

Downs - Space Janitor

- 1 -

1st in the *Brane Worlds* saga

SPACE JANITOR

A Novel by

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Prologue #1

Brane-world theory holds that multiple universes exist as membranes, or branes, through a multidimensional hyperspace—like layers of an onion. These alternate universes or dimensions could be the size of atoms, or infinitely large. As one mathematician said, "There could be a pink elephant in the room, and you wouldn't even know it."

ARRIVAL

2050 A.D. - The Blue Planet sat on the ebony canvas called space appearing as it had at its creation—an object of beauty. With its massive oceans, perfectly created ozone layer, and precisely placed orbit around the sun, Earth was not just the most habitable planet in the universe it was—at least in its infancy—Eden. From the perspective of its moon, it still looked like paradise. The expanse leading to the third planet's atmosphere shimmered, pristine ebony wrinkled, folding to form waves that rolled off into space in search of some cosmic surfer. It was a result of the warping of time and matter due to a mass movement into the brane containing Earth's Universe. Six large ships materialized, momentarily blocking out the Blue Planet before creating a kaleidoscope of color as they moved through atmospheric layers.

Thousands of miles below the inhabitants of the planet went about their lives. The only clue—for the moment—of this rupture in the time

space continuum was a chill down the spine, a clock to reset, and a worldwide *deja vu*.

Moments later the moment became forever part of humanities history as across the globe, robed figures appeared from nothingness, stepping out of walls, shadows and air. The beings emanated such a presence of peace that the masses did not even think to fear them. Those skeptics who voiced warnings of the Greys were quickly silenced and criticized for resisting the evolutionary jump the new visitors were sure to usher in.



The Oval Office sat quiet except for the voice coming from a large flat screen television on the South wall of the Presidents office. Like the rest of the world, The President listened closely to the life changing news. He stared blankly out a large bay window struck dumb by the words he listened to and the imminent effect they would have on his rule.

Brett Michael's voice penetrated the otherwise quite room, "...Some unknown form of teleportation. Some physicists are speculating use of the multiple branes—or dimensions—which mathematically exist, literally transposed and intertwined throughout our universe. The Greys, as they're being called, seem to come in peace, but when can we know that for sure? We will keep you informed as we get the facts."

The President turned to look out his window, watching the empty access leading to the heavily guarded compound. He feared to speculate on what would happen next. His thoughts were interrupted by a click coming

from the small speaker on his desk. A quick push of a button and the TV went silent. "Yes?", he asked, hiding the fear in his voice.

There was a pause as his secretary found the strength to speak.
"They're here."

The President turned toward the door with, and with little success hid the terror in his eyes.

Prologue #2

The development of genetic engineering hit a wall in 2040 when the then reigning President—who was an adamant proponent of genetically manipulated evolution—was assassinated. President Blake's predecessor put a hold on genetic engineering that pushed the creation of the first genetically engineered human's back twenty years. The scientist who was unilaterally responsible for the discoveries essential to the creation of genetically engineered humans was Lloyd Richards. But once the projects were deemed inappropriate, the eighteen-year old was tucked away in the mundane world of astro-physics at NASA where he labored for the next ten years. But all reigns come to an end, and when a pro gen-man President finally took office Lloyd was released from the confines of law and he revolutionized gene research.

GENIUS

EARTH, 2052 – Test tubes, chemical jars, and microscopes filled the small laboratory. One would think a habitat designed for molecular breakthroughs would be pristine, not so, for the brilliant mind running this lab was not one for cleanliness. In a corner, contrasting the pristine setting of the sparkling high tech research equipment lay a pile of Mountain Dew cans and taco wrappers. The pile grew as a crumbled, oil stained paper landed. The greasy taco that once inhabited it was now being crunched and consumed by Lloyd Richards.

He seemed completely unaware that he was putting food into his mouth, so absorbed was he in the causal sequences taking place beneath the lens of the high-powered microscope. He watched the microorganisms as they danced about the glass dish. His free hand adjusted the lens, and reached for a waiting syringe. The magnified image gave Lloyd a clear view as he watched the monstrous tip of the needle enter the micro-world. A honed hollowed point pierced the cell, injecting DNA. For a moment, the sound of crunching taco shell stopped—as had Lloyd's breathing. The cell ceased to move, seemingly murdered by the injection. Seconds passed. Lloyd remained in a state of suspended animation, before finally, without warning, the cell came to life.

Lloyd exhaled as the taco reached his mouth. He reclined back in his high backed chair, spinning it slowly around in circles as he gazed through the skylight of his lab, admiring the remaining stars that still shown despite the early glow of dawn.

Lloyd Richards thought well of himself. He always had, despite the usual teasing one of such intellectual prowess—and ensuing

eccentricities—receives as a child. Yes, his confidence was fine, he considered himself a mix of his two heroes—Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawkins—but he presumed he was smarter...he presumed right. Lloyd's staggering intellect was made evident early in his life, when as a five year old, he re-attached a lizard's tail using a cellular formula he had created with his chemistry set. The countless life forms that met their demise to aid the progression of science were a sad, sad necessity. He moved quickly through elementary, middle, and high school.

In fact, he never completed high school, being hired by a biotech firm at the age of fifteen. He was shortly thereafter snatched up by the government; all this before he could vote. So now—after a forced hiatus due to government regulations enforced by a man who should have never been President—he found himself working for the federal government and pursuing what had always been his passion—perfecting humanity. He was close. Now if he could only get the President to give him more time.

Two hours later, Lloyd's black sedan blazed along Highway 118, fifty miles East of Las Vegas. The second overture of Bach pounded from the speakers, matching the intensity of Lloyd's focused stare. His eyes seemed to be locked onto something spectacular—and it wasn't the road. He leaned his head slightly toward the open window, attempting to escape the smell the car emanated. Angular face and too large lips sat amidst unkempt locks that danced in the wind. The passenger seat and floor were no where to be seen beneath the piles of aluminum cans, half eaten Snickers bars and fast food

bags. More than a fair share of Jack's blistering taco sauce had found its way into the upholstery and carpet.

Braking loose from the Eastern desert floor, the sun quickly warmed the air; the orb's glow emblazoned the desert in tangerine and crimson. Lloyd pressed down on the accelerator, the speedometer climbed to 110 mph.

Area 51 had long been a hot bed for conspiracy theories; many of them were true. But it didn't hold a candle to what went on in Area 19. Area 19 was a barren desert, but interestingly enough a power line stopped dead center in the middle of the plot. The press corp. was often invited to Area 51, but never to area 19. It was supposedly do to unkempt roads, but the road leading to the area of the power line was paved, and in very good condition. Of course there was nothing to see according to the government, just testing grounds they said...but there was that power line.

The black sedan pulled up to the military guard post. Lloyd's bugged eyes glared into a hand held retina scanner. Withdrawing the scanner, the Private looked down at the screen. "Continue on, Mr. Richards."

The sedan moved through the gates, entering Area 51. Cresting a hill moments later, four large hangars—four times the size of the largest football stadium—came into view. A black line of asphalt cut through the scarcely vegetative, near barren valley, the sedan sped down it. Tires squealed lightly as the sedan careened into a parking space marked Richards, very near the front entrance.

Inside of hangar one, Lloyd once again met up with an eye scanner and quickly proceeded deeper into the facility.

Shortly, he descended at an alarming pace inside of a high-speed elevator. Closing his eyes, he fought back vertigo as his last meal rose in his stomach with the elevator's drop in elevation. The large chamber of the elevator was capable of housing fifteen people. Roller-coaster type seats lined the walls, with ten square feet of cargo space in its center. He opened his eyes again as the elevator abruptly slowed its descent, but quickly closed them as the car sped horizontally, accelerating violently down the dark shaft on silent rails. Lloyd swayed expertly with the speeding chamber, resting his head back for the five-minute ride that would take him pretty much directly below the power line that ended at nothingness a 1/4 mile above on the desert surface.

He stepped from the elevator and wobbled slightly. A mundane looking hall lay before him, a door on either side near its end, but instead of a wall capping the long corridor, it was open to the massive hangar revealed behind chest high guardrail. The hallway stopped at a rail that overlooked the inside of a massive hangar.

A spacecraft hovered there, tethered by cables to gigantic eyebolts in the floor. Hundreds of transport space shuttles were tucked into docking bays along the ship's side, each capable of holding a hundred adults. Hooded figures standing at least seven feet tall worked on and about the massive ship while military personnel loaded supplies.

Lloyd shook his head in frustration, and turned to the door to his right, bursting in.

The office was large. Glass walls separated the office from hangar, giving an even grandeur view of the ship. It was breathtaking but Lloyd had seen it before and didn't slow down. "Tell me you didn't move up the date."

The General sat reclined enjoying the view of the ship and the crew that flowed in and out with supplies. He didn't turn as he spoke. "Heard of knocking?" He chuckled. "No, I guess that would be too mundane for someone of your intellectual prowess." The General paused for effect, then continued. "No, I didn't move up the date."

Lloyd waited for the punch line he knew was coming.

"The President did." The General smiled at his own wit.

Lloyd paced in front of the large window. "Ignorant fool! Does no one care about the fate of humanity?" Lloyd ran his fingers through greasy long hair and removed his quickly fogging spectacles, cleaning them with his shirt. "Just give me another year. Without the restraints put on me by that religious nut we had in office after Blake's untimely death, I'd have developed a gene by now that could be injected to enhance humanities genetic pool forever...possibly giving us a fighting chance to stay alive out there. If you send millions of people into the outer reaches of the universe—before I've fixed them—we'll never be rid of our imperfections."

The General was entertained, but gruff. "I'll be perfect when I'm dead. I'll settle for that."

Lloyd shook his head near violently in pompous disgust. "I'm afraid it will be too late by then. I will see humanity reach its glory, trust me!" Lloyd stopped his frantic pacing, looking out at the aliens working around the ships. "It's our only chance against these beasts."

Downs - Space Janitor
- 10 -

Prologue # 3

When the Greys arrived, they arrived as harbors of life, promising to usher humanity into a new stage of evolution. Unbeknownst to the world's proletariat, the elite rulers of the world ransomed the lives of the sick, aged, and unwanted to the Greys in exchange for the promise of safety from the strange world of the branes. After all, many of these same elite had been pushing for more expansive means of population control for years. The President himself signed the deal that allowed the brainwashing of his people. The propaganda campaign only reinforced what most believed, that when they gave their sick and dying to the Greys, they were ushering them into a higher place--instead of the sick truth that Greys used the unique souls of humans to receive an extended narcotic rush before leaving behind a lifeless body.

PURE-GEN

EARTH, 2085--Large, perfectly colored, green California oaks adorned the exquisite park. The park was clean, too clean. The wide sidewalks sparkled, capturing the sun's glare like no concrete ever could. The shrubs and ferns brilliantly paraded colorful foliage that highlighted the park benches and playgrounds.

Children played and adults exercised with vigor. A woman in a tight work out bra jogged along winding path, her breasts perfectly undersized for

an athletic woman, she approached a man wearing a tight tank top that revealed sculpted muscular frame and upright posture. The woman smiled--her breasts enlarged a full cup size as hormone triggered implants expanded, filling out yellow spandex. The man smiled back, his eyes a too perfect shade of blue.

A young boy ran past them both. Today was his eleventh birthday, so he knew he could run faster than yesterday when he was only ten. He was already the fastest kid at school, faster than even the thirteen-year olds. Today, he would be faster than even the fourteen-year olds. His speed pushed long tightly curled black hair back from an angelic face. Veering off the path, he leapt a park bench in perfect stride, landing amidst neatly mowed grass. He was amazing; his leaps, cuts, and strides the envy of any professional athlete. He broke into a full sprint, bolting across a grassy hill and beneath the canopy of oaks.

A mother bird squawked at her three chicks, urging them to wobble closer to the edge of their nest. They feared their first flight. One by one she nudged them off their safe perch. One by one they flapped their wings toward the approaching ground. Hopping several times two of the three took flight. The third continued to hop, hobbled by a lame foot.

The boy was approaching fast, nearing the oak that housed the now panicking mother-bird. She watched helplessly as the boy slowed, nearing her flightless and struggling chick. The boy's sleek perfectly smooth ebony skin glistened with sweat, as he stood over the bird emotionless, watching as it hopped about pathetically. Without hesitation or remorse, he brought a

white shoe down, crushing the life out of the helpless sparrow. The mother cried out.

"Go to the higher place." The boy said quietly, without emotion.

The monstrous high rises watched as the boy sprinted through the streets below them. Spinning, weaving his way through the pedestrian filled sidewalk, he imagined every pedestrian to be a linebacker looking to tackle the star running back. He leapt, crouching upon four foot high wall, momentarily touching fingers to it like a spider before sprinting down its narrow ridge, effortlessly taking flight, landing softly then bounding toward an intersection as green holographic hand motioned him across.

The crunching of metal against bone was a sickening prelude to the sounds of rubber on asphalt and the screams that followed.



She spent hours planning him; graphic simulators, photo shop portrait programs, and major historic research formed his creation. She didn't want her son to have the flaws she did. Yes, her eyes were a perfect shade of blue that contrasted wonderfully with her hazel skin. And her parents were kind enough to give her a nice figure--not as full figured in some areas as she would have liked, but surgery fixed that--and her intelligence was high. But her enhancements were twenty-seven years ago, before they perfected the human genetic model. Her son was--too her great pride--the first child to be born having had every gene perfectly engineered in the lab. He was perfect, until now.

The young G'laieth rested upon a stainless steel slab, legs mangled beyond recognition. The doctor spoke without emotion, informing Laieth's

mother that his organs were severely damaged, possibly beyond repair. The tears flowed freely. Her husband held her hand, trying to provide her comfort where none existed. She knew what she should do. She should show her son mercy. Give him what he'd never have here on earth again. Give him a perfect life...in the higher place.

A strong hand gently brushed hair from her eyes. "It's the right thing to do."

Hesitating, she grasped her son's limp hand, and without looking up nodded approval.

The boy's father ran fingers through his son's charcoal hair. Then, with determination, he lifted his wife to her feet, continuing to support her as he walked her to a sofa where they held each other--and waited.

In the next room a robed alien priest sat alone with a young orphaned little girl, a girl who never had the privilege of parents with the finances to design her body to perfection, she was without genetic alteration, she was, a Non-Gen. Kate had cerebral palsy. Her body would never work right they told her, and she might not live a full life. And what life she had would be full of pain here on Earth. She should go to the higher place. That's what they recommended. She was a ward of the government, and they had already signed the papers; but it was her choice in the end. She'd seen the commercials; she knew in her heart, a paradise awaited her. Her gentle brown eyes glistened with fear as she peered up into the shadowed face of the robed Priest. She nodded, and closed her eyes. The priest placed a cloaked hand upon the rising chest, as the heart's thump of life ceased, her

chest stilled...and the beast exhaled in jubilation, breathing in the rush it felt from the life force that surged through him. The Grey sat there momentarily, enjoying the after affects of his addiction; the emotions, the life of a human surging through him, the ecstasy from the life he'd just absorbed. Finally, without ceremony, he rose and left the girl's room, her lifeless eyes staring blankly.

That same alien entered Laieth's room thirty seconds later, his large form filled the doorway as he entered. Standing seven feet tall, the creature's white flowing robe touched the floor, it was as if he floated across the room; its pale, featureless face hidden in shadows by the large ivory hood. Without a glance at the boy's mourning parents, it moved to the table where the patient lay motionless. Just another full day for the Grey, another day of ecstasy thanks to this foolish race. The creature stood next to the table for a moment, ready to enjoy once again the pleasure he gained from the death of a human. This one should provide an even fuller rush. The older the better, the more memories, the more emotions to suck dry, the bigger the high. Across the globe the act was repeated by countless Greys as aging bodies became weak, and human's who'd bought into the lie of "A higher place", sacrificed years of their life to death. Those Greys with power lived the life of Kings, serving and ushering the elderly from their frail bodies to the higher place. This Priest envied them, a smorgasbord of lives fully lived, primed for the taking.

Quietly, Lloyd Richards entered the room. He looked very near to what he had thirty years earlier. His brilliance in the lab had provided him

the fountain of youth through genetic modifications. He stepped into a corner and watched quietly.

The robed priest looked to Lloyd, who nodded approval. He then placed a robed hand on the boy's breast. The hand slowly moved over the gently rising breast. Suddenly the hand was drawn back as if burned. Slowly it returned; this time with more intention, more definitive movement. The chest continued to rise and fall; breath eased from between the boy's lips.

The hand retreated once again; the Grey seemed perplexed. It paused, looking at its own appendage before slowly returning it to the boy. Slowly, three nail-less fingers extended from the sleeve, caressing the boy's chest--which continued the mantra of life, rising and falling, mocking the Grey with every breath.

The appendage clenched into a fist and in a violent, unnatural jerk of the spine, the being snapped its head around in a very snake like fashion, the alien's head extended forward, forcing the white hood to fall behind its gruesome head. Revealed was an ashen, leathery skin that covered a hairless cranium. Two small holes replaced its nose. Shell shaped ears, wide black eyes, and thin lips begot fear even before the lips pulled back in an evil snarl. A hiss spewed forth from jagged fangs at Lloyd.

Lloyd seemed almost as shocked as the boy's mother, who instantly fainted. The Grey quickly pulled up his hood. In that moment--while the creature was distracted--Lloyd's face revealed his puzzlement, such that his brilliant mind had never faced.

Chapter One

With the arrival of the Greys and their technology, humans quickly explored and created settlements across the Universe. The ruling parties of Earth soon formed alliances with other civilizations throughout the universe, forming the Intergalactic United System. Humans continued to show their uniqueness for dominion and quickly became a major force throughout the known galaxies, using newly discovered genetic technologies to create species loyal to the human agenda. A new breed of law enforcement officer was created, one with the job description of cleaning up space from those who would hinder the propagation of universal peace...

SPACE JANITOR

2100 A.D. DEEP SPACE: THE VOID – The small rock strewn planet floated in the midst of the seemingly endless domain of space. What classified this cragged rock void of atmosphere as a planet instead of an asteroid in the galactic charts was merely a whim of the scientific community.

The blackness was perfect until a silent explosion erupted driving the cobalt into retreat in an elliptic spectrum of energy. A silver bullet appeared from the quickly expanding saucer of light. The pearly mass slowed taking the form of a spacecraft and shattering the quiet with the 125 year-old hit

song, *Magic Carpet Ride*, which blared into space from the ship's exterior speakers.

The long-range fighter approached the rocky surface quickly, wings folded away from fuselage and retracting wormhole shields revealed a cockpit. Intense light exploded into space from the small craft as navigation lights activated.

Inside the cockpit sat Sgt. C.T. McGregor, his black boots at rest atop switch filled control panel. He lounged in a high backed, black leather captain's chair. Muscled limbs draped loosely over large padded armrests. A charcoal tinted shirt hung open across his broad chest. Dark hair was cropped short and had the sheen of youth while the depth of his sleep left his bronzed skin without wrinkle.

The pounding music that thankfully emanated quieter inside than out seemed to have no effect on the Sergeant's sleep. It was quickly apparent that he snoozed unawares of the jagged cliffs that now filled his view screen, increasing in size at an alarming rate.

Looming large in the ship's screen, the rocky planet quickly blocked out the universe behind it. A red light flashed and beeped, quickening with the ship's approach to the planet.

Nary a twitch arose from the pilot's eyes until a very sensual female voice lyrically flowed through the large cockpit as the music faded to a whisper. "Perhaps it is time to consider the briefing?" The voice poised the question as near to a command as possible without it being one.

The switchboard lit up with light and sound as the planet rose up to reveal a crater and boulder-strewn surface. She continued. "And our eminent crash course into that large rock."

McGregor's eyes twitched, the corner of his lip almost curled, his eyes opened, his coarse hand rubbed coarser beard. "E.T.A?"

The voice responded politely, "Twenty two seconds...21, 20, 19..."

McGregor yawned, and looked at the pocked surface casually. "Debrief."

"So soon Sir." The voice responded sarcastically. "We're still thirteen and 3/4 seconds from impact and only two days late for a three-day assignment."

Blue eyes twinkled. "Well Aaia, if you'd kept my ship safe from those mutant tics, we'd have been here on time." McGregor smiled. He enjoyed poking fun at the computer whose personality he had programmed. Sometimes he wondered if he had not given her too much personality.

Aaia interrupted his thoughts. "Security is not in my programming. 11, 10, 9..."

"Just in case you ever decided to turn on me." He said, peering up to the ceiling. "I'm kidding. I'd give you all the power I had if I.U.S. would let me."

"Of course you would. Now, about the incinerary experience were about to partake of?"

The ship plummeted toward what could only result in a fiery explosion. The unforgiving surface took shape as it drew closer...closer...closer... The ship nearly shivered at the fate that was now

inevitable when just before impact a large perfectly camouflaged portal on the planet's surface opened, revealing a tunnel, which lead straight into the planet's core. The fighter glided gracefully into the massive corridor as the portal closed seamlessly behind it.

McGregor smiled. "I guess I should have told you about that."

"Really?" Aaia said with the utmost human tone, expressing in the one word her annoyance and enjoyment at being a participant in her programmer's joke.

"I guess that didn't make it into the research program I gave you."

Aaia sighed and began her debriefing. "Space Hub lovingly referred to as Hell's Gate, one of the largest harbors in the known galaxy. Non I.U.S. controlled but vital to non-worm hole cross-galactic shipping. Until recently, controlled by a reasonable human crime lord...He's dead. The new lord is hiking prices, refuses to show at least the facade of respect for I.U.S. officers and had all the priests destroyed the first day. He's a grainite and mean as hell. Clean Up the mess using any means necessary with I.U.S. section 3 code 7 as protocol."

McGregor grunted. "Can't kill 'em unless he kills me first."

"Exactly".

"Dandy." McGregor flipped a coolant switch. "Wiped out all the Greys, huh?"

"Yes."

"Interesting."

The view screen revealed the pitch-black tunnel that soon sprouted lights as the ship sped through it. As the light sources increased, signs of life

appeared along the shaft's surface. McGregor flipped a switch, dimming the exterior lights as every surface of the corridor filled with living quarters, shops, restaurants and taverns.

McGregor's craft darted from the tunnel exit and into the planet's core. Sailing deep along the radius, the sleek vehicle moved toward the core's center. The hollowed planet teemed with activity as shuttles and taxi's scurried about the interior.

Three miles separated the planet's walls. Every inch of surface was put to use, covered with minimally profiled intricate structures and warehouses; often it was difficult to establish where one ended and the other began. Metal intertwined with stone to create phantasmagoric architectural wonders that sprawled amongst the cragged interior. An orb that glowed moon-like at the planet's center illuminated the core, currently simulating night. McGregor maneuvered the ship through heavy traffic, banking around the silver orb and then guiding his ship toward a cliff wall with several large caves. Decreasing speed, the ship's landing gear dropped and it slipped into a hangar carved into the cliffs natural caves.

Bustling traders moved about the hangar in a furor. Ships of all shapes and sizes were loaded and unloaded with cargo. Exotic creatures bartered and exchanged goods as ships were serviced for the long flight to anywhere. The stone floor of the monstrous cave was polished to sheen. McGregor observed all this while buttoning his shirt, shutting down his systems and arming himself. He looked up to where a long broadsword hung, then reluctantly took down the two holstered blasters next to it and strapped them around his waist.

McGregor's craft gracefully settled into an open space between an I.U.S. trade vessel and a much smaller clepto ship. The cleptos were just one of the many genetic mutant creations that roamed the universe alongside the native creatures of a more natural genesis. Cleptos were humans with the genes of mockingbirds engineered at the point of conception. Rarely did they exceed 1.5 M in height and hollow bones allowed them amazing leaping abilities. Small wings limited their aerial capabilities to gliding--their wings not strong enough to give them true flight. Elfish features, soft feathered hair, and wings that folded gracefully down their back made them beautiful creatures and one of the touted successes from the genetic engineering revolution. But they were not without fault, their abilities at collection and hawking wares made them excellent merchants--it also made them master thieves.

McGregor smiled politely through the windshield as he lowered blaster blinds, waving at the tiny man-bird as he set his alarms.

It didn't take long to make his way through the interior caves toward his destination. He walked briefly down an exterior bridge, a five-foot wide non-symmetrical path stretching across the monstrous cavern below. He was momentarily suspended in space as he stopped to scan the chasm's depths before turning his gaze to the massive airspace inside the hollowed planet. He took a deep breath, wanting to enjoy the experience more than he seemed to. He continued down the rock walk.

McGregor entered the thriving bar with confidence. After all, he was a Space Janitor--highly trained and well equipped. He was in his third year as a Janitor, and was given the best missions. It was a dangerous job, and he

loved it for that. He had worked hard to gain the position, and made the elusive rank of Space Janitor in the fastest time possible, two years. Across the globe his position demanded respect. He looked about the tavern as he strutted through the crowds. Traders from all walks of life--both alien and engineered, organic and mechanical--mingled and partied. C.T. was out of uniform, yet many in the crowd noticed his genetic superiority, he was sure by the way they parted for him. He approached the counter where a sexy barkeep quickly took notice of this tall stranger.

"What's your pleasure, cowboy?" The barkeep whispered flirtatiously.

McGregor turned to his left where two green-skinned lizard men looked pathetically at empty mugs. With a questioning glance he asked them both, "Orange Whip? Orange Whip?"

The duo nodded in unison, a ray of hope filtering into their verdant reptilian eyes.

McGregor dipped his head in acknowledgement, and said without facing the Barkeep, "Three Orange whips." He smiled at his inner joke and ode to one of the greatest adventures of all time. As the barkeep moved to concoct the drinks, McGregor scanned the room, leaning back and resting his elbows on the bar. He took in the entire alcove, noticing who noticed him, and who purposefully kept their eyes away. He grew confident from his ability to observe human emotions--and intentions--at a glance and was emboldened by his effect on the people at the bar.

The Barkeep returned with the drinks and smiled. McGregor smiled back, truly seeing her for the first time. Dark silky hair flowed about her shoulders, and ample cleavage sprang from the girl's low cut, red, sleeveless

shirt. Subtly brown skin glowed between the tapered top that hugged slender waist, and the low cut pants drew a perfectly curved line across her toned abdomen, two inches below the perfectly shaped bellybutton. She set the frothing drinks down. She saved McGregor's for last, and met his eyes boldly as she placed the drink before him.

He fought to maintain his casualness, as the blood in his body seemed to instantly heat, turning him to mush. Raising his eyes, he met her gaze--reminding himself she was probably just a non-gen, far his inferior--he hoped he faked his confidence well.

The twinkle in her eye told him he failed. "Where ya' from?" She asked, the words seemingly caressing his ears as they passed.

Her eyes blitzed his senses, ransacking any chance he had at a witty response. Electric in their coloration, they danced before him; depths of aquamarine mesmerized him. In all his days amidst the genetically designed eyes of the elite, he'd never seen their equal. It was too much, and he pulled his own eyes away from the sparkling pools. Reaching for the tangerine colored drink, he raised it to his lips with his right hand, hoping to sooth his countenance. He'd long ago made the habit of eating and drinking with his right hand so that his more dexterous appendage would be available for his gun if needed. Finally after setting the drink back to the bar, he answered. "Earth."

Delighted eyes lit up, and the beautiful girl couldn't hide her excitement at the answer she had hoped for. "Long way from home. Smuggler?"

He smiled internally, his confidence returning with the reminder of who he was. True confidence replaced false bravado now, knowing his answer would quickly win the girl; every woman longed to find a man of his genetic make-up. "Janitor." He didn't have time to wait expectantly for her dazzled and impressed stare; her disgust rocked him instantly. The very face that a moment ago stirred heat in his loins now sent daggers of ice through his heart.

The girl was obviously surprised by this unexpected piece of information. She recovered quickly, leaned in toward him, looked deep into his eyes and made no attempt to hide her contempt. "You sure? I can usually tell a gen-freak...I mean, gen-man--they do nothing for me."

If her initial reaction shocked him, but this statement broke him. Suddenly every fear of inadequacy swelled up from the past, taking the form of beads of sweat surfacing on the back of his neck and the muscles of his legs turning to jelly. He quickly fought the irrational fears back; he'd dealt with this issue years ago, when faced with a newborn younger brother, a brother designed to perfection by his parents. A brother--who unlike himself--was not adopted. For six years before his brother's untimely death, the boy roused fear of inadequacy in McGregor's adopted heart. It only worsened after his brother's sickness, he became near deity after that, and McGregor felt ever more his inferior in the shadow of the perfect memories his mother had of her womb born son.

McGregor shook off the doubts, so he was adopted, and without papers, his parents said he came from genetically pure stock, and he made Janitor in record time--a non-gen couldn't do that! He was who they said he

was. He had nothing to fear he told himself. He forced his body taller; he was Sgt. C.T. McGregor, Space Janitor--gen-man! He matched her stare, waiting for her to make the next move. Her coldness held, and she stared at him with unflinching eyes of steel.

Stepping back from the bar, he pulled credits from the front pocket of his dark brown flight jacket. He forced himself to meet her gaze then tossed them on the bar. "For the clean up." The titanium chips clinked on the bar and finally drew her gaze from his. He felt released and took the opportunity to escape.

McGregor was up and moving before her eyes rose from the money. She watched him glide purposefully through the crowd toward the rear of the large tavern. Once again, he would quell his own doubts of his genetic make-up the only way he knew how--with action, and with a vengeance.

A large double door sat well protected by two heavily armed eight-foot angular faced kragors. The sentries bred for war frowned at the approaching intruder. One of them stepped forward, extending a six-fingered hand. "Halt."

McGregor ignored the command, quickening his pace. Blasters drew as one and without hesitation the kragars unleashed a barrage of laser blasts.

McGregor's hand casually brushed by his belt as the blasts reached him, a shimmering light flickered where the shots should be destroying flesh. An invisible force field absorbed the blasts with ease. McGregor's left hand was a blur as were the two darts that entered jugulars with deadly silence--the kragars crumbled--a dart protruding from each of their crimson stained necks.

McGregor stepped over the fallen mutants and pushed through the doors, his hands snagging them at their apex and flinging them shut behind him without missing a beat. He continued toward a gigantic desk centered in the elaborate, foliage filled room.

The thing that sat behind the large desk smiled, its seemingly rigid rock face curved upwards. The thing's tangerine hide covered a massively muscled nine-foot frame--he was a Grainite--a genetic mutation bred for mining the mineral planets.

McGregor stopped, glancing toward an eagle sized winged lizard that perched perceptively in an iron cage. It's emerald skin shone like fine polished leather carved to resemble scaled skin. The dragon's tongue licked the air expectantly. McGregor turned his gaze back to the brute behind the desk, coolly meeting the Grainite's smile. "Lord Grimm, I presume."

The genetically created beast ground out a laugh. "I must have done something right, for them to send one of you."

It took an act of will not to acknowledge the complement as pride surged within him, but McGregor held the beast's gaze and said casually. "You worked quickly, unfortunately for you not quietly."

The two warriors analyzed one another carefully, waiting for the other to make a mistake.

"Why'd you kill the Greys?" McGregor asked, hiding his interest.

Grimm paused, then began to chuckle, then to laugh--the laughter grew to a near deafening level before he stopped cold. "Because they kill people." Grimm used the nano-second McGregor's mind strayed to go for his guns.

Pistols slid from McGregor's holsters with lightening speed, firing simultaneously with Grimm.

Two mutated thirty inch shoeless feet that rested casually on the desk became launchers, sending literally a ton of tangerine marble hurling toward McGregor who was already diving through the air, hitting the ground rolling as he fired.

McGregor's blasters ignited again and again, lasers ricocheting off the granite's hide.

Rock chips flew from Grimm's thick hide as he sprinted for the door, firing a large armor piercing photon blaster at the now up and ready McGregor.

McGregor's force field took the brunt of the first blast but it didn't keep him from being knocked back, he fought to keep his balance when a second shot slammed into his chest, propelling him forcefully onto his backside. Breath purged from his lungs and then the third blast connected, slamming the Janitor's head back against stone floor and sending a ripple through his force field...it fizzled away in an electrical light melt down.

McGregor struggled to sit, gasping at the air that was still denied him, then finally finding it and expelling it again with the words. "Oh, shit!"

A massive hand grasped him by the shirtfront; jerking him from the floor and hurling him like a rag doll into the back wall. Grimm laughed again as McGregor slid down the stone to the floor.

A twenty-inch tongue lashed out from the lizard's fanged snout and McGregor heard in his mind, *Better move*. McGregor listened to the thought

and painfully dove from the path of another photon blast. The dragon was obviously enjoying the show.

Grimm continued his march toward the doors, he turned and smiled, firing one last shot at the scrambling McGregor who--hearing the word, *Move*, in his mind--threw himself behind a hutch full of multi-colored roses, landing hard on already cracked ribs. Grimm laughed at the cry of pain from McGregor and he turned away.

Just as the grotesque hand reached for the double doors, McGregor grimaced with the agony of the effort, but pulled himself up from behind the hutch and shouted, "Hey Rock Face!"

Grimm turned to see a four-inch metallic disc spiraling toward him.

McGregor disappeared behind the hutch as the disc embedded into the center of the grainite's forehead. Grimm's eyes crossed upwards as cumbersome fingers reached frantically for the tiny device. Four quick ticks later the bomb detonated and the ensuing explosion thundered through the room like a canon.

Kneeling behind the slate desk turned bomb shelter, McGregor covered his head. The concussion blast sent rocks, pebbles and grains of sand raining down upon the room and McGregor. Shortly thereafter, as McGregor allowed his eyes to rise, the leaves and pedals of a hundred roses and a plethora of herbage settled gently around him.

He rose with an aching snarl, laser blasters still in hand, pointing at the double doors--nobody entered. Breathing deeply, he stretched out his bruised and battered body. He inhaled slowly--agonizingly--testing his ribs. Sniffing, he drew in another breath, suddenly aware of the avid aroma now

filling the room, enjoying the fragrance of a hundred annihilated roses. Two pistols twirled into holsters and he said wryly, "I love the smell of roses in the morning."

A snicker drew McGregor's attention to the cage, which now lay on its side. The shaken up dragon ruffled out its leathery wings then peered at McGregor.

McGregor's mind once again filled with thoughts not his as the words, *Three, two, one, zero*, floated through his mind. On zero the doors of the office burst open and a half a dozen kragars charged through firing upon the Space Janitor. Without his force field he was mandated to defy physics and out maneuver the blasts. His own guns reached his hands in a blur and he miraculously escaped the initial onslaught with only flesh wounds. But he only managed to bring two of the warriors down as he somersaulted his way over a table and across the room; attempting to find cover behind the large upturned desk as he unloaded on the remaining four kragars. The well-trained soldiers spread out, attempting to put their adversary in a position of crossfire. McGregor knew too well his fate if he allowed them to succeed--he would be dead.

He didn't give them a chance to think, and kept on the move. He sprang forward, guns exploding in blue rays of death, purposefully charging in the direction of the two still in the proximity of each other. They leapt apart, as did McGregor's guns, and both kragars fell from precision shots to the head.

Blood sprayed from McGregor's shoulder as a blast from one of the remaining kragars ripped across deltoid. "ARRGH!" He dropped with the

hit, forcing himself to ignore the pain of landing on the very shoulder that now burned, blasting away at the attacking soldier. The leathery skinned creature crumbled to the floor across the room from him and silence stilled the air. He scanned the room from where he fell. The last kragor had gone into stealth mode. He dared not to make a sound as he slowly slid himself into a defensive position between a carved stone pedestal and the wall. His eyes darted about the room and his ears tuned to the slightest sound.

Silence.

Free Me.

Not exactly a good time for that. McGregor thought back at the dragon.

Obviously. After you win.

If I win?

You will if I help you.

I was going to free you anyway.

Thanks. Here he comes. With that thought sent, the dragon sprang to the side of his tipped cage, causing it to roll. The kragor turned toward the noise as McGregor stood up to face him. When the kragor turned back, he was looking down the barrels of McGregor's guns.

McGregor smirked. "Always good to have back-up."

The kragor nodded, glancing at McGregor's weapons.

Two titanium barrels nodded back, as McGregor quipped. "Don't even think about."

The kragor dropped his weapon.

McGregor maneuvered around him to the cage, gun and eyes on him constantly, then reached down gingerly, opening the iron door of the cage. "Stay out of my mind." He needn't have spoken, for the telekinetic lizard had already read the thought.

The dragon's snout curled in what could only be described as a snarling smile, revealing a tiny row of fangs designed for gnashing. Taking flight, it circled the room then landed on McGregor's shoulder.

"Are you kidding me?" McGregor flinched at the talons digging into his shoulder. "To the nearest planet with meat is as far as you're going." He then thought instead of said, *And stay out of my mind.*

Impossible.

McGregor ignored him. "Enter the dragon."

The dragon snickered despite having no way to understand the subtext.

"I'll call you Bruce."

And you...Seeker.

In a flash, McGregor holstered his pistol and pulled a dart. He squeezed its base, causing several drops of venom to disperse. "No sense in you dying." Nearly impossible to see, the movement was so quick, McGregor's hand sent the dart into the kragar's jugular and the giant crumpled to the floor in a heap.

Like a pirate's prized parrot, the dragon rode McGregor's broad shoulder as he walked back into the cantina. The clientele of this establishment were used to violence, and purposefully kept their eyes and glances at bay as the Space Janitor sauntered past them and toward the bar.

He threw down another wad of cash on the countertop. It didn't escape his notice that it wasn't the girl from earlier who took up the money. He quickly shoved the disappointment from his mind--he'd never see her again anyway.

Chapter Two

Planets either aligned with the I.U.S. for protection--therefore aligning with the Greys--or were considered Rogue planets. Rogue planets were not under the protection of I.U.S. and consequently open to attacks from aggressive species. More often than not these planets were inhabited by non-gens (humans without genetic enhancement). Over the years these humans had become stereotyped as inferior and therefore discriminated against.

SAVANAH

The ship crawled through the planet's exit tunnel. In the bridge, McGregor was hard at work. He sat amidst a tangle of wires which lay exposed and spread across the counter before him. He tinkered with the force field control box that nearly cost him his life; his unbuttoned shirt revealed bandages around his rib cage. The jade skinned dragon ripped at a raw slab of meat, his forked tongue lapping up the succulent juices. Leathery wings folded sleekly against his muscled body. The dragon peered up at McGregor intently. The Janitor felt a tingle of thought creep across his consciousness, *Good meat*. He looked at the dragon, *I told you, stay out of my mind*. He sent the thought at the dragon almost like he meant it. Bruce just snickered and went back to his meal.

"What's next?" McGregor voiced without looking up.

Bruce paused, looking about questioningly.

The dragon received his answer when the feminine voice of Aaia came from hidden speakers. "Earth."

McGregor stopped working, and sat back in his chair. Earth was a rare destination lately. "For?"

Aaia paused with surprisingly human timing for effect. "Your presence has been requested at I.U.S."

McGregor waited--his attention suddenly tuned to the task at hand--but Aaia refused to continue without a prompt. Eagerness shown through his failed calm facade. "Go on."

"You've been selected to train for Alpha-Omega status."

McGregor forced his mind to process the words he had longed for; words that would make his dreams come true. The information that confirmed what he had always doubted--that he was a gen-man. "Alpha?" He asked, just to make sure. Bruce purred at the shared positive emotion.

Once again, with amazing human emotion, Aaia replied. "You made it."

"Gen-men only for the six?"

"Of course."

McGregor smiled. Before he could further enjoy the moment, a crash brought him back to reality. He knew it was too easy, the grainite's minions must be attacking. He looked out the starboard windows, shouting out a command to scan the exterior. He quickly grabbed for the controls, scanning bay window to see where the attack came from. But the ship was safely on course, leaving the tunnel and ascending into the planets barren atmosphere

before ascending into space. "I believe--like most everything--the problem is from within." Aaia said dryly. He stood, turning toward the interior of the ship where he caught a glimpse of the reptile flapping furiously in the direction of the crash. "What was it?"

Aaia raised the tone of her voice whimsically. "It seems we have a visitor."

McGregor moved, snatching the steel broadsword from the wall above the slanted windshield, sliding its scabbard across his back, ignoring the duel holstered blasters that hung next to it. An unseen button triggered a recently installed force field that shimmered across the ancient blade--a juxtaposition of technology spawned in different eras. The sword reached 55 1/4' at its full length, 39 7/8' was cold blue steel extending from the intricately carved hilt. The wide blade glistened down to two keen razor sharp edges. Masterfully carved oak mimicked the leather strap of a hammer as it spiraled down to the base of the hilt where 4 x 3 x 2 silver pommel formed a mallet. Between the hilt and the blade a steel guard was forged to resemble a flowing leather strap of the hammer which hung below it. Across the hilt--carved in Norse lettering--was the word *Mjolnir*.

Sword at the ready, McGregor raced through the ship's main corridor, stopping at the bay doors where the dragon hovered in flight, hissing intensely. He nodded toward the dragon that was ready for battle and thought, *This winged reptile could be a valuable asset*. The dragon responded casually, *You just figured that out?* The doors opened. Leaping through in a single bound, McGregor's blade sliced through the air, arcing in an offensive flow then settling into a position to pare a potential attack. The

dragon moved with the soldier in tandem, sweeping high and circling around the room to the flank. Steam poured from its nose in a show of aggression.

The barkeep from the cantina watched the two warriors enter the room, bloodlust in their eyes. She screamed, "No! Please!" Her panicked movement entwined her deeper into the mass of wire that engulfed her.

McGregor's large blade stopped a hair's width from the Barkeep's perfectly sculpted neck.

The ghostly voice of Aaia echoed through the chamber, vibrato added for effect. "Next time you might request permission before boarding a ship."

Hazel eyes darted fearfully about the large room, seeking the owner of the spooky voice.

McGregor angled his blade, drawing her angst filled gaze back to him. The blue shimmer dancing across steel highlighted the fine features of the girl.

"I'm sorry, I just..."

Beating wings interrupted the Barkeep and a small psychic blast caused McGregor to step back. Bruce landed on her chest, coming between her and the blade, his long neck snaked to position his lowered diamond shaped head, snout up, to peer aggressively at McGregor. He hissed. Forcing his thoughts into McGregor's mind. *Many times over during the last year of my captivity this girl has come to my aid. Feeding me scraps and protecting me from the cruel jabs and prods of the degenerate clientele of that bar when that filth of a grainite had brought me out as a sideshow. She can be trusted.*

Maybe?

The dragon *roared* through their psi-link.

McGregor appeased him. *I won't hurt her.* McGregor recognized the girl as well. She seemed much younger and softer than in the bar. Her slightly curled auburn hair hung loosely about angelic face. He softened internally as he raged outwardly--bringing the tip of his blade close to the delicate temple of the girl--she cringed at its heat. "Boarding a ship without warrant or permission, not to mention attempting to travel inter-galactic without a permit--I could kill you and get a raise."

Doe eyes filled with tears as Savannah fought not to break down."

"Nice McGregor. Very sensitive." Aaia spoke coldly.

Bruce snarled once again at his new friend. *You've got issues.*

McGregor paused momentarily, realizing he was outnumbered and had pushed the girl too far. He sheathed his weapon into the scabbard across his back. "Get hold of yourself and start talking."

She paused from uncertainty. McGregor read it as an act of defiance. "Aaia, take us back to that rock."

"Yes Sir."

Savannah panicked, her eyes grew wide. "No, wait." A surprisingly quick recovery followed. The pretty girl brushed back her shiny hair framing her almond shaped eyes perfectly. She moved out from under the sword, and stood as she began her story. "I was taken as a child from my mom...from Earth...It's my home...or was...most non-gens were struggling to survive; maybe she thought it was best. So I was given over to an apprentice. Basically I was a slave, but for a rather nice man actually, old, but nice."

McGregor sent the obvious thought to the dragon, *She's a talker.*

The Dragon agreed, *Yeah.*

"I've been to more galaxies than you have more than likely, grand adventures. We were on our way back to earth traveling through the Void when...well...he died. Like I said he was old. I was stuck on that God forsaken rock for the last two years. I've been saving, but do you know what it costs to get to Earth from here, well, you probably don't actually, being a gen-freak..."

McGregor frowned.

"I mean, man, sorry, anyway it's a lot--either monetary or..."

McGregor's eyes roved to her revealing blouse.

"--And that was not an option!" She continued, pulling her button down together. "I've studied Earth since I could read, know it all, the Exodus, Genetic discoveries, the Grey's arrival--everything." She paused, a sad look penetrating her eyes. "But I've never been there, and I know nothing of my parents." She looked out through the side shield window, frowning at the approaching rock planet in the distance, now coming into line and drawing closer as the ship realigned its flight to take her back. "I just wanted to get back...home...that's all, maybe find them...or find out what happened to them." Her eyes opened wide. "Oh. Oh."

McGregor followed her gaze to the rock planet. Six fighters appeared from the surface tunnel, burners spit flames from their tails and they closed in fast. "Looks like rock head was better liked than I thought." McGregor looked down at Savannah. "You said you we're raised on a ship. Did it happen to have a gunner?"

"Oh yeah." The girl said with a mischievous smile. "I cut my teeth on one."

The fighters were almost in range.

"Aaia?"

"Yes lord."

"Activate shields." He turned to Savannah, and barked. "Port side, take 'em out as they come around."

Savannah's eyes sparkled. "Yes sir!"

McGregor bolted for the starboard side of the ship while Savannah quickly made her way port side.

The turret chamber was five feet in diameter with a high-tech ball that rotated spherically three hundred and sixty degrees. The turrets were positioned strategically on either side of the ship for maximum target radius. Placed so that the small area each turret did not reach on the belly and back of the ship, the other turret covered.

Blasts rocked McGregor's ship as the small, heavily armed fighters opened fire, unleashing a smattering of concussions, which ricochet off the invisible force field, jarring the ship.

McGregor took aim, eyes squinting. He moved his hands gracefully, placing cross-airs on a passing fighter, pulling triggers. The fighter's rear disintegrated in a fiery explosion. McGregor smiled. He liked it when they were foolish enough to chase him down.

Savannah was holding her own, taking out two fighters in a percussion of blasts. The three remaining fighters smartened up quick though, and attempted to fire on the ship as they passed as close as possible to the

underbelly, creating the hardest angle for the gunners. An impossible shot for McGregor and a tough one for Savannah. She proved herself worthy of the task, precisely tracking them with her sight and then firing as they came in range. McGregor watched in awe as she finished them off. He looked back toward the rocky planet. There would be no reinforcements today.

McGregor removed his headset and stood up, almost knocking over Savannah who was already behind him. She stumbled back, falling. McGregor's reflexes took over and he wrapped his arms around her, stopping the fall and reeling her in. Their faces were centimeters apart as they looked into each others eyes before Savannah pulled away embarrassed. "Sorry, I was just..."

"It's O.K., you're excited. So am I...I mean...so was I...about the fight."

Very smooth.

Shut up.

She's pretty, you like.

Mind your own business.

Bruce snickered fluttering out his wings. Savannah glanced at the dragon then back at McGregor. The two stood awkwardly before being interrupted by Aaia. "Set course for W.W. Nine I presume?"

McGregor was taken out of his trance. "Yes." He regained his composure, and spoke to Savannah. "The way you handled yourself I'm assuming you can fly a ship."

"Of Course. Worm Whole Nine? Must be nice to have that tech."

McGregor looked at the girl, trying very hard not to stare. He pulled his gaze away in a forced display of disinterest. "Give her the basics, I'm in need of a very long nap."

Savanah whispered hesitantly. "You mean..."

McGregor finished her sentence. "You're going home."

A sucker for a pretty girl. Bruce took flight, landing on McGregor's shoulder as he left the room.

§§§§

McGregor dreamed.

He strolled amidst fields; flowers of vibrant color and smell abounded, he could feel every bird and furry four legged beast that scampered without fear about him, nasal passages filled with the aroma of a thousand smells, he cried and laughed simultaneously, senses heightened, an awareness he could not know, had never known, now overwhelmed him. He laughed again, shouting out his joy at the billowing white cotton balls floating across the sky. Even they leapt out at him with their clarity and beauty.

Then his face went still, he fought to hold on to what felt so dear, his feelings. But he couldn't, they slipped away like water through open fingers. The colors faded, quickly turning to a drab Grey, the animals scurried away in fear leaving only silence, as even the wind grew muffled. His olfactory lobes seized and he breathed nothing. He looked up and the once magical clouds looked like useless blobs of white. He felt nothing, alive without life.

Eyes bolted open in shock. He stared up into the black ceiling of his slumber chamber, then rolled from bed.

McGregor's ship soared through the galaxies, vanishing through Worm Whole nine and reappearing again in the Milky Way then bolting through space toward Earth.

Washington D.C. lay sprawled both across and upward as McGregor's ship sailed high above, then banked toward the largest building along the skyline, the Pentagon, now known as I.U.S. headquarters. The monolith's name was obvious from the gigantic letters sprawled across all five sides of the structure which rose a hundred stories into the clear sky, two miles in diameter.

The ship quickly descended, devoured by the massive building. It settled inside the hangar and was already being inspected and serviced even as McGregor and Savannah left the port. The two walked through corridor after corridor, McGregor lead the way, guiding her through a labyrinth of hallways. Taking an elevator, they sailed into the sky, the glass wall of the elevator revealed the massive metropolis below, sky cars and ships cascaded across the multi-leveled city. From inside the elevator Savannah stared in awe.

Moments later she stood in the doorway of McGregor's apartment, still in shock that she had reached Earth. She stared into the medium sized room with mundane furnishings. It was a mess.

"Home sweet home." McGregor stopped in the entrance hall and turned to see Savannah waiting. "Come on in."

"Welcome home, lord." The same voice of Aaia came from unseen speakers.

"Hi, Aaia." Savannah said entering.

"Greetings, sorry about the mess. He's not much for cleaning."

McGregor frowned up at Aaia, then turned to face Savannah who had moved across the small room and now looked out over massive maze of glass and steel. He looked at her; she seemed scared, helpless. He sensed it could be goodbye and realized what he felt as he continued to gaze at her.

Savannah turned from the window. "So?"

McGregor didn't respond immediately. He finally snapped out of it. "Oh, sorry. I don't know. I'm going to be busy for a while. You could stay here. Bruce could use the company." He looked over at the dragon perched on window seal. "Seems he's decided to stay." He waited for a response.

Savannah looked once again to the metropolis below.

McGregor approached her. "What are you going to do?"

"Look for my family. That's why I'm here"

He couldn't help but look into her eyes lovingly.

She blushed. "Quit looking at me like that. You're wiggling me out?" She turned away, stepping into the center of the room. "You have a bathroom?"

McGregor pointed. Savannah disappeared while McGregor moved toward the window, opening it for the dragon. Bruce psi-linked, *I'll be back.*

I know. And then, Stay with her while I'm gone.

I want to go with you.

Can't. Take care of her.

(Grudgingly) O.K.

Watch out for windshields.

Bruce snickered and took flight into the city airways.

A smile crossed McGregor's face as the reptilian creature soared across the skies, spiraling up into the heavens above the city. "Aaia, what's my schedule?"

"0500 hours training begins. Report to M-101 with no personals. That includes me. I'll see you in three months."

Savanah appeared from the bathroom, face scrubbed, hair pulled back--she was stunning in her simplicity. "So this is how the privileged live? Somehow I doubt I'll find my parents up here." She went to the window, and looked down upon the city, her gaze penetrating the glistening glass and steel, to the dark streets a hundred floors below. "From what I've heard, not to many non-gens living the high life on Earth these days. I think, more than likely, they'd be down there. And even if I don't find them, I could never live amongst the gens."

McGregor's heart broke on the words.

Chapter Three

Since the contract with the Greys was consummated, many government leaders rested easy. The Greys received what they wanted--a constant source of narcotic entertainment through the dying "souls" of man--and humans benefited from the Grey's technology. The secondary effect was the fulfillment of a long-term goal by many in the ruling parties for population control--until the arrival of the Greys, the practice was frowned upon by most. But the leaders of the United States of America were no such men. From the first President who reluctantly signed the evil contract and the ten plus since including the one currently in office, they all plotted and planned for the day they could fight back. That day finally arrived.

TRANSDIMENSIONAL MAINTENANCE MANAGER

I.U.S. TRAINING FACILITIES – Fourteen men sat waiting in a sterile room, McGregor was among them. They were all athletically built, but one man's physique separated him from the rest. G'Laieth looked like he was created from some perfect blue print, and he was. His bald plate shone a perfect shade of ebony, and his blue eyes sat cold. His only flaw, two rigid scars running the lengths of both legs disappearing beneath black shorts and black socks.

Stainless steel doors opened, a recruit walked out wearing the identical athletic garb as Laieths. Brock smiled proudly, his lightly freckled

face gleaming. Cropped crimson hair sprung forth like pins, refusing to point any direction but out. "Thanks Doc."

Lloyd Richards held the door for him. He was now 78 years old but he didn't look a day over 50. A full head of dark wavy hair hung down near his shoulders defying his age. Once blue eyes had long ago been altered to a deep green and he no longer was in need of the spectacles that once haunted his microscopic experiments. But the brilliant orbs darted about with the same intensity as fifty years earlier as he greeted McGregor. "McGregor, C.T."

McGregor stood, passing the smiling soldier as he walked across the room.

Brock tilted his head close to McGregor's as he passed. "Good luck."

McGregor simply nodded as he strutted through the held open door.

Lloyd followed him in to the examining room, shutting the door behind him.

Lloyd pointed to a table. "Take a seat."

Lloyd searched for something on the medical table along far wall. Just let me find my...my..." He began to flap the air with his hand, attempting to draw the word in from some far off place.

McGregor looked upon the scientist with curiosity. "Stethoscope?"

"Yes. Stethoscope." He said excitedly, looking about.

McGregor observed him for several more seconds then said, "It's around your neck."

Lloyd looked down and grasped it. "Of course it is. Now let's take a look at your file." He flipped through the charts as McGregor took a seat.

"Straight into the corp. after high-school, Air Force Academy. Youngest ever to make Janitor, impressive."

McGregor nodded, resisting the urge to smile.

"But not much here on your genetic history. We usually have everything on file from point of conception."

McGregor turned cold, defensive. "My parents gave birth to me in a small town, they weren't up to code at the time."

Lloyd looked at him, waiting for his eyes to meet his. He peered into them deeply. "You definitely have the physical and mental abilities of a gen-man."

McGregor relaxed slightly.

"But like everyone else, we will need to run the tests. Only gen-men for the six you understand? To hold up under the strain."

"Sir. I don't need to be tested to prove my worth." McGregor got up and moved for the door.

Lloyd scrambled to stop him, reaching the door first, blocking it. "No wait."

McGregor stopped.

"You need to be here." He met McGregor's fearful but defiant eyes. "It will be all right. Trust me."

McGregor searched the mad scientist's eyes for hope. Then conceded, going back to sit on table.

"And don't call me sir." Lloyd jabbed a needle into McGregor's vein. He didn't flinch.

The next few months were hell for the trainees. They were put through the rigors of mental, physical and emotional tests. And like most boot camps, the primary source of grading was the obstacle course.

The obstacle course McGregor battled through wasn't much different than its counterpart a century earlier. It was designed to test all elements of a soldier's strengths--and expose his weaknesses. Technology had allowed for more sophisticated challenges; dual courses paralleled one another through the large training facility. It was formatted as a race against oneself, one's opponent, and the clock. At present McGregor was losing in all three categories.

G. Laieth sped through a field of constantly moving blocking dummies, robots programmed to move randomly until stimulated to attack by a nearing object. The giant of a man turned back, smiling as McGregor entered the field, over ten yards back. The two leapt, dodged, twisted and rolled, avoiding the pounding the weeble-wobble looking androids attempted to administer.

"He's just too fast." McGregor said to no one as he forced his legs to move quicker. One of the 200-pound blockers smashed into his ribs, knocking him sideways where with a growl of pain he was taken out by another hit to the chest. Rolling with the hit, he came up running, but he had already lost more ground. He watched as G'laieth shrugged off a similar blow. "Damn he's strong." McGregor mumbled, keeping moving, forcing his mind back on the task as G'laieth left the blocking field and approached a pair of glass doors blocking him from the next obstacle. Each door held a randomly selected logistical puzzle that must be solved for the door to open.

McGregor watched as he moved, holding out hope that the mutant of a man would at least struggle with the multiple lights that emanated demanding perfect pattern-discerning skills. The door opened in record time and Laieth passed through, leaping on to the first of thirty levitation disks.

Like lily pads scattered across a pond the discs hovered fifteen feet above a bed of steal balls the size of apples. Falling from the disks wouldn't break any bones, but it would hurt and make for a major delay. A disk responded to the leaping G'laieth like a raft in water, holding his weight but bobbing down then up. He sprung forth from one to the next, his balance that of a gymnast. To complicate matters for the trainees, a whirling blade of six inch thick plexi-glass spun five feet above the lily pad lane. The 6'7 G'laieth was finally at a disadvantage to the 6'2 McGregor.

McGregor solved the logic puzzle quickly then leapt to the first pad, flowing with its decent and perfectly timing his leap with its bounce off the bottom to propel him up and forward. He aligned his jump and twisted his body so that he shot the gap of the whirling blade. He sailed over one of the blades and descended down between two more. Landing catlike, he ducked, hearing the hum of the blade just as it grazed his head. He let out a yelp but kept moving.

A smile crossed G'Laieth's face at the pain of his opponent and he continued his graceful waltz across the pads, ducking as he traveled, but slowing occasionally to allow a blade to swoosh over his head.

McGregor leaped again, he was gaining ground, using the blade intervals to travel at a higher speed than Laieth. But he couldn't close the gap before G'laieth sprang from the pads, sprinting toward the final wall.

McGregor sprang to the ground seconds later, sprinting hard, leaping to grasp the alloy handholds strategically placed along the thirty-foot rampart. He scrambled up the wall quickly, but G'laieth maintained his lead, cresting the parapet, jumping from half way down and sprinting across the finish line hands in the air.

Lloyd watched from his bird's nest observation deck. His pen scribbled chicken scratch across small notebook, and then he watched as McGregor went to congratulate Laieth. "Good run."

Laieth lifted his shoulders smugly. "Not really. There's just not much competition when you're one of a kind." G'laieth walked away, leaving McGregor to cheer on the next duo. Tim and Thomas finished, Tim beating Thomas easily. Shortly after Brock and Triton finished strong, neck and neck; Brock lost by a nose, but still smiled at the finish.

McGregor approached his two friends, but couldn't help but glance back at the perfect specimen of humanity--the perfect man--the first pure-gen.

Brock's hard slap to the back knocked him forward. "Let it go man. You'll take 'em. Sooner or later, you'll take 'em. Now come on, I'm starving."

The five men followed in the direction of Laieth.

The commissary was full as the Alpha trainees made their way through to the food line. Murmurs followed the men as they passed enlisted men and officers alike. Laieth especially drew attention. All knew he was one of a kind, a pure-gen. Something none of them could ever hope to be.

A dream many hoped to fulfill through perfectly designed children. Laieth walked in front of the others, keeping to himself. His manners were perfect as he took mounds of the genetically enhanced food onto his tray. He ignored all attention and moved to an empty table in the rear, away from all windows, saluting perfectly as he passed the officer's table.

Brock laughed under his breath, nudging McGregor who finished heaping a pile of mashed potatoes onto his plate, then plopping five squares of butter into their midst. "What a freaking weirdo. Never talks to anyone, 'Yes ma'am, no ma'am to the cooks, and then cold as ice with the guys that he'll go to battle with. He's a freak man."

McGregor continued through the line. "He's perfect. We're not."

Brock scoffed. "That's why you haven't been able to beat him. Not cuz' you can't, but because you think you can't." Brock slapped a slab of ham down onto his plate.

McGregor looked to Laieth before forcing his eyes away. "You don't wish you were him?"

"Hell no." If you ask me they haven't perfected that pur-gen crap. Look in his eyes sometime, there's nothing there man, creeps me out. No, mamma gave me Redford's looks and Conan's bi's..." He flexed his arms and winked to prove the point. "... I'm good with that." He laughed, taking a bite out of his ham as they approached the fountain drinks. "What about you, those baby blues must have been designed, programmed with invisible laser beams that hypnotize the ladies." He laughed.

McGregor smiled. "Yeah. My parents had brown eyes." He over flexed his arm as he put his cup under the dispenser. "But these babies came the hard way."

The oversized Triton couldn't resist, he ripped off his shirt Hulk Hogan style, commencing a pose down in the middle of the cafeteria. "Boys, worship perfection." His chiseled abdomen rippled as he flexed, cannonballs exploded from his arms, and his pectorals danced.

Brock lost it, cracking up and running to his table.

McGregor laughed, momentarily letting go. He glanced to his well sculpted biceps, then to the canyon that ran down the back of Triton's arms as he flexed his triceps. "You win. You win."

The three trainees laughed and goofed all the way to the table, saluting casually to their superiors who shook their heads before glancing to their perfect soldier, Laieth.



Lloyd smiled at G'laieth who sat on the examining table before him, unmoved by the prods and pokes. Lloyd ran a scanner down each of Laieth's scarred legs. "The bionics are holding up well."

Laieth sat stoically, looking down upon the gruesome scars that covered intricately woven technology and tissue. "You did a good job."

"Looks like once again, you will be the best. As you should be." Lloyd looked deep into G'Laieth's eyes, and gave his best Freud imitation. "How does that make you feel?"

Laieth didn't acknowledge the attempt at comedy. "Feelings are useless, they corrupt logical thought, you should know that." He met Lloyd's stare. "It's as it should be. You designed it that way."

Lloyd moved to a medical table, casually tossing scanner and instruments into unorganized pile. "Yes. A perfectly thinking mind acts without emotion, making a decision based solely on the statistical probability of a favorable outcome. That is why you are tough to beat. You are the only one to act without emotion. You are the best." Lloyd watched the man he designed in the lab closely. "But, even without the perfect blue print, McGregor comes close." Lloyd doesn't turn to face G'laieth, but listens, searching for response.

"He is not pure." Laieth said with little emotion.

"No. No he is not. No one is. Nor would they have been for many years. But now we have an opportunity to fix that. If we succeed there will be many more just like you. If I.U.S. has it's way, we'll all be like you, and soon. Very soon."

G'laieth ran his large hands down the scars on his legs.



Over the next few months the recruits continued training for mankind's most dangerous foray into the unknown--time travel through the branes. Slowly the weak were weaned out, until finally, only six remained; Triton, Brock, Thomas, and Tim. With McGregor and G'laieth at the head of the class. The final day of testing and the obstacle course trials came quickly.

The drill instructor barked out the ordered pairs, McGregor and Laieth would run last. The two men exchanged glances; Laieth smiled knowingly, dismissing his competition. McGregor's face betrayed nothing as he matched Laieth's empty eyed stare, forcing the larger man to turn his head. In pairs the men raced. Triton's size failed him through the course and an exuberant Brock spun a cartwheel after his victory, only to pay for his boasting with a wicked tackle from Triton. Brock cried, "Uncle!" And the two laughed as they slapped hands with Thomas and Tim who crossed the line neck and neck, Thomas winning by a hair.

McGregor applauded his friends then took to the starting line next to Laieth. The two men exchanged glances before crouching, bending legs, extending arms, finding the perfect position to propel them forward at a break-neck pace. The bell sang, and the two competitors bolted from the start, racing down the fifty-yard stretch to the first obstacle.

Laieth and McGregor ran and scrambled through the first batch of barrel like hurdles spread across a thirty yard stretch. The two warriors fought it out, but like before, Laieth held his lead. They scrambled through the shooting segments of the course, swam the 100-yard lake, and made their way through the blocking dummies. This time McGregor timed his moves perfectly, avoiding the droids with ease, and closed the gap. The two punched buttons under the flashing lights of the logistic screen like master typists. They entered the floating disc segment neck and neck. McGregor used the technique he had mastered over many runs--timing his leaps and bounds to sail through the spinning propeller--and he took the lead.

Laieth's size impeded him and he was losing ground fast. He reached up as McGregor made a leap, grabbing the plexi-glass blade, grimacing at the blow to his hands, but timing it perfectly. Muscles leapt from skin as he held the powerful blade. McGregor crashed into the stopped blade on the way down from a leap, bouncing then barely managing to twist his way onto a floating pad. Laieth surged past him as McGregor lunged after. McGregor gave it everything he had, risking complete failure as he recklessly blazed through the course after his nemesis, but it was not enough. Once again, the pure-gen defeated him.

McGregor bent over, exhausted, hands on knees after the race, he watched G'laieth saunter away, already recovered. "If it's the last thing I do, I'll be every bit as good as you are."

Lloyd had moved to within earshot. He walked over and whispered to McGregor. "If that's truly what you want, you may get it sooner than you think."

McGregor met his mentor's eyes hopefully.

"But I was hoping you had realized that what you are now is as perfect as you should ever be." Lloyd stepped away. "I'll see you tonight."

Laieth walked away alone as the squad gathered around to console McGregor. Brock was first on the scene, quickly rapping McGregor on the side of the head. "You're still our leader, you can't take that away."

Chapter Four

*Once we wondered, how were we made,
A jumbled puzzle, by chance the pieces laid
Then perfection sought was perfection gained
And never again, need humanity feel pained.*

Author unknown

NON-GENS

Savanah walked the dirty street alone. The once shining ray of hope in her eyes was now but an ember deep in a tawny pool. She looked up at the large buildings, seeking the number that she hoped would provide her the answers she longed for, 1115. She had been on earth for less than a month, but it seemed an eternity. The money she had saved for her transport to earth had been spared thanks to McGregor, so she had more than enough to survive.

She wasn't poor, but she was alone. Even the Bruce the Dragon was off exploring.

Her search for her mother had not gone well, until yesterday. Finally, after asking countless shop owners, she had found one that remembered her. She was a nice person, a custodian at a large factory in the garment district--at least she was the last time she had been in his store--four years ago. Two more blocks, she picked up her pace and the ember grew to a small flame, just enough to give her hope.

She approached the building with trepidation. There it was, the numbers boldly displayed across steel face, 1115. The building's first twenty floors were without windows; only an electronic billboard adorned the lower reaches of the structure. A perpetual commercial ran showing a Grey Priest, softly stroking the hand of a smiling, old--but otherwise healthy--man. The wrinkle faced gentleman nodded and rested his brow against the Greys strikingly white cloak. A gloved hand rested gently on the senior citizen's head. The comforting image faded as blue skies with cotton ball clouds appeared. A caption rolled across the heavenly scene, "Why wait for your perfect destiny? Visit us today."

Savannah averted her eyes from the propaganda and directed them toward a large six lane cement ramp leading beneath, wide enough for four big trucks moving in either direction, which several were doing as she stopped and watched. There were no visible entrances into the monolith other than the steep ramp which lead into darkness. The building sparkled high above her as the cold Grey sediment was replaced with glistening steel and glass. The city thrived at those altitudes, gravity defying vehicles sped about and the air walks were crowded with gens, seizing the pleasures given them by the successful economy.

She looked around her, reflecting on the contrast to the grungy surface and dim surroundings where she stood. Few people walked the street she was on, but those that did had eyes turned down, shoulders hunched as if carrying a load they knew would only grow heavier. Her heart grew harder toward the gens. They had done this, forcing those who chose a natural way

of life--those like her parents--down into poverty. She took a breath, and plunged down into the cavernous expanse.

At the bottom of the ramp she stopped, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She startled, stepping aside from a truck that narrowly missed her as it swung downward pulling up to the loading docks. The shrill of air brakes smashed the air as the vehicle came to a stop in one of the bays. A large bearded man stepped from the cab, looking back at the girl he nearly crushed. "What are you thinking girl?"

Savanah approached. "I'm sorry. I'm looking for a way in."

"Well you're in the wrong place. No access to the higher floors from here. We just drop the supplies, damn robots do the rest." He saw the lost look on Savanah's face and softened, stepping a few feet toward her.

She walked over to him quickly, avoiding the next truck. She struggled not to scrunch her nose at the man's smell; he obviously was not one for hygiene.

Grease stained hand added another spot of filth to the already dark bill of the man's baseball cap. "Who ya' looking for?"

Savanah hesitated, then decided she needed help from somebody and told him the truth. "My mom. I left earth when I was a child. I'm trying to find her again. A man said he thought she might work here."

The driver scratched his beard. "Non-gens?"

Savannah's eyes darted downward, then straight back at him with defiance and with pride. "Yes."

His hand moved from beard to belt, hoisting the leather strap up and around large round belly. It immediately began to work its way back down.

"Nothing to be ashamed of, nothing at all. Just helps me answer your question is all. You see this building's only been here a couple a years. They came in and wiped out an entire block of old school factories, built this high-tech mother. And it's gen-freak only, no non-gens. They don't trust us with their stuff. This place is run by the newest, fandangled high tech crap out there." He shook his head and drew a flannel arm across sweaty brow. "Don't trust it to us dumb-ass non-gens."

Savannah's face darkened. "What about the people that worked here before?"

"Who the hell knows. Ain't many jobs for non-gens nowadays. Nothing but the worst, and most of them taken by the bots. Hell, I'm lucky the driving is still left up to humans--and non-gens at that. Some of taken to the new frontier." He paused, looking up, past the tips of the sky-rises to the Grey sky above, then shook his head. "Space. Not me. No way, no how. Crazy stories about what's out there."

Savannah was at a loss, the ember in her eyes snuffed out.

"I'm sorry. I gotta' get back. Sorry."

Savannah turned and walked from the dungeon and into the gloomy streets of the city.

Jingles, clangs, buzzes, raised voices, whispers, cries, pleas; the plethora of noises that represent a market square bounced hollowly through Savannah's ears. She ignored the peasant children that grasped at her sleeves as she passed, she handed several coins to keep them at bay. One open booth displayed trinkets for good luck, a juxtaposition of faiths sprawled

across the table--crosses signifying a personal God linked with the symbols of Ying and Yang representing an impersonal force, with a serpent binding them together. Squawks, barks and cries of pain arose from a stable run by a misshapen woman peddling live stock, poultry, exotics, puppies and kittens. The air reeked of succulent smelling meat and vegetables cooked over open flame mixed with human scent and animal feces. Despite the open air, the smells and sounds seemed trapped by the invisible floor of the upper reaches of the city.

Savannah walked without purpose through the throng of people. She had given up. She would never find her parents. All her hopes and dreams of a wonderful life on her home planet squashed by the reality her people now lived in. She had wandered far from her tiny apartment and wasn't familiar with the area. Many of the buildings surrounding the merchant's square housed small balconies lined with laundry. Many were used as storage, piled high with junk that probably should have been thrown away long ago. A few provided an oasis in the cement jungle, filled with plants, small tables and chairs. From one of these on the third floor an ageless gypsy woman grinned, catching Savannah's eye and waving to her with magic fingers. Savannah couldn't help but smile back.

Here.

Maybe here she'd find her mother. The ember grew.

Her gaze floated past the woman and followed the apartments into the sky. Somewhere around the thirtieth floor the transformation took place. A large sky-walk jutted from the building, above it the walls became glass. The balconies in the sky were not for storage or tiny table, but for personal

aircraft and massive parties. A flicker caught her attention on one such balcony. She watched as the flicker turned to a yellowish glow. She realized what she was watching as the sirens penetrated her ears. The flames of the fire licked up and about the building with an alarming rate. A smaller, very old seven-story complex miraculously saved for a hundred years from the massive growth upward, stood beneath the balcony that now spit flames downward.

Several air craft darted toward the sky-rise, ushering forth salvation for the condo in the sky. Smoke poured from the window as the fire was quickly defeated.

But no such calvary came to save the smaller building far below that now blazed. The source of the fire--a burning motorcycle like speeder--rested literally on the building's front porch.

High above, the firefighters leapt from their vessel and onto the balcony/landing, making sure the flames were under control. Several helmeted men glanced down to the fire far below, but seeing that the building posed no immediate threat to the towers of cement covered steel, they ignored it.

Savanah watched helplessly as the smaller building burned unattended. She screamed out to no avail. "Why? Why aren't you helping them?"

She didn't expect an answer when the gypsy women from the balcony--now standing by her side--spoke. "They don't care about us. We're nothing to them...a hindrance. They only protect their own."

Savanah shook her head in disgust and frustration, her eyes darting, searching for an entrance into the building. But her efforts were frustrated. The only way into the building was through the upper windows. With terror she watched as several people leapt from the lower floors, thumping as they hit concrete.

Finally, after seemingly an eternity, a red engine left the scene above and darted down. It took only seconds as it unleashed a force field net over the building. The swoosh of displaced air was followed by extinguished flames. Those survivors on the roof gasped for air as the vehicle hovered just above the building, lowering a large platform for the survivors. Some climbed aboard, most had to be carried. Those that could quickly placed oxygen masks over their mouths, and then helped the unconscious. The non-gens on the ground cleared an area, and several with medical experience waited near by. The platform was set unceremoniously into the cleared area. A rough voice came over the speaker. "The medical team will be here shortly. See to your people until then." The injured quickly unloaded and the blade-less chopper swept back into the upper reaches of the city.

Savannah moved to help the injured but before she could take three steps she fell to her knees in shock. There before her, burnt badly, lay her mother. Despite the burns and the fifteen years of age, she knew her instantly. She couldn't regain her feet as she crawled, scrambled and fell to her mother's side.

It was too late. She was dead.

Tears flowed from her longer than she knew possible. Everything in her life, everything she strove for was stripped away. All the days from the

time she watched her mother cry as she was taken away to this moment, she had hoped and prayed to be back with her mother, it was the flame that kept her alive. In an instant, that small ember died.

How long she lay there draped over her mother's body she could not tell, but when a rough hand pulled her back she was still in shock. The man wore a white coat, white cap and his mouth was covered in a white medical mask. Only his perfect blue, empty eyes showed as his muffled, but clear voice barked the order. "Move away from the scene, city morgue--non-gen division."

Through all her journeys across space, the hell-holes she lived in, the countless nights of a child without touch, without the love of a mother--what overcame her deep desire to rage, was hope of a mother's arms to return to. That restraint had been removed harshly. She threw a round-house punch that connected solidly with the chin of the pompous gen-freak. She gasped in pain at the breaking of the bones in her hand but felt a release on the breaking of the bones in his face. He crumbled to the ground, unconscious. She turned her furry on the man who raced toward her. "Bastards! You killed them. You could have saved her. Murderers!" She didn't wait for the man to reach her, taking two steps and driving her foot into his groin. He doubled over in agony. Suddenly the air beat down around them and the whir of gravitational defying machines surrounded them. Police vehicles swept down from above. Anyone able to move did, and only Savannah was left guarding the dead.

The crafts swept down on either side of her, armored men already descending on cables as she clenched her teeth and fist. She would make them kill her.

Before she got the chance a man grasped her arm and pulled her close. She tried to jerk away, but he was strong. "Trust me. You want revenge on the gens?" He waited just long enough. Then repeated. "Trust me. Come with me if you want that revenge." She remained tense trying to turn to see him. He allowed her, meeting her eyes with his. She believed him then. She believed his eyes. "We have to go now."

She gave in and followed him behind the smoldering remnants of the building.

The cops swarmed the area, searching every nook of the destroyed residence, but they found nothing.

Chapter Five

Only one example of the Grey's power was needed to convince the world's leaders that they must comply with the barbaric bargain presented them. The threats of unleashing the gates of hell upon the Earth were scoffed at when the leaders first heard them. Two nights later, when the entire population of Fiji were wiped out by "dark beasts that appeared from nothing to destroy flesh" they signed the accord. They couldn't fight an enemy of unknown numbers and unreachable origins.

BRANES

MISSION CONTROL--The six newly promoted Transdimensional Maintenance Managers sat in large chairs arced in one crescent shaped row in the small theatre. All six TMMs were garbed identically. Near metallic hued dark silver boots, black shirt and black and silver camouflaged fatigue pants--all woven with organatium--snuggly defined the muscular physiques of the men. Organatium was an organically based alloy hybrid developed to protect spacecraft during worm-whole travel--amazingly light, supple and nearly indestructible.

A podium sat empty to the right of the large screen until the General walked into the room. He was a powerful man with wide shoulders and chest, trimming down to fit waste. He took the podium into his large hands; the type of guy whose presence demanded everyone in any room to take notice. He stood poised and in full control of the room. The five stars along his shoulders sent out daggers of light as he leaned in to the podium. "Good morning soldiers."

His hawk like eyes met every eager face.

"What you are about to see and hear is classified information--level five." He leaned back, took a breath, and began. "Since the arrival of the Greys mankind has been held captive on our own planet--prisoners." He paused, nearly choking on the word, fighting back the disgust he had at the thought. He allowed a tiny grimace to cross his face. "*We've* been blackmailed by a powerful race of beings who we can't even fight because

we don't know where they come from or how they got here. We've deceived our own people--providing our old and weak as cattle for slaughter--out of fear--fear of the unknown."

He moved from behind the podium, pointing a finger that seemed capable of destruction toward Lloyd Richards. "Our good friend Dr. Richards predicted such a dilemma, but no one listened. Eighty five years ago he proposed genetically altering the entire Human race to combat these beings, to change us...change us into something that they couldn't use; so that our 'expendables' would no longer be an entertainment source for the Greys in their deaths. You see..." He paused momentarily. "...those creatures that walk about so peaceful, and inviting; they are devoid of anything close to human emotion. When they cause the death of a human being, they absorb the life they've led. The emotions they've felt." His fist clenched. "They get off on it!"

The General scowled at the thought before going on. "That's why they prefer the old you see...more memories, more pain. And unfortunately, genetic engineering has just encouraged the already perfection oriented sick culture we live in. A sick culture that seems all too ready to sacrifice what many believe is just a drain on our resources anyway." The aging General spit. "What good is a wrinkly old man anyway heh? Just send 'em out to pasture, and if it appeases the Greys, so be it!" He had moved back to the podium and his fist slammed into oak as an exclamation point.

Once again he breathed deep. "Well, that ain't exactly the American dream is it boys? Every life, from conception to natural death, is a gift, not to be taken! Every human has the right...the right to live, and the right to

die with respect." He paused. "Dr. Richards has found a way to genetically alter us to the point of perfection, and this altering just so happens to render us useless as a joy drug to these beings. The genetic alterations, which one of you were already blessed to be born with, will also..." The general chuckled, allowing a small smile of satisfaction to come to his face. "...It will also allow us to take the battle to them." The smile disappeared as he growled; "The assassination of one of our finest Presidents delayed Mr. Richard's discovery. Soon you will go back to remedy that situation. But first things first. We... You must test our abilities in the other dimensions--the other branes. Up till now the branes were accessible to only the Greys, and the demonic beasts they control, enabling them to move in and out of our world with ease, we have been helpless to stop them." Once again the smile crept across his wrinkled face. "Until now. What lies through the portal? We don't know. But according to Dr. Richards, your genetic make-up should allow you to fight there."

Brock and Triton exchanged nervous smiles. Tim and Thomas sat stoically.

Laieth stared ahead without emotion.

McGregor nodded eagerly.



The six men stood along the ring of the portal. The only evidence of the gateway to the unknown was a black circle five feet in diameter in the middle of a large bare walled room. The men went through final

preparations for battle. Checking weapons, stretching muscles and waiting to be teleported into preternatural worlds. Brock winked at the team, and nodded to McGregor. "Lead us to victory sir."

McGregor nodded.

The General stepped forward. "Good luck Gentlemen."

The six men ringed the black circle, placing their combat boots at the edge. McGregor barked out the command. "Count it back from three. Three, two, one." In unison the seven stepped forward vanishing into thin air.

What they walked into can only be described as hell. Their senses were immediately overwhelmed as the opaque translucent world they departed overlapped and intertwined with a chaotic landscape of cragged terrain. They could still make out the images of the General and Lloyd in the portal chamber, although it was as if they were viewed through a swirling pool of dirty water.

All this was taken in by the TMM's in a fraction of a second as juxtaposed onto the reality they left, an onslaught of demonic beings appeared and attacked immediately. The branebeasts number was impossible to figure as they attacked with such speed and chaotic maneuverability that it defied physics. The TMM's began to fall like wheat under a scythe, still recovering from the physical jolt, scrambling of senses and searing of pain that met them as they stepped into the hellish dimension.

G'laieth was the exception. He felt no ill effects from the transport, and met the branebeasts with a viscous onslaught of his own. Whatever the strange physics engine that ran this realm; it had no effect on the lethality of

earth's weapons. Laieth's rifle blazed and the titanium butt of his gun crushed everything that dared come within range.

McGregor was not so lucky. On entry he crumbled like the others in the shocking pain that surged through his mind and body. Almost emptying his stomach, he fell forward, struggling to maintain a kneeling position. It was all he could do to muster the strength to avoid the jagged clawed nails of the brainbeasts that swept around him. He succeeded in drawing his weapon, taking out several beasts as they passed. He caught from the corner of his eye in horror the carnage being reaped on his fellow soldiers.

Tim and Thomas were D.O.A. At least it looked that way. Their lifeless bodies crumbled to the floor on entry. But if they weren't dead it didn't matter for the beasts ravaged the helpless soldiers in seconds; tearing limb from limb.

Triton survived the teleport maintaining consciousness, and managed to brandish his weapon momentarily before falling amidst a mass of leathery limbs and bodies, his muscled frame useless to save him.

Brock too was unlucky enough to keep his awareness into the brane. He puked on arrival but still managed to roll with the contact of the first beast slamming into him. He drove his weapon into the beast's gut, firing. The gruesome bat-wolf exploded; spraying bile in a waterfall of blood and guts. Brock's red hair made him easy to identify as he fought to regain his footing.

McGregor caught it all in a fraction of a second as he fought the beasts that sought to engulf him. His two blasters spat blue lines of death,

dropping several branebeasts. He cried out to Brock. "Brother! Flank! To my flank!"

Brock never heard the call. McGregor's heart nearly exploded at the site of the familiar friendly face and crimson lined brow that rolled across the floor, decapitated. McGregor threw walls up deep within, walls so strong and deeply imbedded he could not even know of them. He immediately disengaged emotionally from the man with red hair--a trick he'd learned early in life and didn't even realize he had--and steeled his mind to the fact that death was a part of life and nothing to fret over. He must fight for his own survival now...he didn't know him that well anyway. The lie allowed him to fight to live, but killed yet another part of him.

He caught a glimpse of G'laieth, easily holding his own, but not making any move to help the others or him. For the others it was already too late, they lay in bloody heaps. McGregor shouted. "Laieth!"

Laieth was so enthralled in the havoc he was wrecking he ignored the cry for help and waded through the path of destruction he paved, rejoicing in his own battle fury, moving away from McGregor.

McGregor fired again and again, taking down one beast after another, the pile of death around him grew as they attacked. But McGregor was too weak to maneuver properly and the throng broke through smothering him in a mass of claws and limbs. He let out a death cry and continued fighting as he drowned into darkness.

Suddenly, as his body fought to give in but his will refused to let it, he saw light again; a figure used two samurai sword to slice away at the beasts. The silvery katana's danced in a whirl of electric energy, burning through

grotesque hides like butter. The branebeasts reeled away from the wounded McGregor, seemingly familiar with this man who joyfully severed limbs from hairless bodies.

"Follow me. Fight. Fight the forces of doom!" The unknown wild-man yelled in an almost manic glee.

McGregor didn't need another prompt, without hesitating, he forced his ravaged body into action. With the renewed vigor of a man with a second chance, he busted free, darting after the longhaired man that leapt and sprinted away. The man was of similar height to McGregor, but with a wiry frame. He had the look of a lunatic exiled into the wastelands to fend for himself and found he enjoyed and thrived on the vacation.

The two sprinted through the netherworld, hordes of branebeasts at their back.

McGregor grimaced at every step; the loss of blood, concussion, badly bruised body, ruptured soul slowing him down. Suddenly the man turned and stopped, pointing at a dark shadow to their right. "Through there."

Without question McGregor leaped at the faint shading in the wall as the man took out the first of the beasts to reach them. He smiled then followed McGregor into the shadow, vanishing.

The filth filled alley lay quiet as the two men burst through the shadows, rolling onto the damp asphalt. McGregor collapsed as the man followed through, seemingly unaffected by the transport. McGregor began to stand, then changed his mind and slid down the face of the building. He looked at the shadowed wall he just walked through, waiting for the branebeasts to follow.

"They don't come out here much. But if they do, it's at night...and it's not good."

McGregor worked at a major cut across his biceps, pulling a bandage from his belt and wrapping it tight around his arm above the gash. He quickly took in his surroundings. It was daylight, but the sun's glow barely reached past the mammoth building down into this tight alleyway. One pinky of light miraculously reached the floor, already moving it's way across grime covered blacktop. Flies seemingly appeared from nothing as they moved in and out of the light. He could scale the building--hand and foot on parallel walls--they were so close. One end of the alley closed off in brick and mortar, the other opened to an empty city street. They were obviously in a bad part of town. But then again all of the ground floor streets were the bad part of town.

"Now you know where the myths of vampires come from 'eh?" Quinn laughed.

"You mean werewolves. What were those things? And who the hell are you?"

"Quinn, Spence Quinn. We have a mutual friend, and I think you'll see...mutual interests." He waited for, then answered the questioning look. "Savanah."

McGregor's eyes went wide, but before he could speak Quinn cut him off.

"The interests I'll explain later. You're not ready." He moved toward the shadow. "Don't believe what you think you know, find me, but tell no

one about it." With that, Quinn leapt at the shadow, disappearing through the wall.

McGregor looked after in awe, then forced his bloodied and battered body up and went to the infirmary.

§§§§

I.U.S. HEADQUARTERS. – McGregor and G'laieth sat on chairs in opposite sides of the large office. McGregor peered out the window that looked down upon anything under 100 stories tall. Laieth stared emotionlessly at nothing. Lloyd scribbled away on large yellow pad, equations no one on earth could understand.

The General's large desk sat empty, it's large chocolate leather chair rarely used. He was a lion captured from the wild and stuck in a cage as he walked the distance along window seal repeatedly before speaking. "Shit. What the hell happened in there? I need to know everything. Leave nothing out."

"They were too strong for them." Laieth said immediately, and nodded in McGregor's direction. "But I managed fine." G'laieth said smugly.

McGregor turned on G'laieth. "You managed fine in getting my team killed!"

"They should have been better selected."

"They're dead!" McGregor sprang from the window, lunging for G'laieth, who didn't flinch.

The General's instincts directed him to proper position for intercept before McGregor even moved and he stepped between the two men. He was slightly shorter than McGregor, but his presence was far larger. "Stand down!" The General forced McGregor back, he resisted. "That's an order, soldier!"

McGregor finally complied, reluctantly, death in his eyes. The General stepped back from McGregor. "And what about you? You survived." He glanced at the quickly healing wounds. "If not without injury."

McGregor stole a glance at G'laieth, not knowing if he had seen Quinn. He showed nothing, so McGregor decided to keep that information to himself. "I barely made it."

"How'd you find the other portal? Where did it take you?"

"I don't know. It's all a blur. The transport was far more of physical shock than you two planned. But it was also something beyond physical, like a psychic blast to the soul, an overwhelming force of evil."

G'laieth interrupted. "I felt nothing."

McGregor decided to ignore him. "That's why they died...all of them. Most blacked out, might have been DOA I don't know. I was nearly paralyzed by the pain. I barely kept consciousness."

The General was speechless, treading in foreign waters now.

McGregor met all eyes in the room before whispering. "Not only that. They knew we were coming."

The General's face grew flush with anger. "Life sucking Greys." The General looked to Lloyd. "How come you didn't predict this?"

"I can't predict everything. It was only mathematical theory that we could even make it through at all. We have a totally different genetic make up, I must have missed something." Lloyd runs fingers through hair. G., you felt no effects?"

"Nothing."

"Interesting. C.T.?"

"I don't know? Like I said, I felt it, but somehow it wasn't as severe as the others."

The General paced the room several more times. "We have no choice, they have to do it alone."

Lloyd nodded agreement. "Humanities fate rests in their hands."

McGregor questioned Lloyd. "Isn't it about time we knew exactly what we were doing?"

Lloyd sought the General's approval. He nodded. "Might as well, they're all we've got left."

Lloyd looked to Laieth. "Your success as the first true pure-gen was not only due to your physical and mental prowess. It was due to your resistance to the Greys. When you sustained the life threatening injuries twelve years ago, it was a tragedy yes, but also a blessing coming far earlier than I had hoped. I knew what your parents would do; it's what all parents would do if they've bought into the lies. Give you up to the Greys. But when that beast placed his freakish fingers upon your chest..."

Laieth cringed.

McGregor couldn't help but appreciate his first show of weakness.

Lloyd continued. "...I knew we had them. Pure-gens were useless to them. They couldn't use them for their sick pleasures. I went to the President immediately but at that point in history, it was too late for humanity and years away before it would even protect a fraction of our children. But, we were starting to learn of the Grey's abilities to travel using alternate branes. The branes ability to transport them through time. I developed a program to use those branes ourselves." He met both their eyes. "To change history."

"Go back in time, plant the technology for the creation of pure-gens pre exodus."

"Yes, and more." Lloyd looked to his student with pride. "I had everything I needed years earlier, but the President at the time--a God fearing man--wouldn't allow the genetic experiments. It set back the emergence of Pure-gens thirty years. If I had succeeded then, before the arrival of the Greys--and before the Exodus--I could have planted the genetic codes into every human leaving on those ships, and every baby born since."

"Every man, woman, and child would be useless to the Greys, protected from them." Laieth commented.

"We would all be pure-gens." McGregor approved aloud, unable to hide his excitement at the thought of his dreams coming true. *To finally be rid of the doubts about my genetic make-up?*

"And the Governments of the world would not have had to make the hellish bargain that would sacrifice humanities weak for it's own survival."

"Why not just fight them?" McGregor asked. Looking down at his wounds, placing a hand to his the arm that hurt with its healing. He knew part of the answer.

The General answered quickly. "We thought about it. Remember from history class the small tragedy of that volcano that took out Fiji? A cover up for the carnage the Greys unleashed there. They hold the keys to the gateways to hell. Those beasts that wrecked your team, can be released upon us...any time and any place. Until now, we couldn't do anything about it. We need a hundred Laieth's to fight them."

McGregor and Laieth exchanged knowing glances, for once in agreement on something. McGregor spoke. "So you want us to plant the technology."

Lloyd chirped in. "Yes. But there is more at stake. We might take out their motive for feeding on us, but that may just promote them to destroy us. We don't know how large a force of these branebeasts they have to set loose on us. But, if my calculations are correct, there are only a few portals that connect any one brane to the next, so, although there are a plethora of entries into one brane or another, there may only be one route from here to any particular parallel universe."

All three men looked confused.

Lloyd continued, growing in excitement. "Think of it as a gigantic ball of string, if you are on the end of the string, you could, theoretically get to the other end, but it would take a long time. But, if you leaped from strand to wrapped strand, straight to the center, well you could cover a lot of ground, right?"

No nods of acknowledgement, but Lloyd continued. "But what if the string is hollow, like a straw. Yeah, better. Make the ball of string, a ball of cable, hollow cable, and you're inside see?"

Once again, blank stares met his ramblings.

"You can travel the length inside from one end to another, but the time it would take would be staggering, but, if there were a door, you could leap to several strands of the cable at any time...but only if there is a door. If my theories hold correct, there are some dimensions that we will never be able to reach, and some we can reach easily. What we need is a map, and a way to control the doors." He moved to the yellow pad, scribbling. "Yes, if we can accomplish this, we can stop the Greys--by stopping them where they come through."

McGregor smiled. "Cut 'em off at the pass."

Lloyd nearly leapt for joy. "Exactly."

The General seized upon an idea he could understand and one that accomplished his immediate objective. "That's all fine and good, but it's all theory. Right now, what we all need to worry about is going through the door to our past, and fixing history. Once that's done, we'll take 'em out the old fashion way if they decide to fight."

"So where in history do we plant the technology?" McGregor asked.

Lloyd smiled cryptically. "You'll be giving it to me."

"That's not all you'll be doing."

All looked to the General.

"You'll be stopping the assassination of President Blake."

Lloyd nodded. "By killing the assassin."

Laieth almost grinned.

The General met their gazes coldly. "It's the only way to be sure."

"Such a simple plan really." McGregor said sarcastically.

After a moment, Laieth asked the final question. "When do we leave?"

The General's lined face wrinkled up as he turned questioningly toward Lloyd. "I should have everything ready to change history in sixty days.

McGregor pondered aloud. "What are the ramifications of changing history?"

Lloyd laughed maniacally. "That all depends on which law proves true..." His eyes darted to each of the men. "...the law of fate, or the law of the butterfly."

Chapter Six

Early in the twenty-first century--shortly after the arrival of the Greys with their enlightenment and the technology to save an overpopulated planet--there was a great exodus into space. Like the early pilgrims who set off for America, these pioneers were seeking freedom to practice their beliefs in a genetically natural world, and seeking prosperity in a place without prejudice.

Adventurers, outlaws, and predominately non-gens made up the population that boarded the large Grey designed transport ships. Many set up societies on small planets not always optimal for humans. Some lucky ones found Earth-like paradises of their own. Those that broke clean of the I.U.S. were considered rogue planets, with their freedoms from control they conceded protection. It was rumored amongst nongens that I.U.S. sometimes encouraged attacks on these planets to discourage other new societies from claiming rogue status.

SPENCE QUINN

The dark streets below the upper regions of the city teemed with the dregs of society--the criminals, the poverty stricken and the non-gens. McGregor had never considered entering this God forsaken area--at least not until he teleported out of the hell of brane travel and into this purgatory. He was met by scowls from all that noticed the I.U.S. patch over the left chest of his black jacket. A chill went up his spine as he passed a dark cathedral

with the familiar circular ring, spiraling inwards to a point that was the symbol of the Greys. One of the cloaked beings stood stoically on the marble steps. McGregor kept his eyes on the creature as he moved quickly passed the cold church.

He searched alley after alley trying to jog a memory of where he had entered. He approached a pauper on the street. "I'm looking for a man. Goes by the name of Quinn."

The woman's eyes peered from behind dark hood, her leathery pale skin drawn back taught over fragile bones. "What'll it get me?"

McGregor pulled out two chips and considered. He could probably get her with a hundred credits; he threw down the thousand. "It's got over a thousand units left. Generic, no code."

The woman snatched the small titanium disc quickly. "Seventh and nine. He hangs around a pub there."

McGregor began to leave.

The woman looked at the generous bribe. "Best be careful, gen-freaks tend to get in accidents down here."

"I'll keep that in mind." Remembering Savannah's use of the term on their first meeting drew a smile from McGregor as he went back onto the street. He wondered about her and if he'd truly see her at Quinn's bar--and would the dragon be with her. It seemed another life when he knew them for such a short time. Looking up to a rusted sign that read 16th street, he picked up his pace.

Sandwiched between two endless walls rising upward, with quaint architectural design from a rustic culture, the bar looked like a miniature. In

a fluke, countless reflective surfaces high above managed to reflect a golden beam to erupt on stained glass portal set in the tip of the A-frame roof. It quickly vanished with the rapid descent of the sun.

McGregor lowered his gaze from the now dark glass and set his jaw. He opened the door and walked in with the confidence of a man who had entered a hundred dangerous bars across a lawless universe, and what he found was pretty much standard. The wide oak bar ran nearly the length of the north side of the rectangular room and was filled with hardscrabble clientele, finding peace from the day at the bottom of a glass. Opposite the bar, eight marble bar tops with two stools each sat occupied with mostly humans. It was standing room only and McGregor had to work his way through the glaring--and now silent--crowd. More than one man and woman's good hand was placed on a weapon.

He recognized the barkeep immediately. What viscous and murderous eyes failed to do; the sight of Savannah accomplished with ease; McGregor forced himself to breathe.

Savannah worked the bar like the pro she was, flirtatiously sliding a drink toward a large Grey haired man who caught the mug and drew it to bearded lips in one fluid motion. Her hair was back, and bare arms seemed a deeper tan than what he remembered.

Butter, her skin is like cocoa butter. McGregor's momentary trance was disrupted by a flurry of wings that filled his ears as Bruce landed hard on his shoulder.

A tongue flicked across McGregor's ear. *Stop that. You're making me hungry. Welcome back.*

McGregor grinned; the trust he felt through his psi-link with the dragon put salve on his wounds. *Good to see you.* McGregor rubbed a palm down Bruce's smooth back, pulling up his wings. He aimed his words at the Dragon, but kept his eyes on the girl, and spoke loud enough for Savannah to hear. "It's been a long time."

Savannah turned at his voice and nervously acknowledged his presence.

Quinn approached her from behind, placing a hand on her shoulder as McGregor stepped to the bar. "I was hoping you'd find me."

Savannah met his eyes momentarily. "Hi C.T."

McGregor allowed the connection through her eyes, he wanted to smile, but his mouth wouldn't obey. "Hi." He turned back to Quinn. "We need to talk."

"Yes we do, my dimension hopping buddy, yes we do. Follow." Quinn summoned with a finger as if it pulled a string attached to McGregor's chest and walked the length of the bar, disappearing into a backroom but not before calling out an order to Savannah. "Blend up our friend here an Orange Whip. I hear he likes those."

McGregor took the drink from Savannah, questioning her with his eyes. "Thanks for looking after the dragon."

The dragon purred. *I was looking after her, remember?*

I know, I know.

Savannah hid her feelings well. "Of course."

McGregor smiled. "When I'm through with him, we need to talk."

Savannah hesitated, looked to where Quinn left. "I don't know."

McGregor scowled. "If that's the way it is?" He followed Quinn into the back room without looking back.

Savanah forced herself back to work.

The room was an original. A giant mural of the angel Michael fighting the Unspeakable one--the Devil--covered all four walls with climax battle high above a tall architect's table covered with papers. Quinn went immediately to the table and sat down in the tall, high-backed seat, spinning it around as he reclined, viewing his office as if for the first time. His gaze finally came to rest on the artwork directly above his chair--the final battle between good and evil.

McGregor stopped just inside the door. He scanned the room and said condescendingly. "You're a religious fanatic; one of the nutcases who won't allow science to improve your state of being. You're one of the Way."

Quinn smiled. "You've heard of us?"

All Janitors are briefed in it. Not my jurisdiction."

Quinn laughed, spinning in his chair once again. Maybe it should have been." Quinn laughed again and gestured grandly with both hands to the painted walls. "Do you believe McGregor?"

McGregor was growing frustrated with the antics. "Cut the shit. What do you want? And how in hell are you able to travel through the branes?"

Quinn stopped his spin, facing McGregor. "The second first. A gift was given to me at birth what your scientist friend has just yet achieved." His eyes peered through McGregor for too long before he continued. "The ability to battle the Greys on their own turf." He raised a hand that shook

before him. "Of course, not without a price. You see, I can do it, but I'm obviously not ideally suited to it. I believe there is another who is." Quinn for nary a moment lost his optimism as he stared at the shaking hand, but regained it quickly. "And to your first question as to what I want. It's simple really, I want to save the souls of all humanity." He paused, as if struck by a thought, fear crossed his eyes; then he laughed again. "At least for the duration they are in this reality, after they die... a man greater than I is in charge of that."

McGregor didn't have time to respond to the ramblings, he was jolted with the percussion of gunfire that erupted in the bar.

Quinn leapt from behind his desk, a blade suddenly at McGregor's throat.

McGregor scowled at him. "It wasn't me. He ignored the blade and bolted for the door, drawing his left pistol as he moved.

Quinn reached for McGregor's right shoulder, pulling him back, McGregor turned with him, putting the barrel of his weapon under Quinn's chin. "Let go of me."

The wild man didn't flinch and met his blue eyes with his own. "Wait! Follow me." Quinn leapt toward brick wall, and like a spider used tiny edges to propel himself upwards twenty feet to where he froze momentarily before releasing and pulling down a camouflaged hatch. He scrambled up, hauling himself through and dropping a rope to McGregor. McGregor paused, listening. The noise was diminishing.

Quinn whispered down. "Come on!"

McGregor leapt, cutting his climb by a third, his muscular arms easily drawing him up the rope.

The bar was in chaos as the unit led by G'laieth entered. Savannah went for her weapon behind the bar but went limp from a suspension blast before she reached it. The force field engulfed her, instantly defying gravity through magnetism and lifting her off the ground. Bruce swooped down from the rafters, gauging at an eye from Savannah's attacker, but realizing the odds, he bolted for the door, wings propelling him with amazing agility, avoiding blasts.

The rest of the patrons went limp from suspension blasts, all becoming helpless in the floating force fields as the five men unloaded their weapons. Laieth pointed to the back room and quickly made his way to it himself. He scanned every face he passed.

Kicking down the door, he charged in to the room. Empty. He scanned the walls, then the ceiling...He saw a window open on the exterior south wall. He went to it and looked out at the alley. "Check the area. I want Quinn!"

Above, hiding in the rafters, Quinn looked to McGregor suspiciously. McGregor shook his head as he looked down through very high tech one-way glass. From below it looked like an old painted ceiling.

G' Laieth barked out orders. "Take 'em all to the terminal. By order of the courts, all are to be taken to the mines. The team began pushing the ballooned and suspended bodies through the air and to an air-van waiting outside.

McGregor moved forward as they picked up Savannah. Quinn's hand stopped him. "No. I know where they're taking her."

"So do I." He moved again.

Quinn pulled him back once more. "Listen to me. We have to wait, till she's on the planet. Then we make our move." Quinn watched the reaction of McGregor.

The Janitor's voice was barely a whisper, but clear as he growled, "What do you mean? Our move?"



McGregor's ship sailed through deep space.

Inside he worked the controls while Quinn enjoyed the view. The dragon slept in his favorite spot on the dash. "Incredible. The heavens will declare his glory."

McGregor rolled his eyes. "Surely you've been in space before."

Quinn laughed mockingly. "My friend. You are so sheltered in your life of privilege. No non-gen would ever want to see space, for in our world it only means you go to bondage or death."

"Do you always have to speak like a rambling lunatic?"

Quinn grinned, and laughed, "Hah! It is only insanity to those who are blind."

"Hold on." McGregor guided the ship toward the black whole; the ship jumped and disappeared into a massive pit of gravity.



I.U.S. HEADQUARTERS – G' Laieth stood in the debriefing room with Lloyd and the General. "I tell you he is a traitor. He was there!"

Lloyd twitched, wringing his hands. "Did you see him?"

"I didn't need to see him." G'Laieth said coldly, not letting the men escape the anger that seethed from his eyes.

The General looked to Lloyd. Then growled, "We better hope you are wrong Laieth. You can not complete the mission alone."

Laieth met both men's eyes, challenging them, before speaking in a tone, just short of an order, "Foolishness! I need no one. No one."

Chapter Seven

As the genetic revolution moved forward, people began to consider genetically altered humans to be superior to non-gens. It was only obvious to the majority, that you would be better off going to a gen-man doctor--genetically engineered for the profession, than some non-gen with random genetics. Soon it became quite normal to expect those who refused the enlightenment and option for a technology-advanced life to work the menial jobs. The cycle worked quickly and soon the privileged were gens, the underclass primarily non-gens. Those who voiced concerns with these changes or those who questioned the wisdom of the Greys were sent to re-education camps located on planets far, far away.

THE MINES

Savanah struggled to pull her load up the ramp toward the pit, she mumbles, sarcastically, with fatigue dripping from her voice, "Fill it high, or tomorrow we die." The same words echoed through the air around her, as hundreds of non-gens classified as criminals and assigned to rehabilitation at the mines, walked up and down the 1/2-mile long ramp. They deposited the Utritium in the pit in the center of the massive loading dock. The afternoon sun was nearing the horizon as more and more workers began to glance continually--expectantly--in its direction.

A young boy, skin bronzed dark from the sun, walked beside Savanah.

"Ezekial, why do they look to the sun?" She inquired of the shaggy haired boy.

He glanced at the burning Orange orb in the distance, grimacing. "It is the ninth day and the pit is almost full. Fill it high or tonight we die."

"When do they pick up the load?" Savanah asked, and despite herself, glanced back at the sun.

The boy's eyes lit up, despite the struggle, and the doom lying ahead, he enjoyed giving this new arrival information; it made him feel important, that he had the answers for her. "Every ten days. If on the ninth day, the pit is not full by the setting of the sun...they come."

"The I.U.S.?" Savanah asked, adjusting her load.

"No.", The boy's voice dropped to a whisper. "The beasts."

A chill ran up Savannah's spine, and she looked at the setting sun. She hurried the pace. The chant of the crowd quickened until all were nearly running up the ramp. It would be close, for the Ultritium pit was nearly full. The sun's lower arc reached the surface of the horizon.

A man stopped, dropping his load. He raced to the ridge of the pit, looking down into it, and then to the people on the way up. He repeated the process several times. A decision was made and he pulled a horn from his shirt, blowing hard, sending out a low-pitched wail across the barren wasteland below the ramp.

The response was instantaneous. Bags and wheelbarrows were dropped and everyone took off running toward the partially underground village in the distance.

Ezekial grabbed Savannah by the hand. "Come, come quickly. We must hurry."

Savannah looked to see the last sliver of yellow nearing the horizon, fear overtook her, as the trembling boy's hand pulled on hers, and she ran for her life.

The shadows that slowly crawled outward in geometric shapes across the desert with the sun's descent saturated every nook as the mountain peaks swallowed the last crescent of gold. Dusk had taken the land, and with the darkness of night came death. Along the crags of the mountain portals of darkness released nightmares--the branebeasts poured forth. From each of the portals gatekeepers appeared and stood, waiting. They were Greys without the cover of cowl, leather skinned, hairless beings with protruding

brow and recessive jaw. They watched over the portals to hell and waited for the prey they would relish in to be delivered.

The tidal wave of beasts crashed down upon the sunken houses in the desert. Sprouting forth on all four grotesque limbs, the hairless wolf like beasts pounced and leapt down the rocky terrain before unfolding leathery wings, taking flight. Black eyes peered without seeing, like bats they flurried toward their prey using some unknown sense for navigation.

Savanah chased the boy, and was barely able to keep up with the speedy kid. His feet barely touched the still warm desert soil as he raced for his house. He glanced back, just as he reached his small abode, throwing open the hatch revealing a long flight of steps carved into the sandstone earth. "Quickly!"

Savanah was only a few strides behind him, and didn't wait, she bolted past him, tripping in her terror, and slip, sliding down the dark passageway. The boy slammed the door closed behind him, gracefully moving down the well-known steps. "Shhhh."

Above, the attacks had begun as the old and weak fell to the swarming creatures. Screams of terror and pain rocked the desert as victims were snatched up by black talons and carried back into the rocks. Over a score of the beasts surged through the compound, but their numbers diminished as one by one they retreated with their kills. Some dragged screaming prey back to the gatekeepers before pouncing forward for their own carnage. The easy prey were caught up quickly leaving the rest of the hungry minions to work for their food. In hordes they attacked doors; hinges creaked with the force. Many stopped momentarily, heads grotesquely leaning toward

hatches, sensing. The moment of reprieve was short, and they either bolted forward with a scream in search of living flesh or more terrifyingly began to rip at the door, screaming out. Their cries were met with six to ten other beasts thronging forward, quickly ripping the hatch from the ground. Once removed, the beasts moved like ants in and out of the whole, dragging helpless victims out and into the cobalt sky.

Savanah cringed at the not so distant screams and fidgeted in the dimly lit cavern. "We have to do something."

"Shhhh." The boy's eyes darted upward. "We are doing something, we're surviving. It won't be long now."

"So we wait till they've had their fill. Like ignorant sheep to slaughter!"

"We have no choice! We can't fight them."

"Have you ever tried?"

Ezekial's eyes went wide with the thought of it.

Savanah searched the room, frustrated at the lack of weapons. She knew there was nothing they could do, the screams already decreasing in intensity. "How often do they feed?"

"If the pits not full on the nine, they dine."

"Well next time...we'll be ready."

McGregor adjusted knobs on the control panel as his ship came out of hyper speed. He looked to Quinn who stared at his own shaking hand.

"What's with the shakes?"

Quinn quickly put his hand down by his side, gripping trouser. "It's the brane travel and it's been getting worse."

"How often do you go in there?"

"All the time. I figured it out when I was a kid. Almost died the first time in. But I knew there was a reason I could do it. That it would be the answer."

"The answer to what?"

"To the problem of man's bent to want the Creator's glory."

McGregor looked at him quizzically, banking his ship toward a distant planet.

"How did you figure it out?"

"I lived on a rogue planet with my parents and others who had fled earth to live their life free of discrimination from the gens. No planet is like Earth, but the settlers had found something close. We had peace, until they came."

"Who?"

"The Greys. And the beasts."

McGregor looked to Quinn, encouraging him to go on.

"I was ten years old at the time. They killed everyone, my mom, my dad...only a few survived. A ship got away with the youngest. I wasn't on it...pretty much only infants." Quinn glanced at McGregor before turning back to gaze out into space. "As they poured through the portal I knew we

were dead--my people were strong, but they were farmers with primitive weapons. They are stronger in our dimension than in the branes, especially at night. In a suicidal rage I charged into the fray, a scythe picked up from a fallen farmer slicing at anything that moved, doing little damage until I cleared the portal. You know what it's like in there? "

McGregor nodded, failing to squelch the memories.

"I should have been toast, but a peace came over me. I suddenly knew I would live. And when I swiped that blade...amazing...God knows how many I took down that day, but it was too late. I killed 'em all as they came through the portal with their kills, but revenge was not sweet. I was a child alone." He paused, seemingly distraught not just at his circumstance, but at the thought of any child left helpless. "I went back to my home, but nothing was left. I couldn't fly a ship and I had no communications. So I went back in. It took me three weeks to find a portal that lead to civilized life. As I traveled through the branes, I slaughtered any beast or Grey I could find. I also discovered several planets like this one." He motioned to the approaching planet. "I decided then that I must put a stop to it, and put a stop to the corrupt government that caused it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh come on. Once humanity allows any life to be sacrificed for the benefit of another, it's only a matter of time before they expand their horizons." He shook his head. "I know they've told you about their deal. If they'd sacrifice their weak and dying...and the helpless innocent, don't you think they'd sacrifice a planet of rebellious non-gens if it would appease the Greys?"

McGregor didn't respond. He knew the truth of the words.



The slave planet awoke from its slumber as the yet seen rising sun sent forth its tangerine rays to battle back the night and the fears that go with it. Hatches were thrown open to the glow; workers made their way onto the desert fields, enjoying Reprieve Day--the day longest away from death's door.

A hatch was flung open and Ezekial popped up from the barren wasteland like a prairie dog, smiling at the orange warmth working its way into his bones. He scrambled back below and began working joyfully at his tiny cooking space. "You like eggs?"

Savanah blinked her eyes at the small flames dancing about the steel frying pan. She looked at the boy, quickly separating memories from nightmares in her mind--she frowned at how many fell into the latter category. "I like eggs." Savanah pulled her aching body to a sitting position. "Over easy." She brushed a strand of auburn hair from her face. The rough conditions could not hide her attractiveness. The drab brown bag of a frock clung to her perfect shape and a tied rope highlighted her tiny waist.

Her exquisite beauty was lost on the boy. "They aint' chicken a' course, but a monitor egg's just as good, eh?"

Savanah nodded. "Make them scrambled if you don't mind."

"Weez usually take it easy day one, get to work by nine or so. If it'd be day four, we'd had been working two hours by now." The boy flipped the eggs. Course, can't be loafing too much, don't want to miss the target two weeks in a row now."

"No. No, we wouldn't want that." Savannah took the plate the boy passed to her, viewing the food which looked like a typical scrambled egg. Her lips nibbled with a hesitant bite under the watchful eye of her host. She smiled. "Very good Ezekial." She gobbled down another mouthful and didn't wait for it to go down before jamming more in her mouth, "Very good."

The Boy beamed. Savannah couldn't help but match his youthful optimism about the day.



McGregor looked at the desert planet on his view screen and pointed. "Big planet. How do we find her?"

A jittery finger pointed to the lower hemisphere of the large ball on the black screen, just below what would be the equator on Earth. "There. That's where they keep 'em working. I've been there before, once, through the branes. But the portals there are swarming with branebeasts, they let 'em loose periodically to feed on the indentured servants. Quinn saw the shocked look on McGregor's face. "It's an ugly world out here my friend. For a guy who's been in the thick of it for a couple of years, you sure seam to have an idealized view of things."

McGregor looked back at the planet, hiding his agreement with the statement. He had traveled many places, seen his share of strange events and fought some serious battles. But the lines had seemed pretty clear on who the bad guys were. He now wondered if he had been shielded, or more eerily, denied the wrongs being done in the name of justice. He pushed the thought aside--if not out--of his mind. "Let's just get her out of there."

Quinn looked at McGregor for a moment, waiting for his eyes to meet his. "What about the others?"

McGregor took a moment to fully comprehend the meaning. His reaction wasn't what Quinn was looking for. Exasperated, his voice rose with each word. "You really are nuts, you know that. I don't know what fantasyland you're from, but that is a controlled planet--people don't leave without the government's approval. Yes, Savannah was wrongly accused, but how the hell do I know who's innocent down there. The band of losers you had in your bar the day they were arrested didn't look like your law-abiding citizens to me. No way! I'm a Space Janitor, a cop. I don't free criminals from behind bars, I put them there!"

Quinn matched his anger. "These people aren't criminals. They are non-gens who refused to cow to the elite who would subjugate them. If I know Savannah, she's already working to free them herself, and won't come with us without helping them first."

"Then I guess I'm wasting my time. But I'll let her decide her fate for herself."

"Fine."

Flames burst from around the small ship as it entered the planet's atmosphere.

On the planet's surface, heads turned upward gazing at the sudden twinkle in the morning sky. The planet rarely received visitors except when the super tankers came to collect ore or minors were dropped off. All watched as the ship glided across the crisp blue sky, arcing its way lower and floating to a halt on the too large landing bay atop the plateau.

Savanah smiled then took off running up the long walkway--the same one she had fled from only 12 hours earlier. "Come, on. Follow me." She shouted to Ezekial who was already on her heels.

As the ship settled down onto the dusty surface, Quinn moved for the door, the dragon beat him to it as it slid open. McGregor wanted to rush after them, but sat calmly, breathing deep. He longed to race down the slope to meet the approaching Savanah, to take her into his arms. Instead he finished the docking procedure then moved with calm into the ship's open door.

Quinn had already reached Savanah as McGregor stepped onto the ramp and now escorted her back toward the ship with Bruce running his snout through her hair as he rested atop her head.

The Dragon saw McGregor's restraint. *Trust your instincts Janitor.*

McGregor's smile could not be contained as he saw Savanah--alive and healthy. She smiled up at him and he threw caution to the wind, bolting down the ramp and taking her into his arms. "Thank God, you're alright."

Her eyes glowed as they looked into his, they were as dazzling as he remembered. But the moment was brief as the crowd surrounded them, surging up the ramp to see the unscheduled visitors. McGregor's military training and survival instincts took over. He began to maneuver his way back to the ship, ushering Savannah with him. She looked around, not sure what to do. She wanted off this place--bad. Her eyes met the boys'. He watched blankly as she was drawn away. Quinn followed them both, letting Savannah make the call.

She stopped, turning to McGregor. "I can't go, not yet. These people need our help."

McGregor looked suspiciously at Quinn, wondering how he could have convinced Savannah of his intentions, then back at the girl. "What can we do, we can't take them anywhere, and I.U.S. will just shut them down if we free them."

"Actually, and you should know this, this is not technically a prison." Quinn smiled as he began his lesson. "It's a forced colonization for those who resist the I.U.S. on Earth. You notice; no I.U.S. forces here. These people are free. Of course some unscrupulous merchant has cut himself a fat deal and the Greys have been given reign here, so the people are in bondage to their fears. But, if say, they were able to combat these beasts from hell, take the power from the Greys. Well then, they would truly be free. And the merchant, well, he's a business man, I'm sure a word from a Janitor could persuade him to continue dealing--more fairly of course--with these people."

The crowd around the trio had grown to a very large size. Eyes widened with hope as they heard Quinn's words. But some shouted out

skeptically. "How?" "You can't fight them, their world is not ours, our weapons barely slow them down."

McGregor watched as the situation grew out of his control. Quinn spoke, rising to the occasion, taking his pulpit. "People. You are not created to live in fear, no man is given an oppressor he does not have the strength to overthrow, given time, given determination...given an act of destiny. You may not be able to fight them in their worlds. But we can." He looked to McGregor, whose stomach was already turning at the thought. "We can enter their realm and defeat them where they spawn. Fate has brought this man here. This man who has the technology to close the gates of hell and free you from your chains."

McGregor turned to Quinn. "I do?"

"Shhh."

The crowd leapt at this preacher's words, and they shouted as one. "Free us! Free us prophet. Free us Janitor!"

McGregor began to speak, attempting to deny Quinn's outrageous claims, but it was no use, they had surrounded him, raising him up, carrying him down the ramp to their homes. He caught a glance of the dragon snickering as he circled above. *Looks like your entourage is growing.*

Chapter Eight

With the quickly advancing development of Genetic Engineering came those who resisted the altering of humanity for religious reasons. For a time they prevailed, their cause gaining momentum with the sudden death of the pro gene engineering President Blake. The Vice President who took over quickly squelched all research delaying greatly the advances of genetic science. The victory was short lived and soon those who believed human development and design should be left to God were in the minority. Those who resisted believed mankind was on a path of destroying their own souls, they believed that man's consciousness and soul was given by God, and if man was created through science, he would be nothing more than a biological machine without the soul unique to humankind.

BRANE WARFARE

The next three days found McGregor, Quinn and Savannah preparing for battle. Savannah was put in charge of defense, setting up barriers in front of doors, and booby trapping passageways both above and below ground. Quinn began instructing McGregor in the ways of brane warfare.

So it was that the next few days McGregor found himself the student to Quinn's teachings--not all of them relevant to the battle at hand. Quinn often meandered from his explanation of the use of the mind and soul as weapons of strength in the branes to musings on fate and its obvious work in bringing them together--for the purpose of destroying evil of course. In

Quinn's eyes that evil came in the form of the Greys and the people
McGregor worked for--I.U.S.

At one point he had marched McGregor across the barren planes away from the camps. They had traveled near half the day and the sun sat high overhead. Sweat had soaked, stained, dried and re-soaked their clothes twice over, at least what clothes they still wore. McGregor had long removed his shirt, tying it off around his waist. His loose fitting trousers blended seamlessly with the surrounding dust and sand for that was what they were covered in. Quinn pushed on before him, unbuttoned shirt flapping in the wind, often times muttering inaudibly to himself, other times raising his voice to be heard. Finally after reaching a small rise in the otherwise flat desert, Quinn stopped.

McGregor pulled up beside him, immediately drawing a canteen from his belt, emptying it to quench his parched throat. Quinn did the same as McGregor hoarsely asked the obvious. "What the hell are we doing out here?"

Quinn simply put his index finger to his lips, then folded himself down upon crossed legs and closed his eyes.

McGregor looked down at him, no longer fully perplexed at this strange man's actions. He gave a light shrug of his shoulders and followed suit. Quinn had rather quickly released any tension in his body, and sat loose and peaceful. McGregor took longer to relieve the anxiety from his muscles, joints and mind. He cranked his head around, tweaking his neck, rolling aching shoulders, stretching out tired arms and legs, finally coming to stillness and closing his eyes. The two men sat there for a time.

At first McGregor cracked an eye occasionally, checking on Quinn, but the man seemed in some sort of trance. Finally McGregor rested, allowing the peacefulness of the great distance around him to soak through his being. It was strange to him. He could not remember a time in recent past that he had just sat, doing nothing. It reminded him somewhat of those moments in space, between light speed leaps, in which he stared into the expanse of the universe. But those moments were always brief, for there always seemed a mission to review, a system to fix, and a talking computer to keep his mind in motion. He chuckled. And now a mind reading dragon to boot. As he sat there he slowly became aware of his body. He began to focus on specific points; then he became aware of aches, pains, and stiffness. Without a move he relaxed those areas, helping them to settle into the peace he was finding. As his physical distractions dissipated, he became aware of deeper wounds. They gnawed deep within his sub-consciousness, screaming at him for attention. He quickly threw up walls around them.

Quinn let out a slow breath. "When you find the thorn, remove it. Even if you must tear at the flesh around it first. It must be removed."

McGregor opened his eyes and turned to Quinn who smiled, asking, "Feels good doesn't it?"

McGregor met the man's eyes questioningly, almost asking him but then deciding it must have been a coincidence, and he wasn't ready to tackle that thorn. "Yeah. It did. But don't tell me we just wasted a day of helping Savannah with the fortification for a little veg' time?"

Quinn laughed. "Were that all we were doing, it would still not be a waste." His smile broadened at the thought, then faded. "But alas, it has much more serious ramifications than that."

McGregor nodded for him to proceed.

"Remember when you first entered the brane? The feeling of despair, the attack on all your senses?"

"All too well I'm sorry to say."

"Good, now think back to it. Was it a physical feeling?"

"No. Not exactly. I told the doctor that examined us afterwards--"

"Lloyd Richards."

"--Yes. I told him it was as if a force of immense evil mentally and emotionally attacked me. Like a dagger of hate penetrated my soul. The effect was a physical weakening so tangible I could have passed out."

Quinn nodded his head approvingly. "You've nailed it Janitor. I doubt the others could have understood that."

"They never got the chance."

"Sadly, that is true. But you did. Did you notice your friend? He seemed to hold up well during the battle."

"Laieth? He claims to have had no effects."

Quinn nodded once again, as if confirming his own solutions to a puzzle. "I believe he did not. You see, the world of the branes is much different than ours. It is surreal, supernatural if you will. Our weapons work there, physics work there, but it is different. There your mind--your spirit--has power, but it is also vulnerable. That is what was attacked when you entered. Your psychi' if you will. My theory is that pure-gens have lost

that human spirit. It's been engineered out of them. That is why G'laieth was not vulnerable. But it also means he can not be as strong. You see McGregor, the Greys feed on the spirit of man, the breath of life, the soul, whatever you want to call it. It is their drug. They can survive without it, but like a heroine addict, they care not the consequences for others--especially others who they view as worms compared to their being--on that they get their fix. Pure-gens don't have it, so they are useless to the Greys."

Quinn watched how McGregor reacted to the information. Then continued. "I know of your government's plan to change history, to create a world of pure-gens as a means to defeat the Greys. They think they are doubling the benefit; take away the Greys motivation to be on Earth, and create a super race at the same time. But we have already seen the effects it has had by making an inferior sub-class, but worse yet, in doing so they will destroy the soul of humanity."

"You're one hell of a conspiracy theorist, you know that? You're talking crazy. Not only that, we need Pure-gens to fight the Greys--and the beasts--where they live."

"Oh that is where you are wrong Janitor. And that is why we are here. You see the beasts are stronger outside the branes than in. We must take the fight to them, but don't misunderstand, even there they are terribly powerful. But it is the very spirit which G'laieth lacks--and you my friend have--that will allow us to defeat them."

As had become commonplace, McGregor looked on questioningly. "Laieth did fine. A hell of a lot better than me."

Quinn chose to ignore the comment. "I know you've looked into his eyes Janitor. No soul lies there." He turned back to look across the desert expanse. "You know Janitor, with our leaps in technology, we've lost some of our humanity. Not in the same essence of the pure-gens mind you, but in the way we act, and think. Human touch, companionship, it's been replaced by screens and wireless connections. But the one leap that bothered me most, was when those damn guns were invented. Until then, man fought close. Arrows could be deflected, then overcome with a speedy charge. The true battle lied with the blade. The samurai, the apache, the knights of the round...a different breed of warrior." Quinn stared off, trance like. "I hated it in those old movies, when a proud battalion of warriors were wiped out by a gatling-gun...hated it, they didn't even know what hit them."

McGregor nodded his head in agreement.

Quinn continued, a twinkle growing in his eyes. "We now have a chance to bring the spirit of the samurai back to warfare. You noticed I fight with blades in the branes? You also noticed they did not have to find their target in order to leave their mark? In the brains, a soul that is girded up with the proper armor, is a soul that brandishes the most powerful weapon of all, the weapon of justice, the weapon of righteousness. The blades are conduits for that power. I can teach you to use them."

"By the ninth day?"

A quirk of a smile crossed Quinn's face. "Let's hope so."

For the next several days, Quinn and McGregor trained. It quickly became apparent to Quinn that McGregor required little training with a sword. Having studied the weapon since childhood, and having used it in battle, McGregor was an expert with his blade--and happy to gain the knowledge that his weapon would be effective in the other dimensions. In contrast to McGregor's barbarian broadsword, Quinn used duel sabers, manipulating them like the legendary samurai. The drills forced McGregor to use his mind as a shield and weapon in the branes, protecting it from the beast's and Greys' attacks while giving his sword greater power.

The exercises continued on the dusty hard packed earth just above the mines. McGregor's blade swooshed through the air, ten feet in front of Quinn's neck. Quinn shouted. "See it slicing through flesh and my head rolling through the dust, eyes still open with the shock of it." He laughed. "It really is no different than what a baseball player does. He visualizes striking the ball, and his body follows suit. But in the branes..." Quinn smiled at the thought. "...Your mind has power outside your body. You must visualize the strike, before during and after the attack. But see the blade as an appendage of you, able to reach out infinitely to meet your enemy. But, alas, you must be centered, you must find the desire for good in you, the part of you that wants to do right, but has no power. Harness it, direct it. It must be stronger than the evil and doubt that lies within us all. Any darkness and doubt will thwart your strength. Though you still believe it not, Laieth is a soulless creature. He gains no strength from the desire for good, for he has no conscience. This protects him, but it also hinders his strength. You and I...? We were chosen from eons past to battle in the

branes, naturally given a genetic mutation to allow us there; we also have the capabilities for great power, but if what we fear most in the depths of our souls...if it is tapped into by the enemy? We become weak. They are experts in the arena of the subconscious, for it is their drug. You can only hide from the infirmity, only run from it for so long, before it will find you...and worse, reveal itself to them. You must purge it from you, but first you must recognize it. What do you fear Janitor? What is your thorn?"

McGregor stopped, something almost there, something almost he could voice, if only he could allow himself to think it. "I don't know."

"Yes you do! Find it. See it. Say it!"

McGregor's face transformed with the losing battle he fought against the demons within. The feeling leapt from the probing of his conscious mind. His sub-conscious maneuvering to protect him from the pain. But he found it, his body physically wrenching with the unveiled truth.

"I'm afraid. I'm afraid of who I am. Of not being better, ashamed of not being a gen-man." He breathed, his eyes widening with the vocalizing of what he had never wanted to speak. Synapses in his brain, misfiring since his youth, found their proper paths. If only a trickle, the proper channels had been discovered, and his mind glimpsed the paths in which his thoughts should go. "My parents made it obvious when my brother was born, their son by birth, their son they created. They loved him because they made him, and he was perfect in their eyes. I never knew where I came from. I don't even know whom I'm made from. If I was of them they would have..." He turned away from Quinn, not wanting to face what he would have said, not wanting to admit what he had always known was true. He was not a

Gen-man, and his parents loved him less because of it, because he was not theirs. His body reacted, tension sprang down the back of his neck, he chest tightened. He was adopted, a non-gen. His pain only made worse by the fact that he had six years of their love, only to have it jerked away when they had a child of their own. An adopted son of unknown genetic make-up was fine, until he was replaced with something better. "They wouldn't...no couldn't, love me anymore."

Quinn watched him gingerly, not wanting to derail what he hoped was a breakthrough.

McGregor turned to Quinn, the tears willfully drawn back into ducts, synapses in his brain shut down, allowing his thoughts to retrace the already well paved pathways of his mind. "My entire life I've dedicated to proving I was a gen-man. Showing my parents what I was worth." He paused, hardening. "If Lloyd's plan works, I'll have been born a pure-gen, and I'll have the childhood, the parents, I dreamed of. I can be my little brother. I can be loved like him. I'm not going to let that slip away because some lunatic's religion makes him think humanity will lose its soul." McGregor walked away from the shocked Quinn whose worst case scenario was coming to pass. McGregor stopped and turned back. "Soon we'll go in there together and save this planet, and for that I thank you. But then I'm going back to defeat the Greys, and ensure no boy ever has to go through what I did again." He began to turn, then added. "I believe you'll thank me for it when it's over." He left Quinn standing alone.

Quinn watched him leave then whispered after him. "No, the world will thank me when I stop you."



Like the sands of a sea shore the stars covered the night sky. The universe opened up to the naked eye thanks to the moonless night and lack of a cities dominating false brilliance. McGregor lay atop his ship, leaned back against the space shield, his head resting against a forearm curled beneath it. His other hand drew up the bottle of beer that he drank from deeply.

Bruce snoozed on the small horizontal stabilizer wing at the highest point of the ship. *Relax Janitor. All is safe tonight.* McGregor smiled. The dragon's thoughts once again penetrated his mind. *Your friend is coming.*

A second later McGregor heard Savannah climbing up the side of the ship. She moved with ease, scrambling up the side of the metallic craft's side, her bare feet and legs allowing her to cling like a spider. Her fashionable creativity had once again placed her into a different outfit. The canvass that once covered her entire body now wrapped low about her waist, clinging tightly about her thighs. She had confiscated one of McGregor's ivory shirts and shredded the satin to perfection, tying it about her mid section, revealing a naturally sculpted, tanned stomach that money could never buy. The sleeves were also removed, finishing the very practical and extremely sexy attire.

McGregor feigned normalcy as he fought to keep from gasping for air at her beauty. He turned his head slightly, acknowledging her presence.

She stopped at his glance. "Can I come up."

"Sure." He said, then scolded himself for an idiot as his vocal chords betrayed him, raising an octave and breaking on the simple word.

Go easy on yourself Janitor. Just be.

McGregor exhaled, long and deep, attempting to reign in his racing emotions and hormones as the girl sat next to him. He inhaled her scent, goose bumps leapt across his skin; he shivered.

"You cold? The breeze is so warm." Her swan like neck put her face high into the night, her eyes beholding the speckle filled sky.

"Just a chill." He pulled himself to a sitting position, offering her a drink from the bucket still containing a bottle. She nodded her acceptance. He pulled the top and handed it to her, forcing his hand to be still as he did. *What's wrong with me?* He thought, berating himself. *Get a grip, she's just a girl.* Despite his self talk, his stomach still turned, his heart still raced, and his palms still sweat in defiance of the cold bottle in his hand.

Accept what you're feeling instead of fighting it, your body works much better that way.

Accepting what he felt was near impossible. What he felt was something he long ago committed to never feeling again--love--for he knew the pain it could cause. He steeled himself.

She drew her eyes down from the sky and looked at him. "I hoped I'd find you here. With everything going on, we've barely talked. How ya' doing?"

He forced himself to sound as relaxed as she was but it only came out gruff and whiny. "O.K. considering I've been sucked into a prison break and am being tutored by a lunatic."

She immediately hardened. "I'm sorry you feel that way." She got up to leave.

I'm an idiot.

You're an idiot. Stop her.

"Wait! I'm sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me. Please. Sit down." He grasped her hand.

She met his eyes, pausing but not moving to sit.

"Please."

That's the first real thing I've heard you say.

He pulled her into him.

Tell her you love her.

NO!...I can't.

You need to believe Janitor.

Before he could respond, both he and the dragon's senses blitzed with static as Savannah's lips met McGregors. For a moment in time the wires of his mind and soul that never seemed to connect with purity fired as one, a tingle shot down his spine that caused his loins to burn and his knees to buckle. He took her in his arms, allowing for once in his life to feel. He kissed her back and it was her turn to melt.

The dragon let out a purring roar and took flight into the starlit sky.

Jagged red rocks jutted from the side of the near vertical cliff, a ridge of mountains jutting up from desert floor. Two figures crawled up, dwarfed by its massive face.

A miniscule crease held muscled, raw fingers that dug into the dirt; they pulled up McGregor. He hung there momentarily, looking back at the sun that set amazingly fast as final preparations at the camp continued. The large mining pit sat empty almost directly below him. He pulled up his other hand then once more looked down upon the camp in the distance. With an outburst of breath he pulled himself up onto the outcropping of rock high above the desert floor. He craned his neck for a look over the edge. Quinn made his way up the cliff face, hand and feet searching and finding holds in the crags. When he was in reach, McGregor lent him his hand. Quinn grasped it without question, momentarily trusting his life to McGregor as he allowed him to support his full weight while he scrambled up to the outcropping. "Thanks."

McGregor didn't respond.

Quinn followed McGregor's gaze. "All their defenses won't stop them if we don't do our job inside. We can't kill 'em all, we have to put a scrambler on the gateway."

"The same type of scrambler you will attempt to use to stop the I.U.S. from its mission."

Quinn smiled enthusiastically. "Possibly."

McGregor looked at him with intimidation. "I'm sure you're aware I have the authority to remove any and all threats to an I.U.S. mission?"

Quinn's smile broadened. "Of course." He turned and climbed up. "Come on, almost there, and we don't have much time."

McGregor looked to the fading orange glow still coming over the mountain ridge above them, and to the camp below where Savannah worked. He let the words "Be careful." sail away on the wind. He waved to the shape of the dragon soaring over the camp in the distance. *Take care of her my friend.*

The dragon momentarily maintained a flight pattern toward McGregor, tilting his wing as he arced back toward camp. *I will. Believe and you will succeed.*

McGregor turned back into the cliff face and continued climbing.

Reaching a small plateau in the midst of the high wall Quinn breathed deep. "Welcome to the gateway to hell." He said as he gestured to the shadowed wall of rock. McGregor scrambled over the edge, then turned to watch the last sliver of amber settle below the horizon. With the sun's departure a buzz like that of a locust swarm began to rise, coming from behind the wall. "Here they come!" McGregor barked, pulling his two blasters, broadsword still strapped across his back.

"You have no faith my friend, I hope you find it before you die." Quinn grinned recklessly. "One thing you should know before you enter what may be our death."

McGregor raised his weapons as the sounds of the swarm grew from behind the rock wall. "Can it wait?"

"What you know in your heart is true. You're no gen-man. You're as naturally made as I."

McGregor scowled. "How else could I handle the branes?"

"The same way I can. You were made to."

McGregor knew the truth but denied it deep inside his conscious mind. "No. You don't know that."

Quinn forced him to meet his eyes. The buzz behind the cliff grew frenzied. "I know." He grinned. "No time for more." He dove for the shadow, drawing blades. "But remember your shields, protect yourself, and know...you have all the power in there that I do."

A hundred scenarios leapt to his mind as he followed Quinn through the portal, his pistols leading him. He stepped into the maelstrom and met the onslaught of beasts as his world dissipated around him.

The frenzied swarm that slammed into them couldn't have been more viscous if the attack were happening in the middle of a lumber mill. McGregor and Quinn were immediately driven back from the attack, barely holding their ground. McGregor faintly heard Quinn through the buzz of wings and gnashing teeth. "Keep 'em in front of you, we can't let too many through."

"You're wrong!" McGregor knocked a beast to the side, smashing skull with the butt of his right gun; he fought the pain that seared his soul, finding every fear hidden there, unleashing a barrage of fire at the swarming beasts.

A score of beasts leapt past them, vanishing through the portal.

"Best keep your mind on the task." The two men stood not three meters apart, Quinn shouted at McGregor, his guns continued to blaze, barely warding off the attacks. "You can do it. Feel the pain, accept it,

accept who you are." He parried an attack, skewering a beast. "Then use the strength hidden beneath. You can do it." Quinn bolted into the fray. "My brother!"

Tears streamed from McGregor's eyes. The truth he knew he must finally accept engulfed him. He was no gen-man; his adopted parents had every reason to love their own son more than him, for his brother was the better person.

McGregor let out a scream, accepting his agony as he rose up, guns blazed but the horde was upon him. He stepped into it, unleashing a final blast with his old weapons, a half a dozen beasts falling before him, six more to take their place--his guns twirled into holsters and the same two hands were a blur as they reached back for the blade strapped to his back. With a roar he tore Mjlinor from its sheath cutting a wide arc through the savage mass. His blade danced, its shimmering blue energy slicing through beast after beast.

"That's it!" Quinn shouted out as he decapitated two beasts.

A large ogre of a beast, eyes glowing red, darted for McGregor, leaping at his face, jaws gaping wide. As he yanked on Mjlinor to defend, it caught on the entrails of a slain monster. The momentary pause gave the frothing quadruped its chance; barred teeth released a snarl as they prepared to rip the Janitor's larynx from his throat. McGregor jerked his blade, twisting in a flash of blue light, its tip driving deep into the bat-wolf's mouth now only centimeters from his own. He shoved again, driving the sword through the back of the brute's skull. The beast's momentum carried it forward, knocking McGregor back. He landed with a thud but coiled his

feet beneath him, releasing the sinewy spring that sent the dead brute sprawling across the chamber. Three more replaced the slain animal, bearing down upon the reeling Janitor. He raised his sword but teeth tore into flesh.

Next to him, Quinn's blades rampaged. As Quinn had explained, his blades reached out past their physical limitations. Charging beasts fell long before they reached him. He heard McGregor's snarl and suddenly his rapier darted out, sending a blast at the beast attached to McGregor's arm. The beast shrieked as it scurried away. McGregor dispatched the two other beasts and leapt up, taking note of Quinn's reach. Despite the chaos around him, he focused his thoughts, accepting his bloodied frame as well as his ravaged sub-conscious. He swept his sword in a wide arc, pouring his mind and energy into the swath of destruction. Beasts fell like wheat under a scythe, giving the two a momentary reprieve.

"Good work. Keep them off me while I set the scrambler, then we have to finish them all."

McGregor didn't wait for the next wave; he darted into the quixotic world, meeting the next onslaught head on. A lifetime of suppressed anger and fear finally accepted and released spurred him on into battle.

Quinn shouted after him. "Remember your focus. And take out any Grey you see...and don't get lost!"

The world McGregor traveled through was like a psychedelic painting that plays tricks with the eyes. Shapes moved about him from another dimension. One moment he battled across a kitchen table while a family dined, their shapes faintly apparent to McGregor, the perplexed look of the

young father vanishing as he moved through to another reality. The next minute, he battled amidst the spewing lava of some ancient volcano. But if he spent anytime focusing on these constant changing environments that wove their way across the reality he was in, he'd be dead. Beast after beast attempted to race past him in the narrow corridor he now ran. He slew them all. The corridor wound its way through the translucent parallel branes before opening up into a larger cavern.

He paused there, looking about for an attack, but he had killed the last of the beasts from what he could tell. Suddenly his head jerked to a corner, where he was sure he saw something move. The shadowy figure had fled down a lower corridor. He didn't hesitate, bolting toward the dark tunnel.



Savanah screamed with fear and the ire of a wounded lioness. "Get outta' there!" The final traps had been set, but the workers were still making their way down the ramp when the devilish entities arrived. Forepaws rarely touched the ground as the grotesque beast's wings propelled them forward at frightening speed. Despite the efforts of McGregor and Quinn a score of beasts had made it through. In Savannah's eyes, the horde seemed insurmountable, but several in the crowd had hope spring to their faces at the less than normal numbers. One old minor yelled encouragement. "The warriors have succeeded, fight hard, we shall win the day."

Just as the words of optimism floated across the air, the screams of death overshadowed them. Bruce swept down upon the winged creatures

that dwarfed him. But what he lacked in size he made up for with speed. He was an emerald blur as talons severed flesh and gouged eyes in an attempt to slow down the beasts. Despite his efforts several miners fell as they scrambled toward shelter, but their efforts were not in vain. They darted through a tight area of the village, and the beasts followed. As the last miner cleared the edge of the first two buildings, they dove for cover as leather straps were released. The attackers narrowed their formation to enter the alleyway, but they were still four wide when they hit the wall of spikes that drove into alien flesh. Screeches of agony poured forth from their hellish throats, becoming howls before they died. The rest of the pack reeled back avoiding the trap, and were impaled by pointed shafts driving into their chests and backs. Many spears met their mark, as the men on the rooftops sent the shafts hailing down, finding revenge for loved ones lost.

The remaining beasts scrambled away, overwhelmed by the sudden attack. They bolted for the hills as the villagers gave chase. The winged beasts sprang across the desert landscape, and easily outdistanced the villagers, but just as they slowed their escape, the floor of the desert exploded before them. Savannah, Ezekial and several men stood their ground as the beasts picked up speed, fueled by the hope that they yet may feed. Savannah yelled out the command. "Now!" As one, the small troop raised rifles and blasters from McGregor's arsenal, unloading everything they had on the beasts. Laser blasts ripped through leathery flesh and muscle. The branebeasts had never had to face high-tech weaponry on this planet and they died swiftly if not painlessly.

The crowd behind the slaughtered beasts let out a cheer. The village erupted to life as kids and elderly came out. Savannah smiled at the victory. She looked about at the celebrating minors, joy filled her heart before she saw him. Her eyes filled with tears. Lying in a heap amidst a fallen beast lay Ezekial. His body never seemed so small to her with all the life that it held; now it appeared tiny in its fallen lifeless mass. One small hand lay under his head; the other open at the end of outstretched arm. His face looked so peaceful he could have been sleeping. She raced to his side, crumbling in tears next to him. She pulled him gently into her arms, cradling him, holding him like an infant, placing his head into the crux of her arm. She placed her lips to his head and cried.



Some branes were like sewer pipe, somewhat symmetrical, barely large enough for a man. Others were massive caverns, full of stalagmites, stalactites, terraces, and columns of matter protruding into the surreal space amidst massive walls and ceilings. McGregor wondered if it was not literally the underground worlds of Earth that acted as the insulation to the seemingly supernatural routes of the branes. But instead of limestone and slabs of molten rock the walls were opaque revealing alternate realities--other dimensions.

McGregor made his way down the dark corridor at a brisk pace, sword at the ready. Quinn had made it clear they must destroy any Greys if they wanted to give the minors a chance to develop their defense systems before

they returned. The scrambler would keep the Greys away for a time--maybe indefinitely--but not if one escaped to find his way back. McGregor moved carefully but briskly. His eyes darted to the shadows. He strained to keep his focus on the world he was in and not on those he passed through. The dimensional corridor he was in currently ran down the middle of a large church and straight through the large choir that practiced in front of him. He looked to the large cross, made of railroad ties that hung from the high rafters. He thought of Quinn.

Before he could reflect more deeply or enjoy the massive cathedral he was blindsided by a blast that sent him reeling.

He had lost his focus, and the Grey had taken advantage.

He fought to block out the translucent church around him and see the world that contained his enemy. He was hit again, by a wave of energy that sent him reeling. He stumbled away, trying to catch his breath. But it was more than breath he had lost control of, the fears and insecurities of his entire being poured from him. It was as if the conscious floodgates that held back his every subconscious emotion were released. The feelings and thoughts of evil that devoured him caused him to stagger.

The Grey stepped out from the shadows, both hands pushing forward. McGregor slammed back into the wall, crumbling before the faint images of the choir behind him. The Mandarin language from the lips of the choir in this illegal church in China continued, putting a magical element to the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Although he couldn't understand their meaning, their voices rung clear to him, seemingly growing in strength.

He reached within himself, identifying his fears and weaknesses. He momentarily considered accepting them for what they were and releasing them, but instead controlled them, shoving them back where they belonged, deep within his mind. He hid them, putting them away until they could be extinguished by his mission back in time, he need not be afraid anymore he told himself, he would be perfect soon, he would change history. He gained strength from the knowledge that he controlled his past and future.

He stood, raising his sword as a shield to the Grey's next attack. The sword absorbed the blow momentarily but the force exploded around and through him, knocking him back. He shook it off, the pain surging through him clarifying at least one emotion he could allow himself to feel, the one erupting from within--rage! He raised his sword just in time to shield the next blast, this time he held strong and he sent the power back--and more--driving it toward the Grey. The demonic creature recoiled at the onslaught. Its gruesome fangs extended as an ear splitting shrill ripped the air.

It charged.

McGregor didn't wait. He continued to transform his fears into anger, meeting the beast half way down the aisle.

The chorus rang loud through the dimensional corridor as the conductor beat the air, raising his hands for the crescendo. The two beings--supernatural and natural--clashed in a flurry of blades and claws until McGregor stood over the bloodied ashen colored body. He panted, not realizing that the music had stopped.

He turned toward the choir and the conductor that stood before them. They were bowed in the rehearsal's closing prayer. McGregor smiled wryly, "Good timing."



Quinn looked about nervously just inside the portal exit, a transmitter in his hand. His eyes widened with joy and shock at the sight of the bloodied McGregor. "Shit man, are you alright?" Both men scanned McGregor's bloodied clothes, open wounds and ravaged flesh. Quinn nodded. "Stupid question."

McGregor smiled. "I'm still breathing."

"Anger is the weakest of the emotions, you're lucky to be alive." He smiled. "But I'm beginning to wonder if maybe things will turn out alright after all. Quickly, through the portal, once I scramble this thing, we might not be able to find it."

The bloodied McGregor staggered through the shadow, vanishing. Quinn pressed a button on the small box he held, tossed the device into the darkness and followed McGregor out of the brane.



That night a party for the ages raged for all but Savannah who sat alone atop a burial site for her lost friend. She cried.

The next day McGregor's ship sailed into the horizon. The settlers watched and waved. Their leader held the papers that would free them. An I.U.S. treaties stating their new status as a free trade colony.

Chapter Nine

The mission was clear; use the branes to go back in time and prevent the death of the Pro Genetic Engineering President by killing the assassin. Then plant the technology so all of humanity would be genetically engineered to perfection by the time of the Great Exodus, taking the "drug" of the Greys away and allowing for travel in the branes. Humans--as pure-gens--could finally take the battle onto the Grey's turf if the evil beings still wanted a fight.

TIME CHANGER

McGregor's ship approached earth. Savannah was at the controls while Bruce the Dragon perched on the captain's chair behind her. Aaia's voice echoed through the chamber. "You have been cleared to land, auto pilot activated."

"Thanks Aaia." Savannah leaned back into the comfortable chair, her smaller body snuggling into the large indent left by McGregor's large frame. Her hand reached up to caress the dragon behind his wings. Bruce purred like a kitten. Quinn entered the cockpit, sitting in a smaller chair in front of the starboard control panel. Savannah looked to him, hiding her avid curiosity. "How is he?"

"Sleeping. He recovers quickly, but he lost a lot of blood." He responded to her concerned look. "He'll be fine." Then added quietly. "We have a lot to accomplish when we get back."

Savanah looked up with her eyes only, reminding Quinn that the walls truly had ears. "I know."

The ship settled gently inside the hangar as McGregor struggled painfully into his pants. He walked gingerly down the corridor into the cockpit where Quinn and Savanah still sat. "You should have woken me up."

Savanah gave him back the same tone. "Aaia and I handled it fine, thank you very much."

"I must say Lord, she is an excellent pilot." The cryptic female voice said flowing from the walls around them.

McGregor tried to stay gruff, but he new it was true.

Quinn interrupted McGregor and Savannah's sexual stare down.

"What about us?"

McGregor paused momentarily. "Well, you're outlaws now, and I am a cop." Savahah's eyes widened. "So I guess you better get out of here before I arrest you both."

Quinn nodded. Savanah looked at McGregor longingly then walked through the hatch. Quinn followed, but not before saying. "I'll see you soon, Space Janitor."

"Not if I see you first, madman." McGregor watched the two disappear around the corner. "Damn it!" He looked over at the dragon resting his head on his paws in defeat. *Go with them if you want.* The dragon took flight then circled the room and came to rest on McGregor's shoulder. "Thanks."

McGregor's eyes twitched as he dreamed.

The little boy looked up from his porridge smiling. His dark hair nearly covering his eyes, red super-man pajamas kept him warm. Life was good. "I like the way you make porridge mom. Thanks."

His mother stood in the kitchen, arms outstretched to reach the stainless steel sink as she washed out a pot, her belly was seemingly ready to burst. She paused from her washing, pushing back a strand of sandy blond hair with just a tint of red from her forehead, then placing her gentle palm on her belly. She looked at her adopted son at the table. "He just kicked, I just felt your brother kick."

C.T.'s smile grew. "My own little brother. I can't wait to meet him mom. I'm going to take care of him really good."

His mother placed another hand on the mound of her stomach, and said to C.T., "I'm sure you will, son. You'll make an excellent older brother." She watched the little boy go back to his cereal, and spoke like all parents do time to time, assuming their children don't hear. "A true McGregor at last." Her hands caressed her stomach. "And we've made sure he'll look just like his father." She said the words quietly, to herself, but C.T. heard the words loud and clear. The angelic face of the boy darkened, and his smile turned down. He pushed his cereal bowl away...

McGregor's eyes popped open as sweat beaded his face, he quickly blinked back the little boy tears that had started to well in his sleep. He sat up quickly, breathing deep. "A dream...only a dream."

He looked about his empty apartment before falling back to his pillow, heart pounding. "If only a dream." His eyes fell upon the glowing clock on the alloy nightstand across from his bed. It read 3:30. He wouldn't sleep again this night. The dragon was curled up atop a high wardrobe, nose to tail. It settled back into sleep. *You are who you are my friend. Sleep.* The dragon's body settled as he fell back to sleep easily.

McGregor turned to the blank wall, eyes wide. He let the tears flow.

Two hours later he awoke seconds before his alarm went off. He dressed quickly in sweats and grabbed his already packed bag and slung it over his shoulder. He turned to the alarm as a *beep, beep, beep*, shattered the peace--finger killed it. He stood motionless and scanned his apartment for what may be the last time. The dragon perched on his shoulder momentarily before floating to the open window. *Find the peace that defies your logic McGregor. Go safely.* The dragon unfolded his silky wings and took flight.

C.T. watched the empty window, utterly alone. He moved toward the door but stopped as he passed his desk--a photo of a handsome young couple with their only son sat framed in silver, half obscured by an intelligence briefing. Placing the briefing to the side, he gently picked up the photo. An eternal moment passed as he viewed himself under the strong loving grip of his father's hand on his shoulder. McGregor's hand went to the phone and rested on the metallic handle momentarily.

Breath rushed from his lungs through tight lips and he left his home quickly.



Lloyd's hands betrayed his age. The wrinkled but still strong appendages worked frantically at a small oval shaped electronic device. He mumbled to himself, apparently ignorant to the fact that anyone else was in the room. Two lab technicians worked a control panel and the portal room was a buzz with energy as the team prepared for McGregor and Laieth's journey back in time.

McGregor walked in to see Lloyd's usual chaotically frantic routine in motion. He went straight to the scientist's side, ignoring all the eyes that now followed him.

Lloyd looked up from his tinkering and his face lit up with relief momentarily before it transformed into an image of anger at the site of McGregor. "Where have you been? Are you alright?" He grasped his soldier by the arm, looking him over, seeing the cuts and scrapes. "You look like you were ran over by a...a...what are they called?" His eyes darted about, looking for the word.

McGregor smiled. "Lawnmower."

"Yeah, that's it; lawnmower. He paused again, solving God knows what problem in his mind? "What the hell happened to you? Laieth said he saw you with the rebels. Is that true?"

His questions seemed overly eager to McGregor who glanced at Laieth sitting stoically in the corner. "I had to help a friend, nothing more." He looked to Laieth once more then decided to continue. "The rebels will try to stop us, they have a way through the branes."

"What?" G'laieth stood, advancing on the two men. "How do you know that?" He said angrily at McGregor. He turned his anger toward Lloyd. "I'm tired of you covering for him, I want him off the mission."

Lloyd's eyes danced between the two men he had called students. "G', he can be trusted. We have no choice anyway, you are the only two who can travel through the branes."

"I can do it alone." He met McGregor's eyes with his dark empty orbs. "If I even think he's blowing the mission, I'll treat him as the enemy." Laieth gave them both hawkish stares then walked out the door, leaving them alone in the chamber.

Lloyd and McGregor visibly relaxed with his departure. Lloyd collapsed in a chair near the control board and McGregor moved to the portal, staring down at the seemingly mundane circle. "I went in again."

Lloyd watched him, fearful to speak.

"You were right. Quinn moves about in there like a mongoose in a tunnel of vipers. He'll try to stop us."

"And you?"

"I'm more dedicated than ever to perfecting humanity...and myself. The mission will succeed."

Lloyd turned away from McGregor to hide the disappointment in his eyes.

McGregor continued. "And there's something else, Quinn's up to something, I don't think he's just trying to stop us, he's got a mission of his own."

"Any idea what?" Lloyd asked.

"No." McGregor growled, "I might have a better idea if you gave me more information about our plans."

Lloyd shrugged, "It's simple really, plant the technology in my lab--tell me to clean up the place while you're there--then make sure the President stays alive."

McGregor frowned, "Quinn doesn't seem the murdering type, but..."

Lloyd continued, "He'll try to stop you two, keep the tech away, keep history, history. It's not murder if he doesn't fire the shot, he'll just allow the shot to be fired."

"We kill the assassin."

Lloyd moved away from McGregor, tinkering with the transport control panel. "Laieth will handle that. If fate allows." Lloyd looked at McGregor again. "Did your friend say anything about the fate effect?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"He believes we can only change what God allows us to change. Destiny is destiny he rants, we're just tools who do not always know the what or why of our work, but tools that are effective never the less."

McGregor shrugged his shoulders, smiling slightly at the memory of the madman. He questioned Lloyd, "If the course has been predestined, then why do anything?"

"Because that is what we're destined to do." Lloyd laughed at himself. "We don't know if what Quinn speaks of is true. Does some unknown rule of science--or a super being--defy changing history? Or...will the butterfly effect occur, and by changing one thing, we change all things?"

McGregor nodded. "Or something in between."

"Or something in between."

McGregor looked at his old friend. "You don't seem too concerned."

Lloyd smiled cryptically. "I have belief in you my friend, to do what needs to be done. We can only do what we think is right, the results of those actions, well, I guess that's where faith comes in."

McGregor and Laieth stood before the portal. Two very different men with one mission--perfect humanity and save the world in the process.

Laieth checked his blasters. McGregor drew his broadsword.

G'laieth looked at him mockingly. "What are you going to do with that?"

McGregor glared defiantly. "Worry about your own ass, I'll worry about mine."

"Perfect."

The two men stepped through the portal into the unknown, expecting attack. But this time there were no beasts waiting for them. The room they had just departed still seemingly floated about them but they heard nor sensed nothing from their own dimension. Both men felt the hairs on their neck raise with the deathly silence.

Laieth smiled as he watched McGregor squirm under obvious pain. He recovered, then nodded to Laieth that he was ready. Both men had tracking systems strapped to utility belts. Equations streamed across the screen and created a vague map. They moved quickly through the brane

corridor they were in. A seeming eternity passed as they traveled through corridor after corridor, dimensional worlds collided about them in ghostly images. Mostly it resembled traveling through caves with translucent walls revealing murky worlds on the other side. The air, as it always seemed in the branes, was stagnant. One takes for granted the feeling of air, that it has a feeling, a presence, no such presence was felt inside the branes. It wasn't cold, but the feeling of it brought goose bumps to the skin. They traveled in silence, covering what seemed to be miles before reaching their destination.

Finally, McGregor stopped. He checked his coordinates. "It should be here." Laieth nodded. McGregor raised his sword point and stepped into the wall. Laieth followed.

Suddenly they were in a brane tunnel that ran across a brush and tree filled range of rolling hills. It was night and a metropolis lay lit below them. They moved down the dimensional corridor, keeping a close eye on their scanners, searching for the portal out into the hills of Pasadena California, 2020.

As they walked, G'laieth mused. "Why aren't they trying to stop us?"

McGregor looked at him, hiding the fear in his heart. "I've heard it rumored that they are stronger in our dimension than inside the branes. Maybe they're waiting for us to leave."

"Your terrorist friend give you that tidbit?"

"Just keep your eyes open."

"I'll handle my own ass, remember?"

McGregor stopped, looking down at the numbers running across the screen of his positioning system. "This is it."

The two men turned to face the brane behind them, and backed into the portal.

Suddenly the pleasant, almost warm breeze of Southern California replaced the morbid air of the brane. They didn't turn to look down upon Jet Propulsion Laboratory, a massive complex that sat in the foothills below them, its many lights twinkling in the sea of dark forest. Instead eyes and weapons were anchored to the portal. Finally, after several intense moments, they backed away, turning to look down at their destination.

The large facility lay nestled in the green hills amidst bike trails carved through the dense, heavily wooded terrain. They made their way to a dirt path and began their hike down the switchbacks. The loose gravel made their descent difficult, and the narrow trail often placed them precariously close to seemingly bottomless drop-offs, but the men made good time. Often, the bustling of brush to the side of a trail brought all weapons to bare. But each time it was not the savage attacks of the alien beasts, but just a rodent or bird stirred by their approach. Once a black bear turned from her night fishing expedition to view the intruders. The magnificent beast's large head swaggered back and forth, issuing a challenge. For a moment it seemed it might charge, but then it slowly sauntered away, disappearing into the brush. "Wow." McGregor said in an awed voice.

G'laieth didn't respond. The two continued through the dense thicket, occasionally glimpsing the full moon rising over the mountains.

They approached the scientific compound along a trail directly above the fenced facility. "If Lloyd remembered correctly, he's working late tonight, we should find him in his lab asleep or pouring over his work."

"Let's do it."

The two left the trail, making their way through the shoulder-high brush. It was not a high-security facility, but they wanted to avoid contact at all costs. Scrambling across the last few yards in crouched positions they reached the fence. A small laser made quick work of the wire and they slipped through.

"We'll close this on the way out."

They made use of the shadows and stealth to make their way to an outer window. McGregor worked the lock quickly and they both lifted themselves through, dropping quietly to tile floor.

McGregor whispered to Laieth. "Do you have the floor plans?"

"Memorized. Let's go."

"I don't like this. It's too easy."

G'laieth ignored him and slid down the hall. McGregor followed. They made their way without event down several corridors, up a flight of steps, down a hall and finally stopping outside of the labs. Taking their places on either side of the door, their eyes met. McGregor wrinkled his nose at the smell emanating from the room, then pulled his blaster. Laieth swung the door open as McGregor stepped through without a sound, blaster pointed at the nineteen year old Lloyd.

He sat hunched over a magnifying glass, completely unawares of the red dots now resting perfectly still over the back of his heart.

McGregor silently stalked into the room as Laieth followed, gently settling the door into frame. McGregor moved to within two feet of the

young scientist before stopping. He said calmly. "Dr. Lloyd Richards, I presume?"

Lloyd jumped out of his skin as he spun to face the intruders. "Shit! You scared the crap out of me." He followed the site of the gun to his chest. His eyes grew wide as he saw the red laser point hovering over his heart, then moving to his head before disappearing as McGregor holstered his pistol.

"You don't change much over the next sixty years."

Lloyd fumbled with his glasses, quickly putting them on.

"But you do lose the glasses."

Lloyd stammered. "Who are you? What do you want?"

McGregor couldn't help but laugh. "You sent us here, through the branes. Here." McGregor handed Lloyd a piece of paper with some formulas scribbled across them, a taco stain for good measure.

Suddenly Lloyd had something he could grasp to relieve his fears, his mind worked quickly. "Amazing. My hypothesis are true then?" He looked around his lab, his mind racing ahead, his eyes fell on perfect specimen of humanity called Laieth. "And my genetic theories come to pass as well I see. Wonderful! Amazing! The world must be a better place thanks to me, eh?"

"Not all think so."

Lloyd smiled in amazement at what he was witnessing. "Which is why you are here? One of my theories is that we could use the branes to change history...very speculative...." He smiled devilishly. "And very

dangerous." His smile grew. "And the fate versus butterfly affect debate should be answered. Very exciting, very exciting."

Laieth stepped forward for the first time, holstering his weapon. "We brought you this." He handed Lloyd a disk. "It contains all of your discoveries regarding genetic engineering for the next ten years. I.U.S. has decided you took too long."

Lloyd looked puzzled. "I.U.S.?"

"Intergalactic Unified System."

McGregor amplified the answer. "The new government. It was formed shortly after the arrival of the Greys."

Lloyd grabbed an old half-full Dr. Pepper can, sucking down its contents, his eyes darkened. "I knew they existed." He reached down to the fridge by his side, pulling out a fresh can. "Are they evil?" He popped the top enthusiastically, spraying the room with dark fluid. He didn't flinch and gulped down half the can.

"As the devil himself." McGregor continued. "Next year you'll be recruited by the military and you'll know everything you ever dreamed of about all your conspiracy theories--two years after that the Greys arrive. They will hold the world hostage in order to use humans as their recreational drug of choice. But, your genetic discoveries create a race immune to their soul death, taking away their motivation. It also allows us to follow them through the branes. We need the first pure-gens born before the great exodus, so that all mankind can fight and resist the Greys."

"The Exodus?"

"The Greys bring technology to develop spacecraft that can use the black holes to travel to habitable planets. World population explodes, so we need an out. The government takes it, sending millions off to inhabit space. The Greys get their drug spread throughout the universe, waiting helplessly for the slaughter. And with no way to pursue them even if we wanted to--which now we do. We're helpless against them and the ironic thing is, thanks to a massive propaganda campaign, most consider the Greys angelic priests, ushering them to a higher place, to heaven if you will. The priest's indulge freely."

"But a man engineered to perfection is protected from them?" Lloyd's mind raced.

They are useless to them. They can't feed off them. We want all parents and babies born pre-exodus to have been genetically altered and sent off with the tech to continue genetic altercations. Their children will be pure-gens, and will have the ability to defeat the Greys on their own turf. The hope is that the Grey's won't fight for something that has become useless."

Lloyd sat staring for seeming an eternity before drinking from an old can of pop. "All of humanity perfected--and I am the author. I knew I could do it."

McGregor and Laieth turned to leave. "All you have to do is run with the data we've given you, the rest...well, just do what you would of done anyway, the rest should take care of itself." McGregor stopped, turned and met Lloyd's eyes. "Just make sure we're all pure-gens when we get back to

the future. I'm counting on it." The two men went to the door. "One more message from yourself."

Eyes lit up with eagerness.

"Clean up this shit hole."

The Janitors left the room.

Lloyd went to his computer with the disk, sucked down the last of his Pepper, then looked at the can; his over full trashcan, and his extended trash heap in corner. He smiled, "Some things fate has determined to be." He crushed the can, tossing it into corner garbage dump.

Outside the security fence wires rejoined seamlessly using the same laser--on a different setting--that had cut them. The two soldiers scrambled up the rugged hillside, resting when they reached the top of the hill. They stood upon the ridge that sloped down to the East toward the major city lights. G'laieth spoke softly, "Part Two" and took off across the hill in a wolf-trot. McGregor looked back once more at the light still shining from Lloyd's office, then followed. They traversed the cliff side as McGregor looked to his scanner. The portal that will access our destination should be up here."

Laieth pondered aloud. "I don't understand. Why can't we access it from the other brane, the one we came from?"

"Only Lloyd seems to grasp this stuff fully. But like he said, there are doors, if we find one we can travel through time, but not all dimensions or time/spaces have access from every other. So we come out, find one that does and go through it."

"And hope there aren't an army of those beasts waiting for us."

"Yeah."

They traveled a mile more through the rugged terrain before McGregor stopped. "It should be there." He pointed to an indent into the mountain face, caused by a long ago landslide. "We need to leave our weapons and equipment here, travel by car to the stadium, then find the portal from there. We should be able to back track to here through the branes if we need our equipment, but the lasers should do the trick." As he spoke he removed belt, backpack, sword and blaster. He tucked them beneath the brush as Laieth did the same. "Nobody comes up here. If something happens and we don't return, well, it'll be a nice puzzle for someone to solve."

The two men removed military attire and donned blue jeans and pull-over shirts. McGregor wore a tawny t-shirt with a surfboard logo on the front. Laieth wore a red, collared golf shirt. The men stood looking at one another. McGregor laughed. "You almost look normal."

Laieth looked down at his clothing, muscles bulging from tight fitting shirt and jeans. "I'm anything but normal. That's your department." He pulled his tiny laser, checking its charge.

McGregor did the same. "We better hope they are not waiting for us if we have to return through the branes. These pea shooters won't even penetrate their skin."

Laieth nodded, for once the two adversaries were in agreement.

They left their gear and made their way to the edge of town. The sun's glow slowly lit up the sky. The silver arced slashes through the hills and city were jammed with the herds of cattle moving toward their destination at

nearly the exact same time they had everyday, only to retrace their path eight hours later. A dense Grey layer of smog already settled across the massive metropolis. McGregor leapt down from a rocky ledge onto the asphalt of an overpass. The cars barely moved beneath him. "Life sucked before we harnessed the gravitational fields and developed hydrogen."

The two men crossed the bridge and onto Colorado Blvd in downtown Pasadena. They made their way quickly to the green sign they were familiar with due to its domination of every corner in their time--Starbucks. The morning masses waiting in line with them at the coffeehouse had no clue to the origins of these two well-sculpted men. They barely stood out amidst the health conscious and beautified people of Southern California. It may have been a pre-genetically engineered world, but it wasn't pre scalpel.

Coffee in hand the men walked a short distance to the plethora of auto lots opening for business on Colorado Blvd. Laieth walked the lot, examining the vehicles. McGregor stepped into the office and purchased a used car with cash.

The black H2 sped West bound and down the 210 freeway before hitting the jam of the 5 interchange and becoming one of the herd slowly moving toward downtown.

McGregor drove the Humvee, slamming the wheel in frustration more than once at the stop and go traffic. "This is ridiculous! How do they live like this?"

"You really shouldn't allow your emotions to rule you." Laieth said stoically as he played with the touch screen television popping up from dash. He flipped through the channels finding music. He found a song he liked

and turned up the volume. Bach's second overture filled the SUV. Laieth sat back into the large leather bucket seat, settling his head against rest.

McGregor glanced several times at Laieth before speaking. "You like this music?"

"It is put together well."

"So you like it? You enjoy it?"

Laieth's expression didn't change, but he thought about the question. "I enjoy the structure."

"Enjoy the structure? What the hell is that? Enjoy the structure."

Laieth's eyes moved to McGregor, but his head remained motionless. "When you're perfect you'll understand."

McGregor shook his head and mumbled to himself. "Maybe that nut case is right about no soul."

The slow near stagnant flow of steel finally brought the black vehicle down the ravine and onto the off ramp leading up to Dodger stadium. The puerile downtown high-rises poked through the smog in the distance.

McGregor put the pedal to the medal, feeling the need for speed after the long journey of forced restraint. The powerful engine drove the H2 upward toward the entrance gates. The tires squealed slightly around the tighter corners. "We need to find the portals from inside the stadium complex, from there we should be able to track our equipment on the hillside and reach it through the portals if needed. Could get ugly if the Greys try to stop us."

Laieth stared up at the archaic stadium they drove toward. "What ever you say, Sargent."

Downs - Space Janitor
- 144 -

Chapter Ten

The Fate Effect VS The Butterfly Effect. Scientist's who speculate on the possibilities of time travel wrestle with the ramifications on history if such a feat were possible. Those holding to the extreme view of the Fate Effect believe time can not be changed, for it is not only permanent in its history, but also in its future. These hold that an all-powerful force--God--directs its path. Other theologians surmise that the fact that humans have free will, allows for a world where the future is pliable at least within God's will, God manipulates circumstances so that his divine will is accomplished, albeit through infinite possible situations.

Those holding to The Butterfly Effect are usually atheists or at a minimum theists who believe every action has the potential to change the future, so that, as the name implies, if a butterfly beats it's wings in China, a thunder storm could be the effect in North America. Traveling through time and changing it, is really the only way to test the theory. Even then the results would be subject to severe differences in opinion depending on world-view. After all, God may have foreordained any changes in history resulting in a changed future.

ASSASSIN

Dodger Stadium loomed large. The mountains rose high behind it, its electronic billboard advertising the inter-league game against the Yankees and the first pitch thrown by the United States leader, President Blake.

McGregor handed the parking attendant twenty dollars and pulled in, driving to the farthest lot, near the mountains and over grown foliage. "We know where the assassin is set up. We take him out, and we're done."

"And if your friend is the assassin?"

"We do what we have to do."

The SUV pulled into the isolated spot. The two men stashed miniature but powerful lasers into secret pockets and walked up the steps to the stadium entrance. The egg shaped stadium opened up above them, the gigantic electronic billboard spewing out commercials toward the growing crowd taking their seats, it's back the canvass for the gigantic blue letters reading *Dodger Stadium*, which faced the rolling hills the stadium was nestled in.

The two men made their way without event to the ticket counter, through the turnstiles and easily passed through the metal detectors. Popcorn, dodger-dogs, nachos and hops put forth an aroma that titillated the senses. Even Laieth seemed to inhale the atmosphere with glee. Men, women and children walked lightly in this place of communal joy. Blue championship pennants flew proudly and children looked excitedly down to the field as they followed moms and dads to their seats.

McGregor and Laieth made their way through the busy hall of the upper decks. Working through the peaceful faces of those lucky enough to escape the stresses of life--if only for a Friday afternoon--with Americas past time.

The peanut guy jabbered as he tossed peanut bags with acute accuracy, the would-be quarterback completed lobs, line drives, and soft touch passes

across the deck to appreciative fans, occasionally becoming Magic Johnson and delivering a behind the back pass with roars of approval. His stack of cash grew quickly but his orange quaff of synthetic hair didn't flinch. McGregor watched with admiration as he made room for the elderly man to pass.

"Thanks, son." The peanut man said with a wink and a grin.

They made their way to the highest seat in the house, full view of the entire upper grandstands. People quickly took their seats as the Mayor walked behind the podium just above the catcher's mound. He was prepared to introduce the President.

Laieth peered down and left, two floors below, to a crowded section that curved out from below them in easy view.

The last four seats of the first row of the deck extended just past the cement tower. All the rows above the first lost those four seats due to the cement structure. The vertical drop from the first row and the wall gave the seats some isolation from view. If any action were to happen on the field--such as the President speaking--no eye line would be aimed at the four seats. But Laieth and McGregor were in perfect position to view it easily.

Laieth watched the extended section and the people sitting there. "The shot came from the last seat. When we see him, we should hit him, and the three others in that short extension. If we're lucky, nobody will be the wiser, just a couple of drunks slouched in their seats."

"You speak easily of taking a persons life."

Laieth looked at McGregor scornfully. "Life is nothing." He pulled the pencil-sized laser from his boot, screwing one end into his watch. The

laser's point barely extended half way across his palm. McGregor did the same.

"This all seems too easy. No Greys. No Beasts. No Quinn. This is it, we stop this guy, we win."

"Could they try to change something else?" Laieth asked as he scanned the room."

"This is the window in time. Lloyd was certain that this was the catalyst, not all things can be changed. If it is going to change, it will be now."

"There he is. See the bulge in his jacket. I recognize him."

The President was speaking on the healing power of baseball and it's wonderful symbolism in facing the challenges of life, he stood tall, dark suit impeccable.

McGregor raised his laser with Laieth. A subtle movement, a bending of the elbow, an opening of the palm and their target was seconds from death. "On three. We take him out only, both on him--not the others. Understand?"

An affirmative nod from Laieth.

"One, two, three." With deathly silence the dual laser beams pierced air then flesh in the same instant. The bearded assassin died instantly slumping slightly in his seat, as did the two men and one woman near him, the only three people close enough to notice the dead man. All had centimeter sized holes in their heart.

McGregor looked at Laieth in fierce anger. "That was an order, you son of a bitch."

"The security of the mission takes priority." He said without emotion.

McGregor shook his head, first in disgust then slow recognition of his lack of change. "Either the fate effect is validated or that wasn't what needed changing. I'm the same. I can feel it. I'm still...not pure."

Laieth smiled, then frowned. "Now what?"

McGregor's mind raced. Searching his knowledge, finding the pieces, then putting them together. "They're going to kill Lloyd."

"What?"

"Lloyd calculated the time for a change in history, he couldn't know the full ramifications or even the exact thing that could be changed. This seemed the most obvious, but...if Lloyd's dead, then humanity may never come up with the genetic mastery to create pure-gens. Even if someone looked at the disks, their gibberish to anyone but him."

Fine ebony features scowled. "Back to the portals, we have to get to Lloyd."

Blending in with the masses of humanity that communed in the concourses high above the field, the two men began moving to the portal. "According to the map there should be one up here." They moved quickly through the crowds. "That explains why the Greys are not all over us. They must be waiting for Quinn, if he succeeds their jobs done for them."

"And if Quinn fails?"

"The hordes of hell will finish the job."

Laieth shook his head in frustration. "Why do the non-gens resist this movement? What does Quinn hope to achieve by keeping you people inferior?"

It was not a question McGregor had not pondered over since learning of the man's beliefs. "He believes the Greys can't use you, can't use pure-gens...because you don't have a soul."

Laieth pondered momentarily then laughed. "He's correct, because none of us have souls, fool. He's a superstitious fanatic believing in ancient myths."

Anger and defiance rose in McGregor but he said nothing. Why should the statement bother him? He had said as much himself. He fought to keep the emotion from his voice. "He believes that by changing history--if it can be changed at all--and creating a world of pure-gens, we will defeat the Greys, but humanity will lose what separates it from the animals. He believes the uniqueness of our weaknesses is what makes us special, our uniqueness allowed to us from a Supreme Being. If we try to perfect ourselves, we kid ourselves and die." McGregor couldn't help but be persuaded by his own words. Suddenly the wall gave way beneath McGregor's fingers. He stopped, casually turning to view the crowds as they passed, pulling back Laieth and whispering. "Here."

Laieth quickly moved to stand next to McGregor. "Find Quinn and kill him before he gets to Lloyd."

"And the Greys."

"And the Greys."

The two stepped through the portal and into the branes. The brane path moved straight through the center of the stadium but split off in several directions. The throngs of people blurred about them as they moved toward the speaker rooms behind the stage before stopping. McGregor pulled out

the digital map. McGregor pointed to a lower path. "Take that one. Cover as much area as you can, but if the Greys attack, find me."

Laieth respected the command from a superior and moved down the corridor without speaking. McGregor watched him depart then ran in the opposite direction in search of Quinn.

His mind raced as he moved through the dimensional corridors, he hoped to find Quinn first. As he scrambled through the brane burrow, he trained his senses to see the world he maneuvered through. Like a ghost, he passed through baseball fans. At one point the tunnel lead him across the field, he couldn't help but appreciate the play made on first. He forced himself to the task at hand--finding the proverbial needle in a haystack. He knew Lloyd was at this game, he knew the President's assassin was dead. He didn't know where Quinn was. He decided to wait near Lloyd when he saw--or rather felt--Quinn behind him. He turned; sword already parrying for the attack which didn't come.

Quinn's sabers remained sheathed. "I hope it doesn't come to that."

McGregor knew he couldn't afford Quinn to delay him or gain the advantage, so he didn't wait. His blade sliced through the air, turning at the last minute so the flat part of the blade would connect with Quinn's skull.

Not that it mattered, Quinn performed a leaping somersault and the blade barely glanced off his legs as he rolled, coming up with both sabers drawn. McGregor showed no quarter and charged, sparks flew as the two sabers clashed against the larger but avidly handled broadsword. The sabers formed a V to block a powerful down stroke. Quinn buckled under the

attack, but his swords held before slicing outward in a seeming indefensible attack from both sides.

McGregor leaped forward, surprising Quinn, head butting him backwards. Two blades drew a bloody X across McGregor's back as Quinn drew the blades downward from the embrace he had just released. McGregor let out a battle cry of anger and pain as the two men tumbled together reigning down blow after blow upon each other but neither wishing to use lethal force.

Quinn sprang away from McGregor then renewed the attack. The blades danced as the two men side-stepped, slashed, parried and jabbed at one another. McGregor quickly realized that Quinn was stalling him.

McGregor kept his sword drawn. "I'm not letting you kill Lloyd."

Quinn smiled. "A sad event yes, but one he himself ordained."

Confusion swept over McGregor.

"Yes, your friend knows that this is the only way. He finally came to realize his goal of perfecting humanity was askew and his works could only destroy what he had hoped to save. He came to me with the seeds of the plan, now it is time for it to come to fruition."

"Who!? Do you let the Greys to do your dirty work for you?"

"No my friend. Their silence is strange, but in this you are right. Our goals are intertwined...for now; soon their time will come for defeat. But I can not rely on them to finish this job."

McGregor's eyes went wide. "Savanah." He didn't need to wait for confirmation, he knew then. "You fool. Laieth will find her...and she'll die. Whether she succeeds or not."

So taken with his battle with McGregor, Quinn had failed to account for Laieth. He didn't have time to speak again, only to follow McGregor who bolted down the corridors toward the center of Dodger stadium.



Savanah sat within her brane, watching the man she must kill to save humanity. Lloyd watched intently as the batter took the plate. The hitter faced off with the pitcher in a duel that would stand the test of time. His hand clutched the air as the first pitch sped into glove untouched. Strike one. Savanah raised her rifle, aiming at Lloyd's temple.

From behind Savanah, Laieth stalked quietly through the brane, he was on the far side of the park, but within the brane he had a clear shot. He watched the girl release the safety on her rifle. He smiled and raised his laser.

Savanah took in a deep breath, exhaling through her nose, relaxing her muscles. She was completely unaware of the red point of death that appeared on her chest.

Laieth adjusted his aim and the red dot hovered over the exposed supple flesh in the center of her breasts before it glided over her heart.

McGregor watched as he moved, the color drained from his face as he realized the truth, he was helpless from his position; he wouldn't make it.

Savanah's finger tightened on her trigger, Lloyd's temple in the center of her scope. He sat back, momentarily taking away the shot.

Laieth's thumb moved to the button to fire.

McGregor's mouth opened to scream, but before the cry formed he saw the laser jerk--the dragon appeared out of nothingness and head butted Laieth's weapon to the side. The laser fired into the brane. Laieth roared and lightning reflexes were enough to snag the circling Bruce by the tail. He tossed the dragon viscously into the wall where he fell lifelessly to the ground.

"No!" McGregor hadn't stopped moving and had closed the distance; he slammed into Laieth with his full force, sending the two sprawling across the floor.

Laieth came up quickly, tossing McGregor aside like a rag doll. "What the hell are you doing? She'll kill him." A black blaster-pistol flashed into his hand and he unleashed it on McGregor and the now approaching Quinn. McGregor's blade blurred, deflecting shots but flesh sizzled with a sickening sound and smell as he took a hit across his shoulder. His sword dropped and he fell to his knees in pain. Laieth's blaster darted forward and down pointed at McGregor's face.

Blue energy burst from the floor and seared into Laieth's eyes. The dragon hobbled as a brane enabled blast streamed from his gaped jaws.

Quinn twirled his blades and unleashed his own assault of cosmic power across the short distance to Laieth. The simultaneous attack was too much and Laieth reeled back in pain.

Quinn was on him in a flash and the two battled, their fight moving them away from McGregor, and down through the branes.

Laieth shouted to McGregor. "Do it! Humanities fate rests on it. Do what you have to do. You'll be perfect, man. You'll be everything you wanted to be. Fire the shot!"

Quinn looked back but couldn't spare more than a glance as he fought for his life against Laieth who was now taking the offensive.

Without warning screams erupted about them stopping all three men in their tracks.

From deep within the Earth and from the depths of time and space they came. Silent screams beckoned them forth to feed. Greys stood at the portals overlooking Los Angeles, waiting for the hordes to arrive. The Greys had waited long enough; it was time to risk the exposure for what they were to mankind in order to keep their drug. If they had to take it with a fight, they would, their addiction now demanded it. What was once a joy, was now their doom--they would not accept defeat. They would not allow their narcotic to be stolen from them. They took fate into their own hands and unleashed their full power to destroy Loyd. The hills surrounding Dodger stadium opened up the gates of hell.

Like bees with hive and Queen threatened they emerged from the hillside portals.

A gigantic monitor high above the seats over left field showed a smiling little boy, his eyes went wide with terror as he saw the shapes pouring down the hills behind the giant screen. The cries erupted as the beasts neared the stadium at frightening speed.

McGregor raced to the portal, "We have to fight them in here, we can't let any more through. He glanced to where Savannah sat; she no longer had a

clear shot at Lloyd who scrambled away. "We need to work together, cut them off at the pass."

Momentarily united in the desire to defeat a common foe, and seeing that Lloyd would need to be handled later, Quinn agreed and followed McGregor and Laieth to the portal in which the Beasts materialized. We have to drive them back, attack the Greys if you see them, it will draw the beasts back and I can scramble the portal!"

The three men reached the apex of the attack, diving in with swords and blasters flashing cobalt.

The number was staggering, causing even Quinn to gasp in disbelief.

Unfazed, Laieth began taking out the beasts as they spewed forth, both hands ushering forth rays of death. The dragon darted amidst the rampaging beasts, blasts of energy crippling one after the other with shots to hamstring and tendons. McGregor stumbled with the onslaught of evil, his soul wrenched. Quinn felt it and shouted out encouragement. "Don't squash it man, absorb it, set it free."

McGregor's sword cut an arc through the air taking out several beasts, but only those near enough to meet with cold steel fell. No extension of his power poured forth. He felt the pain of his betrayal by his parents and the insecurities that had been emblazoned into his soul. The doors to his subconscious agony he once held tightly closed burst open at a frightening pace; synapses dammed shut burst free to the flow of his mind. He reached for his chest, his body responding to the pent anxiousness being released. He screamed out, hating the feelings of weakness he felt. I'm whole who I am! It wasn't my fault, he thought. Then he yelled without care. "Without

fear!" He unleashed another arc, swinging his blade wide. A swath of blue blazoned in a circle about him cutting through the beasts and several Greys in the rear. "Without shame!" Another arc of death took down beasts.

Outside the beasts that reaped carnage amidst fleeing and helpless fans roared in anger as they were called back by their assailed pack. They turned in their tracks, bolting for the branes.

Suddenly Quinn, Laieth and McGregor were surrounded as branebeasts began to storm through the portals behind them.

But it was too late. McGregor had freed his mind from the bondage of his past and wielded his sword with deadly accuracy. Quinn sliced and diced through the beasts like a hot knife through butter and Laieth--despite his lack of the cosmic power Quinn and McGregor harnessed--was a deadly warrior.

The tide turned and McGregor and Quinn pursued the Greys, neither noticing Laieth as he slipped away, still intent on completing the mission.

Beasts lay about in crumbled heaps. The dozen Greys that controlled them looked like porcelain carvings in the stillness of death. Any that survived had fled.

As the frenzy of battle waned McGregor looked about. Laieth was gone. "Laieth?" He bolted off toward the portal and into the stadium, Quinn on his heels.

Quinn followed McGregor from the portal and immediately fell to his knees shaking. He fought his body but could not win the battle. Placing his trembling hands on his knees he forced himself up. He painstakingly jogged after McGregor. The dragon found the strength to make it onto McGregor's shoulder.



Savanah wormed her way through the throng of people who still attempted to escape the stadium. Her eyes frantically searched the crowd for Lloyd, who she had just seen. She finally caught a glimpse of him as he crowded into a stairwell. She forced her way after him, and followed as fast as she could up the stairs.

McGregor raced down the highest stadium corridor, searching for Laieth or Savanah, hoping he wasn't too late. Looking over the edge to the lower levels, he spotted Laieth. The large man leaned casually against the railing, following something with his eyes. Savanah walked slowly, trailing Lloyd, waiting for an opportunity to fulfill her mission.

Above, Laieth raised the palm of his hand extending it forward pointed at Savanah. McGregor was too late, but he went for his own laser, knowing he'd never make it as Laieth's middle finger moved back to push the button which would bring death to Savanah.

A violently shaking Quinn appeared from thin air from an unknown portal, grabbing Laieth and dragging him back through the portal he'd appeared from.

Suddenly McGregor was alone to do what he had to do. He looked to Savanah across from him. Tears filled her eyes as she aimed at Lloyd. McGregor raised a lethal dart, no time to question what he knew he had to do. He dropped the dart to his side quickly, squeezing a few small drops from its tip, then placed into a chamber on his gun, no time to think.

He fired, shocked at what he had just done.

Savannah's eyes went wide. She stood confused as Lloyd slumped forward, falling lifelessly to the hard cold cement floor. She looked at her gun. It hadn't fired.

McGregor's eyes flooded with tears he no longer feared shedding. "I couldn't let you do it." He leapt over the balcony into the near empty lower decks. He sprang forward toward Lloyd who was no longer breathing.

Savannah ran to him, meeting him at Lloyd's body. "What are you doing? He's dead."

"I have an antidote."

Savannah moved to stop him, he pushed her away. "I can't let him die."

"But he wanted it. He said he'd never change from his course, no matter what we told him."

"We have no choice! We have to try." McGregor jabbed a needle into Lloyd's neck, injecting the serum into the purple lifeline running down the side of his neck.

The two sat silently, waiting.

After seeming an eternity, Lloyd's lungs expanded and he gasped for air. For several moments he fought for breath before stabilizing.

Savannah sat back, giving up hope. "He already has the data, he'll create a world of Genmen."

"We don't know that. We can try to convince him. And like you said, it was his plan, I have to think he planted a message to himself in the data, just in case. After that we let fate decide.

Lloyd sat up, looking at his two would be assassins.

McGregor firmly gripped his shoulder. I told you that you sent us back to give you the discs, remember.

Lloyd nodded.

"Well it seems you also sent another back to murder you." McGregor motioned toward Savannah.

Lloyd shifted away from her. "Why?"

Savannah spoke softly. "You said you'd never deflect from your science for something as esoteric as saving a man's soul."

He looked puzzled. "I was right."

Savannah's eyes narrowed.

McGregor spoke quickly. "Listen to me. Your genetic discoveries can bring great good, but mankind must not be created from them. Or they lose something. Call it what you will, soul, conscious, whatever; but do not perfect humanity, or you will destroy it." McGregor peered deep into the eyes of Lloyd then stood up, "Look to the files, they should convince you now. And if not, maybe this near death experience will." He grabbed Savannah. "It's time to go back...see the new future."

They left Lloyd standing in shock as they ran toward the brane portal.

Chapter Eleven

If we change everything about our lives, hoping for better results, but nothing changes about who we are, our efforts are fruitless, but if we change who we are, then everything in our lives will change for the better.

21st century Philosopher

EVERYTHING...AND NOTHING

The city sat flawlessly reflecting the afternoon sun. Far below the streets shown as bright, the pleasantly wide spaces and colorful fresh paint reflecting the light of the sun perfectly.

McGregor and Savannah appeared in the alley below a sparkling city above. The same alley Quinn had pulled McGregor into.

It was a different place.

The once grungy dark street was now as clean as the upper reaches of the city. And sunlight shone on the people who meandered through the streets. There was a sense of joy about the folk as they went about their routines. Once the domain of castoffs and non-gens, the lower reaches now looked to be prosperous.

McGregor scanned his body, clinching his fists, stretching his limbs, knowing every imperfect joint and muscle. "He listened to us. You win."

Savanna's smile curled down as she saw the longing look in McGregor's eyes. "We all win." She put a soft hand to his coarse beard, turning him to face her. "You're perfect to me."

Nobodies perfect. But you're perfectly normal. The dragon flicked a smooth tongue at his ear.

McGregor placed his hand behind the dragon's wings, scratching its back. *Why didn't you tell me you could go into the branes?*

You didn't ask.

He thought deeply of all the different realities that may or may not have played out because of their tampering with time, had fate still kept its path?

One question was answered as a street sweeper swooshed by the alleyway--two cleptos' scurried about the vessel, hovering just above the ground, searching for valuable junk. "So Lloyd kept at his work? He just didn't perfect humanity?" He frowned. "So we still have the Greys to deal with? " He shook his head, "Nothing's changed."

"Everything's changed. Mankind is still human. Look around you. You can see it. Lloyd did it, he changed the way the world thinks." She smiled. "And we're still here...together."

He turned to meet Savanna's sparkling eyes and kissed her.

She kissed him hard. He shuttered.

He forced himself to pull away. He looked into those eyes--those deep emerald eyes--he kissed her again, and this time he took his time.

Finally he pulled away and stood, helping her to her feet. He walked to the end of the alleyway, looking down to the familiar cathedral with

circular ring spiraling into its center, the tall hooded priest stood stoically on its marble steps awaiting customers. An elderly woman made her way up the steps, and the Grey ushered her in. McGregor whispered again. "We still have the Greys to deal with?"

Savanah scowled but hope filled her eyes. "But at least we have something worth fighting for...souls."

McGregor turned to her. "I have to go." He kissed her again. Then walked back into the alley. "The Greys still rule. If I don't come back...continue the fight." He continued to the shadowed wall then turned back pulling Mjilnor from its sheath. The blade glistened in the bright alley. "Dinner?"

Savanna's fear filled eyes twinkled with hope. "What?"

"When I get back, I'm taking you to dinner."

She smiled. "What are you going to do?"

Her smile made him indestructible, and he winked, "We're going to get Quinn." The Space Janitor and the Dragon leapt through the portal.



Quinn and Laieth battled their way through the timeless branes. Deeper and deeper they went into the earth's interior, battling through surreal tunnels formed of translucent membranes, which spiraled through stone and cavernous regions. They stumbled beyond fatigue into a massive expanse of a cave, their brane channel suddenly stopping, dumping them through a

portal high above the hardened lava floor. They fell painfully in crumbled heaps; gasps of agony sprang from their lips as they hit the floor.

Both men lay still momentarily before pulling themselves to their feet to face off. Any motivation to fight had left them. Molten lava flowed at a snails pace to the far side of the cavern providing dim light and warming the damp chamber.

Quinn's swords dangled from his shaking hands, supported mostly by the smooth marble like floor where the tips of the blades rested. He watched cautiously as Laieth braced himself with both hands on his knees.

Laieth wept.

It was not the fall alone that had shaken him to the core. The departure from the timeless brane transformed him as he entered the time space continuum that had so recently been tampered with. Tears flowed down ebony skin; life, true life flowed through his veins. He was no longer a pure-gen, a soulless creature, a robot with living cells instead of wires--he was now human. He could feel it as a lifetime of pain, fear, and love engulfed and fulfilled his memories.

He knew now why the Greys fought so hard for the taking of a human's soul. It was where life truly lay.

Quinn was not ignorant to the transformation. He had predicted it. He continued his silence, allowing the man to adjust to his new awareness.

The giant groaned. It was a groan of painful pleasure, like stretching hard worked muscles that hurt when pulled but felt better for the effort. He straightened, breathing deep, rejoicing in his every cell that now worked brilliantly imperfectly. "I'm tired."

Quinn laughed. "A sure sign you're now fully human."

"I never knew."

"You couldn't."

Laieth looked about the stalagmite and stalactite filled chamber, it was beautiful and he couldn't stop the tears.

His moment was brief though as the upper regions and the walls about them began to shimmer with light. The two men looked about them with fear. Suddenly, from above, out of the same brane-end that they had fallen appeared Bruce, soaring out across the chamber, wings aptly angling the dragon down through the magnificent chamber. McGregor followed with much less grace, tumbling to the hard floor, manipulating his body and tucking his shoulder to soften the blow, rolling to come up with a cry of pain and a yell. "Here they come!"

The walls sprang alive with the movement of death's messengers. The black beasts spread across the chambers walls and ceiling sticking supernaturally to the surface as they quickly blanketed the rock with their numbers.

The dragon hissed.

McGregor looked to Laieth, then Quinn. "What happened?"

Quinn smiled. "We have a new brother."

Laieth smiled. A twinkle never before present darted across his golden eyes as he went for his blaster.

"Wait." Quinn said as he drew his blades.

McGregor's sword stayed between himself and Laieth, his eyes widening with the hordes of Beast's that now surrounded them. They widened farther with Quinn's next action.

Quinn twirled his blades with frantically shaking hands. He closed his eyes, voiced the words, "Still me Mighty One." And opened them to watch as his trembling hands stilled. He sent out a blast with one of his katanas. Several beasts fizzled and cracked with the smell of burning flesh and they fell from the wall. The arena erupted in deafening shrieks and roars, sinewy haunches bunched up for the attack.

Quinn tossed the saber to Laieth who snagged it from the air by its hilt.

Laieth smiled at the swarm of beasts about them, effortlessly twirling the sleek weapon before slicing air.

Quinn grinned wide.

McGregor scowled at the two madmen. "You two are nuts."

The dragon roared.

In a frenzied stampede putting past attacks to shame, the beasts were upon them.

Quinn laughed maniacally, shouting out as they came. "They try to end us now, for they know we have the power."

Battle growls turned to yells as McGregor and Laieth formed a triangle with Quinn, covering each other's back. The dragon's wings flapped, effortlessly rotating him in a hovering position just above the three warrior's heads, snout extended upwards, taking aim.

The demonic horde charged from everywhere but below, the four held their position until it seemed they would be engulfed with the tidal wave of death.

"Let it flow my brothers, let it flow!" Quinn's cry pierced the uproar of the beasts: and men and dragon unleashed their attack. Blinding white light burst from them in a sphere of destruction. The dragon's mouth opened wide, unleashing a blast straight up vaporizing a dozen beasts. Quinn had pulled a small dagger to compliment his now lone katana, and they twirled, sending out a blast that knocked every ground level beast on his side backwards in a tangle of leathery limbs.

McGregor lunged in, at once decapitating a wolf like head, and then slamming the hammer shaped handle down upon another, crushing it. He sliced through the air in a great arcing swing of his large blade, cutting a swath through the din the old fashioned way--cold steel rending cartilage and bone--before continuing the arc of his sword upward then down; the point halted mid downswing, protruding out with force, and sending out a flow of energy that reaped devastating results. The aroma of singed flesh filled the room as did the cries of the dying beasts that once stood in the flood's path.

Laieth's eyes, still filled with the joy of life, felt the fear of death for the first time. His every sense seemed heightened and he needed no prompt to understand the power of his soul in this dimension--he unleashed his powerful feelings through the conduit of his blade and the first wave of the attack was defeated. The remaining forces scrambled back into nooks and crannies leaving the cavern empty...for a moment.

The beasts attacked again, their numbers seemingly back to full strength as a plethora of the creatures poured through the tunnel above. Again McGregor and his forces held off the assault. But this time several strikes made it through, slashing and rending at flesh. This continued until the three men waded in carnage up to their knees, their own blood mixing in with the tar like fluid pouring from the fallen brane-beasts.

They held strong but couldn't keep up their defenses forever. Fatigue was setting in and more and more a beast was breaking through to do damage. The dragon had settled atop McGregor's broad shoulder, picking off the beasts one by one. Too often it was cold steel and not a powerful blast that took out the oncoming monsters.

"We're losing! How many more of these things are there?"

"One third of a countless number." Quinn quipped.

"Then we are doomed."

"All things are possible to those who believe. Do you believe Janitor?"

The dragon's thoughts penetrated McGregor's mind. *You do my friend. I know you do, as do I...*

Yes. "Yes. I believe!" He shouted it out, letting the words accompany an epic blast from his broad sword. The others followed suit, but the onslaught continued engulfing them with their mass...

A cry rang out from beneath the bodies, clear as a dinner bell across the empty plains at dusk. "Unchanging One, hear us now!"

McGregor couldn't be sure if he imagined it, but seemingly the hordes paused in their attack. Suddenly the earth began to shake, and the once still chamber began to blow with a chilled wind. The beasts shrieked as if

attacked by invisible daggers. They retreated, as fast as they had come and soon the chamber was empty, the wind stilled and left the expanse in silence.

McGregor looked about, chills still running his spine. "What the hell just happened?"

All eyes darted toward him with anger. *Very bad use of words.*

"Sorry. What happened?"

Quinn looked up, raising his palms. "We were rescued from death."

The three men stood motionless, eyes darting about the cavern walls, not daring to hope that they might have been victorious.

The reprieve was short. The cavern began to shake with the approaching of either an earthquake or some massive creature--it wasn't an earthquake. Rushing air began to swoosh out of the tunnel above them, as if the brane-pipes were being purged by a gigantic plunger--or...a snake.

The almond shaped head burst through the end of the tunnel, rising in the air as its neck formed a S below it. The large head split into six smaller heads, which rested upon six serpentine necks, and the remaining--seemingly endless--body of the snake coiled out, wrapping around the edges of the high ceiling and walls. The three men watched in shock and awe as the slithering body mutated into six appendages that supported the creature's midsection, powerful tail still whipping about. The massive monstrosity clung to the surface of the cavern with four legs, clawed feet finding crags to grip. Two other appendages slashed outwards toward the men, joining the venom dripping fangs protruding from heads that danced about, eyes peering at the prey in anticipation. Whether all the heads worked independently of one another or were all controlled by a single

master was difficult to tell. Each pair of eyes seemed to glimmer with an individually unique passion for evil, but they all worked in tandem as they searched for the weaknesses of their targets.

McGregor glanced at Quinn. "Where in the hell are we?"

Quinn nodded his head in the affirmative. "Exactly."

The creature slowly made its way around the cavern, circling them from above. The four warriors held their ground, eyes darting to follow the rapid movement of the spider/snake. The already massive creature seemed to grow as its movements increased in speed. The four found themselves circling in a more rapid pace, hypnotized into a robotic dance.

Quinn ran through fields of corn, a younger sibling trailed close behind. The boys were laughing as they ran, springing through the tall green corn, leaping up to brush their hands across the yellow fans that reached for the clear blue sky and the large yellow ball of life that floated there. He was happy. He shouted back to the long haired boy, "Come on little brother, faster, we can run faster..."

Laieth leapt from the brick wall, seeing the truck just in time. He adjusted his leap and escaped danger, continuing his run down the paved walk. He looked down to his wonderfully natural legs that propelled him...

She was of the most splendid emerald he'd ever seen; her eyes sparkling like fire, her wings like velvet, he purred before moving in closer. His tongue licked out in anticipation...

A six year old C.T. McGregor sat eating his cereal, his mother looked to him, seeing the concern in his eyes. She quickly went to his side, ruffling his long hair and kissing his forehead. "My little angel, you will always be

our first son. Your little brother will be special, and we'll love him, but never more than you...

McGregor blinked, shaking off the fog. *My friend?*

There was a momentary silence before Bruce answered. *Huh? Leave me alone.*

Snap out of it, its transfixing us with it's movement. Almost simultaneous to his speaking the words, the Sergeant replaced the boy and McGregor shouted out an order. "Stand fast! Hold your position!" Laieth and Quinn nearly fell as their bodies were slow to respond. But they shook their heads free of the webs of deceit that had telepathically poured through their minds.

The spider sprang.

In a maelstrom the four met the onslaught of fangs, claws and tail. The spider's web had done its job and all were caught off guard. As the dragon sprang to avoid an attack, it only succeeded in running into an outstretched claw, which grasped it by the neck. The dragon unleashed a fiery explosion toward the face of the beast to no avail. The claw tightened, attempting to crush the life from Bruce. But McGregor leapt to the rescue of his comrade and skewered the arm of the beast just below it's grotesque hand. The claw released the dragon who gathered himself mid-air before hitting the floor and took flight, dodging the snake's tail as he tried to maneuver closer to its eyes.

The appendage that still held McGregor's blade jerked upwards, dragging the Space Janitor with it. At the same moment a serpentine like head darted outwards toward his exposed head. He went for his blaster but it

was too late. Just as the fangs reached for his skull, three blasts rocked the entity backwards. McGregor jerked free his sword and fell to the ground. Meanwhile, Laieth continued to unload his blaster, following the head as it flailed through the air trying to avoid the blasts of the gun. Laieth held the pistol in his left hand while wielding the katana with his right, slicing and dicing at whatever moved.

"Thanks." C.T. said as he sprang forward somersaulting across the cavern beneath the belly of the beast.

"Don't mention it." Laieth responded, his weapons wreaking havoc on the beast.

McGregor pointed his sword upwards and unleashed a cosmic explosion into the beast. The impact of the hit drew the beings appendages inward and it fell toward McGregor. The dragon continued to pepper the snake as it fell, aiming for one of the twelve eyes as he darted about, avoiding snaps and grabs.

McGregor leapt, diving from beneath the monster as it landed.

Quinn pounced upon the arachnid, his blade glowed as he drove the tips into the back of the thing over and over again. Two claws reached upwards to grasp him by the legs. They wrenched him off and hurled him across the room. McGregor went to slice at the limbs, but was slammed into the far wall with the creature's trunk of a tail. Laieth retreated as four heads darted in and out of his defenses, drawing lines of blood across his body. Only Bruce the Dragon stayed on the offensive, finding his flow, and seemingly effortlessly avoiding strikes while striking blow after blow at the monstrosities eyes.

With the morph creature momentarily distracted by the attack of the dragon, Quinn made his way to McGregor's side. Laieth scrambled over to join them.

McGregor spoke quickly. "We need a plan." He looked to them both.

"Crush its freaking head." Quinn growled.

"There's six of them." McGregor said exasperatingly.

Laieth growled. "We don't have much time, the little guys, doing a great job distracting it, but it's not taking much damage, and he's tiring."

McGregor saw his friend; a gnat compared to the grotesque hunk of mutated flesh it fought. "Decapitate it; one head at a time. Quinn, use your quickness to dart in, aim for the throat, just behind the skull. I'll follow, and attempt to hit the same mark. Laieth, you do the same, cover each other along the way. The way this thing is mutating, I have a feeling we'll see it's true form before it's over, when that happens, we attack at once, to the neck, no matter what the cost."

Laieth barked. "Yes, sir."

Quinn quipped. "Use my speed, huh?" He laughed. "Then I guess I'm first." He didn't wait, screaming with a dangerous glee as he leapt up; sprinting toward a wall where one of the heads hovered, his muscled thighs propelled him upward to where he sprang off a tiny niche in the rock, twirling his blade as he jumped out toward the head. He sent a blast of energy into the snout, driving the head back, then he swept his razor sharp blade across the exposed throat. The creature's body recoiled at the pain and brought all it's resources to bear on Quinn. But McGregor and Laieth followed Quinn's attack, and defended him against the onslaught of

appendages until their blades met their mark. Laieth's final stroke sent the head rolling to the floor. The neck that held it flailed about before being absorbed into the creature. One by one the three men attacked as a unit, defending one another and attacking the vulnerable throats. Soon one head remained and the creature reeled away, attempting to recover in the upper reaches of the cave. But Bruce the Dragon showed no mercy and pursued it, giving it no rest. The three men sent blow after blow at the panicking creature. Desperately, in a final attempt, it charged them, bolting down from the ceiling in a suicide dive.

The three men held, and as one sent a blast of energy into the face of the snake. For seemingly an eternity the beast absorbed their combined ballista sent by the three men. It roared, sending back a fury of energy from its grotesque mouth. The earth shook with the magnitude of the power struggle. A fanged snout grimaced and faces contorted with the energy pouring from their being, but Bruce, McGregor, Quinn, and Laieth held. Finally, the devil reeled away, morphing into grotesque shapes as it released a hellish wail and escaped through the brane above.

The three men stood motionless, exhausted, not daring to believe the battle was over. Floating down from above, barely able to maintain flight, the dragon landed with a thump on McGregor's shoulder. All eyes remained on the portal above; not daring to believe it was over.

Laieth slumped forward, grasping his bloodied side. He went to his knees, then fell to his side.

McGregor went to his side, rolling him to his back, quickly taking account of the injury. It was bad. His shirt was shredded and his entire

upper rib cage was exposed just below the heart. Blood oozed from the gaping wound. It was a miracle that the man had had the strength to fight. His eyes peered up at McGregor. "I'm sorry." He gasped for air. "The first time in...everything...I'm sorry."

"Forgiven my friend. I too wronged you. You'll be alright; I'll get you to Lloyd."

The ivory eyes glistened; the perfect golden pools resting in them were bright with life. "No. It is over. He looked to Quinn, "I believe." The once perfect man closed his eyes.

McGregor placed a hand to Laieth's jugular vein, waiting without hope. Finally McGregor whispered. "Let's go home."

Epilogue

At what point do our actions change anything? At the point when they were meant to.

FATE

McGregor slept, and dreamed.

He ran through fields of corn, their fans embracing the warm ball of energy in the sky that energized them to stretch higher. Inhaling deep through the nose, he relished the life that they brought. He raised his hands, brushing them across the mighty stalks; they bent forward with his passing only to spring back, always aiming upwards, to their life force. He smiled, and he lifted his golden face to the sun. He laughed out loud and let his hands raise high into the air, he was free, free of the doubts that had plagued him his entire life, he wasn't genetically altered; he knew that now. He was 100% divinely designed man...

He awoke to a sensual voice--voice that could put a child to sleep or arouse a man. Aaia purred. "It's good to have you back lord."

His ship sailed across space.

"Thanks." He smiled. Perfectly hiding the brief disappointment that the voice was not Savannahs. *Ah' well, soon enough.* He thought. Bruce sat curled on the dash of his ship's control panel. His smile grew. For once in his life as an adult he had someone to go home to. *Savannah.* Again the smile grew. She was safe on planet Earth, a planet of faults but a planet with a humanity that had a future. The Greys would be dealt with another day

when Loyd mastered his brane maps. Already the Greys treaded lighter in their roles as priests. "E.T.A.?"

"Five minutes and counting." The feminine voice replied.

"Beautiful." He turned in his seat, looking at his companion, the dragon. *Wake up, my friend.*

The dragon stretched its leathery wings, arched its back like a cat then flicked a tongue across snout. *What are we doing?*

Some outlaws are wreaking havoc on the peaceful people of the mountainous planet of Telrocknied.

Sounds cold.

Yeah, but if you're going to hang with me, you're going to have to learn to improvise...

The dragon growled...*adapt...*

McGregor reached out his arm to the dragon that landed on his wrist. "And overcome."

Aaia spoke. "Approaching safe landing area, shall I proceed with appropriate procedures?"

McGregor grinned mischievously. "I'll handle it." He reached to the sword Mjlinor hanging above his windshield; he sliced the air, and then drew the blade up near his face. The scabbard across his broad back received the blade with ease; double-holstered gun belt fell into place. He sat, taking control of the ship. A switch was flipped; *Vertigo* blared through the interior and exterior speakers. The dragon snickered as the ship sailed down to the snow covered mountains scattered with orchards of pine and golden fields of aspen. The silver craft banked toward a canyon cutting through the

mountains, it's near end sloping up, fanning out. The deep crevice descended and snaked its way through the mountains. McGregor guided his ship through the maze, banking around corners, tilting his ship sideways to maneuver through too tight spaces--until finally he threw back the control stick, sending his ship vertical, arcing in a large loop through the cotton ball clouds before swooping down to a snow covered meadow in the distance.

The man was at peace. "Let's clean this mess up."

THE END

Appendix

ON CLAIMING MJLINOR

SGT. C.T. McGREGOR opened his eyes to pitch black, a feather-like substance settled gently onto his pupils. He barely noticed. He saw nothing, the foreign flakes absorbed all light but allowed air to flow freely--just as long as he kept lips tight and drew softly through nasal passages.

He lay face-up three feet below the surface. Buried alive, praying his calculations were correct and the sun--his savior--was up. He'd grown used to the stuff that entombed him, having spent two nights embraced by it, but it still sent chills up his spine to open his eyes to a vacuum of light.

He had no choice, the first night on this planet had told him that. He had landed on this strange globular in space by accident. He was heading to Vec 4, Quad C in the Neuriactic solar system on a routine cleanup when his navigational systems went down. Landing on the nearest planet containing fifty-percent atmospheric oxygen to fuel his transformers, he began repairs.

They struck the first night.

§§§

Forty-eight hours earlier he had his first stint beneath the foreign soil. He'd figured to do most of his work after dark that first evening, so had gone worm to nap until the furnace of the surface cooled. He woke himself just before dusk as the hundred and twenty-degree temperatures dropped toward a more comfortable ninety-five and went to work on his ship.

As the distant, golden sphere reached the horizon, he was well on his way to fixing his star tracking system. C.T. McGregor's twenty six year old intelligence was no match for the genetically charged geniuses that were

being spun out over the last decade or so--at least not on paper--but he had to believe the synapses firing in his brain could out think even the newest gen-man's; not to mention the youngster coming up the pike. It was one of the many reasons he was selected to the cleanup squad; a position now dominated by gen-men. Had to be pretty smart to maintain your own 21st century nuclear powered space ship and non-gens didn't have it in them. McGregor had mastery of several hundred languages thanks to the chip implanted in the left hemisphere of his right orb. He was blessed with a 6'2 frame that couldn't put on fat if it had too. At 210 lb. e.g. (earth gravitation), he was strong, agile and quick; a formidable combatant (not to mention his muscular build came in handy for mundane tasks such as hauling 500 lb. fusion bulbs up to the ships mast).

Right now, fusion bulbs were not a concern--it was his tracking system that needed rewired if he were to ever get off this planet. Intergalactic travel using light speed technology got a little hairy with malfunctioning navigational equipment. He'd attempted it as a solar blazing Private, but when--after an evening of fun at *Twelfth Knight Bar & Grill*--he warped out to see his wing embedded in an asteroid, he started playing it safe.

The sun's last crescent of crimson had slipped below the horizon for nary a second when he heard--and felt--them coming.

The subtle whirl could have been the wind but for the tat, tat, tat, that quickly magnified. The buzz elevated exponentially with the passing second. They swarmed from nothingness with the intensity of a chainsaw seeking live timber. Black clouds migrated toward him, the dark oblong

spheres transforming into wedged spears zooming in for the kill. McGregor had seen some dangerous creatures during his stint as a galactanaut and in this first year as Space Janitor--and he was no coward--but these tiny monsters rammed chills up his spine.

Dual blasters unleashed a splattering of energy blasts at the hoard--with the effect of an automatic pea shooter into a swarm of killer bees--little to none. Holstering his pistols, his laser blade appeared in a flash. Billions of high intensity light beams glowed scarlet as they formed into the shape of a sword. Slicing air, he warmed up, leaving a light-trail about his body--he was ready.

The first wave dissipated with a fizzle and a wretched stench as they encountered the twirling laser swung fluidly by muscular Janitor.

"They'll follow their leader and become vaporized arthropods", he thought to himself. Then, smiling, speaking to no one, "Sorta' fun fighting idiotic insects."

As if on cue, the second wave banked skyward, the regimen splitting into five battalions above him, four units swarming outward, circling back toward him: at twelve, three, six, and nine o'clock positions, the fifth battalion reversed direction, heading straight down.

"So much for the idiot insect theory."

The horizontal battalions would reach him first. He didn't have much hope of stopping them all, but he'd sure as heck die with sword swiping and those little sons of mutants frying.

They hit like a maniacal hailstorm. He managed to vaporize the majority with his pirouetting dance, but then the vertical wave hit. The

momentum of the dive bombing bugs carried a half dozen through his twirling blade. They latched on to him with not so tiny talons and teeth, clawing and gnashing through his suit like it was wet toilet paper. His skin gave little more resistance. The RAAAAZZZZZ was deafening.

Best described as gigantic elongated ticks with the extended claws of a scorpion, these winged arachnids transcended any arthropod the Sergeant had encountered. His split second glimpse of one latching onto his left shoulder and opening furry mouth to reveal a barbed, extending, hollowed appendage was all the time he wanted studying this six-inch killjoy.

In a panic, he dove. Rolling. Coming up swinging his blazing blade. Knowing he didn't have a chance.

The roll saved his life. Coming up from the dive, he figured to have crushed some of the man-eating pests, but to his surprise, they melted from him. It didn't take long to make the connection; these things couldn't take the strange soil of their own planet.

As the remaining battalions swarmed in, aiming for soft flesh, C.T. shut down his weapon and hurled dust into the air--the near weightless particles spread, floating like millions of death drops eating through exoskeletons--his attackers dropped like the mutated flies they resembled. The survivors cranked up the volume of their RAZZZZ in anger, swarming to regroup. McGregor didn't wait, he dove into the soft silt, squirming like a worm escaping a fisher man's muddy fingers, attempting to dig himself under the protection of his new found ally. He had made it, but not without losing a handsome portion of skin from his posterior.

That was forty long hours ago. Now here he lay, hoping he would not wiggle to the surface before the sun and wondering how much farther he would have to trek--and track--before finding his ship, and more importantly, the scoundrel that stole it. Two nights he had slept beneath the surface. Trudging across the soft landscape by day, tunneling to safety several feet below the surface before dusk. He dreamed of taking refuge in the kevlar lined, tri-diamond shelled ship he called home. But if it were around, he'd be off this God forsaken planet, enjoying the hot meals provided by his automated chef, and headed toward the clean-up mission he was assigned to. His shell could withstand a blast from a battle cruiser, and his mini-lasers placed strategically around the craft would make mincemeat of those pesky little monsters if they even thought of going for the wires. He had documented the ballistic buggers as razztics. He was lucky (if you define luck as what happens when you're utterly prepared for every circumstance) to have several days rations in his suit, but the stuff was awful, and it was running out.

He knew he would have to face the razztics sooner or later--that was his job, cleaning up the galaxies from unwanted garbage. It was the position all aspiring T.M.M.s took to prove themselves. To become part of that elite seven was something special, the odds were against him, but he would do it--his lack of papers would be a hindrance, but he'd prove his genetic superiority through action. Space Janitors usually worked alone; sent on tidy missions whenever a planet, galaxy, or star-system had something or someone that needed disposed of. Transdimensional Maintenance Managers basically did the same, but their job spanned into experimental arenas, such

as time and dimensional travel, and their missions had much higher stakes. Only seven positions were available. Only Space Janitors qualified.

At this point his only worry was whether he was searching for something--the raztics--or someone. He would find out.

The thought had occurred to him that first night while lying beneath the surface, in pain from ravaged skin and praying he was accurate about raztics being nocturnal. "How in the 'Sam Heck (whoever that is) could a bunch of furry legged fliers know an advanced flight academy maneuver?" His suspicions were somewhat confirmed when he crawled out of the earth to find his ship gone. But nothing was certain. The bugs could have carried it off to their nests for all he knew. One thing was certain he needed his ship back. With that thought he began squirming his way to the surface.

Tangerine rays met his face as it broke through powder; he froze... waiting... nothing. He could relax, whatever those pests were, they didn't come out during the day. Climbing to his feet, he dusted the amber cells from his body. He was an hour's hike from the brush that led into the rolling hillsides, which then quickly turned into rocky peaks. There, he was sure he would find his craft. Pulling an aluminum wrapped bar from his shoulder pocket, he ripped into it with chiseled jaw.

"AAARRRGH." He spit. "I'm sick of this crap!" He spit the wrapper to the ground, continuing his forced march, begrudgingly chewing away at the tasteless, dry, but all so nutritious food-bar.

His boots left a temporary trail behind him, but it vanished quickly with the steady wind. It was as much instinct as skill that led him on the path that he followed. There were no visible signs to track. No sole, hoof or

pad prints. But the air... the air seemed disturbed in the direction he was heading. He could almost smell the fuel left behind from his passing ship, almost--maybe his imagination--but he could almost see its path through the air. Instinct or skill, either way, it was the direction he was headed.

He slowed pace, nearing the sparse foliage that quickly turned into a forest before him. If the rztics lived anywhere, it would be here.

The long, wide, emerald leaves arched outward from spindly trunks. McGregor hesitated before reaching his bare hand toward the leaf. Turning it up he shivered. There lie his nemeses sleeping in a self-made cocoon of web. He moved to crush it then stopped. He was now sure that this insect was nothing more than a pawn in the hands of someone whose instincts for destruction were much more devious.

Something's behind me. C.T.'s body followed the thought instantaneously. The highly trained Janitor dove, rolling, coming up in a fighting stance--eyes darting, searching the brush, and wondering if his theories on the nocturnal behavior of rztics were wrong. The movement had been directly behind him, the direction he now faced. He could bet, whatever it was, it wasn't in the same spot now. He began to rotate, like a caged lion surrounded by starving hyenas. His left hand rested on the hilt of his blade, the right extended low, in a blocking position.

"Grwapter! Grwapter! Precentete, lo brallamero...come to help us."

Turning, he saw the creature that uttered the now understandable gibberish. It usually took a second for his internal translator chip to pick up a language. The creature was peaceful looking enough--ugly as sin--but peaceful. Its face, which had been revealed from twelve feet up, was

leathery and gaunt. A beak like nose extended between low, narrow set eyes. They peered at him, matching its cry for help.

A Grey muscular arm grasped the limb with a sloth like, two-fingered grasp. Dangling momentarily before dropping, the beast crouched and seemingly forgot its fear. "You have come to help us, no? I knew you would come. It has been long, but the stories still run strong." The thing said as it somersaulted toward him.

"I'm not here to help anyone. I'm looking for a ship." He said gruffly, still somewhat amazed that he could speak the language.

"Oh, yes. The silvery bat that flies without moving wings. I've seen where it hides. Free it, and you free us. Your needs our ours." A nimble arm shot beneath a leaf, snatching a cocoon between thumb and finger, deftly popping it like a peanut and munching down on the raztic within.

The stern Sergeant broke character and chuckled. "I wish I'd thought of that." He moved toward the creature, popping a raztic himself. "What do you call yourself?" He said between bites.

The beast leaped twelve feet up grasping and twirling himself up to a kneeling position on an extended branch; keeping it's distance. He exclaimed proudly, "I am Gramblish, Free Roamer, Seeker of the Naught, Finder of the Savior." He flipped backwards; tripling head over heels through the air, landing a good twenty yards from C.T. "If you wish your ship back...move quick." With that he set off at a rapid pace, mostly running, sometimes leaping and swinging through the quickly thickening forest.

C.T. followed, at a wolf-trot pace. The creature called Gramblish wouldn't lose him, but he didn't want to waste anytime either, so he tried his best to keep up. For several hours the chase went on. The terrain changed quickly, the forest thickened, gigantic emerald ferns arched above him--yellow, white and burgundy floral arrangements sprouted amidst the plethora of fauna. He wished he had the time to take it all in, but Gramblish never slowed, always staying thirty yards ahead. Even when C.T.'s pace was broken by rocky outcropping or flowing river, Gramblish adjusted pace. Once in an open meadow C.T. tried to close the distance, increasing speed quickly and sprinting but the leaping creature adjusted its speed effortlessly.

As the sun began to set C.T. began to worry. The soil here was much too dense to tunnel in a timely fashion so he'd have no where to hide from the razzics and the forest was so thick he could be unknowingly surrounded. It occurred to him that he might have just been led into a trap. He couldn't have been more right.

§§§

Pounding, pulsing and excruciating lights pierced the Sergeant's consciousness like daggers. His mind was being ripped apart and crammed into a sardine can all at once--it flippin' hurt beyond sanity and he was still in a stupor. It really hit the fan when he tried to open his eyes, he'd wish later he hadn't.

Controlling insects wasn't the only trick the Mercronium smuggler who set the trap, stole his ship, and now ravaged his being had up his sleeve.

It seemed the same device he used to manipulate the nervous systems of raztics worked to scramble more sophisticated beings brains, and right now it was scrambling McGregors.

He was in the center of a circular room; wires ran from a helmet strapped to his head and thick metallic belts held down his convulsing body. When he finally managed to pry open his eyes, they peered up at glimmering stars through a glass ceiling at least two hundred feet above. The chamber resembled a round stainless steel sink; he being right where the drain would be and the disposal was on. High to the right a large window broke up the sterile room. He could vaguely make out through blurred and bloody vision a large figure, and next to him a crouching form--Gramblish.

The groveling Gramblish was born into slavery. It was his lot in life he was told, no way out.

The "Groontags were created to work for the master, no question," his mother had told him.

He didn't believe it. He wouldn't learn until later that his mother's thoughts weren't her own, she was under the control of the Masters psi-onic device. Unlike her son, who through some genetic fluke was immune to the influence of the Master's machine, she, like all Groontags within range, was captive to the device that allowed the Master to control a thousand slaves without fence or whip.

As a child he heard stories of an underground group of rebels that lived free outside the Master's compound and outside his hypnotic control. When he was old enough, Gramblish made his move; escaping and joining the rebel group. It was then that he learned of his predetermined fate--free

his people. He would be the one to bring in the savior, to usher him and the new age of freedom in. At least that was what he was told. He would be the key to the destruction of the Master and his evil mind controlling, soul warping machine.

All went as planned for the first ten years. Gramblish and the rebels waited. Always waiting for the sign that would allow Gramblish to find and aid the Savior. Gramblish sat listening to the tales of a brighter future; fantasies of a day he began to doubt would come.

Some days he would sneak back into the compound to spy on the Master, watching as he controlled thousands of slaves. He hid behind walls as the Master talked into his journal, telling of loneliness, of his plans to one day sell the mines, and move on to retirement in some far off universe. All the Master needed was a buyer for the mines, a ship, and a pilot. Few outside the I.U.S. had the skill and technology to travel to the far reaches of the universe in which he wanted to go, but with the money he would make from selling the drug mines, he could pay off some corrupt Galactanaut or Space Janitor and he'd be gone.

Gramblish listened with great interest, and soon tired of pipe dreams spun by the naive, he decided his fate was his own, and his place was at the Masters side. Surely he would be of unique service to him, being who he was, unaffected by the Masters mind control, and trusted by the rebels. He would help him to destroy the rebels, and if a savior would come, he would deliver him to the Master. For this, he would be rewarded, he would accompany the Master in his retirement, and be off of this planet and away from the life of hiding that was his current station in life.

All had gone as planned, unfolding as if he were the Grand Creator pulling the strings. He had to admit, he was surprised by the appearance of the human, his arrival coincidentally similar to the prophecies.

It was like taking candy from a baby. He was sent alone, the galacta-naught trusting him as a seemingly stupid creature. And now here he was, side by side with the Master, his plan about to be complete. The Master had already loaded the ship they would use. The brain washed naught would fly them to the ends of the Universe; where an ex-drug smuggler and a groontag could live risk and worry free. Of course his race would continue in bondage under the criminal who bought the place, but alas, his intellect allowed him to surpass the weakness of being concerned with the welfare of others.

The once bold Space Janitor looked pathetic, helplessly bound to stainless steal table. It was almost comical to Gramblish how the human looked up at him, trying to kill him with his eyes.

"We leave soon, yes Master?" Gramblish said, looking up humbly to the tall figure next to him.

"You've done well Gramblish, you've earned your reward." The tall man said as he adjusted a knob on the panel before him. The Master was an impressive man--if in fact he was a man--he stood close to seven feet, but he was so proportioned as to not look awkward. His long purple robe hung open from muscular shoulders--draping across broad, bare, hairless chest--settling to the floor behind him like a hero's cape. Long Grey hair flowed from beneath a cap that matched the one responsible for C.T's anguish. The wires from his helmet ran into a super computer with lights

flashing. A screen showed horizontal lines jumping like a richter scale during a seven-point earthquake.

Long, burgundy lacquered nails scratched the metallic surface of the panel board as thumb and pinky turned the knob another quarter. "Stubborn. I can't give him much more, he'll not have the sanity to fly his own ship."

"Give it time Master, he'll break, his mind is strong, but, you...you are the strongest."

A sinister smile crossed the gaunt, aging face of the Master. "No, my dear Gramblish, I am not the strongest, but I should be plenty strong for this youngster."

Below, C.T. battled for his mind. Numbing to the pain he could focus--barely--and only for fractions of a second but he was fighting and he was formulating a plan. Glimpses of the man above him entered his mind, thoughts, words, sentences; it was as if he we're becoming someone else for seconds at a time. He concentrated on Gramblish when he wanted to give in, if he lived only long enough to crush his misshapen skull he'd die happy. His mind was melting as his tormentor's thoughts replaced his, some sort of psi-link which enabled this demon to gain control of his thoughts.

Hope was fading fast when he caught a glimpse of the little worm grinning safely behind glass, McGregor's animosity surged and the giant flinched. It was his last and only chance. He withdrew into himself; drawing all his being, all his soul, all his mind into a small security room within his consciousness--then he waited.

"You see." A long finger extended toward the horizontal line that now ran nearly flat. "He fails." The man who had corrupted, enslaved, and

addicted countless of creatures across the universe in order to get to this moment of bliss--retirement--let down his guard for an instant. It was enough.

In the darkest depth of C.T. McGregor's mind a spark became an inferno. C.T. exploded forth from the cocoon he had wrapped himself in, sending forth his most powerful emotions and thoughts, directing them with his God given and military trained intellect toward the invader that had intruded upon his inner being. Like nukes aimed for destruction, the synapses fired, nerve endings crackled, bio rhythms fell into place and a tidal wave of psychic energy flowed into the conduits that joined him with the Master.

The Master was reaching down to disconnect when the wave hit. His mind reeled as his body crumbled under the assault. He screamed in agony, Gramblish leaped away and McGregor ripped the damned helmet from his head. He was still dazed but he had control back. He savagely tore at the belts binding him to the table. Gramblish had disappeared from view and he saw the Master recovering. The belts were strong, they wouldn't budge despite his efforts. He ripped at them, veins bulging from straining biceps, but the steel held fast.

"AAAAARGGGG!" He shouted at no one.

A seamless door opened ground level below the high window. Gramblish exploded through it, coming at the Naught with a jagged blade raised above his head.

C.T. McGregor was helpless, it was all for nothing...then they burst through the door.

Seven groontags hopped and leaped through the door behind Gramblish. One lunged, taking down Gramblish by the ankles. The other six continued toward C.T. going to work on his constraint, they all spoke at once.

"We're here to help you."

"Relax."

"You must defeat the Master."

"His power is diminished, we're unable to harm him."

"Please!"

"If he gets away, we'll be enslaved again!"

McGregor was relieved but overwhelmed. The effects of his telepathic battle were still slowing him down and he didn't need a bunch of manic monsters to motivate him to do what he planned to do anyway.

"Shut-up! Now!" He exploded, finally able to sit up.

The shocked groontags stepped back looking rather pathetic, eyes wide with fear and ignorance.

"We're sorry, but we've waited long." The tallest of the groontags whimpered.

"Well you're just gonna have to wait a little longer." McGregor barked, pushing himself off the table and onto wobbly legs. "Can't help me fight the Big Guy, Huh?"

The six groontags nodded in unison.

"Then find my laser blade and get outta' my way." C.T. ordered. He stumbled then ran toward the fleeing Gramblish.

Gramblish had made quick work of the poor groontag unaccustomed to ruthlessness; the creature's head still rolled several feet from its writhing body. C.T. took notice of the poor creature, logging it as yet another reason to take this dastardly duo down.

Gramblish was fast; sprinting, leaping and taking flights of stairs in bounds. C.T. pursued as best he could in his condition but Gramblish vanished from view.

In the control room the Master was on his feet working the controls of his only hope of survival. Gramblish entered in a flurry.

"Master, please, the slaves are free, they run amuck, destroying everything, we must flee!" Gramblish continued. "To the ship, you can fly it Master, at least to a port nearby, just rid us from this place, we'll find another warp trained galacta-naught on one of the rogue planets."

The Master hesitated; his dreams crashing before him. If he left without control of the groontags he would have nothing to sell; he would barely have enough money to hire a pilot. But Gramblish was right. If he stayed, he would die.

C.T. McGregor burst into the control room as Gramblish and the Master disappeared through blaster shielded doors. He quickly went to work on the numeric control panel next to the door. His fingers danced across numbers, drawing upon all his decipher training. He knew he didn't have much time, they were headed for his ship. And although it took an expert pilot to warp, someone with basic knowledge could get it off the ground. If that happened, he'd be the new Master of a race of simpleton groontags. He worked faster.

The six groontags appeared from behind him, one was holding his blade.

The one with the laser hilt yelled out excitedly. "We found your weapon great one, in the Master's chamber, use it, use it to save us!"

Like he had thought--simpletons. His blade was strong, but it wouldn't cut through shield doors. He tried one last sequence of numbers. 7-23-45...a finger touched 4, "No." His instincts roared. His finger touched 5. A whirl of internal motors sang to his ears. The door slid open.

"Go Great One! Go!" A groontag shouted with glee.

"Swell, a cheering section." C.T. said as he ran through the door, laser-blade in hand, red lights taking the shape of a sword.

He ran up through stairwells and corridors, hitting several closed doors, all of which took precious time to navigate. He could spare some, since it took his ships systems time to engage, unless of course that was done earlier in which case he was in trouble. Reaching what seemed to be the top of the monstrous structure he sprinted down a long suspended hall. A large door waited for him and he was sure it was the hanger.

Reaching the door he was surprised to find it unlocked. He could hear his ship running through the take off cycle behind it. Pushing a green button on the panel the large portal slid into the ceiling and C.T. burst into the hanger. Another rookie mistake.

It felt like a sledgehammer when the flat side of Gramblish's blade struck his head from behind. As he fought unconsciousness he knew he was lucky, no way Gramblish meant to have the razor sharp edge miss. The long

arms and legs of the groontag began beating on him, riding the Naught to the floor and raising a short cleaver for the killer blow.

C.T. rolled instinctually, pulling his knees to his chest, placing heels into his attackers gut and sending the groontag sprawling across the deck. McGregor was up with cat like speed, he saw in triplets as his vision blurred, and he felt the warmth of blood from his scalp as it flowed freely down his back. He was ready for more.

Gramblish moved to flank him as the Master appeared from within the ship. His psi-onic arsenal destroyed, he now relied on a more traditional weapon--the blaster. He opened fire..

McGregor's blade moved too fast for the eye to see, blue beams of high intensity light ricochet across the room. He was lucky to block the first shot, but he couldn't stop them all so he dove, rolling, finding cover behind cargo containers.

As the Master emptied his charge Gramblish lunged, but this time C.T. knew where he was. Turning at the last possible second C.T.'s blade sliced air, removing the groontags sword-arm and head in one fluid motion. The Groontag fell to the floor in a bloody mass of limp limbs--decapitated.

McGregor didn't have the energy to enjoy his revenge. He turned on the Master, who holstered his blaster.

The magnificent specimen of a creature reached back, pulling a long, wide, gleaming steel blade from the leather woven sheath across his back. It was a weapon of yore, old school. If not for the shimmering force field that shone, floating about the entire blade, you'd think it was a sword for a barbarian in Dark Age Mountains. Its hilt easily accompanied the two large

hands of the giant that wielded it. Although more cumbersome than the common laser-blade it was stronger, and in the right hands nearly as fast. The sword reached 55 1/4' at its full length, 39 7/8' was cold blue steel extending from the intricately carved hilt. The wide blade glistened down to two keen razor sharp edges. Masterfully carved oak mimicked the leather strap of a hammer as it spiraled down to the base of the hilt where 4 x 3 x 2 silver pommel formed a mallet. Between the hilt and the blade a steel guard was forged to resemble a flowing leather strap of the hammer which hung below it. Across the hilt--carved in Norse lettering--was the word *Mjolnir*.

Every muscle in McGregor's body ached, quivering with the smallest effort. He could barely see and the blood loss was sapping his strength yet he pulled himself up, forcing his head high and meeting what could possibly be his toughest--and probably his last--opponent.

"You've destroyed my dreams, stolen my future, murdered my only friend. I should kill you. But I won't." The Master majestically turned his hilt toward C.T., grasping the blades tip. "Just get on the ship, fly me to a rogue planet, and be on your way. Find another mess to clean up Space Janitor."

McGregor appreciated the sword from this new angle before allowing his eyes to narrow. "Not an option."

The hardened warrior seemed almost sad before effortlessly flipping the large blade through the air, gracefully catching it by the hilt.

C.T. McGregor's blade fired up. The two began to circle. They feigned and moved gauging each other's abilities. Like two ancient boxers in

an invisible ring the two stepped in, then out, waiting for the other to make a move or a mistake. Despite his arrogance and the ravaged condition of the Galactanaught the Master knew what he faced; a Space-Janitor. A highly trained genetically designed man that was deadly.

C.T. made the first move. Feigning left, he ducked right, luring a swing at his head from the Master. The long broad sword swept through the air, cracking the sound barrier and filling the room with a mini-sonic boom. C.T. continued his duck turning it into a roll, the blade sliced through the air less than an inch above his tumbling body. He was up and lunging at the back of the Master in a flash but it wasn't fast enough. The large man moved with the grace of a dancer twisting and side stepping. C.T.'s blazing blade found nothing. In the same fluid motion from his defensive move, the giant spun, raising a leg in a devastating roundhouse kick. His boot met McGregor's face and sent the wounded soldier sprawling.

C.T. slid across the slick floor. Now he was mad. Adrenaline was kicking in and his senses were clearing. Adjusting on the slide he put his hands back, bracing the floor and hand springing upwards to his feet.

"Wicked men meet wicked deaths." He snarled, spitting fragments of teeth to the floor. He charged the Drug Lord who held his broad sword at the ready. The two collided in a flurry of clashing weapons. Hi-tech beams of light glanced, blocked, and parried with technology enhanced steel.

C.T. maneuvered and blocked--never taking the full brunt of the broad sword's blows--jabbing and slicing with every counter. It seemed an eternity the two warriors battled, and he didn't know from where that he summoned the strength but he battled on against the tireless giant, never giving in.

Finally the seemingly impossible happened, the Master weakened and he broke through. His blade swiped across the Master's chiseled abdomen revealing ivory thews that turned crimson with blood. The Master grasped the wound with one hand swinging his blade wildly with the other. C.T. showed no quarter, easily ducking the wild arc and plunging his blazing blade into the drug lord's upper chest.

A clang rang out through the hanger as the Master's sword hit the metal floor. The Master crumbled to his knees, arms at his side, eyes wide. He held there momentarily before lying back on the cold surface. A trickle of blood peeked through the corner of his wrinkled mouth and his eyes blinked. McGregor went to his side, kneeling.

He'd been a Space Janitor for less than a year, and he'd faced death before--his own as well as others--and he didn't like it.

"I almost made it." The old man whispered. "Fifty years and never a run in with one of you. I get desperate and try to steal a rookie's...ship, and it's over."

Blood oozed from the wounds of the Master, a crowd of Groontags had appeared, keeping their distance, but watching with wide eyes. Fifty years of mind control had left them in a stupor. They were free now but their programming to serve the Master wouldn't allow them to cheer.

"Now I go to...my...place of torment." With that, the last breath of the Master subsided.

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C.T. flipped the switch. Stars became streaks of light as the ship launched through space at hyper-speed. McGregor set the remains of his chicken quesadilla on his dash and lay his head back, settling into high backed, calfskin covered pilot seat. He would sleep now. Even at light speed this journey would take days. He still had a mission to complete.

He glanced over at his new weapon of choice, the broadsword. An antique, but few would have the training to counter it. Besides, he liked its barbarian heritage and it looked cool strapped to his back. A rugged hand ran through dark, coarse hair provoking a wince when fingers struck healing wound. It had been a wild one; ship stolen, attacked by killer bugs, betrayed by a misguided hero, nearly slain in a duel with a giant and hailed as savior of an entire race.

He closed his eyes...just another day in the life of C.T.
McGregor--Space Janitor.