



PART ONE

CENTALPHA 6

JAMES TODD COCHRANE

Centalpha 6

Part I

James Todd Cochrane

Special thanks to all my family and friends for their help and support. Thanks to all my fans. You inspire me to keep writing.

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Published September 24, 2012

www.darkmoonpublishing.com

ISBN 978-0-9797202-9-1

Edited by Janet Michelson

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"All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." ~ Edmund Burke

I've often reflected upon that quote from my days at the academy, whenever I wondered how I got to this point in my life: a hunted outlaw, a rebel, and a deliverer.

1

"How did you manage to flunk the test?" teased James, a tall eighteen-year-old with a narrow face and pale eyes that reflected the joy of the others' humiliation.

Dressed in dark blue military cadet uniforms, the three friends joked as they walked across the grass between the metallic, modern academy buildings.

"I'm not saying," Link frowned, causing his thick black eyebrows to touch in the middle, giving him a unibrow. At barely sixteen, he was the shortest and youngest of the three, but with the stockier build. "Breyden's test is right after lunch and I don't want to give him any help. It was an honest mistake. I want to see him blow it too."

"What a true friend," Breyden beamed. His wavy blond hair reflected the bright noon sunlight. He stood well over six feet tall and had a muscular frame. When your father is the head of the military's elite commandos, they expect big things from you. "I've destroyed you at every test, even with the babes," Breyden chuckled as he razzed his friend, causing a tightening of Link's unibrow and laughter from James.

"So, when do you go on your first raid?" James asked changing the topic, and easing the tension. Sixteen-year-olds at the academy started going on raids with the military to train them on real tactics for taking down and capturing antigovernment, and undesirable subhuman life forms.

"Two days. I can't wait to put a beat down on these antigovernment, anti-people, anti-democratic freaks," Breyden's smile changed to clenched teeth at the mere thought of anyone trying to destroy the society in which they lived.

"I'm so jealous. I have another two months to wait," Link added.

"Slow down there. You only get to ride in the car your first time," James stated. "But believe me, there is no greater satisfaction than handing out a butt kicking and delivering them up to their final home on Centalpa 6."

"It must be awesome knowing you've already made the cut," Link lamented.

"Yep. I'll be out there fighting for the equality of all, at the end of the semester."

"Can't you tell us anything about it?" Link questioned, with raised eyebrows and anticipation in his eyes.

"You know he can't. He's sworn an oath of secrecy. He would be booted out before he even started. We can't have our enemies knowing our prison locations and interrogation methods. That would jeopardize everything we fight for," Breyden rattled off as if he were reading right out of a textbook. Since he could walk, his father had been teaching him and molding him into the perfect soldier. He knew things other cadets didn't know or had yet to learn: ways the enemy used to conceal their tracks, avoid detection, their methods of attack, and their favorite targets. By the age of thirteen, he had obtained his third black belt in multiple martial art forms in which his father kept him enrolled.

"Besides, they test you on these raids to see if you have what it takes. Follow orders to the letter type stuff. Can you deal out the proper force with these subhuman losers? If you fail, it's off to the regular army for you, in some awful remote galaxy," James boasted, puffing out his chest a little to show his superior accomplishments.

"I hope I pass those qualifications," Link sulked as he stuffed his hands in his pockets and lowered his head slightly.

"That's why we have these tests. To..." Breyden started to

offer but finished with a wolf's whistle as a small group of girls in school uniforms scuttled by. Their red faces and giggles indicated their approval of his attention.

"When are we going out, Susan?" Breyden asked as he walked backwards with his arms extended as if he was about to give her a hug.

This maneuver brought more laughter that quickened the girls pace across the lawn.

"Dude, she's been dating Jeff. You don't want to mess with him," Link warned.

"He's a wuss," Breyden smirked.

"Yeah, all two hundred and thirty five pounds of him," James rolled his eyes. "Rumor has it he's going to be placed in your dad's squad."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you can go wherever you want, with your dad in command of the Elite Commandos and your mother a member of the Interplanetary Senate."

The smile faded from Breyden's face, but before he could comment the schools intercom system rang out. "Cadet Pry, please report to the testing center. Cadet Pry, please report to the testing center."

"I've gotta go," Breyden broke into a jog.

"Good luck," his friends called after him.

Breyden hustled up the stairs and into the testing center where a round elderly woman, with reading glasses perched upon her nose, sat behind a desk. He hesitated a few paces from the desk to catch his breath and wipe the beads of sweat forming along his brow.

"Are you ready?" the woman smiled as she spotted him over the top of her glasses.

"You know it," Breyden pronounced.

"With your parents, you'd better be." The woman chuckled as she slid a computer pad around the desk.

Breyden placed a thumb on the screen until a soft woman's voice issued from the device. "Identification confirmed."

"Room two," the secretary nodded in the direction of a half dozen doors that lined the wall, numbered one through six.

Breyden spun toward the testing rooms, took a deep breath and marched to door number two. His pulse pounded in his veins as he grasped the handle. Pausing for a half second, he steeled himself, and then opened the door. The small rush of adrenaline he had felt a moment ago deflated when he saw a small wooden table with a chair. On the table sat a pencil and a sheet of paper. A written test. Breyden frowned at the boring prospect.

"Take a seat at the table, Cadet Pry. You will have thirty minutes to complete the test," A soft female voice filled the rather large bare room.

Breyden circled the desk and plopped himself in the chair. Snatching up the pencil with one hand he flipped the test over with the other. Breyden's heart started to pick up speed. Something told him this was no ordinary test. He read the first question aloud, "What is the standard punishment for not carrying a legal identification card?"

He put the pencil to the paper and wrote out the answer. Automatic expulsion to a non-universal governed planet.

"What amount of force is acceptable when dealing with rebels?" Lethal force.

"What amount of collateral damage is acceptable in a raid?" All forms of collateral damage are acceptable.

Before Breyden could read the next sentence, the wall behind him flew upward and angry screams filled the room. Breyden leaped to his feet and used a sharp back kick to the chair, sending it into the legs of one of three oncoming attackers.

All three wore black clothing with masks. The one to his left carried a short club while the other two wielded long knives. Breyden hopped back as the one with the club swung it in a wide circle, just missing Breyden's midsection. A loud crack filled the room as the wild swing, missed Breyden and connected with the attacker Breyden had tripped with the chair. It hit the attacker in the head as he attempted to scramble back up, leaving him in an unconscious heap.

Breyden rolled backward over the table, placing it between

himself and the advancing men. As the assailants started to circle, Breyden forced the table into the one with the knife, driving him further away. The other attacker started to swing the club in a downward motion. Breyden jumped forward, created an x with his forearms, and trapped the man's wrist above his head. Using the man's momentum, he swung the bat down through the man's legs. Breyden caught the bat and yanked it upward, hitting the man in the groin.

A sharp groan issued from the man and his legs buckled. Breyden slammed his foot onto the man's knee, dropping him to the ground and capturing the club at the same time. Breyden struck the man in the back and on the side of the head, sending him off to dreamland.

Breyden spun backward as a knife slashed a long gash in his shirt, barely missing his skin. When the man lunged again, Breyden struck him across the wrist with the club, causing him to let go of the knife. The attacker paused to stare at his dropped weapon and Breyden took advantage of this mistake. Breyden hit the man across the jaw and square in the face. He stepped aside and let the man fall to the floor.

Knowing this wasn't the end of the test, Breyden dragged the men into a neat line along the floor. He then stripped off their shoes and used their own shoelaces to bind their arms behind their backs, then checked all of their pockets for any identification or contraband. His search yielded two false identification cards, a crudely drawn map, and an outlawed object in the boot of one of the victims.

"Please," one attacker turned out to be a woman, who began to whimper.

"Shut up!" Breyden gave her a quick kick to the head, knocking her unconscious again.

The main door to the testing room swung open and Breyden snapped to attention. He saluted with the typical motion of thumping his right hand over his heart and repeating the words, "Justice for the People."

As they entered the room the instructors returned the gesture.

"Report!" A hardened, elderly captain barked, as he limped around the room. His rough, chiseled features showed his age and experience.

"Three hostiles ready for transport. Two fake IDs and a map, Sir," Breyden spoke with confidence.

"Any weapons?"

"A gun, Sir." Breyden reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, twenty-first century revolver.

"Excellent work, Cadet Pry," one of the other officers smiled. "This concludes the test. Your father will be proud. Dismissed."

"Thank you, Sir. Justice for the People." Breyden saluted again and marched from the room.

###

"I missed the gun," Link scowled. "That's how I flunked the test."

"Holy crap! You got all the way to the end and then overlooked that?" James stated with a shocked expression.

"Dude, how could you forget to search for that?"

"I didn't take off their shoes, alright?" Link almost yelled. "I tied them up with their shoelaces but only pulled the laces out, leaving their shoes on."

"I actually loved the test," Breyden smirked. "It's a blast kicking butt on real rebels. It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy to know that after they take their beating, they're off to the prison planet." Breyden put his hand on his heart, and bowed his head, in a mocking kind of way.

"They're real criminals?" Link asked with wide eyes.

"Heck yeah, you idiot. Do you think they're going to let us beat on real humans? They bring these subs in especially for us to train on," James stated.

"Gee, that will make it a lot easier to pound them senseless on future tests," Link smiled.

"Yes, I never take it easy on subs." Breyden hated subs, a derogatory term given to antigovernment, nonconformists, and undesirables. "Sub humans need to be wiped out of the galaxy.

They're just a bunch of weak-minded people, unwilling to share in our utopian society."

"They will all be destroyed someday," James affirmed.

"You're lucky. Your dad tells you all the stuff you need to remember," Link huffed.

"It's not luck. I'm good," Breyden pulled a folded piece of paper out of his back pocket and waved his hand with a wicked smile. The sweet smell of perfume spread through the room with each pass of the paper.

"What's that?" James smiled.

"A note...from Susan."

"No way," Link's eyes grew wide. "Why would she write you a letter?"

"Because all texts and phone calls are monitored by their headmistress, dummy," Breyden laughed.

"That's not what I meant. She's Jeff's girl."

"Dude," James laughed.

"Apparently not!" Breyden winked.

###

"So, Link missed the gun?" Breyden's dad, Paul Pry, asked as they strolled into the international transport station in Denver, Colorado. He stood a couple inches taller than his son and his shoulders were a little broader. Blond hair poked out from under his military beret and his sharp green eyes constantly searched for the unexpected.

"Yes," Breyden stated, matching his father's pace.

They marched past the ticket counters to the escalators in the center of the large building. Set up the same way as the old airport systems, teleports transported people all over the universe in the blink of an eye. Now, however, instead of people crowding into airplanes like cattle, they and other life forms stepped into round individual glass tubes and disappeared in a flash of light. Special platforms shipped freight the same way.

Across the top of the security area bright red monikers

flashed alerts about forbidden objects and substances, warning travelers against transporting illegal items. Breyden followed his father through a large crowd of people waiting for family or friends to return, or saying their goodbyes to those departing. Breyden always walked tall through this area. His cadet uniform caused fear in some, and admiration in others. Being a teenager, he loved the attention it drew from young girls his age. He winked as he locked eyes with a beautiful brunette with dazzling blue-green eyes. To his displeasure, she frowned and turned away.

His father swung around the knot of people and headed toward a special entrance that would enable them to bypass the scanners and highly trained dogs of the security check point. Breyden, still feeling a little stung by the striking brunette, shot a glance over his shoulder to see her scowling at him.

“Well, at least he didn’t remove their masks like the last time,” his father commented as he flashed his ID to a guard behind a desk. The guard nodded and pressed a control on his display panel, unlocking a gate for them to continue. “Why don’t we remove their masks?” his father asked, like he always did. He thought it important to keep his son on his toes, constantly adding to his education.

“Because then we might see them for something other than the subs they are,” Breyden spat. His distaste heightened by his displeasure at failing to impress the girl. The only thing that helped the bitterness of being shunned was the fact that he didn’t have to have every crack and crevice on his body sniffed by a security dog.

“Precisely. They will do anything to make you think they are more than they are: someone worthwhile with feelings. Don’t let them fool you. They are a cancer, a disease that threatens our way of life, our perfect society where everyone is equal.”

They followed the signs leading to the Interplanetary Arrivals Terminal. They didn’t need directions because they walked these halls almost daily. Being in the People’s Planetary Senate, his mother traveled constantly, making sure the

workers of the universe were all equal and that no one had more than they deserved. Most days, Breyden met his mother outside the security section, but on days when his father was home, they waited for her outside the teleportation tube.

"She's coming in tube twelve," his father said, stretching his head above a particularly tall Henitian, a humanoid from another planet, walking in front of them. He checked his watch. "We have five minutes."

As Breyden and his father passed the other tubes, the glass structures would flash a bright light and a traveler would appear. The current traveler would step away from the tube and a few minutes later another would arrive.

He and his father reached tube twelve to see a short fat man arrive; he could barely fit in the tube. The man actually had to turn sideways to squeeze out of the opening, almost ripping buttons off his suit jacket. The minute he cleared the doorway, a glass door sealed off the tube so the next passenger could teleport in.

"Your mother is next," Breyden's father nodded toward the cylinder, telling Breyden to step up and greet his mother.

Although his mother was seldom gone longer than a normal business day, it had become a family tradition for Breyden to be there to embrace his mother when she returned from trips or work. Breyden would wait next to the door and give his mother a hug and a kiss on the cheek as she cleared the opening. At the interplanetary transports, a teleport representative usually stood waiting to assist the travelers. Since Breyden and his father were regulars, the representatives always allowed Breyden to take their spot.

Breyden blinked as the tube flashed with a blinding light but recovered quickly while the glass door slid open. His mother was a tall woman with short red hair and pale freckled skin. A radiant smile spread across her thin face as she spotted her son.

"Welcome home, mother." Breyden embraced his mother.

Ear splitting sirens suddenly echoed through the complex as red and yellow spinning lights rotated wildly, creating a

dizzying effect. A computerized female voice blared above the sirens, "Illegal object detected in transport eleven, traveler terminated! Illegal object detected in transport eleven, traveler terminated!"

The travel agent directly behind Breyden swore loudly and scrambled away from the tube, knocking over the divider poles and ropes, causing them to crash into the legs of both Breyden and his mother. Breyden tried to maintain his balance but in his effort to keep his mother upright, they both toppled over. Shifting his weight, Breyden landed flat on his back absorbing most of the impact as his mother fell on top of him.

There was the usual bright light from the tube, followed by a disturbing thud that sprayed the inside of the glass cylinder with a thick dark red liquid. The remains of the traveler steamed and boiled as it slid down the inside the tube walls. Breyden's father leaped forward to help his wife off the floor before the automatic door opened letting the sickening red liquid spread across the terminal floor. The sticky substance fully bathed Breyden down his backside.

"Crap!" Breyden scrambled to his feet as the substance continued to cover the floor.

Armed troops stormed the area, ushering everyone back from the scene. "Close down tubes nine through thirteen," one of them ordered.

Breyden's father rushed to the customer service desk. "What was the name?" he barked his face red with rage.

A nervous woman behind the desk typed frantically on her computer. "Ah...Mrs. Stevensen, Jenny A."

Colonel Pry dashed toward the security area and Breyden trailed close behind. As the woman's remains seeped through his clothing and ran down his skin, Breyden forgot his discomfort in the excitement of the hunt for any conspirators involved in a plot to transport illegal objects. His father had told him about this type of tactic before. If they could get to the security area before word of the incident reached the crowd, they could sometimes trick those waiting for the arrival of the smuggler into revealing themselves.

Breyden followed his father to the security desk where the guard was on the phone barking orders to keep everyone out of the interplanetary terminal. Colonel Pry flashed his ID to the guard who told whoever he had been speaking to that he would call them back.

"How can I help you?"

"I want you to announce that a Mrs. Stevensen fell exiting the teleport and needs assistance. Her party should meet her by the...", he glanced around the security area, "main security exit."

"Why not here?" the man asked.

"If you say 'security desk' and they know an illegal object was coming through, they might be tipped off." Colonel Pry rolled his eyes at his son.

Breyden smirked at his father's expression, but the smirk faded as his father eyed him strangely. He grabbed Breyden by the shoulders and whirled him around. "Stay here! All of your clothes are evidence. You are going to have to leave everything that is...wet, here. Plus, you might tip them off if they see you."

"Yes, sir," Breyden accepted the order without showing disappointment. He felt as if his father had kicked him in the gut. His pulse throbbed in his temples at having to sit on the sidelines and watch, when he could have participated in his first bust.

The guard spoke into a microphone at his desk which carried the message over the speakers stationed throughout the teleport. He kept his voice casual throughout the announcement as if this was just routine.

Breyden's eyes danced around the crowd trying to spot anyone reacting to the message. He momentarily focused on the brunette he had noticed on his way in, but this time instead of indifference, her eyes glinted with curiosity. Then he spotted a man with brown hair, dressed in an old suit, heading toward the security exit. Breyden had to bounce and weave back and forth to keep the medium height man in view as he moved through the crowd. Each of the man's steps seemed hesitant as if he didn't know what to do. There was no doubt in Breyden's

mind; he was the man they were seeking.

The crowd gasped in surprise as news of the termination reached the security check point before the man arrived at the exit. Instead of fleeing for his life, the man's reaction surprised Breyden.

"Jenny. No, Jenny," he wailed and sprinted toward the main check point.

A hushed silence blanketed the area as Breyden's dad, along with several others, took the man down. The man continued to cry out and thrash around as the security officers hammered him into submission by slamming him onto the floor and striking him across the head and body with their security clubs.

"That should set a good example for anyone else thinking of trying to skirt the rules," the guard chuckled.

"They should beat on the idiot some more," Breyden spat, as adrenaline replaced the annoyance in his veins. Observing the arrest sparked his enthusiasm for enforcing the laws of the people.

The man continued to scream out the woman's name until a sharp jab to his temple with the end of a club knocked him out cold. The security officers carried him off the floor as everyone watched in horrified shock.

"Here." the guard behind the desk tossed Breyden a pair of overalls. "You're going to need these when they take your stuff."

Breyden patted his pockets to see what he was going to lose, when he remembered Susan's letter in his back pocket.

"They're going to take everything," the guard chuckled.

"Yeah," Breyden frowned. Except Susan's letter!

Taking a quick survey, Breyden noted the position of the security cameras in the room. His father had taught him from a young age how to spot them. Then, checking to see he was positioned properly and that no one was looking, he slipped the stained letter out of his back pocket. The blood drained from his face as he locked eyes with the brunette while he tucked the letter into the folds of the overalls.

2

Breyden stood in the center of his spacious bedroom holding the stained letter. He knew he should burn it but his ego, the one that needed constant feeding, kept him from destroying it. The letter gave him bragging rights over his friends and he relished holding and maintaining that privilege. Still, he felt guilty about it as he pictured the questioning look from the girl at the terminal. Why did she seem interested in his actions? She couldn't have known I was keeping information from the people, the government.

Still, one of the main laws drilled into the heads of all students, no matter what school they attended, was the idea of the people overall. Everyone owned everything and there was nothing out of the government's control. Only the fact his mother was a senator and his father the head of the Elite Commandos, kept the government's eyes out of his house. Almost every building in the universe had video and audio devices of some kind inside, although they might not always be active.

His eyes darted around the room for a possible hiding place for his secret letter. After a moment or two he decided to place it in his favorite book, *The Hobbit*! He snatched it off the shelf and stuffed the letter in the middle of the book before putting it back.

Moving to the bed, he plopped down with a groan. He was sore. The investigators were not gentle as they scrubbed his skin raw in an effort to remove all of the evidence from his body. They told him it was to make sure he didn't absorb any contaminants through the skin. They still weren't sure what the woman was trying to smuggle to earth.

A sharp sting ran down his back as he leaned over to switch off the light. The pain angered him! If only he could have

helped deliver a couple of kicks to the suspect. He let thoughts of the man's upcoming cruel punishments play in his mind before drifting off to sleep.

###

"You were actually there when it happened. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen you on the news last night," Link stated, spotting Breyden as he performed reps on the bench press.

"I especially loved the scene of them hosing you down with the high pressure wash and using those long brushes to scrub your back," James laughed.

"Yep! At least they put that black bar over my butt." Breyden exhaled at the top of his lift and lowered the weights back down.

"I can't believe people are stupid enough to try that. You don't mess around with the teleports. You're toast before you reach your destination," James stated as he stood up from the curl machine and wiped his face with a towel.

"And that dude took a serious beating," Link added.

Breyden finished his set and Link helped him secure the bar. "I just wish they would perfect those things. The stupid attendant tripped me and my mother right into the woman's remains."

"Ewww!" Link's face twisted into a tight knot with disgust.

"Well, when they're traveling that fast, it's impossible to totally disintegrate them before they complete the trip," James explained.

"Oh, I didn't mind the sight, just the swimming in it," Breyden smirked. "They nearly peeled the skin off my butt getting me clean. I am so sore right now. It feels like someone took a cheese grater to my butt."

Link and James chuckled as the three moved to another section of the gym to start working on the military press. Breyden placed two forty-five pound weights on one end of the bar as Link added the same to the other side. James fastened a

weight belt around his waist. A group of upper classmen entered the room, causing a few of the younger cadets to scatter like mice.

Hazing was a daily occurrence at the academy. Older students with higher ranks constantly bullied the younger, smaller students. These incidents ranged from verbal abuse to physical beatings. The only rule against such behavior was: 'don't get caught.' Those who were caught received severe punishment. Usually, the victims kept quiet because a snitch drew even more abuse.

"Cadet Thompson, Cadet Sims, restroom duty, NOW!" ordered Jeff, a tank of a boy and the senior cadet on campus.

"Ugh!" Link scowled.

"Get a younger cadet to do it," James protested. He obviously didn't like that Jeff had chosen him, since they were only a few months apart in age.

But Jeff towered over everyone, and, as the top dog, he wanted everyone to know it, "Are you challenging my authority?"

"No, just your decision making," James spat, getting to his feet. "Come on, Link. Let's get this done."

Breyden's blood pumped through his veins with greater intensity at this strange development. Although it had been a few years since his last serious harassment, he recognized the signs. He took several slow deep breaths to steady his nerves. Keep your head and make them pay!

The older cadets shoved a few students aside as they tried to gain the exit, wanting to avoid being targeted by accident. All six cadets only had eyes for Breyden, with Jeff leading them forward.

Breyden, acting as if he was going to continue with his workout, loosened the pin holding the weights on one side of the bar. He bent over and tied his shoelaces to secure his footing.

"So, Cadet Pry, I hear you've been making moves on my girlfriend," Jeff stated with a twisted sneer.

"I don't like boys," Breyden taunted as he stood tall. He had

every intention of lashing out in every way. He wanted to inflict as much damage as he could, either mentally or physically.

"I'm talking about Susan, punk."

"Oh, well, don't worry, she told me she likes boys!"

"You think it's funny? Now, since you don't know how to keep your eyes off my property, we're going to have to teach you a lesson," Jeff barked, his face knotted with rage.

"Your mother's back is too hairy for me to want to look at."

A quick, sharp look from Jeff silenced the laughter from around the gym. "We'll see how smart you are after eating through a straw for a week."

"Yeah, I noticed you brought help. If you're so tough, let's just you and I have a go," Breyden suggested, as the group circled and closed in around him.

"Everything here is the people's, so why should I be the only one to have all the fun," Jeff smirked, as he waved at the building around them.

"Bring it, women!" Breyden swung the weights off his side of the bar and into the legs of the boy on his right. This caused the bar to tip up and the weights on the other side to drop on the feet of another, both boys howled as the weights crushed their feet.

Before the group could grab him, Breyden focused his attack on Jeff. He drove into him like a linebacker and tackled him to the mat. He managed to land two hard punches to Jeff's face, splitting his lips open, before the other three seized him.

They pinned his arms behind him and dragged him toward a support beam in the center of the room. Breyden managed to drop another boy with a back kick to the knee before they secured him to the pole. Pain erupted all over his face and midsection as blow after blow hammered into him. The room swayed back and forth like a boat in a violent storm as unconsciousness threatened to overtake him. Hot sticky blood filled his mouth and ran down his throat.

"WHAT'S GOING ON HERE!" a teacher, a staff sergeant, burst into the gym.

Breyden could only make out his fuzzy outline through

rapidly swelling eyes.

"You four against the wall, NOW!" he barked.

In a last effort to get his own licks in, Breyden spit blood all over Jeff as he backed away. "Took six of you," his voice harsh in his ears, his mouth hurting as he attempted to smile.

###

"YOU, all of you," the Colonel's eyes fell on Breyden as he marched around the group of students and their parents in the small conference room, "will receive two month's detention, including nightly trash duty."

"Ah, Sir," Colonel Pry attempted to speak on behalf of his son. "Why..."

"Because your son broke two boys' feet to start this little war. Now, I'm not saying he wouldn't have received the same treatment if he hadn't done that, but he did initiate the fight. A smart move, I might add, under the circumstances," he shot Breyden a wink, "but we have zero tolerance for anyone caught fighting. So, all of you will report tomorrow night to the Sergeant in charge of trash duty. And anymore outbreaks from any of you will result in punishments even more severe."

Breyden's father made him recount the incident several times on the way home as they zipped through the city in their hover car, headed toward the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Even though his father seemed impressed with the way he handled himself in the face of such odds, Breyden knew he would receive additional punishment at home. His father believed in strict military discipline and having soldiers fight amongst themselves was seriously frowned upon.

"Do you have any idea why they targeted you?" his father asked. "I know initiations happen all the time but this seems a little excessive."

"Ah..." the letter Breyden had hidden from the investigators floated in his mind. "I may have flirted with his girlfriend," he offered.

"Was she worth it?" his father chuckled.

"She's cute but getting under Jeff's skin was even more fun." Breyden watched the dim city lights out the window of the hover car, his thoughts on the letter. "Hey."

"Yes?"

"Did they ever figure out what those people were trying to transport to earth?" Breyden asked, concerned he might have something dangerous hiding in his room. The last thing he needed was some toxic chemical slowly killing him in his sleep. The tension from this possibility, and a risk of greater punishment, caused his wounds to ache and his stomach to spin.

"People? Oh, yes. They were trying to smuggle Liquid Light"

"Are they sure?" Breyden's stomach stopped churning and a relaxing calm started to spread through his tensed muscles. Liquid Light, the latest fad in hallucinogenic drugs, created from vegetation growing on some far away planet, had to be ingested for the user to get high. Its street value on earth was more than the peoples' average weekly salary.

"Yes, they found massive traces mixed with the woman's remains. They are going to run the story on tonight's news."

"And the man?"

"Her husband. They are trying to determine his involvement at this time. But, rumor has it they've discovered evidence of his complicity on The Main."

"The Main?" Breyden asked.

"Boy, did Jeff knock the sense out of you or what?" his father chuckled. "I've told you a million times: every bit of every form of electronic communication is captured and analyzed constantly by a group of people working from a location called The Main. It is our greatest weapon against enemies trying to destroy our perfect society. Once the government took control of all the major communication companies of the past, real police work began."

"Oh yeah, I guess I'm just tired." More like relieved. Breyden exhaled, expelling stress from his battered mind and body, and went back to staring out the window.

The next week was the longest week of Breyden's life. His

injuries made it hard to move and breathe. As boring and mundane as collecting trash was, it took twice the time when forced to do it at a slower pace to avoid the sharp, stabbing pains caused by bending over or leaning the wrong way.

His father decided to wait a week before adding his own punishment on top of the others, which then occupied all of Breyden's free time. He didn't get to spend any time with his friends or even think about watching television. His father assigned him various forms of yard work: splitting logs and clearing out dead wood and brush along a canal that ran behind their small mansion.

Toward the end of the second week, Breyden received a break from his disciplinary chores when he was assigned to go on his first raid. Even though he would only get to ride along in the car, it was better than trash duty or doing mindless yard work. He gave a long wave to Jeff and the other boys as he climbed into one of the raid vehicles just as the other boys arrived to begin their trash pickup.

Although only riding in the attack vehicles and watching through the windows wasn't that exciting, it beat the heck out of smelling like garbage. The one thing the raid failed to do was use up enough time to get him out of his father's extra chores. He only caught a few glimpses of a half dozen prisoners being forced, none too gently, into the holding craft. After they dropped him off at home, he circled the house to find his father's instructions taped to the door of the shed.

"Crap, 'trim the trees'," Breyden complained. He had to admit he wanted nothing more than to kick Jeff's head in for getting him in trouble. "If he had been man enough to fight me one on one, it wouldn't have lasted long enough for us to get caught," he grumbled aloud to himself as he opened the door of the work shed.

He retrieved the necessary tools and work gloves out of the shed and hurried up the small hill to the designated trees. He would have to hurry to get some work done before it grew too dark to see. His parents would be returning home later in the evening. He had to make it look like he had accomplished

something.

The sun had set and in the failing light; he carried the last of the branches to the pile he would burn tomorrow when a sudden flash of light brought him to a halt. He checked his watch to see that his parents weren't expected home for another hour. He stood frozen in the shadows of some trees when he saw it again. His heart raced as he realized the light which bounced off nearby trees had come from inside the house.

Breyden set the branches on the ground and hustled to the backside of the house in a hunched-over position. He kept his body below the windows as he scampered along the back to the side of the house where his bedroom window faced a small forested area against the base of the Rocky Mountains. Every few minutes a beam of light would swing from the window across the trees outside and then disappear again.

As Breyden hurried toward the bedroom window, several crashes and thuds vibrated through the house and into his body as he leaned against the structure. His pulse quickened and his mouth grew dry with excitement.

Breyden took a quick peek through the window. Two black clad figures rifled through his room showing no concern for his property. What are they after? Idiots! Trashing my stuff. His blood started to boil and he balled his hands into fists. He shot around to the front of the house and up the porch to find the front door opened a crack.

Bobbing his face in front of the crack several times he determined no one was in the entryway or the living room. No one is keeping watch. Dumb move! He smirked as he slipped into the house, using walls and furniture to remain hidden from the intruders. With his soft soled shoes he navigated the hardwood floors of the living room without a sound.

"Are you sure?" a muffled male voice reached Breyden from the hall.

"Yes, I've found it. I told you I saw him take it," a female responded.

"Be careful with that. We've been waiting years for proof."

Breyden changed positions to be around the corner from the hall, on the side away from the front door. His heartbeat thumped in his ears and his breathing was too loud for his liking. He flattened himself against the wall. Be quick and precise. Hit hard.

"Let's get out of here. We're dead if anyone finds us in this castle. A Senator's house who's husband is in the Goon Squad. I just wish these people could experience how the rest of the universe lives. I mean, the ruling class lives like kings while the rest of us suffer," the man bemoaned as his voice grew louder with their approach.

"We needed to take a risk to get big results. The underground is going to love this, if our suspicions are correct," the woman added.

Breyden waited until they passed him and entered the living room. With all his might, he landed a hard blow to the back of the head of the tall male. The unsuspecting man dropped like a stone, smashing the antique wooden coffee table under the weight of his fall. Breyden's plan to subdue them both in the house failed, as a section of the coffee table flipped over the man, catching Breyden across the side of the face. He placed a hand on the wall to regain his balance as his vision grew dark from the surge of pain clouding his sight.

The woman bolted through the door and out into the night. Breyden staggered to the door, still fighting the earth rocking sensation in his head. He paused a moment against a porch beam to clear the stars from his head and to get his bearings.

The street was empty. Only the usual hover cars sat where they always did for this time of the evening. This private neighborhood with its lavish houses had almost no traffic so anything out of the ordinary would broadcast its presence. The dim glow of the energy saving lamps, with their weak light, could have allowed someone to slowly work their way up the street without being seen, but not someone running at a frantic sprint.

Breyden jumped off the porch and started to move toward the forest on the left-back side of the house. The splash of

something large landing in water rose above the chirping crickets, launching Breyden forward.

He raced through the backyard, up the hill, and onto the trail running along the canal. With the sun having set behind the mountains, the forest became a dark maze of trees and shrubs. Breyden knew the area well, which allowed him to navigate the trail with ease. More swooshing from the water nearby brought him to a halt. His target was close. He proceeded forward like a cat, keeping to the worn path, avoiding debris that could alert his prey.

Finally, he was close enough to hear the woman as she struggled to get up the bank on the other side of the canal. Twigs snapping and water splashing told Breyden her exact position. He worked his way to a spot where he could see the shadowy form of her half submerged body. She seemed to think she was alone as she swore several times in her effort to pull herself up the bank, only to fall backward into the slow moving water.

Knowing the forest, Breyden hustled farther up the trail to an old dirt road that crossed over the canal. The water flowed under the road through two large round aluminum culverts. After several minutes he located the woman wading upstream as she searched for a better point of exit.

Breyden waited as she crawled out of the canal onto the muddy bank. Her hands and knees sank into the soft mud before she reached a spot where she could stand. She found an area where the willows grew out the side of the bank and attempted to use the branches to pull herself up.

Her long hair covered her face in the darkness as Breyden reached down and seized her by the arm. She let out a scream as Breyden yanked her out of the ditch and spun her arm behind her back, forcing her face down onto the forest floor.

"Who are you?" Breyden hissed in her ear as his free hand began searching her pockets and clothes for whatever she had found in his room.

"You're hurting my arm," she whimpered.

"I'll break it if you don't tell me what you were after."

Breyden jerked her arm a little higher, causing her to cry out.

"Th-the...the paper," she struggled with the pain in her arm.

"Paper? What paper?" Breyden questioned, as his hand found a small sealed plastic baggy in an inside pocket of her sweatshirt.

"The one you kept from the police at the teleport," the woman gasped. "I saw you hide it."

These words caused Breyden to pause. His aggression faded to curiosity as the pretty brunette with green-blue eyes popped into his brain. "My letter," he muttered, more to himself, as he lessened his tug on the girl's arm.

"Yes." She heaved, taking several deep breaths with relief.

She gasped as Breyden cranked her arm again. "Why did you want it?"

"Evidence," she squirmed. "My arm...please."

"Of what?"

"Murder."

"Whose murder?" Breyden pushed her arm even higher.

"The woman who was killed in the tube. You're breaking my arm," she cried.

"She was smuggling Liquid Light," Breyden stated through gritted teeth in her ear. "She was a criminal!"

"And you believe that?"

Breyden eased back on her arm. "Why shouldn't I."

"They must have scratched your brain when they scrubbed your butt raw. You think you can carry Liquid Light past the security dogs, before you actually make it to the tube?" the woman stated as a fact. "She wasn't transporting Liquid Light and we can prove it with that paper."

Breyden released her arm and dug his knee into her back to hold her in place as he searched for a light source to look at the letter, wondering if light would help him know the truth of the matter.

"Why would the government murder an innocent..."

WHACK! A hard blow to the face caused Breyden to fall backward off the woman. The letter flew out of his hand as stars popped in front of his eyes. CRACK! Another hit turned

everything black.

3

Breyden's head pulsed as if on the verge of exploding as he tried to figure out where he was. It was completely dark. "Ugh," he grunted as he touched a swollen area around his eye. His hands, still stuffed in the leather work gloves, felt rough against his skin. He slipped the gloves off and finished probing the injuries on the side of his head. It took him several minutes to figure out what had happened. What was he doing in the forest at night? The girl!

He sat up but had to place his head between his knees to control the dizziness. He replayed the evening's events in his mind. When his focus jumped to the letter, it snapped his attention away from the throbbing in his temples and to the area around him. Did they find it? He wondered as he remembered losing it as a result of the attack.

"Dummy! Dummy! Dummy!" he chewed himself out for forgetting about the man. His father would not be happy with this oversight in failing to secure the intruder. Breyden was positive it was the man who had helped the girl.

Suddenly his mind locked onto a more terrifying thought. How would he explain all this to his parents? What reason would he give them for his room being targeted by the burglars? He had withheld evidence from an investigation.

"Murder!" the girl's voice echoed in his mind.

Would his parents believe mistaken identity? Had the intruders gone through any of the other rooms? With his mother a member of the Senate, they might draw their own conclusions. The government had more than enough enemies.

Running his hands along the ground and through grass and twigs, he tried to guess where the paper might have landed.

"They had flashlights," he told himself with disappointment. He was about to give up when out of the corner of his eye he caught a faint flash of soft white. It took a few painful bobs of his head to spot it again and follow it to the source. His headache momentarily forgotten as he found the letter stuck in the branches of a young pine tree about three feet off the ground. Only in a certain position could he see the moonlight reflecting on the plastic surface of the bag.

He sat for a few minutes, wondering what he should do with it. He couldn't be caught with it now! It was evidence which he had failed to turn in. Now people had targeted their house because of it. I have to hide it! But, not in the house. As he climbed to his feet, flashing red and blue lights winked at him through the trees.

He swayed a few moments before regaining his balance. His head felt as if it had collided with a car, throbbing with every beat of his heart. He made his way back to the small dirt road and crossed over the canal. Every step caused his head to swim and he felt nauseated. The street lamps and police lights continued to grow brighter as he worked his way through the dark.

When he reached the shed at the back of their property, he resolved on a place to hide the letter. While still in the plastic, he rolled the letter into a round tube, and stuffed it into the finger of one of his work gloves. His pulse increased again as he approached the back of the shed. He didn't want anyone to see him enter or leave the structure, as he wished to keep secret the location of the gloves.

He stepped off the trail and circled around the shed. To his relief, the backyard was empty. After double checking the area, he slipped inside the shed. He placed the gloves into the fourth roof truss hole from the door. Leaving the door open, he headed for the front of the house. Before he reached the corner, twisted shadows stretched across the front yard, indicating the police were aware of his presence.

"It's Breyden Pry," he announced, putting his hands in the air and coming to a stop. He thought this was the only thing

that would save him from being pounced upon. Standard procedure was to subdue first and then get answers.

A flood of flashlights sprang to life causing him to squint and turn his head to the side. He started forward, keeping his hands in the air. One of the officers spoke into a microphone on the side of his vest, announcing they had found Breyden.

The front door flew open and his mother raced toward him. "Oh Breyden, we were so worried."

To Breyden's relief, the intruders had ransacked more than just his bedroom. They had searched a few other areas, but he worried that anyone with half a brain could see the other areas were also related to him; the washroom closest to his bedroom, the TV room, and the game room.

He gave an account of the events to the police, minus his conversation with the girl and any details about the note, the whole time under the close scrutiny of his father. He explained how he had been working in the backyard when he noticed the intruders, who must not have known he was home. "The broken table clocking me in the head obviously caused me to forget to tie up the first intruder. I was in the process of subduing the other when the first one must have found us and hit me with a stick or something," Breyden stated while holding an ice pack against his head.

"Did you hear them say anything that might give us a clue as to what they were after?" the officer asked.

"No. I only caught something about how they knew they were in the house of a Senator and a high ranking military official. Something else about being dead if they got caught," Breyden tried to put the reason for the break in as far away from him as possible.

"Whoever they were, they started down here. You interrupted them before they could get any further," another cop offered.

"Unless...Breyden had something they were after," his father stated with a smile, as everyone in the room chuckled.

Breyden gave the best fake laugh he could muster, though the piercing gaze from his father increased Breyden's level of

concern for the letter hiding in the shed. He decided he would use his father's gloves for the remainder of his punishment.

"I think you did a good job, son," the officer stated. "Who knows what they really wanted. It might have been some way to use you to get to your mother."

"Yeah." Breyden felt sweat building along his brow and under his arms.

"We will need you to take us out to the spot where you wrestled with the girl," the officer stated.

"Of course," Breyden answered.

"It's too dark now, and we don't want to trample any evidence by accident," another officer said.

"How about tomorrow after school?" Breyden's father suggested.

"We will be here," the officer concurred.

The police didn't leave for another two hours as they looked for prints, DNA, and other forms of evidence. Breyden didn't fall asleep on the bed in the guestroom until well after they had gone.

###

"Good military and police work starts in the field, but great work happens in the lab," Breyden's fifth period science professor stated as he put them to the task of identifying certain types of skin cell damage from various injuries and sources.

Breyden spent most of the hour in a hushed whisper with Link and James about the previous night's events. Of course he elaborated on the wounds he inflicted on the intruders. Every once in a while a "get to work, boys" would ring out from the front of the room, but for the most part Breyden told the story in full several times.

To Breyden's displeasure, his injuries were the source of great joy for Jeff and his friends during the nightly trash collection. The comments started the minute they arrived at the custodian's office.

"Nice face," one stated.

"I see you're making more friends," Jeff smiled.

"So, what girl did this to you?" another added, to a chorus of laughter.

"A girl who's a whole lot tougher than the last group who ganged up on me," Breyden taunted. "I mean, this girl knew how to fight. She actually punched and everything. She didn't just swing her purse like the previous gang of girls I fought."

"Knock it off," the custodian barked. "You all want to spend the rest of the school year in here?"

Breyden's spirits lifted when he got home; his father left a note stating Breyden could consider his punishment over after the ransacked rooms were put back in order. He did have to show the police the area where he had struggled with the woman. The size of the broken branch that had been smashed against his head surprised him. He had pictured it as a mere stick not a small log.

After he escorted the police to the location in the woods, he went about fixing the ransacked rooms. Although, it was a lot of work to clean up the mess, Breyden flew through it.

Three weeks passed, and Breyden had almost forgotten about the letter hiding in the shed. His mother had been called into a special Senate session and they went to the teleport to pick her up. It was a beautiful spring day with crisp cool air.

"So, you're going on your second raid next Monday?" his father stated more than asked as they walked across the parking lot toward the main teleport entrance.

"Yep," Breyden stated.

"Are you excited?"

"Absolutely, the first one was rather boring. I didn't have much of a view while sitting in the hover car."

They had just entered the ticket area when Breyden spied her, the beautiful brunette with the mesmerizing eyes. The blood drained from her face and her eyes jumped nervously around the packed building for a way to escape.

Breyden watched as she weaved and ducked in an effort to keep out of his line of sight. He avoided maintaining a constant

stare or craning his neck, so as to not draw his father's attention.

"Well, they try to ease you into the raids. Don't want to give you too much to do at the start," his father explained.

"I understand," Breyden added as he cast a quick glance over his shoulder to spot her eyeing him before she exited the building.

She didn't expect to see me here today. They know my routine or at least they thought they did. Breyden finally pieced it together. They had staked out the house, but because he had been working in the backyard for several weeks they didn't think people were home when they planned to break in. Murder! Her accusation rang in his ears, over and over. Why would they murder anyone?

"Whatever happened to that man?" Breyden asked after they returned to the hovercraft with his mother.

"What man?"

"The guy whose wife tried to transport the Liquid Light?"

"Oh. He was found guilty of conspiracy and shipped off the planet to some hellish place," his father stated.

###

In the hover car Breyden sat across from the armed soldiers as they raced through an older part of the city. He wore complete battle gear but was not given a weapon. The soldier next to him held tightly to the collar of a military dog. It was a large German Shepherd with a bullet proof vest strapped around its midsection.

"Nice dog," Breyden commented.

"Yeah, she's a smart one, too," the soldier smiled, as he scratched the panting animal behind the ears.

"What kind of work does she do?" Breyden desired an answer to a nagging question that had been smoldering in the back of his brain since Saturday. The girl at the teleport had started his mind churning. It kept replaying all the events surrounding the letter; the termination at the teleport, the

break in, and the conversation with the girl.

"She can subdue a sub in a couple of seconds or sniff out all kinds of contraband."

"Contraband?" Breyden's mind focused and he blocked out the roar of the engines and the other soldiers' conversations.

"You know explosives, drugs..."

"Can she detect Liquid Light?" he blurted out.

"Oh yeah. That's one of the easiest substances for a dog to find. She can smell that stuff seeping out of a user's pores two days after use," the soldier boasted.

"Pry!" the commanding officer barked from the front of the vehicle.

"Sir?"

"You follow Jenkins here," the Sergeant slapped a soldier seated next to him on the back.

Breyden locked eyes with Jenkins, "Yes sir!"

"Okay, five minutes ladies," the Sergeant barked, and the air inside the hovercraft turned to a type of pre-football game pep session. Soldiers gave each other high fives and bragged about all the subs they were about to capture; how they were making the People's Government a safer place by ridding the universe of undesirables and non conformists.

"One minute," the Sergeant announced and everyone started checking their equipment.

The second they came to a stop, the soldiers filed out in an orderly fashion and assumed defensive positions around a large dilapidated warehouse. A few small groups of people who worked at other warehouses in the area scattered at the sight of the soldiers. The Sergeant gave a few hand signals and the squad split into several smaller groups and began surrounding the building, covering all possible routes of escape.

"Stay behind me, kid," the soldier whispered, as they halted outside a door on the side of the building. "Turn on your light."

Breyden activated the lamp attached to his helmet. He spotted a few onlookers in the doorway of an adjacent building.

They waited for another few moments until the signal came. "GO!" sounded through their individual earpieces.

Jenkins kicked in the door and Breyden trailed him into the darkened warehouse. The building was a maze of corridors and offices which opened into a spacious assembly line area with loading bay doors. The place was filthy. The occupants had scattered trash, and spray painted all over the walls. Body odor and rotting garbage stung Breyden's nose, forcing him to breathe through his mouth.

In the last office Breyden and Jenkins searched, they found two young girls hiding in a broom closet. The girls wept as Jenkins yanked them out of the closet and ordered them to the floor. After frisking each girl he jerked them up and showed no mercy as he drove the girls out of the room with kicks and violent shoves. They pushed the terrified girls into the center of the assembly area where about thirty people were kneeling on the floor.

"Shut up, you subs," one soldier barked. As an elderly man tried to explain his reason for being there; the soldier struck the man between the eyes with the butt of his gun. The man dropped sideways onto the floor and the wailing of the group echoed off the walls. They were mostly young children, along with a few adults.

"Get back by the wall." Jenkins ordered Breyden, pointing to a section about ten yards away from the prisoners.

"SHUT UP!" the sergeant yelled, changing the wailing to a soft whimper.

Breyden strained his ears to listen to the hushed conversation between the sergeant and a couple of the troops. "What did we find?"

"Nothing but these undesirables," a soldier offered.

"Just another routine cleanup," a second spat.

"It looks that way," the sergeant frowned and then strode over in front of the group. "Does anyone have anything they'd like to confess?"

Breyden almost fell over with shock as every hand shot into the air and the group rushed the sergeant. Several soldiers blocked the group and forced them back to the floor as they fired their weapons into the air. The sergeant's eyes floated

over the group, which resembled the know-it-alls in school, with their arms held high, bouncing on their seats.

"You," the sergeant picked a young boy about twelve years old.

The boy stuttered with fear as he tried to confess. "M—my b—brother an—and I," the boy pointed to an older boy behind him. "We just s—sought s—s—shelter but the o—others a—re planning a rev—revolution."

"I'm good with that," a soldier at the back laughed.

"You may go," the sergeant stated and the boy and his brother bolted for an exit. "I love this game," the sergeant laughed and the others joined in. He touched his microphone on the side of his neck. "There are two teenage boys escaping out the front of the building. Grab them."

"Yes, Sir," returned in Breyden's ear piece.

"Bring in the truck. You subs are under arrest for conspiracy to overthrow the People's Government. You are guilty and will receive no trial," the sergeant stated, as he activated his microphone again. "Make ready to transport the prisoners."

"Cadet Pry, you're finished here, go find vehicle thirty-one for your ride home," the sergeant ordered as he glanced at Breyden.

Breyden hustled to a partially open bay door and ducked to fit under. He hopped down the four foot wall and was rounding the building to search for the correct hovercraft when in his earpiece he heard: "Sergeant, orders from HQ. Bullets are cheaper than teleports."

"Understood."

The rattling of automatic machine gun fire, mingled with momentary screams, vibrated the unstable structure, causing Breyden to stop. A dark empty feeling crept over him as if he were sinking into ice cold water. He rushed to a corner of a nearby building, spraying his lunch on the ground. Even his vision seemed to be dimmed as he rounded the building to see the lifeless bodies of the two young boys oozing pools of red against the base of the warehouse. Two soldiers joked with each other as they meandered back to their truck.

Breyden spotted his designated vehicle at the back of the line of military vehicles and staggered toward them. He tried his best to walk in a straight line, swallowing another couple of acidic, sour heaves from his stomach. Sweat ran down his face and back and the ground seemed to sway under his feet.

As he reached car thirty-one, the door opened and Link's eager face came into focus. The smile plastered on his face faded as he eyed Breyden. "What happened to you?"

A glass panel that separated Breyden and Link from the driver's compartment slid open. "Remember, Cadet Pry, you can never reveal any aspect of a raid to anyone out of the Military. That includes cadets at the academy."

"Yes, sir," Breyden answered and plopped down in the seat next to Link. "Water?" he asked, wiping a film off his lips.

"So how was it?" Link changed his question as he handed Breyden a bottle of water.

The cool liquid spread through Breyden's system, helping to calm him, but his memory continued to eat at his nerves and his stomach remained twisted and tight. "It was okay. I think, I'm coming down with something," Breyden took several deep slow breaths.

"Don't give it to me," Link said, moving as far away from Breyden as he could in the small back seat.

Murder joined with screams and gunfire repeated in Breyden's mind all the way home. It was as if the brunette had created a digital recording just for him and set the player to loop.

"See you tomorrow," Breyden said to Link as he exited the vehicle in front of his home.

"Later," Link waved.

Breyden went to the medicine cabinet and took a few aspirins for his pounding head and then laid down on his bed. Unwanted voices and visions continued to parade through his mind. The lifeless bodies of the young boys against the warehouse and the way the desperate people tried to confess to uncommitted crimes haunted him. A chain of statements began cycling through his thoughts.

“Liquid Light.”

“She wasn’t carrying Liquid Light and we can prove it with that paper.”

“You think you could carry Liquid Light past the security dogs, before you actually made it to the tube?”

“That’s one of the easiest substances for a dog to find. She can smell that stuff seeping out of a user’s pores two days after use.”

“Good military and police work starts in the field, but great work happens in the lab.”

“The lab!” Breyden muttered aloud as he sat upright in his bed. He glanced at the clock to see that his parents wouldn’t be home for another half hour.

Breyden raced to the kitchen, found a pair of scissors in the junk drawer, and retrieved a sandwich bag out of the cupboard. He rushed out the back door and through the backyard. In the shed he retrieved the hidden gloves. He used the scissors to cut out an inch-sized piece of blood stained paper and put it in the sandwich bag. After he placed the rest of the letter back in the glove and stuffed them back in the hole, he held the small piece of paper up to stare at it.

“You’re going to the school’s science lab,” he stated.

4

Breyden found it difficult to concentrate while sitting in class. His mind remained fixed on the piece of paper in his pocket. He didn’t even respond to the rude comments from Jeff and Jeff’s friends, which drew a skeptical eye from James and Link.

“Dude, what’s up?” James asked in a hushed voice, while watching the teacher write a mathematical equation on the board.

"Still feeling ill?" Link asked, from behind him.

"Do you ever wonder if this is all wrong?"

"Math? Hell, I know it's all wrong!" James smirked and Link snorted, nearly blowing snot on the back of Breyden's head.

A momentary smile flashed across Breyden's face but then the lines of deep concentration returned.

"Well?" James asked.

"He got sick on the raid yesterday," Link offered.

"Yeah. Bumping elbows with subs has a tendency to make one ill. The sooner we can wipe them out of the universe the better. Say goodbye to that gene pool," James stated, with a twisted face as if he had just bitten into something bitter.

"Amen," Link agreed.

"It's not that," Breyden mumbled.

"So what made you sick? The fact you didn't get to escort them to prison?" James winked. "That's on your next run. You'll feel a lot better after that. I guarantee it."

"What if this is all a lie?" Breyden's voice was so low it could barely be heard.

"What's a lie?" Link and James questioned leaning in close.

"Gentlemen, I suggest you carry on your conversation after class," the teacher called, his voice getting louder with each word, causing James to right himself in his chair and Link to lean back.

###

"So, what was all that in Calculus?" James asked as they stretched on the gym floor, preparing for combat training.

"Oh, nothing. Just haven't been feeling like myself, lately," Breyden said. "I had a weird dream the other night and I can't seem to shake it."

"Oh, who was she?" James laughed as he cast a glance at the girls training on the other side of the room.

Link chuckled, "Good one."

After checking that no one appeared to be paying any attention to them, Breyden continued in a lower voice, "No, I

just had a dream we were on the wrong side.” That was a dangerous sentence even worded in the form of a dream. If he wasn’t with his two best friends in the world, he wouldn’t have dared bring it up at all.

“Are you crazy?” James lauded.

“On the wrong side of what?” Link asked, too loud for Breyden’s liking.

Breyden double checked to see that no one had moved closer without him noticing. “I said it was a dream.” Breyden rolled his eyes, as if to suggest how absurd he thought his own question was. Remarks like that could get one thrown out of the academy and labeled an outcast.

“This, from the one who couldn’t wait to blow all the subs out of the universe since he started playing soldiers and subs,” James taunted and they all laughed.

“It was just a crazy dream,” Breyden reiterated. “But at least there was a hot brunette in it.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so? I’d cross over for a hot girl,” James chuckled.

Breyden tried his best to hide the concerns brought on by the events of the past month. He figured it would be better to act as if he wanted to be the perfect soldier. Besides, all his fears and concerns could be disproved with the piece of paper in his pocket. He resolved upon a plan to get an analysis of the paper with the help of his science professor.

“You go ahead. I have a couple of questions for Professor Johnson,” Breyden stated when the bell rang, ending his science class.

“Dude, you have a question? In science?” James asked.

“Are you sure you didn’t come down with something serious?” Link questioned.

“About lab work, yeah. How else do we prove subs are guilty?” Breyden flashed some anger to show he was still himself and interested in pushing the cause.

“They’re guilty by just beings subs. What more do you need?” James asked.

“I suggest you go to the hospital wing and see the nurse

after you leave here,” Link said and James laughed.

“Holy crap, the world’s coming to an end. Breyden is acting like he’s interested in science and Link cracks a joke,” James beamed.

“Funny,” Breyden smiled. “I’ll catch up to you in a minute.”

Breyden doubled-checked to make sure his friends were gone before approaching the professor. He avoided looking at the cameras posted around the room and tried to act like everything was normal.

“Cadet Pry, can I help you?” the professor asked, stopping his task of grading papers.

“I’ve been thinking about your lesson the other day. The one where you talked about great police work being tied to lab work and I wanted to know more,” Breyden stated, shooting one last glance toward the door.

“I never thought you were one for the lab,” his teacher said. “I thought you preferred the physical side of things. You know, the hunt and the capture.”

“Well, those are the more exciting aspects of the training, but I want to be the best. How can I do that if I’m not good at everything,” Breyden offered.

“You can’t.” the professor eyed him as if he were trying to read Breyden’s thoughts.

“Without good evidence how do we know someone’s innocence or guilt? Say...someone was imprisoned for something they didn’t do. Maybe there was a cover up. Shouldn’t it be our job to find the truth?” Breyden continued. “I mean, if we really work for the people, we should be there to help them.”

“R—really?” his professor put down his pen and peeked at the camera’s out of the corner of his eye. Little beads of sweat started to form across his brow and he fidgeted in his chair.

“Anything in particular I can help you with?”

“Oh, I happen to kn...come across something I found in the woods behind my house and I want to analyze it,” Breyden tried to act like it was merely out of curiosity. “I don’t know how old it is but it looks like it could have blood on it and I

thought, what a great way to learn.”

The professor adjusted his collar. “And what do you hope to learn?” he asked, staring deep into Breyden’s eyes.

“The truth,” Breyden matched the professors stare.

“And what would you do with the truth? Sometimes it can be a dangerous thing, the truth,” the professor leaned back on his stool.

“Can you help me? I want to learn. I must know,” Breyden tried to keep the pleading from his voice.

“Do you have this, sample?”

“Yes.”

“When do you have a free period?” the professor asked.

“And this is just to help you with your studies?” he increased the volume of his voice.

“Tomorrow morning at 10 am. It will help me more than ever,” Breyden said.

“Then, see you tomorrow at that time, Cadet Pry.” The professor waved him away with his hand.

That night, on his usual trip to the teleport with his father, Breyden saw her again. The pretty brunette with the blue-green eyes. She sat where she had the first time he saw her. Breyden spotted her the minute he stepped off the escalator. As he trailed his father, he didn’t worry about being caught eyeing her.

When their eyes met, it felt as if she had been waiting for him. She held his gaze for a few moments and the expression on her face confused Breyden. She didn’t bolt away like the last time he had spied her. Instead, she cocked her head to the side and wore an expression of curiosity rather than disgust. She remained in the same pose until after he lost sight of her through the security check point.

Breyden actually felt disappointed to see her chair empty when he returned from the tube with his parents. His mother and father chatted back and forth about a skirmish that had broken out on some far away planet and how the Senate was planning to send a full force to end the conflict. Breyden scanned the area for any hint of her but lowered his head and

scowled at the floor as he stepped onto the escalator.

"What's up with you?" his father asked noticing Breyden's mood.

"Just tired." Breyden answered meekly.

"You sure? You look like something's bothering you," his mother added with a smile.

"I'm sure," Breyden responded.

"Hey, I've got some news for you," his father beamed, as they reached the bottom floor and started across the hall toward the entrance. "I've had you assigned to my detail for your final raid of the school year."

"Really?" Breyden didn't know how to react. Normally he would have been ecstatic to work alongside his father, but now it seemed as if something dark was overtaking him. He didn't want to know if his father gave orders similar to those he had witnessed on his last raid. This thought ate at his mind, creating a shadow he couldn't shake.

"Don't sound too excited," his father laughed. "I had to pull a lot of strings to arrange it."

"I'm excited. I've just had a headache all day," Breyden offered as a lame excuse.

"You didn't seem so tired, about thirty minutes ago, when you couldn't take your eyes off the cute brunette in the teleport," his father chided him as they worked their way through the parking lot.

"What?"

"You didn't think I noticed you staring at her?" his father chuckled.

"Oh, so your mother returning home isn't enough to make you happy," his mother winked.

"He looked like someone had kicked his puppy when he couldn't find her on the way out," his father laughed.

###

Breyden was happy to discover that James had a raid to go on the following day. This would spare him from having to

explain to two people why he was going to work with the science professor instead of playing basketball in the gym as usual.

"You're going to do extra credit with Professor Johnson?" Link's face twisted with distaste. "You hate science."

"Yeah, but I want to be the best. How can I be the best if I don't understand the science part of police work?" Breyden snapped back.

"I didn't say you didn't understand science. You have one of the highest grades in class. I said you hated it. So, why would you want to do extra work?" Link asked.

"Okay," Breyden pulled Link out a door on the side of the gym. "Do you swear you can keep a secret? I mean, you can't tell anyone," Breyden scanned their immediate surroundings, catching sight of the camera on the top of the building and lowered his voice. "Not even James."

"What is it?" Link's eyes grew wider as he also checked to verify they were alone.

"I'm doing some research on a case. I figure there's no better way to learn," Breyden explained. He didn't know why, but he couldn't bring himself to tell Link the real reason for what he was about to do. Maybe it was because he didn't have a plan yet. He needed to get the results before he could figure out his next move. He could be sent to prison for life if he got caught holding back evidence.

"What case?" Link leaned in closer.

"You have to swear," Breyden held his gaze and refused to look away.

"I swear. Dude, we're best friends. I can keep a secret," Link promised.

"Okay," Breyden quickly explained about keeping the blood stained note from the police. "I just want to do the lab work on a real case."

"Yeah, that would be cool," Link admitted. "Do you think he would let me come?" Link's expression shone with curiosity. "I'd love to know how they determine the chemicals involved after passing through that kind of heat."

"Tell you what. I only brought a small piece of the letter. I'll talk to him about showing you and bring another section," Breyden suggested.

"Cool."

"Okay. Dude, remember you can't tell anyone. I'd be in so much trouble."

"Tell them what?" Link smiled, raising his voice to its normal level.

Breyden winked and left his friend to return to his game.

Breyden fought the urge to sprint across campus to the science section. His legs set a pace well ahead of his normal gate. A few girls giggled as they passed him, but they continued on, disappointed that he failed to pay them any attention. He bounded up the stairs and into the building.

Professor Johnson sat on his usual stool reading *Universe Today*, the daily newspaper. He glanced over the top and smiled at Breyden as he entered the room.

"So, you're sure you want to do extra credit?" he asked. "It will be really advanced work, but it should help you with your career."

"I'm sure." Breyden said through gulps of air. He didn't know if he was winded from his quick march or his nervousness at the possibility of the results. He hoped it would return Liquid Light but something in the back of his mind told him that wouldn't be the case.

Breyden started to reach into his pocket when the Professor almost jumped out of his chair, motioning toward the lab coats hanging along the wall. "Please put on your coat first and then wash your hands." He pointed to a specific sink.

Out of the corner of his eye, Breyden glanced at the cameras and then went and put on a coat. He walked over to the sink. He had just extended his hands when he noticed some writing in the bottom of the sink, well out of the camera's view.

RESTROOM FIRST STALL.

"Ah, I need to use the bathroom before we begin. I'll wash my hands in there." Breyden smiled and left the room.

He almost missed the writing on the rough toilet paper in

the stall. The instructions told him where to find two slides hidden inside the toilet paper roll. He placed the section of the note between the two slides and tucked them in the pocket of the lab coat. After flushing the instructions down the toilet and washing his hands he returned to the lab.

“Okay, I have some slides set up in the supply cabinet. If you would retrieve them we can get to work,” the professor ordered, as he headed toward the microscope.

With the cabinet door open and blocking the view from the cameras, Breyden tucked the slide into the rack with the others. He carried the tray over to the Professor and set them on the counter.

“I have created several different samples here of mixed chemicals and tissues. Your job is to determine what items are on each slide,” the professor said. “We will only have time for one per session, so I’ll let you chose which one you want to start with.”

Breyden handed the professor the one with the bloody note in it. “I’ll try this one.”

“Then let’s get to work,” the professor stated.

They ran various tests against the sample, which Breyden knew wouldn’t return the results he wanted. Link was correct. Breyden excelled at science and school in general. He strived to be the best and he worked hard at everything. It took him only four tests to confirm his suspicions. There wasn’t any Liquid Light or any other illegal substance for that matter, in the sample.

It wasn’t until after they had completed a DNA test that he discovered something not announced in the news. The professor handed him the checklist, and written in the corner of the already scribbled on paper was the word: Pregnant. Breyden took the clipboard and scribbled out the word. He glanced at the Professor and asked. “Why?”

“Control,” he paused for one brief moment and then continued, “of your experiments yields better results. That’s why we didn’t get the answers we expected today. I purposely tainted one of the samples to teach you this lesson. I didn’t

think you'd chose that one today. I expect you to be here again next week to continue with your extra credit."

"Yes, professor," Breyden agreed. "Thank you for your time." He hung his lab coat on the rack.

"Cadet Pry. Thank you for your extra effort in this area," the professor smiled grimly. "Not many are as dedicated in their pursuit of the truth."

###

"Well?" Link asked as they sat on the lawn eating lunch. His query snapped Breyden out of his thoughts.

The warm spring sun lightened everyone's spirits as it hinted at summer's approach. Students huddled in groups of picnickers everywhere on the lawn, which spread over one hundred yards in the center of the campus.

"Ah," Breyden paused. An inner conflict raged inside his mind. He believed he could trust his friend with any secret he gave him, but this information was not only obtained illegally, but was dangerous. This was proof that the government had murdered an innocent woman and they were involved in a lie to cover it up.

"We...ah...didn't ah," Breyden thought to lie. It wasn't like he wished to deceive his friend, but he did want to protect him. Breyden wasn't sure what he would do with his newfound knowledge. Until he had a plan, he would keep his friend safe.

"I thought it would be easy to detect Liquid Light," Link said with a frown as his eyes jumped back and forth between Breyden's eyes.

"What if the results were something unexpected?" Breyden asked.

"So you got results?" Link looked puzzled.

"Yes, but you can't..."

"I already gave you my word," Link flushed with frustration.

"Okay, but this is dangerous information," Breyden said, checking to make sure no one was listening to their conversation.

"You found another illegal substance?" Link smiled raising his eyebrows.

"No, we didn't find anything illegal," Breyden stated.

"What do you mean? Then why was she eliminated?" Link questioned, as if he hadn't put all the pieces together.

"And why did they cover it up with a lie?" Breyden added, trying to help Link make the connections himself.

"Are you saying," Link started to speak at a level too loud for Breyden's liking.

"Shh," Breyden's eyebrows formed a sharp V on his forehead and he grimaced his extreme displeasure at what Link was about to do.

"Sorry," Link whispered. "What does this mean?"

"I don't know but until I'm sure, don't tell anyone."

"What about James?" Link questioned.

"Let's just keep this between you and me until we have more time to think about it."

"Okay," Link glanced around nervously, his face pale in the bright sun. "I don't need to see for myself."

"I have to go back."

"What? Why?"

"I need to make my extra credit seem real. I will do different tests on other items next time," Breyden said.

"Good thinking. What are you going to tell James? He'll be back next week when you go for your extra lessons."

"Good point. Oh wait, I can't go next week, I have my third raid. That gives me some time to think of an excuse, or maybe I will have told him by then."

To Breyden's delight, and his displeasure, the striking brunette started appearing at the teleport every day when he and his father arrived to pick up his mother. His heart always beat harder with excitement. She continued to stare at him with the same curious gaze as if she expected something from him. The problem was, his father always noticed as well, and would raze him the rest of the evening.

Breyden found himself thinking of ways to give the information about the woman's death to the girl. He had

resolved upon a plan to approach the girl the next evening when his father, who had been teasing him about her, changed his tune.

"She's trouble," his father said, after they passed through security and before his mother's arrival.

"What?" Breyden said with surprise, looking away from the girl to meet his father's stare.

"I did a little research. She has a history. I wouldn't be surprised to find her on Centalpa 6 very soon," his father frowned and then glanced at the girl, causing her to turn away.

"What has she done?" Breyden felt stunned. His blood began to boil at the thought of his father digging up information on a girl he had shown interest in.

"Don't look so angry. I wasn't checking on her because she caught your eye," his father stated as if reading Breyden's mind. "You just happened to point out that a girl sits and waits at a teleport every day. That's what made me curious. She is tied to a well-known underground group working against the People's Government. There is no specific evidence, YET, to bring her in. But I've started an inquiry; I hope she's cleared but I've seen too many similar cases not to know what it will turn up."

"Why would you do that?" Breyden spat.

"I'm doing my job. Don't let a pretty face cloud your judgment," his father fired back through gritted teeth.

Breyden knew better than to challenge his father. He was not a man to trifle with. He didn't get to his position in life by sucking up. He got results and he did it with powerful and violent means. Panic started to crawl up Breyden's spine. This girl might be his only link to the truth. She had opened his eyes to something big, but he knew he had been given a tiny glimpse, and he craved more.

"What are you pouting about?" his mother asked on the ride home.

"He just found out his girlfriend at the teleport is a sub," his father chuckled.

"I always thought she had distorted features," his mother

stated. "We can't have these mutants spreading their sickness throughout our society."

Sub, Breyden thought with disgust. The word had somehow taken on a new form. He suddenly wished to never hear it again. His mood grew dark and quiet.

"Hey," his father snapped, watching him through the rearview mirror. "You'll have to pick up your mother tomorrow. I won't be home until late."

"Okay," Breyden tried to sound normal.

"Don't wreck the car," his father smiled.

"Like I would," Breyden smiled back, as this announcement the makings of an idea grew in his mind. He would have to be extremely cautious. If his father had started an inquiry, every camera in the teleport would be keeping track of the girl. His plan involved getting her a message about the woman, and to be careful. It would have to be something his father wouldn't notice if he watched the security footage.

###

Breyden began his preparations at school. He didn't know why, but something told him not to test his father. Although he wasn't aware of surveillance equipment in their house, it didn't mean there wasn't any. His father had been training Breyden his whole life on how to find such equipment and the most popular and effective methods for avoiding detection. The one Breyden never forgot: when in doubt, act as if they are spying on you.

As he used a piece of scratch paper to work on his calculus homework like he always did, he wrote a few words between the equations. 'She was pregnant' and 'They are watching you.' When the bell rang for the end of class he crinkled up his note as if he was going to throw it away. He kept the small wad of paper in his hand until he headed for the bus stop where he tucked it in his pocket.

On his way to the teleport he stopped at a convenience store where he got a soft drink from the fountain, and a pack of gum.

He sucked down the entire drink on the way to the teleport. Even though the cup was empty he continued to put the straw in his mouth. While riding the escalator toward the security level he got out a piece of gum and threw the wrapper and the note in the empty cup and replaced the lid.

His heart pounded in his chest as he neared the top. What if the girl wasn't there? He crossed his legs and danced slightly. Even though it was for show, the urge to go to the restroom was real; he had just consumed thirty-four ounces of soda.

The racing of his heart caused his temples to hurt as he spotted the girl in her usual seat. She locked eyes with him the moment he stepped off the escalator. It was as if she had been waiting for him. She started to rise from the bench near the wall as if she was going to approach him. A slight shake of his head and a frown from Breyden caused her to drop back down.

Breyden marched toward the restrooms just beyond the location of the girl. Busy travelers and their friends and family moved about the teleport causing Breyden to zigzag back and forth.

As he passed the girl, he lowered his head and spoke out of the side of his mouth, "Buy a drink, then look in my cup."

Once beyond her, he slapped the empty cup against his pants in a carefree manner before tossing it in an open trash container outside the restroom. He hoped she understood.

When he exited the restroom he exhaled in relief as she sipped on a beverage next to a small snack counter in the middle of the area.

###

Later at home, Breyden felt better about the girl. He didn't know what she could do to protect herself, but at least someone out there, besides Link and his science professor, understood he knew the truth. He lay on his bed grasping this little ray of hope, when, suddenly his father burst into the room.

"What did you tell her," he roared as he yanked Breyden off

the bed and smashed him against the wall. "Did you think I wouldn't notice her digging through a trashcan and then carrying out the cup my son had brought in?" he shouted.

Breyden's own reaction surprised himself. He thrust an arm between his father's and then spun it around, breaking his father's grasp. Then he shoved his father away.

This move unleashed a fury in his father that Breyden had never seen. His father attacked. "Oh, you're a big man now," his father taunted as he landed several blows through Breyden's defenses.

Breyden decided it was better to submit than to fight and he only attempted to block his father's punches. This maneuver worked, his father's anger subsided a little. The only man in the universe Breyden feared was his father.

"You are going to do what you are told and only what you are told. You will not do anything until you can demonstrate your ability to follow orders.

"Now, your next answer may determine which military camp you spend the summer at, so think carefully," his father barked. "What did you tell her?"

"That she is being watched," Breyden said, heaving huge gulps of air.

"Is that all?"

"Yes," Breyden stated.

"She's not the only one," his father said and then stormed out of the room slamming the door behind him.

5

Sleep didn't come that night. Breyden had never felt so trapped in all his life. His world had grown very small, closing in around him. He lived in a prison, a cell without walls, but still very real. His father frightened him, but not in the physical

sense. His father's mind was twisted into believing and fighting for something that wasn't right and was obviously wrong. How can people ignore that?

Breyden had a hard time explaining his injuries at school the next day. He made up a story about sparing with his dad and how he had asked for full contact.

"Oh, that was a smart move," James laughed. "I bet you really hurt him when you bounced your face off his knee. And damaged his knuckles while pushing your face into them."

"Why would you want to take on your dad?" Link asked as if Breyden had just done the dumbest thing in the world.

"Hey. How do you get any better if you don't take on the best?" Breyden retorted.

Breyden got the usual verbal abuse from Jeff and Jeff's friends who were delighted with Breyden's condition. Breyden decided it was better just to keep his head down and do what he was told until he could come up with a plan, although he had no idea what that would entail. Where could he go?

Home had become a dark, miserable place. His father reinstated his punishments. Every day he worked on cleaning up the yard or some other house maintenance activity. After his chores were done, his father assigned him extra homework. He had to read and take quizzes on the danger of sub humans and the threat they posed to the People's Government, or books on how social justice is the greatest thing in the universe. Only three months ago he would have devoured this information with zeal, but now he hated it. How much of this is true? Are we being intentionally brainwashed?

"You are going to go on an advanced raid this Thursday," his father announced over dinner, breaking three days of complete silence at their evening meals.

"Oh?" Breyden looked up from his plate.

"I want you to see how things really work and what you are facing. How the choices we make have consequences. I have arranged everything with the school. You will be going with a Special Forces group and a good friend of mine, Captain Ants. He will take care of you," his father informed him.

“Yes Sir,” Breyden’s mood grew even fouler, which he didn’t think possible. He detected something ominous in his father’s tone. Something bad was coming his way. He could feel it.

Instead of the usual line of military hovercrafts waiting to pick him up for the raid, only a single vehicle with a massive soldier sporting a crew cut and a scarred face greeted him. The man sat on the hood of the vehicle but stood the moment he spotted Breyden heading toward him. “Justice for the People,” he shouted while performing the people’s salute.

Breyden stopped and returned the greeting and salute. “Justice for the People.”

“Cadet Pry,” the man extended his massive hand, which fully encompassed Breyden’s. “Captain Ants,” he introduced himself. “I hope you’re ready. You are going to see some top secret things today. I trust you’ll find them to be educational and exciting. It’s rare for a sixteen-year-old cadet to go on such a mission.”

“Cool,” Breyden said, trying to put on his best smile. “Is it just you and I?”

“No, get in. We are joining the others at central control,” the Captain opened his door and climbed inside the hover car.

“Remember, you are sworn to secrecy the same as other raids,” the Captain stated.

“Absolutely.”

“If your dad wasn’t, well, your dad, you wouldn’t be allowed on this type of mission until after reaching a certain rank in the service. But he seems to think you are well on your way to a great career eliminating subs and those who seek to destroy our perfect society.”

They signed in at the security checkpoint and showed their IDs at the front of the base where the Captain parked in a spot designated just for him. Breyden followed him into the metallic building with mirror-like windows. They navigated the spotless halls, which resembled a normal office building mixed with civilian and military workers.

Finally, they walked down a long hallway with no offices or exits on either side. Two large metal doors blocked their way

forward. Captain Ants put the palms of his hands on the doors and then stopped. "You are never to reveal what you are about to see. To anyone."

"Yes Sir," Breyden said.

He trailed the captain into a large dome shaped room with a raised platform in the center. Glass control booths ran in a semicircle along half the wall and a weapons and equipment area continuing the rest of the way. The booths were full of people working on computers and other electronic equipment. Wires and hoses crisscrossed the floor all around the platform. A squad of ten men strapped on body armor and prepared weapons around a table to the right of the platform. When they noticed the Captain striding toward them, they all stopped and saluted. "Justice for the People."

"Are we ready?" the Captain asked, acknowledging their salutes.

"Yes Sir," echoed off the dome.

"Corporal Hudson."

"Sir?"

"Help Cadet Pry get ready to go," the Captain ordered.

"Yes Sir," the Corporal responded and hustled to assist Breyden.

It took about fifteen minutes for Breyden to get into all of the equipment necessary for the mission. He wore a black bodysuit with body armor, night vision goggles, communications equipment, and submission devices.

"Everyone on the pad!" the Captain ordered, answered by a chorus of "Yes Sir."

Breyden followed the squad up a ramp that curved around the back of the platform where they lined up for the Captain's inspection. They stood, saluting as he passed them by.

Breyden felt lost. What were they doing? He had expected them to pile into military vehicles and speed off to some undesirable location. Different voices began speaking into his earpiece.

"Power to the building will be cut in two minutes," A female voice stated.

“Targets are on the thirteenth floor,” A male voice added.

“Prepare for departure in twenty seconds,” yet a different voice spoke and began counting down.

When the voice hit “one”, there was a blinding flash of light and Breyden felt the earth jerk as if it had shifted beneath his feet. A strong tickling flooded his body causing the hairs on his arms and neck to stand on end. Suddenly, Breyden stood in a darkened office lounge that appeared to have been abandoned long ago. An occasional flickering florescent light revealed halls and offices in three directions.

Breyden’s mouth fell open. He recognized the sensation of traveling by teleportation, but he didn’t know the military used it for raids or could do it without the typical teleportation tubes. This didn’t surprise him too much, as it only made sense for the military to have their own teleports to move military personal and equipment. The part that shocked him the most was the way they landed in a building obviously not set up as a receiver teleport. How can this be?

“Power to the building will be cut in ten, nine, eight...” At “zero”, the building went completely dark.

“Switch to night vision and head for the stairs on the southwest corner of the building. Cadet Pry, you bring up the rear,” the Captain ordered through the ear piece.

Breyden lowered his goggles into place and the building became a visible green structure. Instead of a vocal response, the leader gave hand signals and the squad began advancing toward the southwest corner. The soldiers constantly checked behind corners and made quick sweeps of each office. The troops paused as they reached the stairs.

“Where are the targets?” the Captain asked.

“Targets are still on the thirteenth floor,” the male voice spoke through the receivers.

A soldier, in the middle of the group, held up a device about the size of a smart phone. “I’ve got their signals,” he stated.

“Two floors up. Go,” the Captain ordered, pointing to the ceiling and the men entered the stairwell.

They crept up the two flights of stairs and waited behind the

door for the order to advance. Breyden's heart pulsed in his ears. He didn't know what to expect. They were obviously not going after a group of homeless people. To use this kind of technology and Special Forces required a high valued target. Maybe I am going to see the real enemy.

"One target is moving in the north corridor and the second is still in the lab," the soldier with the tracker reported.

"I want a clean takedown. The subs and the lab. Jensen, Taylor, Vaughn block the exits," the Captain commanded. "Go!"

The troops flew through the door and raced down the hallway. They scoured the area to find one of the targets carrying a candle to light his way. It was a frail older man wearing a white lab coat. The man's panic stricken face looked as if death itself had overtaken him. The soldiers slammed him to the ground and tied his hands behind his back with the plastic wire.

"Please. Please," the man begged. "I'm making medicine."

"Sure you were. That's what they all say," a soldier spat in his face. "Scum."

"Gag him if he won't shut up," the Captain barked.

Another soldier approached the captain holding a white lab coat. "I found this." He handed the item to the captain. "It was hanging on a coat rack."

The captain took the coat and pulled out an Interplanetary ID Card. "Well, he won't be going anywhere without this."

Breyden knew from his father's lessons, even before he started the Academy, the Captain was right. You couldn't travel, purchase goods, or enter public buildings or public areas without a government issued ID card. The average person didn't know that secret security sensors scanned their card wherever they went. One could enter a public space without a card but it would draw immediate attention and result in a fine or imprisonment for being without it.

"Corporal." The captain made eye contact with the soldier tracking the other target.

The Corporal jumped to the Captain's side and waved the tracking equipment over the card. "That's the one he's using,"

he stated as his screen flashed indicating the target was next to him.

The fact that they could use ID cards as a locator was something new to Breyden. They know where everyone is at all times? Breyden wondered if they kept records of everyone's movements. His brain froze on one terrifying thought. Did his father know the girl had been the one at the house? He hoped they had taken precautions when they ransacked his house.

"Switch to thermal imaging. We've got a ghost," the Captain ordered.

Breyden flicked a switch on his head gear and the building became an object full of colors representing hot and cold areas. Most of the objects in the building were shades of purple or blue as the troops continued up the hall toward the lab. When they reached the door leading into the lab, the Captain pushed it open with the barrel of his gun and threw the coat over one of the tables. He then backed into the hall. "Search the other offices," he whispered into the microphone.

A few of the men split up and investigated the rooms away from the office, their boots shuffling on the tiled floor. Every couple of offices or so, they would kick in a door.

"I'll bet twenty in under five," a voice whispered through his ear piece.

"You're on," another responded.

In a matter of three minutes, through a distorted glass pane on the side of the door, a white hot figure of a man crept out from under a desk and slowly reached for the coat on the counter.

"Ah, man," the one who had agreed to the odds whined.

"I told you," said the other with relish.

"Switch to regular vision," the Captain ordered and paused for everyone to adjust their glasses. "Give me power to the building, NOW!"

The lights went on and the men poured into the lab. The scientist threw up his arms as a sign of surrender. This act of compliance didn't spare him from several hard kicks and being hog tied on the floor.

Breyden's heart leaped into his throat as he recognized the man as his science professor at the Academy. His head started to swim, blood rushed to his gut, helping it contract inward. He opened his mouth to speak when the professor met his stare. A quick barely noticeable nod stopped him from uttering his protest.

"So, what are we cooking here?" the Captain knelt in front of the man on the floor.

Breyden didn't understand anything that was happening. His world had grown so small in the last week and the walls were crashing in fast. His legs felt like cement every time he had to step out of the way or execute the Captain's orders. It was as if he was listening to the event from the end of a long tunnel, only understanding a word here and there.

He wanted to run away, to escape the madness happening around him. Was this a coincidence, or did his father know about the note, the tests? Did his father send him here today to show him how much control he had? How hopeless it was to fight the system? Breyden grew nauseated and struggled to hold down his lunch.

"What kind of medicine were we making, gentlemen?" the Captain asked, more to himself than the prisoners, as the soldiers dragged the other man into the room and tossed him on the floor next to Breyden's professor.

The men remained silent, except for the occasional whimpering of the elder scientist, as the Captain scanned their IDs. The rest of the troops tore into the lab, snatching up documents, equipment, and meds and piled the stuff on the floor.

Through Breyden's earpiece information continued to flow about the two prisoners as IDs were checked and confirmed. Breyden tried to avoid staring at the professor. He yearned to help him but didn't know what he could do. The memory of the last raid and the two lifeless bodies of the boys danced through his brain.

"Well, Professor Johnson from the People's Youth Academy," the Captain smiled as he eyed the man and squatted down to

be level with him. "Breyden, is this one of your professors?"

"Y—yes," Breyden's voice cracked as his eyes met the professors once again. He coughed to regain his voice. "He's my science professor," he affirmed trying to sound casual.

"So, what were we cooking here, Professor?" the Captain mocked, then coming to his feet he kicked the professor hard in the gut, causing him to groan and assume a fetal position.

"What's the verdict?" the Captain shouted around the room.

"They were making meds, sir," a Sergeant Major stated handing a computer pad to the captain with documentation of the confiscated items.

"Penicillin, vaccines for polio, chicken pox, tisk tisk. Making medicine for subs is a violation of article 3.49.1 of the criminal code, and a felony. On the other hand, making meds to protect yourself against a biological weapon is a capital offense," the Captain stated.

"We were just trying to save lives," the old man muttered.

"That's a lie," the Captain spat. "Saving subs is not saving lives! It's continuing an undesirable gene pool. Get them ready for transport to their new home on Centalpha 6."

This remark brought more tears and pleading from the older gentleman, but Professor Johnson remained calm and showed little emotion. Breyden didn't know which was worse, the begging from the older scientist or the silence of his teacher.

After the soldiers piled all the supplies, equipment, and documentation in the center of the room, the captain placed a flat rectangular object the size of a credit card on the top of the pile. It resembled a circuit board from a computer with an inch-sized black computer chip in the center.

"Stand by for transport in one minute," a female voice spoke through the ear piece.

"Let's take this garbage out," one of the soldiers joked and a few others joined in with various rude comments about the prisoners' new home.

"Your permanent stop," another taunted.

"Ten seconds," the voice counted down.

At zero, the room filled with light and the ground shifted

beneath Breyden's feet. Before he regained his vision, a strong sulfur smell like rotting eggs stung his nose and intense heat slammed him in the face. Steam hissing and plops and blurbs filled the air.

Breyden didn't know what transpired. He expected them to go back to the base before continuing on to the prison planet. Again, something he didn't know was possible happened. They had teleported from the office building directly to another planet. How was this possible?

They landed on a flat, black rock shelf, sitting next to what Breyden assumed was an active volcano. The planet's atmosphere, although breathable, was darker and thicker, leaving a nasty, bitter taste in Breyden's mouth. The sky was dark blue. Breyden didn't know if night was approaching or if this was how it always looked. The land, as far as he could see, consisted of solid black broken rock, which felt strangely soft under his boots. Orange and reddish colors danced off the walls of the pit in front of him. Steam rose from the molten lava like dancing ghosts against the dark blue sky.

Out of a small building twenty yards back from the mouth of the volcano came two men in military uniform. They both wore wicked expressions like a beast about to devour a much needed meal.

"Brought us some fun?" the one in the lead asked, as he smiled a decaying tooth grin.

Captain Ants handed him the electronic pad with the details.

"Set up the ramp," one ordered as he accepted the pad.

The other soldier went to a computer panel set on a pole next to the edge of the cliff. Breyden had failed to notice it with all the steam and dancing colors. The soldier pressed a few buttons on the panel and a metal platform extended over the mouth of the volcano from its housing a foot down from the top of the ledge. The metal shelf was about ten yards long and ten yards wide.

The Captain removed the electronic card from the top of the confiscated goods and put it back in his pocket. "Move it out."

The troops hauled the load onto the metal shelf and then

dragged the men out as well. The old man wailed, begging for mercy. Cries of how they were only trying to save people echoed off the black rocks. One of the soldiers fired a few shots into the cliff face to drive him back onto the platform, as he attempted to crawl off.

"You have been found guilty of crimes against the people. Go to your final resting place and burn," the Captain hissed and then spat on the ground.

"I would rather die helping people than live under the tyranny of the People's Government; where the ruling class tells everyone how to live and none of the laws apply to them," the professor stated, getting to his feet and standing tall. He lifted his head high and looked his captors in the eye.

Breyden wanted it to stop. His heart threw itself against his ribs in anticipation of the outcome. He'd never felt so helpless and weak. He fought to hold back the rage and tears building inside him.

"Any last words?" the soldier by the control panel asked with a sneer.

The old man fell to his knees, his hands together as if he were about to pray, "Please," he begged.

"Yes," the Professor said, and his eyes paused for a moment on Breyden. "You know the truth, now do right by it."

"What?" the group questioned and glanced around with confusion.

"Good riddance," the soldier at the control panel said and pressed another button.

The metal shelf supporting the prisoners and their equipment shot out from under them, back into its housing in the side of the cliff. For one brief moment they hovered in the air and then they dropped.

Breyden lay on his bed, in the dark, unable to sleep. Loneliness and pain threatened to consume his hope as his mental prison trapped him on all sides. Even breathing seemed more difficult. He dreaded seeing his father again and had been relieved by his absence at dinner. His mother, preoccupied with government affairs, paid him little attention as she worked on her computer pad during the meal.

The final words of his science professor played over and over in his mind and he wondered if his father knew about the note. He fought the urge to run outside and check but feared losing the only evidence he had because of his father's warning about being watched. He must avoid revealing its location at all costs. His father may know about it, but he might not know where it is.

He felt isolated. Who could he trust? Link knew a little, but telling him more may put his life in danger. The girl seemed to have gotten the message because she had been absent from the teleport ever since he passed her the note.

The next day at breakfast, to his relief, the silence between him and his father continued. He managed to hurry off to school without saying a word. School, however, didn't bring any relief to his mental torture. The entire buzz was about how their science professor had been busted in a raid and sent to Centalpha 6.

Now Breyden understood why no one ever came back from Centalpha 6. It wasn't a prison but a grave. Somehow, deep inside, he had always known what happened there, but after seeing it, the certainty finally sank in.

Link seemed to forget about the letter, which was fine with Breyden. Instead, he focused on the fact that the professor had been making illegal meds for subs. He only tried to bring up the private lessons once, to which Breyden quickly shot him down.

Breyden's life had become a miserable existence: the days and weeks crept by. He forced himself to act as if everything was normal, apprehensive about his father's watchful eye. He

resigned himself to the fact that he couldn't do anything until he was old enough to move out of the house. But after that, what? Find the girl? She may be long gone by then, another victim of Centalpha 6.

No, bide your time. Show your father you are a good soldier so he takes his eye off you. Lull him to sleep with your apparent love for the People's Government.

Even though it tightened his stomach into painful knots, Breyden tried his hardest to be the Cadet he was four months ago. He broke the silence between him and his father. Although he acted interested, he no longer trusted or believed anything that came out of his father's mouth. It was as if his father and mother had been replaced with robots whose computers were short circuiting. They belonged to the ruling class and wanted to maintain their dominance over the "helpless people" who needed their rules and guidance, too dumb, they thought, to make it on their own.

"So, tomorrow you're with me," his father announced over dinner.

"What?"

"Tomorrow you are going on a raid with my team. Did you forget?" his father stated.

"Oh, no, I can't wait," Breyden flashed his best fake smile.

"I've got something really big planned for you. You should learn a very valuable lesson," his father added, a slight edge to his voice.

"Cool," Breyden went back to shoveling food into his face, but couldn't help wondering what 'valuable lesson' meant.

The next day his father waited for him in the parking lot, the same lot as Captain Ants last raid. Breyden's stomach clenched tighter and harder as his father flew their hover vehicle through the city toward the base.

"Are you ready?" his father asked with a disturbing grin.

"Yeah," Breyden forced enthusiasm into his voice. He remembered how excited he was for his first raid a few months ago. Since then, each new raid only brought more anger and despair.

Just like the previous raid with Captain Ants, Breyden followed his father into the same dome shaped room on the base, with its control rooms and platform. A dozen soldiers prepared their equipment as Breyden and his father approached. Upon seeing the Colonel the troops paused and saluted, to which he and his father responded.

"Your stuff is over there," his father motioned to a pile of equipment on the table. "You'll notice you are being issued a weapon this time. You will need to have it set for your hand print so it only fires for you. Where we are going, you may need it."

Each piece of body armor felt like another brick to a wall that was closing Breyden off from the world outside. A voice inside his head told him this raid was going to be worse than the last, although he couldn't fathom how. Watching your science professor die, the one who had helped you see the truth, would be hard to top.

It was only a short time later that he stood on the platform with the same female voice counting down the seconds until their departure. Then, there was the bright light, accompanied by the jerk of the ground beneath his feet.

When the light faded, it surprised Breyden to see that they stood on a cement platform in the middle of some type of cavern. It appeared only the immediate area around the platform had lights. It was a man-made structure created from brick and steel. The platform dropped off into a lower section with dark tunnels opening in several directions. Steel rails ran along the ground into the various openings.

"Subways?" Breyden questioned. He had read about them in his history classes.

"Silence, Cadet Pry," his father's voice spoke through the ear piece. "And yes."

His father was interrupted momentarily when the female voice in the ear piece started giving target locations and additional details. It appeared this raid involved the capture of nine targets in all. Several troops took out locators and fastened them to body armor attached to their forearms.

“Okay, this will be the main holding bay,” his father continued. After positioning two men to wait at this location, he separated the men into groups of two and assigned them certain tunnels based on the information coming in from control. “Cadet Pry, you’re with me,” his father finished.

They climbed down onto the tracks and separated into the different tunnels. A short distance into the tunnel visibility grew difficult in the darkness. Breyden pulled on his night vision goggles and changed the area to a bright green. Their footsteps echoed off the tunnel walls along with dripping water and the squealing of rodents fleeing at their approach. The air was cool and carried the smell of campfires. What would drive someone to live in such a place?

“Stay alert. We are not after everyone down here but that won’t stop them from attacking you,” his father whispered through the earpiece, causing Breyden to hold his weapon at the ready.

Ahead in the tunnel a flickering light captured their attention. With each step forward the light continued to grow and a murmur of voices reverberated off the tunnel walls. Breyden and his father rounded a corner into another hall similar to the one they teleported into. Three barrels burned with fires as small groups of people gathered around them for warmth. The people wore tattered clothes, and judging by the pungent smell of body odor, hadn’t bathed in a while.

The people eyed them with disdain as Breyden and his father continued along the old rail lines. Breyden held his machine gun tight, as the people hurled a few crude remarks in their direction.

“Just relax. These subs know better,” his father stated. They approached the other side of the platform where two new tunnels spilt off, heading in opposite directions. His father paused and glanced at the locator attached to his forearm.

“Do you think you can handle a single sub? A woman?” his father asked.

“Sure,” Breyden responded as he looked back to catch a glimpse of the people around the fires still watching them.

“Okay, there are two subs down this tunnel,” his father pointed to the tunnel on the left, “and one down that one.”

“How far? And how will I know I’ve found the right person?” Breyden asked.

“About four hundred yards. You will know. I’m guessing she’s living in a more hospitable structure and she won’t be dressed like the others.” His father checked the people behind them.

“Got it,” Breyden’s voice was harsh with dryness.

“Hey, if you need help just say so. It might take me a few minutes to get to you so just hang tight,” his father stated, before starting down the tunnel to the left.

Breyden swallowed a lump of what felt like rocks in his throat and headed into the tunnel on the right. His breathing joined his footsteps bouncing off the walls and creating far too much noise for his comfort. Accounts of the mission from other members of the squad occasionally sounded in his ear piece.

I wonder who these people are. Breyden thought as a different sort of light started growing with each passing step. It didn’t flicker and dance on the walls like a fire but seemed steady and brighter. It grew to where he removed his night vision goggles and could see without any problems.

They have electricity. Breyden ducked into the shadows of a cement wall as he spotted another platform and an underground structure that resembled a series of small apartments. From his location he had a good view of the underground building. There were three sets of stairs climbing from the rail lines up to the platform, and about a yard from the edge was a wall with a door at the top of each stairway. Windows with curtains had been set into the wall to the left of each door. All of them were dark except the one farthest from Breyden’s position. A bright bulb like a street lamp hung from the center of the roof over the tracks, providing the area its main source of light.

Breyden studied and listened for a few moments as if expecting a sign telling him what to do. His blood raced through his veins as he crept toward the door with the light. He didn’t miss anything. Every little noise caused him to stop and

look for its source. He made his way up the steps and tightened grip on his weapon.

He stood in front of the door and took a deep breath. Right before he jumped into action, an update from another group rattled through his ear piece, nearly giving him a heart attack. After regaining his concentration, he kicked in the door and leaped into the apartment.

A scream, followed by a swoosh of long brown hair, drew his attention as a woman bolted from a sofa toward a darkened doorway beyond the room. Breyden's instincts took over and he sprang forward like a leopard, pouncing on its prey. He swung the butt of the gun down on the back of the woman's skull knocking her unconscious and sending her sliding across the floor.

While keeping his weapon leveled on the woman, he ran his other hand along the wall flicking on a light switch. His heart, which had been pumping with excitement only a moment earlier, came to a complete stop. He staggered back against the wall to keep upright as his heart climbed into his throat, making it difficult to breath. There, lying on the floor, was the girl from the teleport.

"I've got something really big planned for you," his father's words paraded through his mind. He knew? Breyden had no doubt his father had chosen this target. His mood changed drastically in a short amount of time: aggression, shock, and now anger. He gritted his teeth with rage.

"How's it coming?" his father's voice spoke to him through the earpiece.

"Everything is under control," Breyden responded as his mind raced for a way out of the horrific situation. Sending this girl to her death would be the final brick in his windowless tomb.

A soft moan from the girl caused Breyden to kill his microphone. He rushed to a sink against the wall and filled a glass on the counter with water. Pouring a little in his hand he splashed it on the girl's face in an attempt to rouse her.

"Wake up. Wake up," he muttered under his breath.

She opened her eyes, which reflected utter terror at the sight of him, and she struggled to get away from him, slapping and kicking.

"Wait. Wait. Wait, it's me. The Cadet from the teleport," Breyden pleaded, glancing over his shoulder at the door. He worried his father would step through the entrance at any minute.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, fear still lined her face.

"My father...it's not important. You need to get out of here. Take your ID card but throw it away somewhere in the tunnels," Breyden stated.

"How will I move about with..."

"They can track you with it. Your every move! That's how I came to be here," Breyden hurried to explain.

Suddenly, an elderly man burst through the door, gasping for air, with a wild look in his eyes. Breyden instinctively swung the weapon toward him, causing the man to raise his arms and back against the wall. "Who are you?" the man asked.

"I don't have time. You need to get out of here now. Lose your IDs," Breyden warned.

"Why are you aiding us?" the girl asked, as the old man helped her to her feet.

"You pointed me toward the truth. I have the evidence," Breyden informed them, lowering his weapon. He moved to the cabinets along the wall and started searching through them.

"Can you give it to us?" the girl asked.

"Not at the moment. I will try to find you when I can," Breyden found the object he was looking for.

"What are you doing?" the man asked.

"This," Breyden handed a rolling pin to the elderly man. "Remember, ditch your ID cards in the tunnels. If they catch you, they will kill you. You were scheduled for Centalpha 6. After I kneel down, hit me hard across the back of the head," Breyden stated.

"Thank you," the old man stated, resting his hand on Breyden's shoulder as he knelt in front of him.

"I will bring you the evidence when I can," Breyden smiled, a sad, awkward expression.

"What will they do with you if they find out what you've done here?" the girl asked with a soft tone.

"No more than they've already done. My life with them has become a living hell. Swing hard," Breyden turned his face downward.

CRACK! Everything went dark.

###

"Breyden, Breyden," his father spoke to him out of the haze. Breyden's head ached from a constant throbbing at the base of his skull. He rolled onto his side and heaved.

His father helped him into a sitting position. "Put your head between your legs. This will keep you from passing out."

"What happened?" Breyden rubbed a hand across his neck to feel a large painful bump.

"It looks like you took a rolling pin to the head," his father said, handing him a bottle of water. "Sip this."

"Where is the woman?" Breyden asked, hoping someone else hadn't snagged her.

"Oh, we got her," his father stated with a grim expression across his face. Lines wrinkled his forehead as he clenched his teeth. "They're taking her back to the platform now."

"Wha..." Breyden wanted to vomit again as the room rocked back and forth and his vision grew dark. He dropped his head between his legs to hide his emotions. That can't be true! Breathe! Breathe! He trembled with fear and anger.

"Don't worry, she'll get her reward on Centalpa 6," his father stated.

Breyden glanced up and no longer recognized the man who had been his father. He appeared twisted and distorted, as if he were no longer human. Instead of a man he saw a killer. Someone who thought the end justified the means and Breyden no longer desired to be like his father. He yearned for the truth!

He took a mouthful of water and rinsed as his father began speaking with the troops through his microphone. As Breyden spat the residue from his mouth, he noticed he couldn't hear the conversation between his father and the other men. When his father turned his back and walked into the other room, he performed a quick inventory. He couldn't locate his head gear, night vision, or his weapon.

At first he wondered if the girl and her father had confiscated the gear after they knocked him out, but then he spotted his weapon hanging from his father's shoulder.

Breyden climbed to his feet and kept a hand on the wall to maintain his balance. His legs wobbled and his head swam, but his desperation to get to the girl at the platform outweighed his discomfort. How would he help her? What could he do? Take on a squad by himself, with no weapon?

His father continued to bark out orders. From what Breyden could make out, a gunfight had broken out when the squad tried to take down a couple of the targets. "We need to find the source of these illegal weapons," his father growled into the microphone. "Okay, I should be there in about fifteen minutes."

His father turned to face Breyden, who had regained most of his strength. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I think..."

A blow, like being hit in the face by a shovel, caused semi-blackness and tiny exploding stars blinded Breyden's vision. He fell backward onto the kitchen floor, struggling to remain conscious.

"I GAVE YOU EVERY CHANCE!" his father screamed as he towered over him.

Blood ran down Breyden's throat and face from his nose and broken lips.

"You could have had everything, Breyden. You were a member of the ruling class. We are better than these weak, helpless people who need to be told what to do and how to live," his father spouted a lecture. Veins twitched along the side of his forehead and his face had become a dark shade of red.

"What about the truth?" Breyden spat blood and wiped his

face on his sleeve. He propped himself up on an elbow to keep from choking on the warm, thick stuff.

"The truth doesn't matter. Only maintaining the system. Keeping the people in line, no matter what. You're starting to sound like a sub with their talk of freedom and personal responsibility. They make me sick," his father continued to rage. "WE KNOW BETTER THAN THEY DO. Give them any control and they will screw things up for all of us."

"Even if we maintain control by lying and destroying lives?" Breyden barked back.

"We own their lives. The government gives them everything," his father paced, shaking his fist with venom. "I never thought I would see my son, whom I loved and trained, save a sub." His father flicked an ID card through the air to land on Breyden's chest.

Breyden snatched up the item to see the beautiful brunette's picture on it. "Maya Timothy," Breyden muttered her name for the first time. His heart ached to save her.

His father held up a small electronic device and played back the conversation Breyden had with the girl and the old man. "I told you the girl wasn't the only one being watched. You only thought you turned off your microphone. All that did was block everyone but me from hearing you. I gave you every opportunity to do the right thing to gain my trust again and you failed."

"No, father, I did the right thing. And I'm going to continue to do the right thing," Breyden said calmly.

This statement stopped his father in his tracks as if Breyden had slapped him. "You want to help subs. Fine! You stay here with the subs, in this filth. We'll see how much fun doing your version of the 'right thing' is. You are throwing your life away, boy."

"No, I'm gaining freedom!"

His father paused for a moment and a sad smile crossed his face. "You wouldn't be the first to be swayed by a pretty face, but don't let it ruin you."

"She did have a hand in it, but it wasn't her face that

persuaded me,” Breyden’s gut squirmed as he pictured her brunette hair blowing in the wind as she stood on the precipice of death on Centalpa 6. “It was the truth.”

His father continued in a saddened tone, staring at the floor. “I’ll give you one week, Breyden. One week to come back to us: your mother and me. You think long and hard about it down here. After that, I will report your treason.” His father lifted his eyes to meet Breyden’s. There was a dark fire Breyden had never seen before. “After that, I will hunt you, and when I find you, I will kill you.”

This End’s Part I

Thank you very much for reading Centalpa 6 Part I!

I know your time is valuable and I sincerely thank you for finishing this novella! If you would take a brief moment to return to where you purchased the book and leave a review it would be much appreciated!

Reviews help new readers find my work and accurately decide if the book is for them as well as provide valuable feedback for my future writing.



[James Todd Cochrane](#) was born in California in 1969. He received his BA from Utah State University, where he majored in Business Information Systems with a minor in German.

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