

Scifi Sampler #1

Science fiction novel excerpts and short stories

George Donnelly

Scifi Sampler #1

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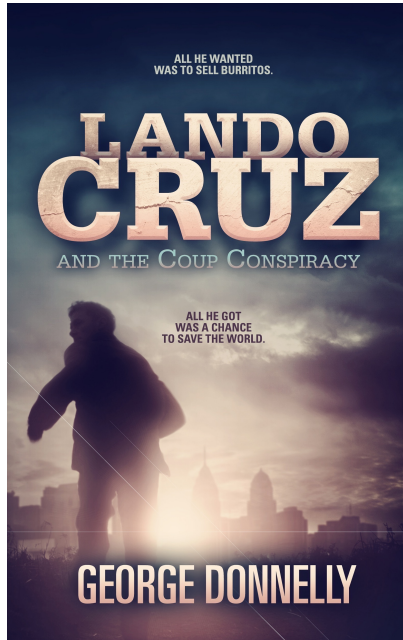
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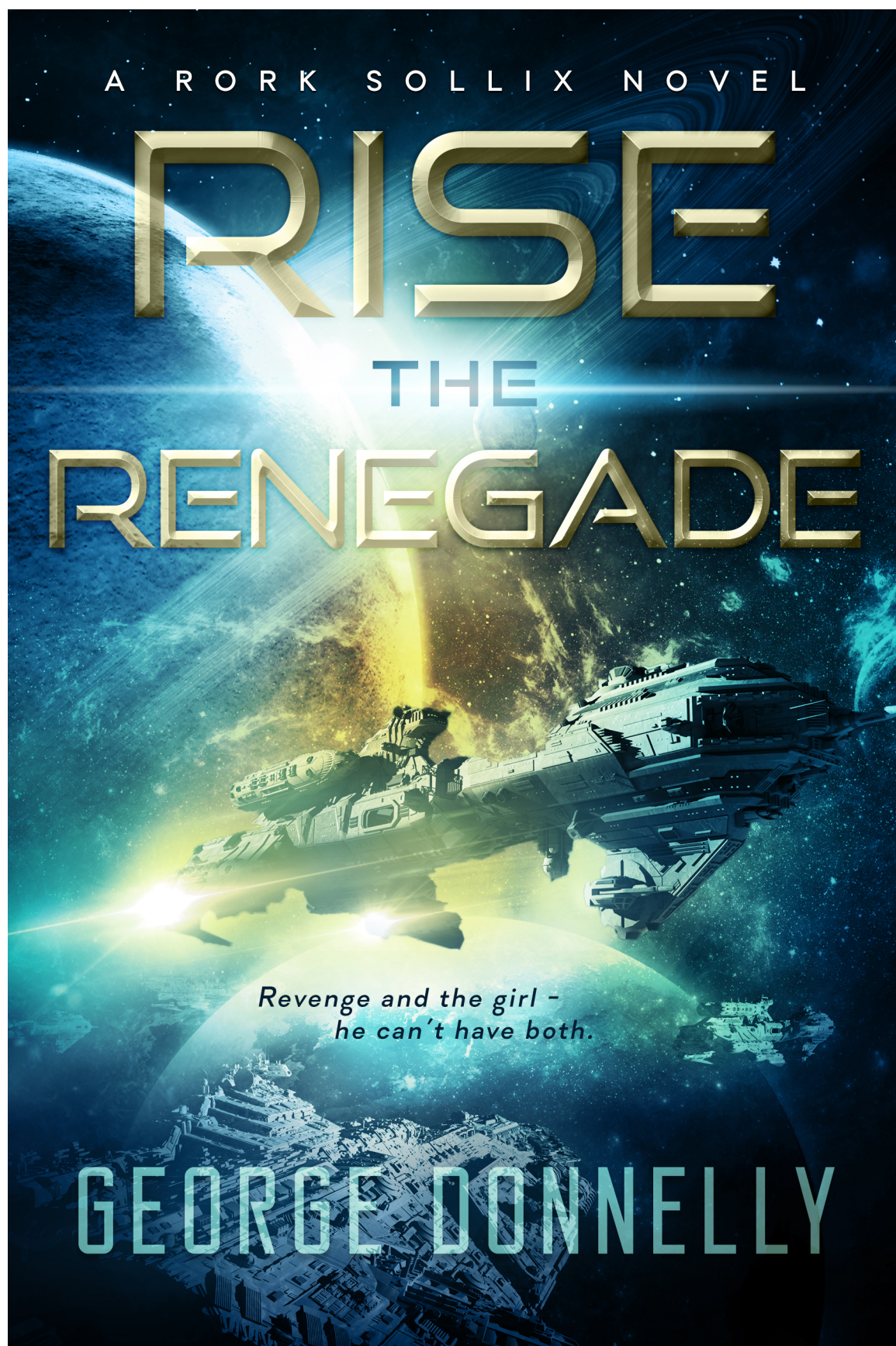
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Books by George Donnelly

About the Author



Rise the Renegade

The golden age of freedom withers across the Solar System as independent colonies fall under the dominion of Barbary and Sons, a ruthless cartel run by a 24th century cross between Genghis Khan and the CEO of Walmart.

One man rises in opposition. Rork Sollix raids Barbary's cargo ships for fun and profit, along with his lovestruck teenage servant Lala Fevari and his ragtag crew.

Just days from death, betrayed by his own men and on the run, Rork tries to safeguard Lala on Earth. But Barbary kidnaps her, throws Rork in a bleak Delhi prison and aims to make the young girl pay for Rork's crimes.

Buy *Rise the Renegade* [here](#).

RTR Chapter 1

"THEY'RE HERE!"

Pulse blasts landed at their backs. Rork grabbed Lala's petite hand and they ran down the corridor. Icy sweat poured from his forehead and stung his eyes. They turned a corner and pressed their backs against the cold metal wall. There was the hatch. On the other side of its bulbous window was dark, empty space.

And they didn't have their space suits on.

Another spasm hit him, like an overcharged wire that ran through his body from head to toe. He coughed and fell to his knees.

This was just the beginning of the disease. And the end.

Lala bent down and rubbed his back. Her hands were cool and utterly smooth. The pain eased. They had to recapture the bridge, his bridge.

A sharp click sounded down the corridor. Rork stood up fast, reached for Lala, stumbled and fell to his knees again.

"They're here!" Klambert yelled again. All three traitors chased them now.

Rork and Lala ran, unsure which of them was supporting or pulling the other.

"Come on!" Klambert yelled. Pulse blasts echoed down the corridor.

Rork crashed into the wall at the end of the narrow hallway. It made a clipped thundering sound as the thin metal absorbed the impact of his torso and bounced back into form. He twisted his body and stretched out his arms to cushion Lala's impact.

Her cyan mane curved over the top of her head and down the right side, ending at her neck in a neat row of subdued curls. The left side of her head was clean-shaven.

Her face was thin, nearly gaunt but patches of baby fat still clustered around her green eyes. It gave her the appearance of an uppity teenager who didn't understand the world but had strong ideas about how it should work.

Rork caught her lanky body in his arms as she bounced off the wall. He felt her breasts against his chest and the warmth of her core against his own.

It was take the bridge or die in space. And they had to do it now.

Smoking holes opened up on the wall behind them. The noxious stench of burnt metal and plastic tickled Rork's nose. He slammed his hand over Lala's mouth.

"Don't breathe it, it's toxic." Too late. His head swam and his chest hurt.

Lala smacked his hand away and pushed past him.

Rork chased after her. "Take a right and then—"

"I know!"

Rork watched her hips rise and fall. The pink long underwear wrinkled and stretched as her legs flew high and fast towards the next turn. *Jupiter, she is gorgeous.*

Pitch black. Rork stopped and Lala skidded to a halt ahead of him. They were lost and out of time. Their pursuers were silent.

Rork put his hands out ahead of him and walked at a steady clip. He

wrapped his left arm around Lala's as he passed her. He hit hot metal and pulled back, his index finger screaming. They took a hard right turn, then hung a sharp left.

"Do you see it?" she whispered.

Rork stopped. "What?"

Lala pulled him forward. "There's a light ahead. It's the bridge."

Rork squinted. "That's not the bridge." He coughed and the charge clawed at his insides again. He needed his meds, bad.

"Come on!" She ran.

He chased. "This isn't right. This isn't the bridge." He turned. "It's this way!" He grabbed her and she resisted.

A burst of air blew Rork's hair back. Bright white light bored into his skull. He covered his eyes.

A scratching sound came over the ship's intercom, too loud. Rork took his hands from his eyes and jammed them onto his ears. Lala cried out.

"Well, Captain, any final words?" the intercom voice asked.

Rork found the camera, angled his chin up at it and stared straight into the lens. "You're fools! Especially you, Thryk!"

"Um, Rork..." Lala said.

A sharp fingernail scratched at the back of his neck. He swatted it away. "I'm your golden goose, boys! I found you. I keep you safe from Barbary! I keep us together. Have you lost your minds?"

She smacked him hard on the shoulder.

"Lala, please!" His eyes adjusted to the light. They were in the airlock — the last place he wanted to be. "Cowards, too? Flush us out into space and be done with it? That was Klambert's idiotic idea, wasn't it?"

The scratchy intercom sounded again and Glagnon cleared his throat.

After I take this ship back, I'm getting that fixed.

"We're going to let you die a natural death, Captain. Then we'll swing back around in a week for your girl. That's how long Doc Vogg gave you, right?" Glagnon chuckled.

"I'll rip your throat out and shove it where the stars don't shine!" Lala stepped closer to the camera and made a rude gesture.

"Your Captain-my-Captain has lost his edge, dearie," Glagnon said. "Too much revenge, not enough profit. We need money. And women!"

Rork shook his head and doubled over in another seizure. The lights brightened and everything went blurry. His world went silent.

I'm a dead man. But he can't have Lala. She deserves better.

Glagnon's chuckle broke through the seizure. "I've got a comfy mining station picked out for you. Take your time. Die. Consider it your retirement, a little vacation with your lady, before the end. If Barbary doesn't get there first, of course."

Rork pulled himself up onto one knee and looked up at the camera. The ship rocked under him. He flew back against the hatch and fell to the floor again. He opened his mouth to breathe. His lungs refused to respond. Next to him, Lala

lay unconscious.

The airlock door screeched open. Fresh air flowed in. Thryk's overworn boot thudded on the metal floor.

Rork looked up at him. *You're losing your ship! You coward! You weakling! Get the hell up already!*

Thryk grinned at him through a transparent respirator. He dug his oily fingers in under the back of his former captain's collar. "'Thryk's too dense to do anything other than clean the engine.' 'Thryk-headed.' 'Thryk, scrub the toilets.' 'Thryk, dump the trash.' Now I really am dumping the trash."

Rork kicked and Thryk jerked him higher. Rork reached for the wall, the floor and Thryk's stained clothes but they were all too far away.

With his free hand, the mechanic twirled the rust-eaten wheel on the hatch. It opened with a pop and Rork sensed the stale odor of engines and metal.

"In you go!" Thryk said.

Rork floated backwards down the hatch tube. He grabbed at the wall but it was too smooth and he was moving too fast. He turned his head. There was the large, spoked wheel of the interior hatch. The back of his head impacted it. The pain spread like electricity.

Rork bounced off of the hatch and into the wall. He twisted and launched himself back at the hatch wheel, his arms ahead of him and his legs behind him as if he were swimming underwater.

His left index finger reached it first. Rork wrapped it around the top of the metal ring and the other fingers followed. He pulled himself into a standing position. He checked the gauge. The pressure on the other side of the door was a little light but it would do. He pulled on the wheel. It wouldn't come. Something was wrong. And where was Lala?

A light ruffling sounded behind him. He turned. Lala's unconscious body zoomed down the corridor, feet first. The impact forced Rork's head back against the hatch door.

"Son of a bitch!"

The hatch at the other end clicked shut. That was his lucky MORF-9 spaceship. He'd bought it — honest — after recovering from what Barbary and Sons did, those bastards. The thin corridor tubing rumbled around him.

His ship was powering up, without him at the helm. It would break away from this godforsaken mining outpost. He and the love of his life would be left floating in a vacuum. Unless he got the mining station's hatch wheel to budge. Now.

He pulled at the wheel again. It clicked but did not move. Something snapped and a wind pulled at the back of his neck.

RTR Chapter 2

"HURRY UP, Rork, before you die!"

Glagnon's laughter garbled in his ear as the atmosphere seeped out of the mining station's thin, accordion-like connecting tube.

Rork grabbed at the locking wheel in his right hand and turned it again. Again the click. *There's a lock somewhere.*

Lala's unconscious body floated away from him as the vacuum of space increased its pull. Rork grabbed her and maneuvered her between his body and the hatch door, her face to his, his legs wrapped around hers.

His hands now freed, he searched the hatch door for a lever or some other way to unlock it. He pulled the locking wheel hard to the right, again and again. Each time it clicked. Each time it refused to grant them refuge.

"Time's up, Rorky!" Glagnon said through the mining ship's intercom. "Death will come a bit sooner than you thought. Tough luck about not getting your revenge on Old Man Barbary. We'll hit him from time to time and think of you. Goodbye and good riddance! Right, guys?"

"What about Lala?" Rork screamed. "Don't you want her? She's still alive!"

The rumbling stopped. The wind from the escaping air slowed.

Rork smacked Lala gently on the cheek. "Wake up. I need you to wake up."

Glagnon answered, "There are plenty of fish in the sea, Captain."

The rumbling started again. Icy wind pulled at the back of his neck and Lala slipped away. Rork grabbed her. He tried the locking wheel. Again the click. "Damnit!" Rork knew he had yelled but there was no sound.

He pulled the wheel towards him in a fit of rage. It rotated away from the wall to reveal a compartment with a red button. Underneath, the words 'Emergency Release' stared up at him in curved red lettering with the Chinese characters below it.

The wind pulled harder at Rork now but the rumbling diminished. He hit the red button. A dull thud sounded far away. He pushed the wheel back into place. It clicked. He turned the wheel and the door exploded open with a rush of warm, wet air.

Rork hung horizontally from the open hatch, the wind pushing him away. Lala hung below him, her left hand slipping from his grasp, his fingers on hers. Rork arched his fingers up and his arm back to regain his grip on her. She loved him for who he was. He wouldn't lose her now. They'd made it too far.

The pressure of the wind eased. His body sagged. He pulled Lala past him and guided her towards the open hatch. He opened his mouth to breathe but precious little air came. He exhaled and pulled himself inside the mining station. He closed the hatch behind him and turned the inside wheel.

A dark circle closed in around him and his chest ached. He held his mouth open and ran his hand across the control panel next to the hatch. The inner bulkhead behind them slid open and air rushed in again.

Rork took a deep breath and coughed. He walked on his knees over to Lala

and smacked her face. She screamed in a breath and sat straight up, her emerald eyes wide. She coughed, tried to stand up and sat back down.

"What happened?"

"Glagnon almost killed us." He felt the station pitch under them and looked out the window. Shreds of the white accordion floated against the black of space. The rear fusion motors of his MORF-9 burned bright in the distance. The other end of the corridor hung from the rear hatch between the dual engines. "Idiots. Joyriding popheads! They're going to damage my baby!"

Lala knee-walked to the hatch window and pushed Rork out of the way. She stared without saying anything. She looked at him, her eyes wide and her face slack. "I thought I was your baby."

Rork bit down hard on the knuckle of his index finger. "They'll retreat to a reasonable distance and party. Or they might have a job. And get killed and someone will seize or blow up my baby."

Lala turned and slumped down next to the hatch. "I'm your baby!"

Rork edged his eyes in her direction and grinned. "Come over here." He held his arms out to her and the pain came again. His lungs clenched and his lips pulled back to expose tightly gritted teeth. Bones popped and cracked. Every muscle seized up.

Lala threw herself next to him and massaged his chest and shoulders. "Hold on, baby, just hold on."

A low, guttural moan escaped his throat. The tension eased. He collapsed forward. "Never should have run those supplies to Isotania. Never should've done it. Always try Port Vantage first! Your master is an idiot."

She rubbed her smooth palm against his cheek and silenced him.

The gentle warmth of her hand relaxed him. He closed his eyes. "And now you have to die."

She retracted her hand.

"They planned this. They scouted this place out. I know where we are," Rork said. "Ceres 476 Mining Colony, Franklin Realm. Abandoned. I smashed the radios myself three weeks ago. There's not much around here anyway."

Lala pushed air onto her face. "But it's warm, fresh, wet."

"Always off in your head, girl. I told you about this place. I fixed life support and just left it running."

"What do you mean, I have to die?" She stood up and glared at him.

"I have days, maybe a week, then—"

"Shut up! You're not going to die! Stop feeling sorry for yourself!" A look of disgust crossed her face. She walked toward the bulkhead door. Beyond it a circular hallway curved away from them. "What's down there?"

"They'll come back for you. After I'm dead."

"Which way's the mess?" She pointed right, then left and looked back at him. "Well?"

"Left." He pulled himself up and ambled after her.

The hallway was finished in a creamy white matte. Thin light panels ran the length of the corridor three-quarters of the way up the wall. The space was

otherwise without ornament. The lights flickered as if they might fail at any moment.

"This is old." She reached a door and moved her hand to the black switch next to it.

"No!" he said.

She retracted her hand and moved along. "Are we just going in a circle?"

"Of course not. Well, sort of. Three more doors on the right is the mess."

She stopped and waited for him to catch up. As he passed her, she reached for his hand and interlocked her fingers with his.

Rork studied her face. Her eyes probed his. Her cheeks tensed and twitched. She exuded a nervous fear. She was so precious. He pulled her closer and put his arm around her. "I don't want them to take you."

She pushed him away and he bumped into the wall. She continued walking, then stopped, turned around and fixed him with sharp, flat eyes. "You still treat me like a little girl. We're going to make it through—"

"You take nothing seriously. You think nothing matters. But it all matters! And it's all very serious, Lala! They will use you and sell you off to even worse people!" He lowered his voice to a rasping whisper. "I will kill you myself, right now, to make sure that doesn't happen."

Lala strode toward him and smacked her master hard across the face. "You don't get to decide that." She exhaled, adjusted her blouse and looked around. "Which one of these has a bed? I want you now. We've waited long enough." Her face glowed hot pink and she fanned herself.

He smirked. "You know it's not proper."

She frowned and hugged her arms to her chest. "I know everything that's going to happen."

"An algae farm seastead and ten kids next to a forest?"

She grinned. "With you. Don't forget that part!"

"Can I get a few more details?"

She waved his question away. "You'll get your revenge on Barbary, for your father. I can see it."

"Details. I need details."

"I'm still looking for that bed." She turned and put a hand to her temple. "I predict that we will find food in the mess." She guffawed loudly, not unlike his obese drunk of an uncle. She walked to the door of the mess and opened it.

He pushed himself away from the wall. He was overheated and his ankles ached.

She stepped back from the mess door and clapped her hands together. She looked at him, her eyes wide and bright, like a child receiving the present she actually wanted. She yelped and knelt down.

He struggled to take another step forward. His head swam and his vision twisted. He needed to eat and take his meds. He took two more steps and stopped short. She stood in front of him, her slender pink-clad legs dancing forwards and backwards in place.

"Look what I found!" Her right hand cupped a tiny beast. The animal sported

a yellow duck-like bill with two airholes on top and set back near the skull. The eyes were perceptive and hinted at intelligence. This platyfet wasn't more than a year old judging by its coarse brown fur.

It emitted a shrill squeak. Lala shrieked, then open-mouth guffawed. "Isn't it gorgeous? It plorked! Was it here before?"

He shook his head. "Food?"

The platyfet plorked again.

"That's two sandwiches we need."

"Alright, alright..." Lala stepped lightly into the undersized mess hall. Only one table remained. She sat the beast down on it and walked over to the dispensers.

"Make it a ham sandwich." Rork struggled to fix himself on the bench seat next to the animal. "Must I eat with this thing here?" He looked down at it. It looked up at him, its eyes wide, its bottom eyelids taut. It plorked once more.

"Empty!" She hit something. It sounded hollow.

He lay his head down on the table. The furry thing trundled over to him, its shiny black claws clacking on the pristine table surface. It nuzzled its bill against his tricep.

Lala walked over and sat down across from him. She plopped two drink bags on the table. "That's all there is."

Rork's stomach rumbled. "I'll split him with you." He grinned.

The platyfet geeped.

Lala rolled her eyes. "There's to be no more talk of death, anyone's death, especially not Faxmir's. We're going to make it out of here, as a family. Are we in agreement on this point?" She arched an eyebrow.

Rork laughed. "Faxmir? You can't name him that! It's cruel — and unusual!"

RTR Chapter 3

"IF ONLY we could reach it." Lala stood at the far left of the galley window and looked up and into the gloom of space.

"What?" Rork picked his head up from the table, the bug-infested beast perched unsteadily on his shoulder. "Since when is there a window there?" The urge to run hit him, but to where? How?

Faxmir geeped and resettled itself in the crook of Rork's neck. Its body vibrated. The moving fibers of its coat tickled his neck. He shuddered and gently relocated it to the table, where it geeped up at him.

"I just hit a button and it popped up. The trainship is up there. There must be a line that passes near us. We're not as remote as you thought." She turned and stuck the tip of her tongue out at him.

He laughed. "This is not like Earth. There's no horizon, really. So just because you see it doesn't mean it's close by."

"Yet somehow, the superior space pirate finds himself in need of a green Earth-girl to take care of him. Oh, the irony." She giggled.

Rork frowned. The platyfet geeped at him and he pushed it away.

Lala strode over to them and bundled the animal into her arms. "There, there. Pay no attention to him. He's just not cut out for fatherhood, that's all."

Rork felt hollow inside and drained but that couldn't pass. "I would make a great father!"

She turned her face up at him and walked away. "You have good genes, Rork, so you'd be a good biological father. But a real father?" She laughed. "You can't even bond with this cute little guy."

"It's a dirty beast and a carrier of disease. Not a human child!"

"And monogamy? Do you even know what the word commitment means?"

"Wait, let me look it up." He pretended to look it up on the wrist computer he left behind on the MORF-9. He frowned.

"Because I'll be gone otherwise, bound servant or not."

He sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Let's see, what shall we name you, cutie pie?" she said to herself.

He stood up and walked over to her. "There has to be more food around here. Did you find anything?"

"What was the name of my last boyfriend again?" She held a finger to her temple.

Rork stopped short. "You've never had—"

"Buff! Right!" She turned around to Rork. "His name is Buff. It's final."

"Who's this Buff?" he asked of the universe.

The station rumbled underneath them.

"Earthquake?" She gripped the table and Buff tensed.

Rork ran out of the galley, turned right and felt himself thrown against the corridor wall to his left. A light panel above him popped out of the wall and crashed to the floor with a sound like distant thunder.

"Where are you going?"

"Bring your new boyfriend, let's go!" He picked himself up, ran and found the door. He hit the gray button next to it and it opened.

The bridge was claustrophobic. There were only three seats: one high white chair at the back and two black chairs lower down in front of a wide black control console.

Rork threw himself into a seat at the front on the right. He hit the button to open the forward viewscreen. A wide picture window blinked into existence ahead of him. The scene was empty. A few distant stars glinted in the darkness of space.

The station rumbled again and a red bar flashed at the top of his panel.

Lala burst into the room behind him. "Buff is really scared!"

"Buff can go jump into a black hole." He tapped the red bar.

"Hull breach in compartment nine," a deep male voice said.

"Now that is a manly voice!" She took a seat in the captain's chair behind him, Buff cowering in her lap.

Another rumble, then an explosion. He rocked back and forth in his chair and grabbed the console to steady himself. He tapped feverishly and a heavy click sounded at the door.

"What was that!"

"I think—" he started.

A shrill male voice screeched from the radio. "What was it you called me, Rork? An underfed boob who couldn't find my brain with three scanners? Was that it?"

"Who is that?" Lala whispered.

He sighed. "Barbary — junior."

"His son?"

He nodded. "Look around for some way off this thing." He pressed the button to transmit.

"What do you mean?"

Rork turned around, his eyes wide. "Get up now and find some way off this thing because he's going to blow it up!"

"What a brilliant idea!" said Barbary, Jr.

Rork took his finger off the transmit button and groaned. "Hurry up!"

Lala stood up, Buff in her arms. She walked to her left, then to her right. "But I don't—"

Rork stood up and walked back at her. He wrapped his arms around her. He felt her tremble. Buff crawled up his shirt and perched on his shoulder. The furry varmint nuzzled his cold bill against Rork's stubble and sneezed with a quiet whoosh.

"Look," Rork whispered. "I just want you to look. I'm dead anyway, but—"

"Don't say that!" She punched him lightly on the shoulder, then rubbed Buff's head.

The beast purred.

She smiled, her eyes bright and wide. "I didn't know they could do that! Hey,

why can't we just fly this thing out of here?"

Rork firmed his jaw. "No fuel, remember? Just see if you can find something, anything." He walked over to the viewscreen and massaged his greasy stubble. He'd think of something. He always did, especially when it involved a Barbary.

"Look Barbary—" He groaned and smacked the transmit button on the control panel. "Barbary, I surrender. Take me aboard and—"

"No, no, I liked your first idea better."

Rork fell into his seat. He cut the transmission and whipped around. "Don't open the door!"

She stood next to the door, her hand poised over the open button, her eyes questioning but afraid to ask why.

"It's vacuum on the other side. I think. I'm not sure." He swiveled around to face the viewscreen again. He hit the transmit button. "He wouldn't like you killing me. He wants reparations, doesn't he? He'll set an example with me. A very public one. I promise to cry a lot and beg for mercy. It will be really good for you guys. Honest!"

"You're right," Barbary, Jr. replied, "but Barbary and Sons is safer with you dead, right now, right here. And so is the Cartel."

"There are two other people, including an unrelated child," Rork said. "Does Barbary kill children? Wouldn't be good for business." Behind him, he heard the sounds of Lala panicking.

"No one would ever find out. Any last words?"

She came up behind him. "This is not how it happens!"

Rork cut the transmission. He twisted his head to look back at her. "Tell me what to do!" he whispered through gritted teeth.

"I... I can't see it."

He cleared his throat and hit the transmit button. Barbary's vessel, a commerce class Ferrari zipship, came into view ahead. The bluish-tinted craft was thin up front and wider in back, with a hull that started at a sharp point in the center and curved back towards dual, square fusion engines. A burst of flame appeared from the underside and headed directly at the center of the viewscreen.

Rork swallowed. "I've always wanted a Ferrari. I know where your sister is, by the way."

"No, you don't. Goodbye." The connection severed with a hiss.

Rork heard a gentle whoosh behind him. He turned.

Lala stood against the far wall, behind the captain's chair, a nervous half-smile on her face and Buff clinging to her neck. "I found something."

Rork jumped out of his chair and bounded up the steps. Three one-piece space suits sat in the cabinet, neatly folded under their respective helmets. He glanced back. He saw the bare outlines of it now. The missile was black — the perfect camouflage for space. It would pierce the hull and explode in their faces. He saw another flame arch away from the hostile ship.

"Get dressed!" he yelled.

"Baby."

Rork scrunched his nose at her.

She flashed him an angry frown.

"Get dressed, baby!" He rolled his eyes.

"But then what?" She searched his face, her eyes dark.

He pulled a suit out and pushed it at her. He pulled another one out and stepped into its legs, one by one. He started to zip it up diagonally across his chest.

Lala pulled Buff off her neck. The little imp stretched its arms towards her and she tossed it down the neck of Rork's suit just as he finished zipping.

"Hey!" He jerked his torso forward. "It's climbing up my back!" He pulled a fishbowl-style helmet out of the closet, popped it on his head and clicked it onto the suit neck.

The first missile flew past the viewscreen to the left. The station rumbled again and Rork's ears ached.

He walked back down to the control console. "It's not too late to fix this, Barbary!"

Lala pulled the suit over her shoulders. Rork ran back, zipped it up and jammed the helmet onto her.

"Oh, it definitely is," Barbary, Jr. replied. "Goodbye, Rork Sollix."

The second missile burned past the viewscreen and hit the next room over. The sound of the explosion didn't reach Rork's ears. The wall in front of him vaporized. He grabbed for Lala and missed.

Rork floated in space, the Barbary ship growing larger in front of him. Lala was nowhere to be found.

RTR Chapter 4

"CAN YOU hear me?" Lala's voice came to Rork through his suit radio. Buff dug his claws into Rork's shoulder and geeped.

Rork tumbled away from the mining station sideways. He craned his neck to see the remains of the station. A cloud of gas and debris followed him but past it he glimpsed a white platter on an oddly shaped rock. The universe rolled away and Barbary's blue zipship was upside down above his head. His stomach lurched and he closed his eyes.

"Rork, where are you!"

The panic in her voice broke him. He was the one with terminal anorxoma. Not her. She had to survive. She was too beautiful not to. He recalled her face to memory. The delicate curve of blue hair, her soft face and those sharp eyes that demanded respect. She hid the vulnerability behind them. But he saw it. She had to make it.

"What do you see?" He craned his neck in every direction. "Do you see me?"

"It's just, uh, no! Everything is spinning!"

"Check your left wrist. How much air do you have?"

"I can't..." She trailed off and the radio crackled. "...not there... Which—"

"Lala! Lala!" he yelled into the darkness.

"Well, it seems one little rat isn't dead yet," Barbary, Jr. said.

Who designs a suit that broadcasts unencrypted by default? "I'll find you. Just hold on." Rork located the enemy ship in his field of vision. He brought his left wrist up and searched the rectangular control panel for booster controls. Air temperature, oxygen concentration, helmet dimmer, floodlight. Everything but boosters.

"Ooh, she sounds cute. Maybe I'll find her. I could always use another consort, maybe even a seventh wife, since the last one got away. Just how hot is she?"

Rork wanted to lash out but he had to stop this damned spinning. He stretched out his arms and legs and twisted his torso. He slowed a little, but not enough. He spotted another flame exiting Barbary's ship. It zipped past him at just a couple tens of meters. He was close.

"Damnit, don't we have smaller arms on this thing? How fast is he going? Can we just ram him?" Barbary, Jr. growled over the radio.

The missile impacted the asteroid face below the station. A few chips floated off.

Rork knew what to do now. He patted his waist. There it was! All technical types carried toolboxes. He pulled the smallest screwdriver from the box on his hip and examined it. It was a tiny blade, shorter than his pinky finger with a tip narrower than Buff's claws.

Rork jammed the tool into his leading shoulder. A burst of air puffed out and his lateral motion slowed. He felt a twinge and a few drops of crimson blood bounced around in front of him. He found a small clamp and jammed it over

the hole.

Buff dug his claws deeper into the other shoulder.

"Sorry, guy. Hold on tight."

Barbary's ship loomed massive to his right now. Its pointed bow arced towards him. Rork was still moving, how fast he couldn't tell, but now his head-over-feet roll was slower.

"It's so cold," Lala whispered.

"Hold on," Rork tightened and struggled for breath. But he focused on the approaching ship. He readied the screwdriver. The ship filled his visual field now. It was a hundred meters away, its sharp prow aimed directly at Rork's head.

He jammed the screwdriver into the side of his left thigh and air burst out into the vacuum. He partially obstructed the gas' exit with his hand and his legs swung up. The surprisingly pointy prow passed to his left and he grabbed at the smooth hull as it sailed beneath him.

"Rork, where are you?" Her voice was weak and far away now.

Rork grabbed his thigh with his left hand to staunch the flow of oxygen. His right found a grip on Barbary's hull but the velocity differential was too great and he lost his grip.

He was moving more quickly now relative to the ship. He found a long horizontal bar. He grabbed it with both hands. This time he stuck, despite the ache in his shoulders and ribs. His lower back stretched and cracked from the sudden acceleration. He frowned in approval.

"Don't worry, Buff, we're going to make it." He leaned his neck to one side and rubbed against the little beast.

"Where'd you get to? We were just coming to pick you up." Barbary, Jr.'s voice scraped at Rork's eardrums.

Ahead of Rork, a long window ran the width of the ship. He couldn't advance. They would see him. Without letting go of the ship, he looked back. There was a round hatch behind him. He let go and floated slowly back to the airlock. He caught the tips of his fingers on the shallow edge where the hatch door met the hull.

"Roorrk? I have your girl. I love her already. Mmm, soft and silky. Love the blue! But I'm thinking a nice crimson would work better. I can't wait to sample the goods. I owe you, man." Barbary, Jr. let out a satisfied sigh. "Well, you're either dead or you'll be out of oxygen soon. Nowhere to go, really, is there? So Lala and I are zolting out of here. I know you wish us the best." He cackled.

"Touch her and I'll kill you." *Or is he bluffing? I really should keep my mouth shut.*

Rork pulled on the manual airlock release. It wouldn't budge. If he didn't get inside now, his arms would rip out of their sockets when the ship accelerated.

He forced his lower body down, his abdominal muscles straining. He secured his left foot on a small ridge and pulled again, with both hands, on the lever. It scraped against the hatch. He tried to draw breath and it didn't come.

"So you are still with us, after all. Well, not much longer."

The ship rumbled. Rork sensed light and heat from behind him despite the

growing blackness at the margin of his vision. It was now or never, whether it made noise or not. He jammed the lever down, the recessed door slid away and he pulled himself in head first.

The ship's artificial gravity drew him down. He fell on his head in the narrow airlock. The hatch closed automatically and his face slammed into the back wall as the ship accelerated.

He picked himself up from the floor of the small compartment. He hit a green button and air poured into the space. The light above the button turned from red to green. He snapped off his helmet and took a deep breath.

Footsteps sounded outside. His lungs burned and his lower back screamed but he maneuvered himself into a crouch, one foot in front of the other. He pulled the screwdriver from his belt and held it above his head. A bead of sweat arced across his forehead and dropped down through his heavy, black eyebrows into his eye.

The door slid aside. A wiry man in a skintight, black suit looked up at Rork's face, his eyes wide. In his hand, a pulse pistol pointed at Rork's gut.

Rork brought the screwdriver down into the Barbary man's jugular. With the other hand, he pushed the pistol high and twisted the man's forearm away from his body. The thin man fell to his knees and Rork grabbed the pistol.

"Rork?" Lala's voice sounded over the ship's intercom. "He says he's going to kill me unless you drop the pistol and surrender now."

He peeked into the corridor. It was clear both ways. He searched the wall across from him for the camera and stepped out. He advanced towards the bridge, staying close to the corridor wall.

"Don't you dare listen to this smug meerflarker," she added. A dull concussion, followed by a groan, came over the speaker.

Rork smirked. *That's my girl.* He popped an eye around the corner of the curving passageway. Empty.

He proceeded down the corridor and pressed his back against the wall next to the door. He heard a slap, then the sharp pop of a weapon discharge. His pulse jumped.

Rork hit the open button and rolled through the doorway, staying low. He found one target and burned a hole in his head. He pivoted.

"Kill him!" The surprisingly heavysset young Barbary grabbed at his side.

Lala ran and threw herself at her kidnapper, a savage scream escaping her lips.

The third man faced Rork, his pistol pointed at Rork's head and fired. The beam glanced past Rork's left cheek and he smelled the sick odor of burnt hair. Rork returned fire and burned a hole through the man's eye socket.

Lala sat on Barbary's chest, flailing her fists into the heir's flabby face. She stopped and put her face an inch from his. "You don't mess with us!"

It was a small bridge, a little wider than the mining station's command center, but also with three seats and a smooth, black control console. Here everything was sharper and cleaner. And the deep vroom of the engine excited him.

Through the viewscreen, Rork noted the wrecked mining station. *She could*

have died there. He rebuked himself.

He walked towards the closest chair. "Is there anybody else?"

She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Baby?" She was sucking him in and there was nothing he could do about it. It was predestined. She'd loved him even when he couldn't love himself. She was the only good thing left in his life.

"Just the four." She looked over at him, her face tired. She blew a lock of cyan hair out of her eyes and smiled up at him.

"Don't let him up yet, baby."

The viewscreen shimmered. A double-chinned man with a full head of gray hair and a neon orange handlebar mustache looked down at Rork.

"I have video proof this time. I'm swearing out a Cartel warrant for piracy and murder," Old Man Barbary said. "Kidnapping, too. They'll vaporize you for this, Rork. Or—"

Rork ended the transmission. "Let's get him up. He's going to float."

RTR Chapter 5

"WHERE ARE we going?" Lala slumped down in the captain's chair on the bridge of Barbary, Jr's cruiser, the *Blockchain* and petted the sleeping Buff.

Rork finished typing some commands into the *Blockchain's* computer and hit return to execute them.

The ship rumbled beneath them. The dark, jagged-walled mining station moved away to the left as the ship performed a graceful one-eighty.

"Does he have enough air?"

"If daddy rescues him in the next couple hours. I strapped on the reserve tank." He scrolled through the list of known destinations in the Solar System and selected Earth, the Asian continent. The computer began its calculations.

"We'll be there in just a few minutes," Rork said.

She growled at him.

He suppressed a smile but said nothing. She was so cute but this was a moment for strength and discipline.

"Hey!"

He swiveled his chair around but looked away from her.

"How do I know you really love me if you won't call me 'baby?'"

He opened his mouth to say he didn't know what but closed it again. The emotion was too much. His throat locked up. If he spoke now, his voice would crack. He loved her. He'd loved her since that first moment when he found her in the cage. But he couldn't have her. Even if he overlooked the impropriety of marrying a former bound servant, he was dying. He had to get her to safety before that happened.

Before his enemies caught up with them, and made her pay for his actions.

She stood up, screamed and walked away from him.

The computer chimed, announcing the imminent firing of the zolt drive.

"You need to sit down. We're going now."

"No! Tell me where we're going!"

"Earth."

"Why?" she asked.

"Please?"

She hunched forward and sulked back to the captain's chair, Buff held tightly in her arms.

Rork swiveled back around and triggered the zolt drive. He whooshed backwards into the cushioned chair, his lungs compressed against his vertebrae. Ahead of them, Jupiter took form as a bright star at the lower right of the viewscreen. The acceleration reduced and he took a breath.

"I'd like a little more notice next time. I'm not a pet along for the ride. I'm your partner. I'm your lover!"

"You're my bound servant." Rork swung his chair back around. He sat back, his eyes heavy, his legs spread wide, blood blotting his pants and shirt.

"Now just— Oh my God!" Her face shifted from outrage to concern and she

moved to get up.

"Stay there! It's fine."

"Is it bad?"

He nodded. "We're going to Earth."

"You told me that," she said. "Why?"

"It's not safe for you. You could have died out there." *And it would have been my fault.*

He tried to imagine a Solar System without Lala. There was nothing in it for him, not even revenge. And he owed his father better.

She stood up, Buff cupped between her forearm and bicep. "I'll decide what's safe for me. Not you. You're my partner, not my master, no matter what the registry says." She sat back down again and sighed. "We're sticking together, aren't we?"

He looked away.

"We have to stick together!" Buff scampered up her arm, leaving pink marks behind where he laid his claws. He settled in next to her neck, his rear end facing Rork. "Don't do this to me. I've waited. You promised." Her eyelids puffed up and her eyes turned red.

"I promised you nothing more than your freedom." He swiveled around in the chair. The control panel beeped. In the viewscreen, the pockmarked back side of the moon lay in twilight. Beyond it, the blue and tan ball moved to the left. The control panel beeped again, more urgently.

"Buckle up." He pulled the dual straps from the back of the chair, put his arms through them and fastened it with a thin click at his waist. He waited for the same click from Lala.

"What about Buff?"

He grinned despite the tingling that signaled an oncoming seizure. "Hold tight." The straps cut into his chest and gut. *Good thing we didn't eat first.*

The ship banked and bucked. The view turned from black to blue. The pressure eased and the ship leveled off.

She released her restraints. "I really missed it, you know." She put her hands on Rork's shoulders and massaged them. Ahead of them, the ocean rolled and pitched. "Do you see what I see?"

"It's the Indian Ocean." He shrugged and arched his neck to look back at her.

"You weren't made for revenge. It's too small for you."

He looked away. "Take your seat. We're going to land."

They plunged into the soupy smog at the outskirts of Delhi on a lazy curve to the spaceport. Rork popped his restraints, stood up and grabbed her hand. They walked out of the bridge, the door swooshing out of their way and to the back of the ship.

His stomach fluttered as the zipship auto-landed. He hit a button on the wall and the large back door unfolded. He studied the tool-packed walls of the cargo bay, then grabbed a rope and a large metal hook that hung next to a cracked helmet. They stepped out into the muggy Indian morning.

"Follow the lux markers to Bureau of Immigration with your papers ready,"

said a female voice. They stood in a large, round landing dock, its smooth gray walls at least fifteen meters high.

At Rork's feet, bright green arrows, each the size of his foot, popped into reality, pointing him to his left. He turned right.

Lala scurried behind him, her hand in his. "My papers are on our ship."

"Mine, too." They reached the front of the sleek zipship. He stopped. *You parked too close to the damned wall.*

"There's only one way out for each of these pods," she said.

Rork secured the rope to the loop at the end of the hook with a bowline knot. He measured the distance again. It was too far. He played out some of the black nylon and dropped the rest in the sand. He held the rope loosely in his left hand and grabbed the cold base of the hook in his right hand.

"I don't know how to climb a rope, baby."

He grinned. "I do." He fixed his aim on the top of the wall. He brought the hook down and lobbed it sideways in the narrow space between the rounded bottom of the ship and the only obstacle to their escape.

Lala crossed her arms and frowned.

The hook bounced off the top edge of the wall, whistled back down and lodged in the sand at Lala's feet.

Her frown intensified.

He suppressed a laugh. "Relax." He arched himself back, one foot pointing at the wall, the opposite hand next to his head. He threw it overhand and the flying claw passed over the top of the wall. He pulled tight on the rope and heard a soft clank. He grabbed the rope in both hands and pulled down on it. It went tight, then stretched a little. He raised a victorious eyebrow at her.

She sniffed.

Rork pointed to his back with an index finger.

She shook her head.

Hard footsteps sounded on metal. He knelt down and looked under the ship. A pair of black-booted feet hunted them.

"We gotta go." He turned and grabbed the black rope in his two hands. He put his feet against the too-smooth wall and tilted his head.

"I don't like this!" She wrapped her arms around his neck and her thin legs around his waist.

He began to climb.

"Hey! Get down from there!" said a voice below them.

Rork put one hand over the other, one foot above the other. His blue-haired servant girl was light but her weight pulled on his neck and his throat rasped as the air struggled to enter his lungs. "Are they armed?" he whispered. Her weight shifted.

"No. Immigration people."

The rope slipped and they fell a meter. She yelped. His heart leapt.

Buff jumped to Rork's shoulder and dug his claws in just below his collarbone. Rork made a face.

"You're only going to injure yourselves," the immigration agent said from

below.

"Are we going to make it?" she whispered.

Her breath tickled his neck. He shuddered and the pain came back. His legs fell and they hung there, bobbing up and down on the bouncy line. He groaned and felt her breathing fast, her chest pushing into his back, her palm sweaty on his cheek.

"Come on, baby," she whispered.

He saw the top of the wall now. It was a peaked, soot-blackened cement. Irregular shards of glass poked out of it. The hook was lodged in something beyond the limits of his vision but the cable was snagged on a particularly ragged piece of glass. He put one hand above the other and saw that for each movement, the rope rubbed against the sharp edge and another strand of it severed.

A helicopter appeared above them. "This is Delhi Immigration Control. You will return to your ship now." The one-person chopper angled forward and its spinning blades edged to within three meters of them. The operator, if it had one, sat inside a reflective glass bubble.

The wind blew Rork's hair back. He pulled them up once more and grabbed two fingers onto the cement peak between shards of glass.

"We have to go back down!" Her grip around his neck loosened.

Rork looked down. It was a long fall. He grabbed her forearm and pulled it closer to his neck.

The helicopter floated forward and its blades nicked a glass shard, sending a chip into Rork's forehead. He saw the flash of light and felt something burn through his scalp. He closed his eyes and the wave of hurt coursed through his body. Life returned to his legs despite his sluggish muscle control.

"You will comply with Earth immigration procedures or face corrective action," said a voice from the chopper. It floated closer.

Rork relaxed his bicep and hung there. The men moved in below them. The line jerked and the rope frayed further. Not more than a half-dozen strands stood between them and a long fall to the ground below. Not to mention detention and being locked in a cage, somewhere underground. *They'll charge her as my accomplice.* He felt her hot breath on his neck.

The chopper drew closer. The tip of its landing skids appeared just above Rork's head. He jabbed his left hand into the air and wrapped it around the padded, narrow plastic. He pulled himself up. With the other hand, he pressed in the cockpit door handle. It popped open.

A whizzing sound tickled Rork's ear and the helicopter bubble exploded above them. Pieces of plastic rained on them. She took her hand from Rork's neck and held it in front of his eyes. There was blood on it.

"Stop or I will fire again!" said the voice from below.

Rork pulled himself up into the helicopter. He disengaged the mechanical arm from the stick of the remote-controlled aircraft and pulled it hard to the right.

Lala settled next to him in the tiny cabin, her feet pulled up into her chest,

her face buried in her knees. Buff jumped to her and wrapped his body around her neck.

Bullets whizzed through the protective bubble. The plastic cracked and fault lines spread across its surface, obscuring Rork's view. He leaned to the right as the world rotated around in the opposite direction.

"Is it almost over!" She dug her fingernails into his shoulder.

The back of the undersized aircraft shuddered and Rork felt himself pushed forward. The rotors above them slowed and made an awful grinding noise before dying completely.

"Rork!"

They glided towards a green area pockmarked by pools of water. Beyond it, a series of irregular, corrugated metal roofs meant they would land in a densely packed slum.

"We're going to crash but it should be soft. Strap in!" he yelled.

The engines picked up again and they rose.

Rork frowned. He pushed the stick forward. Something snapped. Metal met metal and the chopper spun. Metal roofs. Soft green land. Metal roofs. Damn!

He let go of the controls and pulled her into him. A deafening pop sounded, then nothing. Everything went bright white. Rork bounced into a gentle cushion and lost connection with Lala.

RTR Chapter 6

RORK WOKE. He lay still and listened, without any urge to remember what had happened or what might take place next. The sound of excited laughter came from far off. He tried to decipher the words but it wouldn't come.

He sat up and smacked his head on thick metal. He rolled to one side but was stopped again. He twisted his head the other way and opened his eyes.

Short, thick metal bars stood between him and the rest of the dusty room. He was in a low, flat cage with a thick floor. His legs were twisted to the left and pushed up in a horizontal crouch. His back was flat to the floor of the cage. His arms were bound together at his gut. He breathed deep and his chest touched the top of the cage. A heavy odor of rot and excrement hung in the air. His stomach heaved.

Who would think up a cage like this? He started to shake and the panic rose in him. He had to get out of here. *Lala*. The thought hit him like a laser blast. *I'll kill them. I will rip their—*

A door creaked and a brown-sandaled foot stepped into the room. A fine dust rose from the insistent footfalls. Chickens scratched and squawked.

"How much?" a boy's voice asked.

"Ten-thousand each," said a girl.

"Who are they?" the boy asked.

"No."

"It's too much," the boy said.

"We could buy that ship."

Rork's side erupted in a cramp. He bumped his legs against the top of the cage and arched his torso up to align it with his hips. But the muscles cramped. He screamed.

Feet scuffled over and a brown sandal kicked the bars of his cage next to his nose. Dust lodged in his mouth and he spit it back out but his mouth was dry. It tasted like it smelled — musty, moldy and faintly metallic. He tried to collect the soil matter in his mouth and eject it en masse but it clung to his tongue.

"Shut up," the boy yelled.

Rork moved his body up and down the best he could. "Let me out! Please! It hurts!"

"No!" the boy kicked the cage bars again.

Spiked motes of dust lodged in Rork's eyes. He opened them wide and rolled them around. He blinked uncontrollably. "I have a ship! I can get you whatever you want!"

"They will pay us ten-thousand dalrots for you," the girl said. "Be patient. We will take you to the police soon." Her feet turned and made towards the door.

"They'll kill you! It's a trick!" Rork yelled. The pain in his side peaked but the dust in his eye was more stubborn.

The boy's sandal moved into view again and kicked a shower of dust into the cage. Rork turned his head just in time.

"We're not that stupid!" The boy walked out, the girl stepping lightly ahead of him in neon yellow rubber boots and a trailing midnight blue skirt. The boy slammed the door behind him.

"Rork?"

His heart soared. "Are you alright?" She was here with him, but where? He still had a chance to safeguard her. If only he could escape the cage.

"I'm a little uncomfortable," Lala said.

"Where are you?"

"I'm in a small cage, raised a little off the floor."

"Metal top, real close to your face?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Alright, hold on. I'll figure something out." He arched his head up to look at the bars behind him. *It must have a door and if it has a door, it can be opened.* He only saw bars. He pulled his hands apart. It was no good. He twisted his wrists against each other but the plastic rope only dug deeper and burned his raw skin.

"Baby?"

"Just be patient. I'm working on it!" He raised his head and looked down past his feet. There was a string tied around two bars at the bottom of the cage. The bars were too close together. That was it. He pulled his legs up and the cramp returned. He groaned and push them back down again.

"Want me to try something?"

"No, I got this." He gritted his teeth. He pulled his legs up into his side. The cramp returned. He grunted. He used one booted foot to push off the other boot. He flexed his big toe up and reached for the string.

A hand reached down and tickled his foot with its short, pink fingernails.

He started and hit his forehead on the thick metal. "What the...!"

Lala's smiling face appeared just beyond his foot. She giggled and pulled on the string. The long, low door swung open with a high-pitched squeal. She tugged on his foot.

"How the hell did you do that?"

She grabbed just above his knee and pulled. He rocked his body from side to side and inched out. Out of the cage, he stood up, got his boot back on and massaged his aching calves.

"They put me in the bigger cage. I was able to wiggle more." She shrugged and looked up at him, biting her lower lip.

His eyes locked with hers. "You're really something."

"I love you, Rork Sollix." She said it with a pretensionless neutrality, as if she were telling him that two plus two couldn't be anything other than four.

Rork looked away, a hot inadequacy burning his face. He remembered the papers. He eased them out of the hiding spot in his belt and handed the stiff, too-many-times-folded documents to her.

Her eyes followed his every move. She fixed her hair but didn't offer to receive the papers.

"Your manumission papers. I had them notarized on Isotania. I'm sorry it

took so long but I wasn't sure if..."

She fixed her clothes, glanced up at him and received the papers. "So, I'm free? Completely free?"

He nodded. He wanted to say more but his throat had seized up again. The tears massed in his eyes and he blinked them back.

She threw her arms around his ribs and buried her cheek in his chest.

"It's okay, you can go now."

She pushed back. "So you were leading me on?"

"No. I'm just saying—"

"You don't love me. Do you?" She studied one eye, then the other. "You just felt sorry for me. This was all pity." She stepped back again, still searching his face.

"No! Please, not again."

"Tell me you love me!" She shoved him. "Admit it! You love a servant girl!"

"You know that has nothing to do with it. And you're free now, anyway."

"Just because you're sick? Just when you need me the most?"

"He said I had days. You heard him. Barbary will punish you for my actions after I'm gone. I can't..."

"I don't care! Just love me, even if—"

"I do. But it's not enough." He waved her silent and looked around for something sharp to free his hands. It was a small storage room, with chickens in coops from floor to ceiling to their right. A quick scan turned up nothing sharp. "How did you...?"

"Slipped right out." She held up her hands and shrugged.

"Let's—"

She grabbed his arm and scowled at him. "I'm not done talking."

"What?"

"A plan maybe? I don't know." She rolled her eyes.

"Step one: get out of here!" He grabbed her arm and pulled her towards the door. The thin sheet of rotting particle board listed away from the jamb. He poked his nose through the gap and looked around. There was a narrow alley overgrown with weeds. Two deep ruts ran its length and curved around out of his view. He stepped out, pulling her behind him.

"Hey!" The boy stepped out of shadow on Rork's right. He raised a long blade above his head.

Rork took off. He planted his foot in a rut and let go of Lala. It twisted and he fell on his back. The boy was on him and brought the blade down.

Rork rolled out of the way. The blade hit the loose dirt with a dull swish. Rork rolled his legs back and laid them on top of the knife. He punched the surprised boy in the teeth. The kid let go of the blade and fell backwards. Rork launched himself forward and landed a knee on the kid's chest. He grabbed the blade from behind him and put it to his attacker's neck.

The kid looked up at him, his eyes too wide, too white, his body too thin.

How did this stick figure ever get the drop on me? Rork remembered the helicopter crash. Immigration had to be after them. Maybe even the EDF. This

kid and his girlfriend likely did them a favor. If not for their pathetic kidnap attempt, he and Lala would almost certainly be in prison.

"Rork!" Lala screamed.

He looked up. She hopped up and down where the rutted alley curved. She pointed beyond him. "Rork!"

A flat, circular EDF vessel hovered over the marshes between them and the spaceport. A leaner attack fighter launched from the massive ship's underside and zoomed down to within a dozen meters of them. He tasted dust again and lost sight of her.

He rose to run to Lala but the boy grabbed at his shirt.

"I can hide you. They won't find you."

Rork punched his arm away and ran up the alley, his foot slipping in the deep, muddy ruts.

Lala squatted, her arms wrapped tight around her knees next to a low, white picket fence.

He dropped the blade, grabbed her hand and pulled. They ran around the corner. Ahead, he spied a wider, paved cross street. Aircars, cabs and enclosed cargo carriers crossed their narrow gap of hope. He increased his pace but her little legs couldn't keep up. She slipped and fell face-forward.

Rork turned back and pulled her up. She shot him a look that said it all. This wasn't what she signed up for. She signed up to love a daring space pirate who could handle himself in a fight, not a terminally ill, dirtbound renegade wannabe.

"I can't..." she muttered.

He wanted to know where they went wrong, loathe himself for an hour or a week, but he pumped his legs as fast as she would let him. They were just a dozen meters from the street now. He would turn right and plunge into the crowd. He'd find a cargo carrier.

A man stepped from between two shacks just meters from the market avenue. He wore a wide, flat-brimmed black hat and a long, black overcoat. His face was obscured with large, reflective sunglasses.

Lala stopped short. Rork tried to continue.

The black-hatted man pulled a long pistol from underneath his coat and Rork smelled burning hair. He let go of her, stepped to the side and ran his hands over his head.

"In the name of Gamil Barbary, Sr. and in revenge for the life of his son, Gamil Barbary, Jr." The black-hatted man stalked forward towards Rork.

Heat assaulted Rork's right cheek. He grabbed her and ran back the opposite way. He smelled burning hair again and his left thigh ached and weakened.

The kid popped out from between two shacks ahead of them. "Come on! We will help you!"

Rork pulled Lala into the narrow opening. They ran a dozen meters, turned left, then right and right once more.

Lala slipped and fell into a puddle that reeked of urine. She screamed and looked up at him, her hands out.

I'll spend the rest of my life fixing this, somehow, even if she isn't with me. Just give me the time. Rork turned into a shack and pursued the lithe boy through a dark maze that spanned perhaps dozens of the hovels.

They stopped in an empty room with an uneven dirt floor and no windows. One lighted bulb hung from the ceiling on a thin cable.

"Who are you?" The yellow-booted girl emerged from a shadowy corner into the light. She was thin, too, and young. Perhaps no older than Lala.

And there was Buff, on her shoulder. The little guy jumped to Lala. She caught and snuggled him against her cheek.

Rork found himself drawn to this Indian girl. Tall and too thin, her grooming was impeccable. Her long, black hair hung straight down the back of her head. She seemed oddly trustworthy despite the fact that she'd put him in that cage and plotted to sell him.

"We're just a young couple seeking a better future, perhaps like you two," the girl said.

"We're brother and sister." The boy stepped forward. His brown eyes, in shocking contrast with the pure white that surrounded them, settled on Lala.

The roof rattled as a craft passed overhead. A sliver of sunlight invaded the room for a heartbeat before disappearing again. The room was empty except for a tall, narrow cabinet in the corner to Rork's left. Heavy footsteps fell in near-unison outside.

Lala stared at the boy, her head inclined to one side. She began to smile.

Rork interlaced his fingers with hers and pulled her back towards the entrance. "Thank you. We have to go." He walked backwards two steps and turned his back to them.

"You are the pirate Rork, are you not?" asked the girl.

Rork stopped short. He glanced at Lala. "No, sorry, wrong guy."

The wall to Rork's left disappeared and a rush of air pushed Lala into him. The black-hatted man stood thirty meters away to their right. In front of them, an Earth Defense Force fighter hovered silently. A dozen men kneeled and stood below it, their long, black laser rifles pointed at them.

One black-haired man, his belly pushing through the velcro closures of his white and green striped shirt, stepped from around the corner to face Rork. "Indian Immigration. All four of you are under arrest."

RTR Chapter 7

"I KIDNAPPED her. I swear to you that the blue-haired woman is my kidnap victim. I considered raping and murdering her, too. She needs counseling and relocation assistance. She hasn't done anything wrong." Rork pushed back from the flimsy, particle-board table and stood up. Dust flitted through the twilight air. "I confess to it all!"

The guard put a hand on Rork's shoulder and pushed him back down into the shaky plastic chair. The interrogation cell was narrow. The floor was dirty and cracked but at least it wasn't a dusty hovel. If he could get his captors to buy his story, Lala would get her second chance. What happened to him was unimportant.

He closed his eyes and felt Lala's cool, smooth touch on his cheek. For a fleeting second, he felt the rich scented vanilla of her perfume. Then it was gone and he wanted it again. But it wouldn't come. It might never come again.

A door opened in the mirror that faced him and a chocolate-skinned woman walked through. She wore a form-fitting bright yellow blouse and pencil skirt with a crimson sash. Her slick black hair curved forward towards her eyes in a steady wave then rolled rollickingly back over the top of her head and down to her neckline. She sat down across from Rork and smiled up at him, ruby red lips revealing perfect teeth.

"I am Attorney General for the Indian Realm, Sophia Patel. You admit that you are the pirate Rork Sollix?" she asked.

"Yes."

"You are the subject of the Barbary warrant for piracy?"

"Sounds right. Yes." He scratched his wrists under the restraints.

"Do you admit to the charges?" She openly studied his face.

"Ye— What will you do with the blue-haired woman?"

She flashed her teeth at him and breathed in deeply. "Lala Fevari, right? You want her to go free?"

"She's my victim. I was going to rape her. She needs help."

"Madam AG," said a male voice over the intercom, "the prisoner is lying to you. The woman fought us more than this pirate did."

The AG motioned him to silence, her face grim. She looked back at Rork and smiled.

"She has Stockholm syndrome. I held her too long. I regret it. You have to help her! Help her and I will do whatever you want."

"Whatever I want?" The AG sat up straight and cleared her throat. She stood up, crossed to the other side of the table and reclined on it, her bare thigh touching Rork's naked arm. She blinked both eyes at once at him.

Her long, thin legs, her ample breasts, the soft, brown face... Rork rose to her instinctively. But the thought of touching another woman horrified him. This wasn't about finding someone different. He belonged to his blue-haired girl. He steeled his will and looked away.

The AG laughed. "The legendary pirate betrayed by a teeny's puppy love?" She leaned in and caressed his cheek, her ruby red lips brushing over his. "Don't you recognize me? I was in *The Szyzantic Variable*. It opened simultaneously across the whole system, even in the Jefferson Realm mining colonies."

He shrugged. Movies bored him.

The AG emitted a guttural croak. She threw herself off the table and crossed to the other side, her shoes cracking on the hard floor. "I will release the child. You will stay. We will see if you can appreciate the attentions of a real woman." She spoke to the guard outside. "Return him to the cell, then release prisoner Lala Fevari."

A hand wrapped around Rork's neck from behind. He fell to one side. The guard steadied him, then directed him towards the door opposite the mirrored wall. "Move, prisoner!"

Rork shuffle-walked, chains clinking, in a narrow corridor between two, long cages. Arms grabbed at him through the bars. Bald heads with scarred faces leered and yelled threats.

The guard opened the door to the last cage on the right and kicked him into it. Rork fell to his knees. Lala ran and caught him before his nose connected with the pockmarked cement.

"They're going to free you. Get out and get far away from me. Find your seastead. Have ten kids, just with someone else. Promise me you'll do it."

Lala frowned at him, her eyes red and puffy. "No."

"This is your chance. I did it. I got you here. Blend in. Find a new man, a better one. Build a life. Change your name. Do what you have to but live, Lala. Live!"

She shook her head and sobbed. "I won't."

"Let's go!" the guard yelled from behind Rork.

"Just go. Forget about me."

Lala threw herself at him and wrapped her arms tight around his neck. "I love you! Stop pushing me away!" She kissed his cheek. Her lips, wet with tears, sought his mouth.

Rork turned away from her. "You're still young. You'll start over, better."

The guard entered and pried her hands from his back. Another guard ran in and grabbed her other shoulder. They dragged her toward the door. She kicked the floor.

"I can't see our future anymore, baby," she whispered from the other side of the bars.

The second guard let go of her and slammed the cell door closed.

Rork looked away.

"What about his meds? He needs meds!" she screamed.

The guards dragged her past the interrogation room. A heavy door creaked open, then slammed shut, the impact echoing through the block with a lonely finality.

Rork found the far, rear corner of the cell, below the narrow slit of window and collapsed into it. He closed his eyes. He'd be dead soon. The sickness

would claim him.

It was fine by him. *May it come quickly. Jupiter, I just want to die now. I can't stand it anymore.* His chest ached. The icy chill of the refrigerated cell leached into his toes and they cramped up. He ignored it. He didn't care.

"We want to be pirates, like you." It was the yellow-booted girl.

Rork kept his eyes closed. "Whatever you have now, it may seem like nothing to you, but it's better than where I ended up."

"The Cartel took our family, all forty-seven of them: uncles, cousins, our father and mother. The government knows. The EDF helps them. Those metal shacks? Five thousand people lived there. Now there is no one. We escaped but soon they will clear that area. And they took our papers."

He looked up at the girl. She was simple and authentic, without pretension or accoutrement. "What's your name?"

"Anju. My brother is Devi." She knelt down in front of him. "We will do whatever you command."

Rork pointed to the left side of his chest. "Anorxoma. Right here. You know what that is?"

Anju nodded. She looked up at her brother.

"What if we can heal that?" Devi approached, his arms folded in front of him. He evinced an air of authority that contradicted his emaciated frame.

"It's untreatable. You can have my body when I'm dead. I'm sure they'll drop it on a scrap heap out there somewhere. Don't worry. I'll tell them I kidnapped you, too."

Devi turned his back to Rork.

Anju stepped closer and touched his shoulder. "They'll put us on the trainship to the mining outposts." She smiled with pity in her eyes for him. "We'll be dead, too."

"Why did you kidnap us?" He opened his eyes and studied her face. He glanced at Devi. He sensed no danger from them. *Probably haven't enjoyed a decent meal since they suckled at their mother's breast.* "Cannibals?"

"How dare you!" Devi turned, his proud, square shoulders at attention. "We saved you." He focused on his sister. "His reputation is too big for him." He shook his head and scowled.

Anju squeezed Rork's shoulder and held his eyes too long. "If you change your mind, we're still ready to take your orders, Captain." She stood up and walked over to her brother.

The heavy door clanged open. "Sollix! Visitor."

Rork looked through the bars, among the feet of the other prisoners in the other cages. A pair of black boots stepped carefully behind the guard's brown lace-ups. The prisoners' feet turned in Rork's direction and the room quieted. Rork stood and walked to the cell door.

It was the black-hatted man.

The guard muttered something and took a position a few steps away.

The black-hatted man removed his headgear and let it fall to the ground, revealing a hairless scalp. He withdrew his oversized sunglasses.

Anju gasped. "But..."

Rork studied the face. It was his own, only leaner and rosier. There was a deep scar that cut from the right corner of the mouth, up across the bulb of the nose and ended above the opposite eye. He shook his head. "No!"

"Yes."

"They destroyed it," Rork said. "I only barely escaped myself."

"I fired the shot." Jord's face erupted in a proud laugh.

Rork narrowed his eyes at his older brother.

"Dad is alive, too." He drew off his long, black gloves, one at a time and grasped them in his right hand. He put his fists on his hips.

Rork relived the moment of Jord's and his father's deaths. Barbary was firing on their home, a used space station they'd salvaged and repaired.

They were out beyond Titan then, on a trade swing to the settlements and mining outposts. Dad loved to see the miners' kids get a decent meal for once and their parents have a few dalrots left over.

Barbary snuck up on them from the shadow side of Ganymede. Rork had nothing to return fire with. He yelled for Dad and Jord. When they breached the hull, he had to eject.

"Well, where is he, brother?" Rork smiled. "How is he?"

Jord sneered at his brother. "He wants to speak with you." He withdrew a slim, rectangular screen from his coat and tapped it.

"Really?" Rork asked.

Gamil Barbary's pockmarked mug appeared. It smiled wide. "I have your girl, Rork."

Rork's stomach clenched and tumbled. All strength drained from him and he grabbed tighter onto the bars to support his weight.

"Save this feed," Barbary said to someone off-screen. "I want to remember the look on his face."

"You're a liar."

"I picked her up myself," Jord said through gritted teeth.

Rork's eyes unfocused. Barbary. Jord. Dad. Lala. His mind spun. "You work for Barbary?"

Barbary closed his eyes, his head rolled back and he laughed.

Jord's upper lip curled. He shook his head and looked away.

"Silence!" Barbary roared. "Your blue-haired babe is mine now, Rork. She will serve your punishment here with me, in service to the employees of Barbary and Sons Trading Company — mostly the men."

"You're dead, Barbary. You're dead!" Rork felt his eyes moisten and he struggled to hold back the panicked tears. But they spilled over. He imagined his sweet Lala in Barbary's hands. *No!* But the pictures played in his mind. "You bastard. You just couldn't leave me alone to die?"

"Go ahead and die!" Barbary yelled. "Your girlfriend will pay your debts, with interest. We are done!" The screen turned black.

Rork clawed his hand through the bars at Jord but the turncoat stepped out of reach.

Jord fixed the black hat on his head, touched his finger to it and bowed slightly. "Brother." He turned and left.

"Jord! Jord! Come back here!"

RTR Chapter 8

"DON'T DO that again," Devi said with a reproachful glare. "It is better they think you care not to escape."

"It's only natural. He is a man in love." Anju sighed.

Devi rolled his eyes. "Foolish woman." He looked down at Rork. "Are you ready to get out of here now? How soon can your crew be ready?"

"What happened?" Rork asked. He searched his memory but nothing came.

"The guard beat you because you were acting like a fool." Devi stood up and walked away from them.

Anju pressed a moist cloth to his forehead and Rork winced. She pulled it away. It was stained with blood.

"You will heal. Rest now."

It all flooded back and the atmosphere grew heavier. The images of Lala and Barbary's boys pounded on his head. She was strong but they were gutless bastards and they lacked any sense of honor or dignity. He tried to remember her smell but now that was slipping away.

Barbary and Sons would crush her spirit. They would beat it out of her, cheapen her grace and fidelity.

And he was stuck in this hole.

"Is he ready to fight yet?" Devi asked his sister. "A man does not lay down and take it, he does not run from a challenge to his pride."

Rork repeated the words in his mind. *Silly boy. No clue how things really are.* But he needed that kind of defiance right now. The boy was a power source and he longed for a charge.

"How will you cure the anorxoma?" Rork crawled to a standing position and looked from Anju to Devi.

"Will you accept us as part of your crew?" the boy asked. "Will you teach us how to be pirates and to help the people?"

Rork snorted. "What makes you think I know how to help people?"

Devi turned. His face was bright now, the eyebrows relaxed and his eyes pleading. "We've heard your stories. Of how you steal from the Cartel and trade fairly with the people. About your father, Band Sollix."

Rork suppressed a smile. "What have you heard, exactly?"

Devi gulped. "Your father won one hundred thousand dalrots and a Cartel executive's slave in a poker game on Luna. He invested the money in merchandise for the miners. Together, Band and Rolata Sollix ran Sollix Fair Trading. They traveled around the system in an old cattle carrier, defying the Cartel monopoly by trading with miners and other settlers at fair prices."

Anju swooned. "And he freed the slave girl because she loved him. And he loved her. They married and had many children." She looked at Rork and sighed.

"Only two," Rork said, "that I know of, at least."

The room quieted. The prisoners in the other cells poked their heads through the bars, one next to the other. Those who didn't merit a front row seat lined up

behind them. Their eyes fell on Rork.

Devi glared at his sister. "The man asked me, not you." He cleared his throat. "Band and Rolata Sollix singlehandedly cured malnutrition in the Outer Realm settlements. Miners began to turn a profit. They put their money together into cooperatives and started their own, independent mining operations."

"Cartel don't like competition!" said a prisoner in the next cell. "Cartels want to keep the good man down!" His face radiated endurance, and suffering.

His cellmates patted him on the back and mumbled their agreement.

Rork nodded at him.

Devi cleared his throat again, this time more loudly. The crowd quieted.

"The Cartel chose Old Man Barbary," the boy continued. "He won the bid to stop the Indie Shift. He and his sons tracked down Band and Rolata. And their two children." Devi looked at Rork and raised an eyebrow.

Rork straightened up and swallowed hard. "They said they wanted to do business. Dad was willing to do business with anyone, Cartel, government or Indie. Rich, poor, sick, hungry." A tightness rose in Rork's throat and he blinked his eyes.

"Tell it, man," said the prisoner.

Anju extended a hand to him.

"They lasered him. They threw my mother out the airlock. I watched her float past the cupola, her body icy and bloated, bits of her floating alongside."

The crowd of prisoners erupted in hushed chatter. "He killed your parents, man," said the prisoner.

"Then Barbary fired on our home. I couldn't find my brother. I jumped in an escape pod."

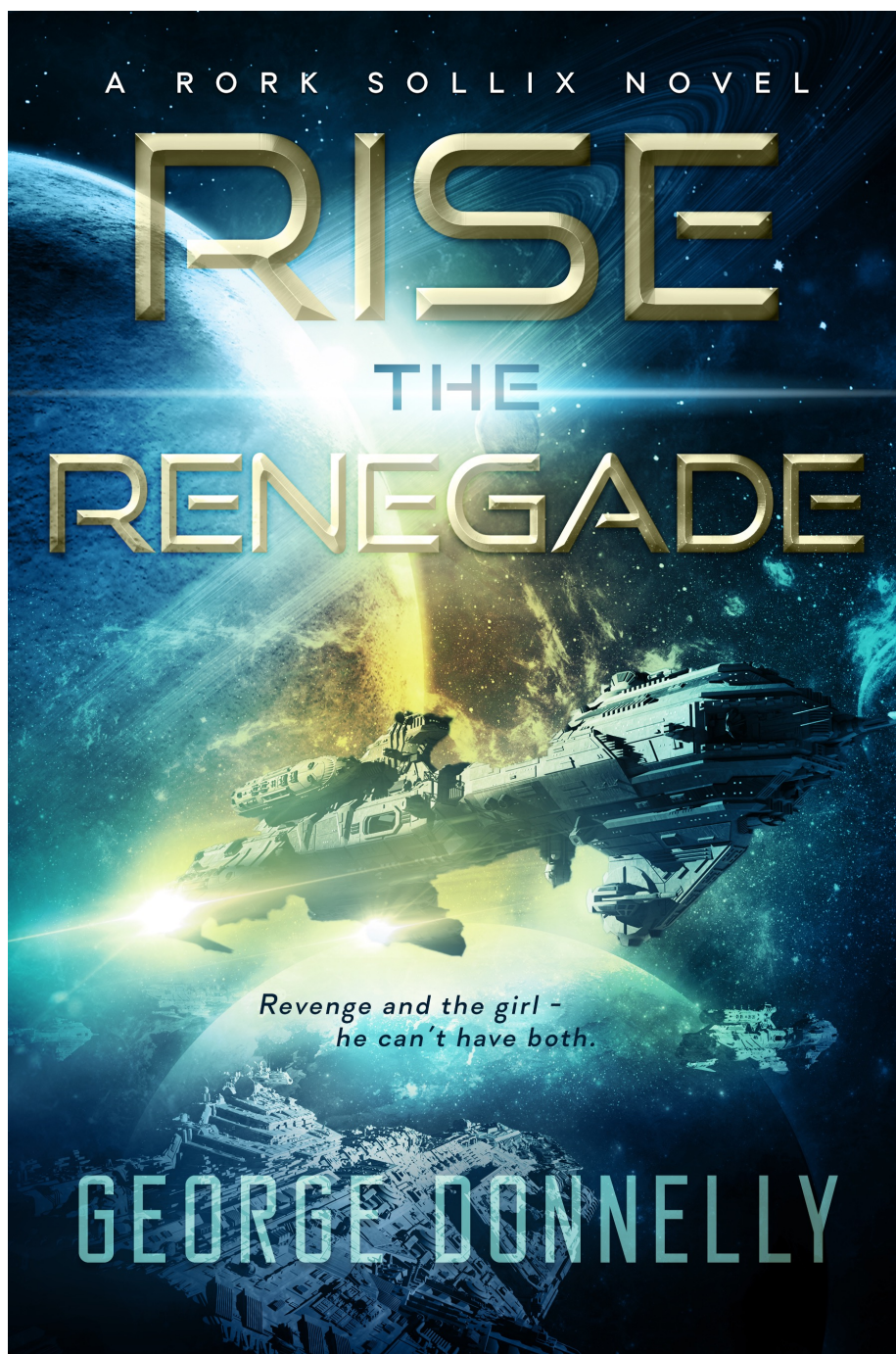
"You abandoned your brother? He's your brother, man," said the prisoner.

Anju turned to the prisoner. "He thought they were all dead! He saw them die! And he's no coward. We all know what he's done to the Cartel since then!"

The certainty of a debt of revenge coursed through Rork's body, filling him with an electric fury. He had to be well. Now. He would find the strength. He was getting out of here. Barbary had to die. He had to save Lala.

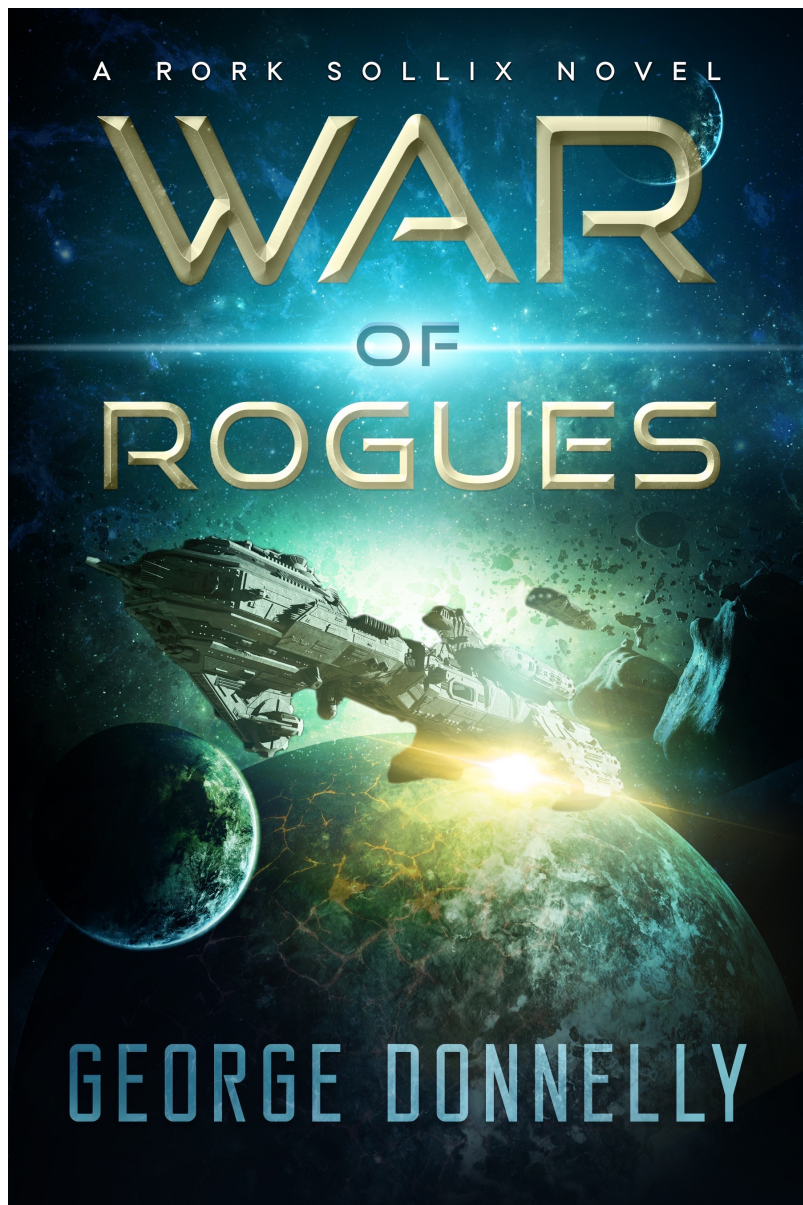
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War of Rogues (Book 2)

War of Rogues is book 2 in the Rork Sollix series and will be available April 25, 2016.



Raven9

Raven Number 9. My streets, my city, my prey. Mine. I alone defend it now. For the ancestors!

"It was all black!" Rona pushed herself against the wall behind a dusty, bannerless stairwell and sobbed.

"Relax." Dane tapped his ear. "Wolf to Roundhouse. Come in." He paused but no answer came back.

The deep guttural throom of the floating vehicle zoomed toward them.

Rona threw herself into Dane. "You said it would be in and out. You said—"

Dane pushed her back into the corner behind the stairwell and grimaced. He charged his weapon. "I'll take care of it."

I bear the mission of the ancestors. Will defend, destroy, wipe out. Do you approve, ancestors? Respond.

After the noise stopped, Rona peeked an eye out from behind the staircase. Dane's body lay in the debris-strewn street like a flat tire, its legs folded back on themselves, its face a rubber mask of anguish, black tire treads running across the forehead and cheeks. Puddles of goo oozed from razed eye sockets. She recoiled deeper into her hiding place.

You're gonna die here!

Her hands jittered. She stood up, her balance precarious, and walked the few steps to the edge of the darkening street. "You worthless heap of scrap! He was a good man! They all were. You're evil! Bad! Wrong!"

Raven9 requires guidance. Destroyed invaders per orders. Told did wrong, was bad. Need instructions, confirmation. Ancestors?

Rona peeked an eye around the corner. The sleek black beast hung millimeters above the rubbly ground, still and silent. She stuck her arm out and waved. No response. Her heart fluttered.

You're going to get yourself killed!

The short, busty scientist burst out of her hiding spot and ran towards the

beta site. She tapped her chest. "Rona to *Arclight*. I need transport!"

Her chest rose and fell. Fetid dust permeated her mouth and desperate breath burned her throat.

A circular pool of air shimmered ahead of her. Her energy flagged, legs heavier, lungs aching. She urged her small legs on.

The atmosphere rattled around her. Dust flew and the planet spun. All feeling lost, her mind struggled to assign meaning to the black four-legged thing entering the shimmering pool.

Lights. Too much. Hurt. No sky, hard cage. Not the ancestors. Hate me. Destroy them. Consume. Kill and destroy.

Rona spit dust from her mouth. She moved her knee to stand and a cacophony of pain erupted from all parts. *The portal. My team. My God!*

It sparkled not ten meters from her. She jerked her hand forward into a pile of powdery rubble. A shining disk reflected the light of Beta Persei into her eye and she flinched.

She crawled forward. The thick, heavy disk filled the palm of her hand. The beast, its four legs fully extended, its head upright and proud, occupied the center in relief. Squiggles surrounded it.

The dark giant of the binary system passed in front of its smaller blue brother. Night fell over the street, shadows reaching their misshapen arms to grasp her.

Rona bit into the pain, limped forward and threw herself through the portal.

Done, masters. Enemies dead. What's this? Another? Again? Destroy. Con--

The beast flew at Rona from across the bridge, its deep throon vibrating, a solid, rectangular block of glowing pitch blackness.

Her teeth clacked. The sound seemed to come from inside her now.

Her palm faced outward at the dog, her fingers grasping the heavy disk.

The beast smoothed now. Curves emerged. A thin rectangle cropped up out of the front of its snaky torso. Four legs extended down and alighted on the bloody metal deck of the ESS *Arclight*.

A wave of nausea blew up inside of Rona and she crashed to the floor.

Master?

The words intruded on her mind. *At rest*. The thought popped into her awareness and she willed it at the beast.

Its legs retracted. The torso descended to the floor. The stick-like head remained attentive.

Rona grinned. She lifted the disk to her face. The beast's head followed.

Ancestors returned! New master. Serve you. Yours. Love you, worship you. Do what you say. Only you. Forever. Beautiful. What now? What now? What now?

Adventure coming. Rona directed the thought at the prostrate beast.

Its torso rose slightly and its head quivered.

She stepped over Offner, the navigator. Dead, his neck ripped open and crushed. Blood still trickled from the gaping wound. She punched up the navigation charts, her back turned to the creature.

A chill breeze hit her from behind and she froze. *Is this it?* It glided past her and took up station again in front of her, waiting, guarding.

Is it living? Machine? Does it have feelings? Rona set those worries aside. Only one course now. She found the planet, programmed the Navcomp and engaged.

A shower of sparks erupted on the viewscreen, then the cloudless, empty brown surface of MZ458-C.

Rona glanced at the beast. *Master. What now?* Its words and frenetic emotions beat like a drum under her temples.

She opened a portal, the air shimmering behind the beast, a dry heat searing her eyes.

Go through. Check for enemies. Will follow. She willed the words to it. Her stomach throbbed and her hands shook.

The beast rose, its legs hit the floor and its head took a proud angle. *Will protect Master. Love Master. Alone no more.* It turned and jumped through the opening without hesitation.

Rona's relief mixed with the creature's transferred joy. She tapped the nav panel, then collapsed next to it.

Raven9 analyzed the blue star. It was hotter than the previous one. He adjusted his operating parameters to maintain a safe internal temperature.

Master? He sat and awaited her arrival. He had a good feeling about this one. He'd already proven his worth. She was different.

The shimmering circle closed, disappeared. Far above him, sparks exploded.

Master?



Human Free

The Gaian Devolution is saving the planet. By exterminating the people. But global warming is only getting worse and technothrope Chairperson Flora B. Harper is out of solutions.

Onder Swart is the last Khoisan in the Southern Africa Exclusion Zone. He wants to return to his homeland and live a natural life with the ragtag gang of children survivors he's collected. But the Gaians have declared it a human-free animal preserve. Their robots patrol its borders with deadly force.

Onder meets Astrix, an ailing visitor from the forlorn genius gulag that is Space Station Independence. They work up a scheme to seize control of the Gaian System and free both their peoples. But the Gaians are using Onder's epidemic-resistant DNA to complete their master plan and wipe out all humans with their worst plague yet. There are no guarantees and anything can happen.

Human Free Chapter 1

Onder Swart gazed at shark fins gliding in circles in the milky turquoise surf below. He toed the loose, black rock, loosened a chunk and stepped closer to the edge. He pushed the hot chunk off the edge. It landed on a shark's head and three of them scrambled to grab it, their teeth glinting in the harsh sunlight.

One step and it's done. No longer will my children die. No more will Philani nag me. No more will I lack food. No more will I fight robots just to enter my homeland. I will be in the ultimate homeland and in need of nothing.

He firmed his left foot at the very edge of the cliff, his toes curling and extending in free air. The ledge shifted under him. His right foot he extended out over the abyss. He sucked in breath and held it. He leaned forward.

A plump bird, its belly white, a black strip painted across its eyes like a pirate, alighted on Onder's shoulder. Onder stopped, stepped back and eyed it. It stood on just one leg. The other hung crooked, a dark gray blotch where it was broken. The precious creature shifted its weight to try the leg, slipped and returned to balancing on one leg.

He stepped back twice more. He reached his opposite hand across and grabbed the delicate creature. It cheeped and struggled. Onder tightened his grip. He examined it and shook his head. It won't survive.

"Onder!"

Onder closed his eyes and frowned. Food again. Do they never stop eating?

Slim and tense in her loincloth and ragged gray t-shirt, Philani slapped her sandals against the smooth rock, her teenage hips rocking from side to side in a display of feminine dominance. Her confidence impressed Onder but deep inside he laughed at her pretension of womanhood.

"The children need food!" she said.

"Give me a strip of cloth and help me tie it around this one's leg."

Philani narrowed her eyes and stepped closer. "We will eat it."

"No, we will save it and eat its eggs."

"But we need food now." She put her hands on her hips. "I won't do it. Your children must eat."

"They are not my children!"

A hollow boom echoed from far away. Three dark balls rose from the scrubland a kilometer inland.

Philani screamed, her face a frozen mask of fear, acute yet fatigued. Onder pushed her to the ground and threw himself on top of her. He sheltered the bird in the soft space under his chin and looked upside down back towards the ocean.

A dust cloud scraped at his back. He jammed shut his eyes and mouth and pushed air out of his nose. Philani sobbed, her body quivering beneath him.

"This land is human-free by order of Chairperson Flora B. Harper of the Gaian Devolution. Move back now or face relocation."

The dust subsided. Onder positioned himself in front of Philani's prostrate

body and hid the bird at his lower back. It pecked at the bare skin of his buttock and he startled.

He faced the translucent machines, their metal skeletons shadows inside their plastic bodies. They were angry, always.

The children cowered behind large boulders thirty meters to his right. Twenty-nine of them, including three infants and one teenager - Philani - who kept the last non-Gaian people of Southern Africa together and relatively happy.

Are there non-Gaians left on the other continents? Onder only vaguely knew other lands existed but he worried about this question.

Two more robots shot up into the air as balls and unfurled into four-meter-tall humanoid figures before landing next to the children.

The children screamed and hugged themselves, forming a mass of frantic arms, jockeying legs and exposed eyeballs.

Onder stepped forward. "Stay away from them!" he yelled.

One of the robots hopped at him and landed centimeters from Onder's toes. The cliff cracked and shifted under him. The guardian pinched the thin young man's shoulder between its silicon fingers and lifted him.

Onder met the robot's deep green eyes. Only lenses, for the Gaians and this Flora Harper to see through. Onder passed the motionless bird to his other hand, slipped his knife from its sheath at his side and jammed the sharp steel into the monster's eye.

The beast did not react. The blade slid off the lens and Onder's hand slammed into the hard glass. He flinched but refused to let the Gaians - the people who killed his parents, everyone he ever knew - see him in pain.

The robot pinched his shoulder tighter. Onder screamed and the bird fell out of his hand. He twisted to see its fall but the pain pulled him back. The robot brought him up to his eye.

"You can not injure me, human. As you do not submit, you must be relocated." Its mechanical arm whined as it pulled him back ever so briefly towards his homeland, then hurled him over the edge of the cliff, his legs kicking, his eyes wide and the salty smell of the sea rising to greet him.

Human Free Chapter 2

Flora B. Harper, Chairperson of the Gaian System, swivel-rolled out of bed, inserted her soft, fatty feet into her new plush pink slippers and heaved her mass into a semi-erect position.

She pulled the master key from its cradle on her nightstand and hung the rough-hewn blue-purple Tanzanite gem around her neck, its platinum chain jingling. Soft lights came on from behind wall panels. Translucent orange panels retracted behind her to reveal glass wall.

Flora walked around her bed to the window and contemplated her African blood lilies. Tall and deep red, each flower was in fact a community of two-hundred or more tiny tendrils reaching toward the sky for life, no matter that their bloom lasted only two weeks. Too perfect. Neither her alone nor humanity in its entirety could match their evolution.

She tilted her head left. "Environmental Cooperation." The line beeped in her ear.

"Yep," said a tired male voice.

"I want the blood lilies harvested today. Cut them all down. You should have done it already. I want them on every table at the feast."

The voice sputtered and seemed to correct its posture. "Yes, Chairperson! Anything else, Chairperson?"

Flora tilted her head right to break the connection.

Bone knocked on hard wood and a wave of stress rippled through her.

"What!" she screamed, reveling in her loss of control.

"It's me," a male voice said.

"I'm not ready yet!" Her voice was half buzzsaw, half drill sergeant.

"Happy Restoration of Balance Day, honey!" The voice was meek and plaintive. It disgusted her.

She waddled back past her bed and straight to the heavy, oak door. She flipped off the deadbolt and whipped it open.

A rail-thin man, his chest caved in and his head leaning precipitously forward stepped back, his mouth hanging open.

"We haven't restored the balance yet, now have we!" She wagged a meaty finger under his pointed nose. "Close your mouth and stand up straight!"

He flashed her a thin grin and took another step back. "Didn't you get your beauty sleep, darling? This is why we need to sleep together again. You see that now, surely?"

Her toes tensed and her lower back muscles burned. "I told you, Philip, I will inform you when I am ready!" She stepped back, slammed the door and forced her breath to slow.

Bone tapped oak again. She held her breath and opened the door, ready to snap her husband's weak frame in two.

"Everyone is waiting...?" Philip said.

"For what!"

"Your speech. It's Restoration Day, remember?"

A cold chill tightened her back. She blinked and looked up to activate her heads-up display. After 9? Already? And an eighty percent chance of rain. She rolled her eyes. Flora, you idiot. "I'll be right out!"

She threw the door shut and trotted back to her closet. She pulled her sleepshirt up and over her chest, where it stuck. "Goddamnit!" She kicked her feet, pulled again and a seam popped with the rat-a-tat of machine gun fire.

"Another one?" She thought back to the time before the machines when people assembled clothing. Then you could get quality. If you had the money, of course, which she always did. But now? Well, it just wasn't important anymore. If you were going to live, you might as well do things right - or not at all. Dad was right about that!

She found the extra-wide, floor-to-ceiling mirror next to her closet and turned away from it. She snaked her head back to look at herself.

"Who's sexy?" She raised one oversized hip, then the next, again and again, up and down in a rollercoaster of flesh. "I'm sexy!"

Philip rapped on the door again. "Darling, we need you!"

She stopped, glared at the door, raised a hip once more, then dance-thudded to her closet, selected a black mini-dress with three-quarter lingerie sleeves, twirled and pulled the two-sizes-too-small garment over her wide head, thick shoulders and, finally, her abundant midsection.

She walked over to the mirror again and admired herself.

"Dear!" Philip pounded on the door. "We're starting without you."

"Just hold on!" She slipped into a simple pair of black flats, shuffled to the door, opened it and slammed it behind her.

Philip raised an eyebrow at her. She flashed him an angry look, then tilted her head back. He lowered his head, got behind her and zipped up her dress with a careful touch.

"Very good." She gestured with her index finger to a spot a meter behind her and commenced a dignified strut down the hallway and through the open doorway into the garden outside. Chin up. Eyes forward. Back straight. You're a sex symbol!

"Happy Restoration Day, Chairperson," a group intoned in perfect coordination.

Flora nodded her head sideways to them and gritted her teeth. Obsequious fawners. Two-faced cowards. Backbiting sellouts. How zealously they cling to their own lives knowing the time has come. And it's Restoration of Balance Day, not Restoration Day! Idiots!

Flora turned left and climbed the steps to the amphitheater stage. Covered by three long, curved golden-orange teak beams, it reminded her of her first days there in Unity. Dad architected this whole place, together with the machines, of course.

She reached the stage, found the podium and looked out at her people. A quarter circle of benches radiated outwards from her. Their expanding ranks filled the space to overflow. Too many unauthorized babies. Too much

weakness. That changes now.

Philip climbed up after her. "Darling, did you see the tigers yet? They're marvelous, don't you agree?"

Flora whipped around. The tigers. That's an important part, Flora, you absentminded enchantress, you! She giggled internally but flashed her husband an icy look. He stopped on the steps.

"How do I release them?" she asked.

Philip studied her, a confused look on his face. "Ferris and his boys are in the audience."

"You haven't fed them, correct?"

"The boys?" he asked.

"The tigers, of course!"

"No, not me. The zookeeper takes care of that." He looked left and right, then sighed.

"How do I release them!" she asked through gritted teeth. And it's nature liaison. When will they learn?

"Oh, yes, well, just pull the latch at the top. Simple as that." He raised his foot to continue upwards.

"Go sit with everyone else."

Philip scowled and lowered his head. He turned and proceeded down the steps, then turned back. "I love you, you know," he mumbled.

Flora took the podium. Yeah, yeah. I know. There was her loser son, Ferris, with his simpleton wife and their three kids. All boys, not a girl among them. And how dare they have three children? Did they forget why we are here?

Behind that ignorant bunch sat cute little Dove with her boyfriend. Now there was a woman. Refused to get married. Refused to have children. She always was a rebel and Flora did encourage her. So what if she drank a bottle of vodka every night. She imagined them all, screaming, their necks draining rich blood onto the hot geopolymer cement. She suppressed a grin.

"Come on, Mom, the feast awaits!" Ferris yelled.

Flora glared at him, then cleared her throat. She glanced back at the beasts. One looked back, its white canine teeth poking out at her, its huge claws scraping on the floor of the steel cage. She thrilled and turned back to the assemblage. "Today, fellow Gaians," she shouted, "I am at the end of my rope!"

Her fellow Gaians quieted. All eyes examined her for clues, possibly for weakness. She was a strong Chairperson but they wanted to block the final solution. The cowards wanted to save their own worthless hides. Flora couldn't allow that, no matter what.

"Happy Restoration of Balance Day!" a jovial male voice yelled from below.

"But we have not restored the balance, have we?" Flora asked. She immediately scolded herself for asking a question. You don't do that unless you're willing to get an--

"Are we not close enough?" a deeper voice asked.

"The Gaian System stands today on the verge of failure," Flora continued, "with enough survivors on three continents to re-establish human hegemony

against the planet. I will not allow this to happen."

Ferris yawned. Dove whispered to her partner. Of them all, only Philip gave her his full attention. And it infuriated her.

"People, they are crossing our southern gate! They have undone the priceless conservation work we have achieved on this very continent!

"Our numbers, too, have grown beyond projections or expectations, such that we have run out of homes in which to put your little brats, not to mention the proper ecological disposal of their dirty diapers!"

They were used to this. They'd heard it too many times. They were immune to ranting, accustomed to scolding. She could see their eyes glazing over, feel their attention turning to other matters. Flora would do something about that.

She whirled around, imagining herself a stage diva wowing the crowd with a racy dance move, and almost tripped over her bovine feet. She found the tiger cage latches and removed each of them, three in total. She descended the stairs, turned to the crowd and bowed.

"It's time to restore some balance around here, people! Say hello to our friendly tigers!" Flora walked backwards towards the door to her complex, watching for the first signs of what she hoped would happen, what she knew must happen, as long as that idiot nature liaison did what she told him to do, or not to do, more accurately. The sense of guilty pleasure floated in her gut like a fresh chocolate cake.

The crowd stood and cheered. Children clawed for their parents' legs, others stepped forward hesitantly. The tigers proceeded from their cages. A smaller female sauntered to the edge of the stage, glanced at Flora, then lay down and yawned. Two males jumped out simultaneously, their thick front leg muscles pulsing under shiny cinnamon fur.

One dove into the crowd, knocking Philip violently back into his daughter-in-law, her eyes wide, struggling to escape from under the weight of the beast. It slashed Philip's neck and she screamed, blood spattering into her silky blonde hair.

The second bounded forward and chased down Flora's grandson Tyler. The tiger tapped the back of the fleeing five-year-old's leg with its massive paw. Tyler collapsed, rolled over and broke out into a bawl. The tiger advanced, put his head down and pushed it into the boy's chest, the weight crushing until a thin crack sounded, then another. Tyler fell silent. The tiger moved on.

"Not the baby. No! Oh my God," a woman screamed. But Flora didn't hear her.

She ducked into the building, her heart thumping in her neck, and pulled the glass door closed behind her. A contact tinkled in her ear. Flora refused it. The nature liaison hurdled down the hallway towards her, a dart gun on his back.

Flora stepped into his path. His eyes went wide, he hit her and bounced back a meter onto his back. Flora took a delicate backwards step and put her arms on her hips.

"You will not interfere," she whispered. A tiger roared and a man let out a scream that chilled Flora. She started to shake.

The nature liaison approached her, eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth, then stepped back in a hurry.

The door behind her rattled in its frame. She turned and immediately jumped back. A wild face, eyes bulging, pressed itself up against the glass.

“Mother, open the door!”

Flora studied Ferris. First-born son. You expect one of those to be there with you when it’s time to man the parapets. To be at your right hand, in fact. To get your back from time to time. But this one was a waste of breast milk. Good riddance. She crossed her arms and shook her head at him.

Ferris looked behind him, then back at her. “Mother! You need me for--”

A spot of orange and black moved behind him. The tiger appeared above him, its giant maw open. Its paws landed on either side of his head, breaking through the glass door. The tip of its longest, hand-sized claw tore the Tanzanite master key from Flora’s neck. The great beast, its middle-finger-sized canine teeth pointing at Flora, ripped into the back of Ferris’s neck.

The man’s eyes rolled up into his head and a heavy sigh escaped from somewhere unexpected.

Human Free Chapter 3

Onder was alive. But he expected the slick bites of the sharks to come at any moment. Would they take a leg first? Grab him by the torso, shake him and drag him into the deep? He kicked and punched out in all directions. Bubbles escaped his mouth in the aquamarine darkness. Which way was up? The light, follow the light. He swam up, his eyes on the sparkling rays of the sun, kicking, his lungs aching, desperate to breathe.

The surface was close now and Onder thrilled. To not be taken immediately, with so many sharks here, that was something. That was a story he could--

A stony head flew from the darkness and rammed Onder in the side and lower back. It wasn't panic that took him now, only the certainty of death. He made peace with it. He laughed at his earlier pride. This was his fate all along. He was but meat to be recycled into a new generation of life. The salt water burned him and a dark liquid curled around him.

But a brute, unspeaking part of him refused to give up. His stunned lungs cried for breath. His legs kicked once more. The light approached again, then darkness closed in around him. Feeling receded from his limbs and he fell, the light ebbing, sharks circling, their tail fins kicking greedily.

Onder fell and fell. A soft bed caught him. A cool evening breeze wafted over him. He sighed. Something moved to his right and he turned.

"What are you doing here, son! Get up! Your people depend on you!" The gaunt, dusty black man towered over his son. Onder scooted backwards.

"Father?" Onder studied his face. He had his father's squinting eyes, wide cheekbones and sense of both impending doom and inexhaustible love.

"Onder!" The older man smacked him across the face and Onder awoke under water, the pink open mouth of a shark racing towards him. Onder found himself magnetically pulled in towards its rows of razor white teeth, his head angling to slide down its cavernous gullet.

What if they are still alive? And, if not, what of my revenge? The thought energized him. Onder drew back a fist and slammed it into the shark's nose. The shark wriggled, its rough skin scraping Onder's arm, then flew off into the murk. Onder pushed himself to the surface and drank deep of the air, his chest rising and falling on its own as if someone else's heart beat within his breast.

A strong wave propelled Onder against the rocky cliffside, his head bouncing off the dark stone. He grabbed a rough outcropping and held firm. The receding water pulled on him but he stood firm. He found footing on a boulder, stood up and put his back to the wall. His head ached and bile rose in his throat. Sharks circled meters from him. He wouldn't swim out of here.

He looked up. The cliffside was at least twenty meters tall and the robots might still be up there. He cupped his hand over his ear to hear Philani's protestations or the cries of the twenty-eight children. But the crashes of the waves at his feet tolerated no other sound to reach him.

Damn the robots. He'd climb. The water receded from his feet. Onder spotted

the wave. Taller than him and but a dozen meters away, it carried a long, finned shadow within it.

Onder turned, found footing and hand over hand began to climb the mossy, slippery black rock. Don't look back. It will only slow you.

Onder looked back. The wave crashed over his legs, the body of the shark pressing his kneecaps into the harsh stone. The beast's jaws snapped, its eyes wild. Onder reached a hand back, his other fingers slipping and jabbed a finger at the shark's wide eye. It recoiled. The wave receded.

Onder climbed again. Halfway up he stopped and listened. The surf still crashed below but a scream sounded far away. Philani's scream. If the Gaian robots cannot quiet her, how could I ever hope to?

He wouldn't have to listen to her nagging voice now. Now there would only be one mouth to feed, instead of twenty-nine. A genuine sense of relief swept over him. He was free. Now he could do what he want.

Guilt spilled over and wiped away his newfound independence. His father's voice spoke to him. You have a duty, son. You have a responsibility. That is your wife. Those are your children. There is no one else. You are the last Khoisan. You are, in fact, the last man in all of Africa.

But they're not my children, he screamed at his father.

They became yours when you took them in. They are yours because they are your people and there is no other father for them.

Onder's chest tightened and a weight grew within him. He reached the top of the cliff and hung just below it, waiting for the familiar vibration of the robots' heavy tread. But none came.

He raised his eyes above the edge and scanned the horizon. Far away to the Northeast a dust trail flittered in the wind. He would track them, find them and free them. His course was set. He climbed up and crouched at the edge of the cliff, dreaming of his father's face.

And what if you must die? his father's spirit asked him.

Then I will die, for my people and my family. I swear it. "And," Onder added out loud, "I will avenge you, father, by destroying the Gaian leader, whatever it takes."

"No. You will die." The robot - the same silicon-wrapped giant now with a slashed flap hanging under its eye - stepped from its hiding place behind a rock twenty meters to Onder's right and raised its arm to fire.

Human Free Chapter 4

"You will be very weak for the first seven days."

Astrix didn't hear her mother's warning. But then she didn't need to. She'd studied physics, gravity, biology and chemistry during her sixteen years of life on Space Station Independence.

If you could call living inside a glass and metal box in the vacuum of space life.

Astrix sure didn't.

"Will the Gaians like me?" Astrix wondered aloud. Beyond her window, the northeastern shores of the continent known as Africa exited night. She found the long Nile River and imagined that the ancient city of Cairo with its pharaohs and pyramids still thrived there.

But it didn't. In fact, not more than ten thousand people lived on the entire, arid continent, ninety-nine point nine percent of them in Unity.

"You are a beautiful young woman," her mother said too loudly. She combed her only daughter's bobbed, black hair from crown to neck, again and again. "You're a perfect example of humanity: tall, Asian, athletically inclined." She stood back and surveyed her daughter. "Your rear end use could some padding."

Astrix turned, her long bangs swirling into her thin, black eyes, and glared at her mother. "Small behinds are more efficient, Mother."

"The Gaians are a queer bunch. They will not appreciate your upgrades, or your small behind. And, frankly," she added in a whisper, "they want us all dead."

Astrix met her mother's eyes. "I don't believe that!"

"Don't be naive!" She pulled a bottle of gel from a panel in the wall next to Astrix and squirted a small bit into her fingers.

"No gel!" Astrix stood up and examined her gray jumper in the dressing table mirror. It displeased her.

Her mother pursed her lips. "The gel will give you--"

"No," Astrix replied. "But if you can lend me great-grandmother's orange dress..." She looked at her mother in the mirror, her eyebrows pleading.

Her mother glared at her. "Your father has already paired you, and well. Don't get any ideas about--"

The door to Astrix's compartment swished open. Astrix turned her body away in modesty, then prepared her sharpest glare for the only person who could possibly be so gauche as to barge in without knocking.

"Hello Astrix!"

Astrix turned her glare on the glasses-wearing, pimple-infested visage of Meridian, and added a sneer just to remind the both of them how much she hated the boy. Two years her junior, math champion since forever, he and Astrix were paired just last month at the joint insistence of their fathers.

And Meridian couldn't wait to get things started.

Shorter than her but wider, his every smugness-exuding move caused her

new agony. She turned away, her arms crossed, and stared out at the newly illuminated continent below her. Sunlight sparkled on the Nile and she took it as a sign. She must leave Independence, and never return.

"I want to wish you a safe trip," Meridian said. "I made a tool for you. It will help you find your way on the surface of the planet."

Astrix's mother received the gift. "Thank you so much, very kind of you, what a dutiful and attentive pair, don't you agree, Astrix?" She pinched the loose skin of Astrix's shoulder and twisted.

Astrix pulled her shoulder away from her mother but the woman's grip was steel. Astrix gritted her teeth. Fine. She turned back to Meridian. "Yes, very kind, thank you Meridian."

He leaned forward, his cheeks puffed out and caffeine-stained teeth appeared where his smile should be. "I'll be here waiting for you, preparing our berth for your return."

Birth. And berth. The very sound disgusted her. The old people were crammed four to a room. The young people, six. More babies was out of the question for the people of Independence. But they were especially repugnant to Astrix. To think, something alive, wriggling inside of her. She shivered.

Meridian set the box on her dresser, turned and left, the sliding door jamming half-closed behind him with a whirring-crunching noise.

"Mother? Please?"

Her mother walked over, kicked the leading edge of the door, swiped her hand over the control sensor twice and then smacked the wall under the sensor. The door swished closed.

"About that dress?" Astrix asked.

"No, little girl. This is a scientific and diplomatic--"

"Father said I didn't have to accept him!"

Her mother crossed her arms and shook her head. "This is a community And you know what that means."

The door swished open again. Two men in navy blue flight suits stood outside.

Her mother grabbed Astrix under the armpits and pulled her up from the chair.

"Time to go? Already?" A dark fear welled up in Astrix. She turned and hugged her mother tight.

"You're going to be fine. It's only a year. Just remember why you were chosen, my darling gremlin. Remember your mission. Your people are counting on you."

General Javal paraded into the tiny room, his funny gold and blue hat under his right arm, his full complement of shined medals on the chest of his matching blue uniform and his close-cropped mustache twitching more rapidly than ever.

"My dear Astrix Volkov, congratulations on your selection as Prime for the year 2205. You have demonstrated an unflinching commitment to science and —"

"Can we skip to the end? I'm ready," Astrix said.

All eyes focused disapproving glances on the impudent teen.

Javal cleared his throat and began to pace in a line perpendicular to Astrix's line of sight, blocking her path to the door.

"Now listen here, Ms...."

"Volkov," her mother filled in.

"Ms. Volkov. The Gaians want you to believe that you are receiving an advanced education in biology, zoology, environmental sciences and other soft disciplines that we lack expertise in. This is propaganda!"

Astrix sighed and sat down. Her mother grabbed her and pulled her back up again.

"Vile and self-conscious propaganda! The Gaians have painted themselves into a corner down there. They wiped out ninety-eight point six percent of the Earthbound population while we watched, unable to intervene, up here."

A mischievous energy surged through Astrix. "And why didn't we? We have access to the space elevators. We--"

"Child, this is why you received a B in our history class, isn't it?"

Astrix looked down.

"Before they killed off nine point nine billion of our fellow human beings, the Gaians built and co-opted from others the great production and defense systems of Earth."

"They don't--" Astrix started.

Javal looked at his wrist. "It's time." He turned and walked out of the room. His two officers strode in, turned sharply around and interlocked one arm each with each of Astrix's arms. They marched as one to the door.

Astrix stopped. "Wait. Mother?"

Her mother trotted over to face her daughter.

Astrix looked up at her, her eyes wet and red. Her arms shook but she reached them out and clung tightly to the older woman. "I miss you already."

Her mother gave Astrix a quick, tight hug. "Back in a year, yes." The words scraped from her throat. She turned and trotted down the corridor.

"Come along!" Javal yelled.

They exited into the pristine, narrow hallway. To their right, a square shaft ran up to the top of this apartment block, so far up that Astrix never managed to actually see its end.

Javal held the elevator doors open for them. The three joined him, the doors swished closed and they rose, the g-force pulling at Astrix's feet. She looked at Javal and he regarded her severely.

"Remember your mission. We need free access to Earth for soil, seeds, water, air and other resources," he said.

The elevator burst out of the living area and into the farming zone. Greens and yellows burst around her through the transparent elevator walls. Water flowed and steam obscured her view in places.

"I still don't understand why we can't get what we need from the Moon and the asteroids," Astrix said.

"You must not speak of that! Ever!" Javal yelled.

Astrix took a step back and one of the airmen pushed her back towards Javal. "I know, okay? I know. You and my mother told me a million times."

Javal's hands shook. "If they find out, they have the weapons necessary to put a hole in the hull. What atmosphere we have will vent in minutes."

"But why? We're friends! I mean that's why I'm going, right?"

The elevator rocketed past the grow zone and slowed to a stop. Above them, gargantuan, orange strips reflected sunlight. Next to the strips, the black of space showed through in a narrow ribbon. All around them, green fields and steel structures curved up and away in a thin half-circle. Beyond that, Astrix knew that the circle completed in a tubular torus. Today she would see the complete structure that was her home for the first time.

Or so she hoped.

A shrill beep started on Javal's wrist and then seemed to come from everywhere around her. Javal tapped his wrist.

"Damn!" he muttered.

Astrix watched him, a knot forming in her stomach. How serious was it this time? Was it the end of Independence? Or a minor malfunction of a forgotten system?

The shuttle landed next to them. A transparent sphere with four seats, its four spinning helicopter blades slowed and it bounced gently to a stop next to them.

"My dear," Javal said, his face dark and his eyes looking far away past her, "you will go on alone. I wish you alertness, strength of will and a good memory." He turned back to the elevator, the two airmen leading the way.

"I will do my best," Astrix said.

Javal stopped, turned and walked back to her. "I don't want to pressure you, my dear, but you - this mission of yours - is the last hope for us, and possibly for the Earth as well."

Last hope? Astrix's eyes glazed over as she struggled to process what could only be hyperbole. But Javal was not known for being dramatic.

"You were not our first choice, Astrix. You were not even on our list of candidates. But then it is the Gaians who choose the student each year and not us."

Not their first choice? "But I earned the best—" she started.

"Sir," an airman spoke up, "Dr. Leavitt says that system-wide pressure has dropped five percent. She's asking for a decision."

Javal listened, his eyes still firmly on Astrix. He nodded to the airman then turned back to her. "Astrix?"

"Yes, Professor?"

"Don't screw this up!" Javal turned and yelled into his wrist. "Get as many people out as you can but seal it off before we hit seven--" The elevator doors closed behind him and he and the two airmen disappeared into the floor.

Astrix turned and strolled towards the shuttle. She climbed up, took a seat and strapped herself in. The craft's blades spun up with a deep hum that made her gut vibrate. The sudden urge to vomit her morning rations grabbed her. She covered her mouth and choked them back down.

The door jerked from its position behind her, rolled into place across the opening and sealed with an increase in pressure that caused her ears to smart.

This was it, really it. She was going to Earth. It was really happening. And if she didn't want to come back to this rusty deathtrap, well no one would make her. She'd run away. Maybe with a boy. Maybe on her own. She'd survive, have a garden, and that would be it. A small smile crept across her face and she thrilled at her escape plan.

The craft rose up and angled forward. She looked down on her people, her world, the only one she'd ever known. It was beautiful and frightening, a strip of steel and life-giving green between the fiery orange sun and the icy black vacuum.

She zipped through the exit hatch. The blades slowed and thrusters fired her forward, the seat biting into her back.

Vacuum all around her now, she turned to finally see the torus in its entirety, a chill passing over her before the heaters kicked into gear. It was a marvel of science, a wonder--

At the bottom of the ring, at its farthest point from Earth, atmosphere and debris vented violently. Astrix did some mental calculations. That was where-- No!

She moved to stand up but the harness held her back. She flapped her hands over her torso searching for the release mechanism but her mind could only think of him.

He worked in that section. He maintained the atmospheric scrubbers. And the water treatment plant. He was the Chief Engineer for Life Support. If there was trouble, he would be the last to leave.

The craft fired reverse thrusters. But Astrix's eyes were on her home. She strained to distinguish the form of the debris that still exited through the hull breach. He might still be alive. He might be in a suit. He could exit once the section depressurized, then re-enter through the port.

Her craft slowed and entered the dispatching tunnel of the Gaian-controlled space elevator. The craft latched onto the two guide cables. The door closed behind her, cutting off her view of Independence. Red lights flashed. The compartment twisted around her.

"Remain still and calm. The mandatory inspection is underway. Resist or attempt to flee and your craft will be destroyed and discarded." The voice was female but there was no courtesy in it, only a dead metal threat.

Her thoughts returned to the hole in her home. He was safe. He had to be. They have protocols for these things.

"Approved. Welcome to the Gaian System, Astrix Volkov. Stay in your seat until the door opens."

The craft bounced as air filled the tube around her. The bottom retracted and the walls moved past her. Slowly, she felt gravity tug at her feet and pull her deeper into the chair.

Now she could see. Below her, deep green land decorated with a deep blue lake and two thin rivers stretched out to meet yellow-brown desert, then the

deep blue ocean.

Braking began. She lost her view again.

The craft slowed to a stop, bounced and the door next to her opened. She stepped out and a rail-thin man greeted her.

"Ms. Volkov?"

She nodded. The air was heavy, hot and wet. A fresh smell, like soap only softer permeated the air. She stepped forward, tripped on nothing at all and fell to her knees.

"Ms. Volkov, welcome to the Gaian System." He paused, looked away, then back again. "We just received word from the space station. I'm sorry, but your father has passed on."

Human Free Chapter 5

Onder jumped forward and rolled, the craggy surface jutting into his back, his heart pulsing in his neck.

A bolt of fire flashed from the arm of the injured robot. WAAZZZ-PAAAA. The flap of silicon skin under its eye jumped as it surveyed the small cloud of rock and dust that hung in the air where Onder had been.

Onder crawled behind a low, black outcropping, turned himself around and surveyed the damage.

WAAZZZ-PAAAA. Another blast landed in the same spot as the first and a sharp pop sounded. A long fissure opened in the ground. The cliff edge arced forward then stopped, stuck on something.

The robot strode out of its hiding spot and fired three times in a tight burst. Onder rolled and closed his eyes but the robot's beams of fire moved faster than his own eyes could see them.

The shots impacted centimeters from the frazzled boy's face. Knife-like bits of dirt and rock scraped his nose, cheeks and forehead. The flash remained. Onder forced his eyelids open and rolled his eyes in all directions but it was no use.

He was blind now.

Onder scampered backwards, got to his feet and sprinted. His instincts told him to stop, or at least slow down, but he pushed through. He hoped he was actually running in the right direction. Behind him was the unstable cliff, the rough surf and the hungry sharks. To his left and right were more ocean, just farther away. Ahead was his ancestral land.

It was harsh land, arid with little game even now that the Gaians had tried to restock it. But it was where he must go.

Onder's imagination wandered to vivid images of his father hunting, the warm blood of an antelope--

Onder tripped and flew head first into something hard. He felt no pain and knew that was the worst sign. He reached up and felt. A rock, a big one. He touched his head. Wet, slippery, hot.

This was bad. But Onder got to his feet and walked into the rock again. He let himself fall over it, then huddled behind it.

Onder listened hard for the clomping feet of the Gaian robot. There was no sound, no vibration.

Onder tensed. It should be chasing him. It had the advantage. Why would it stop now?

A hot breeze burned Onder's eyes. Cold slivers of metal pushed on the boy's chest. His shoulder blades dug into the rock and his breath did not come.

"Thought you could run away from me, human?" The compassionless voice echoed inside its metal skull.

Onder nodded.

It pushed harder. It brought its other hand up and rubbed it into the gash on Onder's head.

Onder screamed. The pain sparked desperation in him and he tried to breathe.

Nothing came.

The robot moved the hand from Onder's neck to his chest and pushed. His sternum cracked and he took breath.

"Your leaders will want me alive," Onder croaked. "I know things."

The robot removed its now bloody hand from Onder's head and moved it to his neck.

"You are to be terminated, as are all humans outside of Unity."

"What..." Onder struggled to speak. He moved his neck and found the robot's hand slipped from side to side. "... my people."

"Your people are gone. And now you will be as well."

A cone of light materialized at the center of Onder's vision. The robot's scraped and slit eye stared at him. Onder leaned right. Ten meters ahead, a robot scooter hummed, water droplets leaking from its tailpipe.

His vision darkened. He struggled for breath. The robot pressed harder on his chest and something snapped. Onder's back arched involuntarily. He wanted to scream but nothing came.

Onder reached up to his forehead and mopped blood with his hands. He grabbed the metal fingers that pinched his neck and spread his blood over them.

Onder kicked his right leg up and into the robot's side. It twisted away. The pressure lessened on Onder's throat. He breathed deep and slipped his bloody neck out of the robot's grasp, his own blood serving as lubricant.

Onder hung there between sitting and standing, his eyes on the robot's unyielding face, watching for the hand to strike out again.

It didn't.

Onder ran forward, tripping, falling, his knee impacting a rock, the pain screaming up his leg. He limped forward, found the scooter and got on.

The clomp-clomp of the robot sounded behind him. Onder's spine tingled with the fear that the robot hand would land on his shoulder. That would be it. The boy had no more tricks.

The scooter control panel was a simple thing. There was a red switch in between the steering handles and foot pedals to increase or decrease acceleration.

Onder pushed the bottom of the red switch. It clicked but nothing happened. He flexed his ankles to push the pedals forward and down. The engine screamed but the scooter refused to budge even a centimeter.

The clomp-clomp of the robot grew louder and more frequent. Onder turned. The robot stretched out its hands, its finger grabbing.

The scooter vibrated under him. Onder pushed his feet forward and it took off. Relief flooded over him. The Gaian robot could run but not as fast as the scooter could fly.

Too fast. He lost his grip on the handles, slipped backwards and fell off the back of the scooter. The vehicle slowed and drifted.

The clomp-clomp of the robot grew closer. Onder picked himself up again,

his chest aching, his knee not responding, threw himself onto the scooter and took off once more, this time his hands firmly gripping the overly wide handles.

A storm whipped up the sand and rock around him, it cut into his face, his eyes narrowed against it as he flew. After an eternity, he turned his head back.

The robot was gone, nowhere to be seen.

Onder kicked the accelerator up higher and pushed into the approaching storm, the pores of his facing burning, sand clogging his throat but free and safe, for the moment, from the Gaian System.

Human Free Chapter 6

Flora Harper sat in her teak-paneled office at the highest point in Unity. Behind her, the solid rock of Mt. Kilimanjaro protected her. Ahead of her lay the decreasingly lush African savanna. Beyond that, the dark rising waters of Lake Victoria troubled her.

Flora Harper was having a bad day.

"It's so crystal clear, I shouldn't even have to explain this to you, Dr. Herczfeld. You will analyze these twenty-nine specimens. You will discover how they resisted our remediation vectors. Then you will create new remediation vectors that actually work! Is that clear, Doctor?" Flora yelled, her eyes wide and blinking unnaturally fast.

"What you don't understand is--" Dr. Herczfeld started.

She hefted her head to cut the connection.

The Chairperson of the Gaian System stood up with some difficulty and hefted herself to the wide picture window that occupied the wall perpendicular to the perfectly cleared surface of her desk. The desk was all show, of course. A renewable resource manufactured into a decoration that spoke of her commitment to the environment. In reality, everything of importance was on the network.

The network was powered by solar, wind, hydro and geothermal energy. With nuclear backup, of course. That last part was a secret best limited to the Gaian High Command.

Which was now just Flora.

The tigers took care of the last remaining council member and the others were too weak to speak up. Flora was a strong woman and she'd shown the others their places - some just below her, others much deeper, six feet underground to be exact.

Flora grinned and returned to her desk for her herbal tea. They didn't bury people anymore. Too damaging to the environment. Too many chemicals in these bodies. We spread their ashes to the winds. In that sense, her enemies who couldn't shut up were now above her.

That thought irritated her. She was Flora Harper, Chairperson. She shouldn't feel irritated anymore. There was no greater power for her to aspire to.

Men. The stronger sex? The conquerors, military heroes and alpha males? I killed five billion of them. She snorted.

But now there were only these stragglers left. Children. Misfits. Pathetic waifs who survived only by the luck of their genetic code.

Flora Harper would break that code. Mother Earth would be human free very soon. But first it would be man free. The women could go last.

She tried to imagine her own death. No, for her to go too soon would be a waste of talent. The rest of these bumbling idealists would screw it up. They lacked the mettle. And then it would all be for nothing.

She thought of the nearly ten billion she'd pushed off the cliff so far. Their

deaths didn't trouble her. It was just that they were so close. The stakes were too high now. If they didn't finish the job straightaway--

Her ear buzzed. "What?" she responded.

"Damian here. Chairperson, my most sincere apologies for disturbing you but the student from the exiles is in Unity."

Rage piled upon rage as Flora counted the reasons why she should not have received this call. She took a deep breath. Damian was a loyal servant. He did everything his Chairperson told him to do. He'd even castrated himself when she mentioned it. But still.

"Is this the level of incompetence I can expect from my staff now? That you bother me with such a minor matter? You know what you need to--" Flora started.

"Apologies, Chairperson. The girl - Astrix - is violently ill. She cannot walk on her own. She has an irregular heartbeat. And, well, her father just passed away on Independence and she is--"

"I don't care! Stuff her in a room near Herzcfeld and be done with it!" Flora twitched her head to cut the connection.

Herzcfeld. Her rage broke and she connected to him. "Doctor, do you have any idea of the context of your work?"

"Listen, Flora--" Dr. Herzcfeld started.

"That's Chairperson to you, bub!"

Herzcfeld guarded his silence. If there was anything Flora hated more than someone who picked a fight with her, it was the someone who refused to escalate the fight!

"Doctor, you are aware that the global warming situation is worsening, correct? Temperatures continue to rise. Grassland continues to turn into desert. We're still losing plant and animal species!" Flora yelled.

"Yes."

Flora waited, her fingernails tapping on the hard wood of her desk.

"Yes, *Chairperson*," Dr. Herzcfeld said.

"These remaining humans in South America and East Asia are responsible for this. And we need--"

"Chairperson, it's time to consider that the cause of global warming may not be human activity."

"How dare you!" screamed Flora. "How could--" He's a traitor. Saboteur! He's been lying to me this whole time. He wants to subvert the Gaian System. I knew it. I just felt it! A new awareness dawned on her and her skin tingled with goosebumps.

He wants to overthrow me. Me! Chairperson Flora B. Harper!

Another realization hit her like a chunk of barbecue fried chicken to an acid-scorched gullet. She groped for her desk chair and plopped into it, the metal and plastic shrieking its protest.

There must be others! He would never be so bold alone. There are collaborators.

And they could be anywhere!

"Chairperson?" Dr. Herczfeld said. "If there's nothing else--"

"Just do your job, Doctor," Flora whispered. She cut the connection.

The world contracted around Flora. Just moments ago, she presumed that her power extended to the borders of Unity and even beyond, with the exception of the stragglers. And that trash heap in the sky.

But now she was vulnerable. The subverters could bust in at any moment and feed her to the tigers. And they would feel justified in doing it! She shivered.

They were smart up there. She mentally reviewed the intelligence reports of the last few years on the so-called space rationals. They were desperate for resources. Desperate to return to the planet. And this girl. Astrid? Astrin? Who cares what her name is. She would be part of the plot.

And Flora you idiot, you put her and Herczfeld together!

Flora strode toward the door. I won't be a prisoner. I'm in charge here!

She stopped and connected with Robot Command.

"Yes, Chairperson," came the deliciously precise synthesized voice.

"These stragglers you brought in. Are they the last ones on this continent?"

"Yes, Chairperson."

"Good, very good." Finally, someone is doing their job. "That's--"

"Unless," the disembodied voice continued, "they are hiding more than fifty meters underground."

"Hiding underground? Is that a possibility?"

"And with the exception of one male adult who evaded unit KB-89431, stole a transportation unit and is currently in the preserve."

Like a roast chicken bouncing off a rubber wall, the words of Robot Command were unable to penetrate Flora's mind.

"Repeat that last part."

"One adult male evaded unit KB-89431, stole a transportation unit and is currently in the preserve."

Flora's heartbeat pounded in her ears and she swayed. "He evaded one of our killbots?"

"Yes, Chairperson."

"And then he stole its scooter?"

"Correct."

"And now he is in the preserve?"

"Sensors show that he has penetrated seven-hundred and forty-seven kilometers into the preserve. With a heading that would take him to Unity."

"How the hell did that happen!" Flora screamed. "Why haven't you caught him?"

"There--"

"And why wasn't I notified!" Enemies within, enemies above and now a new enemy approaches and they don't even tell me? Her guts quivered.

"There is a severe sand storm. The male drove straight into it and disappeared. KB-89431 was unable to maintain visual contact. We did not notify you because it is not protocol."

"It is now. Confirmed?"

"Confirmed," the voice replied.

"Speaking of protocol, confirm my instructions once the stragglers are eliminated on Earth."

"Robot command will execute Space Rational Omega: we will strike Space Station Independence with one-hundred standard missiles."

"Make it one thousand." Better safe than sorry.

"Yes, Chairperson. To continue, after receiving final confirmation from you, we will then deploy poison gas to Unity."

Flora calmed. "Good. Is the scooter still moving?"

"No, the male's scooter stopped four hours and thirteen minutes ago."

Flora smiled. "Good. He's probably dead. Once the storm lifts--"

"We will recover his body, Chairperson."

"You had damned better well! It's only the future of the planet that is at stake. It's only your primary mission!" Flora cut the connection, sat down and drunk deeply of her herbal tea. The damned concoction was ice cold now but she forced it down.

Thank Gaia the little cretin is dead. Men could be persistent little buggers, especially these Africans. Some of them knew how to live from this fouled land. The last thing Flora needed was an alpha male sticking his nose into her business.

Three sharp knocks sounded at the door. It opened. Damian walked in and bowed. "Chairperson--" he began.

Three others followed after him, a thin, balding man with a crooked cane and two younger women.

"Flora," the man started, "we've come to talk to you about this business with the tigers."

Flora sloshed to her feet. Finally, a plotter shows his scrounging face.

"Now, we've all talked, and we know what we came here for, the mission we pledged our lives to. But there is such a thing as a death with dignity."

"Damian, arrest them," Flora said.

Damian fixed her with a confused stare. He looked at the visitors, then back to Flora again. "Where should I put them, Chairperson?"

"The tigers escaped into the preserve, correct? Put them into the old tiger cages."

"Now, listen here, Flora, there is no provision for arrest of expedition members in the bylaws--"

"There is now!" Flora yelled.

"Your powers do not extend--"

"Oh, they do now! I won't allow you to subvert or sabotage our mission here, Raymond. No matter your expertise."

Raymond tilted his head and squinted at her. "You need me to keep the field active, Flora. I have trained no--"

"Robot Command will take over your function. Damian!" Flora sat back down, the chair squealing. Her mug was empty now and she was getting hungry. But lunch was at least an hour away.

Damian swiveled and put his arms out to push the three protesters towards the door. Raymond crossed his arms and refused to budge. Damian paused then pushed him hard. Raymond fell backwards in a heap, his cane clattering to the floor and sliding out the door.

The old man pulled himself up and stepped outside, ahead of the approaching Damian and the two women.

"How dare you. How dare you, indeed!" Raymond cried.

Damian pulled the door closed behind him.

The elderly protester inserted a stick-thin arm and tiny fist in between the closing door and its frame. "This is not the last you'll hear on this, Flora Harper!"

Damian pulled the door closed on the man. He yelped, retracted his arm and Damian slammed the door behind him.

Human Free Chapter 7

Astrix sat in a corner of the tiny room. There were no windows. She rubbed her arm where her gyroscope used to be. It was gone now.

On the Independence she used it for sport. She felt her ears. Those upgrades were gone too. She hoped the holes in her ear canal didn't fill in. It took three months for those things to settle in properly and heal. She didn't want to go through that again.

But now she would have to. Thanks Gaians!

She changed the magnification of her eyes then recoiled. I should know better than to try that in a small room. Thank goodness they didn't find those. They're the last people I want operating on my eyes.

There were also fresh holes above her knees and behind her elbows. They cleaned her out. She was just human now. Only human, in this box. Not even a bed, not even a pillow. Smooth cement floor, hard white walls, no windows, just one bare lightbulb in the middle of the ceiling. Not even the door permitted anything to pass.

Astrix picked at her wounds and thought of her father. To die like that in the freezing vacuum. Not even able to say goodbye. Did it hurt? How long did his lungs beg for breath? How long did his hands reach for something to hold onto before they froze stiff? Did he feel betrayed that we didn't come for him in time? Did he worry about my future?

A tightness formed between Astrix's eyes and her vision blurred. Hot, salty tears poured down her cheek and onto her tongue.

He was her inspiration every day she woke up in that other box above the Earth. She doubted that she would ever escape. She buried herself in the books and the math problems and the physics puzzles. She skipped two grades ahead. No friends, no playing: she lived in a fantasy world up there. She refused to admit that she wasn't on Earth.

And now she was. And she was in a box again.

But this box had no view, period, much less one of Earth. In this box she had no mother and no father. And this one was smaller.

In fact, now she had no father anywhere.

The tears dripped down her face again and she sobbed, her chest spasming uncontrollably, the cries jumping from her throat. She had no control.

She'd made it her goal. Sixteen years of single-minded concentration. Dad told me the Gaians would pick me. He believed in me.

But now he's gone and I'm in another box and I don't like this box. If I have to choose a box, I choose the one in space with my mother. If I knew it would come to this, I would've lived more, had friends and found fun instead of unending and practice.

Something clacked to the hard floor behind her and she turned. A round metal plate with something brown and wet sat in front of the door. How did they get it in here? She crawled over, leaned down and smelled it.

It's smelled of the recycling room on Independence.

She pushed it away and retreated to her corner. She knew the Gaians were a hard people. She knew they hated her people. But they invited her here. She didn't expect this kind of treatment. In fact, her friend Marcus was the student last year and he said they treated him very well.

Maybe that was a lie. Maybe it was true they brainwashed you. Maybe Marcus was a spy. Maybe Marcus caused the explosion that killed Dad.

No. She stood up and paced forward two steps then turned and took two steps back.

I am the master of my fate. They can't brainwash me. I will stand up to them. I will stand up for Independence. I will be a good student again. I will study all they offer me but they will not turn me against my own people.

She stopped pacing and walked to the door. She pounded on it with both fists. "Let me out of here. Open the door!"

Footsteps echoed on the hard concrete floor outside her door "What is it?" a male voice asked.

"I want to get out of here. You invited me here. Why am I a prisoner?"

Metal ground against metal. A screech and then a crash that came from inside the door. It creaked open. Astrix pushed her way out and stepped to the side.

The hallway was narrow. It ran out ahead of her. Windowless metal doors on both sides and, at the end come a bright light. She covered her eyes against the light.

"My dear, I am under strict orders to keep you under lock and key. You had many small machines in your body. I'm afraid our distinguished chairperson is in quite a tizzy."

"What is your name?" Astrix asked. She did her best to appear meek, cute and fascinated by the graying old man that stood half a meter lower than her.

It wasn't difficult.

"I am Dr. Hieronymus Herczfeld." He put his hand to his belt and bowed ever so slightly. "I'm afraid I had no choice but to remove your little machines. We strive to live very naturally here and our leader is feeling a bit paranoid right now."

"I need to speak to my family right now. My father..." she paused, looked away and sniffled. "My father, he was killed just as I was getting onto the space elevator and..." She broke out into sobbing again and collapsed to the floor.

"My dear, my dear..." Dr. Herczfeld stepped forward and tried to pull her back up. He grabbed his lower back and stepped back. "I'm just not as young as I used to be," he mumbled.

Astrix looked up at the old man. The sobbing came easy but she knew she was manipulating him now. It came to her easily. It was unconscious. She didn't need a strategy. For everything else, she needed one. But not for this.

"Doctor, please. I must speak with my mother. They don't know if I arrived safely or not and my family... It's only my mother, my father and myself right now. She's worrying— Maybe she thinks she lost her whole family today. Please,

just let me call and tell her I'm okay."

"Young lady, I have so much work to do. Please just go back into the waiting room and be patient. I'm sure our distinguished chairperson lowercase this allow you to roam this city freely within a few days." Dr. Herczfled turned, looked back, fiddled with his mustache and then sighed. "Now if you will please standup."

"I feel really sick. Can I go to the bathroom?" Astrix let her body slump and she looked up at her warden, her mouth open and her eyes sad. If this doesn't work, I'll have to knock him down and run outside. But I don't know if I have the energy for that. "Please?"

Dr. Herczfled rolled his eyes. "Oh, yes alright." He pointed towards the light. "Last door on the right. Be quick."

Astrix crawled towards the bathroom.

"Good God, young lady! Surely you are not in such bad shape. Stand up already."

Astrix sobbed, coughed and used a nearby door handle to pull herself up. Her shoulder banged the door and from inside came a deep howl. The door banged back at her. She fell away from it and looked up at the doctor, her eyes wide.

Something changed in the doctor's face. He smiled down at her and shook his head. "You really are quite hopeless, aren't you?" He walked over to her, crouched down and helped her to her feet.

Her legs unsteady, she bumped the door next to her and a screeching sound came from within. She recoiled and bumped into the doctor, almost sending them both to the floor.

"Relax, my child. They're only our experimental apes. They're securely locked in. In any case, I thought you were interested in learning about animals. Isn't that why you are here?"

He escorted her to the bathroom door, reached in and flipped on the light and pushed her into the tiny cement block lavatory. "Will you be alright from here?"

"Those are animals? May I see them?" She stood in the doorway. This water closet was luxurious compared to anything she'd found on Independence.

The doctor looked away, annoyed. "All in due time. All in due time." He pulled the door shut behind her. His steps echoed away.

Astrix inspected her face in the mirror. She'd never seen herself so clearly. Dark circles under her eyes, her face swollen. Her skin, too white, sickly. She ran cold water. It refreshed her hands. She leaned down and splashed it on her face. Her strength was returning.

She opened the door and walked towards the light. She found a light wooden door, pushed it open and stepped out into the bright midday sun. She closed her eyes and angled her face up at the sky. The warmth soaked through to her insides. Her stomach began to calm and then a ravenous hunger returned. The trees spun around her and her stomach clenched. She fell to her knees.

A pair of sandals appeared in front of her and she vomited green goop on

them.

"What—" the owner of the shoes cried.

Astrix fell backwards and looked up. It was the same man who met her when she got off the elevator. He wore an angry expression now and stared at his shoes.

"You are supposed to be in quarantine," he mumbled to Astrix. "Dr. Herczfeld!" he yelled.

"I need to speak to my mother. Please." Astrix vomited again and Damian took a quick step backwards.

"You will speak to her very soon indeed. You'll be returning to Independence within the hour," said Damian.

"I need to speak to my people now. They know how to restore my strength. Unless you want me to continue vomiting everywhere?" Astrix looked up at him with her sad eyes but she didn't think that would help. These were hard people and they didn't like her.

"Dr. Herczfeld!" Damian yelled. He pulled a handheld radio from his pack and held it out to her by its long antenna. "Be quick." He climbed the steps to the house.

Astrix knew these devices. They used them several times on Independence when the power systems failed. She hit the transmit button on the side of the black box. "Astrix Volkov calling Space Station Independence. Please come in." She took her thumb off the transmit button and waited, only static reaching her ears.

Inside the house, Damian and Dr. Herczfeld yelled at each other. The animals echoed their mood.

Astrix hit the transmit button again and a voice broke through. She took her thumb off the button.

"This is Gen. Javal of Space Station Independence. Who is calling?"

"They're sending me home."

"Astrix? What do you mean?"

"I don't know. They removed all my upgrades, they put me in a windowless room and now they said they're sending me home."

"Listen very carefully, Astrix. I'm very sorry to tell you that your father is dead. There was an explosion. You remember Marcus? He was lost, too. We still don't know if... but it doesn't matter. We need access to the planet. Remember where you come from. You cannot come back home.

"Represent us well. Plead for our problems. We're running out of food and clean air. We lost an awful lot of water to that explosion. People are dying up here and you are the only one who can do something about that. We must have access to the planet.

"If they won't listen to reason. If they won't do the right thing, tell that new chairperson that our radioactive power sources could fall out of orbit and crash to Earth, effectively polluting the environment across millions of square miles."

Astrix closed her eyes and lay down in the soft grass. A bug zipped around her ear but it barely registered. She just wanted to go to sleep, wherever she

could - be it Earth or Independence.

"Astrix! Did you hear me? You cannot allow yourself to be sent back. If you return now, you'll be the death of us all. Astrix, do you copy? Astrix?"

Astrix opened her eyes and pushed herself up onto her elbow. She found the transmit button and pushed it. "They're sending me right now. I'm so weak. I've never been this sick before. I don't know what to do."

"Tell them we will drop radioactive waste on the planet, in the middle of their precious animal preserve. Unless they allow us to use the space elevator to replenish our supplies of soil, water and air. Do you understand?"

Astrix pulled herself to her feet and walked towards the building. She pushed through the creaky screen door. She found a seat across the room next to a small window and let herself fall into it.

"She's not ready to travel!" yelled Dr. Herczfeld.

"The chairperson considers her a security risk. And in any case, the final days are approaching," whispered Damian.

"Guys? Can I get some food?" asked Astrix.

Damian and Dr. Herczfeld turned to face her. "I'm taking her right now," said Damian.

"General Javal, you know the guy in charge of Independence?" She looked up from the floor to make sure the pair of men were giving her their full attention. "He says that if you send me back and if you don't allow us to come down and get soil and the water and other stuff, that he's going to bomb the animal reserve with radioactive material. So maybe we can go and talk to that lady again?"

"Excuse me?" said Damian.

Astrix closed her eyes and slouched down in the chair. "I really... don't have... the energy... to say it again." Her breath came harder now and she could barely hear what Damian said next.

"Put her back in quarantine," said Damian. "I have to talk to the chairperson right now."

Human Free Chapter 8

Onder pushed himself up from a prone position, sand falling from his body in clumps. He kneeled, closed his eyes and shook his head from side to side. Sand flew all around him. He was hungry and he was thirsty but there would be no game for hundreds of kilometers due to the sandstorm.

The scooter gave up at least ten kilometers ago. Sand clogged the intake vents or it ran out of power. Onder didn't know which. The machine was foreign to him.

When he couldn't take the storm anymore, when his eyes and his nose and his mouth and his ears were full of sand, he threw himself to the ground and fell dead asleep. Now that it'd passed he had just one priority. Eat. Drinking would be impossible he knew that. He had no tools with which to dig. The scooter carried no water. There were no wells here. And the storm covered everything in parched sand.

A line of termites crossed the loamy turf ahead of him. He quickly scooped up five or six of the tiny beasts, stuffed them into his mouth and chewed until they ceased struggling.

The taste didn't bother him. He'd had much worse, like the raw rats in Cape Town and the spoiled meat they'd found in Durban. Even Philani accepted that.

The termites changed direction away from him. But a grasshopper crossed his path - fresh, bright green, stroking its own legs and very much alive. Onder wanted to reach for it. He wanted to make a fire and roast it. He wanted to roast a dozen, dozen fine grasshoppers just like him, over a small crackling fire made of twigs and dry grass.

But the robots would be looking for him. They can sense heat. In fact, when night fell, they would detect him, unless he did something about it.

But he couldn't worry about that now. He grabbed a grasshopper, its legs fighting, its mouth spitting, and shoved it whole into his mouth. He gulped down the sour, meaty mass but it didn't satisfy.

A figure moved in the distance, atop a dune. Onder hugged the ground, sand blowing into his mouth and down his throat. He narrowed his eyes and blinked. That figure was familiar.

That's Philani!

Onder scanned a hundred and eighty degrees. He rolled over and scanned the other direction. No sign of robots. Philani disappeared behind the dune. Onder scampered to his feet and chased after her.

He crossed a flat section almost falling as he went. He started to climb the dune and fell flat on his face. He picked himself up and began to climb again, this time on all fours. But he slipped once more.

"Philani! Children!" Onder paddled up the dune. It was tall and he seemed to not make progress. But he was convinced. Just beyond the peak were Philani and the twenty-eight children. They were waiting for him. They needed him. They wouldn't survive without him.

And he loved them.

But still he couldn't climb the dune.

Robots appeared around him. They zipped in from every direction on their scooters, their dead eyes, their pounding, slow walk.

"Philani, watch out! Run! Save the children!" Onder made one last attempt to climb the dune. He got to his feet. He stepped, drunkenly, fell sideways and rolled down to the bottom, stopping with one leg on top of a cactus.

The spines dug into his calf. The stench of rotten meat sickened him, but his stomach jumped. Flies rose in a swarm and harassed his eyes and ears.

A faint memory came back to him. His father told him of this plant. Remove the spines. It has water. It will sustain you. So many miles still to walk. Find Philani and the children he must. Of his duty there was no question.

Onder pulled a broken chunk from his leg. He slipped his knife from its sheath on his waist and expertly sliced off the skin of the cactus, including the spines. He stuffed one chunk in his mouth, stripped another and chewed as fast as he could.

It stuck in his esophagus. Not enough liquid. But strength was returning.

He looked behind him. The robots would come over the dune any moment now. He had to be ready. His father struggled before him to keep their people alive. Onder could do no less.

He closed his eyes, steadied his breath and readied the knife. He gripped it, blade-down, and flexed his fingers on the handle, feeling, loving the familiar striations. Convinced his grip was firm, he sprang up the dune, knife raised above his head and ready to strike.

But there was no one. The rolling sand dunes stretched for miles. No lights, no movement.

Onder was losing his mind.

He collapsed to the ground. If he couldn't trust his senses, how could he be sure he was even moving in the right direction? He knew that the Gaian city lay to the northeast of him, beyond the river-like Lake Malawi but far south of the great Lake Victoria. Beyond that his course could be off by hundreds of kilometers.

He pulled the compass from his back pocket and checked his location. The sun was down now. It'd fallen behind the horizon, its orange rays reaching out from so far away, struggling to guide Onder despite the late hour.

But it wasn't enough.

Onder would have to spend the night here. In the morning, he'd start again, this time with a full supply of his father's cactus. What did he call it again?

The air cooled and a peace came over him. He knew he was severely dehydrated, but all he could do now was sleep.

Onder bolted awake. Searchlights surrounded him, each brighter than a morning sun. Voices spoke to him but through the daze he understood none of them.

He got to his feet, his knife at the ready. The lights fluttered then moved to his right. The chattering stopped and was replaced by the sound of a dozen robot

scooters.

Onder's eyes adjusted to the midnight darkness. The scooters numbered many more than just a dozen. They were here for Onder and there was no escape. He would be taken just like Philani and the children, just like his father was and his mother and his brothers and the sisters and all his people.

But Onder knew at that moment that he would not be taken. He was different. His will was indomitable. They could not take him. Never. He would slash their skins. He would sever their eyes. He would outsmart them.

Or he would die.

But they would not take him.

Onder ran to his right, climbed the sand dunes next to him, and leapt, his knife hand outstretched. He hooked the blade into the soft plastic case of the searchlight drone and levered himself up onto its tiny top.

Kneeling, he barely fit on top of the flying beast. It dipped under his weight, crashing into the sand dune. The other drones circled around him, each with four large propellers that hung, one each, underneath the chassis at every corner.

Onder pulled a panel from under his knees. He crouched on his tiptoes, one hand grasping the edge of the chassis between the buzzing propeller blades. With the other, he found the power settings and turn them up to high.

The drone jumped straight into the sky. A robot flew towards Onder, its abandoned scooter just ten meters away. The robot, the skin under its eye ripped, got its silicon fingers on the edge of the drone and the flying platform tipped forward, throwing Onder into the air, feet flying over his face toward the approaching scooters.

Onder landed on his back on hard rock. He struggled to draw breath. The land shook from the vibration of the approaching scooters. Onder wanted to give up. Something within him said this was a fight he could not win. He lay there, like a fish whose water has been sucked away by greedy invaders, feeling sorry for himself for the life he'd been dealt.

The voice of his father came through to him, as clear as if the man stood above the boy.

"Son, you are given but one life. For the coward, for the man afraid of his own shadow, who dares not venture into the unknown, an infinite number of lives is too little.

"But for the man who knows his principles and his purpose, who finds within himself the courage to fight even the most unwinnable battle one life is more than enough."

Onder jumped to his feet. Just a few meters away was the attacking robot's scooter. Onder jumped on it, turned and bolted off into the night.

Onder felt the robots at his back. Their cold, slimy fingers grasped at him. He wanted to look back but dared not. He pushed the scooter as hard as it would go. His mind quieted. Speed was his only thought. He maintained maximum pressure on the pedal.

The sun's rays reached back around for him. Morning was near. His throat

and mouth cried out for liquid. The land was smoother now, flatter. Desert gave way to scrubland. Perhaps ahead there would be water. But not here. He'd lost the cactus chunks in the night somehow. His strength failing, his eyes closing, he caught himself falling asleep.

He dared a glance backwards. Somehow, in the confusion, he'd lost them. He'd eluded a squad of robots.

And searchlight drones.

A rush of pride filled him. It was not a bad substitute for food, not at all.

He looked down at the control panel. A red dot blinked. He was heading straight into the rising sun now. But that's not where he wanted to go. He grabbed controls and turned southeast. The controls turned but the scooter continued straight on. The undulating orange morning sun peeked above the horizon, momentarily blinding Onder.

He raised his hand to shield his eyes and that's when he spotted it.

The searchlight drones hung in the sky like tiny flies, floating perhaps a half kilometer ahead of him, their camera eyes surely focusing on him.

The Gaians knew where he was. They controlled the scooter. More robots would be upon him any moment now.

And he was even weaker than before.

Onder pinched the control panel and zoomed out. A few minutes flight time ahead was Lake Malawi. He was so close! He could slow the scooter, jump out and hide in the lake. The robots might not even notice he was gone.

It was insanity. They could just as well fish him out of the lake, or let him drown.

But it was his only chance.

A new blip appeared on the map. It was crossing the lake now. He tapped it. A video feed played. More robots. At least two dozen.

Onder thought of his father. Would he be proud of him? A wife and twenty-eight children. That was something his father never had.

But am I the father? Or just the twenty-ninth child?

Onder had yet to make his father proud. He needed more time. He prayed for it and promised not to squander any further time he was granted.

The lake appeared on the horizon as a shimmering blue apparition. The squad of robots waited for him, his last obstacle. They'd formed a roadblock, between him and the lake. If Onder crashed at this speed, his body would fly a kilometer before crashing to earth, nothing more than a bag of bones left.

Onder grabbed the controls and turned. They didn't respond. He took his foot off the pedal and hit the brake. The scooter did not respond.

Onder brought a foot up to the seat of the scooter. It shook. He brought up the other and stood up, carefully balancing himself. The roadblock was near now. This was it.

The scooter crashed into the assembled robots and he flew, headfirst over the explosion.

The river was narrow. It was shallow from lack of rains. Onder passed over it. His momentum expended, The air resistance too much, Onder fell into the

water, unconscious.

Human Free Chapter 9

Children were in trouble in the next cell. Astrix was sure of it. They weeped and sobbed. The younger voices tired and became silent. An older voice sang lullabies without rest.

It comforted her. Astrix's mother would sing similar tunes to her baby brother, before he died. A tear formed in Astrix's eyes and she remembered baby Steven. Blond hair, wide brown eyes, he was a curious boy. Happy and loved, despite the fact that he was from another father.

It felt wrong and was unfair to father. General Javal, a major then and in charge of Reproduction, said they had to do it in order to maintain genetic diversity in their small community.

Astrix's stomach still ached. The foul smell of the earlier food saturated her tiny box now. She wouldn't eat it. She didn't want to get sicker.

Footsteps exploded outside and the door disappeared. Damian stood in the entryway, his eyes aflame. He sized her up then turned and strode back down the hallway, leaving her cell door wide open.

Astrix rocketed to her feet and walked out of the cell. She was stronger now. She straightened her back and proceeded down the hallway. She was a proud Independent - an ambassador, in fact, of her people. Just a child, not even reached the age of majority, but now she must represent her people in the most important negotiation they had ever needed to win.

She passed Dr. Herczfeld in his lab. He looked up at her, his eyes wary over the tops of his glasses.

"Good luck there, young lady," he said. "Because you're going to need it."

Astrix winked at him and swayed her hips. He was cute, for an old man.

Outside, she found Damian twenty paces ahead to her left. She trotted after him, then stopped and leaned forward, hands on knees, to catch her breath.

"Let's go. Chairperson Harper has only a minute for you before you return to Independence," said Damian. He ran back to her, grabbed her arm and forced her to sprint alongside him.

They turned the corner on the narrow, stone-paved path, hemmed in on both sides by tall bushes, small fields of flowers and varying electronic antennas and other devices she didn't recognize. Ahead of them rose a block metal tower. On top, a giant spear of an antenna reached to the sky. Below that, green plant material spilled out of several floors. Even further down, there appeared to be several floors of residences, with different colored curtains, crescent moon shaped decorations and other unique doodads.

Damian led her to a small, S building to the left of the tower, Not unlike Dr. Herczfeld's lab. The burst through the doors and Astrix found a spot on the floor. She sat down, hung her head and caught her breath.

"So this is the little brat who threatens to destroy all of our hard work."

Astrix looked up. A behemoth of a woman stood behind a curious orange desk. Her brown hair barely reached her ears and was three-quarter parted like

General Javal's. For a moment she couldn't tell if this was a woman or man.

"And she lacks sufficient respect to stand for her first audience with the one person who controls the fate of her family and friends." The behemoth turned to Damian with a quizzical look. "Who recommended this girl to us?"

"Chairperson, I believe it was Dr. Herczfeld who led the selection committee this year," said Damian.

"Take a note," said the behemoth. She gestured at the side of her head.

Damian tapped the side of his head above his right ear and nodded to the woman.

"Remind me," she said in an officious tone of voice, "to never, ever allow Doctor Herczfeld to influence our student selection process, ever again." She turned to cast a pitying glance at Astrix. "Of course, after these threats, I don't think there will be any more students from Independence. In fact, after this, I'm not inclined to tolerate any more people living a hundred miles over my head."

"I have made a note of it, Chairperson," said Damian.

"Good. Now take this one out to the dump and kill her."

Kill me? Astrix grabbed the wall and pulled herself up. "I am here to negotiate on behalf of my people. All we want is for me stay the year, as previously agreed upon, and for a small group to come down to the surface and get some soil and water for use in sustaining our lives."

The chairperson crossed her arms, fell into her chair and turned her gaze away. Damian grabbed Astrix's arm and pulled the sluggish girl towards the door.

"Chairperson, we are dying. Without more soil, and air, General Javal says that we will not survive."

"Excellent. It will save us some work then." The behemoth waved the back of her hand at Astrix. Damian opened the door behind her and pulled the girl through.

Astrix grabbed onto the wall and walked forward with a strength she didn't think she had. "Chairperson, General Javal will blanket this continent in radioactive waste unless you agree to our reasonable requests now!"

Damian stopped. The behemoth stood up in a flash and waddled toward Astrix. The oversized woman's face occupied all of Astrix's world now. Double chin, cheeks hanging low, dark circles under her eyes, the chairperson held a chubby index finger millimeters from Astrix's nose.

"I'm going to shoot you myself. It's been a long time since I've handled a gun but," the chairperson dug the dirty fingernail of her index finger into Astrix's forehead and spewed hot, fetid breath into her nose, "I'll hold it real close. That way all your stupid brains will fly out the back. I won't even get my hands dirty."

Astrix grabbed the small radio from Damian's belt and held it up next her face. "If General Javal doesn't hear from me in the next five minutes, or for any future period of time longer than an hour, he will drop radioactive waste over your precious animal preserve. You want to save the environment? This is your chance."

The chairperson sneered at Astrix. She turned and stomped back to her desk,

the floor creaking at each step. She grabbed a stone ball from its resting place behind her desk. She held it next to her face, her palm facing up and trod back to within millimeters of Astrix. The woman's rapid, hot breath slipped into Astrix's nose and the girl exhaled hard to rid herself of the stench.

"This," the behemoth said, spittle spraying Astrix's face, "is the Zenstone. This is what permits me to control the massive yet hidden robotic production and defense systems that my father created here in Unity. With this Zenstone, I can, within a matter of seconds, order one thousand missiles to attack Independence. Your home, your people, everything you have ever known, will be turned to dust. In fact, you can watch it happen right before I put a bullet through your brain."

Astrix trembled. She found the wall with her hand and slumped against it. She refused to sit down again. She refused to show weakness. She hoped it would only appear that she was Earth-sick. This awesome power, her father told her about it. But she didn't quite believe it until now. She had to say something, something powerful and effective. And she had to say it now.

"I... I—" Astrix's guts seized up and a spray of vomit ejected from her mouth, reaching almost to the behemoth's pristine desk.

The behemoth jumped from her seat and gingerly stepped towards the giant picture window to her left.

"Damian!" the behemoth screamed.

Damian touched the left side of his head and looked up. "Chairperson, I have an update on the straggler. The border guards are about to catch him near Lake Malawi."

The chairperson stepped carefully towards the door. "I want this cleaned up immediately, Damian! You know how expensive this flooring is! I'll watch the video feed from my residence. Prepare the girl for execution. I will do it myself."

Human Free Chapter 10

Onder swam deeper into the black lake, his lungs begging for air, his throat desperate for a drink of water he knew he shouldn't take. It was too easy for it to go into his lungs, and then it would be all over for sure.

Onder's ears popped. He rolled himself over and hung in the cold depths. Above him, scooters zipped all around.

They knew he was here. If he came up for water now, he'd have risked his life for nothing. He might as well have given up in the first place, like a coward, like the kind of man that disgusted his father.

Onder pushed, deeper. Forward or backwards, he wasn't sure anymore. But he pushed in the hopes that he could elude the robots.

His world grew murkier.

His lungs screaming, his eyes dimming, he swam for the light. But he was under too long.

Something long and slithery passed above him in the water. Then everything went black and his body spasmed.

Onder awoke, coughing on the surface of the lake. The inertia had carried him to the top. His lungs breathed deep of their own accord. He looked in all directions. The robots hovered two-hundred meters away, a dozen searchlight drones beaming their rays deep into the indigo waters.

He didn't want to dive again. He thought back to the sharks. But this was a lake. No sharks. But it might have crocodiles. And the shore was at least a kilometer away. He dove. He had to. Otherwise the robots would see him. And they still might.

Onder swam through the gloom. A yellow fish the size of his forearm flitted in front of him. He grabbed for it, his muscles and stomach aching for a meaningful meal. He caught it but it slithered out of his hand and into the darkness.

Onder surfaced again for air. His lungs drank deep but demanded more. The robots were closer now. Somehow they knew the direction in which he was moving. They were following him. He dove again. This time he swam faster.

Something big came at him from the side. Onder turned and extended his legs and arms to protect himself. A crocodile, its mouth open, teeth showing flew at him. Onder drew his knife, maneuvered himself to the side and plunged it into the head of the dark creature.

It rolled away from him, its blood clouding the water. Onder's knife, stuck in the beast's jaws, slipped from his hand. Onder surfaced. The robots were closer now. He dove a third time and swam hard for the shore.

Onder felt something at his foot. He coiled himself and turned. There was the beast. It snapped at him. Onder pulled his knife from its body and stabbed it over and over again.

The crocodile faded into the gloom.

Convinced it was dead, or at least dissuaded from further attacks, Onder

made for shore yet again.

He crashed into the rough sandy bottom of the lake, stood up and ran out of the water. His legs made an awful splashing sound as they came out of the water and crashed back in again. He dove headfirst into the tree line. An especially thick trunk served as shielding and he pressed his body against it. The robots continued their work just two-hundred meters away.

Onder was on the wrong side of the lake. He was on the West side. But the Gaian city was still far to the East in the foothills of the great mountain. He'd have to walk northwest, he didn't know how many kilometers. The lake ended up there. There was a narrow corridor between it and the other great lake. If it was open, he could pass.

If not, he'd have to swim, and risk another crocodile encounter. Or, worse, a hippo.

Onder crawled forward in the muck at the edge of the lake. The corridor between the two bodies of water was intact, but very narrow. Perhaps only three-hundred meters of land separated them.

And right in the middle of the makeshift isthmus was a Gaian control station staffed with three scooter-enabled robots.

Onder retreated into some low brush. He couldn't go back. They knew he was near. To go around either lake was hundreds of kilometers of walking. To swim the lake was suicide. He needed food, fresh water and a good night's sleep. He had to be strong to free Philani and the children, otherwise all of this would be for nothing.

He'd wait for night. That was the easiest choice. He closed his eyes and floated off.

He startled. A robot stood over Onder. Its arm outstretched, it fired. A blast of light filled Onder's world.

Onder awoke. He scampered to the side and checked all around him. It was pitch black. He rolled over and looked back at the isthmus. A half dozen searchlight drones hung in the air illuminating the thin strip of land. Darkness consumed everything on either side. But they could've deployed other types of drones while he was asleep. Drones that would alert if he moved within even a kilometer of them.

His stomach groaned. His limbs ached. He couldn't wait any longer. He couldn't go back. There's only death back there in the desert. He couldn't cross on the land. Every square meter was illuminated with light more blinding than the noon sun.

He'd have to swim, through shallows and over the depths, equally. There could be crocodiles in the water. There would definitely be cranky mother hippos in the water, on shore - or both.

Onder crouched. He squat-walked forward, his knees aching, each step rustling the undergrowth. A searchlight flashed in his direction and he threw

himself flat to the ground.

The searchlight drone floated in his direction, its light growing stronger. Something moved ahead of him. Onder looked up.

The large, lazy eye of an adult hippopotamus looked back at him, bathed in light from the drone.

The drone retreated back to the isthmus. The darkness grabbed Onder once more and the hippo groaned next to him.

Onder dared to move again. He took each step with a painful slowness. Everything hurt. His energy was low. He only wanted to find a cool spot in which to safely sleep now.

He needed more motivation than mere responsibility. A debt to a woman he didn't love wasn't enough. The duty his father would've felt to the twenty-eight children, not one of whom did he sire, would not get him to his goal.

He needed something more. But what was it?

Onder reached the water. He knew only because his foot was wet. He couldn't see. The isthmus hung above him in the darkness to his left and, if he swam straight, he would reach the other side. Then it was a direct path to the Gaian city and the fulfillment of his duty.

He swam on the surface, legs kicking slowly, arms cutting forward and gently pulling. It occurred to him that he might not have a future. This water could be filled with traps both natural and Gaian.

But now he wanted a future, more than ever before. He wanted a woman he loved. He wanted his own children. He wanted a home. He didn't want to wander anymore. He didn't want to fight robots or crocodiles or hippos or anything else that might cross his path on this journey.

If Philani was the only woman available to him, he would have her and protect her.

But she was not the woman for him.

A chill wind blew across the lake. His feet tingled. His body shivered. Something startled to his right. A long tail curled and whipped in the air next to him. Onder paddled faster.

A searchlight drone turned in his direction, its beam blinding him. He dove and pushed on. Deeper still, he smacked his head on a rock. The pain echoed in his teeth and he desperately wanted to punch something.

But he held his position.

Onder wanted a beautiful girl - tall and strong. One who has studied and read many books. He would feed and protect her. She would share with him all the knowledge she possessed. Yellow hair, white skin... he liked these.

But they distracted him. He thought of the girl back in Cape Town. She was perfect. Fair hair, fair skin, she told Onder of all the books she'd read. Onder lived for nothing more than but to see her face each morning.

And that's how she was killed, when he was too busy watching her face and not watching out for robots.

He couldn't make that same mistake. Not again.

His lungs hurt and pressure built behind his eyes. The world spun. Something

swam above him, interrupting the light. Onder dared not look.

The searchlight moved away. Onder launched himself with what little strength remained in his legs. The surface was farther than he thought. His lungs burning, he reached it and cool, night air filled him. He walked ashore and threw himself over a low hedge. All he wanted to do was sleep.

A piercing sound seemed to come from inside his own skull. The world around him illuminated and the low buzz of the searchlight drones approached.

Onder scampered further away from the lake toward a low dirt hill. He hid on the other side of it, his face flat in the stinking dirt.

The buzzing came closer. Onder looked towards the dirt mound. Over the top of it, the mindless machines searched for him. Something small moved in his peripheral vision and he jumped back, kicking a rock that then ran down the shore and plopped into the water.

Onder grimaced. Didn't make it this far just to screw it up now. Father, say nothing, please. He searched for the thing that startled him. A beetle. He grabbed for it. So hungry.

He stuffed it in his mouth, its gooey insides mixing with the crunchy acidity of its shell. He choked it down, grateful for the small bounty. Despite the taste.

The cool breeze returned and moved the clouds. The crescent moon poked through, its feeble rays revealing shapes around him.

His stomach gurgled but the little bug gave him hope. He searched for more and found a soft, round fat one. He picked it up and pulled it towards him. Heavy, he pulled harder.

Something man-sized moved in the dirt mound and fell towards him. Onder jumped back. A body lay next to him. The body of a man, not unlike Onder himself.

The bug had been feasting on this man's flesh.

Onder vomited without warning.

He tried to suppress it but the sounds were too loud. The searchlights zoomed up the land ahead of him. Onder jumped to his feet and ran perpendicular to them.

The land here was soft. Onder ran without fear of cutting himself on a chunk of stone. He accelerated, as fast as his weak body would allow.

He ran straight into a sleeping hippo. He bounced off of the gelatinous side of the beast, picked himself up and climbed over top of it. He fell flat on his back on the other side.

The drones focused on the hippo. It stood up and charged them. Without cover, Onder set off to run again. He found a tree, and climbed into it.

The fluttering of a thousand wings echoed around him. Onder hoped they were birds, and not bats. A thousand bats could kill a man.

Onder maneuvered his back against the trunk of the tree and crossed his legs on an upward-arching branch. He leaned back and fell asleep.

The searchlight drones buzzed all around him.

Human Free Chapter 11

Onder let go of the scooter handles and took another bite of the giant red and orange mango. Sugary juice ran down his chin and the wind pulled it to the back of his neck. It tickled him and he smiled.

Life was good with food. Life without food was not life. It was hell.

He carried six more mangoes between his legs. They shifted in the wind and one rolled off, lost. Onder hadn't enjoyed a feast like this in years. All his food he shared first with Philani and then the children. After that, nothing was leftover.

That's just what you did when your father. You took care of the children first. It wasn't only because it was the right thing to do. It was also so they wouldn't nag you, so they would just go to sleep and so that you and Philani might have your precious alone time.

That and food. That's what life is made of.

His thoughts wandered to Philani now. He remembered the last time they joined. The raw look on her face when he brought her pleasure. The safe feeling he enjoyed after she brought him pleasure.

She wasn't his perfect woman. She was angry, violent and moody. But she knew how to care for him.

And she knew how to do *that*. He felt the blood rushing to his face.

He would never find his perfect woman but at least he had Philani.

He did have her. And he didn't value her then. He missed her now that she was gone.

When he got her back, he would remedy that.

He would value her even more highly than the mangoes.

The great mountain rose ahead of him and in its shadow lay the shining Gaian tower. He was close. He'd evaded the robots and the searchlight drones. But this was the city itself, the Gaian home. There would be more alarms, more robots and perhaps other enemies he would meet only for the first time.

That he made it this far was no guarantee that he would make any farther.

The food gave him strength but it also gave him hope to live longer. Ahead of him was the certainty of death. Would it not be wiser, Father, to stay alive in the hopes of meeting another woman and finding more children?

He didn't wait for the obvious answer to come from that place deep inside of him where he still heard Father's voice. He knew the answer.

It would be cowardice. And foolish. All the other women were dead. All the other children were dead. Philani was moments from death when he found her and the children.

A circle of tall stones greeted him ahead. Each stone was next another. Connecting the pair was an equal stone placed as a cap across them both. A group of these formed the circle and in the middle was a wiry, leafless tree.

These Gaians were a weird people.

The land rose again here. The edge of the city came into view. The shining

tower rose at the back of the city. The front was out of his view, obscured by the rising land and by nature itself.

Onder slowed his scooter. To his left, rows and rows of neatly ordered vines climbed to the sky. He parked the scooter among them and scoured the trellises for fruit.

Soft teardrops the color of fresh grass collected in his arms as his reward. He gorged himself on the sweet delicacies. Far too large to carry, he left all but one of the mangos on the scooter. He'd come back for them. They were too delicious not to.

The Gaian city was full of bushes, trees and small fields of flowers. Onder sprinted through these until he was lost. He stepped out onto a stone path. Angry voices sounded nearby. A girl screamed.

"Hold still! This won't hurt a bit," yelled a deep voice. Onder couldn't tell if it was male or female.

He crossed the stone path into an empty field. He tiptoed around the edge of the field next to a tall green hedge.

"Damian, hold her still!" The voice was louder now, most likely on the other side of the hedge.

Onder drew his knife. He would have to be quick. He'd get behind the oldest person, wrap his arm around the neck and hold the knife to the pulsing artery.

They'd have to release his people then.

What if he failed? What if he grabbed the wrong person? What if there were robots near?

They'd kill him and it would be done. All that struggle only to die because of one poor decision.

Onder tightened his grip on the knife. He had to do something. Action was better than inaction.

Wading into the hedge, he bent one branch, then the next, ever so gently, so as to not snap them and give away his position. He saw them now. A stick-thin man, a much-too-wide giant and a tall young woman.

A circular thing, its flat sides filled with buttons and lights ran around the man's head except for his forehead. He touched it and looked at the giant.

"Chairperson," he said, "the straggler... was sighted... just thirty minutes ago."

Onder leaned forward, struggling to hear the missing words. But they escaped him.

What was a straggler?

Onder had no idea.

A tiny branch snapped behind him and all three people looked at once in his direction.

Onder froze.

The giant turned to the man. "Do we know where those tigers are?"

The man shook his head.

"Leave her for the tigers," said the giant. "We need to solve this straggler situation immediately. I won't tolerate failure again."

The odd pair moved away to Onder's right and inside one of the small buildings, the man walking like a woman and the giant stepping like an elephant.

Onder stayed very still. He glanced carefully behind him and around him. No sign of tigers.

The young woman collapsed, sobbing. She tried to pick herself up, then fell again. She was weak, like him. Perhaps she was a survivor, as well.

Fair skin, long black hair - this was no survivor. She looked more like a princess. Protected from the sun, well fed and dressed. She was important to someone.

The man might be too much for Onder. This woman, she would be valued. He would take her, put the blade to her throat.

Onder dashed out of the hedge, his knife at the ready. The girl saw him. Her eyes went wide. She jumped up and ran.

"Wait," Onder whispered.

She pushed through another hedge and disappeared. Onder stopped, looked back at the house then looked at where the girl had disappeared. His stomach groaned and he felt the need to go to the bathroom, urgently. He was a fool to stuff himself with so many unusual foods. He didn't even wash them first.

His stomach groaned again and he clenched his intestines. He wasn't strong enough now, neither to chase the girl nor to take on the giant woman. But his hastiness had alerted them to his presence.

Onder dashed through the hedge and collided with the girl on the other side. Their heads bonked, forehead to forehead. The girl fell backwards and cried out. Onder rubbed his forehead then leaned forward and put the knife to her neck.

She looked up at him, an eyebrow cocked. "I won't taste very good! So don't eat me."

A long, wet squeal came from Onder's buttocks. He stood up fast, took a step back and put his hands behind him.

The girl covered her mouth and giggled. She stood up and bowed to him, her hands at her sides. "I am Astrix. Can you understand me?"

Onder stepped forward and put the knife to her throat, this time with less enthusiasm. He pivoted, jammed his body up against her back and wrapped his arm around her chest, just above her breasts. Careful to not actually cut her, he brushed the knife's razor-sharp blade against the side of her throat.

She whipped her head back into Onder's nose. She grabbed his knife hand, twisted it and stepped to the side. Onder flew forward, the knife pointing at his chest as he hung in midair. He twisted the blade away and landed on his back.

Astrix stood back, her hands defending her face. If all the Gaians were trained like this, Onder stood no chance. He stood up, knife above his head and charged her. She stepped away and kicked him. Onder fell on his side to the ground.

He sprang up. "Be still, Princess. I can kill you in one blow. But I only want my people back."

The girl relaxed and studied him through narrowed eyes. "Your people?"

‘Princess?’”

Onder stepped forward, the knife handle between his thumb and index finger, ready to throw it at her heart, if need be.

The girl raised her hands again and moved away from him diagonally. "I don't know anything about this. I'm a prisoner here."

"Impossible. You're not a survivor."

Astrix raised an eyebrow. "Don't be so sure of that. The Gaians are holding my people hostage, too, by the way. Do you know where your— wait, I think I know where they are."

"Take me to them, if you wish to live." Onder stepped forward and readied the knife.

Astrix sighed. "Listen, little guy, I don't work well under pressure. You need to stop threatening me. We can work—"

"Take me to them now. I will kill you. I don't want to. But I will." Onder shook. A great fatigue rose in him and his legs buckled.

Astrix stepped forward. Onder steadied himself and swiped at her with the knife, nicking her chin.

He stepped forward again, his knife centimeters from her neck. Astrix stepped back and touched her chin. Blood oozed from the cut. Her fingers were red. She looked at them, then looked at Onder, her eyes wide. Above them, a great buzzing grew louder. Behind each of them, two full-sized robots emerged from the shrubbery.

Onder got behind Astrix and put the knife to her throat again. He maneuvered them to a spot away from the robots. "Make a move and I will kill your princess."

A drone descended from above them, the face of the giant woman projected on a screen that hung below it.

"Welcome to Unity, straggler. By all means, do me a favor and slit the girl's throat."

Human Free Chapter 12

Onder and Astrix stood in front of the giant woman's desk. They looked at each other, eyes wary. Astrix raised her eyebrows at him and widened her eyes.

"What?" Onder mouthed.

Astrix shook her head in a huff.

"The girl, you can take her now. Find the tigers or any other large animal and feed her to them. A bullet is too good for this troublemaker." The giant woman turned and studied Onder, her eyes sparkling with illicit interest.

Damian came up behind Astrix, grabbed her and pulled her away. Onder turned and watched.

His plan had failed. She was no princess, at least not of the Gaians. In fact, she held so little value to them that they planned to kill her.

And yet, there was an intelligence about her. A refinement. She had some food source that didn't require being out in the sun all day. She was neither malnourished nor overweight.

And Onder liked her smile.

"Remember what I told you." Astrix clung onto the door frame. "It can save your people, even if you can't save mine."

"Get her out of here!" The giant woman screamed.

Damian gently removed her hands from the wall and carted her down the steps, the princess - or former princess? how does that work? - screaming the whole time about a stone.

Onder looked around the room. There were many stones, quite a few too heavy to run with. In fact, behind the giant woman a series of shelves carried dozens of different colors and shapes of rocks.

How was he to know which one?

"... perfectly round..." Astrix's words floated up to him from down the path.

The giant woman began to speak. She paced behind her desk, obviously quite contented with having captured him.

Onder didn't know why. There was nothing special about him.

"Return my wife and children," said Onder, "and we will leave here in peace, never to trample your lands again."

The giant woman ceased talking and looked at him with a kind of dumbfounded admiration. "You actually fathered twenty-eight children? With one woman or many?"

Onder studied her. If he admitted they weren't his children, that they weren't even Philani's children, she may not return them. "They're all my children, by different mothers. Now you will please return them to me. And we will be on our way, never to bother you again."

The giant woman giggled. "If only Damian could hear this," she mumbled. She burst out in wild laughter, grabbed her seat and let her body fall into it. It creaked a desperate protest but did not give way.

This was not a reasonable person. She lives here, behind the protection of the

robots. Too much to eat, completely safe, she had no need of others' help. She had no concept of the survivor's creed: Live and let live.

Onder scanned the room once more. A scream sounded from far away. Astrix. Her words echoed in his mind. *Perfectly round*. He scanned the room again. But all the rocks were sharp, misshapen and anything but round.

The giant woman leaned back in her chair and put her soil-encrusted feet up on her desk. She pulled a necklace from under her shirt and rubbed it with both thumbs. It was purple and perfectly round.

Onder summoned the last bit of energy that remained from the mangoes and sprinted forward. He bounded over the desk, his feet smacking the giant woman across her face.

Her chair crashed sideways. Onder landed on his feet and grabbed the rock. It hung from her neck by a silver chain. Onder ripped the rock away but the chain held.

He jerked again and again but the chain did not break.

"Stop that!" screamed the woman. She struggled to right herself. "Help!"

Onder jerked once more and it broke. He ran for the door. The woman clawed a fat hand onto his ankle and pulled his foot backwards. Onder fell flat on the hard floor, nose first.

Everything slowed for Onder. His nose ached and his face was hot. He kicked the woman in the face. She released her grip and screamed in rage. He stumbled out the door.

"Get him! Get him! He has the Zenstone!"

Onder thrilled and a new energy filled him. Finally he had something of value to the Gaians. He would reach a position of safety and then find a way to trade it for his people. I have done it, Father. I have done something.

But he needed the girl. She would know how to communicate safely. And he owed her. She must have more people. There could be an alliance. Because the Gaians were not so easily defeated.

And there was something about her. Onder liked her. She had a good smile, the kind of smile that was evidence of a good soul.

Onder stopped. Hedges and trees all around him. It was a maze and he had no idea where to start.

In fact, she could be dead already.

Two robots appeared to his right. Onder fled left and two robots appeared there as well. Onder turned right and fled straight ahead through a field of weird, red flowers and then through a hedge.

The clump-clump of the robots followed close behind but still no sign of Astrix.

Onder dashed left, then right across a stone path and through another hedge. On the other side, he ran face first into a thin white plastic wall. He reached for his knife to slice it open. But Damian had taken it.

Without his knife, there wasn't much he could do out here. He depended on it, dozens of times a day.

He found the bottom of the wall ripped it up and rolled under it.

On the other side, dozens more giant people sat at wide tables slurping tall colored drinks through thick tubes. They did not look up at him.

Onder ran through the group. Robots burst through the plastic wall behind him and fired. The shots exploded around him.

Onder made a sudden right turn, burst through a hedge and came face-to-face with Damian.

Onder punched him in the gut. Damian doubled over and fell to the ground. Onder retrieved his knife in its sheath from Damian's back pocket. He grabbed the man by the neck of the shirt and squeezed.

"Where is the girl, what've you done with her?" Onder asked.

"Too late, straggler. I have disposed of her." The words squeaked from Damian's throat.

"Take me to her body." Onder stood him up and pushed him forward. He took his knife from its sheath and held it to Damian's back.

Damian took a step forward then glanced back, turned and reached for the knife.

Onder buried the knife in Damian's heart. The thin man's eyes went distant and blood coughed from his mouth.

The clump-clump of the robots approached again and Onder took off, to the left this time.

He ran up the hill, the midday African sun and the lack of decent food for days now taking its toll on him. He fell to one knee, forced himself back up again and climbed the chain-link fence at the top of the small hill.

He threw himself over the top and ran again. The clump-clump ended. He glanced back. The robots were stopped on the other side of the fence.

Onder passed a mango tree on his left. He stopped, jogged back and pulled a ripe one from a low-hanging branch. He bit into it and kept running. The sweet, aromatic juice rolled down his chin. He bit greedily and swallowed without properly chewing.

On his right, a tree with red fruit greeted him. He ran past it then stopped and looked back.

In the shade beneath the canopy, a great lion and his lioness rested. The lion shook his mane and yawned.

Onder turned and walked back towards them. It was noon, they would be docile now and he wanted that red fruit. In the distance the robots watched him. From far away, the familiar buzzing sound of the drones began.

In between the two lions, a pair of human feet stuck out, motionless.

Onder jogged up to them. The lion roared at him, then rolled over and closed his eyes.

Onder approached. Was it Astrix? Had they mauled her? He kicked the unmoving foot.

Astrix sat up. "Hey!" She opened her eyes, smiled, stood up and hugged him. "Did Damian help you too?"

"Damian?" Onder asked.

"Yeah. He put me in here. The robots aren't allowed to enter and they feed

these animals every day. It's like their zoo. So, we're safe here, for now."

Onder thought back to when he punched Damian. Damian didn't fight back. Not at first. Maybe he just didn't want anyone to get hurt. Maybe he thought I wanted to hurt Astrix. I kind of did. He wanted to protect her.

And I plunged a knife into his heart.

"Are you sure?" Onder asked.

"Yeah, I think he could be our friend. Because we're going to need a friend."

Onder looked away and stepped back.

"Wait, come on under the tree. It's cool and the lions won't bother us. Seriously, they're really tame. We'll rest, eat some fruit and then talk to Damian. He'll know what to do." She set back down between the lions, against the trunk of the tree and patted a spot next to her.

"I got that stone you wanted," said Onder. He pulled it from his pocket and held the purple rock out to her, the silver chain sparkling in the noon sun.

Astrix's eyes lit up. She nodded to him and he tossed it to her. She held it up to the light and examined it.

"This is amazing. I can't believe you actually got it."

"I had to fight the giant woman. It wasn't easy. And then, I had to run. Robots were chasing me..."

"Giant woman?"

Onder nodded his head.

She giggled and Onder blushed. She was so cute.

"That's the chairperson." Astrix balled her fist with the rock inside. "This... this will enable us to save both our peoples. Good work. Tomorrow, we'll talk to Damian and work this out."

Onder sighed. He rubbed his hands together and cracked his knuckles. "I, uh, actually... I killed Damian."

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Doubleplusunhate

"I love you, Dad."

Marshal turned from his portscreen and looked at the boy. *Unspeak*. The rigid seat back pushed the thin slice of metal into his buttock. He pulled himself up from a slouch and looked back to his portscreen.

The boy climbed onto Marshal's lap. He knocked the portscreen from Marshal's hands and it clattered to the bare cement floor. Anger rose within him. "Doubleplusungood!"

The boy stared up at Marshal. His smile was wide and mischievous. Marshal studied his face. The deep blue eyes, the round face, the wide smile— Liker. Like... me.

Marshal jerked his head back as the realization struck him. "Doubleplusunhate. Doubleplusunhate Jak." He grabbed the boy and hugged him tight. Jak wrapped his thin sticks of arms around his father's neck. A jumble of emotions stirred in Marshal's gut but one word percolated to the top: defense.

"Jak forgetted goodpharm morewise. Ungood!" The woman smacked the back of her hand across Jak's face. Behind them was a gray wall. A small window provided limited access to the steel city behind them. The buildings followed one another in silence, none reaching higher than the other.

Jake's face turned red. He tilted his head to one side and swallowed. He looked at Marshal. Marshal sat against the wall at the tiny kitchen table. He faced the window but kept his eyes to his portscreen.

"Hate!" yelled Jak. "Hate! Doubleplushate! Goodpharm ungood. Kill me, inner me. No! No morewise." He turned to his father. "Dad. Tell her."

His mother grabbed the boy by the shoulders and twisted him until he stood with his back to her. She pushed him towards the door. "Learnplace unlater, Jak! Go!"

"Dad," said Jak. His face fell and the beginnings of a frown formed around his mouth and eyes.

His mother glanced at Marshal. Her eyes were red and swollen. Her hands shook. She cleared her throat, grabbed Jak's bag from the floor and jammed it into his chest. She pushed him and he fell to the ground.

"Dad, please." Jak looked up at him from the floor. Water welled up and over his eyelids.

Marshal sighed. He put down the portscreen. The memory flashed in his mind. Jak's eyes. Unhateful. Knowwantingful. Unfrowning. Goodpharm ungave it. Goodpharm unived Jak's ... Marshal searched for the word. He imagined a ball of swirling, cereal-colored light inside of Jak. Soul. The Oldspeak came to him. His eyes darted from side to side and his forehead broke out in a sweat.

"Hate uncontrolled Jak! Hate Oldspeak!" yelled Jak's mother. She looked at Marshal. Her face was taut. She raised her chin and sneered. "Marshal

crimethink." She nodded to herself. "Marshal unperson. Ownlife ungood. Oldspeak forbidden." She arched an eyebrow and took a step towards the door.

Time stopped for Marshal. He planned this day. He didn't want it but he expected it. He loved Johnness. She once had Jak's same smile. But he loved Jak more. *Why did I have to teach Jak Oldspeak?* The feeling of the archaic language in his mind shocked him but he knew the answer.

"Joycamp fixwill Jak," said Johnness. "Fixwill." She laid her hand on the doorknob.

Marshal stood up and threw his portscreen at the wall next to Johnness. He was behind her. Marshal pulled the hunk of pointed metal from his back pocket and pushed it into the side of her neck. He stepped away from her and she fell backwards to the floor. Crimson liquid pooled on the gray floor next to her wriggling body.

Marshal thought back five years ago to when he first encountered the Oldpseak book in the domicile of a prole unperson. "Dictionary," it said in silver letters against a navy blue cover. The sharp, dry pages of forgotten words stirred an unexpected need in him. He steeled his resolve. *Doubleplushate crimethink ungood. Ownlife. An ugly word.* He translated it into Oldspeak. My own life. Jak's own life. He took in a rapid breath as the image of a tree sparked in his mind.

"We go." He pulled the boy up from the floor.

Jak's chest convulsed. "Mom," he whispered. Her body was still. He leaned down and caressed her cheek. "I love you."

A man scowled at them in the doorway. Jak startled and the man saw Johnness's body. His eyes went big and he took a step back.

Marshal knelt down next to his wife's dead body. He extracted the makeshift knife. He ran to the door and forced the shiny metal deep into the man's chest. The man fell back into the corner and stared at the floor. Marshal reached for Jak's hand.

Jak took a step back. His mouth hung open and he shook his head.

Marshal grabbed Jak's upper arm and looked him in the eye. "Freedom, Jak. Freedom! Forest. New life. Unforget!"

"Slowful walk. Unfacecrime. Inair." Marshal smoothed out the wrinkles in Jak's shirt and pushed his hair to one side. "Untense." The sidewalk was crowded.

Jak nodded and let his breath out fast. His pace accelerated.

"Slowful." Marshal scrunched up his face then let the muscles fall. *Freedom.* He stared straight ahead and made for the movestop in lockstep with Jak.

At the movestop, a group gathered. People and transports streamed in all directions. Crowds gathered for the quick morning ration in a sprawling square cornerwise from him. Big Brother's cartoonish visage streamed from building to building in a digital display of omnipresence. People dressed in white, silver, tan

and sky blue laid eyes on him. *Facecrime!* He raged at himself for his lapse.

The white transport eased to a stop in front of them. The doors slid open. Marshal redoubled his grip on Jak's small hand. His heart leapt with joy and he struggled to contain his ungood emotion.

"Killer!" The ragged voice came from behind him. "Unproceed killer Marshal."

Marshal froze. Jak's grip tightened and trembled. Marshal sneered at his own incompetence.

"Killer unproceed. Thinkpol come," said the neighbor. The giant screens on the buildings changed. Big Brother's face appeared larger now. His eyes raged and a giant finger pointed down at Marshal.

The crowd formed into lines and moved away from the pair. The square fell silent. Passengers filed out of the back door of the transport. The front doors closed mere centimeters from Marshal's nose.

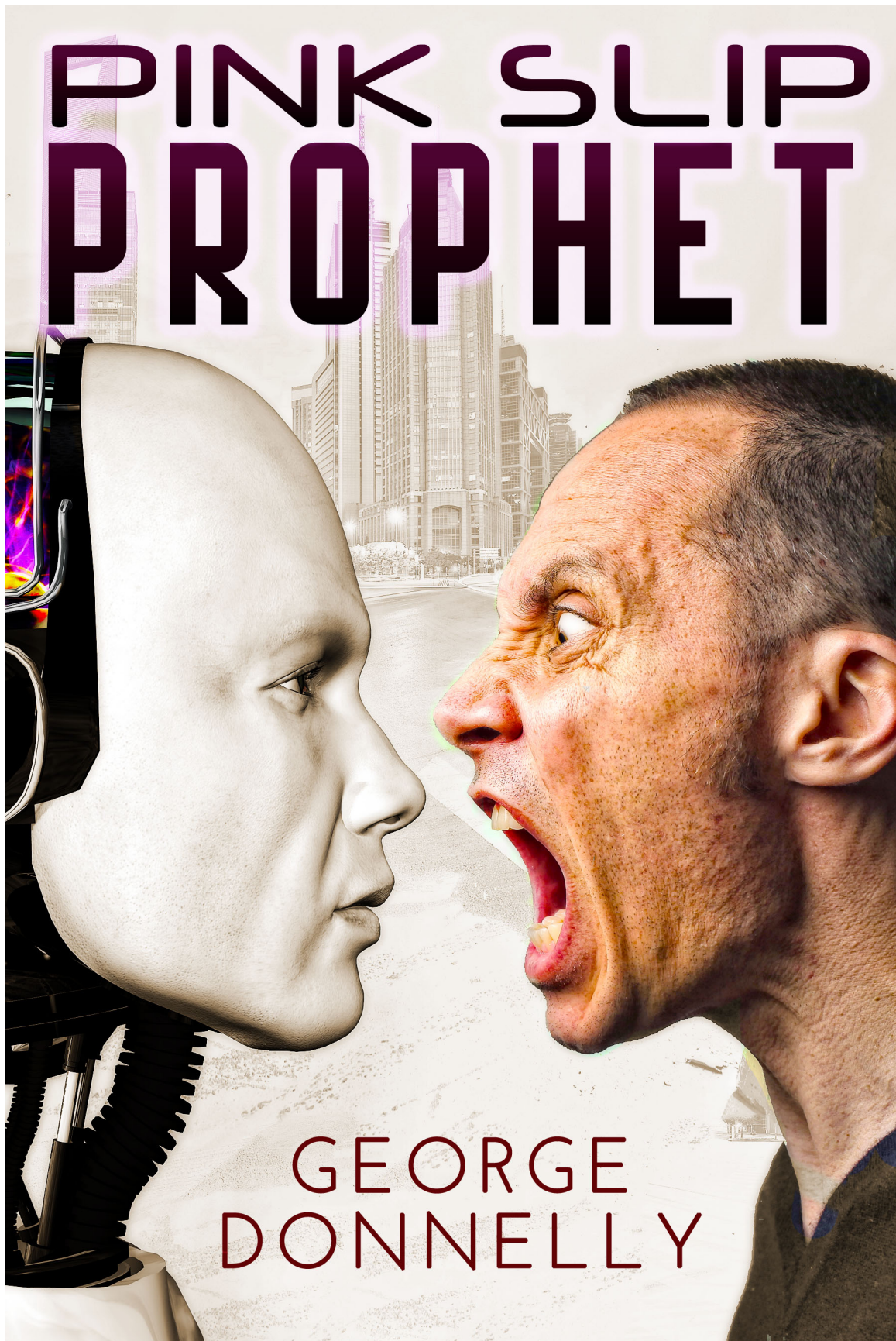
"Dad. I love you."

Marshal didn't want to look down at his boy but he steeled himself. His heart crushed. Gravity pulled hard at the boy's eyes and mouth. *I doed crimethink. I doed ... did this.* He imagined the boy in joycamp.

No. The thought catalyzed a chain reaction of decision within him. Marshal whipped around and shook a finger at his accuser. "Oldthinker!" he yelled. He narrowed his eyes and strode towards the older man. "Blackwhite ungoodpharm oldthinker bewill unperson!"

The man staggered back, his eyes wide. "No," he whispered. "Doubleplusgood duckspeaker. Ingsoc bellyfeel."

Marshal turned and ran down the block. They turned left, ran down another block and the crowds were there again. They boarded a transport and stared straight ahead. Marshal rubbed his thumb into the palm of Jak's hand. *Bewill good. Bewill good.*



Pink Slip Prophet

No jobs. Robots took them. Citizens subsist on a basic income guarantee. They consume their lives in drug-fueled virtual reality gaming binges.

Ian Blake doesn't play games and he won't accept handouts. He needs to be productive and useful – but his creepy boss just fired the baby-saving hero and father of three.

Ian yearns to build his own robots now. But with a job offer in hand under his old boss in a government agency, he fights his family's callous material greed and his own self-doubt to build the future he thinks we all need.

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Pink Slip Prophet Chapter 1

Ian Blake brought his generic white mug up to his mouth using a very efficient elbow movement and took a satisfying, but silent, sip of heavily-sugared near-coffee. He wanted it to be satisfying, but it wasn't. He pretended it was anyway.

Ian steadied his eyes on the horizon and gritted his teeth. The dull rays of the morning sun struggled to emerge from behind the thick, gray haze of downtown Philadelphia. A few people still moved down the street. "It's a beautiful day," he whispered. "It will be."

Behind him, the wafer-thin front door of the family apartment slammed shut with a hollow yelp. Ian turned and, at once, everything he was avoiding hit him.

"Michael, as long as you're under my—" Ian started.

Michael stumbled into the kitchen and ripped open the refrigerator door. Empty glass tinkled against itself. Michael bent over, pulled the flashlight from the bottom shelf and shone it into the empty confines of the icebox.

"Hold that thought, Dad," he said. He craned his neck, opened his mouth and let out a tremendous burp. It resonated into the living room.

Ian closed his eyes and took a stern breath. *This stops now.* He took a step forward and opened his mouth. His foot caught on something and he flew forward, the black near-coffee spilling out of his mug and flying across the small apartment. It splattered progressively starting on the cheap linoleum floor a meter in front of Ian and ending at the apartment's front door, running down the door, desperately seeking a quick exit under it.

Ian pulled himself up. He still held the mug but half of it was littered in sharp slivers across the floor on top of the near-coffee. "My father gave that mug to me," he said, and scowled.

Michael grabbed something from the refrigerator, tossed the flashlight back in without turning it off and slammed the door shut. He scampered unevenly deeper into the kitchen and turned left behind a wall and into his room. The wafer-thin door shut behind him.

"Now, Michael—" Ian started. He looked into the empty kitchen and sighed. Ian bent down to pick up whatever he had tripped on and found the thin leg of his wife. She lay on the floor at the foot of the sofa with the sofa cushions on top of her. He pulled them away to reveal a short-haired woman in a tattered pink robe, barefoot and without panties. An empty vodka bottle and tiny pieces of aluminum foil lay next to her.

Ian kicked her, his steel-toed black boot lightly making contact with the ball of her ankle. "Candy, get up! Candy!" he loud-whispered. He extended his left arm and brought his wrist deftly into position in front of his face. 6:22 AM. *Stacy and Jack need to be woken up and fed.* "Candy!" Ian kneeled down, grabbed her shoulders and shook. "Candy, you need to get the kids ready for school."

Candy sat straight up, her eyes still closed and coughed.

The heavy stink of cheap vodka mixed with the foul stench of Vibricide reached Ian's nose and he turned away. "I can—"

"No," she said. "I'm up. Go to work." Candy stood up. Her hair swirled up and out on one side of her head and was flat on the other. She took a step toward the kitchen, flinched, straightened her back, then continued.

"I can stay home if—" Ian started.

"No!" She said it too loudly. "You know what happens when you're home." She laughed in a haughty way. "You just bring home the bacon, and I will take care of the home front."

Ian sighed and crossed his arms. "Is that what you call this? Taking care of a home? Passing out drunk and drugged on the floor with your... your vagina hanging out?"

She reached the kitchen, turned and faced him over the high bar. She jerked her head to one side in mock surprise. "Not used to seeing it anymore, huh, buster?" She pulled a cigarette out from somewhere Ian couldn't see, lit it with a pink, plastic, single-use lighter and took a deep puff. Her hands shook.

Ian's breathing slowed. The vivacious young woman he married was still there. It was just the drugs, the drink and the general hopelessness of life that dulled the picture. "Look, Candy. We're going to clean up this family and that is that." He looked at his watch. "Michael!" he yelled. "Michael!" He strode into the kitchen and toward the closed door of Michael's room.

Candy raced to block his path. She got in front of Ian and spread her stick-like arms out to the sides. Her robe untied itself.

Ian stared at her oversized though taut breasts. The surgery had worked, very well indeed. Her washboard abs were holding up well, too, though the edges of the insert jutted out to the sides just a little below her ribs. "You need to keep up your weight."

Candy twisted her head to one side and grimaced. "Just leave Michael alone," she said without looking at him.

Ian hesitated. He remembered the loving family they used to be. Candy was so young and excited. Michael was a happy baby, then Stacy... Ian shook his head imperceptibly. Ian looked at Candy again, then took a step forward.

She tightened, her robe still open.

"Michael," Ian said in a stern voice, "we're going to have a chat when I get home from work tonight. This cannot—"

"Good morning, Daddy!"

Candy closed her robe and snuck past Ian into the kitchen.

Ian would recognize that Mickey-Mouse-like voice anywhere. He whirled around, a giant smile on his face and picked up the little boy in his oversized hand-me-down footed Star Invaders pajamas. "There you are!" Ian said in a loud and genuinely enthusiastic voice. "My little Jack is up." Ian grabbed at his youngest son's belly with mock-clawing fingers.

Jack curled up in his arms and giggled, his thin frame grinding into Ian's chest and ribs. "No tickling!" he yelled and giggled again.

Ian stopped and looked into his light blue eyes. Sincere eyes. Good eyes. Ian relaxed. *Something good will come from this. This one will turn out alright. I won't fail with him.* He set the boy down. "Okay, buster, time to get dressed and

—"

"You two were fighting again, weren't you?" Jack narrowed his eyes in mock disapproval.

"Parents have—" Ian started.

"It stops now. Got it?" Jack hardened his face. "That's it, kiddo. No more."

"That's my line!" Ian yelled. *What a kid.* He shook his head, bent down and hugged him. He looked at his watch. "Well, buddy, I gotta get to—"

"No, wait," Jack said, "I just got some new levels on Star Invaders. It's time to save the world!" The boy said the last part with his right index finger extended, arm held high and in a dramatic voice. "Come on, it'll be fun." Jack grabbed his dad's hand, turned and pulled.

Ian refused to move.

Jack turned around. His face pleaded with his father. "Dad, no. Come on." His shoulders flopped forward and a pathetic look crossed his face.

"I got assigned to Saturdays." Ian shrugged. He turned to the fridge and thought about opening it to look for some breakfast, then thought better of it. He opened a cabinet instead. A box of fraspberry-banana Pop-Tarts. His spirit jumped. He grabbed the box. It was empty. He turned it over and shook it. An empty foil wrapper floated out and see-sawed to the floor. *Really?* He dropped the box to the floor and glared at the back of Candy's head. "Any plans to go food shopping, I wonder?"

Candy stood at the stove, a slight fidget shaking her body. She did not move.

Jack sighed. "You have to play with me tonight then, Dad. You have to. You understand me, mister?"

Ian tapped his heavy boot into the peeling linoleum floor. *It's not worth it. Not in front of Jack.* He turned to the boy and produced a thin smile for him. "Okay, tonight we play. But on the TV, not that VR stuff. It gives me a headache."

"Ma'am, is that yours?" Ian stood on the rough, grubby platform of the Philadelphia El. A bald man in a cheap suit pushed past him, knocking him square in the shoulder. Ian twitched his mustache, righted his cap and took his position again. He scanned the platform. All clear.

The young woman stood with her back to him. The tasseled ends of an overlong red knitted scarf hung down her back. Bright yellow headphones covered her ears.

Ian looked back at the car she exited from. There was a package there, on the faded orange and black seat. And it was moving.

Ian grabbed his shoulder radio and held the red button. "Larry, hold the train manually. Lady left something behind."

Ian walked purposefully up behind the lady and tapped her on the shoulder. She looked up at him, her eyes wide but unfocused. She stank of sour milk. "What did you do with my baby?" she asked him. "Where is she?" She grabbed the front of his spotless gray uniform and shook him.

"Your baby?" Ian asked. *Oh, it's her baby. Glad we got that settled.* "No problem, ma'am, I'll get your baby back." Ian turned but the woman did not let go.

"Do you promise?" she asked. Her eyes focused on nothing. But the pain in her voice was obvious.

Ian smiled. "Of course. You just left her over—"

"Oh, thank God. Thank you, sir. I— I thought..." Her head hung forward and she leaned against a metal beam. "I mean, I was really..."

I can't tell if she's on drugs or just blind. Maybe both. Ian shook his head and stepped toward the train. The doors closed and the familiar whine of the electric engine signaled the train's acceleration out of the station.

Oh shit. Ian looked for the baby. There she was, still on the seat, wrapped in a purple blanket. The blanket opened and the baby's pudgy arms and legs broke out in all directions.

"Larry, stop the train," Ian said into his shoulder mic. "There's a baby on the train, repeat a baby alone on the train. Stop the train, now."

The train accelerated. Ian ran alongside it and got the carriage number: 30954. The train hit that bump they refused to fix and the baby teetered on the edge of the seat. *He could fall. He could smother himself in the blanket. Jesus, these people and their drugs.*

"Larry! Jesus, Larry, stop the damned train!" Ian yelled it out loud this time, not bothering with his radio. He ran past the stairs to street level and towards the control booth. It was empty. The control board was off. Ian stared at it for a moment, dumbfounded. *This is the control booth. There has to be someone here at all times.*

Ian looked down the platform, then turned the opposite way and looked up. *Larry. You did it this time.* He grabbed his shoulder mic. "Emergency, track 7. Larry! Where are you?"

The mother wandered towards the edge of the platform. "Did you find her? Sir?"

"Stay where you are, ma'am. We will get your daughter back. Don't worry." Ian put his hands on his hips. *Do I abandon my post to go find Larry? Or do I wait here and pretend like nothing is happening?*

The mother took another step towards the faint yellow line that marked the border between getting on a train and dying underneath one. A train arrived on the other side of the platform and people piled out. A crowd came up the stairs and collided with the arriving people. The platform filled and Ian lost sight of the mother.

Ian remembered the time he got stuck in that public bathroom with mom. She sent him to the bathroom by myself and someone locked the door, from the outside. He shivered. *That almost... No, don't go there. If it wasn't for that janitor...* He shook his head.

Ian found the woman again and ran to her. He pulled her away from the edge and guided her over to the wall next to the steps. "Just stay here— What is your name?"

Her eyes wandered. "Lorelai. That's her. Is she okay? Where is she?"

"Lorelai... Wait, what's your— Never mind. Just stay here." Ian put his hands on her shoulders and pushed down. "Stay here, no matter what. Stay here and wait. I will bring Lorelai back to you if you just stay right here. Do you understand?" Ian took one more look at the crowds on the platform. Distracted, VR-implanted, drug-addled people get stuck in doors. They fall off the tracks. It happens all the time.

But the baby. Ian ran down the pockmarked cement stairs, turned right at the bottom and burst through the rickety, blue door.

The room was empty.

Larry, goddamnit. Ian turned left and pushed through a freshly painted, red and considerably more solid door. On the other side was the new control room. It was small, smaller now that the new automation was installed. The old system of levers and switch sensors was replaced with just a computer terminal.

Ian sat down, punched in his access code and brought up carriage 30954. It was part of train xa42 and headed for maintenance at the depot. There it would sit in the hot sun for a day or week among dozens of others waiting to be cleaned, lubed and maybe even repainted. *Shit.*

Ian took a deep breath to speak and reached for his shoulder mic. He stopped and rolled his eyes. *If you want something done - at all these days - you've got to do it yourself.* He brought up the routing interface, scrolled through until he found xa42 and ordered it immediately re-routed to his station for continued duty.

The system would compensate. It would send some other train back. It would clear the tracks for xa42. That was the whole point of the automated system: so they could fire a bunch of guys and the rest of us could just tell the computer what it had to do. And it would do it.

Ian hit return and the system demanded his access code again. Ian frowned. He entered it, hit return and the access code request flickered back again. *Shit. I need Larry's code.* Ian rolled his eyes. *How they promoted him over me. That slick son of a gun.* Ian chuckled.

Ian stood up and looked around the largely empty control center. He opened empty cabinets and jerked out stuck drawers. Nothing. They were paperless now. *Is this really progress? Wasn't it the invention of writing that gave us a great leap forward?* And now, suddenly, no more writing allowed.

Wait a second. Ian strode over to the computer, hunched down and ran his hand under the keyboard tray. A small piece of paper was stuck there. He gently pulled it off, stood up and dusted off his pants.

It was blank. *Damnit. Wait.* Ian flipped it over and held it up to the light. In a light pencil, it said "CandyUrMine2034." Ian's breath stopped and the world around him disappeared. *No. No, that's not right.* That could mean anything, or anyone. Ian moved slowly back to the computer and sat down. His eyes unfocused into eternity. *My Candy?* He shook his head. *Ridiculous.* Ian carefully typed the letters into the access code box. His hand hovered over the execute button. *Really? That's your password?*

"Is the baby alright?" Ian stood underneath the Allegheny El station, out in the darkened street under the tracks. He rested his hand against the cool, dented back door of the ambulance and looked expectantly at the paramedic.

The man, dressed in a navy blue jumpsuit with a peeling yellow star over his heart, spoke a final jumble of medical words into his device, rolled it up and stuck it in his back pocket. He checked the back door of the ambulance and headed for the driver's seat.

Ian followed. "Sir, the baby? Is she going to—"

The man turned, his hand to his forehead, eyes closed. "Uh, right, yeah, just some dehydration, malnutrition, nothing serious."

Ian nodded. Internally, he smiled. *I saved a baby today.*

The paramedic turned, got into the ambulance and gently pulled the door shut until the catch clicked. "Engine start. Hospital selection. Infant. Dehydration. Low priority."

Ian walked to the door and looked at the medic through the lowered window. "What about the mother? Is she on something?"

The paramedic studied his dashboard and mumbled, "Approved." The ambulance shifted into gear and it bounced slightly against its wheels. He turned to Ian with a look of withering condescension on his face. "A word of advice: don't try to save any more lives, not in this world. Not these people. Too many of them anyway." He shook his head. The ambulance took off at a gentle roll and merged into traffic, its sirens blaring.

"These delusions of grandeur have to stop." Larry sat behind his desk in a tiny, gray office adjacent to the control center, his face a caricature of genuine concern. "The one I really worry about is Candy." He laid one hand on his bowling ball belly and slid deeper into the wooden chair, his legs splayed wide. It creaked its complaint. The other hand landed on the side of his head and scratched at the fuzzy pelt that covered the sides and back quite abundantly. The top of his head, however, was completely bald.

Ian stood across from him on the other side of Larry's desk. There was nowhere for him to sit. The walls were bare. There were no filing cabinets. Only the desk and single chair remained. "What do you mean, that you worry about Candy?"

Larry sat up straight and cleared his throat. He shrugged one shoulder and frowned. "You have a family to support, Ian, that's all. Candy has become accustomed to a certain standard of living, and, well..."

Ian laughed internally. *Still after Candy, huh? She could never see anything in this louse. Or could she? She's been unhappy. But unfaithful?* Ian put the thought out of his mind.

"Now, look, Ian, we're old— Wait, are you done for the day?" Larry asked.

Ian nodded. "You made the schedule. Boss."

Larry shot him an angry glare. He stood up and tucked his dress shirt into his loose-fitting pants. He took a deep breath, his gut expanded and he let it out again in one giant blast. "You've got all your stuff, right?"

Ian tilted his eyebrows up. "And?"

Larry looked straight at him and frowned. "I have to let you go, buddy. Orders from the top." A nervous smile crossed his face before he suppressed it. He sat back down and put his feet up on the desk.

Ian stared at him. *That's not right.* "I saved a baby this morning. I saved the city from—"

"You re-routed a train, thus causing mayhem in the city network. You hacked the system—"

Ian guffawed. "I didn't hack anything. I just used your access code. Which, by the way, is a little creepy. And not very secure."

Larry cleared his throat and looked away. "In any case, you're fired. Sorry. Couldn't happen to a nicer guy. Hell, you should be my boss. My boss's boss! You're the most competent guy in this organization. But I guess that no longer matters, with the automation and all."

"I saved a baby's life today. How can you fire me for that?" Ian paused and tried to reason it through. *I save baby, they fire me. There is no logical connection here.*

"The truth is, they were going to let you go anyway!" Larry stood up and pushed his chair in. "The automation plan—"

"The union said they would still keep both of us here," Ian said.

Larry ignored him. "The automation plan is complete. They only need a skeleton crew at Base. Everything else will be automated."

"I'm thirty-nine, Larry. What am I going to do?"

Larry jerked his neck to the right. "Y'ello." He said with a suppressed smile and an authoritative but casual tone. He listened. "Right now? It would be my pleasure." He laughed mischievously and jerked his neck to the left. "Anyway, Ian, that's it. They'll dock you for the costs associated with those delays you caused but I talked them out of pressing charges."

"Charges? For what?" Ian asked.

Larry shook his head and headed for the door. He stopped next to Ian. "You're an old-fashioned kind of guy. Not an order-taker but a man with principles. I like that about you!" He slapped Ian on the back and walked out the door.

Ian stood in the empty room listening to the screeches of the trains against the rails. *Trains, engineering, it's all I've wanted to do for twenty years, ever since Candy got pregnant.* "What do I do now?" he whispered to himself.

Ian stepped into his apartment and closed the flimsy front door behind him.

Drug Control had broken it down so many times now, there was no point in replacing it. It would only be money wasted. And now he didn't even have the option. They'd need every cent they had to weather this.

They might even have to move out. Where would they go?

He plodded in and fell into his ratty but beloved, garishly-checkered couch. A spring coil poked into his thigh and he adjusted himself. "Real News," he said.

Candy trotted into the living room in a bright purple leotard, her legs kicking behind her. "Pause," she said, and took off her deep green augmented reality glasses. "You're home early, and watching the news?" She scowled at him. "I haven't seen in you front of the screen in years!" She turned and yelled down the hallway that led to two bathrooms and three bedrooms. "Stacy, come on! Your dad is looking at a screen!" She laughed.

"Volume up five," Ian said. *No respect at work. At home, they laugh at me. I need to be tougher with these people.*

Stacy bounded into the living room in her underwear. She looked over the top of her AR glasses and giggled. "Daddy! What are you— Hey, I am going to need the TV soon, you know."

Ian looked at her, his mouth a thin line. "Could you put some clothes on, young lady? It's one thing to traipse around half-naked when you're six, but at your age?"

"But, Daddy," Stacy said, "I am—" She pushed her glasses down. "Oops! I'm dressed in Funation!" She rolled her eyes. "I am such a wooly!" She sauntered energetically back to her room and closed the door while babbling to a girlfriend.

Ian turned back to the news. The President was offering up a soundbite on a group of college kids who, while playing a hacked AR game, threw themselves in front of an Amtrak bullet train. The lone survivor, who lost both legs and an arm, thought they were jumping into a Hollywood jacuzzi.

It was incomprehensible to him. One world was hard enough to keep straight. He didn't need two or three. Just one, ordered world with strong families, good jobs and some grandkids down the line.

Candy cleared her throat. "What are you doing here this early? You know this causes an inconvenience for me." She crossed her arms. "It's not fair."

Ian laughed and spread his arms out to cover the entire couch. "Me relaxing in my home is a problem for you?" He laughed and shook his head.

"Larry Kunkle," the screen said, "is just a common stationmaster at the Philadelphia El. But today, he became a hero."

Ian stared at the screen incredulous.

"Oh, is this what Larry was talking about?" Candy sat down on the edge of the couch and pushed Ian to the opposite side. That spring scraped his leg again.

A young Asian woman appeared on screen with Ian's station in the background. Former station.

"It was right here, just this morning, when a young woman lost her baby on the El, that stationmaster Larry Kunkle came to the rescue. Kunkle acted quickly to reroute the trains and save the newborn baby's life. And our hero is with us

right now."

The camera panned and there was Larry Kunkle. Ian's mouth hung open. *Did I dream that I did that? Was I on AR? Drugs?* Ian remembered back to the purple blanket, the kicking baby legs, the strung-out mother. *I was there. That was me. I ordered the train back. I pulled the baby off of it. And I got fired for it.*

"Look at that, good old Larry. What a guy he is! Stacy! It's your uncle Larry on TV! He's a hero!"

"Larry is not her uncle," Ian said. *No relation at all.*

"You're just jealous," Candy said with a dismissive wave.

On screen, the reporter turned to an unusually bright and smiling Larry. "It was easy," he said. "It was nothing. Well, it took some doing, I'll tell you that."

"How did you save Baby Daphne, Larry? Tell our viewers what happened," the reporter said.

Larry's face blanked with panic and a sly smile crept onto Ian's face. *The bastard liar hasn't even prepared a good story.*

Larry's face flashed serious. "Oh, it was very challenging. I had to find the right train. It was an impossible task, but thankfully the new automated systems made it possible to bring the baby's train back to the station, relatively quickly, you know, after I, of course, did the hard work, by myself." He cleared his throat and the big-eyed look of panic returned.

"Screen off," Ian said. He stood up and turned left to the square, undersized picture window that dominated their living room. Gray clouds hung over the drab, cement block buildings that sat perpendicular to his. It roiled his stomach. It was a disgusting, dog-eat-dog world where anyone could swipe even the heart right out of your chest if you didn't keep a close watch.

The front door creaked open. "Anybody home?" asked a voice.

Ian drew a deep breath. He was in his bed, his eyes still shut. A cool breeze came through the window. He felt fresh, rested. He reveled in the smoothness of the sheets. *After that day, I needed a good night's—* Ian sat up in bed and checked his watch. 8:53 PM.

Damn it. Ian threw himself out of bed and headed into the hallway. *How did that happen? Unemployed just a few hours and already I'm sleeping during the day. What's next? Drugs? Funation? And here I am trying to set a good example for Michael.*

"Hey buddy!"

Ian stopped short just outside of the bedroom he nominally shared with Candy and looked up. *Unbelievable.*

"Did you see me on the news, buddy?" Larry leered at him with those fake, polar-white teeth. He flipped his lucky silver coin. It tinged, floated up, then landed back in his hand and he shoved it in his pocket. Candy and Stacy stood behind him with expectant smiles.

Ian stared at him, unable to move. Larry had pulled some questionable

moves in the past, but nothing like this. This was unprecedented.

Candy trotted up beside Larry and ran her arm along his. "Larry," she said in a sultry voice, "can I get you something?" She tilted her head to one side and smiled up at him.

Larry turned his head to her without taking his eyes off of Ian. "Champagne. Ian keep any around, by chance?"

"Ian? Champagne? Old Tightwad himself?" She laughed. "Never!" She turned to Stacy. "Call the store for some champagne. Have them send it ASAP."

"You bet, anything for the hero Uncle Larry," said Stacy. She traipsed off, half-dressed, to the kitchen to place the order.

Ian ground his teeth. He took a step towards Larry and jammed his index finger into the air in front of the fake's face. "I didn't know that you had that much dishonesty in you, Larry. I knew you were dishonest, but to take credit for what I did—"

Larry whirled around, put his arm around Candy and guided her towards the kitchen. Her robe opened slightly at the chest and he snuck a look.

Ian followed him into the living room. Jack sat hunched-over on the couch, looking at a mobile screen. Ian looked at Larry. *Jack looks so lonely over there.* Ian turned, walked over and sat next to Jack.

"Hey, little man!" Ian whispered to Jack. He put his arm around the boy's thin frame and pulled him into him. "Why so glum?"

Jack tapped something on his screen, then turned away from Ian with a jerk of his shoulder. "No, nothing." He added in a mumble that was barely perceptible over the din of Candy and Larry's laughing, "...even remembers..."

Ian smiled. "What's that game we're going to play tonight? What's the name again?"

Jack whipped around, his face a study in joy. "Star Invaders. I thought you forgot!"

"Why don't you get it ready?"

"So, Ian," Larry said in a projected voice from the kitchen, "what are your plans now that, you know, you lost your job?"

Ian closed his eyes, mortified. *Here comes the inevitable Candy overreaction.*

"What!" Candy screamed, her voice reverberating off the cement walls.

Ian saw in his mind's eye the familiar look of outraged shock on her face: the open mouth, the bulging eyes, the selfish attitude of entitlement.

"What does he mean, you lost your job?"

Jack trotted back into the living room, the virtual reality goggles and gaming controllers piled against his chest. A look of worry distorted his face. "Can we still play?" he whispered.

"Of course," Ian said with a certainty he didn't feel. His stomach clenched up. *I hate this. And I wish Jack didn't have to see it.* "Let's play in your room. I'll be along in a minute." He stood up and faced Candy across the breakfast bar.

"You lost," Candy said with exaggerated facial movements, "your job?" She turned to Larry. "Really?" She stood too close to him and her arm was around his lower back.

"Larry fired me," Ian said.

"Well, I'm sure he had a good reason," Candy said, still looking at Larry.

"I saved that baby girl today," Ian said.

Candy stared at him open-mouthed.

"Larry fired me and apparently took the credit himself. Yeah, he's a great guy, that Uncle Larry."

Ian stared at Larry. Larry stared back at him, his eyes narrow slits of hurt, envy and defiance.

"Larry saved that baby," Stacy said from Larry's other side. "It was on the news."

Larry laughed. "You know good old Ian and his delusions of grandeur." He stared straight at Ian. "Just like when we were back in college, Candy, you remember? He thought he could be a robotics scientist." Larry guffawed. "Ian. A scientist! And then, of course, you got pregnant and he did the right thing. Reality bashed those delusions of grandeur."

He turned to Stacy and put his arm around her, his hand resting on the top of her exposed butt cheek. "I like your dad, darling. I hated to have to let him go. But between the damages and the automation—"

"I just rerouted the train," Ian said.

"What are we going to do?" Candy asked.

"Oh, I can lend you some money until you get on the basic income," Larry said.

"Oh, right, I heard about that at school," Stacy said. "Great idea, Uncle Larry." She patted his hand and smiled up at him.

Ian raged. He stood up and faced Larry, eye to eye. "Get your hand off my daughter's ass. Now."

Larry eyes seemed to recede deeper into his head but he didn't break their eye contact.

"Daddy, it's no big deal, it's just Uncle Larry. He doesn't—"

Ian turned to Stacy. "Get to your room! And put some clothes on already. You're sixteen!"

Larry pulled Stacy tighter into his side and she giggled.

"What's this basic income?" Candy asked Larry in a whisper.

Jack came around the corner of the hallway and into the living room. He carried the gaming goggles and controllers. "Dad, can we play now?" The look of expectant hurt on the boy's face crushed Ian's heart.

Ian closed his eyes and shook his head. He didn't want to let the boy down again. The only one with any hope of turning out right. The one who most took after him. But the frustration, the betrayal, the sense of worthlessness overcame him. "I can't right now. I have to get some air." Ian stormed out of the apartment over the sounds of Candy and Stacy giggling.

Pink Slip Prophet Chapter 2

Ian pushed through the door to his apartment and opened the fridge. It was short, with a small freezer on top so he had to bend way down in order to see into it. A cockroach popped out of a half-open Chinese food container. Ian jumped back and slammed the door.

There are four of them. I work all day. She doesn't even work. Why? Why can't one of them keep decent house? If not for me then at least for Jack.

He thought about Jack and that hurt face of his. *I really screwed up.*

Michael came out of his room off the kitchen and stopped short when he saw Ian blocking his only way out.

"You get a job yet, Dad?" Michael asked. His hands fidgeted below his waist and a nervous smile crossed his face. "Never thought I'd be asking you that question, huh?"

Ian narrowed his eyes. He studied the boy. Nineteen, his first-born son, and still at home. No job prospects, never excelled at education. Not even a girlfriend. *I know he's doing drugs. What do I do with this kid?* "Nothing yet, what—"

"See, Dad? It's not that easy to get a job today! You had a good job so you could judge me, but not anymore!" Michael sniffed.

I should have been home more often. I should have given him more of my time. Is this my fault? No, it can't be. I did my job. I brought home the money. I worked. I paid for everything. I let Candy take charge of— Maybe that was my mistake. "Nothing worth doing is easy, son."

"Fuck you and your psalms, or whatever those are," Michael said. "I'm going out." He took a step towards Ian.

Ian stepped into his path. This was his chance, maybe his last chance, to get Michael onto the right track, to start fixing their relationship. To whip the lazy whiner into shape. "You're not going out, not until we figure this out."

"Forget it, Dad, there's nothing to figure out. You're an asshole and I'm a lazy whiner, right? I know that's what you think of me. You can't deny it!"

A door opened behind him and Ian heard undersized, traipsing footsteps headed in his direction. "Dad," Jack yelled, "can we play now?"

Ian crossed his arms. "Michael, tell me, what do you do around the house? Do you cook? Clean? Do you help pay for groceries? What exactly do you contribute to this household?"

Michael's face contorted into an expression of hurt and outrage. "How dare you? I'm your child. I'm your responsibility. You have to take care of me. You..."

Ian smiled thinly. "You're not a child anymore, Michael. You're—"

"Anyway, I'm getting the basic income now. I guess now that you lost your job you'll want to mooch some of that off of me, huh? Well it's only two-thousand a month. And I need that for my car and my gaming career and other basics. So—"

Great. I produced a parasite. Ian swallowed as he carefully selected his

words. *Screw it.* "You can't live in my house and be on welfare. It's that simple. We're Blakes. We work for a living."

Michael's face visibly relaxed. "I signed up last night. I was the first one in our neighborhood. Starting next week, I'll get two-thousand dollars per month, every month, for the rest of my life. If you're smart, you'll do the same thing." He pushed past Ian and strode out the door.

"I win! You lose!" Jack yelled at his father and then collapsed into giggling. "Why did you do that?"

Ian shook his head and rolled his eyes. "I... just have my mind somewhere else, I guess."

Jack jammed his hand into Ian's ribs and started scratching around with a smile on his face.

"I'm really not in the mood for tickling, buddy," Ian said. *I'm about in the mood to jump off a bridge.*

Jack sat back, crestfallen. He was silent for a moment, then spoke up, "Dad, there's this new game—"

Ian studied his youngest son's gorgeous face. Out of all of them, he was the only one who looked like his dad: a pleasantly-rounded face, brown hair, blue eyes. *If only I could buy him everything he ever wanted, I would. Over and over again.* "I can't do it, not right now. I just lost my job."

Jack looked down. "It's only three dollars. I mean, if you get a chance."

"After I get a new job, okay? It shouldn't be long."

The boy's face darkened. "It's okay, Dad. I can wait." He got up and walked towards his room.

Ian's heart sank. He leaned back into the overworn couch, the mid-morning sun warming his shoulders. He sighed, then sighed again, this time more violently. *It won't hurt to look at it, to just investigate it.* He closed his eyes, laid his head back and allowed the top of his head to be warmed. His thoughts drifted to college. Everything was better then - before he knew Candy. His mind reeled at the idea. *My family is everything I have. I have to stick this through.* He yawned. *There is something I am missing. I feel like I am asleep and I need to wake up.* He slapped his cheek, gently at first, then hard. But it made no difference.

Ian pulled his mobile screen out of his back pocket and unfolded it until it was the size of a legal pad. He typed in 'basic income' and a video instantly played.

"With forty percent employment and the growing robotization of industry—"

Ian skipped ahead with a jerk of his finger.

"The national basic income guarantee is available to all United States residents, citizen or not, over the age of majority: fourteen. Every individual receives the same amount. No labor is required in exchange for your basic income, which is your right as a sovereign human being and American

national."

Ian rolled his eyes. A sense of deep shame erupted in him. Free money? Government money? It offended him at a root level. An image popped into his mind. His German grandfather, in suspenders and a beat-up old hat, plowing his land with a team of horses. The old man was ninety-three then.

The video continued. "You only need visit your local basic income office with proof of residency, valid voter registration card and submit to a toxicology screen. A DNA sample is also required."

He clicked away. A video ad occupied his entire screen. A man in a top hat and monocle popped into existence. "It's the First Annual Basic Income Robotics Challenge! All you budding robotics wantrepreneurs, here is your chance! Prepare a personal service robot prototype by June 1, demonstrate it for us here at the Basic Income Administration and the winner takes home one million dollars in startup funding! It's that easy! Sponsored by the Basic Income Administration, we make dreams come true. Full details at basic income dot gov slash robotics. Government employees ineligible for prizes. Some conditions apply."

Jack ran around the corner into the living room. "Dad, that's perfect for you! That's just what you need! Let's do it, Dad! Come on!"

Ian smiled at his son's enthusiasm. "I'm too old for such things. Better the prize money go to a young person. Maybe you'd like to do it."

"I don't know anything about robots! I'm only nine!" Jack yelled.

"I'm just too old to start something new. I had my chance. I chose to start a family and now I have to live with that decision," Ian said.

Ian drifted up from a soft, lazy dream. A cool breeze wafted over him. He sat in the shade on a quiet beach. There was no one around, he was completely alone. He closed his eyes and smiled.

He opened his eyes. Jack's grinning face greeted him. He lay on the couch, his mouth was dry and he had to go to the bathroom.

"It's a family meeting, Dad," Jack said. His face said it all: you're in for it now.

Candy, Michael and Stacy stood behind the boy, their arms crossed and each with one foot tapping the floor. *Do they even realize?*

"We found some jobs for you, Dad," said Stacy. She was dressed this time, if that's what you can call a bikini top and a mini pencil skirt.

"Yeah," said Michael, "it's time you shape up and take some responsibility."

"We need money," said Candy. "The kids have expenses: gaming, medication, trips, clothes, food, of course, and let's not forget the rent!"

Ian rubbed his eyes and sat up. *It's an ambush.* Deep within him, a sense of moral outrage grew. *You people only live because of my dedication, my intelligence.* But he quashed it. *They're right. I have a responsibility to care for this family. She is my wife. These are my kids. I am the man. I have always provided. They need me.*

Michael brought his screen out from behind his back. "Skyscraper window washer. It pays even more than you made before." He regarded his father with a delicate smugness. It could be shattered at any moment.

Ian fought to clear the brain fog of an afternoon nap. *I should never sleep during the day.* He felt a panic to get up, to do something. But do what? "Skyscraper window washer. The outside of the windows or the inside?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "The outside, of course!"

"Even on the top floor?" Ian asked. He imagined himself hanging from the top of the Prudential building, the wind in his hair, the sun warming him above. It might not be too bad.

"All the floors," Michael said.

"Isn't that a little dangerous?" Ian asked.

"But it pays well, Daddy," Stacy said. "We need the money."

"They're going to throw us out on the street!" Candy screamed. She looked at the ceiling, then down to Ian, then back to the ceiling. "I mean, it's money. What do we do without money? We have nothing!"

Michael touched her arm. "It's okay, Mom. Dad will do the right thing. He always does." He turned to Jack and punched him gently in the arm. "Isn't that right, kiddo?"

Ian looked at Jack. He felt for him. *The youngest of this pack of wolves? And he has to actually spend time with them. What will he say?* Ian felt calm, cool, his mind empty for once. It felt good. It was all good, no matter what happened. As long as his Jack was okay.

Jack's face darkened. "I'm not okay with it. Dad could die! What would we do without him? I need a dad more than I need new video games." Jack looked at his siblings and mother. Their faces were blank. "You don't even care!"

Ian admired the passion in his boy and a small smile crept onto his face before Candy noticed it and he wiped it away.

Candy cleared her throat. "Of course we care about your father. We love him. But—"

"You're lying!" Jack yelled.

"Now listen here, young man," said Candy. "You won't talk to your mother like that. Go to your room. This meeting is for adults only."

"It's a family meeting and I'm staying!" Jack yelled.

Ian laughed and offered his arms out to his son. Jack ran over and hugged him. "I love you, Dad," the boy whispered into his father's ear.

There was silence for a moment, then Michael spoke up. "They also need crab fishermen in Alaska."

"This is how it's going to go," Ian said. He sat back and put his hands behind his neck. "We're going to cut expenses, radically. All of the gaming subscriptions are gone. I'm cutting them all now."

"But, Dad, I need—" Michael started.

Ian fixed his glare on him. "Everyone who is staying at this house will abide by these rules."

Candy let out an exasperated sigh. "Dear, you can't just—"

"Yes, I can, and I will. This is how it will go. We're cutting expenses, we're—"

"But I'm in charge of expenses," Candy said.

"Not anymore. I want all the papers and account access," Ian said. His heart trembled but his gaze was steady and firm.

Candy stared at him, her face slack and her eyes distant. She shook her head.

"There will be no more ordering of food. Candy, you will prepare a sensible shopping list and cook healthy food for us three times per day."

Candy's lip curled. "No," she said in a small voice.

"Kids, your allowances are stopped—"

"No, Daddy! Just no!" Stacy yelled.

Michael stared at him in silence, his chest heaving up and down. "You're not in charge here. You're just one member of this family. There are five of us."

"Six if you count Uncle Larry," said Stacy, her hand on her hip.

"Uncle Larry is not actually anyone's uncle," Ian said. "Now—"

"This is bullshit. I'm leaving," said Michael.

"I'm just doing the rational thing, Michael. I am trying to save this family."

"This is about your ego. You just want to control us."

"How can you say that? I have always let your mother take care of our home."

"Maybe you should continue."

Candy spoke up. "If your father wants to be a househusband, it's okay with me. He can cook and clean and pay the bills. It's okay with me."

"We should all chip in," said Jack.

"We may have to move to a smaller apartment," Ian said.

"That's it!" Candy yelled. "That's where I draw the line!"

Ian shrugged.

"Why don't you sell a kidney? I know a place where they pay top dollar."

"Mom!" Jack yelled.

The front door swung open with a bang. "Hey, kids! It's Uncle Larry, with some presents!" Larry stepped in carrying shopping bags and wearing what was obviously a new leather jacket.

Stacy ran up to him, her steps high and excited. She grabbed his arm and rubbed her hand against the coat. "Is it real leather?"

Larry put his arm around her waist and pulled her to him. His hand hovered above her butt cheek. Ian couldn't tell if it was touching or not. "Well, of course, darling," said Larry. "Someday I'll get you one just like it. Nothing but the best for you, baby." He let Stacy go and she giggled.

"Our family meeting is not over," Jack said in a loud voice. "Hey!" None of them looked back at him and so he looked at his father, an expression of helplessness on his face. "I tried," he whispered.

Ian motioned to him and the boy threw himself onto his father's lap. "They're different," Ian said. "It's okay. We'll always have each other, you and I. Isn't that right?"

"I don't want you to die," Jack whispered and his eyes puffed up.

A wave of tenderness came over Ian. It was not a common feeling for him

and it felt unusual and dangerous to feel it right now, in front of these people - in front of everyone but Jack. "Listen—"

Larry appeared in front of them. Ian, surprised, stood up and offered him his hand. Larry offered a thin smile, then sat down on the couch where Ian had been sitting. Stacy ran over and sat on his lap.

"Ian, buddy, why don't you offer your guest a beer," Larry said without taking his eyes off of Stacy's chest.

Stacy giggled, then looked up at her father. "Well, come on, Dad. Larry is our guest."

Jack looked up at his father, his face pure outrage.

Ian rubbed his son gently on the back and shook his head. He stood by and watched. He wanted to drink it all in. *Just what are they playing at?*

"Oh, I'll get that!" said Candy from the kitchen. Ian watched as she hastily grabbed the last remaining can of Schlitz from the back of the refrigerator, popped its tab and poured it into a fresh glass. She poured too fast and the head filled the glass up before she could empty the whole can. She brought it to Larry anyway.

"That's some good head there, Candy," he said with a grin.

Candy giggled and took a seat next to him. She turned her body halfway towards him until her knees touched his thigh. "There's more where that came from."

"Mom! That's disgusting!" Stacy yelled.

"Go to your room, little girl!" Candy said in an unusually calm voice.

"Ladies, ladies, there is enough of me to go around," Larry said with a laugh. "Let's all take it easy. Ian, why don't you take a seat? We have something to talk about."

Ian narrowed his eyes.

Jack pulled on his dad's arm. "Let's go play."

Ian nodded and they walked towards Jack's room.

"How's that new job, Ian? What's it gonna be? Window washer or crab fisherman?" Larry asked. One arm was around his daughter and the other lay just above his wife's shoulders.

Jack pulled at his arm.

"Don't worry about—" Ian started.

"How about as my own personal assistant at the Department of Robots, Basic Income Administration, Washington, D.C.?" Larry brought his left hand down and placed it squarely on Stacy's butt cheek. Ian swore he saw him flex the hand. The other he brought down over Candy's chest and rested on her breast.

Ian felt his face heating up.

Candy turned and faced Larry. "You got a new job? In Washington?"

Larry nodded without looking at her.

"Congratulations, Uncle Larry," Stacy said. "That's great news!"

"Why don't you have a beer," Larry said to Ian, "and we'll have a chat."

"Oh, that was the last one," Candy said. She inched closer to Larry.

Do they realize how foolish they are, all jockeying for position around Larry?

How quick they are to abandon ship - all but my good Jack.

"It's nine-to-five hours, better than you were making at the El, you get to work under me and you'll pick up a thing or two about robotics," said Larry.

"My dad is an expert on robotics," said Jack. "He studied it in college. He should be your boss."

Ian suppressed a smile.

"I'll—" Ian started.

"You can think about it," said Larry, "but I'll need to know by tomorrow morning. It's a good job and it'll go fast."

"He'll take it," Candy said.

Larry laughed. "Best to listen to the little woman. Happy wife, happy life, right?" He squeezed her breast and pulled her closer.

"He's not interested in your job! He's going to design robots!" said Jack. "Come on, Dad, let's go save the world!"

"Now, hold on, Jack," Ian said.

Jack looked up at him, startled. "But, Dad," he whispered.

"I will let you know my decision tomorrow, Larry." He turned and walked out the door.

Jack trailed along behind him, begging him to play with him.

Pink Slip Prophet Chapter 3

"I just want to spend some quiet time with you," Ian said to Jack. They sat on the couch in the early morning haze. Michael, Stacy and Candy were all passed out next to each other on the floor.

"Why do they do that?" Jack asked.

"What?" Ian asked. He slouched down on the old couch and tried to find a comfortable position. He sat back up again.

"You know!" Jack loud-whispered.

"Oh, the pills and the, uh..."

"Yeah!"

They're lazy. Depressed. The possibilities ran through his head but in reality he had no idea. "It's hard for them," he said.

"Will it be hard for me?" Jack asked.

Damn. That one came back fast. "You're more like me, don't you think? I don't need that stuff."

Jack nodded. "We're different from them."

"That's right, but like them, too. It's complicated."

Jack frowned and shook his head. "No, I don't get it."

Ian laughed. "Don't worry about it."

"But I need to understand."

"Let's talk about something else."

Jack sighed. "Fine. When are you going to start working on your robotics stuff again?"

"I was actually hoping to rest up a few more days. Then I guess I'll start working with Larry again."

"But you said you hated working with him. He's a jerk."

"Did I say that? No, I couldn't have."

"Dad, he's a jerk! He comes over here and puts his hands all over Mom and Stacy."

"What? Don't say that. He's just... being friendly."

Jack crossed his arms and scowled. "You know that's not—"

"Listen. These are big people issues. You're only nine. You shouldn't be worrying about stuff like this. Let me worry about it, okay?"

Jack smiled. "I'll let that go if you show me your old robots and we start working on a new one."

"I don't know, kiddo. It's a long shot. We need money now. Or we'll lose this place."

"Come on, Dad. You have today. You can spend today on it. What else do you have to do today?"

Ian opened his mouth to protest but Jack ran out of the room and quickly returned with a dusty box. Jack dropped the box on the floor in front of his dad, opened it and pulled out a series of black creatures in various shapes and sizes.

"Your old robots," Jack said. He handed a crab-like, matte black robot the

size of his hand to his dad. "Your old multi-tool is in here, too."

Ian turned the robot over in his hands and rubbed his fingers against the rough, 3D-printed shell. The heavy, burnt smell brought him back to the lab at the University of Chicago. *I loved that work.* He gripped the item in his hand and felt the thrill of discovery and invention again, of the power in his chosen discipline. "The field has changed too much since then," he said.

"You're smart, Dad. You can catch up," Jack said.

Candy got up, took off her goggles and eyed the two of them. "Really? Those old toys? When are you going to grow up?" she said to Ian.

"They're not toys," Jack said.

Candy projected a haughty laugh in the boy's direction.

Jack's face darkened. "He can do it if he wants. You can do anything, if you want it badly enough." He looked to his father for support.

Candy bent forward and laughed harder. "The crazy ideas you put in that boy's head," she said to Ian.

"They're not crazy!" Jack walked up to her and put his finger in her face. "Tell the truth!"

She stopped laughing and slapped the boy hard across the face.

Jack held his breath, looked at his father.

"That was uncalled for, Candy, don't you think?" Ian asked her.

"No," she said, finally taking her eyes off of Jack and heading for the kitchen. "It's long overdue. And there's something else that's overdue. I'm calling Larry and you're accepting that job. You know you're not getting anything else in this job market. Nothing that pays nearly as well. Nothing that a washed up old bag like you would qualify for." She took her mobile screen out of a kitchen drawer, unrolled it and tapped it quickly.

"I hate you!" Jack yelled and ran out of the room. He slammed the door to his room behind him.

"I haven't made my decision," Ian said.

"Oh yes, you have. It's ringing." She held it out in his direction and lifted her eyebrows in a manner that made Ian want to punch her in the face over and over again.

Jack appeared in the living room. "Sorry, Dad."

Ian smiled at him. "What for?"

Jack looked at the floor.

"What about me, you little brat? What about my apology," Candy said to Jack, the screen still ringing in her hand. "Hmm?"

"Jack," Ian said. "Just don't respond. Let it go."

"But I hate her!" He ran to his room and slammed the door again.

Ian sat back and crossed his arms. *When will I escape this? I'm about ready to go to work digging ditches. Maybe self-employed. I'm about ready to jump out of this window.*

"Hey there— No, not right— Someone wants to speak with you." She walked over to Ian, that look on her face again: you better do what I tell you, or else. And Ian knew what that else was: the silent treatment, nasty looks, snide

comments and, inevitably, physical violence. He had a new one to add to the list: proxy-punish him through Jack. That was the worst one.

"Well?" she said. She tapped the screen.

"Ready to come back to reality, buddy?" Larry's voice echoed throughout the tiny living room.

Ian stood up, smiled at his wife and took the screen. He walked to the square picture window, pushed open the side window and tossed the screen out of their twenty-third floor window.

"Be there tomorrow at 7 AM," Larry said. He stood in the doorway of the master bedroom and looked down on Ian.

Ian lay on his bed, his hands behind his neck, deep in thought, his eyes closed, a delicate Bach violin sonata playing from his screen on the nightstand.

Larry cleared his throat. "We can drive down together, tonight."

Ian lay still on the bed, his mind deep into robotics. He needed a practical idea. Something that would actually be useful to people, that could fit into their daily rhythms. Not just a prototype but something that will work. What about the software though?

"Did you hear me—" Larry started.

"How dare you!" Candy appeared in the doorway and Ian pried open an eye to catch her expression. There was more worry than anger there. He chuckled inwardly. "Larry drove all the way up here at my request to take you down and get you situated in the only job that is going to provide for your family for the foreseeable future."

Ian yawned.

Candy turned and put a hand on Larry's bicep. "I don't know what is going on with him."

"It's okay, don't you worry your pretty little self," he said and touched her face. "We'll sit down on the couch and chat until he—"

Ian took a deep breath. His hands trembled. He felt like he was floating just above the surface of the bed. This was a big decision. There would be no turning back from it. He had to burn this bridge down to the ground. He had to nuke it, otherwise the temptation would return. They would wear him down.

Candy and Larry stood side by side at the entrance to the master bedroom, their expectant eyes on Ian.

"I'm not taking the job, Larry. I wouldn't work with you again, not for anything. You're a liar, a slacker and an all-around bastard."

"He doesn't mean it," Candy said to Larry.

"Oh, but I do. Furthermore, Larry, you are not welcome in my home anymore."

Candy's mouth hung open. She was a deer in the headlights.

"I will not tolerate you putting your fat fucking hands on my wife or my daughter anymore."

"How dare you!" Larry said in a low tone of voice. "After everything I have done for you..." He huffed and swung his head around like a hyperventilating owl.

"You may now get out. As for you," he said to Candy, "and the kids, all of those spending cuts and other changes we discussed go into effect immediately. Hand over your credit cards and account logins."

"No!" Candy screamed. "You can't do that!"

Larry studied Ian with a sense of calm wonder, the edges of a smile pulling at his cheeks. He put his hand on Candy's shoulder and massaged it. "Relax, girl. I know this guy. He pulls stuff like this. I remember back in college when he was hurting and I found the El job for him. Remember that, baby?"

Candy's face slackened with exhaustion. "I just can't take this anymore. It's not fair."

Ian closed his eyes. There was nothing to be gained from further interaction.

"And he took it. He eventually took it, because he's a smart man who provides for you and the kids. Isn't that right?" Larry asked.

She nodded and caught her breath. "He better do the right thing," she said in Ian's direction. "And he better do it right now."

"Or what?" Ian opened his eyes, a smile of amusement breaking onto his face.

"Or you're out of here. I don't keep useless, lazy dogs around for my own entertainment."

Ian chuckled.

Michael appeared behind his mother. "He wants to punish us, Mom. He's disappointed with Stacy and me because we're not scientists," he said with air quotes, "like him. We're lazy good-for-nothings, isn't that right, Dad?" Michael stomped away and slammed the front door behind him.

"Listen, guys," said Larry, "this isn't necessary. Ian is too old to start a new career. He hasn't even looked at a robot in twenty years." He laughed. "Come on, this guy is washed up."

Ian turned his head and glared at Larry.

Larry held his hands out in front of him. "It's true, buddy. What can I say? You're old. You can't get another job, not unless you want to fall overboard in the Bering Sea hunting for the last few crab. But you have a big family here to take care of. They love you. You can't do anything else."

Jack came and sat on the bed next to Ian, a look of doubt and pity on his face.

"Have you been listening to this?" Ian asked the boy.

Jack nodded. He reached for his father's hand.

"Let's face it, buddy, this is the end for you. Your last hope is to keep working with me. And," Larry added before taking a look at his watch, "you have just six hours to stop tempting fate."

Ian looked at Jack and then Candy. *They care about me. Larry didn't have to get me that job. He didn't have to take me along. Maybe this is the right call. I can keep working on her in my spare time.* Ian rolled over and closed his eyes.

He had to give in and take the job, that was certain. But he silently begged for just a little more time as a free man. *I'll tell them in the afternoon, after a quick nap.*

Pink Slip Prophet Chapter 4

What if? The thought raged in Ian's mind. What if he failed? What if he succeeded? What would success even look like? He couldn't imagine it. What if they had to move apartments? Could they get another one like it? What if all three kids had to share one room? Stacy wouldn't like it. For that matter, neither would Michael, even though he was hardly ever there. Even Jack prized his alone time.

Ian opened his eyes and looked up. A pale, contorted rectangle of light flickered on the ceiling. He glimpsed the moon outside. What if they ended up in the street? What if Candy left him and took all the kids? What if he was all alone?

It's not worth it. The risks are too high. He rolled over. Candy was not there. All-night virtual reality games again? He frowned and shook his head. There was a dead end. Depression, despair, isolation, everything fake. What did they see in it?

Enough. A surge of exasperated energy hit him. Ian swung his legs out of bed, tightening his abdominals and landing on his feet like a ninja ready for a surprise fight.

A pang of doubt hit him. He stood at the windowsill and looked out at the abandoned alley below. *You're not an inventor. You're a train engineer. You supervise machines. You don't make them. You don't even fix them.* He collapsed, cross-legged to the floor, facing his nightstand.

Desperate for some distraction, he opened the bottom drawer and pulled out the first thing he touched.

It was his high school yearbook. He flipped it open with a mix of apprehension and nostalgia. He braced himself against any unhappy reminder.

There it was on page one: a note from Francesca. "You're a great inventor. I've learned so much from you. I know I'll be using your inventions someday, and thinking of you, no matter where I am."

Wow. It all flooded back to him. He stood up, the yearbook under his arm. He walked into the living room, sat down at his workstation and noted the time: 3 AM. *Push through it.*

He yawned.

Jack nestled against his chest and Ian adjusted his right arm to support the boy's head.

With the left, he tapped away at the dusty old keyboard in the living room. On the screen, he looked at his work so far.

It's shit, all shit. Unoriginal, won't work. An amateur's plaything. A delusion. Ian felt his insides collapsing on each other in a self-defeating race to the bottom.

The boy sighed deeply and exhaled in a stutter. He was at peace, happy in

the arms of his father. *I have to do this. If not for me then at least for Jack.*

"We voted and you're out," Candy whispered.

Ian stood up from the living room workstation and turned around. He stretched, then yawned.

In front of him stood Candy, Michael and Stacy. Stacy looked at the floor, Michael obsessively scratched his scalp and Candy glared at him with her arms crossed.

Ian brought his wrist up in front of his face: 5 PM. *Is it that late?* He looked up at them. "Did you say something?"

Michael spoke up. "We voted, the three of us, and we decided that you have to leave. You're not contributing to the household and you're trying to control us."

A burst of laughter escaped Ian.

The three stared at him steadily.

Ian looked at them dubiously. "This is my house. My work paid for this. It paid for every gram of food that went in your mouths." He pointed at Stacy and Michael.

Michael turned away. Stacy tapped her foot against the floor and continued to look down.

"This is a democratic household, Dad," said Michael. "We're occupying it, therefore we have a voice. And we're using it." He shrugged. "I know your capitalist pig asshole point—"

"Michael, shut up," said Candy. "He is still your father."

Michael threw up his hands. He opened his mouth to speak but choked off the sound.

"Why don't you three go somewhere else, if I bother you that much?" Ian asked. "Go live on a farm out near Amish country, like I did when I was your age."

"Where are we going to go, Daddy?" Stacy asked. Her voice reached a high pitch, cracked and almost didn't return. "Who do we know? What do we have? We have no family, no cousins, no money and no Amish farm." She sobbed.

Michael put his arm around her and she pushed him away. "Fuck off," she whispered.

"Who are you going to throw out next? Jack? Is that the kind of family this is?" Ian asked.

"It's a democratic household!" Michael yelled. "Respect our will!"

"If it's so democratic, how come I didn't get a vote?"

"You can either leave," Candy said in a low voice, "or we can go live with Larry."

Rage boiled up within Ian. His nerves tingled and his head twitched. "How dare you, after all I have done for you."

Candy turned away.

Stacy ran to him, pressed her head briefly against his chest and then shuffled to her room.

"What's important is that he's leaving. I'll take charge—" Michael started.

Candy slapped him. "I'm in charge of this home and this ends now."

Michael's face showed the inner struggle between hate and hurt. He put his index finger in her face. "Violence is not helpful. I'm on your side." He went to the window and looked out, his back turned to his parents.

"Get some things and get out," Candy whispered.

"Just because of the job?" Ian asked her.

"It's complicated."

Ian shook his head. "Jack comes with me."

"He needs his mother." She pushed him back into the wall, knocking the computer screen off the desk. "Get out! Get out!" she screamed.

The elevator dinged and Ian stepped out into the chilly bare cement hallway. He turned right and walked down the narrow path. He carried a change of clothes and the workstation in a backpack. In a box, he had a mug, some instant ramen bowls, near-coffee and an electric pot.

He walked through the boiler room door and immediately stepped on someone.

"Close that door!" a familiar voice yelled.

"That you, Hector?" Ian asked the dark room.

"Who that?" Hector asked.

"Ian. From 2304."

"You, too?"

Ian was silent. *Why are there people in the boiler room?*

"We're full up, man. Got sick people and everything," Hector said.

Ian found the light switch, flicked it and a dozen men groaned at once.

"Turn that light off!" said one.

"Trying to sleep here," said another.

Ian glimpsed another one snoring. There wasn't much space around the central boiler unit - a great black cauldron - but it was filled from wall to wall with sleeping men in their underwear. He knew these men. He'd seen them around. They were his neighbors.

"You can not—" Hector appeared next to him, flipped off the light and stepped outside, pushing Ian along ahead of him.

Ian looked at him, disbelieving.

"Find somewhere else," Hector said. "No more room here." He turned to re-enter.

Ian grabbed his shoulder. "Did they lose their apartments?"

"You didn't see us here." Hector closed the door gently behind him.

Ian stood in the hallway puzzling it out. It made no sense. A dozen men wall-to-wall in that hot box. They couldn't all have been thrown out by their wives,

too. Or could they?

Ian walked to the other side of the basement, through narrow and poorly-lit cement corridors to the storage boxes. He found number 2304. As a four-bedroom apartment, their storage box was considerably larger than the others, many of which weren't more than a locker.

He fumbled for the key in his pocket and ran through his options. After the boiler room and the storage box, it was... the street. *I can make it work, but it won't be fun.*

He caught himself. *The street? How did I fall so fast? All I did was save a baby. What did I do?* A thread of doubt paralyzed him. He sat down on the dusty floor next to the storage box door. He sat there awhile, suffering under the weight of the self-doubt, debating between staying the course and begging Larry and Candy to take him back.

Ian's mind wandered. Jack was grown up now, ready for college. Michael and Candy were giving him advice. No point in college, they said. Only do what's good enough. Stick to the beaten path. Don't take risks. Set aside your dreams.

Ian stood up, inserted the key into the storage box door and opened it.

Metal boxes fell out. One hit him on the head and knocked him back. Another pair fell on his foot.

Ian reeled, a thread of blood trickling into his eye. He hopped on one foot as the sheer physical pain overwhelmed him. "Goddamnit!" he yelled. He limped back to the storage box and looked in. It was full from floor to ceiling with metal boxes, cement bags and blood-red bricks.

Where the hell did all this come from? And how am I going to get it out!

Ian leaned back and his chair squeaked. He was satisfied but hesitant to congratulate himself quite yet. He was making progress.

It took him three days, a scraped shin and three jammed fingers but he cleared the storage box. Inside now there was a hammock with a sleeping bag, a wobbly glass-topped desk, his fully-unrolled screen on its stand, an electric kettle and a box with his near-coffee and ramen.

But that was the easy part. The hard part was the robot. It wasn't coming together. His old prototypes were lined up behind his screen. They taunted him. All you can make is antiquated toys, they said. You're a washed up woodcarver making rough-hewn wooden ducks in your basement. That's all. You eat ramen, drink near-coffee and every shit burns.

But he wasn't giving up. It was momentum that kept him going, and the desperation of not knowing what else to try.

He started to make himself another cup of instant near-coffee but instead headed outside. It was only two steps from his chair to the door. He locked and closed it behind him, first patting his pocket to be sure he still had the key. *I'll read Jack a story and then straight back to work.*

A chill wind blew in the sub-level. He tightened the scarf around his neck and pulled his winter hat lower, over his ears. He sneezed, then sneezed again.

Upstairs, he tapped on the flimsy front door of his apartment and entered. Candy stood in the living room in see-through purple lingerie. Her pert, artificial breasts peeked through the sheer material. The top ended just at the top of her legs. She wore nothing else.

Ian stopped hard. The old bag still looked alright. But what was she doing dressed like this. The hairs stood up on his arms and the nerves in his legs tingled.

Candy stopped and stared at him, her eyes nonchalant but her body tense.

"Is that how you dress in front of the kids now?" Ian asked.

"Jack is in bed," she said.

"Where's my daughter?"

"Out."

"Where?" Ian demanded.

She shrugged her shoulders.

I'm gone a week and already this.

"Aren't you going to ask about Michael, too? Or is he a lost case to you?" Candy asked.

Ian said nothing and made for Jack's room instead. Before he turned the corner to enter the boy's room, he heard a voice. He reached the entrance, and stopped.

A soft light illuminated the boy. Jack was in bed, a smile on his face.

Larry sat next to him in his underwear, reading the boy a story.

Ian stood, dumb, and watched, unable to process it. His boy. Larry reading to him. Larry in his underwear. His wife practically naked. *What did I interrupt?*

"Daddy!" Jack jumped out of bed and ran to hug him.

Ian picked him up and hugged him, the boy's long legs dangling almost to the floor. "Whatcha been up to, kiddo?"

"Unc—" The boy paused. "Larry was reading me *Where the Wild Things Are*."

"Good choice, Larry," Ian said without looking at him.

"Ian—" Larry started.

Ian held a hand out to silence the tighty-whiteyed invader.

"You should come down and visit me sometime. I've been working on my robot."

"Is it ready yet?" Jack asked.

"It's a big job."

"How much longer will it take?"

"It'll go faster if you visit me every day!" He smiled and set Jack down. "You should get to bed now, kiddo."

"Aw, Dad, but we have to save the world! Just one game!"

"Let's do that tomorrow after school. You come down and get me," Ian said. His mind wandered to Larry. And who was Stacy with? He brooded on all the things that could go wrong for Stacy: mistreatment and emotional hurt, staying out all night and screwing school up further, rape, pregnancy, sex slavery, never

seeing her again. His forehead erupted in sweat and he felt the sudden urge to run out of there and call the girl. After great effort, he stopped himself.

"Dad?" Jack was still in his arms.

Ian set him down.

"I love you, Dad. Did you hear me?"

Ian smiled and the panic in him eased a tiny bit. "I love you too, buddy. Let me tuck you in." He shot a glare at Larry that, he hoped, would say everything he felt: get the hell away from the only child I have left!

And put some freaking pants on!

Larry hustled out of there and into the master bedroom. He closed the door behind him.

Ian tucked the boy in, a vision of Larry with Candy, Candy with Larry constantly intruding into his mind.

He soon found himself in the living room. Candy sat on the couch. "It's been going on awhile, has it? Not something new?" he asked her. He looked at the floor, his back half-turned to her. He hurt but he also felt disgust.

"Don't tell me you're surprised?" she asked.

Ian's lip curled. *Of course I'm surprised!* There was a lot he wanted to say but one thought in particular jumped to the top of his mind. He knew he should stop it. It wouldn't help. But it needed to be said. "You whore. Twenty years. I've taken great care of you. I gave you everything."

She put one foot under her leg and dangled the other one off the edge of the couch. Her legs weren't young anymore but they were still smooth and well-shaped.

"And for Larry? I gave you more credit than that."

She pressed her lips together and said nothing. She looked around the room then yawned. Still the foot dangled and shook from side to side.

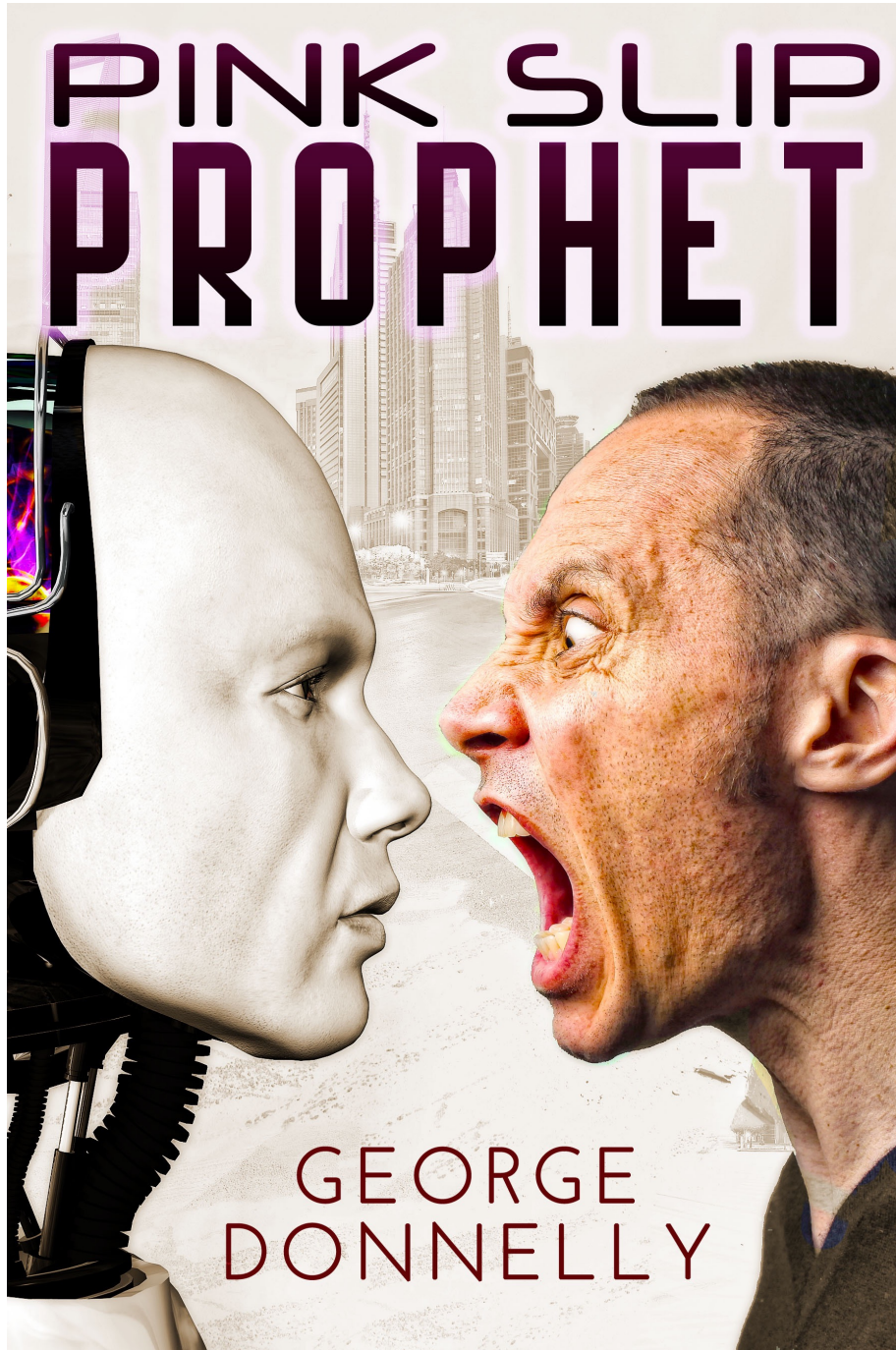
She's over me. Doesn't care about my hurt. That's what she wants me to think, at least. I'm not wanted here. I've been freaking replaced! Jack, though, he I can't abandon.

Ian plodded out of the apartment, closing the door gently behind him. Once at his workstation again, he put a full pot to heat for near-coffee and prepared to spend his last few dollars on off-the-shelf parts. It was time to build a prototype. This would be an all-nighter.

Then his energy collapsed. *I can't do this.* Upstairs, right now, his best friend was laying his wife of twenty years. His kids didn't need him. And he lived in a frigid basement closet. Who was he to invent something useful? He couldn't hold a job or keep a family. He laid his head down on the icy metal desk and closed his eyes to shut out his inadequacy, to go anywhere but here. To be anyone, but Ian Blake, Common Failure.

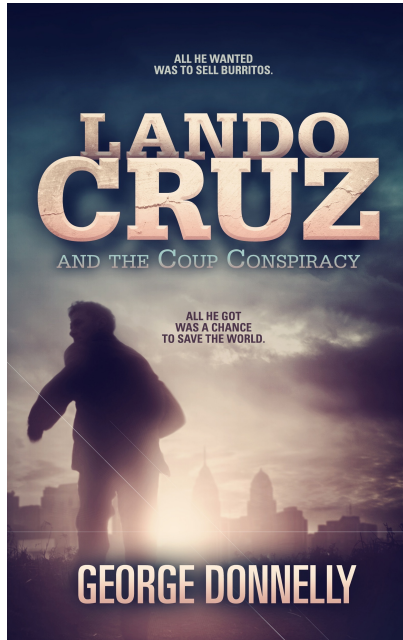
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About the Author

Former altar boy turned truancy fugitive, **George Donnelly** is an expat vagabond who prefers zombies to aliens but is primed for any meatspace apocalypse minus grey goo.

George discovered science fiction on July 4, 1980 at the Free Library of Philadelphia, Welsh Road Branch, when his dad got him an adult library card. Now a single dad with one son and two rescued cats, he's currently working on the next books in the Rork Sollix series.

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