

# THE GAME

Jacqueline Druga-Johnston

OUSTED

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

December 22<sup>nd</sup>

The bottom of the tin cup clanked against the mess hall table at the same time Hal sloppily and with exhaustion, fluttered out his cigarette smoke. Barely sun up, he sat alone with Elliott and Former society Military man, Tim Doyle.

Tim raised an eyebrow along with the corner of his mouth in a quirkiness. "Are you all right with doing this now, Captain?"

"Uh . . ." Hal rubbed his eyes. "Yes, to me nothing better than coffee and a strategy meeting to get the adrenaline pumping. I just haven't been to bed yet. Myself, or Elliott."

"Did I miss something last night?" Tim asked. "I was working dispatch, we picked nothing up from Bowman or Beginnings, and I know for a fact New Jordan was quiet."

"No." Hal breathed out. "The reason we were up all night was more of a personal nature."

Elliott's eyes widened.

Tim leaned back. "Perhaps I shouldn't ask."

It was a peep, just a small one in his morning grogginess when he realized the implication Hal had inadvertently made. "No, Tim, not that type of personal nature." Elliott said.

"Oh." Tim nodded.

Hal, in annoyance peered up from his coffee. "Elliott? Did you just . . . scream over my misconstrued words?"

"Well, Captain, Sgt. Doyle could have believed . . ."

"We were gay lovers?" Hal asked.

"Yes." Elliott answered.

"Good God, Elliott." Hal set down his cup. "One would think you

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should be honored to have me as your gay lover.”

“And why is that, Captain?” Elliott asked.

Hal smiled. “Because I’m hot.”

Tim chuckled.

Elliott huffed in annoyance.

“Anyhow . . .” Hal pulled the map forward. “Before we continue with this. Tim, how many last month did you say?”

“Four thousand.” Tim replied. “Twenty percent women. Of those twenty percent. Half went north to breeding, and the rest went down south to accommodate and live in civility with the industrial ranks.”

“Four thousand in one month?” Hal questioned as he leaned back. “How is that possible.”

Tim lifted his hands in a motion of a guess. “We don’t pick half of them up. They find us now. Civilization is building, out of the woodwork they come.”

“Why can’t we be as fortunate.” Hal shook his head.

Elliott interjected. “We don’t make enough noise. The society, according to Tim, is here, there, everywhere. They have places in the north, they have them in the south. All across the east.” Elliott shrugged. “Probably word of mouth.”

Hal stared for a moment. “Thank you very much for sharing your Dr. Suess rendition of why the society builds and we don’t.”

“OK.” Tim whistled. “Maybe we should save this for after lunch.”

“I can’t.” Hal said. “I have the tri community rounds to make. Our apologies, Tim, for being so indignant. Like I said, we were dealing with a family situation, and were dealing with it all night. But, I’ll slip into a better state of mind. Now tell me about front lines.”

“All right.” Tim’s hand smoothed across the map. “After the UWA took out what small sites we had in North Dakota and Kansas a few months ago, it was pretty evident you were dividing up the country. I was ordered to ship out and set up new front lines. Small camps built and posted fifty miles from what we thought was the divided line.”

“How did your estimate of our lines fair?” Hal asked.

“Pretty well.” Tim answered. “Our positioning of camps goes straight down. They are more watch camps, positioned ‘just incase’. They are defensive, not offensive. So say the UWA hit one, they are positioned to be able to a call upon each other with ease, and be back up.”

“So they have no plans to move across the line and push it back?” Hal asked.

“Not that I am aware.”

“Tell me.” Elliott added. “If you knew of your defection, why did you do this so strongly. I mean, looking at what you mapped for us. Tim, this is a straight line down the continental US. Fifty camps, a manpower of what did you say, close to three thousand?”

“And what was it you expected me to do?” Tim asked. “Call question to myself when I didn’t do my job? I did my job, and I did yours.” He saw their curious looks. “Yes, you have fifty camps and a manpower of three thousand. But those are three thousand of the societies worst soldiers, weakest minds. Leadership in the camps are faulty because the camps are guided by CME’s, or programmed SUTs as you call them. Easily removed. If I had to set up camps, I worked damn hard on who I would send. Soldiers who would frighten easily, and or defect. We need defectors whether anyone likes it or not. We’re a pimple on the ass of the society right now as far as size goes. As you Sgt, Ryder pointed out, as of now, we aren’t making noise. Who is going to come to us. The only way we are going to get enough manpower to bring down the Society, is to gather forces as we go along.”

Almost in a daze Hal spoke up. “Building patriotic momentum.”

Tim smiled slightly. “Yes. Yes, that would be it. You fight like our forefathers, let’s gather the people, like our forefathers.”

“So death . . .” Hal held up a finger. “Is not a goal. A strong body count is not what we seek. We will hit them hard, cause a retreat of such, take the land, and forge ahead.”

“The defectors will come.” Elliott said. “I believe that. It’s a cause, and I don’t believe the heart and dedication of the men are to the society.”

“It isn’t.” Tim added. “They want to just live their lives. That’s all. I can tell you most of these men do not want to be soldiers, and they aren’t given much of a choice.”

“So if we promise the rainbow at the end of fight . . .” Hal said. “The rainbow being the return of freedom, The thought of being a soldier won’t be so bad, because it no longer will be the only way of life, it will be a means to a better life.”

“We can start.” Tim continued. “Start by setting up similar sites on our sides of the lines, only they are offensive lines. They will be the first movers. We would have to start intensive training, Captain. We need to pick camp leaders, we need to prepare to send these men out. Especially if we want to do the first push by spring.”

“And I do.” Hal said. “I think it would be beautiful, to hit the camps,

many simultaneously hit them hard, cause camp damage, minimal loss of lives, and walk away with not only the movement of the front line east, but seventy percent of those three thousand men.”

“If I may?” Elliott raised his hand. “I’d like to inject a little realism into this rush to take the country back. I am for it. One hundred percent. I love the idea of gaining men and land as opposed to killing men, and destroying the land. But . . . And there is a but.”

Hal rolled his eyes. “I hate you. Go on.”

Elliott nodded. “What’s to say after we have hit all these camps in, what a week, what’s to say the society doesn’t just say ‘fuck us,’ and blow us up.”

Hal winced. “Elliott, sometimes it baffles me as to why you are my right hand man. Christ, if we hit them that hard, they will know we mean business. And, if we take their men, and they know this, they then know we are now larger in numbers and not as easily . . . *blown* up. Most importantly, the war we will rage is one fought before. I will strive for War rules. Perhaps a meeting between leaders. Just like it used to be. There are very few people left. With the strive of the society to increase population numbers so drastically, I would think, a massive loss to those numbers is not what they want.”

“He’s right.” Tim said. “The society needs numbers. They need people. I told you of their overseas intentions. Even though they are large, they can’t afford the loss.”

“War rules?” Elliott asked going back some to what Hal had said. “War rules? A meeting between Joe and George. Captain, can that happen.”

“Yes.” Hal said with certainty. “I believe it can, and will happen after we move the lines. And we will move those lines. George will want to talk.”

“Your father still has no idea we are planning this.” Elliott stated.

“Oh, so what.” Hal snapped. “God, Elliott, what do you think, he’ll argue the point. He knows what the UWA was founded on. He also knows just because we joined up with Beginnings that we didn’t drop our cause. He knows this. We’re perfecting it, so upon presentation to him, there are no questions. It . . . It just might take some convincing to get him to agree to this move so soon.”

Tim shrugged. “Maybe not. Not if the society pulls something.”

“And *that*, my new friend . . .” Hal lifted a finger. “Is a viable point. It is too calm. A calm before the storm. The society has been too quiet. I predict, that before long, that *something* will happen. What that is, I haven’t a clue. But I’m certain it will be the launch we need.” Hal lifted his cup.. “Ah

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. . the smell of confrontation.” He smiled. “You have to admit, it rushes you as much as a good cup of coffee.”

^^^

Ellen drew in the steam of the morning brew, hard and strong before she took a sip. In fact, she sipped that coffee prior to even sitting down at the kitchen table.

Exhaling the enjoyment of her first caffeine intake, Ellen settled down into the chair. Placing the mug on the table, she heard the clink of it as her necklace swung out in her movement hitting against the cup.

Reaching down for it, Ellen grasped the quarter size gold medal, and she smiled.

A simple sacred Heart medal, the edges kind of dull. She never really thought much of that medal until that moment. It was Joe’s. And not only did it mean the world to her that he had given it to her the night before, it meant even more because she knew how much Joe valued that medal.

Joe didn’t value that medal because it cost a lot, nor did he place value on it for sentimental reasons. Joe loved that medal because that was his treasure.

He had found it. And Ellen recalled Joe’s reaction to finding that medal walking through the airport. Such a fuss he made about.

*‘Check this out.’ Joe had told them. ‘You see what I found? Goddamn is this thing heavy. Bet me it’s worth a fortune. A good piece of jewelry. Hub? Hub? You know you’re in for some good luck when you find Jesus on the floor of an airport.’*

It was funny to Ellen, one would have thought Joe hit the lottery. He pulled out that medal all the time so proud of the fact that he happened upon something worth so much. But it also baffled her as well. Joe claimed it was never the monetary value, it was the religious aspect of the medal that made it special. Yet, he never made an attempt to place a ‘lost and found’ ad, because if someone claimed that Jesus medal, they were out of luck, he wasn’t giving it back.

Amidst that memory, Ellen gripped that medal so hard, when she widened her fingers to look at it laying in her hand, she saw the indentation.

*‘Joe, you should let me have that medal.’ Ellen recalled her young self saying.*

*‘I should, should I? And why is that?’*

*‘Well, really, even though I’m not blood, I am like your only daughter, and you should let me have that.’*

*‘What? You think I’ an idiot. Ellen, you’ll hock it.’*

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*"Oh, Joe, I would not."*

*"Tell you what." He said. "It's yours when I die."*

*"When I die."*

Die.

Ellen's eyes closed and she gripped that medal again and immediately she heard, in her mind and memory, Frank's voice from many years ago. Through her closed eyes, she could see his back, still hear his deep voice, cracking with emotions, so hard to speak as he held the phone in their apartment . . .

*"Dad." Frank's word sung out. "Dad. I . . . I don't know what to do. There's no money. And she has to take a bus. I don't want her to take a bus. I don't know what to say a . . . I can't calm down. Dad, Ellen's . . . Ellen's father just died." After a few nods, and a broken up 'thanks' Frank laid down the phone, and slowly turned around. "He said hold tight. He's on his way. He'll drive you home to Michigan."*

*"But Frank, he can't do that. Tell him no, I'll take the bus. He has to drive almost five hours to get here, then another . . ."*

*"El." Frank stopped her. "He won't listen. He wants to do this. You know him. That's just my Dad."*

Joe.

There was something about Joe.

They always got along. Maybe because he liked her, and her and Frank were such good friends, Joe didn't just accept her, he took Ellen into his family. He never left her out of anything. Treated her to dinner when he came up, brought her on those spur of the moment family outings. He called constantly to ask how school was. He always remembered when she had an exam. And if she even had a minor cold, a day didn't go by when he didn't call to see how she was. Always.

It baffled Ellen how Joe did it. How one person was so unselfish. How he remembered every little detail, about all of his sons and her. How one man could have so much love, stay so in-depth with his children's lives and problems, plus hold down a full time job.

If Ellen was to pin point a vital turning point in her relationship with Joe, her father's death would have been it. He flew to her aid so fast, not only drive her but stayed the entire time in Michigan. There was no hesitation to be there, no delay, and the moment he rushed through her apartment door to take her home, Joe achieved hero status in Ellen's eyes. A status he had never lost. Why would he. He was Joe.

^^^

Where was Joe's mind, drifting off perhaps in search of one single memory. One to really take his mind away. But in doing so he was flooded with a tidal wave, and there were so many memories to choose from, he was drowning in a reminiscent vat.

Andrea's gentle smile on her face too close, snapped him out.

"Sorry, what was that?"

"You're tired." She told him.

"Long night." Joe responded.

"That isn't gonna help you today."

"I know." Joe said.

"Try to rest your eyes. Take advantage right now."

"I will."

Andrea laid her hand on his face. "If you're up to it, and not too tired, Trish's baby gets christened this afternoon. Fr. O'Brien is coming in for it."

"Will he be sober?"

"Oh, Joe." Andrea scolded.

"The man's a drunk, Andrea, I speak the truth."

"He's a man of the cloth."

"And that makes it all right?"

"The good Lord forgives some things when one works in his name."

Joe grumbled.

"Be good." She winked and walked to the door. "And remember, you're the best futomara a woman can have."

"Thanks."

"And also . . . the christening." Andrea's words trailed as she left.

"Christening." Joe sunk back into the reclining chair and closed his eyes. Immediately in his mind he repeated the word, only this time on an 'up' with a smile. "Christening."

Found. The memory he needed to pass some time.

The Christening. Taylor's Christening . . .

The small female style baby shriek was enough to pierce any eardrum. One eye closed with a horrible facial cringe, Joe had enough. "Christ, it's a goddamn snap."

"This outfit is impossible.." Ellen fussed over little Taylor as she laid on Ellen's bed. "she won't hold still."

"She's a baby."

"But, Joe . . ."



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“Watch out.” Joe moved Ellen aside, and grabbed on to Taylor to fix the snap on the back of the dress.

“Joe, I . . .” Ellen cringed as she watched Joe flip the baby over. “Oh, my God, do you have to be so rough.”

“She isn’t gonna break, for crying out loud. And you have to take control. Besides it’s better than twisting her about to try to do this.” He turned the baby back over and laid her on her back. “There. Now see. She’s not fussing. Go on.”

“Thanks.” Ellen resumed her position. She reached over and grabbed the perfectly knit baby sweater and gingerly played with Taylor’s tiny arms, trying to get them through the sleeves. She exhaled in frustration. “Joe, could you? She’s just so frail compared to how Josh was.”

“Watch out.” Joe took the sweater. “First of all, you don’t poke the baby’s arms through the sleeve, you bunch up the sleeve and slip it over the baby’s arm.”

“Joe.” Ellen said offended as he manipulated the sleeve. “That is a two hundred dollar sweater, should you be stretching it.”

“What!” Joe blasted. “What in God’s name is wrong with you buying a two hundred dollar sweater that a child would never wear again. And yes, I have to bunch it. See how easy her arm goes through. I hope to God, Ellen, you plan on passing this sweater to your brother’s wife for their baby.”

“No, way, why would I do that?” Ellen scoffed. “I paid . . .”

“Two hundred dollars for it, yes, I know. That is the reason. Why let a two hundred dollar sweater go to waste.”

“It isn’t.”

“What, are you gonna do. Stick it in a box.”

“Well . . . yes.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Joe moved aside. “She’s done. Now hurry up we have to get to the church. There’s no parking lot and I want to get a good spot.”

“OK. OK.” Ellen peered around. “Now where is that bonnet?”

“Bonnet?”

“Yes.”

“You’re gonna put a bonnet on this child.”

“Yeah, Joe, I paid a lot of money for that bonnet.” Ellen defended. “And that blanket.” She pointed to the wrap that laid folded perfectly.

“You spent more goddamn money on one christening outfit then entire families spend on school clothes, you know that?”

“You only get christened once.”

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"Yeah well, you only lose your virginity once too, but that doesn't mean you can't go cheap on it."

"Oh, my God. You just embarrassed me."

"Who cares. And you are not putting a bonnet and blanket over this child." Joe told her. "She's wearing a sweater."

"But. Joe."

"No but Joe. And I don't care how much money you paid for them. You aren't doing it."

"Why?"

"It's August Ellen. It's almost a hundred degrees out there. You'll give the damn infant a heat stroke. Now just straighten her and let's move."

"OK." Totally frustrated, Ellen did what Joe requested. "But I bet she get's totally wrinkled on the way to the church."

The church. And that was another part of that memory . . .

"What, Joe, what?" Ellen said in the back pew of the church waiting for everyone to show up. "What did I do now? I straightened her. Did I do her diaper wrong. What? Why are you staring at her like that?"

"First off lose the goddamn tone, we're in God's house."

"Sorry."

"Secondly. Where in the hell did she get the blonde curly hair from?"

"What?" Ellen asked shocked.

"The hair. Something is not right. This child has extremely blonde curly hair. Pete's hair is dark."

"Mine's blonde."

"It's from a bottle, Ellen. It doesn't slip into your genes." Joe stared more at the baby.

"Joe, what are you implying?"

"I'm just implying that baby's hair is a little too blonde to realistically be genetically linked to Pete."

"That's so wrong. And don't let Pete hear you say that when he gets here."

"Like I give a rats ass about Pete. And where the hell is he anyhow?"

"He's at the hall."

"Hmm." Joe looked again to Taylor. "There's just something familiar about . . ." The bang of the church doors through the vestibule carried into the empty church.

Ellen spun in the pew and smiled. "Robbie."

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“Robbie.” Joe nodded, and shifted his eyes to the baby.

“Joe!” Ellen scolded.

“What!”

“I see that look in your eye. Robbie has blonde hair.”

“Yes, he does. But Robbie shoots blanks. However . . .” Joe watched the church doors open again. “He doesn’t.”

Ellen looked. “Hal?”

Robbie stepped closer. “What about Hal?”

“Joe thinks Taylor is Hal’s.” Ellen said.

Robbie snickered. “She does have curly blonde hair. I’d claim her as mine, but I shoot blanks.”

“Both of you.” Ellen shook her head. “I can’t believe you’d insinuate I’d cheat with Hal.”

After blessing with holy water and cordially genuflecting in a good Catholic manner, Hal approached the pew. “Why is the word cheat and Hal even being used in the same sentence?”

Ellen answered. “Because Joe said I cheated on Pete with you and Taylor’s your daughter.”

Robbie pointed. “You were around a lot last year.”

“And . . .” Joe added. “Look at her hair.”

“Good God, both of you ought to be ashamed of yourself. We’re in God’s house.”

“Christ. Hal.” Joe winced. “Lose the Pius image.”

“Pius?” Hal questioned. “Is it Pius to want to show respect in church?”

“Yes.” Robbie answered.

“Listen to you.” Hal snickered.

“What?”

“Boys.” Joe grumbled.

“You should have come to my defense.” Hal stated. “Instead of instigating.”

“I came to your defense, Hal.” Ellen said.

“Thank you.” Hal smiled.

“Christ.” Joe cringed.

“See.” Robbie smiled. “Love talk. I knew it.”

“Robbie.” Hal barked in offense. “She is a married woman. If you didn’t want to defend me, you should have at least defended her while I was parking the rental. Which . . . by the way is an awesome red car. Ellen, you would love it.”

Robbie snickered. "See."

"Christ." Joe complained.

"Dad, must you use the Lord's name in Vain in his house?"

"Yes, Hal, I must." Joe came back.

"You know . . ." Ellen lifted her hand. "This is my child's Christening. Can we not have a family event especially in a church, without fighting or getting loud and obscene?"

From the doors, the loudest of bangs yet rang out, but it paled to the level of the deep voice that blasted into the church. "Who the fuck's red car is that out there hogging up two fuckin spaces?"

After turning to see Frank just at the end of the aisle, at the same time, Joe, Robbie and Hal all answered Ellen's question with a unison 'no'.

Joe chuckled in the after thought of that flashback. Yes, they were at most times, loud. And probably, the Slagels were labeled heathen more times than not for the actions in church. But they were all together that day, all of them. And unlike a lot of families, where the years and miles separated them, that didn't happen with Joe's crew.

They always pulled together for events. Phone calls were never missed. And no matter how large the family grew, every July, Joe gathered them, families and all, for one huge vacation. Everyone always showed. It was a given. Sure, at times it was a fight to keep that spirit alive, intact, and the family together. But it was a fight Joe would never give up.

And as he rested on the reclining chair in the clinic, intravenous of his first treatment hooked to his arm, Joe would think of more memories. Memories that would make the time pass in yet another fight that he endured, that he believed and hoped would help keep his family together, for just a while longer.

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"Now, Frank, hold still." Dean brought the monitor patch to Frank's bare chest as he sat on an exercise bike.

Across the huge cryo lab, Frank peered. In a corner with other work out equipment, he was. "Don't pull any hairs out."

"I won't." Dean placed the patch down. "Shit." he pulled it off.

"Ow."

"Stop it."

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"Why are you so pissy?" Frank asked.

"I'm pissy because I wanted to sleep in today. I didn't expect to have Alex wake me up."

"Where was El?"

Dean shrugged. "Alex said she left early."

"Probably new Bowman.."

"Probably." Dean correctly placed the monitor. "I haven't see her. She must have really left early. Did you see her when you got up this morning?"

"I didn't get up this morning, remember?" Frank said. "Right after we had our pow wow, I had to position myself at the field gate."

Dean winced as he stepped back. "Killer babies were trying to dig in."

"Yeah, but they stopped by dawn. I fed them and played music."

"Journey?" Dean asked.

"Of course."

"Did you sing, too Frank?"

Frank smiled. "Of course."

"All right. I want to ask some questions, routine, you know, but before I do . . ." Dean moved to the machines that would read Frank's results. "Let me just see if I get a reading." He flipped a switch.

A loud vocal buzzing rang out followed by Frank's scream in his mock execution.

"God!" Dean shook his head. "Stop that."

Frank laughed.

"Works." Dean flipped off the switch.

"Are we done?"

"No, we aren't done." Dean snapped. "I have some questions to ask you for my research." He lifted a clipboard and walked back to Frank. "Quit reading my mind."

"I'm not."

"You are too, or at least trying." Dean said. "You get this strained look on your face when you do."

Frank quickly went poker faced, only for a second, then he smiled.

"All right . . ."

"Dean? How come were down in the cryo lab for this? I mean, I feel like one of your lab experiment animals."

"Well, actually, you are, if you think about it."

Frank paused to think. "Yeah, you're right."

From his clipboard, Dean raised his eyes. "Just a few behavioral changes questions. Then we'll proceed with the physical stuff."

“Shoot.”

“OK,” Dean said as he pulled forth a stool. “How do you feel physically? Any aches, pains?”

“Nope.” Frank shook his head. “Only when I land wrong.”

“Now your speed in running has increased, is that a conscious thing.”

Frank blinked. “You mean am I sleeping when I do it.”

“No, I . . .”

“Because Dean, have you ever tried to run in a dream, it’s impossible. Your legs just feel so heavy, they . . .”

“No, Frank.” Dean interrupted. “Are you trying to run fast?”

“I always try to run fast.”

“I mean, are you trying normally, or are you intentionally increasing . . .” Dean halted when he saw the confusion on Frank’s face. “Forget it. Next question. Eating habits? Still craving roughage?”

“I love carrots.”

“I’ll put that down as a yes.” Dean made a note. “Now what about sexual urges.”

“Towards?”

“Just urges, have they changed?” Dean asked.

“No I still prefer women.”

“No, Frank.” Dean winced. “Have they increased or decreased?”

“Has what increased or decreased?”

“Your sexual urges!” Dean yelled.

“Toward?!” Frank blasted back.

“Forget it!” Dean screamed frustrated.

“Fuck, Dean, yell, why don’t you. They’re your fuckin questions. But . . .”

Dean whined, covering his eyes. “Oh, God. But what?”

“You don’t think if by chance I impregnate El, we’ll have a liter, do you?”

Slowly Dean peered at him, then just stared. After a moment, calmly he shook his head. “No, Frank. I don’t think you’ll have a liter.”

“Good, because that would be a lot to pop out for her,. Let alone carry. Speaking of carrying.”

Wanting to just cry, ‘no-no-no, what now?’ Dean retrained. “Yes?”

“You don’t think if something should happen to me, like for example I die. You don’t think people are gonna fight over my feet and want to chop them off, do you?”

“What?” Dean said flabbergasted. “Why in God’s name would people

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want to chop off your feet?”

“To put them on a keychain and carry them around for good luck.”

“They might, Frank.”

“Awfully big key chain.”

“Yes. Next . . .” Dean looked down his list. “Bowel movements. Any changes?”

“Behavioral changes?” Frank asked.

“No, Frank.” Dean rubbed his brow. “Changes. Are you still going the same?”

“Of course, Dean,. Why?” Frank seriously questioned. “Are you expecting me to start to stand up when I go?”

“No, Frank, I . . .”

“Am I gonna start to bend over?”

“Frank . . .”

“Lift my leg?”

“Frank . . .”

“Uh!” Frank screamed.

“What!”

“Fuck!” Frank shifted his eyes around then leaned into Dean with a whisper. “I’m not gonna start shooting pellets am I?”

Slam, went the clipboard, and Dean stood up.

“What?” Frank lifted his hands dumbfounded.

“Questions over.” Dean turned on the monitor, ran his fingers through his hair, and one hand on hip, looked at Frank. “Just . . . peddle.”

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“Not a trace.” Bertha laid down a map before George.

“What was the circumference you ran.”

“Logical one hundred.” Bertha answered.

“Well, they didn’t fly out. And no one spotted them leaving.”

“True, Sir, interviews with everyone stated they saw no one drive out spotting eight of our men and ‘It’.”

“And the footprints were there, indicating they walked.” George rubbed his head.

“Then the footprints disappeared.”

George tossed up his hands. “Well they didn’t spread their wings and fly. How in the hell did they just disappear.”

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"Perhaps they had planted a means of transportation. This plan could have dated back to Sgt. Doyle."

George nodded. "Excellent point you . . ." His eyes shifted to the right of Bertha. "Well, it's about goddamn time you got back."

Steward Lange sporting an even and golden brown tan stepped into the office. "Excuse me?"

"It's about time you returned."

Steward chuckled. "President Hadly you authorized my vacation."

"You had have gotten me on a busy day."

"No." Steward shook his head and stepped closer. "I told you I had to meet with James down south and asked if you minded my staying longer to take a break and see Disney World again."

Slowly George raised his eyes. "I thought you were being sarcastic."

"No, Disney World is up and running."

"Christ Almighty." George snapped. "Disney World. Disney world is up and running? Who the hell did that?"

"James." Steward answered.

"Don't even tell me there's a giant Mouse running around."

"No." Steward laughed. "And honestly, it isn't in full capacity. I mean, yes, Space mountain was great, but there is only so many times you can go on 'It's a Small World'."

"Oh, you poor thing." George said with sarcasm. "Well, seeing how you're rested and tan. Now your ass can get back to work on a major problem we encountered last night."

"Which is?" Steward stepped even closer.

"It escaped with eight of our men."

Steward's eyes widened. "Oh my God. Is It heading to Beginnings?"

Bertha answered that. "That is what the note said. Only, we have a huge country, and hit a hundred mile circumference but have yet to find them. We believe they left on foot and took off in predetermined transportation that could have dated back to Sgt. Doyle."

Steward peered at the map. "So you only took this circumference?"

"Yes." Bertha answered. "And we plan to head east."

"No." Steward shook his head. "Go north. Actually . . ." Steward pulled the map. "Go North East."

Curiously, George looked up from behind the desk. "Why?"

"Well, going on your theory that perhaps Sgt. Doyle aided in this plan, then Sgt. Doyle would have mapped out their route. We're pretty much covered straight across the east. Beginnings is two hundred miles from the



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Canadian border. My guess, if Doyle gave them directions, they headed North East straight to the Canadian Border. That is our weak point. We've barely touched the north. My guess they probably will get fuel and get aid from that small town in North east Ohio that's been giving us problems, then they'll head straight to Canada, go across and come down."

George nodded. "And what do you expect. Hit that small town."

"No. It's not worth the man power. That guy who heads that town will pretty much wipe out anything less than a full scale attack. Don't lose the men. Send an immediate team straight past that town, you should catch them going north."

"Stew." George smiled and leaned back. "Sun tan and all, it's good to have you back."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was an odd smell combination to Robbie as he moved slowly to the kitchen. Cucumbers and coffee. The coffee he needed, The cucumbers he wondered about.

Clearing his throat, while running his fingers through his hair, Robbie released a groggy, 'hey' to Ellen who stood at the kitchen counter.

"Hey." She smiled and stopped cutting.

"Cucumber salad?" Robbie asked, then reached around her snatching one up.

"Enjoy them while they last." Ellen grabbed a cup and poured Robbie some coffee.

"El? Why didn't you wake me? It's dark out."

"One . . ." she handed him the cup. "You were up all night. Plus, all day you were learning and watching the new tracking system. You didn't lay down until after two. You were tired. Why shouldn't I let you sleep, things are quiet."

"Yeah." Robbie sipped the coffee, set it down, then grabbed his pack of cigarettes that were still laying on the table. "I didn't tell you something last night." He lit a cigarette and exhaled the smoke. "I didn't thank you."

"Thank me?" Ellen asked. "For?"

"For picking me to be the one to go with you."

"Robbie, there was never a doubt in my mind that it wouldn't be you."

"See. I find that hard to believe."

"Why?"

"Because, El, come on." He gave a motion of his head to his missing arm. "I'm not a hundred percent effective when it comes to protecting you."

"You're right." Ellen nodded. "You aren't a hundred percent effective when it comes to protecting me. You're a Slagel. You're Robbie. You're at two hundred percent effectiveness."

Robbie snickered with a shake of his head. "If I were Hal, I'd do that fake humble blush thing he does."

"And if you were Frank . . ." Ellen shrugged. "You'd say." She deepened her voice. "I am." She took in Robbie's smile. "Oh!" She said loudly with a snap of her finger.

"What?" Robbie said surprised.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

"Guess what I started while you were sleeping?"

"Trouble."

"Ha-ha-ha. But . . . probably. This way." She led him into the diningroom. "Look." she lifted a tablet.

"What's this?"

"Notes for my book I'm gonna write during the ousting.. It's an exposé. Danny wants me to write some really good dirt on . . ."

Robbie laughed. "My Dad?"

"Yeah, but. Here's the problem. I was making a list of bad things Joe has done since he was in Beginnings. And I think it's pretty lame. Next page, check it out."

Robbie flipped the page, he laughed again. "El, lame is an understatement. This lists sucks."

"Hey."

"He took three paperclips from the clinic when he only asked for one?" Robbie shook his head. "He tracked mud on your carpet when he knew he shoes were dirty. El?"

"Well, what am I supposed to do. Joe's not a bad person."

"You can make things up."

"Yeah." Ellen smiled brightly. "Will you help?"

"Sure. It'll be fun. Our project." The smiled dropped from Robbie's face. "El, in all seriousness. What do you think . . . what do you think Frank and Dean's reaction is right now about you choosing me."

"Right now?" Ellen shrugged then gave a nonchalant attitude. "Fine. Yes, I believe right now, they are fine with it. I mean, come on. Really. It's been half the night, and all day. It's evening now. By now, by now . . ." Ellen nodded. "They should be pretty settled down and accepting of the fact that you and I are no longer in Beginnings."

^^^

"I'm really getting worried now, Frank." Dean, hands in pockets walked with Frank across the yard to Joe's. "Where could she be?"

"I don't know, Dean. I'd be more worried, But Hal had this shitty look on his face."

"Maybe he's hiding her in New Bowman or she's with Ryder."

"I visually tore that town apart. I switched on my senses. I couldn't find her."

"Did you . . ." Dean stopped on the step to Joe's door. "Did you try to

Druga-Johnston/The Game

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read Hal's mind?"

Frank huffed. "I tried. He blocked me."

"Shit."

"Let's ask my dad." After one knock, Frank opened up his father's door. "Dad?"

"Right here." Joe called from the livingroom.

Frank walked in, waited for Dean then shut the door.

"Well." Joe lowered the book he read. "Something tells me I know why you two are here."

Dean stepped forward. "How are you feeling?"

Joe nodded. "Good. What's up?" He asked as he stood.

Seeing Dean ready to speak, Frank jumped ahead. "Dad? Do you know where Ellen is?"

Letting out a nodding, 'ah', Joe placed his hands in his pockets, walked around the coffee table and to the dining area. He grabbed his fake cigarette off the table, flicked his lighter, and went through the motions of lighting a cigarette.

"So do you?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

"Joe?" Dean requested. "Tell us where she is. Is she in new Bowman?"

"Nope."

"Beginnings?" Dean guessed.

"Bear with me for a second." Joe lifted his 'cigarette holding' hand to Frank and Dean. He chuckled once, shook his head, rubbed his brow then brought his hand out in a point. "An entire day. One entire goddamn day she has been gone, and now, just now you two morons are wondering where she is!"

"Dad!" Frank blasted. "We aren't fuckin around."

"Neither am I Frank!" Joe yelled.

"Where is she!" Frank screamed louder.

"Gone! Out of Beginnings." Joe's vocal level was hard. "The sentence has begun! Ellen has left."

^^^

A heavy exhale came from Frank as he lowered the letter Ellen had written to him.

"She wanted me to give that to you when you asked where she was," Joe told Frank, as they stood alone in the diningroom.

Druga-Johnston/The Game

"Why didn't you give it to me sooner?" Frank asked.

"You didn't ask sooner."

"That's cheating."

"How is it cheating Frank? Huh?" Joe questioned. "You should have wondered sooner where she was."

"Does Dean's letter say the same?"

Joe shrugged. "I don't know. She just wanted you to know why she did it. Why she left early. So do you?"

"Who went with her. She didn't say."

Shocked and Joe's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"She didn't go alone. Who went with her?"

It was almost a sarcastic snap the way Joe spoke. "Who do you think, Frank?"

"I don't know. That's why I'm asking."

"Jesus Christ."

"Dad."

"Guess."

"I don't wanna guess."

"I'll give you a hint. Who haven't you seen today in Beginnings?"

Frank looked up to the ceiling. "A lot of people."

"Frank! I know you haven't seen this person today! Here's another goddamn clue. He's your brother."

"Hal!" Frank blasted, "Hal left with . . . no. wait, I saw Hal."

Joe raised his eyebrow.

"Robbie?"

"Aren't you bright?"

"Robbie went with Ellen." Frank stated with a calm nod.

Curiously Joe peered upon Frank. "You look all right with this."

Through his nose he exhaled. "I am. I understand why she did it. I don't like it. But it's done. I can't get angry now about it. Will I miss her. Oh, yeah, with all my heart. But . . . I know she's safe. My brother is with her."

After a moment of eye closing relief, Joe reached out and grasped to Frank's arm. "I'm very glad to hear you say that. Now, let's just hope Dean feels the same way."

^^^

The duffel bag with a few items flung violently across Dean's bedroom

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

smashing into the dresser. In a rage Dean tried to control himself, but failed. He flew across the room, picked it up and whipped it back to the bed.

“Dean.” Frank stated his name calm.

“I’m busy.” Dean grabbed clothes.

“What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like Frank?”

“Packing.”

“No shit.”

Frank folded his arms. “And where are you going.”

“Where do you think.”

“I’m asking the fuckin questions here. Not you.”

“I’m not answering!” Dean screamed.

Frank stormed into the bedroom and stopped Dean. “I won’t let you go.”

“You can’t stop me.”

“Oh, yeah.” Frank chuckled. “You wanna bet.”

“You don’t threaten me.”

“And you don’t even know where the fuck she is!”

“You’re right.” Dean let go of the bag, brushed by Frank in a vengeance and stormed out the bedroom. “And I don’t give a shit, Joe is gonna tell me where my wife is.”

“Dean.” Frank tossed up his hands, then raged after him. Out of the front door Frank flew with a jump off the porch. He grabbed on to Dean.

“Leave me alone Frank!”

“Don’t even think you’re gonna go blast that little body into my dad’s house and give him shit. Don’t.”

“I wanna know where she is!”

“You can’t!” Frank yelled. “Didn’t you read her note!”

“I read it.”

“Then your note must have said something mine didn’t. Where is this angry shit coming from? She left. She didn’t want to start waves. She left on her own to get this thing started. She is in good safe hands. Accept that.”

“I can’t.”

“Then respect that.”

“How Frank?” Dean charged with passion. “I love her!”

“I love her too!”

“Then how . . .” Dean’s words moved his body with each point of his finger and lunge of his words. “How can you stand there! How? You say

you love her! Why don't you want to go after her!"

"You don't think I do?" Frank came back strong. "With every ounce of my being I want to say 'fuck it' and go. But we can't!" Frank's voice va-voomed its loudest yet then he dropped it to a soothing one. "We can't." He watched Dean lower his head. "You and I . . . we wanted to go. We wanted to be the one to leave these walls with her. We love her. But the truth of the matter is, you and I can't. We have kids Dean. Kids you, me, and Ellen, kids we raise together. We can't leave them. They can't lose two of their parents for a month. I have savages out there, and a community full of people to worry about. Not too mention running the security of two more towns. You have everyone's well being to take care of. We, you and me, are needed by this community."

"Ellen needs us."

"Ellen . . ." Frank swallowed. "Has my brother. She will be safe."

"Can't we just go. You and me, can't we go and just see for ourselves."

"Oh, Dean." Frank breathed out the words. "As much as I want to. We can't. A decision was made. Part of that sentence is no one from Beginnings contacts her or helps. That can lengthen her sentence. And if they abide by those rules, we can't get back in. Then this community and our kids are screwed. Ellen doesn't want that. We have one month. Let's not jeopardize anything that will make that longer."

"What if something happens to her."

"It won't. We have to trust and believe in how Hal rigged that house and Robbie's ability."

As if in a daze, Dean blinked, "Ellen is really gone from Beginnings. We aren't gonna see her?"

"But we'll get through this."

"How?" Dean slowly shook his head. "How, Frank? How? I'm so worried." Slowly he stepped back and dropped down in despair to sit on the porch. "She's my wife. This is Ellen. She's gone. What am I gonna do?" Hands brought to his mouth, with an anguish, Dean lifted his eyes. "What am I gonna do."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

December 24<sup>th</sup>

Hal couldn't figure out why Frank did it. And Elliott, who sat next to him in communications, found amusement out of the annoyance fluttering of Hal's right eye.

"Again, Frank?" Hal dreaded the thought of getting a response over the radio.

"If I call you Captain. You have to call me by my radio name." Frank was loud, almost too loud over the radio. The helicopter noise of the chopper he flew completely overshadowed by Frank's vocal ability.

"I will not do that Frank. And why in God's name do you have to scream?"

"It's loud in hear. I can't hear you."

"If you can't hear me, then why are you talking louder!" Hal raised his voice.

"If I can't hear you, you can't hear me!"

"Trust me, Frank, the entire continental US can hear that mouth! I'll talk louder, you talk normal."

"Call me by my flying name!"

"I refuse."

"Then fine." Frank spoke loud,. "I'll call you by the radio name I gave you."

"I don't give a shit. What do you have."

"Well, Small Squaw."

"You're an asshole."

"So are you."

"Frank!" Hal blasted. "What do you have. It's a goddamn radio report. Why are you making this so difficult."

"Does it bother you?" Frank asked with loud sarcasm.

"Yes."

"That's why."

With a huff, and a rub of his head, Hal looked at Elliott. "I hate him."

The grin was shitty, as Frank pulled the mouthpiece a little from his mouth, adjusted the over head controls, then gave a tilt to the helicopter.



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Just left range. Flew south, headed due west, circled around as requested. Savage camp still steady. No movement west. Numbers still look sound. They look dug in. Definitely no major movement.”

“Come back on that ‘numbers look sound?’”

“Yeah, Ryder and Robbie stated there were approximately three-fifty. I’ll go with that.”

Hal, covered the radio and peered to Elliott. “Good Lord he’s making an attempt to count beyond ten.”

“I heard that.” Frank said.

“No you did not.”

“Then I read you mind.”

Hal grunted. “Are you on your way back in.”

“Roger that. Flying twenty degrees southeast. I can make a turn and swing by Jordan.”

“No you’re good. Come on in.”

“Good. I should be hitting Beginnings in about . . .” Frank’s voice dropped to a discovery whisper. “What do we have here?”

“What’s going on Frank.”

“I have movement in the woods. Let me lift up.”

Hal listened to the chopper noise. “Elliott. He has movement. Look at that map, from his ridiculous coordinates, could he possibly be . . .”

“Very much so, captain.”

With concern, Hal grabbed the radio. “Frank. Where exactly are you at.”

“Path of forest, fifteen miles northwest . . .OK, I’ve good a good aerial. Not as good as I’d like. Three packs. All . . . Looks like eight in a pack. They distance between them. Can’t get a good visual on the leader pack. Looks as if they are moving in waves.”

“Can you see beyond the trees?”

“That’s a negative.” Frank responded. “Not yet. I’ll will in sec. Now where in the fuck are they running to in such a hurry.”

The newly constructed roof hatch slammed against the slates of the roof, and Robbie emerged. M-16 and crossbow strapped over his head, Robbie lifted himself to the roof. “I’m not seeing, El. Give me a direction.” He spoke through their ‘in house’ radio system.

“Eight. Behind us. West. Yeah, west.” Ellen said from with in the house.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Four look out crow's nests were build on that roof, and Robbie took the one that faced west. "I see them." He swung around his m-16.

"Robbie's there are two more groups. Eight in each."

"I have to deal with these." Robbie aimed. "Fire up the beams."

"Got it."

"Don't forget to shut down the house switch, there's not enough juice we'll . . ."

"Fuck!" Ellen screamed.

Robbie winced. "You blew the breaker."

"I'm sorry." she said panicked.

"Don't worry about it." Robbie had a clear scope. He shot a savage, taking him out. "Go to the basement. Reset the box." He fired again. "When it's reset, turn off the house *then* turn on the beams."

"Got it."

"Hurry."

"Robbie."

"Now!" Robbie shot again.

"Robbie. The other packs are close."

"Can't worry about them." Robbie fired taking out one more. "These ones are in." Robbie watched them emerge through the trees and past the point where the beams would have torn them to shreds. "Get that box on now, El." Robbie lifted the M-16, they darted too close and from his view. He could pick them off, but how many of the four would make it into the house. "Fuck it." Hoping that Ellen would somehow get the beams back on before the other packs made it, Robbie tossed the m-16 over his shoulder, grabbed on to the long bungee style rope, placed his foot in the loop, held on with his only hand, and leaped from the roof.

The swing was outward, and as the cold winter air pelted him in the face, Robbie grinned. He saw the leading two savages near the house, and knew his aim of motion couldn't have been more perfect if he tried.

Fast with speed the rope swung out, and with the momentum, seeing the first savage in sight, Robbie revved back his free leg and just as he arrived at the savage, he powerhoused a kick that sent the savage back a good fifteen feet.

Chuckling a 'whew' of excitement, as Robbie swung back, he repelled into the house, enough to let the rope head outward again to the second savage. And instead of a kick when he met the savage, Robbie let go and the force his moving body blasted into the savage.

Quickly he rolled out of it, jumped to a stand, jolted his body, brought

forth the M-16, and fired.

“Robbie. I found the box.”

Wondering ‘she’s only in the basement now’, Robbie turned to see the two remaining savages.

“How do I work this?” Ellen asked.

With the thought, “*remind myself to never let her help again.*” Robbie fired forward taking out the rest of that pack.

“Oh! Oh!” Ellen said excited like a child. “I think I found it. Oh. This is it. Got it.”

“Good now . . .” Robbie peered up. “Shit.”

Eight more savages raced through the woods.

“Robbie?”

“More just ran in.” Robbie raised his weapon again and just as he did, and readied to fire, he smiled big time.

“I’ll hurry. I’ll get them on.”

“No need. El.” Robbie started to fire. “Listen. Just . . . listen.”

How he did, he didn’t know, but somehow in the midst of his adrenaline filled excitement, he failed to hear the chopper. In the slight distance, not too far, joining as he shot, was the sound of rapid fire. Even in his battle, Robbie could see the glow of the shots in the woods, wide and bright, sparking out as they sailed from the close hovering helicopter overhead.

“Robbie? Is that a chopper?”

“Not just a chopper. It’s . . . it’s Frank.”

Hand retracting with a tremble from the circuit break box, Ellen lost all breath. Her stomach twitched and her eyes moved to the basement ceiling. “Frank.” She whispered out and spun around and raced to the stairs.

In her charge up, she could hear the slowing down of the shots, and just as she reached the top of the steps and flew into the kitchen, she froze. The helicopter grew faint. “No.” She shook her head. “No.” She hurried out of the kitchen.

With the lowering of Robbie’s weapon in the after silence of the mini war, Robbie peered up to the sky, recognized the sound the helicopter made, and ran to the other side of the house.

Eyes still on the sky, Robbie saw the return of the Beginnings chopper, flying low enough to whip around the wind, and allowing for

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Robbie to see the pilot was Frank. Arm raised high, Robbie smiled to his brother, and gave a thumbs up.

Helicopter tilted, Frank returned that thumbs up, and his heart dropped to his stomach when at that second he saw Ellen racing from the house.

"El." He whispered out, controlling the chopper to hover just moment. He watched her step before Robbie and look up. Her arm waved slow and high as she held the other hand to cover her eyes to shade the wind.

Tilting the helicopter more before he could fly off, Frank leaned against the pilot side window and placed his hand against the glass. "Merry Christmas, El." He whispered out as he just took that moment to stare.

Ellen's heart pounded and rang into her gut. Her body sunk when Robbie moved closer to behind her and Frank flew away. "Merry Christmas, Frank." She closed her eyes. "Merry Christmas."

"Frank." Hal called out. "Frank come in. What's going on."

Frank spoke like his mind was elsewhere. "Situation . . . Situation under control. All savages out."

"Frank . . ."

"I saw her, Hal." Frank rasped out. "I saw her."

Silence.

Hal got it together, he didn't know what else to say.. "You did good. Come on home."

"Roger that small Squaw."

"Christ." Hal winced vocally over the airways. "I told you not to call me that"

"And I told you to call me by my code flying name."

"Frank." Hal ignored the curious looks Elliott gave him.

"One time, Hal. Come on." Frank beckoned.

"No."

"Please. I'll call you Captain Slagel."

"No, Frank."

"Be a pal Hal." Frank snickered. "Do it."

"No, Frank, No!" Hal grew aggravated,. "I am not calling you Stud."

"Thank you. Over and out."

Hal shuddered and set down the radio.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Stud?” Elliott questioned. “Stud?”

“Oh go figure.” Hal shrugged.

^^^

### Lodi, Ohio

His huge frame barely fit in the beat up swivel chair in which he rocked back and forth. His boot wearing feet were propped up on the table used for taking notes, but Mick Owens preferred, if he were going to take a shift in that bank vault, where they positioned, for safety sake, the town’s communication center, he would be comfortable. And he always dressed that way. Levi jeans, old and rugged, a tee shirt, over shirt and always his shoulder harness.

“Hey, Chief.” The male voice called out with a knock on the metal door.

“Hey, Buzz.” With a slightly tainted country accent, Mick brought down his feet, and stood. He stretched some the stiffness he had gained from lingering in that chair for so long. He limped a little from exhaustion and boredom and approached Buzz. Buzz was a big man, but looked little in comparison to the mass and six foot five height of the town’s leader. “Gonna have to get Sanders up to the roof.” Mick said. “Getting a lot of static. Probably dish three again.”

“It snowed.” Buzz responded.

Mick snapped his finger. “That would do it.”

“Wanted to let you know, our men returned. The bike escort took our Society visitors safely to the UWA border.”

“Excellent. Southern Kansas?”

“You got it. They know the society is looking north for them.” Buzz stated.

“I’m glad our man picked that up.” Mick said. “That was really valuable. So when . . .”

“They’ll rest up. They have enough supplies. They want to stay low for a while. Settle. You know as well as I do, society is gonna be watching Beginnings for them. Then they’ll head on in when things look clear.”

“They know not to say anything about us, correct?”

“Not yet. It could ruin things. They know we have to be silent.”

“Good. Good.” Mick nodded. “Hey, you have a cigarette.”

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Buzz grumbled as he grabbed one from his pocket. "You're gonna have to start rolling your own, I can't be supplying your big ass."

With a 'hmm' Mick snatched the cigarette from Buzz. "All right. I'll get a hold of Major McClure and let him know what's happened. Have the second gates put up just as precaution tonight."

"Think the CS is gonna hit."

Mick shrugged. "Might. Not that they're really worrying about us now, but let's be safe." He headed back to his chair.

"Anything?" Buzz asked and pointed to the lit receiver.

"Nah. A little savage action. I want our men alerted as well. If they're back on that side of the country. They're back on this side."

"I'll take care of that satellite." Buzz stepped back. "Let me know what the major says."

"Will do."

"Hey, Chief." Buzz paused. "You have a smile on your face. Did something happen in Beginnings?"

"No not really. Just the antics between the two brothers again. That's all. It's humorous. Then again . . ." Mick settled into his monitoring chair. "It's Beginnings."

^^^

With annoyance in the main corridor of the clinic, Joe looked down to his watch, then shaking his head, he peered back up to Hal who stood next to Andrea. "What in Christ's name is taking so long. I want to get out of here, it's Christmas eve."

Hal tossed up his hands. "I haven't a clue. Frank said he's on his way."

"It's a mile from the hanger. What is taking him so long."

"Joe." Andrea scolded. "You need to calm down. You just had your treatment."

"Andrea, I'm fine. I just want to get home." Joe told her. "I have a lot to get ready for tomorrow and speaking of which . . ." Joe pointed at Hal. "Your ass better home for Christmas."

"Being that it is the first one in eight years to be with you, I wouldn't miss it for the world."

Andrea let out a whispering, 'ah.'. She smiled "Isn't he sweet, Joe."

"A pip. Now where is . . ." Joe jolted at the bang of the glass doors. "Never mind." He turned to see Frank strutting down the hall.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Hey.” Frank grinned, taking off his gloves. “Did you see the fuckin snow. Is it awesome or what? Hal want to build a snowman.”

Hal smiled, then shifted his eyes to Joe. The smile left. “Um, no Frank. That’s awfully immature.”

“Come on.” Frank beckoned. “Tonight. We’ll build one and pretend it’s Dean. We’ll blast it with snowballs.”

With another ‘ah’, Andrea grinned. “Aren’t they sweet.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Frank, forget about the snow . . .”

“Oh!” He snapped his finger. “Hal. We can make it obnoxious like we did when we were kids and give him a huge erection.”

Andrea gasped. “Sweet Jesus.”

Hal’s eyes widened in warning to Frank.

“You?” Joe looked at Frank then Hal. “You boys did that? You told me Jeff Robinson and his big brother did that. I raised hell. Got into a fight with their old man.”

Quickly Frank looked from Hal to Joe. “Um, did I say that? No, I didn’t say that. We didn’t do that. Jeff did.”

“Yeah, right.” Joe shook his head. “Forget the penis on a the snowman. Tell me, Frank.”

Frank stared for a second. “Tell you what?”

Joe lost it. “About Robbie, Ellen and the savages!”

“I saw her.” Frank said.

“Yes we know. What about the savages?” Joe asked again harder.

“Oh.” Frank bobbed his head. “Everything’s fine. He took out eight, I took out eight, then together we took out eight more.” He said nonchalantly. “Not a problem.”

“You told Hal they made it on the property.” Joe stated. “How is that possible? Did Danny’s beams fail.”

“No. I was able to pick up what they were saying over their radios. Good thing they couldn’t hear me, I was bitching.” Frank explained. “Seems, Robbie, I guess, had El help, and she blew the circuit. The beams never went up.”

Joe whistled. “Bet that won’t happen again. If the beams would have been up, do you think there would have been any problems?”

“Nah.” Frank shook his head. “Hating to say it. Hal, Danny, and Sgt. Fuckin Ryder did good with that place. I don’t think . . .” Frank stopped talking and looked around.

Watching Frank look back and forth, confused Hal. “What in God’s name are you doing?” he asked.

Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Dean.” Frank continued to look about the empty hall. “He’s not here.”

Hal’s head flung back in irritation. “You’re just noticing this now?”

“Yeah.” Frank answered.

“How did you miss him?” Hal asked.

“It’s easy Hal, he’s three feet tall.” Frank walked a few steps to the lab, looked in, “Where is he?”

Softly, and with almost too much despair and sadness, Andrea answered. “Where he’s been for the past two days.” She sighed. “Missing Ellen and refusing to leave that cryo lab. Pitiful. Sad and pitiful.”

“Ok.” Frank turned and started to walk away.

“Frank?” Joe called out. “Where are you going?”

“To see Dean.” Frank reached for the door. “I mean, more than ever he needs cheered up, right? Well, if he’s missing Ellen, think how happy he is gonna be when he hears I saw her.”

“You think that’s gonna make him happy?” Joe asked. “You really do. Dean’s down in the dumps. And you saying you saw her is gonna cheer him up?”

“Yeah.” Frank said. “He’ll be glad.”

“Uh-huh. You wanna take some salt with you to add to his wounds while you’re at it.”

“Why is he hurt?”

“Go.” Joe instructed.

After a shrug, Frank walked out.

Whistling, softly, Joe faced Hal and Andrea. “Oh, yeah, Dean’s gonna be real happy.” He grumbled. “Christ.”

^^^

Her full figure felt perfect and comforting, as Dean held her. Perhaps it was wrong to steal a hug, maybe even a bit demented, but somehow she made him think of Ellen. She liked Dean, and nuzzled against him, as his hand stroked her back. Eyes closed, REO Speedwagon playing on the cassette player, all Dean could think about was Ellen.

“Fuck, that’s sick.” Frank said as his announcement as he walked into the cryo lab. “You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

Dean didn’t turn round. He rolled his eyes. “I’m looking at her like a



doll.”

“Fuckin ugly doll.”

“She reminds me of Ellen.”

“I’m telling.”

Dean huffed. “Because, she’s Ellen’s Frank. That’s why. Now, what do you want?” Dean stood up slowly and returned Majestic to her cage.

“I came to cheer you up.”

“I doubt that. But try.”

“Guess what?” Frank grinned. “I was flying a surveillance for the savages, and guess what? I saw Ellen. Yeah.” His voice upped in enthusiasm. “She waved. I waved. I saw her, Dean. I saw her.”

Dean just stared.

“What?” Frank asked. “You don’t look happy.”

“You saw her, I didn’t. I’m suppose to be happy about that?”

“Yeah. I mean, she’s our wife. Right? OK.” Frank clapped. “Just thought I’d let you know. You can go back to molesting the rabbit and sulking.” He walked to the door. “Oh. How long you gonna be. It’s Christmas eve, there’s ton to do.”

“Not too much longer.”

“Can I feed the kids or you want me to wait.”

“Feed them.”

Frank nodded, took another step then stopped. “Dean? I have to fly that surveillance again day after Christmas. You know, I can use someone to chart out savage progress. If you want to do the flight with me, that’s fine.”

Slowly Dean looked up. “Really?”

“Yeah. Maybe we’ll see Ellen.”

“I’d like that Frank. Thanks.”

Frank gave a nod, then snapped. “One more thing. That rabbit . . . she’s fucked up. Can I have her for my pet when you’re done.”

“Um, sure. Why not.”

“Cool. Be a fuckin blast me and her in the killer baby region.” another step, another stop, Frank turned back round. “Me and her aren’t related are we?”

Dean shook his head. “No, she’s not a jackrabbit.”

“Good. See ya.”

After Frank left, Dean had to chuckle. He guessed in Frank’s own demented way, he did cheer Dean up. With a partial smile still on his face, and the song, ‘Keep on Loving You’ playing, Dean went back to Majestic’s

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cage to retrieve her for another hug.

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There was just something so fitting about that moment as Ellen stood in the kitchen pouring the wine. Like peanut butter and jelly they went so well together. The hint of the drunken slur that flowed with the Dean Martin Christmas music playing in the living room seemed to grant permission for the evening drink.

Wine glasses in hand, Ellen walked to the livingroom and stopped upon entrance. Shocked and perhaps a tad mad, she looked at Robbie. "Hey. You put up all the ornaments already."

Standing by the tree that he had brought in, Robbie retracted his hand from the last ornament he hung. "El, there were only twenty. I had them up before you opened the wine."

"You should have waited."

"Sorry." Robbie bent down. "You can do the angel honors." He lifted the limp angel.

"Nah. I have to jump to reach the top. You do it. I don't want to knock the tree over."

Robbie smiled and reached to place the angel on the tree. "There. Done. What do you think?"

Ellen handed him his wine. "Looks good. Now I can sneak out when you're sleeping and put your gift under the tree."

"Cool."

"Actually, you have a couple. I bought so many gifts. I did the rummage for Danny dollars. That was cool. And you wouldn't believe the treasures I got."

An odd smirk hit Robbie's face as he brought his wine to his lips. "What's that?"

"The rummage. Oh, when Danny and the men cleaned out New Bowman, Joe ordered him to get rid of all the junk and keep what's salvageable. Well, to Danny, you know him everything is salvageable, so he packed stuff randomly, junk, in boxes and stored them in the old tool and dye. There was so many boxes to choose from. He sold them, ten Danny dollars a box. But you couldn't peek. You had to take what you got. I bought three boxes."

"Sort of like a grab bag?"

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"That's it." Ellen sipped her wine. "You look very Christmas like with that turtle neck on."

Robbie peered to the black shirt he wore. "It's not a turtle neck. It just has a high collar."

"It's nice."

"It's warm."

"Are you mad at me?" Ellen asked.

"Huh?" Robbie was confused. "Why would I be mad?"

"About today. I was afraid to ask. You know, with the circuit box and so forth."

"Nah." Robbie grabbed the fire poker and stirred the fire. He then sat down on the floor. "It was fun."

"Glad you thought so." Ellen sat down next to him.

"Just, uh remind me not to let you help again."

"Don't worry about that. It was too much pressure. I'll just, if there's a next time, stay clear."

"Good." Robbie winked.

"It was nice seeing Frank, wasn't it?"

"Even though it's only been a couple days, yeah it was." Robbie stared into his wine.

"I'm glad you are here with me."

Up from his wine Robbie peered. "Me, too."

"It feels different being out here with you." Ellen shrugged. "Weird."

"Not in a bad way, I hope."

"No. More in an old world way." Ellen said with a tilted head.

"Speaking of old world." Robbie softened his voice. "You know. We're way out here." The corner of his mouth raised. "Fire roaring. Dean Martin singing. A little wine. You could let me take advantage of you right now."

"I could, could I? What do you have in mind."

If possible, a more ornery grin hit Robbie. Setting down his wine, he turned his body quickly with excitement.. "Scratch my back." He said like a child. "Because this shirt you like so much is driving me nuts."

Chuckling, Ellen took another drink, of her wine, placed it down, and obliged to his innocent request.

^^^

Frank's mannerisms at the diningroom table were so much like Joe's

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that perhaps Frank himself didn't even realize it. Cigarette burning in left hand, Frank sat, elbows on the table, face propped in hands while rubbing his temples simultaneously in irritation as he looked at the chessboard. "Some time today please." He hit his cigarette.

Hand hovering a piece, Billy gazed up. "Good strategy takes time."

"No, good strategy takes good war gut instinct."

"I'm gonna be eight, how good can my gut instinct be with war strategy." He shook his head, retracted his hand to think more about it.

With a loud 'uh', Frank sat back. "Some time today."

"Please." Billy held up a hand while he concentrated.

"Dean . . ." Frank shifted his eyes to Dean who sat at the table with his dinner. "Tell . . . what's wrong with your food?"

"Nothing." Dean shook his head and trailed his fork through.

"There." Billy said proudly.

Frank grinned. "You suck." with a move of his Rourke, Frank took Billy's bishop. "I'm kicking your butt."

Billy grunted. "Why are you so good at this game. It's supposed to be an intellectual game."

"It's still war." Frank winked. "Now, your move again, and some time before you're twenty."

With a huff, Billy stared at the board.

Again, Frank looked to Dean. "Why are you playing with your food?"

"I'm not." Dean responded.

"You are. Don't you like it?" Frank asked.

"No. That's not it. I don't feel like eating."

"I feel bad." Frank said. "Is it my cooking?"

"No, Frank. I told you it's not that. Why would you feel bad?"

"It's just that I worked so hard on that. It's like I'm not appreciated around here."

"I appreciate you. Trust me." Dean stated.

"Then eat or I'm . . ." Frank shut up when the tiny slap of a hand landed on the table.

"God!" Billy stood up. "Do you know how weird you two sound? Gees. I'm done."

"Hey!" Frank called out. "Where are you going?"

Billy stopped before disappearing down the hall. "Aside from the fact I can not concentrate with you two doing the demented domesticated bit, it's Christmas Eve, I want to get to bed so I'm good and asleep when Santa comes."

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Dean blinked in curiosity. "Billy? You still believe in Santa?"

"Um, yeah, Dad." Billy replied. "I'm seven, why wouldn't I?"

"It's just that it's . . . it's you." Dean answered. "And the concept of Santa . . . you know."

"No. I don't." Billy folded his arms. "The concept of Santa?" He chuckled. "Dad, please. We have microchip enhanced soldiers. Bub the lobotomized savage. Majestic the one eyed, three legged rabbit, a time machine and killer babies running around. Now really, with all that, think about it, is one jolly man in a red suit passing out toys really that far fetched."

Frank's mouth dropped open as Billy walked out. "Oh, my God."

Dean quickly looked at him. "What?"

"He has a point."

Dean had to laugh. "What? A point?"

"About Santa. Do you think the secret is that you have to believe?"

"In Santa?" Dean asked.

"Yeah. Believe in order to get toys."

"No, Frank. When you're a kid you automatically get them."

"So when you're an adult, if you don't believe you won't, if you do you will?" Frank stood up.

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"Um, Dean? Santa. Get with the program." In a daze, Frank looked around. "Bet me that's the reason I never got it."

"Got what."

"Dean." quickly again, and as if a huge secret, Frank pulled out a chair and sat down. "I wanted this bionic man doll so bad. You know, the one with the retractable skin? Did you know they had those?"

"No." Dean shook his head.

"I always wanted one for Christmas but never got one."

"Why didn't you ask Santa."

"Dean." Frank stated. "Think about that. Can you see me sitting on Santa's lap."

"No." Dean said seriously.

"There you have it. Then again, maybe the fact that I used to set traps for Santa may have had something to do with it."

"Probably Frank."

"Man, I wanted that bionic man doll." Frank stood back up. "I saw it once at a flea market when I was an adult. The price was too high. But I got the money, went back. Guess what?"

“It was gone?” Dean asked.

“How did you know?”

“Lucky guess.”

“I’d say. So the trick is to believe. And, what more reason to believe than to be in Beginnings. I mean, hey, anything is possible in Beginnings, right?”

“Frank, this is . . .” Dean stopped. He watched Frank close his eyes. “What are you doing? Are you reading my mind?”

“No. I’m sending a telepathic message to Santa. And . . .” Frank looked at his watched. “I’m going to bed.”

“Frank.” Dean stood and tried to stop him. “There’s a ton to do. It’s Christmas eve. Um, the toys?”

“Exactly, Dean, that’s why I’m getting to sleep. Night.” He walked to the hall, paused and turned around. “And you might want to get to bed soon. You heard Billy. Santa’s coming.”

Dumbfounded Dean stood in the livingroom as Frank walked down the hall. “No.” He spoke softly to himself. “He’s just messing with me to get out of doing everything. He can’t possibly be that dumb.” Dean closed one eye in a wince. “Scratch that. Santa’s coming.” Dean nodded and walked back toward the diningroom table and sat back down with his dinner. “Yeah, Frank, Santa *is* coming, and I’m doing all the work.” exhaling, Dean noticed the chess board, he reached over, grabbed one of Billy’s pieces and moved it. “Check Mate, Frank. Man, Bill, how did you miss that one.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

December 25<sup>th</sup>

“Santa wrapped pretty fuckin pathetic, Didn’t he?” Frank made reference to the toys that laid upon the floor. The kids didn’t notice, they were too engrossed in playing with the things they received. However, not much of the new wrapping paper was there, since Dean decided to only lay a cover sheet over the present in leu of wrapping it entirely.

Dean looked to Frank. “Call it paper conscious.”

“El wrapped *her* gifts to us.” Frank nodded then picked up one of his gifts from Ellen, a bright blue and gold tie. He placed it around his neck. “She was generous. Man, did she get a ton.”

“She was generous with all of our Danny Dollar cards.”

“It’s the thought, Dean.” Frank finished tying his tie, he let it drape down over his tee shirt. “Looks good.”

“Yes, Frank. You certainly needed that. Just like I needed that big wooden monk style crucifix.”

“Yeah, that’s right. You’re atheist.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “I am not atheist.”

From his amusement of his toy truck, Joey peered up. “What’s an Atheist.”

Billy explained. “It means he doesn’t believe in God.”

Alexandra’s eyes widened. “You don’t believe in God, Daddy.”

“Yes!” Dean yelled. “I mean, no. I mean. I believe in God. I could kill whoever started this.”

Billy rolled his eyes slightly. “Oh, yes. That’s a sure sign of Christianity.”

“Oh!” Alexandra’s tiny voice screamed out and she jumped to her feet. “Oh!” She raced from the room.

Seeing Dean’s wondrous looks, Frank shrugged. “Maybe she gave up the pee dance for something new.”

Billy decided to add his comment. “Or perhaps, she started the atheist rumor and you frightened her.”

“I forgot!” Alexandra raced back in. In each of her little hands she held gifts. Two of them. Perfectly wrapped in paper that was different than the rest. “Here.” She handed one to Frank, then to Dean. “I forgot. Sorry.”

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Dean smiled. "Thank you, Alex."

"They aren't from me." She sat on the floor. "Santa left a note and said give them to you and Uncle Frank on Christmas."

Frank's eyes widened. "Santa."

"God, Frank." Dean winced.

"No, Dean." Frank corrected. "Santa. Open yours first."

"Fine." Dean unwrapped the box shaped gift. "Oh, shit. Oh . . . shit."

"What?" Frank asked.

Finished with the wrapping, like a child, Dean tossed the paper and nearly shrieked out. "It's an Albert Einstein Lunch box!"

Billy perked with excitement. "Whoa. Look at that. That is cool."

"Yeah." Dean grinned. "Tell me about it. I always wanted an Albert Einstein lunch box, but my dad refused. He said I was weird enough, I didn't need to carry a Einstein lunch box. So he made me carry Scooby Doo."

Billy let out a thinking, 'hmm', "So you were mentally abused as a child, as well?"

Dean stared in awe at his lunch box. "Something like that. My father was torturous." His hand smoothed over the box. "What a gift. Wow." He grinned. "Frank. Open yours."

"Ok." Frank tore that paper off his gift and no sooner did he do so, he jumped straight up with the loudest of screams. "A Bionic man doll!"

"No way!" Dean stood up.

"Yeah!" Frank held up the old doll. "Look, Oh fuck. Retractable skin."

Dean stepped over the coffee table. "Like we're gonna do with Robbie."

"And, Dean. Look." Frank held the doll to his own eyes. "You can peer trough the back of his head and use his bionic eye." Frank made a mouth music sound.

"Like me." Dean smiled.

Billy slumped in annoyance. He gave a twitch of his head in a point to them as he spoke to Alexandra. "And they're supposed to be the adults here."

The grin couldn't of been wider on Frank's face. "This is really cool. My doll. Dean. Santa really came."

Dean was ready to rebut, but stopped. He looked down to the lunch box in his hand and really had to wonder at that moment.

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The older Skipper doll was in mint condition and it fit perfectly in the palm of Robbie's hand. On the floor of the livingroom, he grinned ornery at the doll, and grabbed her arm. "Like this?"

"Just wind it up. " Ellen instructed. "Watch. She's called Grow-up Skipper. She was a huge hard-to-find collector's doll in the old world. Go on. Watch."

Counter clockwise Robbie wound the arm. He shrieked out a peep, when the doll not only expanded an inch in height, but her breasts popped out as well. "Oh my God."

"As soon as I saw her I knew she was you special gift."

"This is so great." Robbie made her small, then big again.

"Did I, or did I not, tell you I hit the rummage jackpot. The whole box was nothing but collector item toys. It was almost as if the box was hand picked for me. I found a doll or toy for everyone in there. Grown ups I mean."

"And you're joking about the Bionic Man doll, right?" Robbie asked.

"No. I'm serious. When I saw that I almost died. Do you know how hard it was not to tell Frank."

"He always wanted that doll."

"Don't I know it." Ellen smiled. "I bet he's in his glory. I left it with a note in Alex's room, saying from Santa. He's probably loving me even more right now."

"That's a great gift. And this . . ." Robbie held up his Skipper doll. "Is awesome." he leaned to her and kissed Ellen on the cheek. Returning to his doll, he turned her arm and snickered like a boy when she went through instant puberty. "Great." His fingers touched the doll. "I'm getting an erection."

"Robbie." Ellen smacked her hand out to him.

"This is . . ." Instinct immediately kicked in and Robbie sprang to his feet when the early morning surprise perimeter alarm went off.

"Robbie?"

Into the diningroom where the set up was placed, Robbie ran. After setting his doll on the table, Robbie grabbed his M-16 and peered at the screen.

"What's going on?"

"One. Only one."

"Do you see anything else?"

"Clear. You watch this." Robbie turned. "whoever it is, is heading

straight for the front door.”

“Should I turn on the fry beams.”

“El, please.” Robbie chuckled. “It’s one person.” Taking another look at his doll, Robbie smiled and walked straight through the living to the foyer and flung open the door.

The snow and cold air blasted him, and a hard storm blazed about making it nearly impossible for him to see. But Robbie took a firm stand, raised the weapon and zoomed straight out. The whistling of the wind was loud, and visibility was virtually nil. A few feet from the porch was the clear path of scope he had. He would have to be fast with his shot, he wouldn’t have much time.

Just as he barely heard Ellen call out ‘they’re in’, Robbie saw him. Had he not been wearing all black he wouldn’t have been visible. Still aiming, Robbie watched the obvious man, thin build, make his way to the house.

He carried a heavy duffle, that black as well, and his face was covered in a back tight hood.

“Stop!” Robbie called out. “Stop right where you are or I’ll shoot.”

“I’m not with gun!” he called back and raised his hands. “Please. I’m cold.”

Young. The voice sounded young to Robbie. And the closer the man drew, the frame of his body told Robbie he was indeed young.

“I’m just cold.” He made his approach to the porch and exhaled when he saw Robbie. “Yellow.”

“Ex . . . excuse me?” Robbie asked confused.

“You have hair. It is yellow.”

“Um, blonde. It’s called blonde.” Robbie lowered his weapon.

“I’ve traveled far. I’m looking for Beginnings.”

“You’re close.” Robbie replied. “We’re from Beginnings.”

“Praise. Oh, praise. I am . . .”

Just about the point when Robbie hit a piqued curiosity over the word ‘praise’ he spun in confusion when the young man dropped to his knees and hovered to the ground.

“What’s going on?” Ellen asked as she stood in the doorway.

“This is fucked up.” Robbie replied. “He’s looking for Beginnings. And I think you scared him.”

“Me?” Ellen asked shocked peering down to the huddle man on her porch. “Robbie get him inside it’s cold out here.”

Robbie shrugged. “All right. Hey, you, get up. Don’t be scared of her.”

“I am not scared.” he replied. “I am just not worthy to look upon

her.”

Ellen grinned. “Oh, I like him.”

Robbie laughed. “Funny. Come on, guy.” He reached down to the young man. “Come on in. It’s cold.”

Slowly he stood up. “My name is Christopher.” He spoke, his words semi muffled through the black hood. “Are you sure, you’ll have me in your home.”

“Yes.” Robbie nodded. “It’s a blizzard out there.”

Ellen stepped back as Christopher walked inside with so much trepidation. She watched him stay back and set down his bags.

The closing of the door brought an immediate silence. Robbie shucked a chill. “So you’re looking for Beginnings, huh?”

“Yes. I have been searching forever. I got lost. But I am close now.”

Robbie moved his bags out of the way. “Why don’t you remove some of those wet clothes. I have to check you for weapons.”

“I have no weapons. We don’t believe in weapons and violence.” Christopher took off the long black coat he wore. Under it, were still black garments. A black turtleneck and black pants. He kept on his gloves and hood.

Robbie took his coat and hung it over the railing of the stairs. “We have coffee, you want some?” He asked leading Christopher into the living room. “El, get him some coffee.”

“Coffee?” Christopher asked. “What is that?”

“This.” Ellen hurried, grabbed her mug and returned. “Coffee. Smell.”

Christopher took a whiff. “I know what that is now. Coffee? You call it. Yes. It is the drink of God.”

A slow upward nod, accompanied Ellen shift of her eyes to Robbie as she spoke through her smile. “Won’t he do well with us in containment.”

“You bet.” Robbie grinned.

Christopher gasped. “Your teeth are so white and perfect. Like God.”

“Yeah.” Robbie nodded. “That’s because I’m God-like.”

“Robbie.” Ellen shook her head.

“You are.” Christopher agreed. “Yet, you have an imperfection.” he indicated to Robbie’s missing arm, “I bet you will get one right back.”

“Yep. Due back in a few weeks.”

“Ah. Praise.”

“Praise.” Robbie laid his hand on Christopher’s back. “This way. Why don’t you take off your gloves and ski mask. You’ll warm up easier.”

“I can not.” Christopher shook his head as he stood in the livingroom

with Robbie and Ellen.

“Why?” Robbie asked.

“It isn’t right. You are from Beginnings. How dare I show my face.”

Robbie snickered. “Are you ugly?” He grunted when Ellen hit him in the gut.

“I am considered amongst my people very attractive. But compared to you, I look very, very different. I am sure, being what you are, you know my race.”

Not a clue what he was talking about, Robbie gave a fling of his hand with a nod. “Oh, sure we do. We’re from Beginnings. Feel confident. We’re used to anything.”

“Yes.” Ellen said folding her arms.. “Trust us, Christopher, show your face. It won’t bother us. There’s nothing we haven’t seen.”

“Very well.” Christopher removed his gloves.

At that instant, Robbie knew something was strongly amiss when he saw Christopher’s hands. He thought at first it was the lighting making them appear that way, however the moment he removed his hood, Robbie knew the truth. No amount of lighting would cause what he witnessed.

They were good about it, both Robbie and Ellen. Never flinching not even a millisecond when they both should have jumped back, screamed, and shouted, ‘what the hell’. But they didn’t. They looked upon Christopher calmly. And they smiled at him, very welcoming, despite the fact that they could see every muscle, vein, and corpuscle in his face and hands through what appeared to be translucent skin.

After a semi awkward silent moment, Robbie gave an upbeat single clap of his hands. “Ok! I’ll get that coffee, you have a seat by the fire. I’ll be right back.” He received what he could only guess was a relieved look from Christopher. Whispering to Ellen as he passed her, ‘All right, this is a new one’. Robbie smiled once more and left the livingroom.

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Retroactive payback perhaps? George had to wonder. A few months earlier, the father, Frank, faked amnesia when George needed him to have it. Now the son, Johnny, had amnesia when George wished to God he didn’t. The recent bout with meningitis and trauma spewed Johnny into a mental state that was labeled temporary. George wondered for how long.

But there was a positive. Johnny was out of the hospital and sitting with George and Stewart at the dinner table. So sad Johnny looked, staring down to the plate, not knowing what to say. George could only watch him,

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and wish he could help the young man who looked so lost.

Years, not many was what Johnny lost. Not completely. He knew George. He knew of his and George's connection, and a part of him, deep inside, understood why he was there. The reasons were lost, buried. Johnny couldn't remember George ever leaving Beginnings. Let alone himself.

After looking at Stewart who fiddled with a roll, George reached out with a pat to Johnny's hand. "It'll be OK, don't try so hard. In fact, don't even try to remember. It'll all come back. I promise."

Johnny only nodded. "It's Christmas George. What happened? Why am I here? Something happened, right?"

"Right. But the doctors said I can't tell you."

Johnny's head dropped again. "I miss my grandfather. Christmas is his holiday. Can you at least tell me if he's all right?"

"He's fine, Johnny. Joe's fine."

"Does he hate me, George?" Johnny looked up. He gave a slight painful twitch of his head. "If I'm here, I left Beginnings. I know that. I never wanted my grandfather to hate me. Does he hate me George?"

"No." George answered solemnly. "I don't believe Joe Slagel could ever hate you."

Partially Johnny smiled, then suddenly his eyes widened when the kitchen door opened and Bertha, wearing a flowered dress, apron, and carrying a huge platter with a turkey on it walked in.

Bertha set down the platter. "Sorry I haven't been out since you got here, son. I'm Bertha."

Johnny, still dazed in his stare at her, only nodded.

George whistled. "Hell of a job Callahan on this bird. Hell of a job. Now sit down and join us."

"Thank you, Sir." Bertha pulled out a seat across from Johnny and Stewart. She flashed a smile trying to make the boy feel at home.

Stewart noticing Johnny's locked stare of Bertha, leaned into him with a whisper. "Frightening sight isn't it? The twilight zone Donna Reed."

Johnny smiled.

George snapped with a point. "That's what I want to see. A smile." he stood up with the carving knife and planted himself before the turkey. For a second he took in the faces at the table and he exhaled in delight at the diverse faces at the Christmas table.

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## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Frank's voice sounded more like the over-dub of a Japanese Movie than anything else. "Watch out Hal." He spoke deep. "I will take you."

"Hal!" Hal sounded the exact same way. "Not if I get you first with my Kung Fu grip."

An immediate growling between the two men occurred over the diningroom table and they lunged their dolls at each other.

In his passing of the table, Joe stopped, looked down and shook his head. "Christ." He moved to the livingroom, paused again when he saw Dean on the couch with Billy. The Einstein lunch box perched at his side. A shift of his eyes, brought in the view of Henry and Joey in a strong tug of war with the long arms of Stretch Armstrong. "I'm in a goddamn retro Christmas nightmare."

"Joe." Andrea scolded in her passing. "Of all days can we not blaspheme."

"Why? Andrea." Joe followed her as she made it to the kitchen. "Look at everyone. Thank God Henry's only here with his toy for a short visit. Is it weird or is it me."

"It's you." Andrea opened the oven door and peeked at dinner.

"No Andrea it's not." Joe went to lean on the counter, but was stopped. "What?" He asked as Andrea pulled him away.

"You're blocking my view of my Diana Ross doll."

Joe grumbled. "And you say it's me. I'll go in the other room and wait. Maybe talk to Elliott. I know he's normal. He got a pocket watch." Joe walked out and immediately to Elliott who stood watching everyone with a look of enjoyment on his face. "Having fun?" Joe asked him.

"Everyone is so funny." Elliott answered, "Thank you for inviting me to your home."

"Glad to have you, Elliott. It feels . . ." Joe took a deep breath. "It feels like Christmas. Hal. The little ones running about. Turkey cooking, the food filling the house. Only thing missing is Ellen and Robbie."

"I believe they are here in spirit."

"Well." Joe rocked from heel to toe. "Ellen certainly is with her gift giving."

"Tell me, Mr. Slagel, what was Ellen like at Christmas time. Did she travel to your home?"

"No. Ellen had the biggest house, therefore she hosted Christmas Eve, and Christmas. Hell, she hosted every holiday. I'd go up a few days ahead of time, the boys would come in with their families. Always a big deal."

"This has to be hard for you." Elliott said. "Have you ever missed a

Christmas with your children?"

"Every once and a while one of the boys would be overseas. You'll have that with the service. But Ellen, yeah, this is hard, because this is the first Christmas ever, I don't have her around." Joe hunched at the shrieks from Hal and Frank. "Sort of."

"So Ellen had a lot of holiday spirit."

Joe chuckled. "Ellen had a lot of money and credit and made it the holiday spirit. Loved giving gifts. Like now. And she always give the most annoying, and loud gifts. Like now. Well, with the exception of that pocket watch she gave you." No sooner did Joe say that, his head sprang up when, loud the cartoon woodpecker laughter rang out, along with the 'Woody woodpecker' music. "What the hell?" Joe looked around.

Elliott pulled out his pocket watch. "It's six O'clock." He smiled and showed Joe the Woody watch.

"Swell."

"Dad." Frank's deep voice spoke right behind Joe.

Joe hesitated before turning around. Something about the slight inquisitiveness in Frank's tone, made Joe not want to see what he wanted. But it was Christmas. Calmly Joe turned. "Yes, Frank."

"Tell Hal to give me back Steve Austin's arm."

"Christ Almighty." Joe looked behind Frank to Hal. "Goddamn grown men, act it! Hal, give him back the arm."

Hal snidely walked to Frank and handed him the toy limb. "Grow up."

"I told you I was telling." Frank popped the arm back on the doll. "This is my special gift, too."

"That's because you're special Frank." Hal stated.

"Hal." Joe grumbled.

"Finally." Frank smiled pleased at the doll and placed it in the front pocket of his tee shirt. "All these years of waiting, and Santa finally brought it."

Elliott who was taking a drink at that moment choked.

Hal laughed.

Joe closed his eyes. "Frank. Don't walk around saying that. OK?"

"Why?" Frank asked.

"Why do you think, Frank?" Joe snapped.

"Dad. Wouldn't it be ungrateful of me, if I didn't give credit where credit was due."

"To santa?" Joe asked.

"Yeah., he gave it to me." Frank said.

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“Frank!” Joe snapped. “Santa didn’t give you that doll. You know better.”

“If Santa didn’t give it, then why did it say from Santa. Huh?” Frank raised an eyebrow.

“How old are you?” Joe questioned with edge.

“Um, uh, thirty.” Frank nodded.

“Thirty my ass.” Joe shook his head. “You’re forty Frank. Forty goddamn years old and you’re still believing in Santa.”

“Yeah.” Frank replied.

“Frank!” Joe yelled. “You can’t run around believing in Santa at your age. It took long enough the first time to break you from that habit.”

Frank gasped. “No wonder I never got my Bionic Man doll. Last night I believed again, and this morning I got it. So what’s that tell you.”

“It doesn’t tell me there’s a Santa.” Joe argued.

“Dad.” Frank barked. “Don’t even tell me you’re gonna say there isn’t a santa.”

“That’s . . . that’s . . .” Joe shifted his eyes around to the immediate silent room and the children that suddenly looked at him.

“Dad?” Frank asked. “Are you saying there is no santa.”

On the spot, and Joe knew it. Tiny questioning faces of children watched and waited. “No, Frank. I’m not saying that. There is a santa.”

Frank smiled and walked away.

The arrogant chuckle was more on a whispers level as Hal walked by Joe with a pat to his father’s back. “Way to encourage him. You’ve no one to blame but yourself.”

^^^

Pretty much Jenny Matoose could have verbally snapped off, mentally annihilating Henry over the looks of disgust he tossed at her at the dinner table. She envisioned as she savored her Brussel sprouts, watching Henry weep, then stomp like a child and storm upstairs. Jenny could have done that. But she chose not to, it was Christmas dinner. Instead, after a few bites of the soft green roughage, she smiled a food covered toothy smile, and enjoy the little gags that emerged.

Last one. Slowly, Jenny placed it in her mouth and chewed slowly with a enjoyable ‘hmm.’

Henry’s mouth dropped open. “God.” He whispered then received a warning nudge from Hector.



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Exhaling, Jenny wiped her mouth. "Hector, in all the years in Beginnings. I have to say they were the best Brussel sprouts, ever. So tender and tasty."

"Thank you." Hector smiled. "The harvest for them was good."

"Delicious. Thank you for having John and I over." Jenny rubbed her stomach. "I'm stuffed. Ate so many of those sprouts. I know I'll get gas, but it'll be worth it."

Henry's vocal sound of disgust brought immediate looks from everyone.

Misha smiled politely. "Dinner was lovely, Hector. I am grateful to you and Henry for having me as well."

Hector reached over and laid his hand on Misha's. "It was our pleasure."

"I love it here in Beginnings. I just love it." Misha glanced at John who sat in his UWA uniform. "Private Matoose, do you find it difficult not being home?"

"I find it difficult being away from my wife." John replied. "Not so much Beginnings. Home is where Jenny is."

Jenny let out an 'ah', about the same time Henry released yet, another sound of disgust.

Misha thought Henry was just being amusing, not serious. "Do you and Jenny plan to live in New Bowman?"

"No." John shook his head. "I wouldn't mind it, but not when you have children."

"You have children?" Misha questioned.

"One." Jenny lifted her finger. "But she's frozen right now. Dean plans to bring her out of the process as soon as he knows it is foolproof."

Misha blinked confused. "Dean?"

"Dr. Hayes." Jenny explained.

"Yes." Misha nodded in understanding. "A very brilliant man."

"Borderline pedophile." Jenny wisped out.

"Jenny." John had a slight scold. "Stop that."

"John, I'm not convinced." Jenny stated.

Hector saw the confusion on Misha's face. "Rumors floated around awhile back. It's fine." He told her. "Don't worry about it. I live here and I can't figure it out."

Softly Misha glanced to Hector. "You are so very sweet. I would like to live in Beginnings one day. In fact. I would like to live here soon. I went to Captain Slagel. He said if I would like a job here in Beginnings, then he

will authorize the house to live. Until then he prefers my stay in New Bowman.”

“Then get a job here.” Jenny stated. “I know you have that shop. But we have lots of jobs in Beginnings. The bakery has an opening since Bev was shot in the head. And we know you bake. You made that lovely desert. Which by the way . . .” Jenny stood up. “Let me get it.” Ignoring Henry’s ‘figures’, Jenny went to the kitchen.

“I like to cook.” Misha told everyone. “But I would like a job that is important. One that will teach me a life skill.”

Hector’s head popped up to attention at the doorbell. “Hold that thought.” he raise his voice some. “Come in.”

The baby cry was heard first, then as the door opened, Dean walked in with Nick. “I brought back the baby for you.”

“Dean.” Hector stood up. “Thanks. You didn’t have to. We would have come for him. I thought Joe wanted him longer.”

“Well, he was getting fussy for you, Hector.” Dean gave a quick shift if his eyes to Henry then handed Nick to Hector. “And I have to get to the clinic. Have a ton of work to do.”

“Dr. Hayes.” Misha spoke to him. “It is Christmas. You work on Christmas.”

“Not normally.” Dean answered. “Usually, I would just go in to check my patients. But . . . my wife is, well, you know, out of town, so to speak. And I’m buried.”

Comforting Nick and quieting him, Hector took his seat. “And you probably didn’t get things too ready either. I know a lot of us were very wishful she wouldn’t go.”

“I’m at the top of that list.” Dean backed up. “And you’re right. My wishful thinking kept me from being prepared.”

Jenny emerged from the kitchen with a huge cake. “Dean, will you stay for desert.”

“No.” Dean lifted his hand. “I can’t. Thank you. I really have to go. If I’m this far behind in three days, I hate to see my lab in a month.”

Misha spoke up. “I did not realize your wife helped you so much.”

“Help?” Dean smiled then chuckled. “That’s an understatement. You can say my wife is half my whole.” He nodded. “Goodnight.”

Misha’s eyes stayed on the door even after Dean had left.

“Misha?” Jenny called her. “Are you all right.”

“I apologize.” Misha drew her thoughts back to the table. “I was thinking. Sorry.”

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

"I hope not about Dean." Jenny sliced the cake.

"More about what he does." Misha responded.

John added. "Odd things. If you need to wonder what he does, he does odd things. A lot of good. A lot of odd."

"Yep." Jenny exhaled as she started to serve the cake. "Pretty much, because of Dean and his works, there is nothing, absolutely nothing, we haven't seen in Beginnings."

Hector lifted a finger. "That we know of."

Jenny chuckled. "Please, Hector. Think about it. What else can there be?"

^^^

"So . . ." Robbie paused to light his cigarette as he, Ellen and Christopher sat in the livingroom. "How long has your skin been see through."

"See through?" Christopher asked. "I don't understand. Skin?"

"Yeah. See." Robbie held his hand. "This is skin." He explained. "You don't really have this."

"No one does." Christopher answered.

"We do." Robbie replied.

"You are God-like."

Robbie grinned. "True. We are."

Ellen rolled her eyes. "Christopher. Everyone has skin." She pulled some of her own on her arm.

"Not my people. We don't." Christopher explained. "We are cursed ones. When God's wrath spread illness. God spared us, but we had to pay for our sins and the sins of our forefathers. So he took from us the protective covering from the elements. Skin as you call it."

"El?" Robbie questioned. "Can this be an after effect of the plague?"

"No way." Ellen answered. "They had to be exposed to something. Prolonged. They had to be. Christopher, how many of your people are there?"

"Many. Too many to count. When the wrath hit, there weren't that many. But we multiplied through God's goodness."

Ellen nodded. "And the new people. The babies. Do they look like you?"

"Yes." Christopher nodded.

Ellen looked at Robbie. "Chemical exposure manipulated the genes.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Dean has to check him out. This is gonna be awesome. I have to keep him here until I take enough notes.”

“Where do you come from?” Robbie asked.

“I live far away. Close to the end of the world where God’s tears flowed.”

“I’m not real sure where that is.” Robbie said. “Where did God leave his tears?”

“A huge body of salty water. Violent at times. It flaps at you when you get too close. Roaring and foaming. Hungry for you.”

At the same time Robbie and Ellen looked at each other and spoke, ‘Ocean’

“West Coast.” Robbie said. “Can’t be east. Man, so you live by God’s tears, huh? Must be tough to visit there with no skin. Doesn’t the sun burn you?”

“We do not visit there. It is forbidden. What is the sun?” Christopher asked.

“The big yellow bright thing that is hot in the sky.” Robbie explained.

“Oh, yes. It burns us.” Christopher stated. “It is the devil’s tool. He who exposes himself to it, is worshipping of the devil. And he will burn in hell.”

“A-huh.” Robbie nodded. “So you cover up when you go into the light of the devils tool.”

“Cover up, yes. But only the explorers like myself who dare to conquer the land that the devil has reaped, cover. The others never dare to go out into the sun. If you come up from God’s world, you are not allowed back in. Though many of us have hid the fact that we have sinned and risen up to explore.”

“Come up?” Robbie asked. “Chris, do you live underground?”

“Below the surface, yes. With God.”

Robbie closed his lips tight, and nodded. “Let me get this straight. You live, with God, under the ground. Hmm. Sounds cool. But, uh, Chris, we aren’t the devil.”

Christopher’s eyes widened. “No. I did not say you were. Forgive me if I implied that. Praise you. You are blessed. You are God like. You come from Utopia. The second heaven many dream of searching.”

“That we do.” Robbie stood up. “I’ll be right back. I need more coffee. El?” He started to walk.

“Um . . .” Ellen smiled then stood as well. “Yes.” she hurried and followed Robbie into the kitchen. “Robbie?” She whispered. “What do you

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

think?” she gave a backwards motion of her head.

“You mean about Chris?” Robbie asked. “El.” He poured some coffee, grabbed his cup and grinned. “We are gonna have a blast with him.”

Just as Ellen wondered how Robbie was going to find humor in the stale young man, she received her answer when she heard Robbie say, ‘Hey, Chris, did you ever hear about the Utopian God of War. His name is Frank.’.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

January 2<sup>nd</sup>

Law of averages dictated had Robbie not tried to talk before he completely swallowed his coffee, he wouldn't have dribbled the hot liquid down his chin. "El." He coughed a little then set down the cup. "Come on, we're on the Moe takes advantage of old lady Josie, scene."

"Sorry. I'm coming." Ellen called from the kitchen. "One sec."

"What are you doing?" Robbie asked.

"Just putting another pot on." Ellen walked into the diningroom then sat next to Robbie as he faced the laptop. "We can do that now. Nine days, we're ahead on our rations."

"Cool."

"Ok." Ellen placed her mug next to Robbie's and pulled the laptop to her. "What did you write."

"Not much. About this point in my physical career, I think faster than I type. I need you."

She turned her head to face him and smiled. "That's why I'm here."

"No, El. I need you." Robbie raised his eyebrows a few times.

"That's why I'm here."

"Oh, yeah?" Robbie grinned. "Think you're ready to put out yet?"

"Think you're ready to hit on me."

"Think you can handle it?"

"Probably not. But I'm willing to give it a try."

"How about after this scene?" Robbie asked.

"You got it."

Robbie chuckled. "Nine days, El. Nine days." He said with enthusiasm. "How many pages?"

"Two hundred and forty-five. We're cool."

"That we are. And this is actually good." Robbie said. "But I'd like to have it finished before we get back."

"You know we will."

Robbie shrugged. "I don't know. This is turning out to be an epic."

"It's Beginnings."

"True."

"What do we have?" Ellen made the laptop face Robbie. "Read to me

what you wrote.”

“Ready?” Robbie waited for Ellen to nod and he cleared his throat, then started to read. *“There was nothing particularly sexy to Moe about the way Josie looked. In fact, she was an old woman. Wrinkled and frail, a mouth that flapped as much as her excess breast skin . . .”*

“Oh, good line.”

“Like that? I thought of it without a pause.” Robbie smiled then returned to reading. *“It wasn’t a pleasure or an attraction that brought Moe to the shoe factory division. It was the need for power. Power over the little woman who wanted badly to get out of the sweat shop. What would she give him? How far would she go to stop her boney hands from aching. Moe knew if he approached her with the right offer, not only would Josie do what he asked, in her mind he would be her hero. Hero meant power. Moe was the leader, he thrived on that.”*

“Robbie, this is good.” Ellen smiled.

“Wait until you here this . . .” Robbie scrolled down the page. *“What conquest would it be for Moe? Certainly not the first. Far from the first and Josie wouldn’t be his last. Maybe she’d be wiry, feisty, add some spark that others did not when he had his way. And he had his way with anyone who wanted to go anywhere in the town of Dawning. Young women, old, even men were not immune to the power trip he was on. A power trip driven by his demented sexual urges. How he would take her was the question. Would he . . .”* Robbie sat back. “And that’s all the further I got.”

“Were you wanting Moe to walk up to her and start the seduction?”

“I was thinking that.”

“No.” Ellen shook her head. “Moe did that the last sex scene. Remember. The young school Mistress Penny.”

“No, he didn’t.” Robbie argued. “Moe blackmailed the teacher remember?”

“No. What would he have to blackmail her on?”

“Keep her teaching position.” Robbie explained. “He was going to give it to Meg if she didn’t put out.”

“You’re right on that point, but . . .” Ellen was insistent. “He didn’t give her a chance to respond. That was our pity scene. We wanted to reader to feel sorry for her. Moe didn’t give Penny a choice. He walked up, grabbed her, turned her . . .” Ellen saw Robbie shake his head. “Robbie, I’m telling you. That is the scene you used that brilliant description, ‘Her full body was a thick pillow that Moe sunk into with every thrust he delivered.’”

“Oh.” Robbie nodded in discovery. “You’re right.”

“He has to talk to Josie. She’s too smart. She’ll have to be frightened by words into it.”

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“You have a point.” Robbie slid the computer Ellen’s way. “You type it. But we can’t have him too strong in his words. We want the real heavy words for when he goes after Gene the scientist.”

Ellen, agreeable to that, and ready to type, stopped at the clearing of a throat. She turned around to see Christopher standing there. “Hi.” She smiled at him.

“Good morning.” Christopher walked into the diningroom.

“Hey Chris.” Robbie said. “Good to see you up and about.”

“Are you feeling better?” Ellen asked.

“Yes.” Christopher responded.

“You look better.” Robbie winked. “Not as pale.” He grunted when Ellen hit him.

“I do not feel as pale. And I feel much better.” Christopher stated. “Thank you Robbie for sprinkling the God dust over me last night.”

“Not a problem.” Robbie waved off Ellen who was questioning ‘God dust.’

Hand on stomach, Christopher walked closer. “I don’t know why I was so ill.”

“Vegetables.” Ellen answered. “You’ve never eaten them. You’re system wasn’t used to those and, well, they can clean you out.”

“Ah.” Christopher nodded knowingly. “I have received a cleansing.”

“A God-like cleansing.” Robbie corrected. “You are internally clean for your trip to Beginnings.”

“And when can I make the remaining journey to Utopia?” Christopher asked.

Robbie shrugged and looked at Ellen. “El, can you answer. You’re the Goddess of Wonder.”

“Day or two,. Your strength should be up.” Ellen explained. “Plus I want to finish my assessment notes for Dean.”

Robbie tossed a point. “Dean. The God of what, Chris?”

“Dean is the small and mighty God of Medicine.” Christopher answered proudly.

“Good job.” Robbie gave a thumbs up. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you.” Christopher pulled out a chair. “And thank you for teaching me Utopia. I will be full of knowledge when I arrive. They’ll be impressed and let me in?”

“Very much so.” Robbie answered. “In fact they may try to talk to Zeus about making you a little God.”

“That would be a dream too much to wish for.” Christopher wisped



out. "Will you put good things about me in the assessment notes, Goddess of wonder?"

Ellen snickered. "Call me, Ellen please. And you don't have to have to call him by his God name either. Call him Robbie."

Christopher looked at Robbie. "Can I have that honor?"

Robbie laid his index finger on his own chin and peered up to the ceiling. "Yes. Yes." Robbie seriously looked at him. "You may."

"Thank you." Christopher shuffled in his seat with excitement. "Ellen. You will put good things about me in your notes to the medicine God?"

"I will. But . . ." Ellen dropped her voice. "You can not. Can not let anyone, not a soul, not a God, only Frank or Dean see you with those papers. We will get in trouble if you let them see that."

"And Chris," Robbie added. "I've blessed you, Guy. You have to make sure no one sees you pass those reports."

"On my soul." Christopher raised his hands. "May I ask why you'll get in trouble?"

Robbie answered, "We're on prayer retreat and such. We aren't supposed to speak to anyone while we pray and write the word." he pointed to the computer.

"Ah, the Gospel yes. You are writing a Gospel." Christopher said.

"Yes we are. It's all about Zeus. Every God has a bible." Robbie winked. "This is his. And you know the story we gave you, right? You can tell the truth to who? Who are the trusted?"

Christopher paused to think, then he spewed forth his list. "Zeus, God of Utopia. Frank, God of War. Dean, Small and Mighty God of Medicine. Elliott, God of Hispanic Crooners. And Finally, Hal. God of the Effeminately Dressed."

Robbie continued to test Christopher. "You are allowed to tell them we helped you. The rest? What do you tell them?"

"Ah, this is easy." Christopher said. "I tell them that I came across Hal, God of the Effeminately Dressed. I tell them that Hal, God of the Effeminately Dressed, was a futomara to me. And since he was a futomara, I went to Beginnings. The Utopia."

Robbie grinned with a nod. "You got it." He saw the stare on Ellen's face. "What?"

"Robbie." Ellen spoke soft. "Not that I'm one who doesn't like to have fun with people. I do. I do my share at containment. But, you are really gonna have him confused."

"No, I'm not. Chris. Is everything I taught you, everything you

imagined about Beginnings.”

“Oh, yes.” Christopher agreed. “Exactly as I thought.”

“See?” Robbie pointed to him. “I reiterated the truth.” He lifted his views. “El?” He turned as Ellen walked by him. “We have the Gospel, El?” After she silently left, Robbie shrugged his shoulders. “She does things with out explanation.” Robbie dropped his voice to a whisper. “That’s why she is the Goddess of Wonder.”

^^^

“Twinkies.” Frank sitting on a stool in the cryo-lab, leaned into the counter holding a cake.

“What about them?” Dean asked sitting across from Frank, the Einstein lunch box between them.

“Why has Danny Hoi not re-invented Twinkies.”

“These are close.” Dean held up the yellow cake.

“Dean, please. It’s cake with jam.” Frank fluttered his lips. “Hardly Twinkies.”

“You have a point.”

“And they can make them, too.” Frank finished off his cake and grabbed his coffee. “I mean, look at those little carrot cakes they make for me over the bakery.”

“Oh, those . . . those are good.”

“Tiny little carrot cakes, inside little puffs of the cream cheese icing.”

Oddly Dean looked at him. “How did they end up with those?”

“I asked for Twinkies.” Frank tossed up his hand. “They didn’t have any. I asked for carrot cake. Didn’t have any. So the drunk thought she’d be funny and made those.”

“But . . . but you’re the only one who eats them, and you like them.” Dean said. “Why is she still making them.?”

Frank smiled. “I bitch about them. Tell her I hate them and that’s all she’ll distribute to me now.”

“That’s smart.” Dean used a napkin to wipe off his hands. He tossed it. “Look at us, Frank. We’re pathetic, aren’t we?”

“No.”

“Yeah.” Dean stood up and ran his fingers through his hair. “We are. We’ve resorted to talking about snack cakes. You take your coffee break with me Frank.”

“Yeah, so. Don’t you want me to?”

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“Sure you can. But, you have other people you can do this with.”

“But you don’t, Dean.” Frank stood up. “You’re pretty wrapped up in Ellen and your work, you never bother with anyone else. I know that. We’re friends. I know you’re as down as I am right now. Especially since we haven’t been able to fly the past couple days.”

“Yeah.” Dean just bobbed his head.

“I have to go.” Frank grabbed his cup. “And, Dean, try to get out of this lab today.”

“I do, Frank. I leave to go get my work at the clinic.”

“And you bring it down here.”

Dean chuckled. “You make it sound as if I never leave here.”

Frank opened his mouth to respond.

Andrea’s voice entered the cryo lab. She had a sense of edge to it. “You don’t.”

Open, shut, open, shut, went Frank’s mouth wondering where the voice came from. He turned and looked behind him. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Frank.” Andrea folded her arms and kept her eyes on Dean. “Frank, can Dean and I have a moment.”

“Sure.” Frank lifted a waving hand to Dean, mouthed the words, ‘you’re in trouble’, then slipped out.

“And no listening in the hall.” Andrea instructed.

“I won’t.” Frank called from the hall.

“I’m busy, Andrea.” Dean gathered up the coffee break items from the counter.

“You are not too busy to listen to me.”

“Andrea.” Dean turned to face her. “You left me a note this morning. Reiterating that it is cold and flu season. Blood work and meds need done. I’m doing them.”

“Slower than usual.”

“As fast as I can.”

“Oh, Bull-poopie.”

Dean, in surprise, opened his mouth to question the mild manner swearing, but only heard Frank’s snickering from the hall.

“Francis!” Andrea yelled. “I said no listening.”

“I’m not.”

Andrea grumbled. “Nine days, Dean. Nine days you have been in this lab. You get up, you leave your home, you come down here. You stay here until it’s dark, and you go home again.”

Dean scoffed. “I go to the clinic lab.”

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“To get the blood work.”

“And bring meds and results.” Dean tossed out his hands. “What else do you want me to do.”

“Follow through. Yes, I know there hasn’t been any surgeries. Yes, I know you have no patients. Yes, you are doing your blood work, meds . . .”

“What!” Dean yelled. “Is the problem then. I am working on experiments down here!”

“You are doing minimal clinic work.”

“No, I am not.” Dean argued. “I am doing the work. I’m doing it as fast as I can.”

“And that’s all you have to do. What you do right now in the clinic is what any lab tech in the old world could do.”

“But, what I do down here, no one else but my wife can do.”

“And that . . . is the problem.” Andrea pointed. “Everywhere down here is Ellen. Ellen this. Ellen that. You miss her. Need her. So you come here to feel her. That’s fine. But you talk to no one but your kids and Frank. When is the last time you data entered any test results, blood work ran, meds made, any of that.”

“Yesterday.” Dean answered.

“Dean. Don’t. How many yesterday? One. You have stacks upon stacks of paperwork that gets put in the computer., Meds that need registered. Files that need filed. That clinic lab is back logged.”

“I’m alone. You guys could help.”

“We could. We do. We have patients in three towns to take care of. Sweet Jesus Dean its cold and flu season.”

“I know.”

“We can’t do your’s and Ellen work.”

“And neither can I!” Dean snapped. “I can’t do both of our work.”

“And what did my dear son, Hal, say? Hmm?” Andrea folded her arms tighter and moved to Dean “He found an assistant for you. Someone to do the clerical aspect. Data entry, filing, organization, and foot work. Nothing medical Dean, just someone to help you catch up so you aren’t far behind when Ellen returns.”

Dean breathed out slow. “I’ll feel guilty having another assistant.”

“Don’t.” Andrea softened her voice. “Another assistant? Dean, dear, Ellen stopped being your assistant a while ago. Now the assistant is here. Again, today. You aren’t. I can only show filing and separating files for so long. Now today, either you get up there and teach them how you want things logged or I do.” Andrea stepped back and walked to the door. “And

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you know, I'll do it wrong." she moved toward the hall way. "Your choice." she paused. "Oh, and Dean. Keep in mind. I haven't a clue to how to read your writing accurately."

Dean nodded, back to Andrea, and he stood there listening to her leave. He sighed out. She was right. Not only did he need to emerge from the cryo, he had to get caught up on the clinic work. If for nothing else, for Ellen so she didn't bitch when she came back. Hating the thought of an intruder in his lab, and training someone new, Dean bit the bullet. And against what he wanted, he left the cryo lab as well.

^^^

Cryogenically preserved. Untouched by the apocalyptic, animalistic ways of the world, but tainted enough, in the year since his release, to be rough enough to handle George Hadly.

Arrogant and young, no older than thirty. His face aged some in the cryo process but not much. He was tanned, because he held his medical post in the Carolina division of the society for so long before recently being transferred. His brown hair was tossed some, and he was tall enough to need to lean against his desk so he didn't have to look down to George. He wasn't a scientist just, was a basic family practitioner by old world profession A smart man, Dr. Andrew Bourke was, smart enough to have graduated top in his class at Harvard medical. But even though he was intelligent, it wasn't his brain that had him selected for the cryo preservation, it was his Uncle Leonard who was one of the ten heads in the founding Caceres Society.

Perhaps that was one of the things George didn't like about Andrew. He was really no better than the average 'Joe' doctor, yet, he held a prestigious position in the society because he had an 'in'. Yes, he was a doctor, and yes, he knew what he was talking about, but he wasn't the best. His arrogance invoked George to the point that had Andrew not been a doctor, George probably would have had him shot in the head long before.

"Where else do you want me to go with this?" Andrew asked. "You know about this condition."

"Retrograde amnesia, yes." George said. "It makes no sense."

"It makes perfect sense, Mr. President."

"Ok. Just bare with me. All right?" George paced some. "They brought you up to handle this case."

"Because of my success with meningitis, yes. I have combined a few

agents that others haven't . . .”

“Yeah-yeah-yeah, whatever. Skip that.” George snapped. “You’re a doctor. End of discussion. Walker is a doctor. Why didn’t Walker pick this up.”

Andrew huffed, reached back and swept Johnny’s chart off his desk. “When I arrived, Johnny was lethargic and in what Dr. Walker referred to as a brain cloud. Basically, major disorientation,. How, Sir, was he supposed to discover that he had retrograde amnesia when Mr. Slagel couldn’t form words until ten days ago.”

“Symptoms.”

“One of the symptoms is discovered through talking.” Andrew set down the folder. “Johnny was confused, yes.”

“But he didn’t seem confused when he first came in.”

“How do you know?” Andrew asked. “How much did you talk to him?”

“Not much.”

“Amnesia is caused by many things. He’s not a total amnesiac. He’s only missing a piece here and there.”

“Vital pieces. It’s seems convenient.”

“Not to me. It seems normal. If you’re expecting him have shown symptoms right away, you’re wrong. It may not have happened because the amnesia may have set upon him slowly. The meningitis may have only delayed the diagnoses of it. The trauma alone to his body coupled with the meningitis could have just thrown Johnny over the edge. Also, there is the possibility that his physical ailments may have had nothing to do with his retrograde amnesia.”

He stopped pacing, and George slowly looked at Andrew. “What do you mean?”

“Well, he may have truly been fine when he came in. But being ill, he didn’t really think about it. As soon as the disorientation from the meningitis cleared, and the wounds healed it hit him.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Self inflicted subconscious amnesia.”

“Is that for real?”

“It’s not amnesia in a physical sense, it’s when you mentally block out something. But you do not consciously do it. If I read his chart correctly. When the medics picked him up in Minnesota, they noted that Johnny was rambling something about shooting his father, and his grandfather.” Andrew gave a half shrug. “The pain of the wounds surpass, the pain of

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doing that hits him. Bam. Subconsciously he blocks the act out, and in doing so, blocks out everything else.”

“So you’re saying the guilt could have caused this?” George questioned.

Confidently, Andrew nodded. “Yes. Trauma or Guilt. What other explanation could there be?”

Closed mouth moving side to side in thought, George nodded and placed his hands in his pockets. “How about this How about the possibility . . . that this whole thing . . .” Slowly, with a hint of guilt of his own, George exhaled. “. . . he’s faking.”

^^^

Ring.

The surprise sound-off of the telephone in Bertha’s office, stirred Johnny as he sat there waiting on Callahan to give him the tour.

Ring.

After standing up. He looked over his shoulder to see if he spotted her in the hall.

Ring.

“Bert?” Johnny called out, no enthusiasm was in his voice, he seemed drawn. “Hey, your phone is . . .”

Ring.

“Fuck.” As if it took all of his energy, in a slow manner, and with almost a strain, Johnny reached over the desk and picked up the phone. “Sgt. Callahan’s office.”

Silence.

“Hello?” Johnny said again. He stood up straight, turned in surprised and his eyes blinked rapidly when he heard the heavy breath. A lump formed in Johnny’s throat, he couldn’t even talk.

Raspy and soft, Frank’s voice spoke over the phone. “Johnny.”

Still, Johnny couldn’t breath.

“I’ll take it you’re speechless. Maybe surprised I didn’t fuckin die when you shot me.”

A few noises, mumbles perhaps slipped from Johnny’s mouth as he fumbled with the phone.

“My purpose in calling was to see how you were doing. You picked up the phone. My answer is received.”

Click.

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It escaped him as a heave and the laborious breath brought forth the words so hard for Johnny to speak. "Dad, wait . . ."

Nothing. Quiet.

Whispering in defeat, Johnny slowly pulled the phone from his ear. Sliding the receiver across his cheek, in a dazed partial fumble, Johnny hung up the phone and closed his eyes. "Dad."



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Strong, firm and steady Frank's walking stride was up from the cryo tunnels to the street level of Beginnings. The pain of the bullet he had taken not long earlier reverberated in his chest in the form of a hurtful memory. Though his flesh had healed, and Frank had convinced himself he was fine, he was slammed with the reality of how fragile his heart really was the second he heard his son's voice.

His heart ached. With each beat it struck, an agony accompanied the blood that flowed through his veins. More than anything he needed to lash out. Spew forth, talk about how he felt. But to who? Telling about talking to Johnny was revealing that Frank had broken all community rules and called the society.

At that moment in time, Frank didn't care. Knowing where to go to get that relief he headed instinctively to containment. Nearing noon, it was the perfect place, perfect person to talk to, and then he remembered.

Ellen wasn't there.

Hand rubbing over his buzzed hair Frank spun in a lost confusion from the containment door. And in his clockwise spin he spotted his next salvation. The social hall. He reached for the keys, pulling the correct one forth in his walk there. No wasted time, key extended, Frank inserted it and unlocked that door. Without hesitation, he walked inside and directly to the bar. Over the surface of the bar counter he leaned and grabbed a glass and bottle. It was somewhere between uncapping that bottle and smelling the moonshine he so much needed, that he fought the urge to find the answers in a liquid temporary cure.

Strength. Frank needed strength. Strength to not only fight the pain of Johnny, but fight the bottle as well. It took for Frank to gaze up in thought and see his reflection in the mirror behind the bar to do it. Seeing himself with that bottle made him see he was taking the easy route without exercising all of his options first. And there was still an option to exercise.

He left that bottle right there. Touching it anymore would have increased his urge to just pour a shot and down it. Leaving the social hall, Frank knew where to direct his relinquishing.

There was one other person who would not only understand his need for a drink, but his actions over calling the society. There would be no

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condemning, not from him, not at a time when both of them were so low from missing Ellen.

Dean was Frank's answer. If not just for sympathy at that moment, but for the simple fact that misery loved company. Dean was miserable company.

Or so Frank thought.

Partially down the hall of the clinic, Frank heard laughter. Dean's. It didn't seem right, and it irritated him some. But not as much as it did when he stopped in the open lab door.

The entire feel of the room was light, and the more Frank watched Dean, the angrier he grew.

Nothing was wrong. Absolutely nothing. Dean was merely going through files with Misha who wore a lab coat way too big for her, the sleeve of which kept knocking things off the counter. Yet Frank felt a sense of betrayal he didn't understand. Especially when he watched Dean push up Misha's sleeve, chuckle with a shake of his head and return to the folder.

Rage filled Frank. Nothing he was witnessing warranted the lightheartedness in that lab. So why was Dean smiling? What happened to his down mood? What was so funny. And to Frank, *why* was Dean, even innocently, touching that woman.

Who was she to be standing in Ellen's lab, doing Ellen's work, with Ellen's husband. And why was Dean enjoying it.

How wrong he was for thinking Dean was the better solution. Stumbling in a stupor of his clouded emotions, Frank enraged, turned unnoticed and stormed from the clinic.

^^^

Joe received word that they were on their way to his office, so he pulled out two more mugs from the cabinet where he had his coffee pot. Not sure if Elliott would have any, Joe poured his first, then placed some in a mug for Hal.

"Dad?" Hal called as he knocked once on the door then opened it.

"Yeah. Come on in."

"Ah." Hal commented as he stepped in the office. "Coffee."

"And, I poured you a cup. Elliott?" Joe asked as he kept his back to them.

"Yes, please, Mr. Slagel." Elliott responded.

"Have a . . ." Turning around, both mugs in his hand, he stopped. A

chuckle took over him when he saw Hal. Kind of a quirky reminiscence smile hit Joe as he stepped to the pair and handed them the coffee. Elliott looked like Elliott. But there was something different about Hal. Perhaps Joe got used to seeing him so perfectly presented when he was filling in, or maybe it was the fact that it had been so long since he saw Hal messy. And Hal was messy. Hair pulled back, but he wore backwards baseball cap, a Dirty 'Army' sweatshirt, and a old pair of green fatigues.

Hal taking the cup, noticed the looks his father gave him. "Something wrong?"

"No." Joe shook his head and walked to his desk. "You just reminded me of thirteen year old Hal. That's all." he sat down.

"Mr Slagel, how are you feeling?" Elliott asked.

"Good. Thank you." Joe answered. "I go for more treatments next week, but Dean said they won't effect my stomach as much."

"No. They won't." Elliott stated. "I bet it feels good to be back to work."

"Yes, it does, Elliott." Joe replied. "Coming back today, felt like coming back to life. A little busy, but my sons kept things in order."

"Everyone was . . ."

Hal's clearing of his throat interrupted Elliott. "If you don't mind, Elliot, can I possibly, I don't know, inject a word or two into the conversation."

Joe shook his head. "What's up your ass?"

"My ass?" Hal asked. "I don't believe anything is *up* there. But thank you for asking. If you are referring to my mood. I'm sorry, I am. I guess I'm just tired. Heavy training does that."

"Working with the men?" Joe asked.

"No. They were working on me." Hal smiled. "Since dawn we had officer training day."

Joe just stared for a moment. "Officer training day. I see. And since it was officer training, were you the only one there?"

Elliott laughed.

Hal was expressionless for a second, then with dramatics, he tossed back his head, opened his mouth, and perfectly mimicked an hysterical laugh without ever making a sound. He exhaled loudly. "Aren't you funny?"

"I am." Joe said. "Now, we'll get started so you can get out of my office, and go back to Bowman where your own town can deal with your pissy mood. Now you know what we're here to discuss."

Hal lifted his hand slightly. "I'd like to speak about the meetings I've

been having with Sgt. Doyle.”

“You would, would you? And these are the meeting regarding society camp raids next spring?” Joe asked.

“Yes.” Hal answered.

“What month is it?”

“December.”

“Hold off until January or February. I’m sure you are handling things well enough you don’t need my input. Now . . .” Joe leaned back. “Jess Boyens. Something needs to move on this. He’s gonna have to go back to the society soon. Update me.”

Hal did, “Elliott’s been handling the last round of calls. Elliott?”

“I handled the last three.” Elliott said. “We’re still having Jess cover his ass by not giving old information only new. Secondly, we don’t know what Johnny has told him or hasn’t. I can’t believe we’ve not heard anything about Bev’s death.”

Joe nodded. “George can’t possibly know about that. Are we still sticking that Jess didn’t say a thing because he assumed George knew.”

“Yes.” Elliott replied. “And it’s been fortunate to us that the community isn’t fully aware of why Jess was detained. No one but Danny knew Sgt. Doyle fingered Jess. Jess has told George that Doyle isn’t a true defector. However, George doesn’t buy and keeps warning Jess to watch his ass.”

A pleased look hit Joe. “That works in our favor for when Jess tells George he has to book from Beginnings. Now even though we don’t have a good reason or time to send him back, I still think, just incase something pops up ASAP and he has to go, we should start prepping *Jess* ASAP. Hal?”

“I agree.” Hal nodded. “Elliott, what about this evening. I can’t leave New Bowman. Do you think you can make time to talk to Jess?”

“No.” Elliot answered. “It is my evening off.”

“So.” Hal said.

“So, I am looking forward to this evening off.”

“What in God’s name for?” Hal asked.

“To enjoy the evening off.”

Hal grumbled. “Fine. What about first thing tomorrow morning.”

Elliott inhaled with debate. “I’m sorry.” He exhaled out. “I can’t. I’m off tomorrow.”

“And I suppose you want to enjoy that as well?” Hal questioned.

“Yes. It’s the first day off I have had in a while.”

“But you have this evening off.” Hal stated. “And you have tomorrow

off too. Father.” He looked at Joe. “I must apologize for the sudden rush of laziness in my men.”

“Hal.” Joe had a soft edge. “The man wants a day off. You’ll have that.”

“No I will not.” Hal argued. “Elliott, I understand this sudden need to be . . . lax. But it’s a simple meeting, I am sure you can find time.”

“I can’t.” Elliott lifted his hands.

“Why?” Hal asked.

“Hal.” Joe interrupted. “Enough. Let the man have a day off.”

Elliott spoke with some uncomfortableness. “Captain, I wouldn’t be so adamant about it. However I made plans.”

“Plans?” Hal asked. “For tonight and tomorrow? What sort of plans?”

“Hal!” Joe yelled. “Leave him alone. It’s none of your business.”

“I beg to differ. Plan?” Hal looked at Elliott. “What are you up to Elliott?”

A knock at the door was Elliott’s saving grace.

“Come in.” Joe called out.

The door opened and in walked Frank. “Dad.”

“Hey, Frank.” Joe spoke. “We’re a little busy right now, is this important.”

“Very.” Frank shut the door and walked close to his father’s desk. “Very. I have to say this now. If I don’t. I won’t. And I may never say it. So just let me say it. OK?”

Hal would have made comment about Frank’s inability to speak functionally, however there was just something so nervous, and so down about his brother, no matter how much Hal wanted to, he couldn’t bring himself to pull out a snide remark. He sat up with attention.

“Go on.” Joe nodded. He, too, noticing Frank’s demeanor.

Over his hair and across his face Frank ran his hand then exhaled. “Before you say anything, I’m asking that you let me finish. OK?” Frank waited until he received agreement from Joe. “All right. Since I got of the clinic, I have broken the trust of this community. I’ve broken rules. More than once, more on a regular basis, I shut down the communications center tracing system and called the society to check on Johnny. Now . . . knowing what I did.” Frank lifted his hand. “And knowing that it is wrong, I know what I have to do. I am . . . I am resigning from not only head of security position, but security all together in Beginnings.” He looked at the silent faces that stared in shock. “So. Here are my keys.” Frank laid them on Joe’s desk. “My headset.” He removed it from his head and laid it down, then

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reached to his belt. "The headset receiver." He placed that down as well. "Walkie talkie." down that went. "Revolver." Frank slid it from the harness then speaking as he did so, started pulling things left and right from his person. "Hunting knife. Dean-ami mini grenades. Four clips. Handcuffs, and . . ." Frank placed his bot on Joe's desk, lifted his pant leg and took off the small caliber pistol strapped to his leg. He dropped that on Joe's desk top. "Mini me gun."

"Anything else?" Joe asked sarcastically.

"Um . . ." Frank felt himself. "Just my carrots." He pulled them out and set them down as well.

"Good lord, Frank." Hal looked upon the stuff in a pile. "Would you like to add any pocket change to that as well."

"Hal, there is no change in Beginnings." Frank shook his head in disbelief.

"First." Joe spoke up. "You will take all of this stuff, including you carrots and little snack cakes . . . and what ever else shit you dumped on my desk and take it all back. I will not let you resign. Got that."

"But, Dad. I broke rules." Frank argued. "Rules that I was able to because I'm trusted."

"True." Joe leaned back in his chair. "Yes, you broke rules but I understand why. Johnny's your kid. He was shot. It only goes to figure you would check on him. I can't blame you and I won't say anything. Now, I do need something from you."

"What's that?" Frank asked.

"You said you've been doing this since you got out of the clinic? Tell me Frank, why now. Why all of the sudden are you making a confession."

"Because one I feel bad. Two, I have vital information that has to get out."

"And that is?" Joe asked.

Frank let out a breath. "Every time I called, I got the same response. Johnny is making progress. Which told me he was in bad shape. The transvestite implied he was in the hospital. That explains why there hasn't been any society retaliation for Bev. Well . . . progress made. Shit can happen now. Today . . . Johnny answered the phone."

In a sudden movement Joe looked at Hal. "Well I guess we got the sign and time we were looking for. If Johnny's alive and well. We need Jess Boyens over there more than ever."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Frank's words, so strong, repeated more times than needed, *I fuckin hate you* rang through Elliott's mind along with Frank's final salutation of, *I owe you, though. Thanks*, while Elliott placed the envelope in the small back pack and secured it closed. He reached to the back of his sofa and grabbed his coat. After placing on his longer black leather jacket, he lifted an M-16, and tossed it over his shoulder. He secured that backpack on his other shoulder, and en-route to the front door, lifted his guitar case.

Glancing a 'once more' around his livingroom, Elliott opened up his front door and stepped onto the porch.

"A-Ha!" Hal shouted, jumping out from behind Elliott just as he was about to step off the porch.

Footing almost lost, Elliott did a smooth turn around and smiled at Hal. "Evening, Captain."

"Uh-ha." Hal nodded and walked slowly around Elliott. "Plans?"

"Yes."

"I see." One arm draped across his waist, Hal tapped his index finger on his chin as he observed Elliott. "Guitar. Backpack. Matrix coat . . ." Hal leaned in with a sniff. "Cologne." A few more steps around him and Hal touched Elliott's head. "Not only do you have the gel on you hair to tame those unruly, near pubic curly head hairs, you Elliott . . ." Hal reached out and opened Elliott's coat. ". . . have that black seduction shirt on."

Elliott laughed in ridicule. "Seduction shirt?"

"Yes. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were going on a date. A . . ." Hal tapped the back pack. "Over nighter, perhaps?"

"Captain . . ."

"A new gentlemen in town that you haven't told me about."

"Captain." Elliott scolded.

"What, uh, are these so called plans, Elliott?" Hal asked.

"They're of personal matters, sir, and I am not at liberty to say."

"I see." Hal calmly nodded. "Then try this. Tell me what your plans are Elliott." Hal grinned. "And that's an order."

^^^

Not that there was only one short man in town, Frank knew better. He

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knew many men were short. Actually most men in Beginnings, to Frank, were short. So maybe he was mistaken. It couldn't of been Dean he caught glimpse of walking with the girl, Misha through the living section. After all not only did the man walk fast and brisk, but Dean, in Frank's mind had kid-duty. He had to be home.

Frank was pulling what he called an 'all'. Day, evening and night. Savage surveillance had been postponed so tracking duty had to be increased incase of trouble. Frank was short handed, with Robbie gone, Sgt. Ryder taking the day off, he had to not only check perimeters, and tracking, Frank had to be available to cover. After all, cold and flu season had begun and it was taking its toll early.

Frank was tired. He caught an hour's sleep in his office and was grateful for that. But his mood was far from the best. He was edgy and irritable, and bound and determined to not let the trick he *hoped* his eyes played on him in seeing Dean, to effect his mood anymore.

Benefit of the doubt. It was just after dinner, actually bath time, where else would Dean be but with the kids.

Peculiarly quiet it was when Frank opened the front door. Also dim. The livingroom light was on, but the kitchen light was off. No dishes remained on the table, in fact the house was clean. "Hello?" He called out closing the door and looking at his watch. It was still early, barely past eight-thirty. At that second Frank wondered if everyone went to his father's for dinner.

Hoping that wasn't the case, because he only had a moment to eat and see the kids, he walked into the kitchen. On the stove was a casserole dish and Frank lifted the lid. "Dean." He spoke to himself. "What is this." He sniffed it. "Smells like Hector food. Whoa." Frank reached in and grabbed a piece of meat, "Getting creative. Good job."

"Dad." Josh called out from the kitchen doorway with a snicker. "Who are you talking to?"

"Myself. Directed at Dean." Frank turned around. "This is good. Where is Alex, Billy and Joey."

"Bed."

"Bed?" Frank looked again at his watch, tapped it, then listened. He hurried and looked at the stove. "What about a bath?"

"Done."

"Done?" Frank smiled. "Thanks, Josh."

Josh snickered. "Not me."

Impressed, Frank nodded. "Dean's finally getting on the ball. Where is



he? Is he in bed too.”

“No. He’s walking Misha to . . .”

“What?” Frank’s voice raised. “Misha? Misha was here?”

“Yeah. Like, Hector had that warmer break at the greenhouse, and Henry had to fix it. So She . . .”

“Came here? Was she here all evening?”

“Yeah.” Josh nodded with a teenage snicker. “You didn’t think Dean cooked and did the bed thing did you.”

“Misha?” Frank asked with edge. “Let me get this straight. She was here all evening. She cooked. Cleaned and bathed my kids?”

Nonchalantly, Josh nodded. “A-hmm.”

“Fuck.” Frank shook his head in disgust and moved from the kitchen.

“Dad what’s wrong.”

“Nothing.” He graveled and reached for the door. Just as he did, it opened and Dean walked in.

“Oh, hey Frank.” Dean spoke. “Did you get to . . .” Abruptly Dean was knocked back a step when Frank raged by him out the door. After the hard slam, Dean looked at Josh. “What’s wrong with him.”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Dean looked back at the just slammed door. It didn’t seem like ‘nothing’ to him, but after deducting it probably was an emergency of some kind, Dean shrugged it off and removed his jacket.

^^^

The whisper of a knock on the bedroom door made Ellen chuckle. From her Indian style sitting position on the bed, papers sprawled around her, she glanced up. “Come in.”

Slow the door opened and Robbie peeked his head in. “You’re up?”

Ellen chuckled. “It’s early, why would I be sleeping?”

“I haven’t heard from you.” Robbie stepped inside.

“I’m sorry.” Ellen lifted the papers. “I got really caught up in this.”

“What are you doing?” Robbie asked then moved to the bed and sat on the side.

“Christopher assessment. It’s largely theory based. But get me and Dean on theories. We go nuts. And that’s what I’ve been doing. Going nuts.”

“Seems like a lot.”

“Well, OK, granted I went a little overboard.” Ellen gathered the

papers. "But I wanted to make sure Dean had my opinion before he continued. Also, it would help him, eliminate some of the thought process he would have to do if I didn't do this. Make sense?"

Robbie nodded then shook his head.

Ellen smiled. "All right. See." She glanced down to her notes. "I have the Christopher story written here. Then I give my interpretation or rather theories. Using the large body of God's tears, we went west coast. Which . . . made perfect sense. Remember he was telling us after God had saved them and led them from the catacombs of death?"

"Yes."

"OK. Him and his friend went topside when he was seventeen. He said he was in a place that was a girl's forest."

"Did you find the forest on the map?"

"I tried. I'm looking. I'm looking and . . ." Ellen pulled forth the map and pointed with her index finger.

"Hollywood. Holly . . . wood."

"Exactly. Which . . . explains the close proximity walk."

"Through the tunnels and sewer system for three days." Robbie said. "So you think they live in LA?"

"Yes. Many of those buildings have sub levels that connect from building to building underground. Which would explain how their civilization expanded some. "

"And they lived underground all these years. Is that the explanation for the skin factor?"

"No, I have that figured out." Ellen responded. "Remember Chris told us of the false prophet who led them to the walls of salvation when the world was dying. He described seeing these cement walls. He said they were large tubes above the ground and they went into the buildings below."

"Nuclear power plant."

"Exactly." Ellen nodded. "Power went down. Core cooled, but the radiation was at a constant leaking level which would manipulate their genes. The radiation would also burn off their skin. Dean's gonna have to come up with why the offspring is translucent was well. OK, so then here's my theory on God."

"Go on." Robbie got comfortable on the bed.

"Chris said that God arrived and the false prophet wouldn't let him in. Chris said they were all very ill and God fought the prophet, defeated him, led them from the combs, then healed them. God . . . is a doctor, and he kept them underground not as some sort of sick dementia of his part, but

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as a precaution because God knew the elements would kill these people without the protective layer of epithelial.”

“Not to put a hole in your story. But there has to be a sick dementia. He’s calling himself God and you’ve heard Chris talk.”

“Yes, well, after a few years the leadership went to his head.” Ellen shrugged. “Speaking of Chris. Where is he?”

“Watching the tracking system for me.” Robbie answered. “So I could come see what was up with you. And I see you’ve been busy.”

“It’s fun. I got caught up.”

“A lot of work.”

“It’ll help Dean.”

“And here I thought you were just getting tired of me.” Robbie smiled.

“Who me? Never. No, I needed to work. Something is going on.”

“What do you mean?” Robbie asked, looking at her oddly.

Ellen exhaled and ran her hand through her hair. “This is gonna sound insane, but something is happening with Frank. Nothing bad. But he’s reaching out. He’s placing a call to me. He’s really down, and I can feel it.”

Robbie stared at her for a second.

“You think I’m nuts.”

Slowly, Robbie stood from the bed.

“Robbie? What is it?”

“It’s amazing.” with his back to her, hand on hip, Robbie spoke in a daze.

“What is?”

“Even way out here. This far from home. You’re sensing him.”

“I may be off.”

Robbie shook his head and faced her. “No way. No . . . way. If you say he’s down, he is. And now, I’m just a little worried for him. Frank’s not been Frank.”

“I know, he’s mood has been different. With all that happened with Johnny and . . .”

“He’s drinking again, El.” Robbie injected.

“He had an incident where he had a drink and . . .”

“No.” Robbie nearly moaned out the word. “He’s . . . he’s drinking regularly again.”

“How regularly, Robbie?” Ellen asked as she stood from the bed and walked to him.

Deep through his nostril, Robbie drew a thinking breath. “From what I’m hearing, everyday.”

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Ellen's eyes closed.

"He hasn't owned up to it with me." Robbie said. "I asked him. 'He's lying about it. But . . . with all that was happening, OK, I understood the weakness. Johnny. My Dad. But now with you sensing something is wrong, what if he goes back over that edge. Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe you're only sensing his missing you.'"

"I wish we knew." Ellen said.

In the silent moment of thought, from downstairs not only did the alarm blare, but so did Christopher's voice screaming, "Alien! Alien!"

In a rush to the door, Robbie flung it open and bolted down the stairs. In his plight to the diningroom he lifted his M-16.

"Alien! Alien!"

Butt of the rifle against his hip, Robbie pumped the chamber as he peered over Christopher's shoulder to the monitor.

Out of breath, Ellen entered the diningroom. "what's going on."

"Alien! Alien!"

"One." Robbie moved from the monitors. "No need to worry." He set down the M-16.

"Why?" Ellen asked

"The cheat path?" Robbie quizzed as he moved to the front door. "The minuscule window that has no warning time from alarm to beam?"

"Yeah."

"They found it. They walked right through. It would be like finding a needle in a haystack or extremely lucky to do that accidentally. They had to know." Robbie grabbed the front door handle. "And if my timing calculations are correct." He opened the door then after looking out, peered to Ellen with a wide grin.

Curiously, arms folded to her to block out the cold, Ellen stepped into the foyer. "What?"

Robbie stepped back while opening the door wider.

Elliott walked in. "I was, uh, in the neighborhood." He set down his things. "Care for company?"

^^^

After a glance at Johnny who looked as if he could drown in the soup he stared, George returned to Steward. "So I told Boyens to watch his back. Doyle is a true defector and is using him to pinpoint him as a true spy."

"I agree." Steward commented.

"Now, back to 'It'." George questioned. "You think they dug in?"

"Yes," Steward replied. "They have to be hiding. And, sir, there is no way 'It' made it to Beginnings yet. Not yet. Boyens would have said something."

"Boyens, doesn't know 'it'." George said.

"True," Steward commented. "However, come on, if 'It' shows up in Beginnings, everyone is going to know."

George bobbed his head. "You have a point. And we have search parties out there still?"

Bertha answered, "Yes. North and south, despite what Mr Lange suggested. Not many though."

Slowly George stood up, he rubbed his chin, gave another glance to Johnny.

Steward had a suggestion. "We could put more troops in there. More of a circumference. However, adding any more would be noticeable. Any large movement can be considered an act of war. At this point in time, do we really want that?"

Curiously, George looked at him. "Stew, we could crush them."

"Can we?" Steward asked.

Before George scoffed in ridicule, he looked at Bertha. "We can, can't we?"

"Depends what route you want to take. If we want to drop a couple nukes, sure we'd take them out. Hand to hand, strict strategic? We'd pretty much have to send everything we have over there. Nukes are not the way to go. For the same reason our men, right now are no match."

George lifted his hand. "I'm confused. We totally outnumber them."

"If I may." Bertha stated. "Mr. Lang and myself were discussing this."

George grumbled. "Thank you for letting me in on it."

Bertha continued. "They have something we don't. A brotherhood."

"Christ." George griped. "Of course it's a brotherhood, it's a goddamn Slagel state of the Union over there. But . . ." He calmed some. "You're right. No longer are they a measly one hundred people behind a wall. With defectors, and that new town they acquired, they're pushing three thousand strong. And that's three thousand with heart. We don't have that here. We don't have unity."

Steward agreed. "And we need unity to stand strong against any overseas forces that try to get this land. You know, that is going to happen. We feed. We have growth. We don't have unity. We have nothing."

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George nodded. "Any strong arm tactic we make on our own soil, may defeat everything we try to convey to our forces. We can't have that. We still have half a goddamn country to acquire people and all. Trust me when I tell you, Beginnings is going to go after those people as well. We'll be kidding ourselves if we think that they're all going to settle and live happily ever after in the blooming state of Montana." George paced some. "And I don't think for a second that pompous patriot Hal Slagel has stopped his so-called calvary induced freedom fight."

Soft, dazed, and with shock Johnny gazed up finally. "Uncle Hal? Uncle Hal is alive."

Quickly, George looked at Bertha then Steward. He cleared his throat. "yes, your Uncle Hal is alive."

"Oh, my God." Johnny wisped out. "What is this freedom fight?"

"Don't worry about." George waved him off. "Anyhow, back to what we were . . ."

"I talked to my father today." Johnny spoke monotone.

A stunned silence hit George and he shot a stare at Johnny. "What?"

"I . . ." Johnny set down his spoon. "I was waiting on Sgt. Callahan. Her phone rang. I answered it. It was my father. I'm sorry for answering your phone." he peered to Bertha. "It was ringing. He said something about seeing how I was and he hung up.

"You'll have that." George said.

"And he said something else." Johnny exhaled. "You have to tell me if it's true. He said . . . he implied I shot him. Did I?"

George hesitated. "Yes. Yes you did. On your escape. And . . . and it wasn't the first time you shot your father."

Johnny's eyes widened.

"However." George 'upped' his voice. "It was the first time you shot your grandfather."

Barreled. Johnny's whole body visually trembled.

"Sir?" Bertha with concern hurried to Johnny. "Stew, get me something strong to drink. Son?"

"I shot . . . I shot . . . I shot . . . my pap. Oh, my God. Oh, my God." Johnny immediately began hyperventilating.

"Calm down." George rushed to him, took the shot of whiskey Steward handed and gave it to Johnny. "Down this."

The small amount of liquid waved in the glass as Johnny brought it to his mouth,

Hand over Johnny's George guided him to drink. "You're grandfather

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

is fine. He's alive. Flesh wound. And I'm gonna probably guess that was an accident. No matter what I don't see you shooting your pap on purpose. Now your father, that's a different story."

A gasp escaped Johnny after the whiskey had made its way into him. He set down the glass. "I shot my father." seemingly in a fog, Johnny stared straight out. "What happened, George?" With a sad innocence Johnny lifted his eyes. "What happened that it brought me to the point . . ." His voice cracked some. "The point where I'd shoot my own father?"

^^^

Almost with an exasperating whisper, Ellen closed her eyes and brought the paper to her lips. "Frank." She kissed the letter, opened her eyes and smile at Elliott. "Thank you. Thank you for this."

"You're welcome for that." In the kitchen, alone, Elliott leaned into her and kissed her forehead. "I am very glad I brought a smile so genuine to your face."

"Just know, it's not just this." Ellen held up the letter. "It's everything. It's you showing up out of the blue. Joining us here for an evening. This is great, Elliott."

Awkwardly, Elliott smiled. "I do have a confession to make. The visit . . . it wasn't my idea. I am not a rule breaker. As much as I wanted to come out earlier, especially on Christmas, I couldn't. I was under orders from the captain. But . . . but Frank, he's been down. And when he approached me yesterday and asked if I would run a message to you, I didn't refuse. It was my excuse to see you. Frank can not leave the walls. However, when his mood pummeled today . . ." Elliott shook his head. "It no longer was my excuse, it was duty. This visit now is for Frank."

"His letter doesn't reflect a major problem."

"Just a major missing, maybe?" Elliott asked.

"Yes."

"He has issues, Ellen." Elliott stated. "We'll discuss them further. But for now, this letter is his secret to you."

"So know one knew about this?" Ellen asked.

"No."

"If no one knew. How come I got a letter from Hal and my father as well?"

Elliott chuckled. "The Captain busted me leaving. So I was forced to tell the truth. When I did, in order for him to keep his silence, I had to wait

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until he and his father wrote you a message as well. I was blackmailed. It's a Slagel thing."

"Elliott." Ellen softened her voice. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Absolutely."

"When you get back. Can you watch Frank for me. Even at a distance. Watch him. He's drinking again. I'm worried."

"Shall I let Dr. Hayes know this?"

Ellen thought about it. "If you think Dean should know, let him know. Play it by ear. But do this for me."

"With out a doubt."

Excitedly, Ellen placed the letter in her pocket. "And I'm glad you're staying for a while. I can respond to these, and hear you sing. Speaking of which . . . let's head back in the livingroom. Christopher is enjoying you." Ellen started to walk.

"Speaking of which." Elliott took hold of her arm. "Two things."

"What are they?" Ellen asked.

"One, why does that man call me the God of Hispanic Crooners?"

"Um . . . Robbie gave you that name."

"I see." Elliott nodded. "Secondly." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "He has no skin."

"Oh, sure he does. You just can't see it."

"And he is heading to Beginnings?" Elliott asked.

"Yes. But, about the skin thing. Don't say anything. He'll show up covered in black. And he has orders to go directly to Frank."

"Ellen. Do you not think that might be a grand shock?"

"Yes." Ellen grinned. "That's the whole point. So don't blow it." She took a step and stopped. "Oh, about that point when Chris unmasked himself to Frank. Wouldn't you love to be a fly on the wall?"

Before giving him a chance to respond Ellen had moved on from the kitchen. After a second of thought, Elliot chuckled. If he could choose a moment to be a fly on the wall, Frank's first viewing of Christopher would definitely top his list of moments.

^^^

The first of his two drink limit poured from the bottle and glazed over the ice in the glass which perched upon the bar at the social hall. Frank didn't bother capping the bottle, he knew he'd have another after he finished the one before him.



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Empty, it was after hours, and on his break, Frank sat down on the stool. His elbows rested on the bar, hands gripped the drink, and he looked down into the alcohol. Contemplation of how fast or slow he would consume that drink was what he thought about. Not if he should.

Eyes lost in a hypnotic stare of the 'liquid' reflection, Frank heard the odd opening and closing of the social hall door. He didn't bother to look, he didn't need to. The voice spoke up immediately upon entrance.

"Thought someone was in here." Jenny said upbeat.

Frank didn't bother to turn around, his eyes stayed down.

"I'm glad. I could not sleep." She scuffled about the social hall. "Had that foot reading thing today and I know . . . whew!" She giggled. "I knew I left my fuzzy slippers here somewhere. Ah . . ." She sighed out . "Now I can sleep. I couldn't sleep until I had them in my possession you know."

Frank said nothing.

"I thought. Look in the morning." Jenny rambled. "But, as I laid there I kept wondering, well, what will I do when I get out of bed. I won't have my fuzzy blue slippers to put on. That depressed me. It's cold. My feet will ache on the cold floors."

Slowly Frank lifted the drink.

"No to mention I think my pinky toe has arthritis. And the cold will most certainly not help that."

Just as Frank brought the glass to his lips he felt the firm grabbing of his wrist. His eyes shifted to Jenny who stood right next to him.

Firm, yet compassionate, she locked eyes on him. "Don't. OK?" she released his wrist. "Oh, Frank. I know. I do. How you are handling everything is beyond me. There is so much pummeling your life right now, even the strongest of us would be weak. But not you. Not you."

"Jenny."

"No, listen to me. More than anyone, I understand you wanting this drink. More than anyone you deserve this drink. But could you await until after your done working. I feel safe with you watching us, Frank, but I'd sure as heck would feel a lot safer knowing you didn't have that drink in you."

Frank swallowed. "You're right." eh set down the glass. "You're . . . you're absolutely right." Slowly he stood up. "Jenny." He looked at her with a nod. "Thanks." Turning, Frank grabbed his coat and began to leave.

Jenny smiled. "You're welcome. Frank? Did you want to talk about it."

"Nah. But thank you anyhow." Still down, not feeling any better, Frank left the social hall. But he left the social hall sober.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

January 3<sup>rd</sup>

“So you understand, Jess?” Joe asked as they sat in his office.

“Yes.” Jess nodded.

“You’ll make the phone call today.” Factually, Joe stated. “It has to be done. Give us six months. We’re not asking for a lifetime.”

“I completely understand.”

A fast, double knock rang out from Joe’s office door, and before an invitation ‘in’ was given, the door opened and Danny Hoi peeked inside. “You wanted to see me, Joe?”

“Yes, Danny, come in.” Joe stood up. “Jess, I’ll see you later this afternoon.”

Jess extended his hand to Joe. “Thanks.”

After waiting for Jess to leave, Joe sat back down. “Sorry to get you up here in the middle of your morning rush.”

“That’s OK, what’s up?” Danny asked.

“The counter. The one you gave Frank.”

“What about it.”

“Is it accurate?” Joe questioned.

“Absolutely.”

“Does it matter who mans it?”

Danny snickered. “No. Why?”

“Well, Frank got a count this morning. And it varied from the one he and Dean received the last time they went out.”

“OK.” Danny nodded.

“Well, my point is, Dean’s a scientist. Frank, well, he has problems sometimes with one plus one. Dean didn’t go with Frank today.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Danny shook his head. “It’s a scanner. It reads like our trackers. If Frank can read a number, Frank has an accurate count. What’s going on.”

“Weather held us back from going out for a few days.” Joe said with concern. “We had a drop in numbers from that savage camp.”

“Did Frank spot them on the surveillance?” Danny asked.

“Nope.” Joe shook his head. “Even went west. Nothing. So I thought, Frank counted wrong. But if that’s not the case, and the counter is accurate.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Then the camp is definitely missing some savages. And the question would be. If they aren't there . . . where are they?"

^^^

"Oh, yeah." Frank grinned, 'Ouch.' with a grunt, to his arm he reached and snapped the arrow off just at the head. Holding what was left of the weapon, he readied himself, and when the savage charged forth, the savage charged forth, neck first into the remaining arrow that Frank seared into him. Releasing an enjoyable 'ha', Frank lifted the savage and ejected him over his shoulder.

Next.

Ignoring the pleas of security, asking if he needed assistance, Frank continued in his fight. Another swing of his body, and lift of his M-16, a sick smile hit Frank in the shower of blood that sprayed from the bodies he pummeled with the automatic weapon.

Down four went.

The rustle of leaves caught his attention, but he didn't think much about it until he realized how far out into the killer baby region he had backed up.

Thinking, 'oh fuck' but being secure in the fact he could out run any ensuing attack of small predators, Frank concentrated on the remaining three he knew were in that field.

They were there. He could smell them. The sound of flesh being devoured wasn't predominant and a savage lunch wasn't being had by the nearby small predators.

'Where. Where.' Frank readied his weapon as he stood at a complete stand still. The blood from the arrow head stopped dripping down his arm. "Where?"

War call.

To his left Frank shifted a view, up from the weeds lunged the savage, but his leap was in vain. Mid jump, right behind flew a barrage of killer babies. Ready to chuckle out an 'enjoy', Frank felt the pelting of weight to his back. Reaching behind, he grabbed a handful of hair, snapped the savage forward, and bracing to snap his neck, Frank decided against it. The weight of the savage was nil, and with ease, Frank lifted him then tossed him out to where he knew the killer babies lurked.

Turning, he knew the third had to be there. And he was.

Waiting and ready, the savage appeared too confident in his ensuring

battle with Frank. Lifting his rifle, just wanting to end it, Frank didn't get a chance. Surprising even him, from behind the savages shot four killer babies.

Horrendous screams of agony lasted only briefly, then they were followed with the upward ejection of flesh.

"Fuck." Frank grunted out. They weren't suppose to be there. The killer babies weren't suppose to be in that direction.

To his left, he looked, and saw the waving fields, to his right, more. Frank couldn't run backwards that was heading directly to the heart of the killer baby region. The cracking of the frozen foliage rang out more, and figuring he would just charge forward, Frank leaped.

He heard the growl, saw the blur, knew what was coming and turned.

Another growl. Another blur, to his right he pivoted.

Encircled by a cloud of moving skin, up from the icy fields it rose. All around him and fast they came. There was only one way to go, and that was 'up'. Just as Frank was going to do his best jump yet, they arrived.

At least twenty of them, with unison hungry growls, lunged that final leap to him. Blood laced jaws, they reeked of rotten flesh, and they made it with in an inch of Frank before they . . . stopped.

Frank could smell their breath, see their eyes, sense their fangs a second before every killer baby fell to the ground around him in a praising mode, and began to gurgle out what Frank believed could only be a Journey song.

"Oh." Frank spoke and looked around in awe as more killer babies joined. Hand on hip, he nodded. "Oh, yeah, I'm their God."

^^^

"You what!" Joe blasted as he stepped from the jeep with Frank in the field perimeter just before the killer baby region.

"I can't kill them anymore."

"What do you mean you can't kill them?" Joe yelled. "They're goddamn killer babies, Frank."

"But Dad, they're my friends."

"Dear God." Joe cringed. "And get that arm stitched."

"I will. After."

"After what?"

"Down the perimeter." Frank spoke into the headset.

"Frank? What are you doing?" Joe asked.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Watch.” Frank pushed open the gate. “But stay here, I don’t think they like you. Not that they told me. I don’t understand their language. But I will.”

“Frank!” Joe watched Frank confidently, no weapon ready head straight to the field.

“Watch!” Frank called out. “Hello! I’m back.”

Joe mumbled. “I’m watching all right.” He pulled out his revolver. “I’m watching my son be fast-food.” It the midst of shifting his chamber on his gun, Joe saw Frank stop, and then he saw the movement. “Oh, my God. Frank! Get out of there!”

In a ‘don’t be silly’ fashion, Frank lifted his hand in a wave to his father.

Like nothing he had ever witnessed, Joe’s heart dropped when he watched the complete blur of the oncoming attack lift up and shoot Frank’s way. “Frank!” Joe aimed, but it was in vain. The blur disappeared. Murmuring out a puzzled, ‘what?’ in his curiosity of what happened, he saw Frank turn around. In his arm he held a killer baby. “I’ll be goddamned.” Lowering his revolver, he replaced it. By the time Joe looked back up many more had engulfed a grinning Frank. Some sat on his shoulder, other fought to be in his arms. And if Joe wasn’t mistaken, he swore they were singing.

The vision before Joe was one he had seen many times in his Catholic upbringing. Many times, in pieces of religious art, the image of St. Francis, so loving, was encumbered with animals. Perhaps in a demented comparison, in Joe’s eyes, Frank appeared the same way at that moment. It had a sort of peaceful effect on Joe. How fitting, Joe thought. St. Francis, was the patron saint of animals, and Frank, in his own way, was living up to his namesake.

^^^

Should he had done that?

On the side of the bed in his room, Robbie sat. His hand covered his eyes, head down, water from his wet head dripped across his fingers. His mind was not far from the events that transpired a half an hour before hand.

Perhaps as time passed in the day he would forget. But at that second, that moment, he couldn’t think of anything else. Not even the pain in his leg where he took that spear.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

It was an inbred habit to take a demented moment to look. And Robbie did as the second wave of savages flew through the 'upped' fry beams.

Limbs and blood tossed about, and just as he smiled, forgetting that so many had made it onto the property, off from the porch leaped a savage onto his back.

Robbie went down. His body weight was sufficient in a struggle to regain his footing, but the savage was joined by another, and both of them bracing him from behind opened Robbie up to the spear from the third. The spear that would have killed Robbie had Elliott Ryder not fired out at the right moment.

The bullet hit the savage just as the spear released. It sailed at a bad angle landing into Robbie's thigh. Then Elliott took out the ones that had him.

From that second forward it didn't matter how many Savages Robbie had taken out prior to that instant in the fight, it didn't matter how many he stopped from getting Elliott. Right then, when he dropped from the spear, Robbie dropped in self worth.

And the worthless stayed with him, after he was stitched, and showered.

"Hey." Elliott knocked on the door then opened it.

Robbie cleared his throat and stood up. "Hey, Elliott." He grabbed for his tee shirt.

"How's the leg."

"Good." Robbie put on his shirt then ran his fingers through his hair to straighten it.

"You OK?" Elliott asked.

"Fine." Robbie nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. Did I miss lunch."

A chuckle escaped Elliott. "No."

"So, um, what's up?"

"I'm taking off." Elliott gave a backwards point of his thumb. "Gonna drop Chris off at Jordan so he can do the Ellen plan of heading to Beginnings unexpected and alone."

"Then you'll be back?" Robbie asked.

"Um, no." Elliott responded. "I'm going home."

"You are?"

Elliott laughed. "You seem surprised."

"I am." Robbie walked to him. "Look, Elliott. What about . . . what about staying."

“What?”

“No, I’m serious. Stay.”

“For how long.”

“The duration of the month.” Robbie stated.

Again, Elliott laughed “I’m sure the Captain would love that.”

“Hal will live.”

The smile left Elliott’s face. “You’re . . . you’re serious.”

“Dead serious.” Robbie turned from Elliott and walked across the bedroom keeping his back to him.

“Where is this coming from?”

Soft was the chuckle Robbie released and he stood by the window looking out. “I guess El didn’t tell you. Probably was waiting for me to do it. But, she wants you to stay here, Elliott. She does. She wants to use this time with you.”

“As much as my ego would love to believe that . . . You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“Turn around and face me.” Elliott said as he reached back and shut the door.

Slowly Robbie turned from the window.

“Robbie, what’s going on?”

Robbie exhaled. “You have to stay.”

“I can not stay. I am needed at home.”

“You’re needed here.”

“No, I am not.” Elliott walked to him.

“Yes, you are.” Robbie moved to him. “Look at me.”

“What about you.”

“I can’t . . . I can’t do my job.”

“The injury is hardly debilitating.”

Robbie closed his eyes, and gave a twitch of his head in a frustrated moment. “My thigh . . .” He looked at Elliott. “. . . is not what I’m talking about, and you know it.”

“No, I don’t. What *are* you talking about.”

“Today. You saw what happened today. You were there.”

Elliott head went back and forth in confusion. “So.”

“So?” Robbie asked passionately. “You saw how many there were. You saw what happened to me. What . . . what would have happened had you not been here.”

“You would have handled it.”

“I doubt it.”

“And *that*.” Elliott pointed with an edge at Robbie. “Is your problem. Doubt.”

“It isn’t doubt, it’s the truth.”

Elliott stared for a second. “I have to go.”

“You can’t.” Robbie raised his voice as Elliott opened the door. “You hear me? You can’t! If you walk out. If you leave. You are leaving Ellen vulnerable, because I can’t protect her!”

“Bullshit!” Elliott spun around. “Bullshit. Should my gut instincts doubt you, then that would be reason for me to stay. But I refuse, refuse to stay because you doubt yourself. *That* isn’t good enough. This guilt . . .” Elliott’s hand flung out. “That you have decided to place on me . . .” He took a step to Robbie and whispered. “It isn’t good enough. You have the ability. What you faced today is nothing you haven’t defeated before nor is it something you won’t defeat again. Do you hear me?”

“Elliott.” Robbie’s head dropped.

“No, Robbie. No.” Elliott backed up. “Don’t do this to me. Don’t. Not once have I ever second guessed your protection over Ellen. Not once. Don’t allow me to leave here today worrying because you have decided you can’t handle things when they get rough.”

“I can’t.”

“Since when?”

Robbie charged. “Since I lost my arm!”

“And you want to depend on me, right now, to do what you can’t do.”

“Yes.”

“All the more reason for me to leave.”

Robbie shuddered. “What?”

“You have it. You have this . . . this skill.” Elliott spoke emotionally. “You and your brothers all have it. It’s in you. You’re born with it. What some men wouldn’t give to have that internal instinct to protect and fight, and emerge victoriously. To be nothing less than a hero every single time. Let me tell you what it is like from an outsider’s point of view . . . Amazing. It is amazing to watch all three of you. And if you doubt your ability, even just a little, then you Robbie, are passing up the perfect opportunity to regain every faith in yourself. To prove to yourself, mind and heart, that the rest of you is more than that arm alone ever was. If you need a crutch to stand on. If you need a crutch to give you confidence, then let *this* . . .” Elliott held out his hand in a point to the room. “Let this be your crutch. Let Ellen’s dependancy on you be what you need to make you strong. I promise you, that you can do this. The second you are needed, you will



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

instinctively emerge into what you and your brothers naturally become. At the end of the next fighting moment, the next protective stance you take, you will again be that hero. And I promise you, at that moment, you will need a crutch no more.”

Robbie wanted to speak. Elliott’s eyes locked dead on him with this strong look upon his face. Robbie wanted to say something, ‘thank you’, anything, even tell Elliott, ‘hell of a speech’ but he couldn’t. Ellen’s wispings. ‘Oh, Elliott’ stole the moment. The serious tension was broken and Robbie slightly snorted a laugh.

Jaw tense, eyes even wider, Elliott turned around in shock to see Ellen standing in the open doorway.

“Oh, Elliott.” Ellen laid her hand on her chest. “That was beautiful.”

“Yeah, Elliott.” Robbie winked. “Beautiful.”

Almost embarrassed, Elliott closed his eyes and shook his head. “I must go.” He returned to looking at Robbie. “Instruct me to go.”

Robbie gave a upward motion of his head. “Go.”

Ellen smiled at Robbie, keeping her stare on him. “Elliott, I’ll walk you out.” she turned and moved through the door.

“Elliott.” Robbie called. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“One more thing.” Robbie waited for Elliott to stop. “This . . . This, me, being down on myself. You . . . are you gonna tell my father and brothers?”

“Robbie.” Elliott stood in the doorway. “I admire all of you Slagels beyond belief. And believe it or not, at times, I wish I were one of you. So . . . with that on mind. Keep in mind, you better believe, in typical Slagel fashion . . .” Elliott smiled. “I’m telling.”

^^^

Hard George rubbed the corner of his eyes, holding that phone to his ear in Bertha’s office. “It doesn’t matter what the rumor is, they’ll shoot you. Get out of there. Did you make another connection to us.”

“Yes.” Jess answered. “I’ll tell you all about it when I get there. But I have to get out. I’m on Robbie’s phone now and I know they’re looking for me.”

“Goddamn Doyle, I told you not to trust him.”

“He was convincing.”

“Get to Duluth. We’ll get you to Quantico from there. Can you get to

Duluth.”

“Yes. I have had that jeep hidden since you made the suggestion.”

“Then go. Go now. We’ll work this out. Give me an hour.” George said.

“Thank you.”

Exhaling, George hung up there phone.

Steward looked at him. “Caught.”

“Yes.” George nodded. “And we can not afford to have another traitor be shot. Whether Jess Boyens has one sheet of paper to give us, or a shit load. Johnny arrived with nothing.”

“Jess has more than that.” Steward stated. “Doesn’t he? You knew they were on his coattails, you knew he would have to get out of there soon. That is why you set up his post here in Quantico for a while. And that is why you never pushed him for information. If you took a chance to keep a phone call going, then you took a chance of him getting caught. If that happened, the most valuable information would never get passed to you.”

George nodded. “Beverly.”

“Bev.” Through his nostril Steward drew a breath. “I’ll get on the phone, get our people in Duluth ready for his arrival, and finalize things here. How long will he be in Quantico?”

“Not long. A man of his skills is needed.” George commented. “After proving himself, I’ll probably give him Callahan’s position down south.”

Bertha, who had sat quiet, widened her eyes when she spoke up. “But, sir sending him down south would . . .”

“Callahan, please.” George scoffed. “He works for us. He was trained to work for us. He’s a valuable man with valuable skills. Trust me when I tell you, in our training phases, we need him. Now to get him.” George took a couple pacing steps. “We need to occupy Joe’s mind. We need something so they don’t notice Jess slipping out. Or go after him.”

“A diversion?” Steward asked.

“Yes.” George answered.

As Bertha nodded her agreement, she noticed Johnny approach the open door and raise his hand to knock. “Yes?” She spoke to Johnny.

“Hey.” Placing his hands in his pockets, Johnny stepped inside. “George. George I’m sorry to interrupt.”

“What is it?” George asked.

“I have a favor. You can say no..” Johnny’s voice took on a wave of nervousness. “I need to do something.” He closed his eyes. “I have to. Can

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... Can I call my grandfather, please?"

At first George wanted to blast out, 'no!', but he didn't. Seeing how Johnny wasn't really looking at any of them, George stole the opportunity to glance at Steward with a smile, and whisper of the words, 'diversion found.'

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The last of the ten papers ejected from the printer in the clinic lab. Dean took them, and tapped them on the counter to group them neatly. "OK, El . . . I mean . . ." He cringed as he turned around. "Misha. I'm sorry."

"No." She said mildly. "That is quite all right, Dean. I understand."

"Thanks." Dean walked to the counter and handed her the stack. "Here you go. I'd say this is homework. Get to know these results to look at. Up top . . ." Dean pointed as he stood right next to her in an explaining mode. "It tells you what type of test was ran."

"All these figures." Misha looked through the papers confused.

"Don't worry about the numbers. That's my department. Separating is yours. We get a lot of blood tests. Especially this time of year. It's cold and flu season. So you have people coming into the clinic left and right. Many of which will ask to be tested for the plague."

Quickly Misha glanced at Dean.

"Yep." Dean nodded, then shrugged. "Go figure, and every once and a while Jason thinks he's cute and marks the blood work 'test for plague'. If you see that, it will be with three tubes of blood. When people want tested for the plague, we run a standard CBC or complete blood count as its proper name is. White blood cell, red blood cell, leukocytes and so forth."

"Lots of code names to learn."

"Yes. You've learned yesterday to separate different types of samples, now today, you have to work on breaking down the requisitions for different types of test on those . . ."

Frank's deep voice interrupted. "Dean."

Dean turned around. "The stranger."

Frank slightly rolled his eyes. "Whatever." He lifted his arm. "There was a savage attack, I have an arrow head in my arm like a fuckin splinter can you get it out?"

Almost uncomfortable, Dean shifted his eyes to Misha. "Frank can you . . Can you watch your language."

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“What?” Frank barked a scoffing laugh.

Misha lifted her arm. “It is all right.”

“Can you, Dean?” Frank asked.

Dean walked over to Frank. He peered at the wound in examination.

Frank’s eyes stayed on Misha who followed Dean.

“It’s not too deep.” Dean commented. “However . . . I’m kind of busy. Andrea and Jason are in the clinic.”

“Figures.” Frank grumbled.

From the wound to Frank, Misha looked. “It appears to not have been cleansed. I could clean that while you wait to be attended.” She reached for his arm.

Frank pulled back. “No.” He said firm. “No, I’d rather not have you touch me. Any woman for that matter.”

Politely, Misha smiled. “I understand.”

“Frank.” Dean scolded. “Why are you being like that?”

“Like what?” Frank asked.

“Really rude to her.”

“Fuck you, Dean, I’m not being rude.”

“Yeah, you are, Frank.”

Misha held up her hand. “Dean. No. I understand his reasoning. I do.” She spoke sweet. “General Slagel has a dedication . . .”

Dean laughed. “General Slagel. Don’t call him that. Call him Frank.”

Shocked, Misha looked at Dean. “That would be disrespectful.”

“He’s not a general.” Dean argued.

“Does he not lead his own army?” Misha asked.

Frank huffed. “I’m out of here. I have to find someone who has time to take care of this.” He began to leave.

Misha looked at her watch. “I must run, too. I promised my Hector I would have lunch with him.”

“Can you not?” Dean asked. “I really wanted to introduce you to the cryo lab and everything down there.”

The squeal of Frank’s boot rang from the hall and back into the lab he stormed. “What the fuck are you doing, Dean?”

Confused, Dean looked up. “What are you talking about. And I asked you to watch your language.”

Frank stepped to him. “The cryo lab?”

“Yes.” Dean nodded.

“The cryo lab is Ellen’s world, Dean. Ellen. That’s her domain.”

“Yeah, so, where are you going with this?” Dean asked.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Un-fuckin-believable.” Frank shook his head.

“What!” Dean tossed his hands up. “She’s my assistant, she has to learn the cryo lab.”

“And I will say again . . .” Frank leaned closer to Dean. “That is Ellen’s domain.”

“Um, yeah.” Dean said sarcastically. “And Ellen left work down there.”

Nervously, Misha cleared her throat. “Dean, I have to leave now. I can not disappoint Hector. I apologize. Perhaps . . . I am not ready for the cryo lab.” She looked at Frank peacefully, then back to Dean. “I think another time.” She removed her lab coat. “I will be back in an hour.” She started to leave then stopped. “General Slagel, please take care of that arm.”

Frank nodded without looking, stared at Dean for a second, then turned to leave.

“Frank.” Dean called to him. “What is your problem?”

Only for a moment, in the lab door, Frank stopped, glared at Dean, said nothing and continued to leave.

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“Good Lord, he’s their friend now?” Hal asked in disbelief as he walked with Joe.

“What can I say.” Joe shrugged. “More of a father to them from what I saw.”

“Let me think.” Hal stopped. “Murderous infants. My brother Frank. Yes, I can see the genetic connection.”

“Knock it off. I am dead serious.” Joe stated and kept walking. “They didn’t attack him. Had to be forty total just mobbing him for love.”

“Father.” Hal lifted an explaining finger. “Do you know how absurd this entire thing sounds. Forty killer babies mobbing Frank for love.”

“You have to see it.”

“What brought it about?”

“My opinion . . .” Joe reached for his office door. The phone was ringing from inside. “I think it’s the fact that he fed them and sang to them. They knew him.” he hurried to his desk. “Let me get this.” He picked up the phone. “Yeah.”

No words. Nothing.

“Hello?” Joe called out.

“Pap. Pap-pap?” Johnny spoke near innocent.

Hal saw it on his father’s face, the look of shock. “Dad?”

Druga-Johnston/The Game

Joe held up his hand and slowly sat down speaking into the phone.  
“Johnny.”

Hal’s eyes widened.

“Pap. I know, I know I did some things. I just needed to hear your voice.” Johnny waited for something. “Pap?”

Painfully, Joe closed his eyes. “What do you want me to say, Johnny? Huh?”

“Nothing. I just . . . I just needed to hear your voice. Bye, Pap.”

Joe listened to the disconnecting of the call. And he held the receiver to his ear for longer than he needed to. Actually too long.

“Dad?” Hal questioned. “What did he want.”

Joe shook his head. “Just . . . Just give me a moment.” Rubbing his closed eyes, head spinning with thoughts, Joe hung up the phone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*And I miss you when I pass containment. When I look at Alex, I miss you. I miss you, El, more everyday. But that's OK, see? Because I use that missing so when you get back, I can justify why I won't let you out of my sight. Ever. I love you, Frank.*

For the tenth time, Robbie read that letter. Sitting by the fireplace, the glow of the flames lighting it. Frank had wrote him one too, and it was sincere. But it didn't reek of 'missing' as much as Ellen's letter did. Then again, Frank's opening sentence to Ellen was he was going to mention how badly he missed her a hundred times. And Frank did. Robbie counted.

"Robbie?" Ellen spoke softly as she walked into the livingroom.

"Oh, hey, El." Robbie looked at the letter.

"Are you reading that again, or counting the 'missings'?" she sat down next to him.

"Reading. It's . . . it's great."

Ellen smiled "I have a ton of letters like that from Frank."

"Could I see them some time?"

"Why?" Ellen asked. "I mean, sure you can see them, but why do you want to. Some times they make sense. Some times they just ramble."

"It's hard to explain." Peaceful Robbie gazed at the letter with a smile. "What I feel when I read this is astronomical."

Ellen snickered. "It's good, it's not that good."

"You don't get it, do you?" Robbie turned slightly. "You or Frank. You don't get it because you take it so much for granted. Many a man, El, may have captured your heart. But one man, only one man, has ever and will ever capture your entire soul."

"Frank."

"Frank." Robbie folded the letter. "I don't care who the other man is. He can't compete with that."

"Where is this coming from?" Ellen asked.

Slightly Robbie's mouth puckered giving a visual of all that he was hiding that he felt.

"Still feeling down?"

"Yeah, but I'll get by it. And . . . and I read the note. It makes me, angry. Resentful. It's a lonely world, El. For a man . . . it's a very lonely world. Frank's down, bet me he's drinking. Bet me. I know it. Turns to the bottle. But . . . when you're in Beginnings, no matter what the hurt, he turns

to you. He can turn to you. Even for a splinter, you El, take a way that pain. And no matter what he or Dean say, they take that for granted."

"I know. I kind of take them for granted too, don't you think?"

"What?" Robbie scoffed. "What do you take for granted?"

"Lots of things."

"Oh, yeah." Robbie nodded. "Like what? Like the fact that my brother writes a good note, and you can go 'ah'." He stood up.

"Stop this." Ellen said shocked. "Where is this coming from?"

"This." Robbie lifted the folded letter then set it down. "Granted my brother loves you. And for that matter, so does Dean. But do you realize, El, when one doesn't make you angry the other one does. When one doesn't make you cry, the other does the honors. You have spent eight years of your life, fighting, crying, getting angry, getting hurt, when for eight years of your life, with all that you've been through, you should have never shed another tear."

"Robbie." Ellen walked to him. "Come on. I know you had a bad day. OK, but what is bring all of this anger on? Tell me."

"Because I read this note. He's hurting, you wrote him a letter and that will sooth him. Yet . . . yet, he'll forget, And in time, not long mind you, he'll get pissed at you, snap at you, treat you bad, and still have you. Same goes for Dean. They aren't grateful."

Ellen chuckled in disbelief. "Robbie, grateful? They're grateful. Just because they get mad at me doesn't me they don't appreciate me."

"Yes it does." Robbie said. "Walk up to any man who has no one. Ask them. To have an ounce of what they have, they would bite their fuckin tongue off rather than raise their voice to you. Me, with all the pain I have gone through, if I had one moment of that to take away some . . ." Robbie cringed. "Inkling of this pain I feel every single day of my life, I would . . . I would . . ." Robbie closed his eyes and turned around. "Sorry."

"You would what?"

Robbie shook his head.

"Robbie?"

"I'm just rattling, El. I'm sorry. I'm down on myself. I don't mean to get down on my brother, or Dean for that matter. That was wrong."

Ellen moved to him. "Again . . . you would what?"

Slowly Robbie turned around. "Have I ever raised my voice to you in anger? Have I ever been mad at you? Have I ever done anything that hurt you to the point where you shed a tear. In all the years we've known each other have I ever done any of that."



“No.” Ellen whispered.

“And I never will.” Robbie returned the whisper leaning close. “I try, I try just to make you smile. Wanna know why? Not just out of gratefulness for the moments you give me in this fucked up world. But just because I like to make you smile. That’s it.” Robbie tossed up his hand and turned from her. “Because making you happy, even just a little, is the only reaction this man ever wants to intentionally cause you.” In the silence, Robbie breathed out. “Whoa. Boy.” He chuckled with a slight bounce of his shoulders. “Did I sound like Elliott Ryder or what? That felt good.” With a huge smile, Robbie turned back around. Surprised, in the quiet, he was greeted not only with Ellen so close to him, but with her lips so near to his. Softly, and unexpectedly, she kissed him. Robbie smiled again. “You know what. Scratch what I said. *That* . . . felt good.” with no hesitation, Robbie pulled Ellen back into him.

^^^

An earthquake of a tremble took over Frank’s hand as he brought the flask to his lips. How badly he wanted to drink. But he couldn’t, he just couldn’t. Not then. He stood in the kitchen, replaced that flask in his back pocket and gripped that kitchen counter for dear life and strength.

How much longer would he have to wait for Elliott to call him to say he was back and he had something from Ellen. Maybe the wait on Elliott, and anxiousness about his return was the reason for the intuitive ‘flash’ he had. Out of no where it came.

Tucking the kids in bed it hit him. Like a wall of emotions, his gut churned and instead of little Alex’s face, all he saw was Ellen . . . and Robbie.

If he truly had psychic abilities, feeling and seeing something like that was just too much. And something told Frank it wasn’t a worry, or a spur of the moment thought. Something told him it was real. His gut wouldn’t scream so badly in pain if it wasn’t.

“Frank?” Dean softly called out, stepping into the kitchen. “Are you all right?”

Frank turned around.

Dean saw the look on his face, anger, and panic. “What’s happened.”

Frank swallowed. “I . . . I had this vision about Ellen.”

“What about her?” Dean asked. “Do you think she’s all right?”

“Yeah.” Frank nodded. “That’s not the vision I had. I saw, in my mind,

her and Robbie. Her . . .” He swallowed painfully. “Her and Robbie together.”

“It’s your jealousy.” Dean stated factually.

“No, it was real. It was . . .a vision, Dean.”

“Like psychic?” Dean chuckled.

“Don’t laugh at me. Do I look like I’m joking.”

“Frank, the mind reading is one thing, but visions?”

“What if it’s not psychic, What if it’s just my connection to her.”

Dean stared seriously at him. “Robbie and Ellen have a past. She’s out there with him. You’re here. It’s insecurity, Frank. And let’s face it, you’ve been insecure lately.”

“What the fuck do you mean?”

“Well, I was saying to Misha that . . . Frank?” Dean watched him fly past him. “What are you doing?”

“You’re not the person I need to talk to about this.” He opened the door.

“Where are you going?”

“I need to talk to Hal.” Frank spoke nearly confused. “I need my brother.” Saying no more, Frank walked out.

^^^

His nude body was partially illuminated and warmed by the dying down fire in the fireplace of the bedroom. Quiet it was, except for the last few sounds of crackling. Robbie had to get to his watch, he knew it, but he needed to steal sometime.

Hitting his cigarette, he glanced over his shoulder to where Ellen slept in bed. The act of lovemaking with Ellen was an act he swore he would never let happen again. Yet it did. What brought him to that point that he would betray his own brother again? Robbie could only answer selfishness. What made matters worse was if he could take the entire act back, he wouldn’t. He needed that closeness with Ellen.

He reflected back on the lovemaking, glancing to his own body and facially cringing in a sort of disgust of his missing arm. A facial expression, that could have ended it, but it was the start of it all.

Heavy, intense the kissing grew, and without thinking, Robbie lifted off his shirt. The second he lowered his lips to Ellen’s again and felt her hands lay upon his chest, he stopped.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

His stomach turned and he moved back from her. What was he thinking, who was he kidding. He was going to throw himself into bed, with a body that was almost revolting, let alone barely appealing.

Ellen had saw what he was looking at, afraid of.

*"Robbie, stop this. You think I care about your arm. Do you think I haven't seen you without a shirt before."* Ellen whispered bringing her lips back to him. *"I bathed you like this remember?"*

That was step one. Step two came when he led her to the bedroom.

How good it would feel. His body touching against another, relinquishing the urgency of his inner pain, by replacing it with the urgency of desire.

An act. A simple natural act. He learned to use a rifle again, a sword. Hang jump. But making love he never even thought about practicing. And he never realized until faced with it, how one arm played so much of a physical role. The loss of balance, leverage, and ability to hold on. They were gone. If he looked for lovemaking to bring back his self esteem, he was wrong. It pummeled him worse into his self worth.

He gave it his best shot, kissing Ellen, relying on that more than anything else. But it wasn't enough. He felt it. How pathetic he had to of come off. He was not the same Robbie, he would never be the same Robbie. When he lost his arm, he most certainly lost a huge part of himself. And staring into that fire, he wondered if he could ever stare at Ellen again.

Ellen wasn't sleeping anymore. Slightly ruffling the sheets, she watched Robbie finish dressing. She felt an overwhelming sensation of 'down' and she knew it wasn't coming from her.

Lifting up some in the bed, she cleared her hair from her eyes and called to him as he stepped from the door. "Robbie."

In the doorway he turned, "hey, El." Robbie cleared his throat. "I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No. Where . . . where are you going?" She asked.

"Have to monitor. So I'm . . ." He pointed backwards. "I'm heading down."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah." Robbie nodded. "Yeah." Turning, he stepped from her view.

No longer was being tired an issue. Sleep was something she wouldn't be able to do no matter how hard she tried. Not with Robbie like he was and not when she could do something about it.



“You know . . .” Frank watched the coffee pour into the cup before him at Hal’s. “I never really liked you all that much.”

“And trust me, the feeling is mutual.” Hal poured a cup for himself. “And you think for a moment it bothers me you spewing forth your disgust with me because I took this form you . . .” Hal lifted the flask. “Go on, be pissed, disgusted whatever. But I will not have you drinking in front of me.” exhaling he sat down at the table. “So instead of drinking . . .” Hal watched Frank just stare into his coffee. “Lash out. You need to do something. You’re down.” He softened his voice. “Say anything. I can take what ever it is. No words are too much.”

After a moment, a heavy moment, Frank raised his eyes. “I love you, Hal.”

“Oh.” Hal huffed out in sarcasm. “You just needed to beat me down, didn’t you?”

“I’m serous.” Frank’s words were soft. “I may fight with you, get pissed at you, but I love you.”

Peacefully, Hal smiled. “I love you, too, Frank.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“And I love Robbie.”

“I know that.”

“Even though at this very moment, if he was standing right here, I’d fuckin kill him.” Over his coffee, Frank reached for the flask.

“Ok.” Hal moved it. “Robbie’s an issue today. Why? I don’t understand. He’s quite a distance away with Ellen and . . . ah.” He nodded. “I see.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. I see.”

“No Hal . . .” Frank stood. “I see. I see.” He pointed to his eyes. “Whatever dying did to me, jackrabbit shit, no matter what the cause, I see now. And it sucks. Because I saw my little brother with Ellen.”

Hal blinked a few times. “You saw them? Explain.”

“I saw them. It barreled me over. Together. And I saw Robbie buried so far between her . . .”

“All right.” Hal stood up as well. “I get the picture.”

“It’s killing me.” Frank graveled. “I let go what happened with that mystery man shit.” He saw Hal suddenly look up. “Oh, yeah. I know. I

figured it out you were covering for him. It was obvious. And I gained a lot of respect for you for sticking up and taking that fall.”

“Thank you.” Hal gave an appreciative nod. “So how was it obvious?”

“Aside from the fact that El would never sleep with your pansy ass.”

Hal huffed out. “Good Lord Frank, I’m asking a serious question.”

“Fine.” Frank held up a hand. “All I had to do was use some common sense. There you are being smug, while Robbie was sitting there being totally fuckin innocent. A part he knows so well how to play. A part he has always used to get to Ellen.”

“You are wrong on that.” Hal argued. “It’s not an act. He is innocent, Frank.”

“Bullshit!”

“No.” Hal said strong. “He is very innocent. He doesn’t know how to think sometimes. He was never given a chance in this world to grow up. To learn correctly. Too many men are innocent now. They never got the chance to live in a relationship, watch it blossom or fail. They never got a fill of making love. Robbie was so young when this world ended. Younger than his years dictated. You know that. And it is far from his innocence that always ‘gets’ Ellen. It’s just Robbie who does. He’s always, always had a thing for Ellen.”

Slowly Frank glanced at Hal.

“And I would say a ‘thing’ is putting it mildly.” Hal spoke. “And that is another thing that you know.”

Frank nodded.

“Since the man was ten years old he has had this infatuation with her. She never treated him like a child, she always spoke to him like an equal, no matter how young or old he was. That child infatuation turned into a teenage crush, and *that* turned into an adult version of unrequited love. But, he never let the adult in him reason that.” Hal walked toward Frank. “He had her up there in his sights. Ellen was a goal to Robbie, and everything he felt or feels is genuine. And everything he feels is guided by his teenage approach. Do you realize he spent half his time writing her letters to keep everything alive, while no matter what he did, where he went, he was spending the other half of his time, waiting, and figuring out a way to get her from Pete.”

Hard Frank swallowed. “I told him not to do that.”

“Yeah, I know, and I told him *to* do it.”

In  
a quick

spin,  
Frank  
turned  
to Hal.  
“You  
what?”

“I encouraged.” Hal tossed up his hands. “I’m guilty. I hated Pete. He was an asshole. Jimmy and I both were encouraging. We told him not to give up.”

“That was wrong.”

“Why?” Hal asked strongly. “Why was that wrong. It was wrong to want to see Ellen happy. Robbie happy. And you want my opinion Frank? I firmly believe with all of my heart, had this world not ended, Ellen and Robbie would have ended up together.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Well.” Hal sniffed. “If that was a measure needed to be taken. I would have had to do so.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “You knew I loved her.”

“And I also knew you were a married man.”

“I still love her, Hal. I love her with all of my heart and soul. And even though I get my chances with her. Every day that passes . . . it’s not enough.”

Nodding slowly, Hal walked closer. “The crying shame of it all, Frank, is you’ve always had to share her.”

“It’s a must in this world.”

“Yes, I know this. But is it a must to be sharing her with someone with whom her emotions run strong.”

Confused, Frank looked at him.

“OK, let me explain.” Hal motioned his hand to the table. Waiting for Frank, they both sat down. “You and Dean have this understanding.”

“Fuckin Dean.”

“Yes, anyway. Both are strong pulls. Positive, negative . . .”

“Which one of us is positive?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does Hal, I don’t want to be a negative.”

“Fine.” Hal snapped. “You’re the positive.”

“Fuckin Dean, I knew he was a negative.”

“Frank!” Hal yelled. “Can I finish my analogy. Thank you.” He breathed out. “I am merely saying you both have the same pull on her, so

everything is too equal. The emotions, the feelings, what have you. I would think, that in this world, should I have a woman, and should I share her, I would be damned if I were going to share her with someone she could love as much as me, and someone who loves her as much as I do.”

Frank stared for a second. “So are you saying Dean should stop sharing her with me?”

“I’m saying maybe, you should stop sharing her with Dean.”

“Then I wouldn’t have her.”

“Not if you do something you’ve never done when it comes to Ellen. Stand up, and take the stance, that no matter what, it is time. It is finally time to be the number one person in her life. And that the person you end up sharing her with, will in no way even come close to you in her eyes. Although, I hardly think any man can come close to you in her eyes.”

“Really?”

“Please.” Hal fluttered his lips. “You know this. You’re her God.”

“Like with the killer babies.”

Pacifying, Hal smiled. “Yes, Frank, like with the killer babies.”

“I’m glad I came here tonight, Hal. I feel better.”

“I’m glad too.” Hal shifted his eyes to the flask on the table.

“One question.” Frank lifted a finger. “Did I resolve anything?”

Instead of saying anything, Hal, grabbed the flask, opened it and took a drink.

^^^

Suicide position. That was how Robbie held the rifle. Butt of the M-16 to the floor, perched between his legs as his chin rested on the very edge of it. His eyes forward on to the tracking screen. Not that Robbie was even considering suicide, but to Ellen that was what it would end up being if she even startled him with a simple, ‘hey.’

She made tiny scuff sounds on the kitchen floor to get his attention and knew she was safe when she heard him clear his throat.

“Hey.” She smiled and looked into the diningroom at him. “I couldn’t sleep. Want some coffee.”

“Yeah.” Robbie kept his views on tracking. “Sounds good.”

It was old, but it would do, and Ellen poured two cups of coffee. She brought them with her to the diningroom. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Robbie sat back.

“Talk to me.” Ellen pulled up a chair and sat down.

Druga-Johnston/The Game

"I'm sorry." He shifted his eyes to her.

"For?"

"For tonight."

"You're regretting it."

Robbie nodded.

"Can I ask why?"

"I'm down. I am very down. And a lot of what I have been hiding about my arm came through this evening. You didn't need to . . . to make me feel better . . . you didn't have to do it. You didn't. I mean . . . look at me."

"Look at you what." Ellen questioned and received a glance from Robbie. "You mean about your arm. You think your missing arm makes a difference to me? And if you want an honest opinion, yes. Yes I am physically shallow. I'm a sucker for a good looking man. And, you Robbie, are the best looking man in Beginnings. Sorry."

Robbie partially smiled.

"And if you're implying it was a pity lay, then you're pissing me off. To make you feel good?" Ellen whistled. "How about to make me feel good."

Robbie slightly rolled his eyes. "Come on, El."

"Come on, what? You didn't think I enjoyed it. Oh, Robbie. It was more than an act to you. You made love to me. You were tender, and you kissed me and . . ."

"El." Robbie lifted his hand. "Not that I don't appreciate the praise, but I have a confession to make. I made love to you that way, because I couldn't . . . let's just say, the lack of my arm, gave me the lack of ability to be . . . A performance artist?"

"Really."

"Yes."

"Oh." Ellen nodded. "Anyway. I still enjoyed it."

"Why did you do it?" Robbie asked. "Be honest."

"Honestly? You stole my heart. When you said those things, it was as if you reached inside of me and grabbed my heart."

After closing his eyes briefly, Robbie stood up. "I didn't mean to go off like that."

"You were speaking what you felt."

"I guess the Elliott Ryder style bit helped."

Ellen winked. "You pushed the right button."

"So what now?" Robbie asked as he paced.

"What do you want now?"



Stopping, Robbie faced her. "I want when we get back to Beginnings, you to leave Dean, stay by my side, I'll work something out with Frank, and you and I will live happily ever after. That's . . . that's what I want. That's . . . what I've always wanted. But let's be realistic."

"OK, let's." Ellen stood up. "Suppose I were to give you that."

"El . . ."

"No, listen. Suppose I were to do that. Let's face it. You and I never fight. I love you. We're close. Realistically speaking, we could be very compatible for the rest of our lives. So suppose I were to give you that. Could you handle that?"

"Oh, hell yeah." Robbie said. "But . . . Frank and Dean couldn't. And, it's not right. Besides, you wouldn't do that."

"Bet me." Ellen spoke seriously. "You say it. I'll do it."

Robbie chuckled. "You're cute." he reached out with his index finger and poked her on the nose. "Thanks. But, realistically speaking again. It has to go beyond what I want. There are to many people involved. Now . . . if you asked me what I needed . . ."

"What do you need."

"You." Robbie said. "I need to know I can turn to you, like Frank, any time, not for physical, but for emotional. I need to be certain you're there, just during this rough time, you know." He shrugged. "Be the ying for the yang. During this rough time for me. Get me through. That is what I need."

"Then let's do it."

Robbie laughed. "Yeah, El. Sure."

"I'm serious. I'll be with you every step of the way. Not because I have to but because I want to. I'm there for you, because you have always been there for me. As much as you need. As little as you need."

A half smile hit Robbie's face. "Not that I don't appreciate the offer. I do. And not that I'm not taking you up on it. I might. But . . . know that the offer . . ." Softly he winked. "Means as much as actually doing it. Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"Now . . ." Robbie walked back over to the computer.. "Feel like writing? We left off with Moe torturing his son, Hank."

"Toe picking scene?"

"That's the one."

"Excellent." Ellen hurried to join Robbie. As she did, she looked at him and saw his smile. It was genuine, Robbie felt better. And that was what really mattered.

“You know I fuckin hate you.” Frank told Elliott.

Calmly Elliott nodded. “Yes, I am aware, seeing how that is you common salutation to me.”

“Whatever.” Frank lifted the folded piece of paper. “I appreciate this. Thank you for going out there and bringing this back. It makes me feel better, and I’ll read it tonight.” He placed it in his back pocket. “I’ll give Dad his.”

Hal, his letter in hand tilted his head with a smile. “She seems well.”

“Ellen looks well.” Elliott explained. “She does. Very grateful to see me and get those letters. Robbie on the other hand was very down on himself when I left. I hope he’s up now.”

Gently Hal smirked. “Most likely, he was up.”

“Hal.” Frank grumbled.

Elliott looked from brother to brother. “Am I missing something.”

“No.” Hal shook his head. “But Frank is.”

“What?” Frank asked.

Hal pointed to the table and the letter remaining. “That.”

“You think I’m gonna give that to Dean. If it hits my hands, I’ll destroy it. Dean can suck my left nut for all I care.”

Hal cleared his throat. “Well, hating to chance your right testicle will feel left out. Why are we mad at Dean?”

“It’s your fault.” Frank said. “And did you do it on purpose?”

Hal tossed his hands up. “Haven’t a clue what you’re speaking about.”

“One word.” Frank explained. “That girl Misha.”

Hal hesitated, then nodded. “What about her.”

“She’s working with Dean. And Dean’s fuckin loving it, Hal. He’s all over her. I mean, he has her filling in for Ellen in every step of the way. It pisses me off. She’s doing things that are Ellen’s. Not hers. And Dean has no right to be so happy about it.

“Frank.” Elliott spoke up. “Chancing you getting upset with me, may I just play the devil’s advocate for a second? Maybe you’re just missing Ellen so much you’re seeing this working relationship in a different view.”

“No, Ryder. How can I mistake fuckin laughing and giggling, and her wearing El’s coat. And Her going into the cryo to work on El’s experiment.”

“The cryo.” Elliott said with a hint of edge. “Why is he taking her to

the cryo?”

“Exactly.” Frank’s hand dropped to the table.

“Captain?” Elliott questioned. “She was placed there as a data entry person and file clerk. Rogers trained her for that. When did it expand to the cryo lab.”

“Gentlemen.” Hal spoke. “Perhaps filing and data entry is needed in the cryo lab. Why are we getting defensive about this?”

At the same time in the same voice, both Elliott and Frank said, “The cryo is Ellen’s.”

One eye fluttering, finger to his ear to rub off the odd after effect of unison Frank, Hal shook it off. “OK. Perhaps you, Frank, should talk to Dean about this. Draw a line.”

“I did. He wouldn’t listen.”

“Maybe you were hostile when you did so.” Hal suggested. “Dean got defensive.”

Elliott interjected, “if I may, Frank. I will be in Beginnings tomorrow for council meeting. I’ll drop off Dean’s letter, and how about I speak to him about leaving Misha out of the cryo work. If not just for Ellen, but for you. You’re his friend, He has to see that it isn’t sitting well with you. And maybe as your friend he can see how it is effecting you and respect that.”

Frank shrugged. “You can try. It won’t work. I’m telling you. Pansy manner way of speaking or not. He’s not gonna hear. You think I’m overreacting. I might be. But I’m still pissed about the way he’s acting. I can see it. He’s getting wrapped up in this person and that’s not right to El. And . . .” He swung a heavy pointing hand at Hal. “It’s all your fault.”

“How is it my fault if Dean, and that is an ‘if Dean is getting wrapped up in her.” Hal asked.

“Because you know people.” Frank answered. “You know their reactions. You could have very easily sent one of your guys in there. But no. You sent this little, polite, sweet cute girl in there, who is all, “Dr. Hayes, this and Dr. Hayes, that’ and you knew he’d fill that void of Ellen right up.”

“And for what purpose?” Hal questioned. “To listen to you bitch. To listen to your desires to have Dean suck your left testicle? Please.”

Smug, Frank looked at him. “Number of reasons. Break Dean and Ellen up. Robbie has a shot. Your buddy here has a shot. You could have done it for me, even though that’s far fetched, you could have.”

Hal scoffing, noticed the stare Elliott gave him. “What?”

“Captain, what Frank has said, it is very feasible.”

“And . . .” Frank added. “It makes sense.”

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Good God.” Hal gasped as he stood. “You two give me far too much credit. No I did not send Misha in there to break up Ellen and Dean’s marriage. For both of your information, Misha came to me about the position. She wanted more than being a file clerk. She heard Dean needed help. She asked for training so she could assist. *And . . .*” Hal stopped Frank and Elliott. “She asked, *not* so she could be near Dean. She asked because she wanted to be in Beginnings where Hector was. Hector. Not Dean. Misha has no designs on Dean. If she is being nice, she is just being nice. If Dean is caught up. What do you expect?” Post speech Hal nodded. “It’s simple. Of course Ellen is his world. But Dean hasn’t had a choice has he? Perhaps he is seeing a choice. Like Ice cream. Yes, one can claim they love vanilla ice cream more than anything else in the world, but if vanilla is the only flavor they have, how do they not know they won’t like chocolate better when it arises.”

Frank stared at Hal.

Hal saw the confusion. “Choices, Frank.”

Elliott slowly stood up, grabbed the note for Dean. “I think we are making too much out of this. I think Frank, may be a little jealous that Dean has a new friend. Dean is too wrapped up in Ellen. I have seen his demeanor. I don’t see it switching all that much over a lab assistant. And I don’t see Dean getting . . . caught up.”

“What do you fuckin know.” Frank snapped.

Elliott smiled. “A little more than you right now.”

Frank stood up. “What’s that suppose to mean.”

Elliott winked. “You’ll find out tomorrow. Captain, good night.” He moved to the door.

“Hold it.” Frank charged.

“Night.” Elliott hurried and slipped out.

“Fuck.” Frank shut the door.

“Couldn’t read his mind, Frank?” Hal questioned.

“Oh, I read it.” Frank scratched his head. “I just can’t figure out what Christopher fuckin Columbus has to do with anything.”

“You’ll find out tomorrow. Probably has a map for you or something.” Hal pulled forward a deck of cards. “Let’s finish our game. Don’t worry about it. You know Elliott, he plays those childish games.” Hal shuffled the cards.

“Fuckin immature. How do you deal with him.”

“It’s a chore, Frank.” Hal exhaled. “It’s a daily chore.” He pushed the deck forward. “Your deal.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

January 4<sup>th</sup>

“Email?” Joe asked Hal through dawn grogginess walking toward the line of utility buildings.

“Well, yes, sort of.” Hal replied. “See.” He lifted a hand held device. “A palm computer of sorts. Danny rigged it so Jess could safely communicate with us. It’s rather neat.”

“I’m sure. Its . . . neat. Did he arrived in Duluth.”

“Yes, and he contacted George. He’ll get back to me as soon as he hears more.”

“And what type of documentation did he take?” Joe asked.

“Just maps. Population information. Training regiments. Basic stuff. And, a few items johnny wanted.”

Joe grumbled.

“Don’t as me why.” Hal shrugged. “I didn’t ask what they were. When Jess said they were personal items, I merely said, could they be a threat, when Jess told me no. I left it at that. I don’t want to know.”

“Neither do I.” Joe stated. “And the Bev thing.”

“Obviously George does not know. And . . .” Hal exhaled. “Against what Jess wanted to do, he is to, without hesitation relinquish the news of Bev.”

“I hate the thought of that.”

“So do I. But . . . if Jess tells. Who knows. But if Jess doesn’t. Then there will be no trust. We are gonna have to deal with it sooner or later. Let’s make it sooner.”

Exhaling Joe nodded. “Where are you off to now.”

“Sleep.” Hal stated firmly.

“Why? Are you sick? You better watch. It’s cold and flu season, you know.”

“Yes, I do. But no. Just tired. I’ve not ben to bed yet.”

“Why the hell not?” Joe asked.

“One word. Frank. He was with me all night. Had a lot on his mind. We talked.”

“All night? And you’re still coherent this morning.”

“It took all of my inner fortitude not to falter to the levels of slight

metal retardation after listening to excessive neurotic rambling. But I prevailed. Barely. I'm beat."

"Your brother may ramble. And sometimes, well, he doesn't make sense."

"Sometimes?" Hal questioned.

"Come on, it was nice. You bonded. He went to you for guidance. Feel good about that. Maybe this is what you two need."

"There's something wrong with him."

"Nah, he's just Frank. And speaking of which . . ." Joe pointed.

Over the grade Frank walked. His figure was shadowed in the early morning light but it was obvious he walked with someone. As he arrived at Joe and Hal he stopped. "Keep walking." He instructed the young man who was with him. "Can't miss it. It's a big building. It looks like a hanger. Not a fuckin coat hanger. A hanger. Go there and wait."

The young man nodded, almost fearful and darted off.

Joe raised his eyebrows. "A little gruff with the guy?"

Hal added, "or are you tired?"

"No, I'm not tired." Frank answered. "Gruff. Miserable. Yeah. That's it. Fuck." He shook his head. "Is this world fucked up or what? I had to go to Texas town to get that kid who wants to be a pilot."

"Good God, you're teachings him to fly." Hal said.

"Shut the fuck up, Hal. I'm bitching."

Joe held out his hand. "He's bitching. Why are you Bitching Frank? Because you have to train the boy."

"No." He shook his head. "I had to go to Texas town, or Jordan, whatever. Have you been there. Fuckin people are fuckin weird. They talk weird, talk slow. Move slow. I tell them, 'uh, spit it out or don't say anything,' and you know what they do? They laugh. Then all morning I'm there, which isn't very long, mind you. They're snickering in that southern fuckin bell way. Every time they look at me." Frank made his voice high. "Tee-hee-hee-hee." He tossed up his hand. "Like that."

Tapping his index finger on his chin, Hal listened, to Frank's rambling. "I didn't quite understand that laugh, could you do it again."

"Hal." Joe grumbled.

"Tee-hee-hee-hee fuckin hee." Frank put his face close to Hal's. "Anyway. I try reading their minds. Nothing. Everyone in their mother is thinking about Christopher Columbus. What the fuck. Get over it." He looked at his watch. "I have to go. Savage surveillance." He took a step. "What happened to the good old days when it was just a hundred or so of

us behind the fuckin wall. Huh?”

Joe shrugged. “I don’t know, Frank.”

“And if we find people, can they be normal? No.” Frank dragged out his words as he walked. “Fuckin Indian wanna be’s. Robot Soldiers. Frozen fuckin scientists. Civil war calvary, and Fuckin Jed Clampet and his whole extended incest family. Fuck. I don’t even wanna know what’s coming next. And, Hal, don’t forget the meteor strategy Meeting. You keep blowing them off!”

“Well.” Hal exhaled his word watching Frank disappear over the grade. “Who needs coffee with him around. But, as you said before. It’s Frank.”

Joe could only do a stock agreement response. He grumbled.

^^^

“A few days tops.” Steward explained to George. “Then we’ll get Boyens out here.”

“Good.” George seemingly in his own thoughts rocked back and forth in his chair.

“The sergeant in charge did a full search of Boyens. Nothing found. He did however bring some information.”

“What kind?”

“From what the sergeant told me, maps, strategies, infantry and so forth.”

“That’s good. Good.” George nodded.

“And . . . a few items Johnny wanted.”

“Swell.”

“Sir, if I can. May I ask what’s up with that?”

“The kid wanted some items.” George tossed his hands up.

“That’s not what I mean.” Steward said. “I mean, I find it curious, don’t you. That someone who can’t remember the last few years of his life in Beginnings can remember which few items from his home he wanted.”

Suddenly, for the first time, George snapped to attention.

^^^

The clinic lab wasn’t the place for her, Dean knew. But he brought Majestic up from the cryo lab. And he had her in the back room so no one

really saw her. Dean needed to. Majestic was Ellen's pet. Sitting on a stool, reflection on his face, Dean gazed at Majestic as she finished off the last of her breakfast squirrel.

"Sorry." Dean said to her. "I know you like when Ellen heats them up. I didn't have time." He spoke in a daze. "I can tell." He waved a finger at the cage. "You miss her, too. Your whole attitude has changed. Mine too. I dreamt of Ellen last night again." Dean gave a sad shrug. "Of course, asshole Frank put it in my mind that she's fooling around with Robbie. So that took over my dream. But I still dreamt of her."

"Dean." Hector called out as he knocked on the open closet door.

Startled, Dean turned around. "Oh, hey."

"Am I bothering you?" Hector asked.

"No. No. Just . . ." He pointed to the cage. "Bonding with Majestic."

"She's losing weight."

"She's not eating right. She's missing Ellen. I know it sounds strange." Dean shrugged. "I'll tell you, if something happens to that rabbit while El is gone . . ." He whistled. "I'm in for it."

"Ellen loves that rabbit." Hector winced. "I don't know why." He chuckled. "Maybe, Misha can help?"

Dean nodded. "I'll try. But she's still very skirmish."

"You'll have that. And . . . she's out here waiting. I wanted to let you know."

"Thanks." Dean stood up. "I appreciate it. And I appreciate you two coming by this morning."

"Oh, no problem. Misha was very concerned about Alex."

"Yeah." Dean exhaled. "Alex is really missing Ellen badly. It's nice that Alex knows Misha from Bowman."

"Well, Ellen brings her there quite a bit. And Misha is so fond of Ellen, she said she would feel terrible, and wouldn't be able to face Ellen if she didn't help Alex when she could."

"And she did. She got Alex to stop crying. Usually, Frank and I, well, we get frustrated . . ." Dean snickered. "And we make Jenny deal with it. Thanks."

"Anytime." Hector nodded. "Misha will be staying tonight, so if you need anything, we'll be happy to stop by."

"I appreciate it. I'll let you know."

Hector stopped as he started to turn. "Not much longer, Dean. Really. Not much longer and she'll be back."

Following Hector from the closet, Dean watched him walked to Misha



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

and innocently kiss her on the cheek. After a smile, he gave an upward motion of his head as his goodbye to Hector and walked to Misha. "Morning."

"Good Morning, Dean." Misha said in a ready mode. "I'm am excited about this new test you want me to run."

"Really. Good." Dean grinned and walked to the fridge. "We'll start."

"What is it?"

From the open fridge, Dean turned with a tray in his hand. "Urine samples."

It was awkward but Misha kept that smile on her face as Dean set the samples before her.

^^^

Smashed was Joe's cheek as he pressed it deep into his palm, while in a head spinning, 'get me out of here' stare on Henry in his office. The only thing that kept Joe alert at all during the entire council meeting was the occasionally moans from Elliott and Frank.

"And that's my decision, Joe." Henry's hands flung about.

"What is, Henry?" Joe asked. "You spewed forth about something. I haven't a clue what it is. It's a simple goddamn question of how many Jordan residents we should bring in to work agriculture."

Frank interjected. "I say none."

"I know what you say Frank." Joe looked back to Henry.

"They move to fuckin slow. We won't have food." Frank continued.

"All right enough." Joe held up his hand. "Why is Elliott the only one who gave me a decent answer?"

"He's a pansy." Frank said.

Tightening his lips, Elliott half closed his eyes with an expected nod.

"You're an asshole, Frank. Henry!" Joe snapped. "What's your response. This wasn't a hard question, it was multiple choice."

"Fine. Go with what Elliott said." Henry griped. "I just wanted to give my opinion."

"On what!" Joe tossed up his hands. "How people keep coming in to visit the greenhouse? Henry, I don't give a rats ass that in three hundred and forty three years we would have lost one years worth of food. What the hell does that matter to me?"

"It matters to our future." Henry stated. "I think we should take a look at the long term effects of Hector giving freebies."

"Speaking of which." Frank looked at his watch. "I have to get a snack."

"Then that's it for today." Joe leaned back.

"Don't ask me back, Joe." Henry stood up. "If you don't value my opinion. I am very insulted. Why did you call me here?"

"Danny is busy, you're filling in for him while Frank is filling in for Jason." Joe explained.

"But I was excommunicated from council, you know." Henry moved to the door. "And Mechanics."

"Henry, you quit." Joe said annoyed.

"Same difference." Henry opened the door. "I really think you should look at the choice you made in Danny. How much more am I going to have to fill in. It's very biased. That's my opinion." Henry walked out.

Thinking 'yeah-yeah', Joe relaxed in his chair.

"I agree with Henry." Frank spoke up. "You're being very biased, not to mention racist, if it's not the same thing."

Irritated, Joe looked at Frank. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"One Asian man can't make it, you get the other. There is a difference, you know. Henry's Japanese." Frank gave a pacifying 'for your information' nod. "Danny's Chinese."

"Yeah, Frank." Joe winced. "I know that, you moron."

"On that note." Elliott stood up. "I must leave. I have something to deliver to Dean before heading back to Bowman."

"About time." Frank mumbled.

"Better late than . . ." Elliott raised an eyebrow. "Never. Which would be the case if you had it."

"You're probably hating to agree with me." Frank said. "And you're just holding off seeing the truth."

"No, Frank, I do not agree with you." Elliott made it to the door. "In fact I am about to see for myself that I am the one correct."

"What ever." Frank gave a flick of his hand. "Fuck you."

Elliott smiled on his exit. "Mr. Slagel, have a good day." He gave a nod to Joe. "Frank?" He waited for Frank to look and then he spoke pleasantly. "Fuck you, too."

Joe gave a shudder of confusion. "What was that all about?"

"That?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

"He responded to what I said."

"No, Frank . . ."

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"I said 'fuck you'. He said, 'fuck you too'."

"Frank." Joe barked.

"Goes on the same lines as I love you. You know, I love you. I love you too."

"Frank . . ."

"It's only polite to respond. Under any case. But I don't love Elliott Ryder."

Joe rubbed his brow in frustration. "Of course, not . . ."

"Because I don't want you to think I'm gay or anything like that. Not that Elliott Ryder couldn't be an attractive man . . ."

"Frank!" Joe screamed. "Enough!"

"What! You asked! Fuck."

"Dear God." Joe dropped his head to the desk, lightly banged it a couple times, then lifted it..

"You all right?"

"Yes." Joe sniffed, twitched his head and sat back. His demeanor switched to a calm one, as if no 'Frank-style' conversation had just transpired. He could have let his curiosity lay. However masochistic it was, it was no longer an issue of *what* Frank and Elliott were discussing, it became an issue of just finding out. "Frank. On another subject. I'm interested in something. Elliott Ryder said he has to give something to Dean. You and him, I don't know, argued a little, disagreed maybe. Why?"

"Oh." Frank nodded. "Dean likes ice cream."

Joe just stared.

"Yeah." Frank continued. "Vanilla, but now he's into chocolate . . ."

He tilted his head. "Something like that. Ask Hal, he started the whole thing."

"Ice cream."

"Choices." Frank winked and stood up.

"Vanilla and chocolate?"

"That's what Hal said." Frank shrugged.

"You were arguing with Elliott Ryder about what choice Dean would make?"

"Yeah. Hal explained it all. Dean now likes Chocolate because he has a choice."

"Hal started this?" Joe asked. "Not Danny Hoi."

Frank paused, "Danny Hoi? Why would you say Danny Hoi."

"Ice cream? Come on. Isn't it obvious?"

Frank gasped. "That is so wrong."

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“What?”

“There you go again being racist. Just because Danny is Asian doesn’t mean he started this mess.”

“What the hell are you talking about!” Joe yelled.

“You. You’re being racist.”

“I am not.” Joe defended loudly. “How in the hell is it racist to blame Danny Hoi.”

“It’s racist because he’s Asian.”

“It has nothing to do with the fact that he’s Asian. I brought up Danny Hoi because it would be so like him to bring it back.”

“Bring what back!”

“Ice cream you moron!” Joe lost it. “Ice Cream! Having ice cream again in Beginnings.”

“Dad! What the hell does having ice cream again in Beginnings have to do with anything!”

“It has to do with what we’re talking about.” Joe rose up slowly.

“We were talking about Dean!”

“Yes!” Joe nodded. “You brought up Dean and Choices!”

“Yes!”

“Vanilla. Chocolate. Dean. Ice cream! Was that or was that not what you said!” Joe screamed.

“Yes.”

“Then it’s the same thing.”

“No!” Frank shook his head. “You’re talking about ice cream in Beginnings. I’m talking about Dean and ice cream. Man!” He huffed, shook his head. “You are really confused today.” He flung open the door. “And people talk about me!”

Joe stared hard, at the just slammed door, then slowly he sat back down. “Why do I bother?”

^^^

The silkiness of Alexandra’s thin brown hair was what did it to Jenny. The way her fingers smoothed through Alexandra’s mane with ease, and without catching a single tangle. Not only was her hair done, but Alexandra matched and smelled good as well.

It wasn’t as if Ellen didn’t do those things, it was just that Ellen didn’t have time to deal with Alexandra’s whining. And Jenny couldn’t blame her. If Ellen fought with Alex it made it into the classroom. So Jenny was used

to Alexandra looking like the tomboy. Not neat, combed, pressed and clean.

Odd things to stir curiosity, however Jenny knew Alexandra's appearance wasn't her final step in going to the clinic. It was the fact that Misha was responsible for the suitable appearing twin.

Misha.

Did Jenny cause it? She had to wonder. In fact, she started feeling guilty. Jenny was the one who downplayed Dean, picked on Dean, called him a pedophile. Was it her bad taste in bitter humor that made Misha, in her defense of the wily scientist, to take an interest in him and visa versa. Was it also her dedication to Ellen that made her look through a distorted vision when glancing into the lab and watching Dean and Misha work. Nothing romantic transpired, not at all. All she knew was that the 'happy-go-lucky' feel of the lab bothered her, and her lunch break was up.

Backing up from her eavesdropping position, Jenny turned and bumped right into Elliott.

"My apologies." Elliott nodded. "Are you all right?"

"Um, yes." Jenny replied. "It was my fault." She took another glance into the lab and walked down the hall.

"Jenny." Elliott followed her. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing." Jenny wisped out. "Probably my female imagination. I was just concerned about . . . about . . ."

"About?" Elliott asked.

"Elliott? What is your take on Dean and Misha?"

"Ah." Elliott nodded. "You've spoken to Frank."

"About Dean and Misha? No." Jenny said. "Why? Is he concerned too?"

"Yes, and I will assure you like I assured him. It is no more than a scientist happy to have some help in the lab."

"If you say so. But I . . ."

"Jenny, I'm positive."

"OK." She folded her arms with uncertainty. "I have to head back." She took a few steps. "But, Elliott, have you seen them together?"

"No."

"Maybe . . . maybe you should."

Elliott was considering the source. Jenny, like Frank, had a dedication to Ellen, unlike himself, who although partial, considered himself pretty straight down the middle. Letter in hand for Dean, and intentions of talking to Dean for Ellen concerning Frank, Elliott walked to the lab. He stopped

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before entering and knocking when he heard Dean yell.

“Frank. No.” Dean said strong. “God. Forget it. You’re an ass.” He slammed down the phone.

“Is he upset again?” Misha asked.

“When isn’t Frank upset.” Dean shook his head.

“Maybe you should make time for him. Something seems to be bothering General Slagel.”

“Something is always bothering Frank and I have enough to deal with. He’s on his own with this one.” In his huff, Dean paused, looked at the counter, then smiled. “Oh my God. You finished these. This is wonderful.” He let out a short peep of delight and reached out placing his hand on Misha’s shoulder. “You are wonderful. I have to tell you, El would never do these this fast, ever. I can’t wait to have you work on things in the cryo. Boy am I glad to have you here, especially during . . .” Dean’s words stopped when he heard the ‘click’ of the hard sole on the floor. He turned around. “Sgt. Ryder.”

Elliott, eyes focused on Dean, took another step. His voice was firm and emotionless. “Sorry for the intrusion. This is very personal and confidential.” A little harder than he needed to, Elliott placed the envelope into Dean’s chest, gave one more glare, then turned and left the lab.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"It's coming." Frank said with seriousness, leaning fist first on the table in the dining area of containment. A small hand picked group of ten, including Joe and Jason were there. "Now we . . ."

"Excuse me." Andrea walked in. "I am so sorry I'm late." She slipped inside. "It is insane at the clinic. Cold and flu season, you know." With a 'whew' she found her seat at the table.

"That's all right." Frank said. "Glad you made it. Now as I was saying . . ." He saw Dan from security raising his hand. "Yes, Dan?"

"Where's Hal?" Dan asked.

Joe leaned a bit forward to see Dan. "Hal's sleeping."

"Sleeping?" Andrea questioned.

"Sleeping?" Dan repeated. "He's not sick is he?"

Joe shook his head. "No, he's . . ."

"Because Joe." Dan interjected. "You can't be too careful. It's cold . . ."

"And flu season." Joe grumbled. "I know. And no he isn't sick. He's just tired. And can we get on with this goddamn meeting, please."

"Fine." Frank took his 'fist first' leaning position again, and repeated his earlier dramatic reaction of looking at all the faces first before speaking. "It's coming. Some time in February. Fast. And straight for us."

"Sweet Jesus." Andrea gasped out.

"Big, too." Frank added. "Jason said about the size of Texas."

"Sweet Jesus."

Joe rolled his eyes and leaned into Jason. "Texas? Wasn't that the comparison state in a movie?"

Jason shrugged. "I was on the spot."

"Jason." Frank pointed. "Can you?"

"Um, yes." Jason stood up.

"Christ." Joe slid in his chair.

"As Frank said . . ." Jason paced around the table. "It's coming. We don't know when, with equipment very barbaric I won't be able to pinpoint a time until we near the impact date."

Arms folded tight, with a calm serious, Frank gave an 'up' motion of his head. "And will that still leave us time to prepare. Go to higher or lower ground."

“Yes.” Jason answered.

“After this . . .” Frank continued his line of questioning. “Will the dinosaurs return?”

“Christ.” Joe slammed his hand on the table. “Can you get any more obscure, Frank?”

“Dad.” Frank spoke in his own defense. “Its stands to reason. A meteor hits, the dinosaurs disappear. Another meteor hits, they come back.”

Just about the point when Joe was going to blast Frank for the lamest logic ever heard, he didn’t. He knew it was in vain, and he was outnumbered when he heard from the men in the room, give a unison moan of agreement to Frank’s statement.

“Yes.” Jason replied. “It is a possibility.”

“I knew it.” Frank snapped his finger.

“Sweet Jesus.” Andrea grabbed her chest.

“Christ Almighty.” Joe closed his eyes then jumped just a tad when he heard Frank’s phone ringing. Hoping it was an emergency, he opened one eye and watched.

“What do you mean?” Frank spoke on the phone, back to the room. “I’m in the middle of a meeting here, it’s just a survivor . . . he asked for me . . . and Dean? Who’s Zeus? All right. All right. We’ll be right there. Take him to my Dad’s office.” Lifting an index finger to the quiet room, Frank dialed. “Dean. You have to get to my dad’s office, some wacked out survivor priest is coming in . . . I don’t give a shit what you’re doing, get up to the examining room now. Fuck. Like I don’t have important things to do. Dean.” Frank stated. “It’s your fuckin job. Get there.” With a beep of the phone, Frank hung up. “I have to go. Dan, can you?”

“Sure, Frank.” Dan from security stood up.

“Dad?” Frank asked moving toward the door.. “Coming.”

“Absolutely.” Escape found, with Frank or not, Joe was leaving. He hurried to catch Frank. “A priest, Frank?”

Frank shrugged. “I don’t know. Mark said some young guy showed up all dressed in black.” He moved down the hall.” Probably another wacko. What was I saying this morning.” He punched in his security code. “At least he’s religious, right?”

Joe didn’t agree or disagree. Though he highly doubted a young priest showed up, he wasn’t going to question. After all he got out of the meteor strategy meeting. And that was fine with Joe.





It was a crying whine Hal released from under his pillow as he heard the knocking on his front door. "No." He whimpered out. "Just an hour. Only an hour." He rolled, literally out of bed. "This better be good." With attitude, and extreme irritability, Hal opened his front door. "Elliott." Hal lifted a finger trying to be calm. "Go away." He slammed the door shut.

Elliott knocked again.

"What!" Hal blasted as he opened the door. "I am trying to sleep. How you and my demented brother survive on nothing, is beyond me. However, I need my sleep." He started to close the door again.

Elliott stopped him. "Captain, if this wasn't important, I wouldn't disturb your rest."

"What is it?"

"Eight society soldiers showed up at our border."

Calm, Hal nodded. "Eight society soldiers showed up?"

"Yes."

Hal lost it. "Eight! Eight! Only Eight! For Christ sake Elliott just shoot them. You can handle eight soldiers. In fact, you could piss on them and they'd probably run away."

"Captain they did not come here to attack. They brought something. Or rather some one . . ." Elliott spoke seriously. "And I think you should see who it is."



"No, George." Johnny pleaded so confused. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Items Johnny. Personal items."

"Yeah, so?" Johnny shook his head.

"How did you know to ask for them."

"I . . . I just knew what I wanted."

"How!" George yelled. "If your fuckin around with me Johnny on this amnesia thing, I will kick your ass."

"I'm not."

"Then how! How did you know what to ask for?"

"They were just basic items." Johnny pleaded his case. "Ask Bert. Ask her. She'll tell you."

"From your house."

“My Dad’s house, yeah.”

“Your own house.”

“I don’t have my own house.” Johnny said.

“Sir.” Steward interrupted.

“Not now, Stew.” George held up his hand while staring at Johnny.

“Sir, this is important.” Steward urged.

“Fine.” George pointed at Johnny. “I will deal with you later.” He faced Steward. “What’s up.”

“News from out scouts outside of Beginnings. A man, wearing all black, head to toe, entered their front gates.”

“What the hell do I care about that for?”

“Well, sir, seems, he must have been watched, Because at the exact moment he entered Beginnings . . .” Steward paused. “IT walked into New Bowman.”

^^^

“And I’m telling you, Frank.” Joe argued as he walked with Frank to his office. “The survivor didn’t ask for you by name.”

“And I’m telling you Mark said he did.”

“He probably overheard your name. And is Dean here.” Joe reached for the office door.

“Yes. And, wait, you’ll see. I’m famous in the wilderness now. I have an effect on people.”

“Your ass.” Joe scoffed.

Frank walked in.

Christopher immediately rose from the chair, faced Frank, then dropped to his knees at Frank’s feet. “God of warriors, I am honored.”

“See.” Frank pointed. “What did I tell you. My effect.”

“Christ.” Joe mumbled. “Son, get up.”

Christopher peered to Joe. “Are you Zeus?”

“No, I’m Joe. I run this community.”

“Then you are Zeus.” To Joe’s feet Christopher bowed.

Frank laughed. “This is great.”

“No it is not.” Joe reached down for him. “Get up.”

Christopher hesitated. “Am I permitted.”

“I’m telling you aren’t I?” Joe snapped and yanked him. “Who are you?”

“I am Christopher Columbus.”

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Frank's head flung back. "There's that name again. Fuck. What is it about him."

Joe held up a hand to Christopher. "Your name is Christopher Columbus."

"Yes." He nodded. "And I am so grateful that you have permitted me in your Utopia. I have searched for so long. The God of Testicular Fortitude showed me the way."

Joe rolled his eyes slightly. "Robbie."

"Yes." Chris smiled. "But I am not to tell anyone I saw them. They are writing the Gospel in solitude."

"Your secret is safe with us." Joe said. "Now, what's with the mask and get up."

"I can not show my face. However Robbie said I may take off my mask in Utopia, only after I take my mask off to Frank, God of warriors."

"That's me." Frank smiled. "Take it off."

Shaking his head, Joe turned around to close the door. "I'm killing your bother." He pushed it shut."

"Dad." Frank said calm.

"What the hell did he do to this kid?"

"He uh . . ." Frank cleared his throat. "EH, uh, didn't do this."

The subtle turned picked up a jolt and his arms flung out when Joe laid his eyes upon an exposed Christopher. "Well you had to ask what would be next, didn't you, Frank."

Eyes wide, staring at Chris, Frank nodded. "Dean." He called out.

"Be out in a sec." Dean responded from the other room.

"Now, Dean." Frank called again.

Christopher smiled. "Ah, Dean. Small and mighty God of Medicine."

"Yeah." Frank nodded. "Dean!"

Dean's irritated 'what' evolved into a loud 'uh' of shock and the clipboard toppled from his hands, his tennis shoes squealed when he laid eyes upon Christopher.

"Meet, uh . . ." Frank held out his hand. "Christopher Columbus."

"Holy shit!" Dean's eyes went as wide as they could and his hand flung through his hair.

"Christ." Joe grumbled. "Can you be anymore subtle." He walked to his desk when the phone began to ring. "And you're our scientist." He looked at Christopher so happy, and Frank and Dean, both at a stand still staring at the more than sightly disfigured young man. In s\disgust he shook his head and lifted the phone. "Yeah."

“Father.” Hal spoke.

“Hal, I don’t have time right now.”

“Dad. This is important.”

“Not right now, Hal.”

Calmly, Hal spoke. “Dad, you won’t believe what just arrived in Bowman.”

“Well, I can guarantee it’s nothing compared to what arrived in Beginnings.” Joe looked at Christopher.

“Care to wager?”

“Yeah.” Joe said annoyed. “I’ll wager that one.”

“And I’ll win.”

“I . . . uh . . .” Joe whistled. “Doubt that.”

“Fine. Ready?”

“Get on with it, Hal.” Joe rushed him.

“Eight society soldiers arrived at our border.”

“Nope. Not better.” Joe stated.

“They came in peace, They seek sanctuary under the province of Beginnings.”

“Nope. Still not good enough.”

“Actually they were escorting and protecting someone.”

“Boring.” Joe commented.

“The someone is Mrs. George Hadly.”

Joe dropped the phone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Margaret Hadly reeked class, even through the dirty Caceres uniform that was too big for her frame. She was medium built woman, a little larger around the hips. An age of mid fifties, but with a face that looked younger. "Thank you, Joe." She took the cup of tea he handed her. "Thank you for this."

"We have your escorts getting situated with Sgt. Timothy Doyle. Are you familiar with him?" Joe asked as he sat behind his desk.

"Tim. Yes." Margaret nodded. "Had it not been for him I wouldn't have had my escort or escape route set up. My escorts know him well."

"Let me take a moment to introduce you to our council." Joe said. "You'll get to know these men. We all Run things. Our Jordan Representation is not here, they lie to go to bed early . . ." He gave a half shrug. "Anyhow, Jason Godrichson."

Fro his seat, Jason rose and shook her hand. "Mrs. Hadly."

"Jason is one of our resident eccentric scientists." Joe explained. "The other one, who is really the head of it all here . . ."

"Dr. Hayes?" Margaret asked.

"Yes. You've heard of him?" Joe questioned.

"Just in name. Go on." Margaret said.

"Danny Hoi, resident invention, and civilization manipulator."

"Pleasure" Danny shook her hand.

"Danny likes to bring back modern conveniences of the old world." Joe nodded. "Actually. New Bowman is his aby. Turned it from nothing into a place everyone likes to go. Third council is Elliott Ryder. Whom you met, and you know my son, Hal."

Margaret smiled. "Hal. The Captain. His reputation proceeds him in the society."

Hal gave a tilted head blushing look.

"There is a lot of talk about his freedom movement." Margaret told. "Sgt. Doyle truly knows where and to whom to spread the word. Mr. Slagel, your son is very genuine and such a gentleman. I can not wait to meet your other sons."

"Well." Joe cleared his throat. "Robbie is out of Beginnings for two more weeks. And well, Frank. Frank is Frank."

"Why is he not here?" Margaret asked.

Druga-Johnston/The Game

"He has to take care of a visit we received. But, I'm sure you'll meet him."

"And I can't wait." Margaret wisped. "He is you son. I'm sure he is absolutely charming."

Bam. The door to the office burst open. "Fuckin Christopher Colombus." Frank stepped in. "Man is he brutal." He whistled and looked around. "Hey, is this a meeting?"

Almost embarrassed, Joe cringed. "Yeah, it is Frank."

"How come I wasn't invited." Frank shut the door. "I am acting council member. What's going on?"

Hal interjected. "We were discussing how charming you are."

"I am." Frank snickered. "Who's the broad."

Joe could have sunk into his chair. "Can you be anymore of an ass, Frank."

"No. I'm not being an ass. I'm being me. Didn't you tell us to always be ourselves."

"Yeah, I did Frank. But I also taught you to be polite." Joe griped.

"Am I not being polite."

The entire room, except for Margaret replied wit a 'yes.'

"Fuck. Fine. I'll just get my file and go." Frank moved to the file cabinet.

"Frank. Wait." Joe stopped him. "You need to meet her. Frank this is Margaret Hadly."

"Ma'am." Frank leaned with an extended hand. "OK, I'm out of here." He walked back to the file cabinet, opened up the top drawer and pulled out a folder. "I want to start my own report on Chris. He's tough to look at you know. But I'll get used to it. Dean says he's gonna grow him some experimental skin." He shut the drawer. "See ya."

"Frank." Joe spoke up. "You aren't gonna say anything?"

"About?" Frank asked.

"Her." Joe pointed to Margaret.

"What about her?"

"Father." Hal lifted his hand. "If I may."

"No, you may not." Joe replied.

"Fine." Hal said smug, "You are hereby responsible for your own stroke."

Ignoring Hal, Joe looked At Frank. "Nothing? No remark."

Frank shook his head. "Chris has me tapped out."

"No, Frank." Joe said with irritation. "About her. Margaret Hadly."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Dad. What do you want me to do insult her. That would be rude, you just told me not to be rude.”

“No!” Joe snapped. “Her name.”

“It’s a nice name.”

After moaning with everyone else, Joe continued. “Hadly. Margaret Hadly. Ring a bell?”

Frank shook his head.

“Try this.” Joe said. “George Hadly.”

“I know that name.”

Joe stared for a second. “Then you know hers. Margaret Hadly. George Hadly.”

After a moment of through, Frank’s eyes grew wide. “Oh my God, are they related.”

Hal did a dramatic, yet near silent exhale with a slight throwing back of his head. “Yes, once again, he shows that he was indeed a short bus rider in his youth.”

“Hal.” Joe warned, then returned to Frank. “This is his wife, Frank. She escaped the society.”

“And you trust this?” Frank asked.

“Don’t you.” Joe gave a motion of his head to Margaret then widened his eyes.

To Margaret, Frank took a step, he looked upon her. His eyes did a slight dance of shifting about her as he looked in a for a moment. After clearing his throat, he looked at Joe. “She’s good.” He stepped back. “Now back to Chris.” He moved to the door. “Maggie, Welcome to Beginnings.”

Hal’s eyes remained closed for a few seconds after Frank’s departure. “You’ll have to excuse my brother. He is a bit rough.”

“No.” She said peacefully. “As I expected he is charming in . . . in his own way.”

After a ‘hmm’ of disagreement, Joe continued. “So Margaret, tell us, what brought you here?”

“Freedom. Escape. Mr. Slagel, I was a prisoner in a house. I was called ‘It’ by my husband because I was so upset and violent toward him.” Margaret took a moment to sip her coffee in her story telling. “When I came out of stasis, I was in Baltimore. I didn’t know what happened, it was seven years post plague. I was very angry that George had decided to preserve me as some sort of token, then when I found out what he was doing, I grew worse. I just wanted out. And it took a while to do so. So here I am. War, as you know, for this country will be inevitable. I want to be

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

here. I know what the UWA stands for and I am behind that. I just wish I had something to offer you. I have no valuable information regarding the society. Nothing. Only this . . .” Into the jacket she wore, Margaret pulled out two photographs. She handed one to Joe. “Because she is so much like her father. Greedy. Selfish. I believe she is here working as a spy. Beverly.”

Joe’s eyes closed when he looked at the picture and he handed it back. “I’m sorry, Margaret. Was. Bev . . . Bev was here. She died in an accident not long ago.”

Hard Margaret Swallowed. “Was she executed.”

“Not on purpose, no.” Joe answered.

A sad sniff escaped her.

“I’m sorry.”

Slowly Margaret shook her head. “I expected as much. I knew she was cryogenically preserved in North Dakota. And she never made it to Quantico, but George spoke of her, so I figured she was here. Now him . . .” She handed Joe the picture. “I know nothing of him. He and his father never saw eye to eye. He isn’t in Quantico, or anywhere with the society. Sgt. Doyle confirmed that. I don’t even know if he was cryogenically preserved. I just figured, if Bev and I were, why wouldn’t Peter.”

Joe shook his head as he looked at the picture. “I’m sorry. I don’t know him.” He handed the picture to Danny. “Recognize him.”

Danny looked. “No.”

Elliott held out his hand. “May I?” He waited for the photograph and then checked it out. “Captain.” He gave it to Hal.

“Well.” Hal spoke as soon as he saw the picture. “You are absolutely correct that he isn’t part of the society.” He returned the picture to Margaret.”

Joe was puzzled. “You recognize him?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Hal responded. “He’s one of mine.”

^^^

From the small frame house in New Bowman where they had settled Margaret Hadly, Hal walked Joe and Jason to the awaiting jeep.

“And he’ll return?” Joe asked.

“Probably with in the week.” Hal replied. “He’s on a scouting mission. Most of them now are close because of winter.”

“And you’re sure he’s not a traitor.”

“I am positive.” Hal stopped with his father and Jason. “Aside from the fact that we found him before we had any means of communication,



and before the society even knew who we were. Bill, or Peter as his real name turns out to be, was pretty much wandering aimlessly, when he was picked up. At first we thought it was a SUT gone bad. You know the micro chip stopped working. But we couldn't find any signs of a lobotomy. He was mobile. Yet, he couldn't speak, or reason past a fifth grade level. In fact, it took a lot of work and getting him around people for him to make progress. His memory began to last longer. Christ we'd teach him something and he'd forget it. Now, he still is not what we would call bright. And we always attributed the lack of memory to trauma."

Jason knew the cause. "It had to be the brain regression syndrom of the cryo process. He just didn't suffer heavy brain damage like our Beginnings field workers."

"Can it ever come back?" Joe asked.

"Not sure." Jason replied. "But if I were to guess. I'd say no. Look at Frank."

"Ha-ha-ha." Joe said sarcastically. "Get in the jeep." He walked around to the driver's side. "Night, Hal. You gonna finally get that sleep."

"Absolutely. Mind and body both." Hal answered, then waited until his father and Jason started the jeep and began to drive off. He lifted his hand in a wave as they passed him. And as he turned to began his journey to his home not far away, his phone rang. Calm, Hal answered it. "Captain Slagel."

"Hey, Hal." Frank spoke on the other line. "I'm pretty wired. You wanna hang out?"

Hal hesitated, then he smiled. "No." with a beep of the a\ending call, and a sigh of relief, Hal headed home.

^^^^

"Maybe . . ." Frank said with a tiled head to Dean. "Maybe this was actually what I needed." He lifted his coffee, took a sip and set it back down.

"We haven't been talking much." Dean held a letter in his hand.

"I know. I think it's me." Frank commented. "Just feeling really lost right now."

"I know the feeling." Dean exhaled.

"And maybe Ryder was right. Just left out?"

"I would agree or disagree, Frank. But you never told me what the problem was."

Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Oh. Forget it.” Frank waved out his hand and picked up a piece of paper.

“Sgt. Ryder had attitude this afternoon.”

“It’s the entire fuckin UWA brigade.” Frank told him. “Hal didn’t want to hang out tonight.”

“I’m glad.” Dean smiled. “I missed my friend. Since Ellen’s been gone. You’ve been avoiding me. You don’t have to tell me why. Just know I’m glad you’re here.”

“All that’s behind me, Dean.” Frank held up the piece of paper. “Thank you for sharing your Ellen note with me.”

“And thanks, for sharing yours with me. This was great, Frank. What made you do it?”

Frank shrugged. “I missed her. I needed to talk to her. And . . . I know it was a chance, but, as long as no one knows, we’re good, right?”

“Right.” Dean agreed. “Ellen sounds good, though.”

“Through her letters. Elliott says she’s fine.”

“She was more serious in your letter than mine.” Dean gave a quirky look. “Although, Misha got teared up when she read . . .”

“Whoa. Wait.” Frank held up his hand. “Misha.”

“Um, yeah, Frank. My lab assistant.”

“What are you? An asshole?” Frank snapped.

“What the hell.” Shock laced Dean’s words by the sudden Frank turn around.

“Do not even tell me you showed Ellen’s letter to Misha.”

“Yeah, I did I . . .”

“Fuck!” Frank blasted as he stood up. “Could you be anymore fuckin lame, Dean!”

“I resent Frank.” Dean rose. “You’re getting all pissy about this. I needed to share it. There is nothing wrong with me sharing that letter.”

“Yeah you fuck. If the circumstances were normal.”

“Don’t talk to me like that. You hear me. Where t\do you get off!” Dean snapped back with passion.

“I don’t. But I’m starting to wonder if you do.” Frank nearly tossed the chair and barged toward the front door.

“What the hell are you talking about.”

“Misha.” Frank said in a spin.

“What about her? You’re pissed off because I showed her the letter!”

“And you have a right to question that!” Total angry flew from Frank. “You have no right. No right whatsoever to question that. And you had no

right to show that letter to anyone! Anyone Dean.” Strong Frank’s moved about as he raged. “Ellen’s not away on a fuck girl scout convention. She’s not in Bowman. Ellen is away from this community for community reasons. And there are rules, Dean.”

All expression dropped from Dean’s face and he whispered out, ‘shit’ just before he closed his eyes.

“That’s right.” Frank grveled. “Rules. Rules that we broke. No one can know this. You miss her?! I’m wondering. Because if it gets out that we broke those rules, that Ellen broke those rules, you can forget about seeing her for another month! If that happens, if that happens . . .” His voice dropped to a frightening whisper. “I will never forgive you. And I swear on my life you will pay.” On his final word, Frank flung opened the door and raged out.

Dean could not move. Even the slamming of the door didn’t jolt him one bit. His heart sunk, his eyes closed and his head fell forward. Frank’s forgiveness? Dean chuckled emotionally. IF Ellen’s sentence was extended because of his error, then deal with Frank unable to forgive him would be the easy part, because Dean would never be able to forgive himself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

January 12<sup>th</sup>

Another big red 'x' was placed on a square. Another marking Ellen made of days served. Very few white blocks remained, but it wasn't the finishing date she stared at in the kitchen the was the current day.

"Whew." Robbie commented as he came in the kitchen door. He stomped his feet. "Cold out there." He rolled the M-16 from his shoulder as he shut the door, then using his teeth he took off his gloves. "Snow melted yesterday . . ." He walked to Ellen. "But it iced up." He put his hand on her cheek. "Cold."

She shrieked near silent from the icy touch. "Yes." She shook her head.

Robbie peered over her shoulder. "Marking the calender?"

"Yep. And look at today."

After a sniff, Robbie glanced again. "Oh." He exhaled. "I'm sorry, El."

"The twins birthday. They're eight today."

"They know you're thinking about them."

"Yeah, I know. Josh knows where I hid their presents." She turned around to face him.

"Are you OK?" Robbie asked. "Is it the birthday. You seem down."

"I am down. But it's not the birthday. It's this . . ." She lifted the calendar. "I keep on wondering how cold it will be in February."

"February?" Robbie smiled. "El, we'll be in Beginnings. It won't make a difference Ten more days. Ten. You can count on both hands. I can't." He winked. "But you can."

"Robbie." She whispered out as she walked by him.

"El, don't tell me you're offended by my one-arm humor."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "Robbie, I'm worried."

"About?"

"Us?"

"In what way?"

"I have a bad feeling. Not about us-us. About this being out here."

"El, please. Have things not been calm." Robbie scoffed.

"Exactly. Calm. Too calm. This has been way too easy. I have this feeling like we teetering on the verge. The calm before the storm sort of

thing.”

“Well, I can tell you. Weather’s bad. No one is going anywhere.” Robbie spoke confident. “And no fears. By the time it clears up. We won’t be here. This time in ten days we’ll be back home in Beginnings.”

“That’s another fear of mine.” Ellen said. “I just have this strong feeling that this time in ten days, you and I, we’re gonna be further away from Beginnings than we ever thought possible.”

^^^

It wasn’t quite the job that Margaret expected, but she did ask to be put where needed. She shook her foot gently to shuck the water that splashed on shoe from the bucket set before her in the chapel and then she smiled at Andrea.

“Is everything all right?” Andrea asked.

“Um, yes.” Margaret smiled again.

“You’re just staring at that as if you have a problem with that bucket.”

“No, not at all.”

“You did ask to be put where needed.” Andrea sighed out and looked around. “And God’s house needs a house woman. It is very respectful. I hope you don’t think it’s beneath you.”

“No, no.” Margaret shook her head. “Not at all.”

“Good. Because this is your new job. This is beginnings and it isn’t a free ride. For the past week you’ve not done anything.”

“I . . . was moved to containment.” Margaret replied.

“Still. I hear you slacked in there.”

“Really?” Margaret asked shocked.

“Oh, yes. Everyone said you gave attitude. Richie told me he came very close to reminding you it wasn’t the White House anymore.”

“Richie said that?”

“Are you questioning me.” Andrea quizzed with intimidation. “That boy wouldn’t lie. He is my sort of son.”

Lost, Margaret looked at her.

“And what in Sweet Jesus’ name is that look for?”

“You son?”

“Oh. Oh. Don’t even be telling me you’re given that look because he’s white and I’m black.”

“I didn’t . . .”

“Race is not an issue in Beginnings unless you’re Frank. And don’t

think I don't remember that little racist comment you made about our Jewish brothers and sisters back during the primaries of George's first term."

"It was a Passover joke."

"Hmm." Andrea tossed her head. "No more covering up. I am not those weak minded people who bought it all."

"I just can't believe you're remembering that."

"Is that an 'old comment.'"

"No, I . . ."

"Are you saying I'm old?"

"My God."

"And you blaspheme too."

"I give up." Margaret tossed her hands in defeat.

"No. No-no. You can not. Sweet Jesus woman, I told you this isn't a free ride."

"You're right. You're right. I won't complain," Margaret pacified. "Joe was nice man and let me in here."

"He is a nice *married* man."

Curiously, Margaret gazed at Andrea. "Why would you add that."

"Just so you know. We all know how you tend to go after men in power."

"What in the world are you talking about."

"Senator James. House Majority leader.." Andrea raised an eyebrow. "Oh, that little affair I read about is still fresh in my mind. You both were married."

Margaret was in shock. She couldn't even speak.

"Well, I'm a busy woman. I have to go." Andrea began to leave. "And don't forget to put the song insert in the humanly. We can't be praising our Lord without lyric." Nearly to the door Andrea stooped when she heard a little scream come from Margaret. "What!" Andrea spun back around. "Is it now!"

Holding up the music insert, Margaret's mouth opened and closed a few times. "This song."

"What about it."

"Jesus is a Futomara."

"Yes. So?" Andrea snapped. "My son wrote that. Is there a problem."

"Jesus is a Futomara?" Margaret asked. "Futomara."

"It's Japanese."

"I know." Margaret said. "Do you know what it means?"

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Oh” Andrea gasped. “Sweet Jesus, just because we weren’t born with a silver spoon in our mouths, just because we weren’t first lady, and just because we live in a plague ravished world behind a an invisible electronic wall does not mean we aren’t cultured enough to understand the language of our Japanese brothers and sister. And if you keep on giving me attitude like this, you’ll be placed in the house of Lesbians.” Saying no more, in a hard sin, Andrea then stormed out.

Jolting some from the slam of the door, Margaret looked back down to the words. “Jesus is a Futomara.” Feeling the after effects of Andrea’s anger, Margaret, figuring she was probably wrong on the interpretation, set down the sheet and lifted her bucket.

^^^

*Access Denied*, the LDC display on the keypad for the Cryo lab read.

“Huh?” Frank looked confused. “Fuck. OK.” Thinking he was in a hurry, he punched in the code again. “Access denied. OK, wait. One . . .” he pressed the button. “Three . . . Five . . . six. Three. Huh?” Again the error message blinked at him. “This can’t be right.” Into his back pocket he reached and pulled out a small note pad. He flipped open the pages. “I’m right. What the hell?” Just one more, looking at the written numbers, Frank tried, and again Frank failed. “Fuck.” He brought his radio headset to his mouth. “Security. Come in.”

“Yeah, Frank.”

“You received any reports on the Cryo keypad being down?”

“No, it’s working just fine.” Mark replied. “I’m getting signals.”

“Well, I’m not getting in.” Frank said. “It keeps reading access denied.”

“Are you using the right code?”

“Uh, Mark, I’m fuckin head of security, I should have the right code.”

“When were you there last?”

“At the cryo?” Frank paused to think of when it was his turn to do the rounds down there. “Three days.”

“That might be why.”

“Mark.” Frank snickered. “You think the cryo lab is dejected because I haven’t been here.”

Mark laughed. “No. The code was changed.”

“No it wasn’t.” Frank argued.

“Yeah it was.”

“OK. Before I fuckin flip out. Why wasn’t I notified.”

“You had to be. Didn’t you get the memo?”

“Memo? When the fuck did we start doing memos?”

“When Hal was running things.”

“Hal’s a fuckin idiot.” Frank snapped. “No one gives me a memo, I wouldn’t read them. Why was this code changed.”

“Dean requested it he said because Misha could reach the numbers.”

Immediate anger raged through Frank. “Oh, fuck him. It was alright for El to jump for the numbers but not her? How fuckin chivalrous. Give me the new code.”

“I can’t.”

“Mark.” Frank said stronger. “Give me the new fuckin code.”

“Frank, I can’t give it over the airways that would be a breach of security.”

“Well then . . .” Frank growled. “Put the fuckin radio to your head and think it.”

“Think it.”

“Yeah. Put the radio to your head and think it.”

“Ok.” Mark said with uncertainty.

“Thanks.” Frank lowered the microphone and punched the code into the pad. He nearly pushed open the door with the force of his frustration, and his boots screeched loudly when he stopped cold in the lab. Misha was sitting behind the computer. “What are you, deaf?” He asked her.

“Excuse me.”

“You didn’t hear the buzz of the wrong code being put in?”

“Yes.” Misha stared at the screen.

“Why didn’t you see who was there?” Frank asked walking across the lab.

“I did not know who was there.”

“You could have fuckin asked. The door may be metal but it isn’t sound proof.” To the back room he walked. “I have to check this temp.” Unlocking the back room, Frank went in, clipboard in hand and did his check. It was brief and he was back out of there in a few seconds. Locking back up he noticed Misha, slowly, but diligently typing. “Why are you down here?”

“I am doing data entry.”

“You can’t do that up top.”

“It has to do with the Christopher assessment. It needs put in down here.”



"Are you practicing?" Frank questioned.

"Practicing."

"Um, data entry."

"No. I am getting good. Why would you ask?"

"You're [putting the assessment information in the computer. Retyping it. I'm guessing you're doing that because you need practice."

"No, I am doing it because it needs logged."

"But it's already logged." Frank told her. "All finished."

"We still have one more series to complete."

"That's not what I mean. Chris came with an entire print out of an assessment and a disk. Didn't the disk work?"

"You mean that?" Misha pointed to the half inch stack of paper bound with a rubber band. A disk set on top.

Frank waked to it. "Yeah. This. Doesn't this disk work?"

"I don't know. We aren't using that information. Dean thought it best to start from scratch so I could learn how to . . ." Misha began to rush her words but it was in vain, Frank had barged from the cryo lab, with that stack of papers before she could finish her thoughts.

"So basically . . ." Dean walked around the counter in the clinic lab talking to Christopher. "The final portion will be a series of tolerance testing. Hot cold. Exposure and so forth."

"Ah, yes." Christopher nodded. "Ellen, Goddess of Wonder performed those before as well."

"Yes, I know. And I hate to put you through these again, but consider it you helping out. Just . . . just humor me."

Frank's voice, so intense, took over the entire feel of the room. "Oh, someone ought to humor you." He marched in. "Because right now you're so fuckin far from funny."

"What is it, Frank?" Dean snapped. "I'm busy."

"I don't care."

"Neither do I over what you want. So leave."

"Dean." Frank stayed firm. "You and I, we need to talk."

"You know, I recall we stopped talking over a week ago."

"There's a reason for it."

"I cared then. I don't care now."

"Dean! I'm not fuckin around!"

"Neither am I!"

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

With a squeal of his sliding stool, Christopher jumped up in the after moment of their raised voice. "Should I run and find cover. If the Gods fight, surely a horrible storm will occur."

"Chris." Frank kept his eyes on Dean. "With how I'm feeling, a fuckin tornado will wipe this place out."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Listen to you. What do you want?"

"I told you . . ."

"We have to talk. Yeah. Yeah." Dean said with irritated sarcasm. "Well, unless you are something important. Save it. Because I'm really busy Frank. I have an assessment to finish."

"Well how about I help you out." On his final word with a hard slam, int Dean's Chest Frank pummeled the assessment. Upon impact, papers flew everywhere.

Dean's anger and shock escaped in the form of a verbal wheeze. "What the hell Frank!" Dean's hands motioned out ward at the mess. "Can you be anymore of a dick."

"Fifty-four pages, Dean!" Frank verbally hit hard. "Fifty-four pages of assessment. Fifty-four pages of Ellen's hard work. No, I think the question should be. Can *you* be anymore of a dick." The emotional turn of Frank's body, and rush of his moments were like a suction, causing more papers to fly about as Frank stormed out.

^^^

There wasn't a step of the way that Jess Boyens didn't feel nervous. But as he stood in Bertha Callahan's office, completely alone, he was at his worst. His stomach flopped, jumped side to side and his hands shook.

He kept wiping the sweat off of his palms against his pants, and he fought hard to keep his breathing in synch. He knew he could pull it off, he just had to get over that first initial moment of seeing George. Callahan was intimidating, and it didn't help that he was expecting a man. The shock of seeing a woman, or rather, masculine woman stunned him. Her voice, when she spoke, finally gave answer to Jess as to why Frank kept calling Bertha the transvestite.

Every footstep that neared, Jess felt it in his chest. Then he'd sigh out when the person passed. And then he found it, the one thing that would help. His thoughts went back to Frank and Joe arguing about Bertha the transvestite, and Jess knew one of the first messages he would send, if nothing else important occurred, would be to let Frank know that he was

absolutely correct. So to speak.

The rhythm of pacing didn't last long. No sooner did Jess slowed down to the nearing sounds of walking, he stopped when he saw who it was. "Johnny."

Blinking, almost lost, Johnny walked in. "Yes?"

"Johnny." Jess walked to him.

"Do I know you?"

Jess chuckled. "Um, yeah you . . ."

"Sorry it took so long." George made his announcement in his steady stride into the office. "Johnny can you leave us?"

"Um, yeah, George. Sure." Johnny slowly started to leave, but before he did, he took one more look at Jess.

"Boyens." George extended his hand. "How was the trip?"

"Long. My injuries are bothering me."

"Like to have our doctors take a look at you. The meds out in Duluth said you were burned pretty bad."

"I'm still healing." Jess nodded with appreciation.

"It's a long process."

"George. Why did Johnny act as if he didn't know me?"

"I haven't a clue. In fact that is going to be one of your first jobs here. To determine if in deed it is an act."

"Excuse me?" Jess asked.

"Later on that." Georg reached back and closed the office door. "But first. And most importantly." Like an excited and anxious, child, George rubbed his hands together. "How's my daughter?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

From the large window of the Mess hall, Margaret lost all breath and grabbed her chest. "It's been a while since I have seen him."

"He is a good man." Hal told her. "The mess hall should be empty it will be a good place to sit."

"I'm actually nervous. He looks very well."

"I'd like to see some weight on him. But he's not a big eater." Hal stated.

"Never was."

Upward was the indicating point Hal gave. "Sgt. Ryder is speaking to him now."

"How do you think he'll tell him?" Margaret asked.

"Gently. I think it should take a few minutes. He shock of . . . Christ." Hal whined.

"A few minutes?" Margaret asked shocked when she saw Peter spin to the window. "He looks horrified."

"I'm sure gingerly isn't the proper term to describe the way Sgt. Ryder broke the news to him."

"They're coming." Margaret caught her breath again as she watched Elliott and a very apprehensive Peter make their way to the mess hall.

Elliott opened the door and allowed Peter to step in first.

Behind Elliott, Hal walked. "Good Lord, Elliott, what did you do, just blurt it out to the man, He looks like death."

Elliott shrugged. "Why beat around the bush."

In a single motion Hal lifted his own bandana from his hind pocket and gave a soft whap to the head of Elliott. "Stop hanging around my brother. Owens is starting to look good."

"Peter." Margaret whispered and stepped to him. "She smiled gently. "You . . . you look well." she reached up to his face.

Peter stepped back and shifted his eyes to Hal. "Captain."

"It's all right, son." Hal told him. "This is your mother."

Peter looked upon Margaret so confused.

"See." Margaret he handed him a photograph. "This is a family picture of us.."

With a trembling hand Peter too the picture. "I am sorry, I am very sorry. I do . . . Do not . . ." He struggled, almost as if he had a stutter, for his

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words. "remember you. I'm sorry."

"That's OK. You hold that." Margaret cupped her hand over his. "We have plenty of time to get reacquainted."

Hal laid his hand on Peter's back. "You could start now. I know you are exhausted after the scouting mission. But perhaps you two could share some coffee in here. Sgt. Ryder and I will leave you be."

As Hal began to leave, Margaret caught glimpse of the look that turned near petrified on Peter's face. "Perhaps . . ." She spoke up. "The Captain could stay and help ease things?"

Peter exhaled in relief. "I would like that."

"That will be fine." Hal nodded for Elliott to leave. "Sgt. Ryder can . . . oh." He snapped his fingers. "Elliott. Wait." He made his way to Elliott. "Here." He reached in his inner pocket and pulled out the hand held computer. "We may be busy for a while. Please keep checking this."

Elliott took the mini computer as Hal walked to a table with Margaret and Peter. He glanced down at it as he walked out and saw there were 'zero' messages waiting. And Elliott would keep checking to see if one arrived, he knew one would, especially since Jess had arrived in Quantico.

^^^

From the single sheet of paper, to Billy Frank glanced and set it down. "Really? To be honest. I haven't a clue."

"That's OK." Billy pulled it back. "I think I have it." He scratched his head. "It's a form of calculus." He shrugged.

"Calculus, huh?" Frank rocked back some in the chair. "Jenny is teaching some tough stuff now."

"No." Billy snickered. "I think it's her compromise to me." He pushed the paper aside. "She marks them all correct even when they are wrong."

"If they're wrong and she's say they're right, how do you know?" Frank asked.

"I know calculus."

"Oh." Frank stood up and grabbed the plates from the table?

"But I didn't say anything. I'm being nice."

Mid clean up Frank froze. "You're being nice to Jenny?"

"She's trying. You know, with Mom gone and all."

"That's nice of you, Bill. Did you want more birthday cake?" Frank picked up the last plate.

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“No. Any more sugar intake and it will effect my sleep pattern.” He folded his hands.

“Joey ate three pieces and he’s sound asleep.” Frank took the dishes into the kitchen.

“Joey is an exception to the rule.” Billy waited for Frank to return. “So, Uncle Frank? Why um . . . why do you think . . .”

“Busy.” Frank cut him off. “I mean, with your mom not being int own. He’s really busy.” Pulling out his chair again, Frank sat down. “And besides, if you want my opinion, I think your dad thinks your birthday is in February.”

“Why?”

“That time ripple. Before we rippled time, you were born in February.”

“How did that happen?” Billy asked.

“Time machine.”

“No.” He laughed. “I mean that are birthday was earlier.”

“You were conceived earlier.”

“How?”

Frank panicked. “How . . . how old are you?”

“Eight.”

One eye closed, Frank took a moment of thought. “I guess with you being smart, you’re old enough. See . . .” He leaned int the table and folded his hands. “When a man and a woman get together. They do things. And these things. Well have parts that fit and . . .”

“Oh my God.”

“Wait. I’m trying to be gentle.”

“No.” Billy gasped out. “You aren’t actually explaining the facts of life to me are you.”

“You asked.”

“No I did not. I asked how the ripple effected our conception. Uncle Frank, please.” Billy stood up. “If I know calculus, I’m pretty sure I know where babies come from.” He kissed Frank on the cheek and snickered in sarcasm. “Everyone knows they’re made in labs.” He laughed again at how Frank was a bout to explain that to him, then with a soft goodnight, Billy trotted off to bed.

It turned into a William Hayes memory for Frank, and he laughed, running his hand across his face in that after chuckle. Thinking back at how William insisted that Dean and Ellen created their children in a lab because Dean was incapable of creating them naturally. It had been some time for

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Frank, but right there, he took a moment and missed William Hayes. In was a peaceful moment for Frank until Dean walked in.

“Frank.” Dean merely stated his name.

“Dean.” Frank stood up. “Busy night?”

“As a matter of fact. Yes.” Dean moved to the kitchen.

“I thought so,”

“You can go.”

“I plan on it.” Frank grabbed his leather jacket. “Night.”

Arrogant, Dean flashed a smile and continued his journey into the kitchen. Not two steps onto the linoleum he stopped. The half of birthday cake on the counter screamed at him and his heart sunk. “Oh my God.” He turned around and as he raced to the livingroom with full intent on going straight to the twins, he saw the door shut. “That asshole.” Halting himself and changing his course of action, Dean flung open the front door. “Frank. Wait.” He called out strongly.

“What?” Frank stopped on the porch.

“Why . . . why didn’t you call me?”

“About?”

“You know about what. The twins birthday.”

“It’s your kids’ birthday Dean, why should I remind you.”

“Because I’ve been busy.”

“Funny.” Frank scoffed. “I thought you had a lab assistant now.”

Dean bit his bottom lip, and tensed his jaw in a withholding. “You still should have called me.”

“We tried. Where’s your phone, Dean. Or rather. Why wasn’t it on.”

“I was working on DNA. I always turn the ringer off. What would it have taken to come get me.”

“What would it have taken to remember.”

“You did this on purpose!” Dean raised his voice come. “To make me look like the bad guy.”

“Fuck you, Dean. I covered for your little ass tonight. So don’t even go there.”

“You know . . .” Dean’s breathing became heavier the more his frustration slipped out. “You have a real problem with me, and I can’t figure out why the old Frank is back.”

“Maybe because a new Dean emerged.”

“What are you talking about.”

“You aren’t the same Dean.”

“:Bullshit!”

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“No! No!” Frank shook his head. “You are so occupied anymore no one sees you, hears from you. You can’t complete simple fuckin household father shores alone.”

“I am trying, Frank. I am trying the best I can to get by until Ellen gets back.”

“No, Dean!” Frank blasted, “you are trying the best you can to replace Ellen until she gets back.”

“Where is this coming from.”

“Misha.”

Dean grunted a sarcastic. “Oh. Oh I get it. Yes.” He nodded. “You know what, Frank. It makes sense. It makes perfect sense. It’s not the lab assistant thing, it’s the fact that I became friends with her. So what. You’re jealous. Like a spoiled rotten kid on a playground, you’re jealous. I made a new friend. I have someone to talk to.”

“Well fuckin congratulations Dean.” Heaviness laced Frank’s words. “Good for you. I’m glad you found someone. Me. I’d rather wait for Ellen. Ellen. You remember her, don’t you?”

“Fuck you.”

CRACK!

The sound of the hit rang out, and the deliverance of Frank’s fist, nailed Dean with more surprise and a force that knocked him off balance and back into the side of the house.

Regaining his footing quickly, Dean didn’t see the red of blood, he saw the red of his rage, and like a pitbull he charged forward. Full speed, shoulder first, into Frank’s gut, Dean rammed him. The splintering of wood broke the silence of the evening even more, when both men collided and with the break of the porch railing sailed into the now covered yard.

Dean within his grip, Frank rolled himself to a stand. His boot slipped some on the iced up snow. Still holding on to Dean, he caught glimpse on the oncoming blow, and before Dean could land his punch, Frank shoved him back hard.

The BANG of the aluminum siding, caused a start in Joe and he peered up from reading his Hoi Newspaper. Lowering his glasses he called to Andrea. “What the hell was that.”

From her washing dishes stance, hands in the water Andrea tipped toed some and peered out the kitchen window. She sang a sweet, ‘ah.’

“What?” Joe asked,.



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“Frank and Dean must have patched things up. Their wrestling out there.”

“Wrestling?” Joe took off his glasses.

“Yep.”

The second bang of the siding wasn’t a signal to Joe that outside a youth filled rough housing ensued but rather a battle. Taking that as a warning, and letting out an aggravated, ‘Christ’, Joe went outside.

Frank had taken one hit. It wasn’t a devastating blow, but it was still a hit taken. Not wanting to deal with a snow covered fight, and just wanting to get it over with, in a single step stride forward, Frank clenched his fist tight, revved back the powerhouse blow, and delivered to what was an open target. Dean.

Stopped.

The stinging ricocheted across Frank’s cold knuckles, with the interception of his punch by his father’s hand.

Gripping tight, Joe stepped between the two men and kept his eyes focused hard on Frank. “Enough. You hear me? Enough.” He gave a firm father point, released Frank’s hand, then turned to Dean. “You. Go in your house.” He turned back to Frank. “You. Go take a walk or something. No more of this shit.” A scolding look was given to both of them, then Joe head back to his house. “I mean it.” He ordered one more time. He stopped by his own porch and glanced back at Frank and Dean who were a few feet apart in a dead stare. “Goodnight.”

Frank’s shoulders bounced in a heaviness, and his breaths of steam encircled him. After the sound of his father’s door closing, and Joe’s yelling out, ‘Christ, Andrea, no they didn’t make up. Drop it.’, Frank wiped the back of his hand over the corner of his mouth and stepped back. “This isn’t over.”

“No, Frank.” Dean brought his fingers to the corner of his eyes, and brought them back down to look at the blood. “The only that is over for sure is this friendship.”

A single arrogant laugh came from Frank and he took a step to Dean. “Friendship? You think I was your friend? Let me tell you something little man, I just used you to get to Ellen. And yo know what . . .” Another step close Frank walked. “Even if I was your friend.” He shrugged. “You don’t need me anymore. You have Misha. In fact. With her around. I don’t believe you even need Ellen anymore. And don’t think for one moment I won’t seize the opportunity, be the old Frank, and step right in.”

“It’ll never happen.”

“You don’t think?” Frank chuckled. “Why don’t we make a little list right now. Giggle sessions in the lab. Misha wearing el’s lab coat, doing El’s cryo work, redoing Ellen’s assessment. Bathing the kids, feeding the kids, reading to them. And let’s not forget the long work nights that pretty much were the cause for you forgetting your kids birthday. You’ve been so wrapped up, Dean you haven’t even seen what you’re doing. But . . .” He took a step back. “I did. Ellen will. That’s all it will take. It’ll never happen?” Frank scoffed. “I’d say, you pretty much made it happen for me.” With another step back, he winked. “Thanks, Dean.”

Dean couldn’t do it. He couldn’t show he listened to every word Frank said, nor the fact that he felt them harder than the punch he took. He kept his eyes forward watching Frank as he walked away. And as soon as Frank disappeared from site, Dean closed his eyes, and to a crouch, he dropped. Elbows on thighs, he brought this cupped hands to his mouth.

He probably could have stayed like that for a while, in the cold. Stayed focused, never giving into the what he felt. Dean could have done that had it not been for the tiny feel of a child’s hand that laid upon his arched back. The hand rubbed once in a comfort. Sliding his lips against his knuckles, Dean turned and looked to Billy.

Billy didn’t say a word, but yet conveyed the right thing. He looked at his father, and not with a look of disappointment or judgement, he looked at Dean with a innocent compassion.

The right thing.

After a second and a long blink, with a heavy release of emotional breath, Dean stood to his feet and lifted his son. Arms wrapped tight, embracing Billy with everything he had, Dean walked back into his home.

^^^

The scouting party reports were pretty encouraging. Three possible leads to populated areas. Maybe that was why, to Elliott, the Captain looked so engrossed sitting behind his desk. In fact so engrossed he didn’t know Elliott had emerged into the open doorway. Elliott had every intention of flowing right in with the important news he had to deliver. But there was a frightening visual about the Captain. Under the glow of the single desk lamp, the Captain illuminated a twin image of his father.

Hal hunched some over the papers sprawled about. Leaning inward in a hover of his desk. The shadows from the dim bulb found a home within

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the corners of Hal's eyes, magnifying the lines to make him look older. To Elliott, the final touch and icing on the cake of the whole pseudo Joe appearance was the half-square reading glasses the Captain allowed no one to see him wear.

A subtle clearing of the throat was Elliott's interruption.

Hal peered over the rims of his glasses, then with the slow lowering of them, he stood up. "Something is wrong."

After a hard swallow, Elliott quietly walked to the desk. "I've been checking constantly for you." He handed Hal the and held computer. "That just came in."

Eyes barely reading the brief message, Hal exhaled heavily. "Oh my God."

^^^

With a rush if urgency, Hal used his authority and began moving things along before even arriving in Beginnings. He knew what had to be done, and the amount of time to waste was unknown. He didn't prioritize his list of those to speak to according to status, he prioritized according to who he saw when. And though he would have preferred do to fear of parental lashing, of speaking hot his father, Frank took the priority Beginnings spot when Hal watched him walk into the social hall.

"I'm not in the mood." Frank graveled to Henry who only inched his way over. "Go away."

"But, Frank, you're bleeding right . . ." Henry pointed to the corner of his own mouth.

"Go away." Frank gave a stern look, pulled up a bar stool, then before sitting down, grabbed for a bottle and glass.

"Please don't drink, Frank."

Slam. With the sound of the bottle's bottom hitting the bar Frank pivoted an angry glare to Henry. "I will say this one more time."

Henry raised his hands in defeat, "Never mind. I know. Go away. Fine. If I can't stop you, maybe he can."

"Who the fuck are you talking about?" Frank readied to pour from the bottle.

"Me." Hal reached out and stopped him.

"Don't." Frank warned.

"What are you doing, Frank?" Hal questioned.

"What's it look like, Hal. Having a drink. And what the fuck? Do you

have radar or something.”

“Pretty much, so, yes.”

“I’ll tell you the same thing I told Henry. Go away. I need this.” Frank poured some into his glass. “My mind needs to be elsewhere right now.” He raised the glass to his lips.

“Good.” Hal spoke. “Put it here.” He placed the computer to Frank’s eyes level. “Instead of there.” He took the glass from Frank’s hand. “Read the message from Jess.” Hal watched Frank take in the words. “I’d say big brother, we found a place for your mind to be.”

^^^^

Joe tried to sleep. He really did. But he knew slumber would be impossible. Snuggling with his pillow, laying on his side, he was able to ignore the light that was still on from Andrea’s side of the bed but he was unable to ignore her talking.

“Vixen.” Andrea stated, sitting up, pillows propped behind her.

“Andrea, I would like to sleep.”

“And I need to talk. Oh how typical that you don’t want to listen now that she’s in the picture.”

“Andrea . . .” Joe rolled onto his back. “What in Christ’s name are you talking about.”

“The vixen.”

“Who is the vixen.”

“Margaret, I packed up and left my husband for Joe Slagel, Hadly.”

“Christ Almighty. Where is this coming from.”

“She called you. What was that phone call about?” Andrea asked.

“She wanted to let me know she was staying in New Bowman with Peter.”

“Oh, and I’m to believe that.” Andrea sniffed.

“Why wouldn’t you.”

“She wants you Joe.”

“Oh this is silly.”

“No. She wants you. I know her reputation and yours.”

“What!”

“Yes. She had that reputation in the old world of chasing after men in power. And you . . . you had the reputation in the old world of . . .” She sniffed in dramatic hurt. “Chasing after anything in a skirt.”

“What!” Joe blasted even louder.

“Oh, don’t deny it. I talked to Frank. He told me.”

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"Frank, is a goddamn hard head who not only has a distorted view of his childhood, but right now is running around thinking a meteor is crashing to earth and John Wayne, who happens to be God, is not gonna stop it."

"You mock your son."

"I tell the truth."

"Are you denying your reputation of being a cheat in the old world?" Andrea questioned.

"Yes." Joe nodded. "I never cheated. When I didn't want to be with a woman I just dropped her."

Andrea gasped.

"Feel better?" Joe asked.

The opening of Andrea's mouth didn't elude any words, the knocking on the front door stopped that.

"Christ." Joe flung off the covers. "Am I not suppose to sleep." He stormed from the bedroom. "Something must be going to happen that I am not allowed to get a single moment of shut eye." He opened the front door. Standing there was Frank and Hal. A stock 'what!' would have normally been in order, but Joe saw it on their faces that they were perhaps the reason he was not suppose to sleep.

Hal handed Joe the computer as he stepped in side. "We have trouble."

Joe knew that to be true when he looked down and read the simple message from Jess: Expect the very worst. Get prepared! He knows.

^^^

Another crash of an object in her office and Bertha knew she would have a hard time controlling herself. She knew the president was in a crisis, she felt his pain, but, to her, did it need to breed such temper tantrums? She was witnessing first hand what she had only heard rumors about.

"Goddamn it, Callahan, are you listening?" George blasted.

"Sir." Bertha stood firm. "I could listen a lot better if you would remain calm."

"Don't talk down to me."

"I am not . . . I am not speaking down to you, Sir."

George huffed. "I need an answer."

"I gave you an answer."

"It's not good enough."

"It is the best I can do."

"Five days?" George moved to her in a rush. "That is absurd."

"Yes, it is." Bertha agreed. "Because a week would be more rational and allow for less error."

"Where in God's name can error occur. And why is it taking so long?"

"First." Berths stayed calm as she explained. "Fuel. The plane will need fueled and fueling stations will need to be set up for the return trip. Second. If a workable deliverance plane is not found, then your plane will have to have adjustments made. Third. A complete weapons check will have to be made by a specialist. We've only two that I can trust. You want to make sure the weapon detonates properly, and more importantly you want to make sure that you are safe in carrying it. A slow leak of radiation in flight will kill you in two weeks. Unless you want to secure another pilot for the job."

"You are discussing this with me as if doing a Hiroshima is the only way."

"It is."

"Bullshit." George argued. "We have that silo in Greensburg Pennsylvania that Frank Slagel didn't dismantle. It's functional."

"That is uncertain." Bertha disagreed. "And it still would need a weapons check and an equipment check."

"What about the Kennedy?" George asked.

Bertha's eyes grew wide. "That is a myth."

"No." George shook his head. "It's far from a myth. I should know. I was the president. It was set up to be fool proof."

"Nothing is fool proof when it hasn't been tested for seven or eight years." Bertha stated adamantly. "You can't even begin to think 'long range', not now. The only accurate way is to drop it."

"Then that is what will be done. If I have to drop that bomb myself."

Surprise and anger was all through Stewart's voice, and he conveyed it as he walked into the office with Jess. "Are you insane?"

George spun around on their entrance. "It's about time you got here."

"I'll repeat my last question." Stewart stepped closer. "Are you insane? Please do not tell me I heard you correctly. You are planning on dropping a nuclear weapon on Beginnings."

Bertha's slight release of breath preluded her 'too' calm answer. "Actually, he plans on dropping it center of the three towns."

Steward lost all breath. "You are insane."

George's top lipped curled. "And you're fired."

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“Good.” Steward gave an upward motion of his head. “Because I want no part of this.”

“Callahan.” George ordered. “Shoot him.”

Bertha’s eyes widened. “Sir?”

“Now.” George ordered stronger. “Pull your weapon, aim it and shoot him in the head.”

“Sir. Begging your pardon . . .” Bertha spoke nervously. “But . . .”

“Screw it.” George looked at Jess. “Boyens. You want Callahan’s position. Shoot him.” George reached to Bertha lifted her gun and laid it on the desk.

Jess walked to the desk, lifted the gun and shifted the chamber.

Steward chuckled. “Go on. Shoot me. It won’t help your cause anymore than dropping the bomb on Beginnings will.” He caught through the corner of his eyes, Jess slowly raising the gun. “You want the trust of your people. You want to have unity. You shoot me, your right hand man in the head, then drop a nuclear warhead on American soil and you won’t have unity, you’ll have mutiny.”

“My daughter is dead!” George blasted.

“And I am sorry about that!” Steward barked back. “I am. It is a tragedy! But losing your cool, destroying this land, making montana into a wasteland all over your grief is absurd!”

“It’s not grief.” George argued loudly. “Its revenge.”

“Exactly! And everyone will know that.” Steward’s neck grew red and he spun to Jess only to see the close range of the steadily held revolver, “And if you follow his orders and shoot me then you are condemning the whole cause! And I’m sorry, you don’t live amongst people, spy or no spy, and not have made one person. One single person you care about!” he raged about Jess. “Pull the trigger. Be the big man, and the bombs will drop on anyone you cared about in Beginnings. They’ll die. I am the only one who can stop this.”

George interjected. “Why are you so sure?”

Steward turned to George. “Because I have never steered you wrong. And I will not steer you wrong now!”

Looking at Jess, George nodded once toward Bertha. “Give her the weapon back.”

Bertha hid well the outward sign of relief when Jess handed over the weapon.

Steward twitched his head and sucked off the tension and nervousness that had consumed his gut. “Now . . . Can we talk about this?”

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"I killed my own daughter." George pulled a chair forward and dropped to it. "I sent her over there."

"No." Steward shook his head. "You did not kill her. She went on her own. They took her life."

"And that is why I want revenge."

"You can not seek revenge." steward told him. "Not when you are building such a strong cause. It will fall apart. No one wants a leader who can not remain in control. Child or no child. We all lost family."

"Stew." Heavily Georg said his name then stood up. "I have to retaliate. I have to. This can not go unnoticed."

"And it shouldn't." Steward told him. "But take a religious look at it all. When Jesus was crucified, did God destroy the world. No."

Not looking up, George responded. "He destroyed those who were right there."

"Yes."

"Then I will destroy Beginnings. Because I want the person that did this, and Beginnings is where that person is."

"No." Jess entered the conversation calm. "No, that is wrong. If you want the person who did this, then you can't find them in Beginnings. Ellen is out of the walls serving her sentence."

Slowly, with revelation, George glanced up.

^^^

The coffee was plenty. The first pot never saw the burner, it was finished off that fast in the pre-motions of the strategy meeting in the communications room. Joe was there. The last one, Frank and Hal had already taken control, and obviously had been talking while they convened, not only council, but Sgt. Doyle and other designated military controllers in the province.

Along with the gurgling of the last drop of brewing coffee, Joe listened to the strong talk, knowing he would only interject if needed. The conversation and decisions were basically logical, no one flew off the handle and everyone had the same best interest in mind. The provinces of Beginnings.

Jason basically had listened to the catalog of what they had as far as weapons and men went. Strengths and weakness. Strategic location of front line society camps. He knew it all had to be leading somewhere but to Jason, it was pretty obvious what the point of the emergency night meeting



was, and really he was tired of waiting for it. Empty coffee cup in hand, Jason stood as if he were going to refill, but he spoke up, drawing a cease talk to the voices. "Gentlemen. Must say I am impressed at your back and forth of what each of you have." He spoke to Frank, Hal, Doyle and Elliott. "However. We are here to discuss worst case scenario. What exactly is worst case scenario."

"Our main argument." Frank stated.

Hal spoke up. "I think we all know what that is, but none of us want to say it. The use of a nuclear weapon. Would he go that far? I say absolutely. Let's face it. We are a pain in his ass. How easily it would be to just get rid of us all."

"But why didn't he do it before?" Elliott asked.

"I can answer that." Tim Doyle responded. "Too much to do on the side of the society. Pre occupation with destroying Beginnings is minimum. Besides he wants this communications center. He doesn't want to destroy, or didn't. I always felt Hadly was looking for one good reason to say 'screw it' get rid of them."

Elliott tilted his head in thought. "And this could be the reason. Frank? What about Dean? Has he anything that we can get over there ahead of anything George can send our way."

"I have thought about that." Frank said. "We have what we call Dean-ami's. Carbon tipped missiles. One, maybe two would wipe out Quantico in about two minutes." He shrugged. "Kill George, throw the entire society into disarray. However . . . Doyle? Wanna tell them why that won't work."

"Radar." Tim answered. "The only way to get one of those carbon bombs over there, or even a virus, would be to deliver by plane. The society has the radar functioning. They'll see the plane coming. Take it down. You could send a squad of planes over with hopes that one will make it through. And chances are, one probably would. But . . ."

Hal completed the sentence. "We only have one [pilot that can fly a jet. My brother."

Elliott looked at Tim. "Would they consider a ground attack."

"Not now." Tim replied. "They know how strong this side is. No way. Hadly will only go into a battle that he knows he will win."

Jason spoke in his route to the coffee pot. "A sure fire win is a nuclear weapon. Who can beat that."

"We can." Tim said with certainty. "We have time. As I was telling Frank, I believe we have a minimal four days to get ready for it."

"Four day?" Hal asked. "How do you figure that much."

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"Maybe even longer." Tim shrugged. "The long range missile capabilities are nil. I was told Frank pretty much did that one on his own."

Frank shook his head. "But I didn't hit them all. Just the big ones."

"Enough of them." Tim said. "Enough to cripple that threat."

Almost pleased, Hal looked at Frank. "You did that?"

Frank nodded. "A man name Carl who was with us early on, him and I, went about when ever the chance occurred. We were thinking ahead. But we didn't get the stockpiles. We always wanted to, but how do you dispose of that many warheads."

"You don't." Tim added. "But, thinking if it was me in charge of getting this thing together fo r the society. We have two specialist. There is no way they will even send a bomb over in a plane without checking it. Then you have to set up a fuel and refuel arrangement for the jet. Not too mention you have to find a special jet, get it together, or make adjustments to the one Quantico has running. All this, would take at least four days."

"Four days." Frank said. "Is enough time to clear out. It'll be tough, but we can do it . . ." He looked around the room to the faces listening. "Women, children, and crucial people like Dean, Danny Hoi, and anyone else who would be vital in rebuilding, we pull them out, dawn tomorrow. Hal, I know you have designated towns with possibility that you have scouted. Tonight, you work on a moving locations, somewhere at least two hundred miles away."

Hal nodded. "Got it."

Frank continued. "They will take minimal survival gear with them, and a skeleton protection crew. The rest of the men, and we have a lot will be divided. One third will be preparing all armory, while the rest will work together to get everything we can packed up. Greenhouses first, medical, then work down a priority list. We can have the towns packed up, but we cap a time limit. After two days, what's packed it packed, what's not stays. Then after sending down an agriculture crew and security crew to the new place, we get together our battalions and form our front lines. First indication of attack on Beginnings, we forge ahead." Frank shifted his eyes to Tim and Hal. "You two have the majority of men. I've watched their training, but I need a vote of confidence right now, that your men can do this."

"Absolutely>" Hal said with certainty. "We'll initiate and settle everything tonight. Based on a four day projection."

Elliott was somewhat concerned. "Are we certain we have four days? Is there anyway possible they can pull a strike sooner?"

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Before anyone could answer, Joe did. "Yes." His word, his first word of the meeting rang out hard despite the fact that he said it calm. Sipping his coffee e walked to the front of the room. "Yes, they can."

Slightly shaking his head, Frank lifted his hand. "How? That's absurd. You heard Doyle. I have to agree. Really, how much faster could they pull a strike."

"How about his." Joe set down his cup. "An hour. Maybe more. Maybe less. A flick of a power switch, a entering of coordinates, a press of a button and boom. Beginnings. Jordan. New Bowman. All gone in fifteen minutes."

Tim chuckled. "Long range capabilities are impossible."

"Oh, no." Joe shook his head speaking very certain. He paused and looked at Frank and Hal. "The Kennedy."

Both of their reactions were the same. Frank and Hal closed their eyes in revelation.

Again, Tim laughed. "It's a urban legend."

Watching Joe shake his head in disagreement made Elliott curious. "What is the Kennedy?"

Leaning against the table, Joe folded his hands before him in an explaining mode. "It's no Urban legend I can tell you. I was in the CIA. We knew. Remember the Cuban Missile crisis. The Kennedy was derived from that. Those nuclear warheads that were pointed at the US. They were never dismantled. Well, they were dismantle only as far as access went. See . . . we kept them there. And we . . . we kind of took over the their launch ability. We, the US, controlled those bombs. And they still are pointed directly at the good old USA. The Kennedy is a war assurance. The means to control the direction and launch of those missiles aren't in any foreign country, but rather in the basement of the White House. The whole premises was to leave those missiles be, and in the event we needed an excuse to attack the Soviet Union. What better excuse then to make it appear that the Soviet Union had first launch. The bombs are in flight, headed directly for us, the United states is in no other position but to retaliate." Joe exhaled. "The Kennedy. George is well aware of the Kennedy and for all we know, Gentlemen, he very well may have already executed it."

Danny Hoi's eyes closed. "Then why are we even bothering?"

Hal answered that. "Because I am certain, we would know. And that's the problem. We just don't know what the society is going to do."

Silence hit when the phone rang, Joe's phone.

Joe himself didn't want to admit it made his heart pound. "Hello." He

answered.

"Just the man I wanted to speak to." George said with bitterness.

"Hadly."

All faces in the room went Joe's way and were suddenly attentive.

"I know." George said.

"You know what?"

"What happened to my daughter. I know she was killed. And let me tell you something, Joe Slagel. I consider this a blatant act of war. And it will not go without retribution."

Joe was stone cold in his tone. "My condolences are conveyed over the loss of your daughter, However, you know and I know, her death is not a valid reason for retaliation."

"It is in my book."

"Not in mine."

"Beginnings and the UWA are nothing."

"Nah. Beginnings and the UWA are your destiny."

"I have the means to destroy you as we speak." George said heavily.

"And I could say the same."

"You're testing me."

"And you're pissing me off!" Joe blasted. "Now what is it that you want! Huh! You want to go head to head. We'll go head to head. You wanna play the revenge game. You go ahead. But don't you dare threaten me. And don't you dare sit there so confident throwing out your bully tactics when you haven't a clue what we have and what we are capable of. Now state your goddamn case and quit wasting my time."

"This . . . is war."

"Then this is war."

"You arrogant son of a bitch." George blasted. "How much better this whole thing sounds. It will all be worth while. My first reaction, Joe was to blast the hell out of that puny state you call home. I can do it. You know that. But I have something better. Something that will hit stronger. Hit *you* stronger. Make you feel what I'm feeling right now."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Joe asked with annoyance.

"I'm gonna give you a choice not many leaders get to make. If any in our history. Your daughter took my daughter's life, I want to take yours. Your daughter for mine, Joe. My fingers on the Kennedy. Beginnings or Your Daughter. Your choice."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

January 13<sup>th</sup>

“Ellen!” deep and with desperation Frank’s voice called out in the distance in Ellen’s dream. “Ellen!”

Ellen could hear her own breath as she ran. Her legs struggled through the high weeds. Something was chasing her, and she only sought the salvation of Frank.

“Ellen!”

“Here, Frank!” Ellen screamed out and then she saw him. Up from the grade he ran in a bull charge, his M-16 in hand. “Frank!” Just as she screamed out his name once more, she felt her hair grabbed and she was yanked backwards into a body. The sadistic snicker rang in her ear and she turned to see the face. “Johnny.”

“Hey, El.” he showed the revolver briefly, as he placed it to her temple.

“Frank!” Her hand reached out to Frank who raged to her. “Frank, help . . .”

Bang.

Loud, Ellen heaved out and sprang immediately to a sitting position on the couch where she had fallen asleep. “Oh, God. Oh, God.” she grabbed her head and tried to catch her breath. Confusion filled her, her head pounded and she jumped from the couch.

“El?” Robbie walked into the livingroom.

“Robbie.” Ellen Stopped cold and her hands went to her face.

“El, what’s wrong?”

“Something’s not right. Something just isn’t right. I feel it.” She brought her fist to her chest. “Oh, do I feel it.”

“You’re scared again?” Robbie asked.

“It’s more than scared, Robbie.: Ellen told him. “All night I dreamt I was running. Running from something, Running.” She started to pace.

“El, it’s a dream.”

“No.” she spun to him. “It’s more than a dream. Something is going to happen. I know it.” She looked at him with horrified eyes. “But what?”

^^^

"I'm on my way to the clinic now." Frank spoke on the cell phone to Hal. "I want to put plan 'B' into a ready mode, just incase this doesn't work."

"It will." Hal told him. "But I'm working plan 'B' as well. Doesn't hurt to be safe."

"See you at the Rules meeting."

"Yeah, and Frank?" Hal hesitated for a second. "I'm really glad to stand beside you on this one, big brother."

"Me too, Hal. In fact, there's nothing better team than the three of us."

"See you at the meeting."

"See you there." Shutting off the phone and putting it away, Frank started to pick up speed to move into town when Misha hurried to him.

"Frank, wait." she called out.

"I don't really have time." he said in his stride.

"Please, one second."

Huffing out, Frank stopped and faced her. "What?"

"I need to speak to you about Dean."

"Second's over." Frank smiled.

"No, please" She grabbed his arm. "Frank. You and he physical fought last night. It is not right. I know it has to do with me. Please. Please tell me how I can fix what I have made wrong."

"Misha . . ."

"No, Frank. I did not mean to do whatever it was that caused your friendship with Dean to falter. Please tell me how to make it right."

"I can't." Frank tossed up his hands. "And I especially can't right now. Excuse me." without being stopped again, Frank hurried off leaving Misha just standing there alone and confused.

^^^

Elliott watched for a second in the jeep before saying anything. "Captain."

From the dazed stare out, tip of the phone to his chin, Hal did a tiny jolt. "Sorry, Elliott. What was that?"

"Are you all right?" Elliott asked.

"Yes. Yes, I am." Hal hooked his phone on his belt. "Too much to do."

“Don’t I know it.”

“But . . .” Stepping from the jeep, Hal took a breath. “Can you feel it. Breathe it. Sense it.” He grinned. “Tension.”

“Don’t.”

“What?” Hal chuckled.

“You’re concerned.” Elliott stated. “I know you are. This was not what you expected.”

“I can handle it.”

“Without a doubt. But you can still be concerned.”

The smile left Hal’s face and he looked away for second. “I am. It’s a big undertaking.”

“Huge.”

“It’s like packing for a long vacation, only problem is, if we forget something, you can just say, ‘oh, I’ll run to the store;’”

“Why not?” Elliot asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You can, if you think about it. The opportunities are vast.”

“You have a point.” Hal slightly smiled, lifting his index finger. “How about you? Are you worried?”

“About you?” Elliott asked. “Yes. How can I not. And it is not a doubting of your ability it’s . . .”

“The deep desire to finally have my leadership position?”

“Captain.” Elliott whispered. “Contrary to what you think, I don’t want to be ‘Captain’, you do that just fine. I’m worried because my best friend . . . my best friend . . .” He took a long look at Hal. “He’ll be fine.”

Hal gave an appreciation wink and nod. “And I should be going.” He looked at his watch. “We have the rules meeting. I’ll go summons Henry, while you secure the information we need from Dean to finalize the leadership option.”

“Got it.”

“See you shortly, Elliott.”

Agreement in a motion of his head was what Elliott gave, then he watched Hal walk off. Fast, strong and confident, and Elliot had to wonder was the iron wall of confidence really that strong? Because to Elliott, the captain had to feel, like he did, that what they were about to face was going to be bigger than they imagined.

^^^

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Forty-nine here in Beginnings.” Andrea said in a fast pace through the corridors with Frank. “Eighteen in New Bowman.”

Frank whistled as he stepped out of the way of one of his security guys. There was a rush of buzz in the halls and everything seemed to pick up, including the adrenaline. “Does that figure sound high?” He asked.

“Not at all.” Andrea answered. “Keep in mind Frank, population is about three thousand now. And . . .” she sighed as she stopped. “It is cold and flu season.”

“Man. OK.” Frank nodded. “Just keep in mind, if things don’t go as planned with this meeting, we’ll be moving them out. I’ll give the order, and there will be no time to waste.”

“Tell me what you think, Frank. What’s gonna happen.”

“I think, for the next week or so . . . we’re gonna be on needles and pins and in ‘ready’ mode.”

“But we’re not gonna have to leave our home, are we?”

“Not if I can help it.” Frank looked at his watch. “And I have to go. Me or my dad will keep you posted.” He turned and in a quick pace left the right wing section of the clinic and turned down the main corridor. Frank’s focus was on the front door, he didn’t want to stop. He even contemplated on barreling Dean over, but he didn’t. “I don’t have time.” Frank said when Dean stood directly before him.

“Make time.” Dean said adamantly.

“Dean. I’m not fuckin around here. All right. I have to go.”

“And we need to talk.” Dean grabbed Frank’s arm as Frank tried to storm away.

Glaring, Frank looked down to the hand that held him. “I have nothing to say to you.”

“Bull shit.” Dean released him then lowered his voice. “Bullshit. OK? Listen to me. You and I have this history. We got beyond that. Last night . . . I don’t like what happened last night Frank. I don’t like what’s been happening for a while. Come on, you and I have to talk.”

“There is nothing to talk about.” Turning, Frank started to walk away.

“You were right.”

Frank stopped.

“You were right.” Dean said to him. “Everything you said. You were right.”

Over his shoulder, Frank only looked. “I know.” And then he took off.

Dean closed his eyes, tossed out his hand and turned to walk into his



lab.

“Dr. Hayes.” Elliott called to him.

Stopping, Dean looked. “Yeah.”

“Do you have a minute. It’s important.”

“Sure.” Dean gave a simple ‘follow me’ wave of his hand and walked into the lab. “You may want to shut the door. There is a lot of activity in the clinic. I haven’t a clue what’s going on. Do you?”

“Yes. Pretty much so.” Elliott walked in without closing the door.

“Drills?” Dean asked. “With all of Frank’s men running around, I’m thinking we’re going through evacuation drills.”

“Close. Now . . .”

“Is that why you’re here? To review this. Because I know the procedure.” Dean said.

“No. This is more important. I’m coming to you as a doctor. For your opinion.”

“On?” Dean asked.

“Mr. Slagel.”

Dean was confused. “What about Joe?”

“OK, with all that is going on, we just need to finalize the leadership portion.” Elliott rattled off. “With me running the entire tri-community security, along with heading it up in Beginnings with Dan. I need to know, at this stage of Mr. Slagel’s health, will he be all right to handle the commute between the communities to check on daily activities.”

“Check on daily activities, but that Hal’s . . .” Dean paused. “If Joe has to work on checking daily activities in the tri-communities. And you are heading up security in all three. Where the hell are Frank and Hal gonna be?”

Hard Elliott swallowed. “You . . . you don’t know.”

“Know what.”

“Oh, my God.” Elliott whispered out. “You don’t. No one told you.”

“Told me? Told me what?”

Elliott walked over and closed the door.

^^^

Dean raged.

Like a freight train, barreling out of control, one objective in mind, and blasting through anyone or anything that got in his way. His heart pounded and blood boiled, and he didn’t stop until he reached Joe’s office.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

He knocked once on the door, didn't wait for the stock, 'yeah' and Dean stormed right in.

Joe stood from behind his desk. "Can this wait, Dean. I'm in a rush."

Dean shut the door.

"Didn't you hear me?" Joe asked.

"Oh, I heard." Dean walked toward Joe. "And you aren't getting by me until you tell me what the hell is going on."

"I don't know what you're taking about."

"What!" Dean blasted. "Don't go there with me, Joe! Not with me! The community is buzzing around, security left and right, it looks like one of Frank's major drills. When in fact, It isn't. It's for real!"

The stack of papers in Joe's hand set hard to the desk. "Who told you?"

"Sgt. Ryder."

"Goddamn it! Nothing was supposed to be mentioned to you until we ironed out all the details!"

"Details?" Dean lost all breath. "Iron out details! The society is going one hundred percent after my wife and I am the last to know!"

Joe remained calm. "That hasn't been determined yet. Now as soon as I . . ."

"No. No. I should know. Why wasn't I told!"

Joe lost some of his cool. "Because of this reaction right now! I didn't want to come to you until I knew exactly what was happening and when. Then it would be better to tell you."

"Did you think any deliverance of the news. Details or no ironed out details would better to tell me. There is no better time. Tell me now. Right now."

"Fine." Joe stepped back. "Fine. You wanna know, I'll tell you where it stands. You were privileged to top secret information in the military. Ever hear of The Kennedy."

"Yeah, what about it?" Dean said as if to hurry Joe along.

"Keep that in mind. Now . . . plain and simple, the finger is on the button, Dean. The society wants Ellen's life in exchange for Bev's. It's that or the button gets pressed."

Dean chuckled as shock took over him. "Don't even tell me you're considering just giving her to them."

"Wouldn't dream of it. Basically, we are meeting today. We are going over the situation, we will find a reasonable resolution to thwart the missiles and give the society what they want."

“Ellen.”

“They have to get to her first.” Joe said.

“Oh my God.” Dean nearly lost his balance. “Oh my God. You’re letting them go after her.”

“If the rules can be hashed out.”

“Rules? How can you set rules on someone’s life.” Dean began to get hysterical. “You can’t do this! She is my wife!”

“And she is my daughter!” Joe blasted back. “What choice do I have!”

“Buy me time. Buy me four days.”

“I can’t buy time, do you . . .”

“No. I can have a virus laced missile ready to be dropped and we’ll take out Quantico in a snap.”

“Then what!” Joe asked emotionally. “Where does it stop! When do we draw a line on numbers! A few thousand here, a few thousand there. IS it worth it! Is it! Bomb for bomb. Viruses? My God Dean, we ended this world once, are we gonna do it again!”

“He won’t . . . he won’t launch, Joe. He won’t.”

“And can we take that chance?” Joe asked. “Can we. Do you, Dean, with your children living here, want to take a chance that George won’t launch?”

Dean’s eyes closed. “So you’re just gonna let George send his men after Ellen. Just hunt her down until she’s dead.”

“We’re hoping to make limitations.”

“Limitations?” Dean laughed emotionally.

“A declaration of war was made against us. It is my hope, that since George made this offer, that we can work out limitations and details that will give this battle a start and a finish. Not just an explosive end to countless lives. But if you want the truth. Yes, they are gonna send a lot after Ellen.”

“It’ll kill me while it’s happening.” Dean lifted his eyes to Joe. “Do you know what this will put me through?”

“How can you even ask me that?” Joe questioned. “With what I have at stake as well. But I have no choice, Dean. I have . . . no choice.” he stepped closer. “There comes a time when one life can not compare to the lives of so many. Even . . . even if that one life is your own child. I don’t want to do this. My God, it’s breaking my heart. But there is something that makes it all a little better.”

“What is that. What can possible make this situation better.”

“Confidence.”

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Curiously, Dean gazed at Joe. “Confidence?”

“Oh, yeah. I can’t stop the society from sending three missiles and taking out everything we have.” Joe spoke soft. “But I have three sons who, with everything they have, can stop the society from taking out Ellen.”

^^^

The short but in-depth agreement had been electronically sent over a dozen times. In the communication room, to the screen, over Danny Hoi’s shoulder, Joe read the final changes. He gave a nod for Danny to send it through.

“Joe.” George’s voice carried over the speaker phone. “What is going on.”

“It’s on its way.”

“I told you, no more changes!”

“And I told you, I wasn’t satisfied.”

“I gave in on too much.”

“So did we. Just read my final goddamn change.”

Georg huffed. “This is it. You make one more change I don’t like, fuck it.”

Joe rolled his eyes. He had some nervousness he tried to hold in. The agreement was good. And workable. He wished he didn’t have to make it at all, but at least, there were limitations and assurances that added a sense of fairness to the whole thing. Fairness that three sailing missiles would not bring.

In the waiting silence, Joe looked at the agreement on the screen. So basic. So blunt.

*War monitors would be selected to insure both parties follow the rules set forth.*

*Those war monitors will live in the other’s jurisdiction for the duration. They will not be treated as prisoners, and will be given free, but monitored access to their homes to give progress reports.*

*At the next day’s dawn, the exchange of war monitors will be made.*

*In the event the rules are broken, either side, can initiate, without warning, and without limitations, any and all means of war necessary.*

*Child for child. Only Joe’s sons can represent Joe’s interest against the society.*

*Only the Slagel sons can intercept any and all attempts by the society to get Ellen.*

*Beginnings can not send any aid.*

*The society can only utilize the man power they have in the border camps and in Minnesota.*

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

*The society can not send anymore aid.*

*Following the old world Geneva conference war code. No attacks can commence before 8:00 am, nor after midnight.*

*The 'life for life' pursuit ceases when Ellen's life is taken, or her ousting sentence is complete on January 23<sup>rd</sup> at noon. Which ever occurs first.*

From his read of the screen, Joe's heart dropped when the single ring of the fax machine broke the tension filled silence of the communication room.

Danny swivelled his chair some. "It's coming through." he sighed out. "It's signed."

Everyman in the room released the breath they seemingly had held for three hours.

"Got it?" George asked.

"Yes." Joe lifted his pen. He stared at Georg's signature. "I'm signing it now." Over the line that read, 'Joseph A. Slagel, President of the United western alliance', Joe placed his signature. He handed the paper back to Danny Hoi to fax through. "It's on its way back."

"Then it's done." Georg stated.

"It's done."

"Good." Gruff, raspy and with a hint of exasperation, Georg's voice spoke. "I have to tell you, this shows how good of a leader you really are. Both of us actually. We are choosing the lives of our people over our own flesh and blood. So day after tomorrow . . . let the game . . . begin."

Druga-Johnston/The Game

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THE GAME

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

January 14<sup>th</sup>

As if she were a princess, Robbie lowered to one knee before Ellen who sat in a chair, grabbing her hand and bring it to his lips. His exhale reverberated across the back of fingers and he raised his eyes to her.

Though not big, a smile Ellen needed crossed her face and she brought her free hand to Robbie's hair running it through the top. "Your hair is getting so long."

"You're changing the subject."

So lost, Ellen shook her head. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are." Robbie kissed her hand again. "I asked how you were. You didn't sleep again last night. I'm worried, El. I'm really worried. What can I do?"

"You're doing it."

"Not enough," Robbie said. "You know what though? In a little over a week we'll be home."

Soft, emotional, Ellen chuckled and closed her eyes. Her head turned.

"I know you don't want to hear this."

"I'm not depressed." Ellen said.

"You didn't let me say it."

"Was that what you were gonna say?" she asked.

"Well . . . yeah."

Smiling, Ellen looked down to Robbie. "It's not depression."

"Then it's missing everyone. You'll be back to your life before long. Everything will be back to normal."

"Not everything." Ellen spoke soft. "There will be an aspect of my life that's different."

"What is that?"

"You. You will be a major player in my life from here on in, Robbie."

"This, El. Out here. It's been great. I won't forget it. But I won't expect it to continue after we get home."

"I know you don't." Ellen said nonchalantly. "But I expect it to."

"We'll see." Robbie winked.

"We'll see." Ellen nodded arrogantly. "You have my promise."

"Just know, I won't forget how you pulled me out of that low time. I'll never forget it."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“And I won’t forget everything you have been doing for me out here.”

Robbie snickered almost a scoff. “I wish I could do more. I wish I could do something to help you right now. I’m beginning to think . . .” Slowly he stopped up. “Nothing, right now, will help you pull through what you are . . .” quick, in a jolt, Robbie spun to the monitors as the sirens blared.

Ellen jumped from her seat. “I knew it. First nice day and . . .” she watched Robbie silence the alarm. “Through the access route.”

“Pulling up now.” Robbie walked to the livingroom ahead of Ellen.

“Pulling up?” She asked following him. “Who is sneaking to see us.

Through the curtain, Robbie peered, then walked to the door. “I have a feeling they don’t sneak. Not with a truck that size. I wonder who it is.”

Curious about the truck she heard, Ellen peeked through the curtains.

A single step onto the porch and when Robbie watched the truck stop, he smiled. His mouth opened to call for Ellen, but he didn’t have to.

The slam of the screen porch door was immediately followed by the loud, long scream Ellen released, and the pounding of her running footsteps as she charged forth. “Frank!”

In the cab of the huge military truck, Frank lost all breath. “Oh, my God.”

“Go get her big brother.” Hal instructed.

Biting his bottom lip with a grin, Frank flung open the truck door and left it open as he raced full speed to Ellen.

No too far, Frank didn’t have to go and Ellen slammed her body with a leap right into his. His mouth parted, letting out a near silent shriek, his arms wrapped tight around her and Frank lifted Ellen some from the ground, his heavy breathing chest pressed to hers.

“Oh, my God.” He rasped out running his hands up her back and to her face. Still clenching tight, he had to pull her back to look. “Oh, my God.” His fingers spread the entire circumference of her face, and through the biggest of smiles, Frank kissed her. “I love you.” outward he breathed, pulling in excitement his lips against her. “Oh, God, I missed you.” Again he kissed her, “I missed you.”

Scratching his head with an innocent look and smile upon his face, Robbie walked toward Frank and Ellen. “Um, hey Frank.”

“Robbie.” Frank said through his reunion with Ellen. He lifted his hand in a brief wave, but never took his eyes or mouth far from Ellen.



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Another look of wonder, then a shrug, and Robbie grinned when Hal stepped around the front of the truck. "Hey."

"What is this?" Hal scoffed. "Do I not get more?" He opened his arms "I'm not gonna kiss you, Hal."

Hal laughed. "No? Well I'm kissing you." Hands landing with sting to Robbie's cheeks, Hal yanked Robbie forward, Kissed him with a smack, then embraced his bother. "How are you?"

"Good." Robbie gave an extra squeeze. "This is a shock."

"You don't know the half of it." Hal released the embrace.

The corner of Robbie's mouth raised in a curious smile. "What do you mean."

"I mean . . ." Hal put his arm around Robbie and started to walk toward the house. "I can use a cup of coffee right now. Frank and I have been out since three this morning . . ." He moved Robbie by Ellen and Frank. "Let them go. I'll explain inside before we take some things from the truck."

"Say, Hal?" Robbie stopped walking and looked back. "That truck is pretty big. And . . . well, pretty loaded."

"Yes, yes, it is."

"Are you two on your way somewhere?" Robbie asked.

"Yes, we are. Here." Hal answered just wanting to get inside.

"Here?" Robbie laughed following Hal to the door. "Why do we need all that stuff?"

"Oh.' Hal opened the door. "For the Game."

"The game?"

"Yes. Starting tomorrow, for the next eight days . . ." Hal smiled just before going inside. "Six hundred and twenty-three society soldiers will be trying to kill you, me, Frank and Ellen."

"Oh." Robbie nodded thinking Hal was looking, and just as the screen door closed and Robbie reached to open it. He froze, spun around, looked at the truck, and said, 'oh, shit'. Then after the very brief second of shock, Robbie smiled. "Cool."

^^^

Another crash of a dropped beaker, not only drew Dean from his thoughts, but made him stop again. He couldn't do it. He couldn't work. He slid himself to a stool in the lab, grateful for the fact that what he spilled

wasn't important, and he did what he had been doing all morning. Thinking of the Game.

The envisionment of seeing Ellen being chased by soldier after soldier at every turn, gnawed at him. But there was something else that kicked in his gut as well. The fact that he had to sit there while Frank of all people was with Ellen.

Again.

How did it so often happen? How did Frank always end up with the upper hand. It never failed. Dean had to keep swaying his thoughts away from Frank being alone with Ellen to Frank protecting Ellen. That was why he was out there. Even though before he left, when Dean tried to speak to him, Frank insisted he would use the time with Ellen to get her away from Dean.

How wrong Dean felt that was. The game wasn't a means of a permanent reunion of Frank and Ellen. Nor was the game a means to dredged up old attitudes and rivalries. Not wanting it to be like that, wanting to send Frank beyond the wall on good terms, Dean rushed out in the middle of the night to say his farewell.

"Bring her back, Frank. Please." All Dean was trying to convey was his concern. Nothing else.

"Oh, I will, Dean." Frank arrogantly replied. "Make no mistake. I will bring her back home. But more than ever, she'll be back home with me."

Why did Frank have to respond like that? Dean wondered. Why couldn't he just say 'I will' and leave it at that. More damage could be done to his marriage by Frank, than any damage done to Ellen by the society. And as soon as Dean hit that thought process a sense of 'less worry' hit him. What was he concerned about? What was the real danger. Yes, Ellen would be chased, hunted down, as George put it, but Ellen was out there with Frank, Hal and Robbie.

He had to admit, if he himself had to handpick three individuals to undertake the task. Frank, Hal and Robbie would be the only choice. And in knowing that, Dean knew, if Frank was going to make his attempt to steal Ellen, then there was nothing Dean could do. But at least Frank was with Ellen. Dean would rather fight to save his marriage upon Ellen's return, then to fight with dealing with never having her return.

Cutting off the unnecessary comments to Frank's last remark to him, Dean replayed in his mind the only parts he needed to hear. 'Make no mistake, Dean, I will bring her back home'.

Dean took heart stock in the fact that if anyone could knock the odds,

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

defeat the unbeatable, and bring Ellen back unscathed, that anyone would, and could only be . . . Frank.

^^^

"How is your head, Sir." Bertha handed George a wash cloth as he stood outside the small military truck.

The damp cloth touched upon his scratched head, and George jolted some. "Fine. Damn it. What the hell was that?"

"An ambush."

"Callahan." George lifted da finger. "I'm not an idiot. Let's try this again. Who the hell was that?"

"They don't really have a name, sir. They are our problem town located in Lodi."

"Why haven't we wiped them out." George asked.

"Too much to worry about."

"Christ." He dabbed his bleed head again. "We have calvary on horses, and now on Harley's?"

Bertha only shrugged.

"When this game is over, I want that town wiped out. Destroyed. Not a trace."

"I understand." Bertha nodded. "However, wouldn't that be a similar situation to what we're dealing wit now. I mean, you and I are on the way to a war game. A game that was derived out of the fact we couldn't just blow up Beginnings. So isn't destroying Lodi the same thing?"

George grumbled. "I'm to a bleeding heart."

"I didn't say you were."

"So why do I have to project the good Samaritan?"

"It's not a good Samaritan image sir, it's the fact that you have to project good leadership. You need that to have the faith and trust of your people. And you can't control the country if you don't have that."

"Fine. How about this. How about after the game. We give the town of Lodi a choice. Get the hell of this side of the country, or die. How's that?" George tossed the rag.

"That . . . that might be better."

George grumbled. "Let's just get moving." He opened the truck door. "Duluth is still a distance away. And I can't wait to see who Beginnings has sent as their monitor."



“Whoa.” Frank said in awe over Robbie shoulder, coffee in hand, staring at the printer that spewed forth sheets. “That is so cool.”

Sarcastically Hal leaned in. “Yes. Yes it is. It’s called a printer, Frank. And those white things. Paper.”

“Fuck you, Hal.”

“We’re in for a long week, Frank. I don’t think you want to use up all of that lucius vocabulary in the first couple hours.”

“Fuck you Hal.”

“My God are you a vat.” Hal took a seat at the diningroom table.

Robbie snickered. “This is great. Oh, Frank. The words may be little, but it saves on paper.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Frank said. “You and El wrote a book. I can’t wait to read it.”

Hal sipped his coffee. “And you shall Frank provided they kept it under a second grade level.” He looked up. “Yes. I know. Fuck me.” He winked.

Ellen walked into the diningroom. “Oh. Robbie’s printing our book. We’re almost done.” She sat next to Hal, but before she did, she slowly ran her hand down Frank’s back. He glanced over his shoulder with a smile.

“What is the book about?” Hal asked.

“It’s an exposé.” Ellen explained. “On corrupt leadership.”

“Aw.” Frank fake whined and sat down. “Does this mean I have to read about Hal.”

Hal’s mouth opened and he released a silent mockery laugh.

Swiveling in his chair, Robbie rolled to the table “This is so great.”

Excitedly. Ellen agreed. “Yes, it is. Why are you two here. Did you sneak out?”

Frank looked at Hal then back to Ellen. “Yes.”

Ellen shook her head in wonder. “How did they not see you in that truck.”

Hal smiled. “We’re slick. No one even noticed.”

“We asked Dean to come.” Frank added. “But he reused said he was busy.”

“Frank.” Hal scolded. “Ellen, that is not the case at all. Frank didn’t invite him.”

“Shut up Hal.” Frank snapped.

“Ah.” Hal lifted a finger. “Yet two more words. You’re limiting your

self, Frank.”

Robbie chuckled. “This is so great This is gonna be a great week.”

“Week?” Ellen smiled. “You guys are here for a week? How are you getting away with that?”

Frank shifted his eyes about. “Um, we’re on a business trip.”

“Business trip?” Ellen asked.

“Yes. Important one.” Frank explained.

“An . . . important business trip?” Ellen asked.

Robbie laughed.

Hal cleared his throat. “Frank means . . .”

“Vacation.” Frank snapped his finger. “I meant vacation. Thank you Hal.”

“Please don’t thank me on that one.” Hal replied. “Not for that one.”

“That w\one what?” Frank asked.

“The taking a vacation comment.” Hal answered.

“Who’s taking a vacation?” Frank questioned.

“God, Frank.” Hal said annoyed. “We are.”

“No we aren’t.”

Robbie snickered “This is so great.”

Curiously, Ellen looked at them. “What is going on?”

“Bonding time.” Hal replied. “Quite simply, we’re here to reflect and bond.”

“Bond.” Robbie nodded.

“Like Glue.” Frank said.

“Or money.” Robbie suggested.

“You mean stocks.” Hal suggested.

“Yeah.” Robbie said. “That’s what I meant. Stocks. Thanks. OR it could be like in Jail.”

Hal gave an impressed nod.

“Or James.” Frank added.

Chuckling, Robbie shook his head. “Probably more like brothers.”

“That’s because we are.” Frank nodded. “Right, Hal.”

“Absolutely last I checked.”

“OK.” Ellen said, her head tired of playing a tennis match between them. “What s going on. Why are you here. Seriously.”

Hal glanced at Frank. “Do you want to take it or me?”

“I’ll do it.” Frank replied.

“Tactfully.” Hal ordered.

“Tactfully.” Frank winked. “OK. El. See. You shot Bev. Bev’s

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George's daughter. He knows. And, well, he wants you dead."

"He . . . he . . ."

"Wants you dead, Yes." Frank finished her sentence. "It was three nuclear bombs, or your life. And what choice did my Dad have. He said kill you instead."

"Christ>" Hal, like a Joe, slammed his hand on the table. "Tact Frank." He saw the mortified look on Ellen's face. "The truth is, this is sort of like a game now. The society, well, they want revenge for Bev's death. But, they have to get you first. We're here to protect you." He spoke calm like a politician. "Once you are back home after your sentence game over."

Frank rocked back and forth on the hind legs of his chair. "A week. No big deal. Not hard at all."

Robbie was assured "And we have a ton of supplies, and you have us."

Hal laid his hand on Ellen's. "You have us. So not a problem. You'll be fine. We may . . . you know have to move around a bit."

Frank shrugged, still rocking. "Or a lot."

Hal sniffed a calming breath and swing a view back to Ellen. "OR . . . A lot."

"Because they will come." Frank added.

Hal, again, tried to downplay Frank's words. "They . . . will maybe come."

"Oh, for sure they will." Frank said in his rocking session.

Ellen looked even more frightened. "The whole society?"

"No. No." Hal said in a 'don't be silly' fashion. "Good heavens. No. This is not a problem. They'll send just a few."

"A few" Frank laughed. "Try Six hundred and twenty-three."

Ellen shrieked about the same time, Frank's chair banged hard to the floor and he yelled a simple, 'ow' after Hal had swept out his foot and into the legs of the furniture.

Following the glancing at a snickering Robbie, and the view of a bewildered Frank trying to decipher what happened, Hal returned to Ellen. He calmly folded his hands on the table and smiled. "As I said this is not a problem."

^^^

The reflection of the gold caused a reflection of the moment that had just transpired. Over two slices of warm bread in a cheese dip Misha had never tried, Hector proposed. It was a surprise, and something he hadn't

once brought up. But it was right, and Misha spewed forth her answer of 'yes' in a teenage girl excitement. Unfortunately, for both of them, the break was over and they had to get back to work.

Misha didn't even have time to bask in the moment with Hector. Ask him what brought it on. Why would he pop out the question out of the blue at a time when they only had minutes, instead of later when they would spend the entire evening alone.

Whatever Hector's reasoning. The proposal caused a huge smile and whisk of enthusiasm from both. So much so, that Misha pretty much ran all the way back to the clinic, pausing at the doors, and in the main corridor outside the lab, to look at the special made gold ring Hector gave her.

She had to share with Dean. He would be so excited for her. Hoping that her news would perk up his day, she hurried into the lab. "Dean." she called out on her entrance.

From the back counter, Dean hesitated, then turned around. "Hey, Misha."

"Oh." She gushed. "I am so sorry I am late . . ."

"That's all right. I have to . . ."

"I didn't mean to take such a long morning break. I promise my lunch break will not be so long."

"No, that's OK." Dean said walking to her. "Listen, I have to . . ."

"You must hear my news." A grin spread across Misha's face.

"Misha . . ."

"But I will tell you first. I went to the cryo lab and fed Majestic. She has gained three pounds."

"That's good." Dean tried in vain to convey his point. "Look . . ."

"I think my good mood will spread to yours."

"I think my bad mood may dampen yours."

"Oh, I don't believe so." Misha shook her head then lifted her hand. "Hector has proposed marriage to me and I have accepted."

Dean looked down at the ring. "Wow." He said less than enthusiastic.

"You are not happy for me?"

"I am very happy for you. However, I hate to ruin this happy mood. But I'm going to."

Confused, Misha looked at him. "I do not understand."

"OK." Dean took a breath. "You have been a wonderful lab assistant."

"Thank you. I love working in the lab."

"But." Dean lifted a finger.

“Bur?”

“But. Ellen is coming back . . .”

“Oh, I know. One week. And I know you are concerned about all that is going on.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“I will help take your mind off of things.”

“That’s been a problem.” Dean mumbled,

“Excuse me?”

“OK. I could pick a better time. But I’m not. And I’ll try to be as tactful as I can . . .” Dean took a few pacing steps. “Misha.” He turned and faced her. “I’m sorry. You’re fired.”

The smile dripped from Misha’s face. “I do not understand that term. But I don’t think it’s good.”

“No. What I’m saying is, I won’t be using you to work in the lab.”

“But I thought after Ellen returned we would all work together.”

Dean shook his head. “No.”

“The clinic can use me elsewhere?”

“Probably.” Dean shrugged.

“So I am only working with you until Ellen returns?”

“You are only working with me for about another three seconds. I have to let you go now.”

“You are mad at me.” Misha’s head dropped. “Did I make an error.”

“No.”

“Then it is my distraction of your friendship with Frank.”

“In a way.” Dean said.

“I will make it up when he returns. I will patch things up with you and he.” Misha nodded. “Just please do not make me stop working here. I love to work here. It makes e feel so good.”

“I’m sorry.” Dean said helpless. “Just know it is me. Not you. See . . . Ellen, like I said is returning. And Misha, I have missed her. Oh, God have I missed her.”

“I know this.”

“I grasped, yo know.” He nodded softly. “I grasped for her while she was gone. I am a very dedicated husband. But I have been gasping so much to get a feel of her, I unknowingly grasped on to you, and I stopped looking like that very dedicated husband. And that bothers me.”

“It os all my fault.”

“No.” Dean tried to explain.

“Please don’t make me stop working here. I need to be near Hector.”



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"They'll be something in Beginnings."

"I'll explain to Ellen that you . . ."

"Misha." Dean bodily stopped her. "No. I'm sorry. No. I can't have you working with me. I'm sorry." That was all Dean was going to say, he totally planned on just being the 'dick' everyone said he was, and turning. He was going to that, until Misha puckered up, her eyes welled with tears, and with a loud burst of sadness she spun around and flew from the lab.

Arm extended, mouth opened, and a single step forward was all Dean took, but stopped when Margaret stepped into the lab.

"I'm . . . I'm sorry." Marge looked over her shoulder. "Perhaps I should come back."

"Um . . ." Dean ran his hand through his hair then rested it on his side. "No. Not a bad time, perfect time." He exhaled the untruth to that statement. "What, can I uh, . . ." He forced a smile. "Do for you?"

"I am really feeling uncomfortable, right now, should I come back?" Margaret asked.

"No. Really. Come in." Dean walked to the counter.

"I can wait if you want to go after her."

After he shrugged nonchalantly, Dean shook his head.

"OK." Margaret tossed up her hands, pulled a stool forward and sat down.

Dean had to admit, his mind was elsewhere, but he tried not to visually convey that to Margaret.

"This may sound silly, or stupid." Margaret said. "I know the last name Hayes is common. I know this, so I really didn't put two and two together. I was just at the school and I met your son. Billy."

"Oh, God." Dean cringed. "How badly did he insult you?"

"No." Margaret chuckled. "That's not it. Billy. William. Was your father William Hayes from Connecticut?"

All expression dropped from Dean's face.

"Originally from Connecticut, I mean." Margaret clarified. "Worked on a dairy farm in Highschool, married a girl name Abigail."

"Yes, yes, why, did you know them?" Dean asked.

"Know them? Oh, yes, very well. I lost track of them when William began Med school. You have to remember I was in stasis, so I haven't really aged. But I'm about three years your father's junior."

"Oh my God." Dean grinned and pulled up a stool. "You knew my parents when they were young."

"William was a hell cat. He used to steal the milk and cream and sell it

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below cost on his own sort of black market.”

Dean laughed with exuberance. “This is great.”

“Did he change much?” Margaret asked.

“From that comment, no.” Dean scooted closer. “Do you have a few minutes?”

“Sure. Why.”

“Tell me.” Dean said with a smile. “This was the best interruption ever. So please, share tell me what you can about my parents.” Cheek propped against his hand, smile ear to ear, Dean listened as if in ‘Santa Clause’ awe.

^^^

Despite what Steward Lange said, rules he spewed forth, instruction he laid out, Jess’ thoughts were elsewhere. But it was the same thought he kept having. Over and over again. *‘No, this is too perfect. No, they are not entrusting me with this shit. No too perfect’*. He’d think that thought, smile at Steward, nod and understanding of something or other, then look in a pleasant bewilderment to the training schedule and stat sheets of the infantry soldiers *he* was in charge of.

“So you have that?” Steward asked.

“Yes.”

“Repeat what I said. I know you weren’t listening.”

Jess chuckled. “Is this a joke?”

“No.” Steward shook his head. “I’m filing in for President Hadly here in Quantico so I know longer joke. Now . . . what did I say?”

Wondering, which part he was referring to, Jess quickly deciphered all the bits and pieces that had slipped into his subconscious. Training schedule. Precautionary deployments. scouting troops to Cleveland? Or was it Lodi?

“Boyens?”

“Oh.” Jess shook his head. “Sorry, was trying to get all the instructions together. Anyhow . . . you said . . .”

“Sorry to interrupt.” Johnny said as he knocked once on the office door. “May come in.”

Steward looked behind him. “We’re busy now.”

“But, I just really needed to speak to Jess.” Johnny stepped into the office further. “I wanted to thank him for bringing the pictures, and ask about my grandfather.” He lifted the photographs.

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Steward was going to tell him 'no' but recalled one of the missions he had given Jess. "I'll let yo speak. I have other things to deal with anyhow." He walked to the door. "Jess. Remember the Bartholomew situation."

Jess knew the code name well and he gave an agreement look to it. Bartholomew. In other words Steward was conveying to begin the task of finding out whether or not Johnny was truly suffering from Amnesia. Looking at Johnny who was checking ut the pictures, Jess smiled politely. He had no problems whatsoever taking on the 'Bartholomew Situation' because more so than the society, he too wanted to know if Johnny really had amnesia. And if he didn't, for the sake of Beginnings, Jess had to also find out why he was faking it.

^^^

"Christ, Andrea." Joe moved at a steady pace through center town.

"Sweet Jesus Joe, I wish you wouldn't blaspheme."

"You know, all that 'Sweet Jesus' exclaiming you do is blaspheming."

"I beg to differ."

"And I'm a busy man, Andrea." Joe claimed. His mind still on the brief one line message he received from Jess stating. 'Johnny has amnesia. Real or not. Know soon.'

"Aren't you listening?" Andrea asked, trying to keep up with him.

Joe stopped cold. "To be honest. No. What were you saying."

"She was hysterical, Joe. Crying."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Talk to Dean." Andrea instructed. "He fired her."

"That's Dean's department."

"No one gets fired in Beginnings, Joe, really."

"Well." Joe shrugged. "Seems Dean started it then."

"I could understand why . . ."

"Andrea." Joe halted her. "Why are you coming to me with this. You're the head of the clinic, deal with it."

"I need to be able to tell Misha she can work in the lab."

"If Dean doesn't want her, then she can't."

"She wants to work in the clinic."

"Find her something." Joe was near giving up. "Let Dean keep the decision. So she lost her job there. So what? Why is she that hysterical."

"Because the reason he gave."

"And what reason is that."

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"The reason for the reason I need you to talk to him."

"Christ." Joe grumbled rubbing his forehead.

"Blaspheme."

"Enough."

"Joe."

"What!" Joe blasted. "Continue."

"Fine." Andrea folded her arms and bobbed her head while she spoke.

"Dean told Misha she could work there any longer because he wants to have an affair with her."

Just about the point where Joe was comfortable in letting his attention go elsewhere, he stopped. "Dean, said what?"

"Oh, yes. He told that sweet innocent little girl, 'I can not work with you, I want to have an affair with you.'"

Joe blinked. "Dean said that? That doesn't sound like Dean."

"Are you saying Misha's lying."

"No, I'm . . ."

"Are you saying I'm lying."

"No! Christ Andrea!"

"She's hysterical Joe!"

"IO know." Joe lost his cool.

"We've not had an hysterical women in a sexual harassment situation ever in Beginnings."

"I just find this hard to believe. Dean is sexually harassing Misha."

Andrea gasped. "This is so typically Male."

"I'm just saying it's hard to believe. Dean barely sexually harassed his wife." Joe took a second. "Maybe Misha was just emotional over getting fried and she was hard to understand."

"Oh, I understood her perfectly well. Can't now. She's worse now as soon as I enlightened the situation to her."

"Oh brother." Joe covered his eyes.

"She's an innocent, Joe." Andrea dropped her voice to a whisper. "She's still a virgin."

"Do I need to hear this?"

"Yes, you do. As father in law to Dean and community leader this can not be tolerated."

"What exactly did you explain to Misha?" Joe questioned.

"That she was being sexually harassed."

"And where did you derive that from."

"From what Misha told me."

“Let’s stop with the children’s programming for a second, Andrea.” Joe lifted his hand. “What exactly did Misha tell you. Word for word please or I’m gonna start to call you Frank.”

“She said . . .” Andrea shivered. “This is difficult for me.”

“I’m sure.”

“She said Dean told her, he was letting her go because he was devoted to his wife and he was grasping so hard for Ellen that he grasped on to Misha and things weren’t looking good for him Joe. Which means . . .”

“Which means squat. I’m not hearing sexual harassment.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Before grumbling again, Joe reached into his reserve calm pool. “Andrea, did it dawn on you that maybe Dean was referring to grasping for clinical help.”

“Nope.” Andrea said surely.

“Nope.” Joe nodded.

“Dean is repeating himself.”

Confused, Joe tossed his hands out. “How.”

“Bev. He has this thing for young girls.”

Disgusted, Joe disagreed facially. “Oh that horse shit. He doesn’t have a thing for young girls.”

“He does Joe, I think we are dealing with a highly trained professional with a sexual perversion.”

“What!” Joe blasted. “Andrea, you’re gonna have to get your mind out of your menopausal delusional state of thought and go rational.”

Andrea wheezed out her offense.

Just as Joe was about to imitate her, then move on, Hector approached, almost with an air of hostility. Joe saw it, and dreaded asking, but he had to. “Yes.”

“We need to talk about Dean.” Hector stated.

“Oh, brother.” Joe rubbed his eyes. “What?”

“He made Misha cry. Not only did he fire her, he touched her.”

Joe’s hand slid down his face. “Touched her.”

Andrea’s eyes widened. “He touched her too.”

“Oh, yeah.” Hector nodded. “Jenny said he grasped her arm.”

“Joe.” Andrea turned to him. “Jenny told him . . .”

“I heard, Andrea.” Joe said annoyed. “I’m standing right here. How did Jenny hear about the situation, Hector?”

Hector shrugged.

Joe looked to Andrea. “Did you tell Jenny what you told me.”

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"Of course."

"Figure." Joe rolled his eyes. "Hector, look, this . . ."

"Joseph Anthony Slagel. "Andrea scolded. "Quit trying to be the peace maker and deal wit this. I want action."

"And I want a goddamn diversion right now to this insane situation!" Joe yelled.

Asked and received, at that instance, with a dramatic squeal, Dean from Security pulled up. "Hey, Joe, tour guys are back. The Society war monitor is here."

"Never thought I'd see the day when I was happy to hear about the society." Joe jumped in the jeep. "Andrea. Hector. Late. Dan. Drive. Please and fast."

"All right. Hold on." Dan peeled out.

Joe took a second to look in the mirror at a baffled and 'left standing' Hector in Andrea. Relieved he had made some distance, Joe sunk into his chair. "Only in the whacked out world of Beginnings."

^^^

Ellen had to wonder. Did they plan it that way? Was it a subconscious thing that was happening before her ion the livingroom. It had to be, because neither, Frank, Hal or Robbie would openly agree to act and be the way they were.

Under the thick cloud of cigarette smoke sat the three brothers. Part 'A', was their appearance. Robbie in a black turtle neck, Frank in a black tee shirt, Hal in a black sweatshirt. All of them wore the exact same faded style of jeans. On the perspective spots before them on the coffee table rested each of their personal revolvers, as if tossed their for the evening. All three held a cup of coffee in one hand as they lounged back.

It was the weirdest cross between reminiscing and strategy Ellen had ever seen. Part 'B' was how the three of them found an attribut to their youth in every aspect of the preliminary 'game' mentioned.

Hal and Frank's description of getting up at the crack of dawn to drive around making decoy tracks, reminded Robbie of the time they all went camping. How Jimmy got up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom and became lost. They found Jimmy at the crack of dawn sound asleep in someone else's camp.

The M.R.E.'s they had packed to supplement food, brought back fond memories of Frank's teenage cooking days.

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And the weaponry. Well, Ellen expected that there'd be a good story to go along with each piece of artillery that brought.

"So we have a destination." Hal explained. "In mind. Right Frank?"

"Pretty laid out." Frank continued. "We know which way to head first."

"And that would be?" Robbie asked. He waited, and received no answer. "Again. And that would be?"

Frank looked at Hal then back to Robbie. "We aren't telling."

"Why?" Robbie questioned.

"You'll open your mouth." Frank said. "You always open your mouth. Remember the time . . ."

"Guys." Ellen interrupted. "It's getting late. I'm gonna head up to bed." she moved some toward the hall. "Robbie? Will you walk me up?"

"Oh, sure, El I'll . . ." Just as Robbie stood, he noticed, so did Frank.

"I'll walk her up." Frank said.

Ellen shifted her eyes about. "I asked Robbie to walk me up."

"OK." Frank nodded. "So."

"So." Hal exhaled the word. "So what part of she asked Robbie to walk her up, don't you understand?"

"Shut the fuck up, Hal." Frank walked over to Ellen. "I'll walk you up, El. I want to."

Locking a look on Robbie for approval, Ellen tilted her head as a question.

"Go on." Robbie sat back down. "Frank's missed you."

Ellen awkwardly smiled, then walked to the steps.

Slowly Hal shook his head, listening to the ascending footsteps. "If you want to keep control you have to maintain control, little brother."

"Over?"

"What you've been building out here."

"You mean with Ellen?" Robbie snickered almost forced. "Nah. It's all right. It's nothing. Frank's here now."

"I see." Hal watched Robbie. He watched that little boy pucker Robbie did that preluded a swallow of disappointment. After raising an eyebrow, taking that in and grabbing another cigarette, Hal rested back and grinned. The game was going to have a lot more interesting turns than even he imagined.

^^^

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

The can fire of the check in post that they had just passed through, reflected as a dance of light in the side rearview mirror. George stared at it, letting it hypnotize him as he rested back in the passenger's seat waiting for Bertha.

They had arrived. No fanfare. Not that he wanted that at near three in the morning, but some sort of greeting would have been appreciate. After all he was the president. But George reasoned his disappointed state to being tired. To his internal clock, he had been up over twenty-four hours.

He took a second to glance at the camp laid out before him. The glow of tents that were warmed by more can fires. A few buildings, not many were erected, and a part of George was excited about living the field life for a week.

"Sir." Bertha spoke as she opened the driver's door.

"Ready?" George asked. "All I want to do is sleep right now."

"The CO of the camp thought perhaps you'd want to meet the Beginnings war monitor."

"He arrived?" George asked.

"Yes. And has been waiting patiently to see you."

"Why the hell would I want to see the war monitor? Unless . . ."

George opened the door. "Do I know him?"

"I believe so, Sir. I'm not sure. This way." Bertha led the direction to walk.

"Who is it. No. wait. Don't tell me. Let me be surprised."

"He is in a VIP tent next to yours."

"VIP tent?" George walked side by side with Bertha.

"Part of the rules. The CO heard from our man in Beginnings. He is set up with a home there."

"I'm not a real fan of this monitor thing. Or getting to know them. But I spent years upon years in Beginnings. A part of me hopes that I already now this person. How enjoyable it would be to really spend a week irritating this person with my presence."

Bertha hesitated before opening the flap door to the tent. "And are you sure this person won't irritate you."

"Oh." George scoffed. "That's impossible." He stepped through the flap and stopped. The words, 'scratch that; just seemed to slip out, when the smiling Beginnings war monitor stepped into view and it was Henry.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

January 15<sup>th</sup>

Like a breeze Ellen wisped by Frank, and to him, it was the last time. “El.” he showed her his wrist and finger as he tapped the face of his watch.

“Do you see what I’m doing.”

“Shh.” Ellen waved him off.

“El. I’m serious. I’m indicating it is time to go.”

“Frank, I have been here three weeks, I want to make sure I have everything.”

“This wasn’t a fuckin vacation motel, El. We can come back for it.” Frank said perturbed. “It’s daybreak, sweetie. Hal has the diversion tracks from the house ready. We have to go.”

With a huff, center livingroom, Ellen spun around. “God, Frank, I am not understanding the rush.”

“Today is the day. We have to move.”

“You know, all three of you are acting like the society is coming right now. Gees.” She chuckled. “You think you’re overreacting, just a bit.”

Crash!

The shattering glass of the livingroom flew about as ball of fire sailed in and landed at their feet.

“Fuck.” Frank stamped at the fire. “See what I mean. Does that answer your question. Fuck.”

Another crash. Another ball of fire.

“Oh my God.” Ellen backed up. “We have to go.”

“Um, yeah.” Frank gave up on the fire. “We have to . . .” he winced some when he heard from the back of the house another crash. “. . . Go.” He led her toward the hall. As soon as they steppe din, with a rush, Robbie opened the door.

“Savage attack.” Robbie informed. “Big one too.” He kicked the door shut and grabbed the extra shot gun from the hall. “We have to move.”

Frank grumbled. “See.” He said to Ellen. “Five minutes. Five fuckin minuets earlier we would have been clear of this shit.” He opened the front door. “Fuck. Robbie. Down.”

Ellen shrieked when Robbie side armed her pulling her out of the way of the sailing arrow that zoomed by a ducking Frank.

Frank pumped the m-16. “What’s the back look like.”

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Lifting from the floor, Robbie didn't have to see. "Fire."

"OK." staying out of the door's view, Frank stood to the side and peered out. "It's raining arrows, but they aren't on the property."

"No." Robbie told him. "They're close to the perimeter projecting the attack."

"Fuckin Hal." Frank shook his head looking out to the truck that was parked at a distance. Hal like he was in an OK Corral fight would stand up, shoot, then duck behind the truck again. "Hal!" Frank shouted. "What the fuck! Move the truck!"

"I'm . . ." Hal shot, then darted back down. "Trying here, Frank! They're waiting for me to get to the door."

Disgusted, Frank shook his head. "Robbie go help him. Back the truck up to the porch."

"Should we run with her?" Robbie motioned his head to a silent Ellen.

"What are you kidding me. I'd have to carry her, and the only distance I want to carry her is from this porch to that truck. Go. I'll cover you, El, down the beams so we can drive straight out."

Robbie stepped mid leaving. "The beams are down. They think they're up."

"Great." Frank raise his weapon. "Thinking Savages. Go. It's not gonna be much longer until they figure it out."

M-16 raised and aimed, side standing in the archway, Frank scooped out, and shot trying to cover a running, smiling and darting Robbie.

"Frank." Ellen called to him.

"I'm a little busy here, El."

"But the house is on fire." Ellen tried, unsuccessfully to stay calm.

"Yeah but we still have the porch as a means of clear escape." No sooner had Frank said that, and another fire bomb blasted right before the front of the porch shooting in up and ignition the posts. "OK, maybe not."

"Frank . . ." Ellen's voice shivered in panic

"We're fine. As long as they get that truck here in oh, say . . ." Frank quickly assessed the blazing situation. "Ten seconds."

"Hey." Robbie did a baseball slid greeting Hal at the back of the military truck.

"One would think," Hal reloaded. "We're in some sort of Cowboy and Indian video game."

"You know what?"

“What?”

“The house is on fire. We have to get that truck back there.”

Quickly, Hal looked back. “Christ.”

“No more fun, Hal. We have to chance it.”

“On my call. You jump in the bed, I’ll go forward. Damn it I hate getting hit with arrows.” Hal put his revolver away. “Go!” he ordered, leaving Robbie in his mid shout and in a hunched position, Hal forged forward to the drivers side of the truck. It was ready to go. Only the ignition needed turned over.

Hal saw them coming, steady and at the same speed. Arrows. With a quick fling open of the truck door, Hal repelled the arrows and dove in the truck. Like making inside from a thunderous storm, Hal took a breath in the silence. “Wow. That was easier than I thought.” Hand on ignition he turned it over and just threw the truck in reverse. High speed he powered backwards, hoping that Robbie held on, just in case worst came to worst and Hal pummeled into the house.

“Frank.” Ellen watched the flames and smoke careen from the kitchen. She coughed some.

“We’re fine. They’re coming.” Frank backed up in the hall.

“What are you doing. We can’t go out that way.” Ellen said.

“I didn’t say we were.”

“But what . . .”

Hurriedly, Frank grabbed her hand pulling her with him further down the hall. “Listen.” He lifted her. “Legs to my waist tight as they can go. Head and arms tucked.”

“Frank . . .”

“Do it!” Frank ordered. His eyes peered at the front door as he felt Ellen grip in her instruction. “This is our runners start.”

Muffled, within his chest, she spoke. “Runners start for what?”

“This.” Grinning at the sight of the truck, holding on to Ellen, Frank charged with his fastest of speed down the hall of the house.

Hoping he didn’t crack his head off the archway of porch roof, just as he reached the door, in what seemed a single smooth motion, Frank gave a pivot of his body, covered Ellen’s head with his hand, and with a sideways motion, leaped in a ejection mode forward.

Skimming the top of the blaze, Frank and Ellen sailed to the truck and dropped hard through the draping cover of the trucks bed. One, two three,

there was no hesitation.

Their hard landing on top of the supplies, just by the back gate, motivated Robbie's charge 'they're in!', and with the screech of tires, not only did the truck peel out, but so did an unprepared Ellen. In a roll atop the supplies, she ping-ponged in a fast bounce right over the gate of the truck.

Two hands. So fast, Robbie had her shoulder, Frank had her other arms.

Excitedly, Robbie grinned over Ellen's scream. "We're cool."

"Yeah." Over the hatch of the high bouncing and moving truck, Frank reach down lifting Ellen the rest of the way in.

Hyperventilating, Ellen's eyes were wide as they moved her further into the safety of the tuck.

"You OK?" Robbie asked.

Ellen only nodded.

Frank's body bounced as he tried to get near her. "Fuckin Hal. Hal!" He shouted. "Learn to drive!" He grunted in pain when in another jump of the truck Frank's head banged off the metal arch over the back of the truck.

"We're going through the woods, Frank." Robbie visually assessed a shocked Ellen for injuries.

"Like he wasn't prepared for this." Settling, he found a spot next to Ellen. She immediately curled into him.

Feeling the smoothness increase in the ride, Robbie smiled. "Hey, we got out of there."

"That we did." One long breath was inspired by Frank to get his breathing back on track. "And . . ." He kissed the top of Ellen's head and looked up to Robbie with a ornery grin. "Game's begun. We're off and running."

^^^

Dean literally dropped everything he was doing in the lab, and spun in total attention and retaliation to what was just spoken to him. "Sexual harassment!" He shrieked. "Oh, come on, Joe."

"That's what is being said' Joe lifted his hands as he spoke in a calm manner.

"And you believe this."

"No, I don't believe it. Did you hear me say I believe it. No. Christ

almighty, Dean. I'm just doing my job. All right? I just want to put . . ." Joe coughed. It took him a second and then he coughed again. It bred an eerie silence and a glance and stare from Dean. "I just want to put an . . . don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" Dean asked.

"Like that." Joe pointed. "You looked at me like that for coughing."

"I did no such thing."

"Oh, yeah. So then how come you haven't looked at me through this entire conversation."

"OK. All right." Dean raised his hand. "The cough made me look."

"I knew it."

"But only because it reminded me that it's time for another series of treatments and I want to get a full body scan."

Joe shuddered. "My cough reminded you of . . . Christ. Thank you Mr. Dr. Compassion. This is why I hate talking to you. You don't know how to be human."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Dean snapped. "I can be human."

"Yeah, right. And you changed the goddamn subject."

"I did no such thing."

"Back to the sexual harassment issue."

"On that . . ." Dean lifted an index finger. "I did no such thing either."

"And I'm just trying to silence this issue. That's all. Did you grab her?"

"No." Dean barked.

"Did you tell her you can't have her working here with you because you want to have an affair with her?"

"No, Joe. No." Dean shook his head. "I told her I couldn't have her here in the lab because of Ellen. I can't believe she got all this from that. It doesn't sound like Misha."

"Well, between you and me, I think she got all this sexual harassment shit from my wife. But . . . that's another issue. Would you have a problem with her working in the clinic? She wants to be in the clinic?"

"I wouldn't have a problem with that." Dean explained. "It's not Misha. It's me. I can't have her in the lab. I can't. I was missing Ellen so much, I was forgetting Misha wasn't my wife. I lost Joe. I wasn't thinking, I got wrapped up . . . innocently in having that companionship, and I lost. I mean, as stupid as this sounds, Frank doesn't want anything to do with me. That is something I didn't want."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

"I think that will resolve itself. You and Frank have come too long of a way to end it over a tiny dispute."

"He decked me, Joe."

"Well .. you'll have that. Now . . ." Joe exhaled. "You need help in this lab."

"I found an assistant. He's actually really good. He's in the back now. He did impressively well on plasma separation this morning."

"Whatever that means. So who is . . ." Joe stopped. His eyes moved from Dean to the lab door.

Dean turned to see where Joe looked. Elliott stood there. "Sgt. Ryder."

Removing his bandana, and looking too serious, Elliott stepped into the lab. "I hate to interrupt."

"Something is wrong," Joe moved toward him. "What is it?"

Elliott seemingly unsure looked at Dean then back to Joe. "I received a call from Jordan reporting some due south. Large amounts. They believe . . . they believe . . ." Elliott exhaled. "It maybe coming from the house."

"Christ." Joe closed his eyes.

"Now, since we've not received report from Henry about any society knowledge of your families whereabouts, I am going to assume it could have been savages. And I'd like permission, Sir, to disburse a few units from Sgt. Doyle's camps to the sight, and I would like to head immediately out there for my personal observation."

"Permission granted." Joe gave a single nod.

"Thank you, Sir." Elliott gave a snap of attention, a nod to Dean, then in a pivot of a turn moved with haste to the door,

"Elliott." Joe called to him. "You'll get back to me ASAP?"

Elliott only gave his look of agreement, then hurriedly left.

"Joe," Dean said with concern.

"No." Joe shook his head. "Nothing is wrong. I would feel it if it was. Nothing is wrong."

Hating to give in, Dean exhaled with reluctance. "If you think so."

"I know so." Joe winked. "Now . . . back to this new assistant. Who is this assistant that has impressed you so quickly,"

Joe receive his answer. Not in the form of a name from Dean, but rather a 'hi Pap' as Billy emerged from the back room.

^^^

Henry's spoon lifted above his bowl, then with a tip of the utensil he released slowly, the thick, brownish liquid. "Oh. This just isn't right."

"What, Henry? What?" Aggravated, in his interruption of his own lunch, George snapped. He glared across the table to Henry. "What isn't right?"

"This." Henry pointed to his bowl.

"It's soup." George said.

"It's like prison food. I'm being fed prisoner food."

"Well, so am I." George barked. "And so is Callahan." He pointed to Bertha who was eating.

"Well." Henry snipped. "He, I mean, she looks like she'll eat anything."

Bertha dropped her spoon.

Henry pushed the bowl forward. "Does he, I mean, she want it. I can't eat it."

"Then you'll starve." George moved the bowl. "I am to feed you. I'm feeding you."

"Bet you in Beginnings your person is eating well."

"This isn't Beginnings." George grew angry.

"My accommodations suck." Henry bitched.

"Why are you complaining so much?" George asked.

"Because Joe said to be myself."

Running his hand over his mouth, George held back the growl. "Figures."

Henry peered around the tent. The three of them were the only ones in there. "Why is he, I mean, she here."

"Callahan is here because I asked her to be here. That's why."

"Sir." Bertha finally spoke up. "We should do the meeting in private."

"This isn't a meeting." George told her. "I lived in Beginnings once. I wanted to have a meal with this man. I used to like him."

"Oh my God." Bertha sat back. "Why?"

Henry gasped. "You aren't very nice. I'm just doing my job. If I bitch, I bitch. Don't you ever bitch."

"No." Bertha shook her head.

"Oh, that's right." Henry nodded. "You're a . . . or . . . OK, what are you anyhow. A man or a woman."

Softly, in a grumble, George warned when he saw the veins in Bertha's neck protrude. "Bertha."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Henry sniffed. "Afraid to answer, right?"

Bertha's hand slammed at the table and she pointed strongly at Henry. "I'll tell you what, you little wiry twit. One more he-she comment from your whiney mouth, and this big hand is reaching across that table, grabbing you by that main and I'm gonna shove your head between my legs and you can see for yourself. How's that sound."

"Disgusting."

The clearing of the throat was the knock of intrusion by the soldier who entered the tent. "Sir." He walked up to George. "This just came in."

"Thank you." George took the paper and glanced at Bertha, "The scout party we positioned outside of Beginnings just intercepted a radio transmission."

"You're eavesdropping." Henry was aghast. "You can't eavesdrop on the radio transmission."

"Yes w can Henry." George handed the information to Callahan. "And good thing that we can. One of the hardest things you and I have discussed, Bert, is figuring out where the Slagels began their run. We knew once we knew the beginning destination we could follow them. Well if that pans out . . ."

Bertha smiled. "If this pans out. Then someone give us the two hundred dollars. We may have just passed go."

^^^

The savage body that laid before Elliott clearly showed evidence of a man who was killed by random bullets. Not a typical Slagel massacre scene at the house, and Elliott didn't need for Sgt. Doyle to recant what he himself had already pieced together.

"They did exactly what I would do in this situation." Tim spoke walking with Elliott by the still smoldering house. "They didn't bother following through on the attack. They just cleared a path and took off."

Elliott nodded. Hands behind his back he peered over his shoulder. "A clear path through those trees."

"Long since gone at a high rate of speed by the time we arrived. My men took out the savages remaining in the area. The ones retreating alone with the ones heading toward Beginnings."

"Then?" Elliott asked. "Did you . . ."

"Yes, sir." Tim replied without even hearing the question. "Sent another truck through those woods to lay another set of tracks."



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Good. With the four of them making a quick escape, they p\more than likely left an obvious route.”

“That they did. Due south west.”

“And your men went?”

“Due North. And another set was sent North West.”

“Good. Then . . .” Elliott froze. The clear and loud sound of synchronized pumping of chambers rang out at the same time the Sergeant at arms shouted, ‘SS forty degrees north.’

Elliott spun around.

“On my call!” The sergeant cried.

With widened eyes, Elliott spotted the blue arm bands on the ensuing, and walking society soldiers. “Hold your fire!” he ordered out. “Hold your fire.” Hand held up in a sophisticated manner, calm, Elliott walked at a good pace to the strong aiming line that Doyle’s men held. “Lower your weapons.” Elliott informed as he walked to the society soldier that led the pack. Certainty was not a lacking, Elliott knew what the blue arm band signified. They were part of the game. Still knowing of that, Elliott went through the motions. He stepped face to face with the lead society man.

“Sgt. Milford. Eastern Caceres Society.” He introduced himself in a stern stance.

“Elliott Ryder. Second in command of the United western Alliance army.”

“Second in command. Second?” Milford nearly smirked. “Kind of a . . . I don’t know, lowly scene for the second in command to be in surveillance. Personally, I would have sent a unit master. Unless of course, there was more importance to the scene at hand.”

“You and your men are in United Western Alliance territory.”

“We’re with the retaliation.”

“Then I suggest you state your cause for being here, and move on.”

“I think you know our cause.” Milford took an arrogant step past Elliott. “Our reasoning is rather obvious.” He spoke staring off. After a second he turned around and smiled at Elliott. He then called to his awaiting unit, “get me the radio.”

^^^

Powell, Wyoming

“Bodies.” Frank grumbled. Even speaking soft, his voice filled the

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

library where he and Ellen were. 'I would think . . .' He reached down. "After all these years." his hand gripped the tattered shirt of the body on the floor. "That time would have turned the remaining bodies into dust." He lifted the body up. "Some still have petrified fuckin flesh." Like it weighted nothing, and really it did, Frank heaved it slightly in a toss to the large crate. "Shit. A leg fell off."

"Just leave it," Ellen said moving the push broom, "I'll get it."

"Thanks. Why there are bodies in here, I don't know." Frank dusted off his gloved hands. "This would be the last place I'd want to die." He walked a few feet. "I want to start moving shelves."

"So why the library?" Ellen asked, taking a breather, and holding on to the broom handle.

"It's center town. It's got a good roof for watching. Not far from where we hid the truck. Center town . . ." Frank moved to a shelf. "Make it easier fro traps." with a slight grunt he started pushing the shelf, sliding it across the floor as he spoke. "And . . .The shelves can block out the glass of the window" He stopped. "Plus. It's big enough for us all, and specious enough for you and me to hide out in the romance section."

"You're funny."

"Actually." Frank took off his gloves. "I'm hungry." He tossed them down and walked over to the main desk. "I'm hungry." he pulled forward the duffle bag. "Wanna snack before dinner?"

"What do we have?" Ellen laid down the broom and walked to him.

"Crackers . . ." Frank rummaged. "Pretzel nubs . . ." He lifted two brown foiled packs. "Wolf cookies?"

"I'll take the wolf cookie."

Frank tossed her one. "What's this remind you of?"

Ellen caught the pack. "A year and a half ago. Colorado."

"Nice little run." Frank ripped open the pack with his teeth.

"Are you kidding me?" Ellen shook her head. "You hated it."

"Nah. I loved being out there with you. This . . . this should be different."

"Oh, yeah. Real different." Ellen said sarcastically.

"We're much better prepared. Hey, at least this time we know there are soldiers following us. And . . ." Frank began to munch his snack. "We have Dean-ami mortars if they come full force. We're good." he winked.

"And we have Hal and Robbie this time."

Frank fluttered his lips. "Dead weight."

Ellen laughed. "Listen to you. Dead weight." she shook her head.

Druga-Johnston/The Game

“What? You don’t think I could keep you alive and safe for a week?”

“From six hundred and twenty-three soldiers?”

“You don’t think.”

Mouth pausing in a bite, Ellen pulled the cookie from her mouth. “Yeah. Yeah, you could. Only you.”

“See.” Frank nodded in arrogance. “I think this time, El, it might even be easier. I think they may have some strategy considering this is part of war. What that is, I’m still working on. I know what I would do if I were following us. I’ll get a better idea once if we actually run into the society.”

“If?” Ellen asked. “We’re safe here in this town.”

“We’re not staying long. A day or two. That’s it. Then we have to move on. Hiding is not an option. Besides it’s stupid.”

“But you said, ‘if’”

“Yeah. If.” Frank repeated. “It’s a big if, El. Realistically.”

“What is that?”

“Come on.” Frank smiled. “It’s a big country. There are four of us. We have a head start. Realistically speaking, finding us will belike finding a needle in a haystack unless . . .”

“Unless what?”

“Unless . . .” Frank shrugged. “They get a good grip and find our starting point. But . . .” He flung out a wave of his hand. “The chances of that are slim.”

^^^

“We have their starting point.” George handed Bertha the message he had just received.

“So the house and radio panned out?” Berth asked.

“Absolutely. Right now we’re playing a game of ‘Lets make a Deal’. Three sets of tracks, three different directions. One of them is bound to lead us t the Slagel crew.”

Bertha handed the paper back to George. “Border camps.”

“Packed up and move out. They should all meet up at the designated spot with in ten to twelve hours.”

“So do I now have the go-ahead on my strategy plan?”

“You certainly do. since this is where most of our men are, I want implement your suggestion. Don’t get too comfortable. We’re packing up the entire camp . . .” George smiled at a finally, silent Henry. “And we’re all going west.”



"Hate Beginnings?" Jess sort of snickered over the evening conversation in his small issued apartment. Into what looked like sherry glasses, he poured red wine. "I never said I hated Beginnings."

After giving a 'thanks' look, Johnny took his glass. "But you were a spy."

"Observer." Jess sat down in a comfortable position. "I never caused Beginnings any harm. Basically my job was to go there, live as a resident, not do anything until needed. When needed I'd do my job and release information. Then leave when it was too close. I'm here." He smiled a flash smile then sipped his wine.

"What happened when they found you out?"

"Nothing. I left. I didn't stick around to find out."

"And you didn't hate Beginnings?"

"The contrary. I rather . . . liked Beginnings very much. I liked . . ." Jess ran his finger over the rim of his glass. "I liked certain people very much."

"Is that why you were reluctant to do your job for the society?"

Quickly Jess looked up from his wine. "I never said that."

"But you just said . . ."

"I said I liked Beginnings. I never said I didn't want to do my job for the society." Jess watched Johnny for a reaction.

"So who were some of the people you really liked?" Johnny asked.

"Honestly?"

"Please."

"Your Uncle Robbie."

Johnny smiled. "How can anyone not like Uncle Robbie?"

"I don't know, you tell me." Jess said.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't like him."

"Yes, I did." Johnny finished off his wine quickly. "I love my Uncle Robbie."

"You turned your back on him. Your entire family. You hated, I mean hated your Uncle Hal."

Hard Johnny swallowed. "I . . . I . . . find that so hard to believe." He rubbed his eyes. "I hated Uncle Hal?"

"Very much so." Still watching Johnny for any sign, Jess continued. "I

was one of the two people you could go to. And you came to me. Used to uh, bitch quite a bit about him. In fact, you tried to kill him . . . twice.”

Johnny stood up. “I don’t know what happened. I don’t . . . know.”

“You talk about finding things hard to believe. I find it hard to believe why you’re so confused. Bow, please, I’m speaking as your friend here. We were very close in Beginnings.”

Slowly from his confused pace, Johnny looked at Jess.

“You don’t recall that?”

Johnny shook his head.

“Let me ask you this.” Jess set down his glass. “Where does your memory stop?”

“It doesn’t. Not completely. Everyone thinks this retrograde amnesia is causing a total blockade of the past so many years. That’s not the way it is. I lost some things. I remember up to about a two years ago. But still, in that time period of my memory, things are lost.”

“Like?”

“Like how I got here. I was hoping you can tell me. And I’m not talking about the escape.” Johnny said.

“Come on, Johnny. You have to recall your closeness to George. You have to. No one turns that bad over night. No one.”

“That bad?”

“You don’t remember the hell you put Ellen through.”

Johnny shook his head.

“You shot your grandfather, and your father.”

Johnny’s eyes closed as he blindly reached to sit back down. “That is something I don’t understand. I shot my Pap.”

“I think the second bullet was meant for Hal. Of course, Ellen says even though you shot Joe, in an essence, you saved his life. In my opinion, using mind over matter, you condemned him to death.”

Confused Johnny looked up.

“Had you not shot him, they wouldn’t have discovered that your grandfather . . . that Joe . . . has cancer.”

Silence.

“He’s dying Johnny.

Every ounce of Johnny’s breath left and he grasped not only for air but for grounding. Jaw dropped, eyes wide.

“Wine?” Jess showed the bottle, then poured some more for he and Johnny.

“How Jess?” Johnny asked. “I don’t know what and when and how

this happened.”

“You didn’t have a connection to George.”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Then that explains it.”

“No.” Adamantly, Johnny stood up. “It doesn’t explain how I turned on my grandfather. Nothing could explain that. Jess.” Johnny swallowed. “Yo don’t think? You don’t think I was brainwashed do you? And the amnesia undid all that was done. There has to be a reason. There has to be for why I’m feeling this way.”

Jess only shrugged and downed his wine, hiding his subtle ‘interrogation success’ grin. He had an answer for Johnny. But he didn’t give it. Jess knew damn well what the reason was for the way Johnny was feeling, and in Jess’ mind it wasn’t brainwashing or amnesia, it was pure unadulterated regret and guilt.

^^^

It wasn’t that Dean was at a loss at what to say, he could say a lot. But most of it would be based on a guess. “Possible.”

“Jess doesn’t believe it.” Joe told him, joining Dean at the dining room table.

“Amnesia is tricky.” Dean explained. “There is no medical means to prove it. You have to rely on the patient.”

“So we’ll never know.”

“Not exactly.” Dean pulled his chair closer. “Ask yourself this simple question. What does Johnny have to gain by faking amnesia with George. Frank, when he faked his amnesia, was gaining trust. What does Johnny have to gain.”

Slowly Joe shook his head. “Nothing, really.”

“Exactly. He left Beginnings to join the society. He pulled a lot of shit here Joe. In my opinion, he’s not faking it.”

“What about him feeling guilty and he changed his mind.”

“Now is that wishful thinking on your part?” Dean waved a finger. “Guilt? Johnny? No. He shot Frank. He shot his father. Too much hatred went into what he said on that stand in the courtroom. If Johnny says he doesn’t remember, Johnny doesn’t remember.”

“Will it comeback.”

“Most likely, yes.” Dean answered. “In time. But there are cases of retrograde amnesia where the patient never regained that partition of

memory.”

A little surprised at the sudden feminine clearing of the throat that entered the room, Joe looked over his shoulder. “Margaret?”

“I’m not interrupting am I?” Margaret walked from the back bedroom hall. “Kids are all tucked in.”

Snide Joe looked at Dean. “Why am I now discovering you have this inability to handle things on your own?”

“No.” Margaret interrupted. “I asked. I wanted to get to know William’s grandchildren. It was my pleasure. May I?” She asked of a seat at the table.

“Please.” Joe pulled out a chair for her. “You know, I was really shocked to hear you knew William.”

“Yes.” Margaret smiled. “I’ve been sharing stories with Dean all day.”

Joe snickered. “Good thing Frank’s not here, Dean. He’d find another womanizing angle behind this for you.”

Dean groaned and sunk into his chair. “Please, don’t remind me, Joe. I shudder at the thought of what Frank has told Ellen.”

Curious, Margaret questioned, “I’m lost.”

Dean lifted his hand. “Long story. But let’s just say, Frank is going to use my last lab assistant to the best of his ability, while he’s out there with Ellen, to destroy my marriage.”

“Frank?” Margaret chuckled. “Destroy your marriage?”

Both Joe and Dean replied with a loud ‘yes.’

In a don’t be silly fashion, Margaret chuckled again. “Marriages are stronger than a few words, Dean. Really . . .” She reached out laying her hand on Dean’s. “If you think about it. What can Frank possibly say to Ellen that would destroy your marriage?”

^^^

“And she’s practically living in your house, El.” Frank, folded arms, stared down to Ellen in such an explaining mode.

“Frank . . .” Ellen near laughed as she continued to build a privacy wall out of books, so she could sleep..

“I’m serious.” Frank said. “Always there. Bathing the kids. Working all your experiments. I think she slept in the bed.”

“Frank.” Ellen laughed.

“Not sure. But she was wearing your clothes. I know that.”

Halting in her task, Ellen stood upright. “Why are you saying this?”

Druga-Johnston/The Game

"It's true." Frank raised his right hand. "I had a huge falling out with Dean over it. See." He pointed to the corner of his mouth. "When I confronted him, he decked me."

"Dean hit you?"

"Would I lie? Really, would I?"

"No."

"Then there you have it. He's been playing around the entire time you've been gone. I think El, I think when you get back, you should initiate the second ever divorce in Beginnings's history." In a spin, Frank turned to look at a snickering Robbie. "What?"

"Sorry." Robbie stopped laughing. "It's just funny that if El divorces Dean. Two divorces in Beginnings history and both of them are Ellen's."

A wide amusement grin hit Frank. "Oh, shit. I didn't think of that. Is that funny or what?"

"No." Ellen barked. "It's not funny. And I'm gonna go ask Hal. He'll tell me the truth."

"Go on." Frank encouraged. "He'll confirm it. He hates Dean."

"I will." Ellen backed up and started to leave the main room.

"You ask. But uh, El . . . call his name first. Hal has a jerk-off addiction and you don't want to disturb him."

In disgust, Ellen's mouth dropped open. "You are such a pig." Shaking her head, she walked out.

Laughing, Frank walked over to help finish her wall.

"Is that true?" Robbie asked.

"Yep." Frank picked up books. "Hal's addicted to masturbation."

"No. I mean about Dean and Misha?"

"Yep."

"Then El will probably leave him."

"I hope." Frank laid a novel on the stack. Then stood up. "But don't get any ideas."

"Excuse me."

"You know what I'm talking about." Frank faced him. "Don't think I don't know what's going on. Or went on. But know this little brother . . ." His voice dropped. "It ends. It . . . ends."

Left to right in a tenseness Robbie's jaw shifted. "Why do you have to be such an asshole."

"How am I being an asshole."

"You're assuming that if she isn't with Dean she'll be with you."

"Um, yeah."



Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Um . . .” Robbie said in a mockery, then with arrogance made a buzzer sound.

Frank shuddered. “Did you just buzz at me?”

“Yes.”

“You fuckin buzzed at me.”

“Yeah. Frank. I buzzed. “Robbie repeated the sound. “Meaning, wrong. You’re wrong.”

“What am I wrong about.”

“Assuming you and El would be together. Things happened.”

“I don’t want to hear.” Frank’s hand waved out.

“No, you will hear it.”

:I said . . .” Frank’s voice raised. “I don’t want to hear it!”

“And you will! Things changed!”

“No!” Frank blasted. “Things didn’t change. Scenery changed. Circumstances changed. They were all temporary. This . . what you have built in your mind, is temporary Robbie. Maybe you need to understand that.”

“You know, if you weren’t being such an arrogant dick . . .”

“Whoa! Wait.” Frank stepped to him. “Where is this coming from?”

“You and your attitude. I wasn’t going to say anything. I wasn’t going to consider it.”

“Consider what?” Frank asked loudly.

“Staying with Ellen.”

“Staying with Ellen?” Frank said in ridicule. “You think you were going to stay with Ellen. Robbie. Wake up. You had three weeks out here. I had a lifetime with her.”

“And so did I.”

“Bullshit!”

“No, Frank. What’s bullshit is that you scoff at the fact that Ellen and I would be together after the ousting.”

“Because it’s fuckin absurd.”

“You think?”

“I know.”

“Then maybe you should really know.”

“What are you talking about.”

“Ask Ellen.” Robbie gave an upward motion of his head.

Frank turned around to see Hal and Ellen standing there.

“As her, Frank.” Robbie said. “Ask her if she told me she’ll stay with me after the ousting. Ask her.”

“El?” Frank questioned.

Ellen walked out.

“Well.” Hal clapped his hands together once. “By no means am I an expert mind reader, but I would say her exit was her avoidance of giving you, Frank, her answer of . . . yes.”

“Shut the fuck up, Hal.” Frank, eyes focused followed Ellen out.

“El.” Frank whispered her name as he walked into the next room. “What is going on?”

Ellen turned to face him.

“El, are you staying with my brother?”

“Frank . . . Frank Robbie’s going through a really . . .”

“Answer the question.”

“If I need to I will.”

“If you *need* to? What is this? If you need to?” Frank badgered.

“That came out wrong.” Ellen waved her hands about. “If Robbie wants to, I will.”

“I won’t allow it.”

“What gives you the right.”

“Don’t even go there.” Frank pointed strong. “Don’t. Twenty-plus fuckin years gives me the right. I have fought too hard, too long, to give you up. Let alone give you up for my brother.”

“He needs me.”

“I need you.”

“You’re not going through a rough time.”

“No, El, I’m not. I’m going through a rough fuckin lifetime.” Frank barked. “We all are.”

“I promised him I would be there.”

“Then you’ll be there for him. But I will not . . .” Frank move closer to her. “I will not share you with my brother. I will not. And I won’t step out of the picture, so don’t ask me, and don’t expect me to.”

Ellen breathed heavier. “There are circumstances, and reasons . . .”

“There are no reasons good enough. I don’t want to hear it.” Frank told her.

“How do you know this isn’t what I want.”

“How?” Frank scoffed. “How can you even ask that. I’ll tell you how. When we saw each other yesterday morning That’s how. We didn’t just greet each other, we breathed each other. That is how I know what you

want and do not want.”

“Ex . . .” Hal’s voice entered the room. “Excuse me.”

“Not now, Hal.” Frank said, keeping his eyes on Ellen.

Hal ignored him. “I’m feeling a tension in the air and I . . .”

“Not . . . now Hal.”

“Yes, Frank. Now. Right now.” Hal said stern. “And you’ll listen. I guessing a sense you’re right. You’re right when you say ‘not now’.” Hal’s eyes shifted between Frank and Ellen. “Not now for the tension. Not now for the bullshit. And not now . . . to be fighting. Not . . . now.” He moved closer to them. “We have seven days out here. Seven days to keep her alive. They may be easy, and then again, they may be the hardest seven days we have ever embarked on. But one thing is sure. This . . . petty, emotional, I want her, you want her, bullshit has no place out here. Especially . . . not now. You want to fight with Robbie, then you save it. I won’t have my brothers at each others throat. I won’t have the tension. You hear me.” He asked looking at the two of them. “We need to be strong, we need to be united, and we need to work together. We are more than a team, We are brothers. And nothing should tear that apart. Ellen . . .” Hal whispered. “For as much as I love you, you really need to hear those words again. We are bothers . . . . nothing.” His voice dropped even lower and harder. “Nothing should ever tear us apart.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

January 17<sup>th</sup>

"I wouldn't disturb you if it wasn't important." Elliott spoke as fast as he walked with Joe into the communications room. "I know you go for treatments today."

"No, Elliott, that's quite all right. What . . ." Joe paused when Leo, who was monitoring communications stood up and saluted. "What the hell?"

Elliott gave a nod. "At ease. Can you leave us, please."

"Right away." Leo responded and with another salute, moved by Joe and walked out.

"When did we start doing that?" Joe asked.

"If I am going to run a uniform security of tri communities, they will all show the same respect." Elliott pulled out a chair for Joe. "Please."

"What's going on?" Joe asked as he sat down.

"Communications began picking up an FSC transmission about five hours ago. Repeated. Pause for ten, repeated, then . . ."

"FSC?" Joe questioned. "What the hell is an FSC?"

"It's the Beginnings form of Morse Code. Frank developed it." Elliott explained. "Frank has been trying to implement it for a while. But since the society found the house, we have been implementing it."

"Frank developed a code." Joe nodded impressed.

"Yes, but it's rather new, so it is taking us sometime to decode it. But . . . we have it."

"FSC? Frank Slagel Code?"

"Um . . ." Elliott cleared his throat. "As much as I would like to say, yes. I can't. It stands for Frank's secret code."

"Oh, brother."

Elliott handed him the sheet. "This just was deciphered.

"Frank secret code." Joe shook his head. "At least he used his brains and developed it as a means so the society can't break into our transmissions." Before reading the sheet Joe saw Elliott look away. "He didn't develop it for those means did he?"

"No."

"Then tell me . . ."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“You don’t want to know.”

Joe grumbled. “Tell me.”

“Well, Frank believed with the meteor approaching, there also was a chance that alien life forces could be waiting for the opportunity to . . .”

“Never mind.” Joe finally peered to the sheet. “Holy shit.”

“My initial thoughts exactly.”

Slowly Joe stood up. “The entire Duluth base.”

“Our scouts said it appeared that way. All settled . . . as of this morning.”

“They had to have prepared the place.”

“We never saw movement there, then again, we aren’t in that region too often.” Elliott powered up the board.

Joe exhaled and peered up. “I guess this is where our focus should be for now. The starting ground of one war now is the start of another.” Joe ran his hand over the top of his lip. “We’ve come full circle I see.” he stepped back and sat down. “What are you up to George.”

“Anything you want us to do?”

“Peaceful movement.” Joe stated still staring at the spot on the board. “Gear up about four or five units. Send them down. Keep a distance from the site, but in communications with us. I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all. He’s on our side of the world right now. End of this game, George has one hour to pack up and start moving. He goes.” A heavy breath escaped Joe. “Or we take him out.”

^^^

George, with raised eyes, gave an ‘is it safe’ glance as the elevator jolted once.

“We’re still getting things moving.” Bertha explained. “We really didn’t have much time to prepare this place.”

“Beginnings wiped it out.” George watched the numbers illuminate on the elevator.

“It was wise to bring things back here. At least the power was easy to get up.” The lights flickered.

“Let’s hope they stay this way.” George said then watched the elevator doors open. “This the floor?”

“Yes, sir.” Bertha led the way. “We’re operating on a skeleton security crew right now, but enough to ensure safety while you’re here.” She led the way.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

"You do know we can not use the additional fifty men."

"Yes, sir."

"I don't want to take any chances. Especially since we're so far from home and close to Beginnings. They infiltrate this place once . . ." George paused at the entrance of what seemed a wide open military command room. Only three other personnel were there. "They infiltrated once, they can infiltrate again."

"This way sir." Bertha held out her hand walking down a few steps to the center aisle. "You know, Mr. Kusakari is still asleep, shall I wake him?"

"No. Please. No."

"But the war . . ."

"There are no rules that state he has to be awake. Just here. He's here. We'll inform him. But for now . . ." George sank into the plush, comfortable feel of a big leather chair. He smiled an 'ah' and drew serious. "For now . . . let's start this thing."

^^^

The bright blue sweat jacket zippered all the way up to the neck, hood covering the head, and big purple sunglasses did nothing for Ellen. But it made Frank, Hal and Robbie laugh as she stood encircled by them center of the street.

"I look ridiculous." Ellen gripped. "I'm gonna . . ."

"No." Frank stopped her from taking off the hood. "You have to be like this."

"Why?" she asked.

"So you can be spotted." Frank explained?

"By who?"

Robbie answered. "Us. We don't want to lose sight of you."

"You have to be in our scope at all times." Hal added.

"Speaking of scope." Frank said. "Robbie?"

"Getting there."

"Hal, truck?" Frank questioned.

"Read to go." Hal answered. "We have to remember, we lucked out here. We may not be so lucky next stop with gas. So let us not use the truck as a means of escape. We're smart enough gentlemen to create our own diversion."

With a sniff, Frank looked up. "Yeah. And from my end, it's just about there."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Robbie shook his head. "Close, but not yet."

"OK." Frank clapped his hands together once. "Hal, you take the prize."

Ignoring Ellen who looked from talking brother to brother, Hal shook his head. "Why don't you take the prize."

"I took the prize last time." Frank said.

"What about Robbie?" Hal asked.

"Robbie had the prize for a while."

"I had the prize for a while, Hal." Robbie shrugged. "Your turn." He told him as he reached into his back pocket.

"Fine." Hal exhaled. "I'll take the prize. Let me know when."

"Almost." Robbie looked at what seemed to be a television remote in his hand. "Frank?"

"When I say." Frank nodded. "I'll call. Hal you take the prize, head to the truck. You go your way. We'll do our thing."

"Frank." Robbie interrupted. "I hate to say . . ."

"Oh, sorry. Hal, ready?" Frank questioned.

"Yes." Hal nodded.

"Robbie? Ready?"

Robbie held up the remote. "Yep."

"El . . ." Frank snickered when he looked at her. "Never mind. And . . ." He shifted his eyes about. "On my call." He smiled. "Now."

On Frank's charge, he grabbed forth his m-16. At the same time, Ellen released a grunt, when Hal, full speed ahead, slammed into Ellen, hoisted her up on his shoulder, and kept on running just as Robbie, with a shitty grin, pressed a single button, causing the simultaneous explosions on the roof tops of five of the buildings that surrounded them.

"Battles on." Frank fired out as bullets rained down upon them. "How many?"

"I don't know." Robbie said running backwards. "My guess not that many." He dove behind an over turned car. "Frank, watch . . ." Robbie ducked when Frank's huge body sailed behind that car as well, just as a stream of bullets ricocheted off the side of the car.

"You would think . . ." Frank said, getting ready to take aim. "Ellen's not here. She's the catch. Why are they firing at . . ."

Silence.

"Us." Frank winced. "Shit."

"You spoke to soon." Robbie looked up. "Do you think?"

"Oh, I know."

“Will Hal . . .”

“He’d better.”

“Then let’s head there and wait.” Without saying anymore, free from firing bullets, Frank, with Robbie on his heels, stood up and ran.

“Hurry, Hal, hurry.” Ellen beckoned, eyes moving to the side view mirror to watch the fast paced pursuit of them.

“I’m moving.” Hal shifted gears and jerked the wheel.

“Oh!” Ellen screamed. “Faster.”

“Ellen.” Hal remained calm. “Whether you are screaming at me or not, I will only go so fast.”

“But there is like two hundred soldiers.”

“Hardly.” Hal checked out his mirrors. “More like forty some.” he grumbled. “What the hell, Frank, couldn’t you two take out more.”

“Oh, we’re losing them.” Ellen relaxed in the seat, but only for a second. With another scream and ejection of her hand forward, she pointed. “Hal! No! You’re headed back to town.”

“Yes, we are.”

“What are you nuts! Forget Frank and Robbie. They’ll be fine. Go. Go. Go!”

“No. No. No.” Hal drove faster. “We’ll be fine.”

^^^

“So we’ll watch communications.” Joe said stepping to the door. “Try to figure out by talks with Henry as . . .”

Hiss Static. Crackle. “Sgt. Ryder. Come in. ASAP.” called security.

Elliott flew with the urgency of his request to the radio. “What’s up Mark?”

“Pick up frequency 77.9. I think this might be important.”

Elliott gave a nod of his head to Leo.

“We found it by accident.”

“What exactly . . .” No more needed asked. The sound of motor engines rang through, accompanied by the sometimes interrupted, and heavy breath laced foreign language being spoken.

Joe rushed back in. “What the hell? Where’s that coming from?”

Leo looked at the board. “Nothing’s lit.”

“Can you tweak in?” Joe asked.



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Mr. Slagel, I’m not that familiar,”

“Here.” Joe took a seat at the control panel. “What country . . .”

“Ours. You can hear English shouting voices in the background..” Elliott said, then held up his hand. “The guy is giving details. Updates. They are chasing a . . . blue doll?”

“Blue doll.” Joe worked the controls.

“They are in pursuit of the truck that holds the blue doll and the truck is heading back to get the two left behind.”

Quickly Joe peered up. “Is it us?”

“I’m deciphering as quickly as I can.”

“What language is that?” Joe asked, trying to pick up a signal.

“Swahili.”

“Swahili?” Joe nearly choked. “You know Swahili.”

“Fluently, yes.” Elliott answered.

“Christ almighty, what the hell else can be strange in Beginnings.” Joe was just about to shake his head in frustration when the alarm blared out. “Got it.”

Elliott quickly turned to the board. “Where is it coming from.”

“Powell Wyoming.”

“It us.” In almost a nail biting mode, Elliott, listening, watched the board. “And I believe, like any good sports channel. We are picking up . . . The game.”

^^^

The slam of the truck door echoed in the dark empty tunnel just before Ellen’s loud, complaining voice did. “This is fine? This is what you call being fine?”

“Ellen, please.”

“Please what? You drive us into a sealed off tunnel?” She nearly shrieked.

“Ellen, I implore you to get back into the truck.”

“Implore my ass, Hal. You said we’ll be fine!”

“And we will be.” Hal responded. “See?” He pointed as Frank and Robbie stepped from the even darker shadows.

“Oh.” Ellen said sarcastically. “I see. Now, I get it. We’re fine. Yes. Frank and Robbie are here to die right along with us. One big happy fuckin family.” She looked at Frank who grinned from ear to ear as he stepped to her. “What? What are you smiling about.”

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Robbie. Open the truck door.” Frank instructed then looked back to Ellen. “El, I knew there would be moments like this.” Frank smiled again while the ‘ripping’ sound of the duct tape rang out.

^^^

“Step out for one second to take a whizz.” George hustled back into the control room and to his seat. “And I miss a lot?”

“Yes, Sir.” Bertha said with confidence and almost happiness. “Seems the truck went back to pick up two they left behind. And seeing how they knew they were surrounded, they made an attempt to, let’s say, hide it out. It appears now they have cornered themselves. I know due to war rules we can not use explosives, but at this point we totally outnumber them, and I just gave the directive to storm the tunnel.”

In a whisper, staring out. George spoke his thoughts out loud,. “Storm the tunnel. Hide it out?” he tilted his head. “Hide it out. Cornered. This is the Slagels we are talking. Shit.” George’s eyes widened. “They would never corner themselves.” He stood up. “It’s a trap. Callahan Pull our men out! Pull them out now!”

^^^

The beautifully orchestrated symphony of rapid gunfire came to the grand finale with the ‘thump’ of the last dead body, and a ‘here and there’ shot ringing out.

“First.” Frank swung his M-16 behind his back. “Most important. Anyone hurt?”

“No. I’m fine.” Robbie shook his head.

“Me as well.” Hal added. “And no damage to the truck at all.”

“Excellent.” Frank nodded with approval. “And I have to say, Robbie, good thinking on the fleshpots.”

“Hey, blinding the is best.” Robbie said. “Should we walk over and check for life. Hit them with a head shot.”

“Nah.” Frank shook his head. “That would be inhumane right now.”

“Dear God.” Hal was dramatic. “He has a heart.”

“Shut the fuck up, Hal.” Frank barked. “We do have one problem. We have to move some bodies to get through.”

“We could drive over them.” Robbie suggested.

“No.” Frank disagreed. “We should move them. Besides . . .” He took

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

a step to the spread of flesh that was before him. "We need to keep a score card. So . . ." He smiled. "Body count time."

^^^

Being 'summoned' anywhere, to Dean, meant one of two things. Either he did something wrong, or something *was* wrong. Seeing how he really hadn't even touched many experiments, he was willing to bet on the latter.

His heart pounded right before the door opened to the communications room, and it grew worse when he saw the look on Elliott Ryder's face.

Was there a twinkle of sweat on his brow? Perhaps Dean imagined it, but if there was, in a non-illness situation, Elliott Ryder being anything but calm, as a rarity.

Dean just wanted to walk in, let Elliott say why they called for him. And with full intentions of doing so, Dean stepped inside the communications room, one hand in the front pocket of his jeans, the other holding back his growing bangs. No sooner did he see it, he smelled it, cigarette smoke, and when he saw Joe put out the butt of the evil he swore off, the words slipped from Dean's mouth. "What's wrong."

Joe raised a finger, then stood up. He pressed a button. "Just listen for a second before I explain."

Over the speaker a snippet of the foreign spoken language rang out.

"Swahili." Dean said. "What's the blue doll?"

Joe spun in surprise. "You know Swahili?"

"Fluently." Dean answered.

"Christ." Joe tossed his hands upward. "Anyone else around Beginnings know Swahili."

Leo raised his hand slightly. "Probably Dr. Godrichson. Maybe Danny Hoi. I think Tim from . . ."

"Stop." Joe halted him. "That wasn't a question directed for an answer, it was a sarcastic comment. Christ." He shook his head. "Anyhow, Dean." Joe took a breath. "We tuned in, by luck, on a low level frequency. A frequency being used by the society to broadcast the attacks executed in the game. The Swahili, my guess, was there was to do so without us being able to understand. The Blue doll, from what we gathered, is Ellen. Where guessing that's a code name of sorts."

Dean's hand immediately went to his mouth. "Oh, God. They found

them.”

“The society found us, yes.” Joe told him. “I wanted you to know, things are hot underway.”

“And . . .” Dean neared hyperventilation. “And what’s the situation.”

“Seems round one is over.” Joe explained. “Take a breath, Dean. Rest through this one. The slagels have 62, the society . . . thank God . . . zero.”

^^^

It was childish, George knew it, and there was nothing more that he wanted to do about the immature snickering, then to say ‘fuck it’ and give the order to shoot Henry in the head. A part of George was almost positive Joe would thank him in the end.

Enough, was enough. Just about the third time through of Henry’s own rendition of ‘We are the Champions’, George slammed down his hand. “Henry, do you mind?”

“Again?” Henry asked.

“You were not this annoying when I knew you. It’s probably the gay factor now.”

Henry’s mouth dropped open.

George grinned. “I found it, didn’t I? I found your shut up button. Great. Now . . .” He returned to Bertha. “Where were we?”

“You were reprimanding me.”

“Do you understand why?”

“I did my job and gave the order.”

“You weren’t thinking.” George said strong.

“No, Sir I will disagree with you. You gave me the authority to give directives. You approved my strategy. Under normal circumstance, my directive would have been correct.”

“Under normal circumstances yes. These aren’t normal circumstances.”

“Sir.” Bertha chuckled. “We’re talking three men and a woman.”

“We’re talking the Slagels.” George said hard. “One is an explosives expert. One organized and brainwashed enough men to wipe out a thousand of our men with swords, on horseback, dressed like the calvary. And the third, well, not only was he a big dumb son-of-bitch before who is driven like no other, but now I hear tell he’s been enhanced by Beginnings mad scientist. No too mention Callahan, all three of them were raised to

protect, kill, and survive.”

“They are still men.”

Calm, George lifted a hand. “I know two of them personally. Things have to change.”

“You want to scrap the whole strategy. It is very good . . .”

“No. Not scrap it.” George said. “It is a good strategy. It just needs enhanced. Manipulated to possibly reflect what their strategy might be. Because they have a plan.” Over his mouth in thought, George ran his hand. “Get a hold of the remaining four teams. But they are looking for a trail.”

“Stop it. Stop them. I have a better idea.”

“What is that, sir?”

With a relaxation breath of security and confidence, George sat down. “We’re moving one step a head of them.”

^^^

Hal told Ellen to go get Robbie, but the instruction given would have been one Ellen carried out on her own. There was something about the look on Robbie’s face that not only could be seen, but could be felt as well.

It wasn’t so much that he was in thought, he was. Concentration was more like it. Robbie was retreat of sorts. Not only the look, the feel, but where he was at said a lot.

His own little campfire built a distance from the main one. And his face was aglow as he worked diligently on a small box.

“You know.” Ellen sat down next to him. “I always wanted to come to Yellowstone national Park.”

“We were here once.” Robbie said, eyes still on his project. “ME and my brothers. Jimmy won a national calculus contest and we had three days out here.” Finally he looked up. “Of course, I remember my father having to pay for a lot.”

“Always a catch. And a Corney Joke. How about Frank irritating Hal by saying he thinks he saw yogi.”

“He irritated Hal the last time we were here too.”

“Can I ask what you’re doing?” Ellen questioned.

“Flash bombs.” Robbie held one up. “Blinds you, burns out the retina. Makes you into a defenseless target.”

“Your invention.”

“Somewhat.” Robbie shrugged. “Actually, this is great practice for

building with one hand.”

“Is it difficult.”

“Every explosive I make now is difficult.”

“Maybe after you get the prosthetic . . .”

“It really has nothing to do with the prosthetic.” Robbie set down the explosive. “It has everything to do with the fact that every time I build one, it reminds me how in an essence I am responsible for my own loss.”

“Robbie . . .”

“Where are things going El?” Robbie asked. “After this is all said and down. Where are they going between us?”

“Where do you want them to go?” Ellen asked. “You never gave me your choice.”

“Would you still stand by your decision if I told you I wanted to be with you until I get my arm back.”

“I’d stand behind my decision if you wanted to be with me even after you got your arm back. Why? Is that what your wanting.”

A lift of his shoulder and Robbie tilted his head. “Just was curious.”

“Dinner!” Hal called out.

“And hungry.” Robbie smiled. “Let’s go eat.”

“Oh, yeah.” Frank set down his papers and took the bowl Hal handed him. “Oodles of Dan-noodles. Thanks, Hal. You’ll make Ryder a good wife someday.”

“Ha-ha-ha.” Hal sat on the ground by Frank. “Your humor keeps me alive.”

“Thanks for cooking, Hal.” Ellen said as she and Robbie joined around the campfire. “I love Oodles-of Dan-noodles.”

“So do . . .” Hal lifted his fork, then opened his mouth in disgust at Frank who nearly inhaled his by the gulp-ful. “Good Lord, Frank.”

Mouthful, noodles dangling, Frank looked up. “What?”

“Have some manners.” Hal shook his head.

“Hal.” Frank snapped and wiped his mouth. “They’re oodles of Dan-noodles. Besides, we wouldn’t be eating them if it wasn’t for me telling Danny Hoi to bring them back.”

“Yeah, right.” Hal nodded. “If that’s true, then why aren’t they called Oodles of Frank-noodles.”

“Uh, Hal?” Frank sarcastically. “These are an oriental dish. Oodles of Frank Noodles? Frank is not an Asian name. That’s why they are called Oodles of Dan-Noodles.”

Druga-Johnston/The Game

"I see." Hal stated in disbelief.

"It's true." Ellen interjected. "Frank did give Danny Hoi the idea."

"See?" Frank smiled. "Plus, they're good, And they travel well. Light as a feather."

Robbie snickered. "Stiff as a board."

"Speaking of board." Hal said. "I am."

"Why don't you read some?" Frank asked. "I got through about fifty pages so far."

Hal was shocked. "You read fifty pages tonight? Have you even read fifty pages of anything in your life?"

"Yeah." Frank answered. "I think. No. Yeah. I did. Maybe not. Who knows." He shrugged. "But you should read this. Robbie and Ellen did good. Man, what a fucked up place they're writing about."

Hal blinked slowly. "They're writing about Beginnings, Frank."

"No they're not."

"Yes, they are."

"Hal." Perturbed, Frank huffed. "Where are you getting that from?"

Holding back from losing it, Hal decided to explain, like Joe. "Well, Frank. Look at the names."

"Yeah. Moe the leader. Nasty guy."

"And Moe's son's name?"

"Hank."

"Moe. Hank." Hal shifted his hand back and forth as a scale. "Moe. Hank."

Frank shook his head.

"Think back to Bobby and Helen story. You did the same thing."

It didn't take long, Frank was quick. "Oh! They changed the names to protect the innocent."

Hal snapped his finger with a smile. "You got it."

"Well, who's Moe."

"Moe. Joe." Hal said then waited and saw the confused look. "Dad! Dad is Moe."

All breath escaped Frank. "Oh my God. Dad is Moe." He looked to Ellen for a 'yes' nod. "Oh my God." So offended, Frank was. "I'll never look at Dad the same way again. I can't believe he was that corrupt and slept with Josephine."

At that point Hal opted to give up and just eat his Oodles of Dan-Noodles.

Dean watched Joe flip through the tiny sheets of paper in the notepad. "Can you read my writing?"

"Unfortunately." Joe responded. "I want to thank you, Dean for doing this."

"I want to do this. I wish I could monitor the transmissions twenty-four seven, but I can't." Dean walked over and sat down on the sofa next to Joe. "You know, that guy Tim from Plastics, he's better than Me, Elliott and Jason in Swahili."

"Why do people even know that language?"

"Who knows." Dean shrugged. "Anyhow. The spy slash Swahili linguist was able to follow them to the point that he pretty much had a good idea of where they were going."

"I see." Joe flipped a page. "And he returned to . . ."

"Meet a special team. But that's when he said if it's the wrong team, there might not be a transmission. I didn't understand that."

"Simple. Says here they think they are in Yellow stone nation park. Three teams. North, South and west. All positioned about seventy-five miles west fo Yellowstone. Instead of attacking, they are gonna try to cut them off."

"That's assuming they are going west." Dean said. "What about the possibility that Frank will head them east."

Joe shook his head. "No. The plan is simple. The route, at least preliminary, is laid out. Put I this way. I know where I have to pick them up when this is all said and done with."

"Ok." Dean was calm. "Knowing this. Knowing the route. *Are* Frank and them going to run into the society trap."

"Oh, yeah." Joe nodded. "And knowing my boys they'll love every minute of it. So I'd say in about . . . oh . . ." Joe looked at his watch. "Twelve hours. Slagels versus the Society will be well into round two."



CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

January 19<sup>th</sup>

*"Well, your father has more important things on his mind, Johnny."*

Recalled. How old was he? Fourteen perhaps. It wasn't to long after getting to Beginnings when Johnny really started spending more and more time with George. It built up right before the survivors started coming through the walls. Fishing. Flying. Darts.

*"But he's my father. How come I'm not important."*

*"You are. But, you know, we're rebuilding everything. We need men like your dad to get things going. You have me, right?"*

Never a bad word. Johnny couldn't recall a bad word being said about his father until right after George returned from Colorado.

So when did it happen? Where did it all begin. Johnny racked his brains trying to pinpoint a moment in time when he turned on his father . . .

"Oh. No, John No." There was a laughter about Frank's voice that carried with a sadistic joy through the woods b the military training field.

"Sorry, Dad." Johnny said, his fifteen year old voice still hadn't settled into hit's deep phase.

"No. Try again. Try again. Just don't miss Uncle Robbie this time. Try for death."

Robbie's voice carried through the woods back at them. "I heard that."

"Paint pellet loaded?" Frank asked.

"Yep." Johnny answered.

"Go for it." Frank stepped back with a proud look on his face. "Hit it Robbie."

The rustle of the leaves, the moment, Johnny caught glimpse and fired.

The pellet sailed through a patch of branches, and to Johnny it was almost a certainty that he would of missed again. And he realized he didn't when he herd the 'fall' in the woods.

Frank whistled once. "Robbie. Did he get you?"

"Head shot." Robbie stood up.

"Yes!" Frank grinned an gave a proud pat to Johnny's back. "Excellent. What a way to be a Slagel. Wait till Pap hears."

Pap.

Johnny's eyes closed and he reached out at the end of that memory

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

and lifted the picture for Joe that laid on the table in a room off Jess' office. Wearing his typical white shirt, the picture was taken outside during the ground breaking of something. It wasn't marked. But Frank was background the picture, and with cigarette dangling from his mouth, hands in his pocket Joe looked at the camera. Almost as if he had just shook his head in disgust at Frank was the look on Joe's face, yet there was a hint of a smile.

It seeped out in a painful whisper, 'oh, Pap', just as there was a knock on the door. Johnny looked up across the room. "Yeah."

The door opened. "Hey," Jess said, "Didn't know if you wanted to sit with me or not. I'm awaiting the results of the next hit."

"Now?" Johnny asked then looked at his watch. "It's not eight in the morning yet on that side of the country."

"I know."

"They can't hit until after eight."

Jess shrugged. "They'll probably wait."

"How many are they sending after them this . . ."

"I don't know." Jess interrupted and pointed to the door with his thumb. "Are you coming? I want to get there."

"Yeah. I don't want to miss it." Johnny stood up and walked.

Jess noticed it. The far off look, the slight quiver sound to Johnny. "You all right?" He asked adding almost a smug tone. "You're not . . . *worried* about your Dad or anything are you?"

Johnny swallowed doing such a 'Robbie' pout, his answer couldn't be hidden.

"Your Uncle Robbie."

"Huh?"

"You're worried about Robbie. You did his look."

Nervously Johnny let out a smile. "Yeah. I'm worried about him. Let's go." He took another step, stopped, held up a 'waiting' finger to Jess, then back tracked. Before leaving that room, he lifted his pictures into a stack making sure as he took them he snuck a look at one of Frank.

^^^

"Skin." Dean explained to Christopher, lifting his own skin by the follicles of his forearm hair. "See. This is what I want to try to give you."

"I have skin." Pinching his translucent flesh, Christopher showed Dean.

With a cringe, Dean watched the corpuscles bunch together. "You know what? Um, don't, uh don't that." He shook his head and mid-swing of doing so, he saw Misha entering the lab.

"Dean." She said quietly. "I will come back if you are busy."

"No. What's up?" Dean asked.

Smiling politely at Christopher, Misha walked into the lab. "I just, I just need to see if things are better between us."

"Things . . ." Dean clung tight to his clipboard. "Would have been just fine had you accepted the reason I fired you."

Shocked, Christopher's eyes widened. "You tossed fire at Misha?"

"No." Dean shook his head. "I didn't want her to work with me anymore."

"I didn't understand what I did." Misha said. "I was upset."

"And because you were upset, and bitter, you accused me of sexual harassment."

Curiously, Christopher interrupted. "What is sexual harassment."

"Something I didn't do." Dean answered.

Misha shook her head. "No. I did not start that . . ."

"Misha, you have the entire female population of Beginnings accusing me of being a near pedophile."

"What is a pedophile." Christopher asked.

Dean ignored him. "At anytime, during this all, during the past few days, you could have spoken up."

"You are gonna make me cry again." Misha began to pout.

Christopher snapped his finger. "Ah, crying. When you make someone cry is that sexual harassment?"

Misha didn't respond. "Dean, I just want for us to be able to work in the clinic without me running by the lab."

"No one told you to do that." Dean said. "But if you want the truth. Yeah, I'm pissed. Sexual harassment, come on Misha. Me? In Beginnings? It's so stupid, it makes me sick. The accusation, with the way rumors are around here, it didn't get me as mad as the fact that you kept letting it go. I don't need this. Not now. Not with my wife on my mind, and with so much going, on, I don't."

A pout, a pucker, and after a tear rolled down her face, Misha spun and raced out, merely barreling over Joe as he walked in.

At a frustrated Dean, Joe looked. "What's going on."

"Dean . . ." Christopher explained. "Was just doing sexual harassment to Misha."

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The clipboard slammed hard to the counter. "Thank you. Thank you very much. What's up Joe."

"Just thought you'd like to know . . ." Joe said. "Swahili."

All attention, Dean's eyes raised and he knocked the clipboard to the floor as he flew past the counter and left the lab.

Christopher smiled, and when alone, pulled out the little note pad Frank had given him. He wrote down a few words. "Pedophile. Sexual Harassment and Swahili." He shut the note pad with an 'ah' and a grin. "I am going to be very enriched when I leave Utopia."

^^^

From the back seat of the moving truck, Robbie to her right, Ellen leaned toward the front and to a driving Hal. "Now, let me see if I got this straight."

"If . . ." Hal said, ignoring a snickering Frank. "If you are going to bitch, save your breath."

"No. No. not bitch." Ellen stated.

"Yes, she is." Frank commented.

Ellen rolled her eyes. "Expressing concern."

"Bitching." Robbie said.

"What, Ellen?" Hal asked. "Say it and get it over with."

"OK. Now . . ." she lifted her hand. "Let me see if I got this straight. We dropped off supplies thirty miles back. Hid them so we can . . . ; go back."

"Dean's idea." Frank spewed forth.

"Yes." Hal nodded.

Ellen still was questioning. "So we can turn around, head back to the society and get our supplies."

"Dean's idea." Frank blurted. "I told you he doesn't want you anymore El and Hal is just helping him."

"Do you mind?" Hal snipped. "I've reached my intake point of Dogging Dean comments from you."

"I speak the truth." Frank lifted his hand.

"And I want to know the truth." Ellen said. "Why did we do that?"

"Fine, I'll explain." Hal stated. "I didn't want to carry all our eggs in one basket."

"Or heavy artillery all in one truck." Frank clarified.

"Thank you for that." Hal shook his head. "In case we run into

trouble and risk losing the truck or hitting truck damage, I didn't want to risk losing all of our supplies."

Ellen snickered. "Hal, please. How is that gonna happen?"

"Like . . . this." On his last word, with a hard jerk, Hal jolted the wheel of the truck sending it careening off the road and toward the woods.

Ellen screamed. "You injuring the truck on purpose!"

"Hal?" Robbie asked. "What's going . . ." He turned to look back. "Shit."

"South. Four o'clock." Frank pumped the chamber on his rifle, looking out the rear view mirror. "Too close."

Ellen was confused. "It's not anywhere near four o'clock. What the hell are you talking about? I mean . . ." She shrieked when Hal hit a bump and she flew upward. "Hey, my head."

"Down." Hal told her.

"What?" She asked.

"Now." Hand from the gear shift, Hal reached between the seats, laid his palm on Ellen's head and shoved her down just as he turned the wheel again, ducked in synch with his brothers allowing the bullet that sailed through the window to pass on through without hitting a thing.

Robbie readied his weapon. "Quick thinking Hal." He grabbed on to the back on Ellen pants, yanked her back and shoved her down. "But we have incoming."

Frank looked out the window. "Off course, Hal. You're off course."

"I know." Hal tried to maneuver the rough wooded terrain.

"Hal!" Frank barked. "To the right."

"I can't."

"Yeah, you can."

"It won't work. This is the route."

"Turn the fuckin wheel Hal!" Frank looked out the window to view, on side road, steady and heading nearly along side of them was the society. "They are getting more speed. Turn."

"No!"

"Fuck it!" Frank reached over for the wheel."

"Get . . ." Hal shove him. "Off."

"Let . . . Go!"

"Frank!"

"Hal!"

Ellen peeked up. "Oh, my God their fighting over who's driving. Robbie can't you do anything."

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"Sorry, I only have one arm." Robbie wound down his window and began to lean out.

"Hey!" Ellen reached for his pant leg. "Get back in here. You'll get killed." She pulled.

"Frank!" Robbie screamed for aid.

"What the fuck." Frank turned around to see Ellen trying to tug Robbie back in the truck. "El"

"He'll get killed."

"Yeah, El." Frank yanked her from him. "If you continue to leave him out there as a target. Stay down!" he ordered then wound down his own window. "Hal, keep it steady and get us away. They're closing in."

"Frank!" Ellen reached when she saw him aim to go out the window.

"Don't." Frank warned. "Don't even think about grabbing me. Stay down." He darted his upper body out the window.

After a shot, Robbie pulled back in. "It's tricky. Can you drive more steady, Hal?"

"Yeah, sure." Hal said sarcastically. "I'll smooth right over the tree . . ." Hal cringed when Frank's 'uh' rang out with the high jump of the truck. "Sorry."

Back into the truck Frank drew. He watched the society truck sail further east on the road and zoom by them. "What the hell are they doing?"

Robbie smiled. "They stayed on the road."

"See." Hal was cocky. "Now who was correct. They went that way. We're this way. We're good."

"Watch out." Frank warned.

"Shit/" Hal slammed on the breaks. But it was too late. The truck slid in a partial turn and with a hard jar and bang, the truck sank into a ditch.

Robbie leaned between the two front seats. "You were saying?"

"Frank." Ellen whispered.

"El, please." Frank shook his head. "Reverse it Hal."

Hal shifted gears. "Stuck."

"Frank." Ellen whispered again only with a little panic.

"El, please." Frank said stronger. "Hal. Reverse."

The wheels to the truck spun. "I'm trying."

"Frank." Ellen called.

"Frank." Robbie repeated and pointed.

"What! What! What!" Frank looked out his window to where Robbie indicated. "Fuck! Pull it out! Pull it out!"

"I'm . . ." Hal peered in the midst of the struggle to free the truck.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

"Trying. Shit." harder Hal fought to move, never taking his eyes off the ensuing society truck, bolting full speed their way.

"Hal." Frank beckoned.

"Come on. You can do it." Robbie said.

"Hal." Frank kept watching the truck. Visions of a deadly broadside filled his head.

"Give it more, Hal." Robbie encouraged.

"Should we be jumping out now?" Ellen asked.

The grinding wheels grew louder. "Please." Hal begged. "Do this."

Closer, so close, Frank could see the faces of the smiling soldiers. "Fuck." Frank grumbled.

"No." Robbie smiled. "They aren't that . . ."

"Yes!" Frank clenched his fist. "They are."

"What?" Hal asked, then didn't need an answer. The hard 'crack and crunch' told him the reason his brothers were cheering. With a loud, 'ha-ha' Hal looked to the society truck that plowed head on into a tree. "Are they dead?" Hal questioned.

Down went Frank's window, out of it Frank leaned and after two shots, he pulled back in. "They are now."

Hal reached for the gear shift. "That was too easy."

Robbie cringed. "You spoke too soon."

Confused Hal was. "What?"

"Timber." Frank mumbled.

"Fuck." Hearing the creak of the falling tree, Hal with his soul, gave a hard shift of the gear, a heavy hit of the metal and just as the tree came careening down with a mighty force, he peeled the truck from its trapped state.

If it was possible to be tickled pink, Hal looked it as the truck began to move freely again. "We're free."

Frank scoffed a sarcastic, 'ha.'

"What?" Hal asked.

His arm extended between his two brothers with a point. "Look." Robbie said. "Ten o'clock."

A whine escaped Hal as he struck his hand against the steering wheel and lowered his head. "Tell me this isn't happening."

"What's happening?" Ellen asked.

"Oh, it's happening. Drop your speed." Frank instructed.

"What?" Ellen questioned again.

Hal didn't respond to Ellen, only to Frank. "I told you to tell me it's

not happening, I didn't tell you to tell me how to drive."

"Drop your speed." Frank told him.

"What is . . ." Ellen almost choked. "Oh, my God."

Up ahead, through the trees, heading directly their way just on the other side of a clearing was a barrage of society soldiers and trucks.

"There's thousands." Ellen sated.

Hal rolled his eyes. "She counts as well as you do, Frank." He released the gas and slowed down. "Now what?"

With his thumb Frank indicated backwards. "You drew the short straw. You knew."

"But . . ." Hal tried to defend.

"No buts. Go. You also got us into this mess."

"Fine. Ready?" Hal asked.

"Ready./" Frank lifted from the seat.

Curiously, Ellen looked at Robbie. "What are they do . . . oh, shit." She covered her eyes and paid no mind to Robbie's snickering as Frank began to take over the driver's position.. "Now is not the time to change . . . ow." Ellen grunted as Hal slipped in the back. "You stepped on my . . . ow . . . hey, where's he going." She watched him keep going.

Giving a boost to push Hal though the back of the truck, Robbie shoved on Hal's leg. "You OK."

Following a thump, Hal answered. "Fine."

The truck slowed just a little, and Frank driving, looked through the side mirror. "Hal's out."

"Hal's out?" Ellen asked.

Robbie slipped up front he grinned. "I don't see him."

"He's on it." Frank said.

"He's out?" Ellen question. "On what?"

"El, please." Frank told her. "This has nothing to do with you."

"Nothing to do with me?" Ellen was shocked. "Oh, I begged to differ. This is all because of me."

Wide eyed, Robbie said nothing he only nodded at Frank.

"And . . ." Ellen continued. "Why are we slowing down . . . and . . . I would like to be more informed so I could help out."

"You could have helped out months ago, El." Frank shifted gears. "By not shooting Bev in the head. Robbie get ready."

"Oh!" Ellen gasped out. "That comment was really uncalled for."

"And so is arguing right now." Frank put the truck in park. "Zip up that blue hood." He raised his hands at the same time as Robbie. "You're



about to be killed.”

~~~~~

The concern in Elliott’s eyes, and hard swallow was masked by the amber flame of the roaring zippo lighter. Joe ignited his cigarette and clanked the lid closed. “Tell me.”

Hands to the counter, Elliott hesitated. “The truck is stopped. They have it encircled. They’re . . . they’re about to claim the prize.”

Every ounce of Dean twinged and twisted. “Joe, how are they . . .” On a wisp of a swahili word, Dean’s whole demeanor switched. “Elliott, did they just say . . .”

A quirk of a smile hit Elliott. “They did.”

“What?” Joe asked. “What?”

Almost with relief, Elliott answered. “They spotted only two men and the blue doll in the truck.”

Joe clenched his cigarette tightly along with his fist. “Yes.” He nodded. “I knew my boys didn’t drive right into this one without a plan. Now let’s just pray . . .” He exhaled his cigarette smoke. “That they can pull whatever it is . . . off.”

~~~~~

The combination growl and whine of Society Sergeant Barnes in charge rang out just after his wall of men shifted the chambers of their weapon in an aim to the parked Beginnings truck. “Damn it.”

“Shall I have them unload on the ruck, Sir?” The corporal asked.

“No.” Sgt. Barnes tossed out his hand. “They’ve raised their hands in surrender. We can not shoot them in surrender. You know the rules. When they are in surrender we can only obtain and kill the prize. The others can’t be harmed unless they interfere.”

“We’ll say they interfered.”

“Rules, Corporal, Rules.”

“Who’s gonna know?”

“Bartlett, the Swahili speaking, play by play war commentator, who just so happens to claim to be extremely honest because he is the last remaining born again Christian in the world.”

“Ah.” The Corporal nodded knowingly. “I forgot about him.”

Sgt. Barnes, released a ‘hmm’, then a disgruntled look. “Get them from

the truck.”

“I can’t believe you guys are surrendering.” Ellen fought to pull down Frank’s arms.

“El, knock it off.” Frank ordered.

“They’re coming, Frank.” Ellen said panicked. “Just drive. Just drive right through them. Go. Hit the gas.”

“El!” Frank yelled when her hand pressed against his leg to add pressure to the gas. “Stop.”

“They’ll gun us down like trapped baby calves in a veal factory.”

Oddly, Frank looked over his shoulder at her. “What?”

Robbie smiled. “Good one, El. But they won’t gun us down. There are rules.”

“Yeah.” Frank added. “And the rules state if we raise our hands in surrender, they can’t shoot us. They can only take you and execute you.”

“Oh my God. And you’re letting them.”

Frank shrugged. “I have kids.” He watched the society near. “And I wish they’d hurry up, I’m getting a cramp in my left shoulder.”

“You’re just giving me up?” Ellen asked.

“Frank.” Robbie said with a hint of snicker. “You got her all worried.”

“Robbie. We’re in the middle of . . . what the hell state are we in now?”

“Still in Wyoming. But . . . we’re nearing Utah.” Robbie said.

“Great. Utah. Hey, at least if they end this game now we can avoid . . .”

“Frank.” Ellen snapped. “Don’t. This isn’t funny. I’m gonna die.”

Frank shifted his eyes to her. “Would I let that happen.” He stared intently at her. “Would I?”

Ellen took a second to look at him. “No.”

“Have faith.” Frank told her watching the one soldier, aiming, reach for the door.

“Frank?” Robbie questioned in a whisper. “You have the safety on the truck, right?”

“Yep.” Frank answered them smiled at the butt of a rifle when the truck door opened. “Gentlemen.”

^^^

From the console, Elliott turned with concern to Joe. “They have her,

Joe.”

“Joe.” Dean rushed forward. “Come on, tell me something. They have her. You said . . .”

A simple raise of Joe’s hand was all that was needed to quiet Dean. “Trust me. I feel it. They’ll pull through. They have a plan.”

^^^

Arm clenched, struggling not to follow the lead, Ellen spoke through clenched jaws. “Just about right now, if you have a plan Frank, you better do it.” Her panicked, ‘oh, God’ rang out as the soldier tugged her further from Frank and Robbie.

“Frank.” Robbie whispered. “They’re spread out.”

“I know. How far are we now?”

“We have about a twenty foot leeway back. That’s it.”

“It’s enough.”

“It’s different than any scenario . . .”

“I know.” Frank said, scooping the area as he walked. “I have faith. I . . .” He let out a breath. “Have faith.”

Sgt. Barnes approached the pair. “Enough talk. As long as you don’t interfere we’ll release you following the execution.”

Robbie nodded and looked up. “That’s cool, hey, it’s kind of bright. Do you mind if I put on my sunglasses.”

“Me too.” Frank said. “Shit. Fuck. Mine are in the truck.”

Robbie grunted. “How could you leave them in the truck, Frank.”

“I left them in the truck.”

“You shouldn’t have left them in the truck. You knew!”

“I forgot!” Frank blasted.

“Now is not the time to forget!”

“Fuck! Yell at me why don’t you. I’m fine, the force is with me.!”

“Hey!” Sgt. Barnes stopped the bickering. “Enough. Put on your sunglasses and shut up!”

Frank gave a motion of his head backwards. “Can I go back to the truck and get . . .”

“No!” Sgt. Barnes screamed and stepped away, ordering to his two guards to ‘watch them.’

“Oh.” Frank whispered. “Head shot on him. First thing.”

Placing on his sunglasses Robbie shook his head. “I don’t know how, since you left your sunglasses in the truck.”

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“The force.” Frank said.

“Fuck you and the force, Frank. Now is not the time for the force.”

Frank looked at the one guard. “Can you believe the way he talks to me? And I’m his older brother.”

Robbie just watched them take Ellen toward a clearing where a group of society soldiers encircled and all he kept thinking was, ‘where is Hal.’

“Down.” Sgt. Barnes ordered to Ellen making her keep her hands on her head as she dropped to her knees. “Corporal, take care of this.”

“Frank.” She lifted her eyes. Her entire body shuddered and tensed when she heard the footsteps near her. “Frank.” She whispered out again, and then closed her eyes when she felt the hard metal of the revolver press to the side of her head.

“Do it.” Sgt. Barnes ordered.

Ellen’s final moment. Her final thoughts. Everything seemed in slow motion and the ‘click’ of the revolver hammer rang too loud in her ear. The firing of the weapon would be evident, and just as Ellen prepared for the ‘bang’; she heard the unmistakable . . . whoosh.

She caught the noise in the midst of its life saving sound, and looked up enough to see the upward motion of the sword. Warm blood shot out and sprayed upon her face as the arm that held the revolver dropped with a smoothness straight to the ground.

The corporal’s horrendous scream ended quickly. Hal, in society uniform, one foot forward, shoved Ellen face first to the ground as he pivoted his body, swung again and decapitated not only the corporal, but in the finish of a swing, took off the head of another soldier.

Down came the sword through the body of another and in the ending of that disembowelment, he lunged the sword forward into the throat of Sgt. Barnes. A second or two had only passed, but it was enough time to cause panic, enough time for Hal to smile, and enough time for him to reach to his belt, lift two small explosives, toss one a foot from him, and the other Frank and Robbie’s way.

Flash.

Flash.

Everyone’s reaction was the same. Immediate screams as the bright flashes of white light sizzled like enormous sparklers across the ground.

“Now!” Robbie charged out, revving back his elbow, hitting his guard. He turned to the stunned man, and with a kick, he knocked him to the

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ground, reached down and grabbed his gun. Aiming as he stood straight, Robbie saw Frank bracing his guard. "You got him?"

The snap of the man's neck and the dropping of his limp body was Frank's answer.

Robbie could hear the confusion. "Let's go." He reached for Frank.

"I'm blind." Frank ran with Robbie.

"I know."

"Just lead me to the truck!"

And Robbie did. Grabbing on to Frank's arm, he ran the twenty feet distance to the truck. Robbie didn't hesitate. He flung open the truck door, tossed the revolver, and grabbed his M-16 along with another explosive device.

He watched for a moment as the smoke cleared and the zapping white began to subside. Then Robbie tossed out the explosive into the middle of the confusion, and when he saw the emergence of Hal holding Ellen, Robbie began to fire into the blinded society men who ran amuck.

Ellen screamed hysterically as Hal set her down before the open truck door. "I'm blind, Hal. I'm blind."

"Get in." Hal pushed her inside. "Robbie, let's take off. Get us a good distance, I'll shoot from the back of the truck."

"Got it." Robbie shut the truck door.

Hal hurried to the back of the truck. He had barely climbed over the gate when the truck began to move. He aimed steadily on the racing society soldiers, shooting in a spraying motion and doing well until the truck swerved drastically left to right. "What the hell!"

"Sorry." Robbie yelled back. "Frank's driving!"

"Frank!" Hal screamed as he tried to fire and hit something. "What the hell is wrong with you!"

"I'm blind!" Frank yelled from the driver's seat.

Hal's voice squealed as he screamed. "And . . . and you're driving! What in God's name . . ." Hal held on for dear life to stop from falling out of the truck as it zig zagged some more. In a rush of anger he spewed rapidly at Frank. "What the hell are you doing driving if you're blind!"

"I don't know!"

"Well stop the truck you moron!" Hal blasted. "We'll take them out from . . ." The hard jerk of the breaking truck sent Hal backwards into the supplies. He shook off the fall, hearing the truck door shut. "I'm killing him." The immediate sound of gunfire sent Hal scurrying from the back of the truck. He shrieked when he saw Frank, standing right alongside Robbie,

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aiming and shooting. "What . . ."

"The force." Frank said and shot.

Robbie aimed outward as well. "He's hitting them, though. Look." He indicated then shot.

Perturbed, Hal stood beside his brother and lifted his rifle. "How in God's name is that possible. How can he be blind and still hit his targets?"

Robbie snickered. "He's Frank."

Frank smiled. "I am."

With a pause in his firing, and a curl of his lip Hal swung a look at his brothers. "I hate you both."

^^^

"Tell me about this Danny Hoi person." George asked Henry. They sat alone in what looked like a cafeteria. Two cups of coffee between them.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Come on, Henry." George leaned back. "It's you and me. We used to be friends."

"You were never a friend George." Henry stared at him.

"Yeah, I was Henry." George winked. "Can we just put aside the petty bullshit and talk. You're not breaking any Beginnings rules of loyalty. And Hey, if it isn't military, or Society government, I'll answer any questions you have. Fair?"

After a moment of contemplation, Henry nodded. "Fair."

"Danny Hoi. Who is he and why all of the sudden is he a man in power?"

"Danny Hoi." The corner of Henry's mouth raised and he shook his head as his finger outlined the rim of his coffee cup. "He's a very intelligent man."

"I see. So are you. So are a lot of other people in Beginnings."

"He invents things."

"So do you. So do a lot of other people in Beginnings."

"Not . . ." Henry lifted his hand from the cup. ". . . like Danny Hoi. His intelligence with electronics surpasses anything I've ever seen." Henry partially closed his eyes. "He can look at something once. Just once. And know exactly how it's built."

"Again I am . . ."

"Don't." Henry shook his head.

"Henry, we wouldn't have had a Beginnings if it wasn't for you."

George said. "Really. You fixed everything even when it was said it couldn't be fixed. You invented things to make life easier. Brought things back better. You ran Mechanics and made sure everything ran smooth in Beginnings."

"I'm not Danny. Danny brought back . . . he brought back life." Henry finally looked at a curious George (No pun intended to my readers). "We thrive not only with new things he has done, gadgets and toys from the past, but with life again. It's a whole different world since you left George. In the eight months Danny has been there, things changed. Money . . . back."

"You're kidding. Joe is allowing that?" George asked.

"Oh, yeah. Under Joe rules, of course. Money still isn't important. It just buys the extras, the things that aren't necessities. People earn Danny dollars . . ."

"Danny Dollars?" George chuckled.

"Yep. Danny invented the system and pay scale. Uses a little Debit card so to speak. And people thrive on earning their Danny dollars. They use them to buy things. Crafts. Clothes that aren't issued. Household decor. They go out to eat at restaurants . . ." Henry leaned into the table. "Bowl. Go to movies.. Remember Starbucks?"

"Absolutely."

"Back."

George couldn't help but laugh. "Oh my God. You're lying."

"Nope. If you did it in the old world, you can do it in the provinces of Beginnings."

"And it took this Danny Hoi to do this?" George asked.

"Yep."

"Henry. Don't you think, eventually, all these things would come back. I myself am working on a viable monetary system. We, too, are in the process of regenerating life again. Heck we even have Disney World half way up and running." George noticed Henry snickering. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just that . . ." After a shake of his head, Henry snickered again. "It's just that, Frank, Hal and Robbie said once they secure your side of the country the first thing they are doing is getting space Mountain up and running."

"Figures." George grumbled.

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Back to what I was saying. We too are bringing back old world life. The Society is changing."

Druga-Johnston/The Game

"The Society is a totalitarian society that hinders freedom."

"Still." George lifted a hand. "You'll have that."

"You want to rule the world."

"You make me sound like something out of a movie. My point to you is, these things will come back eventually. What makes danny Hoi so special that he gets to be so high in command."

"Danny has something about him. People love Danny. He's got Pizzaz and probably could have convinced the Pope to perform Easter Sunday Mass in the Vatican nude."

"Is that an exaggeration?"

"Nope."

"I have to get this guy on my side." George said.

"My turn. My turn to ask."

"Go on."

"Johnny." As soon as Henry said the name he watched George's face drop. "I watched you turn down his phone calls. I watched you get angry. I thought Johnny was your golden child. What's going on."

Inhaling in thought, George rubbed his chin. "I'm glad you asked me that, Henry."

"You are?"

"Yeah. Because you are the only person here. In fact, the only person I can talk to that probably can tell *me* what's going on."

"I don't understand."

On the table before them, George folded his hands. "When Johnny was making his escape from beginnings. He was shot. It was touch and go. We thought we were gonna lose him. However we didn't. He pulled through. Not without complications. Field hospital environment, I don't know. He came down with meningitis. Now, as a repercussion of the meningitis and trauma, it appears. *Appears* mind you, that Johnny can't seem to recall the last two years of his life."

Back in the chair, Henry sat. "Amnesia."

"Retrograde Amnesia the doctors are calling it. It may, it may not come back."

"And?" Henry asked. "I'm not understanding what the problem is."

"The problem is . . ." George let out a long breath.

"You think he's faking it." Henry stated. "Is he?"

"You tell me."

"How?"

"By telling me his demeanor when he left Beginnings."



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

"If you're judging Johnny's legitimacy by his Beginnings behavior . . ."  
Henry whistled. "Johnny was mean. Downright nasty mean. Tried to kill Hal twice. Beat up Ellen. Set it up to make it look like she was insane. Tried . . . I would appreciate you not smiling right now."

"Sorry." George wiped the smirk from his face.

"Anyhow. No, Johnny had turned his back on us. If he's saying he has amnesia, he has it, George. I know what he pulled back home."

"And I know what I see. And what I hear now. A little boy. Not a man. A scared little boy."

"If he's faking what are you gonna do about it?" Henry asked.

"Kick his ass. I won't put a bullet in his head if that's what your wondering. Nah, I love the kid. I wouldn't do that."

"He's not faking George. Demeanor, behavior aside. Think about it. What does Johnny have to gain. Really, what does he have to gain by faking amnesia."

"Ah." George lifted a discovery finger and closed one eye. "The proverbial question. The same one everyone asks. Johnny is a Slagel. The blood in that family runs long, thick and deep. There's an instinctive connection between them. A bond. One hurts they all hurt sort of thing. I say the question shouldn't be, 'what does Johnny have to gain by faking amnesia' but rather . . ." George slowly looked at Henry. "What does Johnny have to lose forever, if he doesn't."

^^^

Carefully Dean measure, stooping down to check that the clear liquid did not surpass the marking lines on the two beakers. After assuring they were accurate, he lifted the beakers and carried them half way across his lab setting them on the center counter before Joe.

Joe smiled. "Thanks, Dean."

"No more though." Dean pushed a beaker to Joe. "This should be enough where it doesn't disrupt any treatment you or Elliott get."

"I appreciate it." To a small glass, from one of the beakers, Joe poured the liquid. "Speaking of Elliott. What's taking him so long."

"Speaking of Elliott . . ." Dean pointed behind Joe.

Elliott walked in with an exhaustion sigh. He stopped, backed up to the door, removed his bandana and returned to entering the lab.

Joe grumbled a snicker with a shake of his head. "He has to be so

official.”

“Always.” Elliott walked to the counter and pointed to the one beaker. “For me?”

“Yes.” Dean answered. “Enjoy . . . in fact . . .” He lifted a bottle of moonshine. “After today. I’ll have one as well.”

“Dean.” Elliott brought the beaker to his nose and sniffed. “Thank you. It has been so long since I have had a drink. And I certainly need one.” He took a sip, gasped a little and smiled. “Especially since I just spoke to Henry.”

Joe lifted his glass. “That would do it. Now . . . tell me the wrap up.”

“Henry states that George is remaining relatively calm despite the total annihilation today.” Elliott explained. “But According to the Swahili speaking announcer, it wasn’t a total annihilation. Eight society soldiers are still unaccounted for.”

“Eight?” Joe asked. “Odd number.” After a shrug, he took a drink. “I wonder what happened to them.”

^^^

“All clear.” Frank lifted the hatch from the floor of the dark abandoned building. “You can come out now.”

Coughing a little from the dust, Ellen crawled out. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” Helping her out, Frank nodded. “There were only eight. One started running, but we got him. “ He slammed the hatch. “Had to hurry though, it was almost midnight.”

“This is insane Frank.” Ellen dusted herself off. “I mean really insane.”

“Could be worse.” Pulling a couple of crates forward, Frank aided Ellen in sitting, then he sat next to her.

“Worse?” How do you figure?”

“We could be dead.”

“I was almost dead.” Ellen griped. “I’m tired. We had a good day yesterday and then they found us. We ran all day today, and most of this day I spent blind.”

“Me too.”

“Yeah, but you still did your thing.”

“True.” Frank shrugged.

“How much longer?” Ellen asked.

“A couple more days.”

Druga-Johnston/The Game

"No, I mean longer." Ellen questioned. "You're keeping tabs of soldiers. How many more hits will they do."

"Hard to say." Frank rubbed his hands together in a loss for words. "There were originally six hundred twenty-three soldiers. After today. Four ninety eight. They could send them all at once, or in spurts. My guess is spurts."

"Can't we just find them and take them out?"

"We could." Frank said. "But do we want to run around looking for them."

"No. You want us to run."

"We're not running, El," Frank kissed her on the cheek. "Trust me, we aren't running. Moving around a bit that's all. And in a few days, you'll look back and laugh at this adventure."

"I doubt that. But hey . . . at least mine and Robbie's book is still intact."

"True."

"So what's next Frank? In your opinion, what's next?"

"Smooth sailing."

In surprise Ellen looked at him. "What?" she laughed. "No more hits. You're nuts."

"No, El, really. We'll be in Utah before they even can touch us. Come on, nothing ever happens in Utah, right." Frank gave a playful nudge to her. "Peace of cake from here on in."

"Smooth sailing."

Frank winked. "Smooth sailing."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

January 20<sup>th</sup>

“Five!” Robbie called out immediately after he fired a shot. His voice echoed back to Frank, who stood with Ellen at the other end of the tunnel they were in. He shot again. “Six!”

“Keep it going.” Frank yelled back, then, back against the tunnel peered out. “Come on Hal.”

“Frank.” Ellen tapped him on the shoulder.

Bang.

“Seven!”

“Frank.” Ellen tried to get his attention.

Frank ignored her. “come on, Hal, where are you.” He shook his head at the nearing sound of trucks.

Bang. Bang.

“Eight and nine!”

“Frank. This is not smooth sailing, And this is not the way I want to start my day.” Ellen griped.

“El, please.”

Bang.

“Ten!”

“Frank.”

Frank spun around to her. “You are gonna make him lose count. Now stop.”

Ellen growled. “We’re like sitting ducks in here. How long do you think it will be before they come through *this* end of the . . .”

Frank fired a shot forward into a charging society soldier.

“Tunnel.” Ellen continued. “See.”

“Oh, stop it was just one.” Frank pumped the chamber on his shot gun. “Eleven!”

Robbie fired. “Twelve!”

Ellen held her ears.

“I’m back.” Hal darted in.

“What’s the situation?” Frank asked.

“Well.” Hal looked over his shoulder to the exit. “We have to get out of here.”

"No shit." Ellen snapped.

Hal paid her no mind. "The main road is clear with the exception of a few stragglers. They are approaching from the north. If we veer off the main road immediately we can make it into a canyon to our left."

Bang. "Thirteen." Robbie called out.

"How many trucks?" Frank questioned.

"Two." Hal responded. "Sparkler fire effect should remove them."

"Good. You take any out?" Frank asked.

"Three stragglers." Hal answered.

Frank nodded then looked back to Robbie. "Hal took out three. Do the math."

"Sixteen." Robbie replied.

"Wow, he's fast." Frank shook his head once, then grabbed Ellen's hand. "Shall we, Hal?"

"Now or never." Hal said.

Ellen exhaled. "I was beginning to think it was 'never' considering we ditched the truck three miles ago."

"Robbie." Frank yelled. "Let's go. Out of the tunnel, to the left and down the reveen."

"Got it." Robbie stood up.

"Block it with Blinders!" Frank ordered, gripped Ellen's hand even tighter and gave another nod to Hal. "Now!" Nearly making Ellen fly, with Hal, Frank barged out.

Backwards Robbie ran, grenade in his mouth, gun ready. Just as he hit the other side of the tunnel, he saw the emergence of a small troop of soldiers. With a swing of his weapon and a pull of the grenade, Robbie tossed the blinding fire explosive and ran out as well. Only Robbie ran out to an oncoming truck.

It was instinct, not concern for well being that caused the society truck to screech to a grinding halt a split second and a foot before a surprised Robbie whose hand slammed upon the hood.

There was a brief pause when Robbie and the driver of the truck got their bearings. Just as Robbie gained his stance and sprang jump to his left, the society driver hit the gas and rammed the truck forward. The explosion of sparkler fire was the fanfare music to Robbie's leap over the side of the road. After being airborne for a second, he landed into the overgrown foliage and slid in a near roll all the way down the twenty foot drop.

Hal had to laugh, as he stood, feet firm on that hillside and watched Robbie tumble past him, Frank and Ellen. He shook his head. "Can he be

any more dramatic?’

Frank reached out, grabbing on to Ellen who tried to follow Robbie.  
“Stay put.”

“But . . .”

“He’ll be fine..” Frank shifted his eyes to Hal. “Hit it.”

“Got it.” With a wide grin, Hal scurried up the hillside to the top.

Frank watched as Hal peered over to the top of the road. Whispering, Frank spoke into the headset of the special band radios they used between them. “What do you got?”

“Truck’s partially in the tunnel. Fire. Some.” Hal reported.

“Any alive?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Take them out.”

“You got it.”

Only a hint of the green fatigues that Hal wore could be seen as he slipped through the bush to the road.

Was there that much confusion that they never saw Hal coming. Hal figured that was the case, because it didn’t take much for him to make it close enough to the truck to toss a grenade. But he waited. He listened for a moment to the mumbling voices, let out a quick whistle, and when they turned around to see him, Hal, still smiling, threw the grenade.

He hurried, gunfire behind him, over that grade. His slid some, not much, catching his momentum so it didn’t get ahead of him like Robbie.

Pleased Frank was, not only at the sight of his brother, but at the sound of the explosion that rang out from above them on the road.

“All clear.” Hal came down the hill near, the bottom where Frank and Ellen were. “Are we heading down to the valley?”

“Just hold . . .” He grumbled. “. . . up. Robbie should . . .” After another grumble of irritation, Frank’s head turned to the sound of rustling leaves. As he lifted his weapon to be ready, he saw Robbie. “You all right.” He asked his brother?

Robbie gave a twitch of his head. “Fine. I’ll be sore tomorrow.”

“What’s down the . . .” Frank growled. “. . . hill? Anything. Society?” Hard he spun back to Ellen. “What! Why are you tapping me!”

Ellen’s eyes widened. “That’s it. I am through with you.” She folded her arms and moved to Hal. “Either him or Robbie, I don’t want your big ass near me anymore at all. You yell at me too much.”

“Well, yeah, El.” Frank barked. “This is a serious situation. You’re

holding us back!”

“Um, Frank.” Robbie snickered. “She’s the reason we’re here.”

“Oh, yeah. Right. Anyhow . . .” Frank shrugged. “Situation?”

“All clear right now.” Robbie said. “But I am hearing a truck in the distance. So bet me they are making their way here.”

“Going by what Hal said, there’s only one truck left. But . . . let’s move it.” Frank reached to grab Ellen’s hand but only felt air. Really irritated, he turned to see her holding on to Hal. Grunting, he snatched back her hand, and with his two brothers, weapons ready, he raced down the hill and through the remaining woods.

The clearing wasn’t a large valley nor was it a safe haven. The moment they emerged into the opening, they were greeted with rapid gunfire.

“Down!” Frank order, grabbing Ellen by the waist and rolling with her.

Over Frank, Hal leaped and charged forth. “Dodge to the right. To the right.” He shouted over the noise.

“Trucks.” Robbie warned following Hal to a small patch of woods that were just on the edge of another hillside.

“Launcher.” Frank called rolling out of his dodge of bullets to a stand, keeping Ellen low on the ground. He pivoted to the left, extended his arm and caught the miniature bazooka that Robbie tossed.

It smacked against Frank’s hand and no time was wasted in Frank’s loading the weapon. He lifted it to aim and saw another truck, then another, and then . . . another. “Fuck. Hal. You said only two trucks.”

“All I saw was two.” Hal called from the trees firing out with Robbie.

“Thank you very much for misleading me. Fuck.” Frank launched.

With the whistle of the sailing explosive, and a swing out of his arm, Frank swept up Ellen, and leaped with her to the thick brush where Robbie and Hal were.

“We can’t stay here.” Hal reloaded another clip. “There’s too many.”

“I didn’t think they’d send this many this early.” Frank said.

“We’re not taking them out.” Robbie fired out.

“No shit.” Frank prepped his M-16. “What now.”

Hal gave a motion of his head toward the next hill. “We can try the next side. Trucks can’t follow us there. What do you think is on the other side?”

“Another valley.” Frank said.

“HA. HA. Ha.” Hal snapped.

“What about leading them to a trap?” Robbie asked. “We have Dean

ami minis. Head to the hill, hit the top,. Lead them down, set the ami minis, take off ourselves and dissolve them.”

Frank snapped his finger. “Good idea. Scout the top.”

“I’m on it.” Robbie, without hesitation took off.

Ellen huddled, holding her ears. “This doesn’t look good.”

Frank laughed, kissed her on the cheek then fired. “Nah. It’s fine.”

“Frank.” Robbie’s voice came through the radio. “Head on up. I have something.”

“Just in time.” Frank grabbed Ellen’s arm, gave it a tug and pulled her. Taking a step, Frank stopped, and tossed Hal the launcher. “Take out the trucks.”

The whap felt good against his hand, almost a sense of power and Hal grabbed the bazooka. “I’m right behind you. Go.”

“They’re gonna get us, Frank. Aren’t they?” Ellen asked while running and trying to keep up to Frank who pulled her.

“No. Not at all. Just stay low. They’re still behind us.”

Behind them, in front of them. It didn’t matter the gunfire all sounded the same to Ellen. The only differentia was the exploding of mortars that Hal shot. Her head spun, she felt like a rag doll only following the lead. She had no idea what would be next, or where they would go. Hitting the tip of the hill, her legs burning from the running, Ellen peered over her shoulder to just double check on Hal. She sighed some in relief when she saw him running not far behind.

Frank stopped cold. He tossed up his hands when he saw Robbie standing in the midst of what looked like a burned down house. “What? What do you have>”

Robbie smiled. “A place to hide while I scope something out.”

“What?” Frank looked confused. “Here?”

“No.” Robbie took a step back and jumped. “Down here.”

Frank , holding Ellen’s hand, walked to the house and through the ruins. There was a small drop off and Frank peered down to see Robbie standing in what looked as if it once was a back yard.

Robbie gave a flick raise of his eye brow. “Back door. “Bring her down.”

Ellen, looking more confused turned to Frank. “I don’t understand.”

Frank shrugged. “Obviously, he has a plan and El . . . we need to stop and plan this thing out. They got a little ahead of us right now.”

Ellen nodded. “Down there.” she looked to Robbie’s reaching hand and she grabbed it.



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Frank watched her crouch down and nearly crawl, apprehensively over the eight foot drop.

"What's going on?" Hal asked out of breath from Behind Frank. "What the hell?"

"Pathetic isn't it?" Frank shook his head, leaped the drop off. He reached up, pulling Ellen down at the same time Hal leaped down as well.

Around them Robbie reached and opened the basement door. "In here. Frank stay with Ellen, Hal, come with me."

Frank questioned. "You have a course."

"Yeah." Robbie nodded. "I think I have something and a way to get them off our backs and into a trap."

"Do it." Frank moved Ellen inside the doorway, then stepped in himself. "Hurry. OK?" He waited for the nods from his brothers, then Frank shut the door.

It wasn't silence but it rang close the way the thick basement door shut out the noise. The gunfire was muffled some, and the cold of the basement surround Ellen and Frank s they stood in a small, sort of, entrance way.

Out of breath they were and it was evident in the dark by the way their breaths reverberated.

"Wait." Frank said then with a flick of a flash light, the small hall illuminated. "Better."

"Will they find us?" Ellen asked, folding her chilled arms closer to her body.

"Nah." Frank swung to his right to shine the light. "Whoa." His voice carried and he took a step.

"What is this place?" Ellen asked. "Frank? Where are you going?"

"It's like the grandmother's apartment. Stay put." Frank kept walking "I want to scope out another section to hide . . ." He paused and looked back. "Just in case."

"Hurry. I'm scared."

Frank nodded. He moved slow around the dust filed furniture wondering how the top portion of the house as destroyed while the bottom remained. He shined the light on the ceiling. The planks of hardwood from the once above floor were still intake. Ransacked perhaps is what ruined the home above.

There were two rooms before him when he reached the main room of that basement apartment, and it was there, just as he started to think nothing about it, that Frank heard a sound. A shuffling sound. He leaned to the closed door on his right. Nothing. To the left he listened and heard it

again. "Hello?"

"Frank?" Ellen called out, so in the distance she sounded.

"One sec El." Hearing the noise once more, Frank turned the door knob.

There was a denseness to the room, almost too thick, and instantaneously a blast of cold air hit him taking over Frank's entire body. It whipped up his back, across his arms and toward his face almost consuming *his* breath from him when it pelted him.

The first exhale Frank released emerged in the form of a cloud of steam. The heat of his own body contrasting with the bitter cold surrounding him. "Hello." He called out, the word echoing over and over again. His eyes widened at the cool acoustics of this one room, this one small room, dark all but for the beam of his light.

Slam.

Frank turned to the sound of the shutting door. "El?" calling out the name, then taking a step, Frank stopped. The room brightened up and he turned back around.

It was clean, the colors bright, almost with an orange hue, and across the room, making the bed was a woman. "Hello?" Frank spoke curiously, his frisky breath huffing out with his reverberating word. "Hello, what are you . . ."

She turned. "Frank." she smiled.

"Oh, my God." Frank moved to her yet his movements seemed sluggish as if he were moving through thick air. "Mom."

"Hi, Frank." She stopped making the bed.

"What are you. No, what am I doing here?" Frank asked. "Did I die?"

"No." she smiled. "You can say you stepped into your gift."

"My gift? This house is a gift. From who?"

"No, not this house. Gift, Frank." She spoke gently. "Gift meaning something special about you." She saw the clueless look on his face. "Like your telepathy."

"Oh." Frank nodded then with revelation, his eyes widened. "Oh. Oh whoa. I can see dead people? No offense."

"None taken."

"Wow." He said in awe. "I see dead people." The corner of Frank's mouth raised and he whispered eerily. "I see dead people."

"Funny."

"I'm a funny guy. But why am I seeing you."

"I have to tell you something about your brother."

"Which one. Hal?"

"No." She shook her head.

"Robbie?"

"No."

"Hmm." Frank scratched his temple. "Who?"

"Jimmy."

"Oh. Yeah. I get it. That's why you're here."

"Do you?" She asked with a smile. "Do you get it about Jimmy?"

"Yes, I do. I know about him."

"Really?" She questioned.

"You're here, right? You're here to confirm what I already knew."

"Oh, good. So you know you are to look for him."

"Look for him. Won't he come to me?"

"He could." She told him. "Don't be surprised if he does."

"I wasn't the last time."

"Huh?" She asked confused. "But, Frank, more than likely you'll have to look for him."

"Look for him. You mean like have a seance."

"Frank, I . . ."

Her voice stopped and was replaced with Robbie's.

"Frank." Robbie called from far away. "Frank." His voice drew slower and more powerful. "Frank!"

Dark went the room, the temperature rose and Frank spun around.

"Are you OK?" Robbie asked.

"Whoa."

"What?" Robbie stepped to him. "El was scared. Are you OK, you looked dazed."

Frank twitched his head. "Yeah. I'm fine. Yeah. Why was El scared?"

"You were gone a while. She couldn't find you."

"I was right here." Frank said.

"El didn't see you. She thought you fell in a hole. Weird." Robbie shrugged. "We have to go."

"The society close?"

"Real close Frank. We have things set. Come on." Robbie led the way.

"Robbie." Frank grabbed his arm. "I saw Mom. She was here. She said I'm gonna see Jimmy's ghost again."

"Cool. But, Frank, right now, if we don't go, we'll be the ghosts." Robbie hurried from the room.

It was an unnecessary pause, but Frank took one to look back at the

room once more before he left.

Ellen rushed to him, the second she saw Frank. "What happened to you."

"I was talking to my mom.": Frank said, still with a hint of being in the fog to him.

Hal quickly looked at Robbie. "What's going on?"

"Don't know." Robbie reached around Hal for the door. "But we have to book. Listen."

Hal zoomed in on the sound of trucks, and voices. "Let's move."

"You guys have everything done already?" Frank asked.

"Already?" Robbie laughed. "Frank it took almost ten minutes to get this shit set up. But it's set up. And it's not only the perfect trap for the society, but the perfect escape for us."

"This . . . this is what you call perfect!" Ellen screamed from the edge of the cliff she stood over. Her voice would of carried further but the sound of fast moving water rushed their way. She peered down the fifty foot drop then back to the small cave from which they emerged.

Robbie darted from the cave. "There on us. Twenty seconds and the Dean ami goes off. It's now or never."

Hal looked at his watch. "Water looks deep enough."

"Fifteen seconds." Robbie timed. "We have everything?"

"Bagged." Hal indicated to his weapon and other supplies.

"Go first." Robbie gave a motion of his head. "Ten . . ." He looked back to the ensuing and closing in voices. "This is great." He grinned. "They haven't a clue there's cliff here."

"See ya below." Hal shook his head once to the right then without hesitation took a leap.

"Me next." Robbie stepped forward. "Better hurry guys." Almost with a run, Robbie jumped.

Frank watched them hit the water. "Ready."

"No." Ellen shook her head. "Absolutely not. I can't swim. So I refuse. I refuse to play 'Fugitive;' and jump from here."

"I wouldn't expect you to." Not giving her a fighting Chance, Frank grabbed on to Ellen and jumped.

Her scream carried all the way down until it was drowned by the splash and submergence into the cold rushing water of the river below.



"Some sort of gas." Bertha explained to George.

George's only response was to look up at Bertha across the edge of his hand.

"With in thirty seconds, not a soul remained." She shook her head. "They took the leap as an escape. We were . . . we were basically trapped and were fortunate enough to get out with seven remaining."

"Seven? Seven out of how many?"

"One twenty-five sir. However they all were not taken out by gas,"

"This is absurd." George stood up. "Absurd. There are three of them and they are toting one very weak female. How in the hell did they . . ." George winced and snapped his finger. "Someone do quick math on our totals for me."

"Two hundred and twenty-two." Bertha gave the body tally.

"Two hundred and twenty two. Is anyone else here think this is out of control. How is this happening?"

Henry's voice emerged with reason. "I think you know George. Come on."

George spun around. "You gonna give me that Slagel theory?"

"What were we just talking about." Henry stepped further in the room. "A bond between them all. They think and act alike. They work together like a fine tuned instrument."

"Have any suggestions Henry?"

A crooked smile hit Henry. "Yeah. But uh, . . ." He winked. "I think I'll keep them all in here." He pointed to his temple.

George's tight fist came down in a frustration push to the counter. "We gave in too much on the rules."

Bertha gave a sympathetic shrug. "It's to late now though. Can't change them."

"No we can't." George nodded. "But I'm tired of this shit. Bring it in."

"We only have three." Bertha informed. "I would think you would want to save . . ."

"Bring one in. Now . . ." George ordered. "Can't get away to easily from that. And certainly three men on foot can't bring it down. Bring it in." His voice graveled with seriousness. "End this shit once and for all."



If there was an instantaneous cure for his nerves, Dean would have initiated it into his blood stream without hesitation. He couldn't take it. He had ran his fingers through his hair so much, he swore he was going bald.

By far it was, the worst week of his entire life. The work load he had only doubled because his mind drifted off too much and too far when he should of been concentrating on work. He couldn't. All he could think about was Ellen. And how every single day that went by. How every single day Frank, Robbie, and Hal, thwarted a society attack, was another day closer, and another percentage drop that luck wouldn't be on their side for long.

Dean only hoped he was wrong in his thinking. That perhaps worry was the reason he wasn't as optimistic as he wanted. So why was he torturing himself? He promised himself the moment they lost the Swahili Society announcers voice that it was his sign to not listen anymore. Not hearing an end to the most recent confrontation was maybe a means for Dean not to hear about a painful end.

He resolved himself to that. So why, when Joe sought him out did he follow. And he did, top speed back down to the communications room.

Did something horrible transpire? Joe, Elliott and Danny Hoi all had the same expression when Dean opened the door to the communications room. A foot forward was something Dean could not take. He was frozen, his eyes locked with those of Joe's. The words barely came out. "What . . what's going on. Did Danny get the signal back."

"Yes." Joe nodded in the silence. "He tweaked the satellite, but our Danny Hoi tweaked it well." with a slight turn of his head to the right he gave another nod to Danny. "Turn it up."

Dean finally moved forward a step. "Joe I don't think I want to hear what . . ."

"Shh." Joe held up his hand. "Listen."

The crackle rang out, followed by more static as Danny tuned in.

"And lead us not into temptation. No . . ." Her voice rang out. "He leads us into the icy cold waters of a hell on earth."

Dean grinned and his insides churned with an excitement that made him want to scream. "El. That's . . . El." He laughed and charged to the speaker as if it made him closer to Ellen. He grabbed Danny Hoi and kissed him on the cheek. "That's Ellen."

^^^

"I could have drowned Frank." Ellen stood, her feet signing in the muddy bank next to the river.

Frank ignored her. Hands on hips he peered up the cliff they had leaped down.

"Drowned."

"You wouldn't have drowned. And Hal . . ." Frank looked back, lifted the radio headset from Ellen and handed it back to Hal. "It's not funny. Trust me I hear her."

Hal laughed. "Sorry, Frank. I just thought it would be entertaining for the mile trot up stream."

"Speaking of that." Ellen said. "A mile? And how far are we from the truck now?"

"Five miles or so." Hal replied.

"I have to walk five miles!"

Hard Frank spun back at Ellen. "What do you want me to do Ellen. Go get the truck!"

"Yes!"

"Fine. But we still have to make it up this fuckin cliff."

"Which . . . you threw me off of." Ellen griped. "You know Frank, why don't you just shoot me yourself and hand me to the society."

"Why are you so ungrateful?" Frank asked.

Ellen gasped. "Ungrateful. I'm a pawn in a game. I would think, with the military mentality of you three combined, somehow, someway, there had to be a route to take where, I don't know . . ." Ellen fluttered her lips. "Where I'm not running, getting shot at, dying of hyperthermia. But no . . .every corner we turn it's something else. How is that? How is that happening?"

"El!" Frank yelled. "I'm sorry we have to run! I'm sorry we're dodging bullets. But I'll tell you what. You may run, you may have to jump and your ass may get wet, but there is one thing! One thing I will tell you for sure, you *will*, not may, you will be alive when this is all said and done." Frank looked up the cliff again. "And what the fuck is taking Robbie so long!"

Down from the top at the exact moment Frank screamed up, rolled the end of a rope.

"Yes. Thank you." Frank took the end then spoke into his headset radio. "How's it look up there?"

"Nothing alive in the tunnel Frank. Not a pretty sight. We can go around or through." Robbie replied.

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"We'll make that decision when we hit topside. Right now . . ." He handed the end of the rope to Hal. "Lead the way."

"You don't want Ellen first?" Hal asked.

Frank laughed. "Are you nuts. No. I need her in front of me so I can move her along."

"OK." Hal shrugged. "See you topside."

"Frank?" Ellen said humbled. "I can't climb a rope."

"Don't have to. Just climb the hill and use the rope for support. It's easy."

"You'll catch me if I fall, right?" Ellen asked reaching for the rope.

"Don't I always?"

A smile of security swept across Ellen's face and she, holding the rope for life, followed Hal up the hill.

Hal stopped. "Frank? Do you hear that?"

"No." Frank answered. "I don't hear anything just climb."

"What?" Ellen asked.

"Frank?" Robbie called over the radio. "Do you hear that?"

"No." Frank climbed faster, moving into Ellen. "I hear nothing."

Just over the half way point, Hal looked down. "Chopper, Frank."

"Fuck. Climb!" Frank yelled.

Hal scurried.

"El, Move." Frank encouraged, the chopper getting closer.

"I'm trying." Ellen slipped some.

"Move, El." Frank yelled louder hearing the fluttering of the blades. "Hurry."

"I'm trying."

"Frank!" Hal yelled his loudest as he felt the wind of the chopper move in.

"I know!" Frank blasted.

"Move for cover!" Hal ordered. "Now!"

Hal's final word seemed to sound off the events that followed. The vibration of the ground was caused by not only the close helicopter, but by the spray of bullets that hit against the ground. Down to his thigh Frank reached, and in one swing up, above Ellen's head he chopped the rope, grabbed hold of her by the waist and with a hard push outward, flung the two of them backwards and off the cliff just as the sear of bullets ripped the dirt beneath where they both were.

Hal's hand hit the top of the cliff at the same time he heard the loud splash of the water below. He rolled to the surface with the aid of Robbie,



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then looked below for certainty that Frank and Ellen were fine before he ran for cover in the tunnel as the helicopter made another pass.

^^^

The bullets fired from the open side door of the helicopter, hit against the ground in a fast motion forward toward the opening the of the tunnel. The last bullet hit with a whistle not far from Frank's head as he peered out and tossed his finished cigarette. "Assholes." He shook his head and head more into the tunnel. He walked to where the small fire was lit and where Ellen sat with Robbie and Hal. Frank paused before joining them, taking a second to check out Ellen who not only had quieted down, but stared almost in shock. "El, you OK?"

Ellen nodded and brought her knees closer to her chest. "How much longer in here."

"I don't know." Frank sat down.

"They're relentless." Hal said lighting a cigarette.

"And they don't give up." Frank added.

"That too." Hal smiled.

"They have to stop to refuel." Robbie stated,. "They have to." He looked at his watch. "At the rate of passes, they'll fall from the sky before long."

"How long?" Frank asked.

"Another two hours." Robbie said. "Maybe. Depends."

Frank groaned. "Two hours. How's the other end of the tunnel look?"

Hal shook his head. "We're gonna run into the same situation no matter what. We leave, they'll get us. With them firing from above, the chances of one of us getting hit are great."

"So we stay?" Robbie asked.

Grumbling in frustration was all Frank could do. "A chopper. They have a chopper. Man."

"Not part of the rules." Hal said. "What are we gonna do. We can't out run it, we can wait until it refuels and take advantage of that lag."

"Only choice." Robbie added.

"Man, a chopper." Frank said in awe. "Do you know how cool it would be to have a chopper?"

"Yes." Hal nodded. "But we don't."

"I mean, really . . ." Frank stood up. "We could be unbeatable maybe with one."

"True. But . . . how are we gonna get a chopper?" Hal asked.

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"The society has one." Frank walked toward the tunnel's entrance. "Shh. Listen. Another pass."

"Frank?" Robbie snickered. "Um, that chopper is in flight."

"Yep. Flies by, fires, flies off, circles around comes back," Frank whispered. "Closer. We need that chopper."

"Again." Hal stood up. "I'll agree. However, what are you gonna do?"

"Steal it." Frank smiled.

"Steal it?" Hal asked in disbelief. "How in God's name do you propose to do that?"

"Like this." Frank darted out of the tunnel.

"Frank!" Robbie screamed, and at the same time as Hal, lunged forward.

They reached the opening of the tunnel and were greeted and sent back to the sides by the spray of fire.

"Where is he!" Hal shouted.

"There!" Robbie pointed to the brush. "Now he's . . . there!" He indicated as Frank started to run to the cliff's edge.

"What's he gonna do . . . jump for it!"

"Uh . . ." Robbie winced watching Frank full speed hit the edge of the cliff and leap outward toward the moving chopper. "I'd say yeah."

The society pilot felt the thump and heavy drop of his helicopter. "What the hell was that?" He asked back to the gunner.

"Don't know."

"Look."

Through the open door, the gunner peered. "I don't see anything."

"Has to be something," the pilot said "We feel heavier."

The gunner looked at the pilot. "I'm telling you nothing is . . ." He looked back around. "Shit."

"What?"

"Surprise." Frank grinned as he stood up from his lift into the chopper. Before the gunner could even respond, Frank grabbed a hold of him, and braced his head. It was a compassion move, Frank figured, save the gunner from experiencing a fall to his death, so Frank, with a jerk to the right, snapped the gunner's neck before sending him out the chopper door.

"What the . . ." The chopper nosedived when the pilot saw Frank approach. "Oh shit."

"No-no. Control." Frank pulled out his revolver and held it to the

pilot's head. "Lift her."

Shaking, the pilot did as instructed.

"Good job."

"I'm just the flyer." The pilot spoke desperate. "I'm just a flyer."

"I understand that. But understand this. I need this bird. You're part of this game. I wanna win. So . . . right now . . ." Frank pulled the knife strapped to the side of his leg. "You lose."

It was a swipe of motions made, a grasp to the pilot's head, a precision slice of the throat, and still holding on with a grip, Frank hurriedly moved the pilot's body out of the way and scooted down in the seat.

It was touch and go and the chopper definitely dropped nearly to an irreversible point, but Frank managed. And though not well, Frank flew the chopper with a huge, pleased grin upon his face.

CHAPTER FORTY

Misha released a tiny giggle when after inhaling the intoxicating lemon scent, the most minuscule of furniture polish droplet sucked into her nostril.

She rubbed the tip of her nose, giggled again the wiped off the long dresser type table in the corner of Hector's diningroom. She was trying to make heads or tails of the home that hadn't been lived in fully for some time since Hector moved in with Henry to help out with Nick. Misha took pride in her cleaning of the house, after all it would be her home when her and hector married.

Boxes were everywhere, some empty, some half full from hector's vain attempts to pack up his life and move a few rows of houses away. But all that changed, and Hector was in the midst of unpacking those same boxes again. A part of Misha felt guilt for taking Hector away from the need of his friend. But she justified it as Nick wasn't losing one of his fathers he was gaining another mother. Misha had resolved herself to loving Nick as much as Hector did. Out of his bond and friendship with Henry, hector developed an unbreakable parental bond with the child Ellen had so unselfishly carried for Henry.

*"Just dump the papers in the burrow. I'll sort through them later."* were Hector's instructions, and Misha followed them.

She grabbed a handful of papers that lined the bottom of the box, opened the drawer she knew was empty and placed them in. She wasn't about to sort through the papers, they looked personal, items from Hector's past. Items that she knew he'd eventually share.

But there was something about the card with the crayon drawn heart on it that made Misha's curiosity pique. Yellow it was, tattered some, hand made obviously by a child a very long time before. It was one of many different items that resembled personal treasures that Misha was dispirited about not possessing herself.

How fortunate Hector was to have kept things from the previous world. Smiling, she lifted the card. Immediately upon opening it a small photo fell out. She laughed at the picture of a boy about eight or nine. He looked so much like a young hector. His black hair stuck up on one side, he grinned a school boy smile, his shirt was in disarray and in complete

contrast to the solid blue background of the obvious class picture.

Her heart felt warm at that moment and knew it has to be Anthony. Knowing from experience and looking at photos, she turned the picture over and received her confirmation. *Anthony, third grade*. It read on the back. It was Hector's son. She moved the photo aside, keeping it in her hands and read the simple card that wrote phonetically a happy birthday message and a conveyance of love to his father.

Having spoke so much to Hector, Misha was so well aware of Hector's life before the plague. How full his life was, how much he loved it and every aspect of it. Misha took some sense of pride in the fact that she was helping move Hector along finally, after all the years of loneliness and lack of love. She felt privileged that he was opening his heart to her and allowing her to give him the physical contact, even though innocent, that he was so much deprived.

The items in the borrow were not for her to see, it was in a sense an invasion of his privacy, Misha knew. But they were also items that belonged to the man she loved. He was a private person, he told her. Hector also had mentioned that there were aspects of his past that he wanted to keep to himself. She respected his decision to not speak of them and understood because she too would find it painful to speak of a family loved and lost.

But she wanted to know more, and even though the phrase 'in due time' kept popping into her mind, the curiosity and woman in her, felt it was fine to look. To her it wouldn't hurt, and she didn't need to mention it to Hector just in case he would get angry. In part, she would be looking at things that he would eventually share with her anyhow.

Or would he?

Misha froze, her hand was the only extension of her body that moved when it trembled out of control. Second drawer, many pictures, cards and notes, later, she found it. A more recent letter, she could tell by the paper that reeked Beginnings. Wrinkles of a previous crumbling smothered over the words handwritten on the paper. Words Misha did not want to see. The letter started out nice, an apology of sorts for taking advantage of a friendship. But then it drew personal, and the clarity of the meaning came in the simplicity of the phrasing Hector used in his letter to . . . Henry.

*I know it was not something you wanted to do. I know my reputation proceeds me. I value the friendship we started. Please know, with you, it was more intimate and on a love making level, then sex. With other men, I released urges through sex, with you, I released emotions I didn't know I had. I am sorry if this hurt you.*

Misha's stomach churned and twisted. There were three more

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paragraphs of writing left to read, but she didn't get to do so because she heard the tromping of Hector's boots on the porch outside the front door.

Hurriedly, she refolded the note, placed it where she found it, slammed the drawer closed as she stood up and did a 'cover up' leap across the diningroom.

The front door opened just as Misha was placing a box to the diningroom floor.

"Hey." Hector smiled. "Sorry I'm late. I got held up with a stubborn batch of onions." He took off his coat, still smiling and walked over to Misha. "I only have a second, I have to go get Nic from . . ." Hector's body nearly spun as Misha zipped by him. "What's wrong?"

"I just . . . I just noticed the time." She said nervously, walking backwards to the door.

"Are you all right? Did you work too hard here. I told you, you didn't have to do . . ."

"No." She cut him off suddenly. "No. I . . . I just promised Andrea I would come to the clinic."

"It's your day off." Hector stepped to her.

"I know. But it is cold and flu season and she is . . ." Misha grabbed her coat. "I must go."

"Ok, then I'll see you . . ." Hand extended, Hector felt the blast of cold air as the wind whipped in from the open door. ". . .later." He stepped to the door to watch Misha make her way quickly down the street. Feeling a little dejected for not getting a moment, Hector understood, and realizing it probably was a sign, he grabbed his coat again, and walked out of his home to retrieve Nick.

^^^

There was a tear in Joe's eye. Not a tear of sadness, but more so a tear of hysterics. He wiped his index finger under his eye catching the moisture before exhaling a breath lost in his laughter.

Oddly, Andrea looked across the crowded table at him. "Why are you laughing?"

"Shock." Joe chuckled. "The shock is making me laugh."

Pausing in his eating, Dean shook his head confused. "Shock of what?"

"That this surprises all of you." Joe stood up with his empty plate, he grabbed hold of Elliott's, Alexandra's and Billy and took them into the

kitchen. "Come on now. We're dealing with Frank." He returned to the diningroom, hesitated in making a comment about how slow Dean was eating, then Joe sat down between his grandchildren.

"Sweet Jesus, Joe." Andrea spoke. "He could have been killed."

Joe lifted his hands with a shrug. "According to Frank. He has nine lives now thanks to Dean."

Chuckling himself, Dean leaned back in the chair. "I keep telling him it's a cat that is said to have nine lives, not a jackrabbit."

Elliott interjected with a smile. "Ah, but wouldn't Frank say, 'same difference.'"

Dean lifted his glass to that comment. "True. And . . . Joe, you're right. It's Frank.. Could we . . ." He pointed to the tape player that set on the counter between the kitchen and diningroom. "Could we listen to that one more time?"

"Oh, absolutely." Joe stood up. "You know, I'm very grateful that Danny Hoi tuned in to their transmissions. He's brilliant."

"Perhaps . . ." Elliott interjected. "No disrespect to the brilliancy of Mr. Hoi. But perhaps it isn't Danny as much as it is the satellite. Maybe, in the initial setting up of that satellite, its full capabilities were . . . missed?"

Pressing the 'rewind' button, Joe nodded. "Excellent point. But for now, I'll give Danny credit. Hell, my boys and Ellen are out there. I sat for days worrying. Now I can hear exactly what is going on. Good or bad. In a sense, I'm with them." Joe pressed a button to play the recording of the radio transmissions picked up.

Static.

"Frank!" Robbie called out.

Gunfire. Static.

"Where is he!" Hal shouted.

"There! Now he's . . . there!"

"What's he gonna do . . . jump for it!"

"Uh . . . I'd say yeah."

"Dear, God. He's gonna . . . shit." Hal's voice moved up with excitement. "Holy shit!"

Robbie screamed as if he were watching a sporting event. "He got it. Hal! He caught the chopper!"

"He's insane. He's absolutely . . . what is he doing now?"

"Well, he'll do what he has to do first take out . . ."

Ellen's hysterical voice interrupted. "What happened to Frank?"

"He stole the helicopter." Robbie told her. "Watch."

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Hal's chuckle came through. "Body number one. Only Frank."

Joe stopped the tape. "Only Frank." He smiled proud. "So you see. You people act shocked. Yet. It shouldn't surprise you in the least."

"Uncle Frank is cool." Billy commented. "I mean, really, even though he can now be categorized as a genetically enhance human being. He is really . . ." he smiled. "Cool."

Joe retook his seat. "But he wasn't always genetically enhanced. And he still did cool things. I remember . . . I remember how much he impressed me when the back room of the cryo lab caught fire, Henry had . . . Henry was dead." Joe exhaled. "That damn door was bolted, and Frank knocked it down, barged into there with the flames, carried Henry out and brought him back to life."

Andrea remembered that. "Flames don't scare Frank. Remember when he saved Kimmy from the burning house. He impressed me then."

"Frank has saved my life." Elliott added. "Ellen, Alex and I were in the entrance tunnel overrun with savages. Like a Harley hero, Frank . . ." Elliott chuckled. "Rode in, took control, and saved the day."

"Wasn't the first motorcycle rescue tough." Joe informed. "Frank loved those cycles. What about when Henry and Ellen were surrounded by Moses and his men, Frank and Robbie rode right in. Saved the day then."

"He always does." Alexandra said. "Remember when I was out in the field and the savages were coming after me? I was with my cat, and Uncle Frank fought the savages, picked me up and jumped for a rope from Uncle Robbie's chopper."

"Frank has a thing about choppers." Dean smiled in remembrance. "I have two favorite Hero moments. If I can." Dean looked around for the nods. "One was when we were under attack by the society and a mortar hit the east wing of the clinic where Ellen and I had operated. Ellen was trapped. Frank barged right in there,. Flames and all, and brought her out. The other was when he swung from the chopper and saved her. Now that . . that was a moment."

"Seems." Joe closed one eye in his talking. "Seems most of his hero moment evolve around Ellen."

"Not all." Elliott said. "Most. How about you, Dr. Hayes. Has Frank ever saved your life?"

"Nothing we can count now since time was ripped." Dean snickered. "Physically, no I can't recall him having to jump in and save my butt . . . to much." He winked. "But right now, right now, Frank is securing that hero



status in my eyes. He's keeping Ellen alive out there like only he can do. I don't think . . ." Nervously Dean picked up his glass. "I don't think I'll ever view Frank the same after this. I can honestly say I owe him. I owe him."

Andrea exhaled with pride. "And the man . . ." she hummed. "Humble. He does not gloat, does not expect praise does not glorify . . ." She paused when she saw the sudden looks tossed at her from everyone at the table. "OK. Perhaps he does." She laughed. "Joe, he's not saved your life though, has he?"

"Yes he has." Joe peered about the curious faces in the room. "He may not have jumped through flames, rode in on a bike, dove from a chopper, but Frank saved my life. He saved my life when he was eleven years old, and his mother passed away. I remember feeling so lost, so . . . lost. Four boys, alone, no wife, no mother for them. I was sitting on the edge of my bed right after coming home from the hospital, right after Mary died. I was sitting there, just staring out. I was ready to quit. I didn't want to live. My God the love of my life was gone. She was suddenly gone and I swear, at that instant, I didn't know what direction to turn. What answer to seek. Then Frank walked in."

Alexandra's tiny voice spoke up. "Did he give you a hug Pap-Pap, is that how he saved you?"

"No, sweetie. It wasn't a hug. He asked me something. He walked in my room, saw me staring in desperation, and Frank asked me something, that made me see which direction I had to place my thinking."

"Ah." Andrea tapped Joe's hand. "He asked about his mother."

"No." Joe shook his head. "At the worst time in my life, my lowest point, Frank walked into that room . . . he walked into that room and asked me how many captain crunch cereal balls would he have to shove up his nostrils in order to break the world record. Because he had already shoved over a dozen and wasn't quite sure he could fit anymore."

No one really wanted to laugh, or chuckle, nervously, Dean spoke up. "You . . . you found comfort in that?"

"No, I found humor in that." Joe answered. "And I laughed. I really laughed. Then I took him to the emergency room to have them removed, of course. But that stupid, moronic move took me from my self pity and showed me where I had to concentrate. On my boys. Yeah, they were a handful, but they became my focus and my life. And yeah, they still do stupid moronic things, but you know what?" Joe spoke soft. "Each of them, in their own way, every single day, save my life. Because they make me want to live."

^^^

Hal looked once over his shoulder to Robbie who loaded the last bag into the helicopter. "I think we should be pretty safe from any more hits tonight, Frank."

"Yeah I think so too." Frank said. "I don't think the society is going to risk anymore for their guys. Not tonight. Not with three days left."

"I have to agree. Well . . ." Hal exhaled. "Robbie's ready."

"You guys can fuel up there, then head off to the meeting place. You have the fuel pump, right?"

"Got it. The truck should be good for gas for you too as well. So I should see you two in about . . ." Hal looked at his watch. "Four hours?"

"Give or take one. We'll definitely be there before midnight."

"Good." Hal extended his hand. "Be careful, Big Brother and remember to take care of that little thing."

Frank smirked when he noticed Ellen's look of curiosity. "No, El, he's not talking about you." he shook Hal's hand. "The chopper should be assurance, but, yes, I'll take care of that."

"Good. See you in a few." Hal kissed Ellen on the cheek then backed up.

"Frank?" Ellen asked of him after Hal boarded the chopper. "What is it you have to do?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it." Taking hold of Ellen's arm he brought her to the truck. "Why don't you wait inside for a second."

"OK. So tell me, why is it you're the one driving me and not Hal."

"El, please." Frank opened the car door. "Four or five hours in the cab of the truck alone with me. Bonding time."

"Oh, God, you're gonna try to brainwash me again." Ellen slipped into the truck.

"No, El, I prefer to call . . ." Frank smiled. "Dean-washing."

^^^

Holding it by the tip, in a taunt, wings flapping, George spun the dart around and around. "Henry." He sang Henry's name. "Hmm?"

"Oh, you think you're funny." Henry was snippy. "Just because you were the best dart player in Beginnings."

"I probably still would be."

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"I'll have you know George. People play now. And we have leagues. I myself am in two leagues. And . . and . . . I am very good."

"Show me how much you improved." George raised an eyebrow. "Come on Henry. It'll be like old times. We'll make some stupid wages, relax, have fun, forget . . . we'll forget our two homes are at war. What do you say?"

Henry stared in contemplation at that dart. "You know what? Yes. I'll play."

"Good." Georg, with a turn placed his hand on Henry's back and turned him to the door. Just as they moved in that direction, Bertha stepped inside.

"Sir." Bertha saluted, then moved to an 'at ease'. "Radar picked up a definite flight signal."

"Chopper?" George asked.

"Appears that way. Lifting from the vicinity of where the Beginnings squad last was. The bird is now in flight sir, we have a trail. No flying around, trying to cause a stir. A direct route. And we got it."

"Excellent." Georg clenched his fist and moved closer to the door. "They messed up and left a trail."

*Messed up?* the bizarre thought immediately flipped through Henry's mind. There was no way that Frank would be so careless as to mess up and leave a trail. Why would they do that? Why would they risk flying that chopper and leaving a trail. It didn't make sense.

"Henry?" George called. "You coming?"

"Um . . ." Henry snapped from his thoughts. "Yeah. George. Lead the way."

"And I will." George said with a hint of humor. "Gonna lead ya right into the George dart trap."

Henry paused in his cross of the door's archway. *Lead. Trap.* Thinking of what George just said and those two key words, Henry relaxed some and smiled.

^^^

*"I'm sorry, I don't know what you want me to confirm."* One of Hector's agriculture worker's told Misha, just before he excused himself and walked away.

It was the same thing, the same response she received from every man she approached.

Druga-Johnston/The Game

*"I don't know what you're talking about?"*

*"If Hector has been involved with any men, I don't know about it."*

*"Why do you care?"*

*"Don't ask around about stuff like that."*

*"You're barking up the wrong tree."*

*"Hector's business is Hector's business. Not mine. Sorry."*

All the same until she ran into a foe. A trusted allie that she knew well from working competitively with in New Bowman. Ben From fabrics.

*"Slut." Ben told her. "Hector was the biggest Slut I knew. Just used men, that's all. Sex Kitten. If I'm not mistaken there was a rumor about his taking advantage of Henry when Henry was drunk. It pushed the limits of assault, I can tell you."*

Misha searched until she received the answer she wanted, a confirmation, and then she searched no more for answers. She searched out hector.

It was cold, and she had no intention of standing outside for long, nor did she have any intention of going into Hector's home. She stayed firm on the porch when Hector answered the door.

"Misha." Holding, Nick, hector opened the door wider. "Wow, you're working late. Come in."

"No." she shook her head.

Nick squealed a sound of delight and extended his arms.

Misha's head turned to the right and away from the baby.

"What's wrong?" Hector asked.

"We are, Hector."

"I don't understand what . . ."

"Us. You. Me. We are wrong. You . . . are wrong for me and I was so misled. I can not see you anymore. I can not have any more dealings with you." She removed the ting he had given her. "Please do not try to talk to me." She reached to him and shoved the ring in his hand. "It's over."

"Misha, I . . ." Hector watched Misha run from the home. He hurried from the porch. "Misha, Wait!" He called out with the fullest intent on chasing her until Nick started to scream his loudest. Hector halted. In the middle of the frigid street, a wailing Nick in his arms, he stared down to his hand and to the rang clenched with in his fist. Slowly he parted his fingers and exposed the band. A snowflake, thick and heavy fell upon it and melted across the gold of it and onto Hector's palm. With the curling of his fingers, and after a long saddened blink of confusion, Hector turned and went back into his house.

Druga-Johnston/The Game



Heber City, Utah

“Dean.” Frank plopped down to the sleeping bag.

Ellen groaned dropping backwards on to hers. “Can we talk about home without bashing Dean?”

“No, we can not.” Frank shook his head. “Dean is the source of all evil. He’s probably married to Misha by now.”

“Oh, you are so full of shit.” Ellen sat up again. “And when will Robbie and Hal get back.”

“Soon. They had to hide the supplies again.”

“See this makes no sense to me. We hid them. Left them behind. Went back for them and are hiding them again.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Why are we hiding them if we are gonna go get them again.”

“El. We had to go get them, what if we need them.”

“Exactly. So why are we hiding them?”

“I don’t know.” Frank shrugged. “Protecting them.”

“OK, so, you’ll hide supplies to protect them from the society. And they remain safe. The society doesn’t find them. Right?”

“Right.”

“So why can’t you hide me?” She asked.

“For?”

“For, gee, I don’t know. Maybe so the society doesn’t find me and kill me.”

Frank laughed. “Never happen.”

“They’ve come close Frank.”

“That’s only because we made errors. We won’t make errors again. I don’t think.”

“Will they follow us.”

“Um. No, El. Not all. Next subject.” Frank lifted a stick and poked the fire. “Dean.”

“How was he? Seriously.”

“Aside from sleeping with Misha, making lab experiments between them, and making the kids call her ‘mom?’”

“Frank.”

“He’s doing.” Frank laid down the stick. “He was pretty down. That’s probably why he turned to . . .”

“Frank!”

“El! I’m not lying.” Frank lifted his hands. “I swear.”

“The kids?”

“The kids are fine.” Frank stated. “They think we had to come and rescue from the new town. But I miss them.”

“I miss them too.”

“Joey lost a tooth.”

Excited, Ellen smiled. “Did he?” Then the smile dropped from her face. “Wait a second. Joey is four. How did he lose a tooth?”

“Dean.”

“Frank.” Ellen whined.

Frank laughed. “He was playing with Marcus and they just got a little rough.”

“Were you able to pull the tooth fairy thing off?”

“We tried. Even though Dean junior was insisting to Joey there was no tooth fairy.”

“So you were able to slip a treat under his pillow.” Ellen watched Frank shake his head. “Why not?”

“Billy. I sneak into Joey’s room, right? I creep up to the pillow and just as I get there, the light goes on. There’s Billy standing there wit his arms crossed, this smug Dean-style look on his face, and he proceeds to wake Joey up to ruin it.”

“At least he didn’t ruin Santa.”

“No one can ruin Santa.” Frank smiled. “Santa brought me a bionic man doll. It was the coolest thing El.”

Ellen opened her mouth to speak in correction but stopped. “Really?”

“Yeah. I have it at home. I would have brought it but, you know, under the circumstances I didn’t want to chance having Steve Austin get ruined. I mean, I waited all my life for one. Sorry you missed Christmas.”

“I’m sorry too.” for warmth and comfort, Ellen scooted closer to Frank.

“It was different this year. People, you know, missing.” Frank brought up his knees and wrapped his arms around them. “You, Robbie . . . Johnny.” He swallowed hard.

“I know you thin about him, Frank.”

“Every single day.” Frank’s head dropped. “What happened, El? What went wrong, huh? I tried. I really tried to be a good father, yet all those years, all those years he spent with me he hated me.”

“I don’t think he hated you.”

"He said so."

"Frank." Ellen spoke soft. "He was on the stand. Under pressure."

"He shot me."

"If I make up an excuse, would you listen?"

The exhale from Frank was loud. "Come on, El. There is no excuse for that. You know it. He shot me. He hates me. All I ever did was love him. I keep playing our life over and over again in my mind. I know I made mistakes. I know it. But, were my mistakes that bad to cause that much hatred toward me?"

"No. In my opinion, they were not."

"But in Johnny's mind, they are." He brought his hand up and rubbed his face. "I wonder what he's thinking now. I wonder if he's gloating. If he's happy."

"I wonder . . . I wonder if he's thinking about you, Robbie, and Joe."

Frank slowly turned a look Ellen's way. "Do you think he would?"

"Yeah, I do."

"What kind of thoughts."

"I don't know. But . . . he's a long way from home. A long way from his family, friends, home. I know Johnny. He spent a lot of his life in Beginnings and around everyone there. Is it that easy to get out of your system? No. He could not have hated Beginnings. No way."

"Just his family."

"I wouldn't say his family."

"Me."

"Frank." Ellen whispered. "I don't even think he hated you. Just strongly disliked."

"You aren't helping."

"No one can."

Frank shook his head. "Wanna hear something pathetic?" he asked. "I have this fantasy in my mind. That Johnny regrets everything. Honestly regrets it, And wants to come home."

"And what would you do if that fantasy came true?"

"It wouldn't."

"I'm not saying it would. I'm just asking." Ellen said. "Tell me. What would you do?"

"It would take a lot . . . I mean . . ." Frank whistled. "A lot of forgiveness."

"Would you?" Ellen asked. "Would you. Could you find it in you to ever forgive your son?"

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

In the silence, Frank didn't answer. He only stared out.

^^^

"Would my father ever forgive me?" Johnny asked Jess.

Jess laughed, bringing the reminder of his wine into his mouth and trying with diligence not to laugh. "Where is this coming from."

"We were talking about my relationship with him."

"Past relationship. You don't have one anymore. You tried to kill him." Jess walked over and sat on the couch. "And would he forgive you? No. No, he wouldn't. Not after what I heard you had said on the stand. Brutal." Jess exhaled. "Why are you worrying about it anyhow. It's not like you want your father's forgiveness."

"Maybe not . . ." Johnny shrugged. "But I'd like to have my Pap's forgiveness."

"Why?"

"It's my Pap."

"You shot him. You lied to him. You betrayed the home he built. Not that I'm an expert or anything . . ." Jess lifted his shoulder. "I'd say, forgiveness is not gonna be found within your family. I come from a family who was tight. Very tight. Turning my back on them would not ever cross my mind. Dying for them is the only extreme I would do to for my brothers." An 'unbelievable' chuckle came from Jess. "You don't know what you had, do you? In this fucked up world. Families dead. Torn apart. You desert yours."

Emotions of the truth caused Johnny to stand up, bring his hand across the top of his head to the back of his neck.

"So sad, Johnny." Jess stood up walking behind him. "What in the world could George have promised you that would be worth losing so much. What was it he said he would give to you that could replace the love of a family. Tell me. I would sure like to know. Because in my opinion there is nothing . . ."

"Where do you get off?" Johnny spin hard around to Jess, eyes glaring. "Huh? Where do you get off standing here . . ." His voice raised more. "Judging me. Taunting me!"

"There it is." Jess smiled.

"What?" Johnny snapped with sarcasm.

"That glare. That glare that was in your eyes while you were in Beginnings. That hatred. The same hatred you stand before me and



adamantly deny having.”

“I don’t remember it, asshole!”

Strong Jess’ hand came down in a swing to the back of Johnny’s neck. He gripped tight leading him across the livingroom to a mirror on the wall. “Then take a look!” he shoved Johnny closer to the mirror. “Take a good look. It’s right there. Look at your eyes, Johnny.”

His hands slammed to the mirror, then Johnny pushed back, shoving his body hard in reverse and tossing Jess off of him. He turned in a perfect pivot, fist revving back.

Jess laughed. “What are you gonna do, hit me?” He shook his head as he gained his footing better. “Go on. What’s that prove?”

“What’s your game?” Johnny asked in a mean whisper.

“What’s yours.” Jess gave an ‘up’ nod. “You play this sad, lost, pity act. You don’t remember this. You don’t remember that. I don’t buy it. So why don’t you tell me the truth.”

“I did.”

“Yeah, right, Johnny.” Jess shook his head and walked back to the coffee table. He poured himself a drink.

“Too much bitterness.” Johnny followed him. “Why is this so personal to you. You can’t hide that.”

“Yeah it is personal. No matter what my job, I still had respect for the family bond your family has. I have respect for your grandfather. I saw the hurt your betrayal caused. I just want to know what caused it. I’m curious. I’m even more curious if you know where and when that betrayal happened.”

“I told you I have amnesia.”

“Even without it.” Jess finished his drink. “Did you get so wrapped up in it you never saw the beginning of it?”

“I don’t remember, Jess. I honestly don’t remember how I got to the point that your describing.”

“Then why are you so depressed?”

“What?” Johnny laughed. “I hurt my family.”

“Yeah, you hurt them, but you don’t remember what you did. You’re living that pain Johnny. How is that if you don’t remember that portion of your life. I think it’d be simple Johnny. The answer is simple. You remember. You regret. Period.”

“No.”

“Then what is it. There is no other explanation for this depression.”

Druga-Johnston/The Game

“I don’t know.” Johnny plopped down to the couch and buried his face to his hands. “I wish I knew. More than that, I wish I had my memory back. I want to remember fully what I did, because if I remember fully, then I’ll remember this hatred you talk about. And If I remember hating my family so badly . . .” His fingers tips pulled down over his eyes. “I’ll stop feeling so guilty and alone.”

“I have news for you Johnny. Memory or not, guilt and pain-free or not, . . .” Jess sat down next to him. “Your lost your family. You will always . . . always be alone.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

January 21<sup>st</sup>

Elliott's attention was stolen for a moment when his eyes caught glimpse of the huge purple bruise on the elbow fold of Joe's arm. Large, encircling a tiny scab of blood. Elliott swallowed, something about the bruising sunk deep within him.

Joe noticed the pause in Elliott's words and where his fill-in Head of Security's eyes were. With an awkward smile Joe turned his arm and rolled down his sleeve. "Horrible isn't it? Makes me miss my daughter and her gentler vampire ways."

"I'm sorry." Elliott shook his head. "Just brings back painful memories."

"No, Elliott, wrong way to think. Joyful memories."

"Sir?" Elliott questioned.

"You're in remission, Elliott. When you had these bruises you were dying. You aren't dying anymore."

Partially Elliott smiled. "At least last checked."

The buzz of the security door caused Joe to rune his chair some. "And speaking of last checked."

Dean walked in. "Did I miss anything?"

"No." Joe answered "Henry hasn't gave us the 'heads up' call yet. So we have a minute. Can I ask you something?"

"Um. Sure." Dean smiled fast then pointed to the coffee pot. "May I?"

There was something forced about the smile Dean flashed Joe, and Elliott noticed. Dean for as small as was carried an abundance of uncomfortable weight.

Stirring his coffee Dean walked to Joe and Elliott. "What did you want to ask, Joe."

"My full body scan I did at the crack of dawn. Did you get to view the\it?"

The steam from the hot coffee made Dean sniffled. "Um, not, not yet. I'm sorry. I was busy."

"I see." Joe nodded. "I understand. I just don't want to put off another treatment."

"No." Dean cleared his throat as the word cracked. "You just finished one so we have time."

Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Good.” Joe relaxed. “Good.”

*Time?* Elliott rewound the words just spoken by Dean and played them with his own thoughts. *‘They still have Time? He didn’t read the scan yet?’* Elliott watched Dean. At that moment he wished he had the Frank mind reading skills because his gut instinct was screaming Dean wasn’t saying something. Intensity and focus must of been with Elliot because the ringing of the phone startled hi to the point he jumped.

Joe laughed. “Some head of security.” He pressed the speaker button. “Joe Slagel speaking.”

“Hey, Joe.” Henry said upbeat. “Boy, is it good to hear your voice.”

“I just spoke to you yesterday, Henry.” Joe said.

“Yeah, I know, but I miss you guys.”

“I under . . .”

“Is Dean and Elliott here again?” Henry asked.

“Yes, Henry they are.” Joe spoke with little patience. “Now . . .”

“Hi Dean. Hi Elliott.”

“Henry.” Joe interrupted. “Enough of the niceties. How’s it going there.”

“I slept terrible last night, Joe.” Henry rambled. “Just awful. “The bunk they gave me is lumpy and I bet the society guy there doesn’t have to sleep on a lumpy bunk.”

“No, Henry, he doesn’t now . . .”

“And the food, Joe. Oh my God is it terrible. No wonder George lost weight. Did I tell you he lost weight. He actually looks pretty good for . . .”

“Henry!” Joe blasted. “Enough! You’re beating around the goddamn bush. Why.”

Henry paused in silence and when he spoke again, his voice was soft. “Joe . . . it’s not looking good. At least from my point of view. From what I am getting. Frank and them found a haven on a mountain in Utah, or they thought. Society has them surrounded right now and they’re moving the men in. All hundred and fifty of them.”

^^^

Society Soldier, Corporal Gary watts felt privileged. And why not? He was chosen to be the one. There was something exciting about counting down the minutes, then seconds until ‘official’ time. His stomach actually fluttered with enthusiasm that he would be victorious. He would be the one to do it.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

He was small, but not too small, wiry and fast, he hid well in the bush not far from the Beginnings camp. Quietly he had arrived and waited for the moment. He sat back, vision of grandeur danced in his head, of being decorated with ribbons from the society.

One more look at his watch, told him it was time. He snickered in sadistic enjoyment, knowing he had the upper hand. Watching, he waited for the big guy to leave the 'blue doll's' side. Gary listened to him tell a sleeping blue doll how much he loved her, and to sleep, they were safe. The big guy stood, lifted an extremely large green duffle bag and walked off.

No other time would be perfect. Creeping, hunting knife in hand, without making a noise, Gary knew what he would do. It was like a game of 'tag you're it', only a little more deadlier. All he had to do was sneak up to the blue doll, touch her, wake her then kill her.

He was a few feet from the sleeping bag where the blue doll lay, and the closer Gary drew, the more excited he became. In sight, in reach, Gary in his mind, spoke the words, 'game over', then reached knife high, and with a grin for the blue doll.

BOOM!

The ground rocked from the explosion and Frank could hear the pleasurable sound of spraying debris and body parts. Knowing time was limited, he set down the duffle bag, and unzipped it.

Ellen gasped for air.

"They fell for it. The dummy just exploded." Frank helped Ellen out.

"Now what?"

"Now we head down the mountain, hopefully meeting up with Robbie and Hal."

"Should we have split up, Frank?" Ellen asked.

"It's the only way we'll pull off the diversions and traps. We'll have to move fast. Ready?"

"Whenever you are."

"Not just yet." Frank shifted his eyes.

"Why not?"

"Down."

"Huh."

Out went Frank's hand. At the same time he pulled his revolver from his harness, he pressed on Ellen, pushing her to the ground as he fired out to the two soldier headed their way.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Quite used to it at that point in the game, huddled like a turtle in a shell on the ground, Ellen coughed away the dirt Frank kicked toward her face in the pivot. Fluttering out her lips, she opened her eyes to see between Frank's firm planted feet, in the distance, more boots. "Frank." She called out. "Behind you."

"I know." Frank turned, rapidly firing at the four ensuing. "Fuck." He fired again, the swung forth his M-16. "Assistance!" Frank cried out through his headset. "Now!"

To his left were three more, he took them out as well. But his inner gut told him it was far from over. Just having that thought, Frank reached down, heaved Ellen to her feet, turned to run, and turned to a wall of soldiers.

No way to run, no way to hide, Frank shoved Ellen behind him, raised again to fire and then . . . Robbie appeared.

But only briefly. The screaming of his word, 'relay', and sizzling flashes preluded his leap forward to Ellen. Without stopping, without hesitating, he grabbed hold of her and kept on running.

Like a well rehearsed ballet, Robbie pulled Ellen across his front, then set her down with the minimal amount of slowing down. "Sector seven. Sector seven, repeat. Fire off sector seven. I'm hitting nine."

Ellen, huffed and ran, her legs twisted trying to keep up with Robbie. She couldn't comprehend what he was saying. "Robbie slow . . ."

"Can't El. Can't. Hal, roger that."

"Roger that. In five . . ."

Robbie, in his run, mouthed the words, 'four, three, two, one . . .' And again, lifting Ellen up with his one Arm, he reared left and a charged jump, just as another explosion rang out.

Tree limbs pelted them just as the hit the bank they dove over. Feet first they slid, separating mid hill. The picked up momentum for a short period of distance, but were halted bodily by the obstacle of a fallen tree.

Ellen felt the bark slam into her back and just as she sat up, she was shove back down by Robbie.

"Fuck." He whispered, belly down, peering over the tree that gave them some protection. 'Hal.' He called int the radio. "You close."

"Sector?" Hal asked.

"Almost at nine. I see it. And soldiers, waiting."

"Sector twelve is to your right a half mile, can you . . ."

"No way. Can't stand. We'll be spotted."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

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"Blinders?" Hal asked.

"Do we want to waste them?" Robbie questioned. "Frank? How close?"

"Too far." Frank responded. "I'm laying Dean-ami-minis, up by four. I won't be long."

Ellen's head shifted from left to right in confusion. "Robbie? What is this sectors?"

"It's what we did all night long." Robbie winked. "While you slept." He lifted an index finger to Ellen. "Hold on. What's that Hal?"

"Relay in a few. Get ready. You go forward. I'll go twelve. Come around. Meet on fourteen."

"Got it."

"Relay?" Ellen asked.

"Relay." Robbie repeated.

"Relay." Hal said just before gunfire rang out. He dove to the ground, nodded to Robbie, watched Robbie's arm lift the grenade, and as soon as Hal heard the safety sound of the snapping, crackling, blinders, he scooped up Ellen and ran off.

Not much cover behind that tree was needed for Robbie. He fired into the men who ran about blinding from the effects of his explosives.

"Where they at?" Frank asked as he joined Robbie behind the tree.

"Headed to twelve. We'll met at fourteen."

"We're clear behind. Want my thoughts?" Frank asked. "I think they are patch worked throughout this mountain."

"Real life video game." Robbie snickered.

"A game of get to the end of the mountain without dying first. Question is . . ." Frank gave an upward motion of his head. "Missed one."

"Sorry." Robbie fired. "What is the question?"

"Huh?"

"You said 'question is'."

"Oh. Question is. Take out the society, as much as we can on the way down, or get down as fast as we can, lift the birds and wipe them out."

Robbie smiled. "Why not try to do both."

"Why not. Let's go." Frank stood, moving his mouthpiece to his radio forward. "Hal, what's going on."

"We're moving forward Frank. Thick brush looks good. Being cautious."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Robbie and I are proceeding. Call for assistance if needed, otherwise, stay on course, see you at the bottom by the bird.” Frank said.

“Roger that.”

Frank turned to Robbie. “Load up.”

Robbie replaced the clip at the same time as Frank.

“Dean-ami-mini count?” Frank asked.

“Four grenades.”

“I have six. Blinders.”

“Three.” Robbie counted.

“Four.” Frank added his. “I’d say we’re hooked up for the rest of the two miles.”

“If we play our cards right, we may clean off this mountain on the way down.”

“Slagel Avalanche.” Frank grinned. “Just be hands ready.”

“Um, Frank, with me, that would be, hand ready.” Robbie winked.

With a chuckle, Frank shook his head. “Let’s just do this.” He started running, Robbie on his side. “I have a feeling little brother, as long as Hal stays on course, this mountain battle will be easier than we even thought.”

“Then it will be easier than we ever thought, Frank.” Robbie said in his running. “I mean, come on. When does Hal ever stray off course.”

Frank exhaled his frustration with a squealing growl. He peered left to right. “Where the fuck is Hal?”

From the other side of the hidden chopper, Robbie walked. “He’s not in the truck either.”

“Fuck!” Frank screamed out. “Fuck!”

“Frank.” Robbie tried to calm him.

“No.” Frank was near out of control. “We clean house. We wiped out. We get a radio from Hal, they made it safely to the bottom of the mountain. So where are they?”

Lifting a finger, Robbie pointed to the radio. “Want me to ask.”

Frank shook his head. “No, I will.” He breathed out once more and tried to sound calm. “Hal. Oh, Hal. Where the fuck are you?”

The radio hissed loudly. “On . . . bot . . . tin.”

Frank’s eye twitched in irritation. “Again.”

“Bottom . . . tin.”

Thinking, he’d help, Robbie translated. “Bottom of the mountain.”

“I know.” Frank grumbled. “Hal.” Too sweetly, Frank spoke. “We’re



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

at the bottom of the mountain as well. Actually, you'll find this funny. Robbie and I, are standing by a fuckin truck and helicopter. Where are you!"

The cracking and hissing was overwhelmed.

The more noise that carried through the radio, the more annoyed Frank grew. "Hal!"

The hissing stopped. "Ah, that's better. I hear you now." Hal spoke. "Sorry, Frank, we ran into some trouble and had to veer off course. We're about a mile or so east of you."

"But everything is fine?" Frank asked.

"Now, yes." Hal replied. "Actually, you should see this place we're at. There's a really nice stream that seems . . ."

"Hal." Frank stopped him.

Robbie laughed.

"What is so funny?" Frank asked Robbie.

"Sorry." Robbie spoke through his snickering.

"Nothing is amusing." Hal said. "I was commenting about the stream."

"Can you find us?" Frank questioned.

"Yes." Hal responded. "Just wait there and we'll . . . shit."

"What?"

There was a slight tremble to Hal's voice, that carried more than his single word answer over the airways. It carried a seriousness. "Trouble."

^^^

The dumbfounded mouthing of the word, 'trouble' from Joe, was reiterated by the confused look on Elliott's face.

Elliott just shook his head slowly. "Where is the trouble?"

Dean moved closer to the pair. "Swahili guy just relayed that they pulled almost a third from the mountain to regroup."

"A third?" Joe asked.

Dean shrugged. "That's what I got. Maybe that is the trouble Hal ran into."

Scratching the bridge of his nose, Joe tried to think like his sons. "Has to be something else. Maybe not even that big of a deal. The boys had this one under control. They lured them in, in order to get the society to commit their troops. The minute the society realized this, hence they pulled."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

"You know Joe. A mountain?" Dean was puzzled. "From what we heard, it sounds as if they had the whole thing rigged and waiting."

"They did." Joe replied.

Dean was still confused. "That's an awful lot of work on chance. How would they know that the society would follow them to the . . . no." He rolled his eyes. "They aren't."

"They are." Joe stated.

"They're leading the society to them." Dean's voice upped on the end in his emotions. "How could they do such a thing. This is my wife."

"And trust me when I tell you, Dean, she means as much to them as well. *That* is why they are doing this. My sons know damn well, if they don't take out all six hundred men. Coming home won't be so easy."

"Got it." Elliott spoke up and raised the volume of the radio. "Hal's trouble. Listen."

Joe did. His eyes closed in disbelief as he turned into the background nosie. "Christ . . . savages."

^^^

If words were voltage than Frank was electrocuted when he heard Hal's call of, 'Christ . . . Savages.' Frank's first instinct was to take off and run the mile to where Ellen and Hal were, but then reality kicked in.

Neither he or Robbie knew the exact location of Hal. And from what Hal broadcast over the radio, Frank was certain, the best aid he could give his brother was from the air. Hurriedly, he and Robbie checked the front and side guns on the chopper and prepped the bird. A plan of motion was being devised with each second that passed. Frank was certain, until he and Robbie arrived, Hal would be fine with a few savages.

"Move it, Frank!" Hal called out over the radio as he nearly shoved Ellen behind a denseness of brush. "I have them coming in from north and east. At least twenty, maybe more . . ."

"Give us one more minute, Hal. One more. Are you out of sight?" Frank asked.

"Buried, right now . . ." Hal raised his weapon to shoot and depressed the trigger. "Don't know for how . . ." Four shots fired then nothing. "Fuck."

"What?" Frank asked.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

"My clip is jammed. Just hurry." Hal slouched down to where Ellen was in a huddle position., he pulled the clip from the rifle, stuck it in his pocket. The new clip was barely in its chamber when Hal turned and aimed out ward. It wasn't so much the purpose of defeating the ensuing savages, but rather keeping them a bay until Frank arrived.

Here and there he hit them.

"Take my revolver." Hal told Ellen. "Just in case."

"Should I help shoot?"

"No. Just take it just in case."

His chest was crushed against the slope of the hillside and Ellen couldn't squeeze her hand through, so over his back, she reached and grabbed the revolver in the holster to Hal's side.

"Got it." She said.

"Get it ready, do you know how?" Hal asked, firing more. Watching the savages out beyond the clearing, dart out, then drop from being hit or run back to the woods.

"Yes." She shifted the chamber as she backed up.

"Just don't shoot that gun."

The gun fired.

"Ellen!" Hal yelled.

Ellen fired again. "Hal! Savages."

Wide, Hal's eyes were as he spun around to look. "Shit. Frank . . ."

The arrow hardly whistled in its high speed flight. It seemed to barely have time to even make a noise prior to the hard, fast, 'deep thump' landing it made into Hal's chest.

All breath escaped Ellen, but her quivering shock quickly turned to a blood curdling scream that carried through Hal's radio.

The chopper lifted from the ground, and Frank, hand above his head, flipped controls? "Something's happened. Hal! Come in. Hal!" Frank looked over his shoulder to Robbie who stood in the open chopper door. "Robbie, secure yourself." He returned to the radio. "Hal, come in."

The hit shocked him for a split second, but Hal kept his bearings. He snapped the arrow off at the body, then grabbed hold of Ellen's arm, and charged out from their hiding spot. "Frank. Spot us in the clearing. I repeat

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

...” Hal pulled Ellen with one arm, and sprayed a safety line of gunfire as he ran with her. “Spot us in the clearing.

Ellen look dup. “I hear them.”

Hal quickly assessed left to right, front to back. “:Run, Ellen. Run.”

“What? No.”

“Run.” Hal shoved her. “go!” He raised his M-16, saw Ellen dart off and then Hal, spun in his firing. He run, fire, drop, roll, fire again. Trying his hardest to not only hit the savages, protect himself, but more so, keep them from chasing after Ellen.

Hal was unsuccessful.

“I see her!” Robbie shouted to Frank. “They are in pursuit of her, Frank.”

“Can you get them.” Frank asked.

“Not without chancing hitting Ellen.”

“What about Hal?”

Bracing himself, Robbie peered out the door. “Alone and about seventy feet from her.”

“Fuck.” Frank grunted in frustration. Finally, in his turn of the chopper, he saw what Robbie did.

Ellen running, five savages close behind her, Hal way off in the distance, alone. “All right. We’ll have to land and get them.”

“Why don’t we just get Ellen, and fire from the air!” Robbie shouted.

“We have to land to get her.”

“No . . . we don’t.” Robbie secured the rope around him. “Keep it steady. Drop your speed and lower the alt.”

“What the hell are you doing?” Frank looked over his shoulder.

“You’ve done it.” Robbie prepared to leap.

“That was me. And I wasn’t . . .” Frank cringed when Robbie leaped out the open door. “I wasn’t the one flying. Shit. I suck at this. Steady. Steady. Robbie, don’t miss.”

The plan was good, and at the steady speed and course Frank flew, Robbie saw he was dead on in getting Ellen. His concept of rescue was noble, but somewhere in the jump of freedom and, ‘man this feels cool’ moment Robbie experienced, he forgot one important thing. The only means he had to grab hold of Ellen, was already occupied with holding on to the rope.

“Grab her, I’ll drop you two, then swing back and help Hal.” Frank told him. “How close now?”

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Um . . .” Robbie fought the rush of air to hear Frank. “Close.” And he was. Just as he thought, ‘how am I gonna do this’, Robbie received his answer when the tip of his boot hit against the head of one of the savages, knocking him forward. It had to be the lack of time to plan it out, that gave Robbie the prehistoric amphibian instinct he never knew he had. He slid down some on the sailing rope, and just as he did, he arrived at Ellen, reached out to her running body with his legs, and locked them tight around her.

“Got her.” Robbie called out. “Oh, shit, I got her. Hey!” He grinned.

“Get ready. I’m lowering.”

Pretty much Ellen didn’t have a second to think about what was happening. She felt the blast of air from the chopper, heard the loud engine noises, and by the time she realized Robbie had grabbed her, Ellen found herself pummeling to the ground. Her back smashed against the rugged earth, it jolted from her every ounce of air. But before she could breathe in, Robbie landed on top of her.

It was Robbie’s intention to roll with the momentum, and move Ellen from harm’s way before jumping up and removing the ensuing savages. But something stopped him mid-plan . . . The single gunshot from a revolver that discharged an inch from his head. Robbie squealed a shriek of surprise. Ear still ringing his head ejected upward and with wide eyes he looked with horror to Ellen. “You have a gun! Oh, fuck! Who would give you a gun!”

With a frustrated ‘give me that’ he snatched up the weapon of his near demise, stumped to his feet, turned and began to fire at the savages so close.

Every single shot Robbie fired was echoed by the magnitude of shots that rang out in the distance from Frank in the helicopter. He could hear the bullets sear and rip through trees. The sounds of dying and screaming savages played like a well received orchestra to Robbie, and he knew things were going well.

Bringing the microphone to his headset around, Robbie fired off his last shot and headed back to where Ellen just sat. Hand reaching to Ellen, Robbie readied to speak to Frank, but stopped when he heard Frank’s voice.

“Hal, respond. Hal. Come in.” Frank called out.”

Curious, Robbie interjected as he aided Ellen to her feet. “Frank? What’s going on.”

“Clearing now.” Machine gun firing was the backdrop to Frank’s voice. “Hal. Respond. Hal? Come in. I can’t see you. Where are you.”

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“Frank?” Robbie said with concern.

“Hold on. Fuck.”

Robbie listened to the gun fire slow down. “Frank? What’s . . .”

“I can’t see him. I have to land. Something doesn’t feel right.”

“I’m on my way.”

Shaking his head, fighting the sun for a better view, Frank moved the chopper into the battle ground clearing where he last saw Hal. Bringing the chopper down, Frank’s heart dropped faster than that bird every could when his brother came into view. “No.” He grumbled out in sickening feeling. “Oh my God.”

Little strength, legs weak, Hal stumbled with everything he had to stand and move. His arm draped across his chest, but it didn’t hide the magnitude of blood that seemed to cover him completely.

Panic was all over Frank’s tone as he landed the helicopter sloppily. “Hal’s down! Robbie! Bring Ellen. Hurry. Hal’s down.” Off went the engines as soon as Frank felt the chopper hit the ground. In a hunch under the still slowing blades, he ran in a charge to Hal.

Hal tried. Hal really tried. Left to right he moved. Knees buckling every step, and smacking to the ground right before Hal fought to stand. He didn’t know where exactly he was hurt. Somewhere in his battle he lost the pain. However, the adrenaline he used to fight, to keep himself moving, dissipated the second he saw Frank. A slight smile of relief swept across Hal’s face when Frank reached to him. But he never made it to the sanctity of his older brother’s arms, Hal’s eyes rolled and he dropped to the ground.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Springville, Utah

Ellen swore her hands were blistered from the temperature of the boiled water she repeated submerged her hands into. The basin of water never cooled because she had to call for fresh water constantly. It seemed every time she turned around, the water was too tainted with blood to use.

She reached the point of exhaustion and her heat chapped hands, still damp ran through her hair and she exhaled a breath filled with emotions she couldn't sort out. Prayers were in order, and Ellen prayed that the medical equipment left behind in the doctors office in town had been cleaned and sterilized enough by her for the procedure she had taken hours to perform.

The word 'raw' was an understatement for how she handled what she had to do to Hal. Things Dean had packed weren't enough, and Ellen had to wonder what in the world Dean was thinking when he did so. Was Dean's faith in the Slagel men so much that he failed to even mildly prepare for the worst?

Frank and Robbie aided as best as they could, but they became more of a hindrance to her. Between their constantly disturbing Hal, teasing him about how lame he was, and 'oh, that's gross' comments, Ellen had enough. She kicked them out.

Where was the seriousness. Weren't they seeing it? She understood that the 'Slagels' placed themselves on a different mentality level when it came to injuries and illnesses. The 'mind over matter' wasn't to them, a question of 'I am not sick' thinking way of a healing process, but rather, 'how bad can I annoy my sibling to the point that don't want to be sick anymore.' To Ellen it was a bit much. Under normal circumstances she would handle it. However, the circumstances were extreme.

Finished finally, she pulled the door closed behind her and followed the voices that seemed to come from the reception area of the doctors office that they had found. She heard talk of 'this mountain or that', but Ellen paid no mind to locations they spoke of, as long as they spoke of safe locations to go.

"How is he?" Frank asked immediately when he saw Ellen step into the reception area.

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“Right now, he’s resting.” Ellen answered.

“What do you mean resting?” Frank questioned.

Sarcastically Ellen looked at him. “Um, eyes closed, resting for healing sort of thing. What other kind of resting is there? He was injured.”

“Yes, I know this, El. Can we wake him?”

Ellen blasted a ‘what!’

Frank peered to Robbie.

Robbie shrugged.

Figuring Ellen didn’t hear him, slowly Frank repeated the question. “Can . . . we . . . wake . . . him?”

At first her jaw twitched then the pointing finger she lifted became a smack to Frank’s chest and she shoved him out of her way. “You’re an asshole, Frank.”

Tossing up his hands, Frank walked behind her. “What did I do? I asked.”

“A stupid question.” Ellen snapped. “And no. You can not wake him. He is sedated.”

“Oh. Way to go, El.” Frank shook his head. “Now we have to carry him. Robbie, let’s get . . .”

“Wait.” Ellen halted his sentence and action with a single movement up pf her hand. “What is the matter with you.” She glanced to Robbie. “Both of you. Do you not understand the seriousness of this? Hal had injuries. A lot of tem. He took a high chest wound that came awfully close to puncturing his lung and incapacitating him completely. That broken leg that heeled not that long ago? Screwed up again.”

“Oh.” Frank waved out his hand. “Hal’s fine. We have to move him.”

“Listen to you.” Ellen argued. “Hal is not fine. He needs to rest. It isn’t safe to move him,”

“And it is not safe here.” Frank grew serious. “Period. We move him.”

“Then fine.” Ellen said with some defeat. “But we move him to a safe hiding place. He can’t fight. He cannot do this running around.”

“All right.” Frank nodded in agreement. “There’s nothing we can do strategically about losing Hal as a third but . . .”

“Strat . . . Strat . . .” Ellen stuttered. “Strat . . .”

“Strategically.” Frank gave her the answer. “Big word.”

“I know the word you moron. Hal isn’t a strategic piece. He’s your brother.”

“He is my brother. But he is also my comrade, my left, right, front and back hand man. We are a team.”



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Ellen huffed out. She look to a silent Robbie and took that as a good sign, then calming herself, she returned to Frank. "There's something not right with you when you hit this mode. But . . . at least we're hiding him."

"Ye." Frank nodded. "Hide him, then you, me and Robbie move on."

"What!" Ellen screamed. "Move on? To where? Why? The game is over Frank. Form this moment on the game is . . . over."

"No, El!" Frank said strong. "The game is not over! There are at least three hundred society soldiers out there and two days remaining."

"And I find I hard to believe, Frank, that with that military mentality of yours, that you can't find a place for the four of us to hide for the next two days." Ellen argued. "I know you've tried, and I know you can do this. But it seems as if every place we ran, they followed us like you led them to us. Now . . ." Ellen was about to continue when she noticed the silent eerie look on Frank's face. "Whoa. Wait. No." She shook her head. "You didn't . . . lead them to us did you?"

Frank said nothing.

Ellen gasped. "You weren't hiding us, were you? You were leading them to us?"

"El, look . . ."

"No." Ellen fought. "No. What were you thinking?"

Robbie stepped forward. "In Frank's defense, the decision to make the society follow us was a joint decision."

"I didn't have as say so." Ellen defended.

"With all due respect, El." Frank said. "You aren't doing the fighting. We are."

"You left a trail?" Ellen asked. "Why in God's name did you do that?"

"To trap them." Frank answered. "Plan and simple trap them. Trap them, kill them, take them out."

"That is ridiculous." Ellen argued. "You had eight days to keep us hid. Eight days. Well, I'll tell you what Frank. Forget these little pissy games you and your brothers are playing with our lives. Two days remain. We let Hal rest and we hide. Like I said before. This game is over."

"We have to continue to fight them."

"Why?" Ellen was baffled. "In two days, it's done anyhow."

"You think?" Frank's voice raised. "You really think. Well if that is what is going through your mind, then you, El, are wrong." Frank's hand swung about in his speaking. "In two day, yes, the hunt for you is over with. And yes, if we hide, the game will end. But also if we hide, there will still be three hundred plus society soldiers remaining. And you know what? They'll

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

still be out here. They'll still be the enemy because we, Beginnings are still at war with the society. So instead of three hundred soldiers chasing us from eight in the morning until midnight. Instead of three hundred soldiers following rules established. We'll have three hundred plus soldiers able to do whatever the fuck they want. It may not look it to you, but even though there are only four of us, we have the advantage right now. And *that* is why we have to take them out before the official end of the game. Because come January 23<sup>rd</sup> at noon. Not only is the game over, but so are the rules. And those three hundred society soldiers . . .” Frank dropped his voice. “They can hit us, any time, anyway. Any how . . . we'll be fucked.”

^^^

The frosted reflection in the aluminum thermos made Joe smile briefly in an ‘old world’ memory. How he never went anywhere without his thermos of coffee, and how he never thought about getting one while in Beginnings. It was a perfect Christmas gift from Danny Hoi. A gift, nearly a month later, Joe finally got around to using.

Tan canvass Jacket buttoned nearly to the top, Joe sat on the concrete wall of the flag staff on the edge of the ‘Joe park’. The early afternoon streets of Beginnings were pretty barren. The snow fell, but Joe didn’t mind. It really wasn’t as cold as it could of been. He undid the cap of the thermos, took in that winter feel and smell of the cloud of steam that emerged, then he poured himself a cup.

“Kind of cold . . .” Jenny’s voice carried down to Joe. “To be sitting out here. Don’t you think?”

“Well, I just thought . . .” Joe looked up to Jenny who stood before him. Her full face encircled and nearly buried behind the pink fur of the tightly tied hood of the parka she wore. “What in God’s name are you wearing?” He asked in reference to her winter outer wear.

“Oh.” Jenny smiled, running her hand down the green sleeve that had big pink fabric flowers sewn upon it. “The last crew that went out found a shipment of military parkas. You gave them to Ben from Fabrics, and he fixed them up. Aren’t they pretty, Joe. They’re the latest rage.”

“Swell.”

“Twenty Danny Dollars.”

“Christ almighty. Twenty Danny dollars for a basic need. That’s a half a week’s work.”

“Yes, but, aren’t all fine coats worth it.”

Joe grumbled.

"May I join you?"

"Yes." he scooted over some. "Coffee?"

"No."

"What brings you out here?"

"I saw you." Jenny said. "I can see the park from my desk. In all the years the Joe Park has been here, I don't think I have ever seen you sit on the reflection wall."

"The reflection wall?" Joe looked to where he sat. "No, I don't think I ever sat here for an extended period of time. I never thought anyone would sit here for an extended period of time."

"In the spring people fight for a lunch seat on the wall."

"That's absurd."

"No. It isn't. Not really." Jenny smiled peacefully. "It's a simplicity of life we all love. Thanks to you."

"I can't take credit."

"So, you didn't say. Why are you out here in the cold?" Jenny looked up. "And snow?"

"Well . . ." Joe exhaled. "You can say I'm reflecting. Long week. Long . . . long week."

"A lot on your mind with your family. I know. It'll be over soon."

"Two more days." Joe brought his coffee cup to his lips. "How's John?"

"Wonderful. Loving the UWA training. So extensive it is. They've recently moved out of New Bowman for two week wilderness survival training."

"They do that?" Joe looked puzzled. "I never knew that."

"Yes, designed to help them when they go out on scouting missions."

"So how much longer until John is full fledged UWA?"

"Two more weeks." Jenny said proudly. "Then we'll be able to see him. This once a week, few hours, here and there is terrible. John said that UWA spirit is holding up well in Hal's absence. Everyone is concerned and awaiting his return."

"Yeah." Joe said sadly. "Me, too."

"What is it, Joe?" Jenny noticed the drop on Joe's face.

"Well, you know we've been monitoring the game. Sort of. It's limited. The limited monitoring was a blessing. Now it's a curse. Something has happened to Hal. He got hurt, I don't know, and we haven't heard anything since."

“What do you think?”

“I want to say all is fine but . . .”

“Then say it.” Jenny said perky. “Really. Say it.”

After a few blinks of contemplation, Joe nodded. “All is fine.”

Whispering, Jenny leaned to him. “But I’ll still pray if that helps.”

“Never hurts.” Joe winked.

“How are you feeling Joe?”

“Honestly. Good.” Joe replied. “Tired. Elliott and I are trying to squeeze in all the communities work, security work, along with having a close watch on this game. It’s exhausting.”

“But things are running smoothly. Oddly enough.”

“Oddly enough, I’m gonna agree.” Joe took a swig of his coffee. “All hell is breaking loose outside of are walls, I’m just grateful that inside of these walls, people are happy.”

^^^

“I have racked my brain all night and morning.” Hector followed Misha around the file room at the clinic.

“Hector, I am very busy.” Misha said coldly and shut the file cabinet.

“I don’t care. Aren’t you listening?”

“I am very busy. I can not talk.”

“I deserve more.” Hector argued. “I have spent every single day with you. I have courted you. Gotten to know you. I fell in love with you. Asked you to marry me. You said, ‘yes’. Misha, you said . . .” Frustrated was the grunt that came from Hector when she walked away to the other side of the rom. “You told me you would marry me. Then out of the blue. Out of the blue. You break it off. You won’t look me in the eyes. You ignore me. I racked my brain.” He followed her back to the filing cabinet. “All night I tried to determine what it was I said or did. My heart is breaking here.”

“And you think mine is not?” She asked and opened a file cabinet.

“If it is, tell me what I did.”

“I can not. It is not important. It is just over.”:

“Bullshit.” Hector slammed the fil cabinet and blocked Misha from reaching for it.

“You will not take that tone with me.”

“And you will tell me why you broke it off. You will tell me why I saw a side of you last night that I didn’t think I’d ever see.”

Misha chuckled a laugh of disbelief.

“What? You don’t think?”: Hector asked. “Nick reached out for you. You wouldn’t look at him. That was wrong. That was really wrong. He is an innocent.”

“I can not have him be apart of my life.”

“That’s cold. And he’s a child. He can’t distinguish things. You can’t open and shut your heart to a baby. My son . . .”

“He is not your son.” Misha snapped.

“I consider him my son.”

“He is Henry’s son.”

“And I assumed responsibility for that child!” Hector yelled. “Henry was granted full custody because I wanted to help him. I needed to help him. I consider that baby as much my son as Henry’s.”

“The mother and the father. You and Henry.” She said near whisper.

“Yes.”

Again, Misha chuckled. “Figures.”

Rapidly Hector shook his head in confusion. “What is this about? This new attitude. I deserve to know.”

“No you don’t But I will tell you because I do want you asking me, or bothering me again.”

“Fine. Tell me.” Hector lifted his hand, an intent stare upon Misha as they stood close at that file cabinet.

“You, Hector, have not been honest with me. Honesty in the beginning wouldn’t make a difference now, because there would be no ‘now’ had you been honest. There would have been no us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Honesty. You failed to tell me. Failed to tell me Hector that the reason you are a father to Nick, isn’t out of friendship or loyalty, it is out of your love for Henry.”

“Henry is my friend.”

“Henry was, or is, your lover.”

Silence.

The hiding of his heavy breath of ‘uncovering’ was hard to do. Even in the quiet, Hector swore even his fast beating heart was heard. He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t move. His eyes just locked on to Misha’s and his jaw twitched in nervousness and anger.

“You can’t respond, can you?” Misha asked. “Because it is true. It is bad enough that you did not tell me you and Henry were lovers, but you did not tell me, you were a lover to many men here in Beginnings.”

Hector’s eyes closed.

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"You have no respect for yourself, your body. You performed unnatural acts with men that make me sick. The flesh Hector was so important to you, that you forgot principal. Marry you?" Misha laughed. "I can't stand to be in the same room as you nor look at you, let alone the thought of your touch makes my skin crawl."

"How . . . how . . ."

"How did I find out?" Misha asked.

Hector nodded.

Misha opened her mouth to speak but stopped. "It is not important."

"Yes, it is. It is very important? How did you find out?"

An invasion of privacy. A promise to her friend, Ben, to not tell that he gave her information. Misha stayed silent.

"Misha. How?" Hector asked.

After a swallow, and a smug look, Misha lifted her head. "Dean."

Hector stared for a second, then he stormed out.

^^^

"Christopher, sit down." Dean instructed with a perturbed tone of a parent. He pulled the chair out from the round table in the clinic lunch room. "Sit."

"This is an odd place to meet."

"Less cluttered and less visual distractions for you." Dean told him.

"No one comes in here."

"What is this place?"

"It's a place where clinic workers come to eat."

"Are we going to eat?" Christopher asked.

"No."

"What is that?" He pointed.

"A refrigerator."

"Ah." Christopher nodded in revelation and pulled out the small note pad he had. "I know of the term. Refrigerator." He flipped through a page.

"Yes. Here. Are there small frozen children in that refrigerator, Dr. Hayes?"

"What?" Dean asked shocked.

"In the cryo lab. Frank, god of Warriors, told me you have his frozen child in the refrigerator."

"Well, yes, but only until I figure out how to defrost him correctly."

Christopher looked baffled.

"Don't worry about it." Dean prepared to sit down. He dropped a

folder before Christopher. "I want to sit down and explain to you some procedures that I . . ." He stopped in the middle of pulling out a chair when he heard the strong calling of his name.

"Dean." Hector called hard and stormed into the lunch room.

"Hey, Hector." Dean smiled. "What's going on."

"Why did you do it?"

"Excuse me?" Dean asked.

Christopher tugged on Dean's sleeve. "Perhaps he is asking about the frozen children."

The left half of Dean's mouth raised in a snicker as his attention turned to Christopher. He wanted to laugh, but realized Hector's inquisition was serious. Returning his views back to Hector, unexpected, before he could say anything, the side of Dean's jaw was greeted with tightly closed, and fiercely delivered fist of Hector.

The crack rang out. Christopher shrieked, and Dean stumbled back.

Barely did Dean ricochet in to the counter, and barely did he have time to even think what had happened. Half way into a repercussion spin of the first hit, Dean was grabbed by Hector and punched again.

Enough was enough. About the point where his adrenaline kicked in to cover any pain, the 'whys' of the accosting were no longer important to Dean, defending himself was. The second his vision, the vision so precious to him, went blurry for an instant, Dean become enraged. The shot to the eye was too far. Shaking his head from the third hit, Dean looked in enough time to see yet another punch coming.

Tee shirt still locked in the grip of Hector, Dean ducked out of that punch and quickly swiped out his leg across Hector's ankle.

Hector's legs buckled some, but before he could gain his footing, Dean grabbed the back of his head, and with a shoving momentum, slammed Hector face first into the counter.

Hector didn't fall easily. His hands slammed to the counter intercepting the face shot. In the 'up' of the after hit, Hector full speed, swung around his body, grabbed on to Dean and in a near toss, careened Dean to the lunch table not far from them.

Across the round slick surface Dean slid, then rolled backwards, legs-over-head off the table and onto the floor. Hector grabbed a chair.

Like a wrestler, in a typical chair shot move, Hector heaved the furniture over his head and charged. Before he could crash it down, Dean kicked forth into the table. It flipped with a vengeance and smacked into Hector sending him flying back.

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Christopher screamed his loudest as he ran from the room. "Uh! The gods are fighting. The heavens will clash. The heavens will clash!"

"There is something about snow and winter." Joe said as he walked down the corridor of the clinic with Elliott.

"I agree. Peaceful." Elliott said.

"Quiet."

"Do you hear that?" Elliott paused as they neared the bend.

"What?"

"Some one screaming."

No sooner did Elliott say that, and Christopher barreled around the corner.

"Whoa." Joe grabbed for him, then quickly retracted his hand when he felt the weirdness of Christopher's skin. "What's the rush."

"The sky will fall. The sky will fall. Run. Run. Run." Christopher, once again, took off running.

Joe shrugged. "Goddamn people. Anyhow. What were we saying."

Elliott continued to walk. "About how peaceful it is."

In a simple turn of the bend, Joe grabbed Elliott out of the way, when like a massive human bowling ball, Dean and Hector, entangled tightly, rolled down the hall.

"You were saying?" Joe asked.

Releasing a shocked, 'oh my God.' Elliott raced to the tangling pair. With a sweep of his arm, in the run of his momentum, Elliott grabbed onto the first person he reached, that person was Dean. He lifted him from the brawl, nearly a foot from the ground, then released him with a firmness and a slam against the wall. "Enough." Elliott ordered.

To Dean, Elliott was just a wisp of diversion. Wiry and worked up, he charged full speed only to be bodily blocked by Elliott.

"I said." Elliott moved Dean further back. "Enough."

Secure in the fact, that Dean was handled, Elliott released him, took a breath and turned around. He spotted Hector only for a split second, before he spotted Hector's sailing fist. With another loud, 'enough!' Elliott's hand sprang up and with a smack of his palm against Hector's knuckles, he intercepted that punch. Fingers gripping tightly to Hector's fist, Elliott's brown eyes dove through Hector. "Enough."

The few clinic workers there, immediately gathered. But the mumbles



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of their curiosity were silenced by the sound of Joe's shoes against the linoleum. Like a clock, slow and steady, Joe approached the men. Their heavy breaths carried out. Both Dean and Hector fought to control the breathing, and both of them showed outward and bloody signs of a hard drawn out fight.

Calm, in a manner only Joe could pull off, he looked at both of the men. As soon as he did, both Dean and Hector at the same time started rambling their explanation.

Joe simply lifted his index finger and both of them shut up. "This is a hospital. And right now, I don't give a rats ass who started it or who did what. You two got me . . . wrong place, wrong time, wrong day, wrong goddamn year."

From behind, Dan from security rushed in. "Every thing OK?"

"Yes." Joe replied. "Help Sgt. Ryder. I want both of them in cool down for two hours." The surge of Dean and Hector's voices blasted out. "Not now." Joe halted them. "Not now." After giving the 'go ahead' nod to Elliott and Dan, still calm, Joe, hands in pockets, walked away.

^^^

The arrogance and confidence portrayed into the air by George was like a blanket. And to Henry, it was too thick of a blanket and generated a lot of heat under his collar.

For days, almost a week, Henry lived, talked, ate and watched George. Never in that entire time span had George been so sure of himself. Odds, a gambler or not, were always something any person looked at. The Slagel team out smarted, out played, and out maneuvered George's men. Truly what were the odds that they would keep that going? That continuously, 'idiot leaders' as George called them, would lead the troops, not just into battle but into death.

What were the odds?

With each passing day. With each passing victory the odds grew more slim for the Slagel brood, even though Henry held high hopes.

But there was something about the phone call he had overheard between George and the last battalion leader that took reign of the mountain that ended up being nothing but a huge Slagel boobie trap. Something about it stirred incertitude in Henry.

George smiled, arms folded, looking at the speaker on the wall as if it were the actual sergeant. All look of worry left him, when the Battalion

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Sergeant said, *'Upon realizing that a forward movement and chase upon that mountain would breed loss of men due to the amount of traps we estimated were set. I apologize, Sir, but I felt it better to retreat and regroup.'*

So instead of losing all one hundred and seventy-five men, the society lost seventy.

And that worried Henry.

Two days left. Too many soldiers. Going back on odds, to Henry, what were the odds that George would say, 'well, three hundred soldiers is too many. Let's only send in half.'

Slim to none.

Reiteration of what Henry feared would be done came when he heard George and the glory of confidence, discuss his ultimate strategy with Bertha.

"Get a hold of our field correspondent." George told Bertha. "Maneuver a meeting place between them all. We're not just gonna see an end to this game. We're bringing an end to this game."

"Hit them continuously in small spurts?" Bertha questioned. "That is the original . . ."

"No. No pettily shit." George informed. "Unity, my Dear. We're gonna hit them hard, hit them big, and we're gonna hit them with everything we have all at once."

^^^

The one thing that Jess did not expect to do while performing his stint in the society as 'Beginnings spy' was laugh. Sure, he figured he'd get an amusing chuckle here and there off of the antics, and Johnny's pseudo retrograde amnesia was amusing. But laughing. Whole hearted laughing was not on Jess' agenda.

Yet he did.

From the belly up, he laughed, rocking back and forth in his chair with each chuckle that emanated while he was on the phone.

James, or as many called him, Level Two Naval Officer in charge, was actually really funny. At first Jess thought the humor wasn't humor at all, but lack of intelligence on the part of James. But the second time Jess spoke to him, he sensed, not stupidity, but rather sarcastic wit.

Jess had to admit, he didn't know much about James. Just a title and first name. And that was by accident because he answered the phone. James was in charge of the far southern region. The area where Bertha originated

her command. James, though labeled by some a militarily brilliant, did not project it, nor did he boast it. He rather complained about having to be in charge. When he didn't want to be. Dictating infantry divisions and movements, when James himself preferred to just perform the job he was given. Oversee and architect the Caceres Society naval division. That was it. That was all James wanted to do. And in the after-days of Bertha's departure, he stuck to his job, avoiding having to deal with any aspects of the new responsibility. Yet, another thing that made Jess laugh. James' figuring, no one would notice if he blew it off for a while. After all, nothing was happening down south anyhow.

It was a comfort to Jess to find out, that the southern division was where he would be sent following the return of George after the game. A comfort to know that he would be working side by side with someone like James. Because in Jess' immediate opinion and gut feeling, spying on the society would be easy due to the fact that James would bother to notice, or possibly even care.

James' loyalty was somewhat to the society, but more so to his men, and to doing his job. That was evident to Jess when James blasted into yet, another imitation of George Hadly.

Jess wiped the small amount of tearing from his eye in the after laugh of a pretty good 'George Hadly'. "That was great." Jess told James.

"I practice. But, hey, I don't get much chance to because I don't talk to him much. Not much at all. Just to that . . ." James made his voice whiny. "Steward Lange."

"That's pretty good."

"So . . . when do I get you down here to do this work?" James asked. "I am getting you down here, right?"

"I'm assuming as soon as the game is over with."

"The . . . game?" James asked. "Whoa. Wait. They're having war games. No shit."

"No. Not war games. The . . . Game."

"Like football?"

"No . . ." Jess laughed. "Like . . . you really don't know?"

"Nope. What is . . . The game? I remember a wrestler who had that name."

"Well it's . . ." Jess stopped. He had to be more careful. What if James was a set up or a test. As much as he enjoyed talking with James, Jess still had to keep his guard up. "You know what? On the chance I am not allowed to tell you, I'm gonna just not say anymore. OK?"

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"Fine with me. So, how long is this . . . game?"

"A couple more days."

"Then I should see you soon. You'll love it down here. Not sure how much you guys know up there, but I've been working pretty hard to deck this place out. Man, I got Disney World up and running ASAP. First order of business . . . fuckin space mountain. Hooked up."

"I look forward to that."

"So, Jess, you didn't tell me,. Where exactly did they pull you from? I never heard you name before Bertha-babe said it."

"You're serious?" Jess questioned.

"Yes."

"I was in the Beginnings plan."

"Well, most of us that are in authority were in it from the beginning plan. I mean what region."

Jess froze. *He didn't know Beginnings?* It had to be a joke, or the rumors Jess had heard about George not informing everyone of everything had to be true. So Jess tried a test. "Um . . . Montana? Ring a bell?"

"The state. Yes." James said. "I'm not talking about where you grew up or were born. I mean what region of the society were you at? You had to be really far north. We don't hear much about people up there."

"Very far north." Jess said. "Actually, the Canadian Border movement."

"Sorry about that."

"What?" Jess chuckled.

"Yeah, I heard the Canadian Border movement sucked."

"You heard the . . . oh, you're joking."

"Yep. And got to go. The timer dinged. I'll check in later."

"For what purpose?" Jess asked.

"I don't know. It makes it look like I'm working. Catch you later Boyens."

Still in a snicker, Jess shook his head and hung up the phone. Checking out his watch, he knew he had surpassed what he considered his usual 'update' time to Beginnings. From his chest pocket he pulled out the palm computer and set it on the desk. After turning it on, Jess immediately readied to send a message, then he saw one on there. It was frm Joe. It was short and it asked simply, if when Jess sent an update, could he include one on Johnny because Joe had been thinking about him.

Fingers ready on the instrument, Jess halted when he herd the light tap on the door. He slid a folder from the desk over the computer. "Come in."

He called out.

The door opened and Johnny stepped inside. Slouching, face drawn and hair messed up, the young Slagel looked as if he had mentally deteriorated.

“Well.” Arrogantly, hands behind his head, Jess leaned back. “Did you not shower today?”

Johnny didn’t say anything. He stepped to the desk, pulled out a chair and sat down. “I need to talk to you.”

“About?” Jess brought himself forward and placed his hands on the desk.

“You said we were friends in Beginnings.”

“We were.”

“Good friends?” Johnny asked.

“Don’t you remember?”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” Johnny’s voice dropped.

“What is it?” Jess asked with seriousness.

“Were we good friends.”

“Why are you asking me this?”

“So I don’t get a bullet in my head.”

“What?” Jess nearly choked out the word. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“Just . . . just answer me.” Johnny wouldn’t even look up. “Were we good friends.”

Hesitant, Jess nodded. “Yes. But what does that have to do with why you *wouldn’t* get a bullet in your head.”

“Because I’m hoping you’ll understand and not say anything. I don’t remember, Jess. I don’t remember why I am here. I don’t remember what led me to this. I don’t remember. That’s why I’m asking you.”

Clueless, Jess shook his head. “Asking me what?”

“To let me get the hell out of here.”

“What?” Jess asked even more confused. “Out of here. You mean leave to go to another division?”

“No.” Johnny shook his head. “To go to Beginnings.”

^^^

“Swell.” Through the corner of the right mirrored cupboard, Dean

saw the reflection of his injured eye. He opened up the cupboard all the way and replaced the bandages and ointment he had pulled out. "Two days." He mumbled to himself. "Two days I have to face Ellen. Not only carrying the emotional damage down by Frank. But now physical damage as well." After shaking his head, Dean closed the cupboard door only to scream in a start when he saw Elliott's reflection.

"I didn't think my appearance was that frightening." Elliott said as he walked to Dean.

"You shocked me. I didn't expect to see you there."

"Obviously." Closer Elliott moved, then with a peering, serious look, shifted his eyes over Dean's face to check out his injuries. "I've seen worse."

"I think, but I'm not sure. I've been worse." Dean lifted an index finger.

"Any idea why the fight broke out?" Elliott asked.

"None. None whatsoever. I can't think of a single thing I did to Hector to make him hit me."

"So Hector threw the first punch."

"Yes. And the second."

"May I ask, Dr. Hayes, if there was no reason for the accosting, why then, Sir, was there an all out fight?"

"He hit me." Dean said. "I had to defend myself."

"I see." Elliott nodded. "And it couldn't end there."

"Yes. No." Dean grunted. "Probably not. I got pissed."

Elliott partially smiled, "Sometimes in stressful moments of our lives, it becomes more than defending our selves or our honor that allots for fights to go forth for so long. Sometimes . . ." He winked. "We need a good . . . brawl?"

"Sometimes."

"How's the vision?" Elliott indicated to Dean's eye.

"It went on me for a split second. I think it was just the hit. Jason did a CT scan, didn't see anything. But Danny is going to run a diagnostics check on the chip to see if there are any malfunctions. And he said he'll rejuvenate it while he's in there"

"We've come a long way, haven't we?"

"What do you mean." Dean asked.

"I mean. We've come a long way since the old world. Now a man doesn't just get a medical examination, he gets a tune up."

Dean chuckled. "You're really not that bad of a guy, Sgt. Ryder."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

“No, I’m not. I don’t believe you ever gave me a chance. But . . . that’s OK, I like a good . . .”

“Brawl?” Dean finished the sentence.

Elliott smiled. “Sometimes.”

“So, why are you here.”

“Aside to see you beaten? Mr. Slagel asked me to come here.”

“For what?” Dean questioned.

Joe’s voice answered. “To mediate.” Joe whistled when he saw Dean. “Christ you took a beaten didn’t you.”

“Thanks.” Dean rolled his eyes. “Mediate what?”

“Let me explain something.” Joe stepped closer. “When you have two opposing sides, some times you need a calm figure. To . . not say a word. To not interfere. To just . . . mediate.”

“Swell.” Dean groaned. “What? Elliott’s gonna play peer advisor while Hector and I sit in this room, has it out, shake hands, and be friends when it’s all said an done?”

“Not exactly.” Joe said. “Hector’s not the opposing force. He’s not the problem.”

Dean was offended. “What? And I am.”

With a shrewd shrug, and a smirk, Joe folded his hands ion front of him. “I don’t know, Dean. Your track record for starting trouble, proceeds you. Let’s look at the past few months. Shall we? I mean, you defect to the society. To save my son none-the-less, but the community viewed you as a trouble maker. You get accused of not only having an affair with Bev Hadly, but fathering her child as well. You then get accused of killing Bev Hadly and you hide the true murderer. The mighty physician in you diagnoses drug abuse, when your own wife denies it. You . . .” Joe started flipping out fingers. “Tranquilize and lobotomize a savage. Freeze my grandson in a cooler. Create a genetically cannibalistic breed of rabbit.. You accost my son Hal during a binge in which you got stoned out of your mind. You turn my other son into a jackrabbit. And let’s not forget that little span of time when you ran around screaming, ‘I went to the future, I went to the future.’” It was obvious the strain on Joe’s face that he was hiding his smile.

Dean just stared. “Ha-ha-ha. You done?”

“Yes.” Joe smiled.

“Why is Elliott Mediating?”

“I got to the root of your problem, Dean.” Joe winked. ;You’ll thank me.”

“For?” Dean asked.

“This.” On the counter Joe set a pocket size recorder. “Listen to this.” He pressed the ‘play’ button.

Hector’s voice played through. *“What do you want me to tell you, Mr. Slagel.”*

*“Hector, come on.”* Joe spoke reasonable. *“I know you. I like you. I’ve never seen you be violent, not like this. You admitted you went after Dean. All I want to know is what happened? Why? Why did you go after him.”*

*“I had good reason.”*

*“Of course you did. Tell me the good reason.”*

*“He ruined my life.”*

*“Well, that’s not news nor reason to beat him up. Dean’s ruined plenty of lives.”*

Eyes rolling, mouth open Dean shook his head. “Thanks a lot Joe.”

One eye closed, Joe point to the recorder.

*“Mr. Slagel, this is no Joke. He ruined my life. He is the reason Misha broke up with me.”*

*“OK, now this seems absurd, Hector. Dean’s the reason Misha broke up with you? I knew the little scientists seems to have his hands in all the trouble around here, but to break you guys up. Let’s be realistic. He’s not working with her, touching with her, or messing around with her. I’ll personal vonge for that.”*

*“That’s not the reason she ended it.”*

*“What’s the reason?”* Joe asked.

*“Misha informed me that Dean . . . that Dean told her that not only were Henry and I lovers, but he also told Misha I fucked every man in Beginnings.”*

The player shut off.

Elliott shook his head. “Dean. You dog.”

Dean was so shocked he couldn’t speak.

“Ah.” Joe halted any words from coming out of Dean’s mouth. “Before you say anything. I know you, Dean. I know you could give a rats ass about anyone’s business. And I also know, that you wouldn’t deliberately tell Misha about Hector and Henry.”

“On purpose or not, Joe. I didn’t say anything. Hector’s lying.” Dean defended.

“Is he?” Joe asked. He switched tapes in the recorder and pressed play again.

*“Misha, who told you about Hector and Henry, and a few other incidents he had with men?”* Joe asked Misha.

Misha answered, *“It was more than a few other men.”*

*“Whatever . . . who told you this?”*



"Dean."

*"I find this hard to believe. I mean, why would Dean tell you this?"*

There was a long pause before Misha spoke again. *"He has been trying for some time to break up me and Hector. He has wanted me for himself. I guess this was his way of revenge because I have spurned his advances to me."*

Joe shut off the player. "Once again, Dean. There's that nasty little accusation of sexual harassment."

Dean's eyes closed. "Joe, I . . ."

"Don't bother, Dean." Joe said. "I know the truth. I know it." He nodded assuredly. "Now, I say enough is enough. And it's time to ring out the truth. The truth being . . ." He pointed to the player. "This little girl has a problem. A big problem. I think you're the one who can start a rectification. It starts with you. You can set her straight. You're the only one." Joe started to walk away.

"Joe. Me?" Dean asked. "Why am I the only one?"

"I can't." Joe replied. "As a leader, I can't step into personal problems. She's not a bad kid, just a messed up kid. She needs a strong . . . she needs a strong opinion to straighten her out, or at least start. The women, they won't do it. They stick together. The men . . ." Joe fluttered his lips. "The men in Beginnings are fearful to insult or argue with a woman on the outside chance they may get laid by her later. And the UWA, they won't say shit to a woman at all. Nope. There's only two men who can argue with a woman, yell at her, make her cry, not give a shit, and not have their reputations tarnished, because every woman already hates them. Frank is the one man, the other . . . Is you." Joe smiled and moved to the door. "Sgt. Ryder, you are to be witness and not say a word. Dean . . . do something about this." he walked out then stepped back in. "After all, you started it."

Probably puzzled more than anything else, Dean after Joe walked out, turned to Elliott. "How did I start it?"

"Firing her perhaps. May I ask you a question, Dr. Hayes? You don't have to answer it."

"Go on."

"I know instances I saw with my own eyes that confused me. Instances with you and Misha. Are you sure, there was not something more than you let on."

"Let on to who?" Dean asked. "You. Frank. Anyone else who seemed to think I was . . ."

Elliott wondered why not only did Dean stop speaking, but his entire expression froze in that mid-thought. Turning to see what Dean was staring

at, Elliott spotted Misha standing in the lab doorway.

Misha's nervous swallow was predominant.

Elliott walked to the door and closed it behind Misha. "Come in."

"I need assurance, Sgt. Ryder . . ." Misha spoke soft. "That you are here in protection of me. That you will not allow him to harm me."

"Dr. Hayes will not touch you." Elliott confirmed.

"Verbally as well I do not wish to take a beaten."

Calm, Elliott answered. "I will intervene if words fly unjustly about. But surely if there is nothing to worry about, if no wrong was committed on your part, then a verbal beating is nothing to fear."

"Then I do not fear." Misha lifted her head high. "Mr. Slagel believes you and I, dr. Hayes, have some problems we need to work out."

"Some problems? Dean stepped to her. "No, I'd say we have a lot of problems. Most of them big. Most of them stemming from nothing. Do you understand that?"

Misha looked to Elliott. "I do not like his tone."

"I judge it to be fear and will intervene if necessary." Elliott stood behind Misha allowing more of a 'face to face' to occur.

"Then let's be fair." Dean said with a soft edge. "Take a look at my face, Misha. I was working. Minding my own business, and Hector barrels in and decks me. With then proceed to fight, and I find out after the fact, fight over you."

Almost to innocent, Misha gave a confused shrug. "I do not know what to tell you. Fighting over me is noble, but neither of you are in my preference."

"Don't flatter yourself." Dean commented. "Let me rephrase. We fought about you. We fought because you and Hector broke up."

"We broke up because of the vile things Hector has done with other men. That is not the reason Hector came for you."

"You're right. Hector came after me because you told him, I was the one who told you about Hector's reputation."

"You did."

The loud 'what!' blasted Dean's appalled nature. "That is an out and out lie. I did no such thing."

"I beg to differ, Dr. Hayes. You were the one that told me."

"Bullshit." Dean's hand slammed to the counter. "Enough of this bullshit. I did not tell you that. I would never tell you that. So why . . . So why would you blame me."

"Because you were the viable option."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

Dean could only blink in shock. “Viable option.”

“Yes. People generally do not like you. They like my friend. He is the one that told me, I will protect him.”

“Your friend? You don’t have any male friends. You’re afraid of men so . . . ah.” Dean nodded with a smirk. “You’re protecting Ben.”

“Mr. From-Fabrics is my friend.”

“Who is a male. You judge Hector’s actions when you’re friend does . . .” Dean stopped when he heard the loud inhale breath come from Elliott. He lifted his views to see Elliott, wide eyed. “What is it Sgt. Ryder?”

Elliott prepared to speak, but stopped. He couldn’t. It wasn’t his place to take sides even though, he himself had the ultimate argument and comeback for Dean. “Nothing.” Elliott shook his head then widened his eyes more to Dean behind Misha’s back to try to convey he knew something.

Dean continued. “Ben is a male who performs the same so call vile acts as you claim Hector does.”

“Ben has a birth defect. Eh was supposed to be a woman. Hector is all male.” Misha said smug. “He is not confused on which gender he is.”

Dean laughed. “That has got . . .” He noticed Elliott behind Misha pointing to her. He mouthed the word, ‘what?’ to Elliott.

Misha spun around.

Elliott quickly folded his arms and smiled. When Misha returned to looking at Dean, Elliott again, moved his lips in word formation, widened his eyes, and pointed at her.

Dean wasn’t in the mood for charades. He had an argument at hand. “Ben is confused? Please. You have this high and mighty attitude. Why is that?”

Silently grunting, Elliott shook his head, lips tightly closed and not his head at Misha.

Ignoring the new symptoms of turret syndrom Elliott seemed to develop, Dean returned to his question. “Why is that? Why the judgmental attitude.”

“Because it is wrong.”

“You don’t blame Ben.”

“Mr. From Fabrics is confused.” Misha said. “Hector did what he did purely for the satisfaction of the flesh. He did it unnaturally and against what God wants.”

“What God wants. God left no women if you want to use God in this. Hector sought the companionship the flesh needs. What he does, every

man does.”

Misha chuckled. “Oh, I do not believe that. Every man?”

*‘Dean, look at me.’* Elliott facially conveyed. *‘Dean, I have your comeback. Dean. Fuck.’*

“Yeah. Everyman.” Dean replied.

“Including you?” She asked.

If there was one thing Dean hated to do that was lose or be proven wrong. And in the middle of his argument, Dean was bound and determined, especially by Misha, not to be proven wrong.

“Including you?” She asked again.

Up went Dean’s head, and he returned the smug look. “Yes. Even me.”

Misha gasped.

Elliott’s hand ejected to his face. He knew Dean would say anything at any cost to put Misha in her place, he just was missing the best one. Sliding his hand down his face, Elliott had it. It might of been crude, but it was a surefire and perfect way to get across his message.

“You are married.” Misha said appalled.

“Well, yeah, but the male-to male thing doesn’t count.” Dean sniffed. “Quite often Frank and I get together and . . .” Dean made a double click sound of his tongue and winked “Hash it out.”

“You make me sick. You disappoint me. I could not come to you for medical help again.”

Doing something Hal would have done long earlier in the argument, Elliott, index and middle fingers held up, placed them in a ‘V’ manner to his lips.

“I make you sick?” Dean laughed. “You . . . you . . .” he saw it. The message Elliott gave. He could of at that instant, screamed in the shock of what he watched mild mannered and proper Elliott Ryder convey. But he didn’t. Dean went right with the flow. “You . . .”

Slam went Dean’s hand to the counter.

“ . . . have room to talk.” He nodded and stepped to her. “We make you sick? Pleasures of the flesh? Unnatural acts. Man-to-man. Against god? Tell me. Misha . . .” Dean dropped his voice. “I’m going to assume was all right, it was natural, and was not against God the last time *you* had a woman’s head between your legs.”

Argument over, at least for right then. Misha only gasped, then after doing her typical emotional sob, she bolted past Elliott and raced from the lab.

Druga-Johnston/The Game

Dean held his firm composure, just in case Misha bolted back in. When he knew it was safe, he exhaled. "Was that true?"

"Yes, very much so." Elliott answered.

"That was perfect." Dean smiled. "It was the perfect thing to shut her . . ." A slight silent wince took over Dean and he brought this hand to his eyes with a groan.

"What? What is it?"

"Do you think . . ." Dean slid his hand down. "Do you thing it would have been more perfect had I known it *before* I told her Frank and I were gay lovers?"

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Mt. Pleasant, Utah

It was a long day. Especially for Frank, and more than anything he just wanted to go to sleep. But he couldn't. A part of him just wanted to stay awake and enjoy the non-movement. His body probably could of used at least eight hours of sleep. After the morning battle, the worrying about Hal, not only did Frank drive Hal and Ellen to where they would hide, but he had to drive and get Robbie from where the chopper was placed.

The whole entire time he went to get his little brother and bring him back to Mt. Pleasant, Frank thought. He worried about Hal and Ellen's safety. He worried about his life after the game was over. Because a part of Frank knew a lot of his life was going to change the moment he returned to Beginning. He just hoped that it would be for the better, and not for the lonelier, like he had been fearing.

The weather was warm, so no heat was needed. They found the best house with the least amount of dirt. Hal rested on a make-shift bed in the diningroom and after seeing that his brother didn't wake up after another attempt, Frank went to the livingroom where Robbie and Ellen were.

He pulled the pocket doors only partially closed as he entered. Frank supposed he would of pulled them shut altogether, but he sort of froze in his entrance.

He watched, without saying anything, Ellen hand Robbie a mug of something warm.

"Thanks, El." Robbie smiled up at her. "You're the best."

Ellen returned the smile and ran her hand through Robbie's hair. She turned to leave and saw Frank. "Hey, did you want tea?"

"Nah. I'm just gonna . . ." Frank walked over and found a spot on the floor.

In a near upbeat mock, Ellen pointed to the diningroom. "I'm just gonna."

"He's still sleeping." Frank said.

"I still want to check him." Ellen moved to the pocket doors and slipped through the opening.

Frank scooted closer to Robbie, taking notice of the electronic equipment before him. "Hey."

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

"Hey." Robbie looked up. "Something wrong?"

"Tired." Frank tilted his head. "And I uh, I felt like talking to you."

"Oh, yeah?" Robbie smiled. "Cool."

"What are you doing?"

"Oh." Robbie lifted a radio. "These are the extra ones, don't worry. I'm not screwing up the ones we use."

"I'm not worried." Frank spoke in a soft manner. "What are you doing with them."

"Trying to fix the transmitter." Robbie replied. "I found an electronics shop in that town where you picked me up. I just wanted to get better transmission. Hopefully eliminate the static that screws up our messages."

"Any luck?"

"I'm checking right now to see if these radios work." Robbie gave one to Frank. "You said you wanted to talk. Feel like killing two birds with one stone and help me test these?"

"Sure." Frank stood up. "I'll head outside."

Robbie nodded then stopped. "Frank? You OK?"

Through the radio with an unconvincing smile, Frank spoke on his way out. "Yeah."

Robbie lifted his radio, tapping it in thought on his hand.

Ellen returned to the livingroom. "Where's Frank?"

"We're testing radios." Robbie answered.

"I'm out. Man." Frank said not giving hint to what he exclaimed about. Out in the open of the former front yard of the home Frank could honestly say, it was the first time a sky had impressed him. He stood there, turning, looking at how huge, open and filled with stars it was. "Man, Robbie."

"Man, Robbie what?" Robbie asked with a chuckle.

"You should see this sky. Out of all of them, this one is the best."

"Uh, Frank, it's the same sky."

"Different view then." Frank told him. "You know, maybe I'll get into astrology."

"You mean astronomy." Robbie corrected. "Astronomy means the stars. Astrology is horoscopes and fortunes, or some shit like that."

"Well I already do that, I'm psychic you know. I read minds."

"And you see dead people."

"Absolutely."

Robbie chuckled and looked at Ellen.

She sat, legs bent up, chin rested on her arm while she smiled and

listed as well to Frank.

“So, Frank.” Robbie said. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“You.” The word conveyed soft.

“Cool topic. Interesting.”

“And Ellen.”

Silence. Static. The quiet brought on by the tone of Frank’s voice made Robbie speechless. He didn’t need to read minds like Frank to know where the subject was going.

“I’m not stupid. I see. I know. I . . . see the way things can go. That’s why I want this talk. I love her, Robbie. And I am begging you to step aside. Just . . . step aside.”

Robbie looked at Ellen when the words came through the radio. Her head dropped to her arm, the smile erased. Robbie found it hard to talk. “Frank, in all fairness . . .”

“Fair.” Frank graveled emotional and soft as he paced around. “Let me explain fair. What’s fair. A lifetime, Robbie. I have been with Ellen and loved her a lifetime. But . . . the entire time I was always second. Always. There was a brief time, I wasn’t. I fucked up. I thought, you know, I thought I made up for that. Obviously, I was led to believe I made p for that.” Frank released a sad chuckle. “I remember one night. When Dad married Andrea. It was pouring. And I stood with Ellen in the rain, I got down on one knee and I proposed. I asked her to marry me. She . . . said yes. She said yes. And during that entire hiatus out beyond the wall, after Brian, there was no question. We knew when we got back, We were getting married. The society takes me. I spend the whole time wanting to get back for my family, for Ellen. I believed when I got back, we would get married. When I return. She’s married to Dean. Now was that fair.”

“In my opinion.” Robbie replied. “No, it wasn’t.”

“And it still isn’t. I had to fight to be a part of her life. To be even second.” Frank pulled the radio from his mouth, paused and then returned it. “I took second because I knew, in my own way, I would be number one. I thought, the time out here, would make her see, I should be number one. I’d do anything for Ellen. I’d die for her. So why do I feel, after everything, that I am wrong for wanting that. Am I, Robbie? Am I wrong?”

It took Robbie a moment to answer. “No. But . . . come on, Frank. I’m not stealing anything from you.”

“You aren’t? You don’t think.”

“I don’t think.” Robbie said. “I just . . . I just need her right now. You don’t understand.”



"Little brother, I understand." Frank said with passion. "I know you need her. Ways . . . ways can be worked out. I would never deny you what you need. Never. Not you. My God, Robbie, don't you know, if I could, I would cut my off my right arm for you. I'd give you *my* arm if that would help you. No hesitation. In a heartbeat. I'd do it. For you. I love you. I think you know what I mean by stepping aside."

"Frank, even with me stepping aside, you're not seeing, you still have an obstacle. A big one, and it comes in a small package."

"Dean." Frank exhaled.

"Dean." Robbie repeated.

"I've been trying my hardest out here to undo that."

Robbie laughed. "You have not."

"Yes, I have."

"Frank. Please."

"What?" Frank asked confused.

"You mean about the Dean and Misha thing?"

"Yes."

Robbie laughed again.

"Robbie, it's true."

"Frank. We know Dean. Have you stopped to wonder why Ellen has yet to believe you about it?"

"She is blinded by Dean." Frank responded.

"Oh, stop. You know the answer. Not only do you go on and on, and over the edge with the Dean bashing, you do it in a ridiculous, immature, joking manner." Robbie did his best Frank imitation. "Oh, Dean sucks. Dean told me to yell at you El, you deserve it. Dean tried to buy Hal off for sexual favors." Robbie returned to his voice. "And let's not forget, you take this friendship or whatever it is between Dean and Misha, and you embellish it so far fetched, it surpasses believable."

"It's all true."

"Frank." Robbie snapped with a snicker. "You honestly think Ellen believes Dean and Misha were holding hands and skipping merrily around Beginnings?"

"It happened."

"Frank."

"Well, maybe not that." Frank walked nearer to the house.

"You know what I think?" Robbie asked. "I think you were pissed at Dean. You missed Ellen and you had every intention of coming out here to steal her away. But . . . but . . . your integrity big brother wouldn't let you do

that. So the part of you that wants to screw it up, says shit. The part that wants to be fair, says far fetched shit. Make sense.”

Frank was silent.

“Frank.”

“I’m thinking. Could you go back to the part about me being pissed at Dean.”

“Pissed or not, he’s still an obstacle.”

“Hey, Robbie? Wanna hear something funny?” Frank questioned.

“You aren’t gonna give me the story about Dean and Misha sharing each others clothes, are you?”

“No.” Frank laughed. “You have to admit that was a good one.”

“That was. But, what’s funny?”

“The way my mind works.”

“Frank. I have news for you, funny is an understatement.”

“Well, wait until you hear this one.” Almost embarrassed, Frank paused in debate on whether to share. He decided. “You know how we just said Dean’s an obstacle, right? I have this fantasy. Nothing sexual mind you. But I have this fantasy that I bring El back to Beginnings? And Dean says . . . “ Frank hesitated. “He says to me he sees how much I love her, and how far I would go for Ellen. He realizes that I’m the one that should be with her. He’s so grateful, he’s so glad she’s alive, he tells me, ‘Frank, you deserve to be in first place now. I’ll be secondary from now on’. I have this whole thing in my mind Robbie. Down to what Dean is wearing.” Frank waited for a response. “You didn’t say anything.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Well, it’s pretty fuckin pathetic, huh? Almost like some teenage fantasy, or believing Santa will come.”

“Frank? Didn’t you say Santa came?”

For a second Frank smiled, then lost it. He turned and walked to the porch of the house. “That’s because Santa coming is more realistic then Dean ever stepping back to second place.” He reached for the door and stopped when it opened. “Oh, hey El. I was just . . .” He lifted the radio as Ellen moved on to the porch. “Just talking to Robbie.”

Closer to Frank, Ellen stepped and hand on the radio, she lowered his arm. “Just know Frank. Santa is real. OK? And it may not be much of a present, it may not be the fullest extent of what you want to hear, but . . .” Ellen inched right against him. She spoke soft, her mouth moving closer to his allowing the warmth of her words to be the warmth of her breath that teased his lips.. “No matter the circumstance, no matter who appears

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

to be standing in the front position. Just know, in my heart and in my soul, Frank Slagel will never be anything less than in first place.”

Frank lowered his lips, parting them slightly. He stopped just before he kissed her and his mouth widened in a smile. “Hey. Wait. Did you hear what I said.”

Ellen tried not to laugh. “Kiss me.”

Biting his bottom lip, Frank pulled Ellen closer.

“Merry Chiasmas, Frank.” Ellen whispered.

Frank snickered in an ornery way. “Ho-ho-ho.” Laughing once more, he pulled Ellen up and into him tighter, then Frank, enacted a mistletoe moment.

^^^

“Well, I hope you told him, ‘no’, goddamn it.” George rubbed his eyes as he spoke on the phone. “Good. Good. Keep me posted. And make sure, Stew and you keep an eye on him.”

Bertha watched George hang up. It was a few seconds and George still hadn’t faced her. “What happened?”

“Two things.” George exhaled and turned around. “We learned that Jess is pretty much being straight up with us about everything. And two . . . Johnny really does have amnesia.”

Bertha was taken aback. “How did that get determined.”

“Ready for this?” George gave a raise of his eyebrows. “Johnny asked to go back to Beginnings.”

Her chest moved a little in a second shock. “Can I ask how this proves his amnesia?”

“If Johnny really did remember what all he did in Beginnings, Slagel or not, he wouldn’t have the balls to go back there. Now . . .” Another slow exhale came from George. “I’m feeling bad. I mean, I doubted him and the kid is in need.”

“Why would he want to go back to Beginnings? Amnesia or not. We told him what he did. He is not ignorant to the antics.”

“Why would he want to go back? My guess. Family.” George shrugged. “He misses his family. No, wait, he misses Joe.”

“Is there anything we can do?”

“Not until we get back.”

Slowly Bertha nodded. “I believe it is a matter of patience, Sir. Patience and in time his memory will all come back. Until then you’ll have

to wade through his emotional turmoil.”

“Unless we give him something to take his mind off of it. Maybe even . . .” George’s face lit up with revelation. “Maybe even something that could give him what he needs and help him.”

“What is that?”

“A trip.” George nodded. “Yes. I think we should give some serious thought to, when Jess Boyens goes, we should Johnny right along with him for a short trip to Disney World. Yep.” again George nodded. “I think that would aid him immensely.”

^^^

Dean noticed the queer look upon Joe’s face as Joe leaned a little in the diningroom chair looking into the kitchen at Billy.

“What is it?” Dean asked.

“Are you sure he was created the natural way?” Joe asked with a point.

Dean looked at Elliott who laughed, then a little disturbed, back to Joe. “You’re sounding like my father. Are you saying I made a test tube baby.”

“No. A clone. That kid is a miniature you.” Joe said with a shake of his head. “Down to the baggy little jeans. What in Christ’s name is he making.”

Dean shrugged. “Probably something to drink while reading.” Dean’s hand reached for the tape player.

“No.” Joe stopped him. “Not again. I do not want to hear one more time my son’s little speech about Ellen. I don’t understand why you do.”

“I don’t know.” Dean leaned back in the chair. “Maybe I keep listening, hoping to hear an ounce of insincerity.”

“Well, you won’t. So . . . stop trying.” Joe told him.

“But it sounded too . . .” Dean paused to think. “Eloquent for Frank. Smooth.”

“Let me tell you about me son. A little thing I learned. When Frank hasn’t a clue what he’s talking about, he sounds like an idiot. But when he knows what he’s talking about. He sounds like a genius. Frank knows too things very well. Anything to do with military. And how he feels about Ellen. I’d include he knows how to jump far distances, but he sounds like an idiot when he talks about that.”

Dean folded his hands. “He wants Ellen.”

“Dean.” Joe said so fatherly. “He’s always wanted Ellen. This is nothing new. Of course, if the Misha stories he gave Ellen don’t work on

breaking up you two, the talk that's rushing about town certainly may help him out."

With a groan, Dean buried his head under his arms on the table.

Elliott chuckled. "That is if Frank doesn't kill you first."

Joe waved out his hand. "Nah. Male. Female. Doesn't matter. Gossip concerning him, feeds Frank. He'll get an ego trip out of this one."

"Really?" Elliott asked. "Despite how much people are talking."

"Well, yeah. However it's a good thing for Dean Frank's men don't believe." Joe said. "Frank might get mad then. But Frank's guys are pretty much denying it to everyone saying it's just wishful thinking *again* on Dean's part."

From under his arm, Dean's voice mumbled. "Oh my god. I can't believe the whole town is talking about me and Frank being gay lovers."

The clank of the spoon against the ceramic cup caught all their attention.

Dean, with a 'no', lifted his head to see Billy standing there. "Billy . . ."

"Don't bother." Billy took a breath. "I always seem to walk in the room on the most inopportune sentiments being spoken." He moved to Joe. "Then again, they always seem to revolve around an unnatural relationship with you and Uncle Frank." He kissed Joe on the cheek. "Night Pap. Sgt. Ryder." Billy moved another step and turned with a snide look. "Father." holding his cup, he took a few more steps, and lifting an index finger, faced Dean again. "Oh, one more thing. This may help. If it concerns you about everyone hearing you and Uncle Frank are . . . gay? Trust me, in light of how you two are, this isn't coming as a major news flash. Good night."

Dean finally moved his open mouth. "Where does he get that attitude from?"

"No." Joe grumbled. "You don't even need to ask that do you?"

"To change the subject some . . ." Elliott interjected. "Not including, the Frank, emotion, 'I wish Dean were out of the picture' monologue . . ." He cleared his throat. "There were some bright spots to the broken radio silence."

"Yeah." Joe tilted his head. "I did chuckle on the Dean skipping with Misha bit."

"I was thinking more on the lines of the captain being all right." Elliott spoke.

Joe smiled. "Yeah, that was a bright spot. As soon as I heard Hal say, 'Frank, get that goddamn radio away from me', I have to admit, I wanted to

scream.”

Elliott smiled as well. “Yes, the captain annoyance with Frank certainly indicated an improving health.”

“I’m curious.” Dean spoke up. “Elliot? Why do you call him the Captain.”

“He is.” Elliott answered.

“He’s your friend.” Dean said.

“My best friend.” Elliott corrected.

“As sad as the\is seems, and even at this point in time, I consider Frank my best friend. I don’t call him any salutations.”

“He doesn’t have one.” Elliott stated.

“No, he does.” Dean lifted a finger. “All the society defectors, New Bowman men, some of his own men, *and* the people in Jordan call him General.”

Elliott shook his head. “If Frank asks me to call him general, I shall.”

“So Hal asked you to call him Captain?” Dean questioned.

“No. Not really. I just did. After the plague it stuck. Like a nickname. He’s always been the captain, Well, at first he was the lieutenant, then he was the captain. He almost was the major, bu the plague hit.”

Curiously Joe turned to Elliott. “Lieutenant. You knew him when he was a lieutenant?”

“Yes. I knew him at least five years before the plague. We were friends.” Elliott responded.

“Why didn’t I ever hear of you then?” Joe asked.

“You probably did. The Captain always called me . . .”

Joe’s eyes widened. “Chico.”

Elliott nodded.

“Chico?” Dean asked. “Hal called you Chico?”

Elliott shrugged. “I don’t know why. He says I look Hispanic. I disagree.”

With sarcasm, Joe asked. “Have you looked in the mirror.”

“Yes.” Elliott answered. “I know I may look a little Latino. But I am not.”

“You are.” Dean stated.

“No, I’m not.” Elliott rebutted. “My mother is pure Irish. My father is German. I know of no Hispanic in my blood line.”

“Then you’re adopted.” Dean said matter of fact.

Elliott chuckled at that. “No. No I’m not.”

“Yes, yes, you are.” Dean argued. “You have to be. The gene code

found with in your DNA dictates a . . .”

“Dean.” Joe snapped with a slam of his hand on the table. “If the man says he’s not Hispanic, or adopted, he isn’t.”

“But Joe.” Arrogant Dean came back.

“But Joe my ass. It doesn’t matter.” When Joe saw Dean getting ready to argue, he stopped him. “It doesn’t matter, does it Dean? For crying out loud you’re sitting here arguing with the man. He should know if he’s adopted or not. And he should know if he’s Hispanic.”

Looking at Elliott Dean shook his head. “No. If he wants to believe that an Irish mother and German father produced an . . .”

“Dean!” Joe yelled.

“Fine.” Dean lifted his hands in defeat. “So, Elliott, say it.”

“Say what?” Elliott asked.

“Just once for me . . .” Dean leaned into the table.

“I’m not adopted nor am I Hispanic.” Elliott said.

“See?” Joe waved a finger at Dean. “You can’t let a sleeping dog lie. You can’t drop this can you. Badger the man, why don’t you. Now this is weighing heavily on the man’s mind making him think his parents lied to him for all those years.”

“I never said that.” Dean argued. “And that’s not what I want Elliott to say. I want him to call Hal . . . Hal. I don’t think he can. Come on Elliott, say, ‘Hal is getting better.’”

Elliott mouth opened, confident that he could. “H . . . h . . .” He stopped closed his mouth, tilted his head and tried again. “H . . . H . . . H.” Clearing his throat, Elliott stood up. “I believe I have a town to check on and something called authoritarian rounds to make.” He moved to the coat tree and grabbed his coat. “Until tomorrow. Goodnight Mr. Slagel. Dr. Hayes.” Coat over his arm, Elliot gave a single nod, opened the door and walked out.

Dean grinned. “I knew he couldn’t.”

The door opened and Elliot popped his head inside. “Hal. There I said it.” He smiled. “Goodnight.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “Go figure.” He noticed Dean still staring at the door in awe. “What is it?”

“Elliott.”

“Find it hard to believe it was that difficult for him to say the name, ‘Hal?’”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “That Elliott doesn’t realize he has to be adopted.”

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“Didn’t I tell you to drop it.”

“Yes.” Dean nodded and in the immediate silence he tapped his fingers on the table. After a minute he looked to Joe. “But really, Joe, if you would look at the DNA test I ran, you would see that there really is no question.”

Joe didn’t say anything. His groan and head dropping to the table was his only response.

^^^

What amazed Frank was that it didn’t matter how many years had gone by, no matter what memory he took himself back to, Ellen still looked the same. He supposed in her mind, or rather hoped, that she had replaced the teenage Frank with the more mature, and ‘Hot’ Frank when she reflected.

A lot of things caused Frank to look back. Little things said or done. He had a plethora of memories regarding him and Ellen. It was at times as if his mind was a bottomless vat, and each time he’d reach in for one, he’d get one he had forgotten about.

Frank guessed his reflections were product of his seeing some ‘alone’ time with Ellen. A small tent was pitched not far from the house where Hal and Robbie were. He laid out the sleeping bags, and basked in what would be the first private moment of the week. He planned no physical contact, no sexual or intimate thoughts even crossed his mind. A night by themselves, just o sleep. That was it. That was enough for Frank. He supposed their earlier kiss was the reason his mind rewound. Stepping from that tent, feeling the flutter of his stomach still alive in the post thought of that kiss, Frank likened it to being a teenager. In fact, Frank didn’t recall getting so nervous or having those flutters after his first kiss. Of course his first kiss was with Ellen.

There were many ‘firsts’ that weren’t with Ellen. But the first kiss was unique. Actually, Frank was pretty secure in the fact that he could kiss well, even though he had never done so before. And he carried that confidence with him. In Frank’s mind, he may not have been all that impressive the first time he made love to Ellen, but he was pretty sure there was a minuscule ‘swept away’ factor in that first kiss. There had to be.

Self doubt of his teenage kissing abilities never really entered his mind, until he was just about to enter the house. He paused on the porch where he and Ellen had kissed and he compared.



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With a 'hmm', Frank walked into the house. Perhaps the journey into the diningroom wasn't that long in the scope of distance, but in Frank's mind it was a mile, because the entire time he was thrown into what he'd consider the lamest stupor.

Did he, or did he not kiss well in his youth.

From Hal's bedside, Ellen looked up with a smile when Frank walked in. "Hey, Frank."

Frank scratched his head. "Did I El?"

"Did you . . . what?" Ellen asked.

"You know." Frank gave an embarrassed twitch of his head to Hal.

Hal looked at his brother. "I believe Frank, we haven't quite acquire your talent for mind reading. Did you what? And no, she doesn't know or she wouldn't ask."

"Kiss." Frank replied.

Ellen blinked in confusion. "Kiss what?"

"You." Frank said.

"OK." Ellen nodded passively.

"Not good?" Frank questioned.

"What?" Ellen asked more baffled.

"Is your answer OK?" Frank asked for reiteration.

"You mean, kissing me now."

"Then."

"Then what?"

"OK, not good, or great?" Frank quizzed.

"Huh?" Ellen was confused.

"Then." Frank stated.

"Frank. You're not making sense." Ellen said.

"El, I can't be more clear."

"Yeah, you can." Ellen replied. "All I got from you is, kiss, then, now, good, great. OK. Right?"

"Yes."

"Good god." Hal interjected. "I believe I have seen this once or twice. Who's on first? What's on second. I don't is on third."

Raising one eyebrow, Frank, looking at Ellen, gave a nod of his head to Hal. "Is he OK?"

"I am beginning to wonder if you both are OK."

"Exactly." Frank stated. "Was I?"

"Were you what?" Ellen's voice started to raise.

"OK, or better than OK." Frank asked.

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Giving up, Ellen tossed her hands in the air. "Frank, you were phenomenal."

Frank smiled. "Thanks. What about Hal?"

"What about him?" Ellen asked.

"You said you were wondering if Hal was OK. Was he?"

"Hal's . . . fine?" Ellen guessed the correct answer. "Does that work?"

With a loud, taunting, 'Ha.' Frank pointed at Hal.

Hal nodded slowly. "Now that we've established one syllable words do produce meaningful conversations. May I ask what I am fine at?"

"Kissing." Frank answered.

"Kissing?" Ellen asked.

"Yeah." Frank nodded.

"I'm only fine?" Hal looked at Ellen.

"You're better than fine." Ellen shrugged.

"Whoa. Wait." Frank held up his hand. "When did you kiss Hal?"

Hitting just about that point where she wanted to scream in the mist of Frank's confusion, Ellen retained a calmness. "I thought you knew, Frank. I thought that was why you were asking. I kissed Hal once. Just once. That was when he came back."

Hal interjected. "And that was because I hadn't been around a receptive woman in . . ." Hal whistled. "A lifetime. And . . . meaning no disrespect, Ellen. I knew you wouldn't mind."

"No disrespect taken." Ellen smiled. "It is our duty as women to indulge those men who are without."

Frank rolled his eyes.

Hal hid his 'weak' well. Reaching over his bandaged body, he tapped Ellen on the hand. "And you women do. However . . ." He winked out of Frank's view. "No woman has indulged me in other means."

"Oh, Hal." Ellen said with such fake compassion. "You know what? Because we're family, sort of. I'll indulge you if you'd like."

"Would you, Ellen?" Hal asked.

"All right. Enough." Frank moved Ellen's hand away. "And I don't think that playing up on Ellen's promiscuity is very funny."

Both Hal and Ellen looked at Frank.

"What?" Frank questioned their glances.

Holding up his hands, Hal separated them at a distance. "Big word for you."

Frank smiled. "Thanks. But . . ." He cleared his throat. "Back to Ellen and her wide variety of *men*. No offense, El. But this world without women

has pretty much fed your old world habit.”

Ellen’s mouth dropped open.

“Oh, don’t give me that.” Frank said. “Miss Flirt. Miss Cheat on Pete.”

“With you.”

“Still.” Frank lifted a finger. “I kept scruples and morals. I’m proud to say I have only been with two women my entire life.”

Hal in his usual sarcasm, spoke up. “And you have to wonder why she seeks other indulgence.”

“Yeah, well.” Frank nodded. “My two are two more than you have.”

“Good Lord Frank, get off the ‘Hal’s a virgin’ thing. Please.”

“You are.” Frank said.

“Are you, Hal?” Ellen asked.

Robbie excited, and projecting so, raced into the room holding up a radio. “Hey! Check this out.”

“You fixed the static problem?” Frank asked.

“Yes. But better . . .” Robbie upped the volume. “I went out and put the new receiver on the truck.”

“The one from Radio Shack?” Frank questioned. “The satellite looking thing?”

“Yep.” Robbie nodded. “Bingo.”

It wasn’t clear, but clear enough to hear, and the sound of it all made everyone shriek.

“Oh, my God.” Frank stepped to Robbie. “Beginnings.”

“No, Frank.” Robbie smiled. “Home.”

“Turn it up.” Hal requested. “Who is it?”

“Frank’s men.” Robbie hit the volume again. “It’s the best we can get.”

Elliott’s voice came through first, *“Don’t bother, Mr. Slagel with this. Just handle it Dan.”*

Ellen smiled. “Elliott.”

“Stop that.” Frank instructed.

*“Are you sure, Sgt. Ryder?”* Dan from security questioned. *“They seem to be rather noisy.”*

*“They’re just missing Frank. Go get the ‘Best of Journey’ and play it. It’ll calm them. And don’t forget to feed them. Hector has three deer in stock for that.”*

*“Speaking of Hector. Did you hear?”*

*“Honestly, Dan, radio airwaves are not the sort of thing for this.”*

*“You don’t even know where I’m going with it.”*

*“Put it this way.”* Elliott said. *“If it deals with Hector, It deals with Misha. If it*

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*deals with Misha you're talking about Dean. Am I heading in the right direction?"*

"Yes."

Gloating Frank smiled. "Told you, guys." He wiped the gloating look from his face. "Sorry, El. Man, Misha must of left Hector for Dean."

"Can't be." Ellen whispered out.

Even Hal was puzzled by the topic. It had to be big. "What else could it be?" He looked at Robbie when he heard the snicker. "What? What do you know?"

Robbie gave a 'be quiet' wink. "Just listen I'm sure they'll . . ."

*"Sgt. Ryder, I'm really bothered by this."*

*"I'm positive, absolutely positive there is no truth to this."*

*"Yeah, I know that. I just am bothered how rumors fly. Just know I'm doing my part, as one of Frank's men, to assure everyone that it's just Dean's wishful thinking, and in no way, no how, are him and Frank gay lovers."*

"What!" Hal barked out with a laugh.

Robbie snickered. "Told you."

"Fuckin Dean. There he goes again." Frank tossed his hand outward. "Man, when is he getting over this crush on me."

"Robbie?" Hal gave an upward nod of his head. "Set that down and we'll listen."

"Ok." with a step and a slight turn, the radio in Robbie's hand hissed and another voice came through. Robbie quickly turned again to get Beginnings to return.

"Whoa. Wait." Hal called out. "Back up."

Robbie did.

"Turn." Hal instructed as he listened to the radio. "A little more and . . . there."

The foreign speaking voice came through.

Ellen looked to Hal with question. "What language is that?"

With certainty, Hal answered. "Swahili."

Frank's eyes widened. "Oh, my God. Robbie, Good job. You picked up Africa."

The crease near the corner of his mouth showed Hal's amusement with Frank, but more so it showed his pleasure in what he heard. "No, Big brother, Not Africa. The society."

"Uh, Hal?" Frank said. "I know you're medicated, but the society guys, they speak English."

"Um, Frank?" Hal mocked his tone. "I know. But right now, they are using Swahili as a code to transmit information. I know Swahili fluently."

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And now we know . . .” Hal grinned. “The society’s final attack plan.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

January 23<sup>rd</sup>  
Richfield, Utah  
THE FINAL DAY

The width of the trench gave barely enough moving room, but the length was sufficient and the trench was a product of continuous work on Frank and Robbie's part. Sandbags spread about the top, weapons lined up with in reach, Frank double checked the mortar launchers, then looked at his watch. "Where are they?"

Hal set down a rifle against the wall. "You know they're on their way. Just when they arrive is the question."

"And do they arrive within the scope of the game and the rules." Frank stated.

"Let's hope."

Robbie approached with an 'all ready' and an exhale.

"Chopper loaded?" Frank asked.

"Fully." Robbie answered. "Did a weapons check. Side gun works, not that I know who is gonna fire it, but it works. Front shooters in order. Missile launchers are working, but without a test, who is to say."

"How many missiles?" Frank questioned.

"Four. Not many."

"Enough." Frank said. "We may need you from the air. How's El?"

Turning his head to the right, Robbie indicated to Ellen who stood by the ladder. "Ready. Anything over the radio?"

Hal picked up that they are in route. They honed in on our chopper signal and think we are in hiding."

Robbie observed Hal peering over the trench edge with binoculars. "And we're sure they are coming from that direction."

"Through the river and over the hill." Frank explained. "Like a bad fuckin Christmas song. We'll see them coming when they hit the top. Not until then can you lift the bird, when you guys are in the air, we'll do a first wave wipe out with heavy duty Dean-ami, then take the rest out when they charge. You do not return until we give you an all clear."

Robbie inhaled and laid his hand on his stomach. "Over three hundred society soldiers. That's an awful lot of guys for you and Hal. Hal's not . . ."

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"Hal's fine." Frank interrupted. "And it's not too many, right?"

"You guys are prepared if they hit the trench?" Robbie asked.

"We're expecting it." Frank winked. "And we're ready. Don't worry. What's a few soldiers dropping in."

"I feel like I'm abandoning you guys."

"Nah." Frank shook his head. "You have us covered by air, if needed. Me and Hal, we aren't what's important. We came out to protect Ellen. We haven't failed yet, and I have no intentions of failing now. But you better get ready. Just a matter time . . ." He winked. "Final inning of the game is about to begin."

^^^

The sterilized atmosphere came close to being in serious jeopardy the third time the Operating door opened, and Dean momentarily halted the skin test procedure he was about to perform on Christopher. Stepping to the door, he removed his mask and walked out into the scrub room where he could see Joe waving through the window.

"Joe." Dean said with a certain amount of seriousness. "I told you. I don't want to hear anything. Not today."

"Today of all days, Dean. What the hell are you doing?" Joe asked.

"Staying busy."

"You had a chance to stay busy this morning when I asked you to review my treatments, but you . . ." Joe saw Dean look away. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No." Dean shook his head.

"Dean, I'm not shitting around on this one."

"Neither am I, Joe." Dean all but cut him off. "I just want to do something else besides play masochist and listen to the final stages of this game. This is my wife's life."

"I understand that."

"Besides." Dean said with a quiver to his voice. "I believe that nothing is gonna happen. There's less than three hours left. Nothing is going to happen. They are just coming home."

"Who are you trying to convince? You or me?"

Into the scrub room at that instant, Danny Hoi walked with urgency. "Joe, I finished." He held up a paper.

"Good." Joe pulled a pen from his pocket and laid the sheet down on the side of the sink to review.

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Dean's head went back in forth. "Hello? This is an operating area."

"Hello." Danny mocked. "This is war."

With a pointing swing, Dean indicated to the Operating room. "A patient is in there."

"He's a mutant, Dean." Danny said. "This is Beginnings."

With an exhale, Joe signed the paper. "Here. Get that to him ASAP, and let me know of any response."

"Got it." Rolling the paper slightly, Danny hurried out.

Confused, Dean looked at Joe. "What was that all about?"

"The game may be over in three hours, Dean." Joe exhaled. "But there's real big possibility, I just signed the start of a war."

^^^

"Henry, my boy." George snickered and swing a smacking hand down to Henry's back in the control room. "Relax."

Sulking, in a chair, Henry just stared at the board. "I don't know why you're so happy, George."

"I don't know why you aren't. Did I take you serious last night? No. Even though I told you not to bet Beginnings on that dart game. You did. Still arrogant, Henry."

"The bet was a joke. And I'm worried for my friends."

"About time you lost some of that optimism."

"It's three hundred to three."

George shrugged, "You know, you can feel better by accepting my invitation to join the society."

"No thank you."

"You mean to tell me you haven't felt a bond this past week with me?"

Henry only looked up.

The smile on George's face quickly left when Bertha walked to him and he saw her seriousness. "What's wrong. Do not tell me they couldn't find them?"

"No." Bertha handed him a paper. "Faxed to Quantico, then faxed to us. Signed by Beginnings."

George took the document and read it out loud. "Decreed this day, the twenty-third day of January. To George Hadly, President Eastern Caceres Society. Due to what is believed to be the possibility of permanent Society presence in Colorado Springs, Colorado, well within the boundaries of the secured western half of the United States, it is hereby declared,



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positions have been established in accordance for preparation of execution. If by Fifteen hundred hours, January Twenty-third, no withdrawal movement is witnessed of this presence, then Beginnings Montana and its provinces, will have no other option than to assume, these presences are hostile, and take such actions to eliminate them by any means necessary. Any attempts of retaliation by the society to stop such removal will result in further defense action by Beginnings, already placed in motion. Signed this day, Joseph A. Slagel, Present United Western Alliance.”

George’s hand brought the paper to the desk with a slam.

Henry pulled the comment forward and smiled. “Wow, hey, George, I might be wrong, but after the game, I think this says you have three hours to go or . . .”

“Or nothing.” George said hard with a stare to Bertha. “Callahan. Put our own precautionary order out. STAT.”

^^^

There was a glimmer in Jess’ eye as he stared into the fireplace of the strategic interim room of Quantico Headquarters. He returned to the conference table where the reason for his slight happiness lay. Staring down, Jess felt a bit of revitalization. He wasn’t there for the Beginnings warning when it was faxed through, but he certainly made sure he was the one that manned the phone or fax for when George responded. And George did. Jess stared at the response, the only Society personnel to witness George’ intentions. And they were simple. George ordered that if any distress signal or call was received by him or his people, then the society was to immediately take the steps necessary to implement the Kennedy. The order in Jess’ hand was to be given to Steward Lange, acting Commander in Chief.

Jess had to chuckle. How simple. Once Beginnings attacked Colorado springs. It was over. No further means would be needed on Beginnings part, because Jess, himself would assure, not retaliation would be made by the society. The simple two line message Jess sent to Beginnings said it all. No need to worry. Do what was necessary. All handled on his end. And as far as the order went. In the event Beginnings attacked poor George Hadly, the only thing Stewart Lange would receive from Jess was a bullet. Sight unseen. No hesitation. In Jess’ mind he hoped Beginnings didn’t wait until three PM. After all, No president, no society leaders, how long would it be before there was no society?

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His fantasy stare of the document came to a quick halt and Jess laid his hand over it when Steward Lange walked in to the office.

"Anything from President Hadly?" Steward asked.

Jess shook his head. "Nothing yet. No. How did that problem go."

"Not well. In fact . . ." Steward exhaled. "I wanted to keep this one buried. I'd still like to do so. Feel like helping solve it and as difficult as it may be, try to keep it under wraps."

With a shrug, Jess stood up. "Sure, I'll try. What's up."

"How about asking, 'what's gone.'"

"Excuse me?" Jess questioned.

"I'm sorry. Rather . . . who is gone." Steward saw the puzzled look. "Johnny Slagel left Quantico."

Jess' eyes widened. "Any indication where he is?"

"We have a trail a, pretty gruesome trail, but one none the less. Care to come with me and try to follow it?"

"Absolutely,"

"Thanks. Let's go." Steward turned and walked from the office.

In his stride, smile on his face, Jess grabbed George's order. Pretty much without missing a beat, he crumbled it up, and tossed it into the fire as he followed Steward out.

^^^

The buzz of the communications room door was barely in its final stages of ringing out, and Joe, alone, rushed in.

"Time?" Joe asked.

Elliott pushed a rolling chair his way. "Confirmation on both sides. We believe Frank just spotted them."

Joe nodded, then exhaled as he sat in the chair. He smiled when he looked around the room. Danny Hoi manned the computers, along with Dan and Mark from security. "I see we have a whole team."

Elliott smiled. "All bases covered. Maps. Signals. You name it."

"Let's get this over with." It was without thought, Joe pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. He projected confidence, and Joe was confident that his sons would pull it off. But as extra security, in the quiet of his mind, Joe said a prayer.

^^^

They appeared on the horizon of the hill like a thick black line. The

faces and figures of the society soldiers were hard to discern even through the binoculars which Hal peered. "What's going on! They're moving in. We have to do this!" Hal called out.

Frank was just as confused. "Robbie. Robbie, come in." He called in the radio. "What's going on."

"She won't start." Robbie charged the engines on the helicopter.

"You have to move it out now, Robbie." Frank watched through his own binoculars. His stance was ready and he knew what he had to do. "Robbie!"

"I'm trying!" Robbie fought to get the bird started.

Over the hill they emerged more, and Hal actually felt his heart race. Too close. Way too close. The plan was simple. Once in scope, Robbie would lift Ellen up and to safety. But the time frame shortened the more the distance between them and the society did.

"Frank." Hal urged.

"I know." Getting his bearings, Frank had to make a decision. "Robbie, you have three seconds, or you'll have to leave that bird. Once they get down that hill. There's not that much distance between them and this trench. We have to . . ."

"I can get this Frank." Robbie was determined.

"Robbie."

"I'm trying!"

"Fuck it." Leaving his position, Frank moved with speed down the trench to make his way out. He lifted himself from the just dug hole, rolled out, and charged to where the helicopter was situated in a ravine. No sooner did he make it to the hillside, the sound of the engine noise and blast of air from the blade, careened at him.

"Got it!" Robbie lifted the bird. "I told you."

Up from the ravine the chopper began to lift and Frank stepped back. He watched the bird raise and the earth seemingly uncover a view of Ellen who sat on the passenger's side of the bird.

Her hand pressed against the glass, her eyes stayed with Frank as she lifted higher and higher.

"Didn't I tell you?" Robbie smiled.

"Robbie." Ellen said with panic.

"What?" He looked. "Shit."

Over the top of the hill, right behind the ensuing barrage of troops flew two fighter helicopters.

"No, sweat." Robbie gave his typical grin. "You're about to see why

I'm the best."

The word 'fuck' was pretty much a given to come from Frank's mouth when he saw the two choppers. He raced back to the trench hearing the high speed of the choppers he knew would follow Robbie and Ellen. Just as the trench returned to his sight, a hard spray of bullets ripped across the ground and Frank leaped to the safety of the hole.

"Down!" he yelled at Hal as the second set of rapid fire ricocheted into the dirt wall of the trench, barreling dirt down upon them. Both Slagel men rolled out of harm's way in just enough time.

Hal hurried to his feet and peered with haste over the top of the trench. "Now or never Frank."

"Now," Frank ran down the line of set up mortar launchers. He placed on a gas mask and took a position in front of the first launcher. "Set."

Hal, putting on his gasmask, checked out the coordinates. "Fire." he yelled as he moved to the next launcher and slid to a stop at the base.

*Whoosh!*

Head turned, Frank fired the first Dean-ami tipped mortar, stood up and raced to the launcher where Hal was positioned.

"Set," Hal said.

With a lean, Frank peered, then moved on. "Fire."

A turn of his head, a launch of the mortar and Hal raced to the next launcher.

"Set!" Frank yelled.

"Fire!"

WHOOSH!

There were six more launchers to go with a total deliverance of Dean-ami carbon tipped missiles that would wipe out a major metropolis. By the time Frank had reached the forth launcher, the first mortar landed.

It was a well composed set of musical war sounds. The yelling of voices, the explosions of death, the pop off of mortars and the whistle of their sail. The timing had to be perfect and for the results of their efforts, Frank and Hal had to wait.

The last whoosh of the closely launched mortar rang out and Frank, at the end of the trench line, dove into the deeper ditch already prepared.

Hal followed. Not removing the safety of his mask, he maneuvered the handmade pseudo periscope to see what was happening out passed their trench. Through the small lense, all he could see was smoke. He knew the odds of no one emerging, and an immediate victory were slim, but he could

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still hope. Hal watched the lingering death clouds block his view of what was impending. Feeling the tap on his shoulder, Hal turned to Frank, who obviously wanted an answer.

Even though the age old adage, of 'wait until the smoke' clears, seemed to hold true, Hal remained optimistic and responded with a thumbs up.

The chopper took another dip, and Ellen hung on for dear life with every turn and spin Robbie made.

"Robbie. Are you sure, we'll be fine?"

"El, please." Robbie pulled the helicopter back up.

"What happens if they shoot at us."

"El, they won't shoot at us." Robbie said, then with a drastic tilt of the bird to the right, he dropped the helicopter in a split second's time to see a missile sail by them into the trees.

"Oh god." Ellen closed her eyes.

"Missiles maybe. Not shots." The moment Robbie said that a seer of bullets hit against the side of the helicopter causing Ellen to scream. "OK, I'm wrong." Robbie comment. "No more fuckin around. I don't expect a response, but . . ." Using his chin he maneuvered the mouthpiece to the radio closer to his lips. "This is Eagle One. Been in a race, now I'm leading the assholes and dropping them."

Ellen could only guess what that meant, however her guess was correct when Robbie increased the speed and flight of the chopper.

^^^

"Damn it!" Bertha's voice blasted out, and radio in hand, she turned to George. "We lost our monitor."

"What do you mean we lost our monitor?" George asked. "The signal."

"No, our monitor." Bertha explained. "He was too close. I guess. He said some sort of gas was used. They were dropping like flies and then . . . gone."

"Son of a bitch." George grveled and spun a view to Henry. "What the hell do they have out there."

Smug, Henry shrugged. "Our secret weapon."

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"Secret weapon my ass. Callahan. Where are our choppers?"

Bertha took a second to find out. "Too far from the initial site. Seventy miles maybe."

"Why are they out there?"

"They are in pursuit. Shall I bring them back?"

Jaw twitching, George bounced from heel to toe.

"It may be pointless." Bertha stated. "I say we keep them in pursuit because obviously the blue doll is in the other helicopter. We want to twin this game."

"Yes. Yes we do."

"Sir?" Bertha questioned. "Your order?"

"Fuck it." George stated hard. "Get Lange on the line and order the Kennedy. This game is over with." No sooner did George speak his last word and he caught through the corner of his eye, Henry dialing a phone. From the holster around his waist, in a smooth motion, George pulled out a revolver extended it, clicked back the hammer, placed it to Henry's temple, and grabbed the phone. "What the hell are you doing."

"You're breaking the rules. I'm doing my job."

"You can't do your job with a bullet in your head, Henry."

"Then fine. Shoot me. But in less than three minutes this game is over with." Henry stared intently at George trying his hardest to ignore the hard pressing metal to his temple. "I am to call Joe. My death means nothing. But if Joe doesn't hear from me, those troops he has positioned, will storm in. Kill me, George, you sign your own death."

"Sir?" Bertha called out. "Your directive."

Slowly George pulled the weapon away from Henry. "Try to get a hold of the choppers. Keep them in the air, keep them in pursuit, and keep them in this game."

^^^

The lunging society soldier met with the tip of Hal's sword as he made his attempt to get into the trench. Like a pierced apple, the soldiers head hinged on the metal of the blade.

Hal, with a bit of resistance, retracted the blade at the same time he fired from his revolver. It was the tenth society soldier that made it into the trench, he had taken out. His body ached with each fighting pivot he made, but he couldn't let that stop him. How he, the injured brother ended up being the hands on man, he didn't know. While Frank fired out with

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diligence, Hal ensued in his battle, and engaged in a readiness for any soldier that tipped over the edge of their safety zone.

“We’re hit.” Ellen informed Robbie when she saw the stream of smoke.

“We’re fine.” Robbie repeated the phrase has had spoken a million times.

Before them in the distance, Ellen could see a mountain range. “Robbie, we’re too low.”

“I know what I’m doing.” He directed his voice then into the radio. “Frank. We may need a ride. I have to take care of this mess, then I have to land.” Controlling the stick for a moment with his leg, Robbie reached over head, flipped a few switches, then after re-grabbing the stick, drastically turned the chopper left in avoidance of the spray of machine gun fire that flew their way.

“Grenade!” Frank blasted out in his charging run toward Hal. “Heads up!” In a hunch, yet in full speed, Frank eyed the grenade that had rolled into the trench. Making his way to where they had dug a lower level trench, Frank whisked up a sandbag from the top, dropped it on the grenade and lunged forward into the ditch with Hal just as the explosion rocked the ground.

It rained sand and debris along with Society soldier body parts.

Uncovering his head, Frank lifted his body some. “You OK?”

Muffled from beneath his brother’s flesh, Hal responded. “I’m . . .” he coughed. “Fine.”

“There can’t be many more.” Frank caught his breath.

Hal sat up. “You don’t . . .shit. Grenade.” on his warning he reached for Frank and tugged him back down, and huddled they waited until the explosion rang out.

Coughing, Frank ran his hand over his head clearing the dirt. “Good thing we dug this level.”

“Good thing.”

“You were saying?” Frank questioned.

“I was merely asking if you really thought there weren’t that many

more.”

Scooting over Hal, Frank grabbed the periscope and brought it up. He peered through then looked at Hal with a smile. “Not many more.” He watched Hal grab the radio. “What are you doing?”

“Checking on our brother.”

~~~~~

“Avoiding fire.” Robbie responded to Hal’s question.

“Robbie.” Ellen whispered out.

“But right now, Hal.” Robbie continued.

“Robbie.” Ellen’s voice shook as she pushed herself further back in her seat.

“I’m ending this.” Robbie said.

“Oh, God.” Ellen held on watching the side of a huge cliff came closer into view.

“Hold on.” Robbie picked up speed.

“We’re gonna crash.”

“I know what I’m doing. I saw this in a movie once.”

“This isn’t . . .” Ellen closed her eyes. “. . . a movie.” She didn’t want to see it coming. Hands to her ears she blocked out the sounds of the bullets that repeatedly seared into their chopper.

“Open your eyes, you don’t want to miss this.”

Why she did it, Ellen didn’t know. But the second she opened her eyes, she screamed. The rock solid side of the cliff was so close, to her, they were like a bug heading into a windshield. And just as she accepted her pending death, with lightening speed, Robbie lifted the helicopter, leaving the ensuing society chopper no choice but to plow into the cliff they missed by a whisper.

Robbie shrieked in excitement. “Did I tell you I knew what I was doing or . . .” his words were cut short by the bullet that bounced off the windshield from the head-on second society chopper. “Fuck.” He tilted the bird and as he did, smoke from his own chopper flooded around him. “This isn’t gonna work. I’m gonna have to find a place to land.”

“Where’s the society.”

“I don’t know. I can’t worry about that now.” Robbie tried to listen for sounds of the other chopper. He peered to the helicopter radar screen and saw nothing. “Shit. We’re flying blind.”

Ellen peered through the windshield into nothing but smoke. “No



kidding.”

“This should clear us.” Lowering down some, Robbie turned the chopper. Slowly he watched the smoke move from vision. “See. I told you.”

The smoke cleared. Ellen screamed. The second society chopper was right before them.

“Shit.” Robbie said, dodging a set of bullets that flew their way. “If I can lock them in . . .” Robbie’s thumb held tight to the button on the stick.

“I can take them out with a missile.”

“If you can get them to stop . . .”

Beep-beep-beep. Beep-beep-beep.

Ellen looked down to her watch. “Oh, my God. Times up.”

The shooting from the society stopped.

In joy, Ellen squealed. “Times up. Times up. They stopped shooting. Game’s over.”

Eyes glued out the windshield to the society chopper in plain view, Robbie grinned, depressed the firing button with his thumb, released the missile close range and veered off the helicopter a second before he blew the last society chopper from the sky.

“Robbie?” Ellen questioned.

Robbie shrugged then smiled. “Guess my watch was slow.” he winked. “Now . . . Game over.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Eight dead soldiers, six of them had their necks snapped with precision, the last two met their demise at the end of a knife's point. He went for the throat. A typical Slagel trademark. It was the trail Steward Lange thought would lead them to Johnny. Jess had to admit he was quite impressed by the fact that Johnny not only made an attempt to leave the society, but he eliminated any resistance that got in his way.

The trail turned up one empty jeep, four more dead soldiers and a missing truck all too far a distance from Quantico to be pursuing in the midst of what was going on.

Steward felt defeat and he showed it when he returned last to Quantico.

"Anything?" Jess asked him when he walked into the interim room.

"Nothing." Steward's voice was raspy. "I need . . ." he rubbed his eyes. "I need you to issue a search party immediately."

"Are we ordering them to bring him in, or to kill . . ."

"No." Steward stopped that sentiment immediately. "No. We'll let George handle this when he gets back."

"Are we going to inform him before hand?" Jess questioned.

"No." Steward slumped down to a chair. "I'll deal with the repercussions of that. Let's see if we can find Johnny first."

Jess picked up the phone. "I'll get a team right on it. Starting point?"

"We picked up clear tracks that went southwest."

Jess hesitated his dialing. "Southwest?"

"Yes. We followed the tire tracks of the truck in a clear direction. I think he's taking a south west route then will go to Beginnings."

"Beginnings?" Jess nearly laughed. "That's absurd. He knows he can't go back to beginnings. He knows that."

"No, he doesn't. He has amnesia. He's a scared young boy heading home. Make that call." Steward instructed as he stood.

Jess nodded. But to him it didn't add up. Johnny killed like a well-trained Slagel, yet he left a clear path to his direction. It was obvious Johnny remembered what his father had taught him, and in knowing that, Jess figured Johnny wouldn't of pulled off the escape without a laid out plan. What exactly that plan was and where that plan would take him, Jess was lost.

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“Oh, Boyens.” Steward paused in his exit. “I’m heading down to see Sgt. Conners. Find me if you hear anything. Hey, maybe we might even hear from Johnny himself..”

Once again, Jess paused in his dialing. Phone to his ear he looked inquisitively at Steward. “How?”

“Aside from taking all his clothes, he made it a point to steal a non-issued working mobile.”

“You’re kidding?” Jess chuckled. “He took a phone. Who’s he gonna call?”

^^^

The final shot of the battle rang out, and the young society soldier, arms outward, flew back ten feet from the direct hit he received from Frank. No sooner did Frank lower his arm, then he raised up his hand with the radio. “Robbie. Come in. All clear. Where are you.”

The hiss of static blocked out the first portion of what Robbie had said, but the rest came through, including his concern. “Trying right now to make a landing, Frank. Looking for an area. We sustained damage.”

“You have to repeat where you are, Hal and I will be there. Landmarks?”

“We’re just passed over . . .fuck.”

“What?” Frank questioned.

“Shit. Frank. We’re going down.” Robbie spoke with desperation.

“Robbie?” Frank’s eyes widened and with a snap of his finger swung a view to the truck. “Robbie!”

The sound of the fluttering motor carried with Robbie’s voice, “Frank, I can’t control her. We’re going down. I repeat we’re going down.”

Frank moved in circles as he ran. Peering to the sky. “I can’t see you! Landmark.”

Hal held up the binoculars. “We’re at a low point. I can’t even hear them.”

“Robbie!” Frank called out then froze when Ellen’s voice came through.

“Frank. Frank. Help.” Ellen cried.

The engines sounds stopped. There was quiet.

“Engine’s gone.” Robbie stated with an eerie calm.

“Ellen!” Frank raged at the same time as Hal to the truck. “Ell!”

Through heavy breaths quivering, the only tell tale sign of what was

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happening, Ellen spoke. "I love you, Frank."

"Ellen!" Frank cried out.

Static.

^^^

Every ounce of Elliott tensed up and his body actually shook, "No. No!"

"Jesus Christ." Joe flew to the control board. "Pin point. Some one get me a location." He ordered. "Where did they go down."

Danny Hoi clicked upon the control board keyboard. "Last location was about . . ." He stopped speaking when he heard the heart felt, desperate arguing of Frank and Hal coming through the monitoring system they had.

Joe stared at the board. "Where, Danny, where?"

"Ten miles north of the Mormon Mountain Range." Danny answered.

"Oh my God, that's a hundred miles from them. They'll never find them." Just as Joe said that, he looked down to the radio Danny handed him.

"Time is up, Joe." Danny said. "Talk to your sons."

Grabbing the radio, Joe turned to Elliott. "Elliott, start a call out. Scan every frequency, Try to get a hold of that chopper radio." He brought the radio to his mouth. "Frank. Frank come in."

Elliott, working with Mark, continuously called out. "Eagle One, this is Sgt. Ryder. Do you read me. Repeat, do you read me."

"Dad?" Frank responded. "Dad. We lost Robbie and Ellen. Oh my God, they went down."

"I know, Frank, calm down." Joe stated. "Head south we have them pinpointed."

Danny interjected. "Tell them I did not. Did not pick up any explosion. Good sign."

"Frank, listen to me." Joe spoke. "We did not pick up any static or interference which was consistent with the last two choppers that went down. That is a good sign."

"Where are they?" Frank asked. "Just tell me where they are."

"We're pulling you guys up now, and we'll give you directions."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Frank's voice was more hopeless than anyone had heard it.

"No apologies, Frank. We'll get them. We'll get them." Joe pulled forth the information and direction, then began to give it to Frank.

"Next." Elliott instructed with a rush. "Eagle One, this is Sgt. Ryder. Do you read me. I repeat. Do you read me. Eagle One this is . . ."

With a saddened excitement, partially breaking up, Ellen's voice seeped through. "Elliott. Elliott."

"Ellen." Elliott smiled. "Ellen are you all right?"

"We're fine. I think. A little hurt. It's . . . hard . . . Robbie."

Elliott shook his head confused trying to decode the broken message. "Repeat."

Robbie's voice came through. "Elliott."

All activity in the room stopped and there was quiet.

Joe caught his breath. "I'm giving you to Danny, Frank. We got them. They're fine." he rushed over to the radio that Elliott held and immediately took it. "Robbie."

"Dad." Robbie spoke with relief. "Dad we're . . ."

"Help is on the way, Son. Just hang tight."

"Dad . . . can't stay. Have to . . ."

"Robbie?" Joe called out.

The sound of a frightened Ellen screaming, 'Robbie!' carried through the radio.

Near panicked, Joe turned up the volume. "Robbie, answer me!"

"Dad." Robbie's voice crackled with the radio. "There's some . . ."  
Down went Robbie's tone an entire octave as he whispered out, "Oh shit."

"Robbie." Joe depressed the button. "Robbie."

A constant 'clicking' was the only sound heard.

"Robbie." Joe called stronger. "Robbie."

Silence.

^^^

The ringing quiet, filed with his concern, was so loud, it actually hurt Dean's ears. He needed something to carry him over the course of the next few hours. Something to take away the worry, the quiet, and he found it in Ellen's voice.

*"Isn't she cute, Dean?"* Ellen held a baby Majestic before the video camera. *"What should we call her?"*

*"How about lab study 4327-G."* Dean from the camera responded.

*"Don't be silly. She needs a name."*

Sitting in a chair, Dean watched the tape. His elbows dig hard into his

thoughts as he prayer folded hands covered his nose. He wished as he listened that he would have zoomed in more. How badly he wanted to see Ellen's face.

*'Dean, come on, she needs a name.'*

Joe heard it and he knew there had to be a logical explanation, but the sound of his daughter's voice sent him flying into the lab. He stopped the second he stepped inside and saw the screen with Ellen's face.

Dean's pressed 'pause' freeze framing the shot on Ellen's face. Running his fingers through his hair in a nervous manner, Dean stood up. "Joe, don't . . ."

"No." Joe held up his hand, his eyes still locked on the screen. "Nothing yet. We . . . we are confident, Dean. Really confident."

"But you said the last transmission from them . . ."

"I know what I said." Joe walked further in the room. "And I know what I feel. They were alive after that chopper went down, and I firmly believe when Frank and Hal get there, they'll be fine."

Slowly back down to his chair, Dean sat. "I can't take this."

"Me either." Joe pulled up a chair next to Dean. "I see you found something to take your mind off of the waiting."

A sad chuckle came from Dean. "I don't think anything can do that."

"No. No, you're right." Joe sat down. "And I have a confession to make, Dean."

"What's that?" Dean looked at Joe.

Patting his chest pocket, Joe gave a humble look. "I've been bad. I smoked all day. Now I know you don't want me to get treatments if I was smoking three days before hand. So, I promise, if you just give me today. Let me smoke away, I promise I won't fold so easily after we find . . ." Joe stopped talking when Dean turned his head. "Dean?"

Dean stood up with an exhale.

"Dean?" Joe stood as well. "I hope you aren't mad. But Christ, you didn't tell me when my next treatment was, so how the hell was I supposed to know. OK, all right, I should have been . . ." He swore his heart dropped when he heard another exhale. "Dean? What is it?"

Dean shook his head, then finally turned around and faced Joe. "Smoke, Joe. Don't worry about me, OK? We'll just deal with the treatment schedule at another time."

"Smoke?" Joe chuckled. "You're telling me to smoke? Good. I won't argue. So, I'm taking it we'll wait a few more days. That won't mess things

up will it?"

Dean didn't answer.

Dean's silence was a residual warning sound to Joe. "Dean? For four days you've avoided this subject. Be straight with me, what's going on."

His eyes glanced away, then by the time Dean returned to Joe, he couldn't look at him. "Joe, could we just talk about this at a later . . ."

"No." Joe grabbed his arm as Dean tried to walk by him. "We'll talk now. What the hell is going on?"

Eyes in a dead stare with Joe's, Dean swallowed. "I'd really rather . . ."

"Dean."

"Fine." Dean pulled away from Joe, then had to turn away again. He walked to the counter and faced the wall.

"You can't look at me. My God . . ."

"It's not . . ." Dean held a raised hand as he mustered the courage to turn back around. "It's not what . . . it's just that. It's just that I'm not sure we're heading in the right direction with the treatments that's all."

"OK. What direction will we head?"

"Joe . . ."

"Dean." Joe was firm and he walked closer. "What is going on?"

A deep breath in was what Dean took, right before his painful blink. "The scan . . . the scan showed that . . . Joe, when we removed the lesions from the lungs, I thought, I was sure we got it all, you know. And with the treatments." Dean whistled. "I thought you'd prevail."

"We didn't get it all."

"Oh, no, we got it all." Emotionally Dean snickered. "It just came back."

"That fast?" Joe asked astonished. "It can't be. The treatments . . ."

"The treatments didn't stop it."

"The lungs again?"

Tightly closed lipped, Dean nodded. "And . . ."

"And?"

"And we found indications that the disease may have spread to . . . let's say it spread further than I would have thought."

Joe lost all breath. He actually spun in his exhale of what he had just heard.

Dean walked to him. "I am not sure, but it appears to be a highly degenerative and progressive . . ."

"Enough." Joe held up a hand, took a moment of thought, then faced Dean. After a nod, and what he believed was a clear mind, he spoke

rationally. "So what now? What do we do now? Do we operate? Change treatments, what?"

"I don't know." Dean shook his head.

"You don't know?" Joe's voice raised. "Well, I'll tell you, Dean. 'I don't know' isn't good enough. I'll repeat. What now?"

"Joe, I don't believe . . ."

"Don't." Joe pointed. "Don't tell me we're out of options."

Silence. Dean didn't respond.

"Dean?" Joe questioned. "Please don't tell me we're out of options." his voice lowered to a passionate whisper, squinting with the pain of his words. "Tell me . . . We're not . . . we're not out of options. Are we? Not yet."

Raising his eyes to answer, the word 'saved' was literally an understatement for how Dean felt when he saw Danny Hoi walk in the room.

Joe saw Dean's attention moving elsewhere, and he turned to the doorway. "Danny?"

"I think . . ." Danny extended a phone to Joe. "I think you should take this."

Joe reached for it. "Frank?"

Danny shook his head.

"Then I won't talk. Not now." Joe stated.

"Joe." Danny held the phone out again. "We traced the call. It's coming from Eastern Ohio."

"Ohio?" Joe questioned.

"Yes." Danny replied. "Ohio. And the location is why I think you should take this."

Hesitant, Joe took the phone and brought it to his ear. "Hello."

"Pap-Pap." Johnny sounded near tears.

"Johnny?" Joe was shocked. "Look if this is . . ."

"Pap, please." Rambling, Johnny spoke despondent. "Pap, please. I'm sorry, pap-pap. I'm so Sorry."

"Johnny." Joe closed his eyes.

"Pap. I'll do anything. I will." He sputtered out confusion filled words. "I will. I'm sorry. Just let me come home. Please, Pap, I just want to come home."

^^^



## Druga-Johnston/The Game

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### Mormon Mountains, Utah

The hour and a half drive seemed like an eternity, and the search in the dense wooded area near the start of a desert seemed even longer. They stuck together in the search, separating and each getting lost was not an option. But once they had found the helicopter, they had no other choice.

Frank had called out so much, so loud that his voice started to leave him. "Robbie! Ellen!"

Hal could feel the heat that generated and blew in from the desert when he looked over his shoulder to where his brother's voice carried from. He returned to his examination of the chopper and area that surrounded it. It was clear that Robbie had made a crash landing. The blades of the chopper had severed and laid quite some distance from the bird. On its side, the helicopter laid, remnants of a air battle and crash evident in the appearance.

The minimal amount of blood found in and around the chopper assured Hal that injuries weren't major. An abundance of blood wasn't the only thing the crash scene lacked. Not only were Robbie and Ellen nowhere to be found, but neither were all of the supplies placed aboard.

Some could of scattered upon impact, some might of dropped from the sky in the descent. Hal was sure they would have come across those in the search. But they didn't. It was turning into an enigma that didn't make any sense. No footprints. No supplies. Nothing but a helicopter crash scene not far from a very open desert.

There was no way, and Hal was certain, that with injuries, they made it too far on foot. They especially wouldn't make it far carrying all the supplies. Even though he kept doing so, Hal couldn't dwell on the supply issue. He had to place his thoughts on Robbie and Ellen. Where were they?

"Hal!" Frank called out in the distance. "Hal, come here."

With a, 'yes, he found them' racing through his mind, Hal followed the direction of Frank's voice. He ran through a small distance through the trees and down a small grade, where he nearly slid to the bottom to reach Frank.

The smile and excitement quickly left Hal's face when he saw Frank standing alone before a large, thick, tree. "Frank?"

Hands on his hips, Frank turned his head to Hal.

"Frank? I thought . . ." Hal caught his breath and walked to his brother. "I thought you found them."

"Nope. But I found what happened to them." Frank still stared at the

tree.

Curious, Hal moved closer and as he made it to Frank he saw what Frank stared at.

Tied to a tree with twine was a skinned rabbit. Its arms and legs spread eagle, the torso was sliced wide open, and the result of the disembowelment lay at the foot of the tree.

"Frank. You don't think . . ."

"No. Look at it."

Hal was speechless for a second. "This looks like a Dean and Ellen Bunny autopsy."

"Yep." Frank poked the animal with a stick.

"Do you think Ellen left this as a clue or sign?" Hal asked.

"Nope."

"Then why did you say you found what happened to them?"

"The rabbit is a sacrifice." Frank stated.

"Ok." Hal was lost. "A sacrifice for?"

"A thank you."

"I am so confused."

With a 'follow me' wave of his hand, Frank brought Hal to the other side of the tree. "If you think we've seen it all. We haven't." Using the stick in his hand, Frank tapped the tree. "Read."

Inching his way to the bark, Hal was set back by the message written on the tree, printed clearly in blood. "My god." Hal read it out loud. "Thank you Heaven for the gift of the Golden Gods who fell from the sky." Slowly and eyes still wide from reading the bizarre message, Hal turned to Frank.

"Heaven" Frank said. "Gods. Sacrifice. Skinless."

"Christopher Columbus."

"Exactly." Frank nodded. "Golden Gods who fell from the sky?"

Hal exhaled. "Robbie and Ellen. Oh, my God."

"No . . . Gods. Plural, Hal. Plural. Do you believe this shit. Do you?"

Frank grunted. "It's a bad sci-fi movie, Hal. A thousand miles from home. Ellen and Robbie are gone and the skinless fuckin mole people have them. Now the only question is . . ." In a hard spin of his frustration, Frank threw the stick he was holding. ". . . where."

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**NEXT: THE PURSUIT OF CREED**

## Druga-Johnston/The Game

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