



Fantasy

JAY CONDON

EVOLUTION CRYSTAL: BOOK 1

THE SEED OF SALYS KON

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SALYS KON

Jay Condon



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Chapter 1

The Xrucibles

2012: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Nen moved like an insect in loose gravel as he made his way through the broken infrastructure of Ethiopia's capitol city. His eyes moved from his footing on the dense rubble to the dark corners that he passed. The survivors huddled in whatever hollows were produced by the fallen buildings as they waited for help from one of the dozens of humanitarian organizations that had collected outside of the city.

Five days ago, Addis Ababa had been hit by an earthquake with enough magnitude to cause widespread devastation. The event created worldwide concern and support flooded in from many nations.

Nen understood the anatomy of a natural disaster. He was drawn to them like an ambulance to the scene of a head on collision, only Nen was not a doctor, and his organization did not distribute food or blankets. They were known as 'The Xrucibles'. They were the army for the unarmed.

Pausing to get his bearings, Nen made eye contact with refugees huddled in the shadows of an overturned crate. It was the color of his skin and the black fatigues that eased their

fear. Military of any kind were better than the Somali Muslims looking to capture them. Knowing they would likely beg for his help, Nen held up his hands and ushered them back. He had learned to speak their language in three days. From his pocket he pulled a canteen and some dried rations. It was enough for them to allow him to leave without drawing attention to his position. If the Xrucibles were successful then this family would be able to walk to the refugee camps without the dangers of abduction.

In the first few days after the earthquake, the survivors walked day and night through the broken city to find clean water and food. On the fourth day, Somali slave traders had set up camp and began kidnapping the youth and sending them north to a primitive airfield. The camps were abandoned and the refugees returned to the city, but the slavers followed.

“Two hundred meters,” the voice spoke through Nen’s microlynk. The device was smaller than a cell phone on the back of his head with two thin wires that stuck to his skin like a matted wet hair. One lead ran into his ear canal and the other wound around his neck to his throat. All the microlynk needed was the faintest of whispers to transmit.

The Xrucibles were a nonprofit organization. They provided protection to those who needed it but could not afford it. They were

mostly funded by anonymous donors, but aside from communications, Nen required very little equipment to operate. He had been trained since the age of thirteen to kill and he became more effective at it with every mission.

“Get the team into position?” Nen ordered in a low tone.

[Point of view (POV) problem. Who’s eyes are we seeing this scene through? Nan’s? If so, he has no knowledge of what Skelton is doing or seeing unless Skelton tells him. He could speculate as to what Skelton is doing, based upon their long association.] “They are as close as they need to be for now,” Skelton responded. The scope of his sniper rifle was fixed on the street leading to the area. If the team was going to pick up Nen the road would have to be clear of obstructions. “I’ll get them closer once your inside.”

Nen stopped and tilted his head forward. He was listening. In the last three blocks he had not seen any survivors. It was a sign that he was close. Looking left through the rebar filled crack of the structures foundation, Nen saw a man with a turban enter a hollowed out building. He had an AK47 strapped to his back, two more followed behind him. Ethiopia was a predominantly Christian nation, unlike Somalia. The turbans made them stand out. “Four story building north of my position.”

Skelton looked down at the GPS set up beside him. Then he rolled left and pulled his beard back to spit his tobacco juice into the gutter on the opposite side and went back to his scope. He was on a rooftop a kilometer away. “That’s the one.”

Nen moved toward the building under a full moon that ushered out the last rays of the sun. He used more stealth than speed as he wound through the street filled with vehicles that had become trapped between immovable objects. Moving quickly was a risk and Nen banked on the Somali slavers arrogance. They were like lions amidst a herd of antelope, poised as hunters and not prey.

Nen would soon reveal himself as something more reclusive, more deadly. He was a Shogii Warrior with skills unmatched by any military training program. But it was hardly training. It was a programming that took place while he was in meditation. Oda Sy, his master, had rewired his brain to be efficient and oblivious to distractions. Pain or fear could not manifest within his conscious mind. Any injury would be acknowledged and assessed for limitations to ability. Muscles would restrict internal and external bleeding until Nen could return to meditation. It was in this state that he would begin to heal, begin to repair damaged tissue.

It had been twenty-five years since Nen had completed training. It was in the last five that

he felt his control fading. Oda Sy never taught him how to avoid aging. Perhaps his master never thought he would live this long. Nen knew of no others like himself to gauge his mortality. It was only recently that he had considered a change to his life style. After two decades of building on his efforts, Nen was burning out.

The darkness had settled. One guard remained near the entrance. It was clear by his relaxed demeanor that the slavers didn't expect any resistance. The Ethiopian military had concentrated near the imperial palace and the refugee camps. It would be another week before they would begin securing the two hundred square miles of city. It would be sooner with help from the United Nations.

Nen found no problem avoiding the guard and entering through a collapsed section of the building. Dressed in black fatigues, he found his way into the center of the building where most of the armed Somali's were sleeping. The security on the upper floors would not be this easy.

Nen avoided the sleeping rooms and entered a laundry room. He knelt down and removed the first of four explosives. "Setting one," Nen mumbled quietly.

Skelton pulled away from the scope and looked at the monitor. The first charge activated and lit up bright on the screen. "One is active."

Nen froze as footsteps passed in the hall outside. He sprang from his position and leaned against the wall next to the door. His eyes found the Somali staggering away from him. Nen glanced out and made sure he was alone and moved to follow the man into the lavatory. He broke the slaver's neck as he stood in front of the urinal. Nen dragged his victim into a stall and came out with his eyes searching the walls. He moved to an interior corner and pulled another charge. "Number two."

Skelton watched it light up on the screen and lowered his brow. "I guess that's close enough to the support." The plan was to bring down the building. The hostages had been transported earlier that day and intercepted by the Xrucibles. Through interrogation they had learned of this slaver base. Now most of them slept in preparation of more raids the following day.

"Setting three," Nen spoke and Skelton watched it blink on.

"The stairwell," Skelton nodded. It was the most important one. Skelton was ten years older than Nen, and a retired navy seal. Like many with his skill set, he became a mercenary. It was only four years ago that he had found the Xrucibles. The job paid horribly and the turnover was constant. Nen never promised his men anything. They worked largely for free. To Nen, it was about standing

for those who could not stand for themselves. To the others, it was about building their name to move on to more rewarding jobs. Nen understood their motivation. They were mercenaries and placed a value on the dangers they faced.

Skelton had made his money prior to joining. Nen never understood why he settled with the Xrucibles. Perhaps he had past sins to repent. Whatever the reason, his loyalty had created a bond between them. This was something Nen had established before giving Skelton a detonator to a bomb inches from his face.

Nen stared at the interior stairwell. The mission was to level the building by taking out the base. He had no reason to ascend to higher floors, aside from his own curiosity. It was out of character to drift from the plan, but Nen had motive. Following his gut, he began to climb. Eyes staring upwards, Jacketer in hand, and feet silent and careful. He had to see the eyes of the enemy.

Years ago in Sudan, Nen met with Omar Al-Bashir to request an end to civilian violence in the region. At the time Al-Bashir was president of Sudanese government and accused mastermind of the Darfur genocide. It was then that Nen first saw the eyes on one of Al-Bashir's aides. The aide held a look about him that incited Nen's senses. The eyes were empty and cold, but looked at Nen as more

than a threat to their national security. It was as if this aide knew him.

Hidden in shadows at the top of the stairs, Nen found the eyes. One Somali raider did not sleep. He paced from side to side. Something identified him as being different from the others, but Nen wasn't sure how. There was something behind those dark eyes.

“What are you doing,” Skelton asked and Nen quietly descended the stairs. His movements were silent. To be detected now would compromise the mission. “The team is in position,” Skelton added.

Once down, Nen found his way back to the same entry point. He carefully exited the building and looked down the street. His pickup would be to the north. Nen crouched down and walked in the opposite direction along the wall. The guard was reading. Nen moved silently around the guard and straightened up. The Somali looked up from his book with surprise as Nen held a knife pinning his neck to the wall. His other hand pulled the AK47 from the guard's shoulder. Nen's eyes never broke from the frightened guard. The intensity of the Shogii paralyzed his opponent and he used the time to give him a gift.

“Four is active,” Skelton confirmed through Nen's earpiece. With the AK47 in hand, Nen vanished.

[POV problem]The Somali felt his neck and nearly laughed at his good fortune to be alive.

Then his sense of duty entered his mind and he ran inside the building screaming out warnings.

“Hit it!” Nen yelled running north toward the pickup point.

Skelton glanced at the GPS and thought twice about questioning his order. He hit the button and detonated the C4 charges.

Nen found the open street. He crouched down as his eyes scanned ahead. Nothing. “Where is the truck?” he mumbled when the building erupted in loud bursts that launched splinters of brick and rebar onto his position. Nen sprung away and began running north to the secondary extraction point. His left hand reached up and pulled a ten inch sliver of wood from his shoulder. He could hear the building collapsing behind him. “I am heading north on foot.”

[POV problem] “I lost contact with the team,” Skelton announced, looking into his scope. After locating Nen, he panned left and right. “The slavers are coming out of adjacent buildings.”

Nen already knew this as he moved off of the street and into the ruins of the city. “Coms down.” He twisted through broken infrastructure.

The Somali’s were splitting up. If they were fast enough, they would catch him on the other side of the hollowed out meat market.

If Nen could read Ethiopian, he would have avoided this shop. The loss of electricity and the hot sun created deadly fumes off the rotting meat. Nen would survive, but he would be forced to pass through. Holding up here would keep the Somali's out, but they would bring down the market with rockets.

Skelton sat up and began packing his gear to relocate. He understood why Nen went silent in a time when he should be calling for support. The other Xrucibles did not share Skelton's loyalty. They wanted more.

Nen's thumb switched the AK47 into single shot and held it up to his shoulder as he burst through a boarded up door. Blind to the enemy that awaited him, he chose left and sent three shots into three slavers. Then as rifles erupted behind him, Nen spun around and switched back to auto. The clip emptied into the remaining Somalis.

Throwing the AK47, Nen found his footing and ran up the side of the street. Parked cars provided cover as he stayed low. At the end of the block, Nen ducked around the corner and flattened against the wall.

Using the corner of his eye he looked for pursuers. Nen counted six, pulled his Jacketer hand gun, and emerged from his cover firing at the remaining Somalis.

Two blocks west

“This was a bad idea,” Smoke mumbled.

He only said what others were thinking. The remaining Xrucibles waited in the dark basement of some apartment building as gunfire echoed through the streets.

“He’s using his Jacketer,” Modri reported as he listened with his head facing to the floor. “He will be out of ammo soon.”

“He’ll find another gun,” Smoke said. “Or use his hands.”

“Shut your trap,” Curry grumbled. “This isn’t time for your doom and gloom. What’s done is done and we must complete our mission.” Curry’s eyes glistened from what dim moonlight these small windows produced.

“Curry’s right,” Stone agreed. “But Smoke’s right too. These Somali’s don’t stand a chance. We have to take him down ourselves.”

“What about the sniper?” Smoke asked and it dampened Stones spirit.

“We have to kill him too,” Curry announced. His Texas accent was strong. “Skelton is the best sniper I have ever worked with, but he would never join us.”

“Even if Nen is dead? You suggest some sentimental attachment between them.” Stone shook his head. “It all comes down to money.”

“Honor,” Smoke said quietly. “He has honor.”

“Fuck it,” Curry growled as he walked toward the stairs. “I’m tired of talking.”

“Do or die,” Stone joined him. The others followed. Whatever doubts they had vanished once they hit the street. If they learned anything from Nen, it was that an operation took complete focus.

“There has been no communications since the building came down,” Modri whispered into the lynk. They had chosen a frequency to transmit unknown to Nen or Skelton.

“He must suspect our intentions,” Curry said. “The charade is over boys, treat Nen as hostile and keep your eyes on the roof tops.”

“I haven’t heard gunfire since we entered the street,” Modri said scanning ahead. They moved as a team with Smoke covering the rear.

“Maybe the Somali’s got lucky,” Stone offered, but it received no traction with the others.

“I’m getting something,” Modri said taking a knee. His eyes darted as he listened to his lynk. “He’s asking Skelton for help.”

Curry tuned in to the frequency. “The river.” He stood up.

Stone pulled his GPS from his pocket and looked south. “The river wraps up from the south to the west.” He began walking toward the corner to get a visual of the river.

The team followed him, scanning in all directions. Modri glanced into the ticket booth of the old theater they stood in front of. No

one was comfortable or at ease with the situation.

“The bridge,” Modri said.

“The last bridge still crossing is to the west.” Stone placed the device back in its pouch.

“We split up and converge on the check point. Move fast, stay in contact, and locate Nen,” Curry ordered. “Do not engage without support.”

* * *

Nen sat above the marquis of the theater as he listened to his team below him. He focused on his wounds. Along with the splinter in his shoulder a single shot had entered his lower back. Nen constricted his muscles around the damaged artery. This action would prevent internal bleeding until the vessels walls clotted and began to heal. He had already rejoined the damaged nerves. The contusion from the splinter would need to be cleaned before he could seal it, but he had things to deal with first.

With his focus drawn in several directions, Nen pulled out of meditation. He had heard enough from the team below to confirm his suspicions. They wanted him dead.

* * *

Curry was wrapped in faded red blankets as he edged across the roof of a three-story hospital. His sights searched the other rooflines. Once at the ledge, the main street gave him a

line of sight to the bridge. Stone was the only one using the thoroughfare.

“I see the bridge,” Stone reported through the lynk.

Curry panned ahead of him. Nen was crossing. Curry opened his mouth to warn Stone, but remained silent. His eye came off of the scope and he began to search. A dim flash lit up the top floor of the adjacent building and Stone fell.

“There’s my sniper.” Curry bent a smile as he returned to the scope. “Stone is down,” he reported to the others. “Nen is moving north from the main drag. He’s coming to you Modri.” Curry slowly edged back with his eyes fixed on the adjacent building where he’d seen the muzzle flash. Once he was clear, he moved out quickly. “I’ll get Skelton.”

* * *

“I got three Somali’s heading south on the boulevard, one has an RPG,” Modri reported from the glassless window of a dress shop. “But I don’t see Nen.” He turned his head to check the alley to the side of the store. The dress shop gave him fast cover from the Somalis, but Nen could be anywhere.

When he looked back to the Slavers, he noticed one on the ground and the other holding his throat. The blood looked black in the moonlight as it ran down his forearms. “What the ...” Modri looked up and scanned for the

third Somali. He leaned out of the shop window and aimed his Carbine north then south.

He never saw Nen come out of the alley until it was too late.

A knife came down on his forearm between the radius and ulna, pinning him to the shops window sill.

Screaming, Modri sprayed bullets in the direction where Nen had disappeared.

Then, in the darkness, emerged his worst fear. The Shogii Warrior's silhouette sent a surge of urgency into the seditious mercenary.

Modri popped the spent magazine and fumbled for a new one with his only free hand. It fell to the floor. He threw down the weapon and pulled on the knife handle. Sweat and tears soaked his bandana that had fallen down his face from his struggling.

Then at the moment of acceptance, he looked up to see Nen raise the RPG onto his shoulder.

* * *

Curry heard the explosion outside as he came to the inside stairwell. The top of the building had caved in and somewhere in the rubble was Skelton. The first step was unforgiving and Curry knew the stairs served as a warning system for the sniper. He backed away and looked for another way up.

* * *

“I see Smoke near the bridge,” Skelton announced to Nen as he looked into the scope of his sniper rifle.

They had found each other on a public frequency that had been dead since the television tower fell.

“Let him be for now,” Nen responded.

“Where is Curry?” the sniper panned away from the bridge.

“Looking for you,” Nen told him.

Skelton pulled away from the scope. His eyes found movement in the shadows. He moved his firing arm away from the trigger and slowly moved it to his holster.

“Don’t do it,” Curry said aiming his rifle behind Skelton. He moved up and jammed the muzzle into his back as he pulled the micro-lynk off of his neckline.

“This is a charity op you son of a bitch,” Skelton growled.

“But it can be so much more,” Curry said removing the sniper’s side arm. “I served three years in this racket and I don’t have a dime to my name.”

“You have a strong resume,” Skelton said. “Until now,” he corrected. “You can get a job with more profitable Mercs. Just don’t bring this one down.”

Curry pinned his trigger arm with the muzzle and relaxed slightly. A sniper would sacrifice his life over his arm. “Listen carefully sniper,” Curry began. “If you had an ounce of

sense in your head you would realize the value of the Xrucible name.”

Skelton nodded as he stared at his pinned arm. “But we are nothing without Nen.”

Curry pulled back and lifted his rifle.

Skelton turned to face his executioner, when Curry’s body heaved forward and his Carbine dropped. The knife entered the back of his neck into his skull. It wasn’t until Curry fell that Nen could be seen.

“You can stop shaking now,” Nen said offering the sniper a hand.

“I knew you were there,” Skelton said taking the help. “I think the North Koreans heard you.”

* * *

“Where is everybody?” Smoke looked out over the bridge from the shadow of a packing crate. The silence made his stomach knot up. He had been in the Xrucibles longer than any of the others and understood the futility of what they were trying to achieve. Nen was not immortal, but he didn’t make mistakes. The trap would have to be flawless and Curry’s plan had too many intangibles.

Smoke looked up to see a figure on the bridge. It leaned on the rail in an unthreatening way.

“Nen,” Smoke said and stood up. He stepped out of the shadows and tossed his weapon. Knowing Skelton was likely locked in on him, he kept his hands in view.

As he made his way down the shore and onto the bridge, he felt no immediate threat. If the Shogii wanted him dead, he would be dead.

Nen faced him as he approached. The moonlight was on his face and it lacked any expression that would indicate his fate.

Smoke didn't expect it. "I am truly sorry," Smoke spoke with sincerity. "Curry filled my head with ... never mind." Smoke held back his pathetic excuses.

"No harm done," Nen said with a half smile. "The slavers are defeated and the United Nations will come in and mop up this mess." He looked to the Bulbula River. "Do you remember that Shaman we met in Columbia?" Nen asked rhetorically. "He came from a tribe that believed the river was a serpent. It would decide which boy becomes a man. It also chose the fate of those who stood on the line."

"The line?" Smoke asked.

"He said when you instigate change in your environment it means that you are rejecting an old life in search of a new," Nen explained. "That Shaman went on to say that the new life must accept you or you will find only misery."

Smoke listened on.

Nen pulled his flask and handed it to him. Smoke needed a drink to calm his nerves.

"The serpent rests at the door between worlds."

Smoke nearly choked on the whiskey.

Smoke understood what Nen was saying. “Hey wait a ...” he said looking into the black waters of the river. It doubled as the sewer system for the city. Nen’s patient silence told Smoke that this was not a negotiation. Exhaling, Smoke began removing his web gear.

“Careful,” Nen said glancing at the sniper’s position. The laser sight drew circles on the back of his head. Smoke froze before proceeding with more caution. He pulled his boots and tied the stings together, then his pants. Nen took a drink from his flask as he waited.

Smoke tied the end of the pant legs together and climbed up on the railing. He turned to Nen. “If I survive this, I want to be a Xrucible again.”

“Not a chance,” Nen said as his elbow rose up and knocked Smoke over the ledge. He watched the river take him down stream as he coughed and gagged. He never had a chance to inflate his Kevlar stitched pants with air.

“Good luck friend,” Nen said as the head lights of the jeep came around the corner toward the bridge. It was good to have one loyal friend, even better when they came with a jeep.

Chapter 2

The Archs

South Pacific: Solcom Island

“How much time?” Alexander Sarkolov entered the command room. He pulled off his tattered Soviet officer’s jacket and handed it to an awaiting subordinate. The ex-cosmonaut looked as though he had been awakened from a long night of drinking and pain meds, but in fact he was seventeen years sober. His face still held the marks of his past. His eye sockets were still darkened with a webbing of wrinkles at the corners.

“Two minutes twenty seconds,” Yuri answered stepping away from his command station. “Do we wake them?”

Alexander paused. His eyes shifted from the projected laser light boards that displayed information, to the front of the room. Everything from the explorer’s movement, to the crew’s status was going according to mission objectives. No mistakes had been made, no compromise to the ships course or speed. Only the underlying threat tumbled toward the explorer with great velocity.

“No, there is nothing they can do.” His English was thick with his Russian accent. “Sixty percent on thruster nine, twenty five to thruster six, on three... two...”

“You will kill them,” the usually quiet Dr. Kazaki interrupted from behind the commander’s station. His eyes were abnormally widened by the audacity of the commander.

“...One” The visual displayed the ship’s movement. “No doctor, asteroid will kill them, I save them,” he spoke calmly.

“They will be lost.”

Alexander’s eyes never left the boards to the front of the command room, “collision inevitable.”

“Yes, but if they do survive, we will not be able to find them,” Dr. Kazaki was frantic.

Solcom Global had hired Alexander’s entire team. They were to give the corporation a much needed boost in its space exploration program. They were pioneers for private industry. Solcom knew that the Earth had given just about all it could give. There were profits to be made on other worlds. The crew members aboard the space explorer had also been cosmonauts. Unlike Alexander, they had never been to space. They were much younger than the commander, but well trained for this opportunity.

The only one not a part of Alexander’s team was Dr. Kimoto Kazaki. He acted as an advisor and to oversee the mission. The Russians looked at him as a spy, someone to keep an eye on things and make sure the corporation’s real interests were addressed.

“Nonsense — they call,” Alexander said.

“If they are alive”

“If not alive, then no call,” Alexander shook his head.

“There is over seventy million dollars of ...”

“You worry about salvage at expense of my crew,” Alexander nodded. “First we save crew, then we salvage.” Less than one minute remained. “Cut all fuel lines and seal off secondary compartments,” he ordered his team as the first projections of impact came into view via holographic image.

“You are putting the starboard engine into the path of the asteroid.”

“Better than main hull,” Alexander explained.

“You must stop the spin,” Dr. Kazaki warned. He was highly educated in every related field, but his experience was only from simulations. “You will not regain control.”

“Crew will control.” Alexander’s eyes bolted from light board to light board. “I send message.” In the remaining seconds Alexander sent them information, instructions and an apology.

Halfway to Mars

The Empire Builder turned on its side as the crew slept in stasis. They would remain there for their protection. The asteroid turned end over end as the explorer drew near. Thrusters ignited on its hull as the dead starboard engine twisted upward. The impact was

violent and spun the explorer, sending fragments of rock in all directions.

The full magnitude of the collision was not entirely physical. The shock wave produced by the object sent energy outward in a ring from the impact.

Texas: Don Silver's Trailer Ranch

Anthony watched Luna sleep.

She was not as calm as he remembered her being. It was a shame, because her serenity countered the feistiness of her red headedness. Perhaps it was just red highlights. He remembered the reference to strawberries but he couldn't recall who said it.

Anthony was boyish in his face and his expressions. His brethren would say his mind followed suit, but Anthony knew his role in the master plan. He was as fit for battle as any other arch in the divine ones arsenal, even the giant Ag.

His body perched above the headboard and leaned against the ceiling as if he were sitting sideways on the bus. He did not feel the pull of gravity, but he did feel the impact of the Empire Builder.

Anthony had been given a message to be delivered. He couldn't read it. All he knew is that he had to choose one of the species to receive it. Anthony struggled with this for hours. The choice was easy, but a message meant change. Any change to the master plan

was concerning and the secrecy surrounding this message troubled him.

Even though it had been many months since Luna had contacted him, Anthony's love for her was eternal. The only problem was how time would affect her. Time would make her grow old and eventually die. Anthony wanted to cherish every moment of their precious time together, but he knew the rules. He knew the law set forth by his lord Taruun. The chosen race was not to be influenced. They had to live their lives, in which they would later be judged. Anthony could not deny her a chance to join the chosen in Paradisia.

When Luna chose her mate, Anthony wept. She had sent him away and cut the ties that connected their worlds. Now the man lays next to her in the bed, his breathing was loud and nasal. Anthony was both repulsed and envious of this man called Morley. On several occasions, Anthony considered ending his life, but he knew the punishment would be severe. Morley was the cause for Luna to turn against him.

Anthony's thoughts were like playthings in his mind, as he let his imagination run wild. He finally remembered that he was here for other reasons. He was given a message to be delivered. There was probably a better candidate for this burden, but he loved this human. This was all he could offer her. This could be her ticket to join him in paradise.

Anthony moved from the ceiling to the side of Luna's bed in the form of shapeless matter and reformed in a standing position. His eyes looked over her sleeping body with desire. Even though she was unconscious, he could still feel her kindness, hear her laughter. In the darkness of the room he could still see her beauty, her bright green eyes looking at everything with interest and curiosity.

Luna's blanket slid from her body to reveal her naked form. His hands rose up over her with his palms facing down. His fingers were slightly bent and parted. Luna stopped breathing, as her body arched off of the bed. Anthony trembled as the seal was broken and the message delivered. A single tear ran from his eye.

He suddenly released her and pulled the tear from his face with a finger. Anthony looked at it curiously.

Anthony took a step back as he drew in a breath for the first time. Never had he felt his lungs fill with air or the ground press so hard against his feet while he was in the Salentarium realm. This sensation startled him. Something had changed in the world around him.

When in Salentarus, Anthony was invisible to their eyes. He understood it as a different frequency of vibration. It allowed him to remain hidden from the harvest. Now he was among them in his own body. This had never

happened before. To be seen, Anthony would have to enter a human body or change his frequency. The later made him visible to only those with the ability to see. They were considered mediums of this world, an anomaly of the species attributed to concentrated elements from their evolution crystal.

Anthony jumped back and wiped another tear from his face. He tasted it and realized he was as human as Luna and Morley. This troubled him as thoughts of what it meant crawled through his mind. An archangel of the divine, he was no longer. Delivering the message had caused his plunge in to the world of the flesh creatures.

Anthony looked up to see her eyes moving beneath her closed lids. He could only imagine the horrific events she was envisioning. The boyish arch found his footing and slowly made his way out of the bedroom. It was an effort to move silently, to navigate in this world. Confused about what has taken place, Anthony stumbled out of the trailer. The neighbor's dog lifted its head and watched the agent. Anthony ran off into the darkness as the dog began barking. His mind was filling with the fear of what would become of him.

* * *

Luna's eyes shot open and she sat up. The room was too dark to reflect her green eyes changing to a brighter shade. This always happened when she felt threatened. She felt

something, like a train was coming only everything was still in the room. She could not breathe in anticipation, from what, she did not know. Her muscles were tensed up for some unseen impact. Morley was passed out drunk next to her. He barely stirred. Unable to breathe, she considered waking him. Then her body released, and her lungs filled with air. Something had happened, something that would change everything, something that she could sense was not supposed to happen.

The sound of the dog barking startled her. Luna closed her eyes and entered her thoughts.

Seattle: Pioneer Square

At one time it may have been a window. It may have been a window into the third story of a once proud building in Seattle's Pioneer Square District. The brick that now filled the arched frame was a brighter shade than that of the walls around it. The slight indent was all Jarrow needed as he perched above the dark alley. He sat among the crows and watched as the world decayed around him. Hundreds of years had passed since he was last called upon. He had forgotten how much he missed the embrace of Taruun. He had grown cold, eyes tinted with both love and hate. The arch had been awakened from his long slumber to again do his lord's bidding.

Jarrow carried a sealed message from his lord. It came shortly after he felt the anomaly. Jarrow contemplated what it meant. Why was his lord keeping such inauspicious secrets? Has his faith in his agents wavered? Jarrow could think of many reasons for that, but his love for his god was undeniable.

Jarrow was to deliver the message to the one who would speak the prophecy, one of his choosing. Jarrow had harvested three other worlds and this was the first time he had to deliver a message that did not fit into the cherub's plan. On the Day of Judgment, the agents would lead the righteous to paradise and destroy what remained. He knew the gig well, at least up until now. Something was wrong, though he could not feel it.

The rummaging of garbage and the shattering glass caught Jarrow's attention. The vagrant held little regard for the refuse that spilled over the lip of the dumpster and onto the stone cobbles of the alley. The smaller city creatures scurried away from his commotion. What this man searched for, Jarrow would not spend the time to find out, but he knew it was a common occurrence in this alley. "Another pig among pigs," the agent muttered. "Sick is the harvest."

Over the past century Jarrow had noticed a sharp decline in those he suspected would earn the privilege to be taken to the next world. Even as the population grows out of

control, it would only be a small group that would be harvested. This troubled him. When he worked on Evalseyah, the species were quick to embrace his lord and they rarely fell from his good grace. Jarrow's eyes widened. Perhaps the Taruun has given up on this world. If that were true, what would become of his agents?

Jarrow was quick to move behind the vagrant, who had his fingers wedged into the slot of the old toaster. The agent's eyes looked skyward with a slight grin. "And so your message shall be delivered. Behold..." Jarrow looked at the vagrant who was using his teeth to detach the threading of his glove from the coils of the toaster. "I give you the voice of your new prophecy." His hands raised up, with his palms down over the grease covered man, who cursed at his own insolence. Jarrow's fingers were slightly bent and spread apart. The seal was broken, the message delivered, and the burden was placed onto the vagrant.

Blood black as oil, seeped through the mortar between bricks and through the spaces between the cobbles of the alley floor.

The crows screamed into the alley. What they said, only Jarrow realized. The crows sang to the falling of the agent. They swarmed the narrow space above their heads. What little sunlight made it into the alley was blocked by the flurry of black wings.

Then it was all gone. Along with the crows and the blood, Jarrow's celestial form and his supernatural ability were gone. He was one of them, flesh and bone, another pig among pigs.

Farfax fell to his knees, as the message spun through his unsuspecting mind. His eyes rolled back into his head and he trembled. Jarrow stepped away looking at his own hands in disbelief. The vagrant was now looking around. His simple mind could not comprehend the information placed within it. His finger touched the trickle of blood that ran from his left nostril. Then he turned around and sat against the wall.

Jarrow stared at the homeless man. There were no crows, no black blood on the walls. His eyes searched for answers. He knew something was different. Something was wrong, out of place. Once he realized what had happened he felt anger. For the first time, his lungs filled with air, his heart began pumping, and his body pulled him down. His lips parted as his anger changed to sorrow. Tears fell from his eyes as he dropped down next to the vagrant. "Why?" His voice was without sound.

The homeless man began pulling himself away from the fallen agent. Then his anger returned to his face.

"What did he tell you?" Jarrow asked.

Farfax winced and shook his head. "Go fuck yourself," he spat. Jarrow grabbed the collar of the man's dirty overcoat.

"He wouldn't say that."

The vagrant gripped his wrist and twisted it until the agent's face hit the ground. Jarrow felt the pain of his arm twisting and glass cutting into his newfound flesh. He did not move from this position, even when the vagrant released his grip and stood up.

Jarrow wept as blood ran from his face onto the alley floor. "Forsaken!"

"What the fuck did you just do to me?" Farfax growled as he staggered back. "Implant some kind of brain control device?" His eyes were bulging out above his greasy face covered in uneven patches of growth. "I should kill you."

Jarrow sat up. "Kill?" He pulled himself to his feet using the side of the dumpster. "So he has told you to kill me?" The agent looked to the sky. "Of course."

"What did you put in my head?" Farfax yelled as he grabbed the agent by the woven fabric that has become his robe in this world.

Jarrow looked into his eyes. "I have given you the word of our beloved father." Jarrow was released to fall to the ground. "You hold within that molded brain of yours, the new prophecy of your world."

Farfax looked around the alley. He felt the agent's words to be true. The vagrant turned

to walk toward the street. Out of the alley, the brightness of the day blinded him. Everything was different. The way things moved, the way things radiated to him from every direction. Farfax knew from this point on, his world would never be the same.

California: Santa Cruz

K'rdea had waited several centuries for the day when he could again be with the chosen creatures. His banishment from human kind was a punishment handed down by his lord for interfering with their path to righteousness. K'rdea only wanted to play with them. He envied their ability to experience pleasure. His thirst to satisfy women in his physical form was forbidden. K'rdea was scarred and sent forth so that he could only watch their world from his icy exile of the planets southern axis, until the day of the apocalypse, until he was again called upon to do his lords bidding.

The woman was playfully leading him to a secluded area of the beach.

Even inside a human body, K'rdea's beauty shined through. The archs were irresistible in the eyes of mortals. This is why their true image was to be unseen by the weaker race. For K'rdea, or any other agent to take human form, they have to be invited in by the host. It was the law of Taruun, and most archs avoided possessing one of the harvest unless

necessary. To K'rdea, it was the only thing that kept him amused through the centuries.

For this uncoordinated fool, K'rdea found opportunity. The Cali Summer Surf competition was on the horizon and with K'rdea's influence, the surfer asked for assistance. It may have been a manipulation, but K'rdea knew the loopholes and learned ways of acquiring a host. He won the event, but K'rdea would use his body.

"How could I possibly choose a messenger without properly testing their ability to love?" K'rdea spoke aloud and the young girl turned to hear his words. K'rdea only smiled causing her to blush. He noted how much had changed over the past few centuries. She wore very little clothing, and felt no shame in her actions.

"Lay before me," K'rdea told her, and she knelt at his feet before laying back. The woman's big brown eyes never broke contact with the agent's piercing stare. She began removing her bikini, freely giving herself to him.

It wasn't physical pleasure that tempted him. He was unable to feel things of that nature. His lust was riddled with his jealousy for the pleasure she would feel. They were given so much, and yet they squandered it. K'rdea's eyes narrowed. Sensing his tension she touched him.

K'rdea raised his hands above the woman. His palms faced down. His fingers were

slightly bent and spread apart. “I will give you a gift from my lord.”

Then K’rdea found himself distracted from his new acquaintance. His eyes scanned the horizon as he felt the wind over his body. He felt the loss of his brethren. He could only interpret it as an act of betrayal. He could feel what was upon him. A trap set by his own lord. His hands returned to his sides. “Why now do you abandon us? What have we done to deserve ...”

K’rdea looked down at his mistress, who knelt before him. She again looked up. Then his eyes narrowed again. “Leave me,” he told her.

“What?” The woman gasped. Her disappointment was truly sincere. “Have I done something ...”

“Leave me!” he yelled as he turned away from her. His eyes continued to search the horizon for unseen answers.

“Please,” the woman said reaching for his leg. On contact, the air in her lungs turned to sand, as the skin from her hand turned gray and began spreading up her arm to the rest of her body until death encompassed her.

K’rdea felt nothing. He awaited the retaliation by his lord for killing one of his precious creatures. There was only the empty wind from the ocean waves. “I no longer feel your embrace,” K’rdea yelled to the sky. “You have

become weak and your world has become tainted.”

K'rdea returned to his celestial form as his host's body fell to the ground. “I will not be forsaken.”

Chapter 3

Contact

South Pacific: Solcom Island

Alexander Sarkolov stood, head tilted to the floor. His hand rubbed the stubble on his chin. There was silence in the command room. All they could do was to wait for communication. “How long has it been?”

“Three hours, nineteen minutes,” Yuri answered and put the display on the light boards for viewing.

The doors to the command room slid open to an entourage of well-dressed Japanese men.

It was clear which one was the ranking member. His suit was bolder than the others. It looked as if the detail of advisors had been tailored to enhance his position of power. It was Kohiro Sukihari, the CEO of Solcom Global.

Alexander was impressed that he himself showed up.

There was a look of great concern on Kohiro’s face as he glanced around. “Have you located the Empire Builder?”

“We wait,” Alexander answered. He did not bow like Dr. Kazaki. The Russians were defiant to say the least. They realized their value

to this corporation, even on the brink of disaster.

“Are you certain that there was a collision?”

Yuri stood. “There was an event picked up in that location by the light collector.”

“Why did we not see this coming?” Kohiro continued his questioning.

“It is very small and very fast,” Dr. Kazaki answered.

“It is uh ... anomaly.” Alexander sat in his chair. “Kind of like rogue.”

“This is unacceptable,” Kohiro barked.

“We prepare second explorer,” Alexander suggested.

“There is too much risk.”

“The crew will need ride back.”

Kohiro watched the hologram of the projected impact. “Your crew is dead Commander Sarkolov,” Kohiro told him. “Why risk another?”

“We have two teams investigating matter,” Alexander said, “one for rescue and one to find out what went wrong.”

“Rescue?” Kohiro spun around. “You mean recovery.”

Alexander shrugged. “Rescue, recovery, maybe I use wrong word.”

“If I may,” Dr. Kazaki spoke up. “Chances of survival are fifteen hundred to one.”

“No,” Alexander shouted as he sprung from his chair. “Asteroid hit starboard engine, under re-entry shield. Fuel lines cut.” He was

pounding his fist into his open hand. “They live!”

“You are a fool,” Dr. Kazaki lashed.

Kohiro looked between them.

“Empire Builder to command. Ca ... you ... r me?” Captain Anastocia Chenski’s voice flooded the command room. No one spoke as heads turned toward the blank monitor. “Em ... re Buil ... to ... mand.” It was a voice that would forever be remembered by those who were there to hear it. It was as if they had just witnessed a miracle, and maybe, in some way, they had.

Texas: Don Silver’s Trailer Ranch

“What the fuck is your problem?” Morley snapped from next to her on the bed. The neighbor’s dog had wakened him.

“I felt something,” Luna spoke after catching her breath.

“I didn’t feel anything,” he lashed.

“It was ... far away.”

“Well Jeezus H Christ Luna,” he shouted, “we better crawl under the trailer.”

Luna got out of bed and walked out of the room. Her purple robe pulled off the door handle and flung over her shoulders in one sweeping motion. Her arms were quick to find the sleeves.

Morley rolled over and stared at the ceiling.

“It’s not like I asked for it,” she shouted from the kitchen.

“Did you take your fucking medicine?”

Luna had been taking her medicine, and until now her mind was so numb she couldn’t see things anymore. She pulled the bottle down from on top of the microwave oven. The feeling was still with her. Usually things come and go, but it was still there and something was very wrong about it.

Morley stumbled out of the bedroom. “You better not be calling that psycho friend of yours.”

“He’s the only one who understands,” she said to herself. Whether or not he could hear her, she no longer cared.

“Understands how fucked in the head you both are.” He pulled a beer from the fridge.

Luna watched him drink it from the reflection in the kitchen window. It was four in the morning. How did he become this way? Her eyes moved to her own reflection in the dark window. The girl with the strawberry blond hair no longer held that glow. She was only twenty-four years old. How did things turn out like this? She looked down at the bottle of pills. She half smiled, as she realized what she had been doing to herself all these years. Now something had entered her and opened her eyes. “Don’t light that,” Luna warned as Morley put a cigarette into his mouth.

“Why not?”

“Because the stove is leaking again.”

Morley scowled and cursed. His words no longer affected her. She could tell he was blaming her for this new problem. He turned and bent down to open the oven door. Luna’s lips curled up just before the skillet hit him on the back of the head.

South Pacific: Solcom Island

“What is status?” Alexander asked in a way that sounded like everything was in complete control.

“We are okay,” Stozi announced to cheers from the command room. “We were hit by object. We have stabilized our craft and Dreeggo has obviously brought up communications.”

“He is outside?” Dr. Kazaki asked.

“We had no choice,” the captain answered. Her voice seemed unruffled by the events that had taken place only a few hours earlier. She was a leader, and when selected for the mission, there was no opposition. “What is plan, Sarko?” Only his closest friends called him Sarko, and Stozi couldn’t be closer.

“We are downloading data from the Empire Builder now,” Yuri told Alexander.

“We are still assessing situation,” Alexander answered her. The video feed finally came through and there was a short silence as they stared at each other. It warmed him to see her again, though it was impossible to tell. Her

brown hair barely grazed her collar. They kept their emotions in check.

Stozi glanced off screen. "I see."

"I will make every effort to bring you home."

"I know you will commander. I know you will." Her voice was calm.

Alexander read one of the boards, a message from Yuri. "You have two small leaks in your life support. Shut off transmitter to save power source, and repair leaks." He looked at another board. "Reestablish communication in seventeen minutes."

"Anderchuk is already working on leaks," she informed him. Then she glanced away again. "We talk again in ten minutes." The image disappeared.

Alexander looked at Dr. Kazaki. "They live."

"This changes nothing," Kohiro announced. "We cannot risk the second explorer."

"The odds of first collision are well over ten million to ..."

"Yet it happened!" Kohiro interrupted Yuri.

"He is right," Dr. Kazaki said. "Never before have we tracked an asteroid at this speed with so little regard for gravitational pull."

"Is this the first in a series of uncharted asteroids, doctor?" Kohiro asked. There were no answers.

Texas: Don Silver's Trailer Ranch

Luna managed to pack her backpack before Morley came to. Luckily the trailer door didn't burst open until the Baja started.

"Get the fuck back here!" he shouted.

"Eat shit!" Luna shouted back at him sarcastically, and then the Volkswagen died. "Shit!"

The Baja was the one of the few things she had left from before she met Morley. She was an indigo child born white in Navajo lands. Her parents were spiritual and free thinking. They looked at the world differently than most. She would later find out they were called hippies. "Stinky hippies" Morley would say.

Luna quickly restarted it, but it had already put Morley into motion. He came around to the driver's side.

She threw it into reverse and backed over his foot before pulling out of the driveway. "I should have done this a year ago."

"I will hunt you down!" Morley screamed as he limped across the oil stained ground under the carport canopy. His old ford truck sat with the hood removed.

Luna shook her head. "Like that things gonna run," she yelled back at him.

Then she could see the headlights spin in the darkness behind her as she drove through the trailer park. She darted out of the en-

trance and headed for El Paso with the truck in pursuit. "When did he fix that?" she asked herself. Then as the on-ramp to the highway approached, they came under a streetlight and she could see the smoke billowing out of the engine. It made her smile.

Morley could not judge the turn for the on-ramp to Interstate 10 or he was too angry, but the truck went straight into the retention pond of the cloverleaf on-ramp.

Luna slowed to watch his demise and finally stopped on the overpass and got out. He kicked the door open. "Bitch," she yelled down to him, "here's your fucking pills." She threw the bottle with the cap removed and the tiny yellow pills showered the half filled pond all around him.

The thunderstorm that had rolled though earlier that night had collected enough water to prevent him from driving back out. Luna performed her patented booty dance, before strutting back to her multicolored Baja. Then she noticed him reaching for his gun rack.

"Damn!" She moved with a purpose, but the bug died on contact with the seat. "I'm gonna have to get this seat fixed." It restarted again on the first try and the side rear window shattered. She tore onto the highway toward the state line.

Chapter 4

The Crystal

Addis Ababa

Skelton dunked his head in an aluminum wash basin and pulled it out, splashing water everywhere.

Nen sat on the porch overlooking the valley. He sat cross-legged in meditation. His laptop was open just a few feet away.

“I don’t mean to disturb you, but shouldn’t we find a new team?” Skelton wiped some water out of his eyes..

“The slavers will not return here,” Nen told him.

“Why or how do you know that?”

“The Ethiopian military is securing the city. The UN is sending a coalition.”

“So we’re done here?” Skelton looked around.

“We were done when our team betrayed us.”

“What’s next?”

“I don’t know.” Nen opened his eyes to watch a trail of dust move down the dirt road toward them. “I need medicine not found here.”

“Let’s go home,” Skelton suggested with a hidden sense of joy.

The Land Rover pulled up to the shanty they inhabited on the outskirts of the city. The driver got out and quickly opened the passenger door. The driver was Asian, something uncommon in Ethiopia.

I'll be damned, Nen said to himself.

“Is that your teacher?” Skelton watched as another Asian man pulled himself out of the vehicle.

Nen stood as Oda Sy walked up. His right fist into his open left hand and he slowly bowed never taking his eyes off of him.

Oda Sy returned a less formal bow. “You are injured.” His eyes were trained to notice his student’s movements. “Or you’re getting old?”

“Both.” Nen stepped aside as Oda Sy climbed onto the porch and bowed to Skelton.

“Those cookies Mamma B sent were tasty,” Skelton said.

“She good cook.” Oda Sy smiled. “I make good choice with her.”

“Just happen to be in the neighborhood?” Nen asked as his master entered behind him.

“No, I come a long way to see my favorite student.”

Nen smirked and walked into the house. It had been twenty-five years since he was a student. He poured a glass of whiskey and offered some to Oda Sy, already knowing the answer.

“I need your help.” Oda Sy appeared old, but Nen had no idea how old Oda Sy really was. His skin still held a youthful complexion yet his mannerisms and wisdom seemed ancient.

“You personally?” Nen asked.

“It is very important.” Oda Sy looked at the décor of their shanty. “I would never ask otherwise.”

Nen took a drink. “I thought you were uninvolved.”

“Uninvolved?” Oda Sy chuckled. “Do not confuse our paths, my young friend.”

“I’m thirty-eight. You can stop calling me that.”

“Your path is a simple one. To stand for those who cannot stand for themselves.” Oda Sy twisted a grin. “My path is more complicated.”

“What is your path?”

“I am no longer sure. Things have come up.”

Nen stared at his sensei for several seconds. He remembered how impossible it was to ask him anything. “Important things?”

“Yes.”

“Problems?”

“Yes, problems,” Oda Sy snapped.

“And they are soon to be my problems?”

Nen lifted his glass to take a drink.

“They are everybody’s problems.” Oda Sy snatched the glass before it touched Nen’s lips. Not a drop was spilled.

“Why me and not one of your younger students?”

“I trust you more,” Oda Sy told him, before Nen snatched the glass back. “You have grown from someone who retrieves groceries for the elderly, to someone who can pull a tribe back from extinction.”

“Thank you, may I retire now? I’m ready to be normal again.” Nen drank his whiskey before Oda Sy could take it back.

“This is normal for a Shogii Warrior. To change this, would create sadness, anger, and confusion. You have contributed more to your society than any one person of your generation.”

“Did I? Or did you? I don’t feel I do this under my own free will.”

“To do this for twenty-five years is far beyond any that I have trained. Others have died or corrupted their minds. My words have left your head years ago.”

Nen remembered his endless ranting. He heard it years after, but never realized it had stopped. His mind assumed the words were there. He shook his head and poured another drink. “I want to stop now.”

“Not easy to darken the skies.”

“Nothing has come very easy lately.”

“There is a man I know. His name is Sodoi,” Oda Sy began. “He speaks of a danger that walks among us, of a contamination to human kind.”

Nen narrowed his eyes. “A plague? We’re in Africa, look around, they are all dying of one thing or another.”

“No,” Oda Sy quieted him. “This threat comes from beyond this world, my y ... friend. This Sodoi has become a medium, words flow from him like a river.”

Nen smirked, about to take a drink.

Oda Sy again snatched the glass from his hand. His eyes looked Nen over. “Your path has come to its end.”

“Thank God,” Nen said snatching the glass back without spilling a drop.

“An interesting choice of words,” Oda Sy spoke under his breath. “A new path lies before you.”

“Talk to my agent,” Nen motioned to Skelton across the room. He was cleaning his sniper rifle for packaging.

Oda Sy was quiet for a while. Obviously thinking over his next words carefully. “I am of a wisdom that has shaped this world for thousands of years.”

“Why didn’t you teach me this wisdom?”

“You do not teach a mouse the mouse trap. It was not my place to interfere.”

“Interfere with what?”

Oda Sy shook his head. "These things you must learn on your own, and I have no doubt that you will." Oda Sy didn't give Nen a chance to react. "Pay attention to the planet as a whole. Look beyond what is shown to you."

"My Path ..."

"This is where your path leads, then you can stop." Oda Sy spoke in finality. He turned to leave. There was little warmth in his visit. Whatever was going on troubled him. Oda Sy was not one to be troubled by things.

Nen did not speak. He finished his glass and watched Oda Sy get back into the Land Rover. "This must be important," he told Skelton who walked up scratching his beard.

"He seemed rattled," Skelton commented.

"He did."

"So are we getting his groceries for him?"

Nen reached for the bottle, but instead found a satchel with a CD inside. The bottle was missing. Nen watched it pour onto the dusty road from Oda Sy's outstretched hand as the Land Rover pulled away.

South Pacific: Solcom Island

"Communications reestablished," Yuri announced. The image of Captain Stozi appeared again.

"I have discovery to report," she told them. "Lieutenant Dreeggo has removed a piece of the asteroid from the hull."

This information created great interest in the command room. “What is it?” Alexander asked.

She looked off screen for a second then turned back. “I will let him show you.” Alexander noted her uneasiness to the situation.

Lt. Nicoli Dreeggo walked in front of the camera. His eyes were lifeless and empty.

“Are you okay lieutenant?” Alexander asked, noticing his appearance.

“I am fine commander,” he answered and held up a crystal with both hands. It was only the size of a large pineapple. The colors were a brilliant swirl of aqua blue and magenta. It almost appeared to glow.

“Why are you holding space debris in your bare hands?” Alexander scolded.

Dreeggo lowered the crystal. He looked slightly confused. It was completely out of character to his usual confident and arrogant demeanor. His hand went to his forehead. “I know,” he said rubbing his temple. “You will come and get us now, right Commander.”

Stozi intervened yelling at him in Russian.

After sending him away she returned to the camera.

“What is happening on your ship, captain?” Alexander asked.

“Your lieutenant refuses to part with his new discovery. If we didn’t need him to bring coms up and down we would sedate him and put him into stasis,” she told them. “The crys-

tal does seem to be energy source. I can feel it at five meters.”

Dreeggo was not her choice of second in command. His experience and talents were well known, and she obviously knew they would still be drifting silently through space without him. Dreeggo would accept no lesser position on the crew, so Alexander made the call against the recommendation of Anastocia.

“Keep eye on Dreeggo, captain. He seems a little ...”

“Strange?” She finished his sentence. Her eyes located the lieutenant’s position in the cabin before continuing. “Lt. Dreeggo’s health is deteriorating rapidly. I’m not sure at what point we will have to tranquilize him.”

“Be careful,” Alexander told her. He knew she was capable of handling the situation, but it was also important to appear in control. Both the commander and the captain knew what was at stake. “Reestablish communication in ten minutes,” Alexander said, Stози nodded and again and her image disappeared.

“What was that thing?” Kohiro asked Dr. Kazaki.

“I do not know,” he answered as Yuri pulled the images back up onto the main light board. He was zooming in from several angles.

“We must act soon before it’s too late,” Alexander spoke up.

“I will need time to review this situation,” Kohiro stated.

“Give me authority to begin preparation for rescue,” Alexander pressed the issue. “Let me at least get second explorer into orbit with space station.”

“I answer to a board of directors, commander. These decisions are not easily made,” Kohiro said in a quieter voice.

Alexander nodded. “Won’t this ‘board’ be surprised to learn that mission not total loss?” He looked at Kohiro. “We may have found the exact thing we were looking for.”

West Texas

Many miles away Luna had pulled over. She sat by a dry riverbed, all was calm at last, and the stars dotted the sky. She laid back and thought of Morley. When she was sixteen, he was so cool, so different. He was so accepting of her psychic ability — or maybe he just wanted a piece of ass.

Luna was beautiful. Her green eyes always viewed the world in a curious way. She was in touch with the natural movement of things and flowed with disregard of consequence. Had she listened to the warnings, she wouldn’t have ended up in west Texas with someone like Morley. She had always taken responsibility for how he turned out, because he was once such a gentleman. Or was he? He was just like his father.

Luna thought of Anthony. He would come to her every night. He was shy. Luna had be-

gun to doubt his very existence, but now something was different. He was with her earlier when she woke up. Luna's eyes darted around as she tried her best to recall the events, but her memories were of things that never happened, things that didn't make sense.

After several minutes of searching her mind, Luna realized that her memories carried a message. This is what had entered her. It was a message or instructions, only in the form of visions and not words. After she was able to decipher the images, she sat back on the riverbank and realized what it was telling her to do.

“Alaska?”

Chapter 5

The stone

California: Death Valley

K'rdea watched the sun set on the Stone of Ugra. Its shadow spilled upon the broken Earth of the Death Valley floor.

This was a place found by the unfortunate and never spoken of. To find the Ugra stone would forever change one's life, as if the gradual stroke of evil brushed onto the soul like blood onto a canvass. Omo Ugra claimed all those who found themselves lost in the desert. The fallen agent would patiently watch his prey through the eyes of the circling buzzards.

"Come out you bastard," K'rdea spat at the stone. His image in the Salentarium realm was a reflection of Michael Angelo's Arellious. It was created out of perfection and destroyed before anyone else laid eyes on it. "I need answers."

"You speak to it like it's some kind of living thing," a hollow voice erupted from behind the agent.

K'rdea turned to see a sun charred figure before a backdrop of purple horizon.

"I do not live in a rock," the figure grumbled.

K'rdea smirked at Ugra's appearance. The demon used the body of the lost hiker. With

an offer of salvation he was able to walk the prime realm inside the flesh of the mortal.

“This look is very fitting for you,” K’rdea taunted. “Pathetic, suffering ...” He looked over the demon’s host with disgust. A backpack was dragging behind him by one strap.

“This is Death Valley. You get what you get.” Ugra’s voice was dry and gravely, “The desperation of the lost and dying.” When he spoke it was not the voice of the hiker, but his own.

“What do you know, Devil?” K’rdea got to the point.

“Whoa, hold on now. Don’t get all religious on me,” Ugra protested. “I am more than a storybook creature.”

“You’re a cancer,” K’rdea insulted, as his form dematerialized and rematerialized atop the Ugra stone. “I know your sons have told you what is going on.”

“You don’t know?” Omo Ugra slogged the ruined body toward the rock. “That in itself is both interesting and amusing.” K’rdea moved again to an elevated position at his back, as Ugra pushed on the stone. The tall narrow rock moved slowly until its weight pulled it down to the ground with a heavy thud. A door had been opened up in the Earth. The red flickering glow of hell fire reflected on the rocky edges of the hole.

The hiker’s body cracked like porcelain hitting a tile floor. Orange light emitted from

within like an erupting caldera. Ugra's true form pulled itself away from the hiker's shell. He was death reborn. His eyes burned deep red out of a shroud of darkness. Its form changing shapes like cobwebs caught in a breeze. From below what could be considered as a robe, came a spiked boot stepping away from the hiker.

K'rdea watched as consciousness reentered the unknowing man. Confused and in pain, he kicked his feet to get away. The screams were not a product of fear, but the agony of scorched skin and dehydrated muscles.

Ugra turned his back on K'rdea to grab the hiker. It was a sign that he did not feel threatened by the agent. "Why did you come here?" Ugra asked as he dragged the flailing man by the back of his neck.

K'rdea did not use the opportunity to strike. He watched the dark entity toss his victim toward the flaming pit. The hiker could not see the hole. His eyes had dried out a few miles back. The pit began to suck in everything near it as if it sensed Ugra's prey.

The demon watched the struggle as he came up behind him. His boot lifted and kicked the hiker into the pit. Flames erupted and suddenly silenced. "There's nothing like the smell of sulfur at dusk," Ugra announced as he gave his attention back to the agent.

“Is the Narcus behind this?” K’rdea asked, hiding any emotions he held for the murder he had just witnessed.

Ugra’s current form made it impossible for K’rdea to read his reaction. “He actually adores the agents left behind. They were ... how do I say it ... not the crème of the crop, so to speak. One might say your stewardship of this world is a final test of your worthiness.”

“What do you know?”

“That is my point, K’rdea.” The form moved around as if facing the agent for the first time. “You are blind, you are forsaken.”

“I will not allow it.” K’rdea began making slow orbits around the demon. He would not let him set up for an attack. “I will find my place among his ranks once again.”

“Have you really come here to slay me?” Ugra laughed. His voice seemed to echo, not off of the distant mesas, but from within. “Do you really think he cares about either one of us anymore?”

“Of course he does.” K’rdea felt his own doubt manifesting. “His harvest depends on it.”

“Oh, his harvest,” Ugra spoke with more laughter. “You truly are blind to the universe. There is little hope for you my ... friend.”

“I hold the fourth sealed message.”

“You can’t read it,” Ugra pointed out. “Perhaps we can find another lost hiker and deliver the message, before torturing him ...

or her.” The dark form flickered like flames upon dry leaves.

“Perhaps it is the calling for the demise of the Legion of Omo.”

“You haven’t been paying attention, forsaken one. Taruun has changed his ... master plan. He has rewritten the prophecy and guess who lost their lead roles?”

“No,” K’rdea stopped his circling. “You spit lies.”

“You are no longer needed puppet,” Ugra’s words tore through K’rdea and twisted like a knife. “Go fuck your pigs, for your time has come to its end. This planet will be ours very soon.”

K’rdea was paralyzed of movement. “How?”

Ugra released him. “He will give it to us.” The demon spoke casually as he twisted his form to lift the stone back into place.

“Why would he turn on his precious creatures?”

“Only those loyal Omo hold that knowledge,” Ugra spoke slowly. “The house of the fallen.”

“Do you expect me to become one of you?”

“No, it’s impossible for you to enter our world with that message tied to your back,” Ugra told him. “A simple renouncing will suffice.”

“You think you can trick me?” K’rdea asked. His patience was dwindling.

Ugra moved slowly into the darkening desert. K'rdea followed him. "When this planet is ours, where will you be?"

K'rdea did not answer at first. "Paradisia"
"Please," the fallen nearly laughed. "You killed one of the harvest."

K'rdea cringed as the demon reminded him of the fact. "What do you want from me?"

Ugra turned his dark form to K'rdea. "One of my legion reports from Solcom Global. Do you know of this corporation?"

"I don't pay attention to their world. I was in exile." K'rdea reminded him.

"They have breached the boundaries," Ugra referred to the atmosphere. "They brought something back. It may be the seed of this development."

"A crystal?"

"Yes," Ugra stopped walking and turned to the agent. "We are blind to its intent or origin. Perhaps you can go to it."

"Is it an Apocalypse Crystal?" K'rdea asked. "That doesn't make sense."

"It's not the crystal that my spy reports about, but the one it has taken possession of." Ugra's form fluttered. "It will taint the chosen species."

"Why would you tell me this?" K'rdea narrowed his eyes.

"If Taruun is to abandon this world, then now is the time to manifest power," Ugra spoke cautiously.

“You plot against the Narcus,” K’rdea realized. “You want my help.”

“I offer you an opportunity.”

“Taruun will send an apocalypse crystal before giving you this planet.”

“You have killed one of his harvest on the ocean beach. There was no retaliation.” Ugra became still. “Do you feel his embrace?”

“No,” K’rdea admitted. “Perhaps I could regain his favor.” A blade of shimmering light emitted from his hand.

“Yet you speak to me as if he would protect you.”

The reality of it was disturbing to K’rdea.

“You are no match for the Legion of Omo. Don’t burn all of your bridges, forsaken one.”

K’rdea searched his mind for answers. “I will learn the truth,” he told him. “Until then, I am not among you.”

“Perhaps the truth is in your message.”

“Then it will forever be lost.”

Interstate 25: Colorado Springs

“You haven’t told me where we’re going.” Arthur looked out the passenger window. “I felt it too you know,” his voice always held a combination of whiny spoiled brat and eccentric snob.

“Did she contact you?” Luna asked.

“She who?” he asked, “I think it was the earthquake in Ethiopia.”

“No,” Luna immediately disagreed. “It came from up above.”

“What did it tell you, dear?”

“She ... told me to go to Alaska.”

“Alas ... Do you know how far that is?” he ranted. “I did not pack for arctic weather.”

“Arty,” she shouted, “this is very, very important.”

“Did she tell you to drag your psychic friend with you?” he asked. “Did she tell you to rip him away from the life he worked so hard to ... ?”

“You’re a shoe salesman. I doubt that position will be filled before you get back.”

“How dare you!” He was near hyperventilating. “I am a palm reader and my clients depend on me.”

“Who helped you when the possum got in your trailer?” Luna looked at him.

Arthur bit his bottom lip before answering. “You did.” He spoke very quietly.

“And who comforted you after they cancelled Days of our Lives?” She asked and Arthur cringed. “Who has to come over in the middle of the night and save you from those fuzzy little spiders?”

“You do.” His voice was barely audible.

Luna smiled and waited for Arthur to look at her. “It will be like a vacation.” She smiled.

He calmed down and fumbled through his bag. “I’m just glad you left that monster.” He

was nearly in tears. Arthur instinctively began biting his nails.

“Stop biting your nails,” Luna told him as an old promise to break him of this habit.

Arthur's hands quickly went to his lap in frustration.

Luna rolled her eyes and turned on the radio.

They passed over mountains and through small towns. Luna slept in the passenger seat during the rare occasions that Arthur drove. He would not drive in heavy traffic, inclement weather, or at night.

She remembered her life before she met Morley. It was a life of no boundaries. She did what she wanted and developed her psychic ability. She met Morley at a music festival. He was nicer then. She wanted to share her world with him, but somehow her world was swallowed up by his world. She was not sure how it happened, possibly her lack of grounding against his pre-programmed survival instincts.

Luna remembered yearning for his mother's approval. She wanted to know how to make him happy. It was his failures that made her change. She wanted to help him, to make him stronger, and that was when she started suppressing her psychic ability. She had no longer desired to be different. Her heightened abilities threatened Morley's confidence and the evangelical movement twisted his mother.

Luna was free now. It was like being born again. People like Arthur took it for granted. She felt like her old self again. She was going to Alaska on a whim, or was she? Blindly following a voice in her head, she didn't know why. Perhaps it was the path she had strayed from years ago, a path to enlightenment.

Perhaps it was Anthony.

Empire Builder

The crew would enter stasis and wait for the Empire II to arrive. With the damage done, they would not risk docking with the Empire Builder. They remained in their damaged explorer as they were towed back to Earth.

Nicoli Dreeggo did not sleep. He watched the planet draw near as they moved faster than the speed of light. This was accomplished through the static drives and the repulsion field.

Solcom had perfected the science behind closed doors, and dazzled the world when they announced their plans to travel to distant planets. Kohiro would never give the stockholders a chance to second-guess their decision to invest in possibilities. His team understood that the moons of the solar system could be the next gold rush and Solcom would be one step ahead.

Dreeggo paced as he looked at the crystal. It was in his blood and his mind. He wasn't sure

how it had infected him or what the end result would be. Looking down at his hands, Dreeggo had a realization. If they were to learn the nature of the infection and how to cure it, than Dreeggo would need others to be infected as well. Before entering stasis like the rest, Dreeggo found a way to accomplish his agenda.