

# CLAN WORLD



***Drone World***  
*The World Series Book 1*

A Science Fiction winner at the 2017 New England Book Festival.

Imagine a city with cameras on every corner, monitoring your every move. A world where no crime goes unpunished, no criminal can escape. No place you can hide.

I live in the safest city in the world . . . until I tried to leave it.

Read the first book in the “World” series before the main character entered Clan World, today!

## *Acknowledgement*

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# 1

## Entrance

The door opened with little resistance, and a blast of heat flowed over me. Whatever this world was, it was humid. Then I heard the call for help.

The girl's voice was distant and out of sight. She seemed panicked, but not as if she was under attack. Yet.

I stepped farther, and my foot immediately sank into something squishy and warm. *Please be mud.* I looked down and realized that I did not want to meet the animal that created this. I pulled my boot off and scraped what I could on a nearby tree. The air was muggy, and I felt sweat beading on my forehead. I watched as water dripped from the tree canopy down a vine to the ground. The trees were immense, bigger than anything from home. They literally blocked out the sky; I could barely make out the sun. The door I had entered through had become a wall of trees, a barrier no one could cross. I noticed light reflecting off the water through to my right and headed toward it, hoping it would take me out of the heat.

I thought I could hear the girl's voice again; this time her yells were louder.

A buzzing sailed overhead. I ducked, remembering the drones from my city that patrolled every inch of my home. This buzzing wasn't mechanical however, but rather organic. A winged insect settled on a nearby tree, its size surpassing any bug I had ever seen. Its antenna shook as a clear purple flowed in its transparent abdomen. I wasn't sure if it was its blood or something it had extracted from another animal. Either way, I didn't intend to get too close.

The vegetation was thick, and I wished I had something sharp to cut a path. I passed by a large tree and came up to a small lake. In the distance I could see a girl around my age, standing by the edge. She appeared to be pulling at her leg like it was glued to the shore. A clump of trees blocked her from my view as I navigated closer.

The surface of the lake was calm, like shining glass, and stretched a distance away from me. I looked at my reflection and noticed how filthy I was. My hair was matted and my face dirty. Since I had left home, there had been no time to wash up. There had been no time even to think. I knew that my mother might still be alive and that I had to get through this world to find her, no matter how long it took. Her face that had stared back at me on the computer screen was the same age I

had remembered as a kid. How was that possible? What did she look like now? Somehow, I would cross this world to find her.

If only I knew about her when Dad was still alive. Maybe we could have escaped the city together. I sighed. I knew it wasn't true, but somehow it felt better to believe that I could have saved my dad. I held the gold necklace in my hand, caressing the amber stone that hung from it. The necklace was the only thing I had left to remember him by.

I could see the girl more closely now. She was about my height, with short-cropped black hair and toned arms. Although I did not belong in this place, she obviously did, by her strength and attire.

The water rippled. I reached down and found a long branch. It looked like her leg was trapped in the mud, and she needed something to help prop herself out. I waved to her, and she smiled. But as the water gurgled in front of us, her expression changed to fear.

"Look out!" She pointed to the lake.

The water exploded, and a face full of teeth erupted into the air. I fell back as my weapon went sailing from my hand. My clumsiness probably saved my life. As I fell, the creature missed biting my neck and instead flew over my head and into the reeds behind me. I tried to stand, but my foot was stuck tight in the mud, so I tried untying my shoe to pull my foot up. Before I could reach down, I was frozen in place by the weird sight.

The fish that had flown into the reeds was now walking through the mud. Walking. Like on four legs. It was almost cute with its body shifting back and forth on its legs. If only its mouth didn't have a pile of razor-sharp teeth. They clicked over and over as its eyes focused on taking a chunk out of my arm. I looked around for a weapon. a rock, a piece of wood, anything. I ripped something from the ground to my right, but I was unable to take my gaze off this walking fish. I pulled my weapon forward. *A cattail? Great — I'll beat it with the brown fuzz,* I thought sarcastically.

Five minutes after entering this world, and I was already going to die. The fish lowered itself to the ground, looking to pounce, readying itself to leap at my throat.

A foot kicked the fish in the side, sending it sailing back into the lake.

"Nasty little things, aren't they? Hope you don't mind. You looked like you could use a hand or a foot." She giggled. "I'm Jinn." She reached for me. Her hands were rough and calloused.

"Thanks. I'm Pene. I would have been in a lot of trouble if you hadn't arrived." She pulled me, and it loosened my foot out from the mud. It felt heavy, and I scraped it again on the nearby grass.

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. I went to get water for my canteen. I got stuck in the sinking mud. Thanks to the branch that you tossed, I could pry myself out. Ten minutes from now and I would have sunk under and suffocated. No thanks to my brother. I must have yelled his name a dozen times for help." She smiled, and I immediately took a liking to her. Her eyes were dark, like her hair.

"Sounds like we're even. We both needed each other."

Jinn nodded. "What are you doing out here? We tend to avoid this area. It's on the outermost boundaries." She looked at my dirty clothes. "Let's get you cleaned up." We walked to rock adjacent to the lake, which avoided the mud. I wiped cool water on my face to remove a layer of grime. Jinn watched me closely. "Are you from a village from the west?" She pointed in the direction I had entered in.

"Far west," I replied, but truthfully, my home was likely different than anything in this place.

"Are you on your own?" Then, without waiting for my answer, she said, "You can join us, if you want. After all, you helped save my life. We're making our trek to the Cradle for the annual pilgrimage." She looked at me with welcoming eyes. Although I had no idea what she was talking about, I figured my best bet was to follow her. She had already saved me once; I would likely need her help again as I tried to figure out her world.

"I'd like that." I hoisted my pack on my shoulder and followed behind her. We crossed around the lake and walked up toward a trail that fed into a clearing.

"We're going meet a lot of people over the next few days. The trek is popular with a lot of clans. This will be my second visit. Have you ever been?"

"I haven't," I answered truthfully. "What is it like?" I asked, hoping to draw a blueprint of what this world was like. It seemed so organic after my home's sterile mechanical environment. This world seemed very foreign and primal. I wanted to get through it as quickly as possible.

"The Cradle is vast, while its history is shrouded in mystery. No one knows who or when it was created. Just that our birthplace was more advanced than what it is now." Jinn became animated as she continued with her story.

"More advanced? What do you mean?"

The Cradle's tall tower reaches into the sky. There is a sealed door at the base that has never been opened. The elders believe that the interior must contain the origin of our existence." "Why don't you just break in and find out what is behind the door?" I asked.

Jinn tilted her head with a puzzled grin. “Wow, I thought everyone as they grew up was told the story of the Cradle.” She looked at me strangely, and I realized I had better keep my questions to a minimum. I didn’t want to elicit too much attention.

“Listen, I’ve heard the stories,” I lied, “I just wanted to hear your version.”

“Okay. That’s fine.” Jinn seemed relieved. “Everyone learns that the Cradle is made of a strange material that prevents any physical force from prying open the entrance door. It seems to absorb any motion used against it. No code will open the entry. They’ve tried everything from cars to weapons. They even used explosives, and it had absolutely no effect. The doors are unmoved, the same as when the Cradle was first discovered. People have tried to scale it to find a weakness higher up. Nothing will stick to it, you can’t nail into the material to allow someone to scale upward. Whatever secrets it holds, no one has been able to get inside.” It sounded like this world had plenty of secrets, not so different from mine. We ascended a small rise, and the lake disappeared behind us.

“So how did you get here?” I asked. Rather than answer me, Jinn just pointed to her right. I looked at an old convertible which reminded me of a vehicle that my grandfather had driven when he was a kid. Fossil fuels probably ran the engine. How backward this world must be! This old technology would have looked out of place in my world.

“Where did you find her?”

I turned to the voice. He was tall, with long black hair and some grease under his right eye. He was thin, but the wrench he held was big, so I knew he was strong. His eyes were penetrating, as if they could see right through me. He made me shiver. I took an immediate dislike to him.

“Tuko, this is Pene. Pene, this is Tuko, my brother.” I stuck my hand out, but he left it hanging and waved me off.

“Whatever. She just appeared?” He wiggled his fingers as if I had appeared out of thin air.

“No,” I answered defensively. “I’m travelling. Your sister saved me from a...?” I looked at Jinn.

“Piscice,” she replied.

“They’re a nasty piece of work,” Tuko replied. *Funny, I was thinking the exact same thing about him.* “Just be glad you didn’t meet a large dinosaur.”

*Dinosaur. What was he talking about? My thoughts drifted back to a bank of video cameras I had watched previously. Had I already seen this place?*

Jinn interrupted my train of thought. “Pene is going to hitch a ride with us to the Cradle.”

“Really? We don’t need another passenger. Is she going to pay her way?” Tuko gave an annoying head tilt that swung his hair around. I had no idea what was valuable here, and I doubted anything in my backpack would be worth something to him. Jinn punched Tuko on the arm.

“She saved my life. I got stuck in the mud and would have drowned. No thanks to you — I must have called you over and over.”

“Are you being serious?” Tuko looked concerned.

“Yes!” She leaned in closer to Tuko. “We’re going the same way, and we have room.”

“Chill. I’m just joking around.” Tuko relaxed and wiped the grease off his face with a rag. “I’m driving. Hope you can handle riding in the back, Pene.”

“No problem,” I answered quickly. Better to have him in front of me, where I could watch him.

“Good,” Jinn answered. “I was afraid we weren’t going to make Trall when we had car trouble. If we gun it now, we should get there by dusk.”

“What’s in Trall?” I immediately broke my rule of not asking too many questions. I leaned back in the seat, trying to like casual.

“The Gathering,” Tuko answered as he turned the engine and eased the car out into a dirt trail. “Before clans drive to the Cradle, there is one town selected each year for speeches and discussions. People listen to the experts and their guesses about who created the Cradle. I think it’s an excuse for the adults to get drunk.”

“It’s the usual crackpots,” Jinn commented, her hand trailing in the breeze from the front passenger seat. “The clan leaders will go on about aliens or about a comet or about an upheaval from under the ground. Everyone will say their theory is the right one, and no one will agree because there is no way to prove who’s right. I find it interesting to listen to everyone’s theories about what created the Cradle. Maybe we have figured out the answer and just don’t know it yet.

If only they knew what existed outside of their world. The mystery of the Cradle might be insignificant compared to the real secrets. Tuko stared at me as if he was trying to read my mind.

“What’s with the look? You think you understand the Cradle’s puzzle?” he asked.

“No,” I answered, clearing my thoughts. I wasn’t sure if he would believe me anyway. I was too afraid that I would change things in this world by telling them what was really going on. “I’m just tired of all the theories. We don’t know anything.” I slumped back into my seat, trying to look disinterested. Tuko looked at me and didn’t seem too convinced.

“You talk a good game, but I think you are hiding something. Why did we find you in the middle of nowhere with no vehicle? Were you looking for someone?” His deep, penetrating eyes burrowed into my mind. I became uncomfortable until he glanced back to the road.

“Don’t mind him. He’s suspicious of everyone.” Jinn looked back, trying to reassure me, but I could tell she had questions of her own. “Why are you alone? Where is your clan?”

*Again, with the clan thing. I must keep to the truth. Harder to remember lies. I felt like this had become my mantra.*

“My father is dead. My mother disappeared when I was young, but I think—” I thought of the computer monitor in the command center “—that she is still alive. I’m trying to find her.” Jinn immediately looked uncomfortable, as if she wasn’t expecting my answer.

“Wow. Sorry, didn’t need to pry. I was only expecting a fight with your parents, which made you run away from home,” Jinn replied.

I gazed into the rear-view mirror, and Tuko’s face looked sympathetic. Almost.

“It’s okay. I’ve learned a lot about her over the last few days,” I answered truthfully.

“Do you know where your mother is?” Jinn asked. I shook my head. I didn’t know where she was, but I would cross this world until I found her.

“Who is your clan?” I asked, changing the subject to take the focus off me. The two of them looked at each other but remained silent. *Hey, they started this.* “Don’t feel like you have to share on my account,” I said a little roughly. Tuko shook his head at Jinn, as if to withhold his permission. She disregarded him and leaned back to me.

“We are Armor clan. Our clan has a lineage — a lot of the elders, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and parents have served on the council. Our clan is currently in charge of the agricultural committee. Our land is fed by the decisions that our dad makes. We are considered protectors.”

“That’s good then, your dad has power to help.”

“And it puts a lot of pressure on the two of us to follow in our parents’ footsteps,” Jinn added. “There is an expectation that when we become of age we replace them on council.” “Like that’s ever going to happen.” Tuko swirled his hand to mock the idea.

“Bet a lot of your friends would like to be in your shoes,” I added enthusiastically.

“Hardly,” Tuko sneered, “it’s a life-killer. All responsibility, no fun. People die if you make the wrong choices. I want no part of it.”

“The two of us are not traveling with our parents to the Cradle. This trip is kind of our time alone to decide whether we want our futures to be with the council or to make a different choice,” Jinn offered.

“Which would be?”

Not a clue. Pretty much anything but the council,” Tuko replied.

“I’m not as sure as my brother, Pene, but I do have reservations about what my choice should be. Having your future predetermined for you feels forced. I’m hoping our road trip will give me some perspective to make my decision.”

“While I have already decided,” Tuko added.

In a way, despite their lack of technology, their choices weren’t so different from mine. Before my dad died, he made me promise to follow the order and security that the drones provided. My home was controlled by adults that decided our decisions. In this place, the adults controlled your choices as well. Maybe Jinn and Tuko needed this opportunity to decide what was right for them.

“I hope you figure out what to do,” I said to Jinn.

“So, do I,” she responded, and her body shook as we drove through a pothole in the road. She looked at the sky. “It will be dark soon. I’m glad we’re close to Trall.”

“Sounds exciting.” But I wasn’t sure if it would be. I was worried about how I’d blend in a crowd. I felt like I was pushing it now with two people.

“It is if you like long, boring speeches about how our choices can change the world.” Tuko gave a kingly wave, if he was speaking to the masses.

“Keep your eyes on the road, loser. Before you hit a bump and knock us into a ditch,” Jinn warned. Then he did hit a bump, and she almost fell back onto me.

“Watch out, hate to see you fall out of the car,” he mocked.

I rolled my eyes. *This guy thinks he’s all that. I’m surprised his inflated ego doesn’t weigh him down. How could someone as sweet as Jinn have such a jerk brother?*

“Are we there yet?” I asked and realized that we were approaching a large wooden wall.

“Look in front of us.”

“Is it...?” I started to ask. Before they could answer, the ground shook, almost upending the car off the road. A flash of fire and smoke exploded from the ground far to our right and extended to the sky. Tuko gave me a crooked smile as he regained control.

“This is Trall. If you haven’t been to a Gathering before, prepare to see the spectacle of a lifetime!”

# 2

## The Gathering

As I stared up, dozens of leering faces peered down at me. None of them looked friendly. There was a wooden railing along the top of the wall where the guards walked along the platform. Past the faces, guards with weapons marched in both directions.

The wall that surrounded the town was almost a hundred feet tall. No person or animal was going to climb up without being discovered. The wall was made of timbers lashed tightly together with rope, with cloth or wood chips stuffed into the gaps. Tuko waved his hand, and the gates opened to let his car in. The earth in front of the main gate had a huge hole in it, like an underground bomb had exploded. The town was a fortress: wire fences protected the upper edges while the walls were guarded by dirty teenagers. I wasn't sure if they were trying to keep people in or something big out.

"What caused the explosion?" I asked as we entered.

"Probably an animal — they have explosives around the wall in random places to keep the dinosaurs out. Some unlucky beast must have met its maker," answered Tuko.

*Again, with the dinosaur reference. Did this place take a step back in time? How do these teenagers actually know what a dinosaur would look like? Maybe humans aren't the most dangerous animal here?*

As the car drove forward, the town looked bleak and uninviting. Long buildings lined the street and graffiti screamed out across several walls. One building had a huge hole, and the interior looked pillaged and empty. People turned and looked at us as we passed. Most eyed us suspiciously. Suddenly I could see the benefits of a drone-watched city. My face must have given me away, because Tuko looked at me and laughed. "Guess this is your first visit?" "That apparent?" I nodded.

"You look scared, like these guys," Tuko waved his hand to the crowd, "are going to eat you."

"Well, they are not very welcoming. Did we do something to make them angry?"

"No. They treat all visitors the same. They're nervous. It's unusual to have so many clans in one place. Although a lot of the clans are allies, there are plenty that don't get along. They're just worried there will be trouble tonight at the Gathering." I listened and tried to fight back my questions. There was so much of this world that I just didn't know.

"We never asked you, Pene, which clan are you with?" Jinn asked innocently. My heart skipped, and my mind raced. If I didn't respond quickly, they would think I was lying or had something to hide.

"Droniums," I answered; the first image that came to mind was the thousands of drones that had watched my city daily.

"Never heard of them," Jinn answered, but Tuko gave me a weird look. I had to distract them.

"What's that?" I pointed to a large field and amphitheater. There were thousands of people and hundreds of vehicles swarming around this area.

Our destination," Jinn pointed. "Tonight, there will be clan leaders who will talk about our origins and what we hope to find during our pilgrimage to the Cradle. Kids will yell and scream behind the leaders they like and boo the ones they think are full of crap."

"And lots of people will get drunk, there will be fights, and someone always gets hurt," Tuko added. "It's a big party..."

"That no one wants to miss," Jinn finished. As our car got closer, we began to slow down as traffic got worse. There was a huge field of vehicles. Some adults tried to direct cars to park, but it was mostly

disorganized. We slowed down as our car passed a group of motorcycles. They were mostly teenage boys, screaming and yelling. The party had obviously begun for them.

“Hey ladies, why don’t you ditch the loser—” pointing to Tuko “—and come party with some real boys.” Jinn made a hand gesture that I wasn’t familiar with, but it sent the boys into a laughing fit.

“The Chycle clan are usually pigs,” Jinn commented. “I’m surprised those gearheads look at anything besides their motorcycles.” I scanned the group. The bikes were in various stages of repair; some were well maintained while others looked like they might fall apart on the next pothole. None of the riders were people I would want to hang with.

A heavy truck drove by with a long trailer bed; boys and girls sat silently on its edges. Each clan member had their faces painted white with black markings. Some were painted scars, stitches, or ghastly skull faces. Their wordless demeanor made them seem more dangerous than the rowdy boys before them.

“Who are they?” I asked as they stared back at me.

“Zombie clan,” Jinn answered. “They don’t say much, and part of their membership includes the stipulation that once you join the clan, you never leave. I’d stay clear of them.”

I nodded and then squinted at the group beyond Zombie clan. These clan members rode in wagons pulled by fierce beasts. The animals had a tiger’s head and legs but a hippo’s body. They were strong beasts and I would not want to anger one. Other clans gave them a wide berth as they marched by.

“They own the place,” Tuko said with reverence.

“With animals like that, they probably should,” I commented to no one in particular. A beast stared at me as we passed, and I could feel its intentions as it licked its lips. The rider pulled on its reins, and the clan passed by us on their way to the stadium. Jinn pulled the car into a row and parked. We got out and started following the crowd on the long walk to the stadium.

There were kids, adults, families everywhere. For the most part, everyone seemed in a good mood, although I could see some jostling between certain clans. Ahead of us, I could see a group of tall spears with some type of crest at the top. Tuko seemed to recognize the emblem and raced ahead. I could see him tapping the shoulder of someone tall and lean.

“Friends of his?” I asked Jinn.

“Tuko wishes they were his friends. He idolizes the Hunter clan. They control those animals we just passed. Their emblem stands for the strength of the land.” She spoke in a deep voice that told me she was mocking them. “They are full of themselves. They kill for sport and not for food.” I watched as Tuko put his arm around the taller teen and motioned toward us. The guy had a sharp, angular face with dirty red hair. I had a feeling I was going to like him even less than I liked Tuko.

“Abraham, you know my sister.” Tuko pointed. Jinn waved and moved off to the side, not interested in talking to him. “And this is my sister’s friend, Pene.” I smiled while Abraham frowned at me.

“Who’s she with?” he grunted.

“Hello, I’m right here,” I answered, not appreciating being ignored.

“Droniums,” Tuko replied as if he didn’t hear me.

“Never heard of them. Must be a minor clan,” Abraham said, already dismissing me.

“Guess we all can’t have big heads like you,” I mocked. What did it matter what these stupid boys thought? All they cared about was themselves.

“What did you say?” he asked with rage entering his voice.

“I said,” forgetting that I should not draw attention, “that you seem very full of yourself.”

“Who do you think you are?” Abraham came at me, getting too close into my personal space. That infuriated me, and I shoved him back.

“I’m someone who doesn’t like you in my face. And I don’t need a wild animal to prove how important I am.”

Abraham's face turned red. "Watch what you say around me. I'd hate for one of my animals to get loose and hurt you." He pointed at one of the creatures.

"I'd rather deal with that animal. It at least has some brains," I countered. I realized that each time I opened my mouth, I was making it worse for myself. But I just couldn't stop. My mouth had a mind of its own and I had pushed too far. A hand came in between us.

"Isn't your father calling you?" Jinn motioned behind us. A large, stern man was watching us. Abraham glared at me and then walked back to his clan. He spoke to his father, pointed at me, and then they moved toward the coliseum.

"Nice move, Pene. He's the son of one of the most powerful clans. You got skill," Tuko jeered.

"Shut up, Tuko. Abraham is a jerk and you know it," Jinn interrupted. "Why don't you go ahead of us and we'll join you inside?"

"Whatever." He dismissed us and walked on ahead.

"Thanks." I smiled. "I don't know why I let him get under my skin. Maybe I just can't stand authority."

"Or guys with huge egos." We laughed, and for the first time while in this world, I felt like I had made a friend. As we walked on, the sea of people became more congested. The excitement was palpable. As we entered the coliseum, I looked up and saw thousands of people in the stands. There were flags everywhere, waving in the night breeze: emblems of Shields, Tigers, Dragons, and other creatures I didn't recognize (and hoped I'd never meet), which must symbolize the different clans. A large stage was in the center of the stadium and several adults in robes were milling around.

"That's the elders," Jinn pointed, "getting ready to tell us about their stories of creation." She looked around, and her eyes stopped on one of flags. "Did you want to sit with us, or do you see your clan emblem?"

I pretended to look around. "Nah, I'll come sit with you." I acted like I couldn't see my family flag.

Jinn grabbed my hand, and we climbed to the top of the stands. All around us people were talking, some excited but almost all engaged in conversation. Most spoke while facing the stage in anticipation of the clan leaders arriving. We reached the stands where Jinn's family crest of armor moved in the breeze. She waved to several people, and I saw Tuko a couple of rows lower, talking to another boy. The noise was deafening, so I couldn't talk to Jinn without screaming. Instead I used my time to survey the crowd.

A large bonfire was burning on the ground to the right of us. From the smoke, I smelled sage. Jinn watched me suck in the air.

"They are going overboard with the incense tonight — trying to make us all remember our old clan members. Armor clan uses a strong charcoal incense, what about yours?"

"Metallic," I answered, absently thinking of all the drones that flew around my home. I almost regretted my answer, but Jinn didn't seem concerned with my response.

Below us, many teenagers and adults were in attendance, but I didn't see any young kids. I assumed tonight's topics were not for the very young. Some groups looked alike as if entire families were sitting together.

Down below us, I thought I could see Abraham having a heated conversation with his father. His temper didn't just go off on me; he gestured wildly as if trying to make a point. Then they stopped talking and Abraham scanned the crowd as if he was looking for someone or something. As he gazed toward our area, I ducked.

*I'm so stupid. I'm sure he can't see me in the crowd, and even if he could, who cares?*

"Can you hear me?" A deep voice boomed through a loudspeaker. His voice resonated, and all the voices around us went silent. "I said — CAN YOU HEAR ME!" The stadium erupted with a resounding "YES!" Cheers filled the air and drowned out all conversations. The speaker was tall and bald, and the video screens flicked on to show his smiling face. He thrived on the energy of the audience as he let the crowd chant for a few more seconds before beckoning for everyone to fall silent.

“When I was a boy,” he began to sermonize, “I came to this very stadium. I listened to many great men and women who explained their theories of the creation of the Cradle. And I said to myself, Self,” the crowd erupted with laughter, “you need to learn from these people. You need to study their theories, make your own decisions, and then teach your beliefs to your children. These ideas must live on!” The crowd roared its approval. He paced on the stage and soaked up the crowd’s cheers. I looked around and a flash of red made me blink for a second.

I marveled at how focused the crowd was on the speaker. I wanted to nudge Jinn to ask who he was but decided against it. It would create more doubt with her if I didn’t know.

“I am here to tell you that this year you will hear a new theory on the creation of the Cradle. It will challenge your beliefs, stretch your imagination, and make you wonder if everything you believed was wrong. Are you ready to hear it?” “Yes!” the crowd yelled in unison.

“I can’t hear you. ARE. YOU. READY?” he yelled again.

“Luther! Luther! Luther!” the crowd chanted. He had them hanging on his every word.

“Isn’t he amazing?” Jinn poked me. I smiled back and watched a crowd enamored with his every word. Whoever this Luther was, he knew how to work a room. I watched the Hunter clan below, beating their chests and trying to make the most noise.

Whoever this man was, he had an impact on these people. They listened. Back home, no one had the charisma to hold thousands and thousands of people’s attention. You did what the drones directed because you thought it was the right thing to do. You believed that whoever was controlling the drones had your best interests at heart. Well, we had been wrong about that.

“I now share with you this new theory of creation and let you make your own decisions.” He brought his hands down and everyone took this motion to mean they should be quiet. I was distracted by a red light dancing along the stage. Everyone leaned forward, hanging on his every word.

“I have waited a long time to share this news with you. Many of your leaders have told me not to talk about this tonight.” Some in the audience booed. “But knowledge is not meant to be hidden, locked away. It is meant to be shared, to make you think in new and interesting ways. Tonight, I will challenge each and every one of you!” He pointed and each one of us felt he was motioning just at us. “Are you ready to change the world?”

An enthusiastic “Yes” rocked the stadium and even I was caught up in the moment. What secret would he share? The red light flashed again, and when I turned I could see nothing behind me but a few other clans.

A shot roared out and brought my attention to the front. Luther stared up at the audience, his voice silent for the first time. His eyes were unblinking, and even from this distance I could see a red stream of blood dripping down his chest. He fell backward, his sightless eyes looking up into the sky.

The crowd was shocked into silence, unable to believe what they had seen. I could hear sobbing in front of me.

“The shot came from that direction!” a teenager pointed up at us as all heads turned in unison.

“I think it was her!” I looked down and saw Abraham pointing behind me. I looked around, but no one was there. I turned back to him. He was pointing to me.

# 3

## Escape

I felt sheer terror when I looked down at people who were going to hurt me. I could see it on their faces, I could feel it in the air. Instead of humidity, it was hatred weighing me down. Before I could defend myself, hands grabbed me from behind and lifted me into the air.

“I didn’t do it! I didn’t kill him!” I replied, but no one was listening. I was carried down swiftly through the hands of the crowd, like ants carrying its meal.

“Pene!” I could barely hear Jinn screaming from behind me as her voice was drowned out by the crowd. No one was listening to me, but the mob needed someone to take its anger out on. People were rough, and I felt several hands scratch my arms and back. It was like a ride, except I knew at the end, Abraham and his beasts would give me little time to defend myself. I glanced behind me and saw that Jinn was pursuing closely. I was lucky that the Hunter clan never received me.

The east wall exploded, and rubble flew through the crowd, sending the stadium into pandemonium. People were struck by large rocks, and others were trampled under the crowd. But what came through the wall increased the death count. It was a dinosaur — straight out of a textbook. Now the walls outside the city made sense. It wasn’t other clans this town was afraid of — it was this gigantic beast.

The dinosaur had a huge jaw with multiple rows of teeth and four fully developed legs that brought it onto the crowd in seconds. It tore into people like they were water. All I could see was a spray of blood and bodies. People had dropped me to escape and I tried to avoid their feet as I got up.

“Pene! Come on!” Jinn grabbed my arm and dragged me away from the carnage.

“I didn’t do it! I didn’t shot Luther!” I yelled back to her over the stadium’s screams.

“Of course you didn’t. Abraham is a jerk and a liar. We’ll sort this out later.” Jinn looked around and saw someone chewed to pieces by the dinosaur. An arm flew by. “Assuming we survive.” She pulled on my hand, and we ran as fast as we could away from the slaughter. The stage began to fall and crashed to the ground. My ears were hurting from all of the screaming. “Where’s Tuko?” I asked, not seeing him around us.

“Don’t worry about him. He’ll meet us at the car.”

A woman screamed behind us as one of the beasts from the Hunter clan attacked her.

“What’s happening? Is the dinosaur causing the Hunter clan animals to attack us?” I asked Jinn as we tried to weave through the crowd.

“The animals are only tame when their masters are controlling them. People are dying, Pene. Some of the Hunter clan is dead and their animals are freed. Between the dinosaur, the beasts, and the stampeding crowd, more people are going to die. We’ll be two of them if we don’t get to the exit soon.” Our movement began to slow as thousands of people were trying to leave through the exits all at once. It became so packed in the crowd, I thought I was going to be crushed. Elbows and heads were swinging in every direction. Nobody was listening, and it was every person for themselves. In the bleachers ahead, I could see the Hunter clan with two of their beasts. Abraham was in front.

There she is,” he mouthed at me from the middle of the crowd.

*People are dying all around us, and he’s fixated on me.*

The crowd spread away from us, trying to avoid the Hunter’s beasts. The crowd spread away from us, trying to avoid them. One of the Hunter clan beasts hugged the ground and looked like it was going

to pounce on us. There were still too many people to allow us to move forward and a push from behind prevented me from turning back. I felt like I was moving in slow motion. I watched helplessly as the beast flew through the air to fix its jaws on my throat.

A huge leg swatted the beast in the air, and it was flung to the next set of bleachers. The dinosaur leapt with incredible speed and bit the head off the clan animal. Abraham and his clan began throwing their spears at the dinosaur's hide. Some bounced off, but several stuck in its side. It roared with pain, but I had the feeling they were more annoying the dinosaur than hurting it.

"Don't we have better weapons against that thing?" I yelled.

"Not allowed in the stadium — clans can't bring any guns or weapons. The Hunter clans have to keep their spears to restrain their beasts," Jinn replied as we made it to the exit. We ran through the archway, and I didn't turn back to see if the dinosaur was pursuing us. *What caused it to enter the stadium in the first place?*

As we stepped outside, vehicles were careening everywhere. People were screaming and kids were jumping on anything that drove by. If the dinosaur didn't kill us, a crazy driver would. Jinn was pulling my arm so hard, I thought I was going to trip and fall in the mud. We veered right, narrowly missing a truck full of boys driving at breakneck speed. Their white faces with black makeup stared back at me and they didn't look friendly. We kept running and behind us I could hear motorbikes revving. They didn't seem to have the same urgency as the others. For a second, I thought I saw one of their arms pointed toward us.

"Pene! Pay attention! Once we find our vehicle, we'll get back to the main gates. It's not safe in the town as long as that beast is loose."

"How did it get here in the first place? Those fences looked pretty strong."

"I don't know. Nothing has ever happened like this before. Maybe too many guards were at the stadium instead of watching the town."

A motorcycle drove by very closely and I felt an arm brush against me.

"Watch it, Gearhead!" Jinn yelled at the biker. He came to a stop and looked back at us. I turned around and saw another biker coming toward us as well. We ducked around another moving truck and tried to lose him. The biker drove along the other side of the vehicle while the first one watched us and was directing the others. I felt like a sheep about to be herded by a pack of wolves.

"We got a problem. Those guys are after us."

"I know, Pene. They think you killed Luther. Probably feel they can get a reward for your capture."

"But I didn't do it!" I yelled in frustration while avoiding another car.

"We know that, but Abraham's group holds a lot of sway. We need to get out of here fast." She looked around. "Come on, let's get a lift. It's going our way." A large vehicle that looked like a supersized tow truck was driving slowly enough to catch a ride. We jumped on the back with a couple of others and my hand grabbed a hook on a metal chain.

"Won't the driver kick us off?" I asked.

"Not right away; he's trying to get out of here quickly too. We just need to get closer to our car."

A third biker began circling us on the truck, like a shark ready to take a bite out of a wounded animal. They were getting closer to us. Jinn threw a broken chain link at one of the bikers, who evaded it easily. The driver of the truck started shaking the vehicle back and forth, like a dog trying to shake off its fleas.

"I'm sorry I got you into this. You don't have to get hurt because of me," I said.

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You didn't do anything. When we get out of this, we'll sort this out. My father will help.” She grabbed my hand and I knew no matter what happened in this world, I truly had made a friend.

A hook came sailing through the air to the right of me, landing on the truck bed. A long rope extended from the hook back to one of the bikers. He was fishing and I didn't want to be caught. Before he could reel it back, I grabbed the hook which was lying sideways on the truck and connected it to the tow chain. The tow truck made a right turn and since the biker didn't let go of his end quickly enough, he was flipped into the dirt. One down.

Another biker came around the truck and lurched toward me. His arm missed, but before he could grab at me again, Jinn kicked at his bike, making him veer right. Unfortunately for the biker, another vehicle was coming toward him and clipped the bike. The biker tried to recover, but it was too late, and he went tumbling to the ground.

“This is fun,” Jinn yelled. “I could do this all day.” Then the tow truck stopped. The driver got out of his cab. He was a big guy with a dirty cut-off shirt.

“Get off my truck,” he growled. “I have enough problems without being target practice because of you girls.”

“Come on,” Jinn said, “our vehicle is just over there.” She pointed, but the driver didn't even look.

“I'm not going anywhere until the two of you get off!” We looked at each other. We had no time to argue with this guy. We jumped off the tow truck, and the driver got back in and sped away. Now we were defenseless against the bikers and our car was far away.

“Get away from me, Jinn. They don't want you,” I begged.

“They'll want me after I knock a couple more bikers to the ground.” She grinned. She was about to get her wish. In the distance, I could see four motorcycles closing on us.

“Come on!” I yelled, and we weaved back and forth between several vehicles, trying to get lost in the commotion. The Chycle clan were relentless and focused on us as a target.

“We can't be far,” Jinn called as the bikers shrank the distance in seconds. They were herding us from three directions, only leaving us one way to go. Then one of the bikers was run down by a car.

“Get in,” Tuko commanded. The biker lay on the ground ten feet away shaking his head. The bike was crushed under Tuko's wheels as he backed over it. We jumped into the convertible without needing any more encouragement.

“About time,” Jinn said without cracking a smile.

“You're welcome,” Tuko answered with his usual stern expression. “But I don't think the Chycle clan have given up yet.” He was right; we had taken one down, but two more had joined their group.

“Don't suppose you can talk to them,” I said to Tuko.

“No. That clan acts first and asks questions later. They'll keep coming until they get you or we get them.” He revved his engine, and for once I felt like he was on my side. Something whizzed by me and was almost impaled in my chest.

“Watch out, Pene!” Tuko screamed. “My sister and I are risking our lives. How about protecting yourself?” He handed me a long wrench, and I figured it would make a great defensive weapon. I was right. About ten seconds later, a chain with a hook clanged onto the passenger door. I batted it away before it could grip.

“Nice.” Jinn nodded. I smiled and then regretted it. While I was silently congratulating myself, another hook had latched itself onto the trunk of the car. I bashed at the metal around the hook, but just made it a tighter fit.

“Watch the car!” Tuko yelled. I gave him a look that said *Really?* But I did feel a little bad. “I've got this!” He pointed ahead, and I nodded. He gunned the engine and headed straight for one of the parking area's entrance gates. He pulled through and then turned hard to the right, pulling the chain around a pole. The chain held fast to the pole and was yanked out of the car. The biker wasn't so lucky and didn't let go in time. He flew off his bike into the field while his bike drove a few feet, teetered, and fell over.

Oh yah!" Tuko raised his hand in the air.

"Way to go, bro!" Jinn screamed. I smiled until I saw what was coming.

"More bikers!" I pointed, but that was an understatement. There were dozens on dirt bikes, choppers, and several four-wheelers that looked like modified Jeeps. There was no way we could evade that many clan members, even in this chaos. They had the exit to the town blocked off. I had to let my new friends off the hook. This wasn't their fight.

"We can't go that way." Tuko stated the obvious, watching the bikers form a wall, daring us to pass.

"We could go back the way we came," I joked, pointing to the terror at the stadium.

"Clever idea, Pene." Jinn slapped me on the back, apparently taking me seriously.

"Let's go!" Tuko slammed the accelerator so hard, I almost fell out of the car. Teach me to not be serious! We raced back toward the stadium, going against traffic as everyone was escaping in the opposite direction. I saw worried faces running by. I didn't know what was worse, the pursuing bikers or the dinosaur. Then the car sputtered, slowed down, and stalled.

"What the—?" Jinn asked.

"I don't know!" Tuko yelled back in frustration. "You know this car breaks down all the time!" He tried turning over the engine again. It made a weak sound and did not start. "Stay in the car! I'll fix this!" He popped the hood, and his head disappeared into the engine. The distance between the bikers and the car shrank. They would be on us in seconds. I had to draw their attention. I took my wrench and stepped out of the car.

"Where are you going?" Jinn asked.

"I'm making a stand," I answered and watched as the bikers approached like a flock of hungry crows. The bikes at the head of the group were in the shape of a "V" and they coasted to a stop in a semicircle around us. I expected a group of angry teenagers waving weapons and yelling curses at me. This was worse. They were silent and made no motion to grab me other than to surround us. They didn't move forward until the lead biker stepped off his bike. He was a tall adult, maybe late forties, with a square jaw and scar above his right eye. He gave no doubt that he was their leader.

"You have something of ours," he said, looking at Jinn. He didn't even look at me. I felt I was some possession to own.

"There is nothing here that is yours, Dero!" Jinn spat on the ground. *Okay — she obviously knows him. That could be good or bad.* Tuko slammed the hood down but didn't say anything. Dero casually walked around the car, edging closer to me.

"You heard Abraham. She killed Luther!" He pointed straight at me, but he stared at Jinn. "She will go before the council for her sentence."

"Abraham is full of crap. The shooter was farther back and had some type of rifle. Pene doesn't even have a weapon. How did she shoot Luther, with her finger?" Jinn sneered.

"That is up to the council to decide. When the son of a chief elder accuses someone of a crime, no other evidence is needed."

"I'm the daughter of a chief elder, and I say she didn't do it! Guess we cancel each other out." Dero looked behind us, and several of his clan got off their bikes.

"Whoa, Dero, chill out, man," Tuko said, leaning casually against the car. His motion look forced, as if he was trying to look relaxed but didn't feel it.

"Whoa nothing, Tuko, you're backing the wrong side. Step aside, and no one has to get hurt." "Do I get any say in this?" I asked Dero as he looked at me for the first time.

"No," he answered and reached for me with his right arm. I pulled the wrench from behind my back and slammed it into his side. I heard the satisfying sound of a rib crunching. He grunted and cursed under his breath but stopped moving forward. He looked behind him. "Get her," he snapped

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at the others. I held my wrench for them to see as they approached cautiously. I aimed to get at least more one blow in before they took me.

Then the wall of the stadium exploded. A boulder sailed through the sky and crushed two bikers and a motorcycle. Everyone looked up. The dinosaur had come through the wall, its long tail lashing like a snake, looking for another victim. Its tail moved so quickly, it barely registered as it whipped three bikers into the air. Their landings would not be soft. I felt an arm on my shoulder.

“Get in!” Jinn commanded as Tuko restarted the car. The dinosaur charged, wiping out bikers with his tail like a ball knocking down bowling pins.

“That was stupid,” Tuko said to me without looking back. “You could have gotten yourself killed by attacking Dero.” He turned the car hard to the right to avoid one of the advancing dinosaur legs.

“Maybe next time I’ll let the threatening guy grab me. The offer to drop me off is still available. Then I’m not your problem.”

“Guys, can we like talk about this after the man-eating dinosaur is gone?” Jinn said. It moved with a bit of a limp, yet it still roared, its anger unabated. It moved its tail and a large boulder fell, crushing a parked car beside us. Then it looked down. I didn’t know how intelligent it was, but I could tell that it was looking straight at us. Its brain registered that we were there and that we were prey. It stopped advancing toward the remaining bikers and twisted its head to the side. Tuko saw it looking at us and accelerated. With most people escaping in the other direction, our way was clear.

“Is this car going to make it?” Jinn asked.

“We’re about to find out,” he answered and drove toward the large fence in the distance. Our exit out of town.

We hit a small rise and went airborne for a second. The car rattled as the wheels connected with the ground again. As I recovered, I looked back to see the dinosaur was crouched like a cat, watching us retreat. I knew when it sprung it would be close enough to grab us. We had to slow the creature down.

“You got something to drink in here? Like hard liquor?” I yelled to Jinn.

“Why? Not really the right time for this.” Jinn gave me a puzzled stare.

“Under the seat, in case there were any parties at the Gathering.” He grinned. I reached under the seat and felt a couple of bottles. I opened the alcohol and poured motor oil in the bottle. I remembered a history class where they talked about guerrilla fighters creating homemade bombs. *Who says school doesn’t teach you anything important?*

I sorted through the toolbox and pulled out a dirty rag, tearing it into several strips. I pushed several tools aside and found a box of matches. As I went to open the matches, the car hit a bump, and the matchbox went sailing into the front seat. I looked behind us and the dinosaur was only one good leap from crushing us and the car.

“I need a match!” I yelled at Jinn. She fumbled around her seat and pulled out a couple of loose matches, handing them to me. I popped the cap of the bottle. The beer reeked and made my nose crinkle. I shoved the rag pieces inside the bottle and struck the match. The flame fizzled, so I cupped my hand around it to block the rushing air. The flame caught, and the rag ignited. I threw the bottle as the dinosaur was leaping toward us. I didn’t have bad aim and it hit the dinosaur in the leg, causing the flames to drip down its skin. But if it caused it any discomfort, it barely registered as the distance between us shrank.

“Hit it in the face!” Tuko yelled. I repeated my steps with another match, but before I threw the bottle, I froze as I watched the beast’s face. Its eyes registered my presence. Violence and death were reflected back at me. I didn’t know if it had enough intelligence for me to consider it evil, but it wanted blood. It wanted *my* blood. I threw the bottle and hoped for the best. It rotated in the air and smashed above the left eye. The beast didn’t react right away, and I began to think its skin was impervious to fire. Then the flames dripped down into its eye. The beast roared in pain, clawing at its face. Its pursuit stopped as its claws tried to gouge its own eye out.

“What the...!” Tuko yelled. I turned to the front of the car. The large gate was open and damaged. The entire left side was melted, like it had been sabotaged.

I started.

“What could have eaten through the wooden planks like that?” Jinn asked.

Could an animal have done that?” I asked.

“Not one I have ever seen,” Tuko commented. “Right now, we need to get out of this town and away from all of this.” He gunned the engine, but as we approached, we noticed one car appeared to be stuck.

“Don’t get too close,” the driver warned. Whatever had eaten through the wall had pooled at the bottom. The right side of the car and tires looked like it had been eaten away. It wasn’t going anywhere.

“They’re closing the gate!” Tuko pointed. I wasn’t sure if they were trying to keep the dinosaur in or whatever had disintegrated the wood out. They were moving some barricades nearby to reinforce the wall. “We need to get through, or we’ll be stuck in town. Another clan will come looking for Pene as their reward.” I nodded and looked back at the dinosaur. One eye was burned from the flames, but the monster was no longer focused on itself. Its one good eye was locked on us.

“Get through the wall now!” I commanded and pointed back to dinosaur. Tuko looked back and needed no further motivation. We gunned toward the opening, but others on the gate saw what was coming and abandoned trying to close the door. Once we drove through, the dinosaur would just follow us. And it was faster. We needed a new plan.

“Stop the car!” I yelled.

“Are you trying to get us killed?” Tuko answered.

“No — we can’t outrun it, but we could lead it into that.” I pointed to the large pool at the far side of the wall. The car wheels were literally melting inside it. Jinn nodded, and Tuko drove to the far side of it. I jumped out of the car.

“How do you know it won’t just walk over the lagoon and bite you in half?” Jinn asked.

“I don’t.” I looked at Tuko. “Drive on past the wall. I’ll meet you there afterward.” “No way. You can’t face that alone!” Jinn cried.

“Don’t argue with me! I’ve put you both in enough danger.” The ground rumbled as the dinosaur bounded on all fours toward us.

“Come on!” Tuko ordered Jinn. I didn’t know whether to be glad he listened or to be offended by his eagerness to leave. None of it mattered. I stood well back from the chemical pool, which reeked of rotten flesh. But the dinosaur was racing toward the gate; its momentum was too much. It was going to slam into me.

Bullets whizzed overhead from the top of the wall, its defenders trying to find a weakness in the animal’s skin. None of them found the mark, bouncing off its hide, but they did distract the beast. It roared and looked up, slowing down. It was puzzled by the weapons, not knowing where to strike first.

“Hey, big ugly. I’m over here!” I waved my arms, and it looked at me with death in its eyes. It slowed and stepped toward me, getting closer to the pool. It sniffed the air, as if smelling my trap. It stopped and cocked its head, considering its options. I was worried that it wasn’t going to take the bait. A rock went sailing in the air and hit the beast in the snout.

“What’s wrong, tasty meal right in front of you? Come and get it!” Jinn stood beside me. I was so glad that she hadn’t listened. She took my hand. The dinosaur took a tentative step forward and then another. Its right foot splashed forward, and the liquid went into the air. I jumped back and evaded the spray. The beast took another step forward and then stopped, as if it realized something was wrong. Its eye filled with terror, and it bellowed, trying to leap out the liquid. In its panic, it tripped and rolled over, getting its side wet as well. We ran as spears from above impaled the beast while it writhed in pain. We didn’t stick around to see what happened next. I grabbed Jinn to run and she winced. I looked at a burn mark on her arm.

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“Flesh wound,” she murmured, but I could see she was in pain. “I’ll be all right, I’m a survivor.” We jumped into the car.

“Where to?” Tuko asked.

“Anywhere but here,” I answered, and the car accelerated, the town disappeared behind us as we drove away. Neither the clans nor the dinosaur had gotten me. We had won. Before I could relax and enjoy a moment of freedom, the car radio sparked to life. Both Jinn and Tuko focused on the speaker.

“Attention all clans. This is an emergency broadcast. Major disaster at the Trall stadium. Many deaths, hundreds are injured.” The announcer’s voice was young, confident. His voice was polished, used to talking to an audience. Not as strong a speaker as Luther, though.

“Who are we listening to?” I asked. The radio had been silent on our drive up.

“Diga. Usually he plays music before some of the major events. Has some clan leaders come on and discuss political stuff. There are some panel discussions before major events. His voice has a lot sway in influencing clan decisions,” Jinn answered, cradling her arm.

“Please take a moment to reflect on those we lost tonight.” His words were solemn and respectful. “Our great clan leader Luther is dead. Killed by those who wanted him silent. Just before he was making a major announcement.” The radio went quiet, as if he was waiting for the news to be absorbed by his listeners. “Young girl with unknown clan affiliation is responsible. Waiting for Hunter clan to provide more details.” Now he had my attention. “Large reward for her capture. Alive preferably. Dead acceptable. Any news of her whereabouts, please contact me and I will report her location to all of you, my listeners.” Jinn and Tuko looked at each other with concern but didn’t speak.

“To our killer. If you are listening to me, know this. There is no rock you can crawl under that will stop us from exposing your cowardly crime to the light. Wherever you go, someone is going to see you. And they will tell me. And then I will tell all of you.”

He hung on the last few words for effect. My day had gone from bad to worse to horrific. Instead of a prehistoric dinosaur with twisted DNA after me, I had a price on my head and an entire world gunning to collect it.

# 4

## Runners

I was out of breath, my lungs heaving. Every step was an extreme effort, like my feet had added weight. My heart throbbed so hard, my ribs felt like they were going to explode. I turned my head and scanned down the quiet street. The homes were dark, and I could see no one inside of them. I felt pursued, but when I turned around, I saw nothing. I dodged around debris on a driveway and leaped into an open door of a house.

There was a crash. Whatever was chasing me smashed into the side of the wall. I didn't look back and ran on, weaving left and right. I threw a vase from a table to the floor, hoping to create a broken obstacle to slow down my attacker. I was afraid that if I glanced back, I would see my pursuer and give up.

I heard boards creaking from upstairs, as if someone was crossing a room. I scrambled up the steps, my feet slapping on the wood. I ran down a hallway and stepped into the first bedroom. It was Spartan; a pair of man's shoes sat at the end of bed and a white shirt lay draped over the sheets. It was so familiar, but a fog hung in my brain, preventing me from remembering. Then the haze began to fade. I was home. The shirt was just like the one my dad wore to work.

I heard water splashing. The shower was running. Was my dad in there? How could he still be alive? I stepped toward the bathroom, steam filling the air as I entered. The shower was on my right, and a small window was open. Water rushed down from the showerhead into the stall. I took two steps and knocked on the frosted glass.

"Dad? Are you in there?" Silence. Then a tap. Another tap. A steady tap, like a bird pecking repeatedly on a tree. But the sound wasn't coming from the shower glass — it was coming from the window. I looked out and was momentarily blinded by the crimson flash. The red eye of a drone. It was an oversized bee, tapping on the window glass with its head. Its red eye ignited a beam that would cut a hole through the window glass in seconds. "Dad!" I pushed the shower door open to an empty stall. The water pooled at the bottom and swirled down the drain. Where was he?

The window cracked, and I knew there was seconds before it broke. I ran back into the bedroom, straight into my father's arms. His face was aged, with gray whiskers. Something was wrong. Dad shaved everyday; his appearance was always immaculate.

"Dad! How are you here?" He held me tight and then released me suddenly.

"Pene. Find your mother. There isn't much time. She will take you home."

"We are already home. What do you mean?" The bedroom window smashed behind us, and a metallic arm grabbed him, pulling him into the air. One second he was in front of me, and the next he was gone. I ran to the broken window but tripped over the nightstand. I cursed myself for my stupidity but was glad I didn't cut myself on any broken glass. My relief was short-lived, because when I reached the window, he had disappeared. What was going on?

I felt warmth on my back and turned around. Red lights illuminated the ceiling and wall. The bee drone had returned, and dozens of its followers were hovering with it. They floated as one mind, as if I was their sole objective. They would move no closer to me, as if they were waiting for something. Someone. The stairs creaked as that someone came up the steps. My pursuer had taken its time

reaching me. As if meeting my dad was part of its plan. I yelled out the door into the hallway, the drones slowly hovering in front of me, blocking my exit.

“What do you want? Who are you?”

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A hand nudged me awake. I swung my arms defensively and connected with someone’s face. “Ouch! What is your problem? You’re screaming! Are you trying to alert the other clans to us?” Tuko looked down at me, and I pulled myself up from the car seat. I had fallen asleep, and he had woken me up. I shook my head.

“Sorry. Nightmare. I thought someone was chasing me.”

“Well, that part is true. You have a lot of someones after you,” Tuko jeered. “I hope you are worth all of this trouble. Come on, Jinn’s got a fire going.” He walked away. The sky was dark. What looked like stars glimmered in the sky. I pulled myself out of the back seat as stiff muscles protested. I walked to a small stove adjacent to a rock outcropping. I sat down next to Jinn.

“Was Tuko scaring you? I thought I heard you yelling.”

“No, something else scared me.” I looked at a boiling pot. “Can I have some? I’m starving?” Jinn scooped some stew in a bowl. The smell was intoxicating, and my mouth instantly began to water. I sat down on a rock and gulped down my food. Something about almost dying seemed to increase my appetite. I finished my bowl and looked up at Jinn.

“Want some more?”

“I’m good for now. Do I ask what type of meat was in that?” I pointed at the bowl. “I hope I didn’t just eat dinosaur.”

“Tuko was the cook. Don’t worry — he wouldn’t use anything that wasn’t safe.”

“The way you cleaned that bowl, you didn’t have any problems with it.” Tuko appeared suddenly, dropping a pile of wood to the side of the fire.

I looked closely at the stove. “I guess we can’t have any fires for the risk of being seen?”

“Yes.” Jinn nodded. “Tuko didn’t even want to stop in case another clan caught up with us but I argued we needed a break to plan our next move.”

Tuko stared at me. Even in the dark, I could tell he had something on his mind.

“What?” I asked, uncomfortable.

“Jinn and I risked our lives for you. Hell, half the clans want you. And we know almost nothing about you. What if we’re wrong about you? What if you are involved with Luther’s death? You need to be honest with us about who you are.”

“I-I’m trying,” I stammered, but I really couldn’t tell them the whole truth. It was hard for me to believe what I had experienced in my home, and I had lived it. I had to make sure my lies didn’t catch up with me. “Listen, I didn’t ask for your help, but I wouldn’t be alive now if it wasn’t for the two of you. If you want, leave me at the next town. You don’t need to take care of me.”

“It’s too late now, Pene. We backed you.” Jinn looked at Tuko. “And we have no intention of changing our minds. But what Tuko is saying is let us in. You can’t do this alone. Is there any family we can take you to?”

“My father is dead. I don’t know where my mother is. I’m searching for her.” They looked at each other. I imagined that if their parents were so dominant in their lives, it would impact them a lot if they were missing.

“We’re sorry. What about the rest of your family, friends? Can no one else help you find your mom?” Jinn asked. I shook my head and thought about my life and everyone in it. My grandmother, my friend Austin (or was he only a friend?), and my best friend Lacey. They had their own lives, and I wouldn’t find my mother by staying at home.

“No, this is my journey. I’ll find her and learn why she had to leave me.”

“In the meantime, we got a lot of clans gunning for you. It’s not going to be easy to make it to the Cradle without someone trying to pick you up. We need to find some support,” said Tuko.

“Is going to the Cradle my only option?” I asked.

“No,” Jinn answered, “but is likely the wisest choice. It is sacred ground, and no one can hurt you there. I don’t think we can stay safe in any other direction we choose.” “Okay. What do you have in mind?” I asked.

Tuko pulled out a map and pointed. “We’re here, and we need to go there.” The distance on the map seemed vast. “There are a lot of settlements between here and the Cradle, and we can’t avoid them all. We’ll need supplies, and we had planned to meet up with our parents here.” He pointed to a mountain range. “If we can make it to them, fewer clans will be likely try to challenge us. Once we get to the Cradle, we can plead your case.”

“Plead my case! Please. I’ve done nothing wrong. Your buddy Abraham is the one who caused this whole mess.”

“Makes me wonder if he doesn’t have a reason to blame you,” Jinn added.

“What you mean?” I leaned forward.

“The clans are very political. Tuko and I know firsthand with our families. Every clan wants to be viewed as top tier. It gives the leaders more clout in making decisions for all clans during the annual pilgrimage.”

“You’re saying that Abraham wanted me to be a scapegoat, so he looks strong in the eyes of the other clans.”

“Maybe. If he makes you the cause of Luther’s death and captures you, he becomes a hero.”

“Or he could have just made a mistake,” Tuko added. “There were a lot of people; he could have seen someone else.”

“Oh, please.” Jinn laughed. “Abraham only cares about himself and whether he looks important to others. You give him too much credit as a son of an elder. Sometimes I think you’d rather be in his clan.”

“Well, he’s not afraid to make a commitment,” Tuko said defensively. “Our parents take so much time to make decisions, they miss a lot of opportunities.” He waved his hand in resignation.

“They’re probably just weighing their options. My dad always liked to understand all the information first. Sometimes it takes time to make the right decision.” I felt a stab of sorrow, remembering him before he was killed by a machine for a crime he didn’t commit. Then I remembered something I saw at the stadium.

Jinn saw my puzzled look. “What are you thinking?”

“Before Luther was shot, I saw a flash of red light. Maybe someone sighting up their rifle before it was fired. You said that they checked for weapons at the entrances. I bet it was hard to smuggle a rifle in, but how do you sight and fire it without anyone seeing you?”

“You can’t do it alone,” said Tuko. “From that distance, you would need the time and space to line up the scope of a rifle.”

“Someone would see you,” Jinn replied.

“Not if you had a whole clan supporting you,” I interjected.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” I started scrawling in the dirt with a stick, “if you had a bunch of people standing around you, blocking the view of any onlookers, you could line up your target. You could even have someone stand in front of you and have them move at the last second or shoot between their legs. The group could muffle the sound so that the shot would be barely audible in the noise of the crowd.”

“So, you’re telling me that instead of one person with a grudge against Luther, we’re talking a whole clan did this.” Tuko was dismissive. “That’s pretty out there.”

“Or is it?” Jinn said. “Think about it. Hard for one person to smuggle a rifle into the meeting when everyone is searched, but each member of a clan could easily take in a piece at a time.”

“But why? What would Luther say that would scare a clan into a killing him?” Tuko needed more persuading.

“Only they and Luther know. Maybe it would have diminished that clan’s standing in council. Maybe Luther was finally going to explain how the Cradle was created.” Jinn raised her eyebrows, trying to make her point.

I thought about this. What if someone discovered their world was self-contained, as I had learned about mine? Would people be willing to kill to keep this information secret? I was pretty sure they would. They might not have a power-hungry judge trying to run everything, as in my world, but no matter where you go, people covet power. Maybe the people here in this technologically backward world weren’t as dumb as I thought them to be. This could be the power play by one of the clans.

“What are you thinking?” Tuko asked, looking at my focused face.

“Which clans would benefit the most from Luther’s death?” I asked. The two of them looked at each other.

“Depends on who would benefit. A strong clan trying to stay powerful or a weak one trying to raise its profile,” Tuko answered.

“Our clan is one of the more powerful, along with Abraham’s, the Armors, and about five others,” Jinn said.

“And the weak ones?”

“Everyone else. Too many to count. Maybe *your* clan?” Tuko questioned. I didn’t take the bait.

“Did you see any of the clans in our area that could have been hiding a shooter?” They both shook their heads.

“I was looking at the stage like everyone else,” Jinn said. “Remember, Abraham was in front of us. It couldn’t have been his clan.”

“Unless some of his clan got behind us.” I didn’t want to let him off the hook. He just seemed too enthusiastic to blame me.

“Then we’re back to the start. It could have been anyone with the help of any clan.” Jinn seemed resigned.

“Then we stick to the plan. We need help. If we can make it here,” Tuko pointed to the map, “we can get the support of our family. Then any other clan would think twice before they dare attack us.” We nodded, and Jinn yawned.

“I’m beat. Almost being eaten by a dinosaur really tires me out.” She gave me a hug. “Be strong. We’ll get through this. Tuko is right, once we meet up with our family, we’ll be safe.” The two of them rolled out their sleeping bags, but I wasn’t interested in another nightmare and stared at the night sky.

I wanted to tell them the truth, but could they accept that everything they believed about their home was a lie? The only chance I could prove it to them was if I could find an exit out of this world. Maybe go back to the one I came in from? If I could find it. But would I want to show them? What good would it do to show them that none of this was real? I thought of when I found out my city of drones was just one of many places of study. By whom, I didn’t know. Or that the outside world was not what we imagined.

I pushed my hair out of my eyes. Would I find a way out of this world, or would I become its permanent captive?

# 5

## Orphans

The car hit a pothole, and I lurched in pain. Sleeping on the ground had stiffened my neck and every jolt aggravated it. Tuko looked at my discomfort and laughed.

“Something tells me that you don’t rough it outside, Princess. I bet you don’t leave home very often.” *Wow, if he only knew how right he is.*

“Leave her alone.” Jinn punched Tuko on the arm. “Don’t mind him, he’s grumpy in the morning.”

“And in the afternoon. And in the evening,” I teased. Both Jinn and I laughed. Mr. Happy just scowled and kept driving. The road was one lane and barely passable. A couple times I thought we were going to get stuck. Some of the mud puddles were huge, and I worried we would sink over our heads. After watching the dinosaur burn at Trall, I didn’t want to get caught in any liquids. It was nearly midday, and I could make out a settlement past the foothills.

“That’s where we’re going,” Tuko stated with a flair for the obvious. From this distance, the town looked like an old Western with no building over two stories. The streets formed a cross with businesses and homes bordering the dusty roads.

In front of us, animals milled behind a wooden fence, although they weren’t like any pasture animal I had ever seen. They were bulky like a cow but with long, muscular legs like a horse, making a combination of the two. I guess I’d have to call them a “corse.” I laughed at my silly joke. Lacey would love this humor.

We passed near one of the gates, and one of the animals ambled toward the fence. I looked at its face. Its eyes were big, and it seemed interested in our approach. Its green tongue was chewing on something, and I leaned closer. Its eyes met mine, and it stopped chewing, as if it was thinking of something to say. A hand pulled me back.

“Don’t get too close. They love to spit at you, and it will burn if it gets into your eyes,” Jinn said, and I immediately jerked back. Again, I looked stupid, like a stranger in a strange land.

“Once we stop in town, we’ll do all the talking,” Tuko commanded. “We don’t want to draw any attention to you. No telling who listens to the radio broadcasts, so we won’t know what other clans will be looking for you. This town will be one of the areas they will figure you would go.” I nodded. The less talking I did, the better. Better to look intelligent than for people to realize the truth once I opened my mouth.

It looked like electricity or plumbing was nonexistent in the old buildings. What I wouldn’t I do for a hot shower! As our car slowed, we saw several kids who were pounding a sign into the ground. One was a teenager, but the others were younger, likely under ten. What was I doing when I was ten? Not working in a field, that was for sure. No, kids definitely had it harder here.

As we drove down the street, I saw many things were in disrepair. Several power poles had dead wires hanging down, as if no one wanted or knew how to fix them. Two cars lay abandoned, mostly intact but with a few parts picked clean. It made me wonder why someone would give up on a running vehicle. A couple more kids stood on a veranda and watched us pass. I felt their gaze and nervously wondered if they knew who I was. The price on my head might make me valuable to a lot of people. Slowly we eased in front of a general store, its windows hawking the latest candy. Jinn and Tuko got out.

“Did you want me to stay here?” I asked.

“No, come in with us. You’re too visible out here and the less people that see you the better,” said Jinn.

“Maybe we can find something to hide your face,” Tuko offered with a smile. They got out of the car and went into the shop. I stepped up the wooden stairs and looked into the window at a huge glass jar. There was a big green mass floating like a lump of chewing gum. As I looked more closely, it seemed to be rotating around ever so slowly. A bubble rose to the surface as my eyes followed it up. When I looked down again, two beady eyes stared out of the mass. Its evil mouth appeared to gurgle, as if it was laughing at me. The momentary shock made me stumble back.

“Ouch! Watch where you’re going!” I turned and a young boy of around ten stared back at me. He had long blond hair, much of which covered his face. He wore blue jeans and overalls. He looked like a miniature adult, and I had to stifle back a laugh. He was trying to be tough.

“Sorry. What is that?” I pointed to the jar.

“You never seen that?” he asked, surprised, as though a huge grinning worm was an everyday sight. “Vestian — grows inside some of the herd. That one was pooped out just a few days ago.”

“Why put it in a jar? It’s disgusting.”

“Maybe so, but they sure taste good barbecued.” He slapped his leg and laughed like he told the funniest joke in the world. Then he stopped as quickly as he started. *Okay, the kids are a bit off here.*

“You don’t want to get any of that liquid on your skin. Its venom mixes and causes instant blindness for hours.” Okay, if this kid was trying to scare me, mission accomplished.

I decided to follow the others into the store and leave this guy to his own devices. I walked in. The first aisle looked like my science lab. There were weird jars everywhere, things floating, things moving, and things glowing. Most of it didn’t look edible, and I didn’t like the feeling of things looking back at me. A large display of incense was staged at the end of the row.

I moved on to find that the next aisle was more interesting. There were tons of electronics, wires, and computer boards spread out along the shelves. It looked like the carcass of a huge robot with pieces strewn everywhere. It reminded me of my marketplace back home where you could find just about anything for the right price. I picked up a mechanical arm and marveled at the technology. *How could such a backward place produce such high-tech items?*

“See anything you like?” The familiar voice scared me, and I almost dropped the arm on the floor. I turned and saw the same boy. Was he following me?

“Do you work here?” I asked.

“You bet.” The boy puffed his chest and stretched an extra inch taller. “My dad isn’t here right now, so I’m watching the store until he comes back.”

“I see.” Although I really didn’t. *What parent would leave this little guy in charge? Good chance to get robbed.* “What are these electronics for? Besides some cars, I don’t see where any of this would be used.”

“Well, that’s a question.” He stood silent, like stating the obvious was some type of skill.

“So ... what’s the answer?” I prodded.

“No one knows for sure,” he whispered, and I had to move closer to hear him. “A lot of people scavenge parts from towns all over. Most don’t know what they were for. People keep away from the bad lands that circle the territory — too many mechanical graveyards where people get hurt.”

*All the better to keep people herded to the center of this world and not explore the outside of their unknown prison.*

“Someone must have designed these electronics. How come no one can duplicate them?” I asked the boy.

He looked thoughtfully at me. “My grandfather used to design all types of mechanical rigs. He built the pumps that power the water towers outside of town. But knowledge doesn’t travel well to my dad. And it certainly isn’t an interest of mine.” *That’s for sure.*

“What happens when things break down?”

“A few adults, tinkers, seem to be able to bandage things together. Especially the cars. But nobody seems to really come up with anything new. Everything eventually breaks down. My dad keeps trading for these parts, hoping to find someone who can make some use of them.” I looked over the shelves, and a few ideas came to mind. *How could anyone build these things and then forget what they’re used for?*

“Hey...” I started to ask another question, but the kid was gone. That was one strange boy. I heard voices around the corner, so I guessed he was after someone else’s money. I looked at the shelves and almost felt my heart stop when I saw the object. I put it in my hand and felt its contours. It was shaped perfectly like the creature it was supposed to represent. It was a mechanical bee. Or more specifically, one of the drones that used to follow me around my grandmother’s house. What the hell was it doing here in this world? I took it and went around the corner. Jinn was talking to the boy, holding up some cans of food.

“This one is a real charmer. Don’t try to bargain a deal.” She smiled while the boy maintained his tough exterior.

“The price is the price,” he said and then folded his arms like he could walk away from whatever deal Jinn was offering.

“Where did you find this?” I held out the bee drone. The boy lit up like he had found some leverage with me.

“That’s one of our special items,” he murmured without even looking down at what I had in my hand. “That will cost you extra.” He smirked. His attitude irked me, and I moved within an inch of his face. The closeness startled him, and he jumped back.

“I didn’t ask you how much, I asked where did you get it?”

He straightened up and became serious. “How am I supposed to know? We barter for dozens of items every day. Does it look like I keep an inventory?” The kid could have been a teenager with all the attitude he gave off. Time to take him down a size.

“Maybe I could speak to your *father*?” I put a lot of emphasis on the last word.

He put his arms to his sides. “He’s not here right now, and I don’t know where he got this stuff. Do you want to buy or trade for it?” he asked. I looked down at the tiny bee lying in my hand. What others might find quaint, I knew as deadly. To think that this little mechanical machine would spy and track your every move. How did it get from my world of technology to this backwater, where everything was breaking down? The last thing I wanted was this little drone. Besides, I didn’t have anything of value to trade for in this world.

“Never mind.” I started to walk back to the aisle.

“Wait,” the kid started, “you might want to check in with Ander. He buys a lot of this stuff and tries to tinker with it to get it working. Maybe he knows where it comes from.” The kid shrugged as if saying *that’s the best I can give you*.

I nodded back. “Where can I find this Ander?”

The kid pointed out the window and down the street. “One block over, fifth house on your right. Big yellow place. There’s electronics all over the front veranda. You can’t miss it, he’s always open. Tell him Benny sent you.” He smiled but there was no warmth.

“Thanks,” I answered, put the drone back on the shelf, and started to head out of the store. I felt an arm grab me by the wrist.

“Whoa, Pene. What’s going on? Don’t take off on your own with a price on your head. It’s a good way to lose it.” Jinn smiled, as if she was trying to make me realize that she was making a

joke. “What is this all about? What’s so important about that little miniature bee?” Her puzzled expression made me want to open up to her and tell her I was from a place where thousands of these little drones existed and followed your every move. Would she believe me? Or would I lose the only friend I had in this place? I thought I’d go with a partial truth.

“It’s something my family used to deal with. I thought maybe if I found out more about it, it would bring me closer to my mother. Look, you don’t have to do this. Give me twenty minutes, if I’m not back by then, come get me.”

Before I could turn away, Jinn yelled her response, but not to me. “Tuko, we’re going to run an errand. Be back soon,” she said.

Tuko stuck his head around a corner. “Sure. Stick me with all the heavy work and with paying the bill. Typical girls.” He gestured as if he’d had enough of us. I just wished that Jinn wouldn’t tag along. It would be hard to ask too many questions without making her more suspicious of where I was really from.

We walked outside and leaped down two steps at time. The street was mostly deserted; the only activity was a bunch of kids hanging out around at the end of the street. They turned as we walked by and spent a bit too much time watching us.

“Losers,” Jinn jeered at them, and they went back to talking amongst themselves. The storefronts and homes looked weathered. Most needed a good coat of paint. A little girl looked at me through a dirty window. She seemed curious, and I could feel her eyes searching me up and down. “Does this town make you feel just bit nervous?” I asked Jinn.

“What do you mean?”

“Seems like people are watching me. Studying me.” I looked back at the window, but the girl was gone.

Jinn stopped me. “The town’s a bit behind the times — not exactly a big travel destination. People are just interested in strangers. Hey, a couple of sweet-looking girls like us are always going to make the boys do a double take.” We laughed.

We walked around the corner; it didn’t take long before I could tell which house we were going to. It looked like a junkyard had exploded on the front yard. As we got to the front gate, fences held all the objects in as if anyone would try to take this stuff. I walked gingerly around the obstacle course, ducking and jumping to avoid some metal apparatus. A large statue stood in the middle, and there was a clearing around it. It was the only space that seemed open, so we walked toward it. The statue resembled a large robot about seven feet tall, with a thick torso but thinner arms and legs. I spied a button under a small vent. Instinctively, I pressed the button, hoping the robot would dance around. Nothing happened.

“What do you guys want?” I jumped, so focused on the statue that I didn’t hear someone come up behind us.

“Benny sent us,” Jinn answered calmly. I guessed she wasn’t as jumpy as me. “Said Ander could tell us where a mechanical part came from. Is he your dad?”

The skinny kid looked back at us. He had long, greasy black hair that looked like it had never seen a brush. A pair of golden goggles seemed to hold his hair in place. He had lots of metal studs on his ears, nose, and through his lip. I shuddered to think his whole body was covered with them. Maybe he wanted to be part of his junk.

“I’m Ander. Follow me.” He turned and disappeared behind a pile of metal barrels. I glanced at Jinn and shrugged. At least with her at my side, I didn’t feel too concerned. We navigated the junkyard obstacle course and stepped through a steel door into an office. There was an audible hum that came from the back of the room. A puff of steam came out of the wall, and I could hear pulleys moving in the background. The room was warm, and I felt a bead of sweat drip down my forehead. Ander was sitting in a rotating chair in front of a table. It looked like a machine had barfed its contents all over the countertop, with cogs and wires everywhere. He beckoned us to approach. We pulled up two chairs and sat across from him.

“What are you doing?” Jinn asked, looking at a soldering tool and a bunch of electronic components.

Trying to figure out what this thing was before it stopped working. There are no plans or schematics, and no one seems to understand how it operates.”

“Can’t you just ask whoever built it? Why rediscover the wheel?” I inquired.

Ander looked at me over his goggles. This kid seemed older than he looked. “If I knew the answer to that question, I would be a genius. For whatever reason, each generation is getting worse at passing on the technology to their kids. It’s like we are moving backward. That’s why I have a junkyard out front with stuff that keeps breaking down and we can’t fix.” *I guess the education system here is not very organized.*

“Can we talk about why we’re here? Your friend Benny said you could help us,” Jinn asked.

“Yeah, Benny,” Ander answered, which made me think they were not friends. “What is it that you want?”

“Robot drones. This one was shaped as a bee. Do you know where it might come from?”

Ander’s eyebrow raised as if he was interested. “Describe it.” He walked over to a shelf with drawers and opened several. He pulled out components and rearranged them in his palm. “How big?”

“Almost the actual size of a bee, only slightly bigger,” I answered and crossed the floor to step on a wide area rug. He held up his hand to stop me from coming any closer. Maybe he didn’t want us to see all the equipment he had?

“Color?”

“Metallic. Some stripes near its rear end. The stinger looked golden. Wings white but partly transparent.” Ander nodded and grabbed several more parts, connecting them together in a dizzying whirl of motion. Seconds later, he held out his palm. The drone was a pretty good duplicate of ones back home, minus the red eyes and its ability to follow you.

“That’s it! Where did you find it?” I asked.

“My turn.” Ander shook his head. “Why are you so interested in this little robot? Have you seen it operate?” He leaned forward, excited by the prospect. I decided to be honest.

“I have — back home, these things used to follow us around. Make sure everyone was safe.” I felt he could hear the sarcasm in my voice.

“You’ve seen these work? How did they keep them repaired?” he asked enthusiastically.

“I have no idea,” I answered truthfully. “They were maintained in a central warehouse, and if they broke down, the parts were replaced and fixed.”

“Where do you live?” he asked with some suspicion rising in his voice.

I gulped, fearing I had said too much. “Far west of here,” I answered but without giving much detail.

“Her clan is the Droniums,” Jinn offered, but I cringed, realizing how stupid the name was.

“Never heard of them,” Ander said and then stared at me. “If I help you, will you take me to your town, so I can see this in action?” He pointed to the dead drone.

“Not so fast, buddy.” Jinn jumped up from her stool and stood with me on the rug. “We came here for some answers. Where did you find this robot?”

Ander paced, cradling the bee drone. He put it down on a table and pulled out a map.

“Here.” He pointed a section on the map that looked like a desert.

“Really?” Jinn looked confused. “Nothing lives there. How did you find it there?”

“I don’t know. You wanted to know where, and I told you. If I knew who created it, I wouldn’t be asking your friend for help to make it operational. Can you take me back to your home?”

“No.” I shook my head. “At least not now. I have to find my mother, and she’s not there.”

Ander made a face. “Then there is nothing more we can talk about. If you change your mind...”

“I’ve already said no,” I answered and started to leave. Ander pressed something on his desk, and then the rug was sinking. It felt like it was going to eat Jinn and I, and we fell backward. No, it wasn’t

the rug, it was the floor disappearing, and the rug was caving in and wrapping itself around us. We both screamed as the darkness beneath the rug swallowed us whole.

# 6

## Truth

“Jinn?” I asked. The room was dark, but there was illumination from a ceiling light in the far corner of the room. It was hard to see, but I could make out the shapes of boxes stacked on top of each other. We had fallen into a type of storeroom, based on all the junk that we had seen upstairs. I thought I could make out a doorway in the far-right corner.

*Damn. We walked right over the rug, ready to be sucked down whenever he wanted. What is the matter with the kids in this town?*

“Jinn” I tried again and thought I heard a muffled sound from behind me. I pulled at the rug and unburied my friend.

“Ouch!” she said. “I think I banged my head. I’m seeing stars.”

“Take a moment. We’re not going anywhere unless we can find an exit.”

“Don’t worry, Tuko will find us. He’ll figure out where we went.”

“What if they trap him just like us? What is wrong with these people?” I yelled in frustration. My voice echoed off the wall.

“Small-minded or scared, who knows. Eventually a parent is going find out what’s going on.”

“Are you sure about that?” I offered. “I haven’t seen one adult since we got into town. It’s like all the parents disappeared and left the kids in charge.” Jinn was quiet, as if she was considering my words.

“You’re right.” Her silhouette was framed before the door to the right. I heard a door handle rattle but no movement. She banged on the door in frustration. “I should have known.” “Known what?” I asked.

“They’re the Orphan clan. Almost all kids — a few adults check in, but they mostly travel around and bring stuff back from other areas. Like the objects you saw upstairs.”

“You mean,” I kicked a box which barely moved, “the whole town is run by kids younger than us? How do they get anything done? Who disciplines them? Who feeds them?” I couldn’t imagine any parents just leaving their kids behind.

“Probably not by choice, but it’s dangerous outside of the town. Some adults never make it back. Most of this clan’s parents are nomadic and spend their time scavenging. They believe their kids need to learn to survive on their own. Sink or swim. If you were forced into the same situation, could you survive?”

I thought about how far I had come on my own. Maybe it wasn’t that hard to believe a town full of kids could live without adults. It just didn’t seem fair. What parent would abandon their kid?

“Maybe. Any luck getting us out?” I heard a bang on the wall from Jinn’s fist.

“Nothing. We’re going to have to wait until Tuko gets us out. I’m fresh out of ideas.” She sat down on a box near me, and even in the dark, I could feel her gaze.

“We could be here for a while. What do you want to talk about?” I asked innocently. Jinn was quiet. The silence lengthened, and I started to get worried. “Jinn? Did you fall asleep?” I joked.

“No.” But her answer was curt. Her silence was making me want to talk. I would be terrible under interrogation.

Is there something wrong?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“When are you going to tell me the truth?” “What do you mean,” I stammered.

“Pene, there is no such clan as the Droniums. The name is so lame; I think you could have made up something better.” Now it was my turn to be silent, but Jinn went on. “I don’t know where you were going, but the place we found you is off limits. There is a natural canyon that acts as a barrier, preventing us from going farther west. When you talk about your home and your parents, it sounds forced and fake. I thought we were friends. When are you going to tell me the truth?”

And there it was. My lies were never believable to begin with. And Jinn saw right through them. Should I try to lie through this? Or just come clean? I really didn’t have a choice.

“I’m sorry. I’m a jerk. I don’t deserve your friendship. I lied to you because I didn’t think you would believe me if I told you the truth. Once we get out of here, you and Tuko can leave me and go off on your own.” Jinn’s silhouette softened as I imagined the anger flowing out of her body.

“Hold on, Pene. Relax. I’m not telling you to go your separate way. I’m asking you to tell me something true about you. I’ve helped save your life; I deserve at least that much?” I nodded, although I doubt she could see that in the dark.

“Okay. Have a seat. What do you want to know?” I was going all in — whatever she wanted to know. If she didn’t believe me, it wouldn’t be because I hadn’t tried.

“What clan are you really from?”

“I’m not from a clan, Jinn. I’m not from here. My home is much different. We don’t have clans; everyone lives in a big town with lots of technology.”

“Is that why you were so interested in that bee thing? Is that from your home?”

“I think so. But I don’t understand how it got here. My home is very...” I struggled for the word, “separate from here. My friends wouldn’t come here.”

“But somebody must have?”

“I guess. But what I told you about my mother is true. I thought she was dead, and now I think she is alive. And I think getting into the Cradle may be the key.”

“Pene,” I could hear Jinn almost laugh, “no one has ever been able to open up the Cradle. It’s a monument of the history of our world. What makes you think you can just walk in and solve a problem that the greatest minds have had no luck with?” She got up and started to pace the room. “If I didn’t like you so much, I would think you must be the most arrogant person I had ever met.”

Her words cut deep. She wasn’t trying to be mean, just stating how she felt. And she was probably right. I had been arrogant since the moment I entered her home. Since I felt I knew about the lies of my home, I knew everything about hers. I had felt her world was a backwater because it didn’t have the technology of mine. But there was so much about her that I didn’t understand.

In my home, everyone looked out for themselves. At least here in these clans, there were people who looked after each other. I had to understand this place if I was going to find my mother.

“Okay. I come off as arrogant. I apologize. But my home is so much different than yours. You wouldn’t believe me if I told you how much more advanced we are. Our homes are at two different ends of civilization.”

“Are you calling us primitive? Are we beneath you, Pene?” Jinn asked quietly.

“No. You are misunderstanding me. I was scared. I’ve never been away from home. Ever. But I’ve always wanted to travel. To see the world. But when I left my home, I realized that my home wasn’t what I thought it was. And neither is yours. It hard for me to explain; even I don’t really understand it. There is so much more than just what you see. And I’m struggling to hold on to what I know is real.”

“Pene. Family is real. I would do anything for my family, and I appreciate that you are trying to find your mother. But lying to your friends is not going to get to her any faster.” “Does Tuko suspect?”

“Please.” She giggled. “He’s a boy. He barely listens to anything that’s not food or a sport. I love my brother, but he’s not the most perceptive.” We both laughed, and I stood up. I felt like I needed to move, even though I might stumble on a box in the dark.

“There is so much I don’t understand. How about you tell me more about your family, and I’ll tell you more about mine?”

Jinn’s posture relaxed. She wanted to help me; I just had to give a reason why. She leaned backward on a box, trying to get comfortable.

“I told you that Tuko and I are expected to take over the leadership of our clan someday. Our family has controlled our clan affairs for generations, but the leadership is only handed down if the family member earns that responsibility.”

“What do you have to do?” I asked. “Save the world?”

“Nothing quite that dramatic,” Jinn answered, “but a family member must do something that improves the life of the clan. My grandfather’s story is probably the most interesting, if you want to hear about it.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” I motioned for her to continue.

“When my grandfather was a young man, he was a tinker. He could build pretty much anything from next to nothing. His home was a full of empty vehicles that he would reshape. People would come from miles away to try to get him to fix their machines.” “Sounds like the guy we just met upstairs,” I interrupted.

Jinn spat on the floor. “Please. That jerk upstairs couldn’t hold a candle to my grandfather. He’s a wannabe robot maker and probable junk collector. There is no comparison. Anyway, one day my grandpa had a visitor, a family who had left their home due to a rockslide. Most of their animals were killed, and they were forced to relocate their farm. They had nothing but the shirts on their back and could offer almost nothing in currency for their services.”

“What did they want?”

“Some tractors to till the ground. Seed planters. Harvesters. But most of what they brought was mangled by the rockslide, and nothing worked. Most people would have looked at that mess and passed. Too much of a challenge and nothing of value in return.”

“So why did he do it?”

“The family had a young teenage girl. Smart. Pretty. And she caught my grandfather’s eye as soon as she walked in the door. After that, I think he would have tried to move mountains if he thought it would impress her.”

“And did he?” I asked, leaning forward.

“And then some. He created a machine that could do all those things and more. He even added equipment for well drilling to irrigate the farmland. To say the family was pleased was an understatement. Their machine helped other farmers in the area as well.

“And the girl?” I asked expectantly. Jinn was silent. “The girl?”

“Once my grandfather was nominated for the clan council, it was against council rules for him to marry outside of the approved council selection. She was a farm girl; she didn’t make the list.” Jinn’s head drooped as if she didn’t approve.

“That’s sad. Did he have any regrets? No offense to your grandmother.”

“He met my grandmother a few years later. She was part of another important family in the clan. I know my grandfather loved her. I wouldn’t have been here if they hadn’t. But you realize the burden that leading a clan means. Although others follow you, there are sacrifices to make.”

“Is that why Tuko and you are out here alone, away from your family?” I watched as Jinn fidgeted in the dark.

“Pretty much. We’re taking this trip to decide if we want the responsibility to follow in our parents’ footsteps. Both of us are wondering what to do.”

“What do you parents want?”

They say they support whatever decision we make, but I’m pretty sure they will be disappointed if we don’t become leaders of the clan. It’s considered a great honor, and many people never get the opportunity.”

“Yet?” I could feel her indecision.

“I’m not sure if I want to devote my life to this. And the sacrifices. I’m young, and I feel like I’m being herded to make a decision before I’m ready.”

“What if you waited a few years to make your decision?”

“Not an option. Several leaders of our clan have passed recently, and there are vacancies to fill. If we don’t express an interest soon, there are plenty of other families to ask.”

“When do you have to decide?” The floorboards above us creaked. I looked up, but the sound stopped. Jinn must have looked as well, because she was silent for a moment.

“By the time we reach the Cradle. Our drive on our own was supposed to inspire us.” Jinn raised her voice mockingly on the word “inspire.” “And Tuko?”

“He’s wary about the leadership. He feels it’s just a bunch of old men that talk a lot but rarely act. But he likes to show off. I bet he would be even more friendly with Abraham if they were both leaders of their clans.”

I stuck out my tongue at the mention of Abraham. “What about...” I started, but we both turned as we heard footsteps coming down the side of the front wall. I couldn’t tell if it was one person or several. We heard the rattling of keys, and we readied ourselves to defend ourselves. The door opened, and the silhouette of Ander filled the doorway.

“What do you want...?” Jinn started. Ander was shoved hard into the room, and a hand reached to the wall. The light flashed, and I was momentarily blinded. I looked up and saw Ander on the floor but a familiar face behind him.

“Playtime is over, girls. Come upstairs.” Tuko motioned. “There is something you should see.”

# 7

## Underground

I was never so glad to see Tuko. Even if he was still annoying.

Ander was silent, but I could tell he wasn't happy as Tuko pushed him back up the stairs. Once we got up the main room, I realized we weren't alone. There were about ten kids (all younger than us), including the kid from the store. *Was this a party?*

"What is this all about? Why did Ander trap us in his storeroom?" I asked.

"Turns out this is Saul," Tuko pointed to the boy we thought was Ander. "The kids use the name Ander to warn other kids about trouble. Saul thought it would be an excellent idea to trap the two of you."

Tuko grabbed the boy from the store and pushed him toward us. He stumbled but didn't fall. "Tell the girls what you told me."

He scowled at Tuko but then looked back at us. "What do you expect?" He waved his arms around. "Your description is all over the radio. Everyone is talking about what happened at the Gathering. So, when a young girl with your same description just happens to show up at the store, what would you do?"

Okay — he was right; I had been stupid. Everyone was looking for me, and I should have been more discreet.

"So why capture us — trying to earn points with your parents?" Jinn sneered at the group. No one answered, but they all looked at each other. One of them looked like he was going to cry.

"These kids have been fending for themselves." Tuko responded for the group. "There are almost no adults."

"Jinn called them the Orphan clan," I added.

"That wasn't what they were called in the beginning, but circumstances have changed now," Tuko continued.

"Listen," Saul began, "we live close to the herds. The town's commerce was determined by how much food was provided by the livestock and surrounding wildlife. But the animals have become smarter, more aggressive. Many of our adults have died on the hunts, and fewer have come back. Everyone here has lost at least one parent, and only the very old are around now. The remaining adults are hunting. We don't want them to leave, but the town would starve if they didn't. But there are so few parents left that the town is barely managing now. It's forced us to run things in their absence."

"We've done a pretty good job too!" the boy from the store yelled.

"But we struggled," one of the few girls in the group said. She was taller than most, with long black hair. "We've had to care for each other. Cook meals, clean homes, teach school to the younger kids and find ways to survive in between their hunting expeditions. Nobody is a kid anymore, and we're not sure what to do. Even though some," she pointed at the boy at the store, "seem to think they know it all."

"I know more than you!" he yelled back at her. I almost wished he'd gone out on the hunting expeditions.

You trapped us to get a reward. Maybe to prevent your parents from leaving next time," I said. The kids all looked at me, and their eyes were so sad, I almost wanted to turn myself in. I didn't wait for them to answer. "So why change your mind? Did Tuko threaten you?"

“Just the opposite.” Tuko gave a smug look, and Jinn rolled her eyes. He may have saved us, but he was so full of himself. “I told them what really happened. How you were framed and some other clan killed Luther.”

“That’s it?” Jinn asked as if these kids would need more to go on.

“I also said that our clan could give assistance to help rebuild the town. We have enough older clan members who think they know everything. Let’s give them a chance to prove it.”

Tuko wasn’t a jerk. I was. He had come up with a great solution that saved our butts and helped these kids. Maybe he deserved to run his clan. Jinn looked at him with renewed respect.

“Good call, brother. Dad could help a lot here. Our clan has tons of adults who would love to tell these kids what to do.” A couple of kids in the back shuffled and looked less than enthused at taking orders from adults they didn’t know. Suddenly a kid with red hair came running into the room. He was out of breath and had to lean over for a few seconds before he could talk.

“We. Have. A problem.” Then he looked at us and pointed at me. “Zombie clan is here, and they are looking for her.” All eyes were on me. Suddenly I felt like a poker chip in a game of life or death.

“We had a deal.” Tuko glared at Saul. “The only thing the Zombie clan will give you is a silent thank-you as they keep the reward.”

“We don’t want any trouble,” one of the boys said as he started to back away,

“Hold on.” The boy from the store tried to puff up in size. “Nobody tells us what to do. Let’s have a vote.” A couple of the kids rolled their eyes, but I got a feeling that this was a common way for them to decide how to proceed. “Who says we turn these three over to the Zombie clan?” Three hands shot up. Everyone looked around the room. “Who wants to help them and get support from the Armor clan?” About eight hands went up, including Saul’s and the boy from the store.

“Then it’s decided. We help.”

“They’re right behind me,” red hair said, pointing at the door.

“Are you going to stick us back in the storeroom?” I asked.

“No, we can go under the town,” the boy from the store stated.

“Come with us.” The girl motioned as the five of us headed back down the flight of stairs. A sudden knock on the front door meant that we had to move quickly. Halfway down the steps, I bumped into the back of the girl as she stopped suddenly. With her foot she depressed a board that sank into the wall. A door opened, and we quickly stepped in. Once inside, she quickly hit a rock and the door shut. She motioned us to be quiet as we entered what looked like a mineshaft. Wooden beams covered the ceiling, holding up the roof. As we walked across rocky ground, all five of us remained silent. Finally, the girl stopped.

“It’s okay to talk now. We’re far enough away that no one can hear us.”

“Who are you guys, and why are these tunnels here?” I asked. I looked at Jinn and Tuko, and their faces held the same questions.

“I’m Sena and that’s Arch. When my mom is here, she runs the bar.”

“You already know what my dad does,” Arch said defiantly. *Man, this kid has a chip on his shoulder.*

“Before this town was known for hunting and its herds, there used to be a huge mineshaft that ran from the town up to the east mountain. There was tons of iron ore used for making steel for vehicles and weapons. To make it easier to process, the tunnels were run to several stores in town for processing and transport. The ore was mined out about five years ago, and most of the tunnels were abandoned.”

“Except kids knew a good thing when we saw it,” interrupted Arch. “We figured what is a better way to sneak out of the house? Instead of climbing out it, we crawled underneath.” “The adults didn’t figure it out?” Tuko asked.

“Some knew,” Sena answered, “but I think they wanted us to have a way to cope with so many parents not returning. They thought if the kids had a secret, it would help them deal with the losses.”

Something scurried by my foot. I suppressed a scream because I didn't want to give Tuko the satisfaction of seeing me act like a scared girl. Didn't matter; Arch saw the look on my face.

"Don't worry," he said. "Seeing rats is a good thing. Means the fumes haven't overcome anyone yet. They're like our canaries in the coal mine. Only when you see a bunch of dead rats should you be worried."

"And if I see a lot of rats running away?" Jinn asked, probably picturing a dozen furry things go by her legs.

"Best to run, unless you want to see what's spooking them. You only need to be faster than the slowest rat," he commented, like he thought himself an expert. Sena opened a door, and the air rushed through.

"Why do you have doors down here?" I asked.

"It helps with the air flow," she answered. "Air is pretty lazy; it will go the shortest distance possible to make its way back to the surface. We have to force it in a certain direction if we want to be able to breathe down here."

The ceiling began to get lower, and the uneven ground made walking more difficult. I felt water trickle, and its coldness made me shiver. This was a place I did not want to get trapped in.

I had to distract myself.

"Where are you taking us?" I asked.

"The water tower," Sena answered. "It will help us see how many clan members there are."

"What is so special about Zombie clan?" I turned my attention to Jinn and Tuko. I needed to understand who or what we were up against. "I don't get their whole silent treatment. Did someone cut out their tongues?" Jinn and Tuko looked at each other as we continued walking through the mineshaft.

"Zombie clan has a philosophy," Tuko started, and he seemed a bit condescending, "that almost everyone has heard." *Okay — that's a dig against me.*

"Lighten up, Tuko." Jinn came to my defense. "Not everyone is the son of a clan leader and knows everyone as well as us." Jinn turned back to me. "The Zombie clan is silent because they believe that actions are the currency of their clan. Talk is cheap and worthless unless action is followed through. Only the leaders speak verbally, but if you watch them carefully, the rest speak through a series of hand signals and sign language. They feel it gives them advantage, since no one knows what they plan next."

"Why the face paint? Are they trying to be intimidating?"

"Yes," Tuko answered, "and they want to appear different from everyone else. No one is going to mistake them for another clan. They believe that once you become converted to the Zombie clan, you can never leave for another clan. Many of their facial tattoos are permanent, so there is no hiding where you came from."

"And they want me for...?"

"The usual. Money. Prestige. Recognition. They don't care if you're innocent or guilty," Jinn answered. "Your capture will make them look good."

"We're here," Sena interrupted. We stopped at a ladder heading up to the surface. A metal trap door was in the ceiling along with a hanging tube.

Arch climbed up first and looked through the tube, going around in a full rotation. I imagined it must have been a periscope to the surface. "Clear," he said after a few seconds and reached for the handle on the door. It opened and I could see a metal shaft reaching into the air. Once we climbed out, the light momentarily blinded me. In about thirty seconds, we pulled ourselves up another ladder and lay prone on the balcony of the water tower. Arch grabbed a pair of binoculars hanging from a hook and scanned the town. We were at the north end, with the mountains behind us and

most of the main street to the front and right of us. I could see our car in the distance sitting in front of the store. Several people sat in the front seat, waiting. Tuko was furious.

"If those guys hurt my car, I will string them up until they scream. And I don't care that they don't talk."

"Relax," Jinn reassured him and patted him on the back. "We got much bigger problems than your car."

"You can say that again," Arch commented and passed her the binoculars. "Look over there."

I looked through the binocs and scanned the area. I counted at least three vehicles and about fifteen Zombie clan members. Most of the clan seemed like teenagers, with a few adults sprinkled in. They traveled in packs of three, combing the town, taking the buildings one at a time.

One of the clan members stood out, and I focused on a large tattoo on a thick neck. A sharp earring dangled from the right ear. His head turned, and I saw a large flame tattoo stretched across the left side of his chin, over his face to his forehead. His smile wasn't pleasant as he motioned orders at another clan member. Whoever he was, he looked like he was in charge. Suddenly, he stopped gesturing and looked straight in my direction. I almost dropped the binoculars.

"Watch out! Those are expensive," Arch scolded and took back the binoculars.

"What's wrong? What did you see?" Jinn asked.

"Guy with flame on his face. Felt like he could see from there. The way they were searching the town, I don't think we can hide out up here forever," I answered.

"Got to be Viktor. He's a nasty piece of work. Probably be the head of the Zombie clan in a few years," Tuko commented.

"Any chance we can reason with him?" I said.

"Naw. He's all about the glory. He and Abraham are cut from the same cloth," Jinn replied.

"Great. This just keeps getting better. How do we evade him and get out of town?" I said.

"We could go back to the tunnels. Hide out until they get bored and move on?" Jinn offered.

"Yah. Like that's going to happen," Tuko added sarcastically. "If the car is here, they know we're around."

"So, let's take the car for a ride," Sena interrupted, looking smug, like she had all the answers.

"No one drives my car but me." Tuko acted all tough. Jinn gave him a look like he wasn't the only driver.

"Hear her out," Arch commanded. "For a girl, she's pretty smart." *High praise from this little boy.* We turned to her while hugging the floor of the water tower. She smiled as if she wasn't used to this kind of attention.

"If we create a diversion at this end of town," she pointed to the junkyard area that we had escaped from, "most of the clan will come running."

"But they're still going to guard the car. They won't leave that alone," Tuko commented.

"Then you're going to have to bust some heads," Arch said, "unless you're afraid to get your hands dirty." He was going to be trouble when he was older. Maybe he already was.

"Actually, we can help you if you move them to certain places. We can lead them to a few traps," Sena said.

"Okay, you have my attention. Now we just need to figure out a diversion," I asked.

"I have an idea for that too," Sena replied as we gathered around her.

This had better work, or I was going to become a permanent acquisition of the Zombie clan.

# 8

## Diversion

Twenty minutes later, we lay huddled under one of the town stores, waiting for the signal.

“You sure this is going to work?” Tuko asked. Seriously, this guy’s negativity was a real downer.

“It has to; we don’t have a chance on our own against all of the Zombie clan. And we sure aren’t going to get to the Cradle by walking,” Jinn added.

“What if I took one of their cars instead?” I suggested, knowing Tuko’s response. Jinn answered for him.

“Most of the clans have a tracking signal or kill switch in their vehicles. We wouldn’t get far,” Jinn mentioned, keeping her eyes focused straight ahead.

“Plus, we’d lose all the supplies I bought,” replied Tuko.

“Shush!” interrupted Arch, trying to wiggle past me for a better vantage point. “It is amazing you guys haven’t been caught yet with all the talking.” He was right. We should be quieter. For two whole minutes, no one said anything. We looked straight ahead at the street, waiting for something to happen.

“When is this going to start?” Tuko asked, exasperated. Before Arch could give him a look, over a mile away a small shed exploded.

A large board fired straight into the sky like a rocket, and debris shot out in the field. The cattle looked unimpressed and barely raised their heads. Then several fireworks exploded up into the air. The cattle looked more interested. And so, did our pursuers.

Viktor wordlessly pointed to the field and made hand signal number three. The zombie clan gathered into three cars. The first one spun dirt into a nearby wall. The other two followed quickly as Viktor scanned the town. Two zombie clan members remained. One sat in the back of Tuko’s car, playing with something on his fingers, while the other leaned on the side of car, watching the rest drove away.

“You got five minutes,” Arch directed, “before those guys figure out that there is nothing there. You better take these two Z’s out quickly.”

“Leave that to me,” I answered and then ran as fast as I could. I ducked into the street heading toward the car; both clan members were still distracted and didn’t notice me. I bent down and grabbed a rock. I tossed it at the clan member leaning against the car and missed. I was never an athlete, but it had the desired effect as dust spayed up in the air.

“I hear you’re looking for me. What’s that — you have nothing to say?” I mocked their lack of speech. Their expressions showed they were less than impressed. I ran past them toward an alley about fifty feet away. They looked at each other in surprise, and then the guy in the car leapt out and started after me. His friend was a second behind him. Both looked fast, and they would catch me in no time.

I turned a corner and leapt over a tarp in the middle of the alleyway. I didn’t look back, imagining that their arms were close to grabbing me. The clan member from the car came first, stepping onto the tarp. There was no ground to support him, and he fell ten feet into the tunnels beneath the town. The tarp wrapped around him, and I could hear him struggling within. I stopped and turned around. The second Zombie clan member pulled up short and glared at me. He looked down and made a hand signal as if communicating with his fellow clan member and gazed around, trying to find a pole or

rope to throw down. Before he could find anything, Tuko slammed into his back like a baseball player sliding into base. The clan member tried to recover his balance, failed, and fell into the hole.

“Right on! I love it when a plan comes together,” Jinn said from behind Tuko.

“Like you did anything.” Tuko grinned as he wiped the dirt off his pants.

“Come on!” Arch yelled, holding the binocular in his hands. “The other cars are turning around. They’re coming back.” We ran toward the car, jumping in without opening the doors. Tuko slammed the key into the ignition, and the car roared to life.

“Thank you,” I yelled to Arch.

“Yeah, yeah,” he dismissed, “just make sure you follow through with your end of the deal.”

Tuko turned hard on the street, trying to escape the town. Our goal was simple: get as much space between us and them as possible. It wasn’t an elegant plan, but it was all we had. Tuko turned the last corner, heading away from town into the wilderness. I took one final look back at the other cars. Strangely, they weren’t pursuing us. Rather, they were circling something. Or someone.

“Stop the car!” I yelled.

“Why? We’re getting away,” Tuko screamed back.

“What’s wrong?” Jinn asked.

“They have Sena.” Tuko slammed the car to a stop. A dust cloud formed from behind and slowly traveled over our heads.

“They knew the risk. If we go back now, we’re all caught and this was all for nothing. Besides, the Zombie clan won’t hurt them. They only want us.”

The coward in me wanted to believe him. I came into this world to get to my mother. I didn’t have to go back. But part of me wanted to. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the dead drone bee. One of these things had watched me my entire life. It never helped, it just reported back to those who were supposed to help. Sometimes they did. And sometimes they didn’t. Others decided who was worth saving and who wasn’t. And I was running away from the few people who had offered to help me. A bunch of kids.

“Keep going. Find your parents. Tell them what happened. I can’t let Sena or any of the kids get hurt because of me.”

“Like hell we’re going to leave you behind,” Jinn yelled. “We’d didn’t leave you when a hundred-foot dinosaur was chasing you. We’re definitely not leaving because of a bunch of silent, tattooed freaks.”

“Well, I’m out of here,” Tuko said. Jinn looked at him with anger glowing in her face. He noticed and intercepted before she screamed at him. “Someone needs to lead these guys on a merry chase so you two can slip in unseen.” I smiled — I kept underestimating this guy. I kept underestimating these people. Maybe they were backward compared to the technology from my home, but they sure had a lot of heart. Nobody would have put up any resistance against the drones back home. Here, kids would fight against bigger kids to help. I had to return the favor.

“Then get going.” I slapped the back of the car. “Don’t get to far ahead. Try to take as many cars with you as you can.”

“Oh, they can’t catch me.” He smirked as Jinn and I got out of the car.

“Be careful...” Jinn started, but Tuko pulled away. Mud sprayed on her shoes. “Brothers.” She shook her head. We quickly got off the roadway and headed back into town. We hid behind a clump of trees and watched as one of the cars drove closer.

“Stay here until they pass,” I warned.

Two cars rumbled toward us, but I was struck by the silence. No one talked, no music from the radio. Only the noise of the engine. A silent predator intent on capturing us. The dust cloud traveled over us, and Jinn coughed. It wasn’t loud, but one vehicle roared to a stop. *Does this clan have super hearing?*

The two of us looked at each other, and Jinn covered her mouth to prevent any further noise. We hugged the tree and peered through the branches. I could see the face of one of the boys in the back of the car. I thought the leaves provided good cover for us and we stayed perfectly still. His face was covered with scar tattoos, and he looked extremely unpleasant. His skin sagged, and the tattoos stretched under his bulk. He scanned the woods and then stopped at our area.

Jinn made a face as a bug landed on her face and walked down her nose. The large beetle was nasty with something green dripping from its mouth. It scurried with mean intent. I tried to flick my fingers at Jinn's face to knock it off. Any sudden movements would signal the clan. Jinn's face was turning purple, and I knew she couldn't hold out much longer. The bug was about to put something into her skin. The car beeped and the bug flew off. The vehicle moved ahead since the driver must have lost his patience as they continued to pursue Tuko. We both collapsed in a heap.

"I don't know how that clan stays quiet. I was ready to scream."

"I'm glad you didn't. Let's go."

We ran from the tree line, through a clearing, and behind one of the first buildings in the town. Near the end of street, two vehicles were parked. Viktor was standing over the two clan members we had tricked into the pit. They both were on their knees with their heads down. Viktor paced around them, and even though he yelled nothing at them, you could tell that they were both trembling, aware of what would happen to them next. Viktor stepped toward one of them and he flinched.

Then Viktor slapped the other one with the back of his hand and he went down hard.

"Great form of discipline," I commented. "I hope your family has a different approach."

Jinn made a face. "Our clan is nothing like them. Zombie clan is a lot like Hunter clan. They think might makes right. There's been a lot of conflict over the last year. They don't play well with others."

"Or maybe they think they can take over," I suggested. "I haven't seen a lot of clans getting along with each other since I got here. It often seems everyone is out for themselves."

Jinn shook her head. "There are other clans, like Armor, who believe that prosperity can only be created by working with others. That is what Luther was a strong believer in."

"And he got killed." My ability to state the obvious was amazing even to me. "Seems like there are just as many clans who are out for themselves." Jinn nodded. This really wasn't the time to challenge their entire social system. We looked ahead. Viktor was turning his attention to Sena. I wasn't sure if he would strike her, and I didn't want to find out. I stood up.

"What are you doing? They'll see you," Jinn asked.

"Exactly. I want their full attention on me."

"Why? I don't think they're going to follow you down an alley again."

"No. But if they want me, they're going to have to come get me," I answered cryptically and then added, "When they are focused on me, get Sena. Go back to the water tower and into the tunnels and hide."

"And how are you going to take down five Zombie clan members who are all much bigger than you?" Jinn cocked her head at me like I was crazy. And she was right. I didn't have a plan, just some options. But for once, I wanted to stop running. I didn't answer her; I just gave her a look that said I was walking and she better get moving as well. I started to march down the street.

For the first minute they didn't see me. The group seemed angry, but it was strange because I interpreted this from their body language alone. Then as one of them stared in my direction, the rest followed suit. Viktor finally stopped gesturing as he noticed that the rest were now paying attention to me. He assessed me in seconds and pointed in opposite directions to his clan. Two moved to his right and two to the left, disappearing behind buildings. At the end of the street, only Viktor remained. I figured I would be surrounded in less than a minute. I had enough time to make it to the general store.

Just like the street, the store was deserted. Wherever the kids were, they wanted no part of this fight. If we were going to rescue Sena, it was up to me and Jinn. Remembering what Arch had said about the worm swimming in the jar, I pulled it from the window. I grabbed several test tubes from a nearby

shelf and ducked behind the counter. I pulled the lid off carefully and made sure that no liquid touched my skin as I filled up the tubes. The worm swam around and looked up at me greedily. I wasn't intending to find out what would happen if it touched my skin, so I quickly screwed the lid back on. I waited. The door to the store opened.

I crouched behind the counter, looking through a narrow crack that allowed me to see the first two aisles from the door. Even though they didn't talk, they made no effort to walk quietly, and I could hear them getting closer. I readied my tube. A tall, gangly teenage boy strode toward the counter. I jumped up and emptied half of the tube into his face. What he did next totally caught me off guard. He screamed! I thought these guys were always silent. *I guess pain will make anyone talk.* The worm juice worked immediately. His face looked normal, but the liquid was absorbed through the skin. His eyes had become cloudy, as if he could no longer see through them. He swung his fist, knocking over a jar of ball bearings. As he turned, another teenage boy tapped him on the shoulder. I don't know if it was fear or reflexes, but he threw another fist and connected solidly with the other boy's jaw. He went down like a house of cards.

"Hey ugly, I'm over here," I jeered. The blind clan member turned, his ugly tattooed face grimacing in pain. He moved one step forward, and his feet stepped on a bunch of the ball bearings. He lost his balance and immediately went horizontal. His head cracked on the floor, and he landed unconscious next to his buddy. That was easier than I thought. Two Zombie clan members down, three to go.

I got up from behind the counter. I debated whether to stay in the store and let the others come to me or go straight to them. I gazed out the windows. The street was empty. A creak behind me made me realize that I hadn't checked the back door. An arm turned me around and I looked into the face of another Zombie clan member. This one was different, though. A girl. Despite all her face tattoos, she was almost pretty in a Goth kind of way. She had similar features as my best friend Lacey from home, and for a second, I let my guard down. The Zombie clan member made no sound but put her fingers to mouth and crossed her throat in a slicing motion. It wasn't hard to understand. *Be quiet or I'll hurt you.* That's when my fight or flight instincts kicked in. After a split-second analysis of my options, a third option appeared. So, I kicked her in the gut.

Power to her, she didn't go down hard like her male clan members. But she did double over on one knee and gave a look of hatred. I poured the rest of the test tube on her neck and watched her eyes cloud over. Her arms flailed as she realized that she couldn't see me anymore. I didn't feel any sympathy at all. I left her panicking on the floor.

I still had the element of surprise. I could take out the last two with the liquid in the second test tube. I grasped it with my left hand as I walked off the storefront onto the street. I saw no one and took no more than a step before a leg tripped me and I fell face down. The test tube went flying ahead of me. I gazed behind me and saw a heavy-set clan member with white flames burning across his face. He looked slow but strong. He smiled, and his crooked teeth made me glad he didn't talk. His arm was like a vise on my leg, and as I kicked, he didn't loosen his grip. I grabbed some dirt and threw it at his face. *Oldest trick in the book.* Something must have got into his eye, because he let go. He made a motion with his tongue, and whatever he mouthed had to be a curse.

I looked frantically around for the liquid while keeping one eye on my attacker. He must have seen what I was looking for as our eyes both settled on the test tube at the same time. I moved faster, but he was closer. We both jumped toward it, but he grabbed at it first. He might not know what it was, but he knew it was a weapon. If I couldn't beat him to the tube, then I would just break it. I kicked his hand and the tube broke. Liquid flowed onto his fingertips. I watched his fear as his eyes clouded over. He rolled around on the ground, slapping his head, trying to ward off the liquid's effects. He'd be no more trouble for a couple of hours. I walked away, my advantage gone and their leader left to beat. How would I take out a clan leader who outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds when I had no weapon? I looked around, trying to improvise.

I heard a muffled cry at the end of street. Sena was tied up, with a piece of cloth rammed into her mouth. She was strung up, hanging on the post like the catch of the day. She kicked feverishly to escape. She was alone. Viktor was nowhere in sight. One of the cars was parked near her, while the other was missing. *Maybe he took his car and went home? This is too easy.* I looked for a pit or other trap that I might fall into by walking to Sena. *Nothing obvious.* I looked at Sena, hoping her eyes might help give away what I was missing. She just struggled to break her bonds; the ropes were hurting and her face was red with exertion. I couldn't leave Sena in pain and marched toward her, crossing the street. As I reached her, I tried to untie her bonds. From the corner of my eye, I noticed a shadow stretching on the ground behind me.

A large board split over Viktor's head. He looked more angry than hurt and hit Jinn with the back of his hand. She went sailing to the ground, blood spraying from her lip.

"Typical Zombie clan coward!" Jinn spat blood at Viktor. "Hiding under a car to sneak up on a girl and take her from behind."

"Not all of us have the lofty standards of Armor clan," Viktor replied, and we were shocked to hear his voice. It was high and nasal and didn't match his body. It sounded like he didn't speak often.

"But Zombie clan can't talk." Jinn shook her head in surprise.

"With each other or in front of one another. I don't see anyone around to hear us. Surely your elders realized that our elders would talk in private or under extreme situations."

"And this is a bit of both," I answered, looking him square in the eyes. He smiled as if he respected the defiance.

"Yes. And you will be quite the prize. Much honor will come to our clan after turning in Luther's killer." He stepped toward me and I knew if he grabbed me there was no way I could break free from his grasp.

"Wasn't me. You got the wrong girl," I said.

"Right girl. Right description. You have a gold necklace with amber stone around your neck. You can't hide from me," Viktor responded.

"The charge isn't true. She didn't do it," Jinn said.

"Don't care," Viktor answered plainly. "This isn't about right or wrong. This is about earning prestige from the other clans. Armor clan spends so much time looking down on the rest of us, you wouldn't know." He glared at Jinn.

"So you don't care if I'm innocent. You're doing this to impress the other clans? This is so high school."

"You act like you don't even understand how the system works." Viktor turned back to me. "I don't know what your clan is like, but you are either recognized or you are forgotten. Then the clans that have everything control your needs."

"That's not true!" Jinn marched closer to Viktor but pulled up short of being grabbed by his meaty fists. "Armor has earned its right, while other clans have just talked about helping society. We created medicines that saved lives."

Viktor laughed at her. "At a price! You make sure we pay top dollar for your help. Gouging us when you could just give it to us. And when we can't afford it, you make us barter for things like her!" He pointed a finger at me.

"You lie! No one is forcing you to do this." Jinn was upset.

"The end justifies the means. Her capture will help my people. What they do with her afterward is not my concern. I'll just be delivering her. The clan elders will decide if she lives or dies." Then Zombie clan would be the least of my problems.

Behind Victor I saw movement. Sena had finally wriggled out of her bonds. She rushed at him and punched him in the nose. She bounced off him and fell to the ground. Her fist had some effect, as a trickle of blood steamed out of his nostril.

“You little girls can’t take me.” Viktor laughed. “Now step aside.” He grabbed me and as hard as I pounded on his arm, I may as well have been hitting a wooden timber. He showed no reaction to my blows.

“There’s not just girls here,” a young boy’s voice yelled as he came out of a building. It was Arch, and he was swinging a baseball bat.

Viktor was less than impressed. “I’ll give you one swing, kid, and then after I hit you, you won’t be getting up.”

“What about me then?” Saul was carrying a jagged piece of metal.

“Or me?” Another girl walked forward with a board with a nail sticking out of the end. Other kids walked out onto the street. There had to be at least twenty and each was carrying a nasty weapon. Viktor didn’t say anything, but I could tell he was now tense. He backed up a step and an opportunity presented itself. Instead of banging on his arms, I kicked him right between the legs. He bent over, but I didn’t totally incapacitate him. He looked up at me with angry eyes.

“You and your little kids haven’t proved anything. I’ll be back and have double the number of clan members. We’ll wipe this town off the map!” He was angry, but I didn’t doubt his words.

“If attacking defenseless kids is the way Zombie clan rolls, then you’ll be even lower on the food chain if you come back here again,” Jinn yelled. She gave as good as she got. Viktor didn’t respond, but I could tell he was going over his options. And none of them were good. The kids surrounded him, tapping their weapons but not speaking. They were giving the Zombie clan what they always gave to the other clans. Menacing quiet. They slowly parted the way, giving Viktor a clear path to his vehicle. He slowly got up, wincing a bit. It made me smile to see him grimace. Just like Abraham, these teenage clan members were too full of themselves, thinking they were untouchable. Today we had proved that wrong.

The Orphans looked tough, but I knew underneath they were scared. Viktor could take any two of them with ease but didn’t seem committed to taking on the whole pack. He stepped gingerly into the car and gave me a parting shot.

“This isn’t over. There’s lots of places between here and the Cradle. Better keep your head up. We’re not done with you yet!” The car spun out, spraying us with dust. As he drove, he stopped to pick up the rest of his crew. They all had to be led into the car. As he picked up his last member, Tuko appeared and slowly evaluated the scene. He and Viktor looked silently at each other but assessed one another with respect.

“Thank you, Pene.” Sena gave me a big hug. “He was rough and the ropes were tied really tight. I guess I should have stayed better hidden after the fireworks.” She smiled and that made my whole sacrifice worth it.

“Are you kidding? This girl rocks!” Arch gushed at me like I was a rock star. “You were amazing. You blinded all those team members on your own. I wasn’t even sure that Dad told me the truth, what I told you about the temporary blindness.” *Whoa. Arch could have scammed me, and I would have been a sorry mess if none of this had worked.* I had no time to dwell on that fact as Tuko pulled up to us. He looked pleased.

“I lost one car, but you guys took out the leader. Color me impressed,” Tuko said. *Seriously. Boys are so lame.*

“So Zombie clan gone. Check. Town and kids saved. Check. Now what?” I asked.

“Time to move on,” Jinn suggested. “There is no reason to stay here.”

I looked down at the drone bee and still felt that I was missing something. I had come from a home where everyone was watched, nothing went unobserved. Everyone was safe, no one got hurt. Here was the opposite. Nothing seemed to watch us, but everywhere was chaos. No one was safe, but everyone was free. I wasn’t sure if what I’d wished for was so great. Yet this little bee held the key. I knew it. Something told me that this drone represented what was really happening. That maybe we were being watched, but it wasn’t as obvious.

“Actually, I met someone while I was trying to lose the Zombie car. He gave me some help.” Tuko pointed down the street. A small dust cloud grew, and a large caravan appeared. There were several large, covered trucks that carried people and supplies. There were a few smaller, nimbler vehicles that circled around these vehicles. The cab was open, with roll bars surrounding the drivers looking like mini dune buggies. *Could another clan be taking Zombie’s place?*

“It’s our parents!” Jinn yelled with excitement. “We’re saved.”

I looked at the oncoming vehicles, but instead of excitement, I felt fear. Jinn and Tuko were trustworthy friends, better than most I had back home. But their parents could be a whole different story. Something Viktor had said about the different classes of clan had bothered me. Were Jinn and Tuko’s parents my saviors? Or my new captors?

# 9

## Drive!

“You’re going to love my dad.” Jinn giggled. “If anyone can get us out of this mess, it’s him.” I looked over at Tuko, who didn’t seem to share the same enthusiasm.

“Yea, he’s a real sweetheart,” he said with a hint of sarcasm. Four cars rolled to a stop, their dust momentarily blinding me as the occupants dashed out. Seconds later there was about half a dozen adults around us. But without any description, their dad stood out amongst the group. While everyone ran around, he walked slowly but with purpose. He was tall and lean, with long gray hair pulled back. His face seemed neutral, but his eyes were angry. He barked several orders and then turned his attention to us. Jinn ran to him to give him a hug, but he barely responded and looked past her to me.

“All of you into the car. Now!”

“Great to see you too, Dad,” Tuko answered but stepped toward the open door. Jinn looked at me and nodded, her face tight. I followed, not seeing any other options. We climbed in, and their father followed. It was roomy in the back, and the seats faced each other. Their dad banged on a glass window and the car came to life.

“Dad! We can’t go. The kids in this town are on their own. We promised them your help,” Jinn explained.

“Help! Do you know what kind of trouble the two of you are in with the council? It has taken all my resources to keep the bounty off your heads.” As he looked directly at me. “That is on hers.”

“It’s false. Abraham and his clan were looking for a scapegoat. Pene had nothing to do with Luther’s death,” Jinn protested. How had I made this good friend in such a brief time?

“You don’t decide that, Jinn!” Her dad’s face darkened. “The council decides if she is innocent or not. By interfering with the other clans, you have also become a fugitive.”

“The other clans would have brought her in a body bag, Dad.” Tuko spoke up. His eyes smoldered, as if he didn’t face off against his dad very often. “You always told us to do what was right, not what was popular; so here we are.” Their father was silent, as if contemplating Tuko’s words. Instead of waiting for his reply, I spoke up.

“If it wasn’t for these two, I would be dead. If they were my children, I would be extremely proud of them.” Jinn beamed while Tuko’s face remained neutral. However, their father seemed less than convinced.

“I don’t know how your clan works, Pene, but in ours we follow orders! Luther’s death has had reverberations throughout our entire clan structure. By assisting and aiding you, they have directly implicated Armor clan as co-conspirators. There are several clans who would stop at nothing to end my leadership to get to you.”

“And that’s what it’s really about, Dad. If we make you look bad, who cares what’s right or wrong,” Tuko countered.

“Enough! I don’t need to explain my actions to either one of you, but I will to your friend.” Their dad looked pained for a second, and I realized that my presence here in this world was making it difficult for everyone. “I am Strika, one of the leaders of Armor and father to these two. Like your clan, Pene, we have a power structure that keeps us organized and safe. Throughout our world, there are dozens of clans, some growing, some shrinking, while others cease and are reborn. The clans are all very different from each other, typically achieving their identity from a single skill or leader. If that

skill or leader is strong, the clan prospers and grows. If the leadership is challenged, the clan may transition to become something very different.”

“I’m sure Pene doesn’t need the history lesson, Dad,” Tuko added. Rather than respond, his father’s glare made Tuko lean back into his chair.

“As leader of our clan, I respond to the group of elders. Luther was one of those elders. They oversee our existence and make sure that the relations between the clans are peaceful. And for the most part, if everyone stays to their territory, we coexist. Everyone knows their place.” “Now?” I asked.

“There are two sides forming. One group of clans feels it should only be the strong that survive. Certain clans feel they deserve more territory and will expand as they see fit. Those who fall before them will become extinct. Other clans, such as ours, believe that we can all coexist and benefit from the diversity of the groups. Just because you can’t beat someone in a fight doesn’t negate your contribution to our culture.”

“Why is my capture important?”

“Several leaders believe that Luther’s killer represents a few clans wanting to destroy the others. Luther preached peace and coexistence. Without his calming presence, more radical views on the council will rear their ugly heads.”

“Shouldn’t those clans want to save Pene and make her a hero?” questioned Jinn.

Her dad shook his head. “Luther’s killer is just a means to an end. No one needs to hear the assassin’s view. And the clan who set this up sees Pene as a perfect patsy to pin Luther’s death on.” “And your view, Father?” Tuko looked at him with concern.

Strika took a second to collect himself and then looked at me. “I don’t believe that a young girl can outwit an entire security system and assassinate a prominent council member alone. Either you’re innocent or you’re extremely dangerous. Either way, I need you alive. We need to turn you in immediately. It is the only way to end this mess.”

And there it was. I had traded my freedom for another type of prison, despite the support of his children.

“Does our opinion mean nothing to you, Father? Do you think that we would just support someone who could be capable of committing this crime?” Jinn yelled.

“Your opinion is not up for debate. Your support for her has put a target on both you and Tuko’s back. By supporting her, you have implicated our clan and made yourselves part of the bounty. Do you know how your actions are ripping this clan apart?” I could tell the time it had taken to find us had not been easy. Tuko was not so forgiving.

“Father, do you remember what you taught me when we went fishing when I was child?” Tuko asked.

“I taught you many things during our fishing expeditions. What is your point?” His father’s patience was clearly coming to an end.

“When we caught a large salmon one day, the biggest I had ever seen, you remarked that it was a great catch. However, you said that the salmon was endangered and this might be one of the few we would ever catch. You told me I had to decide; keep the salmon and win the prize for the biggest catch or throw it back and give this salmon a chance to spawn and replenish its population. Short term versus long term. So, I threw the salmon back into the stream.” “Are you comparing me to a fish?” I asked, not impressed with the analogy. “No. At least a salmon would be good to eat.”

“Are you comparing me to a fish?” I asked, not impressed with the analogy.

“No. At least a tuna would be good to eat.” Tuko smiled mischievously and turned back to his father. “You supported my decision because you understood the long game. Giving Pene to Council would win you a prize with the other clans. Make you feel important for a brief time.” Tuko turned to look at me. “Help her get to the Cradle. She can explain her innocence there. If you turn her in now, I wouldn’t be surprised if she suffers a mysterious accident. That would hurt all clans in the long run.”

I was impressed. This arrogant boy had actually thought about someone else beside himself. His father's face softened, and I could tell his message had reached him.

"Okay. She stays with us, under guard, until we reach the Cradle." He grabbed Tuko's hand. "How did the two of you get so smart? You must take after your mother." "Where is Mom?" Jinn asked. Her dad pointed to the front of the car.

"She is at the head of the caravan. As hard as it is to believe, we have much bigger issues than your friend."

"Such as?" I asked, realizing that I this wasn't my place but curious to learn more about this world.

"Your clan may have noticed, but the animal attacks are getting more frequent. And worse in terms of casualties. The dinosaur you encountered in Trall is just the continuance of many incidents. What's worse is that they are becoming more coordinated and smarter."

"Or we're getting stupider," Jinn added. "A lot of the technology in the Orphan town is broken down, and no one seems able to fix it anymore." Her father considered her comment, but I interrupted before he could respond.

"Do you know what this is?" I pulled the small drone bee from my pocket. He took it from me and examined it.

"Some type of mechanical animal. Never see it before. Was it from the town?"

I hesitated, because if I told him about my home as I had Jinn, I didn't feel he would be as understanding. Jinn nodded to prompt me to explain.

"In my home, these things watched us. There was typically a camera here, and its flight could follow us. You could never get away from it." The three of them looked at each other as if I was telling them a tall tale.

"Where are you from?" their dad asked suspiciously. I realized that it was time to double down and tell the whole truth. Whatever happened would happen.

"My home is much different from yours," I began as the three of them leaned in for my tale. I never got to finish.

The back seat went sideways as an explosion rocked the front of the car. Glass exploded from the window, and I felt a streak of blood drip down my cheek. Their dad immediately barked orders to the front seat driver.

"Radio ahead. I want to find out from the start of the caravan who is attacking us. Make sure my wife is okay." The driver looked like he was going to say something, but their father interrupted. "Now!" he commanded. The driver began radioing several cars, and I heard several voices respond. Some sounded worried while others were excited. None of it sounded good. I put my hand on the door to open it.

"Wait," their father commanded. I felt like another one of his children being ordered around. "Don't go outside until I know what is going on. If you are a target, you'll be giving them just what they want by stepping outside." He was probably right.

"Give my dad the benefit of the doubt," Jinn added. "We don't know what is going on."

"We're being attacked is what's going on! And sitting in here when we can be fighting back is no help at all," Tuko yelled. I guess I was more like him than I realized. Sitting and waiting were not things I could do easily.

That option disappeared as the front of the car buckled. The concussive force flipped the car, and we landed on the roof. The seat belts kept us from flying around and we hung down from the ceiling.

"Get. Out. Now!" their dad commanded. We didn't need to hear that twice. I unbuckled and immediately landed on Jinn's butt.

"Ouch!" she yelled. I pulled open the door and crawled out onto the ground. There was an unmoving body near the front of the car. I was sure it was the driver. I looked around. The roadway

was narrow and barely passable. Huge ruts and rocks jutted out. The trees were close, with thick vegetation. An army could be hiding in there and we would never see them.

“You see anything?” Jinn asked. I shook my head. If another clan was attacking us, they weren’t waving any flags. Her father went to the driver and touched his neck. His body slumped a little, and I assumed that the driver was dead. In front of us, several cars were at a standstill with about a dozen people milling around or standing by open car doors.

“Did the attack stop?” Tuko asked. I looked to where the front of the car had been. Something large and rough had impacted the hood, almost like a large rock. I looked to the ground and saw a bunch of shiny spikes in the dirt. I reached down.

“Don’t touch those!” I jerked back, suddenly remembering the worms from the store and the temporary blindness. What were these things? I looked at Jinn, but she shook her head. Her father stared at them.

“It’s not another clan. It’s an ankylosaur herd.”

My mind raced. I didn’t spend much time in school remembering the dinosaurs and what they looked like. Since seeing the monster at Trall, I knew that they weren’t like the history books. These dinosaurs had something more wicked done to them. I tried to get a glimpse but could only see movement and shadows in the trees. I had never studied anything that had thrown these death balls at me.

“The three of you stay here! I’m going to find your mother.” Strika took several steps forward and motioned to a large man.

“Keep your eyes to the sky, Pene,” Tuko said. “If one of those balls of spikes hit you, you’re dead.”

“The spikes are like a porcupine. If they puncture your skin, they hook in,” added Jinn. “Any movement is transferred to the spikes and they move closer to your vital organs. I’ve seen people who panicked after being hit and died a pincushion in minutes.” I gulped. This world’s beasts were extremely deadly.

“How do they throw the ball so hard?” I asked, still not able to picture the beast.

“The animal is armored; knives and bullets can barely puncture unless you have a tremendous amount of force and are at close range. The tail is scooped like a slingshot; they gather rocks or branches, but the killer is the spikes that they release as well. Think of the hardest, sharpest pieces of steel and these things are tougher.”

“How do you deal with these things?” I yelled.

“You don’t, you avoid them,” Tuko interjected.

“Incoming!” the large man in front of us roared. I watched the dirty ball spin through the air. It made a funny sound like a whistle as air was rushing through it. It impacted in the ground about thirty feet in front of us.

“It missed!” I screamed.

Both Jinn and Tuko looked scared. The man in front of us stood, but his body went slack. He slowly turned to us as if to speak. His chest was covered in spikes that had ricocheted off the ground. He was dead by the time his knees gave out and he fell face forward. Before I could scream, part of a car roof flew in the air.

Now I could see the dinosaur in the distance. They were smaller than I thought, but that didn’t make them any less deadly. The size of a large armored horse, it was covered with sharp plates until there was a gap running along its tail with a clump of spikes at the end. The gap must have given the beast the flexibility to fling its deadly payload. Its face looked simple, almost like a cow, except for its eyes. There was a feeling of menace as it looked at us.

“Run!” Jinn commanded, and we scrambled toward the woods. The creature gave a bleating sound like it was scared, but we had no intention of trying to settle it down. The forest swallowed us up making me wish I had a machete to hack through the overgrowth. There is nothing more frightening when death is walking behind you and you can only get away at a slow crawl. The three of us smashed

through the vegetation and I could hear the animal lumbering behind us. A large tree creaked and splintered, its trunk collapsing into the woods. The dinosaur had picked us as its targets.

“Keep moving,” Tuko ordered. “They’re slow but relentless and this thick forest works to its advantage. We need to get some space between us.” I pushed forward, noticing a small rise ahead. It made sense to find some elevation so we can see what was going on. A large crash came from behind us and I heard a scream. I stopped dead in my tracks; was one my friends hurt?

“Jinn! Tuko!” I called. Silence. This was worse than hearing their pain. I backtracked, despite the rumbling approach of the beast. I saw a large tree with Jinn kneeling before it. Tuko was poised with a knife ready to slash her back.

“What are you doing?” I yelled. Jinn turned and look petrified. She put her finger to her lips. I could see a large spike protruding from the middle of her back. It looked black and sickly.

“Shut up!” Tuko hissed. “She can’t move, or the spike will work itself to her organs. I’ve only got a few minutes to pull it out. Get away from us. If the dinosaur comes this way, I can’t protect both of you!” And like a surgeon, he began to work slowly at the spike. A trickle of blood oozed down her back. Jinn looked as if something was between her teeth to prevent her from screaming. The woods rumbled behind us. They didn’t have a couple of minutes of safety if I didn’t do something. I

ran away from them and screamed as loud as I could.

I hollered for as long as I could. It felt like minutes, but it was probably a lot shorter. My voice cracked and my throat felt raw. I stood on a rock, banging a large stick, making as much noise as I could. Trees shattered behind me. *Good.* The creature had me in its sights. If it was as focused on me, Tuko could help Jinn. I continued climbing upward, hoping that the slight incline would slow the beast down. The closeness of shredding trees made me think it wasn’t helping very much.

I remembered my grandmother telling me about a story of a girl chased by a bear. I had never seen one in real life, so the story didn’t really hold my interest. My grandmother was quite animated, as if she had been there herself. The girl had been walking behind her house to a lake when she thought she saw two dogs playing with each other. Something seemed odd about their shape, but the girl’s curiosity won out. By the time she realized that these were bear cubs and not dogs, she was too late. She turned and realized that she had come between a mother and her cubs. The mother bear stared at her and the fur on her back end stood up. The girl ran and the mother bear chased her.

The girl couldn’t get back to her house and she knew she couldn’t outrun the bear. She searched around for something to climb up. There was a large tree with pine cones strewn everywhere. She did her best not to trip on one and leaped onto the first branch, reaching for the second. The bear didn’t miss a beat and reached for the branch as well. She didn’t realize how good a climber the bear was and had to keep climbing to stay just out of the bear’s reach. She tossed everything down that she could find, pine cones, an old bird’s nest, but nothing deterred the bear. The girl thought she was either going to be raked by the bear’s claws or she was going to break her neck when she fell out of the tree.

There was a cry below when the bear cub yelled up at its mother. The mother bear stopped her advance and looked down. The cub mewed again, and the mother dropped back to the ground and chased the cub away. The bear looked back at the girl and issued her warning, a guttural roar letting her know that she had spared her life.

Was there a moral of the story? I asked my grandmother. Yes, she said, don’t climb a tree to escape a bear. But there are other tactics to get away, he told me. I hoped this beast was similar enough to a bear for them to work.

Another spiky ball came flying, interrupting my thoughts and slamming into the trees. This time I ducked behind a large trunk, not wanting any of the debris to come flying into my chest. I let the dust settle. When I looked around the tree, I saw dozens of spikes impaled in the ground, some not more than five feet away. I zigzagged around them and continued to my goal.

The clearing ahead was trampled down, and there was a small hill with several large boulders. I ran toward them, hoping I could at least see better from the higher vantage point. In my peripheral vision, something moved. I stopped. One of the boulders moved. No, several of the boulders moved.

Instead of escaping the dinosaur, I had just walked into its nest. The large dinosaur that I mistook for a boulder blinked. It was smaller than the beast I had seen on the roadway. There were several tiny ones about the size of a goat that were jumping playfully around the larger creature. I held my breath, not wanting to make a sound. Whatever plan I thought I had went completely out the window. I backed up slowly, hoping that they would not react to me. For a few moments they didn't, but they reacted to the roar of the largest one as it broke through the clearing, shattering trees with its tail. Damn my loud scream, it had no problem following me.

I couldn't go on, and I couldn't go back. I started to climb the rocks, keeping both sets of animals in my sight. The rocks were coarse and easy to get a foothold. I passed a gap and spied a vent of some sort protruding from the rock. *What is something man-made doing here?*

I almost slipped and realized that this was not the time to speculate. I needed to focus. I stood on the rock, trying to make myself look bigger by waving my arms. Maybe I could intimidate the animal. The last tree went flying as the larger beast came moving toward me. It was painful to watch its slow, lumbering walk. I could run back to the clearing, but thanks to the little one below me, I was trapped between it and its family. Like the mother bear, I had only given it one option: attack.

The ball of spikes came flying, and I had little time to find shelter as I wedged myself behind one of the larger rocks. The impact shook the stone, but I felt no pain, so I knew I was okay. But I

couldn't keep ducking these things all day. There had to be a way out. I looked at the overhang above me. The rock sloped down like a slide. Might make a good escape route. Or better yet, I could send down an avalanche of my own.

"Come over here, ugly! Is that the best you got?" I laughed. If my friends could see me now, taunting a beast weighing several tons. They'd think I was out of my mind — and they wouldn't be wrong. I noticed a large boulder that could do some damage if it was moved. I tried pushing it with my foot, but all it did was hurt my back. *Damn, it won't budge.*

I grabbed a rock and threw it at the big dinosaur's face. As always, I had terrible aim, and it sailed off the beast's head. But its eyes blinked, and I could tell I must have made it mad. Its eyelids lowered, and I watched its tail whip back majestically. For a second, I got caught up in his tail's arc, the slow-motion trajectory.

"Pene! Look out!" Jinn yelled from behind as she emerged from the trees.

I ducked, and the spiny mass sailed behind me and struck the boulder above me. It shattered, and fragments littered into the air and rained down on me. Luckily, the boulder I had tried to move now wobbled, and I kicked as hard as I could in hope of dislodging it. "Owww!" I cried as my shoulder smarted from the weight, but the boulder rolled down toward the beast. It picked up speed and I hoped it would smash into the big dinosaur. But before the rock slid into the creature's head, it ricocheted off another rock on the ground, spun, and then rolled to a complete stop. *Any more bright ideas?*

I saw Jinn approaching and knew I had to do something quickly or the beast would turn its attention to her. My only advantage was surprise. I jumped down off the rock and ran toward the nest. I slid across the rock and landed by one of three babies. The other parent seemed alarmed but couldn't swing her tail for fear of hurting their children. To further the impasse, I raised a rock as if I was going to crush the baby's head. I had no idea if I could even hurt it, but my message was received; no one moved. Not even Jinn.

The baby rolled on its back, showing me its belly. There was no malice in its actions. Unlike its parents, its tail didn't seem to have developed yet. Still, it wasn't like I wanted to pet it and have it sit on my lap. But if it wasn't evil, then maybe its parents weren't either. I lowered the rock and looked back toward the dinosaur that had released a killer ball of spikes only moments before. Its eyes blinked, and a realization crossed my mind. Maybe we had scared it by crossing its territory and it had attacked

out of fear for its family. Or I was a fool and it was predatory and I couldn't see it. But I saw intelligence, and suddenly it viewed me as less of a threat.

I walked slowly away from the nest, never taking my eyes away from the largest dinosaur. I would not concede to this animal; it had to think of me as an equal. The babies squealed and followed their other parent away from the nest in the opposite direction. The main beast followed, never taking its eyes off me, but its tail remained still.

For several minutes I watched the family lumber off, and I wondered if we could share the same land and survive. Or would we always be doomed to fight each other until one side became extinct?

"Wow! You just scared them off without throwing a punch. Must be your superpower." Tuko smiled. Jinn rushed up to me and gave me a big hug. Then she let go and slapped my shoulder.

"It's nice to see you too. What's that for?"

"For trying to do everything yourself. You could have gotten yourself killed." I noticed the fresh wound dripping from her shoulder.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm good." She looked at Tuko. "Thanks to my bro. And to you, Pene, for buying us time."

"If the two of you are done hugging it out, you both should look at something." Jinn and I looked at each other and then walked over to Tuko. He was looking at the gaping hole in the rocks I had stood on. Tuko stared into the dark.

"Did you see this?" I looked down at the demolished portion of the vent I had seen earlier.

"Yeah, but I was kind of busy trying to save my life. What's the big deal about the vent?"

"It's not the vent I'm looking at. It's the ladder," he pointed. The twisted remains of a ladder descended into the dark. A bunch of manmade console ports appeared out of the wall.

*What the hell? What is this place?*

"What is it?" Jinn asked. I contemplated how something manmade would exist in the middle of nowhere underneath us. If I had learned one thing about this world, it was that it seemed like a rabbit hole. The more I thought I understood, the more confused I became.

"Only one way to find out." I readied to descend into the darkness.

# 10

## Experiment

Just before I stepped to go down the ladder, Tuko blocked my way.

“Let me go down first.” I could have sworn he was using his macho voice on me. I pushed him aside.

“It’s okay, I just chased off the killer monster, I think I can handle whatever is down there.” I stepped down into the darkness and gripped the metal rails. They were in decent shape, not rough or rusty to my touch. I climbed down another rung and saw nothing at the bottom. I looked up at Tuko, who seemed to read my mind.

“Did you want me to drop a rock?” he asked with a grin at the corner of his mouth.

“Yes, please. Let’s make sure that I won’t be climbing for a long time.” He disappeared and then came back into view. *I mean, how hard was it for him to find a rock?* I motioned with my hand. “Any time now.” He dropped the rock. We waited for a couple of seconds, and then I heard a muffled sound of rock on rock.

“Well, at least we know it’s not bottomless.” He smirked and motioned for me to continue descending. I felt like slapping the smile right off his face. I took another step downward. I moved slowly, envisioning a slippery spot and falling to my death. Instead, after a minute it became so dark I couldn’t even see the rungs of the ladder and had to find them by feel. I looked up and could only see the glow of light. Tuko had not followed. My feet hit an uneven surface and I realized that I had reached bottom.

I felt around the wall. It was rough and moist. There was a groove and I tried to reach in. Something skittered across my fingers. I screamed.

“Are you okay?” Tuko’s voice echoed from above.

“Yes,” I answered harshly, a little embarrassed. “Just give me a minute, I can’t see the hand in front of my face.” I continued feeling the rock surface, not sure of what I was looking for until I found it. My hand crossed a soft, wire-like object and then a square shape. I felt a button on its surface and smashed it down. I heard the echo of power-feeding circuits and lights began to illuminate a short tunnel. It was still dark, but at least I could see. “Okay, you guys can come down now.”

I moved forward and spied a circuit breaker on the left wall. I passed it and stepped into a main room. Light bulbs on long wires hung from the roof and shone down on some type of lab. There was a computer in one corner with an old monitor that had green and red wires hanging out of it. A metal chair with rollers was stationed in front of it. I pushed it aside and it scraped along a flat floor. A thick coating of dust was on everything; nobody had been here for a long while. On a white table lay a schematic of a series of towns. I could see Trall located to the far west. Several symbols were spread across the map.

But a series of photos on a table caught my attention. There were dozens of shots of animals, mostly dinosaurs indigenous to this world. None of the animals acted like they were being observed. On one of the walls there were about a dozen blank monitors. *Was this some type of was observation station?*

“What is this place?” Tuko asked as he entered the room. I could hear another thump down the hall, which must have been Jinn jumping off the ladder.

“No idea. Was hoping you could tell me.” But I could tell from the amazement in Tuko’s eyes that this was nothing like anything he had seen. I walked over to a computer and pressed the power button. A green light came on and noise whirled as if the hard drive booted up.

“What are you doing?” Jinn asked from behind.

“Turning on a computer, seeing if we can access what was going on here.”

Jinn’s face darkened as if she didn’t understand what was going on. “You can make this work?”

“Maybe. Worth a try. Have you not used one?”

“No. Most computers broke down and hardly anyone could fix them. Stop acting like you know more than us,” Tuko jeered. Jinn and I looked at each other. *Should I share my secret with him?*

“Knowing more than you is not a big accomplishment,” Jinn teased Tuko, who pretended not to hear. I reached into the desk, looking for slips of paper. Most of the contents were scribbles, a few wrappers, and bunch of pens that didn’t work. The computer light flashed green, and I pressed the monitor button. It came to life. Somewhere in there must be a generator to power the lights and computer. By the amount of dust on the monitor, I was lucky that anything started at all. The screen came up and requested a login and password. There was nothing of value in the desk so I checked a bulletin board.

There was a collection of technical documents that made no sense to me. The lack of personal effects was surprising. *Did whoever worked down here not have any family? No pictures of anyone they cared about?* I scanned the margins of one document and found someone’s handwriting near the top in blue pen. *Good thing none of us can remember our passwords.* I typed into the two boxes on the screen, and the computer acknowledged that I had entered the correct information. It began loading another screen. Both Jinn and Tuko stood behind me.

“You seem to know what you are doing,” stated Tuko.

“Surprised?” I gave him a smirk. “Maybe I’m more than just a pretty face.” The screen loaded and my smile immediately disappeared.

The screen was divided into folders, each with different dinosaur names. They appeared like a collection of studied beasts. I pressed on the ankylosaurs folder. Our recent encounter had me interested in what make them tick. There were a series of images and videos stored in the folder. I could feel Tuko and Jinn’s silent interest as they pressed from behind. I clicked on the video. The scream almost floored me. I quickly found the volume and reduced it. The animal was inside a cage, with a desert surrounding it. I saw metal prods with electricity raining down on the animal. It screamed in agony every time it was touched. Its tail seemed to be lashed down and it couldn’t move it in protest.

“Where is this?” Tuko asked. “It’s like no place I’ve ever seen.” I had no answer but watched the video and was horrified when the animal turned its head. Wires were connected to its face, and I thought I could see exposed flesh, as if the animal was some type of experiment. What awful things could have been done to this creature? The video ended, and my hand scrolled for another video. Jinn stopped my mouse.

“What is that?” She pointed to a folder with the label with clan names. I clicked it open and dozens of clan folders came up. Once I saw the Armor folder, I knew which one she wanted. I

clicked it and inside the folder there were videos, images, and documents. Jinn pointed to a video with a grainy but familiar image and I clicked on it. Although the video was old, one of the people was recognizable — just a lot younger. It was Jinn and Tuko’s father! The video was taken from above their heads, and the camera continued gliding silently above them. The conversation took place in a meeting room where the participants sat around in a semi-circle.

*“We must work together with the other clans, or we will continue to fight amongst ourselves. Until then we’ll always be fighting for survival instead of growing as a society.”*

“Look how young Dad looked. His hair is so long,” Jinn commented.

“And look who is behind him!” Tuko pointed out. A young woman looked at their father and you could tell there was a spark between them. She must be their mother.

*"You are very naive, Strika. The clans have existed this way for centuries and we're still here. You don't understand how government is run,"* another young man with a scar on his right eyebrow responded. By his condescending tone, he had heard the same argument before and thought he had all the answers. I immediately disliked him.

*"And where has that gotten us? The clans are constantly fighting against each other: taking; scavenging; hating. Our society is stagnant. We are so concerned with trying to get food on our tables that we never innovate, we never grow."*

*"And what do you propose?"* asked an older woman with a kindly face.

*"Reach out to the other clans, propose a truce. Set up a barter system. There are resources we need that will make our clan stronger."*

*"Give resources to our sworn enemies? Next, you'll be proposing we hand weapons to them so they can fight against us,"* the man with the scar jeered, and several other men in the room joined in laughing at his joke. Their father was silent, as if considering that.

*"Dero, that is a great idea. I really appreciate you joining in the spirit of this request."* Their father's smile was playful, but you could see the edge in his actions. It was as if he was taunting the other man.

*"He's from the Chycle Clan."* The realization hit me.

*"Enough!"* Dero slammed his fist onto the table. *"I will not stand here and be lectured to by someone who has no experience running his clan's affairs. You will do as you're told and be happy to sit at this table."* The room was quiet and I looked at their father anticipating his response. But it wasn't him that answered.

*"No."* She said it evenly, without malice, but there was power to her voice. Jinn's mother stood up and walked into the center of the room. The video faded away for a second and when it appeared again, she was standing before Dero. *"For years you have promoted conflict. Hundreds have died so that your clan could stay in power. There is no growth in your leadership, only death and meager survival."*

*"You are a woman and have no voice at this table. You can't tell me how to run this council. You think a woman can tell me what to do?"*

*"No."* Everyone's heads turned back to their father. *"But we can run it together."* The two of them looked at each other to show their united will. *"You could only run on hate for so long."* The video ended, but I felt like I had seen the beginning of the change of leadership for the clans. Jinn and Tuko were silent, but I could imagine what was going on in their minds.

*"Your parents were very brave. They forced changes that affected your clan and many others,"* I said, wishing I still had my parents to be proud of. They remained quiet.

*"I didn't realize how strong they both are,"* Jinn added, looking a bit ashamed of herself.

*"What's wrong?"* I asked.

*"We are what's wrong, Pene,"* Tuko answered without his usual arrogance. *"We have butted heads with our parents for years. Accusing them of being frozen in the old ways, not listening to our suggestions."*

*"You two aren't unlike your parents at their age. Maybe you are not as far apart as you think."* They nodded; they would both have a lot to consider before we reached the Cradle. I thought about my life at home and the discoveries I had made about my parents. It changed things. The video also changed things in other ways.

*"How did we see this footage on our parents?"* Jinn asked. *"It was like they were being watched from above."*

*"I think this thing took the footage."* Tuko pointed across the room. Several bee drones sat on a workbench in a row, like little soldiers ready to be activated. He walked over and picked one up. *"Is this not like the one you found in the junkyard?"* He gestured. He was right; they looked the same. He fumbled with his drone. *"What does this do?"* He manipulated a switch, and the unthinkable happened. The drone's eyes turned red.

“What?” Tuko yelled as the drone came alive. He immediately dropped it. It fell several inches and then hovered just above the surface of the table. It rotated slowly, as if trying to examine its surroundings. As if turned to us, it stopped as if it was recording footage of our existence. Someone on the other side could now be watching us.

“Get it!” I yelled. I saw a broom in the corner and grabbed the handle. Jinn and Tuko did not initially share my concern.

“Why are you so worked up over a flying mechanical toy? I don’t think it can sting us,” Tuko asked, annoyed.

“You’re scaring me, Pene. What’s the big deal,” Jinn asked.

“The. Big. Deal,” I said each word as I tried to hit the bee, which moved effortlessly out of my reach, “is that ‘toy’ has recorded the footage you just saw. It’s probably been spying on you most of your lifetime and you never knew.” I took a breath. “And there is probably someone watching us right now!” The two of them looked at each other and I could tell that they needed no further prodding. They looked around the room for a weapon. The bee seemed amused by our antics and floated to the top of the ceiling, beyond my ability to reach it.

Jinn began to throw objects from the desk at the bee. Some were hard and small like a rock, but the bee moved effortlessly away from each one, like a matador teasing an angry bull.

“Stop it,” I commanded. “We have to work together on this. If we stand in front of it, we only give it one target to watch.” Tuko nodded while Jinn stood on the desk, waving her arms.

“Hey, little bee, come down a little closer so I can talk to you. We really mean you no harm.” Jinn’s grin was mischievous and any human could tell that she meant harm. The drone focused on her while Tuko and I circled around it. I looked for something heavy and found a paperweight sitting on a desk. Tuko grabbed a dangling wire from the desk and began to whip it around in the air. A slight vibration sound caused the bee to angle its body toward him. With the distraction, I threw the paperweight. Even though the bee faced away from me, it evaded the object, as if it had eyes in the back of its head. However, as the object burst on the ceiling, a piece fell on the drone and it momentarily adjusted its flight to compensate. Then Tuko flung his wire.

He hit the drone, and the wire lodged itself in one of the wings. The drone began to fly in a circle as if unable to regulate its flight. Tuko began to pull on his end of the wire, as if yanking a kite down from the sky. The drone protested but came closer until Tuko was dragging it across the table. Jinn lifted her boot.

“See you later, little bot.” The drone was crushed under her boot. It twitched for a moment, and then its eyes went dark.

“Good. Now that should stop anyone from spying on us.” Then the lights went dark.

“Did we do that?” Jinn’s voice rang from my left. Suddenly I had a bad feeling. The lights flashed on again, and a red hue filled the room. An air horn bleated and nearly deafened me. The three of us looked at each other and realized that we had to leave. *Now!*

The noise made it impossible to talk and we ran to the ladder. Before we could reach the bottom rung, the floor shook. An explosion came from the far end. It was like we had set off an alarm and now the lab was trying to bury us! Jinn went first, followed by me and then Tuko. We climbed quickly as another explosion rocked from below. I lost my grip on my left hand and started to fall. I was stopped as Tuko pushed up on my butt to prevent me from falling farther. I grabbed the handhold and we climbed out. The three of us gasped for air as we reached the surface.

Another blast echoed from the tunnel and the surrounding rocks collapsed downward, crushing everything below. Dust filled the air and the three of us were silent, catching our breath. Tuko took a rock and slammed it against the ground.

“Damn it! If I hadn’t turned that toy on, none of this would have happened. Everything else on that computer is gone!”

"It's okay. You couldn't have known. And we learned some pretty good information," I tried to reassure him.

"Why were their videos of our parents? Was there other footage of them?" Jinn asked.

"Perhaps and there were other clan folders as well," I said.

"Who would be watching us and why?" Tuko asked. I thought of my own world, where drones were everywhere you went, watching every move you made. It was obvious that we were being observed and everyone had unfortunately grown used to it. Even though we couldn't see them, this world seemed to be under the same watchful eyes.

"Another clan?" Jinn replied. I had different assumptions, but I didn't share my thoughts.

Tuko gave me an odd look. "You seemed pretty good with the computer."

"So? I've used them all the time."

"Really? I told you most computers have been broken down for years. You saw enough of them in the junkyard back at the Orphan town. Are you telling me there are lots of computers in your home?" I looked at Jinn, who nodded her head. "Pene — where do you live?" I swallowed as I decided to tell him about my home.

"What is that?" Jinn interrupted. A buzzing sound grew louder, almost like a growl under the ground. The vent I had seen before dropping down the ladder was not covered by rubble and seemed to reverberate. The three of us backed away as the sound grew louder. I watched as a small metal bee escaped from the vent, followed by another and another. The three of them hovered in the air, their spacing even as they floated as one.

"Big deal! We'll crush them like the one below." He kneeled and picked up a rock in his hand.

"Wait!" I yelled, noticing something different about the drones. One of them tilted to the right and the stinger shone with a yucky green liquid. These drones were different; they were deadly! "Keep away from them! There is something in their stinger!" As if on cue, the three bees separated and picked each one of us as a target.

"Run!" We headed to the thick forest, hoping to get some cover. In the open we were easy prey. Tuko threw his rock at one of the drones, which evaded it easily. Instinctively, we spread out, trying to avoid giving the drones an easy target. They came at us with the speed of a bumblebee, fast but not so difficult to jump out of the way. I waited until the last second and the drone drilled itself into a rock. It seemed caught for a second and I stretched the gap as it struggled to wring itself loose.

Jinn's pursuer was close on her heels. She ran fast across the grassy terrain as the bee closed in and then she stopped suddenly, which caused the bee to overshoot her. We were about fifty feet from the woods. Tuko's bee had weaved back and forth on him, staying just out of reach. Tuko was faster than the two of us and closer to escaping to the woods. He went too fast, clipped a rock, and stumbled down to one knee. *Damn — he's going to get stung.* He looked up, defenseless as the bee sailed down, stinger first. Tuko grimaced for the inevitable when the drone went flying, one of its wings clipped by a branch. It tried to recover but spun mostly in a circle because it couldn't compensate with only one wing. I looked over at Jinn, who had a big smile on her face, twirling a branch.

"You must play a sport, Jinn. You've got a great swing." I beamed. Tuko was back on his feet.

"Let's congratulate each other later, okay." We reached the woods with the two drones close in pursuit. Unfortunately, the woods slowed us down as much as it did the drones and made it much more difficult to watch their progress. But they were noisy little things and we could tell when they were getting close. I saw a clump of trees with a large boulder behind them.

"Over here!" I commanded as the three of us converged.

"Why here?" Jinn asked.

"I wanted something at our backs so that we can control how the drones approach us."

Tuko gave me a look as if he was impressed. "What did you take, strategic warfare in school?" I thought about my history lessons replaying the battles of my city. Using our technology, I could replay any attack in history through my mind. Maybe it did prepare me for this.

“Down!” I yelled as the drone extended its rear end at Jinn. It missed and lodged itself into a tree trunk. I scrambled around, looking for a weapon. Jinn beat me to it.

“Clank!” The drone was crushed by a branch. It twitched several times and then stopped. Green liquid leaked down the trunk.

“Two down!” Jinn grinned. The third drone buzzed overhead, circling above like a shark waiting to pounce. We took this opportunity to run deeper into the forest. The three of us ran hard, but we were kidding ourselves if we thought we could outrun this thing. Drones never tired. Humans did.

I felt the sweat dripping down my back. We needed a plan. I turned to look at Jinn, her face tight with exhaustion. She was holding her shoulder, as if her earlier wound was bothering her. She tried to smile, but then her face turned panicked. I turned to where she was looking, but I was too late. My body snapped back as I hit something soft but unbreakable. It was white and sticky, and the more I struggled, the tighter I was ensnared.

“Tuko! Jinn! Are you out there?” I couldn’t turn my head, but I heard a muffled reply and sounds of people moving around. The drone buzzing became louder, and then I heard the impact of metal on wood. Then silence.

I felt like an insect caught in a trap, waiting for their captor to decide their fate. I didn’t have to wait long. The web was cleared from my eyes, and all I could see was a hand with a ring. A white gem with an eight-legged creature emblem. A teenage face looked at me.

“Who are you?” I commanded, although I had no power to demand an answer.

He smirked, ignoring my question. “Welcome to the Spider clan. You have had a lot of people looking for you. Your capture will put our clan on the map!”

# 11

## Caught

Most of the webbing had been pulled off, but my legs and arms were now lashed together. Each bump on the road made me wince as the metal in the van was hard and unforgiving on my shoulder. I didn't know if Tuko and Jinn had been captured with me or if they had been left alone to return to their family. I didn't think their capture was worth angering the entire Armor clan.

In the back of the van was a small workbench and a stool. A curtain separated the front of the vehicle, and although someone must be driving, I didn't see their face. Next to me, my captor worked connecting wires to electronics, occasionally looking at me as if I too was a puzzle to solve. He was my age, taller and lean, with short brown hair and an uptight demeanor. Although he knew who I was, he refused to divulge his name. This was so frustrating. Where were they taking me? What would they do with me once we arrived? Almost as if he could hear my thoughts, he looked over at me.

"Hey, Fred, can you loosen these bonds a bit? I'm losing circulation." He smiled but didn't respond or act to help me. I almost found he enjoyed me calling him different names, like we were playing a game. He turned on a radio in his workbench. A familiar DJ belted his voice through the airways.

"There is a rumor that one of the clans has our killer. Big reward and prestige to whoever that is. Some clans don't agree with her capture, but the council will decide her fate. No one can escape all the clans. Guess this little bird has finally been caged." I had never met Diga, the radio announcer, but I wanted to wipe that smug attitude right out of his voice.

"George, does the radio jockey always talk like he knows everything?" "Knows more than you," he answered smugly but turned down the volume.

"I don't know who you think I am, but you need to let me go. You don't want to mess with my clan," I postured. The only language any of these clans understood was a threat. Somehow, he didn't seem to be buying it.

"Ha!" He had a crooked grin that was half cute and half infuriating. "And I guess you were just out for a run in the woods. We know who you are and what you did to Luther. For a girl, you're pretty dangerous." He went back to work on an old circuit board as if talking to me was an afterthought. I had to get his focus back to me.

"I *am* dangerous. I could break out anytime. I'm just hanging out with you to learn more about your clan."

"As if we were that interesting." He didn't even look at me and focused on his project.

"Where are my friends?" I yelled. He jumped and turned toward me.

"Fine. You would find out eventually. We let Armor clan know where to pick them up. They were none too pleased. The last thing we want is to get that clan upset." *Keep him talking.*

"What was that netting you caught me with? Felt like an actual spider's web."

He grinned back at me and stopped his wirework. I had found a topic he was interested in. "I came up with that. Analyzed an actual spider web in school. It's made with cotton fibers mixed with a slight adhesive. You've got to know how to handle it to make sure you don't get caught." I smiled at him. "What?" He looked confused.

"Everyone complains about how everything breaks down. Yet you seem to be able to create things. Sounds like you're smarter than most of them."

“That’s not hard to do. Most teenagers just mimic their parents.” My mystery captor was a bit full of himself. Maybe he liked to listen to how smart he was?

“What you working on, Phil? Some other genius product?” He kept stripping wires but smiled. He liked the attention.

“Electronic fencing. A way to corral the animals without having to kill them when they go on a rampage. It sends out a sonic signal that makes it uncomfortable to approach the wire — the animal stays away and keeps you safe.”

“Where were you when I had a killer dinosaur chasing me?” He nodded like he had already heard the story.

“Might have helped, but that beast was pretty large and angry. Can’t guarantee this machine would work against something that big. From what I heard, you handled yourself pretty good against that monster.” My face flushed. What did I care about some praise from a guy who was holding me against my will?

“Who taught you to be so smart? Are your parents geniuses like you?” His face darkened, as if I had something painful.

“My father is a mechanic, keeps this vehicle and a bunch of other clan vehicles running. He’s always supported me. My mom,” he hesitated, “died when I was young in an animal attack. I never really got to know her.” He looked down as if the missed experience was painfully enough. I understood his pain; my mom supposedly died in an explosion when I was young. Now that I had seen her face at a computer terminal, I wasn’t so sure. I just knew that I had to find out.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean…”

“There is nothing to be sorry about,” he interrupted abruptly. “Animals are dangerous, and if we don’t protect ourselves from them, more people will die.”

“Were you there when your mother died?” My question caught him off-guard.

“Yes. Why?” He stopped fiddling with his wires and gave me his full attention.

“How did it happen?” He looked away and was silent for a second, as if deciding whether to dredge up the memory. I didn’t blame him if he didn’t want to share. I was nobody to him. “You don’t need to share this. I lost my mother. It’s not something I would share with just anyone.”

He tilted his head at me. “You are not what I expected.”

“You thought I was a cold-hearted killer who murders your leaders. The Hunter clan is intent on implicating me. Makes me think they have something to hide.”

“Could be. They are always jockeying to be in the top tier of the clans. When we hand you over to them, it will make them look strong.”

“So, don’t do it. If Spider clan has any balls, don’t hand me over. Do I look like a killer?” I wondered what he saw when he looked at me. A teenage girl or super-assassin?

“Doesn’t matter what we think. The deal’s a deal. Hunter clan is much bigger than us, and we already notified them of your capture. We’ll see them soon. Your innocence or guilt doesn’t matter to us.”

“It matters to me!” I yelled, pulling on my bonds. “What kind of clan captures people to sell?” He did a double take and pretended to look around him, as if I was talking to someone else. He must be a riot with the other clan boys.

“If you were from a poor clan, you would understand,” he replied.

He made me so mad. I wanted to stomp away, but the bonds were restricting my ability to move. None of this was fair — I should have just kept to myself when I entered this world. As soon as I got involved with other people, all this trouble began.

The radio blared with an interruption that they were cutting to a pre-recorded segment. My captor turned up the volume. Our conversation was forgotten.

“Thanks to all of my listeners who have asked for this earlier interview,” Diga introduced. “Just because he was taken away from us doesn’t mean we still can’t learn from him. Please listen to this previous conversation.” A familiar voice began to speak, his charisma dripping through the radio.

“When I was a child, my mammie asked me what I wanted to become when I came of age. Who I wanted to be. I thought for a second, because even at seven years old, I knew she wanted a thoughtful answer. An answer worthy of her question.”

It was Luther’s voice, although he sounded younger and his voice echoed as if in a large space. A crowd murmured as if he was speaking in front of a large group.

“I told my mammie that I wanted to survive. That the world was a cruel place and I didn’t want to die young like my parents. I looked up her, thinking I had given a worthy response. I waited for praise that never came. She fixed me with a stare, and her silence spoke more words than the greatest speech.

“Luther, you must strive to more than just live in this world. Lots of people live in this world, but not all of us make it a better place. You must reach out to people, get to know them. Understand their needs and help them achieve greatness.’ I looked up at her and naively thought I understood what she said.

“Do you mean helping bring groceries to the family down the street?’ I inquired, knowing of the poor people that lived near us. My mammie smiled as if she knew I didn’t fully understand what she was talking about.

“That’s a start, Luther. But what will that family do tomorrow? Or the next day? You help them today and they will need you tomorrow. But if you teach them to grow a garden, they will feed themselves with vegetables. If you teach them how to hunt, they will have meat for their table. If you teach them how to barter, then they will trade for the things they need to survive. These are the things that you need to do — teach people and give them power to run their lives. Then my son, you have had a life worth living.”

Both of us looked at each other for a moment. We had been so mesmerized by the speech that neither of us had thought of anything else. The van bounced off a pothole, and the radio lurched. The station became static-filled, and my captor tried to regain the channel, but he couldn’t regain it.

“He’s an amazing speaker,” I said, stating the obvious.

“He was. Until you shot him.” He gave me a black look.

“Says Abraham. Do you even care if he’s telling the truth?”

“Do you care what happens now that Luther is dead?” I didn’t know. Maybe I should understand why everyone was after me.

“He seemed like an important man. I assume someone else will take his place,” I said stupidly without really thinking about my response.

“Important?” He was distracted and knocked a metal object to the floor. “Where have you been that you don’t understand the significance of his death. Is your clan so stupid...?”

“We’re pretty removed,” I stammered.

“Because of his death, all the bigger clans are jockeying for his position on council. Luther not only provided leadership, he provided unity. Under his direction, the clans have lived in a time of peace. Clans traded with each other when they used to fight against one another. Now, with him gone, who knows what is going to happen?”

“It’s not my fault!” I yelled. “When I heard him speak at the meeting, it was for the first time. Even if I was this amazing sharpshooter, I could never kill anyone. You have to believe me!” His eyes danced around like he was considering my sincerity. He said nothing; even if he believed me, I doubted he would help.

“Can I listen to the radio some more, Billy?” I asked, trying a new name. I wanted to listen to Luther and learn more about him.

My captor said nothing, but he did go back to the radio to find the channel again. He fiddled for a minute but couldn't get the station. He shrugged. "Must be getting close to the wastelands. Radio reception usually goes as we get closer."

"Wastelands?"

"Do you not travel at all from your home? THE. WASTE. LANDS. A barren desert that is strictly forbidden to cross. Dust cyclones can appear at any time and people disappear and never come back.

"Why? What happens if you enter?"

"No one knows, because no one ever comes back. It's important to travel around the outlying areas and not go through."

"Hope you have a good navigator," I commented.

"The best. Dad?" he yelled forward. A moment later, the tarp moved and a man with dark hair and a beard gazed back at us. He looked mostly at his son with a backward glance at me.

"Is everything okay?"

"Fine. Are we getting close to the meeting place?" "Soon."

*Not much of a talker.*

"Are you going to ask if I'm okay? Maybe tell me your son's name?" I yelled, hoping to get a reaction. And I did, just not one I expected. His father seemed scared. Like talking to a girl was terrifying. He couldn't respond. His son answered for him.

"Don't worry about her." He waved his hand, like he was dismissing his dad. He took the message and went back to the front of the van. *What the? This whole family is weird.*

"What is up with your dad? I can see the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." I was being mean but being tied up was not making me feel very pleasant.

"My dad is autistic. He doesn't talk well with people he doesn't know."

"Maybe he just needs to get to know me." My lack of sensitivity would make most people mad. Not this guy.

"It takes a long time for him to get to know people and even longer to like them. You'd be surprised at how my parents first met."

"Try me. I'm not going anywhere. At least not until you give me away." He smirked again; he was easy to make laugh. This guy was holding me against my will, so why couldn't I dislike him more?

"Why do you want to know?" he asked as if I was just humoring him.

"Because my dad held back a lot about my mom, and I didn't get to know her very well. So come on, spill it," I commanded, and he shrugged.

"Okay. Spider clan is small — maybe only a couple hundred members. Most people knew each other. My dad's autism made clan members treat him as if something was wrong with him. He won't look you in the eye. Unless he knows you, he rarely will talk or engage you. Because of this, he didn't have many friends. In my dad's case, he had one."

"And did that friend try to set him up with your mom?"

"My dad's friend tried to go out with my mom." He noticed my look. "Oh yeah, this isn't love at first sight. My mom dated my dad's friend for a while, and initially Dad was aloof with her. It took him weeks before he accepted her as a friend and became more comfortable with her."

"That's awkward. Was your dad's friend comfortable with all of this?"

"Yeah, and the three of them became inseparable. You didn't see one without the other two. And my dad began to care more deeply for my mom. And my mom about my dad." The van lurched suddenly, and I felt my body move forward against my bonds. The engine came to a stop.

"What happened, Colin?" I asked, a bit intrigued by his story. He got up and walked toward the tarp between us and the cab.

"You know what they say, three's a crowd." He gave one of his smiles that was neither mean nor sweet. "And my name is Lucaz." *At least I know his name now. It suits him.*

He unclipped me from my prison, but my hands and feet remained bound. I wasn't going anywhere should I escape from him. I ducked my head under the tarp while we exited the van. The scenery had changed completely. The lushness of the woods was gone, replaced by a barren, lifeless land that could have been on the moon. Small, sandy hills dotted the landscape, with-crater like holes scooped out of the land.

"Why are stopping here?" I asked, staring across the plain. From the dust rising off the ground, I saw there was another clan approaching us.

"Meeting point," he answered. "Time to pass you on and get paid."

I squinted, but I couldn't see details of the nearing clan. Lucaz had said that he was handing me off to the Hunter clan. Could this be them?

I saw large beasts with their riders. There was no doubt which clan this was.

Then I saw who was in front. He stared in our direction like a bull focused on its target. The boy who had accused me of killing Luther. I wasn't sure if he would hurt me, or worse. I barely knew him but hated him just the same.

Abraham was coming for me.

# 12

## Enemies

The beast's hot breath smelled like dead meat. It paced around me as if sizing up another meal. But Abraham's smile identified him as the true predator.

"Well, look who's finally been caught. How did you do it, Lucaz? She's a real slippery one." The three of us stood outside of Lucaz's van. The Spider and Hunter clans milled around us but kept their distance. I was Abraham's prize, and he wasn't sharing me with anyone. "One of my traps — she basically ran right into it with her friends." "Are Tuko and Jinn here?" Abraham looked around.

"No — I let Armor clan know, and I'm sure they got them out. Had a feeling they might try to follow us, but our scouts haven't noticed anyone." Lucaz was casual. I couldn't get a read if he liked Abraham, or if I was strictly a business transaction.

"In case either one of you cared, I'm trapped against my will and charged for a crime I had nothing to do with." I pulled against my leather bonds, but they were unrelenting. I hated this situation and wished I had never left home.

"Did you see her kill Luther?" Lucaz asked. "How did she do it?"

"With a rifle," Abraham answered, avoiding the first question and staring straight at me. "You killed a great man. I hope you are ready to answer for your crimes."

"And you are full of crap. I have never fired a rifle in my life. If you asked me, you fired the gun and you and your clan blamed me." He looked at me and I couldn't see the slightest reaction of guilt. He'd make a great poker player.

"And the guilty always claim they are innocent. Funny that no one from your clan has come forward to support you. Wonder why that is?"

*Snap. He has me there.* Lucaz peered at me like he'd bought Abraham's argument.

"Yet the Armor clan members that I was with support my innocence. Guess that cancels you out!" I shot back. I hit a nerve, because he pulled on my bonds, jerking my head back.

"You'll have time to prove your innocence when we get to the Cradle. The council will decide what to do." Lucaz put his arm on Abraham's. "What?" he said defiantly.

"Time for supper. My dad is preparing our meal. You are welcome to join us."

"No." Abraham shot a glance back at his own vehicles and at a campfire that was burning bright. "Make sure she stays tied up. Hunter clan will post sentries tonight to make sure she remains secure and no dust storms blow in." He grasped my chin with his hand. "I'm going to march you into the Cradle myself. Have a nice meal." He shot me a crazy smile and walked back through the desert to his clan.

"He must be better with animals than with people," I said.

Lucaz smiled. "He can be pretty intense. Runs in the family." He took the bonds off my legs so I could walk and we marched to a nearby fire. The sun had dipped in the horizon and the sky had a majestic orange tinge. I contemplated making a break for it. I knew I could run fast, but to where? I was in the middle of a desert wasteland with no food or water, hands tied behind my back and dozens of unfriendly clan members who could scoop me up. I needed to be patient, find out more about my surroundings. Wait for the right moment.

I sat by the fire on a rock while Lucaz remained beside me, holding a rope to my bonds. I felt like a kid at daycare that the teachers wanted to make sure didn't run away. They weren't wrong.

"Hungry?" Lucaz asked.

"Starving. I could eat a dinosaur." His father stirred the pot and pulled out fatty meat in gravy. A gust blew into the flames, and the fire grew for a second. I noticed that his father handed both bowls to Lucaz instead of one to each of us. It felt like he barely acknowledged I was there. However, the smell from the bowl made me forget about the insult and I almost drooled.

"Then it's your lucky night," Lucaz answered, and I couldn't tell if he was joking. Once I took my first taste, I didn't care. It was better than any steak I had back home. Maybe this world had some redeeming qualities after all. I ate in silence while Lucaz smirked at me. If he had given me a knife, I probably would have sliced the smirk right off his face.

"Do you have a problem?" I asked between gulps.

"Yes, she's in front me."

"Funny guy. Once you hand me off to beast boy, I guess your problem is gone."

"Maybe," he answered enigmatically. Why did every answer infuriate me further? I thought of something.

"Tell me, smart guy. Why do you think that more things are breaking down and fewer and fewer people are able to fix them?" Lucaz just shrugged as if he had no idea. His father perked up, though, and spoke to me for the first time.

"The world is broken," he stated and stared directly into my eyes. "The world is breaking down." And just as quickly, he turned away. Lucaz was surprised.

"What?" I asked.

"Dad never talks to strangers. He must feel comfortable with you." I glanced at how his father was sitting with his body angled away. *Yeah, he was real comfortable with me.* I shivered as the night appeared to get even darker beyond the fire.

"Maybe he just knows an innocent person. Better than his son," I dug, hopefully to get some type of reaction from Lucaz. I got nothing. Massive surprise. I felt something gritty blow into my face. The wind was picking up. I brushed it away.

"Where is home?" I asked innocently, trying to draw some conversation out of him. Both he and his father looked at each other.

"The back of our truck. Our home was in the south before it was destroyed by animal attacks years ago. We travel town to town, trading what we can. Like a true spider, we bring others to us." Lucaz smiled at his description.

His father scowled instead. "No home. No home for the clan," as he answered as his bowl was whipped out his hand by a gust. He and Lucaz looked at each other with a mix of panic and fear. I wondered if they had noticed the earlier gusts.

"I'll lash the van down. Bring whatever supplies you can and throw them in the back," Lucaz commanded to his father and then pulled hard on my bonds.

"Ouch! What's your problem? Why has a bit of wind got you all upset?" "Because it's more than a bit of wind. Look!" He pointed to the west.

The sky was darker, but I could tell something was twisting. It seemed alive, like a creature with a thousand moving parts. It turned on itself and sand spun out of its center like unwanted body parts. In my home, where the weather was controlled, I had never seen one up close. But I had studied enough history to know what one could look like. This was a tornado.

"How much time?" I stammered, the wind already whipping dirt into my mouth.

"Seconds. Minutes. The dust devil comes from nowhere and can lift anything. People have been carried away."

*Great. If the clans or animals don't get you, the weather will. I should have called this place "death world" for all the ways you could die.* Now my home patrolled by drones for my safety didn't seem so bad. A metal object flew and imbedded itself in the ground several feet where I had been sitting.

"Pay attention! We need to get to the back of our van and hunker down until this is over," Lucaz yelled, but most of his words were drowned out by the wind. I bent my head down and tried to move forward, but the air had become jagged from sand and stone. My bonds were pulled from behind again. I swore. I didn't know what was more irritating, the death storm or being directed like a dog on a leash. I'd like to pull Lucaz on a rope and see how he'd like it.

"This wayyyy!" He pointed, but it was getting nearly impossible to see more than a few feet in front of me. The vehicles in the camp swam back and forth in view. I saw our van about a hundred feet to my right and stepped toward it. Then the impossible happened. My next step took me a foot off the ground. Then my left foot did the same. I was floating! The wind howled by my ears as the sand whipped me in the face. I closed my eyes to prevent the grit from getting in. I reached my hands to the sky and felt like a kite about to sail away. Then I felt my bonds pull me back to earth.

"Come with me, we have to get to cover!" Lucaz screamed in my ear. He grabbed my hand and for a second, I almost felt like he cared. Then he dragged me forward. I couldn't see anything and my sense of direction was completely lost. I had been turned around in the wind and no longer could tell right from left. We stepped forward, then the wind blew us two steps back. It was impossible; we had neither the strength or stamina to fight nature. Working against it was counterproductive. I motioned to Lucaz as I kneeled, which fortunately he seemed to understand and bent down as well. Together, we crawled inches at a time to a destination I couldn't see if it was right in front of me.

Talking was impossible, but gestures from Lucaz had us moving toward the van. I moved along the ground, which seemed covered by inches of sand. Suddenly, I pulled my hand back as I touched something sharp. I grasped it gently again and then followed the metal point up to a wooden handle. My hands grabbed the handle, and as I rose, I could make out the features of the holder of the spear. Abraham!

The wind whipped the three of us into the air. I felt like a leaf with no control over my momentum. The two boys were yelling at each other, but I couldn't hear a word they were saying. The last thing I remembered was floating, hoping my body wouldn't be shattered against the body of a vehicle. Everything went black.

# 13

## Wasteland

I had no idea how long I had lain in oblivion. I felt comfortable, as if my bed had completely contoured to my body. But I knew I had to get up and find out what had happened. Was I still in the camp?

I opened my eyes and immediately regretted it. Sand pushed into my eyeballs causing me to slam my eyelids shut. Too late. My eyes itched, but my arms felt pinned to my sides, as if a huge weight bore down on them. I screamed and swallowed sand. It was as if every decision I made caused more pain. I used my anger to break free, but it got me nowhere. I was exhausting myself while every opening in my body was about to suck in more sand. I calmed down, willing myself not to panic. I shifted right, then left. My body didn't move much, but I had some wiggle room on my left.

Like a drowning victim, I felt like I had no air. Was I dreaming, or was I being tortured? My fingers moved and I began to make a fist. Slowly my hands, then my wrist could move. Then I

began bucking my head backward and pushed myself up, like I was rising from a grave. I felt cool air on my forehead as I pulled myself upward. My lungs screamed and I coughed up a mouthful of sand. It didn't matter — I was overjoyed to breathe fresh air.

Then I turned and stared into Lucaz's face. Blood flowed down from his temple and he looked the way I felt. Terrible.

"About time you dug yourself out of there. Abraham got out a few minutes ago."

"Might have gone quicker if you actually helped," I stated, pulling my arms up and trying to disengage my legs from the sand. *What is touching me?*

"Why are you scratching my back?" The sensation was growing stronger.

"I'm not touching you," he whined, like the thought repulsed him. The scratching grew sharper and was traveling down my back.

"Get off me!" I screamed to no one and reached under my shirt. Something scurried in my hand as I gripped it tightly. It sailed through the air and crashed onto the rock. I watched as it tottered on four legs with claws and scurried under the rocks.

"Sand crabs," said Lucaz. "They're nasty things if they clip you. Almost like a paper cut," he joked, amused by my panic.

"Thanks for your concern. Aren't you worried that your precious little hostage will get hurt?"

"Reward is for dead or alive. Just so happens that you're worth more alive so they can question you."

"Ha. Lot of good that's going to do." *Like they'll believe anything I have to say.* "So, where are we? Where's your father and our camp?"

"Safe, I think. I saw him get to the van before we got blown away. The vehicle's weight should have kept him and the others protected."

"And us?"

"I don't know where we are. The sky is too hazy to make out the sun to determine direction. Maybe by night we can figure out how to get out of here."

“

Are you telling me we just blew away? Come on, we couldn't have gone far. You're not that light.”

“Maybe not, but these sand storms can come out of nowhere and I should have seen the signs. But right now, heading out into the wrong direction will just make it worse.”

“Won't your father and your clan come looking for us?” I asked, puzzled by his behavior.

“Nobody will be coming for us,” said the voice of my least favorite person. I turned around. He carried animal meat that looked freshly skinned. We might be lost in a bad place, but Abraham was all business.

“I found one of my animals dead in a sand drift. I have prepared a meal for us. We'll need food. It may be a while before we get rescued.”

“Glad he didn't find a dead clan member,” I whispered under my breath. Abraham looked at me, but if he heard my comment, he chose not to respond. And that was fine with me.

“Do you know where we are?” Lucaz asked and shook his compass as if it wasn't working properly. I didn't understand. *The wind couldn't blow us that far away from camp, could it?*

“Nothing. It's like all sense of direction is lost. I can see why people who wander off to die here never return.”

“But you guys can get us out? Right?” I asked while the two of them looked at each other.

“Educate her.” Abraham jabbed his finger at me. “I'll prepare the meat.” He walked over to a pile of rocks and started a fire.

Lucaz motioned to me. “I don't know what your clan taught you as a child, but the Wastelands are one of the most dangerous areas of our world.” Considering what I had already seen here, that was saying a lot.

“Why? What is here? What is so terrifying that both of you are so unnerved?” He was silent for a few seconds, crafting a response. Just when I was about to ask him again, he spoke.

“No one knows what is here, because no one returns. It is a black hole. Many of us speculate that dangerous animals must kill all those that enter, while others feel that they are poisoned either by the food or air.”

“Seems like neither is true.” I gestured around us.

“So far,” Lucaz answered, “but we really don't know what will happen next. Maybe whatever is going to kill us is just around the corner.” The desert was silent. If death was nearby, it sure was quiet about it.

“Why can't we just walk out of here? What's stopping us?” I was frustrated that I didn't understand the full picture. He must think I was a total idiot. He took out a compass. “There is no magnetic field here — no way to predict which way is north or west.” “Follow the sky then?” I pointed upward.

Lucaz shook his head. “There are particles in the air that reflect anything in the sky and any landmarks of any distance. If I try to follow an object for any length of time, its location will change. Not because it's moving, but because the refraction of light isn't accurate. We could be tracking mirages for hours, even days, before we find what we are looking for. Chances are we won't live that long.”

“And no one's coming to find us?” I asked, depressed.

“From the outside the waste lands, the distortion appears. People become lost very quickly if they enter. Others have tried sending rescue parties and never came back out.” “But your father,” I started.

“My father will try, but no one will listen. His autism makes it hard for others to follow him. He won't be able to get any other clan members to help.”

“Same with the Hunter clan,” Abraham said from behind us. “Our clan has a pact: no one goes into the Wastelands. Ever. Not to rescue. Not for any reason. It's not worth the risk. We're on our own.”

“

So what’s the big plan?” I folded my arms defiantly, but I had little power. I didn’t know anything about this place and there was no way I was getting out on my own.

Abraham pointed to the hills in the distance. “We head over there. Maybe if we can get some elevation, we can see a way out of here.”

“And if we walk in circles before we can get there?”

“Then we die,” Abraham said matter-of-factly. “You seem to escape every situation you get into; let’s hope your good luck will rub off on us.” He smirked. I knew he didn’t believe in any good fortune from me. We gathered a few belongings that had been blown with us. Lucaz gathered some of his mechanical components and wires into a small leather case.

“Waste of space, if you ask me,” Abraham sneered. “We need food and water. Anything else is going to weigh us down.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m not asking you to carry anything for me,” Lucaz responded. *Burn*. I was liking Lucaz’s attitude. It didn’t seem like anyone intimidated him. I wished I could be more like him.

As the two got ready, I sat on a nearby rock, watching the desert in front of where the hills were located. What was so dangerous out here that no one ever returned? Were we kidding ourselves? Should we just bury ourselves in the sand and wait for the inevitable?

Something black caught my eye. Its dark wings fluttered, catching a thermal and floating. If only we could fly out of this mess. The bird’s features were hard to make out, but it looked like a crow. *Figures — no matter what world, crows seem to be a universal bird.* The crow’s wings slowed its descent, and it floated down onto a mound of dirt. In a way, it gave me hope. If this animal could survive here, then maybe so could we? It shook its wings as if shaking the dust off its body. It looked down as if it saw something to eat.

A large jaw with jagged teeth erupted from the sand, engulfing the crow. It tried to escape, but whatever the creature was, it was far too fast. The crow disappeared, and only its feathers in the air remained. Seconds later, whatever had jumped up from the ground was gone. I could have sworn that there was a lump in the ground where the crow once was. Lucaz stepped in front of me. “Stop!” I yelled with more force than I had planned. He grimaced.

“What?”

“Yeah, what?” Abraham said from behind. “We’re not getting any closer to those hills by sitting here.” He walked forward, and for a split second I felt like letting him walk onto those mounds and being eaten as well. Unfortunately, my conscience kicked in.

“Don’t move too far forward. Look closely at the sand over there.” I pointed at the ground. Lucaz knelt, and Abraham stared. I could feel their doubt.

“There is something over there.” Lucaz motioned.

“There are mounds of dirt.” Abraham squinted. “What’s the big deal? The wind can create all kinds of shapes on the ground.”

“Well, the bump over there just ate a crow, so unless you want to become its next victim, I would tread carefully,” I warned. For several seconds none of us spoke, just stared at the ground in front of us.

“If you’re right, the dunes are made up of living land mines, eating whatever walks through them.” I shivered at. This would be no walk in the park. My feet were rooted to the spot.

“We can walk around them or stay here and die. Since we know they are there now, we can give them a wide berth,” said Abraham, starting to take me seriously. “Did you see how far they can reach?”

“

“No,” I answered truthfully, although I would still like to shove him into one. “The crow landed right on top of it. Don’t touch the mound. They must be able to feel motion or body heat.”

“Enough talk. We need to get moving,” Abraham ordered, used to giving commands. But he was right, we could analyze this all day. Avoid the mounds and we might get through this place alive. Lucaz untied and discarded my bonds. Abraham made a face.

Where is she going to run to?” Lucaz stated. “Besides, she just saved our lives. I’m surprised she didn’t lead us to one of those mounds and let us get eaten.”

“The thought did cross my mind,” I answered truthfully.

“Besides, we can retie her up at night,” Lucaz said. Abraham grunted, which was his equivalent of agreement.

We grabbed our supplies and walked, slowly at first, making sure we didn’t take any missteps. Abraham walked first (which I was pleased about), and Lucaz and I walked together behind him.

“What do you think they are?” I pointed to an upcoming mound.

Lucaz rubbed his chin as if contemplating a big explanation. “I don’t know.” He shrugged, but I wasn’t buying it. This guy was smart, but he had a habit playing dumb.

“Come on. Could they be a man-eating gopher?” I asked.

“Naw. I don’t think they could live in the ground for so long. The heat would dry them up. Maybe a worm with a mouth at the surface but the rest of the body well underground. You saw it. What do you think it was?”

“All I saw was teeth. Could be a worm or maybe some type of plant.” As we walked closer to one of the mounds of dirt, our voices started to drop. Abraham made a motion with his finger to get us to shut up. He was probably right. Still, I’d like to yell and have the thing come up and take his head off.

The area directly in front of us contained a large cluster of the mounds, almost like a small colony. Abraham pointed to the right at an open area that circled the mounds. I looked down and noticed a small hole at the top of the mound, almost like a breathing hole.

“I guess it’s not a plant,” I whispered. The mound shook slightly, as if my voice activated its movement. Abraham drew his fingers across his throat. I wasn’t sure if he was telling me to shut up or if he was going to kill me if I spoke again. Didn’t matter; I did not want to see those teeth.

I looked up and, in the sky, I saw wings in the distance. Another crow? Or something else?

As we walked, Lucaz kicked a stick, which sailed through the air. My heart jumped as I watched it bounce and land on one of the mounds. I expected an explosion of dust, but the mound remained still. The stick lay on top as if nothing had happened. Why?

“Maybe the creature senses body heat or flesh instead of motion,” Lucaz said. I didn’t want to stick my hand in the dirt to test that theory. I heard an animal cry. Abraham was pointing to the sky. The bird in the air was much larger than a crow.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Pterodactyl. Let’s just hope it’s flying alone. A flock of those would be hard to avoid and they love any meat. Human or otherwise.”

“Do you think it can see us?” I asked, but the creature was already heading to our location. It was flying lower — we were faced with death in the ground and from the air. We were in the open and we had to move fast.

Abraham broke into a full-on run and we ran to catch him. I heard something whip through the air, then it caressed my leg. It was wet and slimy, but I didn’t stop running. Whatever it was, it didn’t get a firm grip on me. Lucaz and I looked at each other and I saw fear in his eyes. Neither of us knew what we were dealing with and nowhere was safe. I lost track of Abraham but suddenly the ground exploded in front of us. The row of teeth was as long as my body and the creature had no face. It was

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segmented like a worm but with gritty hair that was covered in sand. It bellowed at us and I could smell death on its breath. A thought that might save our lives occurred to me.

“Don’t move!” I commanded Lucaz. He made a face. The eyeless beast turned its head to the right, as if looking for something, movement, I thought, but couldn’t be sure. I knew we couldn’t outrun it, but we might be able to evade or confuse it. Behind us I heard another roar as another creature awoke from its dirt nap.

The creature in front of us rotated its head, trying to find us with its touch. It had to be blind. Maybe all the years underground had taken its sight but enhanced its other senses.

“What’s your plan?” Lucaz asked through clenched teeth. “We can’t stand here forever.” He was right. The only idea I had would require me to move. I had better be quick.

I reached in my pocket and pulled out one of the pieces of meat that Abraham had given us. I tossed it high into the air. The wormlike creature detected my movement but also the piece of meat tumbling through the air. It tried for the meat first. Unfortunately for the worm, it wasn’t the only thing that saw what I threw. The pterodactyl came hurtling down and grabbed the meat with its talons. The worm creature was not impressed and tried for the dinosaur. The pterodactyl evaded its massive teeth and grabbed the worm with its talons. It split the worm in two causing blood to spray me in the face. The blood stank and if I’d had time, I would have stopped to vomit.

“Guess the worm didn’t stand a chance,” I yelled but realized that the pterodactyl was still watching us. The worm was just an appetizer. We ran.

“Any more ideas?” Lucaz asked.

“How about you come up with something?” I suggested. We only had seconds before the bird would dive toward us. I could feel the wind of its wings and I turned to face it, not wanting to die with my back turned. The pterodactyl came at me and just as I was about to avert my head, a worm shot up from the dirt. It wrapped itself around the right talon and tried to bring the dinosaur down to the ground. The pterodactyl fought to snap the worm in two but suddenly arched its back and screamed in pain. A second worm rose from the dirt and grabbed the other leg. A third worm snapped its razor teeth at the pterodactyl’s wing and gouts of blood sprayed the ground.

“Run!” Lucaz commanded. The worms had prey and we had a small window to escape. The worms shot out of the ground like geysers, wrapping around the pterodactyl until it was hard to see the dinosaur’s skin, it was so covered by worm bodies. The pterodactyl gave a death roar as it was dragged to the ground. The sounds of teeth and spraying blood rippled through the desert. We climbed as we got to higher ground. The sand beneath us writhed like a living thing and I imagined how horribly (yet quickly) death would come. Ahead of us, Abraham, who had avoided all the danger, motioned us closer.

“Thanks for your help,” I spat sarcastically, wondering how he had escaped unscathed while Lucaz and I had barely survived.

“Pene, I think we are alive because of Abraham’s help,” Lucaz said as he pointed to a spear in the back of the now-dead pterodactyl.

“You can thank me later.”

I guessed I was still a valuable prisoner. Fortunately, I didn’t see any more mounds in the direction we were heading.

“Thanks,” I replied icily. “Good thing I warned you about the creatures in the sand.” Abraham looked back at me but avoided a response and trudged ahead.

Lucaz grabbed me by the shoulder. “You don’t need to continually antagonize him. We’ll have to work together if we are going to escape the Wastelands alive.”

“Try telling that to future Clan leader.” I pointed. “He accused me of murder just so he can show how important he is. He doesn’t care about what’s true.”

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“So what is the truth, Pene? You maintain you’re innocent — but why hasn’t your clan come out to defend you?” And there it was. Lucaz’s comment was obviously right. In this world, each clan supported its members. A clan member was your family, and family defended each other. I’m sure Lucaz assumed that since no one was defending me, my clan assumed I was guilty. Should I tell him the truth? Would he even believe me? That I had no one to turn to. Then another thought crossed my mind.

“The truth is that Armor clan believed in my innocence! Enough that its two future leaders protected me from other clans and dinosaurs. It’s funny how quickly you believe one clan and disregard another one.” Lucaz looked defensive, but I could see my point registering with him. We walked in silence for the next few minutes, but I could tell he was mulling it over. Finally, my frustration got the better of me.

“What is it?” I asked, and Lucaz flashed a surly look as if he didn’t want to answer. I prodded him again. “Come on — if we have to walk this desert together, you might as well talk to me. It’s kind of boring looking at the same terrain over and over again.”

“I don’t know how to say it, but I believe you. You don’t act like a killer, yet I get the feeling you aren’t telling me the full truth.” *Perceptive. I was never a good liar.*

“So how do I gain your trust? Prevent you from walking into another man-eating worm?”

The fact was not lost on him, and he smiled. “Tell me about yourself. Do you have siblings? Where are your parents?” *A loaded question.* How much did I want to tell him about my past?

“I don’t have any brothers or sisters, and my father is dead. I was living with my grandmother before I came here. My clan is small, but I have a few friends.” “And your mother?” My mind raced. Where was she?

“I don’t know. I thought she died when I was young. Now I think she is still alive, maybe watching me right now, and I’m trying to find out why she left.” I gazed at Lucaz, not sure why he cared about the family I had lost. Then I remembered what he had said about his mother.

“You didn’t tell me how your mother died.”

Lucaz gave a funny look, like I was asking a bit too much from him. What could his mother have suffered through?

“Can you two keep it down! They’re going to hear you.”

*They?* Abraham put a finger over his mouth. I had been so caught up in talking with Lucaz that I hadn’t seen the terrain change. We were at a small rise, looking down into a shallow valley. The “they” he referred to were dozens of corrals circling a cluster of main structures in the middle. I’d bet there was something important in those buildings. Inside the cages were all types of dinosaurs, but few were like the ones I had studied as a kid. It felt like a concentration camp meant to trap these creatures until someone decided they could be released to the wild.

Perhaps the animals did not live naturally, but people controlled their development. The underground lab with the camera footage made more sense now. Someone was doing more than watching these animals — they were controlling them!

# 14

## Breeders

The complex was massive. Dozens of dinosaurs roared with pain and anger. Their fear was palatable, and it made my skin crawl. As much as I did not want to be hunted by these things, someone was manufacturing their strength and intelligence. Why? I ducked around the rock we were hiding behind and looked at the boys.

“What is this place?” I searched Abraham’s eyes for an answer.

“A killing place,” he replied cryptically. I gestured with my hands at him in an effort to coax out an explanation. He rolled his eyes but continued. “My guess is that they are breeding these animals for death. Many of the dinosaurs have scorch or cut marks from torture. No wonder these dinosaurs attack us on a regularly basis. They are trained to hunt us!”

“Hold on,” I asked, “how can you tell all of that from just observing?”

“Because,” Abraham came very close to my face, although I didn’t think his anger was directed toward me, “I’ve trained animals all of my life. I have learned to treat them as partners. We work together for the benefit of our clan. No one is trying to improve our lives with this place. They are raising these animals as killing machines!” Movement caught my eye to my left and the three of us hunkered lower behind the rock.

I watched as a teenage boy came out of a tent shelter. He carried a whip and a slab of meat. He walked to a corner of a cage containing a slow, spiky dinosaur that paced within its fence. The beast stopped and watched the boy from the corner of its eye, as if anticipating its meal. The boy grabbed a rope tied to the corner of the corral and a pulley hung high above the gate. He pulled the rope and grabbed what appeared to be a hook from the end. He twisted the hook and imbedded it into the slab, pulling it up into the air. The beast moved forward cautiously, smelling the air. Something dripped from the meat onto the face of the animal.

The meat was lowered to just above its head, its thick neck making it nearly impossible to reach. The animal roared its frustration and paced around its cell. The boy pushed a wooded dummy in the corral, weighted at its feet, making it stand up a like a human. He pushed the dummy away from the fence into the cage. The dinosaur backed away, as if scared by the cut-out. Suddenly a whip flashed out, lashing the buttocks of the animal. It cried and appeared fearful of the whip as it advanced closer to the mannequin.

It eyed the dummy more closely but still hesitated to come toward it. The animal must have waited too long, because the whip came out again, which forced the dinosaur to lunge forward. An angry welt grew red on the back of the beast, but the whip had the intended effect. The animal trampled the mannequin into the ground. Boards burst from its weight, and pieces of wood splintered into the air. The boy (I assumed its trainer) lowered the slab of meat to the animal’s face and it ate greedily. Abraham’s face flashed as red as the animal’s welt. Lucaz had to restrain him from standing up.

“He is a butcher — he doesn’t know how to train an animal. It’s a partnership — not torturing the animal to do your bidding.” Abraham surprised me with his comments. I thought he only cared for himself.

“Getting us caught isn’t going to help us. How many of them are there?”

“Ten,” I said, watching other boys (no girls) come out of two tents. Their clothes were familiar. I had met them before. Lucaz must have read my thoughts.

“They’re Chycle clan,” he stated.

I remembered them on their bikes. They were the first clan to pursue me at the coliseum. Maybe it wasn’t a coincidence. A couple looked familiar when they tried to capture me from the tow truck. They didn’t seem clever enough to stage this place on their own. Who were they working for?

“Look over there.” Abraham pointed, and I saw a row of motorcycles lined up together, gleaming in the sun. “They must know a safe way into the Wastelands to avoid the underground burrows. And a way to hide their wheel tracks.”

I was only half listening as I watched a caged dinosaur stalking one of the Chycle clan. The teenager circled the corral but came too close to one of the corners. The dinosaur kicked its back feet with such force that the fence rattled, sending the teenager to the ground. He grabbed his arm as if it was injured. He reached for a metal prod with his other arm and yelled at the beast. There was something in his eyes that made me shiver.

The injured clan member pushed the metal against the flank of the dinosaur and pressed a button. The end of the prod glowed red, and the beast let out an earth-shattering scream. I had no love for these animals, but I couldn’t help but feel pity for it.

“We have to release these animals. Their torture makes me sick,” Abraham said, and I agreed with him. But Lucaz had a different response.

“No!” he said vehemently. “We release these dinosaurs and they will escape. They’ll invade our lands and kill more people. We can’t let them go!” Abraham and I looked at each other, not understanding his reaction.

“Why, Lucaz? This is wrong. This clan is raising these animals to be killers. If we leave them here, they will get worse, and they will be released later,” I replied, trying to find out why he was set dead set against freeing them.

“We should destroy the whole camp and all the dinosaurs with them.” His words were cold. There had to be a reason why. Then I thought about the story he had never finished.

“Your mother? How did she die?” I asked, and Lucaz’s face turned gray. For once, Abraham was quiet. I waited. Lucaz’s body language betrayed his pain. This wasn’t the best time to discuss this, but I hunkered down behind the rock, waiting for him to explain.

“When I was five, we went on a family trip to see the caverns of Lenora. My mother was an expert on minerals and she want to see the ore deposits. She loved the beauty of caves and wanted to share this experience with us. My dad hates going underground but loved my mom enough that he was willing to do it for her. I was a kid and I was excited to be going anywhere.

“We went on a tour with a couple of other families deep underground. I remember marveling at the stalactites hanging from the ceiling. Halfway through the tour, we came to the ore deposit Mom was so excited about. The stones were bright yellow and green, and their glow illuminated the cave. She was like a kid in a candy market and despite my dad’s fear of enclosed places, even he was enjoying the tour. So much so that we didn’t even notice the air in the cave was changing.” *The air?* I didn’t understand but decided not to interrupt.

“The other group started to cough, and our guide realized what was happening.” “Stegosaurus?” Abraham said a dinosaur’s name that I had never heard of before.

Lucaz didn’t answer but nodded. “Yeah. They breathe out a noxious gas that helps paralyze their prey. Usually they only go after other dinosaurs, but they have occasionally attacked humans.”

“What did you do?”

“The guide immediately moved us back to the entrance. We turned off most of our lights so as not to warn the creature. Most dinosaurs are attracted to bright lights, and we didn’t want to lead the beast straight to us. We almost made it back to the entrance when I felt something swish through my legs and I screamed like a little girl. It felt like a snake trying to wrap its tail around me. My mom jumped

into action. She switched her miner's light on and flashed it around. The dinosaur was momentarily blinded and roared. Its scrawny arms came up, trying to block the light.

"I haven't seen one before. What does it look like?" I asked, almost afraid to hear the description. Abraham decided to answer.

"They're about the size of a cow, with a tiny appendage so they slither like a huge snake. They have three rows of teeth, and their pores pump out fumes to cause dizziness in their prey before they attack."

"My mom pushed her flashlight right into its jaw and shards of glass burst onto the cave floor. The dinosaur cried out in pain, as if one of the shards was lodged in its jaw. For a moment, I thought she had scared it off. My dad grabbed me from behind and flung me to the cave exit. I

remember the lights momentarily blinding me, and when I looked up, it was if everything was moving in slow motion. Dad had me pinned to the ground and the guide had his hand on the exit button, ready to seal off the door. My mom looked back me, the dinosaur roaring in pain at her feet. I reached out to her and accidentally flashed on my helmet cave light. My light illuminated the cave behind her and I realized she wasn't alone. There were at least another three or four of them.

"What made it worse was my mom smiling at me since she couldn't see what my light had shown. Before I could scream back to her, a massive tail grabbed her around her waist. She disappeared before she could even yell back to me. The guide slammed the door shut and sealed it closed. We could hear them throwing themselves at the door to get at us. We were rushed to the surface, my dad and I sobbing, wanting to go back but knowing that there was nothing we could do for her. Hours later, search parties found no trace of her or the dinosaurs. It was like they came, took what they wanted, and moved on." Lucaz's head was bowed, and I could tell that he was crying. There were no words to console him and I simply put my arm around him. Having lost my mother as well, I understood his pain.

I looked around, hoping Abraham could help, but he was gone. Unfortunately, we had spent too much time talking and not watching our surroundings. From below, clan members were climbing toward us, our hiding place found. Their stride was slow, since they realized we had no place to go.

"Lucaz — come on! They've discovered us." They outnumbered us and they had motorcycles. I didn't welcome becoming a meal out in the desert. We had only one option.

"Run toward that pen!" I yelled as we charged to the nearest cage. The clan members who had walked so casually now broke into a run. It was a footrace to the pen, but I'd rather face a dinosaur than be captured. Lucas was faster than me and almost cleared the metal bars of the pen as he jumped in. I leaped as well, but my foot slipped on the metal bar. Lucaz grabbed my hand and pulled me away before my chin came down hard on the post.

"Thanks." We leapt into the pen. A pair of hands reached for my foot. I kicked out and felt the resounding contact on someone's nose. Once into the corral, we looked at the other inmate in the cell. Suddenly, I doubted my decision. The dinosaur regarded us with its head tilted to the side, as if it couldn't imagine humans any stupider than us. It was the size of a large vehicle, with a pulled-out brow that extended over its eyes. Its eyes radiated a simple intelligence, as if it was only capable of a few thoughts. Then they narrowed, as if it had settled on an emotion. Fear. It charged toward us. Lucaz and I separated and ran to opposite sides of the pen. The beast stopped quickly, as if confused by too many options. We had to get around it and open the gate.

"Look at me!" Lucaz yelled, trying to focus the beast's attention. It turned toward him, and he flailed his arms. I slowly walked around, trying to not attract the animal. A spear tapped me on the back sending me into the dirt. I looked up and saw one of the Chycle clan trying to knock me off balance. He jabbed his spear at me, but I jumped over the tip, leaving him behind. I could see the latch at the back of the pen. Twenty more feet and I could unclasp it.

"Let me go!" Lucaz yelled as two of the Chycle clan grabbed him from behind, pinning his shoulders to the cage. He kicked his feet which attracted the dinosaur even more. *Do I go back to help him or release the cage?* "Get it open!" he yelled, as if reading the indecision in my mind. I ran feeling

something jabbed past my thigh drawing blood, but I had no time to worry about my injury. I dashed and then leapt into the air, grasping the latch. I unclicked it once, twice but nothing happened. There was a chain and lock dangling down. It was locked up tight. I was so stupid to think I could open it.

“Sorry, princess.” One of the clan members smiled down but had no kindness in his voice. “These cages are locked up tight. Now, why don’t you give me your hand and I’ll pull you out before you get gored to death?” His face appeared helpful, but his eyes made me believe he was not saving me. I looked back and saw Lucaz had broken away from the other clan members, but the dinosaur was closing in. I reached down and grabbed some dirt with my left hand and gave my supposed savior my right hand. As he pulled up, I let my dirt fly right in his face.

He yelled and released my hand, scratching at his face. I kicked at the gate, the lock holding it fast. There had to be another way to get this gate open.

“Hey — over here!” I bellowed and searched the dirt for a rock. I found one and threw it at the back of the beast. It bounced off harmlessly, but the animal’s head turned toward me. “Over here.” I waved my hands and tried to make myself as big as possible. The animal cocked its head, and it appeared that I got my wish. It turned from Lucaz and lumbered toward me. I threw another rock which hit the creature in the eye. It squealed, and I immediately regretted my action. It charged, barely giving me time to jump aside. I felt the dirt scratch my face but realized it was nothing compared to the pain I had caused the animal. Still the gate held. My actions had not helped. We were still trapped.

The clan member fell beside me; he must have fallen because of the blow to the gate. He lay prone to the ground, but a shiny cluster of keys was gathered around his belt. I pulled hard, ripping them from his belt loop. I counted ten keys — ten chances to get this animal out of its cage. Another body dropped beside me, only this clan member was on his feet and coming at me. I ran to the lock and placed the first key in. It went in but didn’t turn. One down.

“Ouch!” I was tackled from behind and my ribs hurt from the compression. I wheeled around and kicked my assailant in the gut. The clan member doubled over and sank to the ground. I grabbed my keys and tried a second one. This one wouldn’t even enter the lock. Before I could try a

third, I heard a yell from behind. Before I could respond, another body went sailing into the fence behind me.

“Can you hurry up?” Lucaz whispered into my ear. “I can’t hold these guys off forever.” I smiled as he punched another clan member. I tried another key. It went partially in and then stopped. The fifth key went all the way in. *Got it!* Before I could turn it, I was slammed from behind and dropped to the ground, the breath knocked out of me. I turned, but before I could kick out, Lucaz punched my new attacker.

“I can’t hold them off much longer. Look.” I spun around to see a dozen clan members hanging on the fence. It kept the dinosaur focused away from us, but it was a numbers game; eventually they would overwhelm us. I ran to the lock and tried to turn the key, but the top part had broken off. The key was stuck in the lock!

Lucaz grabbed my arm. Between the dinosaur, the clan members and the gate, we were trapped. Only I had no white flag to wave. Before I could surrender, the cage door slammed open.

“Get out of the pen!” Abraham yelled. He was mounted on a huge dinosaur; its massive head had cracked the pen and destroyed the lock. Being part of the Hunter clan gave him some ability with animals. Some type of dinosaur whisperer. The clan members attacked Abraham. The dinosaur shook its neck and clan members went flying like feathers in the wind. Lucaz and I dashed out of the gate. We jumped to the side as the dinosaur in the pen charged out. Several Chycle clan members tried to corral it back into its cage.

“Try to open more of the pens! We can’t overwhelm the clan on our own,” Abraham yelled and took his animal to the next pen. I grabbed my keys and ran toward the next dinosaur pen. The lock was like the last, and luckily, one of the other keys opened it easily. I turned the handle on the gate and looked at the dinosaur. It was stocky, with a narrow bill and thick legs. Its eyes showed fear and

instead of escaping, it backed into the corner of its cage, trying to get away from me. *Great!* Instead of sending beasts to create chaos, I had found the one that feared its own shadow.

“Come on, baby,” I coaxed with my hands. “Be free.” She looked at me with big eyes as she tilted her head and then backed away.

“Go!” Lucaz slapped the animal’s butt and it charged out of the pen. “Sometimes the forceful approach is a bit more effective.” I had no time to thank him as a metal chain sailed over my head, narrowly missing me. We ran forward. The pandemonium of the released dinosaurs had taken the focus of the clan off us. But with all this mayhem, what were we accomplishing?

“Lucaz, take my keys. Go open as many gates as possible. The only chance we have is if this place is overrun by these animals.” I tossed the keys over to him.

“Where are you going?”

I pointed to the main building. Destroying this place wasn’t enough. We needed to know why it was here and who had created it.

“Be careful. Abraham isn’t going to like that I let you out my sight.”

“He has his own problems. Besides, we’re in the middle of the desert. It’s not like I can go anywhere.” Lucaz nodded, touched my shoulder then charged toward the next cage. I jumped a fence and ran to the permanent structure. As I got closer, I saw a stack of motorcycles stretched out in front of the building. At least I knew how these guys got out to the desert in the first place. The bikes were dusty and they presented an opportunity I couldn’t resist. I kicked the first bike and watched as the others tumbled like dominos. One, two, three until they stopped crashing, leaving two motorcycles upright. Oh, well, almost perfect.

A Chycle clan member was being chased by two small dinosaurs and crossed in front of me. I stopped and let them go by. None of them gave me a second look. The main building beckoned, and I entered a dark entranceway. Inside was quiet; perhaps everyone had exited to recapture the dinosaurs. The walls were plain and the furnishing was sparse, but there was a green glow coming from the end of the hall. I peeked around the corner and found a small room with a monitor, computers, and a series of binders. It didn’t look like something the Chycle clan had the intelligence to run. What other clan could be involved with this place?

The screen blinked with video footage of the animal corrals. I searched for a video stream of Lucaz, but he wasn’t in any of the rotating cameras. Abraham showed up on one monitor, still riding the same dinosaur. There was a wound on the beast’s right leg and it was hobbling slightly. Yet it whipped its tail and took out two more clan members. I didn’t know what control he had over the beast, but he was much more effective than the Chycle clan’s approach of punishment.

What was this place? Why was it like the other underground lab I had found earlier? Some one must be in control of this?

“You must have lots of questions,” a voice said from behind me. I turned and recognized the speaker. “The assassin has come to me. It seems we didn’t even need to put a price on your head after all.” The scar over his eye rose as a smile crossed his face.

With the Chycle clan here, it made sense that their leader Dero would be too. But was he really the one in charge? And would I live long enough to find out?

# 15

## Control

“You have been an incredible mystery to us. I still haven’t learned anything about your clan — that’s why you were perfect to mark as a target. But I’m glad you’re still alive.”

“Thanks. With all of the people who have tried to kill or capture me lately, you’re making me feel all warm inside,” I said with a sarcastic grin. Dero walked toward me, but not in a threatening way, and sat down. I stepped back to stay out of his reach — just in case. I had a feeling that this guy skirted the truth.

“Have a seat. Your friends will be captured, and then we’ll have the whole group together.”

“Thanks, but I’ll stand,” I replied, not giving him any respect. “What is this place?”

“Straight to the point. No pretense. So many of the clan leaders I deal with dance around the issues. It takes them forever to make a point.”

“Which you seem to be doing now. Maybe I should leave and come back when you are ready to get to the point.” I was about to leave when his arm came down on my shoulder.

“There is nowhere to go. You are in the middle of a desert. Let’s take this opportunity to get to know each other better.” Okay, this guy was getting creepier by the second. But my options were limited, so I’d play along. For now.

“All right. What do you want to know?”

“I’ll tell you a bit about me if you share information about you. You intrigue me. How you have survived so far is amazing. But you won’t get information from me for nothing.”

I nodded. I’d play whatever game if it helped me figure what was going on. Even if the information didn’t help me find my mother, it could help Jinn and Tuko. I just had to be careful not to give too much away.

“I’ll go first. What happened at Trall? Who killed Luther?” I demanded.

“Uh-uh.” Dero wagged his finger at me like I was a bad child. “That’s not how this works. You ask one question; I ask one question. I’ll tackle your first one. Changing leadership from within is very hard. Often you need an event that rallies everyone to the cause. Many leaders have created tumultuous change by their death. You just need to create the right cause.” Was this guy a politician? I swear he didn’t come close to answering my question.

“Which is?”

“No. No. My turn. Who is your clan?”

“Droniums,” I answered, not wanting to change my story, and this was a test.

“No such group. You are lying. Where do they live?”

“Isn’t that a second question?” I smirked, getting in the parameters of his game.

“Not if you aren’t going to answer truthfully.”

“Fine. I don’t live with a clan. My people have no affiliation.”

Dero studied me carefully. “You’re telling the truth. It’s a pleasant change. But how do your people coexist with no clan to follow? With no leadership to guide them.”

“My turn. I want to understand why you are doing this. Why create dinosaurs that kill?”

Dero stood up and folded his arms. He looked excited to share his story. “Coming from a people with no clan, this may be a bit hard for you to understand. Clans create a bond that can be stronger

than any family. Members will do anything to keep their clan strong. It is our world's greatest strength. Clans enable our people to grow and evolve."

"But..." I interjected, trying to get him to move along.

"It can also be our greatest weakness. Clans war among themselves, wasting energy and resources. Some clans diminish and become prey for the stronger ones."

"So you send dinosaurs to kill to unite the clans? That's twisted. How does lying to them make anyone stronger?"

"Because we need to be reborn!" he yelled, vehemently making his point. "Clans have never been willing to take that step of maturity of working together. They would rather talk and talk while back stabbing each other. They needed an event, something to unite them against a common foe. A reason to work together."

"Luther's death? You're so full of yourself. How long do you think his true killer will stay a secret? Then what will you do?"

"By then the old ways will be dead and buried. A new foundation laid for a new beginning. One that some will embrace, and others will resist. Now I gave you a few bonus answers. My turn. Tell me where the rest of your clan is?"

This was what the conversation was really about and the reason why he hadn't killed me. Yet. Could he comprehend another world outside of his that didn't involve clans? A place where another leader thought he knew what was best for the people by controlling what they knew. I had come so far from home, but in the end, people weren't much different from each other no matter where you went.

"You can't reach my home from here," I answered truthfully. "I'm not even sure I can get back to my people." He studied my face, as if he had some internal lie detector. Rather than confirm or deny my statement, he stood, motioned for me to follow him, and opened a door that took us to a spiral flight of stairs that descended into the ground. I followed, although he could easily be leading me into a trap. I moved forward, believing my curiosity would be rewarded.

After the narrow stairs, the hallway opened and a glass dome appeared at the end. There were heat lamps emanating from the glass and I was greeted by a roar of pain from behind a post. Were they torturing some poor animal?

As I turned, I saw a small dinosaur lying on the floor, its legs strewn out in front. Its stomach was swollen, and its legs were wrapped around it as if it was in pain. Suddenly I realized what was going on. Only it was impossible — it was giving birth! I turned to Dero.

"This doesn't make any sense. Unless I flunked basic history, dinosaurs lay eggs; they don't birth alive like humans. What weird experiments are you doing here?" Dero walked to the side of the cage, oblivious to the animal's agony.

"Evolution happens in many ways, sometimes without us understanding why it is occurring. The dinosaurs are evolving, becoming smarter, better hunters, more humanlike in their socialization. They are our biggest threat. If the clans don't evolve to meet this challenge, we will be the ones who become extinct."

"So you are creating a threat to eliminate all of the humans. Doesn't seem like a bonding event to me."

"That is because you don't think big-picture. A war is coming, and all clans will need to pick a side. The results will change our society. When you tear down an old building, you must build a new foundation, and the new structure will be stronger because of it." Okay, this guy had a crazy brainwashed feel about him.

"But why have this place in the middle of nowhere, caging these animals? Did you create these dinosaurs, or have they always been here? Are you experimenting on them to make them smarter? Or are you trying to make them hate us?"

"My turn for a question, Pene," he said.

“Enough of this pretending to be civil, the back-and-forth questions! People and animals are dying. All so you can play God. Don’t expect me and my friends to help you. Once people know the truth, your plan will be over!”

“You’re right, Pene. There are others who support our work, but I can see that you will never become one of them. The dinosaurs have always been here, a resource to be cultivated. You and so many other clans are too blind to see their use. I’m not going to learn anything more from you, and you aren’t listening. It’s a shame. It’s a brave new world and you’re too scared to see it.” He dismissed me like a student who had failed her teacher. Maybe I was scared, but this guy was many layers of crazy. It was hard to believe anything that came out of his mouth. He pressed a button on a wall and spoke into an intercom. “We’re done.” Suddenly I felt like I had run out of time. I backed away slowly while the dinosaur mother looked on with pain in its eyes. I heard footsteps on the stairs and turned to see two Chycle clan stepping down toward me. My audience was done.

“There will be others that disagree with you, Dero. They can’t all be swept away like me.”

“I’ll deal with them as they come. This is a long-term plan, but it will unite us into one strong clan. Thousands of lives will be saved. People like you are just too short-sighted to see.” He looked at his clan members. “Take her away.”

They approached me warily, and I raised my hands, signaling my surrender. They softened their stance, and the one on the right reached for my arm. I moved and kicked him in the shin and he immediately went down. I rolled forward as the second one instinctively reached for me. That was his mistake. If he hadn’t come down to my level, he wouldn’t have made such an easy target. I kicked at his knee and heard a yell of pain. I had hurt him, but I didn’t stick around to gloat. I ran hard up the stairs, hoping I could get out before reinforcements arrived.

As I charged up the stairs, I saw there were gaps in the metal rungs, and I tried not to trip and break my foot. At the top of the stairs, I checked behind me and didn’t see any pursuers. Because I wasn’t looking ahead, I slammed into the chest of a tall boy. He was solid, and I fell on my back. I

had the presence of mind to keep my head up which prevented it from slamming into the floor. I was ready to kick my assailant between the legs when I recognized who was in front of me.

“Lucaz! I am so glad to see you. Guess who I just saw?”

“No time. There are too many of them, Pene. Abraham has already left the compound on the back of the dinosaur he was riding. We’re on our own.”

*Great. He helped get us into this mess and now he’s gone with his dinosaur.* We had no such defense. We needed an escape, which made me think about the tangled mess of motorcycles. Could we get one of those going?

As we exited the main door, my thoughts were answered. The main compound was a twisted pile of bikes. There were still two standing up that were hooked together, but I hoped I could pry one apart. Except there were half a dozen Chycle clan members standing less than fifty feet away. They didn’t look happy. One had blood dripping from his forehead while another was swinging a metal chain. And they were all looking at us. We had to run, but with no vehicle and in the middle of a desert, there was no way to get away. But a cloud of dust coming from behind them tweaked my interest.

“Please tell us that you don’t want to give up. I hope you want to run,” the clan member yelled, clearly wanting to hurt us. I just didn’t care.

“No sense disappointing you. Too bad Dero doesn’t care what happens to you or these animals.” Lucaz gave me a confused look. The Chycle clan weren’t here for conversation, and the clan member with the chain threw his end at us. I ducked and then braced for the rest of their attack. It never came. Before they could halve the distance, the dust cloud grew larger and a car emerged.

*Tuko!* My heart beat fast. I’d never thought I’d be so happy to see him. The clan members started to turn around as Tuko’s car skidded to a stop. The vehicle hit a clan member sending him flying. I had no sympathy as he slammed into the bike pile.

“Is he with you?” Tuko pointed at Lucaz. I nodded and the two of us jumped into the back seat as Tuko accelerated. One of the Chycle clan leaped into the back and hit Lucaz in the gut, making him double over.

“We have trouble.” I motioned to Tuko.

“I have to focus in front of us.” There was chaos everywhere, from loose dinosaurs to clan members running at the car. “He’s your problem,” Tuko responded. *Ah, how I’d missed him.* I turned and my attacker swung at me just as Tuko was turning. His fist passed by me, as his momentum pushed him forward. I kicked. He fell out of the car but grabbed the door. His feet dragged along the earth.

“Some help would be nice.” I moved past Lucaz, who was still clutching his stomach. I raised my foot and in one swift motion kicked at one of the guy’s hands. He moved at the same time causing me to hit metal. Just as I was about to kick again, his other hand grabbed my ankle and I fell on my back on the seat. I thrashed, but his grip was solid, and the more I squirmed, the tighter it became.

The car swerved sending the clan member and my leg swinging to the right. It would have been fun if I didn’t feel my leg stretch and his fingernails dig into my skin. I kicked with my other leg and missed. Suddenly the pressure on my leg relaxed and I saw Lucaz rubbing his fist. I checked over the side of the car. The clan member lay in a heap along the side of the road. I brushed the scratches on my skin. *Good riddance.*

“Thanks. Tuko, this is Lucaz. Lucaz, Tuko.” Neither spoke and I realized this wasn’t the time for introductions. I fell back into the back seat after another sharp turn. Tuko was almost clear of the complex, but several Chycle members had managed to get their motorcycles lose from the pile and accelerated toward us.

“What’s your plan?” I asked Tuko, expecting he might have some help from his clan forthcoming.

“Drive faster than them,” he said tightly, proving that if I expected anything complex from Tuko, I’d be disappointed. I began to look for anything to throw at our pursuers when another sharp turn almost knocked me out of the car.

Lucaz grabbed my wrist and pinned me down. “Focus on staying in the car, because your friend drives like a maniac. If you fall out, there will be no time to pick you up.” The car lurched again and I knew he was right.

We exited the encampment and the entire desert loomed in front us. I didn’t know how Tuko had found us, but I hoped he knew how to escape this place. I looked back. Four motorcycles with dust trails were closing the gap. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that in a race the motorcycles were faster. I searched for weapons, hoping that by the time they reached us, I’d have something to knock them down.

“Where is your toolbox?” I yelled at Tuko. This time he glanced back at me and noticed the motorcycles closing.

“In the trunk, but we don’t have time to stop. They’d be all over us.”

“Well, I need something to throw at them.” Lucaz held up a sparkplug he pulled out of the cushions. “And we’ve got nothing back here.” I motioned for him to keep looking.

“That’s your problem. I saved your butt; now you need to figure out how to lose these guys.” Yep, Tuko was as helpful as ever. But he was right. This was one girl who wasn’t going to let a guy solve all her problems. I needed a distraction or a weapon. I watched the desert roll in front of us, mounds of dirt grabbing my attention. *That’s it — how about both a weapon and a distraction?*

“Tuko, drive closer to the edge of the road!” He gave me a strange look and I could tell he didn’t know about the worms in the ground. “But not too close and slow down a bit,” I added. If he was concerned, he didn’t show it and followed my instructions. One of the motorcycles had closed the gap and as we passed one of the mounds, I threw an empty bottle that landed on it. The ground exploded as teeth rose into the air. The motorcycle turned sharply and collapsed, the worm diving into the accident. I didn’t look back to see if the creature got the rider or a mouthful of metal.

“What the hell was that?” Tuko yelled and turned back to the center of the road.

“You don’t want to know,” Lucaz answered, “and I don’t think the Chycles are going to fall for that twice.” Three motorcycles had gathered behind us but didn’t get any closer for fear of the desert erupting again.

“What are they waiting for?” I asked, thinking that maybe we could escape.

“Up ahead,” Tuko pointed, “is a valley. I don’t think those things are in the sides of the hills. They can try to pass us and surround us there.”

I spat, even though my mouth was dusty and dry. How could we take out the bikers before the valley? The answer was obvious.

“Tuko — stop the car!”

“What! Then they’ll catch us.” He scowled.

“Exactly, and that’s just what we want.” The car slowed, but I could feel Tuko’s resistance. But he must have trusted me enough, which was all that counted. As the car stopped, I could feel the dust catching up, and it momentarily blinded me. When my vision returned, the three motorcycles were closing the gap, one in the lead and two following. “Keep the engine running,” I commanded Tuko.

I opened the trunk and pulled out the toolbox. If I was going to activate the desert worms, I needed objects to make it happen. The lead motorcycle skidded to a stop, and its driver disembarked. The two riders behind him stayed on their vehicles with their engines revving.

“Stay where you are,” I warned the lead biker. “Unless you and your clan want to be supper for our friends of the desert.” He looked unperturbed. He took off his helmet. It was Dero, and he was grinning. He was gently swinging a chain in his right hand.

“I’ve lived with them for years. They could just as easily eat you as me. You’re bluffing.” He propped the bike on its kickstand but didn’t come any closer.

“Why don’t you come over and find out?” I challenged, daring him to test me. He smirked. “Guess we have a standoff. Unless you have something else in mind?” I did, but I needed time.

“Who do you work for? What will you get if the clans are merged?” I demanded, wondering if pride would get me an answer. I could feel Lucaz and Tuko looking at each other, wondering what the hell I was talking about.

“I’m not here to discuss our clan’s plans with you. Surrender, and you and your friends will be imprisoned but live.”

“How kind of you.” I paced the roadway then kicked a rock into the desert.

“Why is Chycle clan caging these animals?” Lucaz asked.

“That is none of your concern!” Dero stepped closer, getting frustrated. Maybe it would make him careless.

“Why not? You train dinosaurs that kill members of every clan. I would say it is everyone’s concern,” I countered.

“Enough!” He swung the chain at my head, which is what I was hoping for. I moved and allowed it to wrap around my arm. Sharp edges bit into my skin, I would deal with the pain later. Dero was bigger than me and I would lose in a game of tug of war. I took the rock I had picked up and threw it at a nearby mound in the desert next to the bikers behind Dero.

The ground erupted with teeth as both bikers disappeared in seconds into its mouth. The worm opened its mouth and I heard the sickening sound of bones being crushed. Dero ignored his clan members behind him and ran toward me. I feverishly tried to unravel the chain from around my arm. Before he could reach me, Lucaz kicked him in the gut and pushed him back toward the worm. The chain tightened as the distance increased between Dero and me. I grunted in pain.

The worm slithered around, gnashing his teeth. Dero ducked as the worm lunged at his head. It missed him, and its mouth slammed on thin air. But as I was removing the chain between the two of us, the movement attracted the worm. It grabbed at the chain.

“Lucaz!” I yelled as the chain dragged me toward the open maw. My feet dragged across the dirt as the chain became entrenched in its mouth.

“Stop moving!” Lucaz yelled as he started unwrapping the chain from my wrist. Ten feet, eight feet, my heels were screaming in pain as the worm pulled me effortlessly toward it.

“I have no choice!” I bellowed back. The chain was digging mercilessly into my arm. The worm’s breath stank of death. I ducked as Dero’s fist came at my head. I came down hard on his collarbone. A nice pop rewarded my ears and Dero grabbed his shoulder. It was the last thing he ever did. The worm’s jaw came down on his head and he disappeared. The crunching bones made me cringe. I was next on the worm’s menu as I was being pulled in closer. Five feet, four feet...

“Take this!” Lucaz removed the last of the chain and tossed into the worm’s mouth. It swallowed it whole. If it didn’t like the taste, it showed no reaction. As we ran back to the car, the worm remained rooted to the spot, as if it could only dispense death from a specific location.

“Come on!” Tuko motioned to us. We leapt onto the moving car, leaving the worm to rummage through the wreckage of the Chycles. I watched it shrinking in the distance as the car took us away from the carnage. I sank deep in my seat, weak from the end of my adrenalin high. Was I saved? Then it hit me.

“Where is Jinn?” I jumped up and punched Tuko in the shoulder. He turned, but the pain in his face wasn’t from me striking him.

“They have her. And if I don’t bring you to back to them, they’ll hurt her.”

# 16

## Loss

“Who has Jinn?” I demanded. I had waited twenty minutes for Tuko to drive us to a safe place away from the worms and the Chycle clan. It was one of the longest times of my life as Tuko was unresponsive to my questions, just telling me I had to wait. Lucaz told me to relax, but I couldn’t; this was my fault. With the car stopped, Tuko turned to me. The usual arrogance in his eyes was gone, replaced with genuine hurt.

“When we lost you in the forest, we knew by the leftover web that Spider clan had you.” “Pretty obvious,” Lucaz chimed in. His interruption barely registered with Tuko.

“We wandered for a while before Dad picked us up. He was overjoyed that we survived — when we disappeared, he thought we were dead. But once he realized that you were captured, he was furious.”

“But you tried to find me, right?” I asked. Tuko shook his head.

“Our clan was hurt and needed medical attention, Pene. Jinn and I tried, but there were bigger issues to deal with.” I nodded. Once we got to the end of the forest, the next settlement was Brendal.

“The Relics?” Lucaz asked. Tuko nodded.

“Did we see them at the gathering?” I asked, trying to picture what they looked like.

“No — they don’t tend to leave their settlement, except for hunting and the annual visit to the Cradle,” Tuko responded. “But they were intent on finding you, dead or alive. They had heard through the radio that we were spotted with you and wouldn’t leave us alone.”

“Relic clan is pretty wild — once they get a hold of you...”

“Why are we listening to him, Pene? I gave him a lift because he was with you, but I’m happy to leave him behind,” he snarled at Lucaz.

I sighed. “He helped me but was also the one who captured me.” “This is his fault!” He jabbed a finger at Lucaz’s chest.

“Look — back off.” Lucaz retreated. “I did what I was told to do because we thought she killed Luther. It meant a lot of prestige to my clan to bring her in.” “Now what do you think?” I asked, wanting to know how he felt.

He looked at me. “I think we were backing the wrong side. Because of the animal settlement, there is definitely something else going on.”

“Well, my sister and I knew that from the beginning!” “What happened to Jinn?” My patience was wearing thin.

“They took her! Our clan was beaten and hurt from the dinosaur attack and they outnumbered us. When my dad told them that we didn’t know where you were and wouldn’t tell them even if we knew, they became violent. Jinn fought, but we got separated. My dad had no choice but to call for reinforcements, but I knew I had to find you.”

“But how did you find us? We didn’t even know where we were,” Lucaz asked.

“I didn’t, but you had been sighted near the Wastelands. I found the Spider and Beast encampment that got hit by the storm. They were debating about trying to find the three of you when I noticed a couple of Chycle clan bikes driving out into the middle of nowhere. I decided to follow. It was at night

but a full moon, so they didn't see me behind them. But had I known what was off into the desert, I might not have gone after them."

"So what's next? Are you going to turn me in to get Jinn back? You better get in line. Lucaz also wants to exchange me."

"This is true." Lucaz smiled, but I didn't feel he was as serious about it as when we first met.

Tuko put his head in his hands and stared at the ground. "What do you want me to do! She's my family!"

"Fine. I don't want Jinn to get hurt. Take me to Relics. Do you trust them to make a trade?"

"I don't trust them. We should find Abraham instead. He'll get the Relic clan to give her up," Lucaz offered.

"Sure you're not just looking after yourself?" I asked, realizing that this was his original plan, after all.

"Abraham could team up with Armor and we could overpower Relic," Tuko said.

"Abraham took off when we needed his help. All he cares about is himself." I slammed my fist into my palm.

"And bringing you back to pay for Luther's death," Tuko commented.

"I think Dero was responsible for that, but no one will hear him admit it now."

"I can tell my dad about the animal base and take people back there. That will help show that you are innocent," Tuko replied.

"We don't have time to debate this! If you want to bring me in to get Jinn back, I say let's go." And I looked at Lucaz. "And you can give him and his clan part of the credit." The two of them looked at each other. A silent agreement passed between them.

"This is crazy. We have no guarantee that Relics will even honor their part of agreement. This could be a trap!" Lucaz warned.

"Easy for you to say. It's not your sister that they hold captive!"

"Enough! Save the posturing. It's my life they want. I will make the decision. Take me to this Relic clan and trade me for Jinn!" The discussion was over and neither one had a better solution to offer. I sat back in my seat and closed my eyes. I just wanted a few minutes of rest.

\* \* \*

I opened my eyes hours later. My body was rested but my heart was hurting. The constant running had worn me down. *I would love to be back home in my bed again, where my biggest worry was getting to school on time.* Knowing the truth was mentally exhausting.

The room was dark. The only illumination was from the stars. The walls, as best as I could see, were plain, with wooden panels and a door. The last thing I remembered was the rhythmic movements of the car as Tuko drove us to the Relic clan. Where were we now?

"Tuko? Lucaz? Where are you guys?" Silence greeted me. I hadn't expected an answer unless one of them was lying on the floor at the end of my bed. They were likely asleep somewhere else to rest up before my exchange. I got up, kicked on my shoes (I did not remember taking them off), and walked toward the door. The handle turned easily and I stared into a hallway. A set of stairs headed down into a main foyer while two other doors lined the upstairs hall. Did I dare wake those guys or let them sleep? My instincts said to let them sleep. Both had saved my life so the least I could give them was a few hours of rest.

I crept down the steps. The stairs creaked so loudly that I thought I would wake everyone up. I gave up trying to be quiet and walked normally. The main floor was open and looked like a big kitchen with cabinets. I opened a cabinet door and was greeted by cups and plates. Were we in someone's home? Had the trade already taken place? If so, I didn't feel like a prisoner.

A rapping on the window broke my concentration. The noise was tiny, as if a small beak was hitting the glass. A light flashed and was just as quickly extinguished. Was someone playing games with me? I tried the door, but although the knob would turn, it held fast. I went to the window and tried to open it. The light flashed again. Tiny red eyes! It was a drone. How did it follow me from home to this world? Was it watching or warning me? I picked up a chair. It was only glass. I was sure I could batter my way through. I raised the chair and swung my arms in a backward motion.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." My arms stopped dead. The voice was familiar. From my past. The last time I had seen her was on a computer screen. My mother was here!

"Who are you?" I asked, stalling for time.

"You know," a shadowy figure answered from the end of the room under the entranceway.

"I do." I started to walk closer, but my mother's hands gestured me to stay.

"How can you be here?" Wherever here was.

"Wrong question to be asking, Pene. I can only be with you for a minute. I am here because I needed to talk to you." Okay, now she was talking in riddles. Was this an adult thing?

"Are you close by?" I wondered, hoping my exploration of this world was not a waste of time.

"I am always close to you." Her face remained in shadows. "But your journey will come to an end if you trust the wrong person."

"Stop the mysterious riddles, Mom. Who are you talking about? Why can't I trust them?" Then her shadow shimmered and disappeared. Where did she go? "Mom? Stop this! Are you still alive? How can you talk to me now?" Silence was all I heard. I was so frustrated that I was ready to scream until I heard movement behind me. I turned only to find that the figure was behind me but closer. Close enough that I could see her smile. If this really was her.

"I can't explain, Pene. But I am watching you always, trying to save you. You will need help at the Cradle — don't try the solution on your own." I ran to her but as I closed my arms around her waist, she turned to smoke and dissipated.

Was this a joke? I had thought my mother died, yet lately I had been seeing her and talking with her like she was still alive. *Why can't she come to me?*

"Rap! Rapppp! Rapppp!" The noise on the window was back and the flash of red light told me what it was. I pressed my nose up to the glass. The drone looked back at me as it hovered. Had these things followed me from my world? Or did they exist everywhere, watching the inhabitants like mice in a maze? I raised my fist, intent on smashing the glass and destroying the drone.

"Ahhhh!" I yelled

"What is your problem?" Tuko asked as I straightened up from the back seat of the car. The sky was dark, but the motion told me that we were still driving. That meant everything I just saw was a dream. None of it was real. Was it?

"Sorry — bad dream. Was I loud?" I answered, pushing back my messy hair. *Gross — did I drool?*

"You were screaming about something. Although you didn't wake up Spider clan next to you." Tuko pointed at Lucaz, who was fast asleep with a blanket covering half of his face. Guess he could sleep through anything. "He didn't move?"

"Not an inch. Want to tell me about your nightmare?" I thought about sharing with him. Would he understand?

"It was about my mother. She was talking in riddles, and it was driving me crazy."

"Where is she now?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "I don't even know if she is still alive." Tuko's body slackened. He slowed the car down to a stop and turned to face me. "If I ask you a question, can you give me an honest answer?" "I can try," I said, puzzled by his comment.

“Where is your clan?” His eyes looked concerned but wary, as if he knew something wasn’t adding up. “Why are none of them trying to help you?” There it was. My lies were tumbling down. It was obvious that I wasn’t from this world. Question was, did I continue to pile on the lies and hope something would stick, or was it time to tell the truth?

“My clan, my family, and friends are far, far away. Too far for anyone to help me. I’m on my own.”

Tuko shook his head. “That doesn’t make any sense. Your clan is your family. We do anything to protect one another. It’s what gives us our strength. Who are you really, Pene?”

I slumped down in my seat. “I’m from a place much different than here, Tuko. It’s a lot safer, but people don’t protect each other like here.”

“I can tell. Besides us, no one has come to help you. Doesn’t that weigh on you?” And it did. In school, I didn’t have a lot of friends. Just one best friend and a boy who helped me escape. But I had always been a loner. I had the constant need to leave home, and making friends wasn’t a high priority.

“It does,” I answered truthfully, “but fortunately I have made friends along the way. I thought this journey was about me, but I’ve learned I wouldn’t be alive without help. Your help included.” He nodded as if satisfied with my answer and turned the key, starting the car up again. I sat back down, realizing that Tuko had made his decision.

“You know that I can’t just give you up to them.”

“But you must, we can’t have anything happen to Jinn.”

“I know, but we can find some middle ground. Maybe if we tell them about Dero and your innocence?”

“I have had a hard enough time getting you guys to believe me. I doubt people who don’t know me will take my word over a clan leader’s.”

I struggled for a solution that didn’t involve my death. There must be some way to get out of this. Maybe if I learned more about who I was dealing with.

“Tell me more about the Relic clan. What makes them tick?”

“Relics are one of the oldest clans, living in the treetops of the Oldest Forest. They keep to themselves and are real tree-huggers. Living off the land. Every action they take circles back to the forest around them.”

“They sound honorable. Do you think they will return Jinn if I go willingly?”

“I think so, but they will take you to the Cradle and turn you over to the elders. After that, unless we prove your innocence, I don’t see you living too long. I just wish we had other options to get Jinn back. “As I thought about Tuko’s comment an idea began to germinate. It wasn’t great, but given time, it might be our best option.

“There is something else you could tell them.” I tugged at my father’s necklace on my neck, my plan beginning to form. “But it is going to be risky.”

# 17

## Rescue

The sun was high as Lucaz and I watched Tuko and his car get swallowed up by the forest. We waited until the dust cloud had settled before venturing behind him but stayed off the main road.

“Just for the record, this plan is crazy.” Lucaz shook his head while following in step behind me. The forest was thick and would be slow going for the last two miles before the Relics’ camp.

“Nobody forced you to come with me. You could be riding comfortably with Tuko and avoid the surprises of the forest.” I slapped at an evil-looking bug on my shoulder. Lucaz grunted which I took to be his weak comeback.

“At least we don’t have any problem figuring out where to go.” I pointed to the large trees of the Relic settlement directly in front of us.

“Seeing our destination and getting there are two different things,” warned Lucaz. “This is their land. They’ll have sentries and traps throughout. And we’re just blundering through. We’ll be lucky to get within half the distance of their camp.”

“I guess it’s important that you apply some of your Spider know-how then,” I goaded as I refused to discuss our plan yet again. We ran the rest of the way in silence. The only noises were animal sounds around us. The birds were beautiful making me wish I had the time to admire them more closely. After twenty minutes, we were winded and finally stopped. I was no track athlete and Lucaz was more tech-minded than physically strong. We saw the first sentry at a high vantage point. We couldn’t reach him, so we had to find a way to make him come to us.

As I stepped through the forest, the dry leaves snapped under my feet. I was making enough noise to sound like a herd of dinosaurs. I glanced upward and thought I could see someone climbing down from the trees. I walked faster, almost breaking into a run to put some distance between us. The forest was unforgiving. The branches clawed at my face and hands like a hungry animal. I heard a thud behind me and knew that I had to run.

I leapt across a stream and ran as fast as I could. A huge tree was in my way, and I veered to the right. A branch nearly poked my eye out, and I ducked at the last second. A grunt from behind told me my pursuer was not as lucky. I saw a clump of trees ahead me and ran toward it. An arm grazed my back and I knew I only had a few seconds before getting caught. The clump was a few feet before me as I dove into a gully before the trees. My pursuer overshot me and ran to the center. I heard the whoosh of air as someone became snared in a trap. Lucaz appeared around the corner of the tree.

“He’s caught,” he stated. I turned and stared into the middle of the trees. The spider’s webbing had caught another victim. The Relic clan member was large, taller and more muscular than Lucaz. His face was dark and a blue tattoo circled the right side of his face from his eyebrow to his chin.

“How do you make this stuff? How does it travel with you?” I asked, not understanding how he created it but appreciative just the same.

“Clan secret,” Lucaz smiled and I realized this was the only response I would get.

“Whatever.”

“You are her.” The clan member stopped struggling and looked intently at me. “I am, but I’m not the killer that I’m made out to be.”

“That is for the chief to decide. If you let me go, I will take you to him.” That comment surprised me, I expected a bunch of swearing at us for being trapped, not an offer of help.

“Thanks, but no thanks. We already have a plan and you’re not part of it,” Lucaz answered curtly.

“Your choice, but you’re outnumbered fifty to two. You have no idea what you are walking into,” he said, not bragging but just telling us the facts. I looked at him more closely and realized he was probably only a few years older than us.

“What’s your name?” I asked. Lucaz gave me a look which said that we didn’t have time for this. But I wanted some information on Jinn and I hoped to soften up our prisoner.

“Valsa. Why are you here?” Okay — I guessed that was fair, a question for a question.

“To rescue our friend. Have you seen her?”

“Of course.” He snorted. “She is in the center of the camp. There is no chance of you getting close to her.”

“And why is that?”

Valsa stared at Lucaz. “Is this girl for real? Can you talk any sense into her?”

“Leave me out of it and answer the question.”

“Because there are too many of us and you’re on our territory. Your best play is to walk into the middle of camp, give yourself up, and the other girl will be freed. You try to sneak in and you’ll either get killed or you’ll break your neck trying to scale one of the trees.” I swear I had the same conversation with Lucaz about two hours ago. *Boys.*

“Maybe I just like doing things the difficult way.”

“Well, if you insist on doing it your way, let me tell you something.” His voiced dropped and I leaned in. Valsa made a motion to grab me but the web held fast.

“Nice try but my friend’s trap is pretty strong. I should know, because I got caught in it too.”

“Are you going to release me before you go? I’d hate to get eaten by a wild animal.” I hadn’t thought about that, but since we didn’t see any animals on the way in, I felt like he was playing me. Maybe we could use this to our advantage.

“Tell us the best way to get into camp and maybe we can help you out,” I offered, not really expecting anything useful.

“Seriously.” Lucaz shook his head. “Don’t believe anything he says. He’ll just get us caught. Besides, we have our way in now, let’s go.”

“So you wanted to take my place.” Valsa perked up. “There will be others that will notice I’m gone. Go ahead, you can’t stop us all.” Lucaz and I looked at each other to confirm our plans.

“Then we better get going. Don’t worry about the web. It will degrade after we’re gone.” Lucaz and I jumped up to leave. We didn’t have much time to save Jinn.

“Wait. If you really are innocent, you should know something,” offered Valsa. I turned, half expecting a lie.

“I’m willing to listen.”

“My clan is honorable. If you explain your innocence to my clan leader, Rustin, he may release your friend and not take you captive.”

“We’ll think about it. Don’t struggle too much, or you’ll make the web last longer,” Lucaz answered and pulled me toward the trees. I resisted his reach.

“Enough. I’m coming. You don’t need to get pushy,” I said.

“You set the schedule. Tuko is only going to keep them distracted for so long telling the story of your death. We’ve got to get in quickly if we have any hope of saving your friend.” He was right, and I didn’t spend any more time defending my argument. The next few minutes passed in silence as we climbed the rope ladder left by our pursuer and made it to the top of the branches. The view was breathtaking.

The trees were huge, big enough to drive a vehicle through their trunk. The canopy was massive, branches reaching out so far that it was hard to see where one tree ended and another began. We were several hundred feet above the ground and directly in front of us was the Relic camp. Near the far end

of the main tree was Tuko's car, although I could not see him anywhere near it. I was surprised by the lack of infrastructure. Besides walls and gardens, there was little to see. Then I realized that the camp was in the trees; the inhabitants made their home above the ground.

"Wow! The view is amazing. I've never heard how beautiful the Relic territory is," Lucaz commented.

"Must be why they're so isolated." I looked down and was overwhelmed by the beauty. My home was a city made of concrete. Only the outskirts had hills and forests, but nothing like this. If only I had time to enjoy it."

"Over there." Lucaz pointed to the next tree. I squinted and noticed two Relic clan members approaching our position. We climbed a couple of branches and scaled above the tree walkway. A minute later, the clan members walked below us; their pace was steady. We waited another minute and dropped back down.

"They didn't look like they were in a rush. Seems like we haven't been discovered yet," I said. Lucaz pointed to a tree pathway that would take us closer to Tuko's car. I was vigilant for any more sentries. As we walked, my hand touched the moss on the tree. It felt cool as it insulated the tree from the heat. Something floated down and landed on a nearby branch. It was a bird with brilliant plumage. It chirped at me and I leaned in for a closer look.

With a snap, a flower on the tree sent out an appendage and wrapped itself around the bird. In a second, the bird was gone and the flower was still again. Lucaz's face expressed how I was feeling.

"What the?" He stared at the branch where the bird was a second ago. I looked as well but didn't put my hand where the bird had been in fear that I would also become a victim.

"There must be something alive in these trees, or the flowers themselves."

"The Relic clan has never been attacked on their home territory. If these trees are part of its protection, I can see why," Lucaz said.

I took a step forward and then stopped, realizing something. "If that's so, why haven't we been attacked? We have been in the trees long enough for them to take us at any time."

"Unless they don't view us as a threat or a meal. Yet." Lucaz let that comment sink in, but I realized that it didn't change my determination to free Jinn.

"Then let's keep going but remind me not to take a rest near one those flowers." We jumped back down to the wooden sky bridges. We still had a lot of ground to cover and time was running out.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, breathing heavily, we reached our destination. Directly below us was Tuko's car. A hut was built at the base of a tree and several guards were stationed outside of it. My instincts screamed that both Tuko and Jinn were inside.

"We're here, now what?" Lucaz asked.

"Stop asking questions you know the answer to," I replied a bit too vigorously. We had discussed this all beforehand. I didn't know if this was a boy thing or if he was just nervous and had to verbalize everything. Either way, it was annoying. "We wait. Tuko will give us a sign." So we sat in the tree, not really relaxing based on the earlier bird's disappearance. Fortunately, we didn't have to wait too long.

"I am done here!" Tuko yelled, marching out of the tent. Several Relic clan members followed him out. One of them stood a head taller than the rest, his bald scalp tattooed with intricate designs. It wasn't hard to tell that he was their leader.

"You are done when I say we are done. Your 'proof' does not prove anything and your sister will not be released until the girl has been captured or confirmed dead."

“What else do you want from me?” Tuko tossed my necklace at the leader’s foot. “Her body was taken by sand worms at the dinosaur encampment. All that was left of her was the necklace that they couldn’t digest. Why don’t you send your clan members to check if you don’t trust the word of the son of the leader of Armor clan!” Tuko had his usual disgusted look and jumped into the driver seat of his car, turning on the engine.

“We will, but your sister does not get released until I have more proof. Where do you think you are going?”

“Far away from here,” Tuko sneered and gunned the engine. The car narrowly missed the clan leader while one of the guards jumped back to avoid being hit. Tuko waved his arm dismissively, challenging the clan to catch him. This was exactly what we wanted.

“Close the main gate. Take three of your men and bring him back here. Gently. We don’t want to anger his father any more than we have.”

“But Rustin, he disrespected you. You should throw him in a cage until he learns some manners.”

The clan leader put an arm on the soldier’s shoulder and smiled. “You were a teenager once. His sister is locked away. Give him some leeway. Impulsive decisions do not define us.” The soldier left, taking others with him. The clan leader looked around, eyeing the trees around us but not our hidden spot. I still pulled myself tighter under the foliage. The clan leader ducked in under the canopy above the tree opening and disappeared. This was the opportunity we had waited for.

“Let’s wait a couple more minutes and make sure no more guards rush out to join the group to capture Tuko,” Lucaz said. I nodded.

“What do you know about the Relic clan leader, Rustin?” I asked. Lucaz moved his face closer to me as he considered my question.

“He has always been well regarded, tough but fair. But very solitary, he doesn’t mix well with the other clans but is worshipped in his own clan.” A possible ally or a formidable foe. It didn’t matter — we just needed to find Jinn and get out of there.

“Come on, we only have a brief time before they drag Tuko back. He’ll only be able to delay them so long.” We climbed down the tree onto the ground. We walked casually. There were some clan members in the distance, but they seemed focused on their task and ignored our progress. We stepped toward the tree and opened the tarp. Inside was not what I expected. The passage was rough and tubular, like the roots of a tree. There was no natural light, but the roots seemed to glow with liquid flowing through the veins. I reached up. The ceiling was damp and a little sticky.

“This is amazing,” I whispered.

“I wonder if the whole tree is hollow,” Lucaz said. We moved forward and in the next chamber there was a fork. One root tunnel went upward while the second descended into the ground.

“We are not splitting up,” I barked.

“Well, we have a 50/50 chance of being right if we don’t.”

“Doesn’t it make sense that they would keep someone captured below?”

“I’ve never been inside a tree before, so I wouldn’t know. We could go down a short way, maybe we’ll get lucky.” *Damn it.* This was one of those occasions when I wished I had a drone to see around corners.

“Then I’ll make the decision for you. I’m going up.” Lucaz was already halfway up before I realized what he was doing.

“But I want to go down!” I hissed.

“Then go. Whoever finds Jinn first frees her and meets back here.”

“Deal,” I answered, but Lucaz was already gone. Sometimes I really hated boys.

I continued downward and could feel the temperature drop as I descended. Along the route I counted several hollows that appeared to be rooms without doors. I stopped as the sound of voices approached, and I ducked into one of hollows. I stood perfectly still as the voices got louder.

“Are we going to move the prisoner?” a deep voice asked.

“Soon. It doesn’t look like Armor clan is going to bring the girl. I don’t think Rustin wants to start a war with them for no reason. They’ll probably release her in a day or so. What a waste. With Luther dead, his killer gone. Who will unite the clans?”

“Who says we need uniting?”

“Well, if you ask me...” The rest of their conversation became unintelligible as they walked away from the room. Now I had a new problem. This was a breakout mission, but Tuko had pleaded his case too well. If they truly thought I was dead and were going to release Jinn, why was I here? Should I just go back the way we came? My head swam. Could I really backtrack without being seen? It was a miracle so far, but how could I let Tuko know about a change in plans? Maybe I should go a little farther and find Jinn. Talk to her, ask her opinion. As I turned around, I slammed into someone’s back. Not cool. I fell and looked at my assailant.

“Be careful, Pene, you’ll bring everybody on top of us!” Lucaz whispered.

“I thought you were exploring upstairs,” I said.

“I was, but it appears to be living quarters, and I knew I wouldn’t get far without getting caught. I came back to you thinking that it was more likely that Jinn was down here.”

“We have a problem.”

“What?”

“I overheard two guards saying that they might be releasing Jinn — it makes this whole trip a waste of time.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear. Besides, we’re committed. Once that guard we tied is free, the whole story is going to come spilling out.”

He was right, I wasn’t thinking. We had to keep going. I was about to leave when I noticed Lucaz ransacking the cupboards.

“What are doing?” I asked impatiently.

“I don’t know, maybe something to make us blend in a bit, or I could get lucky and find a weapon.”

“Clever idea.” I opened another cupboard and found a small tray with a covered plate. “Let’s grab this. I can pretend that I am bringing food for the prisoner.”

“Here, take a towel and throw it over your left arm.”

“Does it make look like I’m delivering food?”

“Little bit. It also makes you look like you know your way around the kitchen. Probably a place you know nothing about.” He smirked. I felt like throwing the cup at him but thought better of it. We were running out of time. We stepped back into the hallway and continued to descend into the tree. We came around the corner. A long hallway with prison cells lined the way. The bars were long wooden spikes gnarled like the wood they came from. The cell was empty, but a guard saw us coming and walked toward us.

“What are you two doing here?” He looked at me as if trying to remember if he knew me.

“Food for the prisoner,” I answered haughtily, like he should know why.

“She just ate two hours ago. You feed her like a princess while the rest of us starve. What do you have?” He reached for empty tray.

“Don’t touch!” Lucaz slapped his hand, but not enough to hurt. “Are you trying to get us in trouble?”

“Fine.” The guard grudgingly accepted our word and then cocked his head. “When did they start sending two service staff from the kitchen anyway?” he asked suspiciously.

“I asked,” I answered without hesitation. “I just wanted to see what the girl from Armor clan was like.” Which was true.

“This isn’t a social call. Drop off the food then the two of you can get out of here.” I saw the outline of someone in the cell, but I couldn’t see her face. I stepped closer.

Jinn was sitting on a bench, hunched but looking okay physically. She raised her head and her eyes looked exhausted. But as realization sank in, she began to shake her head.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she said, then covered her mouth as if she could force the words back in.

“What’s the problem here — why is she talking to you?” Then the guard looked at us more closely. “I thought the two of you looked odd with no tattoos around your face. I thought it was just because of your age. You’re from her clan!”

Lucaz was already moving before the guard could ready his weapon. He threw the empty container at his head, forcing him to duck. As he evaded the object, I stretched my leg under his, tripping him. As he went down, I knew I wasn’t much of a fighter, so I sat on him. Big mistake. He was much larger and stronger and tossed me off like I wasn’t even there.

I landed hard on the root floor and the guard came at me with his weapon. I raised my hands in self-defence, waiting for the blow.

With a crack, something hard came down on the guard’s head and he fell face forward to the ground, landing at my feet. I looked up to see Jinn holding a broken mug.

“Great rescue. Is it okay that I stepped in?” I hugged her with all of my strength. I let go first.

“How did you help? You were in your cell!”

“They never locked it. Heck, most of the time the guard wasn’t even around. I mean, where would I go. There is no way I was going to leave their territory undetected. Which begs the question, how did you get this far?”

“No time. We need to get out of here. Now. Jinn, this is Lucaz. He’s with Spider clan.” Jinn looked him over. Lucaz nodded.

“Fine. But that brother of mine better be nearby, because we’re going to need a quick getaway.” I smirked. Jinn had lost none of her fieriness while in captivity. I had missed her.

“Follow me,” Lucaz commanded, and we hurried down the root hallway. We had to get outside quickly, before the guard was discovered. The hallway was long and I could see someone or something in the distance. We ducked into a hollow and made ourselves quiet. About ten seconds later, I could hear the footsteps as someone walked by. This was not good. We waited a few seconds, then I grabbed Jinn’s hand.

“Run!” I whispered.

We ran hard through the root passage but spotted no one else. I didn’t know if I should be happy or concerned. We exited the tarp to find Tuko directly in front of us, as well as about twenty armed guards. I noticed our former prisoner, Valsa, with the group. We were trapped! This had been all for nothing. I stepped forward to take responsibility for my actions and deal with the consequences.

“It’s me that you want. Let the others go, I won’t resist you.” I held my hands up. Before anybody else could respond, the leader, Rustin, came toward us. He walked slowly, and his face was kindly.

“You misunderstand us, Pene. We didn’t want to capture or hurt you. That’s not our way.”

“Which is?” I asked tentatively.

“We want to help you.”

# 18

## Trial

“You mean I could have just walked in here?” I asked. My frustration was building. How had I misjudged everything so badly? Did I even know who my enemies were anymore?

“It’s not that easy, Pene. The Relic clan will support you if you prove yourself worthy. They have some type of trial for you to pass,” Tuko explained.

“You have nothing to fear from us. Our clan is peaceful. Our lives are intertwined with the trees you journeyed through.” Rustin motioned us to sit down on some wooden benches. His tone was inviting, but I noticed that we were completely surrounded by his men. “You have been inside our trees. They provide us shelter, subsistence, protection. But they also judge our actions, perceive if we are a benefit to the land. Or a hindrance.”

“And how do they do that?” Lucaz asked the question before I could speak.

“Most teenagers, when they come of age, must pass the Trial of the Trees. At the base of our largest tree there is a maze of roots and obstacles that must be overcome. Those worthy of escaping the maze are judged victorious by the trees. Those who do not, are not.”

“We saw something swallow a bird whole from within a tree. How safe is this trial?” Lucaz asked.

“There are dangers that must be faced — it is not risk-free,” Rustin answered, but somehow, I felt like he was skirting the issue.

“Do many of the teenagers who try pass the trial?” I asked.

“No. Most fail, and even after multiple tries, they never finish the maze,” Rustin answered. *At least he could have sugar-coated the answer.*

“Why should we even bother?” Tuko asked, playing tough, like he could just walk away. Rustin paced and considered his answer.

“Let me answer your question with a question.” Most of his clan members moved closer to us, as if anticipating what was coming next. “Our world has been rotting from the inside for many decades. The machinery is breaking down, and for some reason we seem unable to repair or rebuild it.”

“Doesn’t seem like a problem here,” Jinn asked.

“It is because we depend less on technology, but even in other ways, our elders have seen the decline, even within our own clan. As we begin to fail, the dinosaurs grow smarter and more vicious. As if they are becoming the main predators, ready to take our place.”

“That’s because they are being raised to be killers. We visited a place where Chycle clan was turning them vicious.” The guards around Rustin broke into conversation. There was anger in their voices, and I heard arguments about whether they believed me. Only Rustin didn’t speak but looked at me as if measuring my words in his mind.

“I’m from Spider clan and support her claims about the dinosaurs,” Lucaz offered, trying to back up my claims. This caused the voices to get louder.

“Enough!” Rustin commanded, and all talk ceased. “If your words are true, the tree will let you pass its tests. Then you will be protected by our clan and have safe passage to the Cradle.”

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And if she fails?” Jinn asked.

“Then she will travel to the Cradle as our prisoner. Do you doubt her innocence?”

“I don’t,” Lucaz said, “but I believe your trial is more dangerous than you are letting on.” A couple of guards nodded their heads by instinct and I could tell there was truth to Lucaz’s comments.

“Doesn’t matter,” I answered. “I’m nobody’s prisoner. I will take the trial.” “But I go with her as well,” Jinn added.

“I’ve come this far, count me in too,” Lucaz added.

“Doesn’t seem fair to leave out the strongest team member.” Tuko smirked while trying to sound supportive.

It’s funny, in my world surrounded by drones, I always felt alone. I had a best friend and my family, but I never was part of a group. Everyone had their cliques and I wasn’t part of them. I came to a different place, with strange customs and dangerous man-eating dinosaurs, and I had finally found friends I could trust. I just wished I didn’t have to risk their lives.

“They have your trust.” Rustin nodded. “But all must be worthy for you to pass the trial. Do you accept their help?”

“I do. Let’s get this over with,” I demanded. Success. Failure. Whatever was going to happen might as well happen quickly. The guards dispersed and the four of us were ushered to the far side of the tree. I gazed up and was lost in the immense network of branches.

At the center of this cluster was a crater. A cave entered the trees, but there was no obvious way out. Maybe you returned at the same place you entered?

“Before you start, let me explain the trial and its rules.” Rustin gestured, and the four of us stood before him. He wasn’t much taller than me but was much wider and stronger. He radiated immense inner strength as well. I tried to tap into it. I held Jinn’s hand as the four of us moved closer to listen.

“The interior of the tree is a maze that extends to many levels above and below. The challenges you will face will be a mix of physical and mental. If you pass, the tree will let you move on. If you fail, the tree will expel you back to the start and you will become our prisoner.” His fingers were playing with something.

“Okay. What do you have in your hands?” I asked. He pulled out a cloth bag with a string tying its contents tight.

“There are objects inside that may help with the trial. You can only use each item once.” “Can we look at them?” inquired Tuko.

“Once you enter the tree, not before,” Rustin replied.

“What is the trial about? What are we trying to prove?” asked Lucaz, which was a fair question.

“The trial explains more about our world and reveals more of your character.” “Thanks for the straight answer,” Tuko replied sarcastically.

“Are you sure you want to proceed?” Rustin answered, unfazed.

“Yes. I have been told that you are an honorable clan. I expect your trial to be the same.”

Rustin nodded and placed the cloth bag in my hands. “Not too late to change your minds.” I directed to my group. No one responded, not that I expected them to. We walked into the crater and watched the eyes of the Relic clan as we did so. I felt apprehensive as I saw their reactions. No time to back out now.

As we entered, it grew dim. Not completely dark, but I stopped for a moment as I waited for my eyes to adjust to the gloom. I heard dripping and the ground felt damp. The root tunnels looked similar, but there was a speckling of particles in the walls. Their glow illuminated our passage and we pushed on. Everyone was quiet, as if talking would distract us from our goal. Finally, Tuko’s curiosity got the better of him.

“What’s in the bag?” he asked. We stopped, and although I was annoyed, it did make sense to see if they had provided anything useful or interesting. I reached inside as the other three crowded around

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me. The objects felt hard and I spread them out on my hand. An acorn, a rock, a needle, and a blindfold.

Wow, did they just throw a bunch of objects that were lying around the camp into a bag?” Tuko made a face.

Jinn punched him in the shoulder. “What were you expecting? A magical potion or a secret weapon?”

“It is a bit underwhelming,” Lucaz chimed in.

“Well — it is what it is. If any of you get any ideas on how to use them, let us know,” I commanded, but I was also disappointed.

“What’s that?” Lucaz asked. I turned, and the walls behind us glowed, not in unison but in sparkling bits, like dust was illuminating the root but only in small sections. I looked forward as the glow illuminated the way ahead then turned left at a fork, leaving the right in darkness.

“Guess we’re being led in a certain direction. Should we follow?” Jinn asked as she stared at me.

“Why not? If the trees are the lifeblood of this clan, I believe they want to help us.”

“Hope you’re right,” Tuko commented, but by the sound of his voice, I guessed he didn’t agree with my choice.

Around the corner we turned and I stopped in amazement. There was a large amphitheater. The ceiling rose, and above there were dangling roots that hung like ropes. There was a peeping sound in darkness, like frogs calling out for their mates. The water rose a bit higher.

“Head over to those rocks, otherwise our feet are going to get soaked,” Lucaz suggested.

We followed his direction and I was amazed by this underground cave in the bottom of the tree. Another entire ecosystem lived here. If I wasn’t so nervous about something jumping out at me, I might have enjoyed the moment. I heard a splash and everyone stopped in their tracks.

“Is someone playing in the water?” I asked.

“Not me,” answered Jinn.

“Or me,” said Lucaz. Then there was silence.

“Tuko, stop playing around,” Jinn said. Still, he didn’t respond. I stopped and looked down. A small wave of water washed over my feet.

“Something’s in the water. Find high ground. Now!” I yelled and climbed onto a rock platform. I heard the others scurry onto nearby rocks. I realized how quickly the root tunnel had become a cave. I looked up and almost poked my eye on a long, sharp stone. I reached up and felt the sliminess of the rock. Something squishy traveled over my hand. “Yuck!” I pulled my hand back quickly before the nastiness could touch me further. The darkness made it hard to see the others.

“Jinn, can you hear me?”

“Yes. But the rocks are moving — there are slugs all over the place. Do not sit down.”

“I know. They’re disgusting. Lucaz, are you okay?” Silence. “Lucaz?” No response. Were the boys playing a joke or could they not hear me? We needed to stay together. “Jinn — talk to me. I’m coming to you.”

“Be quick. My skin is crawling. I don’t think we’re alone.” I stepped on a pile of pebbles and lost my footing.

I fell face forward into the water. It was warm but hard to see through. I couldn’t see my hand under the water, even though it was a few inches below.

“You okay?” Jinn asked, hearing the splash. “Did you hurt yourself?”

“No. Just clumsy.” I pulled myself out and reached up to grasp her hand. “Let’s find the boys.”

As we walked on, the roots from the ceiling became thicker and denser, forming a curtain that was hard to see through. *Could the boys be ahead of us, but the roots dampened their voices?* I kept a good lock on Jinn’s hand, not wanting to lose my only remaining friend.

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“I’ve missed you, Jinn.” I remembered our last moments together when I was captured in the web.

“Ah, you’re going to make me cry again,” she joked but became serious as we moved roots out of our faces. “You should have known that Tuko and I wouldn’t have given up until we found you.”  
“Was your dad supportive?”

Mostly, Pene, but he was interested in what you represented in power over the other clans. He didn’t understand what we went through together and why we couldn’t leave you to face the other clans alone.” I felt a tear rush trickle my face.

“I don’t deserve your friendship. There is so much you don’t know about me,” I said. She stopped me.

“I know enough, Pene. I’m a pretty good judge of character. And so is Tuko, although he might not admit it. You’re worth saving.” Before I could hug her, a moan came from in front of us. We looked at each other and moved ahead. Quietly. The roots opened and we came into a clearing. A large branch reached up to the ceiling. Both Lucaz and Tuko were lashed to the base. Their mouths were covered but their eyes were alert. They could move slightly but couldn’t leave their location. Lucaz looked to his right and I thought I could see movement from the water.

“Jinn — back up!” But she was too late. Roots came out of the water and lashed at her legs. She kicked, but the tendrils grasped firmly to her ankle and pulled her until she hung upside down. She screamed as I leaped. My hand grabbed at her foot, but she was ripped away from me, sending me tumbling into the murky water.

“Pene!” Jinn yelled as the roots pulled her through the air toward the main branch. She struggled but did not look in pain. The root appeared gentle but forceful. There was no escaping its grasp. It quickly covered her mouth so that she was silent. I came with the four of them, but I was alone now. I wanted to run away, but I knew I couldn’t leave my friends trapped. As I watched another set of roots rose out of the water, I realized that the tree was too strong. It was like a bug flying in a hurricane. I was helpless. Fight or flight, neither would work. I needed another option.

I thought about what Rustin had said about the trees. How they were the lifeblood of the clan. They maintained peace within the clan by their quiet strength. I admired the roots and the trees they held. I didn’t want to fight the roots reaching out toward me. That was then I considered another option.

I sat down and crossed my legs, waiting for the inevitable. I tried to will my mind to peace, but the approaching roots scared me. I needed a way to block them out. I could see Jinn’s eyes grow large with alarm as the roots reached to ensnarl me. I reached into my bag and pulled out the blindfold. I quickly slipped it on. The darkness was complete. The cloth over my eyes was soothing.

I willed myself to relax. I was so tired of fighting everyone, always explaining my innocence. I was tired of the preaching, the constant dictation by adults about what was supposed to be done and how I should act. I could feel a root circling my left wrist, winding around and around.

My body was exhausted from the constant running and chasing. Clans trying to capture me had drained my strength. I almost wanted to give up, but then I remembered why I was here in the first place. Somewhere my mother was out there. Alive. I would find her and be with her. Spend the time I had missed since she had disappeared when I was a kid. Another root pulled tight around my ankle. Its grip was firm, and I could feel it wrap itself around me several times over. I didn’t struggle. I enjoyed its embrace.

The roots were everywhere, wrapping me like in a cocoon. My body moved as the roots moved. I didn’t fight their clutches. The wood was cool and surprisingly smooth. No splinters lodged in me as they wrapped my body. I had a feeling of peace and I gave myself willingly to the tree.

Seconds passed until suddenly I felt nothing, as if the roots were gone. Then I felt a tapping on my left shoulder.

“Pene? Are you okay?” I removed my blindfold and saw Jinn looking down. The roots were gone from my limbs and the boys were walking toward us.

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“What happened?” I asked, but deep down I knew the answer.

“You didn’t fight them,” Lucaz answered. “We all fought back, especially me. The more I struggled, the tighter the bounds became, until I was frozen in place. You just sat there, taking it all in.”

The roots of the trees must work on our emotions, making themselves tighter the more we panic. They had nothing to feed on with you, so they just went away. The roots let us go as soon as they realized you weren’t going to fight back. How did you know?” Tuko asked.

“I didn’t. But I remembered something Rustin said about the tree being the lifeblood of his clan. It didn’t make sense that it would attack us, and I realized it was too strong for me to resist. So I didn’t.”

“You got lucky?” Tuko said accusingly. He seemed a little embarrassed.

“So what? She got us free. You might want to show some gratitude, or we would be still tied up.” Lucaz gave Tuko a jab.

“Enough bickering!” Jinn interrupted and then turned to me. “Do you think that was it? Did you pass the trial?” I scanned ahead. The cavern was quiet, but everything felt unfinished. There was a glow somewhere ahead of us.

“No. This was just one test. Let’s keep going. There is more to come.” My feet splashed in the water underneath as I walked on. I could hear sloshing behind me and knew the others were following. I continued and the terrain became rockier. A plant brushed my face, momentarily blinding me. When my vision returned, I saw two green eyes. They blinked at me and moved closer on the branch. The animal made a chirping sound and then flashed a big smile.

“It’s a squikkel.” Jinn pointed. “They’re harmless, although usually pretty timid. I’m surprised this one didn’t run off. Give him something to eat.” As if on cue, it dropped down and ran toward my foot. Little rodents don’t scare me, but I checked my cloth bag for food.

“Here you go, little one.” I tossed the acorn on the ground. The creature ran toward me, grabbed the acorn with its tiny paws, and examined it. It took a bite, considered if it liked the taste, and then took another nibble.

“He likes it,” Lucaz said.

“Fascinating,” Tuko said, clearly not impressed. “Do we really have time to feed the animals?” The rodent chirped as if to give his rebuttal. He then circled me and ran ahead.

“Seriously. Sorry to waste your time,” I mocked Tuko.

“Whatever. Hey, what is that?” We searched ahead. There were lights flashing in the air. They strobed on and off, like fireflies trying to send a message. They beckoned us ahead.

“Follow?” Lucaz offered. We walked on, but there was uneasy silence among us. The three of them had just been strung up with ease, and I didn’t think they wanted to be captured so easily again. As we turned a corner, the lights stopped floating in place. I stepped forward when the squikkel nattered from us at the opposite side.

“Looks like your friend is back,” Jinn commented. The rodent was louder and gestured with his paws. I felt an arm on my back.

“Wait a second,” Tuko commanded as he reached around on the ground, searching for something. His hand grasped a branch, which he flung toward the lights. They parted and then returned to their formation.

“That’s odd,” Lucaz said and bent over as well. He picked a piece of bark and then tossed it. The swarm moved out of its way.

“Can someone tell me what’s going on?” Jinn asked.

“There’s no sound,” I answered. “When they throw the objects, there should be a sound of it ricocheting off the ground.”

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“That’s because there is no ground. Probably a pit, likely pretty deep,” Tuko said.

“The pretty lights were leading us into a trap. We’re not going that way. I guess your little friend was trying to warn us,” said Lucaz. “Maybe he can help?”

“Why do guys always call animals a he? Not everything in the world wants to be a male!” Jinn interrupted. Both boys snickered but didn’t answer.

“Glad I made a friend. Where did you want to take us next, little one?” I asked. The rodent blinked its eyes and turned in the opposite direction. It ran ahead without a second look.

“Well, if he’s your lucky charm, we better follow,” Lucaz commented and walked ahead.

Or the little creature is leading us to another, worse trap. I don’t trust anything down here,” Tuko said.

The root system had a slight incline and as we walked, the walls became greener with vegetation. The smell of the air changed too, a perfumery, flowery smell. Not unpleasant but a bit sickeningly sweet.

“What’s that?” Jinn asked. Ahead of us was a maze of bushes with a flood of unusually colored flowers. Purples and yellows dominated the hues.

“We’d walked into someone’s garden?” Tuko asked, not sensing the threat of the situation.

Lucaz was more reserved. “We saw a similar flower that shot out of the tree and ate the bird,” he said. Everyone stopped.

“You are telling me these flowers eat things?” Jinn asked.

“Unless they get a lot bigger, I don’t think we have to worry,” Tuko responded and stepped forward. A yellow rose flexed its petals and sailed just above Tuko’s head. Its teeth embedded in the root behind it, ripped wood from it, then it returned to the bushes. It made a crunching sound, not unlike an animal eating a bone. Tuko made a face, as if he was reconsidering his comment.

“Everybody stay where you are until we figure out why the flower is attacking,” Lucaz whispered. None of us needed to be told a second time; we froze like statues.

“Is it our voices?” Tuko said quietly. “It leapt when I spoke.”

“Maybe. Do you want to yell at it some more?” I asked. Tuko shook his head. I needed to make some noise. “I’m going to toss the rock in my bag.” I reached in and aimed at the floor in front of us. As the rock ricocheted off the ground, a flower jumped off the hedge and attacked the exact location where the stone had hit.

“Guess that answers our question,” Jinn said, her voice low. I wasn’t sold. The bird we saw that had been grabbed hadn’t made any sound, not even a chirp. It had only pecked the branch.

“Hey, flower — come and get me!” I yelled and then ducked in case my intuition was wrong. I inadvertently closed my eyes, then opened them again. Nothing stirred — no flowers rushed at my body.

I stood up and came as close to the hedge as I dared. I stamped on the ground as hard as I could before immediately jumping back. The flower leapt at where I had stepped as its teeth snapped at the ground.

“Vibrations. The plant attacks based on our sound waves. The bird was pecking at the wood. That is why the flower shot out. The rock and my foot caused vibrations.”

“Great. How are we going to cross here without causing vibrations? Fly?” Tuko said. The same thought crossed my mind, but I had no solution. Then my little friend returned.

“That little fellow is going to get eaten,” Jinn commented. I instinctively moved forward, but Lucaz restrained me.

“Look.” He pointed. The squikkel leapt from hedge to hedge with the flowers keeping their petals closed. Why wasn’t it getting attacked? Did they only go after larger objects?

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“It’s not touching the ground. Whatever vibrations we make walking could be avoided if we climb the hedges.” I didn’t relish the prospect of putting myself so close to the flowers.

“We don’t have many options. Unless we go back and find another way, we must climb alongside those plants,” Lucaz said. The three of them nodded. A feeling of pride welled up inside me. People I had only just met were willing to risk their lives for me. Kids I had gone to school with who had known me for my whole life would never have done this. Whatever happened next, I knew I could count on these three for my life.

“Okay. Follow the rodent. Climb the hedges. Don’t let your feet touch the ground. And don’t touch those flowers.”

The hedges were about six feet high and the plants were tough, almost as if the growth was many years old. They would hold our weight. Jinn followed behind me on my hedge; the boys were climbing the other one. The flowers were sparsely mixed and easy to avoid. The rattling of the branches did not faze the flowers as the squikkel moved ahead of us. I climbed carefully.

I peeked over the top of the hedge. In the distance I could see the dark exit of a cave. I assumed it was our way out. Climbing on the hedges made it easier to see. This way we avoided the dead ends of the maze. Jinn and Lucaz were deep in concentration, picking their way out. Tuko looked annoyed, as if he just wanted to get this over with. I hope it didn't make him careless.

"Ouch!" he cried as he cut his finger on a thorn. A small droplet of blood dripped down his index finger. One of the flowers showed interest in him, slowly weaving in his direction.

"Tuko, stop!" I commanded. But he didn't. I don't know if it was fear or frustration, but he kept moving, although the flower was a lot faster. Before it could land a second shot, though, something hard landed on the floor, and the flower turned its attention away from Tuko.

"My pockets are empty now," Lucaz said. "We're going to have to come up with another plan. Maybe the flowers can smell blood, because another one is moving toward Tuko."

He was right. A second flower was slowly circling Tuko from the other side. He was trapped between them. There were too many of these flowers and more would be attracted to Tuko's cut. I looked ahead at the squikkel running through the bushes, oblivious to the danger and death around it. Or was it? It was fast, the flowers always attacked where you were last. Maybe we could do the same.

"I've got an idea," I said and started to climb off the hedge.

"I'm all ears, fearless leader," quipped Tuko, who was still rubbing his cut. But he looked scared.

"Shut up and listen," snapped Jinn.

"If we stand still, our vibrations show the flowers exactly where we are." "Tell me something I don't know," Tuko said and Jinn glared at him.

"If we move, the plants attack where we were, not where we are."

"So if we keep moving, they should only attack behind us," Lucaz said, nodding.

"It's a pretty long distance between here and the exit. Those flowers are fast. What if we get tired?" Tuko asked. We were all silent. *Don't get tired.*

"Anybody got a better idea?" Jinn asked. None of them responded. There was no better idea. "Then let's do it." We climbed down and stepped onto the floor as lightly as possible. No flowers responded to our movements. I looked ahead to our destination.

"The exit is far, probably two minutes of running hard. We can't turn back if we hit a dead end."

"We know. Come on, it's not getting any closer," Jinn said.

"See you on the other side." Tuko nodded.

"Go!" I yelled, and we broke into a run.

The air rang with the hissing of flowers narrowly missing our legs and feet. There was a gust as they sailed behind us, narrowly missing their targets. Their aroma was sickeningly sweet. The boys were faster, a few steps ahead of Jinn and me. We turned a corner and I could feel Jinn start to lose her footing. I grabbed her hand and pulled her with me, which brought the flowers closer.

A minute of running hard and my lungs were burning. I was in decent shape, but you can only run full-out for so long before your body protests. The boys were still ahead but looked like they were gassing. Jinn was in the worst shape. Her face was flushed and I thought she was going to pass out. As we turned another bend, she stumbled and was about to crash into the hedge. I grabbed her right arm and pulled her forward, preventing her fall. But a flower rushed right at her leg as we slowed our speed. Jinn made a mini hop and it missed her by a fraction of inch.

The boys had reached the exit and were motioning us to hurry. Tuko almost rushed back into the maze, but Lucaz put his arm across his chest to prevent him. Jinn and I were hand in hand running full tilt. The lactic acid was growing with each step and my legs were on fire. The flowers continued to leap behind us, narrowly missing our necks, arms, and legs. My hand felt sweaty in Jinn's and for a second, I saw fear in her eyes.

We weren't going to make it. She was defeated and I could feel her legs about to give out. As much as I willed her to keep going, it was inevitable. She fell to the ground, and I tumbled down with her.

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# 19

## The End

As I watched the ground rush toward us, I imagined what it would feel like. Dozens of them biting our bodies. Their teeth crushing our bones, gouging our skin. We would die by a thousand bites.

Only we didn't. As we fell, two sets of arms reached under our shoulders and pulled us forward before we could land. Tuko and Lucaz had come back into the maze. It was like a children's three-legged race, except the losers would be chomped to death. I could feel Lucaz's arms holding me tight and I squeezed hard as we tumbled out of the maze. My breath came in ragged gulps and I massaged feeling into my legs. The pain was sharp but I would recover. I looked over at Jinn and Tuko only to realize that I had gotten off lucky. Tuko had been bitten.

“Are you okay?” I asked, but I knew he was hurt. Maybe bad.

“Flesh wound.” Tuko grimaced. He was trying to be tough, but the pain was betraying his usual machismo. Jinn was ripping up strips off her shirt and applying them to his wound as gently as possible.

“This is all my fault,” she cried. “If I hadn't been so slow, Tuko wouldn't have risked his life for me.”

“And I would do it again. Family comes first, Jinn,” Tuko answered, and despite me not liking him sometimes, I had to admire him. It almost made up for his cocky attitude.

“Thanks for the save.” I looked at Lucaz.

He gave me a sideways grin. “You may not be family, but I've grown attached to you. Besides, you got to get to the end of the trial. Alive.” I punched him on the shoulder. He turned to Jinn. “Is everyone in Armor as loyal to their family?”

“Of course. Although our parents can be a bit overly committed sometimes.” “Ouch!

Not so tight,” Tuko said as she tightened the bandage.

“Baby!” Jinn shook her head in mock dismay, but I could tell that she was being gentler now. “Our dad tends to be overly involved in our decisions.”

“That's an understatement,” Tuko added. “Sometimes I feel we are following in the footsteps of exactly where he wants us to go. I'm not sure if he's afraid we will make a mistake that will reflect poorly on him...”

“Or if we won't follow him onto his seat on the council,” Jinn interjected, “which seems to be the only role that matters to him. Does Spider clan not have the same pressure from your parents?”

Lucaz swallowed hard. “My mother is dead, and it's different between my father and me. He's autistic and needs my help to relate to others. I hope he is doing okay now. We're not usually away from each other this long. But he's never forced me to be anything I didn't already want to be. I'll never be a council member, but I'm good with gadgets, so I'll always have a role with my clan.” Lucaz turned to me and I dreaded the question I knew he was going to ask. “What kind of pressure do your parents put on you, Pene?” Jinn made a face.

“My family was always big in conforming. Following the rules, doing as you are told. Kept us safe until my father was killed because he asked too many questions,” I answered. Lucaz gulped as if he regretted asking the question. “I believed my mother was dead too, but now there might be a chance that she is alive. I need to get to the Cradle and find a way in. It maybe the only way to reach her.”

“I’m sorry — I didn’t know about your dad.”

“It’s okay.” I touched Lucaz’s shoulder. “We’ve both lost a parent. I would trade for Jinn and Tuko’s problems with their parents any day.”

“Ouch!” Tuko rubbed his arm and turned his head to the opening ahead. “Bandage is tight, are we ready to keep moving?”

“You know it,” I answered. My muscles ached a bit as I got up. “Let’s finish this.” The opening was dark, like a slit in a tree trunk. The steps moved upward, leading us to our next destination. I didn’t want to fail and become a prisoner again.

The air was moist and blue leaves dripped with moisture. How they grew underground, I didn’t understand. We climbed up; teardrops from the leaves fell onto our faces. The wooden stairs were slippery, slick from use. As I grabbed at the railing, a familiar creature returned.

“Look who’s back!” Lucaz pointed. The squikkel ran ahead of us, leading the way. If there was something dangerous, my friend would meet it first. I quickened my pace. Whatever was waiting for us, I wanted it done with. My friends and I were tired of these trials. We needed to go to the Cradle now to clear my name and find a way out of this world. Playing games in a large tree was not high on my list. Whatever was going to attack us next, I would be ready for it. Yet what I saw next was the opposite of threatening — it was beautiful.

We stepped into a large opening. The area had a small pool with fish-like creatures slowly swimming around. Blossoms of gold and purple surrounded the pool. Their fragrance was wonderful, and they evinced none of the deadliness of the hedge. A colorful parrot flew overhead and perched on a nearby branch. Its eyes were kindly and watched us with interest. The squikkel dashed ahead, skipping from rock to rock. I followed; whatever path it chose must also be safe for me.

“Wow! This place is beautiful.” Jinn leaned toward a flower to smell it, but then thought better of it, considering what we had just faced. There was no apparent exit. The four of us stood around a bunch of rocks, trying to gather in our surroundings.

“Not sure what kind of test this would be. Bore us to sleep?” Lucaz commented.

“Keep alert. I expect something to come after us,” Tuko said. His eyes searched around us; his mistrust was amusing. For first time in a long time, I felt like I deserved a break, no matter how short it was.

“You okay?” Jinn looked at me with inquiring eyes.

“Yes. Despite almost being eaten by flowers, I feel almost relaxed. Maybe the tests are over and I passed.”

“Good luck with that,” Tuko responded with his usual hint of sarcasm. For the first time, his comments didn’t make me angry.

“Why is everything a battle with you? Did your parents really make life that difficult for you?” I needed him, hoping for a reaction. He didn’t disappoint.

“You’ve met my dad, and now you’re an expert on my family? For someone with such a strong opinion, you’d think you would share more about yours. Was your father easy on you?” Jinn and I looked at each other. She remembered our conversation about my home.

“My dad was tough on me too. He didn’t expect me to follow in his footsteps, but he did expect me to follow the rules.”

“Then you know what it’s like. Constantly on edge, waiting for your father to come down on you.”

“No, he wasn’t like that. He wanted me to be happy at whatever I did, but he didn’t want me to leave... home.” I had to think for a moment. Maybe Tuko and Jinn’s situation wasn’t that different. We had both been put under pressure by our fathers to do what they decided was right.

“Wait a second,” Lucaz interjected. “You guys don’t think you’re the only ones with pressure from your father. Please. Pene has met my dad. Because of his autism, I’ve always been there for him. Never

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far from his side to make sure he gets what he needs. The pressure,” he yawned and sat down, “was that I could never leave him.”

“Okay so we all have daddy issues — that’s not going to change.” Jinn’s eyelids looked heavy, and she shook her head. “What’s the big solution?”

“Not to go home,” Tuko said, pointing his arm up as if he had struck upon the solution. “My dad can’t force me into anything if I’m not there.” He reclined on a rock.

“Good idea, bro. Nobody can push you around if you run away,” Jinn said sarcastically as she closed her eyes.

“What do you say, Pene? Shall we just avoid our parents?” Lucaz asked. I was ready to say yes when the squikkel jumped onto my chest. It blinked at me and cocked its head as if we needed to get going. Something wasn’t right. I reached into my bag when I touched another hand. His finger grasped the needle and poked me in the hand.

“Ouch! What was that for?” I yelled at Tuko.

“Get up!” he barked.

“Ow! What’s the problem — there isn’t anything threatening here.” But it felt wrong.

“I know. We’re the problem. Something is sapping our wills, making us not care. I think the trees are soaking up our emotions like a sponge.”

Tuko was right. The enormity of the situation was weighing on me, and even though I felt like sitting down again, the needle had cleared my mind.

“We need to leave,” Lucaz answered, standing up. “I’m feeling helpless right now, like I just want to give up. Let’s find an exit before I stop caring.”

“Go ahead.” Jinn motioned to us leave without her. “I don’t need my father’s pressure anymore. I’m fine right here.”

I grabbed her arm and pulled her up. “We’re in this together, remember? No one gets left behind. If you don’t like it where we end up next, you can come back.”

“Okay,” she responded, and we trudged ahead. I took a step forward but felt like I was walking through a mental fog. Nothing seemed to matter. My dad was dead and I would never find my mother, even if she still existed. Better to curl up in a ball and go to sleep. Let the pain of the last few days leave me.

“Get up, Pene.” Lucaz grabbed me before I could kneel. I didn’t even realize I was doing it. It felt so much easier to give up. “Follow the rodent.” He pointed. It jumped between some bushes and I just focused on where the little creature went. I moved forward but my feet felt like they were stuck in cement. *What is going on?* We passed through a curtain of branches and the sun washed over our faces. A familiar face was there to greet us.

“You made it!” Rustin cupped my face with his hand. His skin was tough and calloused, but his grip was gentle. “You have Relic’s support to the Cradle. Come with me.” He guided me to a hammock tied between two branches.

The trials had exhausted me. My body was as tired and demanded that I rest. I smiled, closed my eyes, and let sleep take over.

# 20

## Race

"I thought you'd never get up," Jinn teased me.

"Neither did I," I answered truthfully. I had slept for ten hours while the Relic clan had busily prepared for our trip.

"Not that you were much better," I said. "Tuko said that you only woke up an hour or so before me."

"Whatever that last trial was, sapping our will to leave, it drained all four of us. The boys weren't much better off. I'm just glad we made it out together." She smiled. She almost looked happy. With all the running and attacking, it was nice to have a moment together. That would change when the road trip began. The other clans would be on the watch for me, and we were all heading to the same place. I nodded to Rustin, who gestured toward me.

"You and your friends are remarkable. The trials of the trees are difficult and many do not pass despite several attempts."

"Were we in danger? The flowers especially felt life-threatening," I asked.

"No," was his swift reply. "The tree would heighten your feeling of danger but control your circumstances. You could have been hurt, but never life-threatening. These trees," gesturing around us, "protect us."

"Well, in the final trial they felt like they were taking our will to think and act."

"And yet you fought against the strength of the trees. I hope the items in your bag were helpful?"

"All of them were. Thank you." His face betrayed a stress that I didn't understand. "What's wrong?" He pulled me away so the others couldn't hear us.

"I don't believe you came to us by chance. Our world is like our trees. In a forest of dry wood, it only takes one match to ignite and devastate our home. I think you are that match, and there is war ready to be ignited between the clans. Your attempted capture just shows how divisive our clans have become." I thought back to the dinosaur camp.

"Dero alluded to a coming war as well, although I attributed it to his madness. But now I think he may have spoken some truth."

"I hope I am wrong, Pene, but I will know for sure once we arrive at the Cradle."

"Speaking of that, are you sure you want to risk your lives for a person who is not part of your clan and you have only just met?"

"The trees have determined you worthy of our support. We have no time to debate this. Go now and help your friends with the final preparations." He left me and returned to his clan members. I could tell that they were inspired by him. Their body language expressed their love and devotion. He was a very capable leader and I was lucky to have his support. I stepped back to Jinn.

"We're packed up here." Jinn lashed the rope around the last crate on the Relic vehicle. We headed over to Tuko's car, anxious to get going. There was a convoy of eight vehicles. We were in the back for protection in case they met another clan. Rustin's vehicle would take the lead in an oversized truck with sharp spears on all edges. It made me feel under protected in the car, but Tuko insisted that we needed speed, not armor or weapons. We'd soon find out if he was right.

"You ready?" Lucaz tapped my shoulder and gave me a grin.

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“If you mean, am I ready to be chased by dozens of clans willing to capture me for a dead-or alive reward, the answer is absolutely not.”

“You could just stay here and live with the trees. It might be a while before any clan caught wind of you hiding out here.”

“I considered it. The beauty here is amazing and Rustin and his clan are friendly. But no, I don’t belong here, and the only way to clear my name is to head to the Cradle.”

“Don’t you worry, we have your back,” a familiar voice said from behind. Valsa was carrying a series of knives stacked horizontally along his leather vest.

“Pretty helpful for a guy we tied up and abandoned,” commented Lucaz.

“First time is free. Second time you tie me up, I might have to hurt you. Besides, you passed the trial on your first attempt. That doesn’t happen very often. The trees have deemed you worthy and so have we.” He gave me a hug. The longer I was on this journey, the more I realized that I sucked at doing this alone.

“So we follow you?”

“You bet. We’ll follow the grassy plains once outside our home. There will be a jungle stretch to our left. For no reason should you veer off and enter this area. Understand?” I nodded, thinking how dangerous this world was compared to mine.

“See you soon.” Valsa headed off to his vehicle as Lucaz and I climbed into Tuko’s convertible.

“You sure you want to ride out in the open like this? Makes for an open target. You could hide in one of the other vehicles.” Tuko smirked.

“Lay off,” Jinn interrupted. “Rustin already told us that the radio broke the news that the Relic clan has Pene and are escorting her to the Cradle. I guess every clan has their spies.” “That blows,” Lucaz replied in frustration.

“Well then, there is no sense in hiding and making every vehicle a potential target. If they want me, I’m right here!” I tried to sound confident, but I was disappointed that my cover had been blown before our drive even started. Then a thought crossed my mind. “Tuko, you sure you want to keep driving us? Your car’s already got a few dings in it.”

“It adds character,” Jinn butted in before Tuko could answer.

“We’ve come this far with you, Pene. We may as well see it through,” Tuko responded.

I looked at Lucaz. “There’s nothing keeping you with us and making a target out of the Spider clan. Want us to drop you off somewhere?”

“My dad has a tough time communicating, but one thing he has drilled into me was to always follow through with what you believe in. I guess that’s your innocence.”

“If we’re done patting each other on the back, can we get going?” Tuko asked, not used to everyone getting along.

“I’m ready, and so is the lead vehicle. Look at Rustin.” I motioned. I pointed ahead. The big truck had already moved, and several other vehicles were following. Tuko didn’t need any further direction. The engine turned over and we followed. Soon the trees whipped past.

“So how long to reach the Cradle?”

“Not far,” Jinn answered. “We should reach it by late in the day. Providing we don’t run into any more obstacles.”

“What about Abraham? You think he’s still hunting me? Even though we helped each other in the desert?”

“Abraham is all about the glory of his clan. Doesn’t matter if he’s changed his mind about you. The reward on your head is the same and there’s lots of prestige for Hunter clan if they capture you,” Jinn responded. I slumped in my back seat, energy rapidly leaving me as reality set back in. I might not be able to prevent the clans from chasing me, but I could prepare myself for our destination.

“Tell me more about the challenge of the Cradle. Why do you think it exists?” I asked of anyone in the car. Tuko and Lucaz looked perplexed, as if everyone knew the lore of the Cradle. Jinn waded in to my rescue.

“The cradle wall is smooth and higher than the tallest building. No one can climb or enter — some people question if entry will determine the beginning of our civilization or the end.”

“Luther’s sermons focused on how entry into the Cradle would determine the next step in how our clans grow and evolve. To take our leadership to the next level,” Lucaz added, the wind blowing the hair in his face.

“So who would have the most to gain by his death?”

“Everyone and no one,” Tuko answered, only glancing back slightly as he focused on the road and vehicles. “Every clan is always jockeying for the top position.”

“Like Armor?”

“Yes, and Hunter, Zombie, Chycle, and about five others are your top dogs. But there are dozens of middle-range clans who would like to make the jump to the top ten.”

“Is it less likely that one of the minor clans is the trigger behind Luther’s assassination?”

“Not necessarily,” Jinn said, turning in her seat to look back at Lucaz and me. “The big clans want to stay there and they know if they don’t keep on top, dozens of other clans will take their place.”

“I’ve listened to one of Luther’s tapes. Seems like he was loved by all clans,” I commented.

“Politically he was supported, but there were always rumblings amongst the other clan leaders that someone else could do a better job,” Tuko replied. “You think one of critics was the killer?”

“I don’t know. I’m trying to figure out who framed me for Luther’s murder. We’ve been on the run for so long, I haven’t had a moment to really consider the options.”

“Well, I thought the Chycle clan were our prime suspects. Having a secret base with killer dinosaurs would seem like a good start,” Lucaz suggested.

“They’re definitely involved,” I answered, “but there was something in my conversation with Dero. His clan seemed like worker bees, not the masterminds of the operation.”

“Based on what, Pene?” Jinn asked, her eyebrows arched. Unfortunately, I had nothing but a feeling of menace. Maybe it was another clan or whoever was watching this world. The drones and the underground lab told me that this place was more than it appeared.

“My gut.” I shrugged, realizing that wasn’t much of an answer. “Luther affected a lot of people with strong ideals. There are clans who resist his ideas and would benefit from him being gone. If I can figure out who would benefit the most from his death, we’ll know who the killer is.”

The four of us were silent for a moment, as if each of us was running through a list of suspects, crossing off or prioritizing the other clans and their leaders. My problem was that I didn’t know the clans like my friends did.

“I don’t think you give the Chycle clan enough credit. Remember, they were the first clan to try to catch you at the stadium. They were ready before anyone else,” Tuko pointed out.

“I still think Abraham and the Hunter clan are the most likely choice,” said Jinn. “He was quick to blame you without seeing you actually assassinate Luther. His clan has been jockeying for top position for years.” I didn’t like Abraham making it was easy to blame him. But he had been helpful at the desert base. But why did he disappear?

“From what you told me about Zombie clan, they were pretty enthusiastic to capture you. Like they wanted you to elevate their standing,” added Lucaz.

“You could almost say the same about Spider clan,” I said.

“True.” Lucaz nodded. “Maybe you should look at the clans that aren’t interested in you.” Now *that* thought had a nasty afterbite.

“What do you mean?”

“

“Well, if a clan wanted to eliminate Luther and take control, maybe they want the top clans to pursue you and fight it out. Makes them weaker and creates an opportunity for the killer to swoop in.”

*Great!* With dozens of other clans, Lucaz had just made every clan a suspect. I was back where I started. I looked out to the horizon, trying to focus my thoughts, when I noticed that something was moving toward us “What is that?” I pointed. A huge dust cloud had formed in the grass plains in front of us. It obliterated everything in its path.

“I don’t think it’s a what, I think it’s a who.” Tuko squinted. “Is that who I think it is?” He looked to Jinn for an answer.

“The Miners,” she answered and slumped down in her seat. “You rarely see one.” She covered her eyes to avoid the glare of the sun.

“Can someone tell me who we’re dealing with?” A dark, huge object emerged from the dust cloud’s center, a large semi truck with shiny material reflecting off its exterior.

“Is there any clan that you actually know about?” Tuko commented sarcastically. “Miner clan lives under ground. They are rarely seen, and they wear protective gear to cover their faces. Most people say it’s because they can’t handle the light. Their skin is a sickly green. I don’t think their faces see much sun.”

“And now they decide to join the party? Can we fight them?”

“Maybe if it was an even fight,” Lucaz commented and pointed at the dust storm.

After the large semi truck came out of the dust, there were about twenty vehicles. I spied trucks, cars, and motorcycles. Our convoy was outnumbered. We couldn’t meet them head-on.

“Get Valsa over here,” Lucaz said. I waved my hand, and even though he didn’t see me immediately, he eventually noticed and swung his motorcycle back toward our car.

“What are we going to do?”

He was concerned. “We have to go into the jungle. We can’t overpower the Miners.”

“I thought you said we shouldn’t go there?”

“We don’t have a choice. We can’t get back to our home before being overrun. Reinforcements are too far away. We know this area, the Miner clan doesn’t. We’ll exploit it to our advantage.” “What is that place?” I pointed to the trees.

“Tucantz region. Full of wildlife — few clan members come here to hunt.” “Any of the clans live here?” I asked.

“None that I know of. The bugs are big enough to carry you away. I’ve visited once, but I wouldn’t want to live here.”

“Can we get through it?” Jinn asked.

“We have to,” Valsa replied. “Although with the Miner clan behind us and the animals of this region in front of us, we’ll be in tight quarters. But if anyone can get us through, it’s Rustin.”

“Okay — attackers behind us and death in front us. I’m all for it.” I swung my arm in front of me in mock enthusiasm.”

“The Miner clan might be delaying us instead of seeking the reward. If we miss the opening ceremony at the Cradle, we won’t get to persuade the others of your innocence. We need to be there when everyone else arrives.”

“Then we have no choice. Will the vehicles get through?” Tuko questioned.

“There is a way, but we’ll have to drive slowly through the switchbacks.” Valsa hit his accelerator and veered back to the front. He yelled back at me. “And be vigilant for the trees, that’s where the bugs tend to hang out.” He sped off and was gone. Everything was a danger in this world. I didn’t know how people slept at night.

Our vehicles changed direction, making a beeline for the jungle. The Miners were accelerating as well, trying to cut us off, but they would be just a bit too late. The desert terrain changed and small

ferns sprang out of the ground. The road developed potholes a few of which were full of water. Our back wheel spun for a second spraying dirty water on my sleeve.

Was this nature's way of getting back at me? Before I could wipe off the mud, a large fern branch swung by, almost scraping the side of the car. I hoped Tuko was ready for a bunch of scratches. We slowed as we hit the jungle, but the back tires slid a bit to the right.

"Don't slow down," Jinn said. "The last thing we want is to get stuck at the start of the trail." Tuko gunned the engine. We were about a minute ahead of our pursuers. Rustin's convoy were still ahead of us but driving fast enough that it was getting harder to see more than one vehicle in front of us. The jungle was dense and the sun was partially blocked out by its thick canopy. The air had changed as well; I could feel the moisture and watched droplets hanging from the leaves. But the jungle felt off; the only sounds were from the roar of our engines and spinning of our tires. Tuko hit a bump, and I went flying. Lucaz pulled me down.

"Buckle up." He pointed to my seat. I clasped my seat belt just in time as our car drove through a pothole and my head swung to the left. Were the Miners going to capture me or were we going to get into an accident? As we turned a corner, one of the vehicles in front of us was stopped, its axel broken in half. Tuko slowed his car to a crawl and we jumped out.

"Help load these packs into your car. After hitting the pothole, this vehicle is dead," Valsa commanded. We grabbed the packs, lifted them over our heads, and placed them into our car. They rattled like they contained something metallic. The Relic clan members from the car ran with their weapons into another vehicle ahead. One took Valsa's motorcycle.

Valsa took a pack and joined Lucaz and I as we jumped into the back seat. We heard rumbling behind us as the Miner cars were shortening the distance. There wasn't much space between the wreckage and the jungle and Tuko had to inch his car past. A scraping sound rang out as the two vehicles rubbed each other. Tuko cringed but continued past the dead vehicle. Rustin's group accelerated in front of us causing Tuko to increase his speed.

"Look!" Jinn pointed behind us. I turned and saw the lead Miner vehicle come over the hill. Its front hood had a massive drill attached. The vehicle could drive and dig underground at the same time. "I don't think they're going to slow down!" The vehicle sped up toward the wreck, as if it was a small bump to run over. Would it crash into the roadblock?

The wreck exploded upward into the air. There was dust everywhere and I couldn't see the Miner truck. Then the wreckage flew so high that the Miner vehicle drove right under it. I couldn't make out their faces; the driver and rider were wearing goggles with a yellow tinge.

"Okay. We're in trouble," I said. The wreckage had barely slowed them. This Miner clan was determined and they were catching up.

"They may not be the worst thing in this jungle. Look!" Jinn pointed to the trees ahead. As first I couldn't make out what I saw. Their eyes were huge and spherical, and each eye was double the size of our heads. They reflected strangely, and I could see doubles of copies of the tree around it. It hovered, and I realized large wings were propelling it upward. Its massive legs rubbed together as if was salivating over its next meal. It was a huge fly!

"Can that thing hurt us?" I asked. "It looks like a house fly. Annoying, but can it do anything but buzz around our heads?"

"It can do much more than annoy us; unlike a common fly, it's an oversized horsefly. Think of a regular fly that takes a chunk of your flesh to get at our blood. A thing that huge can literally rip you apart to get at your blood."

*Great! Maybe we should have surrendered to the Miner clan before entering the jungle?* As if it could hear, the fly began to circle around, waiting for an opportunity to land on us.

"Can you drive any faster?" I yelled to Tuko.

"Only if you want me to crash," he responded without taking his eyes off the road.

“

The massive horsefly hovered above the vehicle in front of us. The driver closed the window to avoid it from striking. The fly took this as a challenge and buzzed the windshield several times, ramming against the glass. Then it looked at us. Five bodies in an open convertible. A dinner of five waiting with no exterior protection. It rubbed its front legs with glee, as if it was anticipating a yummy meal.

“It’s coming right at us,” Tuko yelled, unable to drive any direction but toward it.

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Jinn growled. Valsa took a long knife and waved at the approaching creature to get its attention.

“Grab something sharp or heavy. If we can’t kill it, make it regret swooping down to take a piece out of you.” Lucaz and I searched around. In the packs from the crashed car we found a tire iron and a whip. Now if we could only hit the bug.

It flew low and fast, swinging right to left. It was difficult to determine which way it was going to strike. Fortunately, the canopy helped keep it in front of us, so it couldn’t attack from behind. It flew at Valsa first; his motion had attracted its attention. It lunged at him. Valsa stabbed upward, but the bug was expert at evading his lunges. I figured its eyes gave it an advantage; you weren’t going to sneak up on this creature.

“Don’t worry, I can keep this thing away from us. It’s tiring, but the bug doesn’t want to be impaled.”

“That is fine — but what are you going to do about those?” Jinn pointed to the trees ahead of us. Several dark shapes were hovering in the leaves. This bug had friends.

“I don’t how good you are with that knife. Unless you get some extra arms, you can’t keep them all away from us,” Lucaz said.

“Not to make this any worse, but the Miners are gaining on us,” Tuko said as he looked in his rear-view mirror.

I turned to see that they were indeed gaining ground. We needed our enemies to attack each other. I struggled to remember what I learned from biology class. I looked at Valsa.

“What attracts the bugs to us? Is our body heat, smell, what we breathe?”

“All of the above. And the fact that we have blood that they would like to drink.”

“I remember clusters of flies near our garbage at home. They circled around the smell. Is there something to entice them to go elsewhere?”

“Check the rest of the packs we unloaded from the wrecked car. There might be some food,” Valsa answered, focused on the sky.

Lucaz and I grabbed the packs and opened the drawstrings. Metal tools, clothes, and a bunch of objects that made no sense to me. Lucaz had more success.

“A container of a sweet-smelling liquid — I don’t know if it’s to drink or a lubricant,” he answered.

“I’ve got someone’s lunch — must be meat. It’s smelly,” I answered. “Let’s put the food in the pockets of that shirt, but don’t pour the liquid on it yet. I don’t want the flies on us any sooner.”

“We may not have any choice; they’re circling us. I won’t be able to fend them off if more than two of them attack,” Valsa answered, swinging his knife from right to left to keep them away.

“Are we going to throw this in a tree?” Lucaz asked.

“We should throw it at our friends.” Jinn pointed behind us.

“I couldn’t agree more.” I smiled grimly. “Tuko, slow down!”

“You think that’s smart? What if your package doesn’t work?” Tuko shook his head as if he didn’t have much faith in my idea.

“They are going to catch us eventually, but my gift may even the odds.” He nodded and grudgingly eased up on the gas. The Miner clan vehicle was only a short distance behind us, and I could see their faces underneath their goggles. They were dirty, as if the underground was always a part of them. I

didn't hate them, but I had no doubt I wouldn't like being captured by them. It was us or them. Too bad for them.

"Ready?" Lucaz asked.

"Wait for it," I said, wanting the Miners to get just a shade closer. Then I looked at my cocked arm and realized I was making a mistake. "Valsa, you make the throw. I'm betting you're good at throwing that knife. Hope you can throw something less aerodynamic."

"One way to find out," Valsa said confidently. Lucaz poured the sweet liquid over the bundled shirt with meat sticking out of its pocket. The flies hovered, and I wondered if they could smell the shirt. I could see the reflection of the shirt in the closest bug's eyes.

"Now!" I yelled as the Miners' car was close enough to throw their weapons at us. The shirt sailed in the air and hung there for a long time. I almost thought Valsa had overthrown it when the shirt landed in the truck bed. The driver and passenger barely acknowledged it, as if a shirt couldn't do anything to hurt them. They were wrong.

The flies immediately changed their focus to the Miners' car. There were at least six bugs now, and they moved as a coordinated unit to surround the Miner's vehicle. A sharp knife flew out of one of the windows. One of the flies fell backward then flew away from the group and into a tree. The Miners' vehicle drove, erratically trying to hit the flies, which flew out of reach. Suddenly the Miners' car flew into the air as it hit a bump while evading the bugs. It landed and rolled on its side. Mercifully, we rounded a corner so there was no way to tell if the flies or the Miners would be the ultimate winner.

"The car flipped on its side. No vehicle behind them will get through for at least a few minutes. The flies bought us some time," Valsa said. I shuddered as I considered what buying time might look like.

"I can see why you avoid this region," I said. "What other creatures are we up against?"

Valsa made a face at me. "Let's just say that you may be wishing for dinosaurs instead of what lives in this jungle. But if we drive fast and don't hit anymore obstacles, we should get through in about thirty minutes."

"What if the Miner clan is waiting for us on the other side?" Tuko asked.

"Unlikely. It would take hours to circumvent the jungle. We crossed at the shortest route. Unless they knew we were going to enter here, our enemies are in our rear-view mirror, not the front," Valsa responded.

Tuko drove at a steady rate, careful not to hit potholes. I slumped back in my seat. I looked at Valsa. "Why? Why are you helping me? You are pitted against so many other clans who want me. Isn't that going to damage your relationship with them once this is all over? Am I worth it?"

"You passed the trial, Pene. You are kin in the eyes of Rustin. For our clan, that deems you worthy of our protection."

"No offence but trading your clan security for one person doesn't seem like a very strategic plan," I replied.

"Our father," Jinn gestured to herself and Tuko, "would have a similar view as a Relic. If a clan always tries to please others, it eventually pleases no one. Especially itself."

"I'm afraid Spider clan might not be as honorable as Armor or Relic," Lucaz interjected. "We're a small clan and pretty dependent on the goodwill of the other clans. I'm not sure even knowing the truth about Pene would change their minds. No one wants to rock the boat."

"You haven't spoken much about your clan, Pene. Will they be at the Cradle once we arrive?" Valsa asked. Before I could think of an awkward answer that would probably not fool anyone, Jinn came to my rescue.

"I think several other clans have been impeding their progress to the Cradle. Besides us, Pene is on her own." *Thanks, Jinn.* As I had become closer to my new friends, my lies had become harder to manufacture.

"Good thing you met us then," Valsa nodded. But there was some doubt behind his smile.

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“Does it matter? Once we reach the Cradle, isn't everyone going to grab me to turn me over for the reward? Won't all of this running be pointless?” I gestured.

“No,” Lucaz answered. “Luther always promoted the Cradle as a safe zone for all clans. No matter what the actions of an individual or a clan, they could not be prosecuted there. The Cradle is our greatest mystery. Once we arrive, everyone has an opportunity to be unhindered by others, to find the answers. Especially with Luther's death, clans aren't going to break this rule.”

So I just had to solve this world's greatest problem and all would be forgiven? Who was I kidding? I was in way over my head. I thought I could get through this on my own, but I owed my life to everyone else in this car. I just wanted to find a way out of this world and closer to where my mom was. Was she still alive?

I hated my home and its constant drone surveillance. But it was better than this place and its constant wars. Alliances seemed to change all the time and no one could really trust each other. Maybe my life before wasn't so bad. Or maybe this world was what life was really like. Everyone fighting for top spot, always willing to step on whoever was in their way.

“Pene? You okay?” Lucaz was concerned.

“Farthest thing from it. I am surrounded by captors at every turn and have only a car full of friends to protect me. Yet I've never had so much fun.” All of us laughed. The sound was alien after my last few days. It felt good. Tuko gave me a sideways look.

“You have a funny outlook, Pene, I wonder if the rest of your clan is so strange. I'd really like to meet one of them.” He looked at me in the rear-view mirror, and I realized that he knew. He knew that I wasn't part of any clan. He knew that I was a liar.

“Like you're so normal,” Lucaz teased. “Everyone has a backstory, if you just asked instead of talking about yourself all of the time.” Before Tuko could respond, Jinn interrupted.

“Boys, enough. We talk about what to do once we arrive at the Cradle. It maybe a safe area, but we are not going to be welcomed. Clans will still accuse Pene of being a killer. Like the tree trials, we have to prove her innocence.”

“Can we get Abraham to support us? When he blamed Pene, she became enemy number one. The radio propaganda still promotes stories of her guilt,” Lucaz said.

“We don't even know if he's still alive. The last time we saw him, he was on the back of a dinosaur. He didn't come back to our aid. If he made it out of the desert, I doubt he's becoming part of my booster club,” I said.

“He's alive. Abraham is the toughest guy I know,” Tuko said. “He's also the most stubborn. I doubt he would go back on his statement, even if he knew he was wrong.” The car hit a bump and we lurched. Valsa didn't participate in our conversation. He was looking for more bugs.

“So, except for the Relic, Spider, and Armor clans and the people in this car, everyone else is going to be against us.”

“Why do you do that?” Jinn spoke. “Why do you pit yourself alone against the world? We can help. We know you are innocent. And explaining what the Chycle clan have been doing with the dinosaurs may sway other clans to our side.”

“Sorry. You must remember a week ago, I didn't know any of you. I've always gone at problems alone. I'm adjusting to the fact that there is a 'we' here. Do you think that Chycle have been using the dinosaurs to keep people away from the Cradle?”

“I don't think so, but if you are constantly fighting against animals that are trying to kill you, you may not be focusing on solving the Cradle's entrance. I haven't been there since I was young, but even then I felt the elders in my clan concentrated more on the ceremonies than on creating a solution,” Lucaz offered.

“What if there isn't an answer?” Tuko said. “You have an entrance with a console that no one has been able to make operational. You can't climb over or dig under it and you can't blow a hole through

it. What if there is no way in?" Our silence to the question made me uneasy. Then I remembered a class from school

"I remember a history class where two armies fought against each other. One retreated to a huge fort on a hill. The other army attacked all night and day. Each time their losses were immense and the results were few. They examined the fort's defenses — they were made of stone and could not be burned down. The ground was hard and difficult to dig under. Any battering rams or ladders were crushed the moment they were placed against the fort. The harder they attacked, the more determined the other army was to repel them. Their attacks were feeding the other army's reserve. The harder they fought, the greater their losses."

"I don't remember that history lesson," Lucaz answered as I realized my slip. My history didn't match their history.

"Doesn't matter whose history it is." Jinn made the save. "What is the lesson?"

"Don't attack," Valsa answered without looking at us. His eyes danced amongst the treetops.

"What do you mean?" Tuko asked. "Pack your bags and go home? Great idea, bet lots of armies win that way."

"No — I think I understand what he's saying," Lucaz said.

"Good to see someone is listening," Valsa commented.

"To keep fighting caused many losses and produced few results. What if they stopped fighting and let the other army come to them?" Lucaz continued.

"You mean let them starve? They could have reserves for months, maybe a year," I added.

"Nobody said the right answer was the quickest," Lucaz said.

The car slammed to a stop and I grabbed the door handle to keep myself from flying out. A large fallen tree trunk blocked our path.

"I can't get through," Tuko cried. "There is no room to maneuver. We have to move it. Where is the rest of the Relic clan?"

"They're gone! The tree must have just fallen after the last vehicle passed. But once they realize we're not behind us, they'll come back," Valsa said.

"We may not have enough time for that." Lucaz pointed. Dust formed in the distance. Another Miner vehicle had appeared and was only moments away. There was no way to avoid a confrontation now. I knew what we had to do.

"Time to follow history then. Let's stop fighting and bring the enemy to us."

“

# 21

## The Light

The vehicle hurtled toward me, intent on reaching its goal.  
Me.

I sat on the hood, as inviting a target as possible. The truck slammed on its brakes at the last second. A plume of dirt sprayed into the air. The engine's roar died, but no one exited the truck. I watched — the windows were tinted dark. If I was being studied, I could not see them in the cab. The only noise was the screech of a bird. A bead of sweat trickled down my neck as I started to doubt my plan.

The door creaked open and a large man with pale skin, at least the skin not covered by rags, stepped down from the truck. The other door opened as well, and a tall woman stepped out, a zigzag scar crossing her forehead. Goggles covered both of their eyes. I could not tell their eye color and only saw my own reflection. They walked slowly, and even their steps were mirror images of each other. Their heads shuffled to the jungle, as if everything but me was more interesting to them. I made no aggressive moves but waved my hands to get their attention back on me. It worked. Both tilted their heads

As they walked toward me, they neglected to see the hands that reached out from under the car and grasped their ankles. The girl went down quickly. Jinn and Tuko jerked her to the ground. Jinn scurried out from under the car and sat on her while Tuko grabbed her arms. The man stumbled but was too strong for Valsa and Lucaz to pull to the ground. Valsa came out from under the car first, but the man tried to stomp on Lucaz's fingers. He pulled back quickly, but Valsa had to face the larger man on his own. Valsa threw a punch that was swallowed up in the man's fist. He pulled Valsa's wrist to the side, making him kneel to the ground. This wasn't going as planned.

I grabbed the tire iron from the car and jumped toward the Miner, swinging as I went. He evaded me, but the tire iron did glance off his right shoulder. He barely grunted. His arm shot out at me and grabbed me by my throat like a vise. I tried to kick him in the groin, but he kept me out of reach. I felt light-headed, then the grip released as Lucaz tackled him. Lucaz swung wildly. The man deflected most of his blows, but he was still paying for Lucaz's savagery. Valsa turned the man and pulled his arms behind him, taking most of the fight out of him. Lucaz didn't stop in time and knocked the man's goggles askew. The Miner clan member cried out as if he was experiencing real anguish. I thought I saw what was causing the problem.

“Enough! You're hurting him,” I yelled at Lucaz.

“Well, if roles were reversed, he'd have no problem hurting you.” I ignored his comments and moved to place the goggles back over the man's eyes. His cries ended quickly. He stared at me as Lucaz and Valsa allowed him to sit up.

“Thank you. The sun is hard on our eyes.” His voice was high-pitched and did not match his sturdy frame.

“No!” the woman cried. “We have to take you to the Cradle. You don't understand what is at stake.”

What you don't understand is that everything you heard about her is untrue. She didn't kill Luther,” Jinn said.

“It doesn't matter what is true,” the man spoke. “Our clan is dying. There is little food left and it will take months above ground to grow a new crop. Her bounty was the only way to pay for our clan's

salvation.” Even with the goggles covering their eyes and the cloth wrapped around their face, I could see their anguish. They weren’t necessarily evil; they were just pursuing me to survive. And I ruined that for them.

“I don’t understand. Why don’t you trade for food from the other clans?” Tuko asked.

“We don’t have anything to offer. Our mines are picked clean of gems, and we haven’t been able to find any new veins. You are our last resort,” the woman cried.

*Great.* I thought they were an enemy to hate, but all I felt was pity. They needed my bounty to survive. They weren’t trying to hurt me, just feed their clan. I couldn’t help them. Or could I?

“My name is Tuko — my father is part of council of the Armor clan. I can talk to him — get food to you and your clan.”

“Miner clan takes no handouts, and we have nothing to trade for,” the man said.

“You could work it off,” I offered, eyeing the boom crane that hung off the back of their truck. Great for lifting. “Can you move this tree off the road?”

\* \* \*

“That didn’t take long,” Jinn said ten minutes later.

The Miner truck was behind us now, based on our agreement. They would tell their other vehicles and explain the arrangement. I had no idea if the others in the Miner clan were as reasonable as the two we had met, but I wanted no more violence. I wished other clans would be as willing to bargain. We exited the jungle. The threat of insects and clan attacks were behind us. But who knew what was ahead of us?

“Worried?” Jinn’s eyes were fixed on me, and I knew there was no sense in lying about my feelings.

“I’m that obvious, am I?” She nodded. “It was easier when I knew we were up against clans like Hunter and Chycle; they’re in it for themselves. Truth is inconvenient, and they look the other way if it suits them. It’s not the same with the Miners or Orphans. They’re suffering and I’m not angry that they pursued me. My problems are minor compared to these clans fighting for survival.”

“What’s the answer, just give up? Give your freedom to the neediest clan and hope the bounty helps them? It would be a temporarily fix. The problems they face are still going to be there long after they spend your reward,” Jinn said. The boys were staying out of this conversation. They were scanning the land in front but listening to us.

“I know, but I’m allowed to feel bad. There is no ideal situation, but I can’t help but see what is wrong. Proving my innocence is trivial compared to what is going on around us.”

“So what do you want to do? Are you going to wave your wand and make all of our problems go away?” Frustration had crept into Jinn’s voice. “You can only control what is happening to you. You can’t change the world.”

“And if I try, I’d be dead like Luther. I only wish I knew what his big news was going to be.”

“I think I know,” Lucaz interrupted, and we all stared at him. “I think he figured out how to enter the Cradle.”

“What?” Jinn and I said in unison.

“Well, think about it. What could be more life-changing than solving the mystery of the beginning of our civilization?”

“But who wouldn’t want that for their clan?” Jinn said.

“Maybe a clan that benefits from keeping us in the dark ages? Who has been chasing Pene from the start?” Lucaz held out his hands, waiting for a response.

“

Chycle clan! But I don't think they have the brains to orchestrate all of this. There has to be someone else involved,” I said with more confidence than I actually felt.

An explosion rocked the ground behind us, causing the car to turn right. Tuko regained control and straightened the wheel.

“What the hell!” he cursed, and we all looked behind us.

The plains were vast, and from all directions plumes of exhaust rose into the air. I blinked twice, focusing my eyes on the incoming vehicles. They were hundreds, a hodgepodge of pursuers intent on capture. Although faces were barely recognizable at this distance, I could make out dozens of clans, their faces focused on one thing: our car.

“Gun it, Tuko! We've got dozens of clans intent on getting Pene before we reach the Cradle. Everyone wants the bounty, and I don't think anyone is going to be as reasonable as the Miners,” yelled Jinn.

“How far to the Cradle?” I asked.

“Too far. At least ten clicks. Some of those vehicles are faster than this car. We aren't going to outrun all of them,” Tuko said grimly as he floored the accelerator.

“We only have to outrun most of them. Look, Rustin's vehicles have stopped.” Valsa pointed. We saw the Relic's vehicles up ahead. They had turned around and were facing in the direction of our pursuers. Tuko drove past them. Rustin nodded and watched us go. Then his vehicles headed in the opposite direction. His group looked little like a school of minnows about to be swallowed by a pod of whales.

“He doesn't have a chance, does he?” I asked without expecting an answer.

“Doesn't matter. You earned his support. He will continue to do what is right, no matter what the consequences,” Valsa replied. “Besides, we have bigger problems. Look!”

Above the tide of vehicles, a lone machine hung in the air. It looked like a makeshift helicopter. I spied two occupants, an adult and a kid. The thing shook like it was going to break apart at any second. I hoped it wouldn't self destruct right over our heads.

“Who is that? And are there more of those things?”

“I don't think so. Pilot clan hasn't been able to fly for years, except for hang gliders. They must have gotten their helicopter working. Lucky us,” replied Lucaz.

“Can you go any faster?” I begged Tuko.

“I could if I lost some weight. Anybody you want to get thrown off?” Sarcastic to the end.

“Get ready to defend yourself,” Valsa commanded. “We're about to have company.”

The lead vehicles were motorcycles. I made out the Chycle insignia on the front of their bikes. They were so much faster than the other vehicles. One of the motorcycle riders had a chain hanging from his right hand. Visions of the stadium attack came to my mind.

“Drive over there!” Valsa pointed to a rocky outcropping. The plains had a few rolling hills, and this area would at least give us cover over the flat land. Tuko drove over a small hill and a motorcycle sailed over us to land on our left side. “They're trying to herd us to the right, where they have more vehicles. Drive straight.”

I counted the motorcycles. Eight. I wondered what motivated them to chase us. My bounty? The prestige? Revenge for Dero? Or instructions from whoever killed Luther? Either way, I knew that they wanted my head.

A chain slammed into the ground near the back tire.

“Slow down, let them catch up,” Jinn barked.

“What?” Tuko looked confused but eased up on the gas. Our pursuer closed the distance and smirked as he was about to throw his chain again.

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“Stop!” Jinn commanded, and Tuko slammed on the brakes. The Chycle member’s facial expression changed instantly as he realized as he was about to crash. He turned his front tire too quickly, and as the bike stopped, he kept going.

“Nice,” I said as Tuko gunned the engine again.

Yes, but you can only try that once. The rest of the bikers are wary now and a whole lot closer,” Valsa said. He was right. We were going to have to be a whole lot more creative if we were going to escape this mess. Two more bikers were closing in, and they sped alongside. One jumped ahead of us, and I saw something in his hand. He tossed it, and it dropped into the seat below us. Without thinking, I grabbed it and tossed it at the other biker. The ground exploded in front of him sending him cartwheeling off his bike.

“They trying to kill us!” Lucaz yelled. “Either the bounty has changed to dead, or the Chycle clan is trying to prevent you from talking.” Before we could process this latest information, the helicopter dove low, and the man in the craft fired a weapon to take out our tire.

The sharp pole didn’t miss by much.

The biker looked up and threw his chain upward to hit the craft, but the helicopter pulled upward out of harm’s way. That gave me an idea. “Tuko, you need to turn around.” “What?” the others said in unison.

“We can’t outrun them, but the clans aren’t working together. They are working against each other to get at me. We can turn that to our advantage.”

“You want me to drive into the middle of dozens of vehicles?” he said in disbelief.

“She might be on to something. In a few minutes we are going to get picked off either by the Chycle or another clan. There are too many of them, and they are focused on getting us. But if you go in the middle of that,” Jinn pointed at the sea of vehicles, “they might fight each other to get at you.”

Another chain swung by the rear door. Four of the motorcycles were within striking distance.

“Anybody got a better idea?” I yelled.

“No. But running into the hands of our enemies doesn’t really work for me. Maybe I will get lucky and outrun them long enough until we reach the Cradle,” Tuko suggested.

“Objection noted. All those in favor of my plan, raise your hand.” Every hand but Tuko’s went up.

“Fine,” Tuko replied icily as he suddenly turned the wheel. One of the bikers was too close and slammed into a rock while trying to avoid the car.

We accelerated toward the mass of vehicles. It was a mishmash of cars, trucks, and bikes. I counted and stopped at fifty, realizing that I had only counted about a third of the mass. The dust behind them reached high into the sky. I saw hundreds of faces — some clans I recognized from the coliseum and from earlier attacks. Others were foreign to me.

“Be ready to be attacked,” Tuko yelled. Some faces of the clans were almost comical, as if our suicidal attack on them was beyond belief. Others looked more determined and readied whatever weapons they had. Tuko steered to the right toward a group of Zombie trucks. The driver of the lead vehicle smiled as if receiving an early birthday present. The adjoining clan members were in flashy cars like Tuko’s, and several tried to ram the Zombie vehicles. The two clans were focusing their energies on each other.

It was working, but there were hundreds of vehicles to go. One Zombie vehicle steered toward us, but Tuko was too fast, and it missed us and rammed into another clan’s car.

“Don’t get hemmed in,” Valsa screamed. “If everyone focuses on us, we’ll be trapped.” Tuko spun to the right, and several cars whizzed by us. The sounds of vehicle crashes were all around us. The plan was working. So far.

I was so focused on congratulating myself on the plan that I didn’t see my attacker, but I felt something grab my hair. I turned and saw a teenager flip from the cab of her truck into the back. She

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reached for Jinn next. The girl was my size but much stronger and wiry. It was like trying to grasp a piece of spaghetti. I couldn't hold on to her.

“Help!” Jinn yelled as she was being pulled from our car.

“Grab her,” Tuko screamed and pulled one arm off the wheel to reach for her. The vehicle adjacent to us was pulling her away.

Leave her alone. I'm the girl you want,” I yelled. The girl did a double take at the adjoining car. Jinn stood in the back seat and tried to punch but missed. As her momentum swung through, she was pulled into their car. Valsa grabbed for her but had his hands were smashed by another teenager. He pulled back in pain as Lucaz reached for Jinn but was too late. The car had pulled away.

“Get her!” Tuko yelled while swerving the car to avoid a head-on collision.

My plan was a bust, and I had just lost my best friend. Tuko spun the car around and advanced on the vehicle that had taken Jinn.

In the distance, I could see her swinging her fist at one of his captors, and it looked like she had given him a bloody nose. *Awesome!*

I knelt on the edge of the car, and before the boys could pull me back, I leapt into the back of their vehicle as it drove by. I fell hard and split my lip on the truck bed. As I tried to stand up, a teenage boy kicked at me. I ducked but fell hard on my knees.

Jinn was in the front seat, wrestling the same girl as another vehicle pulled adjacent to us. I evaded the teenage boy and reached for her. My hand grasped her shoulder before I was pulled back suddenly and slammed my head on truck. For several seconds I saw stars and almost felt like passing out. I felt the hot exhaust of another vehicle pulling away from us. I could see Jinn's anguish as she fought for her life. Either they thought she was me or she was worth something as a daughter of Armor clan. The car drove away, and our eyes locked for a second before she had to defend herself. Then her vehicle disappeared into a dust cloud. I was left in the back of a truck with a clan I didn't recognize.

Great. I had lost Jinn and allowed myself to be captured. Great plan.

Just as the teenage boy reached for me again, Lucaz came flying from our car and tackled him. He shoved him hard and the boy fell off the truck. The driver tried to close the window between the cab and truck bed, but I kicked at his fingers and felt a satisfying crunch. The truck slammed to a stop, and I crashed into the back section, knocking the air of me. I looked up and watched Lucaz pull the driver out of the vehicle and punch him in the mouth. He crumbled like he had a glass jaw.

“I'm driving,” he said as two oncoming cars approached.

“Move it.” I pointed to the car Jinn was in as it was swallowed by a mass of incoming vehicles. She disappeared in seconds. Our truck lurched forward, but it was getting hard to see with all the dust that was kicked up. I saw Tuko and Valsa ahead of us, and I knew he wouldn't let Jinn get far.

“Follow Tuko.” I turned and barely ducked down in time as a man tried to grab me. He was tied to a pole as an extension off the back of his truck. His fingers grazed my knee. I had to focus on my surroundings or we'd never get the opportunity to find Jinn. The clan member's face was covered with tattoos. Zombie clan was back. A grappling hook clanked off the back of their vehicle, and I stumbled as our truck pulled to the right.

“We're being boarded!” I yelled.

“Do something about it,” Lucaz answered. “I have to drive.”

*Thanks. You're a big help.* Another grappling hook stabbed the other side of the truck. The metal moaned, as if it was going to be pulled apart. The chains were pulling the truck's back tires off the road. I kicked at the grappling hook and succeeded in embedding it farther into the metal body.

“I need a crowbar,” I yelled to Lucaz. His head turned in the cab as he searched. I noticed a piece of wood in the back that might work. I grabbed it and wedged it under the grappling hook. It moved slightly, but as I looked up I could see a Zombie clan boy shimmying down the chain from his vehicle.

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“Oh, no you don’t.” I got the usual nonverbal response. I wedged the wood as hard as I could, and the grappling hook went flying. The clan member tumbled into the dirt and the hook began to gouge into the ground.

One down.

Before I could turn, my arm was twisted behind me. His strength pushed me down. I ducked and sent my foot high and backward. When I heard a satisfying cry, I knew I had hit home. I wriggled out of his grasp. The man was large but doubled over. I kicked his knee, and as he reached down in pain, I pushed him backward. He tumbled off the truck and bounced a few times off the ground. I didn’t feel any sympathy for him.

I pried the wood from under the second grappling hook, and after a couple of hits, it came loose. I kicked it and the chain to the ground. It ricocheted and embedded in the tire of the Zombie Clan car that was pursuing us. It came to an abrupt stop and smashed into another Zombie vehicle behind it. *Love the karma.*

“I can’t find Jinn or Tuko’s car. There are too many vehicles. It’s hard enough to avoid the other clans,” Lucaz yelled. My heart began to pump with panic. We had lost them, and it was all because of my great plan. We had no other choice now.

“Aim toward the Cradle. They must be heading in this direction. Can you find it?” I asked.

“You mean that?” Lucaz pointed. I strained my neck up to view the largest wall I had ever seen. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It wasn’t made of stone or wood. It looked almost organic from this distance, like huge waves of muscles. At the sight of the Cradle, the other clan’s vehicles immediately spread out. It was as if they were in awe of it and that my capture was less important than the majesty of the place. A horn beeped from behind us, and I saw Tuko driving erratically. Valsa’s shoulder was a bloody mess.

“Did you see where they went?” Tuko asked. I shook my head and tears filled my eyes. If she was hurt because of me, I would never forgive myself. “Don’t worry, she can take care of herself.”

“We should head there. You take the right side, we’ll take the left. One of us will see her,” offered Lucaz.

“No.” Tuko shook his head. “We have to stay together. We’re weaker if we separate. Besides, Valsa is hurt.” He had slumped down in the backseat and looked exhausted, as if the fight had been taken out of him. Tuko was right; we were minutes away from our destination. We’d have to find Jinn later.

A spear came sailing from behind me and stabbed the ground. Not all the clans had forgotten about us just yet.

“Drive faster!” I yelled to Lucaz as we separated from Tuko. It was me they were after. Lucaz weaved back and forth like a dog trying to shake off its fleas. I dove into the cab for cover.

“Is there any clan here on our side?” I asked.

“Depends on what you mean by being on your side. I say a third of the clans are not actively trying to get you. So if not trying to kill you is on your side, then you have a few friends.” *Thanks for the sarcasm.* I slumped in my seat just as a spear came through the windshield. Its tip was inches from my stomach.

One of clans obviously wanted me dead. I kicked the windshield, and it shattered into a thousand pieces, like little gems, onto the hood of the car. Lucaz swerved as the glass and spear went tumbling into the ground.

“Over there!” I pointed. Two heavy trucks appeared on either side of us. They quickly closed the distance. If they decided to come together, they could crush our vehicle like a peanut. Then I noticed the occupants. They wore goggles. This was the rest of the Miner clan. The message must have gotten through. Their vehicles formed a barrier between the Chycle, Zombies, and who knows whatever other

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clans wanted my head. For a moment I was overjoyed; even though the Relics were missing and the Armors were nowhere to be seen, some clan I had just met was fighting for me.

Then my joy fled. I watched a Miner clan man tumble to the ground with a spear through the side of his chest. Someone who didn't even know me had died to protect me. No more. This was enough. And I realized that I couldn't have any more blood on my hands.

“Slow down,” I commanded Lucaz.

“But we'll lose our protection.” He slammed his hands on the steering wheel.

“I don't care. I won't see innocent people die for me.”

“So, my life, Jinn's, Tuko's — our lives don't matter to you!”

You made a choice to come with me, and if you don't like it, you can jump out of this car right now!” I came very close to his face. I didn't want this argument at this point and time.

“I did make a choice, and so did several other clans. You don't get to change your mind every time the going gets tough. We're all adults here. We need Miner clan's help. Accept the losses.” He continued to drive the car between the vehicles. A Miner man fell onto our hood, wrestling a Chycle member.

I reached through the broken windshield and swung my wooden club. It slammed into the leg of the Chycle rider. He cried in pain, and as he reached for his leg, the Miner man shoved him off the hood. His goggles briefly assessed me before he leaped back onto his own vehicle. *Why would these people fight for someone they barely know?*

“Look!” Lucaz yelled. Tuko's car was ahead, stopped before the Cradle. He was waiting for us, but I couldn't tell if they had found Jinn. Every vehicle slammed on their brakes. The chase was over.

Dust was everywhere, making it hard to see more than a few feet in front of us. I coughed. I heard the impact as vehicles that had driven too close slammed into each other. Tuko's car was gone behind the curtain of dirt. We slowed to a stop. The only thing I saw was the mountain of the Cradle reaching well above the cloud of dust. Then I saw him. And his clan.

Abraham stepped out of the dust with a beast on either side of him. There was no mistaking his intent. Lucaz reached for his weapon, but I put my hand on his and shook my head. The time for fighting was over. Whatever I was to face at the Cradle, I would be ready for it. I stepped out of the vehicle with Lucaz while Abraham and his animals formed a semicircle around me. He said nothing. He herded us away from the car and toward the Cradle. The dust was settling now, and I

could make out some shapes. Vehicles had stopped, and most of the clans had gotten out. They watched us like inmates walking toward their sentence.

Tuko and Valsa appeared on my right, accompanied by four members of the Hunter clan. They were not restrained, but I knew that any movement toward me would bring the Hunter clan on top of them. Their faces were strained. We walked for a full minute without a word. Abraham didn't need to brag about his capture, and I had no patience to listen. We turned around a large vehicle, and I approached a dozen other people. One was Jinn's father, but he said nothing to me. I assumed the others were clan leaders, maybe ready to watch my execution. Then I heard a familiar voice.

“So this is the girl who everyone has been after. Innocent of her crimes. Well, my dear, the danger is over.”

I turned and stared into the deep eyes of Luther. The man I supposedly killed. The leader who had never died.

# 22

## Leaders

I was speechless. Nothing made sense. I had been hunted and almost killed for a lie. Why?

“You’re alive! But I saw you die. Everyone did!” Murmuring around confirmed my comments. Luther approached and grasped my shoulders lightly.

“I’m sorry, my dear. You saw what everyone needed to see. My death was planned and packaged for maximum results. Through my death, true allegiances were shown. Much has been revealed, and those clans responsible for our world’s downfall are more apparent now. I’m truly apologetic that you were incriminated in my death.” He let go of me and walked around, slowly measuring his words. I didn’t know if he was playing me or if this was the greatness I had briefly seen in him at the Gathering. But whatever performance he was selling, it had almost gotten my friends killed. “The shooter?” I asked.

“There never was one.”

“The gunshot sound?”

“A real gun was fired behind you into the air.”

“Your blood?”

“Real, just not my own.”

“But when they examined you...”

“They never had the chance — the dinosaur took all attention away from me. Allowing me to disappear.

“The dinosaur! You set that on the crowd. People died because of your actions.” I was red with rage. A man I recognized as Abraham’s father motioned to two people behind me. I was forced down awkwardly on my knees. I felt Lucaz brought down beside me.

“Know your place. Luther doesn’t need to explain his actions to the likes of you.” *Great. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.* A couple of sentences and I already disliked him more than Abraham.

“Enough! She has a right to know.” Luther motioned to the two men, who released me. “Their deaths are my fault. A distraction was planned so that I could be whisked away without a close examination. But the dinosaur attack was unplanned, although we have a good idea who orchestrated that.” Luther looked around the crowd, and I noticed no one from Chycle clan was represented. “Nonetheless, I arranged that gathering and gave that beast the opportunity to attack so many people in an enclosed place. I am responsible for their deaths and your endangerment. I can’t change the past, but no one will ever hurt you again.”

“But why?” His apology had little effect on me. “Everyone tells me how amazing your speeches are. How you can captivate an audience. In Trall, they were right. The crowd supported your every word. Why stage your own death?” I stared at him and he looked perplexed. He wasn’t used to a teenage girl questioning his judgment. Maybe no one did.

“You deserve an explanation. I’ll use the analogy of a beautiful red apple. From the outside, it looks flawless and you can imagine how juicy it would be to bite. How succulent it would be to eat. But you would be wrong. The apple is full of rot, but no one is aware until you try to eat it.

Our clan system looks good from the outside. Every clan leader here...” he motioned to the people around us “...will tell you how effective our society is. How important it is to support one another, weaker clans working with stronger clans for the benefit of all.”

“But it’s not working that way,” I interrupted, and a few clan leaders raised their eyebrows at my impertinence. “I’ve seen clans that are starving, some without family, others that only care about themselves, and some that would destroy everything.”

“That is why the illusion had to be removed. To take my leadership out of the equation and watch how the clan leadership adjusted. My death exposed the rot and those who are causing it. We have failed our people, and the lies had to be exposed.” Luther directed his comments to those around him.

“You couldn’t have just spoken about this at the stadium?” I asked.

“Unfortunately, action trumps speech. In the past, I talked about the greatest of our clans and what they had accomplished. Now,” he waved over to the clan leaders, “I would have talked about how a cancer has spread throughout our clans. We are consumed with taking rather than giving. Clans push to get at scarce resources and then wonder why no one cooperates.”

Luther was right about that. I had seen that over and over in the last few days.

“So why not change this? Staging your death caused hysteria and violence,” I responded.

“I know. I was wrong. I naively thought that the clans who have been causing the most damage to our society would expose their true motives. I thought it would be bloodless. I didn’t trust enough people with my plan to realize how flawed it was. And I didn’t anticipate you and how you would become a focus of everything that is wrong with our system. And for that I am truly sorry.” He looked at me, as well as the other leaders standing around us.

“But the Chycle clan has been exposed, thanks to your friends and the Hunter clan. An evil that has been attacking our people can be removed. Too many lives have been lost, but many more will be saved now that the dinosaur attacks can be stopped.”

“I don’t think Chycle clan was in charge of the camp.” Luther’s face filled with confusion. “Their leader, Dero, bragged about his control, but even up to his death, I felt like someone else was pulling the strings.” The group of men around Luther erupted, and I could tell that many didn’t agree.

“Enough!” He demanded their silence, and they gave it. “Whether you agree with her or not, our problems reach much deeper than the beasts that attack us. Our society is dying. Every year our machinery breaks down and we forget how to fix it. Our society stagnates. We regress every generation. We need a breakthrough.”

“Which is?” one of the clan members asked.

“We need to enter the Cradle, to discover our birthplace and determine where our future lies.”

“And how will we do that?” another clan member asked.

“Actually, the answer is right in front of you.” He pointed directly at me.

Now he shocked me for a second time. What was he talking about?

“You bring something that our clans — these leaders,” he pointed to the other men and women, “seem to lack. I have heard your clan name spoken and they don’t exist. I think you are from beyond the wall, and therefore you can lead us through. If that is true, will you help us?”

Instead of an uproar, everyone was quiet. As if Luther’s claim was so beyond belief that no one could process his claim. Seconds hung like hours as he waited for me to respond. I couldn’t. When I didn’t, he continued.

“These men and women are used to the old way of doing things, the way that has frustrated us for decades at the Cradle. Year after year, failure after failure. No way to enter, lives lost with nothing to show for it. Pene, you have a rare gift, a unique perspective outside of our home. You have survived obstacles that many of us could never overcome. We look to you, hoping for a miracle.”

My voice still did not return.

“Wait a second,” Lucaz interrupted and stepped up from our captors. “You expect Pene to solve a mystery that has stymied the greatest minds for generations. She’s a smart girl, but she’s not that smart.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” My voice was returning, but I wasn’t really offended. I could stand now as well.

“You’re welcome.” He smirked back.

“You could be right,” Luther answered, deflating my confidence a little. “But if she can’t find a way in, those on the other side of the wall may be more willing to speak to her. Perhaps they will come through to get her.”

So all the cards were on the table. Either I found a way in or I was a bargaining chip. Suddenly Luther didn’t seem so noble.

The other leaders looked shocked, as if Luther was sharing information with them for the very first time. Despite how poor a liar I had been, how could a man I never met know the truth about where I was from?

“The time of the opening is upon us.” Luther snapped his fingers, and Lucaz and I were moved roughly away. It didn’t take a genius to understand we were being taken to the entrance of the Cradle. I hadn’t seen it when we arrived, but after a couple of minutes of walking, I could make out a small depression in the wall. It was a gouge, like a cut in the skin. Inside this cut was a dirty console well weathered by the elements. It might have been a working screen years ago, but now the whole apparatus looked dead. There was a circular eye at the top of the console, like a camera looking out onto the world. The clan leaders positioned me in front of it. Luther stood before it.

“The one from outside is here. Come take her from us. Show us the way that explains our past and directs our future. We await your response.” Luther projected his voice to the console. I looked at Lucaz. Did Luther really think that I was responsible for those on the other side?

The blank console didn’t change. If there were people watching on the other side, they weren’t answering. We waited thirty seconds, then a minute. Everyone was silent, hoping for something to happen. Nothing did. The futility was evident to everyone.

“This is useless. She is nothing but a child. She is not the key to entry to the Cradle. Send her and her friends away while adults discuss our future,” Abraham’s father’s voiced boomed. The rest of the crowd seemed to agree with him. Tuko and Jinn’s father stepped out of the clan leaders’ crowd and addressed the group.

“Let me talk to Pene and my children. Maybe there is a way to enter that we can’t see just now,” Strika replied.

“Please take them to your tent. I can’t deal with any more failures,” Luther answered and turned to the rest of the group. “Gather all remaining clan leaders to meet. The fate of our society depends on the choices we make next.” Everyone dispersed, and I felt a gentle arm on my shoulder.

Strika walked us briskly to a tent in the distance. Just ahead of us, I could see Tuko and Jinn being led to the same tent. I broke into a run and gave Jinn a big hug.

“You’re okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine. You should see the black eyes on the clan members that tried to capture me. I was so not worth any reward.”

“Dad — what is going on? Did you know about Luther faking his own death?” Tuko asked.

His father’s face looked pained and frustrated. “No. I only found out a couple of hours ago. None of the clan leaders knew.”

“I bet the Chycle clan knew,” I commented.

“I don’t know. But his appearance was quite a revelation. It immediately stopped the squabbling between the clan leaders, but most of us are confused on how to move forward.”

“You remove him, Dad. He lied to you. His fake assassination caused hundreds of deaths. He’s not the leader for our clans,” Tuko said.

“If I can speak to my dad, I’m sure we in the Spider clan would support his removal,” Lucaz said. You kids are missing the point. Luther has considerable authority. People are more in shock about his return than wanting to dispose of him for his actions. Maybe in a few days or weeks...”

“What is it that Luther thinks I can help with?” I asked and was surprised when Jinn spoke up.

“Luther knows that you are not from this world. That you have no clan affiliation. He has often said that the door to the Cradle will open when an outside force was welcomed in.” “And no one thought to tell me this?” I exclaimed.

“You haven’t exactly been honest with us, Pene,” said Strika.

“I don’t understand why everyone already seems to know Pene isn’t from one of our clans. When was anyone going to tell me?” Tuko was fuming.

“I figured something was off, but if you’re not from one of the clans, where are you from?” Lucaz asked.

“Far away — in another world with different rules. But I told you the truth when I spoke about my family and friends. They just aren’t from here.”

“You’ve known the whole time, haven’t you?” Tuko asked Jinn.

“Girls are more perceptive than boys, aren’t we?” Jinn gave me a smile.

“We don’t have time for this, children,” Strika said. “If Luther thinks you are the key, he will try to use you. Can you think of any way that would get us into the Cradle?” The console was dirty and forgotten. How could I figure a way in? Yet something had tweaked my curiosity.

“I’ve never been here before. How would I solve something that your whole civilization has never figured out?”

We were all silent, considering the options. I turned my head toward a commotion at the tent entrance. Strika rose, and I could hear him talking to someone. After a minute, the conversation ceased and he came back in.

“Abraham’s father, Isaac, has challenged Luther for leadership. Isaac has considerable influence with many clans, and I think he wants to challenge now while many are questioning Luther’s recent choices. There is going to be war unless the clans can decide on a solution. All clan leaders are commanded now for an audience. You kids stay here. I will come back for you once a decision has been made.” The tent flapped rustled, and he was gone. The four of us were silent, then Tuko laid into me.

“I risked my life for you, ruined my car. I trusted you, Pene, and I have to hear from my father that nothing you told me is true?” I couldn’t face him. He was right. I had kept the truth to myself, and by taking his help, I had been unfair. Before I could respond, Jinn came to my rescue.

“You ever think she had good reason to lie? Maybe she’s trying to protect herself. I doubt you would have believed her if she told you the truth. I had a hard enough time, and I’m not some boy!” “Hey now!” Lucaz said defensively. *Silly boys.*

“Tuko, I’m sorry. I lied. I’ve been used to tackling problems on my own. Back home, I didn’t have many friends, and I didn’t want anyone else mixed up with my issues. I kept thinking that you guys would bail on me at some point, so every time I considered being truthful with you boys, I backed off.”

“We gave you everything, and you held back. I don’t think I can trust you again.” Tuko looked at me sulkily.

“Move on, Tuko. I don’t like being lied to either, but there is something bigger here. If Pene can get us into the Cradle, then you can get over your wounded pride,” Lucaz chided. “So, what’s the plan?” He looked over to me.

There was something about the console ports — my hand rummaged through my pocket. I felt the dead drone I had been carrying in my pocket and wondered if the most hated object from my world might be an answer.

“I’ve seen that look before. What are you thinking?” Jinn asked.

“We need to get out of this tent and find out if the Orphan clan is here. If we can activate this, I have an idea about how to use it on the entrance.”

# 23

## Activate

Ten minutes later, after successfully tunneling out of the back of the tent to avoid the Armor guards, we were swallowed up by the huge camp of clans. I covered my face, not wanting to draw any attention. The others were more discreet as well, in case one of their own clan members recognized them. Tuko talked to a few people, eventually getting us directions to where we needed to go.

Most of the activity was at the center of the camp, with the clan leaders meeting to discuss the next step with Luther and Isaac. The clan members that remained seemed on edge, as if a war was inevitable. Although I was glad to have the focus off me, I didn't want to see more deaths. As we worked our way to the outskirts of the camp, I saw a familiar face and ran toward her.

"Sena! I missed you. Are the others with you? Are your parents here as well?"

She squeezed me back. "I missed you too. I'm so glad you made it here safely. Only a few parents are here. They are stretched too thin to send many to the Cradle. Arch and Saul came as well. Did you want to see them?"

"Arch I can do without. Saul we need to see. He may be able to help me with the Cradle." Sena looked confused, but she was willing to help.

"Follow me." She motioned and weaved around a couple of vehicles and half dozen kids kicking a ball. Saul was sitting on a rock, playing with a pair of tweezers and a wire. He jumped when we rushed up to him. He wasn't overjoyed to see us.

"Can you guys not tell I'm trying to do something delicate?" He fumbled with a set of wires.

"Be careful you don't connect those two red wires together," Lucaz cautioned.

"Well, of course I know that. How did you figure that out? Most of the guys from our clan can't figure a bolt from a nut."

"Let's just say in Spider clan, I'm pretty good with electronics," Lucaz answered. Saul seemed interested.

"Saul — Lucaz. Lucaz — Saul. We need your help. Do you remember this?" I pulled out the dead mechanical drone and handed it to him.

"I remember it was hard to get any details out of you about it. Why is it important?"

"I think it could open up the Cradle wall," I said, realizing how unbelievable that sounded.

"Yeah right." Saul laughed. "This little dead bug is the key to our whole civilization. You're crazy."

"Maybe. Look at the back of its tail. There is a port in the back that resembles one of the ports in the Cradle door."

"Wait a second," Lucaz countered. "Instead of an outsider opening the door, what if something from outside will open the entrance?"

Saul immediately became interested. "You think this console will interface with this little machine?"

"Maybe. Before we met the Spider clan, we found an underground lab with a similar console interface. We were pursued by the same mechanical drones. There is a connection."

"You want me to take this apart?"

"Yes. Either we need to turn it on or get a computer chip out of it that will allow us to interface with the door. Are you up for the challenge?" Behind us there was a chorus of yells. Tuko left us to go talk to someone behind us.

“You bet,” Saul answered enthusiastically.

“I can help too,” Lucaz said. “Mind if I use some of your tools?” He motioned to the mess around Saul.

“Sure. Just don’t get in my way and don’t break anything.” He smiled, and I could tell he liked having someone else mechanically inclined around.

Tuko grabbed me from behind. “One of Dad’s men found us, and they aren’t happy we disappeared from the tent. Seems we have to make an appearance at the clan meeting with Luther.”

“Great,” I answered sarcastically. “Saul, Lucaz. We don’t have much time. Get this drone operational or apart. Your clan leadership may depend upon it.”

We left them and went with Jinn and Tuko, who were accompanied by two Armor guards. As we dodged other clan members, I could feel the guard’s gaze on me. I didn’t know if they thought I was a circus freak or a prize to collect. I felt like everyone knew that I didn’t belong here.

Tuko walked ahead with the Armor guard.

Jinn gazed at me with concern. “The only people these leaders care about is their own clan. I don’t see how they will agree on anything, especially with Luther’s deception.”

“What do you think they want with me?” I shuffled around the front of a vehicle. “I already told them everything I know.”

Jinn stopped and looked me in the eyes. “They want to use you, Pene. Luther, Isaac, all they care about is themselves and that they have the power. If you support them, they will make you out to be a potential savior. If you’re against them, they’ll say your presence could jeopardize everything in the Cradle. Don’t believe anything they say.”

“Even your...” But before I could finish, I felt hands pressing on me as several Armor clan members directed Jinn and I into a large tent. We were surrounded by people, with a wooden podium in the center. Chairs were placed around it so that every seat had a good vantage point. On the podium were Luther, Strika, and about ten other adults. Around the room, some sitting and others standing, were another twenty. Their attention was focused on us as we walked in. I was placed in a chair while Jinn and Tuko sat behind me with their backs to the tent flap. All conversation died as Abraham’s father, Isaac, stepped forward.

“Please sit. During the discussion, we will decide who will lead the clans by a vote. Everyone can speak, but your response must be under a minute long. Be direct. Talking about yourself will not further the conversation. Talking about what is best for the clans is where we need to focus our conversation. I have the talking stick in my hand.” Isaac held a gnarled piece of wood in his right hand. “If you wish to speak, motion for it, and it will be given to you. Otherwise, do not speak over someone, and don’t interrupt. Any questions?”

The room was silent. I had the feeling that this was standard protocol for meetings between the clan leaders, and most of them had heard this before. Several seconds later, Luther stepped forward and grasped the talking stick.

“All of you know me, and I have explained the reason for my deception. To me, my absence has shown which clans will rule if it benefits their own members. This is wrong. Instead of warring tribes, we must unite under one leader. Our decisions have consequences, and we must pick a leader who will watch over all.”

Isaac grabbed the stick from Luther. “Respect and trust drive our clans. Our families follow us because we listen and provide help based on their wishes. They cannot trust someone who lies to them.” His eyes directly matched Luther’s.

Luther took the stick back. “Does a parent lie to his child when he has their own best interest at heart? We had to learn what it would be like without my leadership. The clans attacked each other during my absence. Now they need direction to take them to next step.”

“

And what would that next step be?” Isaac yelled, looking straight at the other leaders. “Will you open the Cradle door? Will you bring peace to our clans? Will you stop the dinosaurs from attacking us? Your promises are empty.”

“And what promises are you providing, Isaac? Does anyone wonder what he will deliver other than special treatment for himself and his Hunter clan? We need unity. He brings special interest.” I had to stifle a giggle, but unfortunately both speakers looked over at me. It was one of those moments when you wish you could turn invisible.

“Do you have something to say?” Luther asked.

“This is for clan leader’s voices only,” Isaac said. “Teenage girls need not be heard.” I was willing to be quiet, but Strika spoke.

“Let her speak. Considering what the clans have put her through, it is the least we can do.” He handed me the talking stick from Luther. I was nervous. I wasn’t a great speaker and the staring adults were intimidating. Yet I needed to say something.

“Both of you talk about what you bring as a leader and where the other is deficient. What you don’t talk about is how you’re going to help the other clans. I came from a place where leaders believed they knew what our people wanted and provided it. Their way. They usually got it wrong. If both of you talk about yourselves instead of how you would help the clans, I wouldn’t vote for either of you.” There was a gasp behind me; other clan leaders were surprised by my audacity. I caught sight of Rustin, who bowed his head at me as if in agreement.

Isaac grabbed the stick away from me. “She is not from our home. Her words are meaningless. She knows nothing of our culture.”

“Does she?” Rustin interrupted, retrieving the stick for himself. “She passed our clan’s trials. Only the most valiant of warriors of our clan succeed. I think she is right. Neither of you should rule.”

“Are you offering to take our place?” Luther demanded.

“No.” Rustin paced and looked at the other leaders. “But instead of one, we need a group of leaders to make decisions. To make sure the needs of all clans are met instead of the needs of one.” Several heads nodded in approval, which infuriated Isaac.

“Our leadership process cannot be left to a committee of clan leaders who defer decisions, because as a group nobody wants to make the tough choices,” Isaac replied. “You’re an even weaker clan leader than I imagined, Rustin.” The room broke out in angry conversations, and the message was getting lost in their egos. Luther grabbed the talking stick.

“This is why a group cannot rule. A group cannot find a consensus when a decision must be made. Only a leader can make the life-and-death decisions that will unite our clans!” Before Luther could elaborate further, screams came from outside.

The tent was suddenly shredded above us as a large talon reached through, as if it was paper. A large winged dinosaur ripped the canvas to pieces. Its claws grabbed an unfortunate guard and lifted him into the air.

Everyone scattered. I looked up and scanned the sky. Dozens of pterodactyls had flocked to the camp. People scrambled to find weapons that would take out the winged invaders. I grabbed Jinn and Tuko, and we scurried away from the tent.

“I thought you had stopped these dinosaurs from attacking us,” Jinn asked.

“We never saw these birds there. Makes me wonder if there are other places where these animals are trained to kill,” I said.

As a bird shrieked overhead, Jinn shoved me into the ground to avoid the claws that almost impaled my chest. I spat out some dirt as Tuko pulled me back up.

“Come on — let’s find Lucaz. Let’s hope they’ve had some luck with the drone.” It was chaos all around us. I bumped into clan members as they ran away. I ducked into a tent and almost hit my head

on Lucaz. They were working at a small workbench. He and Saul were excited, and it wasn't about the flying dinosaurs.

We were able to get the drone bee apart. There is a small chip inside, and when Saul examined it, it had its own internal power supply," Lucaz said.

"Which I figured how to turn on," added Saul.

"So I can insert it into the Cradle door," I said.

"Yes. The door console has several ports. One of them may accept the chip or the drone. You just need to insert it and see what happens."

"We'll never get near the console. It's heavily guarded," Tuko explained.

"Not anymore," Jinn said and pointed in the distance. She was right. The posted guards were fighting two pterodactyls. One had a guard in its talons, while the others were spearing the dinosaur's foot to get it to release the man. No one was watching the door. It was our chance to get close, if we didn't get ripped to shreds by one of the birds. We ran over as the guards continued to battle. Lucaz and Tuko got there first, while Jinn, Saul, and I arrived seconds later.

"Stay away from there!" one of guards yelled, noticing our arrival. He took two steps toward us and then fell back twenty feet as the bird's wings sent him sprawling. I looked at the console as Saul removed the chip from his pocket.

"Here goes," he yelled over the noise of attacking birds and dying men. The console was plain, with a screen, a few dials, and empty slots. He inserted the chip in the slot that matched its size. Nothing happened.

"This isn't working!" I yelled. "Trying to insert the rear end of the drone into the port."

There was a screech, and we turned as a huge bird dived down on us. Saul was so scared that he dropped the drone in the dirt, losing it.

We had no weapons and no access to the Cradle. In seconds, the bird would shred us.

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# 24

## Origin

A spear erupted out of the chest of the bird, and it fell to the ground. The bird's death was instantaneous. I turned and watched Abraham remove the spear from the bird's chest and wipe the blood on his shirt.

“Y-you saved me,” I stammered. “You saved all of us!”

“You are not my enemy,” he answered. “Doesn't mean I like you, but I'm not going to let any of you die. Especially if you can help.”

“I'm trying to get in the door. We think we may have a way in.” I looked down. Saul was trying to find the drone in the dirt. Abraham didn't look too impressed.

“I'll buy you some time. It's no coincidence that these birds are attacking. Someone doesn't want you to get into the Cradle.”

Saul picked up the drone. “Shall we try again?”

I nodded, and he put the drone's butt end in. He turned it to the right, like the drone was a switch. Nothing.

“Turn the power on,” Lucaz commanded. Saul pressed a switch on the chip and a red light came on.

A spear landed at my feet, thrown by one of the guards. Lucaz and Abraham threw themselves at him and pinned him to the ground. Saul turned the drone again like a wheel, and it made a clicking sound, like a key opening a door.

Suddenly the console screen came to life.

“You have pressed an incorrect key. Please state your purpose.” A computer avatar came to life. Her image was unmistakable. It was my mother. I was too shocked to speak.

“Let us in,” Jinn commanded.

“You do not have clearance. Request denied.” “That is my mother on the screen,” I said weakly.

“Then talk to her. Tell her to let us in.” I looked at the screen and faced my mother. Or at least the computer representation of her.

“This is Pene. I request entry. Mom.” The computer whirled and shook, as if trying to compute its logic. Ten seconds passed, and nothing happened. I had failed.

“Entry approved. Only you have access. The door will stay open for thirty minutes. If you do not exit in that time, it will be approximately one year before the door will open again.” My mother's voice was cold and logical, nothing like the caring woman I remembered as a baby. Could she still be alive? Was this computer representation the only thing left of her?

The door raised to the ceiling. Decades of dust fell to the ground. I was going to enter the Cradle, something that no one in this world had done — until now.

My thoughts were interrupted as an arm reached around my throat. The world was fuzzy around the edges, and before I passed out, I responded as I knew best. I brought my leg backward, and my assailant let go of me.

That is the second time you have done that to me!" Viktor spat, hunched over. He had about a dozen clan members surrounding us. They were silent but menacing, and they aimed to be the first ones into the Cradle. *Not after all my hard work!*

But with a two-to-one advantage, they seized us. Even Abraham was immobilized. He didn't look pleased.

"Tell your silent friends to remove their hands from me, or I will have my animals destroy your clan. And that is no empty promise," Abraham commanded.

"Too bad for you. Why don't you cry to your father? This is a victory for Zombie clan, Abraham. This is our time." Viktor motioned to his clan members. "And as much of a pain as this girl was," he grabbed me again and twisted my arm, "she sure came through when we needed her."

"Seriously. People are dying around you, dinosaur birds are attacking, and all you care about is the glory of being the first into the Cradle. You self-centered jerk — your clan is a waste of space," taunted Jinn as she tried to escape her captor's grip. Viktor walked over to her and got so close, he was almost nose-to-nose.

"Our clans have waited an entire lifetime for this moment, and you want to give this opportunity to her." Viktor pointed at me. "No — this is our time. Whatever secrets are inside are mine for the taking." He stepped forward, his huge frame filling the doorway. I was red with rage. What if he took my one chance to leave this world? To see my mother. He smiled back at me, but as he crossed the threshold, a red flash occurred, filling the space. Then he was gone, a shower of ash filled the entrance and fluttered to the ground.

"Unlawful entry. Intruder was eliminated. Only the door opener can enter with guest specifications," the computer announced dispassionately. The Zombie clan immediately let us go.

"He was vaporized!" Lucaz exclaimed, amazed.

"And only you can enter," Saul commented, "with a guest. Pick me! Pick me!" He began to jump up and down with excitement. I realized that there was only one person I wanted to enter with.

"Computer — take visual." I quickly pulled Jinn in front of the computer screen before even asking her.

"Scanning." A white light went from top to bottom. It happened so fast that no else could react. "Completed. User and guest may now enter."

"I guess that settles who goes in," Lucaz replied. I turned and felt his lips on mine. My eyes widened as he kissed me!

"I obviously can't go in with you. I need to get back to Spider clan and make sure my dad is okay. Once you go in there, the birds can't reach you." "And the kiss?" I asked incredulously.

"For luck. I hope you find what you are looking for." He turned and was swallowed in the sea of people who were fighting the oncoming birds.

Abraham looked at me but had no words. I felt like we were no longer enemies, and his recent support was his way of saying sorry. But like a typical boy, he couldn't say so. He nodded at me and ran toward an incoming bird, already moving on to the next fight. Jinn looked at Saul, who seemed disappointed I hadn't picked him.

"Saul — go find any of the Armor clan. Tell them that we need them at the entrance of the Cradle. Find my father if you can. It's a matter of life and death."

Saul nodded, looked at us, and ran. He zigged and zagged around bodies, and I hoped he would be okay.

"Are we ready for this?" Jinn gulped.

"Do we have a choice?" I answered. "Tuko, I'm sorry I picked Jinn over you. I just felt that if I had to do this with someone, I wanted it to be her."

"I understand. And although I am so jealous right now, there is no one more deserving than Jinn. Now, get going before time runs out. I'll secure this entrance so no one else will get vaporized trying

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to chase after you. Go find whatever answers lie inside.” He grabbed one of the spears that the guards had been using. Suddenly he was no longer Jinn’s annoying brother. He was ready to be a clan leader.

“I love you, brother.” Jinn beamed.

“Thank you, Tuko.” I gave him a hug. “Don’t get yourself killed trying to guard this entrance. Whatever is inside is not worth your life.”

He playfully pushed me away. “Come on, you’re wasting time. You already have less than thirty minutes. Get going.”

Jinn and I didn’t need any more motivation. I stepped into the doorway and walked through. Intact. I reached back through and grabbed Jinn’s hand. She closed her eyes and held her breath. She stepped through and remained whole on the other side. We waved to Tuko, who stared back at us as we ran into a dark hallway and away from the battle. Suddenly the chaos of the clans and the pterodactyls were gone, replaced by the silent tomb of a strange stone hallway.

The air was stale. It seemed like no one had been here for a very long time. The passageway was dark, but there was illumination from above. I guessed that sunlight was shining through cracks in the rocks. Jinn stepped gingerly, as if not wanting to break anything. I put my hands in front of me and almost swallowed a spider’s web. At least it wasn’t one of Lucaz’s traps.

Gradually, the tunnel widened and I saw a large space ahead. It opened into a wide lab with a high roof. There was a large monitor at the far end of the room and rows of computers in a semicircle around it. It felt like a control center where dozens of people could work toward some hidden goal. I rubbed my finger on a console and drew a happy face on the screen. The dust was so thick, I didn’t know if anything would work. I tried anyway. I tapped the power button on the computer screen. Nothing came up.

“Either there is no power supply, or these computers are toast,” Jinn commented. She walked over to a red switch adjacent to a fuse box. She pulled it down, and a low hum reverberated through the hall. Nothing changed except for a green light that flashed at the bottom of the main monitor. I went from computer to computer, trying to get one of them to turn on. Same result — nothing would boot up.

By the red switch was a large plastic lid over a table. It covered a map and laptop. I tried to lift the cover, but it was too heavy for me.

“Can you help me with this?” I asked. Jinn took one corner, and we lifted the plastic cover and dumped it on the floor. The cover bounced off the concrete. I popped open the laptop and plugged the cord in. It had a faded screen, but when I hit the power button, I heard the computer booting up. The plastic cover must have kept the dust out.

“What are you trying to do?” Jinn asked.

“I don’t know. Our time is short to figure out what this place was. I’m hoping this can tell me.” The laptop flashed green, and then the huge monitor in front of us turned on. I guessed we wouldn’t have to crowd around the laptop. The laptop main screen appeared, as if no password was required to enter.

Jinn pointed to a folder. “Try that.” She motioned to video labeled “Operations.”

“Good idea,” I answered. The video was black and white and the frame rate seemed off. The movements were very jerky. The background was this lab, only it seemed much brighter and cleaner. A young man in a lab coat faced us. He wore his glasses on top of his head like he had forgotten they were there.

“Welcome to the command center of World 56-a18. A population of about fifty thousand residents has been seeded in warlike clan structure to see how long they can peacefully coexist. We have created twenty clan-like entities but anticipate that more will splinter off. To facilitate the survival nature of the world, dinosaurs have been introduced to create fear amongst the residents. This will either make the clans combine forces or fight for resources. Either way, it will be our job to analyze the results and

report.” The footage stopped, and I looked at Jinn. She was trying to absorb what was happening, her entire home as she knew it was a lie. Or this video was a hoax. Either way, since I had come from a world that was constantly being observed, I felt I needed to prepare her.

“In my home, we were constantly observed. We were safe to a point but could never really leave my city. Your home isn’t much different. Starting at some point in history, your actions were observed and analyzed.”

“You’re telling me that we are rats in a big maze? How is it that no one else has ever discovered this before?” Jinn asked.

“How would you know? In bunkers like this, you would never see the ones watching you. In my home, we had a barrier that prevented us from leaving home, although no one seemed to realize it was there.” I turned to Jinn, who looked like the wind had been knocked out of her.

“My home isn’t much different. There are natural barriers that prevent us from going beyond our world. From the Cradle wall to the gorge in the west to the desert in the east to the mountain in the north, we have always been hemmed in. But why? Time is running out. Fast forward to the middle of the video.”

I clicked farther into the video and the scientist appeared again, this time with at least half a dozen other people in lab coats. He had some gray in his hair and a beard. Several people appeared behind him and were working on video consoles as well.

“The clans have been very resourceful and grown more cohesive as a society. Although there have been battles, it has not been as warlike as we had hoped. To create conflict, we have augmented the dinosaurs’ intelligence as well as found ways to sabotage the clan members’ technology.” The scientist paced around the room as if playing to the camera and to whatever authority he was reporting to.

“The animals are easy. We have found ways to surgically enhance their brains, increasing their abilities to solve problems and pushing their aggressiveness. Sometimes they attack each other, but we are having success in focusing them on the clans. They are easy to control, but the clans are another issue altogether.” He reached for something off-screen and brought it over. “We have been manufacturing this incense and using one of the clans as a distributor. They have no idea of its results. The incense has a special chemical that makes metal brittle and affects all electronics. Car and computers will break down, pushing these clans into the dark ages. Future generations will move backward, and technology they used to count on will continually break down. The incense will delay any technological advances.” I stopped the tape and considered his information. I had smelled incense everywhere I went. These clans were literally destroying their technology by the smoke. Jinn made a big sound as she slumped into a chair.

“You mean we have been ruining our vehicles for decades? No wonder computers always broke down. Thank god Dad never used incense,” she said. Then she was very quiet — like the wheels were turning. She was scaring me.

“What are you thinking?”

Before she could answer, an alarm rang with a digital clock appearing on one of the video screens. “FIFTEEN minutes before door shutdown,” an automated voice said from one of the speakers. *Super annoying.*

“Time’s running out. Let’s keep watching.” Jinn gave a terse nod.

I scrolled to the end and hit play. The scientist was alone and covering up various pieces of equipment.

“The lab is being scuttled, at least for now. Don’t know when we might return. We must prepare everything for storage in case we’re gone for a while. One of the clans has been contacted and will act as caretakers for the others. I don’t agree, because it gives them too much knowledge and power over the other clans. But the decision was not mine to make. I hope they know what they’re doing, otherwise we’ll return, and that clan will change the future of this world. And it might not be for the

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best.” The screen froze, as if the tape had run out. It backed up our theory that one of the clans was controlling this place.

I considered what I had seen in this world since my arrival. I had travelled from end to end. I had been to the dinosaur camp, but Dero didn't seem intelligent enough to be designated the architect clan by this lab. Chycle had the brawn but not the brains. If Luther or Hunter clan was controlling the strings, why go through the trouble of persuading the other clans to support them? They could just release the dinosaurs to do their bidding. Then I considered the most obvious option.

“Jinn — it was really lucky that you happened to be exactly where I entered your world.”

She was silent. Was she listening or ignoring me? I couldn't tell with her back turned. I pushed away from the desk and rolled a short distance in my chair.

“You mentioned that the area you found me in was fairly isolated. Was it really on the way for you?” Still no reaction. Her quietness was unsettling.

“I never did question how Tuko found me in the dinosaur base when Lucaz had told me that no one would dare venture into the Wasteland. I didn't question his explanation.” Her posture was more slumped now, and I thought I could see her shaking.

“I never did ask how your father found us at the Orphan town. Almost like he knew we would be there.”

I thought I heard a sob.

“Are you going to tell me what is going on?” I reached over to touch her on the shoulder.

“No,” said a male voice, “but I will.” I turned and saw that Strika had entered the room. His tall frame was less kindly now. He looked like a predator about to pounce on its prey. “Jinn, go back to the entrance. We'll discuss this later.” Jinn looked at me. Tears had welled up in her eyes. Her expression told me everything.

“I'm sorry, Pene. I knew you were coming, and I was told to look after you. To keep you safe. But you became so much more to me. I was hard on you about your secrets when I had plenty of my own.”

“You knew everything!” I said incredulously. “Your dad and Armor clan have been pulling all of the strings?”

“No!” she yelled back. “I knew who you were when you arrived. Dad had been contacted before and told that there may be a visitor from outside, and I was to protect you.” “Protect! You mean endanger and use me,” I yelled back.

“No. We kept you safe and have been in contact with my dad the whole time. He's been able to track your whereabouts so that we could always find you.”

“But the dinosaur camp! The incense! You knew and agreed with what he is doing?”

“I didn't know about the dinosaur camp until you discovered it. I didn't learn about the incense until a few minutes ago.” She turned to her father. “I'm going to tell the other clans what you are doing.” I could tell that she meant it.

“You'll do no such thing,” answered Strika. “You do that, and you will have written a death sentence for your mother and I and the rest of the clan. You don't understand. We were contacted by the Others. They put us in charge. If we didn't follow their instruction, there would have been widespread genocide unless we agreed to be caretakers. You don't understand. Armor clan has always protected the other clans!”

Maybe Strika was protecting the other clans by following his orders. I didn't know, and I didn't have time to understand.

“How to you get in? You should have been vaporized.”

“There were ways,” he answered cryptically. “As a caretaker, I have certain access. Now step away from daughter.”

“Why? I want nothing to do with her. She lied to me!”

“Don’t blame her. I put a lot of pressure on her and Tuko. I need them to step up and replace me and their mother one day. I was in contact with those outside our world and prepared for your possible arrival.”

“So you control the Chycle clan and the dinosaurs they torture? Your actions kill people of all the clans.”

“What happened at the stadium was a mistake. Dero was supposed to scare, not destroy. He was an idiot. Part of me was glad when Tuko told me he was killed. But time is short, Pene. I’m not here to explain all my reasons. I do what I’m told, and as a result my clan has a seat at the table. Without my support, my people would have next to nothing and our world would be destroyed. I do what I need to do to keep us all alive.”

“And it’s convenient that your choices give you power,” I added.

He refused to be drawn into my conversation. “It’s okay. I don’t need you to understand. I just wanted to thank you for taking care of my children. You looked after both of them. And for that I owe you my gratitude.”

“You mean Tuko didn’t know?”

“No. He’s a bit more idealistic than realistic. I gave him direction to find you in the desert. He doesn’t know about my contact with the outside world or the choices I’d had to make. Jinn is the one I knew I could trust. Someday I will do the same for Tuko.”

“Ten minutes before door shutdown,” the computer voice whined again.

In the minutes that were left, I had no hope of understanding why he had made the choices he did. But I knew what he was going to do next. “You’re not going to let me leave here.” Strika’s eyes left no doubt of his answer.

“Dad?” Jinn asked. Strika pulled out a gun and pointed it at me. It was a first time I seen one in this world, and it looked as evil as its holder.

“I can’t risk you coming back to our world. The truth would tear our clans apart. You would destroy us.” He cocked his gun. He had made his choice.

Jinn stepped between us. She had also made a choice. “You can’t do this, Dad. This goes against everything you and Mom taught us. She’ll promise to be quiet. Won’t you, Pene?”

I nodded, but I wasn’t very convincing. I would be a risk. My interference already had proven that.

“I can’t take the chance. I’m sorry. Move aside.” He motioned with his gun.

“I’m sorry too, Dad. I don’t have a choice either. Catch.” She pulled something from her pocket and threw it. Her dad instinctively caught it with his other hand, and its contents spilled over his fingers. He screamed as his eyes turned white.

“I can’t see! I’m blind,” he yelled as the liquid took effect. While he was blinded, Jinn pulled the gun out of his hand. She looked at me.

“I watched you beat the Zombie clan with that stuff. I wasn’t going to leave it behind.” She smiled, and even though she had saved my life again, our relationship had changed. Our friendship remained but was different now.

“I wasn’t the only one with secrets. It’s easy to think you’re the only one with private thoughts. I guess we all have things to hide.”

“I’m sorry I broke your trust, Pene. I am your friend and always protected you. But my family has it share of secrets, and I chose to be part of them, even if I don’t accept them all. Now you need to come with us. Despite what my dad says, I can protect you.”

“No, she can’t. If she tells them what she saw, our clan structure will fall apart. Thousands will die,” Strika yelled, turning toward our voices.

“He’s right about one thing. I can’t stay here. The exit is here. I just need to find it.” I hugged Jinn. We both knew that we would never see each other again. She grabbed her dad and guided him out of

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the lab. Before they exited, she said, “I will wait by the door. If you can’t get out in time, come to me.” And then she was gone.

“Five minutes before the main entry is closed. Please exit the lab.” Five minutes before I was stuck in this tomb. Should I take Jinn up on her offer and leave now? The monitor blinked back at me. *Oh, why didn’t I spend more time in my computer class?* I wiped a tear from my eye. I always was a loner, never reaching out very much for help. But I had liked Jinn and Lucaz, even Tuko. And there were so many other good people in this world. But had my visit made it better, or would it make it worse? Would I ever know?

I had to get my brain working. One entrance into this place didn’t make sense. How did the lab coats leave when they scuttled this place? They sure didn’t walk out into the desert.

I sat down in front of the computer. Was there something I had missed? There was an icon of a camera in the top corner. It reminded me of my home protected by drones. Was this how the watchers watched?

I clicked on it, and all the screens lit up. But what they showed made no sense. Each camera showed a place that I had never seen, with people who could not exist. There were ocean battles between ships and sea monsters, a war of thousands of people on a massive grassy plain, pyramids with some type of alien ship blasting them to rubble.

“Four minutes before this area is sealed!” The computer voiced wailed its next warning.

One monitor especially caught my attention as a huge airship flew into the frame. A boy with oversized goggles was shimmying down a rope that looked like his lifeline. One mishap and he would tumble to the ground below. He was pursued by men with sharp blades, hacking and slashing at his ropes. His odds of survival were overwhelmingly bad. He was minutes or seconds from death unless someone came to his aid. Would he survive?

I shook my head. There was no time to think about these fantasies. If I were to survive, I had to concentrate on my escape. I shut the camera icon down, and the other monitor images disappeared.

I returned and scrolled through the initial video. There had to be some clue. I stared at the frozen computer screen where the video had ended. Was the scientist angling to the right as he was leaving? I walked over to the right of the massive screen. There was a large pile of debris where part of the ceiling had collapsed. It obscured the corner of the room, otherwise I would have noticed the door. I had an EXIT! But the debris had smashed the console. Could I trigger a way out?

“Three minutes to power shutdown.” If I didn’t leave now, I was going to spend a lot of time here. Or a short time, if the air ran out quickly. I pushed lumps of ceiling around, trying to see what was left of the console. Most of it was smashed, except for the one slot where my drone tail went in.

*Here goes everything.* I inserted the chip. Seconds passed. I kept waiting. Nothing. *The story of my life.*

“Two minutes to closure.” *Is time getting faster?* Several lights around me shut off as if the nonessential power was going first. I reinserted the drone tail several times, stupidly thinking that doing the same action over and over would get a different result. The power was on in the drone — what else could I do? I ran back to the computer. I scanned the video names looking for something labeled “access” or “exit.” No luck.

“One minute to door shutdown.” The computer’s calm voice made me want to scream.

A video labeled “reboot” caught my attention. I clicked on it and hoped for the best.

“In case of a system shutdown,” the scientist appeared, “the system can be rebooted with the command code BrX943 and the power will reset...”

I typed the code into the console. Whatever happened next would decide my fate. I had no time to exit the way I came. As I entered the code, the screen went wavy, like the system had crashed. I was about to curse my bad luck when all power fluctuated, including the console in the wall. The console flashed, and I ran forward, slamming the chip in. A door reverberated and moved to the left, sending clumps of debris into the open space. I dove through, and as soon as it opened wide, it started to close

again. The drone had fallen out of my pocket when I dove through and was lying back on the floor. I reached for it to pull it through. I wasn't fast enough, and it was smashed to pieces on the closing wall. All that I had left was a wing, a grim reminder of my pursuer and my savior. I was on the other side, and the door was closed tight. I wished there was a way to tell Jinn that I had made it.

Ahead of me were a corridor and a metal door. My friends, my attackers, were all left behind in Clan World. Who knew if I would ever see any of them again? My mother (if she was alive) had to be closer if I went through the door in front of me. I didn't care what worlds I had to cross to find her. Nothing was going to stop me. I reached down, spun the wheel, and the door yawned open. I stepped through into the cool air.

There was no ground. Nothing solid to step on. So, I fell. I fell down through the sky, and the clouds came rushing toward me. It felt surreal, as if I was flying. Only I knew the impact would not be so sweet. I had better land on something solid quickly, or I would be dead.

## *The World Series continues in*

### *Steam World*

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I felt the moisture in the air as it rushed into my face. I had been so tired that the fear of dying, of the coming impact of the ground did not scare me. I wished I could fly, take myself away from all of my problems and discover if my mother was actually alive. In some ways, I wish I could fall forever.

I looked down and a fluffy cloud raced towards me. What would feel like to fall through a cloud? Is this what a bird experienced? Then I hit solidness and bounced back up high into the air like a supercharged mattress. I fell again and bounced back several times like I was attached to a bungee cord. I had done the unthinkable. I had landed in a cloud.

I stood up, my feet sinking into the whiteness below.

In the distance, a huge airship was floating through the clouds. There was activity on the outside of dirigible, like bees buzzing around a hive. I spied a boy with oversized goggles shimmying down a rope that looked like his lifeline. One mishap and he would be gone. He was pursued by men with sharp blades, hacking and slashing at his ropes. His odds of survival were overwhelming bad. He was seconds from death unless someone came to his aid. Was there some way I could help?

### *Steam World Overview*

In a world where solid earth is scarce and most people live in the air, Pene learns that the clouds are not what they appear. Befriending a young boy on the run from sky pirates, they must navigate strange innovative machines that are run by steam. Their only hope is to find an artificial being who may be their savior or the death of all. To continue her search for her missing mother, she must solve the mysteries of Steam World.

## *Message from the Author*

Most authors write for the love of storytelling and only a few make a living at it. Like most, I work fulltime during the day and write at night, hoping to share a story with people I will never meet. If you liked this story, please take a moment to write a review with Amazon, Good Reads or wherever this book was purchased. If you enjoyed the story, the greatest gift you can give an author is feedback on the novel. Like most authors, if enough readers give feedback, then fortunately future readers will be engaged to read the story as well.

If you ever want to contact me, please go to my website [www.adventurebooks.ca](http://www.adventurebooks.ca) to find out more about me or email me at [j\\_kochanoff@hotmail.com](mailto:j_kochanoff@hotmail.com)