thought it was a pretty ingenious gift idea."

"I just asked you for this."

"Yep." Dean smiled. "I know. So you like it?"

"I love it. I'll put it right here . . ." She stood up, walked to her dresser and set it before the mirror. "Now I can see it everyday. It's so cute."

"Thanks."

"Join the party." Ellen went back over to him.

"Maybe in a bit." He grabbed her hands. "I have to let my mood calm down. But before you go back, can I . . . steal a moment with you." He pulled her closer.

"I think I can manage a moment." Ellen spoke seductively slipping her body between his legs and leaning her chest close to his.

"Maybe just a few . . ." Dean wrapped his arms around Ellen and raised his lips to her. "Moments." He kissed her. The kiss widened. Pulling Ellen even tighter to him, and with him, Dean backed down to the bed. Just as he met the mattress with Ellen right against him, he stopped. "Shit."

"What?" Ellen lifted her head slightly.

Dean closed his eyes and with disgusted defeat, he let out a long

whining crying. “The cake.”

Looking at the icing and cake remnants that spewed across the bedspread like a culinary explosion from beneath Dean’s shoulder, Ellen did the only thing she could do. Laugh.

~~~~~

It wasn’t as cold as the season dictated it should have been, but Elliott wore his longer coat, walking at a steady pace down the streets of New Bowman. He felt as if he had walked all day, and in essence he did. Frank’s rounds. Killer baby lessons, and as he approached the time when he’d rather just rest for the night, he found himself doing what Hal did every night. Just walk around, making sure all was fine in New Bowman. He really didn’t mind filling in, it was just he felt a little drained. But the Captain wanted to be by Frank’s bed side waiting for Frank to come out of the initial dose of Salicain. Elliott supposed the captain had some sort of demented wake up plan in order.

The hour was late, but the noise from Hoi-Hoi on the Range carried in the sleeping streets. Elliott figured it was the last of the dart throwers finishing up for the evening, having a good time until, like in the old world, last call hit.

And just like in the old world, where there was booze and high levels of competition between males, there would be trouble. Not a frequenter of Hoi-Hoi on the Range, but Elliott knew that would have to be a stop. Especially when he heard the laughter and saw the three men walking up his street.

Newcomers, recent residents of the town, they had wandered in. New Bowman welcomed all. There were four of them all together and something about the new men made Elliott want to re-examine the Bowman attitude of containing survivors. Hal didn’t believe in containment, especially in a town where it was ninety-five percent male and the female population was under lock, key and guard all the time. But the new men were loud, rough, and angry.

Their bitter and defensive attitudes they brought into New Bowman when they arrived, sent red flags up to Elliott about them, Hal too. But Hal’s attitude was that any UWA soldier could handle themselves and the newcomers, should there be trouble. And Elliott *did* have to agree with that.

The laughter of the three men stopped when they neared Elliott.

“Evening, Sgt. Ryder.” The one spoke.

"Gentlemen." Elliott nodded. "I see Ralph isn't joining you this evening."

"Yeah, he did." The one spoke again and pointed back. "Still at the bar. Got kind of miserable so we left him."

"I see." Elliott peered some down that street. "Well, I must be off. Have a good evening, Gentlemen." Another nod and Elliott, hands in pockets, just to ease his mind, headed straight to Hoi-Hoi on the Range.

Bulls-eye. When the dart landed and the alarms of a win rang out, Robbie cheered.

"See?" Danny gave him a proud pat on the back. "What did I tell you."

"I can't believe I did that."

"Concentration." Danny put his finger to his temple. "It's just a matter of concentrating, changing angles and perception. And . . . confidence."

With a shake of his head and a happy 'whew', Robbie smiled. "That felt so good. I stopped hitting the wall."

"And we beat Hector and Henry." Danny looked toward the tables where Hector and Henry sat in conversation. "Gees, they don't know. Hey!" Danny hollered to them across the partially crowded saloon. "You two, we won."

Neither looked.

Robbie shrugged. "Let's set up for another game."

"You said you were working." Henry spoke in a low voice.

"No." Hector corrected. "I said I was busy and I would be late."

"Working."

Hector chuckled. "When in the world did I say that. I was pulling a surprise which involved coming here to Bowman."

"And seeing Misha?"

"Who?" Hector asked and lit a cigarette.

"Some woman who runs the dress shop."

"Is that her name? If so, yeah, that's who I went to for the surprise. Don't ask."

"You're getting involved with this woman and you don't even know her name?" Henry asked.

"What?" Hector laughed in surprise. "Where in the world did you get that from?"

“Danny said she’s interested in you. Asked about you.”

The smile dropped from Hector’s face. “That’s not even a funny joke to play on a guy.” He grabbed his drink.

“It isn’t a joke. Danny wouldn’t joke about that. And if she’s interested, you should really go for it.”

“Really?” Hector asked. “Why would she want me?”

Robbie answered as he pulled out a chair. “You’re cute. I mean, if I was a woman, I’d think so.”

Henry looked up when he saw Danny approach. “Hector doesn’t believe Misha asked about him.”

“She did.” Danny stood by the table. “Is looking to pick up a primary and secondary relationship.”

Hector whistled. “Whoa. And she thought about me?” A slight smile hit his face. “Oh, man, Henry. Can you imagine. What if she would want to run it the way Beginnings does and the primary picks the secondary. I would pick you.”

“You would?” Henry asked.

“Hell yeah. You’re my best friend. This . . . this could be great. Danny, are you sure?”

“Absolutely. I’ll talk to her again, if you want.” Danny said.

Robbie interjected. “Can I offer some advice. Not that I’m one to talk or anything but . . . if she’s looking at you and not a UWA, keep one thing in mind. The UWA guys act differently. Real different. She’ll expect that. I mean, look at suave Elliott Ryder. I think you should handle it like him. Innocent. Naive, suave and . . . honored to be considered. Man, that shit worked with Ellen, didn’t it. I keep watching him snatch her further and further away from Dean and Frank. And it’s all because of the way he is.”

“For what it’s worth.” Henry spoke up. “In my opinion, you Robbie, deserve to be with Ellen. No, wait, Ellen should be with you.”

Robbie smiled gently. “Thanks Henry. Now we may let you win.”

“Speaking of winning.” Danny pointed to the dart board. “We kicked your asses last game. We’re ready for another. Henry, you’re up.”

Finishing his drink, and not paying attention, Henry stood up, pushing out his chair as he stepped back. “Don’t get so . . .”

“Hey!” The deep male voice of Ralph blasted with a hard shove to Henry. “Watch it.”

Henry flew forward landing hands first on the table. Hector jumped up.

Before any trouble could ensue, and seeing not only Hector, but

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Henry going for the husky man who obviously wasn't UWA, Robbie decided to intercept. Bodily he stepped between them. "Easy." He spoke calm. "Just take it easy. That wasn't necessary."

"Stay out of it." Ralph snapped and moved for a 'fight ready' Henry.

"No, man. Chill, all right." Robbie held up his hand. "No one wants a fight."

"What are you a joke?" Ralph laughed. "Trying to be a peacekeeper. Usually I would just nail you for sticking your nose in my business but . . ." Stepping back, Ralph snickered. "I don't fight cripples."

In defense of hurtful words, Robbie in a hard step to Ralph, instinctively reached for the man. Just as he laid his hand on Ralph's shoulder, Ralph spun hard, bringing his tightly closed fist in a sail to an unprotected Robbie's face.

Robbie, thrown off balance by the surprise and force of the punch, spun from the hit, face down to the table before him.

Sadistic and in a mood for a fight, fast Ralph lunged for Robbie, but only made it a step.

Click-click.

Frozen. Ralph didn't move when he felt the cold barrel of the revolver pressed hard to his forehead. Slowly he raised his eyes to meet those of Elliott's.

Stone cold Elliott's eyes were and they didn't even blink. The gun stayed firm and so did his finger on the trigger. "I will suggest . . ." He spoke hard and in control. "You step back right now."

Ralph did.

"Hands up and turn around slowly." Holding his aim, Elliott caught in his peripheral vision, two of his men. He called their aid. "Privates, could take him to the detention hall for me, thank you." Waiting for the men to take hold of Ralph, Elliott lowered his weapon and started to turn around. "Robbie are you . . ." Elliott stopped not only speaking, but swore he felt so badly, he stopped breathing. Robbie, head down was leaving the bar.

^^^

The sound carried out of the gymnasium of the UWA training center. A building that once was the highschool of the former Miles City.

Thump, thump-thump. Slow, steady, strong. It seemed to match the beat of Hal's heart as he walked slowly into the gym. He made his entrance quiet, standing by the door watching his younger brother far in the corner.

Thump, thump-thump.

Robbie, in a sloppy boxer's stance, punched one of the bags that hung in the corner. He hit more for emotions than for skill and Hal could clearly see that.

Head down, Robbie would hit, pause, shake his head and hit again.

Taking in a deep breath, Hal then walked heavier allowing his footsteps to click across the wooden planks of the floor.

Thump.

Robbie stopped. His hand slid down and his head lifted, yet he didn't turn around. "Only two men . . ." He spoke soft. " . . . walk with so much arrogance. Elliott Ryder . . ." Robbie turned around and lifted his hand. "Or my big brother."

Hal grinned. "Elliott told me you were here."

"I asked for the key from one of your guards. I guess . . ." Robbie exhaled. "I guess that's how he found out." Slowly, he walked to the bleachers and sat down.

Hal joined him. "How are you?"

Robbie only gave a small shrug and raised his eyebrows. "Bruised. But not physically. You know what I mean?"

"I can try to know."

"How about this then . . . embarrassed." Robbie let out a laugh that showed his humiliation. "I forgot, Hal. I completely forgot. It still feels like its there, you know. I've caught myself before, but never like this. You, me, Frank, Jimmy. Dad taught us to kick ass, to defend. There I was, being everything I was taught. Stopping trouble, intercepting, and this asshole . . . this asshole calls me a cripple." Another chuckle flowed from Robbie. "I was livid, I grabbed him, and by the time I realized I had him with my only hand . . ."

"He nailed you."

"He nailed me." Robbie's head lowered. "When has that happened? Never."

"I wouldn't say that." Hal shrugged. "Probably the last time you got into a skirmish with me or Frank. So, you've been nailed unexpectedly before."

"It's not the same thing."

"Oh, but it is little brother. It is. Like with Frank and myself, you were at a disadvantage tonight."

"What are you talking about. Now maybe, not before. I was never at a disadvantage with you and Frank."

“Robbie.” Hal said arrogantly. “Now, before. Honestly, you couldn’t beat me or Frank.”

“Hal, please.”

“No. Not Hal please.” Hal hid his laugh. “Perhaps when you grow up . . .” Hal chuckled. “In all seriousness. Yes, you are at a disadvantage. But that is only now.”

“Until I get my arm.”

“Do you really think you need that arm?” Hal asked.

“Um, yeah. I got nailed tonight. My only offence and defense was occupied.”

“See that’s where you are wrong. Your left arm is not your only offense and defense. You have an entire body to use, you just have to learn how to use it. And when you do, you’ll not need that bionic arm to beat the likes of Ralph Mouser.”

“I know Elliott placed him in the detention hall.” Robbie stated.

“I apologize for that.” Hal lifted his hands. “Of all people to be there. Arrogant Elliott Ryder.” He shook his head. “You know he won’t let me or you live that down.”

Robbie snickered. “That’s not what I mean. You put the man in the detention hall. That’s not the way you usually handle things.”

“No.” Hal said. “It isn’t. But when do I ever do things normally. He is on his last warning.”

“Because of me?” Robbie asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Is that fair?”

“Never claimed to be Dad. I will honestly say, I am not fair. I do play favorites. Well, Dad does too, he just doesn’t let it get out.”

“So, what does this last warning mean?” Robbie questioned.

“It means, one more ounce of trouble, of any kind, and he’s out of Bowman. Excommunicated.”

“What if he doesn’t leave, or starts trouble.”

Calmly, Hal answered. “He’ll be shot.”

Robbie laughed. “Yeah, right. What are you gonna do? Put a gun to his head and shoot him?”

“Good Lord, Robbie, who do you think I am, Frank?” Hal spoke offended. “No. We don’t do that in New Bowman.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“No.” Hal exhaled. “However . . . accidents do happen.”

Robbie quickly looked at him.

Hal lifted his hands. "Happened before."

"Hal, I'm shocked."

"Don't blame me. Elliott. All Elliott. You do know I would vote to reform."

"Right." Robbie scoffed. "Frank would be proud."

"Speaking of our brother." Hal noticed Robbie's demeanor dropped. "I'm not Frank, and I would love to be him right now because he would know exactly how to make you feel better at this moment."

"You're doing good."

"Thank you. But, he has a demented way of doing things."

"Yeah, he does." Robbie said. "He probably would have me training or something."

"Which . . . I could do. You know that." Hal spoke soft. "But I don't want to." When he saw Robbie's shock, he lifted his hand. "Not that I don't want to train you, I do. I just don't want to take that from Frank. Robbie, you do know he'll have you doing things as if you never lost that arm. Would you like to know what I want?"

"What's that?"

"I would love to have all three of us work together on this. A brother thing. I would like that. But . . . in order for that to happen, we need to get Frank up and about. And we need to speed his recovery so we do not delay this training."

"Might be difficult. Unless . . ." Robbie said. "You have an idea."

"Ah, little brother but I do. Mind over matter. The mind heals and I figure some good motivation would do wonders for our brothers healing process . . ." ornerly, Hal grinned. "And do I have some excellent motivation ideas in mind."

^^^

No movement or feeling in his body, Frank could only see what was in his peripheral vision and where ever his eyes shifted. That was it. He experienced emotions, only on in the inside, just as he spoke . . . only on the inside.

"I hate you for this, Dean. I fuckin hate you for this."

Dean had sad but smiling eyes, as he kept eye contact with Frank, talking as he did. "I know, three in the morning is an odd hour."

"Like I fuckin know what time it is."

"But you don't know what time it is." Dean smiled. "So anyhow, my

day sucked.”

“Are your days ever good?”

“Ellen’s birthday, I forgot. But then again, Elliott Ryder didn’t.”

“Sgt. Fuckin Ryder. Figures.”

“Got her a dancing hula girl.” Dean chuckled as his hands moved. “So I go to New Bowman, Ben is there, gets snippy. I make my purchase, hand my card, my card gets denied. Then Ben, he calls me a loser, tosses the card in my face and I . . . I well . . . Frank, I didn’t know I could jump over a counter so fast. I went after the man.”

“Oh, shit. Dean, that is so funny. You attacked Ben From Fabrics?”

“Your brother arrests me, interrogates me for forty minutes . . .” Dean continued. “I get back to Beginnings. Danny gets pissed because I yell at Henry, and refuses to help me with my problem. I get it solved, find a gift, go home, everyone’s there, Including Josephine who’s licking her fingers and sticking them in the icing.”

“Uh! Old bag lady germs.”

“Then, Ellen gives me the piece she was sticking her finger on.” Dean said. “And the night didn’t get any better. Bad day, I’m frustrated, I think, well, maybe sex will help.”

“Dean. Stop. Do I want to hear this?” Frank asked in his mind.

“So I seduce El.”

“Dean! It’s me you’re talking to.”

“I get her to the bedroom.”

“Dean! Fuck!”

“I’m kissing her. She makes this comment about the kids being asleep and no fights to referee and I stop. I couldn’t. I mean, I couldn’t.”

“Hub?”

“Referee. Frank, all that went through my mind was that stupid dream I had about you and I having a tag team love making match. Remember I told you about that. And I started laughing, and couldn’t stop. So now, Ellen’s pissed at me. So here I am. And . . . I’m glad I was the one here when you came out of the initial dose. Hal had this shitty grin on his face while he was watching.”

“Probably planning on tormenting me.”

“He’s probably planning on tormenting you. He left. There was a problem with . . . with Robbie. He’s fine.” Dean said. “Just some sort of personal problem that I bet . . .” He winked soft. “Robbie needs you for.” With an exhale Dean moved back some. “Done. All shaved. Now you’re ready for visitors tomorrow.”

"I better have my goatee."

"And don't worry, Frank. You still have your goatee. I even made it defined so you look extra mean."

"Excellent."

"I'm sorry I had to hit you with the Salicain, Frank." Dean pulled up a chair. "But, I'm worried about you. Seeing you in the future or not, my mind is not at ease about your heart. One week, Frank. Give me one week on the Salicain." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "I have a secret. You can not tell anyone. Blink long to give me your agreement."

"Oh, I'm fuckin doing tricks now. Like I'm gonna blab. OK, how's this." Frank blinked.

"Good." Dean smiled. "Anyhow, El and I are creating those genetically enhanced embryos of our own in the lab. Actually accelerated growth. Well, I'm trying something new on you. It's an accelerated healing agent El and I have been working on. Andrea doesn't know I used it on you, because you know her, she'll insist on seeing test subjects and all that shit. But . . . if you could see your chest."

"It's massive. I know."

"Frank, it is healing so well. Three days and it looks like a surgical site post one week. You're gonna shock everyone. They'll think you're super Frank."

"I am."

"I know. I know. I can hear you now. You probably said, 'I am.'"

"I did."

"So anyhow, I need to talk to you about something. When . . . when you opened your eyes this morning." Dean noticed Frank's eyes took another long blink and immediately drifted off. "You said something. You said something about your father."

Frank moved his eyes directly to Dean.

"I don't know how you do, but you know, don't you?"

With a blink, Frank answered. 'Yes.'

"Oh, God, Frank. He won't let me help him. Joe won't talk to me about it. He doesn't want to hear it. You have to help me when you get out of this."

"Oh, I will, Dean. I will. You and I, we'll get him."

"My heart's breaking." Dean said soft. "I can't say anything to anyone, and I'm going insane. It's too much to carry. I am so glad you know. And if you don't . . ." Dean shrugged. "I guess you know now."

"I know, look at my eyes. I know."

"I can tell by your eyes." Dean nodded. "So I have your dad. Ellen's leaving on my mind, which, she isn't going until after Christmas so that's good. And I have you to worry about. I am so miserable, I am snapping at everyone. Everyone is bitching to Joe about me. And you're probably looking at me wondering why I'm here."

"You can't stay away from greatness."

"Knowing that in your mind, you made some arrogant comment, I'm going to say something. And I'm saying it only because you can't respond."

"Oh, sure. Take advantage of me. Why do I get the feeling this is gonna happen a lot."

"Frank. I'm lost." Dean lifted his hand. "I realized you're the only one I really talk to. Communicate with. You, Frank, aggravate me so much, there's no aggravation left for anyone else at the end of the day. You fire me up, you get me angry. You . . ." Dean chuckled. "You make me laugh like no one else has ever done. You know, despite ourselves, our best hatred efforts. We're best friends."

"Man." Frank spoke in his mind. *"Things must be really low for you. I wish I could help you Dean."*

Dean laid his hand on Frank's. "I'm hanging out a little more longer. I hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind. Just don't tell me any Ellen sex stories."

"And I promise . . ." Dean smiled, "Not to tell you any sex stories about me and Ellen."

"What is he, fuckin reading my mind? How many times does that make? Oh! Wait. Maybe I'm projecting my thoughts. Whoa. I'm telepathic, Let me try this." Frank concentrated really hard. *"Come on, Dean. Brag about me."*

"I need to hang out with you, Frank." Dean said so lost.

"There it is. Oh, shit. I did it."

"Yeah." Dean exhaled. "Right here. I'm giving you the Salicain, the accelerator. I'm doing the best I can to get you recover really fast. OK?" Dean leaned closer. "I need you to. Because . . . and here's another secret. I got so used to it being Frank and Dean, and I'm so lost without you being a part of my daily life, that I swear I don't know how to act when you aren't around. Get better my friend. *Please*, get better."

CHAPTER SIX

December 10th

Footstep.

Stop.

Frank opened one eye first then the other. He shifted his views from the left to the right, saw nothing, then closed his eyes again.

Double footstep.

Silence.

Frank's eyes opened, only when they did, a wide shitty grin on Hal's face greeted him.

"Morning." Hal smiled.

"Fuck. What are you up to?"

"I know it's early. Actually . . ." Hal glanced at his watch. "Five am."

"Five? No fuckin wonder it feels like I didn't sleep. Dean just left here."

"I see you have your breakfast." Hal lifted the tubing.

"Oh, real fuckin funny asshole."

"But, I had to stop in and see you. Talk for a bit before I head back to New Bowman to run my town."

Frank's eyes rolled.

"Cute." Hal pointed. "You know big brother, I really like this new you."

"The new me?"

"Strong. Silent. Your goatee is gone."

"Fuckin Dean."

"Kidding." Hal laughed.

"Hall!" Frank screamed in his mind.

"Yes, I bet that near death incident changed you."

"It did. I'm telepathic now. Probably psychic as well. I'll be so fuckin cool when I get out of this bed."

"So, knowing that you're the new sensitive you."

"I never said I was sensitive. But. I am."

"I thought . . ." Hal exhaled as he sat back. "We could share a moment or two." He reached into his back pocket. "And read poetry."

"What!"

"I wrote some of these myself, Frank."

"No. No poetry."

"You'll find them enlightening." Hal opened the first one. "This one is called. Butterflies of Thoughts."

"Oh, Fuck."

Hal cleared his throat. His reading of the piece was lively, flowing, almost flowerily. "I think I saw a butterfly cry today. Tiny wings flapping in the summer breeze that moves me. A wisp of emotions flicker me from his bright colors. My soul revitalized. Hark! Did he say something. He calls my name. Hal. Hal. Hal . . ."

"Hall!"

"I reply. I sing. We float together in a song of joy. Is he my lost connection. I can be happy with this butterfly."

"Oh, you're fuckin gone."

"He is my soul mate. My inspiration. I am free when I am with Mr. Butterfly."

Frank just stared.

"I can tell you liked that one." Hal smiled. "So, knowing that my reading is always so . . . good." Another shitty grin flashed across his face. "And that you need the poetry. I brought thirty."

"Thirty!"

"Ready for the next one, Frank?"

"No! Dean! Oh, Dean, you're fuckin dead."

"This one is called . . ." Hal took on a wistful look, "My Pet Rock."

^^^

"El. Please." Frank's voice played in Joe's mind when he reviewed that memory.

"Frank. No. He'll bear." Ellen said.

"No he won't."

"Yes, he will. No, I'm not doing it."

"El, please he's old."

Joe interjected. "And deaf."

"See?" Frank said. "So we're good."

Joe chuckled while staring into the empty examining room off the back of his office. Standing there, getting a file, he had glanced to that room and he thought of Frank.

"Hey, Joe." Jason called as he stepped in.

Snapped from his thoughts, Joe jolted. "Christ. You scared me. I

didn't see you yesterday, I forgot you weren't dead." Finishing his sentence, he turned around to see not only Jason, but a puzzled looking Elliott Ryder. "Christ."

"No. I'm Elliott." Elliott corrected and winked with a smile.

Joe, perturbed stared at him for a second. "Acting the Frank mini me now, aren't we?"

Chuckling, Elliott took a seat. "No, actually, practicing."

"For?" Joe asked.

"Your son has asked if I would participate in his 'get Frank better fast' scheme. So I'm just practicing my part."

Oddly Joe peered at Elliott as he sat down behind his desk. "You don't strike me as the type to get involved in something like this."

"Usually I'm not. But if it helps." Elliott said. "And though fearful that your son will awake and hunt me down like a killer baby, I'll take that risk."

"Speaking of killer babies . . ." Joe interjected. "How's it going?"

"Not well." Elliott responded. "Although I did graduate with honors from the Robbie Slagel school of small predator training. The population increased again today by three."

"You're kidding?" Joe asked.

"Afraid not. I believe . . . I believe they are repopulating." Elliott said serious, then waded for a moment through the silent stares. He laughed. "Kidding."

"Practicing the part again?" Joe questioned.

"Yes."

"Well, since you're doing the 'Frank' thing." Joe said calm. "I'll do the 'Frank's dad' thing." He paused then raised his voice. "Knock it the hell off!" Joe smiled. "That felt good. OK." He exhaled. "Back to the killer babies before we continue. There are more. Any luck getting them?"

"The Frank traps don't want to work for me. Doing rounds I saw a stray one. I tried to shoot it. Embarrassingly, I missed."

Joe raised his eyebrows. "They move fifty-five miles an hour."

"This one faster, he was older. But I shot again, and hit him." Elliott explained.

"If it was older, the bullet wouldn't have penetrated."

"I learned this." Elliott held up a finger. "That was something Robbie didn't teach me. So, I gassed it."

"Only knocks them out." Joe said.

"Yet, another thing I wasn't told. I went to retrieve the carcass. It awoke."

Jason interjected. "Have you played around with the feed catapult?"

"Yes." Elliott replied. "I even placed a small timed explosive device on a rabbit, thinking they'd eat it and, well . . ."

"Christ." Joe stared at Elliott. "You're taking this Frank thing way too serious. That's demented. Did it work?"

Jason shook his head. "Won't. They smell explosives as if it were a foul stench."

Elliott nodded. "And they never touched the snack. Another thing I didn't learn. But I'll get them. I'm determined."

"Good for you." Joe spoke. "Now onward. Jason, I won't keep you I know you have to get to the clinic. And on that, will you be checking on Frank?"

"No." Jason shook his head. "I will avoid Frank, and I would like very much for my name not to be mentioned at all in the room. It's a theory I'm testing."

Confused, Joe looked at him. "A theory?"

"Yes, and I'd rather test it after Frank is out of the Salicain, because if I'm correct." Jason snickered. "The results should be quite amusing."

"I'll go with that. Now . . ." Joe leaned back in his chair. "The reason you both are here. Jason. Without beating around the bush, you're off council."

"OK." Jason shrugged. "Why?"

"I need a judge. Not . . . not to say Grace is easily replaced. She isn't. She established a lot of groundwork, but it needs continued. Carol said things are backing up at the courthouse. So, you're it, you're fair. You're Judge Jason."

A smirk crossed Jason's face. "I'll serve with honors."

"I'm sure you will. And . . ." Joe looked at Elliott. "You're on council. You'll be third member representing Bowman and Beginnings. That's it."

"Council?" Elliott asked. "Will the Captain be all right with this."

"Ask me if I give a shit what the captain thinks. I don't. I'm his father. Leader of Beginnings or not, I overrule him in everything."

"Joe." Jason spoke seriously. "You do know. With me on the bench now, I can handle Ellen's sentence. I can even suspend it indefinitely."

Elliott grinned. "Would you do that?"

Joe answered for Jason. "No. He could. He would. He won't."

"Pardon me, Mr. Slagel." Elliott interrupted. "But this is your daughter."

"I know this. And more than anything I would love for that to

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happen. But unfortunately, Ellen has already come to me. She fully intends on and needs to serve this punishment. So it will be done.” Joe let out a sad breath. “In about three weeks, Ellen goes.”

^^^

A soft snuffle and a dab of a tear from his eye preluded Ben from Fabrics, tearful words. “Oh, Frank, it was brutal.” He whimpered. “Just brutal. And I’m telling you this because you are the big . . . and may I say, sexy, head of security guy.”

“Fuck.”

“You would have handled this in my defense I know this. Gotten rid of the beast.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh, Frank. I’m having nightmares. In fact, I am certain I will have nightmares for centuries to come. He lunged at me. He had this beastly look in his eyes. Maddening, yet attractive in a way. He took hold of me and tossed me to the floor.”

“Why do I get the feeling he is talking about Dean.”

“I asked for him to stop. Begged him. Dean, stop.”

“He is. Fuck.”

“He didn’t.” Ben continued. “Unable to move, fearful for my life, I watched him leap for my unsuspecting body.”

“God, please stop.”

“He landed on me. Grabbing me. I felt a twinge of his erection in his pants.”

“Uh!” Frank screamed. *“Knock it off.”*

“I swore he was gonna take me right then. He wanted me I could tell.”

“Dean is fuckin sick. I am talking to him about this shit.”

“Knock-knock.” Andrea’s chipper voice entered the room.

“Thank fuckin God.” Frank breathed out, or at least he thought he did.

“Mr. From-Fabrics, would you mind if I were alone with Frank?”

“No. Not at all.” Ben stood up. “Frank, I’ll stop by later with another lovely story. Be well.” He leaned down and kissed Frank.

“Uh! Did he just kiss me?”

“Aren’t you sweet.” Andrea giggled. “Frank has found a futomara in you.”

“Oh, you’re encouraging him. Andrea, I don’t need another guy having a crush on

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me. Henry and Dean are bad enough."

"Have a good day!" Andrea sang and walked to the bed.

"*At least you got rid of him.*" Frank complained. "*Now I can have some rest.*"

"How are you, sweetheart. You look so handsome today."

"*I am.*"

Smiling, Andrea pulled up a chair.

"*What? You're sitting? I thought you were doing the doctor thing.*"

"Ah." She sighed out. "Time to relax and, since you are the Christian man . . ." She held up the bible to Frank's view. "We'll read. Let's start with the book of Corinthians, shall we?"

Frank just closed his eyes.

^^^

It sounded to Joe as if he had walked into an episode of 'Happy Days.' The sock hop music blared at him the second Dan from security buzzed him in.

'Let's twist again, like we did last summer . . .'

"Christ." Joe grumbled, listening to the music and Ellen sounding like a bad Richard Simmons wannabe.

"Let's twist again . . .'

"Come on. Hands up. One and two. That's it and turn." Ellen called out.

Joe knew what he would see when he walked into the skills room, the place the sound traveled from. Folder in hand he stood in the doorway watching twelve of the twenty non-survivor residents, in a line up, twisting with Ellen in the lead.

She was in her own world, Ellen was. Hands waving, getting the residents to do a really bad replica of the twist in synch, with some sort of hand motions that didn't go.

"Everyone, big spin . . ." As Ellen turned she stopped mid pivot when she spotted Joe. When she froze, so did the line up. "Hey, Joe."

"Hey Joe!" They all shouted.

"No." Ellen turned back to them. "Um . . . Davis." She looked to one of the people sitting in a chair watching. "Can you take over. Watch the wide arms swings, they're hitting each other." Catching her breath, she walked over to Joe. "What's up?"

"Can we go to your office?" Joe asked with a motion of his head.

"Am I in trouble?"

"No."

"OK then." Ellen shrugged.

"New exercise?"

"No. Recital." Ellen followed Joe.

In front of her office door, Joe stopped. "Recital, as in dance recital?"

"Well, more like a review show we hoped to have completed by Christmas. Didn't it put you in the spirit?"

"Of what?" Joe asked crass.

"Christmas. This is all Blake, you know. I'm just picking his back up dancers. Will you come?"

"To what?"

"The recital."

"Christ, Ellen " Joe griped and walked in sitting behind her desk. "You're getting as goddamn looney as the containment residents."

"Joe, please." Ellen pulled up a chair. "We don't call them looney. We call them reality challenged."

Joe just stared for a moment. "Are you doing anything to get these people back into reality?"

"Oh sure."

"Oh . . . sure." Joe nodded. "Oh, sure, like what?"

"Oh, sure like therapy, drugs. Won't work. At least for some of them. They're pretty much, you know . . ." Ellen whistled. "Gone. But they're fun."

"Glad to hear that. Now see this folder, this is why I'm here, Missy Jane."

"I thought you said I wasn't in trouble." Ellen said.

"I did. Why would you think you were?"

"You called me Missy Jane. And that's a dead give a way. So . . ." Ellen stood up. "If I'm in trouble, I'd rather be practicing the dance recital."

"Ellen. Sit." Joe pointed to the chair. "Now."

Ellen did.

"First . . ." He opened the folder and pulled out a stack of papers. "Reqs. There are forty-seven requisitions you turned into mechanics, and to me, over the last ten days. Various items, like . . .an addition to containment."

"We need that."

"I see for the . . ." Joe peered at the paper. "Private quarters for the long term residents."

"Privacy is important."

"Four computers."

"Rehab."

"Carpet." Joe lifted another req.

"Warmth." Ellen nodded.

"In the bathroom?"

"Well, Joe, it's cold in there."

"How about this other copy machine."

"Blame my brother." Ellen held up her hand. "Bub the lobotomized savage and the others are used to taking self portraits and the copy machine we have is slow."

"These are all stupid, Ellen." Joe neatly gathered the reqs into one pile.

"I feel they are all important."

"I'm sure you do." Joe held up the stack. "See these."

"Yes."

"Watch." Joe tossed them in the trash. "Denied."

"Hey!" Ellen snapped. "That's mean. I'm trying to make things comfortable in here."

"And I'm trying to keep things simple." Joe stated. "This isn't a goddamn hotel. Now, granted, some of these people, I agree can never function normally, in or out of Beginnings. But there are some, Ellen, that should be out. We have a town moving up. We can use the workers."

"Joe. All of these people are still under therapy."

"Ellen, I don't think you want some of these people out."

"Joe, that is so untrue. I'm working with them."

"Yes, you are. But you also play with them. They aren't toys. Some of these people should not be in here."

"Name one." Ellen told him.

"What about Davis?" Joe questioned. "He's been in here six months."

"He has issues."

"He's diagnosed Obsessive Compulsive." Joe said.

"True. But containment has never been so clean."

Grumbling, Joe stood up. "He gets out tomorrow."

"What's with your mood, Joe? You're making this aggravated noise."

"Grumbling, Ellen. I always grumble. It's my nature, you know this. I'm in a bad mood. In fact, I've been in a bad mood for eight years."

"Don't I know that." Ellen mumbled then saw Joe look at her. "Huh?"

Joe just shook his head. "I'm out of here. And . . .one more thing." Joe walked to the door. "Who's in charge of security?"

"Frank. But Elliott right now."

"So, Elliott has say-so over the guards right now?"

"Of course."

"You agree to this?"

Ellen snickered. "I just said that."

"Good." Joe nodded. "Then don't let me hear again from your new containment worker that security won't let him in here. Under your orders."

"But, Joe. You won't say who it is and I'm scared it's Ben from fabrics. He hates me now. Do you know he's running around making up rumors about Dean?"

"Ellen, I don't give a rats ass. You need a worker in here. A replacement, like it or not while you take you leave. Hard as that sounds, it has to be done. And it's not Ben."

"Who then?"

"Don't worry about." Joe started to leave. "They'll be here in ten minutes. And be nice." Joe ordered. "Train them correctly."

Ellen, arms folded watched Joe leave. There were two things about the replacement that bothered her. One, she didn't know who it was, and the second, it was a replacement. For her. Another total reiteration of a situation forthcoming, that no matter how hard she tried not to show it, it was breaking Ellen's heart.

^^^

"Skippy." Sloppily, Josephine called out from the doorway of the lab.

Back facing her, Dean let his eyes flutter when he lifted his head. "What can I help you with."

"You can start by not making me face that lame skinny ass of yours."

Letting out a breath, Dean slowly turned around and placed on a pleasant look. He saw her sway some. "Josephine, have you been drinking?"

"Yes. I had a few . . ." She hiccupped. "Maybe more. Why?"

After thinking, 'a few, maybe more?' Dean slowly walked toward her with a concerned tone. "Don't you think . . . don't you think it's a bit early in the day to be drinking?"

"Christ Almighty Skippy, no wonder your father never liked you."

"What?" Dean shook his head in shock.

"Who the hell died and made you my sixth husband. That's probably why I never liked you, you know. Asshole. I feel sorry for Ellen. And you people ask why she's out screwing around with the Hot Latino Horse

soldier. I would. Choose between you and goddamn dumb Frank . . .” Josephine smiled. “Speaking of Frank.”

After allowing his head to stop spinning, Dean remained relatively calm. “What about him.”

“Is it true you gave him some drug. That even though he can see, hear and think, he can’t move a muscle or talk.”

“Yes. Why?”

“Just double checking Hal’s word. That’s all I wanted to know.”

Getting ready to question further, Dean didn’t get the chance. Josephine was gone.

In a quick pace that made her look like a billiard ball bouncing off the walls, Josephine made her way to Frank’s room. She knocked once, placed on her best smile and walked to his bed. Frank’s eyes were closed and she poked his leg.

Nothing.

Grinning again, Josephine cleared her throat.

Frank opened his eyes. “*Oh, my God. What!*”

“Hi ya’ Frankie.” Josephine winked. “For all those times you harassed me at the bar. For all those things you said to me. I got a gift for you.” Without hesitation, Josephine stepped closer to the bed, grabbed the ends of her sweater, and whipped it open exposing her aged, bare skinned floppy breasts.

“*Help! Help! Uh!*” Frank screamed. But it didn’t do any good. The torment had begun. It wasn’t going to end quickly and Frank knew it when, in what seemed like a taunting, agonizing long torture session, Josephine, for Frank’s visual benefit, began to fondle herself.

^^^

Ellen’s laugh was sadistic. Shaking her head, carrying her schedule clipboard, she walked from the skills room to her office. “Thank *God*, my day here is done.”

“Ellen.” Richie walked behind her.

“Hmm.” She stopped and pulled on her ear. “Do I hear something?”

“Why are you being like this?” Richie asked. “Is it because Joe gave me the Containment position.”

“Wonder where my assistant was today. Gee, Robbie will be here.

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Hopefully he can train . . ." Ellen spun around facing Richie. "Him." She set the schedule down.

"I don't understand." Richie tossed his hands up. "I may have been under that drug, Ellen, but I remember. You were nice to me in here when I was a resident."

"Exactly." Ellen nodded. "Now, you're normal, wear a UWA uniform. I am officially allowed to not speak to you. So there. I will though, eventually when you pay me back my thirty-six hundred dollars plus interest."

Richie gasped. "You're still pissed about that."

"I remember, Richie . . . I remember that day, you told me, no matter what you would pay me back. Fifteen years. Fifteen years ago."

"And over half of that the world's been dead."

"Still." Ellen folded her arms.

"Still? Still? Ok." Richie nodded. "How about this. How about I pull a Danny Dollar transfer as payment. Will that work?"

"Steady at, say, twenty a week."

"Fine." Richie agreed. "I'm you're only family who survived, do you realize how absurd it is of you to ignore me."

"You're missing the point of the money issue." Ellen said, "It's not the money. It was a matter of trust. You broke that."

"And now we've fixed it. And speaking of fixing . . ." He pointed to the copy machine.

Ellen looked. "Oh, Henry. Didn't see you there."

Richie rolled his eyes. "It's a six by six office, how did we miss him."

"I'm slick like that." Henry stood up. "El, I can't find anything wrong with this copy machine."

Puzzled, Ellen looked. "I didn't say there was."

"No, Frank did." Henry replied. "He filled out a req a while ago and since it was deemed less important, we just got to it. But . . . I took the whole thing apart. I couldn't find anything wrong."

"What did he req it for?" Ellen asked.

"He said it kept losing count."

Ellen took a short pause so as not to laugh. "He's right. I was here when he had trouble with it. Oh, well. If it works now. Don't worry about it."

"Good." Henry exhaled. "I really didn't want to waste anymore time on it. I have . . ." He looked at his watch. "I have to go visit Frank. It's almost my time."

“Oh! Me too.” Ellen smiled.

Curiously, Richie shifted his eyes from Henry to Ellen. “There are visiting schedule times for Frank? I was gonna visit him, who do I see to schedule a time.”

Ellen answered, “Hal.”

“Hal?” Richie asked. “Why, Hal, not Dean?”

Henry interjected. “Because Dean is being possessive with Frank. Keeping everyone away. Hal thinks his brother should have visitors. Dean wants to hog Frank to himself. If you ask me El, I think a little weird thing developed between them two.”

Ellen giggled. “No it did not. Dean’s just being over protective for some obscure reason.”

“There.” Henry held out his hand. “There you have it. All those years they hated each other. And what? They move in together, look now. Also . . . also, what about Ben from fabrics. He said Dean hit on him.”

Richie had to laugh. “Ellen, you aren’t believing any of this, are you.”

Ellen snapped a view to Richie. “Shut up. Who asked you. If I’m not mistaken, you are in training around here.”

“I’m your brother. Forget it.” Richie exclaimed. “And to think I was gonna offer to go with you when they ousted you.”

“You?” Ellen laughed. “You? Oh, yeah, right. Oh, I’ll be protected.”

“I’ll have you know, I trained as a society soldier.”

“Let me let you in on a little secret, Dick.” Ellen leaned into him. “I wouldn’t let that info out around here.” She winked. “People around here tend to kill those associated with the society.”

Richie raised an eyebrow. “You would know.”

Henry heaved in the air of his offense. “That wasn’t very nice, Richie. Your sister didn’t mean to shoot Bev in the head. Besides, El, I would like to go with you.”

A loud burst of laughter left Richie. “You? What will you do if there’s trouble? Bitch the person away?”

Henry snarled. “I can see someone has been hanging around Dean just way too much.”

“I like Dean.” Richie came back.

“You would.” Henry nodded.

The simple knock on the small office door, silenced the trio. Robbie stood there. He wasn’t his usual upbeat self. “I would step inside, but I don’t think there’s room.”

“I’m leaving anyhow.” Henry grabbed his tool box. “It’s my Frank

slot. Good luck working with him, Robbie.” Pointing at Richie, Henry walked out.

Robbie stepped in. “Sorry I’m late.”

“That’s OK.” After looking at her watch, Ellen lifted her schedules. “I got everything ready for you. Oh, and courtesy of Joe, meet the new containment assistant.”

“Hey.” Robbie smiled. “You’re the one? Cool.”

“See?” Richie nodded. “Someone is happy about my employment here.”

“That’s only because I’ll make you do my work.” Robbie said. “Starting now, I just brought the lunch in for the residents. You can go gather them. It’s noodles today. You remember ‘noodle day’ don’t you Rich.”

“Amongst other things you tortured me with. And I’ll do it. But only because I like you.” Richie grumbled and walked out.

Ellen shook her head. “He just isn’t fun anymore, is he.” She noticed Robbie’s demeanor. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Well. I’m just, you know, last night put me down a little.” Robbie shrugged. “I’ll be fine. Maybe the motivating Frank thing Hal has in action will perk me back up.”

“I’m sure it will.” Ellen spoke softly and compassionately laid her hand on Robbie’s cheek. “But if you need to talk.”

With a nod, Robbie grabbed her hand, slid it to his mouth and after kissing it quick, he cupped it. “Thanks. I’d better go help Richie.”

“And I’d better head over to the clinic.”

Releasing Ellen’s hand with an exhale, Robbie stepped back. “Oh, one more thing.” He spoke as if he had to reach hard inside for enough volume for his words. “It’s not gonna mean much with me, but . . . I heard Henry and Richie. With you leaving soon, just realize I would go. I want to go with you. And I want you to know, even with this . . .” He gave a motion of his head to his missing arm. “I would do my best to protect you, and if nothing else, I’d be great company.” Robbie gave a sad smile. “Going with you . . . It’s not an act of chivalry, or looking cool, or family obligation with me. It’s just because I love ya, El.” Once more he gave that saddened boyish smile, and with a tap on the archway, Robbie walked out.

Robbie’s words spoke his pain, and they magnified with Ellen’s own. To Ellen he not only left the room, but he bequeathed an ache that left her speechless.



“Yes, Captain.” Elliott Ryder spoke on the cell phone right outside the clinic.

“Dean will be the best first judge.” Hal said. “You know what to do.”

“Yes.”

“Good luck. I’m counting on you.”

Elliott gave a nod Hal couldn’t see, and after disconnecting the call, and ignoring the odd glance he received from Andrea in his passing of her, he walked into the clinic.

Steady. Steady. Steady.

Dean reiterated the words in a calming manner in his mind. The drops had to be perfect. Not a smidgen more or less. Hands not twitching an inch, Dean dipped the dropper in the beaker he held.

Steady. Steady. Steady . . .

It was loud. It was blunt. But more than that, it was all too frighteningly familiar.

“Dean!”

Crash!

Dean froze, staring at the back wall. “No.” He whispered out. “I’m not that good to heal . . .” He turned around and no words, just a short peep, escaped him in shock when he saw Elliott.

“Dean.” Elliott spoke so unlike himself. Gone was the smooth edge, his voice was raspy, deep. He stood with an arrogant lean, hand on hip. “Things are supposed to stay in your fuckin hands.”

“El . . . El . . .” Dean blinked. The goatee. The short, flattened black hair, white tee shirt, fatigues four gas cans around his waist and he wore that stupid hunting knife strapped to his thigh.

Elliott pivoted, looking behind him to his left and right, his combat boots squeaked with every turn. “What?”

“You look like Frank.”

“I do.”

“That is amazing.” Dean stepped to him.

“I am.”

Loud, Dean laughed. “Hal’s plan?”

“Fuckin Hal.” Elliott shook his head. “I’m going to see, Frank.” He pointed back with his thumb. “Is that OK?”

“Um, yeah. Sure. Oh, hey, Elliott. Wait.”

Elliott stopped with another squeak of his boots. “Yeah?”

“Let me watch you walk.” Dean hurried to the door.

“Just don’t stare at my butt.” Elliott gave a wink and headed out.

Leaning against the archway, arms crossed and totally amused, Dean watched Elliott. He had it. He pegged it, that walk that only Frank did. Dean had to admit to himself, he really enjoyed watching it. Loud, strong, egotistical, Elliott strutted down the hall. And Dean couldn’t help but laugh out loud, when just before turning the bend, Elliott stopped, and in such Frank fashion, looked back, glanced down to his own rear, shook his head then continued on.

Frank was grateful for the upper positioning of his bed. At least when he opened his eyes he didn’t have to strain to see who was by him, and he didn’t have to look at the ceiling. However, his newest view drove him insane and there was nothing he could do about it except close his eyes.

It made him want to kill Hal, because he knew it was all his brother’s doing. It made him want to kill Dean because he placed him under the salicain. Those were two of the people Frank had mentally placed on his growing ‘people to kill list’ for when he came out of the Salicain. Thinking of that list was something that filled Frank with a sense of pleasantry. But the pleasant thought of that list was short lived.

The poster.

Hal had placed a poster on the wall directly in Frank’s line of view. If Frank had to stare at a blonde with long flowing hair, why did it have to be Olivia Newton John in her virgin years. She looked pretty hot when she turned into the bad girl, in that one movie about being slick. But the poster only reminded him of all the songs she sang that he hated.

Then Bam.

It hit Frank right then and there why Hal had taken on the look he did.

Hal had a slightly demented obsession and kindling with Olivia. Both had long blonde hair, both were virgins late in life. Only Olivia gave it up long before Hal did. Actually, Frank was still convinced Hal may never have given it up. Perhaps he was waiting on Olivia.

Chuckling at his own thoughts of a Hal intimate bathroom moment thinking of Olivia, Frank lost his inner smile when Elliott Ryder walked into the room.

“Fuck.”

“Fuck.” The word rolled with a Frank imitation from Elliott’s mouth when he looked at the poster.

Frank watched Elliott. There was something about him that looked different, even vaguely familiar and he couldn’t put his finger on it.

“Man,” Elliott pointed to the poster. “Olivia Newton John? Fuckin Hal, that had to be fuckin Hal. You know he probably fantasizes about her. I hated her songs.”

What was it? There was definitely something comforting about Elliott.

Elliott walked to the bed. “Hey, Frank. Just stopped in to say hi. Been filling in for you. Chasing fuckin killer babies. Or shall I say, small predators.”

Elliott sounded a little different. Tough, perhaps.

“What a fuckin blast.” Elliott smiled.

Frank almost had it, it was right on the tip of his tongue.

“Everyone’s been calling me a mini you. Of course, I’m not that much smaller than you.”

What was it. Frank dove into deeper thought.

“Fuckin Dean, I went in to check to see if it was OK to come in here. Dropped everything,” Elliott laughed. “Of course, I did this . . .” Loud, Elliott yelled out. “Dean!”

Frank blinked. *“That sounds like that I do.”*

“Then I kind of scared him cause of how I look. I have to tell you, it’s great being you.”

“It would be . . . Uh!” Frank got it. *“That’s it. Uh! You sound like me! No. Wait. Uh! You look just like me!”* he calmed down some. *“Whoa. Wait. Hmm. Now that’s a handsome guy.”* In his mind he laughed. *“This is pretty good. Finally Sgt. Fuckin Ryder comes to his senses and makes a good fashion choice.”*

“Being you has its perks.”

“It would.”

“Got a SUT today.”

“No shit. Fuck, I missed it.”

“Was chasing killer babies. No luck.”

“Did you try luring them with Journey songs?”

“Maybe tomorrow I’ll try luring them with Journey songs.”

“Ha!” If Frank’s smile could be seen it would have. *“There’s those telepathic powers of persuasion. Man, I could be the next ultimate weapon. Frank Slagel, master manipulator.”*

“And then . . .”

“Elliott?” Ellen called out pleasantly and with such surprise, almost

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too much surprise when she walked in the room.

"El." Elliott spoke it like Frank.

"El?" Frank questioned. *"When do you call her . . . oh, I get it. You're being me."*

"Oh, wow." Ellen spoke in awe.

Frank watched. *"El? Hello? I'm right here."*

"You look incredible." Ellen wisped out.

Frank grumbled. *"Hello!"*

"I do." Elliott came back.

Ellen snickered. "It's like, if you'll forgive me, it's like having Frank right here."

"I am!" Frank blasted. *"I'm right fuckin here. Turn your head. Hello!"*

"Wow." Ellen walked more to Elliott. "So handsome. Say my name like him again."

"El."

"*Uh!*" Frank screamed when he watched Ellen giggle immaturity. *"Oh, this is nothing. He can't say it like me."*

"You know, Elliott. Having this moment alone with you." Ellen whispered.

"You're not alone, El!"

"You actually have me . . ." She dropped her voice even lower. "A little turned on."

Elliott grinned.

"Oh, get that fuckin look off your face Ryder. Right fuckin now. Where's Dean. He has to see this shit. Dean! He's moving in on our wife."

"It's been . . ." Ellen's hand crept up Elliott's chest. "So long since I have had Frank . . . and. Feel how firm this chest is. I wonder if you kiss like Frank."

"No!" Frank yelled unheard. *"Ryder, you fuckin touch her, you're a dead man when I get out of this bed."*

Elliott smiled. "Would it be right if I kissed you."

"No. No it wouldn't. Thank you. The chivalrous calvary wanna be soldier arrives."

"Sure, we're alone."

"No, you're fuckin not!"

In such Frank mannerisms, Elliott but his bottom lip, raised his eyebrows and smiled that ornery smile.

"Hey!" Frank grew worse. *"That's my look."*

Ellen smiled. "That is such a Frank look." She moved even closer

against Elliott, pressing to him in Frank's plain view.

"Read my mind now, Ryder. Read it now. Touch her you're dead."

"Do that look again." Ellen whispered. "Then kiss me like Frank would. Can you kiss me like Frank would?"

"Nah." Elliott shook his head.

"That's a fuckin fact." Frank said.

"I'll kiss you better." Elliott bit his bottom lips again with that smile, then with a rigidity, swept his hand up Ellen's back, cupping the back of her head and bringing her up and to him. His mouth only touched briefly to hers before it widened in a long enduring kiss.

"Uh!" Frank's eyes bulged. *"What the fuck is this shit . . . Ryder, get you hand off her ass, right now. Dean!"*

Exhaling with a moan, Ellen fanned herself dramatically as she stubbled to catch her footing post kiss. "Wow. Whew. Thanks. Too bad Dean has me boggled down or I'd suggest we find a clinic room. Frank and I used to . . . never mind." She giggled and gave a fling of her hand. "Walk me back to the lab."

"Absolutely." Elliott nodded, grabbed Ellen's hand and started to leave. He paused with a squeal of his boot, looked back at Frank and wink. "See ya, Frank."

"Oh!" Ellen, laughing poked her head back. "Hey, Frank. Sorry didn't see you there." With a 'nice poster' comment, bubbly Ellen left with Elliott.

Upon their exit, Frank made a mental note, adding Elliott Ryder to his 'people to kill list' after he emerged from the Salicain.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

“Seven stitches?” Steward asked George with almost a chuckle.

“Yes, go on, laugh you asshole.” George touched upon his bandaged forehead. “A vase. And it didn’t even break. Sailed it at me top speed. Christ.” He lowered into his chair in this livingroom.

“I warned you there was disruption at the house.”

“Then why didn’t you get hit with the vase?”

Steward shrugged. “It . . . likes me.”

George mocked him. “It likes me.”

“Sir, is all seriousness. Something’s up there.”

“It is just being it.”

“No.” Steward shook his head. “Just call it a hunch, OK? Something is going on. I saw three soldiers leaving that house today. They weren’t ordered there. They looked, I don’t know, guilty.”

“Maybe it’s a sexual thing.”

“The thought of that doesn’t bother you?” Steward asked.

“Hell no. Out of my hair, so to speak. Goddamn it my head hurts.” George said disgruntled. “Just . . . just keep a trusted eye on it.”

“Got it. And . . . all those applicants I gave you for Sgt. Doyle’s replacement?”

“I didn’t review.”

“No need to.” Steward handed him a folder. “I have our man. Or shall I say, woman.”

“What!” George stood up, grabbed his head and moaned. “A woman? Stew, we have no viable women who think. You know as well as I do.”

“Down south we do.”

“The ones down south are for standard repopulating, those are the ones we didn’t ship to the northern fertility breeding facilities. All other viable thinking women are in the science field.”

“Not this one. Take a look.”

George opened the folder. “Been hitting the bottle Stew? Sgt. Bert Callahan?”

“Former Lt. Colonel, United States Marine Corp.”

“OK. The name is Bert. I’ve been dealing with Callahan for a while.

Why wasn't he on the original candidate review list."

"Refused. Didn't want it. The prime choice, who you won't consider . . ."

"For obvious reasons." George rolled his eyes. "He's my ace, which he doesn't know."

"Good thing he is so good natured, or anyone else deserving of Doyle's position would be upset. But James was . . ."

"Get to your point."

"Fine. He recommended her."

"Him."

"Her." Steward corrected. "As you so much had stated, no one up here gets too personal with anyone down there. Keep it that way. We never got personal with her. We spoke to Callahan through Callahan's aid. Bert is actually Bertha. Mid folder, take a look."

Flipping through pages, George stopped and whistled. "Did we think she was a man at first?"

"Most likely yes."

"Beast of a woman." George sat back down. "Christ, she frightens me."

"Loads of experience, has done very well with mid region. Shall I bring her up here."

"Yes. Get her up here ASAP, let me meet with her. If for nothing else, perhaps, *she* can handle *it*." Taking another look at the photo, George shuddered then smiled.

^^^

"I'm working with Majestic now." Phone wedged between her shoulder and ear, Ellen squatted on the cryo lab floor.

"How's she doing?" Dean asked speaking on the other line.

"Good. Staying between the lines. Hold on . . ." Ellen softened and sweetened her voice speaking to the baby rabbit. "Come on, you can do it." She snapped her finger. "Dean, she does see me though. I can tell."

"Good. Just stay at the finish line. You're timing her, right?"

"Yep. I figured it was something to do while waiting on Elliott's test results."

"Thanks for doing that." Dean said. "Get me the results as soon as you can. And let's keep our fingers crossed that there isn't an increase."

"A decrease would be nice."

"A decrease would be beautiful. But, we won't see one until we blast him again. Hope for a steady result and we're successful."

"Fingers crossed." Ellen facially beckoned the rabbit who moved slow.

"So when do you think I'll see you today?" Dean asked.

"Quality time, brief conversation, or work."

"Quality."

"Not until I get home. Which won't be until after five."

"How about I try to get home before seven."

Ellen laughed. "Yeah, right. You? You're always working."

"You too."

"Not like you." Ellen looked up when she heard the single beep. "I have to run the results the second time." She grunted when she stood up. "Ow, my knees, I'm getting old." Limping she walked to the computer. "Half way there, and . . . so is Majestic."

"Half way to the computer?"

"No." She laughed. "Through the results." She clicked on the keyboard. "All right, so back to quality time. When? Last night you were pretty down."

"You got mad at me."

"You laughed while we were trying to have sex."

The flashback of what caused Dean to laugh the night before, caused him to chuckle over the phone.

"You're doing it again." Ellen said.

"I'm sorry. I'll tell you what? If I'm not done, I'll just bring home what I can work at in my office there. We'll get some quality time."

"Sounds good." Ellen walked back to Majestic. "Now back to work. Dean? You don't think we're getting too routine that we don't notice each other do you?"

"What?" Dean asked with a laugh. "Why would you say that?"

"Because our life revolves around work. Everything. Are we too routine?"

"Ellen, that's just marriage. I'll talk to you in a bit."

"Bye." Ellen hung up the call and set the phone on the floor. She stared at Majestic and snapped her fingers to call the rabbit. "What do you think? Should marriage be routine?"

"No." The male voice responded.

Ellen looked quickly at the rabbit, then around. "Oh." she snickered at her confusion. "Elliott."

"I heard the voice." Elliott walked closer. "I didn't mean to intrude on

your conversation with . . ." He froze. "Ellen."

"Yes?"

"Is that a rabbit?"

"Yes. Dean and I are timing her progress in walking a distance and seeing a finish line. She sees it and is moving well."

"Ellen, that rabbit has one eye and three legs."

"That's why we're timing her." Ellen moved to the rabbit and lifted her. "But I give up." She stood and grunted. "It's taking too long."

"Birth defect?"

"Um, yeah, sure. You can say that." Ellen replaced the rabbit in the cage then grabbed her phone off of the floor. "We tried this growth thing on her. Accelerator. We're using the same sort of concoction on Frank's gunshot wound. But don't tell him about the rabbit. We don't think anything will happen to him. And we don't want him worried."

"I should hope not." Elliott shook his head in amazement.

"So . . . you said 'no'."

"Excuse me?"

"You said No. Marriage shouldn't be routine. Is that what you think?"

"I think many marriages get routine, but because most couples are, doesn't mean it should be. Does that makes sense?"

"Kind of. I've been married three times. And I wasn't routine with Frank. He's the only one."

"Ellen, on the Frank subject. About today . . ."

"You looked so good." Ellen smiled. "And the kiss . . ."

"That's the topic." Elliott ran his hand down his face. "I'm embarrassed. I feel as if I took advantage of the situation."

"Don't be absurd. How did you take advantage of the situation." A long strand of beeps caught Ellen's attention and she moved to her computer. "Actually, I really enjoyed the . . ."

Elliott waited. "Kiss?"

"Huh?" Ellen slowly turned her view from the computer to Elliott.

"You didn't finish your sentence."

"Um . . ." Away from Elliott she looked and back to the computer screen. "This can't be right. No way." Ellen spoke dazed.

"What is it?"

"Your test results." She sat down and began to work on the computer.

"From my recent biopsy?"

"Yeah." Ellen shook her head. "No way, this can't be right." She grabbed her phone.

Elliott's heart dropped. "What's wrong."

"I'd rather not say. Not until I speak to Dean."

"Ellen." Concerned laced his words, as Elliott walked nearer to her. "What is it."

"Please don't put stock into this. I may have screwed up, there might of been an error . . ."

"Oh my God." Elliott whispered out.

"In fact, can we wait. I'd rather not say . . ."

"Ellen. What . . . what does it say?"

"It says . . ." Ellen, phone in hand, turned her chair some. "If this is correct, and there is no error, Elliott, its says . . ." Ellen smiled. "You're in remission."

^^^

The joy of the prospect was overshadowed by Dean's anger with Ellen for opening her mouth to Elliott. How misleading. How devastating it would be to him if Elliott found out human error gave him false hope.

He only hoped that the rational and logical side of Elliott Ryder would emerge before the wishful thinking side did. Plans for an early evening were thwarted. Dean called Elliott in for an biopsy of his lymph nodes. An immediate second testing was warranted and in Dean's mind, the humane thing to do for Elliott Ryder was to confirm or deny Ellen's results.

It wouldn't take too long, if Elliott came right up from the cryo. Dean started gathering the biopsy necessities in his lab right away.

"Dean?" Andrea called in the lab. "I know you're busy."

"Yeah, I am."

"Dr. Blue has the flu." Andrea paused and giggled. "Sorry. Anyhow, he's ill. And a few of his patients have come here. I have that knee surgery in twenty minutes. Can you do a quick suture for me?"

"Andrea I . . ."

"Please?" She asked. "Can you be a futomara and do that?"

Dean cringed. "Fine."

"Thank you. Room two. Probably four stitches." Andrea smiled and hurried away.

"Great." Dean mumbled. "Shouldn't take long." He moved in haste across his lab to the cabinet where they kept the suture kits. Grabbing one, and turning at the same time, he stopped when he saw Elliott.

"Dr. Hayes."

"Elliott." Dean held up the suture kit. "Can I get you to go to room three and wait. I shouldn't be long."

"Sure." Elliott replied.

"Thanks." Dean tried to hurry out.

"Dr. Hayes." Elliott halted him. "Just . . . just in your opinion. Do you think . . ."

"Stop." Dean held up his hand. "My wife is good. She does make mistakes. I'm very upset with her right now for opening her mouth."

"But it is my health."

"And it is your heart that can get broke if these are wrong. I hope to God they aren't. I really hope to God they aren't. But if you really want my opinion, then I have to say they are. Because I'm not that good to throw a latent stage of leukemia into remission."

Elliott nodded slowly and lowered his head.

"I'm sorry."

"No." He held up his hand. "I asked."

"And I'll be with you shortly. OK?" Getting agreement, and shaking the feeling of 'bad' he got from being so blunt, Dean moved to examine room two.

Misha Sabatino. Was the name written on the chart that Dean grabbed when he walked into the examining room. "Sorry." He closed the door, saw the dark haired young woman on the table, and then Jenny, sitting in a chair. "Jenny?" Dean questioned. "Andrea didn't tell me you were here."

"Misha asked that I'd sit with her. She feels uncomfortable with you."

"With me?" Dean questioned pulling a tray close to the table.

"Aside from the fact that you're a man, and she's well, been around . . ." Jenny dropped her voice to a whisper. "Women. We all know your reputation with young attractive women who could be your daughter."

"What?" Dean grabbed Misha's hand. "Oh, good, Andrea cleaned this. This shouldn't take long." he smiled at Misha.

Misha raised her head some. Soft spoken she was, seemingly timid, yet somehow in her dark eyes there was a confidence. "Thank you."

"No need to be afraid of me."

Misha looked at Jenny.

"Really, he is harmless." Jenny stated. "Just a player. I explained that term . . ."

"Jenny." Dean snapped.

“See.” Jenny pointed. “And his son is very rude, so that should say a lot for him. He’s been extremely mean to a man named Henry.”

“Ah, yes.” Misha smiled. “He is Hector’s friend.” She smiled.

Dean smirked with a snicker. “If you can say that.”

“See.” Jenny said strong. “You are so wrong.”

“What?” Dean lifted the sutures. Lightly he tapped upon Misha’s wound. “Can you feel this.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Do you not like Hector? Is that why you left my shop yesterday.”

“No. I like Hector.” Dean answered and began to stitch her hand. “I left the shop because I didn’t see anything I liked.”

“Rude.” Jenny whispered.

“Jenny.” Dean paused in his task and looked at her. “If you can’t be quiet. Leave.”

Jenny gave a ‘see what I mean’ nod to Misha.

A tiny embarrassed giggle left Misha. “So you like Hector? Do you know him well?”

“Not as well as Henry.”

“Dean.” Jenny growled.

“What?” Dean said clueless. “No, I know Hector. Not well. Why?”

“Well, I am, looking to start my own family. I can not do that where I am at.”

“She wants a man.” Jenny interpreted. “She’s doing a vital selection process.”

Dean cringed. “Jenny, I know what she means. And Misha, I know for a fact that Hector is very good with children. Very good. He helps Henry raise his son.”

“So he has a family.” Misha said. “In a sense. That is the child he purchased for. Does he have a woman?”

Dean snickered.

Jenny growled again.

Misha looked confused. “He has had many women in Beginnings.” She said sadly.

“Hector?” Dean asked with a chuckle. “Not Hector.”

Before Dean could say anything, Jenny intervened. “Hector isn’t with any woman, or doesn’t have a history of women in Beginnings. We all like him. In fact, he’s working at the greenhouse. Why don’t we stop by before you leave.”

“That would be forward.” Misha said. “I have no reason.”

"Sure you do." Jenny gave a wave of her hand. "You want a tomato. Everyone stops by for a tomato. It's not out of the ordinary."

Dean, finishing the stitches, shook his head with a smile. "No one stops by out of the blue up there. But I think you should. If you like him."

"I would like to find out if there is interest in him. I have not had the opportunity to do that." Misha said softly. "He seems so nice and is very handsome." Her eyes shifted to Dean's name tag. "Oh." She wisped out. "You are the male Dr. Hayes. Jenny did not tell me. Your wife, she is wonderful. We love her."

"I do too." Dean smiled. "And this is finished. Keep it clean, I wouldn't bandage it. But watch the sutures don't get too wet." He gathered up the supplies.

"It must sadden you to know your wife is leaving. It saddens us."

"Yeah," Dean exhaled. "But I won't let her leave alone. I plan on going with her."

Misha looked puzzled. "But you have children."

"They'll be taken care of."

"And this community you cure?"

Dean scoffed. "I don't care. They take second place to Ellen." He went to the sink to wash up.

"This surprises me. Forgive me, but Dr. Hayes, speaks of you so kindly as a father and doctor. I would think that you, as a man who loves his wife, you would find the suitable companion and protector for your wife, instead of leaving your other responsibilities behind."

"Ouch." Jenny commented. "Misha, Dean just doesn't want some man out there alone with Ellen. He doesn't trust her." She lowered her voice as if to tell a secret. "Meanwhile he's one to talk."

"Jenny." Dean grumbled her name as he dried his hands. "Misha I . . ."

"What of Sgt. Ryder?" Misha asked. "He is very honorable and he is her friend. I am sure if you asked him to respect your marriage he would."

The towel slowly lowered from Dean's hand. "Sgt. Ryder . . . he can't go. And I still . . . I still prefer to be the one." He laid the towel down. "It was nice talking to you. I . . . I have to attend to the honorable Sgt. Ryder right now." Dean flashed a fake smile. Misha had brought forth with a vengeance the thoughts of the testing he had to do on Elliott. And with concern and nervousness, Dean hurriedly left the exam room.

Misha slid from the table. "He left abrupt. I'll apologize for upsetting him."

“You didn’t upset him . . .” Jenny reached for the door. “That’s just Dean. He’s rude.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

"It becomes inconceivable to the advanced mind, but with uninhibited science in Beginnings, the probability is high." Billy said to Elliott who sat on the sofa. "I just wanted to convey that to you. I believe in my father's ability. Keep the faith." He gave a thumbs up.

Elliott blinked in surprise. "Thank you."

"Night Mom. Sgt. Ryder." Billy, like a little Dean, walked from the room.

"How old is he again?" Elliott asked.

"He'll be eight." Ellen answered taking a seat next to Elliott.

"Somehow I feel if I label him only 'smart' he'll be insulted."

"Somehow I think you're right."

Elbows resting on his knees, Elliott stared out, tapping his fingers together. In an antsiness, he stood.

"Elliott. Sit." Ellen pulled him back down. "Pacing won't make the time go any faster."

"What is taking so long. It has been hours."

"Testing. Retesting. I'm . . . I'm sorry."

Elliott looked at her. "For what?"

"For telling you. I was wrong. It was very unethical to deliver such news to you."

"It was pretty unlike me to take it so to heart." Elliott's voice dropped. "However, your husband lowered me from the clouds."

"He was blunt?"

"Yes." Elliott nodded. "Blunt." he rubbed his hands together. His parted lips released the exhale of his nervousness and he felt a shimmer in his stomach when Ellen glided her hand to join his. "Thank you." He squeezed tight. "Why am I so nervous about this. I have never been nervous about any of the results."

"That's because there are probabilities right now, that we never thought possible."

"As much as I fought it, as much as I hid it. For as much as I pretend it doesn't exist. The truth is, Ellen. It's there. I know it." Elliott slowly shifted his eyes to her. "I don't want to die. "

The front door opened.

Did Ellen's heart drop as much as Elliott's? He squeezed tighter to her

hand and tried to act the cool exterior he always portrayed.

Reading Dean. Ellen tried to read Dean when he walked in. He held something behind his back. The test results perhaps. "Dean."

Dean lifted his free hand. "Stay seated."

A lump formed in Elliott's throat. "You finished the results?"

"Yes." Dean nodded and walked before the coffee table. "You know, did you ever notice if you make a friend, the more you hang out with them, the more you pick up their mannerisms, ways of speaking and so forth."

Puzzled, Ellen looked at Elliott then back to Dean. "What does this have to do with Elliott's tests?"

"Pretty much everything." Dean answered very calm and serious. "Deliverance, El. Frank turned out to be my friend. And right now, to sound like Frank would be the best way I can give the results. OK?" He nodded. "Ok. Sounding like Frank . . ." From his back, Dean pulled a bottle of wine and set it on the table with the hugest of grins. "Not that you can have any but . . . I am *so* fuckin cool!" He said with excitement. "You . . . Sgt. Ryder, are in remission."

Ellen had a delayed reaction but only momentarily and she jumped from the couch with a shriek. "You did it?"

"No. *We* did it." Dean nodded with arrogance.

"Elliott?" Ellen turned to him.

Shocked Elliott stood from the couch, then so unlike himself, he too let out a small shriek of enthusiasm and embraced Ellen in his doing so. "Oh, shit." He caught his breath. "I'm in remission." He turned to Dean and extended his hand. "Thank you. I'm in remission."

"You're in remission." Dean said proudly.

"You're right, Dr. Hayes. Unbelievable. You're cool." Elliott stated with exuberance.

Arrogantly, Dean grinned and winked. "I am."

^^^

"I love you . . ." Robbie sang sweetly with emotions. "I honestly . . . love . . ." He pointed to Frank. "You—ooh—ooh."

"*Fuck.*"

"That was my favorite Olivia Newton John song." Robbie grinned. "Should I do it again. How about that, 'Oh, Danny' tune?"

"*No. Go. Don't you have to sleep or something.*"

"I would have come in and played guitar, but . . . you know. That's

impossible.”

“Two hours, Robbie. Two fuckin hours. You can’t sing Olivia for much longer. And missing an arm or not, you go on my people to kill list.”

“Whew.” Robbie let out a long breath. “You know what? I feel like singing that song again. Water.” He lifted a glass from the night stand and took a sip. “Ah. Ready?” He cleared his throat. “I love . . .”

“Robert.” Joe called out from the door.

“Oh, hey, Frank. It’s Dad.” Laying his hand on the side of Frank’s face he moved Frank’s entire head to face the door.

If it was at all possible, Frank felt dizzy. *“Oh, right, make me go on a fuckin hospital bed roller coaster.”*

Joe walked in and to the bed. “Frank. Robbie.”

“Hey, Dad. I’ve been singing.” Robbie said.

“I heard.”

“Frank likes it.”

“I’m sure.” Joe stated, “And fix his head.”

“Whoops.” Robbie turned Frank’s head straight again.

“I’m fuckin killing Dean.”

“Christ, Robert. Take the ribbon out of his hair.”

“*What!*” Frank blasted then cringed when he saw Robbie reach and when his arm came back into view, Frank saw the ribbon.

Joe pulled up a chair. “Enjoying the Hal plan, Robbie?”

“Oh, yeah. It made me feel better.” Robbie sat down as well. “Are you here to torture Frank?”

“Nah.” Joe shook his head. “Hal wants me too. But . . . I, more than anyone know how it feels to be under the Salicain.”

“Yes.” Frank said. “Yes, you do.”

“People come in . . .” Joe continued. “Talk about shit you don’t want to hear.”

“Ain’t that the fuckin truth.”

“And Frank. Frank was the worst.” Joe pointed at him. “He came in everyday and talked about his marital problems with Ellen. Dean this. Ellen that. Yep.” Joe exhaled. “I could very easily drive him nuts right now. Talk. And talk and talk.”

Frank swore he felt his heart sink. *“You talk, Dad. I swear I’ll listen to every word. Every word you say. Talk to me. I don’t care, just talk to me.”*

“So.” Robbie spoke up. “Does this mean you’re not gonna torture him then?”

“Hell no.” Joe replied. “It’s payback time.”

"*Ha!*" Frank scoffed. "*Nothing. Nothing right now you can say, especially you Dad, that will torture me.*"

"And . . ." Joe leaned back in the chair. "I thought I'd share some intimate details of my earlier sex life."

"*Except that.*" Frank closed his eyes.

^^^

"Mine." Hal spoke with a gasp, lowered the shot glass and poured another. "And this . . ." He showed it to Elliott. "Is your's." He raised it higher. "To your health, my friend." He downed the drink.

Elliott smiled. "It is great news, isn't it?"

"No." Hal shook his head. "It is awesome news." Setting down the shot glass, he laid his hands on the table in the empty Hoi-Hoi on the Range. "What a celebration. Whiskey . . . Sushi." He motioned his head to the plate of test sushi before him. "This is the life."

"The sushi does look good."

"Yes." Hal clapped his hands together. "And you and I get to try it. Go on, Elliott. You first."

"Um . . ." Elliott tilted his head. "Why don't you try it. You outrank me."

"That's correct. And as your superior, I order you to try the sushi first."

"Is that ethical?" Elliott questioned.

"Yes." Hal pushed the plate forward. "Go on."

"All right." Using chopsticks, Elliott lifted the tiny maki style sushi and dipped it in the brown substance supposedly, soy sauce. He hesitantly brought it to his mouth.

"Eat."

After a grumble, Elliott did.

"Well?" Hal asked. "Good. Bad. Adequate."

Chewing then swallowing, Elliott nodded. "Not bad."

"Yes." Hal clenched his fist. "There is a God. Sushi has returned and so has my friend's health. I can't tell you how happy this makes me. So what all does this remission entail." Hal grabbed the chopsticks and tried the Sushi. He moaned in his chewing of it. "Excellent."

Elliott chuckled. "It means I can be asymptomatic for a short time, or . . . years."

"Years." Hal wisped out. "And all the worrying and babying you, I did

for nothing.”

“Babying me?” Elliott laughed. “When did you ever baby me.”

“Come now, Elliott, you mean to tell me you don’t think I gave you special treatment.”

“No.”

Hal gasped loudly. “I’m appalled. I gave you hours off. No more favorites. We have you well. Now all we have to have is Frank well. Just need even more motivation to get him up and about.” Across the empty bar, the sound of boots caught Hal’s attention, he turned and then stood with surprise. “Carlson?”

“Captain.” Corporal Carlson, snapped at attention and gave a salute.

“At ease.” Hal still spoke in shock. “I wasn’t expecting you back until next week. Unless . . . Sgt. Ryder, am I mistaken?”

“No, sir.” Elliott shook his head. “Carlson and the other scouts that went southwest were not due back yet.”

Hal hurried and turned back to Carlson. “Was there a problem?”

“Yes.” Carlson nodded. “We lost two of our men.”

“My God.” Hal stumbled back. “It was a scouting exhibition.”

Sadly, Carlson agreed. “We did the best. But I’m afraid we may have erred. We hurried back when the trouble began, There was many of them. They followed us a good bit.”

“They?” Hal asked.

“Yes, sir, they.” Carlson answered. “No matter how cunning we tried to be, we believe they . . . followed our scent.”

“They. Carlson, who are ‘they?’” Hal’s eyes widened when his answer was dropped before him on the table in the form of a bloody spear.

The reaction on Hal’s face was not one Elliott expected.

“Captain?” Elliott questioned.

Almost brightly, and with a twinge of a smile, Hal peered up. “Motivation.”

^^^

“And then . . .” Joe exhaled in his story telling. “My junior year in highschool arrived.” He whistled. “What a year.”

Frank grumbled unheard. “*Robbie, I can’t believe you’re sitting here listening to this. Make him stop. This is sick.*” Then Frank heard it, he couldn’t turn his head, but he knew by the tapping of fashion boots, Hal had arrived. Hal may of been on Frank’s people to kill list, but at least Hal would stop their

father and his childhood sexual experience stories.

"Frank." Hal emerged in quickly with Elliott at his side. "Oh, Dad. Robbie. Glad you're hear."

"That's only because you haven't been hearing his stories. Tell him, Robbie. Oh, swell, look, Fuckin Ryder is here as well."

"Hey, Hal. Elliott." Robbie grinned. "Just in time. Dad's been telling us stories of his sex life. The early years. Did you know he had sex for the first time when he was twelve? Cool huh?"

Hal's eyes widened and he gasped. "Good God, Father and you brag of this?"

"Christ Hal." Joe gave a fling of his hand. "We all can't be thirty-five year old virgins."

Elliott's laugh was silenced quickly when Hal snarled a look his way.

Perturbed, but Hal stayed calm. "I never claimed virginity, I just never boosted promiscuity. None of us boys were promiscuous."

Robbie lifted his hand. "I was."

"No, you weren't." Hal barked.

"Ok. I wasn't." Robbie shrugged. "But Dad was. And he's about to tell us more. Go on Dad."

"No." Hal stopped him. "Spare us."

"Yes!" Frank said in relief. *"Thank you!"*

"Hal." Joe barked. "Don't you have a home, like in New Bowman or something?"

"Yes."

"Go there, will ya. Christ. I'm bonding with my son who finally can't talk back to me." Joe said crass. "So unless you have something important to say, I . . ."

"I do." Hal stepped forward with a smile. "There is a reason I'm here for this late night visit. And Frank, you are gonna love the reason I'm here."

"I doubt that."

"Get well, Big brother. And get well fast. I have incitive for you." With a wide grin, Hal lifted the spear to Frank's view. "The savages are back."

Druga-Marchetti/Divided Blood

AWAKENING AND AWARENESS

CHAPTER NINE

December 16th

The helicopter tilted drastically in its turn and Elliott Ryder lost hold of his pencil. He caught it before it hit the floor and rolled totally out of his reach.

“Just the way I fly.” Robbie grinned from the pilot’s seat. “Wasn’t the lack of an arm thing.”

Elliott smiled. “Didn’t think it was.”

“Have it now?” Robbie questioned.

“Unfortunately.” Elliott replied. “How often now will we check on them.”

“They’re savages. I’d say everyday. Check to see if they moved any.”

“The camp looked pretty permanent.” Elliott commented. “Do you think they’re like the others.”

“I think they were a branch we missed in the wipe out. Oh, wait until Frank finds out.” Robbie shook his head. “He’ll want to come out just to get attacked.”

Elliott looked quickly. “He likes them that much?”

“Killing them yeah. And you have to admit, Elliott. They are a challenge and it isn’t dull. No . . .” Robbie made machine gun mouth noises. “With a M-16.”

“You have a point. I like being able to use my sword.” Elliott spoke near daze as he peered out of the windshield. “There is something about the power of it. The motion of the swing. The knowledge that you are in control. The ejection of . . .” He stopped.

“Body parts?” Robbie asked.

“Well, perhaps.” Elliott smiled slightly. “Three-sixty.”

“What? A turn?”

“No. Miles. That is how many miles from Beginnings the camp is.”

“No shit?” Robbie asked with some enthusiasm. “Whoa, that may qualify for the jet. I have to . . .” Suddenly Robbie stopped speaking.

“What?” Elliott asked. “You’ll have to what?”

“Never mind.” Robbie shook his head. “I was gonna just say I’ll ask my father, But . . . I can’t fly the jet with one arm. I could try, but an

accidental landing may not be real easy.”

“Is there anyone else aside from yourself who can fly a jet.”

“Why? Wanna get them to fly the recognizance.”

“No.” Elliott answered. “I thought perhaps, they could go up with you while you fly, and get the hang of it with one arm. Then you’ll feel secure enough to do it on your own. Because that’s what you need. It isn’t your inability to fly with one arm, it’s your apprehension.”

“You think?” Robbie asked.

“Let me ask you this. Can you fly it with one arm. Really, can you? Can it mechanically be done?”

“I guess.” Robbie shrugged. “With practice.”

“Then practice. You have the skill.”

“I don’t want to do it alone.” Robbie said. “And who in their right mind would go up in a jet with me. I mean, you flew this with me, I needed you to chart things. But, the truth is, everyone else had an excuse. No one wanted to come. I don’t blame them. And I appreciate you not being afraid.”

“Afraid?” Elliott asked. “You’re a pilot. A good one. Why would I be fearful? No, Robbie I trust you and if you want someone to fly with you in that jet. I’ll go.”

A bright smile lit Robbie’s face. “Really? Elliott that’s great. We’ll do it. Are you sure. You do know how fast a jet goes.”

The corner of Elliott’s mouth raised. “I think I want to do it.”

“Cool. Hey look.” Robbie pointed with his head. “Below. My Dad and Hal.”

Elliott checked out the jeep pulling up near a farm house embedded with trees. “Now we know we’re close to home.”

“I’ll swing around so they see us, not like they won’t know it’s us. Who else would be in a chopper.” Robbie controlled the stick. “So tomorrow you wanna try the jet.”

“I think that’ll be great.”

“Excellent, and I promise not to crash.”

“I’d appreciate that.” Elliott spoke soft.

“Let me just turn . . . oh, shit I lost control.” The helicopter dropped suddenly.

Elliott hurriedly turned and looked to Robbie.

Robbie laughed. “Kidding.” The chopper lifted back up.

^^^

"Asshole." Joe shook his head as he looked up to the sky. "As if I'm not nervous enough."

"You don't doubt my brother's flying ability, do you?" Hal asked.

"Um, yeah, Hal, I do, right now."

"No need. Elliott is with him."

"That's good. "Joe walked toward the farmhouse. "Elliott's flies?"

"No." Hal shook his head. "But he's lucky, so we'll leave it at that. So . . ." He stood on the porch with Joe. "This is what we found, Elliott and I."

"Not too far, not too close that we will hear backlash." before entering, Joe looked around. A huge yard recently cleared out was out front, lightly covered by a dusting of snow. The circumference of the home was surrounded by a thick overgrowth of trees that the jeep had a hard time getting through. "Water?" Joe asked.

"Seeing how it's midway between Bowman and Jordan, it gets it's supply from the Bowman reservoir, and power from what Danny instilled in Jordan. It won't be a powerful signal so there will have to be conservation."

"I see." Joe stepped inside. "Kind of dusty." Joe coughed the tickle in his throat.

"I have men getting it ready. Aside from bringing food, there should be one hell of an armory when Ellen arrives here." Hal walked in behind Joe. "It's big, a fireplace in all of the rooms will be good for warmth because that is where the problem lies."

"I see, and hence another problem. The burning fireplaces."

"Plenty of wood." Hal answered.

"No, Hal, smoke signals. Those savages are not that far away. They're back. That smoke signal will send up a sign of life."

"True. But we've got that covered. Danny will be placing beams around. They will suck up a lot of energy, so they will be placed on only when needed."

"And how will it be known if it's needed?" Joe asked.

"If we see more than a few coming. A few can be handled."

With a 'a-huh' Joe walked around the house, from the livingroom, to the diningroom to the kitchen.. "And how will that be determined?"

"Tracking."

Joe stopped in the kitchen. "Tracking?"

"Danny will be placing a small version of the tracking system a half mile circumference around the house. Similar, only scale to what is being

placed in Jordan, what we have in Beginnings and Bowman.”

“All right. But Jordan will be responsible for their own tracking. We can’t link to them like we do to you. This house might be too far. And we aren’t allowed to aid anyhow. No radio.”

“True.” Hal replied. “But it’s covered. The house will have it’s own tracking inside. The signal will be loud. When it goes off, I’ll check for intruder, if it’s a big movement, I’ll put on the beams. If small . . .” Hal shrugged. “I’m certain I can handle it.”

“You.”

“Yes.” Hal replied. “Me. I plan on being the one to escort Ellen out here.”

“I’m gonna let you in on a secret, Hal. I was gonna suggest to Ellen that I escort her out.”

“Good lord, Father, she’ll drive you insane out here for a month.” Hal walked from the kitchen into the hall that held the stairs. “It’s a good suggestion, but you’re needed in Beginnings. Especially with the Texas town. And . . . Frank will not be well enough.”

“You don’t think?”

“He’s needed with the savage situation. I’m going with her.” Hal spoke serious. “I’m the best choice.”

“There are those who will argue with you.” Joe told him.

“Are you one of them?” Hal questioned as he was ready to ascend the stairs.

“Nah, not me, Hal. I can honestly say, you are a good choice. But I’d give that same faith to any of you boys I believe in all of your abilities. I just wished . . .” Joe hesitated. “This wouldn’t even be a subject for discussion.”

“Maybe since Jason is officially Judge now, he can . . .”

“No.” Joe shook his head. “Ellen is going. The only decision now is a matter of how long and . . . when.”

^^^

“One more day.” Dean set down a small tray of supplies next to Frank’s bedside. “You hear me? One more day and this Salicain will be worn off. No more torture. I tried to stop it, you know.” He shrugged. “But . . . I’m way too outnumbered. Now . . .” Dean exhaled and sat on the bed. “Let’s take a look.” Reaching slowly he pulled down the front of Frank’s hospital gown to expose the bandaged chest area.

The tape was loose and Dean removed it. “This can stay . . . whoa.”

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His eyes focused. "Did my creation work or what? Oh, My god Frank." Dean's fingers moved about the surgical site. "I swear this looks as if it was done three weeks ago. When I took out the stitches, I was amazed. This is . . . this is awesome."

"It is." Frank spoke as he opened his eyes.

Dean screamed and jumped up.

"Dean."

"No. You should not be out of the Salicain."

"I fuckin had to get out of that salicain. I started coming to last night."

Smiling, Dean moved to the bed. "This is great. Can you feel now? Lift your arm."

"Is this on the lines of blinking for yes or no, because I can speak."

"No." Dean laughed and then flung back his head with an excited exclamation. "Just . . . move."

"You want me out of the bed."

"No, don't get . . ." Dean held out his hand when Frank started to sit up. He waited for the cringe of pain.

Frank didn't. "How's this?" He sat up.

"How do you feel?"

Closing one eye, Frank nodded. "A little dizzy right now." Frank nodded again. "I understand."

"Understand what? I didn't say anything."

"Yeah you did, about the lack of circulation and blood flow."

"I did?" Dean scratched his head. "I guess I did. Other than . . ."

"No pain. None at all. I feel strong."

"You are."

"I am." Frank laughed. "Thirsty though. Thanks I'd appreciate that."

Dean paused in his getting up from the bed, after a seconds hesitation he walked to the sink.

"Dean, please. Of course I do."

"Do what?" Dean asked turning around with a glass of water.

"Want to get out of this bed right away."

Dean gave a twitch of his head in a shudder and brought the glass to Frank. "I must be thinking too hard and not realizing that I'm rambling."

"Thanks." Frank took the water. "Oh, hey, Dean, I need some help. You have to help me."

"Sure. But can I tell everyone you're out of this first."

"No." Frank held up his hand. "You can't. That's part of my plan. Dean. I have been laying in this bed, staring at Olivia fuckin newton John.

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Listening to her stupid songs, watching Josephone masturbate in front of me everyday and watching Elliott fuckin Ryder and Ellen make out.'

"What!"

"Oh, yeah, didn't know about that one, did you?"

"No." Dean whispered out. "I'll kill him."

"Little thing they had going. He's me, she's her, they're us." Frank shrugged and downed his water. "To inspire me to get out of this bed. I'm inspired all right. And I want to get them all back."

"You have a plan?" Dean asked with an upward motion of his head.

"Oh, yeah." Frank smiled. "I have a plan."

A smile that matched Frank's swept across Dean's face. "Well, then there's some things as a doctor I have to do first." He got up and moved to the door and closed it. "Privacy."

"This isn't on the lines of a prostate exam . . ."

"Frank . . ."

"Because I know you have this thing about my butt."

Dean chuckled with a shake of his head. "It's good to have you back, Frank."

"Yeah. And I am . . . aren't I?" Frank grinned.

^^^

Robbie should of been in a hurry, after all he was an hour late for containment. But he didn't feel the need to rush. After all, Richie was in there and Richie was capable. If not, he'd learn fast. Never easily distracted unless he was doing something he didn't want to do, Robbie caught glimpse through the corner of his eye of the odd vision in the street. And even though Containment work was important, Robbie had to at least investigate the scene that amused him.

Sgt. Tim Doyle led four men. Three older, one young. Walking in circles, and confused Tim seemed to be. Which was understandable since, Tim had only entered the gates of Beginnings the day before.

"Doyle." Robbie called out and trotted their way. "Hey."

"Major Slagel." Tim spoke in relief. "I am so glad to see you." Tim held out his hand. "Gentlemen, this is Major Robert Slagel, son of the commander and chief, brother of Captain Slagel and General Slagel who is ill today."

"Robbie." With a smiling introduction, Robbie winked. "Call me Robbie. Who are you guys? I know Warren Baydee."

Tim answered, "Texas Town Council."

Robbie with a hand shake, greeted the men and took in their names. "So you guys, just wandering around?"

The youngest of the four, Dale, responded. He was older than he looked, his darker blonde hair cropped, yet perfect. Shorter with a bright smile that lit up an almost too perfect face. "Grand tour. But I think . . . " He laughed little. "I think we might be lost?"

"Lost?" Robbie looked to Tim. "How come you're doing the tour. You don't know Beginnings that well."

"I told these gentlemen this." Tim responded. "But, unfortunately they are stuck with me showing them important places. Which . . ."

Robbie finished the sentence. "You haven't a clue where they're at. How did you get stuck? I can't see my father doing that to you."

"He didn't." Tim said. "He gave the honors to Jason Godrichson."

"Jason asked you?" Robbie questioned.

"No. Jason told Danny to show these folks around." Tim saw Robbie getting ready to speak and he stopped him. "Before you place the blame on Danny. Danny told Henry, Henry passed it on to Hector, Hector passed it on to Jenny, and I happened to be at the school and I ended up with it. I know no one else to pass this one to."

Robbie laughed. "Man, you would think it was a bother to everyone. Hey, you know someone. Me." Robbie stood up straighter. "I'll show you all the cool spots. In fact . . ." He motioned out his hand. "Number one place." He pointed the social hall.

"You're not too busy?" Tim questioned.

"Nah." Robbie shook his head and walked to the social hall. "Cool, it's open." He pushed the door. "This gentlemen is our watering hole. Local tavern so to speak. Bowman has Hoi-Hoi on the Range." Robbie explained as he walked in. "But this is where you go when you want a more down to earth, corner bar feel."

Warren took in the familiar view of the hall. "I remember this place well when I was here. Good place to come for us to get to know people since we'll be staying here in Beginnings for a while."

"Whoa." Dale spoke in awe, and immediately, eyes glued, he moved to the stage area where the instruments and PA were. "You have a band."

"The Starters." Robbie answered. "Yeah, they play here all the time. Practice here too."

Warren interjected. "Dale here was our stock entertainer back home."

"Oh, yeah?" Robbie smiled. "You play?"

"Guitar. And I sing. A little piano." He gave a humble twitch of his head. "Not much." He moved closer to the stage. "I played out a lot before the world went to pot."

Again, Warren spoke up. "Dale, knows so many songs. Kept learning them for us. Had a lovely woman who sang with him, but she passed on. We enjoy him."

Dale shook his head with a smile that showed some embarrassment. He was more focused on the stage.

"So you're good?" Robbie asked.

"I'm OK. I mean, what musician says they're good. I probably suck now . . ." His hand reached out and touched the electric guitar on the stand. "We didn't have power. I haven't played an electric in, well, a really . . ." He snickered. "A really long time."

"Then all the more reason for you to sit in with the Starters." Robbie suggested.

"You think they'd mind?" Dale asked.

"No way. They'd love it." Robbie replied with a smile. "You're in town, might as well."

"I'll do that." Dale nodded. "Thanks. And can I tell them you said it was OK."

"Hell, yeah." Robbie said. "They love me. Paul will tell you to grab the guitar and get on up."

"I can't wait."

"Neither can I." Warren added. "And not to seem impatient, but we really must move things along. We have that meeting with President Slagel and council shortly."

Robbie understood. "Then if you have that important meeting, I really should take you to where the brilliant people hang out."

"Brilliant people?" Warren asked.

"Brilliant." Robbie repeated. "So highly intelligent we keep them together."

With an 'ah' Warren nodded. "They probably are always coming up with something new."

"And entertaining. Most of them are male too. And we like to keep them out of sight because what women we have fight over them." Robbie added. "Shall we?"

"Yes." Warren answered following him. "What is this place called."

"Oh, you'll love it." Ornery, Robbie grinned as he opened the door. "Containment."



One side of the clinic lab counter Ellen stood, while Elliott stood on the other side. She rambled. He stared, hand on hip, nodding.

"And then I wondered, you know, would Dean get mad. He might not. He might . . ." She pulled her coffee to her lips and sipped. "Wow, that's good, Dean did good. Want some?"

"No, Ellen . . ."

"You look like Frank when you stand like that. Anyhow . . ."

"Ellen."

"I was thinking. Would he get mad. And where is it? I mean I would think that it wouldn't be too hard to spot, right? What do you think?"

"Two things." Elliott held up his fingers. "One, I don't know what to think because I haven't a clue what you're talking about. And two . . . you're stalling."

"Oh, I am not."

"Yes, Ellen, you are."

"Well, I was waiting for Dean, but he's taking so . . ."

"Tell me." Elliott raised his eyebrows.

Ellen shifted her eyes to the door. "He might get mad if I do, but he ran them right?" With an exhale she smiled. "Same. Remission holding steady. You made it through the test week."

Elliott's jaw clenched at the same time he fisted his hand and closed his eyes.

"I take it you're happy." Ellen said.

"Very." He wisped out.

"I am happy for you too, Elliott. In fact, being a little selfish, I'm happy for me too."

Elliott smiled. "This Leukemia episode. It has taught me a lot. Whether the remission is short lived or long, I know for a fact that life is too short. One doesn't come to that true realization unless they think and know they are going to die well before they are ready. I'm not ready, yet, and I fully intend on taking advantage of this second chance."

"What do you mean?"

"Risks. I think I'm going to take some risks. Not be so reserved."

Ellen snickered. "I don't think you can."

"Oh, certainly I can . . ." Elliott paused. "I think. And my first risk, which may not sound like a lot to you is . . . asking you something."

“What’s that?”

“Defying what the Captain wants, I, Ellen, since my health is stable, I would like to be the one to escort you out of these walls and spend the sentence with you.”

“Elliott.” Ellen closed her eyes.

“No, listen to me. The Captain and I have been preparing the place you’ll go. I can defend any elements that come our way, you know this.”

“Yes, I do.”

“And, also I believe of everyone, your husband would want me to be the one.”

On that, Ellen laughed. “I don’t believe so. Why would you say that.”

“Because he knows as a gentleman I will respect the sanctity of your marriage, and treat you as no more than a friend in any physical capacity. He can trust that if he asks that of me.”

“Right.” Ellen scoffed. “Up to two months alone out there with me. Just you and me, you won’t try anything.”

“No.” Elliott shook his head.

“What if I hit on you?”

“I would turn you down.”

“What happened to the risk taker?”

“I don’t want to die, Ellen. For as much as everyone around here fears Frank, I fear your husband more. He is the one man in this community I am certain can kill me and no one will ever know.”

Dean’s entrance along with a revelation, ‘ah’ rang into the lab. “Finally.” Dean said as he walked in. “You say something I agree with.”

Ellen hurriedly looked to Dean. “Dean.”

Dean smiled and extended his hand to Elliott. “I know my wife has a big mouth and she told you. Congratulations on making it through the test week.”

“Thank you, Dr. Hayes.” Elliott responded. “I was nervous when you said it would test the remission. But I’m confident we are good for a while.”

“So am I.” On his words, Dean kissed Ellen on the cheek and stood next to her. “I overheard your conversation, yes, I was eavesdropping. And . . .” Dean’s tone took on a serious one. “I don’t know if you realize this, but there are a lot of offers from people to go with my wife.”

“I do.” Elliott responded.

“And . . .” Dean continued. “Out of those offers. Though I don’t admit it, there are those I fully trust to protect her. They have the skills and ability. Frank, Hal, Joe, Danny, you. However, I believe I only trust one to

be no more than a protector and friend out there. So . . . should I not be able to be the one to accompany my wife, just know I stand fully behind the decision, that you, Sgt. Ryder, be the one to escort her and protect her.”

It was music to Elliott’s ears.

However, it was a sour note to Robbie who, like Dean, was in the hall listening. About to make his happy entrance into the lab, he stopped on the conversation so as not to interrupt. He only wished he had walked away. It wasn’t what he heard, it was what he didn’t hear that made Robbie’s heart so heavy that he felt less than minuscule. It wasn’t Dean’s backing of Elliott to escort Ellen out. It was when Dean reviewed his list of names, of men with ability and skill, men he trusted to protect Ellen, Robbie’s name was never mentioned.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

Johnny had stirred.

As soon as the news arrived to George, he dropped his strategy meeting, nothing else was important and he flew to the hospital. Johnny wasn't sitting up, bright, smiling and well as George expected. But his eyes fluttered and some sort of life was finally seen.

"Not too long." The doctor instructed staying by the bedside. "He has to be sedated again. Keep it short."

"I understand." George moved closer.

"Don't get him upset."

"No. I won't." With a lot of fatherly concern, George grabbed Johnny's hand. "Hey."

Johnny moistened his lips and weakly spoke. "George."

"Don't want you to speak. OK?. I was concerned."

"Better."

"You're looking it. I'll tell you . . ." George let out a 'whew'. "Had us worried."

"Was shot. Escaping."

"That's what we figured." George stated. "They were on to you, then."

"Trial." Johnny rasped out. "My trail."

George lost his breath for a moment. "They had a trial for you?"

Johnny nodded.

"Johnny . . ."

"Bev." Johnny said painfully.

"That's what I wanted to speak to you about. She wasn't with you."

"No."

"Did they have a trial for her?"

"No." Johnny replied and tried to speak more.

"You couldn't get her out? Could you?"

"Couldn't . . . killed."

Understanding, George nodded. "That's what I thought." Exhaling he gave a pat to Johnny's leg. "I'll let you get that rest." George stepped back some to allow room for the doctor. "We figured things got dangerous. But don't you worry, Johnny." George winked softly. "We'll get her out of there

yet.” After another pat on Johnny’s leg, George turned to leave.

Johnny’s mouth opened some, the word formed, but no sound emerged in his attempt to call George. Hit with an immediate uncontrolled sluggish and grogginess, Johnny gave in and closed his eyes.

^^^

“See this?” Hal pointed to the closed hospital room door of Frank.

Robbie, enthusiasm at a level zero, nodded.

“This emptiness, or lack of a do not disturb sign better be permission granted. What in the world was up with Dean placing a three hour quarantine on Frank’s room.”

“I don’t know.”

“He knows I have a town to run, and . . . I have Frank to torture.” Hal reached for the knob. “Ah, open.” Just as he started to push in the door he stopped. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you sure, Robbie?”

“Positive. Let’s do this. This will help my spirits.”

“Nothing like Olivia Newton John for that special pick me up.” Grinning, Hal walked into the room and looked at a laying Frank. “Look at our bother, Robbie. Doesn’t he look well.”

“He looks great, Hal.”

“Are you exercising more, Frank.” Hal asked in a joking manner. “You look more buff.”

“No, Hal.” Robbie corrected. “Rested. He looks rested.”

“But bored.” folding his arms, Hal nodded. “He looks bored little brother. I think we should help him out.”

“I think so too Hal.” Robbie snapped his finger once. “Hey, I get it. Nothing like a song.”

“So true. Sheena Easton?”

“Nah.” Robbie shook his head. “How about . . . Olivia Newton John.”

“Wonderful choice. How about . . .” A look of revelation hit Hal. “How about something in honor of Frank’s new physique.”

“I know exactly what song you’re talking about.” Robbie positioned himself next to Hal in Frank’s view. “Look Hal, he’s giving us smiling eyes.”

“That’s because he knows we’re gonna serenade him. Would you like to count it?”

“How about you?” Robbie suggested.

"Love to." Hal cleared his throat. "On three, and don't forget to bob."

"Bob. Got it." Robbie gave a thumbs up.

"One, two . . ."

On the count, both Hal and Robbie began to bob back and forth, side by side, singing brightly and up as they did.

"Let's get physical. Physical. I wanna get physical. Let's get into physical. Let me hear your body talk. Your body talk. I wanna hear your body talk . . ."

Frank's 'oh', silenced them both. "You wanna hear my body talk?"

"Hal." Robbie said brightly. "Oh, my God. Did we?"

"We have to get Dean. We awakened him early."

"It's Olivia." Robbie said.

"It's fuckin sick!" Frank flung off the covers causing both Hal and Robbie to scream in surprise and shut up.

"You're dressed." Robbie pointed.

Hal indicated as well. "And armed."

"I am." Frank stepped to him.

Quickly Robbie dove behind Hal. "Help."

Hal rolled his eyes. "What are you gonna do, Frank. Kill us?"

"Yes. For all the stupid songs. The poetry. The ribbons in my hair. For making Josephine play with herself."

Robber snickered.

"Frank." Hal said serious. "It is not our doing that you were in a position where a woman aroused you and you could do nothing about it. Perhaps if I summons her now she'll be happy to repeat her performance while you more . . . up . . . to the occasion."

"Hal!"

"Frank."

"Frank." Robbie called.

"Robbie." Frank responded.

"Frank." Hal gave an upward motion of his head.

"Fuck. What?"

Robbie dropped his voice to a whisper. "I just heard Ellen."

"Fuck." Into the bed, Frank flew. "Don't blow this. She's on my people to semi kill list." He settled himself, covered up, and kept his eyes open.

Robbie and Hal, just stared solemn.

Humming some Barry Manilow tune, Ellen stopped the second she walked into the room. Her humming slowed down and she gave an

awkward snicker. "What's going on you two?"

Hal shook his head. "Visiting Frank."

"Visiting." Robbie said.

"Staring is more like it." Ellen with a chart in her hand walked to the bed. "No singing? I was hoping to hear some Olivia Newton John songs." She set the chart on the night stand and looked at Frank. "He looks different today."

"Buff." Hal stated. "He looks . . ." The word 'buff' was a grunt when Robbie nudged him.

Ellen looked with a smile. "Buff? What is up with you. No he looks . . . different." She inched closer. "And . . ." She took in a whiff. "He smells different."

Trying with diligence not to laugh, Frank refrained during Ellen's long sniffing of him.

Shrugging Ellen exhaled. "Can't put my finger on it. Oh, well. Hey Frank." Leaning down, Ellen brought her lips to Frank's to kiss him softly. The moment they met his, she was grabbed.

Frank's hands clung to Ellen's head forcefully holding her to him as he kissed her. Ellen's struggling grunts were heard as her hands punched and her legs kicked to try to keep her footing.

"Good God, Frank." Hal reached down perturbed. "Allow the woman some oxygen." He separated the two.

Gasping with a wheeze of life, Ellen stepped back, hand over mouth. "You're . . . You're . . ."

"Frank." Frank replied. "I know I look younger, but I'm still Frank."

At the same time, Robbie and Hal just looked at each other.

Frank stood up out of bed. "So, El."

"Why . . . why didn't Dean tell me you were awake?" Ellen asked. "You came out of the salicain early."

"You people brought me out early." Frank stated. "And Dean is helping me pay all of you back for torture. Sheer torture while I laid in that . . ." Frank just stared.

Thinking, perhaps his brother was having a hard time remembering, Robbie decided to help. "Bed, Frank. While you laid in that bed."

"Ryder." Frank rasped out with a slight gravel. "Sgt. Fuckin Ryder."

Elliott froze as he stood in Frank's room. "Captain, this is unfair. You failed to tell me Frank awoke."

Hal tossed his hands up. "I am as surprised as you."

In slight nervousness, with Frank coming at him, Elliott cleared his

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throat. “Good to see you up Frank.”

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Ignoring Hal, Frank moved to Elliott. “Are you glad to see me up and about. What? No pretending to be me. No molesting our wife.”

Mouthing the words, ‘our’, Hal shrugged it off. “Elliott, I think my brother is a bit upset with you.”

“No, shit, captain.” Elliott said.

“No shit?” Hal asked curiously. “No shit. Hmm. Thank you for that Elliott. I’ll have to remember that fine gentleman style comeback when someone suggests something I am already aware of.”

Grabbing his head, Frank spun to his brother. “Hal. Fuckin knock it off. You started this.”

“I did no such thing, Frank.” Hal acted innocently. “If you want to

blame anyone for Elliott's recent impersonating of you, blame Elliott. It was all his idea."

Elliott's mouth dropped open.

"Oh, yeah?" Frank took another step to Elliott. "Well, let's just hope you didn't mean it when you said you lost my Journey Greatest hits volume two up in the killer baby region."

Lifting a finger, Elliott calmly nodded. "I am a man of honesty. I am also a man of intelligence. So, utilizing both of those qualities in the same instance, yes . . . I lost you Journey tape, and . . . bye."

After initially thinking, Elliott was trying to convey a solution, Frank figured out Elliott didn't mean, 'bye' as a form of purchase, he meant it as a means of announcing departure, because Elliott flew out.

^^^

"Dean." Frank grumbled as he got back into bed.

"Frank. I don't care." Dean shook his head.

"It's called the chase."

"It's called exertion." Dean explained. "Which you can't have. Walking about this room is one thing, chasing Elliott Ryder through the clinic is another. You had to be stopped."

"But did you have to have Hal trip me?"

"I had to stop you." Dean held Frank's wrist and took his pulse.

"I'm fine."

"Physically."

"No." Frank disagreed. "Physically I'm more than fine. I like to say spectacular."

"Frank, listen . . ." Dean released his wrist.

"Dean, I'm healed. The gunshot wound looks good."

"That's not what I'm talking about." Dean said.

"You're talking mentally. Yeah, I have a lot to deal, with and I will. Johnny, my dad."

"No." Dean shook his head. "Your heart, Frank."

"What about it."

"For starters you took a massive coronary."

"OK."

"You don't understand, do you?" Dean asked. "Your heart stopped beating."

"It's beating now."

“Your heart can’t be effected like the wound I treated. I couldn’t give your heart medication to build it back up. Only relaxation and no exertion can do that. I don’t want any strain on your heart.”

“What if someone breaks it.”

“Frank.” Dean snapped almost too serious. “No exertion. OK? Humor me.”

“How?”

“What?” Dean asked.

“How do you want me to humor you. I know I’m a funny guy. Oh, wait. No. See, Dean? You have me on the spot. Wait. I’ll come up with something. I know a joke from . . .”

“Frank.” Dean stopped him. “That’s not what I mean, and you know it. I’ll put you under the salicain for another week if I have to.”

“Dean.” Frank scoffed. “Please. There’s nothing wrong with me. I’m not sick. My hearts fine. I would think God would have told me that.”

Dean stared for a second. “What do you mean God would have told you?”

“I saw him, you know, when I was in the coma. Before the Salicain. I saw the big guy. And Dean . . .” Frank relaxed a ‘whew’ “He’s a big guy. Looks like John Wayne.”

“God looks like John Wayne?”

“In his prime.” Frank said. “I saw my mom too. That’s how I found out about my Dad. All kinds of dead people stopped by.”

“You were in heaven?” Dean asked.

“Limbo. And they gave me my youth again. Can’t you tell, look how young I look.”

After a moment’s stare Dean nodded. “Who else did you see?”

“That guy from Star Wars. The evil leader.”

“Darth Vader.”

“No.” Frank snickered. “Dean, get your movies straight. Captain Kirk.”

“That was Star Trek Frank.”

“Same difference.” Frank shrugged. “And I saw some fraud guy. Singing fraud. A doctor.”

“You mean, Sigmund Freud?” Dean asked.

“That’s him. The guy with the dance. Yeah he came by.” Frank nodded. “Told me some things. Dean?”

Teetering in a suspension of whether to believe Frank or not, Dean nodded. “Yeah?”

“Did your father lick you as a child?”

“What?” Dean laughed.

“Lick you.” Frank lifted his shoulders. “Guess not. Man we were neglected weren’t we?” Frank saw the look on Dean’s face. “You don’t believe me, do you? Somehow you have that Farmers from Wizard of Oz Kansas look on your face, like I’m fuckin Dorothy returning from a tornado induced trip.”

“No. No that’s not it.” Dean slowly stood up and ran his hand through his hair. “A part of me does believe you. A lot of people say they have gone to heaven, or limbo, when they are comatose. What did it look like?”

“Limbo?” Frank bobbed his head in thought. “An armory.”

“Frank heaven.”

Frank smiled. “Exactly.”

Joe poked his head once more into Frank’s room unseen, then stepped away from the door into the hall with Jason. “Dean’s in there.”

“Then I’ll wait here.” Jason said. “Until Dean leaves.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s important, Joe. I need to test my theory. Or rather prove or disprove it.”

“What is the theory?” Joe asked.

“If I’m correct, you’ll see. Go on. Oh, and Joe. Do me a favor. When I come in, don’t acknowledge my presence, just ignore me.”

“Whatever.” Joe shrugged and walked into the room. As soon as he did, he watched Frank lay down stiff as a board and stare out. “Asshole. Don’t pull that shit with me. I heard your big mouth.”

Whining, Frank sat back up. “You got me.”

“I’m quick.” Joe walked over and kissed Frank on the forehead.

“You could lick me.” Frank suggested.

“What?” Joe asked surprised and looked at Dean.

Dean lifted his hands. “Don’t ask me. It has something to do with neglect . . . And . . . I’m heading out. No exertion, Frank.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Frank waved then flipped Dean off.

“So how ya feeling?” Joe asked.

“Good. Dad there’s something I . . .” Frank’s eyes widened and then Frank . . . screamed. “Uh!”

“What?” Joe snapped.

“Uh!” Frank pointed.

“What!” Again, Joe asked, turned and saw Jason. “Frank!”

“Uh!”

“Frank!” Joe yelled at his pointing hysterical son. “What in God’s name is wrong with you?”

“Him!”

“Jason?” Joe asked.

“Aw, Joe.” Jason complained. “You ruined it.”

“Ruined what?” Joe asked confused. “My son is acting out of control. What the hell did I ruin.”

“My theory. Coma means limbo, limbo means Time machine ripple exempt.”

“Dad! It’s Jason! He’s dead.”

Joe’s eyes grew wide. “Oh, shit.” He stared at Frank who looked as if he were seeing a ghost. And to Frank, he was, in the form of Jason.

Jason, of course, just chuckled.

^^^

Sneakily, Ellen darted from her peek into the clinic hall back into the lab and picked up the phone. “Just checking. And . . .” Ellen exhaled. “Thanks, again.”

“All situated?” Hector asked on the other end of the phone.

“All situated.” Ellen replied. “There wasn’t much loss was there?”

“Two chickens. I can cover two chickens. Anymore than that I would have had to blame it on the killer babies.”

“Which would of been difficult.” Ellen said. “Seeing how they have been calm since the deer herd moved into the region.”

“That was smart on Elliott’s part.”

Chuckling, Ellen agreed. “Anyhow, Hector. This means a lot. I’m glad it was you, not someone else. And this is a secret, right?”

“Right. And she is there?” Hector asked.

“Right now. Waiting on Dean, so you better hurry because I don’t know how long he will . . .” Ellen looked up. “Oh, hi Dean.” She said almost fake.

“I get it. I’m on my way.” Hector hung up.

Ellen set down the phone and looked at Dean. He stood one hand on hip holding back his lab coat, the other hand rested on the back of his neck. “Dean? Your patient is not in here.”

“Huh?” Dean looked up. “No, I know. She’s in two.”

“What’s wrong.”

“El? I was just down at the cryo lab.”

“Oh!” Ellen smiled “great place, isn’t it.” She started humming and turned her back.

“Great place?” Dean questioned. “Yeah, it is, I guess. But . . .”

“Misha is waiting.” Ellen picked up a rack of empty tubes.

“It’s suture removal. El . . .” He stepped to her. “Have you seen Majestic?”

Thinking, ‘shit, he saw that scratch’ Ellen shook her head. “Is something wrong?”

“She isn’t there.”

Crash.

“El?”

Ellen turned around. “What . . . what do you mean she isn’t there. I was just there.”

“So was I. I didn’t see her.”

“Oh,” Ellen flung out her hand. “Maybe you missed her.”

“No. I don’t think.”

“Over looked her?”

“Ellen. She has three legs and one eye, how does one overlook her.”

“Like this.” Ellen stood on tip toes.

Dean stared at her for a moment in her bad humor.

“Dean, she’s there. I’m positive.”

“I’m just worried. You know she had that huge growth spurt last week. Those jaws . . .” He whistled. “I mean, what? She bit the killer baby we have, El.”

Ellen nodded. “At least Lester healed after that.”

“But a normal person wouldn’t. And Joe would have a fit if he saw her. You transferred her to the steel cage, right.”

“Oh, yeah. Of course I did. You told me right?”

“Right.”

“She’s there.” Ellen assured calmly. “Don’t be silly. You didn’t notice.”

“OK. You’re probably right. I wasn’t looking for the steel cage.” Dean walked to the lab door. “I have to do those sutures. Could you check on her. Just ease my mind?”

Ellen smiled and gave a thumbs up.

“Thanks.” Dean walked out.

After waiting calmly for Dean to be gone, Ellen allowed the instantaneous panic to hit her, and with an ‘oh, shit’ she flew from the lab.

Dean's signature knock preluded his opening the door of exam room two. He smiled on his entrance but lost the smile when he saw Jenny sitting smug in the chair. "Hi, Misha. I see you brought Jenny again."

"She makes me feel confident." Misha replied.

Jenny gave a smug look.

"This shouldn't take long." Dean walked to the table and took her hand. "This looks good." He pulled the tray closer and grabbed the scissors. "You know, I was thinking of you."

Jenny let out a 'hmpf', and shook her head. "Doesn't that figure."

Dean quickly looked at her. "What's that supposed to mean."

"Well, she's young. Pretty. Of course you're thinking of her. We don't have to worry about that mid life crisis again, now do we Dean."

"What?"

"One word." Jenny whispered. "Bev."

Dean rolled his eyes then returned to Misha. "That wasn't what I meant. I meant, Misha, that I was thinking about what you said the last time you were here." Dean proceeded to remove the sutures. "About my wife's temporary ousting."

"Ah, yes. You mean about escorting her?" Misha asked.

"That's it." Dean removed the last suture. "And, after thinking, I made a decision. If circumstances prohibit me from being the one to escort Ellen, I spoke to Sgt. Ryder."

Misha smiled. "That is a wise choice."

Jenny snickered. "Frank's gonna get mad. He'll want to be the one."

"Frank can't do anything for a few weeks aside from taking it easy." Dean told her. "And you're finished, Misha."

Before she slid from the table there was a knock on the door.

"Come in." Dean called out.

Slowly the door opened, and Hector slid in. "Dr. Hayes. Sorry to interrupt. I couldn't find Ellen. And I brought her squash she picked out."

"Squash?" Dean asked surprised, when he saw Hector hold up the long thin object.

"Yes." Hector stepped in and flashed a shy smile to Misha. "She picked it out and I didn't want someone else to grab it, so I brought it."

"You're delivering produce now?" Dean questioned.

Jenny scoffed. "Of course he is. He always does. I'll give that to Ellen, Hector, thank you." She held out her hand, and let out a 'hmm' when Hector set the elongated vegetable in her palm. "Ellen picked this?" She

raised an eyebrow to Dean. "They say there's a lot to learn about a woman's depravity when you look at the produce she chooses. And you aren't worried about her and Sgt. Ryder, Dean?" Jenny held up the squash.

"Give me that." Dean snatched up the vegetable. "And what is up with your attitude with me. Been hanging around Henry lately?"

After a quick shift from Hector to Misha, Jenny smiled brightly. "Yes, Yes, I have. Thank you. And speaking of Henry. Hector . . . Misha. Henry and I are having a lovely dinner at my house tonight. A sort of date."

Dean laughed. "A date? You're married."

"And your point." Jenny snapped.

"You're married."

"Again . . ." Jenny bobbed her head. "Your point?"

Dean gave an upward arrogant motion of his head. "What about . . . Hal?"

Closing her eyes, Jenny gasped and grabbed her chest. "Please. Hal is a painful, heartbreaking experience. I have to rid him from my soul. He's poison." She glanced at Misha. "Poison. How we wanted each other." Jenny exhaled. "But since John has joined the UWA, can't have that. And that's where John is this weekend. His UWA reserve training. So, Henry and I are, uh having an evening. And I thought, since Henry and Hector are close . . ."

Dean snickered.

Jenny nearly growled in her quick view. "Since they are friends, why don't you Misha, and You, Hector, not you, Dean. Why don't you two join us."

Misha slid from the table. "I wouldn't want to intrude on your private time with Henry."

Dean laughed.

"Dean." Jenny snapped, then smiled quickly. "No intrusion."

"I would like that." Misha raised her eyes to Hector. "Would you like to join us as well?"

Hector contained the smile. "Yes, I would. I'm sure Henry wouldn't mind at all."

"Good." Jenny clapped her hands together. "It's a double date. Sort of. Let's go plan." She opened the door. "Bye Dean."

Hector waved as he left.

Misha paused. "Thank you, and I am glad that you listen to what I said."

Dean nodded, and as his good bye, he lifted his hand, only to realize

he waved the squash. Laughing at himself, he set it down. "Not that I was any good at the dating scene." Dean spoke to himself. "But could Hector and Jenny be more obvious." He stared at the squash, and in looking at it, he remembered Ellen. After snapping his finger in revelation, he grabbed the phone from his belt and dialed.

"Cryo." Ellen answered.

"You sound out of breath." Dean said.

"Who me. No."

"Hey, El, you wanna have sex tonight?"

"Sure. That was out of the blue though."

Dean lifted the squash then set it down. "Just dawned on me, it's been a awhile. Anyhow, the reason for the call. Majestic."

"She's right here."

"Are you sure?" Dean asked.

"Positive. Gnawing on a squirrel." Ellen raised her voice to a singing one. "Is that good, girl. Huh? Yep, Dean you just over looked her."

"Oh, good. Just checking. As long as she's there."

"Looking right at her." Ellen said with certainty.

"See you at home."

"Yep." Hanging up the phone was Ellen's sign that she could breath. And she did, heavily. Small antenna pressed to her lips, Ellen stared with worry to the rabbit cage. The empty rabbit cage. She should of listened to Dean and transferred Majestic to the steel cage. She didn't. And thinking, 'oh God how am I getting out of this one' Ellen just stared at the chewed up metal where the one eyed, three legged carnivorous Rabbit ate through for her freedom.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The cigarette smoke was thick, a lingering cloud above Joe and Jason's head. But they didn't seem to notice or even mind. Both sat there, Jason in his usual position. One leg crossed, and arm draped over his waist as he held his cigarette.

And Joe sat behind his desk, rocking some. "How was that possible?"

A slight shrug, then Jason hit his cigarette. "I theorized that, Joe. I had a feeling."

"How though?"

"The mind." Jason pointed to the temple. "Is in the soul, not here. Understand? At least that's what I believe. The spirit remains intact. Frank's spirit drifted off into some sort of limbo. Therefore that spirit, that . . ." He snickered. "Mind, was not in the body that experienced the ripple. If for an example, when you brought me back, Frank got slashed across the face. The body would show it, the mind wouldn't remember it."

"And you were right."

"I was right." Jason said smug. "To Frank, I'm dead."

"And this has caused him to get confused, scream, act an idiot . . ." Joe paused when he saw Jason lift his eyes. "OK, perhaps this incident didn't cause him to do that, but he's doing it worse right now."

"So, the question is, what do we do?"

"Do we tell him?" Joe questioned. "Explain I went back. Or hope he forgets, and for the time being let him look like a babbling goof."

"In all seriousness, not only so we cause no uprising if it gets out, but for entertainment purposes alone, I say we let him look like the babbling goof."

Joe nodded slowly, then he chuckled. "I say, yeah. Cigarette?" He pushed the pack forward.

Jason took one with a smirk. "Sure why not. Problem solved."

^^^

Danny Hoi let out small huffs of steam in his fast pace walk with Ellen to Mechanics. "I think this should help."

"If it is, what you say it is, it will."

Slowing down, by the door, Danny looked back at Ellen then opened

it. "It's in here."

"Thanks Danny." Ellen followed him in.

"Should you be doing this, though?" Danny asked. "It's pretty cold out."

"I know. But this is necessary. Trust me, and please don't tell anyone."

"I won't. Mostly because I haven't a clue what you're actually doing in the dark." Danny walked to the closet.

"You can say, if I was a carnivorous sometimes cannibalistic creature, I am figuring where I would be."

"You lost a killer baby?" Danny asked horrified.

"Close. We've given new meaning to Henry's fallacy of killer rabbit."

The object Danny held nearly slid from his hand. "It's running around Beginnings."

"Oh, wow." Ellen took the thick pair of goggles. "These are cool." She placed them on.

Speaking in a daze, Danny reached to the side of the goggles that were humongous on Ellen. "Power is here."

"Thanks." The slight motorized hum made Ellen smile and she moved her head from left to right. "Looks normal."

"You aren't out side. The left side controls the zoom."

"Oh, wow." Ellen zoomed in. "Whoa. Nauseous." She giggled and lifted the goggles to the top of her head making her hair stand on edge. "Thanks, Danny I appreciate it."

"Ellen, should we inform security about this?"

"Why?"

"Um . . ." Danny shrugged. "Maybe because the creature is deadly and you might get hurt."

"Don't be silly, Danny, I'm like her mom. She won't hurt me. And I can't let security know. Letting them know is letting Joe know. Joe will have a fit if he finds out we've been playing with mutated genetics. And Dean will have a fit if he finds out because he told me three days ago to put her in a steel cage, I said I did but I didn't."

"And now she's out."

"Oh, yeah., hopping about." Ellen reached for the door.

"Good . . . good luck."

"Sure. I'm confident now." With a loud exhale, Ellen lowered her goggles and walked out. "Well, I'm gone."

Danny whistled slowly with a tilt of his head. "Oh, yeah, you pretty much are."



Fast Henry walked with Hector, shoulders's hunched to block out the wind as they moved through the living section. "I just think I should have had ample warning."

"I gave you warning," Hector stated.

"Yes, one hour."

"Why do you need more warning than that?"

"To mentally prepare. A date, Hector. A date with Jenny Matoose none-the-less." Henry shivered. "And I'm supposed to pretend I like her."

"Yes." Hector answered. "And don't bitch tonight Henry, I like Misha."

"How is my bitching going to effect that?"

"You're my friend," Hector said, "If she sees you bitch, she'll think I bitch. I don't . . ." His speech slowed down.

"What?"

Silent. Hector pointed.

Curiously, Henry looked at the arched back of the bent over little body wearing a white lab coat. "That has to be Dean or Ellen, I can't tell in this light."

Head lifting, Ellen, cage in hand, turned around. "Hey."

Henry and Hector stepped back in a start when they saw the glowing green roundness illuminating on Ellen's face.

Hector lifted an inquisitive finger. "Ellen? Why are you wearing night goggles?"

"Help me see in the dark."

Hector nodded. "Uh-huh? See what?"

"What I'm looking for." Ellen said with a 'so there' attitude.

"Can I ask what?" Henry asked.

"Bugs." Ellen answered. "I'm collecting bugs."

Mouth swishing from side to side, Hector nodded again. "And what do you need the cage for?"

"To put them in." Ellen responded.

"How big is the bug, Ellen?" Hector questioned.

"Normal size small ones, why?"

Hector indicated to the cage. "Don't you think they'll get out?"

Quickly Ellen looked down at cage. "Yeah, they will. Silly me. Thanks for bringing it to my attention. I'll go get a smaller cage. See ya."

After hearing Ellen singing out a beckoning call, Hector shrugged and started walking again. "Something is up."

"No kidding," Henry said. "She's Ellen. She's part of Dean and Ellen, trust me she's not looking for any normal bug."

"Henry." Hector laughed as they approached Jenny's home. "Come on."

"No Hector. Bub the savage, killer babies, deadly viruses, zombies . . ." Henry rang the doorbell. "I wouldn't put it past them to have created a two foot cockroach" Henry shivered his body. "Makes me shudder. And speaking of shuddering, even though I want your date to be a success, don't expect me to put out for Jenny." Henry flashed a grin when he noticed Jenny in the doorway. "Hello, Jenny."

Looking smug, and flipping Henry off, Jenny opened the door wider, only to be more perturbed when Henry whispered in his passing. "I'm not easy. Don't get any ideas."

^^^

It was usual for Robbie to run late, but he didn't expect to be caught up in undoing Richie's errors in containment. It was all right, he had time, in Robbie's mind better late than never. Rushing home, he showered, and impressively did his own hair well. He was ready, even though his participation would be limited, he still thrived for that feeling of getting back up on stage, and the Starters were back full force for the first time in weeks.

A whole four sets were planned, and so many of the tunes Robbie could sing, a few he could play bass on. Of course, Robbie hoped Paul would be surprised to see that he changed his mind. He had to admit, it was pretty childish of himself, turning Paul down to participate. Maybe it was jealousy over the fact that James, who only played rhythm guitar would be taking lead. But Robbie quickly extinguished that little bit of jealousy when he realized James was terrible at playing lead.

Smiling at that thought, and rounding the bend into town, Robbie lost the smile. It was replaced with a confused look, when still far from the social hall, he not only heard the music, he heard the cheers of people.

The social hall sounded crowded, more crowded than usual. Everyone must of really been waiting for the return of The Starters.

Another step and the next song began, Robbie slowed down. James played keyboards as well, but he heard keyboards, bass and guitar. Thinking

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maybe Elliott Ryder was sitting in, Robbie hurried to the social hall.

He flung open the door, the noise level was deafening. Not only couldn't he hear, but he couldn't see as well. A wall of backs was before him. The hall was packed thick with what looked like every adult resident in Beginnings.

Smiling, with an 'excuse me' Robbie parted through two men and froze.

It was something from the old world, a scene Robbie hadn't witnessed in Beginnings ever. The dance floor was packed, and there were women, a lot of women in the hall, some must of come from the House of Lesbians, and some from the Texas town.

But the women weren't the only thing of 'new and exciting' Texas Town produced in that social hall. Texas Town produced what was causing the level of enthusiasm to rise out of control.

Band playing, loud and tight, dancers bobbing, none of that bothered Robbie as much as seeing the cause of it all.

Dale.

Not only did he sing like Robbie had never heard, but he had pizzaz like no other musician. Dale didn't just play that guitar, he breathed that guitar. It was an extension of his body he worked as well as any other. Precision, smooth, while he flashed a smile so bright. He seemed to charge the crowd, with every note sung, lick played, and move his body made.

Robbie's heart sunk.

Was Dale as good as he seemed, or was he just magnified by Robbie's heartbreak at that moment.

Robbie knew the answer.

Dale was that good.

Any musician knows when another is better, and Robbie could own up to that. In Robbie's opinion, Dale played, sang and worked the crowd better than he ever did. Robbie knew especially with his physical insufficiency not only was there no competition, there was no reason to even attempt to walk on that stage.

Why quiet the crowd? Why damper their good times. Robbie wanted cheers for his talents, not pity applause for his efforts, and getting up to even do one song would be nothing more than a pitiful attempt at what he used to be. In Robbie's mind, The Starters letting him up on that stage was only a token good natured move to give a self esteem boost to the cripple.

Every ounce of Robbie gnawed and twisted in a personal pain no one would ever understand. Useless, hurt, angry. Every single emotion was

rolled together in one knot that blasted him worse than the explosion that took his arm.

The song ended, the screams entailed, The Starters were ready to roll into the next song. And before he was spotted, before the click of the drumsticks counted off the next tune, Robbie raced from the social hall.

^^^

Dean had received numerous calls and reports that disturbed his 'at home' evening. Calls that informed him that it had to be the most pathetic sight. So many times Dean was told it, that he had to up and leave the house just to see for himself.

Dan from security, Mark, and all the others. They were right.

Positioning himself just a small distance, unseen from the east wing of the clinic, Dean witnessed the sight. And pathetic, in Dean's mind, was an understatement. He felt bad, because in a way he found a demented amusement out of it. And he knew why security called him, because he himself was the cause for it.

Before undoing it, Dean looked again.

The clinic room window was barely two feet by two feet, yet Frank could be seen clearly. One arm above his head, body hunching so as to peer out, a lost puppy dog look was upon Frank's face in his gaze into a community he was not allowed to walk.

Orphan like, as if Frank hadn't a friend in the world and every ounce of trouble rested on his shoulders.

Was he wishing on a star? Was he thinking of ways to squeeze his oversize body out of that window? Dean didn't know, but as entertaining as it was to watch Frank like that, it was time to end it.

From the window, Frank turned in surprise when he heard the unlocking of the clinic room door. He hurried and looked at his watch to check out the time. The 'no visitors for Frank' lock-in rule applied until morning, so Frank was baffled.

He knew it wasn't morning, the sun rising would of told him that, unless something happened while he was in limbo and Beginnings was cast into darkness. A segment of the bible coming to life. Or worse, the sun had burned out and the next ice age began. It did snow and it would only be par for the course. Apocalyptic plague, SUTS, killer babies, Ice age.

"Oh, shit." Frank whispered out.

Dean slowed down in his entrance. "What's wrong?"

“Are we in the next ice age?”

Dean hesitated before answering. A simple ‘no’ would of worked.
“Why do you ask?”

“It’s dark.” Frank pointed out the window. “It snowed. You’re here. You weren’t supposed to open that door until morning.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“What you asked me.”

“Huh?”

“Frank!” Dean snapped. “You asked if we were in the next ice age.”

“Oh, OK.” Frank nodded. “So are we?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck.” Frank stepped in disbelief. “Fuckin figures, don’t it.”

“Yes. But it’s only lasting until tomorrow.”

“That’s a good thing. But it still figures. Next thing you know a meteor will hit.”

“It might.” Dean walked to Frank. “Now . . .”

“When?”

“When what?”

“When will the meteor hit.”

“I don’t know, Frank.” Dean barked. “Why are you asking.”

“Dean. Fuck. You brought it up. You said a meteor will hit.”

“No, *you* said a meteor will hit.” Dean argued.

“How would I know a meteor will hit. I’m not a scientist.”

“Maybe you’re psychic.”

Frank’s mouth dropped open. “Bet me I am. That’s probably how I know.”

“Probably. Now . . .”

“Are we on safe ground, or do you think it’s too early to tell.”

“Tell what?”

“When the meteor is coming.”

Dean lifted his hand in an explaining manner. “Frank. Listen. There’s no meteor coming.”

“Dean, you said.”

“No.” Dean came back. “*You* said.”

“That’s right, I’m psychic.” Frank pointed to his own temple. “That always over rules science. So I need to figure out if we’re on safe ground and when the rock is coming.”

Dean tossed up his hands. “Use your psychic ability.”

"I will."

"Or ask Jason."

"Uh!"

Dean jumped back. "What?"

"Jason. Jason . . ." Frank shook his head. "He's not dead anymore, that shocked me."

"Jason was never dead."

"Oh, yeah he was Dean. Blown up into a million fuckin pieces . . ." Widening his arms Frank made an explosion noise. "Gone. But he's back."

"Back from where?"

"The dead. Like our zombies. Did you have anything to do with that."

"No, Frank. Jason never died."

"Was he hidden then?" Frank asked.

"No." Dean became perturbed. "And can we stop this. You worry about the meteor and whatever, later. Right now . . . right now, I'm letting you out. You don't need to stay here."

"Oh, yeah." Frank smiled.

"But it's not a full release. Come home with me and I'll explain it all."

"Sounds good."

"Are you up for company? Your granddaughter's at the house."

Frank slowed down in his walking out. "I'd love to see her. How come you have her?"

"Denise is at the social hall. Ellen volunteered, but then, Ellen is working on our cryo project."

"So you have the kids plus Amber?"

"And Nick." Dean added.

Frank laughed. "No wonder you're releasing me, you need my help." Dean smiled. "Yeah, I guess I do."

Frank gave a clap of his hands, inhaled deeply and stepped with his usual Frank cockiness into the hall. "Smell that freedom. And just in time. Ice age, destructive meteor. Oh, yeah, I'm gonna be busy."

^^^

The buzz from the shifting of one magnification view to the next, sounded like an old toy robot to Ellen. The night goggles made a slight hum and buzz as she zoomed in focusing between the trees of the wooded area near the fields.

She figured that foliage would be the best spot to start. It was dark, a terrain rough enough to hide, and close to the chicken coop which would

be to Majestic, a virtual feeding ground.

Around the area she looked, making several different noises as she did.

She sniffed quite a bit from the cold, huffed out her breath and her movements.

Sniff, huff, shift, hum, buzz.

Tree. Ellen announced in her mind what she saw. Shift-hum-buzz.

Squirrel, tree, Robbie, Tree . . . ‘What?’

Ellen turned, increased the zoom and with a churn of her stomach, she saw him again. Robbie. Walking to him, cage in hand, she lifted the goggles from her head. She didn’t needed to use them to see him. More than just the way he sat, knees brought close to his chest, head down, Ellen could see something else, his hurt.

“Robbie?” She whispered in question, setting down the goggles and cage as she stepped right before him.

“Oh, hey, El.” Robbie lifted his head and blinked.

“What are you doing up here?” Ellen asked staring intently at him.

“Solitude. Prayer. You know. Needed some peace.”

“That’s not it.” Ellen, eyes still on him, sat down. “Don’t bullshit me. What happened.”

He locked a stare back at her, then with a swallow and movement of his full lips, Robbie grew a slight pucker and he closed his eyes.

“Robbie, what happened?” Ellen moved closer.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why?”

“Because if I start going off, it will sound like I’m making a soap box plea for someone to feel sorry for me.” He shook his head. “Pity.” In almost a defeated disgust, he tossed out his hand. “And you know what’s disgusting, El? I want that. I need that. And that fuckin sucks. And I don’t . . . I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I understand.” Ellen, still close, read him. She watched for signs, anything that would tell her what set him off.

“So, why are you up here?” Robbie asked.

“I lost an experiment. But shh. Don’t tell Dean. I’ll find it, wanna help?”

Robbie exhaled. “Yeah. I’d love to. What are we looking for?”

Ellen bit her lip.

“What?”

“It’s kind of like, I don’t know, a mutated bunny. That’s it.”

“And no one spotted it. It must not be that mutated.”

"Not really. Her name is Majestic. And I'd appreciate the help."

"Sure." Robbie stood up. "I need to look for a lab creation, slightly mutated or not. I'm glad that's what you're doing. I saw you in town."

"You did?" Ellen questioned. "I was trying to stay out of view."

"I know that. I figured you didn't want Dean to know you were going to the social hall . . ." Robbie swallowed. "Like everyone else."

If Ellen could have raised her hand high in the air and yelled out with the enthusiasm of a thousand dollar jackpot, 'Bingo!' she would of. She saw it in Robbie's eyes, heard it in his voice, and picked up that hard swallow of hurt. Her search in town also informed her of what was happening at the social hall. "The hall?" Ellen laughed. "Well, yeah, I stopped in. But . . ."

"But what?"

"Don't say anything all right? I don't want to start trouble." She shook her head. "There's this dick . . ."

"Dick?"

"Yeah, some little dick, in there. Little guy, like Dean, blonde hair, and he thinks, you know, he's this . . ." Ellen fluttered her lips. "This rock star. He's singing, playing, dancing. He has our women and the lesbians going nuts. For what? All because they're watching a bunch of Texas town Hillbilly women who don't know any better, get all wet . . ."

"El."

"Sorry." She cringed. "But, that's what's happening. These Hillbilly 'I've been without real men and electricity' for so long, haven't any idea what talent is. They're all weird over him, they got our people started thinking he's all that."

"El . . ." Robbie spoke soft. "He is."

"No he isn't."

"Uh, yeah." Robbie nodded. "He sings, dances. Entertains, plays. Is good looking. He is all that."

"He sucks. Andrea hates him. She stormed out, holding her ears. She wants to ban him from the social hall for obscene crotch motions.."

Robbie snickered. "Thanks, but I know you're lying."

"OK, maybe about the crotch thing. But he really isn't that good. And . . . and he's a dick. You know I caught them at the end of the set, I approached him and asked if he knew that old song you always play me to brighten my spirits."

"Thing you do."

"That's the one." Ellen nodded. "He says no. I tell him it's simple. He scoffs and says, then why would I want to do a simple tune." Ellen rambled

faster. "I said, 'hey Pal, a simple song can give a lot of soul, he told me 'little woman go away . . .'"

"El. Stop." Robbie, with a smile, held up his hand. "You never went in the hall did you?"

"No."

"I knew it."

"I heard though."

"And?" Robbie asked.

"Not much. I had no desire to go in there. I knew it wasn't you, and I was upset that Paul allowed this guy to steal the show when it is your band. Like Henry."

"Henry was upset?"

"Very. That's probably why he downed the power to the social hall."

Robbie nearly choked on his laugh. "Henry downed the power to the hall. That's so cool, I have to thank him." he smiled. "But I bet the band played on . . . acoustically."

"Yeah, but you know, every egomaniac will find a way." Ellen said.

"Thanks, El. Thanks a lot. I feel a lot better."

"And the nights not over with." Ellen bent down for the night goggles and cage. "Help me find Majestic and we'll head back to my house. That'll take your mind off of things."

"Oh yeah? Am I getting lucky?" Robbie tried to pass of his tone as serious until Ellen turned around lit up by her goggles and he laughed. "That . . . works for you."

"Thanks, and who knows. I'm winking right now but you can't see." Ellen started to walk.

"Cool. And you know El, you don't even have to hook me up. You just have to help me out, I lost my jerk off hand."

Ellen skid to a stop, and thoroughly enjoyed the ornery smile on Robbie's face. She shook her head. "Let's just find my bunny."

A few steps into his following of Ellen, Robbie thought he heard it, a slight growl, at first he thought Ellen's stomach was making that noise until he spotted it. "Oh, shit."

"What? What do you . . ." Ellen's tone picked up and she flung the goggles off. "Oh!" Excitedly she darted the way of the rabbit. "Baby."

Questioning with an odd look, Robbie silently repeated. "Baby?"

"There you are." Ellen picked up that rabbit. "Say hello to Robbie." She lifted one of Majestic's legs in a wave.

"El, that rabbit has three legs and one eye. How did she get around."

“Very well.” Ellen moved closer.

“Oh my God.”

“What?”

The teeth, Robbie’s eyes looked on the bottom teeth of the rabbit. Fangs that shot upward and didn’t fit into its mouth. “Oh, my God, and El’s she’s been eating.”

With a giggle, Ellen removed a feather from the rabbit’s mouth. “Wanna pet her.”

“Um, no. I only have one arm left and I’m not risking losing that one.”

“You’re funny.” Ellen bent down to the cage.

“No, I’m serious. Has Frank seen it? He will love it.”

“You think?” Ellen locked up the cage.

“Sure.” Robbie joked. “It will be his new pet.”

“That’s a good idea.” Ellen lifted the cage and started to walk. “Domesticate her. I’ll speak to Frank.”

“El.” Robbie hurried to catch her. “I’m joking.” He tossed his hand up in defeat while speaking to himself. “The demented thing is, Frank really would make it his pet.”

^^^

“Ah.” Frank grunted out with relief as he rose from the bed in Josh’s room. “It feels good to be back home, Dean. It has that warm welcome feel here.”

Crossed arms, leaning in the archway, Dean nodded. “You do know this is short lived.”

Frank walked to him. “Sure.” He winked.

“I’m serious, Frank. For numerous reasons, your health. Physical and mental health.”

“Dean, I can understand you wanting to watch my physique. However my mind will be fine.”

“Will it Frank?” Dean asked. “Seriously. You haven’t dealt with it yet.”

“I will.”

“When.”

“I don’t know. When I’m ready. I sort of dealt with it already.”

“No, Frank.” Dean argued. “Leaning over the roof of a building, revolver in hand, aimed, in the just after revelation of your son’s betrayal, is not coming to grips, it’s touching the surface.” Dean saw Frank staring. “You understand?”

“No. I haven’t any idea what you said. And it doesn’t matter. You don’t need to monitor that part of me. No one does.”

“Yeah, Frank. That part effects the physical part.”

“How do you figure?”

“Stress effects your heart. Stress effect your desire . . . your . . .”

“Say it.” Frank stated. “My desire to drink. I’m not gonna drink.”

“You have.”

“I won’t again.” Frank raised his eyebrows. “It’s under control. And speaking of under control, I have that situation in the livingroom to control.”

“Please.”

“I’ll just get some coffee, sit down . . .”

“No. You won’t have coffee.” Dean stopped Frank as he started to leave the bedroom.

“Tea?”

“No, that’s not what I . . .”

“Dean.” Frank snickered. “Tea is so feminine. Wait. Good idea. So is Andrea.”

“That’s not what I mean, Frank. You will watch your caffeine intake.”

“Right.” Frank scoffed and reached into his chest pocket as he moved into the hall. He pulled out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. But before he could light it, Dean took it. “Hey.”

“And these.”

“Dean. You can’t be mothering me like this.”

“Doctoring. Your heart Frank needs to heal.”

“Dean, there is nothing wrong with my . . .” Frank grunted, cringed in pain and with a slight hunch over, grabbed for his own chest.

“Frank. Oh, shit . . .”

Frank stood up straight with a cocky smile. “Got ya. And give me that.” He snatched the cigarette from Dean’s hand, lighting it and walking away before Dean could respond.

Andrea stood from the couch with a sniffle and a wipe of her tears when Frank walked in the room.

Perturbed, Joe shook his head. “Andrea, can we go home.”

“I just need to know, Joe.” She walked to Frank. “Did you think about it and why are you smoking.”

Pausing in confusion, Frank deciphered the odd question. “Yes I did. And Dean said it’s OK.”

"So you're coming home?" Andrea asked.

"Andrea." Joe grumbled and reached for her.

Swiping his hand away, Andrea sniffled again and peeped out the word. "Frank?"

Frank let out a heavy breath. "No. Dean wants me here."

Titled head, with a hurt look, Andrea lifted her hand. "I have a hard time believing this was Dean. I'm capable of monitoring you. Is it me? I come back, you leave."

"Andrea." Joe tried to interrupt.

"Joseph, please." Andrea spun to him, then back to Frank. "I don't understand this decision. Robbie is happy there. You boys should be together. Why can't . . ."

"Christ, Andrea." Joe snapped. "He's a grown man, we had him living in a closet for crying out loud. He wants to move out, he can move out."

Again, Andrea turned to Joe. "You had something to do with this."

"What!" Joe blasted. "I did not. Ask Frank. Frank did I have anything to do with your decision to move in here?"

"Yes." Frank nodded. "Coffee?" After a flash of a grin to Dean, Frank walked to the kitchen.

"Asshole." Joe grumbled.

Andrea gasped. "I knew it. You kicked your own son out of your home in his weakened state?"

"Yes, Andrea. Yes I did. I raised him all those years, I'm pretty much done with him now."

Releasing another gasp, Andrea stormed to the door and flung it open. She stepped back when Robbie stood there. "Well, at least one Slagel loves me. Don't you, Robbie."

"Oh, yeah." Robbie grinned. "You know it."

"See." Andrea lifted her head in a snobbish manner to Joe and tapped Robbie's cheek. "Not too late." She said as she walked out.

"What's wrong with Andrea?" Robbie asked as he walked in, with Ellen behind him.

Grunting, Joe waved out his hand. "She's dejected because Frank moved in here."

Ellen's eyes widened. "What? Frank's in the clinic?"

"No." Joe pointed back with his thumb. "He's in the kitchen getting coffee and before you ask . . ." He pointed to Dean. "Your husband moved him in."

Frank emerged from the kitchen. "It's easier to share our wife that

way. But I refuse Dean to give into kinky sex. Well, maybe not too kinky.”

Dean winced. “Frank.”

“I’m out of here.” Joe walked to the door. “Good luck, and Robert, not too late.”

“Dad.” Robbie scoffed a snicker. “I’m a big boy, I can stay out late.”

“Where do you live?” Joe asked.

“With you.” Robbie answered.

“My house. My rules. One hour.” Joe walked out.

Shaking his head with almost a childish snicker, Frank, carrying his coffee walked to the sofa. “And you wonder why I sought my independence. Better watch the time Robbie, you might get grounded.” Positioned nicely, cigarette in one hand, Frank raised his cup to his lips.

Dean took it. “What did I tell you. And this . . .” He snatched the cigarette. “No smoking. Low caffeine. No exertion. You’re still recovering.”

Robbie laughed. “Better watch Frank, he may ground you.”

“Dean.” Frank stood up. “You will not take what little pleasures I have in life, off of me.”

Ellen stepped forward. “What if Frank did them within reason.”

“Reason?” Dean laughed. “What does Frank ever do with in reason. Monitoring Frank, watching him, is exactly why I moved him in.”

Frank took his coffee and cigarette back. “And to give me Saturday and Sunday nights with you, El. We share you.”

Ellen turned fast to Dean. “Are you dividing me up like a possession now?”

“No!” Dean snapped. “I never said that.”

“Ha!” Frank pointed. “Yes, you did. You said, ‘Frank move in here, I’ll share Ellen with you.’”

“I said no such thing.”

“Yes, you did, Dean. You even said, I’ll share my wife and you can have my bed.”

“Frank . . .”

“Why do you think I was so quick to take you up on your offer? Nope.” Frank halted Dean when he opened his mouth. “You said uh-uh-ah. Made the offer. Can’t take it back now, Dean. Hey wait . . .” Frank sat back down. “It’s Saturday. Dean, did you want the couch?”

Dean’s mouth dropped open. “Where in . . .” He turned to a snickering Robbie. “Oh, you think this is funny?”

“Yeah, pretty much so.” Robbie smiled. “Frank, any more coffee?” Getting a nod, from Frank, Robbie walked toward the kitchen. “And, El,

this is exactly what I needed.” He stopped right before going in. “Although temporarily replacing my jerk off hand for an evening wouldn’t be bad.”

“Great.” Frank shook his head. “Ice age. Meteor, El sleeps with one brother, jerks off the other. “ He peered up to a speechless Ellen. “And don’t think I forgot about that little you and Hal incident.”

“Frank?” Ellen questioned confused. “What is wrong with you. You’re worse than usual. Did something happen to you when you were in that coma?”

“Besides looking younger?” Frank asked. “I’m psychic now. Speaking of psychics. El, did your parents ever lick you as a child.” He ignored the ‘lost for an answer’ look, Ellen gave. “Hey, Dean, how old would you say I look now.”

“Twenty-two.”

“Yes.” Frank grinned.

“And you’re encouraging this?” Ellen questioned. “I don’t mind Frank being here . . .”

Frank whispered ‘because she wants me’

Ellen grumbled. “But, you en . . .”

“Ellen.” Dean halted her before she could argue. “He just came out of the Salicain. Just emerged from a coma. A lot mentally is going on with Frank that he isn’t smart enough to realize yet.”

“Thank you, Dean.” Frank said sincere.

“So, I am going to do what I have to do . . .” Dean continued. “To ensure this man gets well. If I have to knock him back under the salicain, I will. I don’t want to. So I thought, watch him, monitor him, keep him in control.” He looked when Frank laughed. “What’s so funny, Frank?”

“Dean.” Frank laughed again. “In this house, yes, but you can’t keep tabs on me all the time. You’ll never be able to do it.”

“You don’t think?”

“I know.”

“What makes you so sure?” Dean asked.

“I’m Frank.”

“Yeah, well, I’m Dean.”

“OK. So.”

“So?” Dean scoffed. “Frank, I’m smarter.”

“Dean, I’m psychic, and I’m twenty-two years old.”

“You are not.”

“You said.”

Ellen tilted her head. “You did, Dean. I heard.”

"Me, too." Robbie added walking in.

Growling, Dean did a pivot turn in aggravation. "Do you two mind!"

Outwardly, Ellen gasped with dramatics. "Fine. Come on, Robbie, we'll go next door and bother Joe." She moved to the door.

"Do we have to, El. He'll make me stay in."

"It'll have it's perks." With a nod, Ellen showed Robbie her hand and walked out.

Grinning, with an ornery, 'see ya' Robbie followed.

"See Dean." Frank stood up. "Now she'll be employed as his new hand. Oh!" Frank laughed. "Get it. Hand job?"

Dean cringed perturbed. "Frank."

"You scared away our wife, Dean."

"She's not our wife. My wife. My wife."

"You moved me in here to share her."

"I . . ." Dean pointed. "Moved you in here to monitor you constantly."

"Which you can't do."

"You don't think."

"I know. No way. It won't work. You're bluffing."

"What!" Dean laughed in confusion. "What won't work."

"What you're planning on doing."

"How the hell do you know what I'm planning on doing."

"I'm psychic." Frank said proud.

"Yeah, right."

"I know what you're thinking, Dean."

In ridicule, Dean snickered. "Oh, you know what I'm thinking."

"Yep."

"You're a mind reader too."

Frank closed one eye and tilted his head. "I think so. Yeah. Yeah, I am."

"Right, Frank. You can't read a children's book, let alone my mind."

"Dean, I'm telling you."

"And I'm telling you. Fine!" Dean with arrogance, tossed up his hand.

"All right, youthful, psychic, swami Frank." Up with attitude, went Dean's chin. "You're so telepathic. Read my mind, Go on."

"Shh."

Dean laughed. "Read it."

"All right." Frank closed his eyes, then shook his head.

"What?"

"Dean." He said with a snicker. "No matter how much you wish,

you'll never be quite as big as that squash."

Barreled over, Breath lost. At first his eyes went wide, then if Dean could of dropped to the floor he would have. Stumbling back, Dean gave a twitch of his head. 'oh, my God."

"Yep." Frank sniffed. "But don't tell anyone, I can't do it all the time, and I don't want them being subconscious or holding anything back." In arrogance he sniffed and sat back down. "You aren't gonna tell anyone, are you, Dean?"

Still in shock, Dean shook his head. "If this is true, then, no, I won't."

"Good, because it could ruin the weaponry of it. Think about it. The ultimate invasion tool. Frank Slagel Master Mind Manipulator. Oh, yeah."

Dean almost thought, 'oh, no we're all in trouble,' but he didn't feel like being read, so just in case Frank could, he just said it.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

December 17th

Deep, soft, resonating, and heavily sexual, the moan emanated from Frank reverberating off the tile of the bathroom walls with almost an echo effect. After a quiet moment, he repeated the sound.

“Frank.” Dean quipped in an early morning whisper. “Knock it off.”

“I can’t help it, Dean. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had feminine small hands manipulating my chest.”

“For as much as I’d like to feed your ego and tell you, you have great nipples. I can’t.” Dean held the four inch, flat device to Frank’s chest. “This is purely science.”

“But you’re thinking it.”

“I am not.” Dean placed a piece of adhesive on the object center Frank’s chest.

“Yeah, you are. Whoa. Now you’re thinking, how massive I am.”

Dean withdrew his hands. “I am not. You’re not funny.” He brought his hands back to Frank’s chest causing another joking moan. “Quit that. And . . . besides . . .” Dean grabbed another piece of tape. “You promised me last night you wouldn’t make an attempt to read my mind.”

“I did. I’m not.”

“Good.” Dean’s focus was on the object he secured to Frank’s chest.

“But, to be honest. I tried. No luck, though. I kept getting a bunch of letters. Is that a scientific formula.”

“No, Frank.” Dean said calmly. “I keep reciting the alphabet.”

“Oh, no wonder it sounded familiar.”

“No wonder. OK.” Dean exhaled. “Done. Put your shirt on.” He tossed Frank the tee shirt.

“I feel used.”

With a tilted head, Dean just gave Frank a look that said, ‘are you done yet with the comments’

“Dean. Attitude. What’s up with this thing anyhow.”

“That is courtesy of Danny Hoi. My monitoring of you. See this . . .” Dean lifted his own tee shirt and reached for the rim of his jeans.

“I’d rather not.”

Rolling his eyes, Dean ignored the comment. “This beeper, asshole.

This will sound off when your heart rate increases and your respiration increases. You want to be the big security guy overseeing everything, fine. But overseeing is all you'll do. One ounce of excitement, this sounds off to me." Dean turned the beeper on. "Ah." He peered down to it. "Your heart is beating 70 beats per minute."

"How fast am I allowed to let it go?"

"Within reason."

"What's with in reason?"

"Like it makes a difference, Frank."

"Dean. I can keep it in control." Frank said, "Or put it on someone who can."

"Covered." Dean lifted a finger. "You move that, it will alert me. You put that on someone else, I put you under the salicain."

"You keep threatening me with this. How do you think you'll pull it off?"

Dean chuckled. "You have to sleep."

"And you can't sneak into my room without me hearing you."

"True. But Robbie can."

"Ok." Frank nodded an agreement. "Robbie can. Can I go to work. It's pushing five-thirty."

"Yes, you can." Dean reached for the bathroom door.

"Oh, and Dean. Just so you can know how great your hands are . . ." Frank moaned then laughed and opened the door before Dean, only to stop cold.

"What's wrong?" Dean asked.

"It's your Mini Me." Like a giant, Frank hands on hips, peered down to Billy.

Billy with attitude looked up to his father and Frank. "Are you two done with whatever perverse behavior you were doing in the bathroom?"

Frank nodded. "Yeah, we're done. Thanks for asking. Let's go, Dean."

In his squeezing by his father to get in the bathroom, Billy just looked up to Dean with the most disconcerting expression.

"What?" Dean asked.

"I won't make mention of this to my mother . . .yet." The bathroom door closed.

^^^

Dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, Jess Boyens, lowered almost sadly to

sit on his clinic room bed. His eyes gazed past Ellen to the open door and the Beginnings guard that stood there.

"I'm sorry." Ellen whispered. "We tried. We really tried."

"I understand."

"Dean and I kept you in here as long as we could. But Andrea, reviewed your medical records and told Joe there was no need and that you were here far longer than you should of. She . . . she tends to butt in."

"No." Jess, with partially closed eyes, just shook his head. "She's doing her job. That's all. Like him . . ." Jess motioned his head to the guard, then stood up. "A criminal."

"Jess."

"At least I'll be in containment until they oust me." He winked softly. "We'll bond. It was containment or holding. I should just say screw it and go. I want to tell you something, Ellen. I have every intention of camping out close to Beginnings, cold or not, until you . . . until you . . ."

"Get temporarily ousted?" Ellen asked.

"I'll wait. I'll go with you. That way there's no need for anyone to leave Beginnings." Jess locked on the stare Ellen gave him. "You don't trust me to?"

"That's not it, Jess. I trust you out there with me. I know I'll be safe and protected with you. I just . . . I just don't think they're gonna oust you."

Emotionally, Jess snickered. "They're having that meeting today. And you know it has to be urgent if they're having it on a Sunday."

"They're discussing other issues as well. It's not all about you." Ellen stated. "And, you have a good shot. Hal Slagel is arguing for you."

"I appreciate that."

"And for what it's worth. I'm going to argue for you as well."

Robbie stepped into the room with a 'me, too.'

His breath was lost for a second, and Jess turned to Robbie. His voice cracked. "Really?"

"Come on, Jess. Really." Robbie walked in.

"Thank you." Jess extended a hand and shook Robbie's firmly. "What, um, are you doing here? Don't you have services?"

"Yes, yes, I do." Robbie nodded. "In ten minutes. I know I'll see you in containment in all, but I wanted to stop over and let you know that I'll be checking in at that meeting. However . . ." Robbie exhaled. "I do have to get over there. I've avoided Andrea long enough."

Curiously, Ellen looked at him. "Are you two arguing?"

“No. Not at all.” Robbie shook his head. “She asked me to write that new song for her, and I haven’t gotten around to it yet. Sooner or later I’m gonna have to wing it.” he stepped to the door. “Coming to services, El?”

“Uh, um, you know what? I can’t. But I’m there in spirit.” Just as Robbie started to leave, Ellen called to him. “Robbie? By the way, what is the song Andrea’s been pestering you to write.”

“Oh.” Robbie replied. “Just some tune she had in mind. If I end up really writing it, it’ll be good, you’ll have to come and hear it.”

“I will.” Ellen said.

“I did think of a couple titles though to appease her.”

“Really? What are they?”

“Pretty basic, but . . . Either, Jesus is a Futomara or I have a futomara in Jesus. Which do you think?”

Awkwardly, Ellen smiled. “Either one . . .” She cleared her throat. “. . . works.”

“Good.” Robbie grinned and left.

The smile dropped from Ellen’s face while she took on a moment of dramatics. And even though Jess stared inquisitively at her odd behavior, Ellen still heaved out shock and an abundance of religious offense she didn’t even know she had.

^^^

Big Bertha Callahan. Or rather, Sgt. Callahan of the Eastern Caceres Society. She stood a little over six feet tall, a chest as brawny as any man. Her hair was in a butch near buzz cut, and she took an at-ease stance, hands behind her back, knees slightly bent, eyes forward, in the corridor outside of Johnny Slagel’s room.

The doctor peered. “Waiting for you?” He asked George.

“Probably.” George peeked as well, then returned to his conversation with the doctor as they stood by the door. “Now, what is going on?”

“An infection. We expected as much. But it appears to be meningitis.”

“So I shouldn’t be in here.”

“Well, yes and no. Keep your distance, don’t touch, but you can visit. Perhaps some protective garb.”

“I understand.” George checked out a sleeping Johnny. “You have him resting.”

“Yes, we do, we think it is under control, but he . . . he is experiencing some brain clouding.”

“Brain clouding? Is this a scientific wording?” George asked.

"It's a laymen way of telling you he's pretty much in the fog. Isn't remembering much."

"That's a good thing," George said. "At least he won't suffer mentally over the anguish of him leaving my daughter behind. Well . . ." he shook the doctor's hand. "Thank you."

"Good luck with . . ." The doctor gave a motion of his head to Bertha. Grumbling a 'hmm', George stepped into the hall.

Loud and strong Bertha spoke up, as if the president were a hundred feet away. "Sir!"

"Gees." George cringed. "We're in a goddamn hospital. Quiet."

"Sorry . . ." Bertha dropped her voice. "Sorry, sir."

"Walk with me." George began to move down the corridor. "Am I late, I thought I still had time before our strategy meeting."

"No, sir, you are not late." Bertha's voice graveled. "I wanted to let you know I stopped by the residence of *It*."

"I see. So you are attempting to find out what is going on with all the guards stopping by."

"Have it down to three, sir. Three guards. They say they are just visiting *It*. No other reason."

"You don't buy it?"

"No, sir. Regular schedule of stopping by, at odd hours. Never long, briefly, and almost secretively."

"So, how did it go with *It*?"

"Sir, *It* didn't take too kindly to me."

"Well, you know . . ."

"I tried to make it a 'get to you' you sort of thing. But to know avail, *It* insulted me."

"Not out of the ordinary." George said.

"I'd prefer not to go back unless under direct orders. There was a level of uncomfortableness about the insulting."

"Really?" George asked, "What was said?"

"*It* referred to me as a behemoth lesbian and said should I want to further my career instead of playing 'I spy' for you I should take the easier route of . . ." Bertha cleared her throat in nervousness. "Orally copulating your penis . . . Sir."

"Christ." George winced. "All right, though you're a big girl. A really big girl. I won't place you in that position. It was just worth a shot."

"I understand."

"So, clear your mind Callahan." George opened the door to the

stairwell. "We have other things to concern ourselves with, and I need a plan from you."

"On, Sir?"

"On a way, without rising suspicions, to get in touch with Beginnings and a Jess Boyens inside . . ." George slowed down. "He works for us. And it's time he did his job."

^^^

Joe didn't quite understand what the infatuation was about the meteor. Though he himself particularly liked those types of movies, he wasn't one to cause an uproar about showing it at the community day movie. Or at least that was what he figured was the reason four of Frank's security guards approached him about preparing. Thinking he set them straight by telling them to seek out Danny Hoi later, Joe was able to finally make it from the chapel to his office.

He extinguished his cigarette and coughed a little on the smoke. But for the first time, in a while, he noticed the cough. His hands hesitated before opening the door, and he stole a moment. He knew what waited on the other side of that door, and even though it was only a brainstorming pow-wow, it was still a meeting of sorts, and in Beginnings, in Joe's office, a meeting was never simple.

He opened the door greeting those in attendance with the announcement of their names. "Hal, Elliott, Jason . . . Danny. Ah, Mr. Baydee, glad you could stop by." Joe made it to his desk. "You do know you didn't have to."

"Yes, I realize this." Warren spoke politely., "But, I had nothing else planned. I'll not suggest or speak if you wish me only to be silent."

"Nah. You interject. Everyone does. Beside . . ." Joe exhaled. "I hold high hopes that this will be a simple meeting."

Upon the completion of his sentence, a blast of cold air brought in by the fling open of the door, was accompanied by Frank's. "Oh, yeah, I'm back."

"Maybe not." Joe said.

"Sorry I'm late." Frank shut the door.

"Frank." Joe barked. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm on acting council. There's a meeting, I'm here."

"Standing council." Joe corrected. "Standing, meaning, you fill in when someone can't be here."

"Exactly," Frank pulled up a chair. "That's why I'm here."

Hal noticed the perturbed look grow on Joe's face. "Father, may I offer you advice?"

"No." Joe told him.

"Ha." Frank sat down.

"Frank." Joe grumbled.

"Father." Hal spoke up. "If you want to keep the meeting simple, why do you bother arguing with him?"

"Hal." Joe swung a view his way. "No one asked you."

"Yeah." Frank instigated. "No one asked you."

"Frank." Joe snapped. "Why are you here?"

"Standing in. Well . . ." Frank looked down to his position. "Actually, I'm sitting but it holds the same effect."

"Frank." Joe decided to take the calm approach. "You're only to be here when a council member can't. No one is missing."

"What about him?" Frank pointed to Jason.

"What about him?" Joe asked. "Jason's here."

"But he's dead, so in an essence he isn't here."

Hal rolled his eyes. "Good Lord."

"Hal." Joe turned back to Frank. "Jason is not dead you asshole."

"Yes he is." Frank argued.

"Look at him!" Joe pointed at a snickering Jason. "Does he look dead?"

"He is a little pale."

"Frank!"

"Dad!" Frank blasted back. "Maybe not now, but he was Dead. Dead." Frank glared at Jason. "Blown up into a million fuckin pieces. Blown up! I should know."

Hal huffed out. "And how should you know, Frank?"

"Because I saw what was left of him." Frank replied. "A million pieces and I'm not exaggerating."

"Frank . . ." Joe tried to halt him.

"Blown up here, blown up there. A piece of him here. A piece of him there." Frank continued. "I was fuckin scraping his intestines off of Warehouse six for three days."

"Frank!" Joe slammed his hand. "Now was that necessary."

"Dad." Frank scoffed a laugh. "What was I suppose to do, just leave him there like some sort of sick memorial. We didn't leave Robbie's arm, why would we leave . . ."

“Frank.” Joe slammed his hand on his desk again. “Enough! Now open your mouth one more goddamn time and I’ll throw you out myself!”

“But you need me here as standing council.”

“Frank . . .”

“Fine.” Frank lifted his hand. “Mouth shut.”

Hal murmured a ‘for now’

“Shut up, Hal.” Frank snapped. “Oh hey, did I ask you. Did Dad, ever lick you when you were a child?”

“What?” Hal questioned in shock.

“Lick you.” Frank said as if to explain. “Elliott, how about you? Danny? Did your parents . . .”

“Frank, enough of the licking..” Joe held up his hand.

“What?” Frank was baffled. “I didn’t lick anyone.”

Groaning, Joe took a second, calmed down and gave an apologetic look to Warren. “Are you sure you want to stay?”

“Absolutely. Continue.” Warren smiled.

“Thank you. Now. . .” Joe noticed Frank’s hand lifting. “Why are you raising your hand.”

“To be polite and ask a question.”

With a slight whine, Joe shook his head. “What?”

“I would like to discuss killer babies.”

Joe stared for a second, took a breath and nodded. “Since I know nothing will get finished if we don’t cover this topic with you, go on. Discuss.”

Frank smiled. “Thank you. I just need to steal this moment with Ryder, since he’s been running around all day. I didn’t ask him. Why wasn’t there any small predator carnage reported on the kill stats last week? Tracking said there is about fifty up there.”

Joe lifted his hand, with a closed mouth look. “Valid question. Elliott?”

“There were no kills.” Elliott answered. “Actually, I’ve been just keeping them fed and busy until Frank returned. He is the master slayer of Killer babies.”

Nodding with a ‘true’ Frank accepted that.

Danny Hoi saw the horrified and confused look on Warren’s face. “Something wrong?”

“Killer . . . babies?” Warren asked.

Danny shook his head. “Nah. It’s just a term for wild dogs.”

Frank had one more question to ask of Elliott. “No suspected

intrusions? Farming reported eight mutilated chickens.”

Elliott nodded with a lifted finger, “I checked that out. No underground passages dug, and Hector stated he saw a wolf but he darted back out though an open perimeter.”

“A wolf.” Frank repeated. “As in wear?”

Danny laughed. Hal grunted. Joe moaned, and Jason snickered.

“Ex . . . excuse me?” Elliott sought clarification.

“Werewolf.” Frank stated seriously. “You know . . .” He howled.

“Frank!” Joe yelled. “Enough.”

“Dad, please.” Frank held up his hand. “This can be a serious situation. A werewolf in Beginnings, and we haven’t a clue when the next full moon is.”

Jason interjected. “Three days, Frank.”

“Thank you.” Frank replied. “We have three days to prepare and I’m not even sure we have any silver . . .”

“Frank.” Joe had all he could take. “There is no goddamn werewolf running around Beginnings, you moron!”

“How do you know?” Frank asked. “I mean, in the day he wouldn’t look like a werewolf, and . . .”

A mere lift of Joe’s hand halted Frank. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right, Frank. We’ll keep an eye out for werewolves.”

“There’s more than one?” Frank asked.

With a whining, ‘why’ Joe dropped his head to his desk. “I don’t know, Frank.” He mumbled under his arms. “Figure it out while you’re making silver bullets.”

Annoyed and looking it, Hal calmly spoke up. “Dad, do you really think this . . .”

“No, Hal, I don’t think.” Joe snapped. “Stay out of it.”

“If I may.” Warren raised his hand. “Is this the man who was shot in the chest and lay in a coma just over a week ago?”

“I am.”

“Amazing.”

“I . . .” Frank was silenced by Hal’s hand.

“Don’t say it. Please.” Hal beckoned. “Please don’t say it.”

Emerging from the sanctity of his arms, Joe, in a state of normalcy, continued as if nothing was out of the ordinary. He figured that was best. “OK, next. Jason, since you’re the judge, what date did you come up with for Ellen’s ousting.”

The opening of Jason’s mouth was not a release for his response, but

rather a vain attempt to speak over the unison, argumentative voices, of Hal, Frank, Elliott and Danny, screaming out all at once.

An ear piercing whistle by Joe silenced them. He gave a 'sorry' look to Warren, then looked at the guilty four. "What the hell is the matter with you. Nope!" he stopped the singing of complaints. "Danny. You. Since you've been oddly quiet."

"Well." Danny shifted in his seat. "It's not right, Joe. Jason has openly stated that he would suspend Ellen's sentence and you are her father and you're insisting upon it."

"First off." Joe stated. "I would love to have her sentence suspended. It's not me. It's Ellen, and gentlemen, like it or not, it's the community. They decided the sentence. She committed murder, we suspend her sentence what message does that send to the next person that kills? I can guaran-goddamn-tee, if this was the old world, she would pay, no matter who the victim was."

Danny spoke up again. "You're using her as an example. The community needs her. You can't kick her out for up to two months."

"How many times do I have to say it?" Joe asked hard. "It's not me. It's Ellen."

"Don't give her a choice." Elliott added. "I mean, what choice will she have if Jason suspends her sentence."

"If I may again." Nervously, Warren raised his hand. "I see president Slagel's point. And if his daughter insists on paying her punishment, she should. And I see Sgt. Ryder's point. If the sentence is suspended, she has no choice. However, if the community sentenced her, would it be fair to them for Jason to overturn their decision without putting it to a vote? Ask her home, ask her peers. But be fair about it. When getting their vote make sure you state a crime was committed, And ask them to judge their decision based on whether or not they believe the needs of the community and the short term loss of this woman, outweighs the severity of the crime."

Silence.

Joe looked back to Hal, Frank, Danny and Elliott. "I'll go with that and set up a vote. Anyone object?" He didn't receive an objection. "Jason?"

"I'm good with that, Joe." Jason answered.

"Ah." Joe sighed out. "Feel the silence. OK, next. The Jess Boyens situation."

"Out." Frank spoke up.

"Out." Jason reiterated.

"Out." Danny stated strongly. "No question in my mind."

“Wait a second.” Hal’s voice raised. “You can’t oust the man.”

From his paper, pencil in hand, Joe looked up. “And why not, Hal. He’s a traitor.”

“He is no such thing.” Hal argued. “He has been a valuable commodity to this community. He used the society and their trust in him, to get away from them. He told us that.”

“Hal.” Joe seriously looked at him. “His job was to be one of us, how in God’s name can we trust he isn’t using another line. He goes.”

“No.” Hal argued loud. “Then if you oust him, I’ll take him in New Bowman! End of story.”

Joe’s arm swung forward in a point. “You! Will do no such thing. Lest you not forget New Bowman is a province under Beginnings, and under Beginnings rule. He leaves here, he leaves there. You even think about undermining my authority, and son, or no son, I will remove you from your office.”

Hal locked a stare with his father, his words cool, yet arrogant. “So I am to assume, Beginnings rules are final and the only one who is allowed to bend them is . . . you.”

Hard went Joe’s hand on the desk as he rose up.

“Oh, yeah.” Frank whispered. “Fight.”

In the heat of the moment, timing and tension just right, the office door opened, Ellen and Robbie walked in.

“Are we too late?” Ellen asked.

Joe just wanted to scream. “What in God’s name are you two doing here! Out!”

“Joe.” Ellen stepped in. “We came to argue Jess’ case.”

“Dad,” Robbie said. “You can’t kick him out.”

“There is no argument. He goes.” Joe stated strong. “Where is the confusion on this. . .” He turned around to a gazing out Frank. “And don’t say anything right now, Frank.”

“Dad.” Hal stood. “Give me time to present a viable plan of argument to you.”

“Hal. For what? What in God’s name is wrong with you?” Joe argued. “The man openly admitted working for the society,”

“No.” Hal shook his head. “He openly admitted to agree to working for the society.” He ignored the moans. “Listen to me. I can smell a good person.”

Frank let out a ‘ha’, “I can smell a smelly person.”

Through his clenched teeth Hal glared at Frank. “Quiet. Dad. We can

use him.”

“Use him?” Joe questioned.

“Use him against the society. Test his allegiance to us, if we must, but use him. He is our opportunity.” Hal argued passionately. “If he is faithful to us, let’s not send him back to the society to work for them, let’s set it up to send him back to work for us.”

Joe looked in silence to his son, thinking about the words told to him. “I will give that thought. But thought only. Jess stays in containment until I make my decision.”

“Thank you.” Hal sat back down.

“Robbie. Ellen. Out.” Joe pointed.

Ellen smiled at Robbie. “We were victorious.”

“We did good.” Robbie reached for the door. “Good thing for Jess we came up.”

“Wait.” Frank turned in his chair. “Robbie?”

“Yeah, Frank?” Robbie hesitated in his leaving.

“Did Dad ever lick you as a child?”

“Oh, sure all the time. Let’s go, El.” Robbie opened the door and walked out with her.

“Aw.” Frank whined as he turned back around in his chair. “I knew it.” He noticed the look Hal gave him. “What Hal?”

“What is the matter with you?” Hal asked. “Licked?”

Slowly, Joe walked around his desk. “Frank, I have had all I can take about this licking stuff.”

“But, Dad.” Frank said. “You never licked me as a child. I was deprived. You were suppose . . .”

Joe’s palms landed with a slap onto Frank’s cheek and, leaning forward to his son, Joe delivered to Frank’s forehead the end to the licking discussion. “There. Happy? Now enough of the licking shit.”

Hal’s mouth dropped open in disgust. “That . . . was foul.”

Frank’s head bobbed side to side. “I don’t feel any different. Maybe it will sink in later.”

“Maybe it will.” Joe returned to his desk. “All right. The next . . .”

“What about the meteor?” Frank asked.

Joe could barely speak. “What meteor, Frank.”

“The deadly, earth shattering meteor Dean said is sailing to earth.”

“Holy shit!” Danny Hoi exclaimed. “A meteors coming?”

“Yep. Big one too” Frank nodded. “I had a psychic vision and Dean confirmed it.”

Hal exhaled loudly in annoyance. "Dad, can we not do anything about this man right . . ." Sharply Hal turned his head to the high pitch, out of control, but low volume hyena style laughing. "Elliott, you find amusement in this."

Hurriedly, Elliott shut up. "No, Captain."

In a hand signal that all but said, 'I have it under control' Joe looked to Frank. "Frank, we'll deal with the meteor later. We still have time, I don't believe it's arriving until, when Jason?"

"February." Jason answered.

"February. See? Lots of time." Joe winked. "OK, if we can move on to farming. I'd like to discuss since Mr. Baydee is here, about winter workers and distributing."

In Frank's mind, he sang the word 'boring'. Sinking back into his chair, a bright idea hit him. Farming was something his intellectual input wasn't needed on, and it was the perfect opportunity to practice mind reading. After all, there was a group of men in the same room, and one of them was bound to think something really cool about him.

Hoping to hear perhaps how strong he was, or how bright he was, Frank sat back and concentrated.

The voices of the men hit Frank's mind. *Farm. Lake. Deer. Massive chest. Why now. Dumb.*

"Huh?" Frank shook his head with a twitch when the voices all merged together. Maybe he wasn't trying hard enough, singling out a certain person. So trying again, only even harder, Frank closed his eyes.

It barreled him like a wave, throwing his equilibrium off and sending him immediately dizzy. No longer was it just words, but partial sentences, overlapping, fast and strong.

How much longer . . . massive chest . . . chicken sounds good . . . reversing the molecular . . . I wonder if Hal is gay . . . too much on my mind to . . . get me out . . . hard buttocks . . . chicken . . . blood . . . sequence progression . . . heart attack . . . I hope no one smelled that . . . attractive features . . . why am I here . . . Frank sucks . . . God, not right now . . .

"UH!" loud Frank screamed and stood up.

"Frank." Joe nearly startled from his chair, hurried and looked at his panicked son.

"Uh." Frank swung a point toward Warren "You. Uh. Hal. I don't suck." With another loud, 'Uh', Frank bolted from the office.

Joe stared for a second in the after quiet of the just slammed door, then he shrugged. "OK, where were we?"



The squealing monitoring alarm on Dean's vital signs beeper, blared with a vengeance. Flapping open his lab coat he peered down and silenced the noise. "Goddamn it, Frank. A hundred and twelve beats per minute. What the hell are you doing?" Turning to find Frank and stop him, Dean didn't have to go too far.

Frank flew in. "Dean!"

"Frank. What the hell are you doing? Your heart rate is out of control."

"Sorry." Frank caught his breath. "But I was running here."

"Why? Was someone chasing you?"

Frank laughed. "Dean, please. Would I run from someone. No I'm running from myself."

"What?" Dean checked out the beeper. "Your slowing down, good."

"No, actually I ran real fast."

"Your heart, Frank. Your heart."

"What about it?"

Dean grunted. "Forget it. What happened?"

"Oh fuck, Dean. It was fucked up." Frank pulled out a stool and sat down. "My fuckin head went . . . and I thought . . ." He tilted his head. "And then. Fuck."

Dean blinked several times. "I haven't any idea what you said."

"All right. I was in the meeting, and it got boring, so I decided, you know just in case someone was thinking about me, to eavesdrop."

"You were mind reading."

"Yeah." Frank nodded. "And Dean, I couldn't control it. It blasted me. Like ten fuckin radios all . . . well maybe not ten, more like four, or rather five, I don't know. I'm confused, but I couldn't decipher any of it. Just bits and pieces. I got dizzy. And man what people think."

"Frank." Calmly, Dean approached the counter. "What did I tell you last night? You have to learn how to use this new gift. You don't know how. That's why it hit you. Now think, this doesn't happen all the time, right?"

"No. Actually if my mind is occupied, I can't fuckin hear what someone is thinking. Like if I'm listening to someone speak, or I'm thinking or talking."

"This is a start." Dean said. "We have direction. We can do this."

"We?" Frank asked.

"We." Dean stated. "I mean, I am the scientist. And if you want to be Frank Slagel Master Mind Manipulator you have to work up to it."

"But how can you help me. Do you read minds."

"Oh, yeah, sure." Dean lied. "Been doing it for years. How do you think I got so smart."

"Whoa. Did you steal it from people."

"You can say that."

"Like a vampire." Frank snapped his finger. "Oh, man, an intellectual vampire."

"Frank."

Very seriously, Frank slowly shook his head. "Can it get any more weirder in Beginnings, Dean. Ice age. Meteor. Werewolves, vampires."

"Possibly, we could . . ." Dean stopped himself. Instead of blurting out another unnatural phenomenon, or disaster scenario, Dean didn't. The last thing he wanted to do was add another item on to the Frank laundry list of things to worry about. "Back to the mind reading. I think, we should devise some sort of exercises. Would you be up for that."

"Sure." Frank agreed. "As long as it doesn't get out of control."

"Hopefully, working with you it won't. You'll be able to pick and choose the minds you hear."

"On serious note, Dean."

Dean's attention was caught. Even Frank's wording was off. "What's wrong?"

Frank swallowed. "I did hear someone's thoughts pretty clearly today. And I have to tell you . . . despite what my father says, it's bothering him Dean. It's really on his mind."

The solace of the subject hit Dean hard. "I figured it would. And you know Frank, time is so important right now. I think, since you confirmed it's worrying Joe, I think you and I should both go confront him with this. Right now. And get him to take some action about his health. Do something."

"Can something be done?" Frank asked and cleared his throat.. "I mean, my mother told me my father is dying."

"As painful as this is going to sound . . ." Dean's voice dropped. "He is Frank."

Frank's eyes closed.

"But not if I have anything to do with it. If he lets me try. We have to get him to let me try."

“Do you think it will work?”

“We can hope.” Dean replied. “And . . .” He exhaled. “I think it’s time to slam your father with a little hope.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when I tried to talk to your dad before, he threw mind over matter in my face. He tossed at me, Elliott Ryder. Now, for my argument . . .” Dean smiled. “I’m tossing Elliott Ryder right back at him.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ellen had never seen bowel movements quite so large come from a rabbit. Usually in her cage cleaning , she just swept up those little fecal pellets. But she needed a shovel when it came to Majestic's waste.

It was a dirty job, but someone had to do it. And knowing where Majestic had been, Ellen rather it be her instead of Dean, just incase something that would give away that Majestic escaped, would poke through. And it did.

Face covered with a scented mask, Ellen moved the waste product from the cage's bottom. In her scraping, it rolled through a smear and became visible.

"What the hell?" Ellen peered closer. "That can't be what I think it is." Needing to take a better look, she grabbed for a new pair of gloves, and into the substance she reached. "It is." Her eyes widened when she lifted up what clearly was half of a little finger. "Oh, Majestic. What did you do?" Just as panic was about to hit her, it dawned on Ellen. Surely if Majestic took a bite out of someone's hand in Beginnings, she would have heard about it at the clinic. Smiling at that, Ellen then noticed the nail on the partially digested pinky. Long, filed almost to a weapon's point. "Shit. Oh, My God." Holding that little finger seemingly belonging to a man, Ellen spun left to right in a panic. "Oh, shit. Oh my God. I have to show this to . . ." Walking with the body part in her hand, she stopped when, in the rabbit's defecation remains, she saw the semi shininess of it. Reaching quickly for a petri dish, Ellen laid the finger in there, then went to retrieve the shining object.

Lifting it from the feces, she wiped it clean enough to see what it actually was. An arrowhead. Holding it in her hand only confirmed her guess where the finger came from. After initially wondering how Majestic caused herself no internal damage, Ellen tossed the arrowhead in the petri dish with the finger, took off her gloves and raced from the cryo lab.

^^^

Loud laughter, almost boyish and silly flowed from the other side of the door at Frank's security office. Holding that petri dish, Ellen knocked.

The laughing slowed down, and Elliott called out, 'come in.'

"Ellen." Elliott stood up from behind Frank's desk. "Nice to see you."

"Hey, El." Robbie sat across from Elliott and waved.

"Where's . . . where's Frank?" Ellen asked.

"He's with Dean." Elliott answered.

"Again." Robbie added.

Ellen whined. "Aw, what happened to the good old days when they hated each other and never spoke." So bothered appearing, she held back her bangs. "If he's not working, who's running security?"

Looking at Elliott, Robbie burst into laughter.

After mouthing the word, 'thanks' to Robbie, Elliott smile politely to Ellen. "I am. Frank is merely overseeing. I'm still filling in. Why? What's wrong?"

"Well, I have a major security problem Frank can help me with."

"Containment?" Elliott asked.

"No something else." Ellen replied.

Robbie, in a fake serious, nodded. "She needs only Frank. Which must mean it has to do with an ice age, walking dead, meteor or werewolves."

Elliott caught himself laughing, but stopped.

Ellen looked confused. "What are you guys laughing about?"

Robbie shook his head. "Nothing. Just Frank."

Ellen gasped. "That's wrong. You shouldn't laugh about Frank. Now I'm pissed . . ." She stormed to the door. "Assholes."

"Oh, my God." Elliott wisped out in shock.

Ellen stopped. "What?"

"You called me an asshole. Ellen . . ." Elliott spoke sincere. "I apologize if I offended you. You never called . . ."

"Elliott." Robbie stopped him and stood up. "We're allowed to offend Ellen every once in a while. But . . . you're right. El, I'm sorry. What can we help you with."

"Don't laugh." Ellen walked to the desk and set down the petri dish. She lifted the lid. "This."

Still by the door, Elliott sniffed. "What's that smell?"

Robbie shrugged. "Don't look at me. El?"

"What?" She said annoyed. "Are you two going to take a look."

Both Elliott and Robbie walked back to the desk and took their seats.

Just as Elliott settled, he froze. "Shit. Is that?"

"A finger yes." Ellen answered. "And an arrowhead, partially."

Robbie grabbed for the finger. "Looks savage."

Elliott grabbed the arrowhead. "Hand carved." He peered up to Ellen.

“Where did you get these?”

“In Majestic’s rabbit poop.”

Out from both of their hands at the same time ejected the finger and arrowhead. The objects landed on the desk.

Elliott wiped his hand on his pants. “Majestic the rabbit.”

“Killer rabbit.” Robbie corrected.

“Why is living in Beginnings like living on the sci-fi channel?” Elliott asked.

Robbie pointed to Ellen. “Here’s half the reason. The other mad scientist is running around with my brother.”

“And speaking of which.” Ellen pulled a glove from her pocket, put it on and lifted the finger and arrowhead. She put them in the petri dish and closed lid. “I have to find him. You guys aren’t getting this, are you. Knowing Majestic’s digestive system, she ingested these objects yesterday. Which means, yesterday she ate part of a savage. Where did she get the savage from?”

Robbie stood up in a rush at the same time as Elliott. “Why don’t I pull a scan of the hillside where we found Majestic yesterday. You Elliott, find Frank and my dad and brief them.”

“Got it.” Elliott hurried to the door. “Ellen, come with me and bring your rabbit waste.” He opened the door for Robbie, allowed him to leave first, then halted when Ellen wasn’t with him. “Ellen?”

“No, you go on.” She told him.

“They’ll want to see proof of our suspicions, can I have those?”

“Nope.” Ellen put the petri dish in her pocket. “Just tell them, they’ll believe you.”

“I don’t understand. You had no problem showing us.”

“You aren’t Joe. Joe can’t know about Majestic and her carnivorous instincts. He’ll get pissed. And he’ll find out when he asks where I got them and I say in her poop.”

“OK.” Elliot nodded. “How about this. Bring the finger and arrowhead, and we’ll tell Joe that you found them in . . . killer baby waste.”

“Oh, good idea.” Ellen walked to the door. “Wait.” She stopped. “What if Joe wonders why I was digging through killer baby poop?”

“Trust me, Ellen,” Elliott escorted her out of the office. “When it comes to you and Dean, Joe won’t even try to ask why.”

^^^

“Defective glass?” Joe spoke soft to himself, then chuckled with a shake of his head as he looked down to the paperwork sprawled across his desk. “I don’t know what you want with the defective glass particles, Ben from fabrics, but . . .” Joe signed the requisition. “You can have them.” It was an odd request, then again, to Joe, Ben was an odd man. But he supposed defective glass wouldn’t be the only odd request in the ‘useless requisition’ pile he finally made time to go through.

Getting to the next requisition, Joe heard the knock at his office door. “Come in.” Above his half square glasses he raised his eyes to see Frank open the door. “Frank.” Joe returned to looking at his paperwork. “I’m doing useless requisitions. If this is about Hal, killer babies, ice age, meteors or werewolves. Save it.”

“It’s not.”

“Then come . . .” Joe looked up. He felt the tension of the silence. His eyes shifted in almost an angry curiosity when he saw Dean closing the door. “. . . in. What’s going on?”

“Dad.” Frank stepped closer and sat down. “I need to talk to you.”

“About?” Joe’s eyes were still on Dean as Dean took a seat.

“You.” Frank answered his voice almost cracking as he did. “About you.”

Joe turned his views to Frank. “What about me.”

“It’s about your . . .”

“Frank.” Joe stopped, looked quickly to Dean, then back to Frank. “I’m busy.”

“You’re not too busy for this.” Frank stayed firm. “This is important.”

“I doubt that.” Joe returned to his paperwork.

“Stop this.” Frank reached forward and snatched the pencil from Joe’s hand. “I think you know why I’m here.”

“No, Frank, I don’t.”

“I need to speak to you about . . . about what’s going on with your . . . with your health and . . .”

“Goddamn it!” Joe’s hand slammed down and he stood in a rage, eyes locked on Dean. “You little shit. I don’t give a rats ass what ethics you breach with your . . .”

“Dad.” Frank stood up.

“Research.” Joe continued loud and angry. “But you have breached a confidence I placed in you. And you were wrong! Wrong! You had no right . . .”

“Dad!” Frank yelled. “Dean didn’t tell me!”

"Then how the hell did you find out!" Joe screamed back.

"Mom."

"What?" Joe lost his breath.

"When I was in the coma, mom came to me and told me. Mom."

Frank spoke soft.

On to the edge of the desk, Joe grabbed. "Your mother?"

"Why are you doing this?" Frank stood close to his father. "Don't ignore this."

"I'm not ignoring this, Frank. I'm not."

"Dean says you are."

Joe spun a look at Dean. "You need to stay out of this."

"No, Joe." Dean stood as well. "No I don't. You won't listen to me."

"That's because you have nothing to say."

"Bullshit." Dean argued. "I have plenty to say. If you would just hear me out."

"Hear what, Dean?" Joe questioned with edge. "Hear what's going on. I know what's going on. I'm not a dumb man."

"Then quit acting it." Dean snapped back.

"Excuse me?" Joe tilted his head.

"You heard me." Dean stood strong. "And you will not leave this office until you hear everything I have to say."

Joe's jaw twitched. "What? You two come up here to gang up on me? Do you think it makes a goddamn difference to me. I'm not a guinea pig, I'm not a lab creation, and I have no plans to sit back and be your next shot in the breeze, Dean. Sorry. I have too much to do." Joe moved to leave.

Frank stepped before Joe, blocking him. "So does Elliott Ryder. And you know what? He's got time now to do it. He didn't before."

"That's right, Joe." Dean added. "Elliott was in latent stage of Leukemia. He is in remission."

"Elliott Ryder." Joe said with passion. "Is a thirty-four year old man, strong as an ox and fit as a horse."

"And you, Joe." Dean spoke up. "Are a sixty year old man, strong as an ox and fit as a horse."

"Key word, Dean." Joe lifted a finger. "Sixty. I'm sixty years old."

"It doesn't make a bit of difference." Dean tossed his hands up. "Don't you see? You are thinking back to the old world ways of this. This isn't the old world, Joe. We are no longer bound by laws of one righteous group or another. We can exceed any boundaries placed before us because manmade laws no longer prohibit where or how far we take medicine. We

can be successful . . .” Dean raised his voice as Joe started to leave. “And we are. What are you afraid of?”

Joe stopped and spun hard, raging back at Dean. “I am not afraid! You hear me! Why aren’t you getting this. This is my fight!”

Frank pointed hard. “Then fight!”

“I am! In my own way.” Joe’s voice was sharp and hard. “This is my life! My choice! And if I choose quality of life, over quantity, so be it! You, or you, have no say so in the matter! This is how I choose to deal with it! And this conversation is over, now and forever. You will never, you hear me, never, approach me, or bring up the fact to me again that I have cancer!”

Frank’s eyes did a slight shift and the word with shock, flowed out. “El.”

Hurriedly, Joe turned to see Ellen. She stood by the door, shoulders moving up and down rapidly, eyes wide, mouth dropped.

“Son of a bitch.” In a storming mode, Joe grumbled and walked out of the office.

Ellen couldn’t budge at that instant. She heard Elliott whisper her name, heard Dean and saw Frank’s mouth move. But a rush of blood took over her, and entire body trembling, Ellen walked inside. Almost in a shocked stumble she reached for Joe’s desk and grabbed on to it for support. Her legs felt like Jelly, and they buckled some causing her to grip even tighter.

“El.” Frank laid his hands firm on her shoulders.

Head slightly lowered, Ellen slowly turned her head toward Dean. “Joe?”

Dean’s eyes closed.

Nightmare confirmed. A sickening vibration shot through Ellen’s being, twisting her stomach and ricocheting up to her throat. She choked on the abundance of emotions that tidal waved her at that moment. In closing her eyes, a single tear rolled down Ellen’s cheek and her voice whimpered as she dropped her head forward. “Joe.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The growl of Frank's inner rage and frustration echoed loud, over and over, through the thick wooded area. His foot, in his scream, slammed down to the hard ground causing an upward swosh and cloud of snow laced frozen leaves.

Elliott apprehensively, yet doing the task handed to him, spoke soft. "Frank, this isn't helping you."

"Yes, it is." Frank trudged on, M-16 in hand.

"No. It isn't." Elliott stayed close. "Tracking spotted movement. I brought you up here thinking this would help your mind, calm you, it isn't. Dean gave me a tranquilizer gun for you."

Frank stopped, spun and raged back to Elliott. "Let me tell you something Ryder. Use it on me, go on. But I will fuckin kill you when I wake up."

Elliott kept a lock stare on Frank. "It won't work with me, Frank. I'm not Dean. I'm not one of your men. I don't scare easily."

"Fuck you." Frank shoved Elliott back, turned and started walking again.

Elliott caught his footing, shook his head and followed.

"What are you!" Frank yelled "My fuckin spy? You don't think I can handle this!"

"I know you can handle this, Frank." Elliott moved faster to catch up. "I'm here to handle you! To make sure you stay in control."

"I am!" Frank stopped again.

"You are not!" Elliott stood right before him. "Dean informed . . ."

"Fuck Dean."

"He'll stick you under the Salicain, Frank! Is that what you want! For the sake of your health, you need to calm down!"

"You want me calm?" Frank asked tilting his head.

"Yes."

"Fine." Into his shirt Frank reached, and after a ripping sound he pulled out the monitor. "Fine." He grabbed Elliott, yanked out the top of his tee shirt, extended his hand in and slammed the monitor to Elliott. "Be calm for me."

Elliott exhaled in frustration. "That's not the answer."

"There is no answer. I'm mad. I'm pissed. My father is blowing this

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off. Blowing us off. I can't say shit!" Frank complained loud and deep as he veered right. "I can't talk about it to him, to my brothers. He won't do jack-shit about his health. And where! In the *fuck* is that fingerless fuckin savage!"

Music to his ears was the scream of a war call Frank hadn't heard in a while. Shrill, loud and piercing, the vocal warning preluded the jumping emergence of the savage from the trees.

The feat of the savage barely hit the ground when Frank lifted his weapon, pumped the chamber and fired a single shot into his forehead, blasting him back fifteen feet. "Fuck!" Frank screamed, tossed the weapon over his shoulder, and stormed off again. "He wasn't even a fuckin challenge for me!"

Elliott lifted his hand in defeat, speaking softly to himself. "Who is?" After shaking his head, he watched Frank move further away and as he did, he seemingly took out all his anger on any object he passed. "This has to stop. He has got to calm down." Elliott reached behind his back. "I'm sorry, Frank . . ." He raised the tranquilizer gun. "I'm doing what was asked of me." After a good aim, Elliott fired.

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Dean's hand rubbed up and down the arch of Ellen's back as she leaned with sadness, hands to her face, on the clinic counter. His eyes shifted up to the series of x-rays that hung on the light board. "Come here." He gripped to her shoulder.

Ellen lifted some, but turned directly into Dean.

"I'm sorry, El." He wrapped his arms around her. "I am really sorry."

"It's my father, Dean." Heavily she exhaled. "He's not just Joe. He's my father."

"I know this." His finger slipped to a tightened grip under Ellen's hair and he laid his lips firmly to her head.

"I'm still trying just to understand this."

"If I could have told you sooner . . ."

"No, I understand." letting out a breath, Ellen wiped her cheek and stepped back, trying to regain her composure.

"I'm only sorry you had to find out the way you did. Frank and I were just trying to talk to him."

"You told Frank?" Ellen asked.

"No. His . . . his mother did." Dean saw the curious look on Ellen's face. "When Frank was in limbo his mother came to him and told him."

"You believe him."

"Oh, yeah." Dean nodded with a heavy breath. "I believe him. He . . . He was doing good with it." Dean winked. "I told him it didn't sink in yet. Nothing had sunk in yet. Joe, Johnny, nothing. Frank didn't buy it. He thought he was emotional superman or something."

"Not when it comes to his family."

"I know this." Running his hands through his hair, Dean paced some. "And I'm worried about him, El. I know he had it in his mind, all he had to do was talk to Joe. He wasn't expecting Joe to be so adamant towards him. And when you ran out of the office, I swear I saw something snap in him. It was in his eyes, his face. Something snapped."

"Is that why you radioed Elliott?"

"Yes, to get him, calm him. Because I very well couldn't tell Robbie why Frank was out of control. And . . . thinking about it . . ." Dean looked down to his beeper. "I had this silenced but it looks like he calmed down."

"Well, that's a good . . ." Ellen peered past Dean. "Elliott?"

In the doorway Elliott stood, he flashed an obviously nervous smile. "My apologies for the intrusion, but may I speak to the male Dr. Hayes, please?"

After a quick glance to Ellen, and look that conveyed his short return, Dean stepped into the hall pulling the door closed. "What's wrong?"

"Frank went out of control."

"Nonsense. See." Dean showed the beeper, when he raised his eyes he saw the monitor in Elliott's hand. "Aw, damn it. How bad was he?"

"Like you had suspected. I believe Frank is understanding the reality of all that is, excuse my use of language, fucked up right now in his life."

A little shocked was the look Dean gave Elliott over the mellow man's use of language, but he had to agree. "He was that bad?"

"Yes."

"Did you use the tranquilizer on him?"

"I did."

Dean heaved out a breath of relief. "That's good."

"He's sleeping nicely in a jeep outside of the security building, I didn't want to rouse suspicion so I left him up there. I have to tell you, that man is one very heavy man. I do want you to check on him though."

"I'll do that, you go on up. There's something I want to get."

"Yes, sir." Elliott nodded. "I'll be up there waiting."

“Oh, and Elliott.” Dean spoke out when Elliott started to leave. “Nothing about this to . . .” He pointed to the lab, got an agreement from Elliott, then went back inside.

“Everything all right?” Ellen asked.

“Oh, yeah, sure.” Dean nodded. “I have to aid Elliott with something, will you be all right?”

“Yes. I want to look at these some more.” Ellen pointed to the x-ray then noticed Dean in the medicine locker. “What are you . . .” She stepped closer. “Bunny Thorazine. That’s a strong dose.”

“I know. Elliott thinks he found a killer baby trapped and I want to knock it out for enough time to set it free,” Dean set it in his medical emergency bag on the counter.

“That’s nice of you, Dean.”

“Yes.” Dean smiled. “I’ll be back.” Kissing Ellen on the cheek, he took a second to give an encouraging look, then swiping up his medical emergency bag he walked out.

Ellen returned to the x-rays. Perhaps something inside of her was hoping she’d see something different. Anything different. They were the same as when Dean put them on the board to show her and nearly twice as heartbreaking to view, because she stood alone.

The lowering of her head and breathy expiration of sadness, lasted only for a second. She halted every minuscule bit of moving and breathing the moment she heard the clearing of a throat.

Whispering out, ‘Joe’. Ellen turned around.

“Hey.” Joe cleared his throat again, and closed the door. “You don’t mind if I . . .”

“No. No. Please.”

Joe gave a short smile, and hands in pockets, he walked to Ellen. “You’re not . . .” Joe’s hand smoothed over the counter and he tilted his head with one closed eye. “You’re not mad at me, are ya?”

Ellen could only close her eyes and exhale a sound of her ‘no’ answer as she stepped right to Joe and placed her arms around him as tight as she could. “Joe.”

“I’ll take it by this hug that you aren’t.”

“Oh, God, Joe. No . . .” Ellen whispered as she separated from the embrace. “Why in the world would I be mad at you?”

“A few reasons. One, your not knowing. Another, my reaction in the office. And the big one, my reaction and attitude towards this all.”

Ellen shook her head. “Not one of those is a valid reason to be angry.”

"Not even my choice?"

"Not even that." Ellen spoke soft.

Joe exhaled. "I'm glad. But I suppose I'll at least get an argument from you."

"Do you want one?"

"An argument? No."

"Then you won't get one." Ellen said. "It's your choice, Joe. I understand why you're making that decision. Who am I to get mad at you, to force your hand, any of that. And you have to understand Frank's reaction."

"Oh, yeah, I do." Joe nodded. "Frank's my kid. My boys are the most emotionally charged men I know. They may be strong, but I have this feeling they won't handle this. That's why I didn't want them to know. And Dean . . ."

"Dean has his own inner battle and prejudice against can . . . about it." Ellen lifted her hand. "He lost his mother to it."

"I understand that. Maybe that's why he's the way he is about it all." Joe shrugged. "He's brilliant, Ellen. But he fails to see that science can be fallible. His optimism at times contradicts the scientist that is supposed to be a realist. It's hard to hear what he says, because Dean has an 'I can save the world' attitude at times."

"Dean can save the world, Joe." Ellen spoke serious. "I truly, one hundred percent have faith in that. And if we were ever given the opportunity to go back in time and give him the knowledge of the plague, the knowledge he has now, Dean *would* save the world."

"You're right." Joe smiled almost sadly. "So . . ." He looked to the light board. "Is this me?"

Ellen nodded. "Yeah, Dean was showing me these and telling me what he wanted to do."

"Feel like explaining what I'm looking at."

"Sure." Ellen lifted a pen and held it to the x-ray. "This is your left lung. Up here, the upper lobe. See these four spots." Ellen tapped the pen to each spot. "Here and here are larger, than these two. Four lesions. By this . . . well, they look like inner surface lesions."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, it's not imbedded deeply in the lung. Without a full body scan it's impossible to tell, but Dean believes it is confined to this area. What Dean wants to do is remove the lesions from the lung to prevent any further spreading. Hit the operation site of the lung with a almost skin graft

of fresh cells. He wants to use the healing accelerator we used on Frank. Which, worked tremendously. Let the lung heal, then hit you with milder treatments like we gave Elliott. Monitor you and see.”

“What do *you* think?” Joe asked.

“Well, Dean says . . .”

“Stop.” Joe lifted a hand to her. “You gave me the run down of what Dean wants to do. What Dean thinks. What Deans says.”

“Joe. Dean is the mind here. He’s the brains.”

“He’s not you, Ellen. What . . . do *you* think.”

“Why . . .” Ellen’s breath escaped her for a moment as she locked eyes with Joe. “Why do you want to know what I think?”

“My God, Ellen. I know what Dean is. And I know what you are. You are my daughter. And I don’t give a rats ass how intelligent the man is, he speaks through his optimism and arrogance. You . . . you’ll speak to me through your heart. No matter what I have ever projected, know I have never, *never* lacked faith in your ability. When it comes this . . .” Joe pointed to the x-rays. “More than anyone on the face of this planet, I trust you.”

Ellen’s mouth parted and her lips quivered. “I love you, Joe.”

“I love you too, Kiddo.” He put his arm around her. “Now . . .” He turned her to face the board, then kissed her on the cheek. “Give it to me straight. *You* tell me, what should I do.”

^^^

In their near sprinting walk back to town, Elliott handed Dean the tranquilizer gun. “I don’t understand what happened to him.”

“Are you sure he was out?” Dean asked as he loaded another chamber in the gun.

“Yes.”

“Where did you hit him.”

“I wanted to avoid the upper torso so I hit him in the rear.”

“We should have gotten three hours out of that.” Dean paused to make sure the tranquilizer gun was loaded correctly. He handed it to Elliott. “This one should knock him out solid for an hour at least, then I can get him with the Salicain if he refuses to put the monitor back on.”

“We’ll have to first find . . .”

“Ryder!” Frank’s voice boomed across the main street of Beginnings.

“Shit.” Elliott looked up.

“Just get ready to hit him again.” Dean told him. Then flashed a smile

to Frank. "Hey, Frank."

"Ryder." Frank stepped chest to chest with Elliott. "Did you fuckin hit me with that tranquilizer gun?"

"No." Elliott shook his head.

"Oh." Frank said with a nod. "I thought you did." he scratched his head. "Dean, I'm having blackouts."

"You're not having blackouts, Frank." Dean told him. "Elliott knocked your ass out because you wouldn't calm down."

Frank's eyes widened in his look at Dean, not seeing the cringe Elliott did. "Then Ryder *did* hit me with the tranquilizer gun?"

"Yeah, Frank. Yeah he did." Dean snapped back. "You need to clam down and put the monitor . . ."

"Wait." Frank said. "Just to be clear. He . . ." Frank pointed without looking at Elliott. "Raised a weapon, aimed at me and shot?"

"Yes, a tranquilizer Frank. For your own good." Dean responded. "And there's nothing you could do about it."

"Oh, yeah? How about this?" Frank's eyes only left Dean for a moment to make sure he landed correctly the hard punch he delivered to Elliott that rang out a ear piercing 'crack.'.

From Elliott's hand the tranquilizer gun flew, and hit the ground spinning a few feet away. Elliott stumbled back, nearly hitting the ground completely, but his hand caught his fall and he was able to spring back up.

Dean's angry yell of, 'Frank, you asshole', did not seem to be heard. By the time, Dean looked back up, all he saw was the motion blur of the two men sailing toward each other. "Enough!" Dean raged to the two big men at the same time they grabbed on in a lock to each other in both body and eyes. Their fists raised in prelude intention of their fight.

Jaw twitching, Frank's eyes glared. "Go head, Ryder make your mistake."

"If you think I'll back off, you're wrong." Elliott's voice was low.

"Enough." Dean tried to intercede.

Frank ignored Dean. "You're out of your league here, Ryder."

"And you're forgetting the first basic rule of engagement, never underestimate your opponent."

"What the fuck is this . . ." Frank shoved Elliott back hard from the hold. "This arrogant shit."

"And what the fuck . . ." Elliott, footing firm, shoved into Frank. "Is this angry shit toward me."

Dean tossed his hands up. "I quit." In his walk away, he picked up the

tranquilizer gun.

Standing at the bottom of the clinic steps, Joe gave an upward motion point of his head, toward the building confrontation between Frank and Elliott. "Emotionally charged. Unable to handle it. See, this proves my point."

Shaking her head, Ellen rushed forward past Dean. "Frank! Stop it."

With a confused and surprised, 'what?' Frank spun his head to Ellen. "Me?"

"Yeah, you, Frank." Ellen snapped. "What is wrong with you?"

"He!" Frank swung a point to Elliott. "Started this whole thing. He hit me with a tranquilizer gun, El. I'm suppose to lay down and take it?"

Elliott mumbled. "He's supposed to be knocked out."

Frank bit his bottom lip and lifted his hand. "This close, Ryder. This close . . ."

"Frank!" Ellen screamed. "I know you're upset. I know you're angry, but taking it out on Elliott isn't going to solve anything. If he tried to knock you out, do you think perhaps he had a good reason."

Frank's head flung back in disgust. "Oh!" He grunted out in outrage. "Fuck this. You here me? Fuck it." He threw out his hand. "Let's defend Elliott fuckin Ryder. He can do no wrong. Well, defend him all you want!" Frank blasted loud. "I don't care! In fact! The next time you come running to me, turn around and run to the fuckin horse soldier. Let him get your ass out of trouble! Because I fuckin . . ." Frank's eyes widened. "Fuck . . ." His head moved from left to right. "Don't care." Knees buckling, eyes rolling back, Frank dropped face first to the pavement.

Dean let out a small breath of relief. "Thanks, Joe. I appreciate it."

"My pleasure." Giving a blow on the barrel like some sort of Dirty Harry move, Joe smiled and returned the tranquilizer gun to Dean. He took in the feeling of slight enjoyment, and with a smile on his face that he needed, he walked to Ellen so they could finish where they had left off.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ellen's foot pounded on the floor to adjust her shoe that didn't seem to want to fit correctly.

"Here." Dean grabbed her leg, bent down, took off her slip on tennis shoe and fixed it. "You're nervous. You were nervous all through dinner."

"I know. I'm sorry." Ellen let out a breath.

"I'm glad you decided to go." Dean stood up.

"Joe would be mad if I didn't."

"No he wouldn't." Dean removed Ellen's still damp hair from under the collar of the coat, then fixed the twisted garment. "You're going because you need to go to this."

Ellen nodded. "I still would rather not."

"I know. Do you know what is going to be said."

"I have a feeling. And . . ." She kissed him softly. "Thanks. I love you."

Dean ran his hand down the side of her face. "Good luck."

"Yeah." Ellen, reached out her hand for the door, saw it trembling, then retracted it into a fist. "Could you make sure all the kids are settled and in bed. They're gonna need to be if this goes as I think it will."

Dean blinked a few times in confusion. "Sure. They'll be tucked away. Why?"

"I'll let you know." Again, Ellen reached for the door, only she gathered the courage to open it. "Here I go."

The cold air hit her the second she stepped out, but it really didn't pelt her as much as the vision of Frank walking toward Joe's house.

"Frank." She called out to him, wanting to catch him before he went inside.

Frank kept walking.

"Frank." Ellen ran and caught him. "Didn't you hear me?"

Just about to step on the porch, Frank turned and looked at her. "Yeah, I heard you. I just chose not to answer."

"Frank." Ellen grabbed his arm. "You really can't be mad at me."

"What?" If it was possible to yell in a whisper, Frank did. "How can you even make that statement."

"Because this is stupid."

"Stupid? El, I woke up in a fuckin hospital bed two hours ago from

being knocked out . . . again.”

“There were reasons to do that. Your heart . . .”

“I don’t give a shit about my heart!” Frank yelled. “If . . .” He dropped his voice to a graveling one after looking at his father’s front door. “If you even remotely understood what I am going through.”

“I do.”

“No! No you do not.” Frank shook his head. “You haven’t any idea what I’m going through. You defended Elliott Ryder.”

“And that is no reason to be pissed at me. You were fighting with him.”

“We, El. Him and I were fighting. You stepped in. You defended him. I am at a low point, do you know this?”

“Yes.”

“Do you care?”

“Yes!” Ellen said offended.

“Bullshit.”

“What?”

“I can remember a time, no matter what, no matter who, you were on my side.”

“OK, stop.” Ellen lifted her hand. “You’re angry. And before you start speaking through your anger and saying things you can’t take back, I’m just gonna stop this.”

“Yeah, I’m angry, El. But I’m being honest. Who am I kidding, Chasing you around, waiting for what? Your fuckin return to me? Your loyalty? Playing second fuckin fiddle to a man you married behind my back? No, wait. Third fuckin fiddle, I come after Dean, then after Ryder. I have for a while. I just pretended that it wasn’t that way. Well it is. And I’m done with it. If you can turn your back on me when I needed you, I don’t need to deal with you.” Frank turned to go inside.

“This!” Her one word yell caused Frank to stop. “This is exactly why I wanted to stop this before you said anything hurtful Are you happy, Frank? You did.” Ellen threw her hands up. “And I didn’t turn my back on you. Your anger and hurt is making you think that I did.”

“No, El. Your selfishness is making you think you didn’t.”

Grunting Ellen shook her head and just moved to the porch.

“Whoa. Wait.” Frank stopped her. “Where are you going?”

“In there. Joe called a family meeting.”

“Yeah, that’s right. A family meeting. Family. And your last name stopped being Slagel a long time ago.” Frank flung open the door and

stormed inside.

Ellen couldn't move. His hard deliverance of hurtful words cemented her right where she stood. More than anything, Ellen wanted to go in the house. But she didn't. Frank would have to deal with enough in the house, without having to deal with the anger over her presence. So, Ellen, head down, slowly turned and went back home.

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From his three sons seated on the livingroom furniture, to the door then back to his watch, Joe glanced. He shook his head as he stood before them. "As soon as Ellen gets here I'll start."

"She's not coming." Frank grabbed his glass of water from the coffee table, finished it off and set it down angrily rattling the remaining ice.

"What do you mean, she's not coming?" Joe asked. "How do you know?"

"I know."

Hal rolled his eyes in irritation. "Can you just give him a straight answer?"

"She's not coming." Frank looked back to his father. "This is a family thing."

Hal sunk back into his seat. "You're pissy with Ellen, so today she isn't family."

"She stopped being family when she stopped being my wife." Frank told him.

Joe grunted. "You're an asshole, Frank. Robbie go get her."

Robbie stood up from the chair.

"No." Frank rose up in anger. "No, If she comes over, I'm leaving."

"Robert. Go." Joe instructed.

"And I say . . ." Frank interjected strong. "She comes. I go. Make your choice. I don't want her here. Her or me."

Joe stormed toward Frank. "Why do you have to be such a goddamn asshole."

"Ok," Hal stood, stopping the confrontation. "Can we not fight. He's not gonna budge on this, Dad. Just . . . just tell us why you brought us here."

Joe let out a breath. "Fine. Sit. All of you." He watched Frank return to his chair, Robbie to his, and Hal on the couch. "All right. I had this all set out in my mind, but since Ellen is not here, I'll make some

adjustments.” He stepped closer before them, his voice soft. “There’s some things I want to say first. To each one of you. Just some things I have never said., not said in a while or . . .”

“Stop.” Frank stood up.

“What, Frank?” Joe asked as Frank moved to the door. “What are you doing?”

“Just . . . just hold those thoughts.” He flung the door open. “OK? Mad at her or not, I’m getting Ellen. I’ll be back.”

Walking out of the house Frank had to wonder what he was thinking. He wasn’t. He didn’t give any thought to what the ‘family meeting’ was about, when he should of known. As soon as it hit him what his father was going to convey, he knew it wasn’t his place to halt Ellen from hearing it.

Knocking once on Dean and Ellen’s door, Frank just walked in. “El!”

Dean emerged from the kitchen with a cup of coffee. “Frank?”

“Where’s Ellen?”

“What the hell did you say to her out there? She’s crying.”

Ignoring Dean, Frank just walked toward the bedrooms. “El!”

Ellen stepped into the hall from Alexandra’s room. “Frank, I’m trying to settle the kids. What?”

“First, this is no way a sign that I’m not mad at you anymore.”

“Trust me, I wouldn’t take it as one.”

“Good. Let’s go.” He grabbed her hand.

“What? Where?” Ellen was tugged.

“My dad wants you there. You’ll be there.” He kept pulling her through the livingroom. He paused, grabbed her coat, handed it to her, and moved to the door. “Dean, I’m taking her.”

“Wait. Frank?” Dean stepped to him. “Is everything all right.”

Frank stared for a second, just stared. Then he leaned down and close to Dean, blasting as loud as he could. “No!” He turned, still holding Ellen’s hand and walked out.

“God.” Dean closed off his ear and winced..

With a ‘hmpf’ Billy looked up from the couch. “Tell me about it. Someone’s testosterone levels are blaring out of control.”

^^^

Frank shifted his eyes once in irritation, then took another drink of water. He sat in the chair watching Ellen settle between Hal and Robbie on the couch. They were separated by a minuscule distance, yet they were miles

apart when they shouldn't of been. Not when they were the two of the four that knew what was going on.

Joe's keys jingled in his pockets as he rocked only a little from front to back, heel to toe. His slow releasing breath seeped through his nostrils, and all eyes were upon him. "I'm glad . . . I'm glad all of you are here. Now it feels . . . it feels right." he gave a nod of his head with a wink. Unlike himself, not crass, Joe spoke. His eyes never staying on a single one of them for too long. Not playing visual favorites, looking at them all. "I went back and forth, quite a bit on if I would say what I wanted to say first, or if I would tell you the reason for my saying it. To you, it may not seem like a tough decision, to me, it is. As a parent, one thing happens, you get wiser as you get older. I was thinking about this. Do you realize for the first eighteen years of your child's life, you spend most of the time, yelling, correcting them, sending them off to learn. Unless, of course that child is Frank . . ." Joe semi smiled. "Then the yelling increases with age."

Frank wanted to return the smile to his father, he tried, but he couldn't.

"Anyhow . . ." Joe continued. "As parent, you tell your child many things as they grow up. Many . . . many things." His head dropped. "Some good. Some bad. Some encouraging. And as a child, you don't always hear them all. What happens." Joe lifted his hand. "What happens when a kid grows up? You don't really stop telling your child things, you just don't say them as you should, when you should. Why? Because they're older? You try to give your kid their space? They don't need to hear it? I don't think so. I think a kid, no matter how old, needs to hear how their parent feels about them. And I'm a parent, who, I pretty much butt out until I can't. I think you guys all know that." Joe took a look at all of them. "Here's someone you haven't heard me speak of, probably since you were young. *My* father."

Hal peered up. "We were never allowed to ask about him."

"And there's a reason." Joe explained. "When my mother died, she didn't just leave me with my father, she left me with a bastard. My father was a son of a bitch. Never a nice word to say, never a pat to the back, always a belt to the face when a wrong was committed. Old country, hard ass. No love. Now, I'm a hard ass I know and I know I've been a hard ass with all of you. But, I firmly believe, one hundred percent, I accomplished what I wanted to do, and that was, be a father to you, like my father never was to me. I hope, no, I pray." Joe's voice dropped. "That you all think I'm a good father. I love you all the same, and I love you . . . I love you all like I never thought humanly possible." A sweep of emotions came over Joe in

the silence and he bit his lip, nodded and gained his composure. He looked about the eyes locked upon him. Hal and Robbie searched him for answers in the unexplained solemnness that reflected in their faces. "I raised a smart bunch. A very smart bunch. And knowing this, I knew by just starting to talk, you would figure out the reason I'm standing before you."

The quiet was crushing. Frank held a poker face as best he could. Robbie's eyes fluttered and his head lowered. And Hal rang out the loudest with a heaving breath, a swipe of his hand down his face, and eyes that closed with so much pain.

Joe's lips parted first, he emitted a soft whisper instead of words, cleared his throat, and tried again. "I'm . . . I'm sick. And there's a pretty big chance, that if things . . . Even if things slow down, there's a chance I won't be around much longer." There was silence brought on by Joe's pause in his inability to speak. "I'm dying."

Knowing it was one thing, hearing it from Joe's mouth was another and it felt to Ellen as if she heard the news for the first time all over again. Immediately she looked to Frank who stared elsewhere, and then through that vision she saw the child in Robbie seep out. His pouty lips moving in a sad pucker in and out, his facial muscles clenching, and eyes glossing over. Just as Robbie's head dropped forward, Ellen's views swung to the sound. Soft, probably only a sound *she* heard because she sat next to him. But the groan of agony that rumbled near silent and inadvertently from Hal, was like a dagger to her.

It was visually obvious, that strong, 'knight of knights' Hal, fought with everything he had not to crumble. Looking at the Slagel men reiterated Joe's wording of how they would handle it. The iron wall of strength they all portrayed had a weakness, and that weakness was their father.

Both of Ellen's hands were free and she extended one to Robbie. He grabbed her hand, pulling it to his chest, while Hal intertwined his fingers in such a tight lock, he could of squeezed them off.

Young. At that moment to Joe, they all looked like children. So young. It made it harder. "Before any of you say anything. I'd like to get some things out. Say some things. Be . . ." Joe lifted a finger to tell them to 'hold on' and he walked over to the dining area grabbing a chair. He slid it into the livingroom, and patted his hand on the seat. "Jimmy. Can't do this without Jimmy." Preparing to take his place again before them, he watched Hal stand up.

Walking to the empty chair, Hal lifted from around his neck the dog tags he always wore that belonged to his brother. He hung them over the

chair and returned to his spot on the couch and holding Ellen's hand.

Joe gave him a peaceful smile. "Ok, perhaps this is selfish of me. Who knows. Who . . . who cares. Me making this little speech to you has everything to do with what's going on with me. I've always felt what I'm gonna say, and I know, I've told you before. But I need to tell you again. 'Cause you never know . . . you never know." exhaling Joe turned to the chair. "I'll start and go around. That way eliminating any argument that I said these things in order of least to most important." Joe tried to make a little joke, and smiled. "Jimmy. I can't tell you how many times I wished you were here. I know you are, in your own way. I miss you. Not a day goes by when I don't think of you, stop and say a prayer for you, and in my mind, tell you I love you. I was blessed with you and your brothers. You were always the smart one, the one who used his head. How we could use you here right now in Beginnings. What an asset you would be. How complete we would be. You just know, *I* will never be complete, until I see you again." A stare at the chair, then Joe lifted the dog tags, he brought them to his lips and kissed them. "Hal, I'm gonna hang on to these for a little bit. Do you mind?"

Hal just shook his head. "No. I don't mind." The words were barely heard.

Placing the dog tags over his head, Joe moved to the next child. "Robbie. I gave a lot of thought to what I was gonna say to you. Not because it was hard, but because there is just so much. I could go on, and on. Talent?" Joe whistled. "You define talent. The music you write is amazing. I never told you but I could listen to you sing all day. Look at you. You have this incredible gift, that my other boys don't. You have this ability to brighten a room, no matter what your mood, no matter what the circumstance. You make people smile. There's an air of . . . and God knows how you maintained this through all that's happened, there's an air of innocence in you I never want you to lose. You hear me?"

Robbie nodded, he couldn't even look at Joe. His hand covered his face.

"And despite these odds you are battling, my God are you overcoming them. I'm proud. Know that."

From under his hand, Robbie whispered. "I do."

"Ellen." Joe looked at her. "I know I have told you a million times, married to my son or not, I have never viewed you less than my own child. To me, you're a Slagel. You're brilliant. Don't ever let Dean, or anyone overshadow the gift of intelligence you have. I watched you go from this

annoying girl, to a woman in Ashtonville. A woman who took urine samples, spent way too much money, and found any excuse to have a Tupperware party. You grew into this woman who sits before me that cures illnesses old world doctors only skimmed the surface of. As much as I'd like to give Dean the credit for teaching you, I can't. You had it in you all along. You just waited to release it. I trust my life to you. I trust . . . my health to you." A soft wink, and Joe turned to Hal. "Hal, lift your head."

Swallowing hard, Hal slowly rose his eyes.

Joe smiled. "You. I think of all my kids, I've complimented you the most in your life. For many reasons. Mostly, to be honest, to annoy the hell out of your brothers."

Hal emotionally snickered, but that small laugh didn't help.

"Thirteen years old." Joe said. "When you were thirteen years old, you were at the invention convention. A General approached you and asked you what you wanted to be when you grow up. Do you remember what you said?"

Hal nodded.

"You said, you were gonna be the man who started the new calvary. And goddamn it, Hal, you did. You did it. Look at you. Look at your men. The UWA isn't just a band of men you gathered together. They aren't just survivors, they are going to be the reason this country moves on. It is a fight for freedom that puts to shame any that our forefathers ever endured. And *you* are responsible for it all. You. I am so . . ." Joe's words tensed up with his emotions. "So proud of you. So proud. I look at you in front of your men. I watch them salute you. Watch their respect and I say, every single time, that's my son. That's my son."

It was long, and an attempt to hide his sadness, the snuffle Hal made as he raised his head and gave a 'thank you' look to his father.

"Frank." Joe looked to his oldest. "Frank, I . . ."

"Don't." Frank stopped him.

"What?" Joe asked confused.

Frank's mouth opened slightly, his eyes closed and he lifted his hand. "Please don't say anything to me. Please."

"But I have to." Joe said.

"I know it all." Frank swallowed hard. "I know what you want to say. You've told me, and I heard. I heard each time. I just can't hear it now. I can't." He lifted his hand some containing with a deep breath, any emotions from seeping out. "So let me tell you about you." Slowly Frank stood up and his words held a vibrato to them as he spoke. "You are always here.

We've never been too old for you to hug us, or walk up to us and kiss us. *You* . . . you are not a father who ever goes without telling his child he's proud of them. You are not a father who forgets to say he loves us. And *you* are not a father I want to lose." Frank took a step to Joe. "Look at me. Look at me and tell me that you are going to do *everything* you can so I don't have to lose you. Not yet."

"Not yet." Joe spoke near whisper. "That's why I wanted to have this talk, right now. Because I've waited long enough and I decided to fight this thing, and the battle starts tonight."

^^^

Ellen's hand smoothed softly over the back of Robbie's head as he sat on the sofa in the waiting room. "As soon as Dean finishes, I will be right out."

Next to Robbie, Hal sat. Hal peered up to Ellen. "Immediately, right?"

"Before Dean even closes him. No hesitation. I promise." She looked at her watch. "It's almost nine now. It should take a few hours. I have faith."

"So do we." Hal said.

"Robbie?" Ellen glanced down. "You haven't said anything."

The swallow he made was heard, and cupped hand, just under his nose, Robbie shook his head.

Ellen crouched down to him. "I have to go." She whispered in his ear. "It'll be fine. Afterward. We'll talk. Just talk." Again down the back of his head she ran her hand, then she kissed him. "I love you."

The crackle the separation of his lips emanated in his attempt to speak was the only noise Robbie made. Closing his eyes, Robbie just nodded once.

"I'll be back." Standing, Ellen gave a reassuring look to Hal, and started to leave the waiting area. In the doorway, as she walked out. Frank walked in. She stopped and took in the look he gave her, waiting for him to say something, he didn't, then Ellen kept on walking.

^^^

The thin chain that held the small crucifix dangled outside of Ellen's blue hospital scrubs, and Dean lifted the chain placing it inside of Ellen's garment. "Better." He said.

Ellen let out a slow nervous breath. "Tell me again."

"I . . ." Dean laid his hand on her cheek. "Am overly confident." he kissed her. "But I want to get started. So, if you could, Joe is probably ready now. Tell Andrea I need her, then you can walk him down here."

"I'll do that. And since I can't do this in there." Ellen kissed Dean quickly. "Thank you."

"No, Ellen, thank you for talking him into this." Stepping back, Dean turned and went through the double doors that would take him to the main operating room.

Watching the doors swing was Ellen sign to go get Andrea and Joe. She pushed through the doors that led her to the hall, and as she stepped out, there was Frank. She looked up once to him, then started to walk again.

"El."

"I have to get your dad."

"This will only take a second." Frank reached out and grabbed her arm.

"If you want to apologize . . ."

"Apologize for what?"

Ellen heaved out. "Forget it. I don't need aggravation. Just answer me this? Did you miss it? Was that the reason? Did you miss being the old Frank that used to say shit just to hurt me. Is that why you said I wasn't family, wasn't worth your time."

Frank released her arm. "The family thing. OK, that was wrong. I'm sorry for that. I was speaking through my anger. And you proved me wrong. You got him to fight."

"No, Frank. I can't take credit for that."

"But my dad told me . . ."

"No." Ellen spoke soft. "Joe didn't come to me for answers, Joe came to me as an excuse. He's so stubborn Frank, and he just needed someone to blame for changing his mind. When the truth is, more than you realize, he wanted to do this all along." On that, no more needing said, Ellen walked away.

^^^

It was a little room not far from the operating rooms. Ellen didn't expect Joe to be alone, Andrea was waiting with him until Dean was ready for her in the OR. The person Ellen didn't expect to see was Danny Hoi.

Tapping on the open door as her announcement, she peeked her head through.

Andrea let out a surprised breath, and released Joe's hand. "I guess Dean's ready."

"He's ready." Ellen said as she stepped in.

"Joe." Andrea leaned down and kissed him. "I'll be right there."

"I know." Joe told her.

Andrea moved to the door. "And I'll be praying for you the whole time."

"Andrea." Joe called her. "Not that I don't need the prayers, but could you just concentrate on operating."

Andrea giggled. "Joe, please, I'm just there to aid, Dean's the one with the laser in his hand."

"Swell."

Before leaving completely, Andrea peered back. "One more thing, Joe. You are not only my husband, but you define the meaning of futomara."

Danny's eyes widened. "Oh, my God."

"What?" Joe looked at him after Andrea left.

"Um, nothing." Danny shook his head and stood. "Just that was, uh, nice of her to say." He extended his hand to Joe. "Good luck. I'll stop back in the morning."

"And good luck to you, with everything this week." Joe told him.

"Tomorrow will be the rough day." Danny said. "The community, Joe. They aren't gonna handle it well about you. You're more than the leader to them and you know it."

Joe only smiled with a hint of sadness. "Get going, my escort awaits."

Danny gave a nod and conveying look of peace to Ellen as he moved to the door. "See ya' tomorrow, Joe."

Waiting until after Danny left, Ellen looked down to Joe who sat in the chair. "I see you're all ready. Hospital gown, jammie style bottoms."

"The newest look." Joe lifted the edge of the gown.

"What was Danny doing here?" Ellen asked.

"Turning over authority for a little bit. He'll check in, run things by me, but, while I recover, it's in his and Hal's hands."

"They'll do well." Ellen told him. "But, you do know, you'll get out of here Wednesday night. I'm expecting you to argue about going back to work."

"I guess I will. I know Dean said the treatments won't inhibit me from working. But I'm not going back full force until after Christmas."

"You're taking time off?"

"Yeah." Joe nodded slow. "I know there's this town meeting Wednesday night to vote on whether to suspend your sentence or not, and if they vote to . . . to uphold it. Well, I . . . I want to spend some time with you. We'll hang out." He winked.

Ellen chuckled sadly. "You don't think they'll suspend it do you?"

"I hope they do." Joe spoke seriously. "But, would you? You can't get mad if they don't suspend it. It isn't a strike against you, it's a message to the next person who may commit a similar crime."

"I understand that. And I am not expecting it. The only thing now that is making it hard for me to go, is you. I want to be here for the treatments. And speaking of you . . ." She held out her hand. "I'll walk you."

"Can you . . ." Joe grabbed her hand. "Can you just sit for a second with me. There's something I need to tell you."

"Sure." Ellen pulled up a chair and moved it close. "What is it?"

Gripping her hand, Joe brought it to his mouth and kissed it. "My boys. They'll handle this eventually. I know it."

"I do too."

"But initially, they're emotional. I'm expecting Hal to be the best because he isn't afraid to let it out. They'll do good until . . . until things get bad."

"Joe." Ellen whispered.

"No, Ellen. It's a strong possibility. I want to get this out and in the open now. I want this said now, at the start of it all. So there is no question. Things may get bad. I may be in a position where I'm not the Joe everyone knows. Do you know where I'm going with this?"

Ellen nodded.

"Now I'm gonna fight this. I'm gonna do what you and Dean want. Even if you eventually have to take the lung. Hell, John Wayne lived with one lung and who's he compared to me, right?"

Closing her eyes, Ellen tried to smile.

"But there may come a time when choices are to be made. Choices on whether to fight for my life. Choices that I . . . I may not be able to make for myself." Joe's voice was soft. "I know my boys and Andrea. I know Dean. They are gonna want to kick in every viable option to keep me breathing. But . . . I know you and me." Joe paused for a moment. "Ellen. Ellen look at me."

Ellen lifted her eyes.

"I love to be strong. I don't want to live out any of my life in a bed."

Unable to speak, walk, talk, move or breath without the use of a machine. If . . . if I am a position where I won't be the same, that I am not Joe. I want you to tell them, tell them life support, or any kind of mechanical means to keep me alive, are not means that I want. I only want to be put on a machine, that I can eventually come off of and lead a normal life. I know this is a tough one to put on your shoulders. But your's are the only shoulders I trust to put this on. Don't let them prolong a life I would never want to lead. I've raised my family, provided and protected them. When the time comes, allow me to go with dignity." Joe grabbed tighter to her hand, pulled her nearer and spoke with passion. "Promise I'll have my dignity."

Over Joe's hand, Ellen placed hers and leaned her forehead to his. "With everything I am, I promise you will have that. If I have to assure it myself, I will. I swear to you, anything less than dignity for you, is not and will never be an option."

^^^

"The operation was smooth, and I believe a success." Dean's words rang through Frank's mind. The words he spoke right after emerging from the operating room. *"His recovery should go well. He's strong. We're on our way, Frank. We're on our way."*

The words told, though optimistic and good to hear, did not overshadow the fact that his father still had a hard battle ahead of him. In Frank's mind, a battle his father didn't deserve to have to fight. All he did his entire life was work and live for his family. It was unfair. Not right.

A simple 'bleep' of the board, and Frank turned his head to the electronic map of the United States that hung on the wall of the communications room. The bleep was a signification the satellite ran a sweep. All was quiet.

From the map back to his hands, Frank looked. He held the reminder flask that Dean gave him. A pint size flask, filled with whiskey, and covered with pictures of everyone Frank loved. He stared at the picture of him, his brothers and Joe. Fishing, somewhere, Frank wasn't even out of highschool. He recalled some old Asian man took the picture for them and how they laughed about that the whole way home.

Frank had a lot of memories in his hand, tiny pictures cut and pasted on that flask so whenever he wanted a drink he just had to see the lives he effected by doing so. They blared at him, the faces. The smiles, Ellen, his kids.

His kids.

Johnny.

Up in the right shoulder of the flask, just before the bend, was a picture of Johnny in the fifth grade. A couple years pre-plague. Johnny wore such a little boy striped shirt. His 'growing in' crew cut plastered down by some sort of substance. Johnny smiled widely, his adult teeth still in that 'too big for his face' stage. But the smile was bright. Innocent. What happened?

To ask himself 'where he went wrong with Johnny' was not even an option. Frank knew the answer to that. Johnny's entire life Frank went wrong. Stationed elsewhere, barely home, and when he was, he was never fully there. Then the plague hit and Frank, instead of consuming himself with Johnny, consumed himself in starting the world over. He all but handed Johnny over to George.

He hadn't thought of Johnny, and what Johnny did to Beginnings, him, and Ellen. He buried it in his mind until he was ready to handle it. But when his father's illness grew forefront, so did everything else. When it rained it poured, and Frank's mind was flooded with all that went wrong in his life. Johnny rammed to the front of the line, and from the second he entered Frank's thoughts, he didn't leave.

The true meaning of heartbreak stared at Frank in the form of a fifth grade picture and a smile of purity long since lost.

A slight lift of his hand, and Frank flipped a switch, turned his head and watched the communications board go black. Gripping that flask, he embarked on the task he has gone down to the communications room to complete. He picked up the phone and dialed.

A Ring. Two.

"Hadly." George answered the phone.

Silence.

"Hello?" George asked.

Frank released a heavy breath.

"Look." George spoke perturbed. "This number is the number I gave Beginnings. No one else calls this line. So if this is Robbie Slagel placing crank calls again, I'm . . ."

"No." Frank spoke raspy. "It's . . ."

"Frank." George said in surprise.

Another outward breath rang over the line from Frank.

"Why are you calling?" George asked.

"I think you know why."

“You waited long enough.”

“George.” Frank graveled. “If I could of called sooner. I would of. I couldn’t. Tell me.”

George didn’t speak. More than anything, George wanted to tell Frank, ‘I’ll give you what you want, but you have to tell me how my child is’. But George couldn’t. To him, if Bev’s identity wasn’t known, he couldn’t be the one to divulge that information.

“George.” Frank spoke with emotions. “You know what I want. I need to know. Tell me.”

“He’s alive. He’s recovering slowly from the gunshot wounds, but we expect Johnny to be back full force.”

Frank’s eyes closed, and he mumbled a ‘thank you’ as he slid the phone from his ear and hung up. He looked at the phone for a moment, flipped the communications board back on, he turned his head to his right.

Scott, one of his men just stared.

“You won’t say anything about this, right?” Frank asked.

“No.” Scott replied. “I understand why you had to do that. Not a word.”

Speaking slow and down, Frank held up the flask. “And you won’t say anything about this either, right?”

“No. Not a word.”

Frank nodded and tipped the flask over a glass, a small amount emerged and then the last few droplets of whiskey. To his mouth he brought the glass, sniffed hard in his emotions then downed it, releasing a gasp as he lowered the glass. Grabbing the flask, Frank stood up, trying to hide the slight uncontrolled sway to his body as he moved. He laid his hand on Scott’s shoulder in his passing as a form of ‘thank you’ and perhaps a little help to his balance. After placing the empty flask in his back pocket, Frank slowly and silently left the communications room.

PREPARATIONS

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

December 18th

Something told Henry he should have worn better shoes, perhaps his work boots instead of tennis shoes. That way he wouldn't have slid across the barely glazed sidewalk so many times in his walk with Hector.

"Thanks for going morning bowling with me." Henry told Hector as they hit the portion of streets with the shops. "I needed to take my mind off of things."

"I wanted to come to town anyhow before I hit the fields. Long day, it's Monday, so it's reports day. Joe usually is like clockwork coming to pick up the stats and stuff."

"I'm sure Danny or Hal will be there as well."

"Maybe." Hector said and lifted up the long thin, paper wrapped object, "And coming to town gives me an excuse for this. Plus I wanted to get *this*." He held up a card.

"I can't believe all the card shop had left was birthday cards."

"I can believe it." Hector stated. "I mean, everyone is getting something for Joe. I'll just scratch out 'happy Birthday'. The cards are nice." Hector examined it. "Every one is hand painted. He certainly is gonna have his work cut out for him to restock." Hector stopped walking when Henry did, and snickered at the offended gasp Henry let out. "What?" He asked. "What did I say?"

"Not you." Henry gasped again. "I can not believe some people. I don't mind Ben from Fabrics half the time, but this is a shame. He's capitalizing on Joe."

Hector peered to the just hung sign on the Unique Boutique window. "That's not capitalizing, Henry. I think it's nice."

"Please." Henry scoffed. "Get well stones?" He read the sign with sarcasm. "*Why buy a card when you can give Joe a get well stone for only two Danny Dollars.*"

"Don't forget." Hector pointed to the sign. "You get a free purple 'support of Joe' ribbon to wear." He winked. "I'm heading to the dress shop."

"Good luck. I have to check with Hal's guy, Owens, get some things and I'll meet you there."

"Sounds . . ." Hector spun in his turn. "Oh, Henry. Before I forget. I was thinking, since Misha doesn't have any family, I was thinking about asking her to spend Christmas with us this year."

"I spend Christmas with the Slagels every year."

"You think *this* year you're gonna be invited?"

"Um, no, probably not. That's a good idea, ask her."

Hector nodded and started to walk. He paused to watch Henry walk away and get a moment of enjoyment out of watching Henry's slipping and sliding. Putting the smile on his face he thought would help, he walked into the dress shop.

Misha turned from the counter when the bell rang. "Hector. What a surprise."

"I was in town." Hector walked to the counter. "I wanted to get Mr. Slagel a get well card."

"Ah, yes. I have heard of his illness. How is the Captain doing about it?"

"The Captain is filling in for his father so his mind is busy."

"Did you get your card?" Misha asked. "If not, Mr. From Fabrics has some lovely get well stones."

It took everything Hector had not to laugh, but since Misha was taking the stones seriously, like most people would, he just nodded. "I saw those. But I got the card. And . . ." He laid the long paper wrapped object on the counter. "I got this for you."

Curiously Misha looked then began to open it. "Me?" She smiled with an 'oh' when she exposed a rose. "Hector? Where ever did you get this?"

"I run the agriculture division. We have a few bushes in the greenhouse that belong to Dr. Winter-Sanchez-Slagel. The third one just came into bloom, she said I could bring you one."

"That is very sweet." Misha sniffed the rose. "I will thank her."

"I pass it along. Well . . . I should be going. You have a good day." Nervously, Hector started to walk away, but he gained his confidence and turned around. "Misha. I was wondering. Maybe some time this week, you and I could have an official date. A movie. Dinner. Or even Hoi-Hoi on the Range."

"That would be nice. You pick a day."

"Thursday? I'm off the next day."

"Thursday evening it is." Misha smiled, holding her rose.

"One other thing. Out of curiosity, what uh, are you doing for Christmas."

"I've been asked by a young UWA soldier, named Daniel, that if I had no plans, if I would like to spend Christmas with he and his two roommates."

"Oh, I see." Hector nodded.

"Were you going to ask me to spend Christmas with you?" Misha asked.

"I was. I was going to see if you wanted to spend the day with me, Henry and Nick. But . . ."

"Then I accept. You have now given me plans, I will inform Daniel I am busy."

"Wow." Hector grinned. "Really?"

"Really."

"Great." Feeling a hundred percent upbeat, Hector grabbed for the door. Before leaving he turned back around. "Misha, thank you. It means a lot that you would want to spend time with me."

"Hector." She said his name with a smile. "Why wouldn't I? You are very sweet. But more so than that, what I like of you most is your honesty. You are very sincere and honest. And there is something very old fashion about your morals that I am attracted to."

Bubbling, with a blushing, 'thanks', because he always believed himself to be honest. Hector then only mumbled an, 'um' when the opening door not only brought in Henry, but brought in the reality, that everything Misha said he was, 'honest, sincere and with morals,' Hector pretty much wasn't.

^^^

The 'Christ, Danny' that came from the other side of Joe's office door, made Frank hesitate before entering. He knew where his father was, but it was eerie. It wasn't until that moment that Frank realized, not only did Hal look like his father, but sounded like him as well.

In Frank's mind, it was too bad Hal couldn't act like his father, otherwise, Hal wouldn't be all that bad. With a hard 'bang' he knocked.

Hal rolled his eyes, and leaned back in Joe's chair. "Come in, Frank."

Slowly the door opened and Frank peeked in. "How did you know it was me?"

After looking at Danny, Hal tossed his hands up. "I'm telepathic."

"You too?" Frank asked.

"What?"

“Never mind, you ruined my entrance by guessing.” Frank stepped to the door again. “Just say ‘come in’”

Confused, Hal was getting ready to question when the door closed. A repeat bang was at the door. “Come in, Frank.”

“Hal!” Frank opened the door and yelled. “Don’t say my name. Pretend you don’t have the ability to know it’s me. Just say come in. You’re pissing me off. Which isn’t bad, I need that.”

Danny shook his head when Frank left. “Don’t ask me, he’s your brother.”

Bang!

Hal nodded. “Come in.”

The door blasted opened, banged off of the file cabinet and immediately after his storm in, Frank slammed the door. “Hal!”

Calmly, hands folded, Hal peered up. “Something wrong, Frank?”

“Yes.” Frank moved toward the desk. “Where the fuck is Elliott Ryder.”

“Doing your job.”

“No.” Frank lifted a finger. “I’m doing my job.”

“No, Frank, you’re not. You aren’t allowed to do rounds. Elliott is doing them., you’re just over seeing it. Why are you looking for him?”

“It’s Monday.” Frank answered. “I can’t find his fuckin stupid reports that have to be turned in. I’m gathering up all my division reports.”

Pulling the clipboard from the desk to him, Danny lifted the sheet. “Joe usually doesn’t hit security until after two. It’s still morning.”

“So.” Frank said. “I always have my reports done. Just incase.”

Hal lifted his hand with a tilted head. “There you have it, Frank. He’s not you.”

“True. So where is he?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know.” Hal leaned back. “He’s following your typical schedule. It’s nine in the morning., where are you usually at nine in the morning.”

“Fuck.” Frank bit his bottom lip. “Fuck!”

“What!” Hal blasted then shooed his hand to a laughing Danny.

“Oh, he fuckin better not be doing what I do at nine in the morning.” Frank flung open the door.

“Frank?” Through his chuckling, Danny called out. “I’m curious. What are you usually doing at nine in the morning.”

“Um . . . nothing really.” Frank shrugged. “But that sounded really good. Now back to being pissed.” Out the door Frank went with a slam.

Hal calmly shook his head. "I haven't a clue. It's Frank."

^^^

The biscuit wasn't warm, but it was still fresh, and to Jenny Matoose, the perfect time was at hand to eat that small biscuit. Strawberry jam spread across it with the right amount of butter, she peered across her class room to her students who worked diligently at their desks, then she lifted the biscuit.

How hungry she was, and how good that was going to taste. It would hit the spot plus stop the embarrassing growl her stomach kept on making. Teeth ready to sink through the soft surface, she heard the tiny patter of feet hit the linoleum and walk.

Before biting she looked. Letting out a soft moan, she set the biscuit down. "Billy." She said his name as he approached her desk barely coming over the desk surface. "I know you can't be finished with the worksheet."

"I'm not."

"So what are you doing out of your seat?"

"OK." Billy lifted a sheet of paper. "Here's the deal."

"Here's . . . here's the deal?" Jenny asked in shock.

"Yes." He laid the sheet before her. "If you can solve this math problem, I will, from here on in listen to every word you say. If you can't, I get free reign over what I do in this prison of a classroom."

Jenny's mouth was still open from her biscuit indulging readiness, and it stayed that way when she looked at the math problem. It took up the entire width of the paper, numbers, letters, dashes and dots that made up the problem.

"Well?" Billy asked. "What do you say?"

^^^

"And I would totally understand." Elliott said, standing with Ellen in her containment office.

"You would, would you?" She folded her arms.

"I would accept no." Elliott spoke soft. "But as I had said, this is my first evening off in a while."

"Why do you want to spend it with me?" Ellen asked.

"We haven't spent alone time together and since you're staying in New Bowman tonight, I thought . . ."

"We'd have sex."

"Oh, my God." Elliott stumbled back in shock. "Is that what you think I'm asking. Ellen, I apologize if I came off like that. That wasn't my intention."

"Elliott, stop." Ellen laughed. "I teasing you. Of course I'll spend some time with you tonight."

"Thank you."

"What did you have in mind?" Ellen asked.

"Well I was thinking . . ."

"Get your mind out of the gutter, Elliott no." Ellen joked again.

"I fuckin knew it." Frank spoke hard as he stepped into Ellen's office. "Not only is he pissing around when he's supposed to be working, but he's in here fuckin around with you, trying to get you to do God knows . . ."

"Frank." Ellen cut him off. "What is it."

Frank held out his hand. "Where's the fuckin security reports Ryder."

"It's not two." Elliott answered. "I thought they didn't have to be . . ."

"Do you always wait until the last minute?" Frank snapped.

Ellen gasped. "Can you be any more rude, Frank?"

"Probably, El." Frank returned to Elliott. "Where?"

"I've not finished them yet."

"Well, I suggest you finish them." Frank snapped. "I don't have all fuckin . . ."

"Frank." Ellen yelled. "Knock it off."

"Oh," Frank grunted out. "Coming to his defense. Again."

Elliott held up his hand. "I don't need Ellen to come to my defense. I do, however, Frank, need to know, why all of the sudden you've turned a reprehensible cheek toward me."

"What?"

Ellen slightly rolled her eyes. "He wants to know why all of the sudden you don't like him."

"Aside!" Frank spoke loud and rough. "From the fact that you need her to speak for you . . . like now. I never liked you Ryder. Don't kid or flatter yourself. I want those reports. One hour. I suggest you stop being the fuckin chivalrous flirt, and get to it." In his turn to leave, he stepped into the hall, only to see Jenny walking up with Billy.

Billy's little 'ow' noises were intermittent with his steps and each pull of his ear Jenny did as she brought him to Ellen's office.

"Frank." Jenny called out.

Never taking his eyes off of the approaching vision, Frank gave a tilt

Druga-Marchetti/Divided Blood

of his head toward Ellen's office. "Um, El, could you come out here, please." he spoke.

"Frank." Jenny huffed out and released Billy.

"God." Billy grabbed his ear. "I believe you can call that behavior abuse."

Folding her arms tight, paper in hand, Jenny tapped her foot. "Where is Dean?"

Ellen stepped into the hall. "Maybe still sleeping, why?"

"Here." Jenny handed Ellen the math problem. "I refuse to deal with him anymore. I am seeking his removal from school. I believe home schooling is the way to go. Frank, school him. Someone do something with him. I'm done."

Billy whispered out an excited 'yes.'

Confused Ellen looked at the paper. "What did he do?"

Arm lifting in a wave, Jenny kept making her escape. "Ask him."

After the security door buzzed, Ellen peered down to Billy. "What did you do?"

"I merely told her," Billy said. "If she could solve that math problem then I would forever allow her to teach me. If she couldn't then I refuse to listen to her."

Ellen showed Elliott the problem then looked again. "Can you solve this, Billy?"

"Mother, please." Billy scoffed. "I'm seven. Of course I can't. But she didn't realize that, so what's that say about her?"

Closed mouth, Frank nodded. "He has a point."

Ellen tossed her hands up. "I guess he stays here."

"Yeah, right." Frank said with sarcasm. "Come on Bill, I'll teach you for a while and then you can learn some tracking." He took Billy's hand. "Ryder!" he looked back in his walk. "My reports."

Billy glanced up to Frank. "This is cool. Do you think we'll get any SUTs today?"

"If we're lucky." Frank reached the security door panel. "And if we're really lucky, then maybe we'll get a savage." The door buzzed. "God knows I need one today."

^^^

"Sweet Jesus, Joe." Andrea, Joe's hospital gown lifted some above his chest, stared in amazement. "Sweet Jesus."

“What?” Joe asked.

“Sweet Jesus.”

“What!”

“Easy.” Dean said as he stepped into the room. “You can’t get this mad after surgery. How are you feeling, Joe?”

“Good.” Joe answered. “I thought you were sleeping.”

“I did. I’m awake now.” Dean set the chart down.

“Dean, did you see this?” Andrea asked.

Walking closer to the bed, Dean peered at Joe’s surgical site. He gave a closed mouth nod. “Looks good.”

“Good?” Andrea repeated in shock. “Great. Sweet Jesus, Joe the Good Lord must have been listening to our prayers, I have never seen anything heal like this before in my life. This fast.”

“Andrea.” Joe chuckled. “That’s because Dean used . . .”

“Rosary beads.” Dean interrupted. “I used rosary beads in my pocket while I operated.”

With a wispig ‘oh’ Andrea smiled. “It is good to see you’re being a God fearing man again, instead of the Atheist you became.”

“What?” Dean laughed. “Where is everyone getting this from.”

“Me.” Jason said stepping in the room. “I told everyone.” He flashed a smile. “Hello, Joe.” He lifted a small shoe box. “Just came from New Bowman. Have something for you.”

“More get well stones?” Joe asked.

“Yep.” Jason smiled.

“Christ.”

“Joe!” Andrea scolded.

Jason snickered. “And people are now sporting little purple ribbons.”

“Christ.”

“Joe!” Andrea gasped again. “These people are concerned for your well being.”

“And do you see the goddamn message they’re sending me Andrea?” Joe asked. “Stones. They’re stoning me.”

Jason set down the box. “Good one. I like that. How are you feeling.”

“Good.” Joe nodded. “A little sore. Not much. I thought you had a full slate in Bowman today.”

“I do.” Jason sat on the edge of the bed. “Lunch break, and I wanted to bring the ballots for the meeting on Wednesday. They’re all done.”

Curiously, Dean looked. “Ballots?”

Joe shook his head. “You really should start paying attention to what

goes on in the community. Especially when it concerns your wife.. Did you read the Community Board."

"I never read the community board." Dean commented.

"There you have it." Joe lifted his hand.

"Sweet Jesus, Dean, you should read that board, you would be more informed." Andrea lectured.

"Read the board." Jason reiterated. "It says a lot."

"Well, I'm in the clinic." Dean said. "What is the board saying about my wife."

Jason shook his head. "The board says nothing.. It's an inanimate object, Dean. Unless you've done something scientifically to . . ."

"Ha. Ha. Ha." Dean interrupted. "What? Is the meeting about when she leaves and where she goes? Because Joe . . ." Dean looked at him. "I'd like to know where my wife is going."

"Can't." Joe shook his head. "No one knows."

"Someone has to know." Dean argued.

"Oh, someone knows." Joe replied.

"Well . . ." Jason interceded. "More than one. Hal. Elliott. You. Me. Danny. We know"

"Whoa!" Dean held up his hand. "They know and I don't know."

"You can't know." Joe told him. "Frank doesn't even know." Slowly Joe lifted his head, peered around Dean and to the door. He shrugged. "Usually Frank would walk in with a 'know what?'"

"But . . ." Jason gave a nod. "Bet me Frank knows about the meeting."

"Frank knows. He was there. He should know. But then it's Frank." Joe said. "We know Frank."

Andrea had enough. "All right." She gave a shaking head, scolding look to Joe. "The boy is confused enough."

Joe winced. "Man, Andrea. He is a man. Don't let his size fool you."

"Joseph." She widened her eyes, then faced Dean with a smile. "The meeting is for Beginnings residents only, to decide whether or not to suspend Ellen's sentence."

"Oh, my God." Dean grinned. "Really?"

Closing one eyes, Joe hated to ruin the happy moment. "Don't get yourself hyped, yet, Dean. The question isn't to suspend Ellen's sentence, the question is whether or not the short loss of her out weighs the crime of murder."

Andrea reached across the bed and tapped Dean's hand. "Don't worry, though. I am certain the community will vote to suspend her

sentence. We need her. And since you're Christian again, you can pray." She smiled. "Me? I think I'll start a little noise around the community to suspend that sentence." She leaned over and kissed Joe. "I have to go." She started to leave. "Oh, and Dean. You could talk to people too. And remember, perhaps you can help by trying to be a futomara to everyone."

"Point well taken." Joe agreed. "You could try that."

Jason shook his head and smiled snidely. "You don't have to Dean, In my book . . ." He winked. "You already are a futomara to everyone."

Dean tossed up his hands in defeat. "I give up." He grabbed his chart and walked out. "I give up."

^^^

Found him.

Frank had been looking for some time, and every obvious place to search out Robbie produced nothing. Containment. Mechanics. Tracking. Communications. He was like Waldo. Everyone had seen him, but no one knew where.

But Frank accomplished the task. In the old garage not far from center town, he located his baby brother. And he didn't announce his presence, he preferred for a while to stand back and watch.

Robbie stood, highly concentrating on the M-16.

Like a militant baton twirler Robbie was. Turning the weapon clockwise, counter clockwise. Using his hand, a lot of wrist action, then catching it around his finger.

Frank stared amazed, watching Robbie demonstrate he had total control over that M-16. He'd toss it, grab it, spin it, tuck it under his arm, then with a quick movement, pump the chamber and prepare to fire.

It was about the tenth repetition through, that Robbie took a breather, and caught his breath. The second he put down the weapon, Frank applauded.

Startled, Robbie spun around. "Frank?"

"That . . . that was fuckin impressive. I mean, you know how hard that is to do."

Robbie tilted his head.

"Let me see that Rambo thing again."

"Rambo?"

"Yeah, you know, you catch the gun and whip it around to fire." Frank bent down and grabbed the M-16. "Will ya."

“Um, I don’t know, Frank.”

“Let me see . . .” On his final word Frank tossed Robbie the gun, it bounced off his fingers and fell to the ground.

Robbie shook his head. “There goes being impressed.” He picked up the weapon. “I suck.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yeah, I do, Frank. Why else am I the lame guy in security. I know the only reason I’m still in security is because I’m a Slagel. It isn’t right to be a Slagel and not be in security. And don’t give me that tracking shit. I’m OK to stare at a screen. Hell, Josh stares at a screen.” Robbie slowly moved over to a work bench and lifting up some on it, he sat.

“And your point?” Frank asked as he joined him.

“My point is, I’m not trusted to do anything. And I don’t blame anyone. Look, I couldn’t catch that weapon.”

“No. You couldn’t.” Frank told him. “But you sure as hell spun that thing like I have never seen.”

“That’s because I didn’t know you were there. I do good alone.

“You practice a lot?” Frank questioned.

“Everyday. I shoot too.”

“So you still have your skill, it’s your confidence you lack.”

Head lowered, Robbie raised his eyes. “I guess.”

“Ok, let’s narrow this down.” Frank lifted his hand. “You obviously don’t lack confidence in flying.”

“No. Not that.”

“Is it your shooting?” Frank asked. “How’s your accuracy.”

Robbie shrugged. “Pretty good. Actually, you know what? I was OK, I mean it, I was. Until . . .” He paused. “Until I got nailed. Punched in the face by some nobody drunk guy.”

“You didn’t see it coming?” Frank asked.

“Oh, I saw it coming. I lifted my right arm to block his punch.”

“Um, Robbie?” Frank leaned closer. “You don’t have a right arm.”

Robbie snickered. “I know. Frank?”

“Yeah.”

“I know you have a lot on your mind, and I haven’t been wanting to ask you. But Hal, he suggested we do some brother training. Maybe you work with me.”

“You don’t need work, Robbie.” Frank stated. “You still have all the skill you need. But . . .” He slapped his hand on Robbie’s leg. “Brother training meaning me and you?”

"Um, yeah." Robbie said. "We're brothers. And maybe Hal."

"Hal?" Frank said perturbed, and then he grinned. "Hal."

"You . . . you like the idea of working with Hal?"

"Oh, I love the idea. It'll be a fuckin blast. Get him involved in this. In fact, this may be exactly what we all need. My mood is up, now, thanks. I'm glad I was looking for you." Frank slid from the work bench.

"Frank?" Robbie called to him. "Why did you stop by?"

With a snap of his finger, Frank spun around. "Oh, yeah. It's Monday. I need your weekly flight reports."

Robbie chuckled. "Frank. Dad doesn't get them until 3. They aren't done."

"Fuck." Frank's hand cut through the air. "Does everyone in my fuckin division wait until the last fuckin minute to do their weeklies. Am I the only one who has them done on Friday?"

"Pretty much so, Frank. They're stupid."

"Yeah. But I fuckin do them. Anyhow . . . Robbie. The savages. I didn't talk to you this morning about them."

"Still camping. We're hitting a week now." Robbie answered. "They look like they might be digging in for the winter, so to speak."

"And how far from . . ."

"Far." Robbie replied. "Ellen will be at a good distance."

"Where exactly is this house." Before Robbie could answer, Frank lifted his hand. "Never mind. You can't tell me."

"No, I can't, but I will."

"I'll find out when I go out with her."

Puzzled, Robbie glanced up at him. "I thought Elliott was going with her."

"Sgt. Fuckin Ryder? Yeah, right. I'll cripple his ass before I let him go with her."

"Frank?" Robbie snickered. "Why do you not like him anymore?"

"One. He has Ellen's interest. Two, he isn't dying anymore. He is now a viable threat. Or was. I don't care. He can have her."

Robbie laughed. "Here we go again."

"No. Not again. Well, again. I'm breaking it off with her. But for good."

"Frank." Robbie slid from the bench. "You do this all the time. You'll break up, you'll go back. Especially if you plan on being out there for a month with her."

"I'm tough."

“You love her. And she loves you.” Robbie stepped to him.

“Yeah, I love her. But the truth is, Robbie. Who am I?”

A sound of disbelief escaped Robbie. “A lucky guy Frank. You have the understanding. You have the friendship. The physical side.”

“I don’t have her heart anymore.”

“Bullshit.”

“Nah. Neither does Dean and he’s kidding himself if he thinks he does. Ryder has her interest. Me and Dean. We’re habits to her.”

“And you just want to dump that habit like you did with the alcohol.”

A short huff came from Frank with a near silent chuckle and he turned. “Something like that. I have to go . . .”

“Frank. Let’s . . .”

“I’m done talking about this. See ya.” He lifted his hand.

“Frank . . .”

“Training. First thing tomorrow.” out of the garage door, Frank moved without looking back.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN
Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

George thought the aromatic blast was a figment of his imagination or else a brush of a person from his past. He always considered himself gifted in that way. Anytime a strong memory, or even a visit from someone who passed, away hit him, so did a familiar scent that was attached to the deceased person.

After his father died, it was the car garage he worked at. George's mother brought the scent of her prized rose garden, his grandmother the sour kraut she made every Saturday.

Scents.

But George couldn't place the cigar scent. It was bold, vibrant, strong, and since it was something he hadn't smelled since pre-plague, it couldn't have been real. But the more he moved down the corridor of the office installation, the stronger the scent grew. And just as he was about to turn the bend to his office, the cigar aroma was the strongest.

Sniffing like a dog, George turned clockwise, and slightly hunched some in his hound dog mode, he followed it.

Bingo.

A simple knock on the office door, and then George opened it.

"Sir!" Bertha Callahan stood up. From her mouth she removed the thick cigar and placed it in the ashtray. "Sorry, Sir."

"At ease." Georg stepped inside. "Are you smoking a cigar?"

"Yes, sir, I indulge."

"Where did you get one?"

"Brought them up from down south. They make them down there."

"I'll be damned. Do you have another?"

"Absolutely, Sir." She reached in her desk drawer and pulled one out. "Enjoy." She extended it to him.

George took it and ran it under his nose. He gave a shrug of 'not bad'. "I'll save this for after dinner." He stuck it in his chest pocket. "I'll leave you be."

"Thank you."

"Oh, Callahan. Have you seen Stew?"

"He . . . he left for vacation two days ago."

"Vacation? Where in the hell did he go?"

"Florida. You approved it. Shall I show you the . . ."

"No." George lifted his hand. "No need. So you're in charge of the Beginnings line?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything?"

"No, sir."

"Find me if Jess Boyens checks in." George reached for the door. "And if Frank Slagel calls, tell him to try me later, I'm not dealing with his stupid ass."

"Slagel, Sir?"

"Yes." George turned around.

"Slagel." Bertha sat down slowly. "Sir, that's an odd name."

"Well, they're an odd bunch." George turned for the door again.

"Begging your pardon, Sir. But did you ever wonder . . ."

"Bert." George stopped her. "Do you like your job?"

"Very much so."

"Would you consider yourself dedicated to the society?"

"One hundred percent. Have a notch belt with thirty-three personal kills sir."

"Good. Good. That's the kind of dedication I need to hear. Now, before anything gets said . . ." George stepped forth into the office. "We have to talk."

The office door closed.

^^^

The tin of the reminder flask rattled its emptiness as it fell on the counter before Ellen in the clinic lab. Slowly, over her shoulder she peered. "Frank?"

Frank stared hard at her, eyes to eyes, and then he swallowed. "I broke."

Exhaling at a slow rate, Ellen nodded. "Frank, I . . ."

"Last night." He reached down and grabbed the flask. "I broke." He shrugged almost in embarrassment. "Everything crashed down on me. Everything. My Dad. Johnny. Us. You name it. So . . ." He raised his eyebrows. "I drank this. Drank it all. One pint, El. And I, uh . . ." Frank exhaled. "Stopped for one more before I came home."

"How are you feeling today about it?"

"Like shit." He shook his head.

"You do know it's understandable."

"No. It's weak. I needed it. I was weak." Shoving the flask in his back pocket, Frank turned to leave. "I needed to tell someone."

"Frank? What now?"

"I don't know." He lifted his hands. "I can't honestly say. Do I want to drink? No. Do I need to drink. Oh, my God, El, do I need to drink."

"Do you want to go somewhere? Sit down and talk?"

"No." Frank shook his head. "I said all I needed to say. No talking."

"Frank, please don't tell me you're still upset with me." Ellen moved to him.

"Upset? Nah."

"I'm glad." Ellen smiled. "You had me worried." She chuckled emotionally. "It probably was just your bad day talking. But I thought, I thought for sure you were ending the understanding."

"I am."

"Here we go again." Ellen shook her head and turned. "For how long this time, Frank?"

"For good."

"Right." She scoffed and returned to her work.

"I'm serious."

"And for what reason!" Ellen in a surprise switch of demeanor blasted as she faced him. "Huh! It's always something. What is it this time, Frank?"

"One word! Sgt. Fuckin Ryder."

After closing her eyes, and counting three fingers, Ellen shook her head. "What about Elliott? He has nothing to do with it."

"He has everything to do with it." Frank argued. "And do you have any carrots?"

"Huh?"

"Nothing. I don't know where that came from."

"I'm lost." Ellen gave up. "I am. Did something happen when you took that bullet. Before you got shot, you liked Elliott. Now you're an asshole to him. It was a joke Frank we were playing on you to give you motivation to get out of the salicain."

"That isn't it."

"Then what is it?" Ellen asked strong.

"He's no longer dying."

"W . . . what?" Her question squeaked out. "What does that have to do with it?"

"It has to do with you. Before when he was interested in you. It was

OK. He was dying.” Frank rattled, ignoring Ellen’s gasp. “I mean, if he got you, how long would that be for. Right? A few months maybe . . .”

“Frank!”

“What! He’s not dying anymore, El! Dean fixed him. You’re still interested in him!”

“You thought I had an interest in Elliott only because he was dying?” Ellen asked.

“What other reason is there!”

“Well, what about . . .”

“Oh!” Frank grunted. “Oh, you would think that about him.”

Ellen looked at him puzzled.

“And yes, I do know what I’m saying. Don’t even go there. No!” Frank shook his head as Ellen just stared at him. “I am thinking clearly. Too clearly.”

“You’re insane.” Ellen spoke soft.

“Right. No, I’m out of here.” Frank took a few steps and spun around. “I’m not an asshole! Oh, yeah! Bet me. Bet. You watch how serious I am. You don’t think? Watch how long this lasts!” He turned again. “Fucking figures don’t it!” Frank blasted to Elliott who had just walked in. “What!”

Elliott with a calm raise of his eyebrows, raised a sheet of paper. “Your . . . report.”

“Thank you.” Frank snatched it up and stormed out.

Confused Elliott looked at Ellen. “What is going on with him.”

“Frank . . . he’s . . .”

“Ryder.” Frank raged back and stuck his head in the lab. “Meteor strategy meeting one hour. Don’t blow it off.”

Watching Frank leave, still confused, Elliott returned to Ellen. “Is he all right, maybe really stressed?”

“He’s perfectly fine.” Ellen spoke calm and smiled. “Why in the world would you ask?”

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If breaths of relief were measured in velocity, Hal released a tornado of an exhale when he walked into the communications room with Danny. “Finally.” He gave toss of his keys with a jingle, then placed them in his pocket. “Anything Len?” He asked the communication man.

“Nothing. All quiet. Is this my break?” Len stood up.

“Take a long one.” Hal instructed, “Mr. Hoi and myself have matters



to discuss so we'll hang out here."

"Great. Thanks." Smiling, Len hurried and left his post just incase Hal pulled a Frank and changed his mind.

Pulling out the chair, Hal slowly sat. "I thought Frank's meteor meeting would never end."

"It was interesting." Danny stated as he too, sat.

Hal just looked at him.

"No, really. It was. Hey, Hal? Do you think a meteor is actually coming on February 28<sup>th</sup>?"

Hal's mouth dropped open. "Good Lord, Danny. No, I don't think a meteor is actually coming on February 28<sup>th</sup>. Do not tell me you do."

"I didn't at first. But . . ."

"Frank claims a psychic vision." Hal said.

"But Dean confirmed it."

"Oh, yes, that's a reliable source. Dean."

"He's our top scientist."

"He's also Frank's friend and encourages this behavior in Frank because he finds it amusing. And what was up with the roughage comments from my brother? No." Hal shook his head. "It's not happening. Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?"

"No. It really doesn't." Danny replied. "And Dr. Godrichson was at the meeting giving details."

"It's a scientist thing. Dr. Godrichson was amusing himself as well."

"He had charts. And told about how he had to watch it more closely."

"He is also the man that agreed with Frank that they should get a space crew together. Go up in the shuttle and blow it up." Hal nodded. "Let's not forget, the viable option that if they can't get the shuttle working, they just . . ." Hal fluttered his lips. "Go back in time, find Ronald Regan, he'd believe them, help him out with Star Wars and in exchange he helps destroy the meteor long before it becomes a threat. And what happened after that suggestion. The men . . . applauded."

Danny shrugged. "I'm just not dismissing it."

"You do what you want.. There is a lot to concern ourselves with. The killer babies who get violent should their deer feast, thanks to Sgt. Ryder., not arrive by six pm. A darting in wandering savage here and there. Remaining SUTs from the societies last attempt. Ellen, should the vote not go her way, is leaving. And *this, this* plan must get started should I want to begin the move in April."

"Joe hasn't approve a offensive move, and you know it."

“He’s going to have to, Danny.” Hal said. “A peaceful existence will last for how long? Besides, do we really want to live in a country that is not free to roam? Don’t think so. I don’t. I want to start planning our strategic hits. We have enough to start, we’ll pick up more men, I’m certain. I want to start these hits and free this country again. That’s the only way.”

“Some how I feel as if I should have been singing the national anthem while you said that.”

Hal smiled. “Not just yet.” He winked. “Elliott Ryder assured me he is working on a new one. And knowing Elliott, I will gather it’s brilliant.”

“Speaking of our illustrious third council member. Where is he?” Danny asked.

“This is more top of the chain, Danny. And secret. I have to see that this will work prior to informing my father of our doings. If you don’t want to cross any trusted boundaries, I would understand if you did not want to partake.”

“Nah.” Danny shook his head. “After thinking about it all last night, I agree. This should be done.”

No sooner did Danny finish speaking and the communications room buzzed and opened.

Robbie walked in, Jess Boyens behind him. “Hey.” Robbie shut the door. “Sorry we’re late. I got held up. How’s my arm coming, Danny?”

“Slow but good.”

Hal stood up. “Jess.” He extended his hand to Jess. “Glad you agreed.”

“Hal.” Jess exhaled. “I’ll do anything to not leave. Even if it means leaving for a little bit. As long as I know this is home.”

“It is.” Hal smiled. “This is just a simple initiative. You know what we discussed. Come in.” Hal held out his hand. “Have a seat.”

Jess followed the lead.

“Say, Hal?” Robbie questioned. “I’m taking it Dad doesn’t know about this. Do you think you should be doing this?”

So perturbed, and offended at the same time, Hal faced Robbie with a huff. “Little brother, our father, our leader is ill. He’s taken absence for at least a week. Who did he pass his authority unto?”

“You.” Robbie answered.

“Exactly. I am in charge of Bowman, Beginnings and Jordan. Danny is second. We decided on this. Dad will just have to deal with it. But . . .” Hal lifted his finger. “Just don’t say anything.” He walked over to where Jess was.

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Jess sat down and watched Hal push the phone to him.

Hal leaned closer. "You know what to do. We aren't sure whether George knows about Bev. I don't believe he does. Either my nephew did not survive to tell him, or something is withholding that information back. Should President Hadly give any indication that he hasn't a clue his daughter is dead. End transmission. Got that?"

"Yes." Jess nodded and picked up the phone.

"Danny." Hal gave an 'ready' look to him. "Dial." He watched Danny dial the phone, then Hal picked up the monitoring line and listened.

Jess' heart pounded with each ring of the phone. When the voice answered he didn't know what to make of it. Was it a husky woman, or a man with a bad cold. Suddenly, upon her answer, Jess lost his breath.

"Hello?" Bertha repeated.

Another breath, as if an obscene phone call.

"I've been warned, you know." She said. "If this is that Robbie person, I won't find amusement in you and your Simpson Cartoon sense of crank call humor."

Slowly, Hal lifted his eyes and looked at Robbie.

Robbie stood confused shaking his head in question on why his brother stared at him.

"No." Jess voice cracked. "It's not Robbie. I couldn't talk for a second."

"Who is this?"

"Boyens. Jess Boyens."

"Hold on."

Jess closed his eyes, as if he weren't nervous enough he then had to wait.

Hal, on the other hand kept a stare on Robbie.

"What?" Robbie whispered. "What did I do?"

Hal covered the receiver and spoke in a whisper as well. "Bart Simpson? Grow up." He shook his head and removed his hand.

"Boyens." George's crass voice rang through. "Tell me."

Jess lifted his eyes to Hal. "The West Land ridge is guarded."

George let out a sound of relief. "Good to hear from you. I was worried."

"I've been hospitalized, this is the first opportunity I had."

"No problems, I hope."

"I was badly burned in an explosion. I'm still . . . I'm still healing."

"Sorry to hear that. How long until you're in full force?" George

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asked.

"Another week or so, Listen, President Hadly." Jess watched Hal give a 'cut it' signal, and then he spoke fast as if he were rushing. "I can't talk. I snuck in here to make this . . ."

"I understand."

"Communications may be tight. They have to be. There's an all out call and things are coming down tight and strong looking for any other infiltrators."

"So you have to stay under wraps?"

"Yes. Just know I'm here and ready. Someone's coming." Jess spoke rapidly.

"Can you start logging?"

"Someone's coming." Even faster Jess spoke.

"Yes or no."

"Yes. Shit." Jess hung up.

So did Hal. "Excellent." He told Jess.

"Anything about Bev?" Danny asked.

Hal shook his head. "No. If he asks. We have to end transmission. Jess can not tell him."

"I'm curious." Danny asked. "What about when George finds out? How are we going to get him to accept Jess back to the society, if Jess never told him about Bev?"

Hal lifted his hands. "Why would Jess tell him about Bev? Hmm?" Hal indicated to his own temple. "Think about it. Johnny left. Jess assumed George knew."

Jess finally moved his hand from the base of the phone. "What now?"

"A few days you'll call again. Ask what type of info he wants logged, end call. We can play with this 'end call thing for a while." Hal answered.

Robbie took a step forward. "How are you gonna pull this off, Hal?" Robbie questioned. "Doyle defected. Doyle told us he handpicked Jess. George is gonna get suspicious if nothing happens but quickly ended calls."

"Robert." Hal spoke smoothly and stood up. "Have you confused me with the less intelligent Slagel brother, Frank?" Hal chuckled. "You don't believe I have already thought of that. Jess will give information. Nothing valuable. He must to keep George's trust. Jess will also tell George that Doyle is not a true defector. That is, until Jess finds out the truth that Doyle was only pretending to still be working for the society in order to ensure Jess' Caceres Loyalty. At that point. Jess is turned in to my father which causes Jess to flee."

“God.” Danny laughed. “It’s like soap opera. Do you have this written down somewhere.”

“Oh, absolutely.” Hal pulled out a little note pad. “Right here.”

Robbie snickered. “Every fine detail. Well, I better get Jess back to containment before he’s missed.” He opened the communications door and peeked out. “Jess?”

Jess stood up and walked across the room, he paused at the door, turning to Hal. “I appreciate this. I do. This is my home now, Hal. And even if no one ever believes that and I have to leave for real. Just know, I’m glad you guys have faith in me. I would die for Beginnings.” Jess left with Robbie.

Danny, hands in pockets, walked to Hal. “That was pretty convincing. It shows some loyalty.”

“Yes.” Hal said almost in awe staring at the door. “Actually, Danny, I would say his dying for Beginnings remark is very courageous.”

“Why is that?” Danny asked.

“Because chances are, he will. But realistically . . . and honestly . . .” Hal slowly and seriously faced Danny. “When the fight for Freedom begins, before we are victorious, which we will be . . .most of us will die for Beginnings.”

^^^

In the smoke filled office, George puffed on that cigar in an enjoyment mode, kicked back in his chair. He pulled it from his mouth and stared at it. “I wanted to save this for after dinner with a good cup of coffee.”

“I have more.” Bertha held a match to her cigar.

George watched her forearms that were exposed from her rolled up sleeves. He had never seen cut muscles like that on a man much less a woman. “Hell of a set of forearms you got there, Callahan.”

Bertha looked down. “They are my weak spot. Can’t seem to get them as cut as the rest of my body. In my youth, I won twelve state body building championships. I think these forearms cost me the nationals.”

“You don’t say.”

“Still stick at it. An obsession.”

“Flex.”

Bertha lifted both her arms and flexed. The muscles bulged through her shirt.

“Unbelievable.” George gave a shudder of his head. “You hide those things well.”

“Now, I do sir. When I was pretending I was a man, I didn’t have to.”

“You pulled that off good. Had everyone fooled.”

Almost too female, Bertha blushed with a tilt of her head. “Well.”

“So you have more of these?” George asked.

She brought another match up to her cigar. “I’ll pass on another to you, if you’d like.” Her cheeks indented in and out with each hard puff she took to keep the light going.

“I’d like that. And . . . you manipulate that cigar pretty good.”

“Tears of practice.” With a suctioning sound, Bertha pulled the cigar from her mouth. “Years of practice.”

“You don’t say.” George cleared his throat. “How’d you like to have dinner with me and continue discussing this Boyens thing.”

“Be very honored sir.” Bertha stood up. “Shall we?”

George’s glance was still upward even as he rose to his feet. “Christ you’re tall.”

“Six two.”

Letting out a small whistled, Georg replaced the cigar in his mouth. “Yep. Gonna enjoy this one. This is my victory smoke.”

“And rightfully so, Sir. The Jess Boyens call was good news.” The cigar dangled from her mouth

“Great news.” George reached for the door and opened it. “It means we’re still in Beginnings. After you.” He widened the openness of the door.

The cigar popped as it sild from Bertha’s mouth. “Thank you, Sir.”

“No . . . Thank you.” imagining it as well defined as everything else, George paused to check out Bertha’s rear end as she passed, then with a smile, he followed her.

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One sip was all Frank wanted, and one sip was all he took. He allowed the whiskey to swish around his mouth, then replacing the cap to the reminder flask, he put the flask in his back pocket. On the counter of Dean and Ellen’s kitchen, his snack set on a plate. He lifted that plate, grabbed his water, and hands full walked to the dining area of the sleeping house.

Just getting ready to settle and review the reports, Frank looked up when the door opened and Dean walked in.

“Hey, Frank.” Dean shivered and took off his coat. “Kids asleep.”

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"Yep. Every one of them."

"Excellent." Dean hung up his coat. "El?"

"Dean."

"What?"

"El's in New Bowman. She has clinic there tomorrow." Frank pulled forward his reports.

"Gees, I forgot. And sorry I'm so late."

"That's all right."

"What . . . what are you eating?" Dean asked as he joined Frank at the table.

"Carrots."

"Carrots?" Dean looked at the plate. "A bushel."

"I was in the mood so I stopped at the greenhouse."

"For carrots."

"Dean." Frank said perturbed then, in a Bugs Bunny manner, snapped a bite of his carrot. "Roughage is good for you. I felt this overwhelming desire for carrots." He took another bite. "Man, this is fuckin good. You sure you don't want one."

"Um, no, you enjoy. Any coffee?" Dean pointed toward the kitchen.

"Half a pot."

"I'll just . . ." Dean stood up. "So, did you try any of those mind exercises I set out for you." He asked as he went into the kitchen.

"Yes. The blocking out worked really well. Thanks for the tip."

"A black wall. Sounded plausible." Dean walked back with his coffee. "How about reading thoughts. Did you . . ."

"Yes. Went to Jenny Matoose. She was easy. Of course all she thinks about is sex."

"Sorry about that."

"Not a good visual, Dean." Frank shook his head reviewing the reports. "Fuckin Ryder, man he screwed up my killer baby situation."

"How's that."

"He's feeding them. He won't kill them. I have to get out there and take some out, all we need is more of them. Fuckin Ryder. He's the reason I broke up with Ellen."

Dean laughed. "What?"

"Well, ended the understanding."

"Are you serious?" Dean asked.

"Yeah."

"You . . . You did what!"

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“Dean! I just told you!”

With an ‘uh!’ and holding his head, Dean stood up. “How could you? How, Frank? I thought you were happy. What went wrong?”

“Dean . . .”

“Do you even comprehend how hard of a decision it was for me to give you this arrangement! If you had one inkling, you wouldn’t have done this to me!”

“To you?” Frank stood up.

“To me, Frank. Oh. Oh! You’ll change your mind, right now, go and tell her you were wrong, and continue the understanding.” In his ranting Dean didn’t even notice Billy had stepped into the room.

“I’ll do no such thing. It’s over, Dean. Over. You’ll have to accept that and move on.”

“I can’t accept that.” Dean spoke. “We were good together. It was the perfect combination.”

Against the archway that led to the bedrooms, Billy leaned with folded arms.

“Things . . . things change.” Frank explained.

“What things? Is there no love there.”

“Oh, there’s love there. But I don’t think it goes both ways. It feels unnatural. Like it’s forced.”

“Bullshit. You’re just being hardheaded that’s all.”

“How am I being hardheaded? I know what I want.”

“You want this. And you know it.” Dean nodded.

With a silent, ‘hmm’ Billy kept listening.

“I think . . .” Dean explained calmly. “I think you just had a totally different perception of how this would be with you and me.”

“No, I went into this with my eyes wide open. I knew exactly what to expect. But I do have to say, you surprised me.”

“I gave more than you expected me to give you. Didn’t I?”

“Well, yes. Why are you this upset?”

“Wouldn’t you be, Frank?” Dean asked. “Think about it. Put yourself in my shoes. There I was before we started this. I thought I’d be selfish, but with you, I don’t know what happened. . .” Dean shook his head. “Years maybe, our history. Whatever the reason, I found myself open to you. I found myself not being selfish. I found myself not fighting you. Without the resistance between us, things clicked. I started to understand and accommodate when your emotional and physical needs had to be met. Would I give that to any one else! No! I don’t want to give that to anyone



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else!”

The tiny clearing of the throat silenced Dean and Frank. Billy shook his head at them. “About this point in your little . . . Spat. I am wondering if I should be hearing this. Now . . . I’m going back to bed. Can I give some advice. Keep in mind this is coming from an almost eight year old. But I think these little . . .” Billy snickered. “Talks should be confined, like yesterday to the bathroom. Or . . .” He snickered again, turned and headed back to bed. “The closet.”

Watching Billy walk away, Frank blinked in curiosity. “Why would we fight in a closet.”

“Frank . . .”

“The bathroom’s not a bad idea, that way we wouldn’t wake . . .”

“Frank!” Dean yelled.

“What! Fuck!”

“You know what?” Dean tossed his hands up. “Fine. You want to end this. End this. But, living here with me and Ellen won’t be easy for you. It will be torture. Sheer torture. When we make love. I’ll moan. I’ll moan really loud.”

“Hello!” Billy shouted from his bedroom. “Again! Do I need to hear this.”

Dean cringed.

“Man he got good ears.” Frank commented. “But you can’t do that Dean. That’s in violation of our understand treaty. I have the papers you drew up. No intimacy while the others around.”

Dean shrugged. “According to you. It’s now null and void.”

“But you can’t do that.”

“I will.”

“I’ll move.”

“Where?” Dean asked. “Joe already gave your house away. You can move back with Joe. But isn’t Andrea there. Robbie. You can do that, or stay here and . . . listen.” Dean flicked a raise of his eyebrows.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.” Dean nodded in arrogance. “Here’s a preview . . .” A deep moan emanated from Dean.

“Dad!”

“Go to sleep!” Dean yelled.

Frank lifted his hands. “I thought we were talking. You want me to sleep.”

“Not you. Him.”

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“Who?” Frank asked.

Fast came the patter of feet down the hall, and Billy folded his arms. “Me! God!” he turned around and ran back to his room.

“Oh.” Frank understood. “Him. OK. Fine.”

“Fine what?”

“I’ll rescind the break up. But . . . I still don’t know why you were mad. I thought you’d be happy.”

“Happy?” Dean questioned. “Oh, yeah, I’d be happy if this was the old world. But it isn’t Frank. Ellen is gonna do what she wants to do. Trust me, if it’s not you, it’ll be someone else. And fast.”

“Like Ryder.”

Dean chuckled. “Um, where is she now?”

“New Bowman.”

“Who’s in New Bowman?”

“A lot of people. Hal, that Owens guy . . . Ben from Fabrics moved there . . .”

“Frank? Who else?”

“What, Dean, you wanna fuckin list?”

“Frank, I . . .”

“Over five hundred fuckin people in that town I can’t list them.” Frank argued.

Dean growled. “Forget it. I’ll tell you.”

“You can name all five hundred people?”

“No!” Dean nearly screamed, then lifted his hand and calmed himself. “Concentrate of me, right now. Listen to what I’m thinking.”

Frank locked a concentrating stare of seriousness on Dean and then his eyes widened. “Fuck!”

“Oh, yeah. Try this.” Dean gave a nod of arrogance.

“UH! She wouldn’t dare.”

“Where is she now?”

“Are we going through that whole list of questions again? Because we did this once and it wasn’t all that fun the first time.”

Grunting Dean walked over and grabbed his coat. “Let’s go. Josh is here. Go run and tell him to keep an eye on the kids we have an understanding to put back together.”

“Right now?” Frank asked.

“Right now. Because . . .” Dean projected his thoughts.

“Fuck. Go get a jeep. I’ll tell Josh.” Frank took off toward the bedrooms.



*"It is not within my character to take advantage like that."* Elliott heard his own voice earlier talking to Ellen. *"But, perhaps, I can steal one night . . ."* Key in hand, Elliott faced the old door. He could feel Ellen huddling close to his back as some sort of protection from the cold. "One, second." He told her and inserted the key in the door.

"Elliott?" Ellen spoke with curiosity, taking a moment to look around the darkness that surrounded them. "At dinner, you said you were taking me somewhere special, and private."

"I am." he opened the door.

"A church?"

"No . . ." After Ellen stepped inside, he led her immediately down the stairs. "The basement of a church."

"A dungeon." Ellen said realizing how far down they were doing.

"Basement. I've learned this is very sound proof. No one can hear what goes on down here."

"Are we gonna be that loud?" Ellen questioned.

"I might be."

"You're that loud during sex."

"Oh, my God." Elliott stopped. "No."

"We're not coming down here to fool around?" She winked jokingly.

"No."

"So the sound proofing is important so no one hears me . . . scream?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are you killing me, Elliott."

"Ellen." He walked to the last door.

"In all seriousness." Ellen reached her hand out to him. "We're in New Bowman. We're alone. I'm not in the understanding with Frank. I made the offer. What is it. Don't you find me attractive?"

"Ellen, that is not it." Elliott rested his elbow on the wall by the door, his hand played with the back of his neck. "There are two reasons. One, this recent stopping of the understanding will not last. I don't care what you say. You'll be back with Frank. And it is not my place, nor my character to take advantage of that."

"But you said you wanted to steal one night."

"That doesn't mean intimacies."

"So what's the other reason?" Ellen asked. "You said there were two

reasons.”

“Ah, yes.” Elliott held almost an embarrassed look upon his face. “You’ve been with Dean for quite some time. Let’s just say he’s had much practice, and is probably very seasoned in matters that I wish not to look like an amateur in comparison, due to my lack of . . . or rather void of..”

“Elliott.” Ellen chuckled softly. “Do you think I would make it a competition.”

“No. No I don’t. But I am a man, *I* would inadvertently make it a competition.”

“Don’t you think the act is like riding a bicycle? Once you get back on, you’ll remember.”

“That would be after getting on that bike with exuberance, and with the first move for the peddle, one . . . pops the chain.”

Ellen giggled. “That’s funny.”

“It would be an embarrassment I wish not to take.” He raised his eyebrows. “Ellen, it’s not only been so long since I have . . . ridden. It’s been since before the plague my hands have even rested on a bike. That’s too long.”

“Yeah.” Ellen spoke soft. “Yeah it is.”

“For now, I would like to just admire the . . . beauty of the bike from afar.”

Ellen let out a soft, ‘oh.’

“However . . .” Elliott exhaled. “Should this break up be true and last, perhaps the offer would still stand?” Elliott asked. “Only maybe . . .”

“With training wheels?” Ellen finished his sentence and saw his smile. “So, if you didn’t bring me to the dungeon to have sex with me, or to kill me, why do we need to be here so no one can hear us.”

“This.” Elliott opened the door.

“I don’t . . . oh, Elliott.” Ellen turned clockwise looking around at the many keyboards set up in there. “This is great.”

Elliott set down the keys and shut the door. “This is my practice room.” He turned on the power strip causing a buzz. “I come down here to write, play, and no one especially the captain, can hear. Well, Fr. O’Brien. But for the most part he is intoxicated and doesn’t notice.”

“So are you going to sing for me.”

“Sort of.” Elliott pulled out a chair for her. “Actually I wanted your opinion on something I wrote. The Captain wants to hear it, and before I do that, I would like to save myself the embarrassment if it isn’t any good, or is hokey.”

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"Sure. I'll be honest."

"Great." Elliott began turning on the keyboards. "I have the different parts synchronized, let me it loaded."

"You're so musical, Elliott."

Elliott laughed. "I like to play."

"So what is it?" Ellen asked, crossing her legs.

"Don't laugh." Pulling a stool forward Elliott positioned himself in front of his keyboard set up. "The UWA National Anthem."

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"So where are they?" Dean tossed his hands up as he stood with Frank in Elliott's bedroom.

"Not here."

"I know that. I can see that."

"Maybe they're hiding."

Dean didn't even comment. "All right. We looked at the Danny-Plex. Dan-a-Rama. Hoi-Hoi on the Range. Hal's. I give up."

"No." Frank walked out of the bedroom. "I have an idea. I'm gonna hone in on them."

"Yes." Dean smiled. "Excellent. Think, Frank., Think. Concentrate and I bet . . ." He stopped when he heard it. A hard sniffing sound. "Frank?" He hurried to see Frank. "What . . ."

Frank faced him, his nose crinkled. "I got the scent. Let's go." Sniffing hard once more, Frank took off down the steps.

"He . . . he has the scent." Dean scratched his head. "OK." Not thinking any more about it, Dean just followed.

^^^

"Oh, Elliott." Ellen slowly stood up as the last remaining note, sound, rang out in the room. "Oh, Elliott. Look." She lifted her arm. "I have chills."

"You liked it then?"

"I have chills."

"It could have irritated you like fingernails on a chalkboard."

Ellen just tilted her head. "I'm speechless. That . . . that was awesome. You have to let Hal hear it."

"I'm a little frightened that if he likes it, he'll make it a thing to be sung

at all events.”

“And why not? Why did you write it?”

“Inspiration.” Elliott shrugged. “A sense of patriotism that we will need when we go to . . . I mean should we go to war.”

“Then all the reason to introduce it now. I love it. And aside from the way you sing . . .” Ellen whistled. “You play so well.”

Elliott’s hands hovered the keyboard. “I believe more so than skill, it is all in the touch. You have to feel it to play it. Does that make sense?”

“Yes.” Ellen nodded.

Elliott stared at the keyboards, then he started to just play something soft as he spoke. “I once had a music instructor who told me, when I sing, play, write music, each step, each process of that should be treated with the soul and feel as if I were making love to a woman.” Elliott continued to play. “So in a sense . . .” He chuckled. “I get a lot of action.”

“Elliott . . .”

“That wasn’t a come on.” Elliott peered up, Ellen was right there.

“It’s allowed to be.”

“It’s not me.”

“Elliott.” Ellen walked around and stood to his side. “I told you why Frank broke up the understanding, right?”

“No.”

“You.”

Elliott stopped playing.

“You.” Ellen repeated.

“Oh my God.” Elliott closed his eyes. “It was not my intention. Trust me Ellen, the combination of Frank and Dean is a deadly one to cross. One will chase you down and catch you while the other injects you with a vile substance.”

“Not long ago you pursued me with innocence, and honesty, you took me up on my offer of an understanding.”

“Not long ago . . .” Elliott turned in his chair. “You were not involved with Frank or Dean.”

“I’m just with Dean . . .”

“There is no ‘just Dean.’” Elliott folded his hands. “It’s always Frank and Dean. I don’t understand why Frank used me as an excuse. The boundaries I crossed with you were innocent. I haven’t touched, kissed or made any move toward you since the arrangement of those two.”

“Don’t you want to?” Ellen asked.

“I would love to.”

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“You said you would steal a night.” Ellen softened her voice. “This is the night Elliott. Steal it.” She grabbed his hand.

“Ellen.”

“You said it has been forever since you’ve touched a woman.” She led him to stand. “A woman is right here, Elliott.” Slowly she began to unbutton her shirt.

“Ellen.” He closed his eyes.

“No lines need to be crossed. This doesn’t have to even be sexual.” she grabbed his hands and placed them on her shoulders. “Let me give this to you.” Ellen’s hands still on his, slid Elliott’s hands to rest flush, just under her neck, and she moved into him, lifting her mouth to be near his ear. “You don’t have to kiss me, hold me, there’s no bike riding here, Elliott. Just explore something you haven’t in so long. Unless you don’t want to.”

Eyes fluttering, Ellen close to him, her words beating against the skin of his face, Elliott stepped even closer. The thick nostril breath he released preluded the inching of his right hand. His fingers, with a slow apprehension, slipped just a small amount under her shirt. It was only the skin of her chest he touched, yet it made him shudder, the softness of it. His other hand moved in a similar innocent spot. Palms gliding against the bareness of her body, he circled the motion of his hands staying close to the nape of her neck and her shoulders as he pressed nearly to Ellen and brought his lips in a hover of hers. Eye lids lightly closed, Elliott’s head kindled back and forth and his lips brushed in an ‘air’ kiss to Ellen. The tiniest bit of a anticipation moan that eluded from Ellen caused Elliott to fight the widening of his mouth and the forging ahead into a deeper kiss. He stayed in control of the mockery intimate moment, his body never nearer than an inch to hers, his hand being the only portion of Elliott to touch. Smelling her, feeling her energy, Elliott moved his hands across the curve of Ellen’s shoulders, slowly slipping the shirt from her.

“Freeze then fuckin hands right where they are, Ryder!” Frank blasted into the room.

Elliott’s hands stopped, then after a swallow, he opened his eyes and looked at Ellen. “I knew it.”

“Oh, fuckin great!” Frank bitched. “Dean, if you don’t so something, I will.”

Ellen’s eyes, still locked on Elliott’s, questioned. “Dean too?”

“Hey!” Frank yelled. “Ryder, you can stop undressing her anytime you want!”

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Lifting his hands, only enough to fix Ellen's shirt, Elliott gave an apologetic look to her.

Ellen buttoned, then turned perturbed to the pair. "What the hell are you two doing here."

Frank's head flung back in dramatics. "Oh! You would ask that. You're in God's house. God's House! Committing adultery. Dean! Do something, you're her husband. Step in any time."

Fingers running through his hair, at a loss at what to say after witnessing a situation he wasn't ready for, Dean shook his head. "What's going on, El?"

Frank spun a quick look to Dean. "That's it? Fuck! Fine! I'll handle it. Ryder . . ." Frank barged to Elliott.

Ellen interceded and stepped quickly ahead of Elliott. "Frank! You have no right! Back off!"

Elliott peacefully tried to get by Ellen. "Maybe I should go."

"Just like you to run!" Frank barked. "Run or hide behind Ellen!"

"Frank!" Ellen screamed at him then calmed. "No, Elliott, you stay here, because there's no reason for you to leave."

Frank huffed. "There you go, standing up for him. And what do you mean I have no right. I have every right!"

"The hell you do. You broke up the understanding!" Ellen yelled.

"Well *I* changed my mind." Frank yelled back.

"What!" Ellen shrieked in disbelief. "You can't just change your mind."

"Ya-huh. Dean said." Frank nodded and pointed to Dean. "Ask him."

Dean lifted his hands. "I said."

Ellen moved forward to the side by side duo. "And you think, Dean, just because you 'said', that means you dictate who I have the understanding with."

"Yes." Dean nodded.

Ellen laughed. "And I have no choice in the matter?"

"No." Dean saw Ellen getting ready to argue. "Let me finish. If I'm going to agree to share you, it has to be my decision on who I share you with."

"Again . . ." Ellen raised her voice. "You're saying . . ."

Elliott tried to intervene. "Ellen, maybe if we just leave . . ."

"Elliott, stay out of this!" Ellen snapped.

Frank snickered.

Ellen continued. "Dean? You choose?"



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“Yes. Or there’s no understanding. That’s it. I’m your husband, El. I have the understanding say-so.” Dean explained. “And I say there’s no understanding especially with Elliott Ryder.”

“Elliott *fuckin* Ryder.” Frank corrected. “Or Sgt. fuckin Ryder if you want to give him some sort of respect in ranking.”

Grunting, Ellen grabbed Elliott’s hand. “Oh screw both of you. Let’s go, Elliott.”

Frank bodily blocked the path of exit. “You will *not* go with him.”

Ellen rolled her eyes in sarcasm then looked at Dean, who stood pretty confident that things were being handled, for him, just fine by Frank. “You guys really piss me off. And I’ll go with him, Frank, there’s nothing you can do to stop me.”

“Try this.” Frank looked behind her to Elliott. “Ryder, you walk out of here, you and I, we’re going head to head, and I don’t think you want to go there. Not with me.”

Releasing a slow blink, Elliott moved Ellen gently aside. “The arrogance you have in your ability to encumber your every opponent, baffles me. You’re far too confident, Mr. Slagel.”

Silence.

Dean inched closer to Frank with a whisper. “He thinks you’re too confident about kicking ass.”

Frank laughed then returned to seriousness as he stared at Elliott. “I have every right to be confident. You don’t know me.” An inch closer Frank moved.

“I’ve taken your punch.” Elliott lessened the distance between he and Frank.

“I never gave you all I had. You don’t want me to give you all I have. Trust me, Ryder. End this now, get out of my face, or, like I said, you and I will go head to head.”

“Your verbal warnings may work with some. They won’t frighten me. I don’t frighten easy.” Elliott stayed firm, a whispers breath separated them. “You’re just a man.”

“No.” Frank corrected collectedly. “I’m Frank.”

“And about this point in time, especially after the past few days, I’m pretty much sick of how you’re all that.”

Frank scoffed. “I am. And I earned that right. I’ve handled a lot of things, no one else has during the course of my job.”

“I’ve done your job.”

“You haven’t scratched my ass as far as doing my job goes.” Frank

graveled.

"You know what, Frank?" Elliott smiled some. "Fuck you."

Ellen's eyes widened. "Dean."

"Ok!" Dean said upbeat, projecting his voice and body to the heated men whose tension reflected off each other in a pre-eruption manner. "Let's just stop this right . . ." He watched the locked eyes. "OK, enough. All right. Stop. This has gone way beyond the original point of this all. I'm not kidding, back off you two." He received no response. The mental instigation between the two was thick. Dean continued his pleas. "This was about Frank's understanding with Ellen. And Sgt. Ryder, your intrusion in that."

"Hey." Ellen called out. "Frank broke it off."

"He . . ." Dean corrected. "Changed his mind. End of story. That is the reason for the start of this . . ." He indicated to the frozen intense Frank and Elliott. "Now, can we stop this, please." Dean laid his hand on Elliott. "Sgt. Ryder, just listen to me. For years I never liked Frank."

"Hated me." Frank added.

"Um, yeah." Dean nodded. "But I would never deny. Frank is all that. Don't. OK. Don't put yourself in a position others have been in, and others have fallen."

"I'm not others, Dr. Hayes." Elliott said eyes never moving from the arrogant confident look of Frank.. "And if I do not stand my ground with this man I will become nothing but another mere victory notch he can add to his 'men he intimidates' belt. If I need to take him up on his threats, his challenge, I am prepared to do so."

Ellen closed her eyes briefly, then interjected. "Um, Elliott. It . . . It's Frank. I wouldn't do that if I were you. Not with Frank."

For the first time in the entire stance, Elliott's eyes moved from Frank. In a jolt of surprise and shock, his head turned to Ellen. "Am I mistaken, or is that a lack of faith in my ability?"

"It's . . ." Ellen winced and pointed. "It's Frank. It's . . . Frank. I'm sorry."

Elliott nodded. "Then so am I." He stepped back a foot. "Well, then Frank, I see no reason to stand here and make sure you don't shatter my honor, it seems . . ." He moved aside and to the door. "It seems, Ellen has done that for you. Excuse me."

Ellen watched Elliott not look back as he walked straight out. Her heart sunk. "Oh, my God."

Not wanting to add any insult it injury, Dean tried the compassionate

route. "El, look, it's all right." He looked at Frank and shrugged.

"No, Dean, it's not." Ellen spoke soft. "What did I do."

"I'll tell you what you did." Frank gave a single upbeat clap of his hands. "You did a god job. Good job El." he released a loud sigh. "Ah. Carrot?"

Curious and head spinning from the weird and out of place remark, Ellen popped open one eye, looked up to see not only a grinning Frank, but the long orange vegetable he extended with gleefulness before her.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

December 20<sup>th</sup>

“Ah.” Frank smiled and nodded with approval and gratitude to Hector. “Thanks.” He spoke through the still early morning grogginess of his voice.

“No, problem.”

“Perfect you know.”

“If . . . if you say so.” Hector smiled.

“And you won’t tell anyone I was here, right? I don’t want anyone to know I was sneaking in on distribution.”

“Nah.” Hector shook his head. “We call those mutants. They never make it to distribution.”

“Oh my God.” Frank said offended. “Well, pass them to me.”

“I will.” Hector watched him open the green house door. “Enjoy Frank.”

After giving a thumbs up, Frank pulled the door closed. He was going to wait, but his stomach churned in hunger, and it was really just a snack. Something he had been craving for all night. Looking to see if anyone watched, Frank lifted it to his view . Small, and petite, it fit into the palm of his hand, the miniature head of lettuce did. And with a huge grin, a hungry belly, as if it were an apple, Frank chomped on that head of lettuce as he walked from the greenhouse back to his rounds.

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What had happened? What went wrong? Dean hadn’t a clue, all he knew was that he found himself down in the cryo lab conducting a secret set of experiments about it. Finding not only the real cause, but a resolution was going to be a difficult task, especially since he couldn’t share it with anyone.

Something told him not to be surprised when he peered into the Danny scope. Dean didn’t need the technology of computers to identify what screamed out at him. His eyes and knowledge were good enough. And

it did scream at him. Upon first glance, Dean stepped back, shook his head and looked again.

“Oh, shit.” Dean said softly to himself. “How? How?” he shook his head. “How in the world is this possible. No.” He took a calming breath. “Maybe something happened. Maybe this slide wasn’t a clean slide. God knows Ellen does that to me all the time.” Not that Dean wanted to find a reason for his viewing. Actually Dean, even though it was wrong, hoped his scientific result was valid. It was too awesome, and in the old world it would have sky rocketed him to the top of the DNA expert chain.

Hand tapping in thought on the counter, Dean had to double check. He knew somewhere in the lab he had a blood sample done prior to any of the changes. That was the sure fire way to see if the ground work findings were accurate. Go to the original source. And on his way to the back of the cryo lab to retrieve *that* source, Dean stopped at the long line of animal cages to retrieve another.

^^^

The irritated snap Hal gave to Ellen’s name mixed in with the slam of the filing cabinet in Joe’s office. “Ellen.” File in hand, Hal walked back over to the desk. “Haven’t you anything better to do than to pester me at nine in the morning.”

“No, Hal, I don’t.” She stood before the desk. “What did he say?”

“Who?” Hal asked as he sat down.

“Elliott. It’s been two days, he hasn’t spoke to me. I haven’t seen him . . .”

“He went back to new Bowman yesterday.”

“I know this. But what did he say about me. You have to know.”

Hal lifted his hands. “Ellen, I assure you I haven’t a clue what he is thinking about you. I haven’t gotten into matters of a personal nature with him.”

“So you don’t know what happened?”

“Haven’t a clue.” Hal answered. “Would you like to tell me.”

Ellen laughed in ridicule.

A raise of his hand, and Hal dropped it to the desk. “Please do not tell me you’ll be this bad when we are out beyond the wall during your temporary ousting.”

“We?” Ellen moved closer to the desk. “We.”

“We?”

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“Right, Hal.” Ellen scoffed. “You and your anal ways would be unbearable out there. You’d make me clean.”

Hal gasped. “My God, how horrible.”

“Besides,” Ellen folded her arms tight. “I have no intention of going with anyone.”

“No one, huh?” Hal asked with sarcasm.

“Nope. No one. I’m going alone.”

Holding back the laugh, Hal swiped his hand over his own face to present an air of calm. “And where, Dr. Hayes will you go?” He questioned knowing full well Ellen wasn’t aware of the prepared house.

“I’ll find a place. Hal, please, this is the apocalypse. There are lots of houses.”

“True. What about water.”

“I’ll head up near the lake.”

“Heat?” Hal questioned.

“I’ll chop down trees.”

“Food.”

“I’ll hunt.”

“Christ, Ellen, give me a break. You don’t even fetch your own milk from distribution. You believe you’ll traipse through the woods hunting?” Hal rocked some in the chair.

“What if Hal. What if, at the end of a month they vote to make me stay the full sentence. What then, huh? I’m not that strong What if I want to have . . . sex.” She whispered out the last word.

“It’s me, Ellen. I should think with me that wouldn’t cross your mind.”

“Believe it or not, Hal.” Ellen fluttered her lips. “You’re pretty hot.”

Hal smiled and stopped rocking.

“However . . .” She lifted her finger. “You’d be impossible to have sex with.”

“What?” Hal huffed.

“Oh, yeah, I can hear it.” Clearing her throat Ellen proceeded to do her best Hal imitation. “Heavens, Ellen we’ve wrinkled the bed. Must it be this messy? For medicinal purposes could we not . . . kiss.” A loud Hal-Style gasp came from Ellen. “Good God, Ellen, you want me to put my mouth where!”

Hal’s top lip curled in the utmost disgust and offense.

Ellen breathed out a laugh. “Look at your expression. Sitting there, trying to be so Pius. Rocking back and forth, arrogant . . .”

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"All right." Hal snapped. "Enough. Is there a reason you've decided to go on an insulting binge with me?"

"Yeah!" Ellen screamed.

"What!"

"You won't tell me what Elliott said!" She yelled her loudest.

"Well ask him yourself!" Hal pointed to behind her.

Ellen spun around. "Elliott." She said his name in surprise to see him, hurriedly tucked her hair behind her ears, then spun on her heels back to Hal. "Fucker. You knew he was standing there."

Hal, tilted head, whispered in question, "fucker?" So puzzled he looked. "Fucker?"

"Quit that." Ellen barked, then with a schizophrenic change of personality, she faced Elliott with a smile. "Hi."

"Dr. Hayes." Elliott closed the office door. "Captain, I had a few items to pick up from security, and thought I'd leave Frank's two day reports here."

"Thank you." Hal took them.

"Elliott." Ellen stopped him. "We have to talk."

"I'm afraid we don't."

"Yes, we do." Ellen insisted. "Talk to me. Please."

Elliott stared for a second, then turned to Hal. "Captain, do you mind?"

"No, go right ahead. Talk." Hal leaned back in his chair.

"Hal." Ellen said, "I think we'd like you to leave."

"I think not." Hal crinkled his face. "I've work to do, and must admit, I'm curious. I'll be quiet." He lifted a pencil. "Resolve." He lowered his head to his work and smiled.

"Elliott? Would you like to go outside to talk." Ellen asked.

"No, this will be fine. I don't mind the captain knowing."

Pen fake writing against the paper, Hal listened. He chuckled in his mind thinking it had to be good. Immediately coming up with a list of things that transpired to cause the silence between the friends.

"Ok." Ellen lifted her hand. "About what I said. You have to know I didn't mean it."

"You didn't mean it?" Elliott asked. "Tell me Ellen, how you can not mean to imply I am physically no competition for Frank."

"Ouch." Hal commented, then smiled when he saw the looks they gave him. "Sorry. Slipped out. Continue."

Ellen did. "Elliott, that's not what I meant."

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“What *did* you mean?”

“Well I meant . . . I meant . . . shut up, Hal.” Ellen barked at him.

“What! Go on explain to the man.” Hal stated. “Not that I’m listening.”

“What I meant, Elliott . . .” Ellen peered up to Elliott whose head was tilted, waiting. “Frank . . . he performs these astronomical feats. Things normal men like yourself can’t do.”

“Sizzle. Burn, ouch.” Hal whispered then quickly lifted his hand with an apologetic look.

Ellen, frazzled, tried to continue. “I mean, he jumps from helicopters, Elliott. He’s taken on multitudes of savages, SUTs, you name it.”

Elliott nodded. “And does Frank . . . fly as well?”

Hal laughed.

Ellen grunted. “No. Not yet.”

Hal laughed harder. “What!”

“I mean . . .” Ellen gathered herself. “He’s just at times, most of the time, he’s . . . unbeatable and . . .”

Elliott cleared his throat. “Captain I think . . .”

“Elliott.” Ellen tried again. “Look, all I’m saying is, the only person I know that can come close to taking Frank is Hal. And really, do you think you can take Hal?” Ellen cringed when realization hit with another sizzle sound from Hal.

“If.” Elliott lifted a finger. “There is a point to all of this, please inform me.”

“The point is, I don’t want to be at odds. Elliott, right before this all went down I was letting you touch my breasts.”

Crash.

Both Ellen and Elliott looked to see Hal straightening the pencil holder.

“Just a bit shocked.” Hal said. “Wasn’t that wonderful of her to allow you to touch her breasts.”

“Hal!” Ellen yelled. “You aren’t helping.”

“Never said I would.”

“Elliott.” Ellen spoke soft. “Can we stop. I’m sorry. Let’s just go back to the way we were.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. I’m sorry, Ellen. I think not only should we not come close to crossing boundaries, I believe you and I should curb the close friendship as well.”

“Why?” She asked.



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"Because I'm not Frank. I will never be Frank. And God knows, I can never stand up to Frank . . . in your eyes. And romantically involved or platonic, in your eyes I want to be more."

"You're serious." Ellen stated.

"Very."

"Ok." She reached for the door. "Fine. Fuck you." Opening the door with hard swing, Ellen stormed out.

Elliott jolted at the slam.

"Hmm." Hal peered up. "She said fuck you. I wonder what she meant by that."

"Captain." Elliott grumbled and took a seat.

"So the reason you are at odds with Ellen is because she insulted your ego?"

"Yes. Your brother and I were close to going at it. And she implied it would be foolish to even try."

"I see." Hal nodded. "And this upsets you."

"Yes." Elliott snapped. "It burns my ass she thinks that way."

"It . . . Burns your ass? Burns your ass. Hmm." Hal leaned back in the chair. "Eloquently put."

Elliott rolled his eyes.

"In her defense, think about it. She has a lot on her mind." Hal folded his hands.

"So you think I'm wrong?"

"No. Not at all. You made the choice. I just think your timing is a little off. Seeing how, your former friend, the one who told you 'fuck you' the one whom you are abandoning, is pretty much facing excommunication from her home land, And Elliott . . ." Hal's voice dropped to a truthful whisper. "That happens in less than a week."

^^^

"Now . . . Now let me see . . ." Joe held up one hand in a calm understanding manner. Laying in an upright position in his hospital bed, he stared at Frank. "Let me see if I have this right. Your psychic ability told you a meteor is coming. You saw your deceased mother. Sigmund Freud gave you licking lessons. You met God."

"Who looks like John Wayne."

"Of course."

"A lot, sounds like him too."

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"That's who I would want to be, Frank, if I were God."

"Him or Clint Eastwood."

"Absolutely." Joe nodded. "Going back. Meteor. Your mother. Freud. God who looks like John Wayne. Darth Vader."

"What?" Frank laughed.

"That's who you said."

"No, I didn't."

"Frank. You told me the evil leader in Star Wars came to visit you."

"Um, yeah." Frank spoke as if Joe were less than intelligent. "But, Dad? That's Captain Kirk?" He winked.

"Captain Kirk is from Star Trek you, idiot."

"Same difference."

Joe grunted. "Trying this again. Meteor. Your mom. Freud. God. Captain Kirk and now, after meeting and speaking to all these special people . . ."

"Kirk wasn't all that special."

"Whatever Frank." Joe's voice raised some. "After meeting all these people, you're gonna tell me, that you, can read minds too."

"Absolutely."

"Get the hell out of here." Joe sneered.

"I just got here."

"Frank!"

"What!"

"There's no goddamn way you can read minds."

"Dean said."

Joe mocked. "Dean said. Dean's an asshole."

"I'm telling."

"Go on. Tell. But it still doesn't make you able to read minds."

"Bet me." Frank said arrogantly.

"I'll bet you."

"What do you wanna bet?"

"I'm not betting anything."

"You can't just say 'I bet' and not back it up." Frank argued.

"Frank . . ."

"You have to bet something."

"Frank!"

"Leader for a day."

"What! Are you out of your goddamn mind?" Joe snapped.

"No, actually in tune with my mind. Bet me."

---

"All right. I'll bet. I'll make you leader for the day. But I say when. And that's if, *if* you can read my mind."

"And if I do, I'm leader for a day?" Frank asked.

"Yes. But on a day I pick."

"No welshing?"

"Frank!" Joe yelled. "Just read my mind!"

"Fine." Frank looked at him with one closed eye.

"Christ, you look constipated."

"Nah, I'm fine. Been eating lots of roughage. Thanks for asking though."

"What am I thinking!" Joe blasted.

"Dad!" Frank raised his voice. "No! I'm not a moron."

There was a slight beat of a pause, but only slight. "Lucky guess." Joe said.

"What!?"

"Lucky guess! Try again. Something a little more obscure. Go on."

After a 'hmm', Frank nodded. "Uh!" Frank screamed. "That's just not right. Jason having sex with Josephine."

"You guessed." Joe disbelieved.

"How can I guess that. No, Dad. Unfair. I won."

"You did not, Frank." Adamant, Joe was.

"No way I could guess that."

"Yes you could. You know me and knowing me you would know what I would think."

"Huh?"

"Forget it." Joe waved out his hand.

"No. Not forget it. I want to be leader. Try again. Ask me a question. Any question."

"Fine." Joe took a couple irritated breaths, folded his arms and looked at Frank.

"Robbie wears a size twelve boot."

Joe's eyes couldn't hide his surprise.

"A-ha!" Frank gloated. "I won. I won. I'm leader . . ."

"Knock it off. You guessed again!" Joe yelled. "You can't read minds."

"No! I didn't guess. Why won't you believe me?"

"Why? I'll tell you why, Frank." Joe said. "I don't believe you can read minds, because you just aren't smart enough."

"I'm not saying I'm smart. Only telepathic."

"And don't forget Psychic." Joe said with sarcasm.

---

“Oh, yeah.” Frank grinned. “Psychic, telepathic, leader for a day. Watch out Hal. Oh! And speaking of Hal and being psychic. I have brother training.”

“Brother training?” Joe asked.

“Yeah, me and Hal are gonna work with Robbie. Work on his fighting skills and stuff. He only has one arm now, you know.”

Joe closed his eyes. “Yes, Frank, I know.”

“And I better get there. I’ll stop by later.”

Grumbling an ‘oh joy,’ Joe caught glimpse of Frank leaving and wondered curiously why his oldest sone looked like he had foliage growing out of back pocket, on a rear end that looked distorted.. No sooner did he think that, Frank’s boots squealed as he stopped.

“Oh.” Frank reached out and pulled out a carrot. “Carrots.” He explained. “That’s what they are. Just been eating a lot lately, that’s all. Want one?”

Stunned, Joe just shook his head. Just as the shock started to leave, panic did. *Frank reads minds!!* But the panic didn’t last long at all. Being the virtual wheel of emotions, Joe spun to the next one. Humor. And he laughed because he couldn’t help but think, it didn’t matter if Frank could read minds, because Frank didn’t understand what people said as it was, And in a way, Joe couldn’t wait to hear the Frank interpretations on people’s thoughts.

^^^

Buzz!

“What!” Dean thought as he looked up quickly from the cryo-lab counter.

A double bang against the door rang out, then another buzz.

“Shit. Ellen.” Dean looked at his watch. “Oh, shit, it’s that . . .”

Bang. Buzz.

No time to hide his test, Dean hovered the objects on the counter to cover them as best as he could.

Ellen entered with an exhale of relief. “Oh, good. You *are* here. I need to talk to you.”

Dean smiled, leaning awkwardly. “Sure.”

“Elliott hates me.” She walked to the counter.

“Oh.” Dean nodded. “Too bad. So, uh, what are you doing here.”

“Looking for you.” Ellen tried to peek at what she knew he was obviously hiding. “What, uh, are you doing here.”

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“Working.”

“On.”

Dean sung the first word. “Well . . .” He smiled. “The cryogenics process. I want to rework it before we bring Brian and Caroline out of stasis.”

“You’re working on that?” Ellen asked.

“Yes.”

“Liar.”

“What! I’m not lying.”

“Are too.” Ellen folded her arms. “No lights are on in the freezer room.”

“So. Doesn’t mean anything.”

“Oh, yeah. So why are you hiding that dead bunny?”

“Shit.” Dean lifted up. “I didn’t think you’d notice.”

“I wouldn’t have if you weren’t hiding it. So . . .” Ellen walked over to the counter and pulled up a stool. “What’s going on.”

“Oh, my God, El.” Dean sounded desperate. “Oh, my God.”

“What?” Ellen asked. She locked into Dean’s eyes and could see how badly his mind was spinning.

“It . . . we . . . You . . . I . . . this . . .” Dean grunted, held up his hand and calmed down. “Here. I’ll show you.” He pushed the microscope forward. “Slide ‘A’ Subject One. Our jackrabbit. Or rather one of them.” he put it on the stand. “DNA.”

Ellen peered and shrugged. “OK.”

Dean removed the slide and lifted another. “See this. This is a smear from Subject two.”

Ellen checked out the name. “Yeah, what . . .”

“Examine it. Say nothing.” Dean laid it on the stand of the microscope. “Will call this Slide ‘B’, taken two months ago it’s all I had.”

“Normal.” Ellen exhaled. “What’s the . . .”

“Watch.” Dean placed the slide on the stand. “Slide ‘C’, from subject two taken . . . this morning.”

Like it didn’t matter and it was rather inane, Ellen peered, as soon as she did, she shrieked and her head popped up. “Oh, shit.” She looked again.

“Exactly.”

“This can’t be right.”

“Oh, but it is.” Dean nodded.

“How . . .”

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"I haven't a clue." Dean shrugged. "Hence the reason we keep things secret, right."

Whistling Ellen took one more look then raised her head again. "Is this caused from . . ."

"Yes." Dean answered.

"But, I don't understand how this could have happened."

"Neither do I." Dean held back his bangs.

"Since this has happened, did you check . . ."

"Normal. His is completely normal."

"Then it has to be the individual." Ellen's hands tapped on the counter. "OK, so since that's established, then you have to find out why this happened."

"I'm trying." Dean said. "I'm at a loss. We'll have to run some experiments. And I don't want to say anything, yet."

"No-no. Not yet." Ellen agreed. "It's not deadly, right?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "Not at all. Just some minor changes can, have and probably will occur."

"So we have to find out what it is that caused it in this one case. We have to."

"I agree. It's a must." Dean looked at her.

"Dean?" Ellen brought her finger to her lips when she caught what she believed a twinkle in Dean's eye. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"I think." Dean said. "It would be pretty . . ."

"Awesome." Ellen finished his sentence. "If we could do this again."

Letting out a 'whew', Dean smiled. "Tell me about it. I thought you would be mad."

"Mad?" Ellen grinned. "No way, this is a breakthrough. I mean . . ." she cleared her throat. "In all seriousness, it could be considered fucked up for Subject two. But it is pretty funny."

"Not only that." Dean nodded. "It's phenomenal. Feel like working on it?" He asked excited.

"Without a doubt."

Dean pushed forward the totally open and exposed dead jackrabbit. "I was getting a good view of internal organs so we can see if there were any anatomical changes in subject two. That could match up."

"We'll have to get a full body scan."

"We will."

"Dean?" Ellen waited until he looked at her. "Thanks. This is just what I needed to brighten my day."

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“Nothing like a successful genetic experiment.” Dean spoke with a hint of a chuckle.

With a smile, she kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll say.”

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Hand on Robbie’s wrist, Hal in a slow manner, guided Robbie’s left arm in an upward swinging motion of the sword. “See what I mean?” Hal asked. “You want to feel that the blade is moving toward the direction, not see it. You want to slice your opponent, not annoy him with a whap.”

Robbie chuckled. “Can’t kill them if you’re hitting with the flat side of the sword.”

“Exactly.” Hal stepped back from Robbie.

“So where am I going wrong.” Robbie took a practice swoop.

Hal nodded impressed. “Very good. In consistency is where you are going wrong. Seventy-five percent of the time, you’re doing it right. But the rest of the time your turning your wrist.”

“Like I used to do with bowling?”

“Yes. Yes.” Hal said as if Robbie were the student giving the correct answer. “Exactly. How did you solve that problem?”

“Concentrated on two things at once. My target and I wore that thing on my arm.”

“Just concentrate, soon enough it will come naturally.” Hal inched Robbie to the next bush. “Now step into this one, pretend this is your enemy, and gut it. Dagger in and . . .”

“Rip upward?” Robbie questioned.

“Yes. Fast though.”

“I can’t do the full smooth swing?”

“No. You have that one. This is the one you turn your wrist. You do that in battle, the upward disembowelment will not be easy because the flat of the blade will lift your opponent more than melt through the flesh. Go on try.” Just as Hal stepped back, folded his arms and took on that mentor look, he heard the sound of Frank’s approach.

“Oh, my God.” Frank said with an almost sarcastic laugh.

Annoyed, and with rolling eyes, Hal turned around. “You finally arrive, I see.”

“You see?” Frank asked.

“Yes, I see.”

Frank snickered. “I see too. I hear, speak and . . . I read minds.”

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“Good Lord, he’s in a joking mood.” Hal shook his head. “Ha-ha-ha. Let’s prepare Robbie, shall we, to laugh politely at the slow child humor.”

Frank looked around.

After curiously watching, Hal gave up. “What are you looking for?”

“The child.”

Hal grumbled.

Robbie laughed.

“Frank.” Hal stayed calm. “Glad you can finally make it.”

“I was busy Hal.” Frank responded. “Unlike some people who have nothing to do all day.”

“I hope you aren’t referring to me.” Hal said. “I have things to do all day.”

“Like what?” Frank asked.

“I’m doing Dad’s job.”

“Exactly.” Frank nodded. “Nothing to do but look like you have something to do.”

Hal lifted a finger. “Do not think I won’t mention that remark to our father.”

“Like I fuckin care.” Frank scoffed. “And you’re supposed to be teaching Robbie skill.”

“I am.” Hal replied.

“No you aren’t. You’re teaching him the pansy sword thing.”

“Pansy sword thing?” Hal questioned with arrogance. “Pansy sword thing. I’ll have you know, Frank, our little brother is getting quite versed in it. Robbie?”

“Yeah, Hal?” Robbie held the sword.

“Show what you’ve learned. Demonstrate. Behead our brother.”

“Oh!” Frank said with dramatics, then faked a laugh. “Oh. Aren’t you being funny. Give me that.” Frank snatched the sword from Robbie. “Fuck the pointy thing.”

Hal probably could of drummed up more of a fabricated puzzled look. But mild worked for him. Eyes looking up, as if pondering the universe, Hal rubbed his chin. “Pointy thing. Hmm. I’ll have to remember that eloquently put description when I am instructing my men to use the pointy thing.”

“Shut the fuck up, Hal.” Frank grumbled.

“You know what your problem is, Frank. Your problem with the sword is, you haven’t a clue how to use it. And since it is something you aren’t good at . . .” Hal lifted his hands. “You make fun of it to cover up for



your inability.”

“I’ll have you know, Hal.” Frank came back. “I can use a sword. I can be fuckin Samurai Frank if I want to, and out do any of your ‘wanna be a calvary’ soldiers. I just like my M-16. *Which* by the way, in a an automatic state, can take out more men then a swift swing of the mighty fuckin sword.”

Robbie nodded. “He has a point.”

“I’m not arguing that.” Hal replied. “But there is an advantage and situations where a sword is better.”

Frank fluttered his lips. “Aside from swinging apples from a tree. Name one.”

“All right. You’re going into battle. You and your men are up against a long line of men and you have to charge . . .”

“Why would I have to charge?” Frank asked.

“They are charging.”

“So.” Frank shrugged.

“They reach you in the charge.”

“Impossible.” Frank laughed. “We would have taken them out long before they got close.”

“Say you couldn’t.”

Frank laughed harder. “Right.”

“Frank!” Hal snapped. “This is a hypothetical situation . You and your men are facing a charging line of enemy soldiers.”

“I thought you said we had to charge them.” Frank asked.

Hal groaned. “They are charging you.”

Snickering Frank shook his head. “Do you know how far fetched that sounds.”

“Frank, there are a ton of enemy soldiers.”

“Trust me Hal, if there is that many, I would have taken a sniper position long before we engaged.”

Frustrated, Hal almost gave up, but didn’t. “All right. Different scenario.”

Robbie tapped Hal on the shoulder. “Are you sure you want to do this to yourself?”

Ignoring him, Hal continued. “You’re alone Frank. Ten men ambush you from the trees. What do you do.”

“Shoot them.” Frank answered. “With . . . my M-16.”

“You don’t have it.”

“I always have it.”

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Like a child, Hal stomped. "You don't have it! Pretend you don't have it!"

"All right. Fuckin yell, I don't have my M-16! All right!" Frank screamed.

"Thank you." Hal calmed down. "You don't have your M-16, what do you use?"

"My revolver."

"I give up." Hal lifted his hands in defeat.

"I told you." Robbie whispered.

"Speaking of guns." Frank interjected. "Did you guys work on his shooting?"

"Yes." Hal answered. "And our brother does well with that. Of course I have been doing all the training thus far, and I have a feeling that you, Frank, will get all the credit."

"Of course." Frank chuckled. "Ask Robbie."

Innocently, Robbie bobbed his head. "Have to Hal. It's Frank."

"I'm Frank."

"Knock it off." Hal snapped. "All right Mr. Frank. What are you going to instruct on."

"What I think is Robbie's weak spot." Frank said. "Fighting. Physical confrontations. Defensive and offensive. But first . . ." Frank reached behind his back. He whipped out a piece of rope, but as he did a carrot flew out from his pocket and landed on the ground.

Hal slowly gazed at it. "Frank? Why are you carrying around carrots."

"Oh." Frank picked it up. "Snacks. Want one" He showed it to Hal.

Hal shook his head.

After getting a 'no' from Robbie, Frank shrugged. He was about to replace that carrot in his pocket, but instead he sniffed it, shrugged again, and he plunged the carrot into his mouth. Quick, smooth, and steady, as it passed through his lips, Frank devoured that carrot as if he were a human tree shredder.

Both Hal and Robbie, open mouth, watch amazed.

Frank tossed the green portion of the carrot to the ground. "OK." he handed the rope to Hal. "Tie me up."

Hal had to blink himself out of the fact he was still stuck on Frank's snacking ability. "I'm sorry? You want me to do what?"

"Tie me up. Sort of. My right arm." Frank placed his arm flush with his side. "Tie it to my body so I can't use it."

"Why . . . why am I tying your arm to you?" Hal asked.

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"I just said. So I can't use it." Frank replied.

"Why don't you want to use it?"

"Hal." Frank said annoyed. "What are we doing?"

"Brother training." Hal answered.

"Why?" Frank quizzed. "I'll tell you. To help Robbie learn to use his skills with one arm. Well how can this be one arm training if I have two arms?"

"Frank . . ." Hal tried to interrupt. "You . . ."

"Seriously, Hal." Frank stepped closer. "How can I expect Robbie to think it's easy to do with one arm, if I can't do it with one arm."

Grumbling an 'I hate you', Hal preceded to tightly tie Frank's arm to his body.

"Ah." Frank tried to budge it. "Better."

Robbie grinned. "Frank, that's really cool. It is. I'm impressed."

"Thank you." Frank looked at Hal as he spoke. "At least one of us isn't afraid to look bad if we can't do it with one arm."

"I really hate you." Hal growled. "Do you have any more rope?"

"Absolutely." Frank reached behind him and pulled out another rope.

"Tie me." Hal laid his arm to his side then watched Frank.

Frank looked at the rope, to Robbie, then to Hal. "This might be difficult." Frank said. "Tying takes two hands."

Hal tossed his head back in irritation. "Do it together, Frank. You both have one hand."

"Exactly." Frank said. "We both have one hand. It takes two."

Trying again, Hal repeated himself. "Like I said. Do it together."

Frank just stared.

Hal grew perturbed. "You both have one hand Frank. Do it together. One plus one."

Still . . . Frank looked.

"Equals two!" Hal screamed. "Two hands you asshole!"

"Oh!" Frank got it then handed an end of rope to Robbie. "Hold this." Gripping his own end, Frank walked around Hal. "This works, let's tie it."

"Say, Frank?" Robbie maneuvered with Frank. "What are we gonna work on right now?"

"Fighting. Actual fighting, and as soon . . ." Frank gazed out. "Never mind he's here." He pulled as Robbie did to tighten the rope.

Robbie peered to where Frank looked. "Henry?"

Hal checked it out to see Henry approaching. "Why is Henry here?"

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"Helping." Frank answered. "We need him for this."

After waving, Henry stepped closer. "I'm . . ." He looked at the three Slagels, all in one arm mode. "Ready."

"First." Frank said. "I need to say, thanks for taking time to help out."

"No problem." Henry replied. "It's the least I can do. I know Robbie and I have had our differences, but I feel bad that Robbie lost his arm."

"Actually." Robbie tilted his head. "Frank found it, so it can't be considered lost."

"Yeah. I found it." Frank reiterated. "It wasn't in real good visual shape, but it was mostly there. Dean has it right now. It's in his lab floating in formaldehyde."

"Yeah." Robbie snickered. "It looks pretty gross."

Henry opened his mouth in disgust. "Oh, that's not right. Dean has your arm?"

Totally offended, and with a gasp, Hal glanced at his brothers. "Why in God's name does Dean have Robbie's arm?"

Robbie answered, "So him and Danny Hoi can make the bionic one look like my arm."

"I hope he at least puts back the two missing fingers." Frank stated. "I'd hate to see Danny spend all that time making a perfect match only for you to not have a middle finger and thumb. You did tell him, Robbie, that you had them there before the explosion didn't you?"

"Um, no." Robbie shook his head. "I will now. Thanks for reminding me."

Frank nodded with a wink.

Hal rolled his eyes. "All right. Can we proceed? What are we doing with Henry?"

"Nothing sexual I hope." Robbie snickered.

Frank laughed. "No." He saw Hal and Henry weren't laughing. "Moving on." He cleared his throat. "Henry is here because we need him to help us. We're gonna fight."

"Fight?" Henry quickly looked. "You said nothing about fighting. Who do I have to fight?"

Frank smiled.

"Ah, no." Henry stepped back.

"Henry." Frank grabbed him and tugged him back. "Fake fighting. Just for the moves."

"Oh." Henry nodded. "OK."

"Good." Frank gave a pat to Henry's back. "Now the reason I picked

Henry, is because Henry is an above average fighter. I didn't pick him because he's Asian or anything like that, I'm not racist. I would have picked Danny Hoi, not because he's Asian either, but because he fights well. Only Danny knows that fuckin Kung Fu shit and I don't feel like dealing with it."

Hal just stared. "Are you going anywhere with this?"

"Shut up, Hal. And by the way, cut that fuckin hair." Frank snapped.

Hal's top lip curled. "What does that have to do with it?"

"Nothing," Frank answered.

Very serious, Hal looked at Frank for a moment. "Dear God, he's retarded."

Henry gasped. "Oh, that was rude. That wasn't very nice Hal. There are mentally challenged individuals who would take offense to that. I'm beginning not to like you, Hal."

"Henry." Hal spoke composed. "I don't care."

Frank interrupted. "Anyway. Henry is your above average fighter. He's better than norm., I trained him. What you Robbie, will be going up against will be average fighters. So I thought, go against Henry for practice."

In agreement, Robbie nodded. "Sounds good. So he's gonna take a swing at me?"

Frank shrugged. "I don't know. Wouldn't be very good training if we knew what Henry was gonna do, would it. But . . . your average fighter would punch. So . . . Henry take a swing at my brother, fast, like you're gonna hit him, really go for him."

Henry looked at Frank. "But don't hit him?"

"No." Frank said. "Go for it like a real fight. Actually hit him. You have to pretend you're fighting him, Henry, or this training will be useless. All out. Do it."

Henry's eyes widened. "That doesn't seem right."

Frank lifted his only free hand and spoke teacher-like. "Henry, it's fine. Nail my brother."

"All right." Henry faced Robbie and took a breath. "I'm sorry if I hit you."

Robbie laughed. "Not that I think you will. But it's OK if you do."

"Here goes." Henry paused, stared, took another breath, then with a tightly clenched fist, and a small rev back, he sailed his hand forward.

Up went Robbie's left arm in a defensive block of the hit, and when he did, Henry shot forward his right hand. Fast the punch came and with a sound of a whap, Henry's fist stopped a mere inch from Robbie's face.

Both Henry and Robbie looked at Frank who stood clenching Henry's

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wrist.

“Now.” Frank released Henry’s hand. “You would have gotten hit, Robbie. You used your left hand.”

“Instinct kicked in.” Robbie replied.

“I know. But you have to lose the instinct of blocking left, hitting right. You lost your right arm, you know.”

Robbie nodded. “I forgot.”

“Remember this time.” Frank moved back some. “Use your . . . wait.” He smiled. “Hal. Why don’t you show Robbie the way you would handle this.”

Checking out the smirk on Frank’s face, Hal shook his head. “You think I won’t be able to do it.”

“Now, did I say that?” Frank asked. “No, I just uh, think that you’re uh, so fuckin skilled, you would do well.”

“Your inability to complete a sentence without sounding like Baby Huey, amazes me.” Hal took Robbie’s place before Henry. “Little brother I’ll show you what I would do. Me and my . . .” He peered to Frank. “Pansy civil war accessories.”

“Oh my God.” Henry moved back some. “He’s not gonna use his sword is he.”

Hal huffed out. “Henry, if I did, do you think I would slice you. Now, please, hit me.”

Apprehensive, Henry moved closer. “I swear Frank if he swords me, I’ll be mad.”

“Just hit my brother,” Frank snapped.

“Fine.” A little fearful he would end up gutless, Henry took a swing.

Almost too fast to be seen it occurred. The ‘swosh’ of the releasing sword caused a peep of a shriek to come from Henry. The ‘whap’ of the flat side of the blade in a blockade to Henry’s punch was almost over shadowed by the loud ‘ow’ Henry made. Then with a sweep of his leg, a thump as Henry hit the ground, Hal brought his boot to Henry’s chest, and brought the point of the sword to Henry’s neck.

Henry screamed.

“That.” Hal lifted his sword and replaced it. “Is how I would do it.”

“Whoa.” Robbie smiled. “That was really impressive.. Shit, Hal, Good job.”

“What about me?” Henry asked. “I hurt my bum.”

Grumbling, Frank reached down, aided Henry to stand. “I fuckin can’t believe you let my brother do that to you.”

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Robbie commented, "Frank, you have to admit, that was cool."

"Lucky." Frank said. "He couldn't do it again. Now, Robbie, you try."

"Can I use the sword?" Robbie asked.

All three, Frank, Hal, and Henry yelled out a 'no!'

"OK. OK." Robbie took his position. "I'm ready. I got an idea."

Rubbing his rear-end, Henry limped to Robbie. "Look." He held up his arm. "I have a red mark from that sword. Oh, shit, I'm bleeding."

"Henry!" Frank yelled. "Hit my brother."

"Fine!" Shaking his arm with another 'ow', Henry readied himself. He nodded to Robbie, waited a moment to give a semi element of surprise, then swung out.

In a block of the punch, Robbie swiftly, lifted his left arm, but instead of being wide open, Robbie closed the opportunity quick. With a pivot of his body, still holding onto Henry's arm, Robbie heaved with all his strength, and over his shoulder, he brought Henry.

'Slam' to the ground with a grunt, Henry went. And no sooner did Robbie release his hold, he brought forward his left arm, whipped it around Henry head, lifted him slightly and braced his neck.

Hal's loud 'yes!' was nearly drowned out by Frank's shriek of 'impressed'

"I'm . . ." Henry coughed. "Choking."

"Sorry." Robbie let him go.

After banging again to the ground, Henry groaned, lifted up, and brushed himself off. "That was pretty good."

"Good?" Frank proudly gave a swat to Robbie's back. "That was awesome. But . . . you still used your left arm."

"But, Frank . . ." Robbie defended. "I did it though."

"You still used your left arm. Your relying on it too much. I don't want you doing that. If you do it again, I'll tie it to your body." Frank instructed. "You don't want me to disable your only upper limb."

"Good God, Frank." Hal barked. "Can you be anymore tasteless."

"Probably." Frank said. "But if I have to tie his arm, I will."

Henry was confused. "Then he's really stuck, Frank. There's nothing he can do."

"Oh, sure there is." Frank replied. "His arms . . . Whoops, sorry, arm, isn't his only line of offense or defense. It probably would be easier." He heard the snickering scoffs. "Fuck you guys, I'm serious. Watch." Before Henry Frank stood, and placed his only free hand deep in his front pocket. "Hit me, Henry."

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“Oh, Frank, I don’t know.” Henry shook his head. “I might really hit you.”

Frank laughed. “Henry, please. But, if you hit me, you hit me. It’s not like I never took a punch before. So go for it.”

“Ok.” Taking one more look at a armless Frank, Henry, hating to do it, Released his punch.

In darting motion, Frank arched back in avoidance of the hit. Upon release of Henry’s immediate second punch, Frank, in a swopping manner, ducked. And on his raise back up, before fully coming to a stand, at Henry’s height level, like a shot, he ejected his head forward snapping in a connection to Henry’s forehead.

The loud ‘crack’ proceeded the timber fall Henry did. And stiff like an ironing board, Henry went backwards to the ground.

“See.” Frank nodded.

Hal looked down to Henry. “He’s not . . . he’s not dead, is he?”

“Nah.” Frank shook his head and pulled his hand from his pocket. “Just out.” He rubbed his own forehead. “Man he has a hard head.”

Robbie nudged a still Henry with his boot. “He’s out cold.”

“Yep.” Frank nodded. “OK. We still have time. Let’s move on to the punching bag before it gets too late.” He stepped over Henry.

Robbie, following a walking Frank, stepped over Henry as well. “You should try swinging it at me.”

“I have a better idea.” Hal said, stepping over Henry and catching up to his brothers. “Why don’t practice Robbie’s reaction time. Toss thing at him. Both of us at once.”

Frank stopped. “That’s a good idea. Robbie you game?”

Robbie looked at his watch. “Yeah, but I have to be at containment soon.”

“And I have to prepare for the meeting.” Hal added. “But let’s try.”

Just as Frank was about to tell them, ‘sounds good’, he heard the hiss in his radio head set. From around his neck he lifted it to his head. “Yeah, go on.”

“Frank.” Mark in tracking called. “Have one, Savage. Moving fast into that region. We could take it out but . . . This is perfect positioning. You may not get another chance.”

“I’m on my way.” Frank reached for the knot on his rope. “I have to run. Single savage.” He untied his binding. “Up in the area behind the fields.”

Robbie grinned. “No way. Are you . . .”



“Yep.” Frank said. “And if I want to try it, I better run. Finish up, Hal.” Frank took off running top speed.

About to move on, Hal and Robbie, stopped. As if they were connecting by the same brain, both of them, seemingly in slow motion, at the same time, tilted their heads to the right in curiosity.

“Robbie?” Hal spoke his name coolly.

“Yes.”

“Did Frank just . . . hop?”

“I believe he did Hal.”

“Odd.” Hal shrugged. “Oh, well. What do you say we save the ‘tossing thing’ for later. I really have that town meeting to prepare for.”

“Sounds good. See you at dinner?” Robbie asked.

“See you then.”

In two different direction, Robbie and Hal parted and walked away.

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*Heartbeat slow. Heartbeat slow. Breathing slow. Breathing slow.* Frank pounded those thoughts through his mind as his feet pounded the hard cold ground in his fast run toward the region behind the fields. *Heartbeat slow. Heartbeat slow.* Though getting that savage was forefront, not hearing Dean bitch to him was almost equally important.

He spotted the salvation of the region and two of his men with binoculars peering out. “Down the gate!” Frank yelled into his headset. “Charlie!” he yelled to one of his men. “Open it up, I don’t want to stop!”

Charlie turned to see Frank bolting his way. He listened for the sound of the downed perimeter and unlatched the gate. “Better step back.” He told the other guard Bill. “Frank will run you down.”

Bill looked back at a raging Frank. “Shit.

*Heartbeat slow. Breathing slow. Heartbeat slow, man am I running fuckin fast.* Frank arrived at the gate. “Thank you!” he called out as he plowed through the openness of it into the region.

“Got you.” Mark spoke to Frank from tracking.

“Where is he.”

“Man, Frank. He is heading right towards it.”

“Yes.” Excitedly Frank clenched his fist and darted to the are not far from him. “In position.” He stood there. “How far.”

“You should be . . .”

“Got him.” Frank smiled when he saw the savage heading his way.

“Oh, man is he a sight for sore eyes.”

“Frank.” Mark spoke up. “Listen, there’s . . .”

“Shh.” Frank informed him. “I’m trying to enjoy this moment. Now where is . . . ah!” Frank shuffled some leaves to find what looked like a foot pedal. He rested, gently his foot on it.

“Frank, look, I’m serious. You have to . . .”

“Mark. Fuck. You’re ruining it. Do I have to shut you off?” Frank smiled and waved to the savage running his way.

“Frank! You . . .”

“Off.” Frank switched off the radio. He let out a relaxed breath, and watched the savage. “Come on. That’s it. A little more.”

As if he couldn’t before, the savage spotted Frank. He howled out a loud scream and lifted his spear picking up his speed.

“Oh, yeah, that’s it. Raise that fuckin spear. Come and get me and . . .” One more wide, pleasing grin swept across Frank’s face, and after lifting his boot up a few inches, he slammed it down to the pedal.

Just as the savage let out his war call again and readied to release his spear, a shifting mechanical sound rang out. And the already in progress cry-out the savage made, rippled into a ‘wa-wa-wa-wa-wa’ as the savage dropped the spear and ejected high and out into the air.

“Beautiful.” Frank commented watching the arms-flopping savage free-fly out toward the grassy area. “Now I wonder if they’ll get him before or after he hits the ground?”

The rustling of foliage was wildly fast preluding the group of snarls and flash of flesh blur that shot above the high thick weeds.

Sloppy and wet was the sound that emanated as only four killer babies successfully snatched up and pulled down the heavy body.

“Not a rabbit or squirrel, huh?” Frank folded his arms. “No. That’s fuckin dinner guys.” To his ear he brought his finger when he heard from behind him, Bill and Charlie screaming frantically. They shouted something, Frank couldn’t interpret through their meshed together voices. “What the fuck.” Frank turned around.

War call.

The tip of the spear lunged surprisingly within an inch of his face. With only a split second’s warning, Frank swung out his hand batting away the spear and seeing the second savage a few feet from him. No sooner did the spear make it from face level, the savage leaped for him.

“You have to be fuckin kidding me.” Side stepping to his right and giving a slight pivot turn of his body at just the right time, Frank with an

upward swing motion of his left arm, caught the savage in mid lunge.

The force of Frank's hit to his gut nearly folded the savage in two and he dropped to the ground. Before he could get back up, Frank reach down, seized the savage by his hair, snatched him to his feet then after bracing him to his back, Frank wrapped his left arm around the savage's neck. "Man, you smell."

The savage growled and squirmed.

"I have to tell you. Good to see you guys." Frank smiled and gave a jolt of his arm strength.

*Crack*

The savage stopped moving and went limp.

Dropping him some, but still holding his hair, Frank turned on his radio as he started to drag the body. "Mark."

"What the hell Frank?" Mark breathed heavily.

"You think you could have told me another savage was up here."

"I tried. You shut me off."

"Oh." Frank set down the savage, walked over to the arm of the huge catapult and placed it back in position. "Well, He's taken care of."

"Good. How about the other."

"Gave new meaning to the term fast food." Frank grabbed the savage again and dragged him to the arm of the catapult. He dropped him and walked back to his peddle. "Now I'm about to find out who was right. Me or Robbie. Hold on." Frank smiled, and slammed his foot into the pedal. At that moment he tilted his head in appreciation because the shift and whip of the catapult seemed like an intro of a song. It was a peaceful, almost beautiful orchestration, the silence of the sailing savage carcass, making only a wisp of a noise as it flew with speed toward the field. Rustling weeds from the rushing killer babies was a bridge, and the powerful chorus was the leaping of the small predators in a growling hungry manner. The devouring of flesh, was in its own right, a solo of sorts.

"Frank. Did it work?" Mark asked. "Who was right about what?"

"Robbie was right. Oh, yeah. I have to tell him. The aerodynamics are much better when dealing with dead weight. We definitely have to kill then first for the full effect. But . . ." Frank started walking. "Either way is enjoyable." Pausing to look and to listen to the meal time noises of the killer babies, Frank smiled once more, then returned to the sanctity of the Beginnings gate.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Montana State Line: 40 Miles.* The sign on the over grown highway read.

Relief filled Christopher in his journey when he read the sign out loud, sounding it out slowly. “Moe-not-a-na.” He sighed. His twenty year old body was feeling the effects from the super long journey across what God had told him so many times was nothing but the Devil’s waste land. And Christopher saw proof of that.

The barely dressed dirty demons with long spears that continuously chased him. He thought perhaps they were demons only by that state called Texas, but when he ran into them again, it reconfirmed that it truly was going to be a battle of good versus evil.

He was glad, despite his navigating and leaving his home, that the shine of good and God was still on his face. Because when Christopher lifted his covered head, the demons dropped the weapons and ran.

In a sense it was comforting to know that the demons feared God.

Christopher new what miles were, and he knew forty wasn’t too bad. He had done more than that while lost in the wilderness of evil. But he was headed in the right direction. He found the correct road, it was a path directly to Montana. And that was where he had to be.

Once there, he would embark on his next task. The reason for leaving the sanctity of his home, and he wouldn’t stop until he found Utopia, or rather Beginnings.

^^^

Joe looked pale. He really looked pale to Dean, and in a sense, the doctor in him understood completely why that was. The surgery. The rush to get out of the clinic. Though Dean would have preferred Joe to be on Clinic rest for a few more days, he took comfort in the fact that Joe assured him, he wouldn’t be working. He was on sick leave.

Noises that only the entire Slagel crew in one room could make were buried beneath Dean’s concern as he stared across the dinner table at Joe.

Joe shook his head in disgust, played with the fake cigarette made for him, while in a silence, smiled at the arguments of his sons.

It was a valid argument. But, in Dean’s mind, The ‘Who could eat dinner with one arm better than who’ contest went single handedly-no pun intended-to Robbie. He ate his meal with grace, and ease. Unlike Hal who

was a bit sloppy, or Frank who just lunged face first into the plate. While everyone thought it was the lack of arm usage on Frank's part, Dean feared it was something else.

"Not hungry?" Andrea's motherly voice broke Dean from his concentration.

"Um . . ." Dean stuttered for the words. "I am, just my mind is occupied."

With a concerned. 'Oh', Andrea nodded and laid her hand on her back. "I appreciate you coming over here to sit with Joe."

"Christ, Andrea." Joe shook his head chomping on the fake cigarette. "I don't need a sitter."

Partially, Dean smiled. "It's not sitting, Joe. I'm here more for me."

Face covered in food, Frank lifted his head from his plate. "My dad needs to babysit you Dean?"

"God." Hal snapped irritated. "What is wrong with you. And look at you, Frank."

Andrea handed a towel down to Frank, "Nothing a napkin won't fix. Are you finished?"

"Yes." Frank lifted his plate. "Very good."

"And look, you ate all your carrots." Andrea smiled.

Dean quickly looked up.

"Correction." Robbie added and lifted the empty serving dish. "He ate everyone's carrots."

Taking a bite of his food, Dean mumbled out loud. "I have to tell him."

"What was that?" Joe asked.

Dean shook his head.

Hal checked out his watch. "It's getting late. We should."

Andrea sighed out when she felt the immediate tension and silence in the air. "It will go well. I feel it. Perhaps Robbie, you could lead us in a prayer before we got to the meeting."

"How about I lead us in a prayer *at* the meeting?" Robbie asked.

"Oh, wonderful suggestion." Andrea pinched his cheek. "You are so Christian."

Frank stood at the same time as Hal and Robbie, and like them, cleared the table. "We'll all walk together." He walked into the kitchen.

Lifting his own plate, Dean stood and followed Frank into the kitchen. "Frank, you'll let me know immediately, right?"

"I will." Frank nodded. "I promise. Then I'll find El."

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“Hopefully with good news.”

Solemnly, Frank laid a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “Hopefully.”

“Frank?” Dean called to him as he walked to the kitchen door. “You don’t have a good feeling do you.”

“I want to believe that things will go the way we want, Dean. I really want to believe that. But right now, and a decision hasn’t even been made, but right now, my heart is breaking. So I guess . . . no. I don’t have a good feeling. Do you?”

Dean only lowered his head.

“Fingers crossed.”

Sadly, Dean raised his hand with crossed fingers. He stood there thinking about the meeting that would entail in Beginnings A meeting that would decide whether his wife left her home. A meeting Dean decided he’d rather not be at. Hal held his vote for him, the decision would be one Dean only wanted to hear if it was favorable. But something told Dean it wouldn’t be.

He listened to the sounds of the departing Slagel men, waited for the livingroom door to close, and then Dean went back into the diningroom.

Slowly he rejoined Joe at the table. “What are we gonna do, Joe, if they decide to make her serve her sentence.”

“What can we do, Dean?”

“Is it me, or is Ellen’s ousting something none of us are dealing with.” Dean stared at his folded hands.

“We aren’t. Really, we aren’t.” Joe said. “I think we all hold hope in the back of our minds that it isn’t going to happen. So we aren’t dealing with it fully. Why would we? It’s Ellen. This is Beginnings, a place she started. How could we kick her out, right? Well, hating to say it, to think it, I think if the vote goes as my gut says it’s gonna go, tomorrow there’ll be a completely different feel around us all regarding it.”

Slowly, Dean peered up. “Sadness?”

“No, Dean.” Joe said softly. “Hard reality.”

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Henry wanted to scream. It wasn’t fair. His head spun in irritation. Both sides of the scale were weighed down by Hector on one side of him, Danny on the other and they both laughed hysterically. The only balance was Josephine who sat directly across from Henry at the table in the social hall and she just stared. She could have been sympathetic or offended, but

Henry would wager she most likely was far into a zombie drunken stupor.

"Guys." Henry looked from left to right. "It's not funny. It isn't. I got sliced with a sword, knocked on my butt, my neck hurts and . . . I was knocked out."

Danny controlled his laughter for a second. "Let me get this right." He took a breath. "And they just left you there."

"Yes."

Hector laughed loudly. "And the best part is no one found him for an hour."

"I have a concussion, you know." Henry pointed to his head. "Josephine, what do you think?"

"I think . . ." She hiccuped. "It's all Frank. I hate that fuckin Frank. And speaking of the beast." She pointed up with her boney finger.

"What?" Frank approached the table. Robbie and Hal beside him. "Why is she pointing at me?"

"I always point at freak sightings." Josephine said.

"Ha-ha-ha." Frank scoffed. "Why don't you keep on sucking it down, I hope one day you drown on it."

"I hope . . ." Josephine sloppily stood up and moved to Frank. "I hope one day you get run over by that wagon you keep falling off."

"Oh, yeah?" Frank peered down to her. "I hope Dean left that splinter in your ass and it gets gangrene,"

"Why don't you do us all a favor. Frankie and have another heart attack."

"How about this? How about I jump out at you and *you* have the heart . . ."

"Frank." Hal jumped between the pair. "What in God's name is wrong with you. Have some respect."

"For who?" Frank asked.

"This woman."

"It's fuckin Josephine."

"She . . ." Hal caught Josephine creeping closer. "She is your elder. She . . ." Hal noticed the wrinkled face so close. "May I help you ma'am?"

"Christ Almighty." She pointed at Hal. "Do you look like Joey Slagel or what? Spitting image."

"Yes, I do." Hal nodded.

"Why is that?" Josephine asked.

"I'm his son." Hal answered.

"Holy Jesus!" Josephine snapped. "Joey has another son!"

---

Frank grunted loudly. "Uh! Hello! Everyone knows this. If you weren't so drunk all the time . . ."

"Frank." Hal stopped him, "Enough. Leave the woman alone."

Josephine smiled. "My God, are you a hot one." She told Hal.

Hal awkwardly smiled. "Thanks."

"So." She winked. "Wanna get lucky."

Robbie nudged into Hal. "She'll hook you up, Hal."

"Oh, yeah." Frank instigated. "You can finally lose that virginity you've been saving all these years."

"Both of you . . ." Hal pointed to Frank then Robbie. "Are assholes. Excuse me." He walked by Josephine.

With a whap, Josephine smacked Frank.

"What!" Frank blasted.

"Way to go. You ruined it for me." Josephine snapped.

"No I didn't." Frank argued. "And if you're nice and quit . . . *bitching* at me, maybe I'll fix you up with him."

"Let me get this straight." Josephine tipped some. "I'm nice to you, and I get to sleep with boy-toy over there."

"Yep." Frank nodded.

"In what way nice?" Josephine asked. "I'm not performing any sexual favors on your ugly ass."

"Hey!" Frank yelled. "No! Quit picking on me."

Josephine contemplated. "Quit picking on you and I get him?" She rubbed her chin. "Forget it. I don't need laid that bad." She stammered back to her chair.

Frank tossed up his hands.

Robbie tilted his head. "You tried."

"I did. Hold on." Frank felt a tap to his shoulder. When he turned around, he screamed.

Jason tugged his own ear. "Problem?"

"No, you scared me. I forgot you weren't dead anymore."

"I see." Jason gave a quick look to Robbie. "Frank, I just needed to remind you about another meeting. I'd like to get one in soon, Christmas is in a few days and we need that spirit lifting."

"Got it." Frank replied. "And, just to be safe, I'll let Hal know I'm prepared."

"You do that." Jason informed.

"Be right back." Spotting his brother by the podium with Danny Hoi, Frank had to intrude. "Hal." He poked Hal. "Hal."



---

"What!" Hal turned around.

"I need to speak to you."

"Obviously. One moment." Ignoring Frank's mimicking 'one moment,' Hal returned to Danny. "And here is my father and Dean's vote. I'll just make a short speech and we'll proceed. Let's keep this short and painless."

"Got it." Danny took the votes. "I'll be over there." He pointed.

Nodding to Danny, Hal exhaled. "Now." He turned to Frank. "What is it."

"Just in case." Frank patted his tee shirt pocket. "I wanted to let you know, I am prepared."

"Prepared?"

"Yes. I know how these meetings go. Just in case people need answers about the meteor. I have them."

"On a sheet of paper in your chest pocket?" Hal asked.

Frank looked. "Yes."

"I see." Hal nodded. "And would this statement be similar to the grizzly bear statement you gave the community not that long ago."

"Um . . . ." Frank pulled out the paper. "Well, similar . . . hey." Frank yelled when Hal stole the paper

Hal breathed in irritation. "Similar? God, Frank, it's the same stupid statement, you just crossed out bear and put the word meteor."

"Hal, the same message gets driven home. Why change an effective speech."

"Why give one should be the question Frank. "

"Because there's a meteor coming."

"Frank." Hal snapped. "There is no meteor coming."

"Oh yeah? Well people said there was no bear, but there was."

"And what are we going to do if one does sail down to Beginnings? Nothing."

"Hal." Frank huffed out. "I'm working on it. I saw that movie, I was thinking of showing it to everyone for getting prepared. I'm also searching out Lyme caverns . . ."

"Frank." Hal held up his hand. "Please stop this. If you start to display any more signs of progressive degenerative intelligence we will be sending the short bus to take you on your rounds."

"I can walk."

"Ex . . . . excuse me" Handing back the statement to Frank, Hal walked over to the podium.

---

Staring down to the open sheet of paper, Frank nodded impressed. "It's a good speech."

"I like Ellen and all." Larry Gaines stood up amongst the crowded social and all those seated. He turned to look at Frank who stood way in the back next to Robbie. "I like her, Frank. I do. And I know I work for you."

Arms folded, calm exterior, headed titled, Frank gave a nod. "You speak your mind. Go on, Larry." He said then wished there weren't so many people in that hall or Frank would read his mind.

Larry peered around as he spoke. "As I said I like Ellen. And I'll be the first to admit, I didn't like Bev. But, the only side to the story we ever got was Ellen's. I mean, John Matoose was known to work with the society. He did it in protection of his family. But no one shot him. How do we know Bev wasn't just hiding from her father. We don't. Murder is a crime, no matter who the victim, And let's not forget, there was another victim in all this. That baby Bev carried." Larry, again, looked at Frank. "I'm sorry Frank."

"Not a problem." Frank lifted his hand. "I understand." After Larry had taken his seat, Frank leaned into Robbie whispering. "Oh, he's walking the fuckin worst beat for at least a year."

Jenny stood up. "Well I disagree. Bev was nasty, mean, and I saw first hand some of the things she did. Ellen has lived here since the beginning of Beginnings, telling her she has to leave whether it be for a day, or a month, is wrong."

"So is murder." Larry argued.

Frank grumbled another whisper to Robbie. "Scratch walking the worst beat, he's walking the killer baby region."

"People." Hal drew their attention. "As much, Jenny, as I appreciate your argument for Ellen. A platform of debate is not why we are here. Ellen admitted her own guilt. We, her peers, sentenced her. Now the only decision to be made is whether to suspend that sentence or not. There will be no more debates on how long she goes. That is determined already. There will be no more arguments about the act of murder, or how vile a person Bev was. It is a simple check mark that you must make. A check mark that must be made within your own clear conscious. The question to be answered is. Will the loss that Beginnings suffers over the departure of Ellen for one month's time, outweigh the act of murder? That is the question you will answer. That is the determining factor. Mr. Hoi has the

ballots. No one will know what you voted, so vote freely.”

After watching Hal step from the podium, Frank glanced to Robbie who had a thinking look. “Why are you thinking that?”

Robbie snickered. “Thinking what?”

“That Hal is so much like Dad.”

“Well, Frank look . . .” Robbie stared for a second. “You knew I thought that?”

“Uh, Robbie? I read minds now.”

“That’s right. Anyhow . . . he is. He’s just a natural leader, like Dad.”

“Like me.” Frank said. “And Hal doesn’t end up running this country. I do. Remember that. Let’s go get our ballots. And we’ll stand real intimidating by the turn in box.”

“Sounds good.” With a shrug, Robbie followed Frank.

^^^

The hooting and hollering, Elliott supposed was above normal level for Hoi-Hoi on the Range, and in all honesty, Elliott would have preferred not to be there. But he had his reason, and his reason was the instigation of the hooting and chanting. He glanced across the establishment to the men who encircled the pool table laughing and shouting.

Finishing his water, Elliott set down the glass, slid from his bar stool, and having had enough walked to the group of men. He could see slightly, the blonde hair of the center of their attention.

“Gentlemen.” Elliott spoke up.

Silence.

At the same time, the group of ten men turned and snapped at attention.

“God!” Ellen emerged forward. “Can’t these men go out and have a good time without you or Hal constantly throwing your authority in their faces. Relax guys, you’re out having a good time.”

The men didn’t budge.

Elliott moved more toward the table. “Gentlemen, may I have a word with Dr. Hayes . . . alone.”

Upon the completion of his request, the men dispersed.

“Hey!” Ellen called out slamming her cue stick. “Elliott. What is wrong with you?”

“I needed to speak with you.”

---

"Well, couldn't you have found a better way rather than scaring away my friends."

"Ellen . . ."

"Dr. Hayes, please." Ellen said smug.

"Dr. Hayes. I don't believe those men were your friends."

"What do you know."

"I know with the relinquishing of the rumor that you are, how did I hear it, searching for a new UWA prospect. You are also portraying an air of promiscuity."

"Oh, bite me, Elliott." Ellen snapped. "I am not. I'm having fun. You're pissed because you are easily being replaced."

"Replaced?" Elliot questioned. "I didn't realize I had a place to begin with."

"Really?" Ellen spoke a little above normal level. "And I suppose I just let every man grab my breasts."

Silence hit the Range.

Elliott cleared his throat looking around the room. "Keep talking, gentlemen."

The mumbling of conversation continued.

"What do you want, Elliott?"

"Does your husband know you are in Bowman searching?"

Ellen rolled her eyes. "I'm having a good time with my friends."

"They are not your friends."

Ellen's voice shrieked. "And neither are you! You made that abundantly clear! So take your attitude, and your high and mighty judgmental self and get lost!" she dropped her voice. "I'm here to take my mind off a decision that right now is being made about me. I don't need you, Sgt. *Fuckin* Ryder, to bring me down."

"Do you need to swear."

"Fuck you."

"All right." Elliott remained calm. "Upsetting you is not what I wanted to do. I just wanted to speak to you."

"I thought. Now, correct me if I'm wrong. But I thought, just this morning, you told me you wanted to keep distance. That you didn't want to cross any friendship boundaries, that you didn't want to talk. Did you or didn't you say that?"

"I did."

"Then why are you talking to me?" Ellen asked.

"I changed my mind."

---

Ellen gasped loudly. "Oh. And you were the one saying you aren't Frank. Well, aren't you being just like Frank, changing your mind. People can't just change their minds over decisions that effect other people's lives, Elliott."

"I have. I erred in not accepting your apology."

"Well, forget the apology. I take it back." Ellen folded her arms.

"You can't take back an apology."

"I just did. Taken back."

"It's on the same lines of changing minds." Elliot argued. "If I can't change my mind then you can't rescind your apology."

"Fine." Ellen threw her hands in the air. "You can't change your mind. I can't rescind my apology. Guess what?" She smiled. "We're back to square one. You're still mad at me."

"I'm not." Elliott stated.

"But your mind isn't changed, so you are."

"Ah," Elliott lifted a finger as he leaned closer to her in an arguing mode. "So going by that. If you never apologized and I have never changed my mind. That means, yes, I'm still angry, but therefore you are still remorseful."

"I'm . . . I'm confused." Ellen walked away and grabbed her pool stick.

"Ellen, can we just put this behind us."

"You're too pissy, Elliott." Ellen chalked up her pool stick. "Really. I can't deal with a wishy washy guy."

"I am not wishy washy."

"You changed your mind. One second your mad, then next you aren't." She shrugged and put down the chalk.

"I want this settled."

"There's no way."

"I beg to differ." Elliott smiled. "There is a way, plus, it will pass time while you wait here in Bowman."

Ellen tilted her head in curiosity to him.

"We'll settle it the way many a men have done before."

"How's that?" Ellen asked.

"Best out of three." Elliott laid his hand on a pool ball and rolled it to Ellen.

Ellen laughed. "Oh. You're in trouble. I've been winning all night. I'm pretty good."

With an 'uh-hmm' Elliott nodded. "And keep in mind I've been watching you play all night." He winked ornery with a smirk and grabbed

the rack. "You break."

^^^

Almost as if he couldn't shuffle the cards and speak at the same time, Dean waited until the noise of the flipping cards had completed. "And you're sure you don't mind talking about this."

"I don't mind at all." Joe replied, hitting the fake cigarette as if it were real.

"Good. As I was saying . . ." Dean dealt out the cards and paused. "I'd like to start the treatments day after tomorrow." he dealt some more, then paused again. "The first series of treatments will not be a high dosage so . . ." He finished dealing. "You should still be able to move about during them."

"Unlike you with those cards."

"Excuse me?" Dean asked.

"Some scientist." Joe picked up his cards. "You can't shuffle and deal while talking."

"I didn't realize I did that."

"You do. Bet you can't walk and chew gum at the same time." Grumbling, Joe checked out his cards. "These suck."

"So are you in agreement?" Dean asked.

"On what?"

"The treatments." Dean smiled when he looked at his cards.

Joe rolled his eyes. "Dean, you have a good hand. The secret is to not let me know."

"I didn't."

"You smiled. Ever hear the phrase poker face?"

"You're avoiding my question."

"No I'm not." Joe picked up a card, then laid one down. "I heard. And no, I'm not in agreement with the treatments. I'll have them. Not until after Christmas."

"That may delay your full return to work."

"Then it delays my return. Hal will do fine."

"That makes me feel good, Joe. That you're in no hurry to get back to work." Dean said.

"There's a lot I can do without fully returning."

"I know, but usually . . ." Dean froze. The livingroom door opened.

Somehow the air of demeanor that swept in with Andrea was as cold

as the December air right outside the door.

Andrea tried. She really tried not to relay much upon her entrance, but somehow she knew she blew it. Was it in her face? Her movements? She hadn't spoken a word. What ever it was, something tipped Dean off enough for him to not only drop his cards, but lower his head as well.

Joe slowly turned in his chair. "Andrea."

Andrea shut the door. She daintily cleared her throat. "Dean . . ."

Dean's hand lifted and he shook his head. "I . . . I don't need to hear."

"I do." Joe stated. "I do. It needs to be said or it won't be real. Tell us."

Andrea's eyes shifted from her husband to Dean. "The votes were counted. It wasn't unanimous, but the majority was, well, the majority by a long shot. Twenty-seven, to One-fifty-three. With in . . with in one week . . ." Andrea's voice cracked. "Ellen must leave Beginnings."

^^^

"Eight ball corner pocket." Ellen said seriously. "Off the bank." She leaned over, cue in hands and eyed her shot. Her and Elliott were the only two remaining patrons at Hoi-Hoi on the Range. Not that it was late, it was just for the first time, Elliott used his authority to 'clear house' Bobbing her head in cockiness to the beat of the slow country song, Ellen took her shot.

The ball sailed across the table, banged into the far bank, ricocheted left and basically rolled in no real direction, back and forth, until it stopped.

Elliott nodded and took his lean over the table. "Eight ball side pocket no banks."

"And you think this is a possibility." Ellen looked. "It's way over here."

"Eight ball." Elliott reiterated. "Side pocket." One simple rev and he hit the shot sending the ball directly into the pocket. "I believe I won . . . again. What does that make Ellen, eight times in a row."

"I won the one."

"No. You won none." Elliott set down his cue stick. "You only were able to sink the balls because I put them in for you. You . . . you . . ."

"Suck at pool?"

"I was going to be more polite." Elliott said with one eye closed. "Now can we end this and make amends." He extended his hand. "I believe now, I've earned it. I've received more insults from you this evening than I have from everyone my entire life. Truce."

---

Ellen stared at his hand, then with a smile, shook it. "Truce."

"Thank you." Elliott leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "Want to play a . . ." Noticing the far off look in her eye, brought curiosity to Elliott. "Ellen? What is it?"

Ellen swallowed. "Hal's back." Her eyes locked upon the door that Hal just walked through.

Whispering, Elliott lowered his head to her. "Perhaps it is good news."

Turning to face where Ellen did, Elliott saw that the news wasn't good.

Hal walked in removing his bandana and keeping it in his hands before him. He gave some sort of awkward forced smile, then after a long blink, he looked over his shoulder.

It was all Ellen needed to see.

Robbie walked in, then Frank. The Slagel brothers stood. A family together. Three in a row, so tall, a wall of strength. And Ellen knew their abundance of size, power and presence wasn't all they were standing together to deliver. They stood together to deliver an abundance of bad news.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

December 21<sup>st</sup>

Pain.

How many more hits, strikes against him, losses, could Frank take. It was a hard community decision to swallow, but Frank eased it down, instead of with a morning cup of coffee, a hard shot of moonshine.

He never saw it coming. Never expected it. Everything inside of Frank truly believed that Beginnings, a community Ellen founded, healed, cared for, would never in a million years, vote to make her leave.

They did.

Frank would have bet his life on it. He was in no way mentally prepared for the outcome, nor was he physically prepared as well. His eyes glanced to the calender that hung in the communications center. He looked at it for two reasons.

One, the date. December twenty-eighth. That would be the day Ellen left. And she wouldn't return for at least a month.

The second reason, Frank supposed was to smile.

The 'Dazzling Danny Day Deal' always brought a smile to Frank's face. A calendar courtesy of Danny Hoi. Everyone got one who wanted one. And every calender was complete with different Danny poses each month. Some the action hero, some the suave model-type.

Danny was one of a kind. His originality was never outdone and he always came up with technology that Beginnings never thought of bringing back.

There was a lot of bright in Beginnings, that in Frank's mind, would have been dark had it not been for Danny.

But even with Danny persistence, arguing, and sweet talking, nothing made the Ellen situation bright.

And with one more sip of his moonshine tainted coffee, Frank knew he had things to do. One week wasn't much time at all to plan his leaving as well. He knew somewhere Hal had found a place for Ellen, and Danny hooked it up. Robbie and Elliott would do the security bit, and Dan from security would be an essential aid.

All that had to be written out, reported. Frank understood with the budding savages, and still lose SUTs that he was leaving at a bad time. But

## Druga-Marchetti/Divided Blood

he couldn't let Ellen leave alone. He never had any intention of it. He protected her well outside of the walls once, and he would do it again. In his mind, the task couldn't be done by anyone else.

Listening to the buzz of the communications door, Frank flipped on the monitoring switch to the panel then turned his chair as Lenny walked in.

"Any luck?" Lenny asked.

"Nah." Frank stood up. "George wasn't there, and neither was that transvestite. I'll try back in a bit."

"I'll be here."

Frank nodded with a smile, "Thanks. And thanks for not telling anyone about this."

"I have a kid, too, Frank. I would do the same thing. It's not a wrong. You're just being a father and checking up."

Again, with another sad thanks, Frank left communications.

^^^

"And, yet another . . ." Ellen said sadly walking with Joe. Her hand gripped tight to his arm in their side by side slow walk from the school house.

"I know it bothers you." Joe told her.

"Yeah, but not for the reasons everyone thinks."

"I know what reason." He explained. "You aren't mad."

"Not at all. I understand their decision. I understand what they are saying. Joe, I took a life. No, I took two. Contrary to what everyone believes, I do feel guilty. I will never purge this guilt ever in my life. But if I pay some sort of dues. Some sort of punishment, I can at least relinquish some of the guilt. Does that make sense?"

"Very much so."

"Yet, they still won't look at me." Ellen sighed out.

"It's their guilt, Ellen."

"I know. Hey, at least I know there's twenty-seven people in the community that will glance my way. Maybe my posting will help?"

"Posting?" Joe asked.

"Yes. On the 'Joe' Board. Last night. I knew this would happen, so I put a huge note."

"What does it say?"

"Something simple." Ellen stopped walking. "It says, 'It's OK.'"

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Joe smiled. "Hope it works."

"I do too." She began their stroll again.

"You know, Ellen, you don't have to walk me. I'm not an invalid."

"I know. And it has nothing to do with you. It has everything to do with me. Aside from you being the strongest and best looking man in Beginnings . . . I need to rely on you a little for some of that strength."

Joe leaned down to her kissing the top of her head. "I wish there was something I could do."

"You are."

"I can tell you something."

"What's that." Ellen faced him.

"This is gonna make you stronger. I think . . . I think a month sounds like a long time, but really it isn't. You'll make good use out of this time. My only concern is the savages that aren't that far. And we still don't know what George is up to."

"It's winter. No one is up to anything anymore." Ellen said. "Right? I mean, if history proves right, we're safe from the society until spring."

"You have a point. Things die in the winter now in this world."

Ellen winked. "Not me. And . . . I *do* plan on making the most of my time. I, Joe, am going to write the next great book here in Beginnings."

"Oh, brother." Joe smiled. "You're gonna finalize it as a Slagel thing aren't you? Hal and his Beginnings Times columns. Robbie and his erotic adventures. Frank's 'The SUT and the word Fuck' children's book, and you will write . . ."

Ellen was silent.

"Ellen, you're supposed to finish that sentence. What are you writing the book about?"

"Um. I really don't know. An exposé is what Danny wants."

"An expose on who?"

Ellen shrugged.

"You aren't planning on writing an expose on me, are you?"

"You did have the Casanova life."

"Christ." Joe started to walk again. He spotted the clinic. "I guess this is where we part."

"Yeah." Ellen exhaled. "Promise me no running around today."

"Just strolling." Joe assured.

"Joe. How are you? Really?"

"Really?" Joe tilted his head. "Tired, Ellen. I know Dean did that laser surgery on the tumors, but, I some how feel like when he opened me up, he

opened a pandora's box. Does that make sense?"

"It's worry." Ellen spoke soft. "And you'll feel this way until after you're first treatment."

"Let's hope you're right."

"I know I'm right." Ellen said with certainty. "I'm very confident, and I need you to be."

"If you are . . ." Joe lifted his shoulder in a shrug. "I am."

"I love you, Joe." Ellen kissed him on the cheek. "And just know, if you didn't have to get these treatments. *Which* you need, so don't use this as an excuse." she waved a finger in front of him. "If you didn't have to. I would want you to be with me out there. I would seriously ask you to go."

"And if I didn't have this health situation. I seriously would go."

Looking dead into Joe's eyes, Ellen smiled with an exhale. "See you later. Be good."

"Me?" Joe smiled. "You're the mad scientist." He took in another flash of a grin she gave him, one he knew was masking all that she felt. And then Joe kept strolling, slow and steady until he made it to the 'Joe' Park.

The park with the winding walking path was empty. Joe expected that. The work day was just underway, and the park never had anyone until lunch. He made a mental note to contact Mechanics to toss some ash on the path way. Though not completely snow covered, the temperature was dropping, and the last thing Joe needed was someone to fall on a slick path during a lunch time stroll. Of course, if the people of Beginnings were at all anywhere near normal, Joe supposed no one would even be at risk of slipping on that path. Because no one of a near-normal mind would even consider taking long enduring walks around a winding path in a pseudo park no bigger than an average livingroom.

Planning on sitting on the wall for a moment to take one of Dean's instructed sitting breaks Joe had to take, Joe hesitated. It caught his eye. Ellen wasn't joking when she said she left a big note on the community board. Big was an understatement. The note was huge and the words 'It's OK' blared in deep red ink. However the message somehow didn't blare to Joe. No matter how big, how eye catching, in Joe's heart and mind, the message erred. It wouldn't be OK, it would never be OK. Not to him. Not when his daughter, in such a short period of time, at the worst time of year was having to leave the sanctity of her home walls.

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There was an abundance of information laid out almost too perfectly and in order across the counter of the clinic lab.

Ellen picked up the one set of neatly stapled sheets, checking out the times and charts of what was titled a feeding schedule.

"Oh, you're here." Dean said surprised as he walked into the lab.

"Dean?" Ellen set down the chart. "What is all this."

"Preparation." He walked over to her and kissed her on the cheek.

"For?"

"Things have to be settled with the lab stuff, meds, research and everything before . . ."

"I get it." Ellen held up her hand.

"So you're OK with this?" Dean asked.

"Preparing?" Ellen nodded. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I thought you'd be upset."

"Dean, please. It would be highly irresponsible if an alternative means were not derived."

"I'm so glad you are thinking that way. I thought for sure you'd argue." Dean smiled.

"Nah."

"Good. Because I was working on a plan for the kids. I was thinking of just telling Frank to stay."

"He does anyhow."

"True." Dean said. "But as far as help for him, Andrea is right next door."

"What about you?" Ellen asked.

"El?" Dean chuckled. "I'll be with you."

"Dean . . ."

"Why else would I be doing all this." His hand motioned out toward the papers.

Ellen opened her mouth to argue, but then she closed it with a smile. She didn't want to deal with it, not at all, and she had time before she relayed to Dean the impossibility of him leaving. The community and kids relied too heavily on him. Dean was reasonable, he would see that, Ellen knew. But hitting him with the argument in the wake of the reality of her leaving would only breed a hostile reaction.

"El?" Dean spoke her name with question as she paced from the counter. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing." she wisped out. "Just a lot on . . ." Ellen paused by his desk.

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“What?”

“Dean?” She lifted a sheet of paper. “Twenty-seven bushels of carrots?”

“Uh . . .” Dean cringed. “Yeah. That’s unofficial.” Dean took the sheet. “Hector’s been keeping count.”

“Twenty-seven bushels of carrots in how long?”

“Past few days.”

“Twenty-seven bush . . .”

“El. I know.” Dean stopped her. “Amongst other reported obscurities.”

“When are you gonna do another level check?” Ellen questioned.

“I did one this morning. Looks steady now. No more changes. But the mutation . . .”

“Is still there?”

“And probably will never leave.”

“Oh, my God.”

“He’s mutated.”

“Thank God it’s not physical.” Ellen commented.

“Yet.”

“Yet?”

“Maybe not.”

“Maybe?”

“I don’t think.” Dean lifted his hand. “No, I’m positive. I think the physical changes won’t be anatomical, they’ll be characteristic.”

“And, do you think subject two has a clue?”

“Not a single one.” Dean stated. “But . . . I can’t . . . I can’t hold back. I have to tell him. I have to. Not just for him. But for me. There’s a lot I can learn.”

“And a lot you have to test.”

“Eating habits. Physical changes. Behavioral . . . El?”

“Hmm?” Ellen peered through the data.

“Has, um subject two demonstrated any weird, I don’t know, sexual impulses toward you?”

The paper dropped from Ellen’s hand at the same time her mouth dropped open.

“I’m curious as to . . .”

“No!” she snapped.

“Just wondering.”

“But . . .” Ellen picked the data back up, and with an ornery smile,

peered at Dean. "Could be interesting if he would."

Dean grumbled.

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"I spy." Danny Hoi swivelled a little back and forth in the chair in Communications. He held Robbie's inner Bionic arm, touching it with a small probe, making the fingers clench. His entire bionic arm set up was across the counter. Not only did Danny have to be there for a meeting, but Danny preferred to take a shift in communications to work on the arm. Limited interruptions.

"That is amazing." Hal watched.

"No. The grip is amazing. Watch." Danny laid the arm on the counter next to a lap top. He fixed the wires that came from the port. "Now, this connection is a simulated neuro transmitters from the microchip in Robbie's brain."

"So you have a pseudo chip in that laptop?" Hal asked.

"Yes. Now . . . let me . . .here." Danny reached into his tool box and pulled out a wrench. "I can get Lou to fix it again." He laid the wrench in the palm of the bionic arm.

With an odd smile, Hal watched.

Danny typed into the lap top. "The words are basic, the chip will be more complex to work on reaction and thought as if Robbie is thinking about making the movement on his own."

"I know that."

"OK." Danny typed. "Grip."

The fingers clenched fast and with a slight 'squeal' of a sound, the wrench began to bend.

"Holy Shit!" Hal almost rose from his chair.

"Pretty cool huh?" Danny freed the wrench and took hold of the arm. "Of course, at first how tight the grip is will have to be a conscious thing. If it isn't . . . well, hence the wrench."

"What exactly are we waiting for? Why can't my brother have that arm."

"Dean has to finish the skin sleeve." Danny explained. "And the chip, it has to be perfect. It isn't yet. Plus, there are a ton of other movements this arm has to be able to make naturally. I don't want it to feel like a prosthetic. I mean we're putting sensors in here, Robbie will know hot from cold, so why wouldn't the motions he makes be as natural as his real limb."

Druga-Marchetti/Divided Blood

It has to jab in a punch, lift. The grip is good. And, the wrist isn't mobile enough yet." Danny grinned. "Robbie specifically told me he wants good wrist action."

"Dear God, after seeing that grip, and knowing it has to be controlled consciously, the thought of 'good' wrist action would frighten me."

"Or inspire you."

In amusement Hal chuckled, but cut it short when the buzzer for the door rang.

"Speaking of wrist action." Danny pointed to Robbie who walked in with Jess.

No more needed to be said or explained, Robbie flashed that ornery grin, waved high then brought down his hand in a motion for Jess to go on in first. "We can't be too long." He explained. "El's at containment. She'll start asking if he doesn't emerge from their bathroom."

"Not long at all." Hal shook his head as he watched Jess take the seat. "You know what to do, right?"

"Yes." Jess sat down.

"You know what to say?" Hal asked.

"Cut it short. No info. This is just to touch base."

"Exactly." Hal laid a hand on Jess' back and brought the phone forward. "The society needs to hear from you. Just do a check in."

It was a 'ness' feast, unexpected, abrasive and loud was Frank's voice and the 'ness' of all those made everyone freeze when he shouted. "What?"

Calmly, after the initial shock, Hal looked. "Oh, Frank."

"What the fuck, Hal!" Frank blasted in the open doorway. "Tell me I didn't hear correctly."

"Depends. What did you hear?" Hal asked

"That you plan on having him call the society."

With a single tilt of his head, Hal gave a closed mouth nod. "Then you heard correctly."

Frank's head bobbed a few times in a nod of knowing silence. Then, head lifted, he tossed out a cocky smile. "I'm telling." With a turn he walked out.

Silence.

All eyes were on the door.

Robbie's mouth opened and closed and he pointed at the door, looked to Hal, pointed and shrugged.

"Telling?" curiously, Danny rose from his seat. "Did he just say he's telling?"

"I believe so, yes." Hal responded.

"Telling Dad?" Robbie asked.

Hal rolled his eyes.

Jess stood up. "Look, Hal, the last thing I wanted to do is get you in trouble."

"People." Hal scoffed a laugh. "Consider the source. Really. What is he going to do. *Run* to my father, tattletale, and have my father blast in here all so he can say childishly, 'you're in trouble. You're in trouble'? I don't think so."

"You're in trouble." Frank whispered in his pass behind Hal.

"Hall!" Joe blasted. "Are you listening?"

"I'm sorry. No, I had a pest of an insect buzzing by my ear." Hal said sitting in the chair. "Continue."

"Continue?" Joe asked crass. "What is with this arrogant attitude?"

"Father, I . . ."

"Hall!" Joe raised his voice louder. "Do you understand what you are doing? I placed you in charge. In charge of three communities! It is your job to be leader!"

Hal stood up. "And I am doing my job!"

"You!" Joe pointed at him. "Will not face off with me. You will not *even* attempt to stand toe to toe with me. Sit your pompous ass back down in that chair and listen to what I am saying. Shut up Frank!"

"What?" Frank tossed his hands up.

Hal slowly sat back down.

The whistling caught Joe's attention, and he swung a hard view toward the door. "No! You two. Hold it!" he shouted to Danny and Robbie who were trying to sneak out. "If you two think I view you as totally innocent, you're out of your goddamn mind. Back in here."

They inched back in.

"Shut the goddamn door."

A little frightened and feeling like a ten year old, Robbie swung out and closed the door.

"Ow." The painful voice emerged from the other side.

Everyone looked.

"Who in Christ's name did you just shut that door on?" Joe asked irritated.

"I don't know." Robbie answered.

“Well look for crying out loud! Christ almighty I’m gonna have to start calling you Frank.”

“Dad.” Frank interjected. “That’s *my* name. You can’t do that.”

In the chair, and with typical arrogance, Hal tossed up his hands. “And we listen to him.”

“Robbie!” Joe yelled. “Open that door!”

Robbie did. “Oh, hey, sorry, Dean.”

Dean rubbed his head and stepped in some. “That’s, OK, you didn’t see me.”

Frank snickered.

Calmer, because Dean really didn’t do anything, at least he thought, Joe spoke up. “Can we help you Dean?”

“Well, Joe. I was looking for Frank, I heard he was here.” Dean walked further in and closed the door. “I have something very important to tell him, and if I don’t get cornered into telling him I may not tell him.”

With an ‘uh-huh’ Joe nodded. “I see. We’re in the middle of something. Bye.”

“I don’t think so.” Dean took a seat. “Aside now from telling Frank, I’m here to assure you stay calm. I heard you yelling. You can’t be yelling and getting upset, Joe.”

“Fine.” Joe said with an edge and returned to Hal. “All right, Mr. ‘Fill in leader’. You tell me where your head was aside from up your ass when you made this decision.”

“Defending the placement of my head.” Hal retaliated. “I was thinking of this community. They have done it to us, why not do it to them.”

“I know the ‘reasoning’ of the Jess situation. I know your plan. What I want to know is, did you think because I was on leave, and I wasn’t around, that you could do this without my knowledge?”

Calmly Hal nodded, ‘yes.’

“Wrong.” Joe’s hands swung out through the air. “Do you know what you did? You let out a man who was detained for being a traitor, you let him out to call his people, because you trust him.”

In the same manner, Hal nodded again. “Yes.”

“What in Christ’s name made you think you can trust him. You can’t.”

“He said . . .”

“I don’t give a damn what he said.” Joe nearly yelled. “Whether or not he defected with intention to spy, or used that as an escape, he did not come forward earlier. Which tells me he’s one of them. He probably had a lot to do with a lot of shit that went down in this community.”

Frank, arms folded, not only watched Joe, but Jess, who leaned forward in a chair, face buried to his hands.

Joe continued. "Jess Boyens can not be trusted. You buy his 'I love Beginnings this is my home' line? I don't. And you, Hal abused your position of authority, you took advantage of my absence, advantage of time I granted to think. And you are not the only guilty party. Robbie, Danny . . ."

"Dad." Frank's voice cracked as he spoke up.

"Frank, I'm busy. What is it?" Joe rubbed his head.

"No." Frank shook his head almost with confusion. He shifted his eyes to Jess again then back to Joe. "Forget I said anything. Jess is not a traitor. You and I, we're wrong."

On the sudden change of demeanor, Hal looked curiously at his brother.

Joe took a step to Frank. "He's not a traitor now? Five minutes ago you were ranting and raving how Hal was single handedly helping the inside sources of the society, and now you say you were wrong. What happened Frank?"

"I . . ." Frank cleared his throat. "I had a revelation."

"You had a revelation." Joe nodded. "What in Christ name type of revelation? I didn't see lightening bolt come in here and zap your big ass. What the hell, Frank?"

"I . . ." in nervousness, Frank cleared his throat. "It'll sound dumb. It really will. I always thought, that if Jess wasn't a traitor, Hal's plan was good. But to me, Jess was see? And now, I know he isn't. I know." Frank said strongly. "Trust me on this one. He isn't. And . . . OK." He lifted his hand. "Think back to a few days ago.

Hand on hip, Joe stared. "Go on this better be good."

Frank continued. "Think back. Jason having sex with Josephine.

After being pelted by the unison sounds of disgust that flowed from everyone in the room, Joe stared for a moment at Frank. "On the lines of Robbie wears a size twelve?"

"Yes." Frank answered.

Eyes shifting back and forth from his father to Frank, Hal mumbled. "My God, this is as obscure as using a Captain Rocket code ring."

Joe ignored Hal's remark, Eyes still on Frank. "I see. All right." A few nods escaped Joe and he ran his hand across his chin with a heavy exhale. He turned to Danny. "Danny, can you take Jess to containment, return back here, we all have to lay this out . . . in detail." He glanced at Hal.

"Before we proceed with Hal's plan."

In shock, Hal stood up. "Dad? You're changing your mind."

"I'm gonna . . ." Joe hesitated with a wince. "I'm gonna go with Frank on this one. I'm gonna trust him. Danny?"

"We're going, Joe." Danny stood at the same time Jess did. "Let's go."

Even as they left Hal never took his view off his father. "Thank you."

Joe nodded then let out a breath. "You're welcome. Anyhow, . . ." He spun to Dean. "Dean, would you like to steal Frank, or just have us step out."

"Just, um, step out would be fine." Dean said with nervousness, hiding his beating heart.

Joe, leading Hal walked to the door. But before he stepped out, he watched Robbie roll up a chair and sit down. "Robert. What are you doing?"

"Dean looks way too nervous." Robbie got comfortable. "I want to hear this."

"Now that you mentioned it." Hal walked back in the room. "Perhaps this is news our brother may need our support on." Hal, too, grabbed a chair placing it on the other side of Robbie.

Joe tossed up his hands. "Might as well."

"Swell." Dean mumbled then ran his hand through his hair. "Ok." He said with an exhale.

Frank blinked. "I'm not reading you."

"I'm blocking you."

"Black wall?" Frank asked.

"Better than Jenny." Dean replied.

"You're right. Or Josephine."

Hal shuddered. "Am I the only one in Beginnings not practicing this form of code?"

"Shut the fuck up, Hal." Frank snapped.

"Yeah, Hal." Robbie instigated.

"Robert." Joe softly scolded. "Go on, Dean."

"OK." Dean clapped his hands. "I've been watching for a while. And . . . Frank, do you know how I've been doing blood tests on you. Well, this all has to do with that."

"Do you need more?" Frank questioned.

"No." Dean shook his head. "I took enough to tell me . . ."

"Oh, my God." Frank gasped seriously. "I'm dying."

"No." Dean shook his head. "You . . ."

"Have an incurable blood disease?" Frank guessed.

"Frank . . ."

"Hepatitis?"

"Frank, you . . ."

"Blood sugar is low."

"Frank . . ."

"Low iron. My iron should be good, Dean, I've been eating lots of roughage."

Dean snapped his finger with a point. "Exactly."

Joe, Hal, and Robbie questioned in unison a loud 'what?'

"Fuck." Frank wisped out. "Eating too much roughage caused hepatitis?"

"No." Dean whined. "No. Listen to me. OK? Just listen. Say nothing until I'm done. This is very difficult to say."

"Are the words too big?" Frank asked. "I can try to help."

"Frank!" Joe yelled. "For crying out loud. Let the man speak!"

"Dad!" Frank returned the loud yelled. "You heard him, he can't. The words are too big."

"Dear God." Hal tossed his head back. "Slap a leather jacket on the man and call him Vinnie Barbarino."

"No. Frank." Frank corrected.

Robbie laughed.

Hal growled.

Dean tried again. "All right. I'll just come out and say it. Frank. When you were shot, I gave you an accelerator to heal you. Remember?" He waited for Frank to nod. "Now, we tested this accelerator, received some really good results, but, it wasn't tested on humans. Since your wounds were bad, and we knew you'd want to be up and about, we . . . we saturated your wounds with it. It worked." Dean nodded. "So seeing the success in you, we gave that to Joe after his laser surgery. Only not in the quantities we gave you. Understand? Are you following me. Everyone?" Dean waited to see he got agreement. "I believe the reason Joe wasn't affected is because we didn't bombard him. Joe, you're fine."

"I'd say thanks, but. . ." Joe spoke. "Somehow I fear where this is going."

"It's not bad. Sort of. It could be,. But it isn't. It actually has it's perks to Frank." Dean explained. "See. The accelerator agent I used was a DNA based accelerator which consisted of certain strands of DNA taken from . . . A jackrabbit. This accelerator, it's pretty powerful, and so . . . so seems to

be the jackrabbit DNA.” Dean nodded. “More powerful than I ever anticipated. The accelerator not only sped up the healing process it sped up the mutation process. The carrots, the scent finding, the increase in speed, the recent occasional . . .” Dean bobbed his head. “Hopping that Frank does. All these are attributed to the fact that the jackrabbit DNA pretty much mutated and meshed with Frank’s.”

Frank stared with intent at Dean following his explanation. “So, what exactly are you trying to tell me?”

Hal lifted his hand. “Dean, are you saying our brother is . . . I don’t know, turning into a rabbit?”

“Jackrabbit.” Dean replied. “Did. Is. Sort of.”

A rattle, crash, bang and thump rang out loudly when in his hysterical laughter, Robbie fell out of his chair.

“Dear God.” Joe closed his eyes. “What the hell else can happen in the screwed up goddamn whacked out world of Beginnings?”

Barely interpretable, Robbie laughed his remark. “He could grow a bushy tail.”

After a flutter of his lips, Hal snicker. “Can you see it, Robbie. Suddenly around April, Frank will get this urge to carry a big purple basket and hide colorful eggs about Beginnings.”

“He’s gonna have to grow his hair longer, Hal, to cover up those floppy ears.” Robbie commented.

“Or perhaps.” Hal crossed his arm over his waste while rubbing his chin. “He may have to lose the goatee. Lord knows the whiskers will clash.”

“With the pink nose.” Robbie looked at Dean. “And Dean. You better watch Ellen. You know what they say about Rabbits and . . .”

“All right.” Joe cringed. “All right. Enough. Dean. If you’re serious. He’s not . . . Frank’s not gonna grow fur is he?”

Dean shook his head. “No more than he already has.”

Frank shrieked for an instant, pulled out his tee shirt and peered in. He let out a whew of relief.

Dean closed one eye. “I was referring to your chest hair Frank. But, there won’t be any physical changes. The mutation is complete. It’s more behavioral changes. The need for roughage. The catching scents and following them easily. Running.”

Frank snapped his finger. “Jackrabbits are fast.”

Hal rolled his eyes. “Too bad their intelligence didn’t mutate with Frank’s. I see he still has his own quick wit.”

Frank ignored him. “So, Dean, the speed thing. That would explain

how I made it from the back gate to the field gate in a little over two minutes.”

“Um, Frank?” Hal spoke up with sarcasm. “A jeep would explain how you made it there in a little over two minutes.”

“No, Hal. I ran.” Frank corrected.

Suddenly Hal spun a view to him. “You ran that distance in a little over two minutes.”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded. “Mark in tracking commented how fast I got there. He said I must have been driving fast and I agreed, then I remembered I wasn’t driving. I ran.” He looked at Dean. “I ran those two miles in just over two minutes. Dean. Do you know in one minute I almost ran . . .” Frank paused, closed his eyes and drummed up a thinking look while holding up his fingers.

After groaning, Joe answered. “A mile Frank. You almost ran a mile a minute.”

“Man, you’re fast with math.” Frank shook his head. “Whoa. I’m fast with running. Running almost a mile a minute means I’m running almost.” Again, Frank paused to think.

Joe solved the math. “Sixty miles an hour.”

“No.” Frank shook his head. “Fifty . . .no, forty, no sixty miles an hour. You’re right.

Joe tossed up his hands. “Sixty miles an hour.”

“Yes!” Frank clenched his fist. “I am running near small predators speed, Watch me outrun those bastards now.”

“Frank.” Robbie’s face grew bright. “If you catch a scent, eat carrots, run real fast like a rabbit. I bet . . .” He sang the last word.

Hal grinned. “Oh, that would be awesome.”

Robbie looked at Frank. “Do you know where I’m going?”

“No, but I know what you’re thinking.” Frank pointed to his temple. “I read minds.”

“Yes, you do.” Robbie smiled. “Hal?”

“I say lets test it.” Hal said. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Robbie shrugged. “Break a leg?”

Hal tossed out his hand. “He’ll heal fast. He’s Frank.”

“I am.” Frank moved to the door. “And let’s do this.”

With enthusiasm, Frank raced out with an excited Hal and Robbie right on his heels.

Joe looked at a bewildered Dean. “See? And you thought he would be mad.” He moved to the door.

"Where?" Dean pointed. "Where are they going?"

"If I know my sons, and I do. And if I know their train of thought, they probably took Frank somewhere to test his jumping ability. And I think I want to see this." Joe walked out.

"So do . . ." Following Joe, Dean stopped. "Wait." He looked around the empty communications room. "This is a twenty four hour station. Joe!" Dean yelled out the door, but Joe was gone. "Great." He threw his hand out. "Great. I haven't a clue what I'm doing and they stick me down here . . . again." Grunting in frustration and totally aggravated, Dean pulled out a chair plopped down, and figured while he was waiting on Danny's return, he'd closed his eyes.

^^^

The selection of the Supremes' song he chose to sing out, was not an indication of his age of early thirties. The deep slurring voice of the male survivor blasted loudly in the skills room, and Ellen, after taking a peek, retracted back to the hall. "He's drunk."

Jess shrugged. "Mildly inebriated."

"Mildly inebriated. He's . . ." Ellen paused at the loud bang above her head. She peered to the ceiling and listened to the series of voices from outside.

Cheers, Robbie and Hal did, their voice carrying through the aluminum of the building.

"Come on Frank." Robbie yelled. "Do it again."

"You can do it." Hal edged on.

Ellen shook her head. "He's gonna come right through this roof."

"No he's not." Jess stated standing center hall with her.

"What in the world are they . . ." She cringed at the thump, thump, thump. "Doing?"

"Frank's jumping."

"Oh. Anyhow. He's drunk."

"He came in that way." Jess explained.

"He came in yesterday. How can he still be drunk?"

"Blame Robbie. He likes him drunk, so he gives Dwight . . ."

"Dwight?" Ellen asked. "Dwight?"

The tall, dark hair man poked his head into the hall. "You called."

Ellen huffed. "Your name is not Dwight. It's Rob."

Jess shook his head. "His name is Dwight now. Blame Robbie again,

he didn't think there should be more than one Rob."

"You know . . ." Dwight tried, relay tried to walk straight. "You're pretty."

"Me?" Jess asked with a snicker.

"Her." He pointed at Ellen.

Ellen looked. "Thanks." she then turned back to Jess. "But he . . ."

Bang!

Ellen growled. "As I was saying . . ."

"Faster, Frank." Robbie yelled.

"Really go for it." Hal shouted.

Slightly rolling her eyes, Ellen gazed to the ceiling.

Frank's running footsteps above her rang out.

Ellen tried to continue. "As I was saying . . ."

Loud and interrupting, squealed Frank's scream, just before a deadened thump.

"Whoops." Dwight commented. "I think he fell."

Robbie's laughter carried through. "Man, that was funny."

"Oh!" Hal said loudly, "You aren't hurt. Get up, shake it off and try again."

Feeling the tension rise up her neck, Ellen shuddered. "Anyhow . . ." She sang the word loudly. "As I was saying about Rob, I mean, Dwight."

"Yes." Dwight stepped closer. "Hey, did I say you were pretty?"

"Yes." Ellen answered him then returned to Jess.

"Real pretty?" Dwight asked. "You are."

Ellen's mouth opened then shut in politeness before she yelled. "Thank you. So, Jess . . ."

"Can I have you?" Dwight asked.

"No." Ellen replied. "Jess, I know you and Robbie are just . . ."

"Please?" Dwight interrupted.

Jess laughed.

"No." Ellen told him.

"Then can I just hug you?"

Ellen turned to face him. "I don't think so."

Jess saw it, Dwight inching to her, the large man over shadowing her small frame. Holding back his laugh, Jess stepped forward. "Look big guy. She's married, Back up. And go to the skills room. OK?"

Almost like a frightened child, Dwight nodded. "All right." Pouting he turned back around. "I'll go sing. I just thought she was pretty, that's all."

After watching him walk from view, and looking up to the loud

banging, Ellen returned to Jess again. "He's tall. How big?"

"My guess around six four." Jess answered.

"What did he do pre-plague?"

From the skills room, shouting, Dwight answered. "I was a fireman. Helmet number AX8."

Ellen blinked several times. "Something is not right about a man remembering his helmet number. Anyhow, now that we have silence"

BANG.

"Sort of." Ellen continued. "I need to go over a few things if you're gonna be helping Richie and Robbie in containment while I'm gone."

"I'm not." Jess said.

"Where are they putting you? Security?"

"No." Jess shook his head. "I want to go. I . . . I want to leave Beginnings with you."

"You can't." Ellen folded her arms.

"Why? I can watch out for you, help you, and I think I'm the perfect person to go."

"Jess, everyone thinks . . ."

BANG. BUZZ.

"God!" Ellen exclaimed, then watched the security door open and Dean waltzed in.

"I'm not taking no for an answer." Jess whispered, then turned to see Dean. "Hey, Dean."

"Jess." Dean kept his pace, pausing once to the noise above his head. "El. I think, I think I made matters worse with Frank."

"Unless you've given him fuckin wings, Dean, I don't think you can make matters worse." Tighter Ellen folded her arms to her body and in irritation fluttered her eyes.

"El, I'm serious." Dean said. "I told Frank. He wasn't mad. In fact, him, Hal, and Robbie . . ." He stopped when he heard the voices. "Are they . . . chanting?"

The unison, loud voices of Hal and Robbie called out. "Frank. Frank. Frank. Frank."

Jess tugged his ear. "I believe they are."

"Why?" Dean asked. "What is Frank doing?"

Ellen answered. "Jumping."

"Jumping?" Dean quizzed. "From?"

Jess interjected the response. "From the bakery roof to here."

"What?" Dean laughed. "That a good thirty feet. He won't even hit

the roof.”

Upon the finishing of Dean’s sentiment, the loudest of crashes screamed out with a thunderous blast on the roof. And making them all jump back in the hall was the loud ‘bang’ that not only brought down the de-hinged hatch from the roof, but the ‘uh’ from Frank with his sailing body that careened down to the floor at their feet.

Ellen looked down at Frank. “No, Dean he didn’t hit the roof. He went through it.”

With a ‘whoa’, and a cat twitch of his head, Frank stumbled to a stand and peered up. “Talk about hitting the target dead on. Wow.”

“Frank?” Dean questioned as he watched Frank brush off. “Are you all right? You could have been killed.”

“Nah.” Frank scoffed. “But, Dean, if I was. No problem.” Frank winked. “Thanks to you, I’m a jackrabbit now, and I have nine lives. Man, that was fun.” He walked backwards down the hall. “Hey, El could you keep everyone clear from here, just in case, you know, I fall through again.”

Ellen nodded in normalcy. “Oh, sure, Frank. You go on.”

“Thanks’ Smiling, and giving a thumbs up. Frank hurried from containment.

Mouth swishing from side to side, Ellen calmly turned around and started to walk away. “Frank’s a jackrabbit with nine lives . . .” she whistled. “And they call *my* people insane. OK.” After singing out the last word and slurring it into a whistle of a happy tune, Ellen waltzed into the sanity of the skills room with the drunken former firefighter, AX8.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Former Quantico Marine Headquarters

Slanted with arrogance was the walk, arms outward some because they failed to be able, through the brawn, to reach the body's sides. The stride was slow, almost too slow and deliberate. But the streets were quiet in Quantico City, and the winter's moon, too bright. No snow had yet to fall, and that was always a bonus.

Bertha felt the twitch in her left forearm muscles. A twitch of nervousness as her arm brushed against the arm of President Hadly in their stroll. How much she wanted to sigh like the female that screamed inside of her. Sigh out, comment on how crisp, cool and clear the night was, and reach down to grab George's hand.

But she couldn't. It wouldn't be right. Perhaps it was the romantic that was embedded within the estrogen she knew she produced.

"Sometimes." George said as they walked through the town portion toward where the special houses were. "Sometimes. When it's quiet like this, and the men aren't being drunks, you can hear a hint of music carry through the air. And sometimes, it's just the right kind." He placed his hands behind his back, slowing his walk even more.

"The . . . the right kind, Sir."

"Yes. Could be rock and roll. Country. Whatever. But the right kind of song just hits ya. Ever have that, Callahan."

"Well, Sir, always felt a stir myself when I listened to the Village People."

"Macho Man?"

"Favorite song." Bertha smiled.

"It's you."

With a blush, Bertha lowered her head. "Thank you, Sir."

"You're welcome. This is nice."

"Was gonna say that. The evening air and all."

"I was referring to the walk." George stopped. "It is a great prelude to where we are going. I appreciate you going to 'its' House."

"Call it a protective instinct with you. I don't mind going to 'Its' house. It, is very frightening."

George shuddered. "True. But this walk with you is nice. I enjoyed it."

Been a rough couple days.”

“Your son is making progress though.” Bertha stated. “They said the brain digression should be temporary.”

“What did you tell Frank Slagel.”

“That young Johnny is coming along.”

“Good.” George started to walk again. “You know, Bertha. It’s been a few days. And I wanted to do it again, but with Johnny and his health.” George cleared his throat. “That evening we had. Dinner, Chess, and talking. I haven’t spent an evening like that in a while.”

Was it a flutter in her stomach she felt. Whatever it was caused her breath to shiver. “I enjoyed it too.”

“Been forever since I spent quality time with a woman.” They edged the end of town, “when you’re married or involved with someone special. There’s more to a relationship than the physical aspect. Now don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed a good ‘bump and go’, but, I always enjoyed the companionship more.”

“Same here, Sir.”

“Now granted, Stew. He hangs and talks. But he’s Stew. And when he returns I’m busting his ass for hitting Disney world for so long.”

“He needed a vacation, Sir. Perhaps you may not want to be harsh on him.”

“It’s a goddamn apocalyptic world. No one takes vacations.”

“Maybe it’s time to start.” Bertha suggested. “You, yourself might need a nice one. Quiet secluded place.”

“Might need protection.” George raised an eyebrow.

“I’d be happy to go along.”

George hid his smile. “Anyhow. As I was saying. You were a sense of companionship the other night, like I hadn’t had in a while. Wildly competitive, a hell of a cook, and you share a doozy of a story.”

“And yourself, sir. I chuckled for hours over that one tale of how you handled that Middle Eastern Leader. You never finished the tale on how you ended the budding military confrontation.”

“Well, it was easy..” George said humbled. “Scared the hell out of him. Didn’t expect me, myself to attend peace talks. Flew my ass right over that table, grabbed that cocksucker by his tyrant military uniform collar, and said to him. Look you son of a bitch, withdraw them goddamn troops, back them up now, or I’m kicking your ass right here. You and me Pal’. He was shaking. But he withdrew. The entire US just though we hashed it out

verbally.”

“I liked how you proposed getting into a boxing ring with him.”

“It worked with that one guerilla leader. Hey, can’t expect our boys to fight, If I can’t fight myself.”

Bertha shivered. “Such a strong man. I always admired your roughness.”

“It’s a gift.” George tilted his head and stopped walking again. “You’ll join me again for dinner, right?”

“Anytime.”

“But now . . .” George whistled. “It.” He pointed to the house.

Her voice held her newly alerted concern. “Where are my guards, Sir.” Bertha rushed to the door.

“Probably devoured by IT.” George raced in behind her.

Upon bursting in the door, a feeling of bad stirring in her gut, Bertha withdrew her revolver. Pumping the chamber and holding it ready, she charged into the quaint livingroom.

She didn’t know what to expect, but she knew expecting the worst wouldn’t be in the wrong direction. Gun aiming, left to right, eyes peeled, she checked out the clean livingroom with one table lamp.

“It!” George called out when he walked in. “It!”

“Something is not right.”

“Maybe it is sleeping?” George questioned. “And the guards just went home.”

“No, Sir. My guard are twenty-four hours. I have to check up stairs.”

“You don’t think ‘It’ killed them do you?”

“Possibility.” Bertha softly headed to the stairs.

“Hold it.” Georg called out, his eyes transfixed.

“What is it.”

“Christ.” George rubbed his eyes as he lifted the sheet of paper. His heavy grumbling breath rang out.

“A note.” Bertha walked up behind him. “Fearing, sir. What does it say?”

After inhaling, George read it. *“Asshole, I always resented how you chose my destiny. I never made any bones about hating it. I fought, struggled and caused dismay for a long time. But I planned. My minimal devastation and disruption, is finished here. I’m off to where I not only can be of value, but can aid in causing even more devastation to you and your so-called society. To the feeling of Freedom and the cause that calls me. I head to Beginnings. Signed, (As you refer to me) IT. PS: Thanks for the eight soldiers. They were and will be a great help.”*

“Son of a bitch.” Bertha flew to the front door. “Sir, I’m on this. I will start an immediate investigation as to where and when IT went. But in the meantime, I’ll alert our outside forces to keep an eye out.”

“We at least know which direction they are heading. Just don’t know which route.”

“Will find them..” Bertha opened the door. “And I apologize, Sir. I can not believe that eight of our men helped IT escape.” She flew out the door.

“Oh, I believe that.” George mumbled to himself. “What I can’t believe is that IT went to Beginnings.” Heavily George closed his eyes and exhaled. “Not good.”

^^^

Andrea’s mood was pretty upbeat, despite the fact that she hadn’t left the clinic all day. Cold and flu season was upon them, and she had to wonder what happened to the days when people didn’t run to the hospital every time they sniffled.

She supposed there was ‘just cause’ for the hysteria every time a bug went around. After all, aside from Dean and his little experiments, the residents of Beginnings did see two extinction causing plagues in their lifetime.

Tired, wishing she had more help in the clinic, Andrea headed down the main corridor to go home. She knew had she not been switching the words to ‘What a friend we have in Jesus’ and singing her own rendition of, ‘What a futomara we have in Jesus,’ she would had lost her cool when she walked by Dean’s lab.

“Dean?” She called out in the bright lab.

No answer.

“Sweet Jesus. Does he think the electricity is cheap? Hard working men keep the power up, Dean.” Shaking her head with a mother scold look, she walked over to his computer, “And he left it all booted up.” She reached for the mouse. “When will that boy . . .” Andrea froze upon glancing at the information on the screen. “No.” She stood up, then with a shift of her eyes she noticed the thick stack of papers on his desk. With a quick ruffle through, a confirmation hit her along with outrage. And in keeping up with the current trend in Beginnings, Andrea stormed off ‘to tell’.



"Christ, Elliott." Hal grumbled as he flicked on the light to his office. "Do you never have a moment where work is not foremost?"

"Captain, this is important. I've been busy."

"So have I." Hal walked over toward his desk. "I have been running three communities. Plus, I've not had the ample opportunity to work on my society strategy."

"And you'll be even busy in a few days." Elliott said. "That is why I must push this talk. We haven't had it. Ellen's ousting is schedule to begin less than a week."

"Yes, I know this."

"There are things to prepare."

"Yes, I know." Hal nodded.

"Arrangements to be made. Or shall I say rearrangements, UWA men who could take over responsibilities, that will be lacking."

"Yes, I know this." Hal stated more perturbed. "And you've come up with these men."

"Yes. Now, number one. To take my position here in New Bowman . . ."

"Wait." Hal held up his hand. "Where will you be?"

"With Ellen."

Hal laughed. "No. Correction. I'll be with Ellen. I'm leaving with her."

"Begging your pardon, Sir. But *I* will be going with Ellen."

"You hate her."

"I do not." Elliott defended. "We mended ways."

"Doesn't matter. I feel I'm the better man to go."

"I'll argue with that." Elliott gave a firm nod. "I also am in a pseudo, sort of relationship with her."

"Well, I happen to be like a brother to her." Hal tossed up his hands. "My father prefers me to go."

"Really. Well . . ." Elliott stepped closer to Hal. "Dr. Hayes himself asked *me* to be the one to go."

"He did not."

"Did too."

"When."

"A week ago."

"No way." Hal scoffed.

"I'm afraid he did."

“Swear to God.”

Elliott lifted his right hand. “I swear.”

“Damn it.” Hal blinked. “Does Frank know?”

“No. I don’t believe he knows.”

“Then guess what?”

“What’s that?” Elliott asked.

Hal grinned. “I’m telling.”

^^^

“What, Andrea? What?” Joe, feeling pulled, complained as Andrea led him into the clinic lab.

“You have to see this.”

“I don’t give a shit about what Dean does in here. At least not right now.”

“You’ll care about this.”

“I highly doubt that. I care about my fake drink at the social hall.”

“Look.” Andrea pointed to Dean’s desk.

“What? You’re showing me how much a mess Dean’s desk is?”

“No, Joe. I’m showing you how much a mess Beginnings is gonna be in.” She handed Joe a stack of papers. “And you as leader better do something now.”

^^^

“So I don’t get it.” Richie Martin dropped upon Ellen’s desk in containment, what would be his lunch for his shift. “How did you end up getting the day shift around here?”

“I’ve been in Beginnings longer.” Jess replied.

“Yeah, but . . .” Richie plopped down in Ellen’s chair. “We all know about you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why you were in here. At least I do. You were here to be a living resident observer. You were big detained.”

“Yeah, but no one is supposed to know that.”

Richie shrugged. “But I do. So knowing what I know. How are you trusted more than me to get the day shift.”

“Why wouldn’t I be trusted?” Jess asked.

“You are Mr. I spy Society guy.”

“Yeah. So. You were Mr. Society Errand Boy.” Jess rebuked. “But, you won’t have to worry about it for long.”

“True.”

“I mean, you’ll have the day shift.”

“I won’t be around.” Richie said.

“Where are you going?” Jess asked. “Because I won’t be around.”

“I’m going with Ellen.”

Jess laughed heartedly. “You? No. I’m the one going with Ellen.”

“Oh, sure. So you can lead the society right to her.”

Scoffing, Jess shook his head. “Get the fuck out of here. At least I can protect her. You on the other hand, if the savages came, would find a nice little hole to hide in.”

Richie stood up. “You honestly think Ellen would want you over me.”

“Um, yeah.” Jess nodded. “She told me today she wanted me to go. In so many words.”

“Well, I wanna hear those so many words.”

“Let’s go.” Jess pointed to the office door. “Let’s get the guard in here, and you and I will go.”

“You’re on.” Rich walked out into the hall. “We’ll ask her which one is better to go. Bet you it’s me.”

“Bet you it’s me.” Jess argued.

“What do you wanna bet?” Richie asked.

“Loser does night turn.”

“You’re on.” Reaching up to the security door, Richie buzzed the code for them to leave.

^^^

Hand extending for the livingroom door, Henry stopped and looked back at Hector. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’m positive.” Hector said.

“And I should do this right now?”

“Henry, I think all kinds of arrangements around Beginnings are going to have to be made when you go with Ellen. It’s better to tell Joe now.”

“And you don’t mind me leaving you with Nick?”

“Not at all. Just . . . just don’t sleep with Ellen out there.”

“Why would you say that?” Henry asked.

“Not that it would bother me. Personally, it wouldn’t. But we’re making such progress with Misha. And she doesn’t want to get involved

with any man who had a previous relationship with a woman in Beginnings. I never had one.”

“But I did.”

“I didn’t tell her that.”

“Hector?” Henry scratched his head. “How did you explain Nick to her then. She knows Nick is Ellen’s son, right?”

“I just told her, that Ellen was artificially inseminated for you. That’s why we have Nick.”

“That’s a lie.” Henry gasped. “What if she finds out?”

“She won’t. And I want this. It’s just a little fib. I’ll blame it on you and tell her that is what you told me.” Hector shrugged. “But that is a subject for another time. Right now. Find Joe.”

“I’m finding Joe.” Henry opened the door and stepped out. “I think this is best Hector.”

“I do, too. You’re the best choice.” Hector moved closer as Henry slipped through the archway. “And remember . . .” He called to Henry as Henry started down the path. “Don’t take no for an answer no matter what Joe says.”

^^^

“Oh, yeah.” In the social hall, Frank bobbed his head in arrogance, finger pressing to the earpiece of his headset. “All clear?”

“All clear, Frank.” Robbie responded. “I’m covering tracking for a few.”

“Excellent. I’m playing darts for a few. You know, because it’s gonna be a while until I get to do this again.”

“Get that time in now.” Robbie said. “And, Frank?”

“Yeah.”

“No drinking. OK?”

Frank paused and looked down to where has been sitting. A glass half full set on the table. “Um, no drinking. I promise.”

“Thanks.”

Tossing the headset around his neck, Frank remembered his promise and forgot about the drink. Just as he clapped his hands in a kill scope for his next dart victim, he spotted Hal. “Aw.” Frank whined.

Hal grinned and waved.

Frank whined again. And as soon as he saw Elliott, Frank stomped his foot. “Fuck.”

"Evening, big Brother." Hal approached him.

"Hal." Frank shifted his eyes to Elliott. "What's Sgt. Fuckin Ryder doing here?"

"I'll get to that." Hal lifted his hand.

"You aren't here to make me do any more parlor tricks are you?" Frank asked.

"No." Hal shook his head.

"Because I don't think I can jump leaps of fate anymore. My butt hurts."

"I'm sure . . ."

"I wonder if cats hurt from hopping about."

"Cats don't hop about.." Hal corrected.

"So if cats don't hop, why do I?" Frank questioned.

"Because perhaps . . ." Hal said snide. "You aren't a cat."

"Oh. Yeah. I'm a rabbit." Frank shrugged. "Same difference."

Hal refrained. "Anyhow . . ."

"So If I'm not showing off how good I jump, what's Sgt. Fuckin Ryder doing here?"

"I'll get to that." Hal said. "Now, Frank. This is important. Ellen leaves soon. And you and I both know, without question, who it is that is going with her."

"With a doubt." Frank stated. "No question."

"No argument?" Hal asked.

"None."

"And, our father, as you know, backs up this decision."

Frank winced some. "Well, not entirely, but, better his son, than someone else."

Hal snapped his finger. "That's right."

Elliott rolled his eyes some, but did have to admit to himself, he enjoyed the play of words between the two Slagel men.

"Now for the reason Elliott is here." Hal explained. "Do you like Sgt. Ryder?"

"Hate him." Frank raised his eyebrows. "He was all right when he was dying, but he got shitty when he found out he was gonna live."

"Didn't he though?" Hal instigated. "So, anyhow, if Sgt. Ryder were to initiate something that would really rub you wrong. You would . . . I don't know, possibly? Hurt him?"

Elliott huffed. "Thank you very much for that Captain."

"Hush." Hal waved his hand to Elliott. "You know I wouldn't let him

hurt you. Please. Aren't I the one, according to Ellen, that is the only one who can take on Frank."

"Hall!" Frank snapped. "Get to your point. Obviously you have one if you came all the way from New Bowman."

"And I do." Hal nodded. "My point is, not wanting to see any confrontation erupt between the two of you, but . . ." Hal smiled. "Guess what?"

^^^

Was Dean at the North Pole or in Beginnings. Sitting on his livingroom floor and looking around at the massive amount of presents made him really wonder.

"And stay in there." Ellen's instructing voice to the children trailed into the livingroom as she made her return. "Hey." She said almost disappointed as she joined him on the floor.

"What?" Dean looked up innocently.

"You didn't wrap any more."

"El." Exhausted Dean dropped his shoulders. "Why wrap? Just give them to people."

"Dean. Please."

"Why are we wrapping?"

Gasping, Ellen's mouth dropped open. "Why not? It's the Christmas spirit. God, Dean, half the fun is unwrapping. And . . . we can wrap. Thanks to Danny Hoi for bring back paper. And . . ." she sighed out. "It felt so good to shop again. It really felt good to go into the store, pick out what I want, and say 'charge please'. No limit on what I can spend."

"Of course not." Dean mumbled. "When you maxed out one card, you just used someone else's."

Ellen giggled. "Yeah. Something like that."

Both of them looked up when the doorbell rang.

Ellen stood up. "Must be Andrea. She's the only one who rings my bell." Smiling, Ellen opened the door. "A-ha." She pointed, opened the door wider and allowed Andrea in. "See Dean? And bonus . . ." Ellen waited for Joe to enter. "My dad." she closed the door. "Don't peek. Your presents are in here."

Joe looked at the massive amount of gifts. "Christ, Ellen, what did you do? Buy out all of New Bowman?"

"Something like that."

“Joe.” Andrea spoke up. “Please save the hum-bug attitude and give it to him.” She swung a point at Dean.

“Me?” Dean stood up. “What did I do.”

Andrea huffed out. “Oh you would ask that, wouldn’t you?”

Dean shook his head confused.

Andrea folded her arms. “Tell him, Joe.”

Joe opened his mouth. “Dean, I . . .”

“I will.” Andrea interrupted. “What. Did you think we wouldn’t notice because you’re so little.”

“Andrea.” Joe whined.

“What is going on?” Dean asked.

Before Joe could say anything, Andrea did. “You left the lights on in your lab.”

Dean blinked a few times. “That’s it? Oh, sorry.”

“Sweet Jesus.” Andrea snapped. “That is not it. Tell him Joe.”

“Dean, it . . .”

“What . . .” Andrea intruded again, “Were you thinking. Not only did you leave the computer on, you left everything out in the open.” Her head bobbed about as she scolded. “It’s no secret now, Mr. Eienstein that you are fully planning on leaving Beginnings.”

“I never said it was a secret.” Dean said. “I’m going.”

“No, you are not.” Andrea argued. “You can not go. Tell him Joe.”

“Dean.” Joe tried again to talk. “I have to . . .”

“First!” Andrea screamed another interruption.

Joe tossed up his hands, then whispered to Ellen, “I’ll get that door.”

Totally engrossed in Andrea’s yelling at Dean, Ellen never noticed the knock on the door.

Andrea continued. “First you are a father. Second you are the medical mind and means, and medical leader of this community. You have an obligation.”

“I have an obligation to my wife.” Dean argued.

“You can not. And will not.” Andrea gave a dramatic bob of her head.

“I go with her. El?” Dean faced Ellen. “El, tell Andrea who you are taking.”

Crossing her arms, Ellen nervously opened her mouth but hid her relief when Henry, who entered the home, also entered the conversation.

“You, Dean?” Henry stepped closer. “You can’t go. You can’t. You have the kids and the communities health. What are you thinking. Ellen should take someone with limited responsibilities, and someone who can

protect her. I plan on going.”

Dean laughed, “You? Oh, sure Henry, let me send my wife with you for a month. Right. What are you gonna do, bitch at the savages?”

“Dean.” Henry raised an eyebrow. “I would have El and I out of any physical situation before you even finish thinking about it.”

“Henry.” Dean had edged. “Get out of my house. You aren’t going with my wife. I am.”

“No you are not.” Andrea barked “I think Henry should go.”

Henry smiled. “Thanks Andrea.”

“Both of you . . .” Dean waved his finger at Henry and Andrea. “Are out of your minds. You can’t stop me.”

“I will Dean.” Joe interceded. “If I have to hog tie you and lock you up, I will. I can’t allow you to not only leave your abundance of off spring, I can’t allow you to leave this community.”

Snide, Henry grinned. “See, Joe wants me to go.”

Face crinkled in irritation, Dean swung a look at Henry. “Where did you get that. And, he won’t hog tie me, I go with El. Period. El?”

Ellen honestly wanted to respond as she stood side by side with Joe. She made the attempt, her lips parted, but a knock on the door was the sound that emerged.

Joe gave a twitch of his head. “You or me.”

Ellen lifted her finger. “I’ll take this one.” She reached for the door, opened it and in walked Jess and Richie.

Richie stepped in first. “Joe, are you busy?”

With a calm serious and a tad of dramatics, Joe looked around the room. “Kind of looks that way, yes. What is it?”

“We need you to settle an argument.” Richie stated.

“It’s important Joe.” Jess added. “Or else we wouldn’t be here.”

“It better be goddamn important.” Joe barked. “Who the hell is holding down containment.”

“Handled.” Richie replied. “Now, we are arguing, and we have a bet, on who you think should go with Ellen.”

Unseen, Ellen’s hand ejected to her face.

Henry tilted his head. “We’re arguing the same thing. Who do you think should go?” He asked Richie.

“Me.” Richie replied.

“I say me.” Jess sated.

“You guys?” Henry scoffed. “No, you two aren’t even in the running. This argument is between me and Dean.”

“Dean?” Richie laughed.

“Dean?” Jess said in shock.

“Yeah, me, I am her husband.” Dean rebutted.

Richie snickered. “You’re like three feet tall.”

Dean stepped to Ellen’s brother of the same height. “And you have room to talk.”

Andrea lifted her hand with attitude. “Gentlemen, this argument is really moot.”

“Yeah.” Henry instigated. “Andrea thinks I should go.”

“I do.” Andrea agreed.

“Bullshit.” Dean snapped. “I don’t care if Andrea supports you, Henry. I go, I’m her husband.”

“I’m her brother.”

Jess aided the argument. “And I believe Ellen told me she wanted me to go.”

All three, Henry, Andrea and Dean, not only swing a view to Ellen but they all blasted her with a loud ‘what!’

Ellen cringed.

Knock-knock-knock.

Sighing in relief Ellen’s shoulders dropped. “Saved.”

Joe opened the door. “You think?”

The three of them, Frank, Hal, and Elliott, blasted in past Joe like an emotional tornado. Frank the hard whipping whirlwind, Hal the funnel, and Elliott bring up the tail of it all.

Frank wasted no time. “Dean!” he charged forward. “What the fuck are you up to?”

From his argument with Henry, Jess, and richie, Dean turned confused, to Frank. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. You know. What the fuck are you up to?”

Just as Joe was going to intervene, he caught glimpse of something so typical on Hal’s face. Arrogance. Before saying anything further, he moved to Hal who was inching his way toward Frank. “Hal. What did you tell him.”

Hal just gave a tilted head innocent look.

Joe faced Elliott for answers. “Do you know, Elliott?”

“He delivered a painful truth.”

Dean didn’t have time. “Look, Frank, Right now, I am really pissed off, OK? I don’t know what I did, I don’t care. I’m arguing about something very important. In fact . . .” Dean’s voice raised some. “There

should be no argument over who is going with Ellen.”

“Exactly.” Frank nodded. “But you Dean, think you know the exact person. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah, Frank I do know that person.” Dean snapped. “And it’s not Richie, who thinks he should go.”

Hal laughed. That notion amused him.

“Nor . . .” Dean swung a point. “Henry.”

“Sorry.” Hal held up his hand, chuckling even more.

“Or is it Jess.” Dean continued in his rave. “Who says Ellen told him he could go”

“She what?” Hal asked shock.

Frank facially showed his disagreement. “El, did not. Did you tell him El?”

Ellen tried to talk. It was useless.

“Yes, she did.” Jess stepped in. “El is the one going. El picks.”

“Well El . . .” Frank moved to Jess. “Maybe going. But it seems Dean made the decision. Seems he told Sgt. Fuckin Ryder he could take Ellen.”

Elliott corrected. “I believe he asked me.”

Dean, stunned, turned around. “I did not.”

Ellen gasped. “You did. I was right there. You said you’d be honored to have Elliott go.”

“If I couldn’t.” Dean yelled. “I can.”

“No!” Andrea yelled. “You can not.”

Dean’s hands went out and his voice went it’s loudest yet. “She’s my wife! Where are you people not understanding this!”

Smug, but cool and calm, Hal moved closer. “Dean.” He spoke soft. “I understand she is your wife. However, it is not just a question of your children left behind, nor a community whose welfare would be indigent without you.”

“Yeah.” Frank agreed. “Whatever he said.”

Hal, ignored Frank and continued. “It is an argument of assurance in Ellen’s well being and safeguard. While she is beyond those walls. Now, really, Dean. Do you honestly believe, not saying you do not have your talents, but do you think that you have the skills to shelter her from the physical elements at large in this wild world. Now it is commendable that you chose Sgt. Ryder.”

Frank scoffed. “Who doesn’t have the skills either.”

“I beg your pardon, Frank.” Elliott said offended. “But I do have the skills and do not appreciate you insinuating that my abilities lack.”

Frank rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

Henry reached out with a poke to Dean's arm. "Why did you ask Elliott to go. That is so wrong, Dean."

Dean growled. "I was merely asking him to be the one to go if I could not. I can! Drop it! I'm going!"

"Ha!" Frank blasted. "No., you aren't. First off, El is not only a part of my life, she is a part of my family. My father knows who is the best one to go. Right Ha?"

"That's right, Frank." Hal said. "And our father has verbally stated who that is. Frank and I know this. Right, Frank?"

"That's right Hal."

Hal nodded. "And do you see us arguing over the fact of who goes? No."

"That's right," Frank said smug. "Hal know my Dad wants me to go."

Hal spun to Frank. "You? No, Frank. Me. Dad picked me."

"Dad picked me." Frank bickered. "Dad? Didn't you pick me?"

"Father." Hal interrupted. "You did say I was the one, did you not?"

"Hold it." Dean lifted his hand in frustration. "Joe has no say so. Ellen's father or not. And even if he did, it only goes to figure he would pick one of his sons. Lord knows only a Slagel and the testosterone, demented brutality minds would have the ability to watch Ellen."

With offense, Hal turned to Dean. "Excuse me, Dean. I hope to God you are not insulting our father."

"Oh." Frank grumbled. "You better not be saying anything about our father. Or us. There is nothing wrong with either me or Hal going. And . . ." Frank nodded. "We are the best choice to go. Physically, mentally, and instinctively."

Closed mouth, Hal nodded impressed "Wonderful word usage Frank."

Frank sniffed. "Thanks."

Dean groaned. "Oh, give me a break."

Jess who had been quiet, finally spoke up. "Sorry Dean, that break can not be going with Ellen for a month."

"Uh, Jess?" Dean smiled. "Fuck you. She's my wife. I go."

Richie shook his head. "I know what your problem ism Dean. You're worried about whoever goes with her, stealing her from you. That's what it is. They save her, we all know Ellen's hero complex. If it comes down to choosing between two of us. Choose between me and Jess. I'm her brother, Jess is gay." Richie tossed up a hand. "There. Safety."

Elliott, perturbed, softly let his voice ring out. "I believe I have the

honor, even though I am unrelated to Ellen, and a straight man . . .” Paying no attention to Frank’s mumbling, ‘well that hasn’t been established yet’, Elliott went on with his thought. “You Dr. Hayes, are needed. I have the skills. You asked me. I would like very much to take you up on that offer.”

Hal rolled his eyes and spoke with a complaining tone, “Elliott. Stay out of this. You are not an option.”

“Neither are you, Captain.” Elliott stated.

“I’m more an option than you.” Hal argued.

“But not more than me.” Frank said.

“Or me!” Dean yelled.

“Sweet Jesus, can we resolve this!”

Andrea’s exclamation was the runner’s bell, and like horses being released from the starter’s gate, off went the vocal blasting of all seven men in loud meshed together yelling.

The sound of their voices faded, as Ellen slipped from the room unnoticed. Was it anymore a matter of her well being, or had it become an ego battle. Whatever the reason, they were so caught up, they never noticed their ‘cause’ had left their presence.

Smiling with an exhale, Ellen partially closed the bedroom door, shut out their voices and leaned against the wall for a moment.

Up from the floor where she sat playing cards with Joey and Billy, Alexandra peered to Ellen. “Mommy? Why are they all in there fighting.”

Billy laid down a card. “It’s a macho thing. Perhaps mom, if you suggested they all go outside and fight physically about it, they’d resolve it sooner.”

With a smile, and a wink, Ellen walked to the sitting circle,. “I think Pap may end up suggesting that.” she joined them on the floor. “It’s peaceful in here.”

Billy released a ‘hmpf’. “now it is. A minute ago we were screaming. Which you would have never heard.” Billy pointed to the door. “Joey was cheating.”

“Frank said.” Joey defended. ‘He said it was all right when playing with a mini Dean to stick a good card in your sleeve and hide it.’

Ellen tilted her head some. “Billy, you do know, your father and Frank established that rule.”

“Yes, Mother I do.” Billy replied. “I know it is all right to sneak a card in his sleeve. And the rule is as long as I don’t see it, right? But you must explain to him, that if he is going to sneak a card in his sleeve to hide, he

shouldn't be wearing short sleeves."

Alexandra grumbled in annoyance "I wish they would just stop fighting and pway. God! Men."

Ellen chuckled in agreement. "Men."

"What are they fighting about?" Alexandra asked. "You didn't say."

"Well." Ellen's fingers played with the cards as she spoke. "You know how Mommy has to go for a month to that new town to set up the new hospital. There are no phones there, or as good of security. So they're worried. All of them want to go with me, and now they're all screaming about it." She growled. "It's frustrating."

"I know." Alexandra tossed a card and picked one up. "I had the same problem. God! Men."

Billy snickered a scoff. "How do you know what Mom is going through."

"I was there." Alexandra motioned her head for Joey to take his card. "Same thing."

Billy rolled his eyes.

Ellen smiled peacefully. "Tell me, Alex. What are you talking about."

"Well." Alexandra set down her cards, when she saw Joey reach to peek, she smacked his hands, lifted the five cards and stuck them in her shirt. "Well, one time, Josephine made me that really big, double chip cookie. You know the kind she makes for girls."

Billy bobbed his head. "Yeah, I call them the Hansel and Greta cookies. She's gonna stick you in the oven next Alex."

Alexandra ignored him. "Anyhow. I had this cookie, and I said I was gonna share it with someone at lunch time. Well, everyone kept saying *they* were the one I was sharing with. Everyone thought they were the one. They were fighting and fighting, and saying wait till lunch. Then . . ." She shrugged her little shoulders. "I just said fuck em, and ate the cookie myself before lunch."

"God." Billy complained. "Not only is she vulgar, but pointless."

Slowly, almost in a daze, Ellen stood up. She spoke as if in the fog. "No, Billy, She isn't pointless. Quite . . quite the opposite." After a hesitation, Ellen closed and locked the bedroom door. She turned with a peacefulness to her and looked down to the children. "We need to talk, guys."

^^^

A quiet moment was what Ellen needed to steal. And she got it, later on that evening, with Joe. They stood, the outside air cold but unnoticed. His hand laid upon her cheek as he stood so close to her.

“Is it the right decision, Joe?” Ellen asked.

“I believe it is the best decision.”

“How much . . . how much trouble is it going to cause?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.” He winked.

“All they kept on doing was yelling. Arguing. Who is going with me.” Ellen closed her eyes. “I couldn’t take it.”

“And I don’t blame you one bit for that.”

“The truth is, Joe, from the moment I knew I was leaving. If it couldn’t be you, it had to be him. I just knew he would be the one I picked. In my mind, there was no argument, he was the one.”

“And I have to give you my truth, in my mind and heart I hoped he’d be the one.”

Ellen smiled and laid her face more into the grip of Joe’s palm. “That you for your support.”

“Support hell. Ellen, this is a wise decision. And when they all think about it, they’ll see that. I won’t let anyone talk shit about it. You are nipping it in the butt. And that is taking control.” Joe winked.

“Just answer me this. Everything . . . everything is gonna be fine, right?”

“Everything is gonna be fine. I feel it.” Joe stepped into her. “I feel it.” and Joe did. Inside of him he felt Ellen was going to be just fine, and at that moment, his arms extended into an embrace, because he needed to feel something else one more time . . . Ellen.