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Kill the Bastard!

Michael McKuin

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Kill the Bastard

By

Michael L. McKuin

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Zo Media Production

Dedication

My children: Lucian, Lillian, and Xara. You all keep daddy's imagination alive.

To my family: my mother, stepfather, sister, and her husband, Albert. My niece and nephews, love you.

To Joy, for being such an incredible and amazing person. Thank you for finding me.

Liz Guild, you gave me hope when I thought it was gone.

To my amazing Sister Diana, brother Frank, Aunt Myra, Aunt Sheryl, Grandpa Cuppa, and all my nieces, nephews, and cousins.

To my friends: Alex Castillo his loved one Jenny and their children, Christopher Velasquez, Dustin Kelley, Oscar McNatt, Thomas "Taz" Tenor, Josh Phipps, his beautiful

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daughter Uncle Michael loves you! J.R. Velasquez, Ivan Kilgore for his support and believing in my writing.

To Nathan Allen, I wish I could have done more. I should have been there. Rest in peace brother.

*Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me Man, did I solicit thee
From darkness to promote me?*

—Paradise Lost, X, 743-45

When I run over the frightful catalogue of my sins, I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness. But it is even so; the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolations; I am alone.

—Frankenstein by Mary W. Shelley

Remember this, Tyler said. The people you're trying to step on, we're everyone you depend on. We're the people who

do your laundry and cook your food and serve your dinner. We make your bed. We guard you while you're asleep. We drive the ambulances. We direct your call. We are cooks and taxi drivers and we know everything about you. We process your insurance claims and credit card charges. We control every part of your life.

We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won't. And we're just learning this fact, Tyler said. So don't fuck with us.

—Tyler Durden, Fight Club by Chuck Palahniuk, Yes, there was a book....

Chapter 1

Dark clouds plagued the midnight sky. The heavens cried pouring rain on the barren land of the damned. Patches of dying grass and weeds spread throughout the once hard cracked soil that now was mud. Tombstones protruded in uneven rows. Their markers were decayed very much like the planet they had tried so hard to save. It was an already dead world. It was the year 2524 and all life was struggling to survive.

The rain holds a gothic beauty I suppose, Thirteen said to himself. He was a biogenetic experiment, infused with organic matter found on a planet long destroyed with unknown mystic minerals to alter one's DNA.

The iron fence and thick chains and padlock kept him from entering. *For the moment anyways*, he thought to himself. With the wave of his hand a flaming star suddenly appeared

inside a circle. The star spun around and faded as the padlock and chains fell to the ground with a wet splash, sinking into the mud.

Thirteen, never one to marvel at his supernatural abilities, slowly opened the iron fence and stepped across the threshold. Lightning struck in the sky, illuminating the area for a split second followed by a clap of thunder. He then scanned the graveyard and noticed the mausoleum. It stood out like a beacon.

I know I will find what I have been searching for inside.

The stained-glass doors eased open as he stepped through the doorway. Lightning laminated the room as if a light switch flickered on-and-off.

There she sat, huddled against the back wall between two coffins, soaking wet. She shivered as she looked up at him with terrified slanted eyes. Her eyes glowed in the dark a rich emerald green. She held a haunting look that rattled him to the core.

“Unlike the others, I don’t take pleasure in my purpose,” he said as he approached her with great caution and concern for his safety. “It’s exactly the opposite. I despise it. Yet I am created to do this, to rid the world of monsters, the ‘flawed’.”

She hung her head, and her black matted hair hid her slender face and haunting eyes.

“You know what I am here for.” He stepped closer.

“I was only defending myself. That man came at me. I just wanted to be left alone,” she cried in an attempt to save her dreaded soul.

Thirteen looked away and slowly said, “None of that matters to me. You broke a law, not to be in any Havens and not to steal from people in Havens.”

“I was only hungry. I took a cabbage and that man attacked me, what was I supposed to do?” she cried, biting her bottom lip. She was young.

“Regardless, you shouldn’t have been in Haven, and you shouldn’t have killed that man. You knew the consequences; you knew they would send us for you,” Thirteen quipped.

She whimpered and plead, “But your just like us, you’re a flawed like me! The only difference is that they created you as an attack dog. Their own personal Hellhound. Who’s to say they won’t turn on you and your kind one day?”

He met her eyes and thought, *so beautiful how they glow*, then said, “That would never happen, we protect them.”

“Protect them from what?!” she spat. “From people that are different from how they perceive a perfect world with perfect beings? They are flawed just as much as we are!” Instantly, her bottom jaw split in half and flared out like a cobra.

Thirteen’s eyes glowed with fire as he quickly reached for his hip-holster, drawing his plasma revolver—a throwback invention he had specially made to give him that western edge. It winded with an electronic charge and grew green in the chambers and barrel. “I’m not like you.”

A tear ran down her face. “No, your worse. You’re a Bastard.”

“I am. I am a Bastard.” He gritted his teeth before pulling the trigger. The green charge found its mark.

Chapter 2

About an hour later, Thirteen pulled up on an Air Glider ML130666. It was a relic of a 2025 Harley Davidson motorcycle that had been modified and equipped with a gravity pulse regulator that provided a magnetic energy source. Its wheels now would turn sideways with the push of a button and levitate with a glowing green energy source. It had carried him some 600 miles at lightning speed across the dying landscape to reach a city of stone and metal: the Haven.

Before him stood a 100-foot steel wall surrounded with spotlights, razor wire, and armed guards. A futuristic city of glass towers, concrete buildings of old, paved roads and land, gardens, farms and factories—the Haven was a city that was supposed to offer safety, peace, and prosperity for people to thrive once again. Sadly, it was only prolonging the inevitable,

prolonging death in a dying world. For how long, he could not say. It was not his place to say. He only did what they created him to do, that's all; serve the Leader. Protect the city. Protect the Haven. Hunt the monsters or whatever creatures that threatened it. In return, he was given a life to live within the Haven as long as he served his purpose. Thirteen would have a place in Haven and never looked upon as different. He guessed a good kind of different. A necessary different. A different they had made, created, controlled.

A guard in exo-skeleton black armor waved him to a stop, and Thirteen stretched his wrist out for him to scan his identification number. Thirteen saw his I.D. flash in the guard's visor: shaved head and red eyes.

Sitting on the glider, hovering, dressed in black, the guard glanced at Thirteen again, then said, "You're clear number Thirteen. The Leader wants to see you."

Thirteen gave a slight nod and proceeded through the entrance as it rolled open. After entering the Haven, the massive steel door rolled closed behind him. The streets were crowded with people and machines, cars both hovering and driving. Metallic service droids were cleaning the sidewalks, catering to people in little diners and bars with holographic images of the establishments' names shining brightly.

Eventually, he would reach the tallest skyscraper in the center of the city. A building separated in the middle and held up by magnets, so the top of the structure floated and rotated. This was how they were provided energy; powerful reusable energy for all vehicles so they could levitate and travel for as long as the magnetic energy allowed. Usually, the vehicles

would fall apart and decay before the energy ran out. But not Thirteen's Harley.

The Leader, a middle-aged woman who was the powerful creator, put so many of the Havens together. She was the head council of the other leaders who controlled the other Havens. The Leader was the first to create Thirteen's kind to protect the Havens and all that lived in them.

The Glider landed in front of a glass palace and Thirteen stepped off. The building held floor after floor of shops, restaurants, clothing stores, bars, and housing units. A security droid then scanned Thirteen's wrist. He waited patiently.

"Proceed," the droid crackled.

The glass door opened and Thirteen stepped inside. Before him stood many influential and wealthy people. Numerous security droids, human officers, and service droids occupied the space as well. He looked out at the people walking by. They glanced at him briefly, then turned away quickly to avoid eye contact. *Getting the feeling I disgust them*, he thought. He had heard their snide remarks about Thirteen's kind in the past. He ignored them. It was none of his concern.

He quickly walked over to the elevator and the doors closed. A gentle push sent him up. He stood there looking through the glass, thinking of the concrete jungle and beyond that, a barren dying land filled with ruined cities of the past to forever haunt the world of mistakes. Ruined cities where the Flaw thrived.

The elevator reached the part of the building where it separated from the top half. It continued floating up, being pulled by the top floating half of the building, which turned the

elevator upside down as it kept him upright. Finally reaching the top floor he came to a stop and exited.

Another armed guard in exo-skeleton armor greeted him and opened the door to the penthouse suite.

The Leader sat behind a grand piano playing a song that she had heard in the data archives of a time long ago. The irises of Thirteen's eyes glowed red and their eyes locked on one another. Her eyes were blue and would change to grey. One would think that such a brilliant radiant color such as that would be filled with life, but her's were lifeless like the land beyond the walls. She smiled as she stood up grabbing her martini glass which sat on the piano seat next to her. Her teeth, white and perfect, matched her porcelain doll like skin. The Leader gracefully swept her hand across her snow-white shoulder length hair. Like her and this city, nothing was to be flawed, only perfect.

He kneeled before her.

She casually strolled to the center of the room between them and asked, "Did you dispose of that filthy vermin?"

The flawed woman's glowing emerald eyes haunted his memory. "I have."

The Leader smiled, showing off her blue lipstick. Her lips erected from her white robed garments. "Good, I am very pleased. Did you bring me her head?" she asked.

He remained kneeled. "There was no head to take."

Approaching him she slid her blue painted finger nailed hand elegantly across his shaved head and replied, "I am a little disappointed by that, but grateful for the service, nonetheless. You are my best." Her touch was cold like death itself.

"What did she do wrong?" he asked.

The Leader raised her white eyebrow.

He continued, “She said she was hungry, and the man attacked first.”

Her lifeless eyes seemed to be piercing through him.

“Had a conversation, did we?”

Thirteen regretted saying anything now. “She was ranting a helpless plea to save her own life.”

The Leader turned her gaze away from him. “Hmmm...does not matter what she did. That vile creature broke a law, no flaw in my city and no stealing. She should not have entered if she had wanted to live.”

“Understood my Leader.”

“Good, enjoy the rest of your night number Thirteen.”

Rising back to his feet he left.

Chapter 3

The Leader watched Thirteen leave the room with lifeless blue eyes. She took a drink from her glass while she strolled leisurely to her desk and took a seat. She tapped the glass desktop in deep thought. She swiped her index finger across the glass top before a soldier appeared.

“My Leader?” the soldier asked steadily awaiting orders.

“Bring up number Six. I have a special assignment for him.” She tussled her hair casually to her side.

“Right away!” the soldier replied as his image disappeared from the glass.

She leaned back against her chair and twisted about.

“Number Thirteen seems to have developed a curiosity.”

She stood and walked to the window looking out across all she has strived to build. Her empire. “Such a shame.”

Her door opened and she seen number Six through the reflection of the glass window. Dressed in black much like Thirteen except with all black eyes and black smoke like skin. He kneeled before her exposing his black hair which was shaped into two horns on his bald head.

She smiled into the reflection and said, “Well, if it isn’t my favorite Bastard.”

Chapter 4

Thirteen laid in the dark. Red eyes were the only thing glowing in the abysmal room. Her voice haunted him. “But you’re just like us. You’re a flaw like me...”

He could still see her green eyes lighting up the dark within the crypt as lightning filled the room.

“That man attacked me. What was I supposed to do?” He recalled her plea as she shivered in the dark and her black matted hair hid her face with haunting eyes.

Motionless he laid there. *What am I feeling? Why am I thinking about this...flaw? Is it pity?*

No, he did not think it was that. It was her eyes, soft lips, her voice, her rain-soaked thin athletic body. Why was he thinking of the wet clothes that clung to her curves? *I must not think like this.*

He closed his eyes and seen her crouched in the darkness between two coffins. Scared, bewildered, and beautiful, her bottom jaw split in half and flared out like a cobra, revealing fangs and sharp teeth. Tears streamed down her face.

“No, your worse... You’re a Bastard.” Thirteen vividly recalled squeezing the trigger, a shot echoed, and his eyes snapped open.

“Damn.” He muttered as he quickly sat up in bed and buried his head in his callused and scarred hands. The room was soaked with the night shadows, but he could see about it as if it was daytime. He then got out of bed and dressed before glancing about the room. If someone was to enter it, one would think it had been abandoned. There were no pictures on the walls, no framed artwork, and no possessions of any kind except for a bed, a cup, a plate, a fork, and bare walls.

Rain beat against the windowpane and he could not just sit there anymore, he needed to go. He exited the room and got on the Air Glider as the rain tapped against him before speeding off into the barren landscape once again.

His mind screamed. *Why am I doing this? If I am seen the consequences are devastating.*

Yet he felt his heart was screaming as well, but he could not understand what it was saying.

He slowed the Glider down and pulled up to the black iron fence of the cemetery. He stepped off and strolled in front of the mausoleum that was frozen in place before the stone doors. The echo of the shot rang loud in his head. He clenched his fist and proceeded through the doors. The lightning flashed and filled the crypt silhouetting her body.

He could not understand why he had done what he had done.

As he made his way to her body and stood over her looking down, his red glowing eyes locked on to her green glowing eyes. He could not understand why he had done what he had done...why he missed the shot.

“You came back.” She had spoken softly.

He stared at the hole in the concrete wall before he looked back into her haunting eyes.

“Yes.”

“Why?” she asked.

Thirteen kneeled down reaching into his pocket to pull out some fruit and handed it to her. “I figured you might be hungry.”

She gladly accepted the fruit before saying, “No, I mean, why did you miss the shot? You could have killed me, but you didn’t. Why?”

He didn’t know how to respond; his heart was racing. He stood at eye level and a few inches away from her. He could smell her sweet aroma. *Why did I miss?* “I don’t really understand why I missed,” he answered.

“Why did you come back?” she whispered.

Being so close to her he could do nothing but stare into her eyes before he stammered. “Your eyes...they haunt me.”

A puzzling look swept across her face.

“Your eyes are all I can think about. I feel something I do not understand.” He pointed to his heart.

She smiled a beautiful smile and asked, “Is it like a flutter? Does your heartbeat fast?” She placed a hand over his heart.

“Yes.” he said as his heartbeat faster from her touch.

“Haven’t you ever felt that way before?” she asked.

He thought about the question for a moment and shook his head.

Her face came closer to his.

“You’re feeling love.”

He could not look away.

“Love? I think I have read about that.”

She looked sad at the response.

“What is your name?”

Now he looked puzzled.

“I do not have a name.”

“Well...,” she said, “What do they call you?”

“Thirteen.”

“A number?”

“Yes. What do they call you?”

She smiled. She had a lovely smile. “Chanta.”

“Chanta,” he whispered just to hear it roll off his tongue.

“That’s beautiful.”

She blushed. “Thank you.”

They stared at each other and became lost within their gaze.

“Why did you come here?” he asked.

She shrugged before replying, “Seemed like a safe place.

No one ever comes out here. Can I ask you something?”

He nodded.

“Why do you hunt us? Why kill the so called ‘Flaw?’”

“It is what I was created to do.”

“Yes, but why? Don’t you feel bad about it or feel that it is wrong?”

“I do not feel anything. I mean, I never liked it, but I never felt anything, until I saw you.”

Chanta looked down and smiled, but the smile quickly disappeared. “What happens to you if they find out that you didn’t kill me?”

“They will not find out.” He tried to assure her. Before he could say anything else she leaned in and kissed him, and he did not pull away.

Out in the rain, a figure stood in the distance on a small mud caked hill with hair made into two horns on a bald head with solid black eyes that stared intently with disgust. He lifted his left arm to his mouth and began to speak into it.

“You are right. Thirteen defected. What would you like me to do my Leader?”

Her voice was calm while she answered.

“Nothing at the moment. Come back for further orders.”

Chapter 5

Thirteen got back to the empty place he called home. Soaking wet and confused as ever, he had made love to Chanta, and it opened a door to new sensations. Senses came about that he never knew existed. It was strange, yet wonderful. The intercom on his left wrist started to beep. He gently touched it and a holographic projection of the Leader appeared before him.

“Thirteen, I have a new assignment for you. I have arranged an escort for you to see me to get more of the details. I will see you soon.” She then disappeared.

A new assignment? An escort? Since when do Bastards need an escort to the sky tower? Something does not feel right. Maybe I am just being paranoid.

He walked to the door ready to leave and upon opening the door, a grinning figure with horns greeted him.

“Thirteen.”

“Six.” Thirteen responded.

Maybe I am not so paranoid after all, he surmised.

Six moved to the side and revealed his Glider, a newer model from the previous year with blue lights. It sat next to Thirteen’s.

“I am your escort. Shall we go?”

Thirteen did not bother responding he just closed his door and got on his Glider. Six hopped on to his and they made their way to the sky tower.

Something is not right.

Arriving at the glass fortress they made their way to the gravity defying elevator and silently stood next to each other. They waited quietly while they ascended up to the Leader. The glass walls reflected images all around them, including their own.

Six was the first to break the silence. “How long has it been, Thirteen?”

Thirteen raised an eyebrow.

Six continued, “How long since we worked together?”

Thirteen thought about the question then replied. “A lifetime it seems.”

Six nodded. “A lifetime, indeed brother. Remember that job we did? When the Leader sent us to exterminate that group of Flaw children, I remember that, loads of fun. I enjoyed it, didn’t you?”

Thirteen recalled Six unloading on the children, laughing with madness as he did so.

“I get no pleasure out of it. They were kids. Barely old enough to understand what we are and what we were doing to them.”

Six smiled. His eyes were as black as his soul. “Nothing makes me feel more alive or feel like I have such a purpose like that day, but I don’t know. Something new always seems to present itself, doesn’t it?”

Thirteen looked into the reflection and saw Six’s mirror image had a dagger in his hand; he wielded the dagger into the air towards Thirteen’s face.

Thirteen blinked, red eyes glowing like hot embers. He had seen Six’s reflection standing casually again as if nothing had happened. He had caught a glimpse of the future, Six’s plan. Just as he had foresaw it, Six wielded the dagger into the air and Thirteen grabbed Six wrists and squeezed tight, punching Six in the face repeatedly before he dropped the dagger. Instantly, blood flowed from his nose like a faucet.

“You’re going to pay for that! It would have been quick, but now, it is going to be slow and painful.” Six spat before waving his hand to send a wave of energy that sent Thirteen flying into the wall.

Thirteen was quickly back on his feet. He twisted his neck until it popped and rolled his shoulders and said, “Sounds like fun.” His eyes glowed red and a heat wave was seen leaving his body.

Six cracked a smile, exposing his jagged and sharp teeth. His hands clinched into a fist with black smoke emanating from them. “I’ve been waiting for a worthy opponent for a long time. Let’s see what you’re made of Thirteen.”

The two wasted no time charging at one another.

As fist and kicks were flying and hitting their targets, the elevator ascended into midair before eventually making its way to the top entrance of the building. There, an exo-suited guard quickly scrambled at the sight of the struggle before raising his rifle and taking aim. A subtle ding was heard, and the doors slid open. The guard placed a steady finger on the trigger and black smoke plumed out of the elevator and filled up the corridor. The guard tried to peer through the smoke for a target but spotted Thirteen slinging a fireball into Six's chest that launched him into the guard. The rifle flew out of the guard's hands and landed at Thirteen's feet. Thirteen snatched it up and wasted no time firing into Six's chest.

Six instantly disintegrated and his body turned into smoke just as another plasma blast found its mark in the chest of the startled guard. Smoke floated in the air above Thirteen and reassembled back into Six's imposing figure that now stood behind Thirteen. Thirteen quickly spun on his feet and attempted to fire another round at Six, but Six knocked the rifle out of his hands. He then swung a wild punch across Thirteen's chin.

Thirteen could taste the blood in his mouth as he blocked an onslaught of blows, ducking down and coming up with an elbow across Six's temple that caused him to stagger backwards. Thirteen instantly jumped at the opportunity. His boot landed square in Six's chest sending him flying through the Leader's door where he now lay unconscious.

Thirteen calmly stepped over Six's body into the office.

The Leader stood by her desk eerily calm and smiled before saying, "You lied to me Thirteen. How could you betray me for a Flaw?"

Thirteen stood apprehensively. *Something is wrong.* “I am seeing a different side of this story. There’s nothing wrong with those people. They are different sure, but that does not make them flawed. We are all flawed...including you.”

His words hung in the air for what seemed like eternity as the Leader stared into him with lifeless eyes and rage.

“I am flawed? You dare compare me to those freaks?” she cried in frustration. There was malice in her eyes. “I am perfection. I am nothing like those creatures! Nothing!”

Without warning, she launched at Thirteen with incredible force and took him by the throat. The skin around his throat instantly turned gray from her touch.

She leaned in close to his face and said, “I’m worse...” She then sent him flying across the room, where he crashed into a glass window. Thirteen stuck to it like a smashed fly and could not move. Her eyes turned pure white. “As for your precious Flaw, she is being exterminated as we speak.”

Thirteen felt the heat of anger surge through his body. An inner fire that was building. “You are a bitch!” he spat.

She smiled. “And you are a stupid Bastard.”

A wave of energy suddenly smashed into Thirteen and sent him through the glass window. Glass shards danced around him as he quickly descended toward the ground. It comes fast as the elevator descended along side of him, providing him a reprieve. Thirteen quickly grabbed the edge of the elevator and positioned himself adjacent to the building before letting go. As he descended, his hands burst into flames as he plunged them into the glass, causing it to melt and warp like lava to break his fall. Thirteen landed on his feet hard and collapsed to the

ground. As he got back to his feet, he was quickly surrounded by guards with rifles raised.

“Stand down number Thirteen!”

I do not have time for this. He mentioned to himself. *Chanta needs me.*

He closed his eyes and summoned an ever-expanding ring of fire from his body and hit the guards around him. The ring of fire set the guards on fire, and they ran around trying to put themselves out. The rifles melted to their hands. Thirteen used the opportunity to get on his Air Glider and take off to the gate of the Haven at full speed to the outside world of a dying land.

More guards and droids stood in front of the gate, rifles raised. Thirteen did not slowed down. His eyes burned with fire and an explosion blew the guards, droids, and a small opening in the gate apart.

Thirteen kept speeding into the dark of the night in hope of reaching the cemetery to save Chanta. He just hoped he would it in time.

Chapter 6

A small team of four soldiers hid amongst the tombstones and fanned out. They positioned themselves around the bare skeletal trees.

The black clouds hanged over head and looked as if it was not done flooding the world. Black exosuits camouflaged the soldiers; their helmets covered their whole head with smoked visors that had given them night vision. They talked to each other with a built-in mouthpiece. “Echo one in position.”

Another voice responded.

“Copy that. Let’s take this freak out quickly. I don’t want to be out in this forsaken land any longer than I have to be.”

A third voice chimed in.

“Could be worse, remember those damn flesh eaters? I’d take this job over that one any day.”

The second voice answered.

“Unfortunately, I do remember those damn Decayed. I can never forget them. They haunt my sleep.”

The first voice cut in.

“Enough babble. We are moving in on the target.” He signaled for them to move in. “Quietly now.”

Chanta sat on the floor in the mausoleum and daydreamed of her time with Thirteen.

Who would have known that she would feel for a Bastard. She pondered to herself. Punch drunk on love her body trembled at the memory of his touch, his embrace, his kiss. The sound of twigs snapping under foot waked Chanta out of her trance. The wind picked up and lightning cracked the sky.

She called out to him.

“Thirteen?”

She sensed someone at the door that waited to come in.

The soldiers treaded softly to the door and held their position. They had thier rifles raised and fingers on the trigger.

The squad leader held up his hand with three fingers extended, then two, one. He kicked the door open, and they reigned down with gun fire. They sprayed the walls, crypts, and the floor; everything was riddled with bullet holes. Debris and dust clouds filled the air. The firing stopped, and the only thing that was heard was the last shell bouncing off the floor. The visors on the helmets switched to thermal imaging that detected body heat of any kind.

They stepped into the dust clouded room where they slowly moved to two coffins near the back. The squad leader

had seen space between the wall and the front end of the coffins. The leader pointed to the unseen gap, and they circled around to it with rifles pointed down. They each gave a slight nod and rushed the gap ready to fire only to discover that the spot was empty.

The squad leader was dumbfounded.

“The hell did she go?”

The squad leader looked, but she was nowhere to be found. One of the soldiers in the center of the room looked up. He could not believe what he had witnessed.

A dark-haired woman with her fingernails buried in stone that held herself up. Her eyes glowed green and bottom jaw split in two. Her jaw flared out with fangs on each side like a vampire’s.

She dropped down from the ceiling and sliced the air with her clawed hands. She smashed through the helmet and caved in one of the soldier’s skull.

Like a cat she landed on her feet and dashed to the next soldier. The soldier turned around and had his throat cut by the same clawed hand. He clutched his throat and he fell to his knees. His head was almost cut clean off, and he slipped into shock when he bled out.

Chanta grabbed the next soldier from behind and stretched her split jaw mouth wide then slammed her fangs into the soldier’s throat. She drank his life away and ripped his throat out with her mouth.

She spun on her heels and faced the door where she had seen the squad leader standing there, rifle raised and pointed at her. Chanta stood there and waited to be executed.

This is it. She thought. Thirteen's embrace had flooded her mind.

"Got you now, you damn freak!" The squad leader spat.

Chanta's jaw formed back together, and she closed her eyes.

The squad leader pulled the trigger, but his index finger had gone through the slim metal piece like it was butter. The plasma assault rifle heated up in his hands and melted. The molten metal seeped on to his hands and had eaten away at his armor, the liquid metal fused to his skin.

The squad leader screamed in agony.

"The hell?!"

He turned around still screaming and bursted into flames, he shined brightly in the dark of night.

Instantly his body became a statue of ash that was in an agonized pose.

Chanta stared with awe while a dark figure with glowing red eyes of hell fire. The figure walked through the squad leader's body of ash which caused the ash statue to burst into a cloud of millions of tiny particles.

"Thirteen!"

Chanta cried out and ran to him. They embraced one another within their arms.

Thirteen held her close.

Thunder roared across the sky. Her eyes pierced into his.

"We have to go. There will be more."

She grabbed his hand.

"I know a place. Come."

Into the night they sped away into the unknown on the Air Glider. She squeezed tightly around his midsection while she sat on the back and directed hm where to go.

Chapter 7

A violent storm had broken out on their trip, so they sought refuge in an old mine. About a quarter mile in the tunnel, Thirteen ignited a fire to dry their clothes and keep them warm.

Chanta decided to break the silence.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Sorry for what?” He asked.

“For having you hunted like an animal.”

He shrugged.

“You have nothing to be sorry for? None of this is your fault. All you did is open my eyes even more. So, thank you.”

Thirteen watched the light dance upon her face, her skin was smooth and flawless. He could feel his heart beating fast again, such an incredible feeling. She spotted him looking at her from the corner of her eye, but Thirteen did not turn away. Her pale marble white skin flushed to a rose color on her slender

cheeks and smiled. He scooted closer to her, and they rested next to one another. He felt her resting her head on him and they stared intensely at the fire. At the same time, they felt the fire burning within their hearts.

“They are not here.” Six said into his com. He kicked a soldier’s lifeless body out of frustration. Six examined the other three lifeless bodies in the mausoleum.

“They must not get away. Find them. We cannot have a Bastard going rogue. Especially one like Thirteen. He is too much of a threat.” The Leader responded.

Six gazed across the soaked wasteland.

“Don’t worry; they could not have got far in this storm. I will find them.”

Chapter 8

The wind whistled through the shattered glass window of the sky tower. A few times the whistle turned into a howl much like an animal the Leader was hiding inside. Her lifeless eyes stared off into the distance at something she just could not grasp. Taking a drink out of her wine glass, she tossed the emptied glass out of the broken window to free fall into the emptiness of the outside world.

Thirteen's words echoed through her mind; "We are all flawed...including you."

"How dare you." She muttered, "How dare you spit in the face of your God."

She made her way to the desk and swiped the surface of the glass, which unlocked her data base. She entered a numbered sequence and an automated voice spoke: "Protocol Bastards initiative enabled. Do you wish to proceed?"

She stood in front of her desk and reevaluated her judgment for a moment.

“Yes.”

The automated voice complied.

“Very well, waking the Bastards now. Please enter primary target.”

“Bastard number Thirteen,” the Leader said.

“Very well,” the computer responded, “Extermination mode activated.”

Thirteen’s words still lingered in her mind.

“We are all flawed...including you.”

The Leader’s eyes glowed white.

“I am not flawed...I am perfection.”

She closed her eyes, and she shattered the rest of the reflecting glass windows of her suite. She did not want to catch a glance of her reflection due to a creeping fear that lurked deep within.

That Thirteen was right.

Chapter 9

In a darkened basement of the Leader's building, lights flourished like a wildfire that chased out the shadows and the abysmal blackness. Hundreds upon hundreds of seven-foot metal cylinder pods lined the room. A computer automated voice filled the room that echoed of what was to be commanded.

“Protocol Bastards, initiative enabled.”

Five pods lit up in response and the doors to the pods slowly opened and revealed five dormant Bastards.

The automated voice filled the room yet again.

“Primary target: Bastard number Thirteen.”

The eyes in pods one through five opened simultaneously.

The first Bastard, One, stepped out of the pod. His eyes glowed a bright blue. No smile escaped his thin lipped stone face, which was topped with a blue Mohawk and supported by

a muscular build. The alpha of the squad, the very first Bastard. He was feral, vicious, and rarely spoken.

Bastard Two, a woman with ultra-violet glowing eyes, long purple hair with her left side shaved; she was the omega. No emotions whatsoever. Her face and body looked waterlogged as if she had been soaked in water for the entirety of her life. She was slender and agile.

Bastards Three and Four were twins. Glowing sickly yellow eyes and combed back yellow hair. Both looked lanky, but wiry.

Bastard Five, had solid white eyes with no pupils. Long black hair with a tint of red which flowed over his face. A vacant almost painful expression fell upon his face as if everything hurt. Thin and ghastly, he moved unnaturally and animalistic. His body contorted and spazed into unnatural positions, which cracked whenever he moved giving the impression that his bones were constantly being broken.

One after the other they stepped out of the pods and glanced toward One. One gave a slight nod, and without word or question they followed. They approached an open area, and a metallic sarcophagus box rose out of the floor. The lid slid back and exposed plasma rifles and handguns that were built to each of their own preferences.

One and Two picked up a few static grenades and plasma grenades.

Five picked up a meltinade, a nasty experiment that proved to be very efficient.

Three and Four both grabbed two handles with a clear rope like tube. An experimental whip that was still being worked on.

They were an elite team, a death squad to eradicate any targets that were placed in their paths. They were savage, brutal, and loyal to the Leader. They would not stop. They had no remorse, and they were good at what they did and how they did it.

Chapter 10

Thirteen remembered opening his eyes.

He was but a child, new to the world. He had not yet known the evil it held, the tragedy it offered, and the despair it gave.

“Good. You’re awake.” A woman’s voice had gently spoken. “Come, now it is time for your lessons.”

Her long white hair shined as if it was light itself.

“Are you my mother?” he asked.

He did not remember how he learned to speak, but he had spoken, nonetheless.

She did not even smile. She was distant and cold.

“No. Call me Leader. Now come, there is another child to see.”

He remembered he followed her into a well-lit corridor that was surrounded by white tiles on the walls and ceilings.

She had led Thirteen to a room where another little boy sat and played with toys. They entered the room and she had Thirteen stand a few feet across from the dark-haired boy. The boy looked confused and uncertain.

Thirteen was confused as well.

The Leader placed a knife on the floor between the two boys and walked to the door.

“What do we do with this?” Thirteen asked.

She turned and faced them, “One of you will use it to kill the other. Figure it out.”

With that final instruction she walked out and left the two small children with a knife between them to kill the other.

Thirteen had woken up next to Chanta and heard something scurried about. She was still lying there asleep. He heard a clicking sound. It was animalistic. Probably used for radar.

There was a few of them communicating with one another.

That was not good.

If he woke up Chanta he risked her safety, yet, she was still in danger if he left her to sleep. There was always a chance she would wake up while the creatures were prowling.

Maybe I can divert their attention. Then again maybe they will be on their way and leave us alone.

Again, he could not take the chance. He had come across these types of creatures before. They traveled in hordes and packs, and were aggressive as hell. He had seen them strip a Bastard of his flesh in under a minute. Nothing was left behind, not even the bones.

More sounds clicked back and forth. Thirteen could not have shaken the feeling it was about Chanta and him.

He could see into the darkest crevasses and corners of the tunnel clearly, yet there was no sign of the creatures known as the Sporgs- That was what everyone had called them anyways. Thirteen heard them clicking in the dark but he could not see them.

Where are the things?

“Click, click, nick.”

“Click, snick, click, click.”

They sounded so close. Where the hell are they?

Thirteen got to his feet and walked further into the mine tunnel and became consumed by the dark. The clicking had grown louder. More of them joined in and yet he still could not see them. They were not in the corners, crevasses, or crawling on the ceilings.

The three-foot creatures with translucent skin had two arms with three long claws and a slender body and tail. Jagged razor wire teeth covered their mouths. The head of the creatures had no eyes and reminded Thirteen of a rose bud that opened up to devour its prey.

Thirteen walked into a clearing in the mine with tunnels on every side.

He had known it could be a trap, but he did not sense them in either of the tunnels. The moment he stepped into the middle of the clearing all the clicking noises stopped instantly.

Shit. Did I mention they were intelligent?

Four Sporgs sprung out of the ground and screeched like crazed beast. The sounds would have scared the soul out of any man.

It was a good thing I am not a man and as far as I know, I do not have a soul to scare.

The creatures hurdled towards Thirteen from every corner. He drew his revolver and gunned down the first two and kicked the third to the ground, digging his foot in to the creature's throat.

His free hand snatched the fourth Sporg out of the air. He gripped and squeezed its throat while it thrashed wildly. He shoved his boot clean through the third creature and severed its head from its body. The fourth was trying to free itself from Thirteen's grip. Thirteen squeezed tighter and felt his fingers penetrate the flesh. A loud snap was heard from its neck. Thirteen flinged it to the wall and he watched the Sporgs body twitched and spaze while it bled out. He threw the piece of its throat back at the dead creature.

That was too easy.

Twenty more Sporgs rose from the ground and shedded dirt from their skin. They hissed and growled. Two young Sporgs had rushed to the Sporg that was bleeding out and they devoured its fallen.

They're starving, that's not good. They'll be even more aggressive.

They came at him from all angles, and he held nothing back. Thirteen threw calculated punches and kicks that sent the Sporgs flying back, while firing a few shots in between. He turned to point his revolver at one of the Sporgs. It quickly wrapped its mouth around the gun's barrel. Thirteen did not hesitate and pulled the trigger, blowing its head clean off. The body fell-down with a wet thump. Another quickly bit the corpse, and dragged it away to eat.

More poured in from the other tunnels like a flood. Thirteen just fought faster, harder, and more blood thirsty for the kill. A fire pulsed outlines from his body that lit up the clearing like it was daylight. He sent a shock wave of fire all around him, burning all the creatures alive.

Thirteen caught his breath and watched them run around screaming until one by one they fell and crumbled to ash. The clearing darkens once again and a breeze followed through, blowing the ashes away.

Thirteen collected himself and he turned to see a lone little Sporg that leaped onto Thirteen and pinned him to the ground. Needless-to-say, Thirteen became slightly annoyed by the action that had transpired. It opened its face like a rose bud that bloomed and revealed all its jagged crooked teeth and roared. Its breath was incredibly foul.

Thirteen heard more clicking, the creature stopped and clicked back in response. The Sporg, had a conversation with something else in the room. It leaped off Thirteen and made its way to the unknown caller.

Thirteen got up and dusted himself off only to see Chanta, to his astonishment, talking to the Sporg in its language. The Sporg reacted like a dog and licked her hand and expressed affection. Chanta looked around at the burned up Sporgs then back at Thirteen with saddened eyes. He had never seen a Sporg acting like a pet before. He didn't know how to react.

“You should have awakened me.” She sighed. “You didn't know though. I can't be mad at you for killing this Sporgs family. He is the only one that survived. They are gentle creatures to my kind. We have a code of honor between us. He has no family now. It is our responsibility to care for him.”

“I do not think that is a good idea.” Thirteen retorted.

The creature flared its face open and clicked.

Chanta smiled.

“Funny, it says the same about you. It wonders why I haven’t eaten you yet.”

Thirteen swore he had sensed the creature chuckle.

Chanta spoke again.

“You might have been the savior in the Haven’s Thirteen, but out here you’re the devil, the villain.”

Thirteen laughed at that response. Thinking to himself: *The whole damn world hated me and wanted me dead, story of my life.*

The Sporg made a clicking noise.

“What is it saying?” Thirteen asked.

Chanta chuckled.

“He told me to keep a tight leash on you.”

Chanta and the Sporg had both left the room leaving Thirteen in an emptied room of ash and corpses. He could not help but to think, *is this all I leave behind? Destruction and death?*

Thirteen followed them after a moment longer of self reflection.

Chapter 11

The young child stood in a pool of blood and lost in a daze; he was breathing in his first kill. Hands stained with another's life, hanged limply at his sides. He looked down at the body of the slain child with eyes black as a shark, void of emotion. He lifted his hand and touched his face. He felt the sticky red liquid smeared across his forehead, brows, nose, and mouth. He didn't know what was becoming of him except for being reborn.

A woman with white hair stepped into the room. Emotionless, she just stared for a moment.

“Did you use the knife?”

The little black-eyed boy shook his head.

“I used my hands.”

A grin flashed for a second, but quickly diminished.

“Hmmm...promising. Definitely a first, come with me. It is time to go to your new quarters to get some rest.”

Not waiting to see if he will follow, she turned and walked out. The little boy stayed close behind and walked through a white well-lit hallway. The boy looked up to the woman.

“Are you my mother?”

She stopped in her tracks, without turning around she answered.

“No, but you serve me and do as I say.”

The little boy did not question her. She started walking again and he followed obediently.

She turned left and opened a door with three other children inside the room. A bed was in every corner of the room.

“These are your roommates. Get acquainted and go to sleep.”

The flawless woman said then left the room.

The little boy walked to the center of the room and browsed around. Two of the three kids looked a bit older maybe fifteen; the other appeared to be nine.

The two older kids approached the little boy.

“Welcome newbie. Before you get comfortable just know we are in charge. You understand?”

The little boy just stared with those lifeless black eyes. He stood his ground not saying a word. He had seen the nine-year-old off in a corner, and he stared with eyes of fire.

“Say something you little bastard.” The other older kid spoke then puffed out his chest.

The little boy sensed these two kids were not like him. The other kid, the one with eyes of fire...he had felt a deep connection with.

The older kid that spoke first tried to shove the little boy but went straight through him as he had turned to smoke. This caused the older kid to lose his balance and fall to the ground. The boy turned around to face the kid on the floor, to see his eyes widened with fear. The little boy had his back exposed to the other kid. The kid dug into his pocket and pulled out a pocket-knife. The kid unfolded the blade and held the blade high, ready to drive the shiny steel into the back of the boy's skull. Before the kid could strike however, the knife he held bursted into flames. The boy dropped the knife from his hand and crumbled to the ground where he burned to ash.

The little boy with eyes of a shark turned to see the charred body, then at the nine-year-old boy with fire that emanated from his body. The fire pulsed as if a heartbeat.

The little boy turned back to the stunned kid on the ground, scared out of his mind.

The kid tried to plead, but the little boy disintegrated into smoke and flew into the pleading child's mouth, nose, and eyes. The kid flopped on the ground and choked to death. Once the kid stopped breathing the little boy poured back out and into human form. He had seen the charred embers that burned in the pile of ash of the other kid.

The boy with eyes of fire walked up, putting a hand on his own chest and said, "Thirteen."

The little boy with black soulless eyes put a hand on his own chest and responded, "Six."

Six then put his hand on Thirteen's chest and asked, "Brother?"

Thirteen looked at Six then after a moment placed his hand on Six's chest. "Brother."

Six stared in to the camp-fire and warmed himself in a cave with five armed exoskeleton guards scattered about, sleeping. Hypnotized by the dancing flames he reminisced back to being that little boy with black soulless eyes meeting Thirteen for the first time. The only family he ever had. He had known that the day would come for him to kill Thirteen. But he had become conflicted by it. Six felt betrayed by his own brother and remained fixated on the fire. He whispered to himself,

"Brother."

He clinched his fist and choked the fire out.

Six sat in the dark where he had always been.

Chapter 12

The broken-down Air Glider laid on the cracked dry soil of the barren land. A swirl of dust clouds danced in the wind. Footprints in the dirt had made its way to Chanta, Thirteen, and their new traveling companion, a Sporg.

Chanta had grown much attached to the creature. Thirteen could not say the same about himself, however.

Chanta interrupted the silence.

“Remember you may have been a hero, a savior of the Havens, but out here with the entire flaw, you are the villain. You will be hated, and many will try to kill you, just be on your guard and stay close to me.”

Thirteen pushed forward.

“That is comforting to know. Well, If I die the Sporg can eat me.”

The Sporg had made a few clicking sounds.

Chanta smiled.

“He says no thanks, he doesn’t eat filth.”

Thirteen waved it off.

“Where are we going?”

Chanta looked at Thirteen with her haunted glowing green eyes.

“We are going to follow the sun a ways until we come across a crater. Within that crater is a town for my kind.”

“For the flaw?” Thirteen inquired.

“For my kind.” She continued. “To us we are not flaw. We are beings, a community. It is you and your kind that is flaw.”

He had to chime in once again.

“I mean no disrespect. It’s just what they have taught us to call you all of our lives.”

She looked so sad at his response.

“It’s not your fault. It’s how you were created and designed to be.”

A thought had passed through his mind, and he shared it.

“Well, if I was created and designed for this then obviously, I must be flawed myself. I failed to follow through with my orders.”

Chanta smiled.

“Guess you’re more like us than you thought.”

“Guess so.” He agreed.

Chanta stretched her arm across Thirteen’s chest and stopped him in his tracks. He looked down into a wide gaping hole. They had arrived at Crater City, a city that was in a big hole in the ground hidden from sight.

“Now we start our descent” she said, and started to climb down.

Thirteen took a deep breath and peered down, it appeared to be a hundred-foot drop. Within the crater were crumbled and brokendown buildings, tents, planks of wooden sheds, some rotted and put together to form a hut. It looked as if there were bustling groups of people here and there that walked by and interacted with each other.

Thirteen examined the scene a little closer and he noticed a structure, a watch tower of some kind. The sun rays reflected off the glass lenses that were held up to a figure that was covered from head to toe in a heavy brown cloak.

He called down to Chanta, “They know we are here.”

“Well then we better hurry and reach the bottom before they try to shoot you down,” she responded.

Good Idea. Thirteen reflected to himself.

Chapter 13

Chanta, the Sporg, and Thirteen descended down the steep crater as fast as they could. They did their best not to fall to their deaths.

The Sporg seemed to be climbing with ease, almost annoyed it had to wait on the others, mainly Thirteen. He looked to be gliding down rather than climbing.

A whooshing sound whizzed by Thirteen's head and planted itself into the dirt and rock they were scaling.

They all stopped for a second and glanced. They saw an arrow that stood out, stuck in the crags of the rock.

"They're firing arrows at us!" Chanta called out.

"It is nothing to be concerned about! They are aiming at me not you! Keep climbing!" Thirteen shouted in response.

A louder whooshing sound ten feet away to his left went by and then a thud was heard.

A large log the size of a telephone pole protruded out of the stone wall.

They all stopped for another second to see and comprehend what had just happened.

“That is something to be concerned about! Climb faster!” Thirteen yelled.

Another loud thud slammed into the wall to the right of Thirteen which was much closer. He felt a few chunks of rock grazed his cheek.

Chanta was right. I am seen as a monster. Are they correct in thinking so? After all, I was created to kill them. Rid the world of their kind. What changed my mind from the mission? Why and how do I feel differently about my way of life that I have been trained for?

Perhaps I will find out one day, I hope.

The huge log shaped arrows slammed into the crater wall a few feet away with a thunderous cracking sound that echoed far and wide.

One after another were fired. Most would stick into the stoned wall and stay there while a few others would splint or shattered upon impact, which sent debris of splinters, wood chunks or pieces of rock that scattered about in every direction.

This was becoming really annoying.

Thirteen did not see them running out of ammunition any time soon.

Another crackling sound had deafened them.

He called out to Chanta. “I am going to roast these guys!”

“No! We are trying to make alliances and bring peace, not a reason to continue the war! We need to prove to them you mean no harm!”

Thirteen could not believe this. He was a moving target for individuals that fired logs until he could get to the ground.

“We might not make it!” Thirteen shouted.

“We don’t have a choice!” She cried out.

“There is always a choice.” Thirteen muttered and with that he summoned a wall of fire that stretched high. It had surpassed well over the craters wall by another hundred feet and expanded wide from one end of the crater to the other. Before they could fire another shot, a barrier of fire was seen from a distance.

They fired a few large telephone-pole arrows that penetrated through the wall only to come out the other side as ashes that blew in the wind.

Chanta and the Sporg witnessed the wall of fire in awe.

The attackers probably needed new pants.

Six and the squad in his command rode across the barren landscape in a vehicle that looked like a floating armored Humvee that was heavily armed.

They scanned the land relentlessly for Thirteen and the flaw. They had grown weary and engulfed with doubt about finding them until they had seen the huge wall of flames that reached to the skies.

Six looked on and signaled the driver to head in the direction of the flaming wall. He had felt his body tense.

So many thoughts flooded his mind with one goal: to reach Thirteen before anybody else. Under his breath a single word had left his lips,

“Brother.”

Finally, they were able to have their feet planted on the ground. Chanta and the Sporg looked up in amazement while the fire reached what historians would have called, ‘the Heavens.’

Does such a place exist I often wondered. If it does, it sure as hell does not have a place in this world anymore.

“Think you could have used something more low profile?” Chanta asked.

Thirteen shrugged.

“You did not want me to kill them. Besides this helps get my point across.”

“What point would that be?” Chanta questioned.

“Not to fuck with us.” He stated.

Thirteen summoned the fire down until nothing was left but heavy smoke and scorched earth, but once the smoke had blown away a group of four individuals with cloaks and hoods that concealed their pale skin and shimmering yellow and blue eyes appeared. All four were armed with old plasma rifles that they probably had taken from dead soldiers of the Havens.

It was not uncommon for soldiers on missions out in the wastelands to get ambushed by the flaw and stripped of supplies and weapons.

Thirteen heard Chanta whisper in his ear.

“Don’t do anything. Don’t cause them any harm.”

Against Thirteen’s training protocols he listened.

The figure in a heavy brown cloak that Thirteen had seen in the watch tower marched straight up to him, he was inches away from Thirteen's face.

A huge horizontal scar ran down where his left eye should have been, the other had glowed a bright blue. His face was weathered, lined with age, but it seemed to be chipped from stone. He had gray stubble that was not exactly a beard but was on its way to become one.

His one good eye had squinted with disgust towards Thirteen. He then spat on the ground next to Thirteen's feet.

"Why did you bring this murderous devil to us?" His voice sounded rough.

"He is not like the other Bastards. He has a conscious. This one saved me from being killed by soldiers of the False Havens." Chanta said.

False Havens? Thirteen thought. *Guess they have their own names for us as well.*

The one eyed being sneered.

"He is a devil! Murdered hundreds, maybe even thousands of our kind because we are different! We are not considered perfect. Sparing your life does not make up for killing so many of us."

"You are right." Thirteen replied. "I am sorry. I was blinded to what really was going on. I am defective too, I guess. I am also being hunted."

"You don't get to speak you wretched creature! So hold your tongue or I will cut it out and feast upon the vile thing!" The one eyed being said and stepped closer to Thirteen. He lifted a jagged blade to Thirteen's neck.

"You don't remember me do you devil?"

“I do not.” Thirteen answered.

The man pulled down the hood and revealed a scarred burnt head. The scars were a bright irritated pinkish outline on a translucent pale skin.

“You should. This is your work. I was much younger then. I was fifteen and yet you haven’t aged one bit, have you devil?”

It was true. Upon Thirteen’s creation he was made as an infant yes, but upon thirty years old Bastards were given a special serum that prevented them from aging, ever. Thirteen had been thirty for a hundred and thirty years now. Death had not been a thought for him for so long, well, his own death that was. It had been a new experience for him.

Chanta gazed upon Thirteen confusion.

The one-eyed man carried on.

“I was fifteen when you and another devil of smoke brought soldiers into my city. Don’t you remember my little sister calling out to save her as the black horned devil had his foot on her? She screamed for me. Quanser help me! But you two made sure I could not do that. You two killed her in front of me!

“Weapons being fired upon countless innocents, men, women, children...you burned countless in your fires. Their screams still haunt me even now. I tried to stop you. Do you recall that devil? Your black horned brother choking the life out of my family as you burned the city down. I grabbed a plasma rifle and turned my sights to you and your brother. You melted the weapon from my hands leaving them scarred and covered my body with flames. Your brother gouged my eye out, laughing as he tossed me into the mud.

“That was fifty years ago and every second since I vowed to get my revenge on you and your kind. My how time has rewarded my patience.”

Thirteen lowered his head. He remembered all of what the man had described. He too could still hear the echoed screams of the countless dead. So many lives have fallen by his hands. So many cities have burned. Thirteen had bathed in the ash of destruction. Now, he did not know what to make of anything anymore. He did all that he could do at that moment.

“I am so sorry.” Thirteen said.

Quanser seemed surprised at first then stone faced again.

“Sorry doesn’t bring any of them back.”

“No, it will not.” Thirteen agreed. “I am not your enemy. I know I have wronged you, all of you. It is not who I am anymore. I am against the Leader and all she stands for.”

The man stared into Thirteen as if to burn a hole.

“Is that supposed to change everything? Am I supposed to change my mind? Give you a welcoming embrace? Eat and drink with you? Invite you in? Breathe the same damn air as you? I don’t care what your bitch of a Leader feels towards you or anything else. She’ll get hers eventually, as you will get yours today.”

Chanta rebelled.

“You can’t! He saved me! He’s not who he once was, he has evolved from the others!”

Chanta tried to block them from doing anything to Thirteen and kept her argument going.

“He can help us against them! He would know the secrets of the Havens and how to possibly bring them down!”

“Is that why you want me around?” Thirteen asked.

Chanta whispered in Thirteen’s ear.

“You’re not a devil, not a defect. I think you are the one to save us. I believe this. Despite all the evil you’ve done that’s not who you are anymore.”

Thirteen’s eyes glowed and reflected off her slender face.

“You do not know the evil I have done over all these years. You do not know the monster that I am. There is a reason I am one of the Leader’s best and favorite Bastard.”

“I don’t believe that. Even if you were, you aren’t now,” she retorted.

“Enough!” Quanser shouted. “The devil comes with us to get what’s long over do. He dies today. You and the Sporg may go on your way.”

Chanta flared her jaw as if to attack. “You’re not taking him anywhere!”

The Sporg opened its face like a deadly bloomed flower that revealed the endless rows of teeth.

“Don’t stand between me and the devil unless you wish to join his fate.” Quanser threatened.

Chanta hissed.

“I am not going anywhere, and neither is he!”

Quanser did not hesitate and pulled a plasma handgun and held it between her eyes.

“Walk away while you can. He is not worth saving.”

Chanta did not even flinch.

“Neither was I.”

Quanser became puzzled; he still had the muzzle of the gun pressed between her eyes. The air around them became

tense and heated. A dry gust of wind had blown by. The standoff was unsettling, and neither was willing to back down.

Chanta fearlessly stood her ground when screaming ranged out.

“We have company!”

Apparently during their trip down memory lane some soldiers led by Six had climbed down the steep cliff. They had reigned in on the people shooting them like fish in a barrel.

An explosion could be heard in the distance. Shots fired in all directions with screams that filled the air around them.

“What the hell is going on?” Quanser yelled out.

A flaw answered.

“We are under attack, Quanser!”

Quanser’s voice boomed.

“Secure the devil! The rest of you with me! We must save the people!”

Quanser had taken flight towards the battle and left behind two others holding plasma rifles aimed at Thirteen.

“You need my help.” Thirteen said.

“Quiet filth!” The guard barked.

“You will all die if you do not allow me to help.” Thirteen pleaded.

“I said quiet!” The guard growled and swung the stock of the rifle at Thirteen’s face.

He missed.

Thirteen seized the moment and dodged the rifle. He quickly grabbed the barrel and used leverage to force the stock to connect with the guard’s chin. The impact had knocked the guard out cold.

The other guard raised his rifle ready to fire, but Thirteen's red eyes had glowed as he made the rifle too hot to hold. The guard dropped it, his hands wide open and seared with burns. A fist connected with his right temple that laid him flat out.

Chanta clutched his hand and smiled.

“Go. Get your redemption.”

Without hesitation Thirteen ran towards the screaming to do what was right for a change. He dodged discharged fires from the exoskeleton guards. A building exploded and debris scattered through the air.

Thirteen roasted alive the few exoguards near him in their armored suits. Smoke and charred flesh seeped through the helmets, and they collapsed.

Thirteen had seen translucent faces shrouded with cloaks going to war against the Leaders troops, and that was when *he* appeared.

A flaw gasped for air, and he clutched at his throat and then to the sky. He died in pain as black smoke left his body and formed in to Six.

His solid black eyes locked on to Thirteen's. He whispered the word, “Brother,” and revealed a grin.

“Six, stop this madness! It is me you want! Leave them out of our affairs!”

Six chuckled.

“Do not tell me you actually care about these...” he looked around with hands raised; open palms faced the sun as he sneered, “Flawed!”

Bodies had fallen around them on both sides.

“These people are not flawed, we are. Our way of thinking is flawed. Brother, you must feel deep down inside that this is wrong.”

Six calmly walked to Thirteen, as a flaw lay clinging to life on the ground. Six looked upon the flaw, head tilted to the side then back at Thirteen with a crooked smile. His foot slammed down on the head and crushed the skull. The flaw’s body laid still.

“Brother, I feel nothing.”

Rage had built up inside Thirteen, and he shared it with Six. He let out a guttural growl and unleashed a funnel of fire Six’s way. Six had taken the hit and was flown to a far wall.

Thirteen’s eyes burned with embers.

Six turned to smoke and surrounded Thirteen trying to engulf him within it. Thirteen became a being of fire which radiated flames from its body. The flames forced Six to back away and dissipate.

His body was smoke and had the face of a monster.

“Come now brother, you can do better than that.”

They charged at one another. Fire had collided with smoke; each one tried to suffocate or scorched the other. They tangled with one another and flung each other into buildings. The smoke got darker, and the fire got hotter. One could not help but to stare at such a sight. Elements were fighting with one another, gods trying to kill gods. They shot into the air and then crashed into the ground.

Thirteen stood over Six.

“Please brother, do not make me kill you.”

Six clutched his sides on the ground and looked up at Thirteen.

“You kill me, or I will kill you!” Pain escaped his lips. It had hurt him to breath.

Thirteen’s hands were consumed with fire, and he clenched his fist ready for the final blow.

Six held Thirteen’s gaze.

“Do it!”

Thirteen stood there and looked down at him, but he did not see him as he was now. Thirteen saw a young boy that came into the room so many lifetimes ago. The same young boy Thirteen saved. The same young boy Thirteen called, “Brother.”

The fire extinguished from Thirteen’s fist, and he backed away from Six.

Six was filled with rage and hurt.

“Do not deny me of this! Kill me! Do it dammit!”

How did we become so broken?

“No.” Thirteen said and turned to the exoguards. He burned the weapons from their hands.

Six shouted.

“Do not deny me of a warrior’s death! A proud and honorable death! Damn you! I am your brother! You need to honor me that!”

The flaw surrounded the unarmed guards and beat them senselessly.

Thirteen stared at Six.

“It is a senseless death. Besides I thought you do not feel anything?”

A boom had echoed through the skies and a huge assault vehicle zoomed past. A giant pod slammed down into a building from the vehicle. The structure crumbled down around the pod.

Rubble and debris filled the air. Five figures stepped out of the destruction.

“No.” Thirteen muttered.

The first five original Bastards had revealed themselves.

Chapter 14

A gust of wind and sand had flown across the city within the crater. The air became dry, and tension had grown between the beaten exo-suited guards, the flawed, the five Bastards, Six whom had got back to his feet, and Thirteen whom was surrounded by them all.

Where are Chanta and that damn annoying Sporg at? Hopefully they had enough time to run or hide.

One stood in front of the other four Bastards. They had eagerly and anxiously waited to be unleashed on everyone like a pack of wild rabid dogs. Three and Four barely held themselves back from lashing out. Five contorted his body in unnatural ways. Bones broken and grinded with every movement he had made. The pain showed in his face. Two laid her head on One's massive shoulders with a seductive look in her violet eyes.

“He is my kill! No one elses!” Six called out.

One just flicked his finger toward Six, nothing else just a flick motion and Six was blasted through the building behind him. A gaping hole was the only trace of him.

Thirteen clenched his fist and they ignited into fire. He felt their hungry eyes that pierced through him. These were the first five and the most vicious.

Thirteen smiled and thought to himself: *I must have really pissed the Leader off for her to wake them up.*

At least that would have given him some joy out of the whole ordeal.

Thirteen unleashed a cyclone of fire from his hands in their direction. Two raised both of her arms, fingernails painted violet, and pointed to the sun as she blasted water at the oncoming fire. Steam and mist filled the air, and when it cleared Thirteen made his move and hid. He could not take them all on, but one at a time maybe...just maybe.

One signaled for Three and Four to track Thirteen down. They got on all fours and sniffed the dirt. They laughed and nipped at each other with excitement for the hunt. They moved with exceptional speed and ran past the exoguards and trampled over the flaw.

One glanced around at all the flawed that watched with terror. With a wave of his hand, Two and Five moved after them.

Five stopped midway and noticed a lonely dandelion that was in full bloom. Nothing else showed life, but this yellow flower. Five knelt down and held the flower between his fingers without plucking it. For a moment he smiled, but that smile had withered away as did the flower. It shriveled up and died to his

touch. He stared at the dead flower with an ache deep down inside then watched the wind carry it away. He heard shrieking sounds of the flaw and laughter from Two as she drowned a few. Two blasted water with enough pressure to cave in their skulls. Five bended backwards then flipped to his feet and his head twisted all the way around and his bones snapped.

Five let out a shrill that sent fear down the spines of the flaw and the guards alike. His arm extended out to a small group of flaws and his hand opened up in a gripping motion. Steadily he shook his hand and the shaking had sent tremors up his arm.

The three flaws started trembling. Their heads were flown back with a violent jerk. Their eyes rolled to the back of the skull and revealed only white.

Five pulled his arm back and ripped something from the air and held it close for himself alone to have. The three flaws had their souls ripped out of their bodies and into the palm of Five's hand. He quickly consumed them while the three fell dead to the ground. The other flaws screamed and retreated to hide.

Two stopped a flaw in his tracks and filled his insides with water which caused him to choke and drowned.

Three and Four crept to the corner that Thirteen was hiding behind. They stood straight up, and a bolt of electricity shot out of their hands that caused the corner to explode. Chunks of cement swarmed the sky and rained back down.

Thirteen hid in a different corner before the smoke had cleared.

Four returned back on all fours and sniffed the ground getting closer, while Three went off to another corner. Four slowly crawled closer and closer towards the area Thirteen was

hiding at; A corner wall that was about four feet high surrounded with crumbling brick walls.

Thirteen stayed low and heard Four's sniffing get louder and louder until it was like he could feel him breathing down Thirteen's neck. Four was on the other side of the four-foot corner wall. The sound of gravel and broken cement scrapped at the dirt, and he moved left to right and looked around. Four raised his head from the ground, sniffed the air while his yellow hair was guided carelessly by the wind that had picked up sand and debris along with it.

Thirteen gradually pulled his plasma revolver out of its holster. The green light glowed while it charged. Thirteen glimpsed Four's hand that gripped the top of the wall so he could look over for a better view.

I am going to give him such a surprise.

The bottom of his pointed chin appeared first then his whole head and neck. His pasty skin glistened from the heat. The moment Thirteen saw Four's throat he took the opportunity and reached up, grabbed Four, and dragged him over the wall. Four slammed to the ground, Thirteen placed the barrel of the plasma revolver to Four's heart. Thirteen thought he had the upper hand, but Four was faster.

The whole time Four had his hand pressed against Thirteen's chest and a grin on his face. Thirteen felt an electrical surge that blasted against his chest sending him flying in to a heavily damaged building.

Needless to say, Thirteen felt that one. He slowly picked himself up from the floor and heard running footsteps. Thirteen looked up to see Four jumping in the air and land a kick to Thirteen's chest that caused him to stagger, falling to a knee.

Four sent a standing kick, but Thirteen blocked it with his forearms. Thirteen gripped Four's leg as he quickly stood up and swung Four to the wall, sending him through it. Thirteen could see a big hole where he had thrown Four. Four rose to his feet.

Thirteen leaped through the hole in the wall and rolled across the floor throwing an uppercut. Four could not dodge it. Hitting his chin, Four reeled from the hit and Thirteen took advantage and rapidly punched Four in the chest eight times. Then, Thirteen grabbed him by the back of the head and slammed his face against his knee. Four's nose bled like a faucet.

Four touched his upper lip seeing his fingers red. In an outrage Four sent a shock wave that left his body, leaving Thirteen on his back.

Thirteen quickly rolled to the right and dodged a bolt of electricity that caused a chunk of the floor to go missing. Thirteen did not dodge the one that followed.

Four guffawed menacingly and he continued to zap the hell out of Thirteen. Four's laugh soon faded as Thirteen fought beyond the pain, getting to his knees and let out a deafening roar of defiance.

Four expelled his full power in an attempt to take Thirteen down, but his eye's bulged with terror when he noticed it was to no effect.

His electric currents ran through Thirteen and triggered his body to give off smoke.

Thirteen's eyes blazed red while he returned the favor and burst Four's body into flames. Four tried to get away, even

tried to put himself out, but buckled a few feet away in the center of the room.

Burning to death, Four attempted to crawl, but his hand laid flat and motionless much like the rest of his body.

Thirteen did not bother extinguishing the flames; instead, he fed the fire more and burned the whole damn building on top of Four. Thirteen walked out of the building and had done just that.

Thirteen had to catch the other Bastards attention to save the other flaws.

Thirteen decided to let out a shout.

“I am right here!”

Two and Three looked Thirteen’s way. A smile spread across Two’s face as Three pulled out a handle with a clear tube. He charged the handle, and it filled the tube with electricity crafting a whip of lightning.

One down, four more to go. Thirteen mulled over.

Three snapped the whip and the sound of thunder cracked the air.

Thirteen clenched his fist at his sides and they immersed into flames.

“I do not have all day.” Thirteen yelled.

Two and Three began circling Thirteen like a couple of Jackals that nipped at the heels of a wounded prey. They grinned and laughed with each other and made false attempts to attack. Maybe trying to see fear in Thirteen’s eyes, but they would not get that satisfaction.

Two stretched her hand out sending a blast of water towards Thirteen, and Three sent out a continuous bolt of electricity into the water. Both of which smacked square in

Thirteen's chest and sent him flying off his feet and onto the ground.

Thirteen shot like a rocket through the dirt and into the remains of a crumbled building.

Completely soaked, Thirteen's eyes shined a bright red. Heat waves came from his body which helped Thirteen quickly dried out.

Out of the rubble, to Thirteen's surprise, came Six and he thrust a knife towards Thirteen's heart. Thirteen blocked Six's hand coming down with his forearms.

"I am the only one that gets the pleasure of killing you!" Six roared into Thirteen's face. Spit flew from his mouth like a rabid dog.

"Get in line." Thirteen gritted through his teeth.

Thirteen plunged his boot into Six's face and rolled to his feet. Thirteen picked Six up and landed a few jabs to his chin.

Three sent another wave of electricity Thirteen's way and Thirteen shoved Six in front of himself. Six received the blast instead of Thirteen.

Sorry brother.

Thirteen dashed to another pile of rubble and hid behind it as a blast of water and electricity collided into the rocks.

"He is my kill!" Six screamed.

"You had your chance!" Two barked.

"Stay out of the way!" Three joined in.

While they were busy fighting over Thirteen, he made his move.

Thirteen swung a fireball at Three that knocked him off his feet and he was consumed in flames.

Two and Six shot water and smoke Thirteen's way.

Thirteen quickly tumbled behind another pile of rubble.

Three screamed while he burned. Not able to control his electricity, bolts fired wildly hitting huts, a few flaws, and some exoguards, and almost hit Two as well.

"You damn fool! She cried and she soaked him with water to put out the flames, but Three did not move.

Chapter 15

Five moved about the chaos in the city. Exoguards and flaws were fighting for their lives. Clustered behind a broken wall a crowd of flaw regrouped and reloaded their weapons.

Five tossed a meltinade into the center of them. There were no explosions just a sporadic burst of gases that melted the skin and meat clean off the flaws' bones in a matter of seconds.

A flaw woman stood over a guard continuously stabbing the man in the head.

Five tightened his hand in her direction and ripped the souls out of both the blood splattered woman's body as well as the exoguard.

Five harvested the souls and feasted on them to numb his pain, but it never does.

A shot ranged past him. Five bent over backwards to see who had tried to kill him. A man with yellow eyes looked on with fear.

Five vaulted toward the man and sailed in the air straight through the man and ripped his skull, spinal cord, and rib cage out of his flesh. The man's upper body deflated like a balloon to the ground.

Five tossed the skeletal remains to the dirt.

"I am here to free your souls," Five spoke to the frightened crowd of flaw women and children huddled together. Two men stood to defend them. "You are making a wonderful contribution to help take away my suffering. Your souls will feed my body and live within me forever."

A smile snaked across Fives face.

"Oh, the pleasure! The pure ecstasy you will bestow upon me. Thank you all. I gratefully accept." Five began to tighten his fist.

"Hey asshole!" Chanta yelled.

Five turned to see her holding a plasma cannon. Her eyes glowed green and a smirk painted her face.

"You looked." She chuckled.

Five stared at her strangely and she fired a blast that hit him dead center.

Five flew backwards toward a wall and it crumbled down on top of him.

"Get out of here!" Chanta hollered to the group of flaw. An exoguard fired and barely missed her. She immediately looked the guard's way and returned fire.

She did not miss.

A white boney hand ruptured through the rubble.

Five shrieked as he crawled on all fours over the rocks resembling a spider with long black hair matted against his face.

“That’s creepy.” Chanta muttered.

“How dare you come between me and my prey!” Five spat.

He rose to his feet and revealing the charred flesh across his torso and chest.

“You are going to suffer slowly for that!”

Five tightened his fist and extended his arm toward her.

Chanta kneeled in pain trying her hardest not to lose her soul.

“Yes, fight it! It makes the pain that much worse.” Five laughed.

Chanta screamed in agony.

Five stretched out his arm to get ready to pluck her soul much like a tormented rose, but the Sporg jumped on his back and bit into his shoulder.

“Aaagggghh!” Five howled.

Chanta was exhausted but she mustered enough strength to lift the plasma cannon to five’s hand and pulled the trigger.

The discharge of light from the blast consumed the hand leaving behind a bloody seared stump at the wrist.

The Sporg clamped its many rows of razor teeth into the shoulder and shook its head vigorously back and forth. The Sporg pulled Five down to the ground. Chanta got up and kicked Five repeatedly and slammed the stock of the plasma cannon into the bridge of his nose. Five was knocked unconscious.

“Thanks,” she said.

The Sporg wagged its tail and hummed a deep vocal purr.

A woman's voice screamed out.

“You damn fool!”

It was enough to have caught Chanta and the Sporg's attention.

A single name had left her luscious lips.

“Thirteen.”

Chapter 16

Two ordered a couple of exoguards to drag Three's charred flesh behind some rubble for cover.

They checked Three for life.

"He's dead." The guard called out.

"Damn fool" Two muttered.

During the midst of it all, One stood in the same spot since they had first arrived. He watched as the battle carried on, not moving a muscle.

Thirteen tried to ignite Two's body into flames, but she had managed to extinguish herself with her water abilities.

"That is not going to work on me Thirteen. Just have whatever honor that you have left, if any, and die by our hands!" Two bellowed.

"He will die by my hand! That is my right!" Six retorted.

“You had your chance and you failed. You are lucky we are not hunting you!” Two growled.

“The only one that will fail will be you!” Six barked.

Thirteen felt like a piece of steak that a bunch of wild dogs were fighting over.

How did I get so lucky?

Thirteen could not catch Two on fire so he resorted to the next best thing.

He pulled out his glowing green revolver and pushed a button on the side and lifted up, this unlocked a mechanism that split the gun down the center into two glowing green revolvers.

Thirteen rose up from behind the pile of stone and wood, revolver in each hand and opened fire.

Thirteen hit an exo guard in the head while the other ducked for cover. Two took a green plasma charge in the shoulder.

She cursed at him as the force spun her on her heels and then on to her back. She winced in pain.

Thirteen moved from one pile of rubble to the next and sprinted for cover unloading both revolvers ruthlessly toward the guards and Two.

Finally, Thirteen dived near a pile and heard a blaster cannon being fired from another direction.

But where?

It sounded like around Thirteen’s left.

Thirteen peeked and seen Chanta dumping shots at Two which caused her to retreat for cover.

One had had enough of the interruptions and raised his arm which causing Chanta to levitate. He flicked his raised hand

which her sailing through the air and into a poorly built hut. The hut fell to pieces on top of Chanta.

“Chanta!” Thirteen yelled out.

One swiped his hand in the air and the rubble Thirteen took cover behind flung in different directions that left him exposed.

Without any cover Thirteen stood up and fired both revolvers. One used the same hand and faced his palm out and froze the plasma shots in the air, then clutched his hand and they exploded.

Thirteen anticipated this. When Thirteen fired his shots he rolled a grenade towards One. One did not seem to have noticed when he froze the plasma shots.

One’s face became perplexed when Thirteen smiled and winked at him.

One looked down and noticed the small black grenade. He tried using his powers to fling it away, but it only got a few feet from him before it went off and knocked him back.

One jumped up infuriated, but Thirteen had already taken cover.

Thirteen scanned the collapsed hut to see if Chanta was ok, but there was no movement.

Damn it!

Thirteen made his way over and stayed low while he rushed through some buildings with hopes of not being seen.

Plasma rifles discharged everywhere on both sides of the battle. The air was heavy with the smell of burned electrical shots.

Thirteen rushed to one of the unoccupied buildings and avoided windows the best he could. He exited out of one

building to another when two exo-guards rushed in his direction. Thirteen didn't break his stride and fired the first shot at the guard's foot. The guard knelt down and howled in pain. Thirteen rolled across the guard's back and grabbed the second guard's throat as he landed on his feet. He then fired a shot into the second guard's head. Before the second guard folded to the ground Thirteen squeezed the trigger that had found its mark on the first guard, which went through the skull.

Thirteen slowed down for nothing and no one. Nothing was going to stop Thirteen from reaching Chanta. Nothing was going to... A wave of smoke smashed into Thirteen's left side which sent him flying into a wall. Six approached Thirteen who was down to one knee.

"We are far from done, brother."

Thirteen stood back up on his own two feet and held on to his revolver that was concealed behind his back. Thirteen pressed a button on the side of the revolver and the revolver started to extend into a glowing green assault rifle. The barrel stretched, a grip folded out and the stock extended a bit as well.

"Get out of my way." Thirteen ordered.

"No." Six hissed.

"Have it your way." Thirteen said and revealed the glowing green assault rifle.

Six's eyes grew wide when Thirteen squeezed the trigger that fired on full auto. Green plasma charges rapidly filled the air.

Six leaped behind a stone pillar. Thirteen took his finger off of the trigger. A cloud of smoke flowed out of the plasma holes within the cement and spiraled like a rocket to Thirteen's chest.

Thirteen landed flat on his back with Six's knees on Thirteen's arms and Six's hands around Thirteen's throat. Six tried to squeeze the life out of Thirteen.

Thirteen swung his legs up and he wrapped them around Six's head and constricted tightly.

Six flailed about and flopped like a fish out of water. He turned to smoke and seeped out of Thirteen's leg lock.

Thirteen rose to his feet with eye's blazed with fire. He stared into the cloud of smoke and Six sailed through it swinging his fist.

Six connected with Thirteen's face and Thirteen blocked the next and returned a flying fist of his own.

Six staggered back in a daze. Thirteen ignited his fist into flames and he planted them square between Six's eyes. Six collapsed on the ground and wasn't moving.

Got to get to Chanta! Thirteen's mind screamed. He quickly continued the pursuit. Thirteen was just a few feet away. So close he could have seen her body.

I can make it! I can...

"I'm going to make you pay Devil!" The heavily cloaked one-eyed man said and jumped on Thirteen's back. He held a jagged blade to Thirteen's throat.

"Come on already!" Thirteen exclaimed.

Thirteen melted the blade and left only Quanser's bare hand. Thirteen flipped the man off his back and Quanser landed on his stomach. Quanser gasped for air that was knocked out of him.

"I am not your damn enemy! I am trying to save your people, your city, and yourself!"

Quanser rose to his feet. “You lie Devil! You did this to us before and the truth is showing us today that history repeats itself!”

Quanser could still hear the screams of long ago combined with the screams of now.

“I have changed LaHaye,” the one-eyed man stopped in midstride from his own name being heard, he was shocked that Thirteen had remembered. Thirteen continued. “I remember you. I remember what we have done to you and your family...” Thirteen lowered his head with complete disgust of himself. “I am so sorry LaHaye. There is not a day that goes by that what I have done to you does not haunt me or plagues my dreams.”

“Don’t you dare!” Quanser stammered. Tears welled in his eyes, “Don’t you fucking dare!”

Thirteen looked upon the man that he had broken so long ago. “You must get your people out of here. Protect them before it is too late. The Bastards will wipe this whole place out. I cannot stop them all.” Thirteen turned away from the shattered man.

Quanser stood firm and pulled out a plasma pistol and aimed it at the back of Thirteen’s head.

“You don’t get to do that! You don’t get to walk away from me without paying for what you have done!” Quanser had a tear fall down his cheek. “There are consequences for your actions!”

Thirteen stopped in his tracks, back still turned to Quanser.

“You are right. There are consequences for what I have done. I pay for it every time I take a breath. For all my actions, one day I will pay in full, but today cannot be that day. I must

save Chanta. So do what you feel like you have to do.” Thirteen had taken a step and turned his head slightly. “I do not expect forgiveness from you, but I am sorry.”

Thirteen ran forward. Quanser screamed out to Thirteen with pure rage and pain then he lowered his pistol.

“I will never forgive you! Never! You will pay Devil!” Quanser collapsed to his knees and cried with the pistol on the dirt, lifeless within his hands. “You bastard...”

Thirteen was relieved that Quanser did not shoot him in the back. He hoped Quanser found some sort of comfort or peace out of their brief exchange. Deep down inside, Thirteen had known that Quanser probably would not. Those types of scars harbored ghost that tended to stay with you forever. Thirteen had known that from personal experience.

After what felt like eternity, Thirteen managed to reach Chanta. The Sporg stood over her and protected its fallen friend. Thirteen noticed she was still breathing. He picked her up in his arms and rushed to cover. The Sporg followed close behind Thirteen’s heels.

“There has to be a way out of here,” Thirteen said to the Sporg, then had felt dumb for doing so. Thirteen knew the Sporg understood him when it started looking around.

There’s got to be an underground passage that leads above the crater. No way they would constantly climb in and out every time. Hopefully when Chanta comes to she might know of one.

Thirteen looked around at the gun fire that was exchanged. The scene painted before him was one of buildings and homes that laid in ruins, and many burned. Flaws and

soldiers scattered the land dead and dying. Thirteen had been there for far too many times before.

Amid it all, a thought occurred to him: *Where did the fleeing flaws go?*

Thirteen scanned the area and saw a family of four running in the direction of an old building on the out skirts of the battle. He clutched Chanta close to his chest and quickly followed. The family entered the building and disappeared inside. Thirteen arrived at the entrance of the same building just a few feet behind the family. He saw that they had pulled up a few floorboards and jumped into a hidden hole underneath. Thirteen looked back and saw One with his pulsating bright blue eyes extending his arms far apart. His muscles tightened and he unleashed a deep guttural scream of raw anger.

A combat ship hovered over Crater city then lowered to land. A few of the remaining exoskeleton guards dashed into the craft which quickly hovered up and flew away.

A strong push had emanated from One's body while the buildings, huts, shacks, soldiers, and flaws looked as if they were hit by a nuclear bomb. The force, which had blown everything away, quickly made its way towards Thirteen. The Sporg dashed to the hole. Thirteen clasped tighter to Chanta with in his arms.

The force of the explosion started tearing the buildings apart like a strong wind kicking up sand. Thirteen jumped down the hole with Chanta in his arms. He felt debris crumbling down, blocking out the light from the top.

"Looks like we are not getting out that way," Thirteen declared and looked at the Sporg.

The creature let out a snort probably in agreement, or just cleared its nose.

The narrow tunnel was dark, so Thirteen lit candle sized flames to help brighten the way. The Ghost candles lighted the way in the form of floating flames.

Dust filled the air, dirt covered the floor, and the tunnel was narrow with jagged rock walls. Thirteen glanced at Chanta cradled in his arms. He proceeded into the tunnel, and after an hour or so, they had found the exit above the ground of the crater. A heavy assault vehicle with the keys in the ignition had presented itself.

Six must have left it and entered the crater through here.

“Looks like we do not have to walk.” Thirteen smiled.

Chapter 17

Crater city laid in ruins. Everything that was standing before was now scattered about broken and devastated. Hundreds of dead charred bodies, many mangled had littered the grounds. Smoke hovered above the rubble of the fallen city. The combat ship flew by and stopped in midair over a lone figure with a blue Mohawk that stood ominously in the middle of it all.

The craft lowered itself down and the cargo bay doors opened. One glanced around the carnage once more taking in his work in admiration, then entered the ship. Two stood by the entrance and greeted One with a smirk.

“You could have given us a warning in advance before you went all nuclear on us all.”

One smiled and sat in a seat at the far end of the ship as it took off.

The smoke hovered above as the rubble started to swirl, forming into a figure with black hair shaped horns on a bald head that glistened in the sun high above. Six felt weak and fell to his knees. Solid black eyes stared and regarded the area where the tunnel had once been. Now it lay under the crumbled structure of a building.

“We are not done yet,” he imparted under his breath.

Six rose to his feet and stumbled while he searched for a way out of Crater city to continue his pursuit of Thirteen, to get what he felt was owed to him.

Chapter 18

Her snow-white hair was perfectly combed back while her blue eyes flashed to grey and darted across the screen of her console. She noticed she had an incoming video feed and touched the message then the video projected off her desk.

Two appeared over the Leader's desk with One in the background sitting in his seat upon the flying combat ship.

"My Leader, we ran into complications," Two stated with unease in her voice.

"Do tell." the Leader sighed.

"We ran across a small army of flaw as we were in the process of terminating Thirteen. He and the Flaw woman were hiding out in a city hidden away in an old crater. Six got in our way as well. He claimed he should be the one to kill Thirteen first."

The Leader smiled and tapped her long pointed blue fingernails gently against the desk. “Six is still trying to win my approval I see.” The Leader glanced back at the screen. “Where are Bastards Three and Four?”

“Dead, my Leader.” Two responded with a grim expression.

“Hmmm. What about Five?”

“Five’s status is currently unknown at the moment. He and the fugitives went dark after One went nuclear and obliterated the city. There’s nothing but rubble down there. No signs of life. It’s possible they survived. We have a recon team on the ground searching as we speak.”

The Leader exhaled a long sighed. “Don’t skip an inch. I want Thirteen and that damn flaw found. I want their heads. Do not disappoint me.”

With her pale hand she swiped the hologram away. The image dissipated while the Leader rubbed the bridge of her nose with her thumb and index finger. She noticed her reflection off the glass desk and noticed a few strands of hair out of place.

“I am perfect,” she whimpered. “I am not flawed.”

She sat silently in rage with a tint of fear that whispering in the back of her mind. Words barely audible, but she could still hear it.

Maybe Thirteen was right.

Chapter 19

The rain poured from the darkened sky like tear drops falling from the old gods above. The water flooded the hard soil into caked clay dirt. The long blackhaired woman with bright green eyes had stumbled in the mud and wrapped her hands around a black rustic fence with thick chains and a padlock that prevented others from entering. She had known it was a good spot to hide and to keep from getting soaked for the night. The woman scaled the fence with ease. The mutated abilities she had been given was both a blessing and a curse.

She could climb walls and ceilings as well, and her bottom jaw separated at the center of her chin and flared out like a cobra with two long pointed fangs attached. She was a mutated vampire. True, she could drink blood through the fangs, but she had no desire to do so.

The vampiric woman climbed over the cemetery gates and landed on the other side when she spotted the mausoleum.

Perfect. She considered.

She made her way inside and secured the stained-glass door behind her. The woman walked to the back of the mausoleum then kneeled between two coffins and huddled in a ball holding herself, dripping wet.

Thunder was heard off in the distance and lightning flashed here and there that illuminated the crypt. She heard something outside. Not too far off, chains rattled and the wet splash of something hit the ground.

She could smell him, her hunter. He had been on to her for a while and tracked her every move. The woman with glowing green eyes had heard stories of them that were meant to scare her when she was younger, but she had seen the aftermath of what they could do. She was in awe and fear of possibly meeting one. She heard the doors when they opened. The outside noise of rain filled the room. A dark shadowy figure with glowing red eyes of fire slowly approached her. She noticed his footsteps were silent, like the predator he was.

She had seen a look in his fiery eyes, a look of pain and displeasure, a look of confusion and conflict.

“I was only defending myself. That man came at me. I just wanted to be left alone,” she said.

The red eyed man looked away. He had spoken in a comforting voice, one that hid hurt within.

“None of that matters to me. You broke a law, not to be in any Havens and not to steal from people in Havens.”

She had never heard a Bastard speak before. He could not be the monster she had heard of in stories that plagued her and her people's dreams.

She bit her lip. "I was only hungry. I took a cabbage and that man attacked me, what was I supposed to do?"

She seen uncertainty sprawled across his face. He had a bald head, black beard, and flawless skin. His clothes were all black that clung to his body as well as his soaked black trench coat.

"Regardless, you shouldn't have been in Haven, and you shouldn't have killed that man. You knew the consequences; you knew they would send us for you."

The woman looked at the man with hope that she could reason with him. She hoped that the stories weren't true of them being ruthless killers. "But you're just like us, you're a flaw like me! The only difference is that they created you as an attack dog. Their own personal Hellhound. Who's to say they won't turn on your kind one day?"

"That would never happen, we protect them." He tried to convince her, but she knew he wasn't convinced himself.

"Protect them from what?!" she spat. "From people that are different from how they perceive a perfect world with perfect beings? They are flawed just as much as we are!" She tried to show him, splitting her bottom jaw in half then flaring it out like a cobra.

She saw his eyes glow with fire as he reached into his holster on his hip like an old gunslinger, drawing a revolver. It charged glowing green in the chambers and barrel. She felt like she could not reach him.

"I'm not like you" he said.

A tear streamed down her face. “No, your worse. You’re a Bastard.” She sat there and looked up at the red eyed Bastard that was ready to kill her.

This is how I die. She thought.

He pulled the trigger; a green charge found its mark slightly past her head and into the wall behind her. He stared at her with eyes of fire, and a tear left his cheek.

“I am. I am a Bastard.”

She stared at the man with disbelief. She heard so many stories of Bastards being created without a soul, without second thoughts. Yet, here was one that stood before her, lost and broken. Confused about his very existence and questioning his purpose in the world. He lowered the revolver and met her eyes with his; of a man that has looked for meaning in his own life.

She had seen so much pain, loneliness, and torment within his gaze. He turned around and holstered his revolver.

“I’m tired.” He said and she watched him leave.

“Chanta wake up sweetie.”

Chanta opened her eyes and saw her mother who stared back at her lovingly.

“Mom?” Chanta questioned and rubbed her eyes with her little hands.

“Hurry up and get dressed. Your father has a surprise for us today.”

Chanta crawled off the sheets of the hard wood floor, and her mother helped her get some clothes on. Her little feet ran through the smallhouse and she sprinted outside into her father’s open arms.

“Daddy!” Chanta cried with glee.

“There’s my princess!” Her father said and hoisted her up. “Happy birthday baby! How old are you again?” He asked playfully.

“Dad! I’m eight!” She smiled.

Her father chuckled. “Eight? Oh wow, you’re getting old baby.”

“Not as old as you dad!” She laughed.

“Not yet little one, but you will be. You ready for your surprise?”

“What is it?” Chanta asked.

“Well, if I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise now, would it?”

Chanta shrugged. “I can act surprised.”

Her father guffawed. “You will have to wait and see little one.”

The mother walked out of the plain sturdy house with a basket of food in her arms. She placed it in the land vehicle for the day’s journey that lay ahead. Chanta climbed into the roofless vehicle and sat in the back seat.

The sun brightened the sky with no clouds anywhere in sight. Heat waves were rised off the barren landscape.

Her mother and father sat in the front. Her father started the vehicle. After a few attempts it finally roared to life and made its way down the path filled with smiles and laughter. Chanta watched her mother and father lovingly holding hands as they chatted back and forth. Casually they watched the road in front of them, and each other. Chanta could see they were so in love, and they expressed it freely.

An hour later they pulled upto a luscious scenery of green grass, trees, and brush with a crystal clear waterfall that

poured into an even clearer lagoon. Many small fish glowed assorted colors of violet, magenta, orange, blue, and green; a sequenced light show of colors that illuminated throughout the water.

Chanta ogled with awe. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

Chanta dashed to the lagoon and dived into the water. She rose to the surface and splashed around laughing.

The father cannonballed into the water while the mother laid a blanket down, then placed the basket of food down on top of it.

Chanta held her breath and swam to the bottom of the lagoon. She witnessed the wondrous world of multicolored fish that swam past and around her. Her father submerged to her side and pointed toward different fish that glowed brightly. Coming up to the surface they laughed and giggled. They played freely and without a care. Then, a sound of a person's throat being cleared startled Chanta and her father.

“Ahem.”

Both father and daughter looked on with shock as a commander of the Leader's army hovered over Chanta's mother with a blade to her neck.

“Isn't this a touching moment?” The commander snidely remarked. He pulled Chanta's mother's hair so hard her head lifted up, revealing an open throat. The mother's bottom jaw split open then shut again.

Two exoskeletal guards had their plasma assault rifles raised and pointed towards Chanta and her father.

“Please, we have done nothing wrong,” her father pleaded to the man that held a blade to his love’s neck. He watched a tear fall from her chin.

“Nothing wrong?” The man scoffed. “You filth are contaminating this beautiful pristine piece of paradise with your presence. This is Haven’s territory. You are trespassing.”

The man’s bottom jaw seemed to be mechanical. A steel plated jaw with sharp metal shark teeth.

Chanta’s father stepped in front of his daughter. “There is no fence, no wall, no signs, nor any Haven’s that signifies this place is off limits.”

The man chuckled. “There does not need to be. Anything that is beautiful and perfect belongs to the Leader and those of Haven. Not for you or your kind.”

“Please, punish me, but let my family go.” Chanta’s father begged.

The commander pulled the blade from the mother’s throat and walked up a little closer. He looked at the desperate father. “Let them go? Hmmm...,” he pondered whimsically. “I could do that. It is an option.” The man turned away from the flaw and stared at the woman on her knees and smiled. “But where’s the joy in that?”

The commander had threw the blade of the knife into the heart of Chanta’s mother.

“No!” Her father screamed and he leapt out of the water with huge bat like wings stretched out wide from his back, claws extended from his fingertips. He attacked one of armed guards as the other tried to apprehend him.

“Run!” Chanta’s father yelled at her while he wrestled the two guards.

Chanta took a deep breath and dived under the water. She had seen her father kill one of the men by driving a clawed hand through the soldier's chest. He then turned on the other soldier when a muffled shot rang out.

Her father had fallen limp to the ground as the commander held a smoking plasma pistol. The commander aimed into the water and fired at Chanta. She swam as fast as she could to the other side and leaped out of the water, where she clinged to the cliffside walls. Chanta scaled the cliffside with ease, avoiding some very close shots and made it to the other side of the rocky waterfall. She ran as fast as her little feet could take her. She stumbled and scrapped her knees, she cried with swollen eyes filled with tears.

Night quickly came, but her glowing green eyes helped her see with the same effect as if it was daytime. She sobbed and wiped her tired eyes. Chanta looked around and sat on the ground, then curled up into a ball and laid down. The young girl shivered from the cold and cried herself to sleep.

Chanta woke up in the morning to a harsh sun that hammered down on her. Her body was scratched up and scabbed with dried blood. She felt sore and every muscle ached, but she had to keep going. She doesn't know where to, but anywhere safe was the main idea.

The little girl's pale skin dried up and cracked under the unforgiving sun after hours of no shade. She was thirsty, hungry, scared, and alone. Chanta desperately wanted her parents. She wanted to see them holding hands, smiling, and loving one another again. She wanted to be embraced by their loving affection. She dreadfully wanted to cry, but she felt so dehydrated that she could not.

A couple of times Chanta had hallucinated that her parents were walking just ahead of her, slightly out of reach. She had run to them, but they disappeared. After a couple more times she stopped giving chase to the ghost, collapsing to her knees. Night had fallen once again, and she laid on the hard ground covered with dirt. For an hour she whimpered, shivered, and waited for sleep to come claim her. Chanta started to softly sing a song in a whisper to herself. A song that her mother would have sung to her.

“My little one, you have my heart. You are my soul; you are the best of me. My little one, you are the sun; you are the joy, that fills me. You will never grow old, because you are my little one...my sweet little one.”

The little girl was consumed by the dark, but her voice could be heard as a soft whisper into a soft humming until she had fallen asleep.

The sun pounded away on her while she trekked slowly through the barren landscape. Her bare feet bled and became too heavy to walk with. She painfully dragged her steps while the night came once again, so she lay on the ground and faintly hummed herself to sleep.

This went on for a week or so, but the little girl could not tell. She had lost track of the days and of time itself. She lay in the dark and could not help but to think, *when will I be dead?*

The next day the sun hung high over the sky. Chanta didn't have the strength to move or get up anymore. She laid on her back and stared at the sky, softly singing the song her mother sang to her in a dry broken voice. She had to stop between words and gasped for air.

“My...little one...you...have my heart...you...are the sun...my...little one...my sweet...little one...”

Chanta stared with dead eyes when a shadow loomed upon her, and a figure leaned down and picked her up. She floated across the sand and dirt seeing the vast open sky with a face she could not recognize out of her peripheral. The blurred faced individual held Chanta closer. Her poor little eyes would not stay open anymore. So, she slept and didn't have the strength to care what would happen to her.

Chapter 20

Chanta stayed submerged under the glassy surface of the lagoon. Her father wrestled the two guards, his wings stretched out with brilliance. He killed one and the other tried to apprehend him.

Her father's words screamed in her mind, "Run!"

A muffled shot rang out and her father had fallen limp to the ground and the commander held the smoking plasma pistol. The commander with a steel plated jaw with sharp metal teeth looked at her dead in the eyes and pulled the trigger. The pistol gone off, Chanta woke up out of her sleep and gasped for breath. She flared her jaw out, scared of what awaited her now. She backed into the corner of the darkened room and had taken a second to look around.

What is this thing I am sitting on? It is so soft!

Her body felt cradled and comforted. It was long and squared shaped. Silky thick sheets and little rectangles that was incredibly gentle and spongy.

What is this? Her mind wondered.

She looked around the room and saw stuffed animals piled up in a wooden chest with blocks laid about the floor. The walls were decorated with smiling clouds and fluffy rabbits. The room was nothing like she had ever seen. The room alone was the size of half her parents' house...her parents.

She remembered seeing them die before her, and her time in the wastelands flooded back to her mind.

Did I die? Was it an angel that picked me up and flew me to heaven? I don't feel dead. Then again how does one 'feel' dead? How would I even know if I am truly dead for that matter?

At that moment, the door slid open and revealed a tall stocky black figure that held a food tray. Chanta scurried halfway up the wall and hung there.

"Don't be scared little one," a deep soft voice said to her.

The words 'little one' resonated within her, it reminded her of her father. She hesitated a moment then slowly climbed down.

"May I come in?" the man asked.

Chanta thought about it for a moment, then nodded her head. The man walked in slowly not to make any fast movements. He didn't want to scare her any more than she already was. He sat the tray on the big square Chanta had sat back on.

"I brought you some food and water."

Chanta looked at the tray then at the man and at the tray again. Slowly she crawled to the tray and drank the water then bit into a chunk of meat and a cherry tomato.

“Don’t eat too fast, okay? You will get sick,” the man cautioned her.

Chanta gave another nod then asked, “What’s this?” She pointed to the square she was on.

The man gave her a perplexed look. “It’s a bed little one. You never had a bed before?”

Chanta shook her head.

“Oh sweetheart, what did you sleep on before?” He asked.

Chanta pointed to the floor. The man conveyed a sad expression. He walked to the chest and picked up a stuffed animal that resembled a rabbit. He held it in his massive hands and stared into the bunny, he was reminded of a ghost long ago. He glanced back at Chanta.

“Do you like the room?”

Chanta nodded.

The man smiled. “It was my daughter’s, years ago. I didn’t move anything around just kept it the same. I could not bring myself to throw anything out.”

Chanta stared at the man then asked, “Where is your daughter?”

The man lowered the rabbit and moved over to the bed sat down next to the tray that lay between him and the little girl. The cushions shifted under his huge frame. The man handed the little girl the bunny. Chanta greatly accepted the animal and admired the softness of the plush.

He searched for the words until he had found them. “She got sick and died. She was about your age. Are you seven?”

She shook her head. “I turned eight.”

The man smiled with his eyes. “Eight? My goodness! Happy belated birthday little one. Your parents must be worried sick about you.”

Chanta lowered her gaze and a tear fell. “My mom and dad are dead.”

The man’s heart weighed heavy for the little girl, and he wrapped his big muscular arm around her and pulled her in for a hug. She was startled for a second but allowed him to continue to hug her. There was something comforting about it.

“I’m so sorry little one.”

Chanta noticed the man was not like her. His skin was dark not translucent. He looked like the guards that killed her parents.

Were these the people my parents warned me about? She could not help but to wonder. These people hated us. Why would he help me?

“Do you believe things happen for a reason?” the man enquired breaking Chanta of her train of thought.

“What do you mean?” She responded.

The man grinned. “Things that happen that can’t be explained. I lost my daughter, could not throw her things away. You lose your parents and here we are. Can’t help but think that fate allowed us to find each other. I don’t know your parents, but I can do something for them, if you like that is. I am making a proposition. I am in need of a daughter. You are in need of a father. How about we take up those positions?” Chanta stared at him, and the man smiled again. “I will never replace your

parents just like how no one could ever replace my daughter, but I can promise to protect and love you as my own. How does that sound?"

Chanta sensed that the man was hurting and in need of something familiar again. She could not lie to herself either, she was hurting too. Maybe they could hurt together.

She nodded and hugged the man.

"What's your name sweetie?" He asked.

"Chanta." She answered.

"Chanta...that is a beautiful name. My name is Scott. Pleasure to meet you."

Chanta beamed.

"Get some rest now Chanta, you need to build back your strength," scott insisted.

He tucked her into bed then picked up the tray. He stopped before exiting through the sliding door and peered back at her lying on bed holding the bunny.

"Thank you Chanta."

The door slid shut and he was gone. Chanta closed her eyes and dreamed of celebrating her birthday with her parents as if neither of them had died. They finished their picnic at the lagoon then left back home as a family. She sat in the back and watched her mom and dad holding hands in the front seat. Her parents gazed lovingly at one another, and they drove off into the fading sun.

Chapter 21

The next morning Chanta rolled out of bed and left the bedroom. She entered a long corridor with pictures that hung in display frames on the walls and moved in a loop. Many were of her newfound guardian Scott, a beautiful brunette woman, and a little darkhaired girl. They were grouped together laughing and smiling. Many of the frames were of the little girl playing outside in some luscious green field, blowing out little flames on a cake, swimming, or many other various adventures. The little girl appeared to be very happy. Not one person in the moving pictures looked like Chanta though.

She continued down to the end of the corridor and entered a larger room, the living room. A plasma rifle that looked well taken care of sat on a mantle with many medals that surrounded it.

“You’re awake. Good morning little one.” Scott said from the adjacent room that was separated from the living room by a long counter.

Chanta sat upon a stool at the counter and gazed over the clear glass surface where she saw Scott cooking breakfast on a stove burner. Scott noticed her watching.

“Lots of people have hydration machines to cook a meal in seconds these days, but you will never catch me with one.” He flipped a pancake in the air with a skillet. “I love to cook. It’s my passion. After getting wounded from the service I was honorably discharged. Didn’t know what else to do with my life that was until one day I found this old heap in a destroyed museum. So, I took it. Shhh, our secret, okay?”

Chanta nodded and smiled.

Scott continued, “I cleaned it up and fixed it then had to do some work in the kitchen to be able to make it functional. It’s what made Tara,” He pointed at the beautiful brunette woman that hugged and kissed Scott in the pictures that moved. “My wife, fell in love with me. Well, my cooking anyways.” He placed a few pancakes on a plate and gave them to Chanta.

She picked up the fork next to the plate and ate a piece. Her eyes grew huge.

“What is in this?”

Scott snickered. “Blueberries and chocolate chips.”

Chanta stuffed the whole pancake in her mouth and mumbled. “I love it!”

“Well slow down there. Don’t choke on it, okay?” He chuckled.

As she finished her meal, Chanta began to question where she was.

“We are in a place called: Haven.” Scott replied.

Chanta had shrunk with panic. “My mom and dad told me to never come close to a Haven. That they will kill any of my kind that enters!”

Scott calmed her down. “Sweetie it’s okay. No one knows you’re here and no one will ever find out alright?”

“But what if soldiers come?”

Scott shook his head. “No soldiers will come. I am, well, use to be a soldier. No one will suspect to look here.”

Chanta became confused. “If you are a soldier, why didn’t you kill me?”

Scott glanced upon her a moment before he answered. “It’s not in me to do that anymore. My days of killing are long gone. There’s no more fight in this old dog. I was out scavenging the wastelands when I saw you laying there on the ground delirious. You were dying. I could not just leave you behind like that. You look so much like my little Carla. If I left you, she would never forgive me.”

“But your kind is trained to kill us.” Chanta stated.

“True, but not all of us agree to that. You are not the real monsters out there. We may call you flaw, but every human is flawed. So, in my book, you Chanta, are human.”

She heard herself be called human, it was so foreign to her ears. Here before her, was a soldier trained to kill her and her kind and she was eating breakfast with him, saying she was no different from him.

No one will ever believe me, she thought.

“Now Chanta, since you are staying here, we must lay down some ground rules, ok?”

Chanta nodded and stuffed her face with another pancake. “Okay.”

Scott smiled and shook his head. “Alright, first rule: never leave this house, ever, unless if I am there to make sure no one spots you. Second rule, don’t be afraid to ask me anything. Third, I will train you to defend yourself from attackers and potential threats. And finally, you will be schooled. Education is important and it will help keep you alive. Does that sound fair?”

Chanta thought about the proposition then asked, “Is there any more chocolate chips?”

Scott grabbed a container next to him and poured a bunch on her empty plate.

Chanta leered. “Sounds good.” She grabbed a handful and stuffed them in her mouth.

Scott laughed. “Good to hear little one.”

Chapter 22

A few years had passed and Chanta had learned much from Scott. She had excelled in education and combat training. Scott could not have been prouder. She looked out the glass window with eyes that wandered to the city life below. Not having to be worried about being seen because the windows only allowed people to look out, not in. Chanta longed to feel the fresh air flow through her hair and caress her skin, to wiggle her toes in the earth. Chanta had dreamed about it. To be able to walk amongst the people in the city without being feared or hated but embraced for whom she is. A being was never meant to be caged up forever.

Scott entered the room and placed the cleaned plasma assault rifle back on the mantle, he had already known what Chanta wanted to ask.

“Can we go outside tomorrow?”

“You know it’s dangerous.” Scott replied.

“I do, but we can be careful. They won’t notice me.” Chanta retorted and looked away from the window then into Scott’s brown eyes.

“I don’t know...maybe soon.”

“You said that a year ago.”

“It will be soon Chanta. Please don’t push the issue.”

“Am I to remain trapped in here forever?” She huffed sitting on the couch with her arms crossed. Scott stared at her and wondered what to do or say to alleviate the situation. There was no way around it. He needed to confront the problem head on before it became an issue or resentment.

“Alright...”

Chanta wasn’t sure if she heard him correctly. “What?”

He extended his arms and shrugged his shoulders. “Alright, but you do as I say when I say and how I say, and you are expected to respond without hesitation. You understand?”

Chanta nodded with glee. Scott had left the room and came back with a small bag.

“What is that?” Chanta asked.

“It belonged to my wife,” Scott answered opening the bag and lining the items out. “It’s make-up. Women use it to hide and conceal fla...” He looked up and quickly changed his choice of words. “Blemishes.”

He placed a delicate amount on Chanta’s face and hands, in turn; it gave her the illusion of having caramel skin. He then applied green lip stick on to her lips. Scott once again got up and left the room then returned with a hooded cloak. He helped Chanta put it on, and she looked at herself in the mirror.

She could not believe what she had seen. She did not look like a flaw, but a beautiful normal person. Chanta turned back to Scott who had the front door opened.

“Let’s go.”

She eagerly rushed to the door when Scott handed her some dark sunglasses. “Put these on to hide your glowing green eyes.”

Chanta had done so right away. Before they left Scott grabbed a plasma pistol he had on top of a tall book case and tucked it in the back of his pants. Scott grabbed Chanta’s hand and squeezed it gently while they exited the house.

“Stay close and don’t leave my side.”

“Okay.” Chanta agreed. She was excited, scared, and relieved to be out in the open. She thought to herself that she could not screw this up because maybe Scott will do this more often.

The sun shined brightly when she looked around taking in the amazing sights to behold. The cool air caressed her body and it felt exactly how she had imagined it to be. She could not believe how long it had been and how she could have ever forgotten such a feeling.

People walked the sidewalks and bustled by one another, a few had greeted both Scott and Chanta with warm smiles. Chanta could not believe it.

A few vehicles hovered by at insane speeds. Droids passed by, cleaning both the streets and sidewalks. She had never seen the inside of a Haven before and never seen anything like it.

A sudden thought crossed her mind, and a small pain entered her heart. *My people are out in a dying world*

scavenging to survive as these people lounge in luxury. It's not fair!

They walked for about thirty minutes as various people and soldiers approached Scott and saluted him, while praising him for his bravery in the wars. Scott introduced Chanta to them when they inquired of her. He announced Chanta as his daughter. They didn't question him at all and told her how lucky she was to have a father like him. She could not help but wonder who Scott was as a soldier. Chanta listened to the conversations being exchanged and she glanced across the street. All the sounds ceased while her heart dropped. A tall man in all black with a steel plated jaw and shark like teeth was talking to two exoskeleton guards. Images of the man killing her parents flooded her mind, as if old wounds were being torn open with a serrated knife. Finally alone, Scott strolled to her and placed a hand on her shoulder which startled her.

“What's wrong little one?”

“That man...he's the one that did it.”

“Did what?” Scott asked.

“Kill my parents.” Chanta uttered.

Scott looked at the man then grabbed Chanta by the hand. “Come on. We have to go.”

Chanta resisted and pulled her hand back. “Who is he?” She demanded.

Scott sighed. “Commander Shoffner. He is a ruthless man who kills your kind for sport.”

“How do you know this?” Chanta posed.

Scott looked upon the child he took in as his own with a heavy burden buried deep within. “Because...at one point in time, I helped him do it.”

Chanta's world had shattered. The man she'd grown to love as a father helped eradicated her kind for sport. "Why?"

Scott became disgusted with himself. "I was young when I first joined the Leader's army. I wanted to kill something, anything just to prove that I was a man. I didn't know the horrors it would bring. I quickly transferred away from his squad, but I can't outrun the things I have done under his orders. I am sorry little one. I am not that man anymore."

Chanta felt betrayed and hurt but could not bring herself to hate her savior.

"I want to kill him." She replied coldly.

Scott gawked at her; a little girl asking to kill a person in cold blood. "You do not know what you are asking for."

"Yes, I do." she shot back.

Scott shuffled his feet and argued in his mind the decisions that lay before him. "Once you go down that road it will change you little one. You might not be able to come back from it. Is that something you really want?" He told her with the eyes of a killer.

Chanta had never seen Scott like that, but she held her ground. "I want to kill him."

Scott pondered a moment, and contemplated. "Alright, but we do this my way. Let's go." He grabbed her hand and pulled her away. Chanta glared with rage at Schoffner. She hoped his death would be slow and painful. She prayed for it.

Scott had sneaked Chanta out to the wastelands by using an old long forgotten underground tunnel system. Far from Haven he slapped the plasma pistol he had earlier concealed in into her tiny hands.

“You want to kill like a soldier you’re going to be trained like a soldier. I’ll be damned that something should happen to you. Shoot that gun at that rock forty feet away from you.”

Chanta faced the rock that he had pointed at which was the size of her head and rested on a slab of stone. She hoisted the gun up with both hands, aimed for the target and squeezed the trigger. She missed the rock completely and stumbled at the recoil.

“Congratulations you missed the mark. Giving yourself away and now he has fired at you. He won’t miss either and guess what? Now you’re dead.” Scott kicked her foot a bit. “Widen your stance, tighten your grip on the gun, inhale slowly, and exhale as you squeeze the trigger.”

Chanta had did so and fired the weapon. She hit the rock causing it to explode into pebbles.

“I might be able to make a killer out of you yet,” he smiled. Scott pointed to a boulder towards the left and said, “That boulder is a mile from here. Run to that boulder and back twice. That will be four miles and don’t stop. When you come back on your last mile you will drop and give me ten sets of twenty push-ups.”

Chanta looked at him with wide eyes. “What?”

Scott explained further, “You want to be a killer, right? You want to kill a man that has trained in all various forms of combat for many years? Well, we have to train you to be better skilled and prepared for such a task. It won’t be easy. I will push you to your breaking point and keep pushing you until I know you are ready. You will hate me, hell, you will probably want

to kill me, but if it helps you kill Shoffner and come back to me alive, then hate me with a passion because I will not lose you.”

Chanta gazed at Scott and hugged him. “I love you,” she said.

He held her close. “I love you too. Now run the miles.”

Chanta didn’t hesitate and did all that was asked of her. At the end of the day, she was sore and had trouble moving, but she kept at it every day because she knew it would be worth it to have Shoffner pay for what he had done. He will be punished.

Chapter 23

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years while Scott gruelingly trained Chanta nonstop. At the same time, he tried to not let herself get lost in it as he had once done. No longer was Chanta eleven years old, but a seventeen-year-old hell bent to kill. Every day she asked Scott, “Can I kill him today? I want to kill him now.”

Every day he would give the same answer, “No, you’re not ready.”

He pushed her hard with the hopes of deterring Chanta from going forward with the deed, but he had already knew that wouldn’t happen. The more he tried to save her from that road travelled, the more she had resisted. She studied Shoffner’s habits, patterns, and schedule. She learned his whereabouts and what time he would be there.

She decided to sneak out one night and follow the commander to his home. She watched from a distance and looked on as the commander was greeted by his wife. They embraced and kissed while Chanta peered into the scope of Scott's sniper rifle. She picked up 3D images of the commander and his wife going through the kitchen and into the living room. She saw and heard them as perfectly as if she was in the room with them.

Chanta charged the rifle and it silently hummed. Her finger was barely on the trigger. Flashbacks of the man that killed her family replayed over and over in her mind. About to take the shot, she had seen a small child run into Shoffner's arms, a little girl. Chanta's finger eased off the trigger as realized she was about to destroy that little girl's world, as Shoffner had destroyed hers. A tear rolled down her cheek.

"Damn it, no! He needs to die." She fought with herself until the killer in her convinced her that Shoffner needed to die. Chanta looked back into the scope and tried to focus. Unexpectedly, she lowered the rifle. "That would be too easy of a death."

Chanta had broken into a quiet stride across the yard with the rifle strapped to her back. She headed to the back door and turned the knob, it opened. She entered the house; silently she stayed in the shadows and avoided the well-lit rooms.

Chanta climbed the side of the walls and across the ceiling into other rooms until she spotted Shoffner sitting in a chair in front of a fireplace. She dropped down behind Shoffner without a sound and pulled a combat knife out and thrust it straight into Schoffner's right hand nailing him into the chairs arm rest. Before he could let out a scream, Chanta muffled his

mouth with her hand. She pulled out another combat knife and cut off his left ear. He stifled in pain.

“I have been waiting for this a long time,” Chanta whispered in his right ear.

Shoffner used his left hand and yanked the knife out from his right then turned to slash at Chanta but missed. He knocked the chair to the side in rage. Her reflexes were just too quick.

“Bitch!” Shoffner spat. He kicked Chanta in her midsection then slammed her head into the wall. He was strong, but she was determined. “You dare break into my home? Who are you?”

Chanta removed the contacts and revealed her glowing green eyes then wiped the make-up off her face.

Shoffner could not believe a flaw had broken into Haven, and into his home. *The audacity of it all!*

“Don’t you recognize me, Shoffner?”

“You flaws all look alike! A bunch of hideous mutants!” He smirked.

Chanta had spit the blood from her mouth. “You killed my parents nine years ago at a lagoon.”

Shoffner gazed at her, and after a few seconds he remembered. His metal plated jaw tightened, and he laughed. “Well, well, the little freak grew up and wants revenge. Come on then, come get it!” He planted the knife into her thigh and punched her in the face. Shoffner pulled out the knife when he noticed Chanta reeled from the blows. He tried to slash at her throat but Chanta ducked the attack and sliced across his chest with her other knife. Shoffner touched the bleeding gash and slashed at Chanta in retaliation.

Chanta dodged the blade; side stepped and stuck his right bicep with the blade and kneed his chin while she wrenched the knife free. Shoffner swung the knife wildly with his left hand and missed. Her bottom jaw flared open as she bit his shoulder and ripped out a chunk of flesh, then spat the meat on the ground. She spun low in a circle and cut the tendons to his ankles.

Shoffner landed on his knees, bleeding out heavily. Chanta walked a small wide radius from him. He looked up at her and chuckled, “I can’t believe a damn flaw got the best of me, a woman at that. Life sure is cruel. Funny, but cruel.”

Chanta turned to face him. “Cruel?! You know nothing of the word! You took everything from me! You stole my whole damn life!”

Shoffner scoffed, “Boo-hoo. If not me someone else with the common sense of killing your kind off would have.” Shoffner spat up blood. “Look, if you leave now, I will make sure you won’t be hunted like the filth you are and suffer slowly.”

Chanta stood silent for a moment then grinned, “I could do that. It is an option, but where’s the joy in that?” She then threw the knife right between his eyes leaving the handle of the blade protruding out of his skull. Chanta reached out and ripped the metal plated jaw from his face. Shoffner was jawless and had fallen limp to his side. He twitched in a pool of his own blood.

She breathed in her first kill and thought she would feel different, but she didn’t. She still felt empty inside and her parents were still dead. Chanta turned around and saw the little

girl standing in the room. She clutched her stuffed animal to her chest that hid her lower part of her face.

Tears filled the little girl's eyes. "Daddy?"

Chanta started to cry. Shoffner shattered Chanta's world, and now Chanta had shattered this little girl's world.

"I'm sorry. I really am." Chanta dashed out of the house, bloodied and bruised, and eye's glowing green. She ran down the dark sidewalk until she was clubbed over the side of the head by an exoskeletal guard's rifle. She felt her hands being cuffed and she faded out of consciousness.

Chapter 24

Scott had woken up in the middle of the night and went to check on Chanta like he normally did. The door slid open, and he found an emptied bed. It occurred to him like a punch to the gut that she had disobeyed him. *I should have seen that coming really, can't hold her back forever.*

Scott hurried to his bedroom and pulled open a cabinet door, then flipped switches to the old communicators he kept from his time as a soldier. He changed frequencies by sliding his index finger across the panel. He heard a conversation that erupted from one of the channels, and it gripped his heart.

“We have a flaw in custody. Commander Shoffner is dead. We are Transporting the prisoner to the compound to be executed.”

Scott rose-up and placed his hand on a wall panel that lit up to his touch. The wall folded open into a secret panel that

revealed his old soldier's armor and an assortment of weapons. He donned the armor and placed a couple plasma pistols at his sides like a gunslinger from the old historical achieves that he loved to watch. Scott shoved a few grenades and chargers into his vest. He placed a lightweight razor-sharp sword in the sheath over his back. He walked out of the bedroom with a full-face helmet on, stopping in the hallway. He looked at the holographic looped videos of his wife who kissed him, his daughter who laughed while she ran to his opened arms, and another image of Chanta who was celebrating her last birthday and opening a gift, then said, "I love you."

The looped videos didn't give off any sound, but he still heard the laughter and the "I love you" all the same.

"I promised to protect you. I'm not going to break that promise." He swiftly moved to the mantle and grabbed his plasma assault rifle then went out the front door without looking back.

Chapter 25

A guard slapped Chanta across the face to wake her up. She breathed heavily and looked around the room wondering where she was. Another hard slap across her face and the memories flooded her mind.

“Piece of shit filth!” One of the guards yelled.

“Let’s just hurry up and kill her,” the other said as he lifted his assault rifle.

Chanta stared into the barrel without fear and waited for the guard to pull the trigger. A loud crash and an array of gunshots echoed into the room.

The guard lowered his rifle. “The hell is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Check it out. I’ll keep watch on her.” The guard gripped his rifle tight. The other guard seemed hesitant. The

guard who gripped his rifle continued, “Don’t worry; I won’t kill her until you get back.”

The other guard nodded and rushed out, equipped with an assault rifle.

Chapter 26

Scott proceeded through the gates thanks to a fellow soldier he had served with that granted him access. Hover assault vehicles were parked outside the building. Scott walked in and asked for the man in charge of the recently captured flaw.

“That would be me.” A grey-haired man approached, “Scott, how have you been?”

“I’ve been good, Fred.”

Dammit Fred! Why did you have to be here!

Fred playfully slapped Scott on the shoulder. “What’s your interest in that flaw?”

“As you know Fred, I use to serve under Shoffner. I wanted the opportunity to avenge him by executing the flaw myself.”

Fred grinned at the thought. “Dammit son, I wish you got at me ten minutes ago. I already have my men on it. In the next few minutes, it’s going to be shot and burned.”

“I see. Well, it was worth a shot,” Scott said and hanged his head. He turned and left the building after he shook Fred’s hand.

Fred sat behind his desk and swiped at a holotab, he went over messages that had been sent to him while he was away. He heard a loud noise of an engine being revved. He looked up to see one of the hover assault vehicles speeding up the parking lot and into the building. It smashed its way through the entrance and ran over the guards, Fred’s desk, and Fred in the process.

Sorry Fred.

The Gatling plasma cannon blasted a long burst of plasma that scattered throughout the room, sending Plasma into all the walls and in many of the guards.

Scott jumped out of the vehicle, drew his pistols from his hip and fired away at the confused guards that rushed in only to be slaughtered. Fred’s legs were trapped under the vehicle and Scott walked over him.

“The hell are you doing Scott?” Fred cried.

Scott shot Fred square in the eyes. “I’m getting my daughter back.” He dropped the pistols then pulled out his sword. He sliced off a guard’s head when he tired getting up. A couple more guards stumbled up from the rubble only to taste the cold steel blade.

A droid rushed into the room, blasing through the debris and rubble. Scott took a shot in the shoulder but he didn’t let it

slow him down. He threw the sword into the head of the droid then tossed a grenade at its feet blowing it to pieces.

Thirty or so guards rushed in and fired at Scott who ducked behind some fallen pillars. He tossed another grenade in the center of ten of the guards.

“Grenade!” a guard yelled, as it went off. The blast killed the ones close to it; the shrapnel took care of the others. Plasma assault rifle in hand, Scott’s fired short controlled burst into the other clustered guards, dropping them like flies. The guards pulled back, and Scott walked towards them with a purpose. He fired round after round hitting his targets.

The armor Scott wore absorbed the impact of the return fire that connected with his arms, legs, and chest. Scott just took the shots, pushed forward, and kept firing, without being phased by the hits.

Scott made his way down a corridor and rushed two guards. He used his combat knife to sever one guard’s throat and fired his assault rifle in to the other guard’s chest, point blank. A guard darted out of a back room and fired a few shots that hit Scott in the head and knocked his helmet off. Scott heard a ringing in his ears and roared in defiance as he unloaded the rifle into the guard and watched the guard collapsed dead to the floor.

Scott kicked the back door open and saw a guard who had his rifle drawn on Chanta. “Stay back! I’ll kill her!”

Chanta looked at Scott with a bruised and bloodied face; she witnessed firsthand the killer Scott used to be. His armor was heavily damaged and covered with blood splatter from head to toe. Scott resembled a rabid monster from a nightmare Chanta used to have.

She elbowed the guard in the gut which caused him to heel over, giving Scott an opening. He fired a round into the guard's head, and the body hit the ground hard.

Scott ran to Chanta and hugged her, then kissed her forehead. "I got you little one." He uncuffed her and she wrapped her arms around him. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Chanta nodded and reached down to grab the dead guard's rifle. Scott peered down the hallway into the main lobby, with Chanta behind him. She saw the countless stacks of bodies scattered throughout the place. Every square inch of the building had plasma burns and shrapnel dispersed about. She would have never thought Scott was ever capable of such violence and destruction. The closer they got to the hover assault vehicle the louder the alarm to the compound could be heard.

"Get in!" Scott shouted. They climbed in and strapped themselves to the seats and he backed the vehicle out of the building then ran over a few soldiers and smaller vehicles. The guards fired away at the vehicle, but they could not do any damage to stop it. Scott charged through the gate, then the vehicle shut down a hundred yards away from the main gate behind them.

"Damn, they hardwired the mainframe and killed the power to this thing," he growled.

"What do we do?" Chanta asked.

Scott stared down at his rifle and took a deep breath. "We aren't doing anything. You're going to go out through that bottom latch under the vehicle and run to safety. I'm going to hold them off."

Chanta shook her head, “No! We are going to leave together!”

“We won’t make it that way. They will be on us in no time, but I can at least make sure you got away.”

“No! We can make it!” Chanta cried.

Scott removed his hand from his gut and exposed a lot of blood. “This old dog won’t be able to, little one. I’m bleeding out badly.”

Chanta grabbed him, nevering wanting to let go. Her eyes were full of tears. “I can’t lose you too.”

Scott smiled, and a tear left his face. “You will never lose me. I’ll always be here.” He pointed to her heart, “and here.” He placed a finger on her head then cupped her face with his massive hand.

“You can’t!” Chanta sobbed.

“Little one, you will be fine. I have taught you everything I know. You’re special Chanta, you know that? You have the power to do incredible things, maybe even change the world for the better.”

“No!” Chanta pleaded and clawed at Scott while he pushed her away down into the bottom latch. She reached up to him. “Dad! I love you! Please...”

Scott smiled at her. “I love you, daughter.” He quickly closed and locked the latch. Chanta banged her fists hard against the steel door and tried to open it but could not. She crawled out from under the vehicle and dashed into some trees, then ran as far as she could.

Scott wiped the tears from his face and held his rifle firm. He had let out a few grunts and screams from the depths of his soul, summoning up the beast that lurked within him. He

opened the door to the front of the vehicle and exited. His boots crunched the gravel beneath him while over a hundred guards raised their weapons, all aiming for Scott. The spotlights shined brightly on his position.

“Stand down!” A guard ordered.

Scott gripped his weapon tight and roared, “Eat shit!” He fired into the small army taking as many with him as he could. The guards fired back and hit him with shot after shot. Each shot that connected with Scott was met with a flash of his wife, daughter, and Chanta, which filled his vision and thoughts. Another shot brought Scott to a knee when he saw his wife, Tara, and she kissed him. He stood back up and roared to the heavens while he returned fire, taking down a crowd of soldiers. A shot to the shoulder struck him, and he saw his daughter Carla who laughed, running up to him and hugging Scott tightly. Scott yelled with defiance, and he fired again refusing to die. Each plasma charge that connected with him was a memory of his family which flooded his mind. Taking shot after shot, he killed more guards until a blast hit him in the chest and knocked him flat on the ground. He saw himself flipping pancakes for Chanta. He saw her smile as she mouthed the words, “I love you, dad.”

Cautiously, the soldiers gathered around Scott with their guns still raised. Scott coughed and gagged on his blood as his wife and daughter stood over him. Carla, his little girl, knelt down and grabbed his hand. “Come on daddy. It’s time to go,” Carla’s voice echoed.

Scott lay on the ground in a pool of his own blood. His body quivered from the pain and trauma it had endured. The

guards stood over him admiring him for his bravery, determination, and disgusted for his betrayal.

Scott grinned, “Daddy’s coming home.” His hands dropped releasing a few grenades, as the life left his eyes. Fear and panic hit the guards as a huge explosion took them all out, along with Scott.

Chanta heard the explosion and stopped in mid stride. She turned to see the plume of fire and smoke. She cried and wanted to fall to her knees, but she pushed on for her savior. She didn’t want to make Scott’s death a waste. Chanta ran throughout the night and pictured Scott in her mind with his wife and daughter, finally together once again. She made it to the underground system and snuck back into the wastelands where she applied her new skills and training to survive.

Until her twenty-fifth year she met Thirteen in that mausoleum where he had spared her life and where she had fallen in love with him. Thirteen helped prove to her that humanity, love, and kindness did not die with Scott after all.

She opened her eyes in a dream like daze and realized that Thirteen was carrying her in his arms. She felt as if she was that eight-year-old girl who floated across the wastelands within Scott’s arms the day he found her. Now she had another savior. Chanta’s eyes grew heavy again and she slept, as Thirteen carried her close to his heart with the Sporg by their sides.

Chapter 27

The fire burned brightly within a cavern of an old mining shaft. Thirteen carried Chanta deep inside, and hoped the glow of the fire could not be seen. Thirteen gazed upon Chanta and made sure she was alright. He felt the Sporg brush by his leg(?) and lay down next to her. Thirteen could not help but replay the events that had transpired, leading him to that moment.

Chanta stirred and opened her beautiful eyes. She sat up. She rubbed her head as the Sporg nuzzled its head on her lap. “What happened?”

“You took a bad hit.” Thirteen answered.

“Feels more like I was hit by a falling building.”

“Well, that was actually after you were thrown into a shack.”

The Sporg made a few clicking sounds and Chanta nodded. “I know, he is a smart ass.”

Thirteen cracked a smile, he could not help it. Chanta looked so perfect to him sitting there with the embers of the fire glowing off her face. She gently pet the Sporg’s head, and Thirteen could not look away. He was fixated on her. She fascinated him to no end. Chanta captured his heart and froze the words in his mind.

“What happened to Crater City?” She inquired.

Thirteen lowered his head. “It is just a crater now. Nothing left of the city. Some made it out. We barely made it ourselves.”

“How long was I out for?” She asked with shadows of the flames that danced about her body.

“About seven hours,” Thirteen replied.

Her bright green eyes grown wide. “Really? How did we get here?”

“I carried you.”

“When did we get here?”

“About two hours ago.”

Chanta became surprised. “You carried me for five hours?”

Thirteen’s eyes locked on the fire. “Yes.”

She gently removed the Sporg’s head from her lap and scooted by Thirteen’s side and laid her head on his shoulder and put her arm around his waist.

“Thank you,” She said softly.

Thirteen did not know what to say other than, “Your welcome.”

Chanta leaned into Thirteen. He turned to her and kissed her soft pouty lips. She bit the bottom of his lip, and he could not help but to pull her on top of his lap where she instinctively wrapped her legs around his hips then grinded into Thirteen. The Sporg mumbled some clicks and exited the room. Thirteen slid his hands up her shirt and removed it. He grabbed a handful of her supple perky breast and sucked on her nipples. Her breath escaped with lust, and she put her hand down his pants feeling it get hard, whipping it out for him while he pulled her pants off. He climbed on top of her as she slid her tongue up his scarred chiseled chest, before she felt him penetrate her.

She moaned with pleasure, and he thrust into her deeper and deeper. They explored each other with their hands then their lips. She closed her eyes and arched her back when he gently traced his fingers up her abdomen then around her throat. Sweat gleamed off their bodies, and her silky black hair became wild and matted. He ran his hands through the strands grabbing a handful of her hair and pulled on it. She exhaled a loud moan and he continued to thrust into her. He throbbed deep in her while she dug in her nails and scratched into his broad back.

They made love for hours and passed out into each other's arms. Thirteen dreamt of what life could be like with her, and a future of endless possibilities.

Chapter 28

Six sat on a rock with a fire that blazed when an incoming message appeared and projected from his wrist communicator.

The Leader stood before him in holographic form.

“Any word of Thirteen’s whereabouts?”

“His trail grew cold, but I will find him. It’s only a matter of time.”

The Leader sneered, “Time that is too precious to waste on a defective Bastard. Find him. Bring him to me alive and you will have the honor of killing him.”

“I will not fail you, my Leader.”

“Make sure you do not.” The Leader dissipated into glowing particles and swirled back into the wrist communicator. Six became entranced by the dancing flames, Voices of the past echoed in his memory as he saw a young

twelve-year-old Thirteen who sat across from him. Six looked past the fire and into the flame of his eyes.

“Well?”

Six shook his head. He was a ten-year-old, again. “Huh?”

“What do you think we are doing out here?” Thirteen gestured around the surrounding of forest of trees and brush.

“I do not know,” Six replied.

The Leader appeared from a thicket escorted by a small platoon of guards and droids. “Time to complete your training.” She pointed past the trees and said, “In the clearing over there are a small band of hideous creatures, the flaw. They are different from us, so it makes it easy to spot them from their defects. They are dangerous and have no place in or around Haven. This beautiful land belongs to Haven. The filthy vermin, those flaws are trespassing; therefore, they forfeit their life. Find the flaw and kill them all.”

Six rose to his feet as did Thirteen in unison. The two little Bastards both entered through the trees to find the clearing. It did not seem fathomable that there was one in the mass of entangled shrubs and trees, until twenty minutes into their search. They stayed true to their training and kept in the shadows. They moved with stealth as they stalked a small band of seven flaws, five adults and two children. They had found their targets,

“They do not look dangerous,” Thirteen whispered.

“Does not matter, the Leader told us they are. That is all we need.”

“Why do we have to kill them though?” Thirteen queried.

Six looked at him with black soulless eyes. “Because that is what we are made to do.”

Six disappeared into smoke and flowed with the wind, carrying him into the mouth and nose of a male flaw which caused him to suffocate. The flaw had fallen to his knees, and he clutched at his throat. Recognizing he was choking, the others gathered around him and beat against his back, attempting the Heimlich maneuver, but nothing worked. The flaw collapsed dead with eyes wide opened.

A female and another male stood over the fallen flaw and tried to figure out what had happened to their comrade. A stream of black smoke flew out of the dead flaw and into the female and male that stood over their friend’s corpse. They too had fallen to their knees then their backs and choked as they thrashed about. The female that remained grabbed a huge stick with hopes of protecting the children. Feeling a sense of pride, Six formed into himself and looked down at the three dead flaws.

Six admired his work and became so caught up that he hadn’t noticed the woman who wielded the stick high over her head about to to smash down on him. However, before she could have done so, shescreamed in pain as a blast of fire engulfed her body. Six looked back to see instead of what could have been his demise, a woman made of ash.

Thirteen watched on in horror, and the woman crumbled away. He saw that the two small children were statues of ash as well. They had been caught in the flamethrower attack. Their

arms rose to shield themselves only to fail. The kid's mouths were opened with frozen screams and face that were etched with fear. Thirteen staggered over to the children and examined. With a heavy heart he noticed they were younger than he was. He reached out to touch one of the children. His finger barely felt the side of the child's face before the body crumbled, then scattered into the wind. Thirteen shed a tear. "I'm sorry."

The Leader sauntered behind Thirteen and Six. "Killed three Flaw in one blast...very well done, and perfectly effective Thirteen."

Thirteen hid his tears away.

"Six you left yourself open for that woman to kill you. Very careless. You can learn much from Thirteen." Six glared at Thirteen then nodded at the Leader. "Let us go. You two can find your own way back. Consider it survival training." The Leader left with her platoon into a hover craft and sailed through the air. Six and Thirteen regarded each other and marched on to Haven. Thirteen could not help but glance back at where the children had once stood, and all that remained was scorched earth.

Six snapped out of the past and peered away from the fire. He scouted the wastelands and he wondered to himself, *Where could you be brother?*

He was determined to be the one to kill Thirteen. Not only because it was his birth right to do so, but to win over the affection of the Leader, and to be her favorite once again.

Chapter 29

Thirteen woke up to a dead fire and looked down at Chanta whom was nuzzled on his arm. The Sporg seemed to have chased some sort of small creature in the cave, possibly to eat. Thirteen's stomach growled; it had been days since they had last eaten. If he was hungry, he knew Chanta was hungry as well.

She rolled to her side and gave Thirteen an opportunity to get up and stretch. He got dressed and decided to go out and get food of some kind. What ever there was to eat out in the wastelands, it wasn't much. He knew plant life was scarce due to the abnormal temperatures, so he depended on finding meat from a creature that he could catch.

Thirteen walked out of the cavern and the sun beat down upon his back. The dry cracked soil stretched across the horizon with dunes and weeds in scattered about. There were a few

cactus plants and a colossal Venus Fly Trap, which was eating a small creature before moving on. Thirteen watched its roots come out of the ground and it scurried a few feet before it transplanted itself. It stayed still, waiting for another unexpected prey . A couple of prickly bushes were far apart from one another, but mostly rocks and cracked soil dominated the landscape. Ahead nestled between two dunes, Thirteen saw a crater.

Thirteen stood at the top of one dune, picked up a rock the size of his hand and tied it to a rope. He tossed the rock into the center of the crater and dragged it slowly back to himself. He gave it a few quick movements which jerked the rock, and the sand started to stir. Thirteen could see something that moved about underneath, stopped, and moved again in the direction of the rock. Thirteen pulled hard on the rope, causing the rock to skip. Once the rock landed, the creature, with lightning speed, struck and engulfed the rock, then pulled it under the sand.

Thirteen yanked hard on the rope and the creature fought back. With another hard tug he pulled the creature out of the sand little by little. The creature was aggressive and revealed its head with sharp long mandibles and six black eyes that stared a hole of rage through Thirteen. First the torso and four long spiny legs emerged, then the abdomen and another four long spiny legs revealed themselves. The creature hissed and tried to submerge itself back into the sand to get out of the sun light, but Thirteen wouldn't allow that to happen. He strained and tugged on the rope. The creature resisted relentlessly and thrashed about. Thirteen was determined not to let the creature get away. When the creature realized it wasn't

going back under the sand it became enraged and leapt at Thirteen.

The creature was bigger than the Sporg and it had long-pointed claws at the end of each leg. Thirteen got to see one up close when it slammed the claw down towards Thirteen's head. Luckily, Thirteen managed to dodge it, as well as the others that quickly followed. The creature drove its mandibles at Thirteen's face and Thirteen grabbed them both as he fought the creature off of him. The creature roared with rage .

Unfortunately for the creature, Thirteen was hungry as well. Thirteen planted his feet on the torso of the creature and pulled hard on the mandibles until he snapped them off. The creature howled while Thirteen jumped to his feet and drove both mandibles into the head of the beast. The creature staggered then stumbled as it tried to get back up, but ultimately failed to do so, and fell. Thirteen ran on top of the creature and retrieved the mandibles from the beast's head to use them to saw off the creature's head from its body. The creature swayed back and forth, then ran a few feet while headless with Thirteen on its back, then collapsed. Thirteen threw down the mandibles and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Damn Sand Spiders." Thirteen dragged the body of the creature by the leg into the cavern. Once Thirteen positioned the Sand Spider, he lit it on fire and roasted it.

An hour later Chanta perambulated in from deeper within the cavern with the Sporg by her side. "What is that?" she asked.

"Breakfast."

Chanta tried to make out the body in the fire. "How many legs does it have?"

“Too many,” Thirteen smiled.

Thirteen sliced into the abdomen and passed a chunk of meat to her.

She sniffed the cooked meat. “Is it safe?”

“The poison glands are in the head, I removed it.”

She hesitated a moment then bit into the cooked flesh. “Oh wow! It’s actually really good.”

Thirteen smiled again.

The Sporg sniffed at Chanta’s plate, which was made up of a few leaves that were bundled together. The Sporg lifted a few flaps of the petal like skin wrapped around its face. Thirteen had taken another chunk of meat and placed it on a rock for the Sporg to eat. The Sporg happily devoured the hot food.

“What is this?” Chanta asked while taking another bite.

“It’s probably better you do not know.”

Chanta pondered on the statement then shrugged, “Fair enough.” She took a few more bites then stopped. “We are the cause of Crater City being destroyed, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Thirteen said.

“All those people are dead, families destroyed because of us being there.”

“I know.”

Chanta stared into the fire. “Where can we go that they won’t follow?”

“I do not know. Perhaps nowhere especially with the troubles we brought upon the Leader.”

Chanta scoffed, “The Leader...she’s the real flaw.”

“That is what I basically told her before she snatched me up and tossed me out a window of her building.” Thirteen smiled a little at that satisfaction.

“We should kill her and end this mess.”

Thirteen looked at Chanta, “She is more powerful than you know.”

“Together, we will have a chance,” she tried to convince Thirteen, but really she was trying to convince herself.

“Where are we anyways?” Thirteen asked.

“Close to the Decayed Pits.”

Thirteen’s eyes raised. “How close?”

“Too close,” she assured Thirteen. “Close enough to watch our steps.”

‘Damn,’ Thirteen thought to himself. That was not an area they needed to be at. It happened to be ground zero of the last experimental nuclear war. A new kind of radiation that the people of the living world decided to put in a bomb and test out on the enemy. The ones within the immediate blast radius had died. The ones outside of it became infected, driven insane, and feral. They were not alive, but not dead either. They were fast, aggressive, and vicious creatures. They traveled in packs or in huge hordes and were seldom alone.

The Bastards were trained to kill them on sight, without hesitation, or they would kill everyone without a second thought. Even the flaw stayed clear of them. Those true monsters would even attack and eat flaws, anything really. If you were not of their kind or smell, you were on the menu.

“We can sneak past them during the day when they sleep, and if the Leader’s army tries to follow us through there then they will have to deal with the Decayed. Might be a good thing for us that we ended up so close to that living hell,” Chanta suggested.

Thirteen thought upon that. He'd rather avoid the Decayed at all costs. Yet, Chanta was right, it could be the leverage they needed.

"It is worth a shot, I guess. We will finish eating and head out while the sun is still rising in the early sky."

"Sounds good to me. The sooner the better. I don't want to encounter any of those things." Chanta rubbed her hands together and cleaned them of any grease.

Thirteen put the fire out and grabbed a few big chunks of meat to take on the journey.

The Sporg stretched out and followed them out of the cavern while they began their descent into the worst place on the planet, The Decayed Pits.

Chapter 30

The sun was set high in the sky and beamed down across the barren land. Thirteen could tell Chanta was skittish while she crossed through the threshold and into the area, he was too.

The Decayed Pits...even Bastards hated the region. What the Bastards were to the flaw, the Decayed was to everything else. They were ravenous creatures of such speed and agility. They were deceptive and devious. While fighting one you would not see the other five that had attacked you from behind and your flank. They teared apart anything that they could sink their teeth in to. They were creatures of madness, destruction, and pure evil.

The Decayed thrived in ground zero with its huge craters which were spread apart from each other because of the experimental nuclear bomb tests. Nothing would grow out in the Decayed Pits because the soil had held the stench of death.

The only place in the world that you would ever see black dirt and sand that was forever turned to glass.

Thirteen had assumed it was the side effects of the radiation. The jagged rocks protruded out of the ground were made of black glass from the heat of the blast that melted the black sand. Many of the rocks resembled towers that stretched to the skies. Frozen within time from when the bomb dropped. Little holes that resembled air pockets scattered throughout the towering glass rocks and when the wind blew air through the holes, it created multiple whistling sounds. Due to the deformities in the glass, the whistling sounds sounded much more like a mass of screaming people. Thirteen had been told stories of hell, and if he ever wanted to know what hell would look like all he would have to do was go to the Decayed Pits.

One could feel the temperature change immediately. The heat went up about fifteen degrees and it did not change when the sun went down. A hot wind had blown every minute or so and created the screams from the massive rock pillars. The Sporg tensed up every time the screams were heard.

Across the plains all that could be seen was the blackened earth, everywhere that the eye could see. Thirteen hoped to be through the Decayed Pits before nightfall, but that may not happen. They had not even made it halfway through the cursed place. The only good thing was there had been no sighting of the Decayed. With the sun still out, the Decayed would remain in their caves, craters, or the dirt holes they buried themselves into. The Decayed did anything to keep themselves hidden from the sunlight which hurt their eyes; They could not stand the sunlight.

“We might not make it across before dark. I am afraid we will have to find a place to hide soon.” Thirteen had spoken to Chanta slightly above the sounds of the screaming but not loud enough for something close by to hear. She nodded, not wanting to speak at all out of fear that it would give away their position.

By the time the sun started to go down they came across an old building that had been infused and consumed by the black glass long ago. The weary travelers walked in through the opened door that hung loosely upon a hinge.

Thirteen stopped Chanta within the threshold. “We should check the place out before we settle in.”

Chanta followed close behind, and the Sporg sniffed about the rooms. Thirteen’s eyes glowed red in the dark building while they searched around. They scanned the whole building and with luck, there were no Decayed. Whatever furniture was available or around, whether it was broken wood or concrete slabs, they used it all and blocked the only door, which was the one they had come in through. They did not need to worry about any other doors or windows on the other side of the building because the black glass had engulfed it completely. It served both as a good and a bad thing. The good was less barricades to make. The bad was a potential death trap with no other exits to flee from.

“I wish we didn’t have to stay here overnight,” Chanta said.

“I know.” Thirteen held her close. His heart ached for her with every beat.

The sounds of screaming from the glass rocks were heard. Whatever sunlight was left had fluttered across the

horizon and shined through the black glass that filled the room they were in with a weird black light effect. Chanta and the Sporg were both illuminated, Once the sun completely vanished, blood curdling howls were heard.

Chanta, no longer illuminated, looked upon Thirteen, “It’s them.”

The Sporg tensed up and slowed its breathing, it had felt threatened.

“If we keep quiet, we might be alright until dawn.”

“That’s if they don’t smell us first,” Chanta replied.

She had a point, but Thirteen did not want to feed in to it because he did not want to make her any more worried than she already was. They sat and waited quietly in the dark with only their glowing eyes to be seen. They heard the Decayed dashing about while they scavenged the land. Things were thrown around, while the creatures screeched and cackled, which resembled the extinct hyenas, but gravellier.

“There are so many,” Chanta whispered.

Thirteen did not even respond, he just reached out for her hand and held it tight. The Sporg stood near Chanta, ready to protect her. A noise came from outside the entrance that they had barricaded. A Decayed scurried by and examined it for a moment then dashed off.

Good, Thirteen thought not wanting any curious carnivores coming in.

Outside he heard two Decayed fighting amongst each other, then, only the sound of one that ripped into the other’s flesh and chewed on it.

The Decayed must be starving if they want to eat each other like that.

Eventually the noises slowed and quieted down as they traveled further away.

“We should be safe. Let’s try and get some sleep.” Chanta glanced at Thirteen like he was crazy. Thirteen persuaded her. “It will be alright, I will stay up and stand guard for a few hours then we will switch.”

“Okay,” She nodded, although not exactly sold on the idea.

Thirteen watched her lay down on some cushions they had found in the other rooms. The Sporg laid down next to her and made itself comfortable.

The loyal guardian, Thirteen teased in his mind.

He waited until he knew she was asleep. Using his computer that was around his right forearm, he opened the audio log. At first, he just let it run and it recorded the night around them. He did not know what to say. If something was to happen to them or to one of them, he wanted their story to be carried on, to be heard. He cleared his throat and began with, “I’m a Bastard. I have no name, but a number. Thirteen.” He stopped and gazed at Chanta. He admired her for all that she was. “Dark clouds plagued the midnight sky above. The heavens cried pouring rain on the barren land of the damned. Patches of dying grass and weeds spread throughout the once hard cracked soil that was now mud. Tombstones protruded in rows. Their markers were decayed very much like the planet they had tried so hard to save. It was an already dead world. It was the year 2524 and all life was struggling to survive. The rain holds a gothic beauty I suppose...”

Chapter 31

After telling some of their story, Thirteen had left off on where they now laid their heads and dozed off himself. He awakened to the deafening roar of a thunder crack. He observed Chanta still asleep with the Sporg nestled next to her. Thirteen glanced around, and it was still dark. He got up and stretched when he heard cackling close by. It sounded as if it came from inside the building. He decided to check to make sure, the last thing they needed was one of the Decayed getting in.

Thirteen entered the conjoining hallway and kept alert. He could still hear many of the creatures outside while the wind blew through the glass stones that generated unearthly screaming. Thirteen peered into the dark expecting to see something, anything, but there was nothing. He descended some stairs, and he heard the sound of his own footsteps

echoing and fading away. He headed toward the entrance and saw that it was still barricaded.

Always a good sign.

Another cackle, but it sounded like it came from the room to the right. Lighting flashed and light flooded across the room for a second. The door was left ajar and he approached slowly and quietly. Sliding his hand across the base of the door, he pushed it open gently. A low creak made itself present once the door opened. The room was solid black with no windows whatsoever. The only light was his red eyes that glowed. Thirteen looked around, but there was nothing to be seen.

Another cackle. This time it came from within the same room he was in, so close it sounded like it was right next to him. Thirteen ignited his hand on fire then lifted it up like a torch. The moment he had done so hundreds of obsidian faces with black eyes stared back at Thirteen. Their mouths were open, revealing countless razor sharp teeth.

“Shit,” Thirteen muttered.

He conjured up a burst of fire that pushed outward from his body into the room. The Decayed started to burn, but the madness that plagued their minds had kept them from noticing. Thirteen dashed out of the room while the Decayed followed quickly in pursuit. Many Decayed were engulfed in flames as they flooded out of the room. They crawled on the walls and ceilings as they ran on all fours. They were literally hot on Thirteen’s trail. A few had fallen off the ceiling and landed on their backs, almost crashing down on Thirteen.

Thirteen rushed up the stairs and headed back into the room then slammed the door behind him. Chanta and the Sporg woke up in a panic.

“What’s wrong?”

“The Decayed, they found us.” Thirteen’s hand was still gripped on the doorknob as he pulled against the creatures that were trying to open it.

“Let us in!”

“We just want to feed on your flesh!”

“Open the damn door!” The Decayed called through the door, cackling with laughter.

The sun started to peer into the room through the black glass and Thirteen looked at Chanta. “We have to get outside, the sun is too much on their eyes.”

“How do we do that? They are blocking the only way out of this room.”

Thirteen gazed at the black glass that covered half the building.

“Not the only way.”

Chanta turned to see what Thirteen had implied. “We’re on the third floor!”

“Do you trust me?”

Without hesitation she nodded her head.

Thirteen used one hand to grip the knob and used his other to point at the black glass. His free hand glowed and was on fire. Thirteen used a flamethrower attack and concentrated on making the fire incredibly hot. Sweat had beaded off Chanta’s skin as well as the Sporgs. A huge hole started to appear, letting in the natural sunlight that washed over the room.

Thirteen extinguished the fire then yelled, “Go to the hole in the glass! I am going to let go of the door and when I get to you, grab around my waist and jump with me!”

Chanta grabbed the Sporg and ran to the hole. Thirteen took a deep breath and let go of the doorknob. Immediately Thirteen dashed toward the hole as the door flung opened and the Decayed flooded into the room. Many of the Decayed shielded their eyes when the sun had made itself known to them. Not able to withstand the sun, yet they pushed on toward Thirteen, Chanta, and the Sporg. The creatures shrieked and howled with a deafening madness.

Chanta grabbed around Thirteen's waist struggling to hold onto the Sporg and they jumped. Thirteen faced his palms downward so he could slow down their descent as he blasted powerful flamethrowers from both hands. To their surprise, it worked, somewhat, they still fell hard on the ground. Thirteen looked up and saw the Decayed screaming at them, then slithering back toward the dark.

Thirteen and Chanta staggered to their feet, the Sporg gave an unhappy growl at Thirteen.

"We got to go. We won't be safe here another night now that they know we are here."

"No argument here," Chanta replied and dusted herself off.

They proceeded further into the Decayed Pits under the brightly lit sun, hoping to be through the cursed land before nightfall. Thirteen thought honestly to himself that might not happen since they had not even reached the halfway mark yet.

Chanta grabbed his hand, which caught him off guard. "Yet again you saved me."

"Do not worry, I am not keeping score," Thirteen said as he cracked a smile.

Chanta grinned, then as if reading his thoughts she asked, “We might have to spend another night out here, won’t we?”

“It is a strong possibility.”

She squeezed Thirteen’s hand tight. “As long as we are together, we can make it.”

They walked in silence for a moment still clutching their hands together. Thirteen lifted them up, “What is this?”

She raised an eyebrow and asked, “What is what?”

Thirteen darted his eyes to their hands. “This.”

“Hand holding,” She chuckled.

“Hand holding?” Thirteen repeated observing both of their hands.

“It is an expression of affection. I am showing you that I love you. It is expressing a desire of wanting to be close to you. To be able to touch you.”

“All that from holding hands? Interesting.”

“Do you not want me to hold your hand? Does it make you uncomfortable?”

Thirteen gently squeezed gently and said, “No, do not let go, I like it.”

Chanta leaned on him and rested her head against his arm.

“Where did you learn about hand holding?” Thirteen asked.

“From my parents.” She almost choked up then continued, “I remember being little and I would see them always together, always holding hands. They would laugh, kiss, and love each other. I always wanted to find someone that I could love like that, and I have, with you.”

Thirteen laid his head on hers. “Tell me about your parents.”

Chanta smiled at the memory of them. “My dad, a tower of a man, although, you are slightly taller than him. He was strong and smart. He loved my mother and me. My mother was so gentle, beautiful, and carefree. She was always putting her family before her own needs. We would take trips together, and they showed me what hidden beauty this world had to offer.”

“What happened to them?” Thirteen asked.

She clutched tighter. “They died at the orders of the Leader.”

“I am sorry.”

“I had to survive out in the wastelands alone. I almost died when I got saved by an incredible man. He became a father to me, and I became his daughter. He was the only one to say that I am human. His name was Scott.”

“Tell me about Scott.”

“He saved me. He was a soldier for the Leader, but he retired and disagreed with everything the Leader had stood for. He snuck me into Haven and taught me how to blend in, trained me to survive. I came across the man who killed my parents, then I killed him. I became captured and Scott gave his life to save mine. He was a good man.”

Chanta’s story sounded familiar to Thirteen. “I remember hearing about that. The whole base was destroyed, and every soldier killed. The Leader was extremely furious. She had certain Bastards look for the escaped flaw.”

“Did she have you look for me?”

“No. I was on another mission hundreds of miles away.”

“I wondered if things would have turned out differently if you did.”

“Maybe I would have defected sooner.”

Chanta smiled, and Thirteen kissed her.

“I love you,” Thirteen said spiraling into her eyes.

She melted into Thirteen after she heard those words. They trudged on through the Decayed Pits hoping to find a safe place with shelter along the way.

Chapter 32

A beeping went off and alerted the listener of an incoming message. Two swiped across the monitor and said, “What did you find?”

A recon scout appeared before her. “Not much. We found no trace of Six. We think we may have found Five, but the body is so badly damaged we cannot tell for sure.”

Two looked off to the side of the ship and glowing bright blue eyes stared across at her, it was One. He readjusted in his seat and proceeded to listen.

“Any sign of Thirteen or the flaw?” Two asked.

“No, they must have made it out somehow. We did on the other hand find a few survivors. A family. One adult male, an adult female, and two children. We questioned them on locations close by. They mentioned the Decayed Pits being the closest location, however.”

Two did not like the sound of that. “They went there. I am sure of it.”

“What of the family?”

“Kill them,” Two smirked.

The scout lifted his rifle and fired, followed by some brief screams.

Two ended the transmission and said to One, “Should we go to the Decayed Pits?”

One stood to his feet, waltzed over to her, swiped the monitor on then opened a holographic map. He scanned the area and sent a homing signal out that was immediately received.

Two grinned. “Clever...very clever.”

One made his way back to his seat and silently contemplated their next course of action.

“We have some time to kill.” Two hunched over a seat and revealed her cleavage while she licked her lips.

One simply beamed.

Chapter 33

The Leader sat behind her desk and stared blankly out the glass window as she looked over her empire. She picked up a martini glass and took a drink. She gazed upon the bustling streets full of hover crafts that zoomed by. Droids and people of wealth clogged the sidewalks and past the buildings and skyscrapers. A wall loomed and made itself known, beyond that the wastelands. The Leader closed her eyes and heard echoes from her past. When she opened them, she was a younger woman, a teenager.

“Cynthia,” an elder woman’s voice called out to her. The teen, Cynthia, with white snow hair braided down her back proceeded to the elderly woman, “Yes mother?”

The older woman, with wrinkles and blue lifeless eyes, cast a glance at her daughter. “Are you ready to go to the ribbon ceremony of our accomplishments?”

“Of course,” Cynthia said.

“It is going to be so perfect, flawless really.”

When the two women stood next to each other, they resembled a before and after picture; They looked almost identical.

The teenaged girl grabbed the hand of her mother and said, “It is such an exciting time mother.”

“Indeed,” the mother replied. “Today is the start of a new era. Where the family name, Riverbrook, will be remembered as saviors. Come dear, time to go.”

They proceeded to leave the sky tower, which was different then. There was no upper half of the building that hovered on top of the lower building. Hardly any droids roamed about, and no large army.

A man in a soldier’s uniform greeted the mother and daughter as he escorted them into a vehicle. The soldier closed the door behind the women, got in the front and started the up vehicle.

A television came on in the back that showed a news anchor looking tired and worn: “The wars have ended, but the mutation rates are growing rapidly. Many cities are plagued with these creatures. Ground zero of the new experimental nuclear bombs, Arizona, has been destroyed. The aftermath of the radioactive fallout has spawned crazed monsters called the ‘Decayed.’ The Decayed are rampaging through other cities, slaughtering and feasting on the flesh of people. The army is doing all they can to eliminate the Decayed, but the creatures are overpowering our forces.”

The television turned off as the elderly woman put back down the remote control. “Today is the day all of that ends. No

longer will we have to live in fear of those monsters. We can live in peace.”

The car pulled up to a curb and the soldier stepped out, then opened the door. Cynthia stepped out of the vehicle and looked up at a huge monstrous steel wall that surrounded the city. Thousands of people gathered around clapping hands and cheering. Cynthia’s mother exited the vehicle, where she was congratulated.

News cameras and anchors swarmed around the elder Riverbrook. Soldiers, armed with assault rifles, created a protective barrier around the women. Riverbrook smiled and waved at the cheering crowd of wealthy people.

Steadily she stepped up the stairs to the stage with help of the soldier that drove her and her daughter. She stopped behind a podium and spoke into the microphone. “I am so happy that you all can be here for this historic event,” she said. “The wars have just ended, leaving this country in pieces. Horrible creatures known as the Decayed are slaughtering millions. Other mutates called the flaw, invade our cities. What can we do to protect our loved ones from these abominations?”

The film crews captured every moment and flashes from cameras flooded throughout the mass crowds. Soldiers scouted the perimeter for possible threats.

Riverbrook looked at her daughter and continued, “We must band together as one. Come together and overcome especially with this.” Riverbrook lifted her hand to the new colossal steel wall that wrapped around the city. She continued, “This wall will keep the evil out of our city permanently. With our vast growing army along with mass marketing droids to serve and protect, we are also experimenting with a new breed

of super soldiers. It is still in the works, but the ‘Bastard Protocol’ will soon be up and running to fight the Decayed and the flaws.”

The crowd clapped and cheered.

“This is our safe haven. Let it be known that today marks a new day for Los Angeles, and a new name. Our city will no longer be called Los Angeles. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Haven.”

The crowd cheered even louder, and the colossal steel door rolled open, allowing in many of the wealthy and soldiers to march in.

Cynthia looked about them, casting a glance at her elderly mother who waved at everyone. Riverbrook made her way down the stage with her loyal soldier by her side. “Get the car please, dear.”

“Right away ma’am.” The soldier left to fetch the car.

“Take this all-in dear daughter. This is our empire.” Riverbrook held Cynthia tightly against her.

“What is the Bastard Protocol?” Cynthia asked.

A loud beeping sound could be heard, which brought the Leader from the past to the present. The Leader opened her eyes and swiped the glass surface of her desk. She was still dazed from remembering the past as the teenager she once was amidst her mother’s glory. “What is it?”

“My Leader, your presence is requested in the labs.”

The Leader drank her martini and placed the glass down. “I am on my way.”

“Understood, my Leader.” The image of the holographic soldier vanished from the display over the glass desk in front of her.

Another loud beeping was heard before she could get to her feet. The Leader swiped the surface once again. “What is it?”

The holographic image of Six appeared where the soldier had disappeared.

“My Leader, I am tracking Thirteen and the flaw. I believe they have gone into the Decayed Pits. Would you like me to...”

The Leader cut him off. “I would like you to do nothing. You have done enough. One and Two are on it. You are no longer needed.”

“My Leader, I should be the one to kill Thirteen.”

“Are you giving orders now?”

Six lowered his head, “No, I, I need to be the one to do this. Please my Leader.”

“You had your chance, Six. You failed me, and you know how I feel about failure.”

“My Leader I...”

“I do not tolerate failure Six. You are utterly worthless to me, a disappointment. Looks like I am going to be losing another Bastard.” The Leader swiped the desk and ended the holographic call. Finally standing to her feet, she left her room, went down the hallway and entered the elevator that went down to the labs. The elevator door closed, she could see her reflection in the glass and closed her eyes. Her mind drifted back to being a teenager so long ago.

“Look around Cynthia. This is our master work.” Riverbrook steadily walked around the vast white clean room of metallic utensils and glass vials that were filled with

chemicals. Cynthia seen the computer screens running numbers and compared mixtures.

“This is where you make the Bastards?” she asked.

Riverbrook nodded in response. “This is where we make the Bastards, dear. You own all of this as well.”

Cynthia had seen a tablet on a desk that read: ‘Alpha Zero and Omega Zero.’

Riverbrook noticed Cynthia’s gaze and turned the tablet off.

“What was that?” Cynthia asked.

“Nothing to be concerned about yet, my dear. Just the first Bastard we were designing. I will fill you in on it when the time is right.”

Cynthia stared at the tablet once more and proceeded to follow her mother. “What can these Bastards do?”

Riverbrook smiled, “Amazing things. They can control elements or whatever we create them to control. They will not question their tasks. They will do as they are told. They are our guard dogs, I guess you could say.”

Cynthia’s finger glided across the stainless-steel desk and gazed around. “When will it be up and running? To create the first Bastard?”

“Two were already created,” Riverbrook admitted. “We are going through trials with them as we speak. In particular, one for a long time.

“Alpha Zero and Omega Zero,” Cynthia said.

“Yes.”

“May I see them?” Cynthia asked.

Riverbrook stood silent for a moment and contemplated. “I suppose I could show you one of them.”

Riverbrook guided Cynthia to a bulletproof glass window. The visor raised and revealed a room with a bed, table, and chair. A bald man with gray skin sat up from the bed and looked at the women.

“This is Alpha Zero,” Riverbrook said.

“He looks my age.”

“Almost. He is slightly older,” Riverbrook replied.

Cynthia and Alpha Zero locked eyes. Alpha Zero approached the glass and stood before them with curiosity.

“His eyes,” Cynthia noted.

“Beautiful, aren’t they? A different color determines the element they possess.”

“What element does he possess?” Cynthia inquired.

“All of them,” Riverbrook said.

Cynthia had seen the multitude of colors that swirled and danced within Alpha Zero’s eyes as if with a mind of their own.

Riverbrook nudged Cynthia, “Watch this.” She pushed a button and a door within the room opened. A swarm of Decayed entered the room.

Cynthia was taken back by their fierceness and savagery. Alpha Zero calmly turned around and looked upon the growling creatures, yet they cowered in fear of Alpha Zero. Alpha Zero lifted a single hand, levitating all of the Decayed in the room. He then thrashed them about in the air, into the walls, ceiling, and each other. It became a whirlwind of Decayed everywhere. One caught on fire, the other electrocuted, another froze, and a few sprouted vines from their bodies. Finally Alpha Zero clenched his hand, and the Decayed all froze in midair. Lowering his hand, Alpha Zero turned away from the Decayed

and stared back at Cynthia, as the Decayed turned to ash and crumbled everywhere.

“Amazing,” Cynthia said.

Cynthia moved to the edge of the glass. Alpha Zero followed her movements, stopping back in front of her. Cynthia placed her hand against the glass. Alpha Zero did the same. “He is focused on me. Why?”

“Maybe he thinks you’re pretty dear,” Riverbrook smirked. She pressed a button, and the visor went back over the glass window concealing him inside from view.

Alpha Zero stood silently until Cynthia could not see him anymore.

“Come dear. Let us leave.” Riverbrook turned and walked away.

Cynthia gazed at the tablet again before she followed.

That night Riverbrook retired to her chambers leaving Cynthia alone with her curiosity.

She does not want me to look at that tablet...why?

The question nagged at her. She lay in bed, until she could not take it anymore. She got up and left the room and snuck her way past her mother’s room. Cynthia glanced at the closed bedroom door, and left the suite. She walked down the empty hallway to the elevator and stepped inside. She listened to the soft ping as the doors closed. She stared at her reflection from the glass as patiently waited to reach the labs. A soft ping came and the doors opened. Cynthia walked through a long dimly lit corridor. She approached a steel door with a retina scanner placed next to it. Cynthia stepped in front of the scanner and placed her face close to it. The machine scanned her eyes,

and opened the door. Her mother's words echoed through her mind, 'You own all of this as well.'

"Thanks mother." Cynthia strolled into the dimly lit laboratory and headed towards the tablet that rested on the steel surfaced table. She danced her fingers across the tablet and picked it up. Carefully, she examined it and turned it on. Words loaded up.

'Alpha Zero and Omega Zero.'

She tapped the file and opened it. An image of Alpha Zero popped up. She swiped the picture away as another image replaced it.

"The hell?"

Cynthia stomped over to the bulletproof glass and raised the visor.

Alpha Zero was already standing there expecting her arrival.

"The hell is this?!" Cynthia placed the tablet to the glass. Alpha Zero gave it a glance then back at her. "Answer me! What is this?!"

Alpha Zero tilted his head and pointed at her.

"Answer me dammit!"

"It is you." Alpha Zero had spoken without using his mouth.

"Telepathy," Cynthia said.

Alpha Zero nodded. "The image is of you."

"How is that possible? I don't remember any of that. I was born in a hospital," Cynthia said.

Alpha Zero shook his head. "Not a hospital. Here, in the laboratory, a couple years after creating me."

"I don't understand." Cynthia felt dizzy.

“You were a science experiment like me. What is there not to understand?”

“Am I a Bastard?” Cynthia asked.

“No. You are so much more. You have so much power within you.” Alpha Zero placed his hand on the glass.

Cynthia placed her hand over his and said, “What power do I have?”

Alpha Zero locked eyes with hers. “Strength, speed, and...death.”

“Riverbrook is my mother; at least I thought she was.”

“No. Not your mother. You are Riverbrook.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You are Riverbrook. You are her clone.”

Cynthia became silent and trembled with anger. She left the laboratory and got into the elevator heading back up to the suite. Cynthia gazed upon her reflection in the mirror. For the first time she didn’t see herself, she could only see Riverbrook.

“You are Riverbrook. You are her clone.” Alpha Zero’s words echoed throughout her thoughts.

“No!” Cynthia screamed and shattered the mirrors. She entered the suite and kicked open Riverbrook’s door.

Riverbrook rose out of bed. “What in God’s name are you doing?”

Cynthia kicked a coffee table over. “When were you going to tell me?!”

“Tell you what?” The old woman questioned.

“When were you going tell me that I’m not real! That I’m a damn science experiment!”

“I see,” Riverbrook said. “You found the files. I was going to tell you.”

“When? When were you going to tell me that my life, that I am a lie!” Cynthia seethed.

Riverbrook got out of bed and staggered to Cynthia. “You are not a lie. You may have been an experiment, but you are a daughter to me. You are me. My second chance in life to do great in this world. You are meant to do so much good.” Cynthia looked down and Riverbrook held her close. “I’m sorry you found out this way. You may have been an experiment, but I love you as my own child. You are my child,” Riverbrook said, and hugged her tighter.

“I am not an experiment...,” Cynthia softly spoke.

“What?” Riverbrook asked, then felt Cynthia’s cold hand squeezed around her throat as she lifted the old woman off the ground.

“I am not an experiment,” Cynthia said garishly, squeezing tighter on Riverbrook’s throat. Riverbrook’s eyes grew wide as she struggled and wrapped her hands around Cynthia’s iron grip.

Cynthia pulled Riverbrook closer and said, “I am perfect.”

Riverbrook cried out in fear and agony as her flesh around Cynthia’s hand turned to grey and started to peel away.

“Cynthia...,” Riverbrook choked.

“No...that is not my name anymore,” Cynthia spat coldly. She watched Riverbrook, the woman who had raised her and loved her as her own, crumbled to ashes. Cynthia walked to the phone, picked up the receiver, then talked to one of the soldiers. “I want a press conference in the morning.”

“I’ll make it happen,” The soldier assured her.

She hung up the phone and proceeded to flip through all the documents lain about Riverbrooks' desk and scrolled through more on her laptop.

That morning, she stood before the media in front of her home tower. Soldiers once again created a barricade between her and the crowd of news cameras and anchors.

Cynthia cleared her throat. "Last night, Riverbrook passed away; Leaving Haven, the company, technology, and the military within my control."

"How did your mother die?" An anchor woman called out.

Cynthia despised that word, 'mother,' but hid it well. "She passed away due to old age."

"What does this mean for the future of Haven?" A man with a loosened tie called out.

A storm that brewed inside Cynthia, yet she gave a appeared calm. "Haven will continue to grow and thrive under my care, my protection, and my rule."

The same anchor woman asked another question which further agitated Cynthia. "You're saying you are taking over Haven as in a mayor? Governor?"

"More like a leader," Cynthia said. "The second that wall went up we became an independent city that fell into Riverbrook's rule. Well, she is gone now. I am the heir. If you don't want to live under my rules, my command... well, you are free to leave Haven. But how long will you survive out there with those creatures? Those monsters? Those flaw?"

The news reporters were speechless. Camera flashes moved about like a wave. Cynthia went on, "I offer protection

for compliance and loyalty. I offer perfection. A utopia to thrive in.”

“What about diplomacy? Democracy?” A reporter asked.

“Diplomacy and democracy died when the world died. There is only one rule now, my rule. This is only the start of my empire. There will be Havens built in any cities left and willing to give their loyalty to me.”

“Cynthia...”

“My name is no longer Cynthia!” she cut the reporter off. “My name is...Leader.” Riverbrooks’ loyal soldier that was standing by Cynthia stood uneasy. “Witness the birth of your savior, your new Leader,” Cynthia said, then went back inside the Sky Tower.

She was scrolling through the documents on her tablet with the uneasy soldier walking next to her, side by side.

“How did she die?” the soldier asked.

Cynthia raised an eyebrow and said, “Old age. It’s a bitch.”

The soldier shook his head. “She still had years left in her. Where’s the body?”

Cynthia stopped in her tracks. “Looks like your estimates were wrong, and we had her taken out last night.”

The soldier gripped his rifle. “Bullshit. You’re lying.”

Cynthia remained motionless. “Am I now? What does it matter? All this is now mine. Your army is mine. Haven is mine. You are mine.” Cynthia positioned herself face to face with the rugged soldier. “If you don’t like it, shoot me or fall in line.”

They stared intensely for a moment which felt like eternity for the soldier, and then Cynthia turned and walked away. The soldier lowered his head in anguish.

Cynthia made her way into the laboratory and gathered around the scientists that were working. “The F.O.Y. serum, where are we on that people?”

“How did you get access to that information?” one scientist asked.

“I am in control now. I have complete access to everything. Now where are we on the development of the serum?”

“We are years away from an actual serum,” a woman in a lab coat had uneasily answered.

“I want it done quicker.”

The scientists were taken back. “But...”

“Where are we on the Bastard Protocol?” Cynthia cut them off.

“We may be even further on that from the F.O.Y. serum.”

Cynthia pondered on the given response then pulled out a pistol and shot the scientist in the head. The scientist fell lifeless to the tiled floor and people screamed. Cynthia shushed them by pointing the barrel of the pistol up against her mouth. “No, you’re not,” she told them. “We need the Bastard Protocol up and running. We already have Alpha Zero.” She pointed to the glass that was covered with the visor across the room. “You have six months to create the first Bastard,” Cynthia said, leaving the scientist in a frenzy.

Within six months, Bastard One was created. Six months after that, Two was born along with Three and Four. A

year later, Five was created. The following year Bastards Six through Thirteen came to be. A couple years after that, hundreds more came to be. Cynthia was pleased, but still needed the F.O.Y. serum.

A decade had past, and on her twenty-seventh birthday she was called to the labs. Once there she was presented with a few hundred vials of the serum she sought.

“Our Leader, we present to you, the Fountain of Youth serum.” The same scientist handed her the vial with a syringe.

Cynthia filled the syringe with the serum and injected herself with it.

“You will remain twenty-seven forever now.”

Cynthia smiled. “I’ll be perfect forever...I want my Bastards to be injected with this serum when they reach thirty years old.” She stared at the bulletproof glass covered by the visor. “I want Alpha Zero to be given this serum as well.”

“Yes, my Leader.”

Cynthia headed into the hallway and stopped at a door. She entered a code which opened the door. Immediately, she saw a child of ten engulfed in fire who stood over another young child who was laying in his own pool of blood. “Very good Thirteen,” Leader said to the boy on fire. “Most Bastards are not able to use their powers until they are older. Your training is almost complete. I have high hopes for you. Come, I will show you to your barracks.”

That was four hundred years ago, and the Leader entered the same laboratory the Bastards were created in when she had first taken over.

“What is the progress?” Leader asked the team of scientist that bustled about.

One woman in a black lab coat stopped and greeted the Leader. Her name tag read: Kandice. “Going exactly as planned.”

“Wonderful. How long?” The Leader asked.

“It has been hundreds of years since any activity, so the Revival Stasis is slow at first, but it has quickened...”

“I asked how long?” The Leader cut her off.

The woman stammered then nodded. “Right...right...I would say about three days for complete revival.”

The Leader approached the bulletproof glass. “Good. I want more Bastards from his blood. A new breed of Apex.” She placed a hand on the glass. “It has been too long.”

Chapter 34

“I failed?! I failed at nothing!” Six shouted to a vast open sky. Frustrated, he threw a stone into the wasteland. “It’s my right! I should be the one to kill him!”

Thunder roared in the distance. Six fell to his knees, grabbed a handful of sand and watched it fall from his hand. “I have no home...I cannot go back without his body.” Six stared at the Decayed Pits that were miles in the distance. He knew he could die going there, but he had no other option.

“What are you doing?” Thirteen asked.

Six had found himself in his mid-twenties. A flaw child lay on the ground with Six’s heavy boot on her chest. “Playing with my prey. Why should you care?”

The child screamed for help.

“Don’t do that,” Thirteen said.

“Don’t do what?” Six dug his boot deeper into the child’s chest.

“That! Don’t do that! Come on!” Thirteen shouted over the child’s screaming.

“I’m just having fun. Don’t tell me you feel pity for this thing,” Six sneered.

The child cried and reached out to Thirteen for help. Thirteen stared at the child torn at what to do. “Just stop it! Let her go!”

Six looked up appalled. “Her? Let her go? You really do have pity for this filth, don’t you? Don’t you know what would happen to you if the Leader found out about this?”

“Just let her go, brother,” Thirteen pleaded.

Six thought about it and even lifted his foot up an inch.

A voice called out, “Get off of my little sister!” A fifteen-year-old boy stood behind Six with a rifle raised to the back of Six’s skull.

“Quanser help me!” The little girl screamed.

Quanser kept the rifle steadied. “Don’t worry sis, I got you.”

“They killed them all!” She cried.

“I know...I know.” A tear left his eye.

“Uh oh, looks like we have a situation,” Six mocked.

“Shut up! Just shut up and get off my sister!” Quanser barked.

Six took his foot off the little girl and she rolled over onto her stomach, hurt.

“Just stay there, okay? I’ll handle this,” Quanser told her. He charged the rifle ready to fire, but the rifle felt hot and

started to melt out of his hands causing him to scream in pain. Thirteen's eyes glowed a bright red as he melted the rifle.

Six grinned as he turned to Quanser. He immediately leaped at Quanser and gouged out his left eye. Six scratched and dug into the flesh around the eye and laughed before he tossed Quanser into a mud puddle.

"Let's go," Thirteen urged, disgusted by his brother.

Six looked at Thirteen. "Fine, but before we do..." Six stomped his foot on to the little girl's head and crushed her skull.

"Six, no!" Thirteen yelled.

"Kala!" Quanser cried and dragged himself through the mud while blood flowed off his face.

"Now we can go," Six said and bumped against Thirteen. Thirteen watched Quanser cry over his little sister's body.

"I'll kill you, Devil!" Quanser vowed, "I'll kill you."

Six snapped out of his past when the thunder had grown louder than his own thoughts. He peered at the Decayed Pits while he rose. "I am coming for you brother."

Six ventured towards the land of black sand glass that whistled screams throughout the hellish place.

Chapter 35

Thirteen, Chanta, and the Sporg made it to the center of the Decayed Pits. It was at least forty degrees hotter with the sun beating down on their backs. After they had escaped from the Decayed, they had pushed forward in a hurry. Thirteen hoped they would make it through the Pits before nightfall. It was certainly looking that way, at least.

Chanta wiped the sweat from her brow. "It's so hot."

Thirteen nodded. "After the explosion, it never cooled here. Just stays hot no matter what."

The Sporg trudged along and Chanta cast a glance at Thirteen and said, "You don't ever get hot?"

Thirteen shook his head, then responded, "I control the fire. I am a part of that element. The heat never bothers me."

"Must be nice."

Thirteen chuckled at her sarcastic response.

The black glass surface stretched for miles and miles. Sharp shards reached to the sky and contorted in different directions. Thirteen stopped in mid-stride; Something had caught his attention.

Chanta stopped to see what the matter was and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Thirteen turned around and faced behind them. “We are being tracked.”

Chanta glanced about. “But the Decayed don’t come out during the day.”

Thirteen thought so as well. However, that was until he noticed a large horde of the Decayed sniffing the air and running on all fours towards them.

“Their eyes...what did they do to their eyes?” Chanta gasped.

“They dug out their own eyes to avoid the sunlight,” Thirteen explained.

The Decayed ,with claw marks around their eye sockets that were now bloodied and emptied, sniffed the air. Their mouths were open, revealing rows of sharp fangs as they shouted over one another. “The fresh flesh is over there!” they screamed.

“Get them!”

“I want the red eyed one!”

Thirteen grabbed Chanta’s hand. “Run!”

They ran as fast as they could, but just seemed like the Decayed were gaining.

The Decayed ran and climbed over each other moving as one single organism that relied on scent. Thousands of them,

cackling and nipping at each other for the thrill of the hunt. Many slipped on the smooth black surface.

“Can’t we ever catch a break?” Chanta yelled.

They passed a huge black glass stalagmite that reached to the sky. Four Decayed leapt out from behind it and landed on Thirteen, cutting him with their claws. Chanta swung at one, but they remained latched on to Thirteen. He swiped a flaming fist into one of them, engulfing its head in fire. The creature flew off with him. Thirteen kicked the other one off and the Sporg rushed it from the side. The Sporg’s head bloomed and clamped down around the Decayed’s neck.

Thirteen managed to get his revolver and shoot the other two off. Thirteen got to his feet and pressed a button on the side of his revolver, sliding the button inwards it extended into a glowing green assault rifle. Another horde of Decayed, perhaps another thousand more appeared in front of them. They were surrounded by the raving mad creatures.

Thirteen lifted the rifle and opened an automatic fire of constant green plasma charges. One after the other, he laid into the horde of Decayed that surrounded them. The Decayed was not letting up, even as Thirteen tried to cut their numbers down. Thirteen might have dropped about two hundred of the creatures on both sides.

Thirteen tossed the rifle to Chanta and she caught it. “Use it!” he yelled.

She didn’t hesitate; she shouldered the rifle and let loose. She sprayed plasma charges into the hordes of Decayed that were flooding their way around them. It was a complete war zone. Thirteen made a flaming circle around them to keep them at bay, but it did not work. The Decayed scurried through

the flames and sliced their claws through the air. Chanta fired shot after shot while the Sporg bit and latched on to a Decayed's neck then ripped it out. Thirteen kept lighting them on fire, but there were too many of them. A tornado of fangs and claws swarmed around Thirteen, Chanta, and the Sporg. One of the Decayed knocked the assault rifle out of Chanta's hands. She tried to recover the rifle but a group of the Decayed surrounded and restrained her then carried her off.

"No!" Thirteen screamed and rained fire balls at the Decayed but as soon as he dropped one another had taken its place.

"Thirteen!" She called out and stretched her hand towards him.

"Chanta! I'm coming!" Thirteen dashed over and leaped into the air and landed a punch and kicked another Decayed. He grabbed Chanta trying to free her, but to no avail. The Decayed latched around him and slashed his chest, mid-section, back, and legs. They pulled Thirteen away from her. Thirteen and Chanta kept their hands latched to each other as much as they could, but the Decayed dragged him away from her.

"No!" Thirteen cried. A Decayed stomped on his face and left him in a daze. The sound of Chanta screaming his name snapped Thirteen out of the haze.

"Chanta!" Thirteen hollered. He sent a heat blast and burned those surrounding him. He got to his feet and started to lose control of his anger, of his power. Thirteen shook with an intense rage.

"Chanta!" Thirteen screamed.

Thirteen caught a glimpse of the Sporg going after her. *Good.* He thought. *Now I can unleash it all.*

The Decayed circled around Thirteen and nipped at each other to see who will be the one to go for the kill. Thirteen's feet became fire which melted the glass around him. As the Decayed got caught in the hot molten glass, they burned and sunk into the liquefied substance. The fire spread to Thirteen's legs, his waist, and his abdomen until his whole body became engulfed in flames. Thirteen looked like a walking fire ball which melted everything around him. He lifted his arms, that were alive with fire, to the sky.

“Come and get it!” Thirteen roared.

His whole body quaked, overloaded with the buildup of his power. Thirteen was a walking reactor about to explode, and that was what happened.

Thirteen exploded like a supernova, with temperatures he had never reached before. An explosion so big it may have been seen in space. The boom had echoed for miles upon miles. A bright red and orange flame consumed throughout the Decayed Pit, engulfing all in its path. The hordes of Decayed around him turned to ash.

The heat from Thirteen's blast created ripples of sand waves that were caught in time and forever frozen for the entire world to see. The difference was the sand towers were black glass, but what came from Thirteen's explosion were red and orange glass towers that resembled a rose in an abysmal pit. A sight that could be seen miles away in a place of death, darkness, and evil...Thirteen had created something beautiful.

Chapter 36

The Decayed dragged Chanta and carried her for miles. She kicked and punched, but to no avail. She heard growling and seen the Sporg as it leaped at one of the Decayed locking around the throat and ripped it out. Two Decayed rushed the Sporg and clawed at him.

“Leave him alone!” Chanta screamed.

The Sporg yelped and fought back. A loud booming sound erupted followed by a bright explosion. Chanta, the Sporg, and the Decayed all stopped to the sound in confusion. A red and orange bright flame propelled into the sky. Chanta thought it was a nuclear explosion. She’s only heard about them, but never seen one.

“Thirteen...” She whimpered. A tear had left her eyes. “No!” she cried.

A blast wave barreled through, shattering many glass towers. The force pushed Chanta, the Sporg, and the Decayed on to their backs and blew them across the glass. The Decayed scraped against the surface with their claws and the ground began cracking.

Once the blast wave passed, Chanta stirred. She laid face down and lifted her head up. She touched her face and felt blood trickling down. She felt the world spinning around her.

“What a rush, huh?” A figure stood over her.

She shielded her eyes and saw a man with long black hair with a tint of red. His body spazed and contorted, his solid white eyes revealed pain and pleasure.

“You?!” Chanta shrieked.

Five reached down and grabbed her roughly by the throat. He hoisted her up in the air and she let out an excruciating yelp.

“All this trouble over a defective Bastard and a flaw. How...trivial. I should rip your soul from your body, but I have orders.”

The Decayed got back to their feet and gathered around Five. One by one a selective few spoke, “Master we found her.”

“We done well, yes?”

“We gouged out our eyes like you say.”

“Did we do good?”

Five patted the Decayed with his free hand. “Yes, you all have done so well, marvelous really.”

Chanta clutched her hands around Five’s. “Why are they serving you? They hate Bastards,” she managed to choke out.

The Decayed chuckled. “He no Bastard.”

“He has strong scent of death. Like us.”

“He Alpha.”

Five smiled. “We share the same scent. Mine is a bit stronger though, hence, why they serve me as their Alpha. I suppose I have you and Thirteen to thank for that. For helping me discover my own army.” Five pulled Chanta closer. “Thank you.” Five slammed a fist across Chanta’s face. She hung limply in his grip.

A ship hovered over them, then landed. The cargo bay door opened and Two walked out. “We thought you died,” he said to Five.

“I almost did. Luckily, I was protected under a bunch of rubble. There were a few flaws as well. I took their souls to heal.” Five opened his palm and revealed a few souls that screamed and bubbled out of his skin.

Two grinned. “So full of surprises, aren’t we?”

The Decayed sniffed the air and hissed. One by one they spoke. “A Bastard amongst us!”

“We should eat it.”

“What should we do master?”

Five lightly traced his fingers over the Decayed’s head that was closest to him. “Easy my followers, we work together. Bastards are not our enemy, the flaw are.”

“Don’t let that go to your head.” Two smirked then casted a glance at Chanta. “Take the vile creature to the ship. The Leader is waiting on us.”

Five turned to the Decayed and said, “Come my beautiful creations of debauchery.”

The handful of Decayed followed Two and Five into the ship. Five dragged an unconscious Chanta in behind him by her arm. The cargo bay door closed and the ship hovered, and then

sailed into the air. They flew over the red and orange frozen blast wave that resembled a giant beautiful blooming rose with a black canvas in the background. Chanta's eyes opened and for a moment she saw the rose when she was propped up in a seat against a window.

“Thirteen...” She murmured and passed out.

Chapter 37

Thirteen's body laid motionless in the center of the red shaped glass rose he had created. A dry gust blew by as a Decayed with its eyes dug out sniffed around the area. The creature sensed Thirteen and dashed towards him. The Decayed licked its chops while it crept up on Thirteen, silently befalling before him like a shadow. Its jagged teeth were revealed when it opened wide for a bite. The jaw popped into place as it stretched wider. The creature paused when it heard a sound in the distance, then its head split apart with an abrupt impact. The plasma burns charred and sizzled the creature's flesh as it collapsed.

A man in a brown cloak and hood draped over his face lowered his rifle and signaled for two other hooded individuals to go forth and collect Thirteen. No words were said, just hand signals. The two individuals both knelt down on each side and

grabbed thirteen by the arms. They put thick chains around his wrist and closed a pad lock around them. Once that was done one of the hooded figures spun a finger in the air. The figure with the rifle gave a nod and they proceeded to drag Thirteen away with them. It wasn't until they treaded past the brown cloaked figure that he too spun around and followed close by. He provided cover with his rifle which was aimed at the Bastard they had captured.

Thirteen could not feel the end of his boots as they slid across the glass surface. He twitched in his captive's hands, and he dreamt of a time that seemed a lifetime ago...

"What do you think they will have us do tomorrow?" a Bastard said who laid on his bed. His blue skin was smooth and glossed. His eyebrows and hair were white with light shimmering blue eyes. He created a few frozen daggers and threw them at the dart board across from his bed. His name was Nine.

"I don't know." Thirteen replied. He laid on his bed next to Nine. Six was already passed out.

"Maybe it's another mission," Nine continued.

"Very well could be," Thirteen went along.

"Hopefully we get to take out some more flaw."

"Hopefully..." Thirteen's heart was not in the conversation.

"Oh, maybe we get to do battle with the Decayed!" Nine was giddy and he tossed another ice dagger, hitting the little red dot at the center of the board.

“About time,” Thirteen commented. He could not get the image of Six’s foot coming down that crushed the little girl’s skull in. Yes, she was a flaw, but still a child.

Kala...that was what Quanser screamed out when Six killed her. I am so sorry Kala.

Thirteen felt that he could have done more. He could have done something.

“Ten and I wandered a bit past the edge of the wastelands and found a few flaws that had stripped weapons, armor, and supplies off a few dead soldiers that were carrying cargo to the Haven. We caught them in the act. Ten spit acid on one and melted him completely and I froze two of them and shattered them like glass. It was so cool...no pun intended.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Thirteen asked.

“I do not know.” Nine thought about the question. “I do not know. I guess because we all look up to you, man. You’re a damn legend. You destroyed countless flaw civilizations like it was nothing. You have killed more than any of us. You’re cutthroat man.”

Thirteen lay silent and reflected on what was mentioned. All he could had said was, “I am not a man. I am a monster for all that I have done.”

Nine nodded. “Yeah, you are. What do the flaw call you?”

“Devil.” The words escaped Thirteen’s lips numbly.

“Devil! That’s right! Man, they fear you.”

“I know.” Thirteen did not need to be reminded. Thirteen liked Nine, but he talked way too much. He began to wonder as well, *Do all of them look up to me?* Thirteen could

not figure out why, but he wondered just how many he had inspired to follow in his footsteps, and his heart sank a bit.

“I would give anything to have your publicity,” Nine mentioned.

“No, you would not.”

“What are you talking about? Flaws fear you, the people of Haven call you hero, and you’re the Leader’s favorite. You are getting your own place down the ways from the Sky Tower. You are the first Bastard to be given a place within Haven society. You are a complete bad ass.”

“Well, if I could give it all up, I would. Hell, I would give it all to you if I could,” Thirteen admitted.

“I do not understand why you would. You have it all.”

“It does not feel like it. I do not expect you to understand.”

“Try me,” Nine offered.

Thirteen wondered if he should. “Do you ever wonder why we are made to kill the flaw? Do you ever feel that it is wrong?”

Nine looked at Thirteen as if he had lost his mind. “We are not supposed to question any of our orders or what we do.”

“Why is that?” Thirteen asked.

“Because we are not supposed to?” Nine tried to look for a good answer, but could not.

“Why do we have to kill the flaw?”

“Should we even be talking about this?” Nine asked.

Thirteen looked upon Nine, then turned away. “Just forget that I even mentioned it. We need to get some sleep for whatever they are having us do tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Nine agreed, and they both closed their eyes.

Across from them Six laid on his bunk hanging on every word before he closed his eyes while the lights dimmed.

In the morning Thirteen, Six, Nine, Ten, and a handful of exoguards went into a forest that was still lush with life. This forest was treated sacredly like a gift from the gods.

A heavily armed exoguard pushed a button on his wrist coms that projected a holographic image of the Leader. “I asked you all here because there is a small army of flaw that are hiding out here. I need you to flush the filth out of this beautiful forest and eradicate them. Do not fail me. Be sure to check in periodically.”

“Understood my Leader,” they all recited in unison.

The exoguards traveled one way and the Bastards split up to another direction. The forest was thick with trees, shrubs, and insects, but a lot of natural light still peered through. The early morning mist hung heavy in the air. Once everyone went their own ways, one could see their silhouettes until they become engulfed.

Thirteen learned to tread softly so he would not make any sounds such as the crunching of leaves or snapping of twigs under his footsteps. The element of surprise was always most important in training as well as not to give away one’s own position.

A very handy survival trait that was well worth picking up.

Thirteen had made his way along the tree line staying low. His eyes darted around for traps, but there seemed to be none so far.

A twig snapped in the distance, about 100 yards away. Thirteen stayed low and froze to the spot he was at. He was

being followed and he knew this. He also knew that his pursuer does not know exactly where he was. Thirteen unholstered his revolver and waited. Another twig had snapped, closer this time.

That's right...keep coming, Thirteen thought.

The individual walked past Thirteen, stopped, and looked around then continued. Thirteen rose from the shrubs and touched the barrel of the revolver against the back of the individual's skull. The individual had wisely stood still. Thirteen then recognized the unlucky individual.

"Nine?" Thirteen pulled away the revolver.

"That was intense!" Nine said.

"What are you doing following me?"

"I wanted to experience firsthand and learn from the legend. Got to say, you did not disappoint."

Thirteen shook his head. "You should have just asked. Would have kept me from almost blowing your head off."

"Totally worth it," Nine chuckled.

Thirteen contemplated Nine wanting to tag along. "As long as you stay quiet and do not give away our position like how you did yours, I suppose you can come along with me."

"Alright!" Nine celebrated.

Thirteen gave a stern look.

"I mean, alright," Nine said quieter.

"Come on," Thirteen said.

They hiked stealthily for hours and after Nine crunched some leaves they had to stop for a bit and checked in with the others. No one had spotted anything out of the unusual, but there was still a lot more land to cover. They could not go back empty handed.

“Do you really think there are flaws out here?” Nine asked.

“I would not doubt it. There is plenty of cover, rich soil to plant a garden, lots of wildlife to eat. There’s got to be something out here.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” Nine said.

A black bird flew overhead and cawed, followed by silence. Nine felt uncomfortable by the silence and decided to break it. “Where would the flaws be hiding at?”

Thirteen listened to the sounds of the forest and heard a stream nearby. “Experience taught me to go near rivers, lakes, brooks, and streams. There is a river close to here. We find the river, we find what we are here looking for.”

Nine nodded. “Sounds good. Let’s go.”

They both headed toward the sound of running water. Within fifteen minutes they had found a stream and followed it to its source.

“Now where?” Nine asked.

Thirteen shushed him. He knelt and peered along the river for anything out of place, footsteps, or caves. The only thing that stood out to Thirteen was a bunch of broken sticks that hung from a few shrubs which led North. Thirteen placed a finger to his lips, the universal sign to be quiet, and signaled to move forward. They did so, and along the way Thirteen noticed more broken branches going to a clearing. They kept quiet as they entered. Thirteen and Nine looked around at the few huts that were built in the closed off area.

“I think we found them,” Nine whispered.

Thirteen glared and shook his head. They stood outside the poorly built hut’s door. Thirteen ignited his fists into flames

and Nine formed frozen blades over his. Thirteen kicked the door open and they rushed inside. Thirteen expected a small army ready for a fire fight, what he did not expect were two frightened children. The children quickly dashed to their mother who held a blade, ready to slash. The children cried and the mother screamed at the intruders.

Nine was confused at Thirteen's hesitation. "You going to kill them?"

It was a human mother with two half flaw children. It was not common, but every now and then there were human sympathizers that believed flaws should be treated equally. They defected from the Havens and lived amongst the flaw. They were seen by the people of Haven as being lower than the flaw and their treason would be the same as the flaw...death.

The mother slashed wildly at the air and screamed, "Don't you dare touch my children!" One of the children grew an extra two arms and wrapped them around his mother's leg out of fear.

Thirteen extinguished the fire around his fist. "It's okay," he said. Then he held his hands up to show he did not mean to harm them.

"Are we going to kill them or what?!" Nine yelled.

"I'll kill you before I let you hurt my babies!" the mother spat.

"Everyone calm the fuck down!" Thirteen roared. The air was electrified as they stood with unease ready to strike.

"What are we doing Thirteen?" Nine waited orders.

"Stay away from my babies!" The mother cried.

"Nine shut the hell up!" Thirteen barked.

Nine stood by silent and wide eyed.

“Ma’am, can you please drop the blade?” Thirteen asked and he slowly approached her.

The woman slashed towards him and Thirteen grabbed her wrist, spinning her around and wrapping his muscular arms around her. He restrained the woman and forced the blade from her hands. Softly he whispered into her ear, “Calm down. I am not going to hurt you or your children. I am going to let you go now. Are you going to make me regret my decision?”

The mother shook her head.

“Okay. I am letting you go now.” Thirteen released the woman and she quickly got back in front of her children.

“Thirteen, aren’t we going to kill them?” Nine asked.

“No,” Thirteen responded.

“But they are flaw, they are dangerous,” Nine retorted.

“It is a woman and her two children. They are not dangerous!” Thirteen said.

“We have to, though,” Nine reasoned.

“We do not have to do anything, Nine,” Thirteen grabbed Nine by the back of the neck. Nine winced at the pain. “Do they look dangerous to you Nine? Are they imposing a threat? Are they?!”

Nine looked hard. “No, I guess not.”

“Then why are you so hell bent on killing them?”

“I...I do not know,” Nine said.

Thirteen released Nine. “You do not want that kind of blood on your hands, Nine. I have too much of it already.”

Nine threw his hands up. “Then what do we do?”

Thirteen looked at the woman. “Is there an army here?”

“No,” The woman said. “Just a few of us trying to find a safe place to live.”

“Where are the rest of them?”

“Hunting,” The woman replied.

Nine proceeded to ask, “What do we do?”

Thirteen looked at Nine. “We help them get to safety.”

Nine was dumbfounded. “But if the Leader finds out she will kill us.”

“She does not have to find out. I understand if you don’t want to be a part of this. You can go if you want, but I am getting them to safety.”

Nine ran his hands through his white hair. “Screw it. I wanted to learn from you. Let’s do it.”

Thirteen nodded his head. “Okay then. We have to do this quietly and quickly.” Thirteen walked to the woman. “Do you know where the rest of them are?”

The woman seemed reluctant to say but decided to take a leap of faith. “West from here. They should be back soon.”

Thirteen took a deep breath. “Okay, we will wait until they get back and get them out of here.”

“Why should we leave? This is our home.” The woman picked up one of her children.

“There are exoguards and Bastards out there hunting you. It is no longer safe out here for you and your family. You can always build a home elsewhere.”

The woman shook her head, “Okay then.”

They waited a couple hours, Thirteen watched the door and occasionally peered out the curtains of the window. Nine created miniature snowmen for the kids to play with. The children smiled and laughed, Nine looked like he was enjoying himself too.

The mother watched her children closely then rubbed her hand into her face. “They should have been back by now.”

Nine continued to distract the kids and Thirteen put a finger to his mouth, signalling everyone to be quiet as he radio a check in from his wrist coms.

“Thirteen and Nine checking in. Anyone find anything?”

There was silence then an abrupt static and a voice.

“Ten checking in. Nothing on this end.”

Silence and more static.

“Exo-One. Nothing here.”

“Exo-Two. Same.”

“Exo-Three. Nada.”

“Exo-Four. Just a lot of trees.”

A longer silence then another voice chimed in.

“Six checking in. I put two under.”

“Ten here, any more of them?”

“Not that I can tell,” Six replied.

The wrist com went silent.

“Damn it,” Thirteen muttered.

Nine looked away.

“What does that mean?” The woman asked. “What does I put two under mean?”

Thirteen closed his eyes and sighed, “It means he killed two.”

The woman clasped her hand over her mouth and a tear streamed down her cheek. “No.”

“I am sorry,” Thirteen said. “How many of you are there here?”

The woman sniffled. “Including the kids and myself, six.”

“They killed two so four now,” Nine added.

“They did not find the other one so he might have gotten away. Did they hunt together or separately?” Thirteen asked.

“They hunt together,” She answered.

“Then why did they not find the third?” Nine questioned.

“Because he was probably trailing behind and saw the other two get put down so he either hid or made a break for it,” Thirteen answered.

“What do we do now?” Nine asked.

“We have to get them to safety, now,” Thirteen ordered.

“But we have someone out there,” The woman said.

“It is out of our hands now. We have to get going before they find you,” Thirteen reasoned. Thirteen walked to the door and waited. Nine got up and stood next to him. They both eyed the woman. she contemplated her next course of action then ushered her kids towards the door. “Okay, let’s go.”

Thirteen and Nine opened the door and looked around. “We need to take them East of here, into the mountains.”

“I will scout ahead a bit to make sure it is clear,” Nine said and dashed off.

Please do not draw attention to us, Thirteen thought to himself. He looked at the flaw sympathizer and her two children. “Stay low and stay quiet. Okay?”

The children nodded.

“Let’s go.” Thirteen stayed in front, the children in the middle, and the mother right behind them. Every twenty

minutes Nine would come back and let them know what was ahead of them then continued to scout ahead.

“I know who you are,” The woman stated.

“Oh?” Thirteen said.

“You’re the Devil. There are stories about you wiping out entire cities of flaws.”

Thirteen stopped in his tracks. “I am and it is true. I have killed thousands of flaw.”

The woman stared at the ground. “Why are you helping us?”

Thirteen looked over his shoulder. “I did not like what I was becoming. I guess even the Devil can grow a heart.”

Thirteen carried on through the brush and Nine came back to the group. “The mountain path is ten minutes away. We are in the clear. I got to say this was exhilarating.”

The woman took Thirteen and Nine off guard by hugging them. “Thank you both so much. How can I ever repay you?”

“You can start by following this path into the mountains and start over. Do not look back and take care of yourselves,” Thirteen replied.

“Thank you both,” The woman said as she held her children’s hands and they hiked on the path.

Thirteen and Nine watched them until they disappeared.

“That was wild. I cannot believe we did that,” Nine raved.

“Yeah, well, get it all out now because we have to keep it to ourselves,” Thirteen warned.

“Hey I get it. You think I want to die? Hell no. Do not worry I will keep this to the grave,” Nine vowed.

They both stood there for a moment. Nine had broken the silence once again. “I understand now.”

Thirteen glanced at Nine.

Nine continued, “When you said do you ever wonder why we are made to kill flaw and do I ever feel that it is wrong...I understand now. I did not ever think about it before. We do it because we are forced to. It never crossed our thoughts as to why we must. Truth is, we are brainwashed into believing they were the monsters. It’s the opposite. I have been plagued with nightmares of what I have done. I was always searching for peace. Today, I found my peace. It is all because of you Thirteen. Thank you.”

Thirteen was lost for words. Did he really change a Bastards point of view on flaws?

A loud sound of a stick being snapped filled the air then a thump.

Thirteen and Nine looked at each other.

“What was that? You okay?” Thirteen asked.

“Yeah...I feel great,” Nine said. He felt the back of his head and pulled his hand to his eyes and noticed wet red fluid. “That’s weird...” Nine mumbled and collapsed to the ground with an arrow sticking out of the back of his skull.

“Nine!” Thirteen yelled.

He rushed to Nine’s aide when Thirteen got clubbed over the head. He hit the ground hard. He had stolen a glance of a flaw that grabbed the arrow and pulled it from Nine’s skull with a sick suction sound. Thirteen’s arm stretched out an open hand to reach Nine.

“No...” Thirteen stammered.

The flaw locked on Thirteen and put the arrow against the drawstring of the bow. “You killed my brothers.”

Thirteen shook his head with disagreement.

“We finally got you, Devil.” The flaw went to pull the arrow back, but he had taken a head shot that put him on his back. The bow and arrow fell from his hands. Four exoguards rushed towards the flaw and checked to make sure the target was down. One exoguard helped Thirteen to his feet. Another exoguard radio in that Nine was dead.

Thirteen just stared at Nine’s body. “No...”

“It’s okay Thirteen. We got you,” The guard said.

Ten and Six arrived at Thirteen’s side.

“What happened?” Six questioned.

Thirteen woke up in a darkened room. His arms and legs were chained heavily to a wall. Every muscle ached that moved.

“You’re awake. Good” a voice called out. “Thought I would have to throw water on your face. It would be a shame to waste precious water like that. Especially since it is scarce out here.”

Thirteen could not see the figure, yet. A piece of cloth was wrapped around his eyes. The voice sounded familiar though.

“Where am I?” Thirteen asked. The cloth was ripped away from Thirteen’s face.

“You’re at a place, miles and miles away from where you once were. That is all you need to know for now.” The cloaked figure sat down and removed his hood. The unforgettable scar over his left eye was enough to know who his captor was, Quanser. He gave a long stern uneasy look at

Thirteen. “Been a while since Crater City. What? A couple of weeks?”

Thirteen nodded, “At least.”

Quanser was sizing Thirteen up. His thoughts could almost be seen as he struggled to decide on a decision. “I was blinded by rage last time we seen each other. You helped a great deal of us. Why?”

Thirteen knew that wasn’t the thought he was deciding on. “Like I said, I changed. I am tired of the killing.”

Quanser leaned back in his seat. “Yeah, that was what that woman you were with kept saying. Where is she? Did you kill her too?”

Thirteen shook his head, mainly out of disgust from such a question. “She was taken. I could not save her.” Those words choked in his throat and cut him deep.

Quanser just stared intently. “For years I waited to have my chance at killing you. Make you pay for everything. Now since I have you...I don’t know what I want to do. What a conundrum, huh?” Quanser sat up and walked towards a table and sorted through the drawers. “What’s her name?”

Thirteen knew he was talking about Chanta. “Chanta.”

Quanser pulled a bottle out and dusted it off. It was some sort of whiskey. He began searching for something else. “What is Chanta to you? She’s not of your kind and not a ‘normal’ person.” Quanser quoted with his fingers then went digging into another drawer.

“I was sent to kill her, but I could not. I fell in love with her.” Quanser chuckled, Thirteen ignored him and continued, “I do not see her as a flaw. She means everything to me and...I lost her.”

Quanser found two glasses and pulled them out. He walked back to sit at the table and faced Thirteen at the opposite side. Quanser sat the two glasses down and poured whiskey into both, filling them halfway.

“That is truly a touching story,” Quanser said and drank the contents of the glass before he slammed it down. “A Bastard and a flaw. It would make an interesting bedtime story don’t you think?” Thirteen stared not amused. Quanser continued, “I have seen ‘normal’ people get together with flaws, but never in my life have I seen, let alone heard of a Bastard and a flaw. It’s mind bending really.”

Quanser picked up the second glass and he gestured like he was going to offer the whiskey to Thirteen, but then he pulled his arm back and drank that glass as well. “Let me guess...you two did the dirty deed right? Sealed the deal?” Quanser chuckled and poured more whiskey into both glasses. Thirteen remained silent, not being bated. Quanser drank from one of the glasses. “She has vampiric powers, right?”

Thirteen nodded.

Quanser continued, “Yeah...I have had a few of those in my life. The bottom jaw splits wide open.” Quanser shivered from his past experience. “The things they can do with that, huh?”

Thirteen looked at Quanser. “What’s your special little power?”

Quanser opened his palm and faced it toward the emptied glass. A spiked bone whisked through a flap in his skin, hitting the glass and shattering it then shot back into his palm and covered back up by the flap. The spiked bone shot out in a blur but must have been a foot long judging by the distance of

the remaining glass. “It’s not as cool as vampiric powers, but it serves me well in combat.”

“Why didn’t you use that on us all those years ago?” Thirteen inquired.

“I was still a kid. Scared shitless of the two murderous Bastards in front of me. Your brother murdering my sister and the Devil himself in person. I didn’t know what to do, that didn’t stop the two of you gouging out my eye and killing her, did it Devil?” Quanser stared coldly.

“I’m sorry about your sister, Kala.” Thirteen said softly.

“You remembered her name. How touching?” Quanser mocked. “Doesn’t bring her back now does it?”

“No. It does not,” Thirteen admitted. “But I am still sorry. Kala did not deserve that. Six is...he is lost in hatred.”

“Six. That is his name, huh? Good to know.” Quanser murmured as he drank another glass. “Tell me, would Six come here if he knew I had you?” Thirteen didn’t have to answer, Quanser had already known. “He would, wouldn’t he? From what I noticed he really wants to be the one to kill you.”

Thirteen nodded, “I get that a lot.”

Quanser pushed the glass away. “I bet you do, being the Devil and all. The thought of having Six come for you is one of the reasons I decided not to kill you yet. You see Devil, I had a lot of time to think and reflect on the past, you know, the death of my sister and all. I came to the conclusion that you did not kill her, Six did. This much is true, but you helped him murder Kala and caused me to fail in saving her life. All in all, you are as much responsible in Kala’s death as much as Six is.”

Thirteen stared. “So why kill me when I can bring you what you want then you can kill us both.”

“Or just have you both kill each other, and I kill whoever is left over,” Quanser chimed in.

“I guess you could do that too. Sorry I will disappoint because my fight is not with you, it’s with the Leader. She’s the real enemy, not me. Instead of tearing each other apart, why don’t we band together and take the fight to Haven?”

“To Haven?” Quanser chuckled. “A few hundred flaw against a city full of exoguards, Droids, and Bastards...that’s rich. My people wouldn’t stand a chance. We are heavily outnumbered, out gunned. We wouldn’t make it a hundred feet to that damn wall before we get slaughtered.”

Thirteen straightened his back. The chains squeezed tightly. “There are more of your people than you think. You could all unite. There are human sympathizer’s that would gladly fight as well. Also...you have me on your side.”

Quanser laughed. “You! You’re going to walk us into Haven and roll the doors open for us? Is that it? I hate the Havens and especially the Leader, but bringing the Haven down is not a reality. Killing you and Six on the other hand is a reality. One that can happen a lot sooner than the other.”

Thirteen smirked.

Quanser could not help but ask, “What’s so funny?”

Thirteen shook his head. “I did not think the great Quanser LaHaye, general, fearless leader of the flaw armies, is a coward.”

“That was a long time ago,” Quanser sneered. “How rude of me...I didn’t offer you a drink did I?” Quanser poured a glass of whiskey and splashed it in Thirteen’s face. “There you go.” Quanser stood up and left the room.

A guard with three eyes looked at Quanser, “Everything go as planned?”

“We will see.” Quanser said.

“What’s bothering you, sir?”

“After what he did in the Decayed Pits changing the landscape the way he did, he should be able to melt those chains away like butter...yet he’s not.”

“Why do you think that is?” The three-eyed flaw questioned.

“I don’t know,” Quanser admitted. “Just keep an eye on him, or three”

“Of course, sir.” The three eyed flaw smiled and placed a fist across his chest.

Quanser wandered off to his quarters. A few of his people walked by acknowledging him with a wave. He waved in return and dragged his feet across the hard cracked soil. Tall redwoods towered high above as he glanced transversely across the horizon. The mountains were glorious around the Hidden City of broken buildings and shacks. After the devastation of Crater City, Quanser guided as many survivors as he could and brought them to the Hidden City. On a supply run he and a couple of flaw were taking a short cut on the outskirts of the Decayed Pits when they spotted the explosion then saw a ship dart off right after.

The force of the explosion knocked Quanser and his crew off their feet. Quanser had known Chanta on board because he had seen her through his scope. They were hoping to find something out there such as weapons. Unfortunately, they did not find such things, but he did find Thirteen, and Quanser still had a score to settle.

Quanser did not bother telling Thirteen that Chanta was alive. He wanted Thirteen to suffer. What better way than ripping out his heart. Then when Six had found his way to Thirteen, they could tear each other apart.

Yet a question still nagged at Quanser, *Why is he not melting the chains away?*

Quanser had high hopes Thirteen would so they could have their final confrontation. A fight to the death, but he supposed he would wait until the other Bastard arrived to begin their dance of death. Something else ate away at Quanser. Words that were spoken by Thirteen that had hanged over his head as truth. *The real enemy was the Leader, Haven itself. All the Flaw should be banding together to bring the Leader and Haven down for good.*

Quanser stopped a foot outside of his quarters; he turned to see the open mountain sky with a tint of a pinkish red and purple. His own words echoed throughout his mind:

We wouldn't make it a hundred feet to that damn wall before we get slaughtered.

Chapter 38

Thirteen thought about dissolving away the chains, but he went against the judgment. He needed to earn their trust and not as a threat. Thirteen had known the chains could not hold him. His first instinct when he stirred was to free himself. The binds that kept him were too easy, and that was when it had come to him. It was easy. It was what Quanser had wanted. That was why Quanser kept aggravating Thirteen. He wanted Thirteen to break out of his chains and attack, so Quanser could further prove to his people that the Devil had not changed, to help justify killing Thirteen. Quanser's thirst for vengeance was insatiable. He would go to no end to destroy Thirteen, but Thirteen needed his help to take down the Haven. So, Thirteen would bide his time to earn his trust.

Thirteen could not help but to think of Chanta: *Was she dead? Was she alive?* He had seen her get dragged away by the

Decayed, and they were not known for taking prisoners. He felt that she could not be dead, but he could not prove otherwise. Either way he looked at it like he had failed at protecting her. His heart felt like it was being ripped from his chest. Images of their time together flooded his mind. She helped define who he really was, not what he was created to do. She helped him understand that he was not who he was based on his past, but what he could achieve now and the future; All the good he could do for this world and everyone in it. She helped him feel.

A tear had left the corner of his fiery eyes. She helped him discover love, and the power it possessed. She had brought life to him. Further helped him discover what he had been fighting with inside him all this time; since his first kill of a flaw. An internal struggle that plagued his mind all his life and she had freed him.

How did he repay her? By failing her. She got caught and there was nothing he could do to help her. He became heavily outnumbered by a sea of fangs and claws that kept him from getting to her. He played it over and over in his mind. Thinking about what he could have done differently. He could have used a bigger wall of fire or a flamethrower effect to drive them further back.

A million of different scenarios played over and over in his mind and he could not help but wonder, would it have ended up the same? Would fate have favored him either way? Was that Chanta's fate all along? Does fate even exist? So many variables, so many what-ifs. Thirteen's head throbbed in pain thinking about it all. He just wanted to crawl away somewhere and just die. Or stay bound to the chains and let Quanser kill him, ending his pain and heartache.

She was all he could think about. Never had he ever experienced such loss and pain such as this before. Yet some little fire still burned deep within him, he told himself not to give up. He could not lay down and die just yet or it would have all been in vain. Chanta's life would be in vain. He owed her so much and more. He owed her his life. He needed to stand and fight. To earn his trust with the flaw, with Quanser, and unite them all together to end the Leader's dark reign and icy cold grip of death that wrapped around the dead world. To once and for all bring down the Havens and end the separation of both worlds altogether... forever. That was what he owed to Chanta, his love. Once he had done this, then he could die.

Chapter 39

Six wandered the Decayed Pits in search of Thirteen and the flaw. Every time he thought about his brother betraying him for that filthy creature, his heart became more and more enraged. Hate was what had driven him, nothing else mattered. Revulsion as well as passion burned deep within to get to his brother first. To give Six the honor of killing Thirteen before anyone else, it was his birth right. The wind blew through the holes of the black glass towers which that sounded like the screams of thousands of people. These screams could be heard a great distance away. The towers that were shattered and broken generated different sounds. These sounds were a dark ominous low hum or a high pitched screech.

Six paid no attention to any of it. He was lost and consumed in his own hatred and thoughts. Still, he pushed on. He had known his brother was there somewhere. Not slowing

down he peered the twisted nightmarish landscape for any sign of Thirteen. He caught a glimpse of something hidden behind one of the towers, and another figure scurried behind him.

Six cursed himself for letting his emotions blind him from his own surroundings. He was being tracked by the Decayed. They were worse than the flaw by far, more lethal and dangerous. However, Six's animosity for the flaw made them far worse, in his opinion, than the Decayed. Six could at least admit to admiration towards the Decayed for their savagery. Something he felt he had more in common with than anything. He sensed the feral creatures surrounding him. The Decayed hated the Bastards. The feeling was very mutual.

Six figured it may be a small pack of them out scavenging the grounds. Not uncommon with the sun going down and the darkness claiming the skies. The Decayed had done the same of the land. Two of the Decayed dashed from their hiding spaces behind Six and leapt at him. The Decayed went through Six as he transformed himself into smoke. The two Decayed could not fathom what had just happened. They were on top of their prey, and then he was behind them smiling. Six dissolved into smoke once again and sailed through the air then became two different clouds. The clouds of smoke went into the nostrils of the other two Decayed that laid in wait ahead of him. The smoke choked the other two Decayed while they clawed for air and suffocated. The other Decayed looked on confused.

“Where he go?”

“He disappeared.”

Once the other Decayed choked to death, the two clouds of smoke drifted in front of the two Decayed that remained

stationed where they were. Both clouds of smoke formed into Six and a copy of Six, both identical in every way as they formed long black tar claws. Six and his counterpart each ripped the throats out of both Decayed before they could react. The Decayed fell to the ground and bled out while they twitched. Six and his smoke copy looked at one another with a fond smile before they merged together.

It was late into the night, but Six had pushed on. He was surprised of the lack of Decayed that was out. He came across a couple of small packs and eliminated both of them, but there should have been thousands of them out in the Pits. Yet there were very few. It finally dawned on Six as clear as rain. They were all pursuing Thirteen. A grin crept across his face. He now had confirmation that Thirteen was indeed here, somewhere.

Six kept going throughout the night and well into the morning. He came to a building engulfed with black glass and a hole big enough for a person to fit through burned out of the glass near the upper floors. Six knew that was the work of his brother. He glanced around and decided to keep pushing forward.

In the afternoon he felt the ground shake and the glass surface cracked. The tall black glass towers crumbled and broke apart. A force wave of great energy he had never felt before hit Six with the strength of a shockwave. It reminded Six of a nuclear bomb going off, but way more powerful. Six could not react in time and he flew back from the force and smacked his head into a shattered glass tower. His head swam while a fire explosion seared from the ground. Six struggled against his heavy eyes and felt the heat enveloped over him. It became

hard to breathe as he noticed One and Two's ship blasting off. Six mumbled to himself and passed out.

The immense heat that had blown against his skin burned him, but he could not feel it as the wave continued to pour around and burned up much of the oxygen up in the area. Then it suddenly stopped as the wave stretched further out. After an hour Six opened his eyes, his skin burned when he moved to sit up. The air was hot, and he drew short breathes in and out. The heat had gone up another fifteen degrees in the Pits due to whatever explosion that had transpired. He got to his feet and pushed on.

Six went the way he had seen the explosion erupted from. He could see the biggest glass tower he had ever seen right where the surge of heat had shot up in the air. The tower looked new though. It was not of black glass, but frozen waves upon waves of red and orange that loomed out like rose petals. That was exactly what it was, a bloomed rose that reached to the sky with a black canvas underneath. The power to have caused the transformation was one he had never seen before, stronger than any nuclear weapon. Deep down Six had known it was not a nuclear weapon, it was Thirteen. Something devastating must have happened that caused him to lose all control of his power and unleash it on the damned world. The only thing he could have deciphered was that something had happened to the flaw female that Thirteen cared so passionately about.

The thought excited Six. His brother's state of mind would have been one of anger, pain, and despair. His mind would be diluted and corrupted. Now he could fight Thirteen

with nothing holding them back. It really will be a fight to the bitter end.

Six searched the view that stretched all around him. Open wastelands all around for hundreds, possibly thousands of miles, but to the North were more wastelands as well as mountains. Six knew he would find Thirteen there, and once he made his way there, either Thirteen or Six will finally die.

Chapter 40

Chanta's head lay on top of Thirteen's heavily muscled chest. Her fingers danced across his huge arms. They were being hunted and they were starving out in the wastelands, but none of that mattered in those moments they had shared. Nothing mattered, but the love that burned between them. They smiled, laughed and they kissed. They would make love and fall asleep in each other's arms. Chanta had never been so happy in her life; never had she felt such love. Thirteen's flaming red eyes pierced deep into her soul and melted her heart.

"I love you," she whispered.

Thirteen's rough callused hand ran through Chanta's black hair. His finger lightly traced her lips. "I love you," he said.

A powerful hand slapped across Chanta's face.

"Wake up bitch," Two glared.

Chanta moved her jaw around splitting it in two momentarily and rearranged itself. Her right cheek flared with a painful sting. Hate raged deep within her chest.

Two slid her hand across Chanta's forehead. "Such a filthy animal. I cannot wait until your kind is all wiped out."

"And I can't wait to get my hands free so I can beat the shit out of you," Chanta spat.

Two sinisterly smiled. "You have fight in you. I like it. Other times your kind just scream and beg for their life to be spared, pathetic really."

Chanta shook her head. "You're sick. I'll enjoy killing you."

"Too bad you will never get that chance," Two chuckled.

Chanta looked to the left of the ship. Five sat a few feet away with four Decayed laying at his boots.

"How did you two find me anyways?" Five asked.

Two stared down Chanta and they engaged in a spiteful stare down. Two then turned to Five and strode towards him. "One used the computers to lock a signal on your wrist coms."

Five gazed over at One who was sitting at the tail end of the ship overlooking them all.

"Well done One. You never cease to amaze me."

Two sauntered up to One and slapped her hand on his thigh. "Yeah, well done." With one hand, she firmly grabbed him between the legs. With her other hand she grabbed One's throat turning his face and shoving her tongue down his mouth. One smirked and Two slapped and licked the side of his face. One just watched passively not saying anything.

The voice of the pilot was heard over the speakers, “We are now in Haven air space. Getting ready to land.”

Chanta could not help but to cringe at the thought of once again being captured in Haven, except this time there was no Scott to save her. She hoped Thirteen will come for her, but she’s not even sure if he knows she’s still alive, or if he was even alive for that matter. Now, she doesn’t know what would happen to her. However, she knows there will be torture and a lot of pain. Yet she would endure and hold on if it means there may be a possibility of seeing Thirteen again.

The ship rocked a bit when it descended towards a landing pad just within Haven’s wall. Chanta stared out the little window to see the bustling city miles away from the military compound they were landing.

Two unhooked the chain linked to the cuffs around Chanta’s hands and led Chanta off the ship with hard pulls and tugs that delighted Two to no end. Chanta resisted, so Two yanked harder. Chanta almost fell over but managed to catch her balance. One exited. Five was not far behind. The four Decayed stayed at Five’s heels nipping at one another.

Exoguards raised their rifles to the Decayed and Five growled at the guards. “Stand down! The Leader wants them.”

The guards stood uneasily tightly gripping their rifles aloft. A guard said, “The Leader did not inform us of Decayed freely moving about our city.”

“They are not freely moving about. They are under my command. Are you questioning us? More importantly, are you questioning the Leader?” Five scowled.

“No, of course not,” The guard answered.

“Good. Lower your rifles.”

The guards did what Five ordered. The guards watched them all get into an armored vehicle.

“Flaws, Decayed...thought we were keeping them out not allowing them in,” one guard remarked. The others nodded in agreement.

The armored vehicle barreled down the street full of other various hover crafts. The windows were heavily tinted so no one outside the vehicle could see in. Chanta observed all the people walking the sidewalks. They consisted of so many different creeds, age, color, and shapes.

All these people sealed away behind these walls have learned to coincide with each other, yet they can't accept my kind as people, too.

That had always puzzled Chanta.

Why do people fear and hate others that are different?

Chanta had not been out in the streets of Haven since she lived with Scott. It seemed little had changed. The Leader's claws still had its hold on the jugular of the city. No citizen dared to go against the Leader. Droids carried out task and cleaned about the streets, bussed tables, and helped carry things for the busy socialites.

The armored vehicle pulled up to the back entrance of the Sky Tower to a service elevator which would take them deep underground.

Thirteen, please be alive.

Chanta's heart sank with the elevator as they descended to the underground laboratory.

Chapter 41

The Leader was overlooking her empire from the top of the Sky Tower when she received the call about her new captive.

“What about the newly acquired Decayed?” She inquired.

“They were tranquilized and in holding as we speak,” the woman, a scientist on the other end reported.

The Leader made her way to the elevator and made her way down to the laboratory. “What is the status of the Revival Program?” The Leader asked.

“Our patient is fully revived. No complications or issues. It is as perfectly healthy as it was before the deep sleep chamber. As you requested it is sedated and we will be extracting DNA samples later this afternoon.,” the woman happily announced.

“Good. I have plans for the DNA. We will create a new breed of soldiers. The ultimate Apex. The Bastard program is severely outdated. We need something new.”

The elevator pinged letting the Leader know she had reached her destination. The doors slid open. As she stepped out, she was greeted by her caller. A short, beautiful Latina with raven hair, wearing black smocks and a black lab coat. Her name was embroiled in green on the coat: Kandice.

“My Leader, welcome,” Kandice announced.

“Skip the pleasantries, where is the flaw?” The Leader said as she stormed past her.

“Right,” Kandice nodded and race to catch up to The Leader. “It is in holding tank A,” Kandice said. “May I see the flaw? It would be extraordinary if I can conduct experiments on it.”

“Not yet,” The Leader said.

They turned around corners and went down different hallways to reach their final destination. A separate room from holding tank A. From here, they could look in on their captive through a wide bulletproof glass window that covered most of the wall.

In a corner of the holding tank A, Chanta sat cradling her legs. She looked at Kandice and the Leader as they entered the room. Chanta’s Black hair draped over her face as she stared intently and cautiously on the individuals across the way. She knew very well who the woman with porcelain skin and white hair is.

“Disgusting creature,” The Leader expressed. “Thirteen betrayed Haven, betrayed me for that?”

“I am afraid so,” Kandice consolidated. “We performed our standard blood work on the flaw for unknown diseases and pathogens.”

“And?” The Leader cut off Kandice.

“And we found one.” Kandice said.

“Good,” The Leader replied with her eyes still locked on the flaw.

“Well...not exactly,” Kandice said as she rearranged the papers in her hands.

The Leader raised an eyebrow.

Kandice had taken that as a cue to carry on with the explanation.

“We found...some irregularities.”

“What kind of irregularities?” The Leader asked.

Kandice hesitated, biting her bottom lip. “This flaw is pregnant.”

The Leader gave a “so what” look until it dawned on her a second later. “With Thirteen’s child.”

Kandice nodded. “It’s really amazing. We never heard of such a thing such as a Bastard reproducing on their own, let alone with a flaw. With the flaws mutations and the Bastards powers, the baby will be unique. One of a kind- a scientific first!” Kandice stopped when she saw the displeasure in the Leaders eyes. Kandice tried to counter, “What would you like to do my Leader?”

The Leader stared in disbelief at the flaw. Rage built up within her and she clenched her fist. However she relented, ultimately loosening her hands and hiding the emotion from her face. “Like you said, it is a scientific first. We can study it, examine the child’s powers and abilities. I want blood drawn

from it for future experiments, afterwards, destroy the abomination.”

“Understood my Leader!” Kandice verbalized with excitement.

Chanta had known what they were talking about. If anything, watching the Leader and the scientist body language and expressions of disgust and excitement confirmed Chanta’s suspicions. Ever since Chanta and Thirteen’s first night of passion together in the mausoleum, Chanta had been going through changes. Morning sickness struck her as well as an increased appetite. She knew she was pregnant with Thirteen’s child. The thought made her incredibly happy, but the realization of where she had frightened her to no end. Now, the Leader knew she was carrying Thirteen’s child. Chanta feared what may become of her unborn child. Chanta would fight to her death to protect her child, but she seemed to be way out gunned and outnumbered. She sat in the corner of the room with her arms wrapped around her stomach, her forehead rested against her knees. She made a vow to herself; She will die to protect her child, doing whatever it took to do so.

Chapter 42

The soldier gripped his rifle. “Bullshit. You’re lying.”

Cynthia remained motionless. “Am I now? What does it matter? All this is now mine. Your army is mine. Haven is mine. You are mine.” Cynthia positioned herself face to face with the rugged soldier. “If you don’t like it, shoot me or fall in line.”

They stared intensely at each other for a moment, which felt like eternity for the soldier. Then Cynthia abruptly turned and walked away. The soldier lowered his head in anguish. He watched Cynthia as she walked into the laboratory where the doors closed behind her.

Frustrated, the soldier punched the wall and screamed, “Bitch!”

Should have shot you. His mind sulked.

Heavy-hearted, his arms hung limp at his sides. News of Riverbrook's death did not sit well with him. Especially when he knew she hadn't died of old age.

No, it was much more than that.

He knew that Cynthia had something to do with it, noting with her sudden rise to power.

"Captain Moyer. Everything alright?" A voice called out into his earpiece.

He pushed on his earpiece and responded, "I'm fine."

Truth was Moyer was far from fine. He had sworn his allegiance to Riverbrook. Vowed to protect her at all costs. He was there for her at every moment and suddenly, suspiciously, she died. Worst of it all, there was no body to examine. Something was very wrong. He could feel it and he was going to figure it out.

Moyer glanced at the floor then stormed towards the elevator. Once inside he pushed for the top floor and the elevator took him there. He approached Riverbrook and Cynthia's suite and entered Riverbrook's room. The sheets on the bed were a mess. A water glass half full sat on the nightstand. Papers and documents were strewn about the desk.

Moyer did not see any signs of a struggle of any kind. On the carpet, he came across what appeared to be ashes. Moyer knelt down and rubbed the soot between his fingers.

"The hell is this?"

He straightened himself and went to the desk. The center drawer called to him like a beacon. He pulled the drawer open and rummaged through it until he came across an old picture of a younger Riverbrook, a man, and a young boy. He held the photograph in his hand and a wave of questions and

emotions crashed through him. He tucked the photo in his armored vest as a voice filled his ears:

“Captain Moyer, you are needed outside.”

“I’m on my way,” Moyer responded.

He searched the room with his eyes a moment longer going to the elevator and back outside. Moyer was waiting by the entrance of the building when a soldier approached him and handed Moyer a tablet.

“Charlie team missed their last radio check in. I can’t get through. Their last signal pinged about fifty miles from here.”

Moyer evaluated the tablet which showed a red dot labeled Charlie team at a structure in the wastelands. “Looks like the mines and cave systems,” Moyer said. He checked the time and then looked at the soldier. “So, it’s been about forty minutes since anyone has heard from any of the soldiers in Charlie team?”

“Correct, Captain,” the soldier responded.

Moyer sighed and collected himself from his earlier confrontation with Cynthia and all that had transpired. “Velasquez,” Moyer said to the soldier, “round up a group of four men and let’s go check on Charlie team.”

Velasquez nodded then surveyed the group of soldiers nearby. He yelled to the group, “Abrams, McClendon, Navarro, Saxton, you’re up! Lock and load.”

Moyer got into the driver’s seat of an armored assault vehicle. Velasquez, a stocky built man with black hair who stood about five foot eight, got into the passenger seat.

“Let’s do this!” Saxton, a tall burly Irish man with reddish brown hair, said as he climbed into the .50 Cal Gatling gun that was mounted on the back of the vehicle.

McClendon, a muscular black man, sat in the back inspected his assault rifle. “So much for getting that beer,” he sighed.

“Who says you can’t have one now?” Abrams hollered and got in on the other side. He handed McClendon a flask, which he gratefully accepted.

Abrams and McClendon were brothers, but Abrams took his mother’s last name instead. He resented his father. He planted a sniper rifle between his legs and was ready to go.

“Finally, some action,” Navarro said and sat at the window seat. She was a beautiful Native American woman with long braided black hair and dark eyes. She gripped her riot shotgun tight, anxious for battle.

“Let’s go check on our boys,” Moyer called out. The rest of the soldiers whooped and hollered. Moyer grinned like a proud father. He had personally trained this unit for years. They served together, trained together on numerous missions, and were all successful.

Riverbrook respected them and held them high regards. They were the people she could rely on, for anything. It ate away at Moyer knowing something happened to Riverbrook. But he couldn’t focus on that now, he had fellow soldiers out there in need of help. It was their job, his job, to get them home. After all of that, he could solve what had happened to Riverbrook.

The armored vehicle rolled through the wall that opened before them. Saxton stayed vigilant on the Gatling gun ready to

use it. They sped off into the wastelands towards the mines. The wall rolled shut as other soldiers watched in admiration of the legendary elite team going off on another mission.

Chapter 43

“We are approaching the mines. ETA about ten minutes Captain,” Velasquez reported. He scrolled the tablet evaluating the layouts of the area.

Moyer tapped the com at his ear, “See anything Saxton?”

“Nothing yet Cap. Damn wind is kicking up the sand a bit.” Saxton steered the gun left and noticed up ahead there was a vehicle next to another object on fire. “Scratch that Cap. We have a vehicle next to an inferno up ahead.”

“Yeah, I see it,” Moyer responded.

They drove closer towards the vehicle for a better view.

“Man, looks like someone took a can opener to it,” Navarro said.

Abrams whistled.

“Weren’t there two vehicles?” McClendon asked.

“The inferno is the other vehicle,” Moyer answered while he pulled to the side of the vehicles and stopped. The unit got out one by one and assessed the scene. Moyer had taken careful note of how the steel slabs of the vehicle were twisted, torn, and bent. Blood covered the sand around them, bullet casings scattered about, and chunks of flesh in massed certain spots. It was a massacre.

“Captain!” Velasquez called out. “There’s a body.”

Moyer sauntered nimbly and maneuvered through the debris to reach Velasquez, who stood beside the burning vehicle. Velasquez pointed to a burning body in the driver seat. The flames devoured the flesh and charred the corpse.

“Who was it?” Moyer asked.

“I don’t know. He’s one of ours though,” Velasquez said as he gestured to the dog tags around the charred body’s neck.

Moyer glanced back to the ground. He spotted boot prints and unknown prints of maybe forty other individuals that surrounded the vehicles.

Saxton, still on the .50 Cal Gatling gun, scanned around. “Looks like they were ambushed,” Saxton said, saying out loud what Moyer already had known.

Navarro gripped her shotgun and her eyes darted everywhere.

“There’s drag marks over here!” McClendon hollered. The team assembled towards McClendon. “I think the remaining Charlie team was dragged to the mines.”

Moyer took a step forward; hazel eyes pierced the dunes ahead to what looked like a cave entrance, miles away. “We search for survivors and kill the sons of bitches that did this,” he said. The team nodded anxiously. Moyer continued, “We go

on foot from here. I don't want to give us away and ruin any chances of a surprise attack. Move out."

The team fell in line with Moyer leading the pack. They stealthily moved to the opening of the cave. Moyer held up a fist and they all stopped. He extended two fingers. Navarro raised her shotgun and McClendon readied his assault rifle. They both went ahead of the team and into the cave entrance. Moyer followed as did Abrams, Velasquez, and Saxton.

"Night vision visors," Moyer whispered into the com. The team put on what appeared to be sunglasses, but they turned the dark cave into a lighted room. With night vision visors, no flashlights were needed which could give away their positions. They could also move about in the dark seeing everything as clear as day.

Wooden beams braced the tunnel walls and ceilings throughout the cavern. Chipped rock walls and a couple pickaxes were lain about. A cold draft in the cave dried the beads of sweat on their faces.

"Captain...I found a vest," Navarro murmured.

Moyer stared at an armored vest that was clawed.

"There could be survivors leaving us breadcrumbs," Velasquez spoke gently.

"Or planted purposely for another ambush," Moyer warned. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Either way, we keep going. Just keep your eyes peeled."

They pushed further and deeper into the cave. The sounds of water dripping echoed throughout the cavern.

Saxton sweated more than the others. "I hate small places," as he tried to fight against his panic.

"Easy big guy," Navarro hushed.

The tunnels became smaller and narrower. Saxton's anxiety grew. Being tall and burley, he felt like he was trapped in a sardine can. "Come on...this is nothing," He mumbled to himself.

McClendon had trouble as well being wide and heavily muscled, but still he managed better than Saxton.

Navarro's eyes squinted letting her fingers glide across claw marks dug deep along the stone walls. They entered a huge clearing where a fresh pool of water lay before them, fed by a small waterfall.

Moyer scanned about the area and noticed a small gap slightly above the water leading into the wall.

"There's an opening on the other side of the pool. Looks like we're getting wet," Moyer said.

He led them into the water, where they swam out thirty feet before they reached the wall with the opening. One by one they held their breath and dived through the gap in the wall. On the otherside, Moyer glanced up and saw that the surface was a solid rock ceiling with no air pockets whatsoever. They kept swimming for about three minutes in the underwater twisted passages. Moyer struggled holding his breath until he spotted an opening above them a few feet away. The team broke for the surface gasping for air. Here, they found another large cave opening.

Velasquez observed a glove that floated past him. "Sir," he lifted the glove for Moyer to see. "They must have taken them through here."

"At least we know we are on the right path," Moyer said.

"This place is driving me crazy. Can we please just get out of the water?" Saxton implored.

“Alright, let’s keep moving,” Moyer responded. He and the team turned to face Saxton, but noticed he was gone. “Who’s got eyes on Saxton?” Moyer called out raising his assault rifle.

The team looked around and regrouped together.

“He was just here,” Abrams announced.

Navarro held her breath and submerged under the glassy surface. Once under water, she saw Saxton fighting to swim to the top, but a pale fleshed creature had its mouth around his boot and was dragging him down. The creature’s head looked like an alligator’s and the body resembled one too except it had longer arms and legs. The tail had razor sharp blades on its sides. Navarro swam to the creature as it violently shook Saxton’s foot. She placed her shotgun at the creature’s head and pulled the trigger. The top part of its head ripped back and revealing chunks of bone and brain. Saxton kicked what remained of the creature off and desperately swam to the surface.

Navarro followed him to the surface. “There’s Alirazors!” exclaimed Navarro.

McClendon and Velasquez dove under the surface to see the creatures emerging from the dark depths. They quickly rushed back to the surface. They fired at the water. Bullets whizzed by a couple of the creatures, striking one, but it kept heading towards them with arms stretched out. The other whipped its tail and sliced across Velasquez’s arm creating a big open gash. He bled heavily in the water and turned it red.

McClendon shot one in the head and the creature sank as the two other Alirazors proceeded further.

Velasquez shot another in the head and it began to sink, coloring the water red on the way down. He noticed an Alirazor

approaching fast and pulled the trigger, but only received a click. The something happened to McClendon. They scrambled to reload when a few bullets zoomed between McClendon and Velasquez hitting a creature in the face three times. They looked behind them and saw Moyer. They nodded at Moyer, and they all swam to the surface.

“Shit!” Velasquez cried out grasping his arm. Blood kept pumping out. He let go momentarily and the flesh hanged off the bone. “Dammit!” He clutched it again and tried to pull it back together. Moyer helped him as they swam to shore and caught up to the rest of the unit.

Abrams pulled out a stapler from his pack and stapled the flesh together, then gauzed it and bandaged Velasquez’s arm. “That will help for now, but he will need it cleaned and looked at as soon as possible,” Abrams stated.

“That means we have to find the survivors that much quicker,” Moyer announced searching the enormous room.

“Let’s get to it,” Velasquez winced and hoisted his rifle.

Saxton lifted his foot. “Bastard almost bit off my boot.”

Navarro walked past him and said, “You’re lucky it wasn’t your foot.”

“I love these boots,” Saxton whimpered.

The team found another long winding tunnel and within, a pistol with an emptied clip on the wet surface of a stone.

McClendon picked it up and tucked it into his belt. “I hope we’re getting close.”

“Captain, I have something,” Navarro called out.

Moyer and the team walked to her and stared at what she was pointed to. A body sat up hunched over, back towards them, covered with the same armor they were wearing.

“It looks like Charlie team, but I can’t tell who it is,” She uttered.

“You okay?!” Moyer yelled to the body.

The body swayed a bit.

“Are you hurt?” Moyer hollered.

The body lifted its hand slowly and mumbled.

“I don’t like it. What is he doing right there?” Moyer questioned.

“Captain, we have to go to him,” Abrams urged.

“Fine. You’re with me. The rest of you stay back and cover us.”

The team nodded while Moyer and Abrams slowly approached the body.

“Anyone else here?” Moyer asked the injured soldier.

The slumped over person spoke in a low whisper, “No one else here.”

“Are you okay? Where does it hurt?” Abrams inquired and kneeled in front of the person.

“It hurts...,” the person muttered.

Abrams checked the person’s hands and noticed they were dark, charred looking. “The hell?”

“It hurts...,” the person continued.

“What’s wrong?” Moyer asked.

“I...I don’t know. He is very badly burned. Something’s wrong,” Abrams responded.

The person carried on, “It hurts...everywhere.” The person snapped its head up with a quick jerk and revealed a mouth full of fangs and black charred flesh with sunken eyes. Abrams didn’t have time to react as the creature bit into his throat and ripped out a huge chunk of flesh.

“Decayed!” Moyer roared and unloaded on the creature.

The Decayed’s body became riddled with bullets, and it dropped. Moyer grabbed Abrams body and carried him back to the others. McClendon met them halfway.

“No!” McClendon cried, “We got to do something!”

Abrams clutched at his gapping throat and choked on his blood.

“There’s nothing we can do; his arteries are gone!”

Velasquez exclaimed trying to place gauze over the wound.

“Damn it no!” McClendon yelled as he watched his brother bleed out before his eyes. Abrams lifeless eyes stared hauntingly into McClendon’s. “Dammit!” McClendon screamed beating a fist on the ground. McClendon clutched on to his brother’s body and sobbed while the team silently watched. Suddenly, Abrams body was ripped away from his brother’s grasp by a Decayed. The Decayed dragged the still warm corpse into the winding tunnels, cackling along the way.

“No!” McClendon screamed and chased after the creature that stole his brother from him. McClendon’s assault rifle lit up the tunnels as the shots echoed throughout the tunnels.

“McClendon! Get back here!” Moyer yelled.

McClendon’s screaming and gunfire was drowned out by waves of cackling Decayed that swarmed out of the tunnel McClendon ran into.

“Shit!” Saxton bellowed.

“Light’em up!” Moyer roared.

The team opened fire on the Decayed that poured in. The Decayed dropped, but more came rushing through the opening. The creatures climbed over their dead, sprinting up the

walls and ceilings, they ran on all fours, wanting to rip the flesh from the soldier's bones.

"There's too many!" Navarro shouted over the gunfire. Her shotgun proved effective against the clustered groups, but it was not slowing down the massive growing number of Decayed.

"It must be a nest or a hive!" Velasquez concluded.

Moyer knew they were outnumbered and had to make a call before losing anyone else. "Fall back!" he yelled.

"But sir, the survivors?!" Velasquez retorted.

"There are no survivors! They're all dead!" Moyer yelled over the disharmony of gunfire and cackles of the Decayed. "Navarro! Toss a grenade!"

Navarro clutched at her chest and pulled off a grenade. She pushed a button and a light started flashing faster and faster making small beeping sounds. She hurled the small metallic cylinder at the endless flood of Decayed.

"Frag out!" She screamed.

Within seconds the grenade exploded and chunks of Decayed showered everywhere. Unfortunately for the remaining team, this did not slow down the Decayed as more and more climbed over their fellow dead.

"Must eat their flesh!"

"Suck out the eyes!"

"Crack open their skulls!" The creatures called to one another.

Moyer stepped back and felt a splash of wet water hit his leg. He stole a quick glance behind him and saw the pool of water they had entered from.

"Back into the water!"

The team had done what Moyer ordered and dove into the water. The Decayed followed them under the water as they swam across the pool. A few of the underwater creatures, the Alirazors, darted up from the dark depths, snatching a few Decayed, and dragging them down to their violent deaths. Moyer and the others swam through the underwater passage they came in from and into the narrow corridor of the other room.

Once again Moyer, Velasquez, Saxton, and Navarro had to endure another eternal three minutes without air. Moyer only hoped the Decayed wouldn't be able to hold out as long. A few of the Decayed drowned and floated in the water with frozen sinister fanged smiles of lunacy. Other Decayed kept chasing Moyer and his team.

Velasquez strained with only one good arm and the other trailing blood. With his rifle strapped across his chest, he stroked his arm out as far as he could. Velasquez reached ahead of him like there was an invisible hand; waiting to clasp around his to pull him out.

Saxton had seen Velasquez struggling and held back to help him. They could finally see the opening of the other room. Saxton felt a tug on his boot and claws excavated into his ankle. He looked back to witness the creature sink its teeth into his leg. Another Decayed attached itself to Saxton's chest. Velasquez stopped, but Saxton signaled to keep going. Velasquez refused and Saxton pulled a grenade from his belt while a Decayed slashed into his chest and burrowed as deep as it could. Saxton winced and signaled again for Velasquez to go. Velasquez hesitated then turned and left Saxton to push the button. Saxton shoved the grenade down the Decayed's throat. The Decayed

devoured the small cylinder and Saxton smiled as the Decayed exploded killing Saxton, the two Decayed, and the trail of other Decayed approaching fast. Velasquez reached the other room and broke to the surface and saw Moyer and Navarro on the wet stone floor shore of the pool.

“What happened to Saxton?” Moyer asked.

“Gone. He sacrificed himself for us,” Velasquez gasped.

Navarro hung her head.

“I’m sorry,” Velasquez said.

“Damn it! Abrams, McClendon, Saxton...this whole mission went to shit! Those damn creatures set a trap for us!” Moyer exclaimed.

Velasquez gripped his arm. “I know who knew those bastards were smart enough to do tha...”

Right before he could finish, a group of Decayed sprang out of the water and cut Velasquez off, shredding into his flesh with their fangs and claws. Velasquez screamed until his throat was ripped out leaving him gurgling red froth.

Moyer and Navarro opened fire. Another small group came out of the water going into full sprint. Navarro ran out of shells for the shotgun. She threw it at the creatures and pulled out a pistol and popped off a few shots. Moyer’s emptied the clip of his assault rifle, and then he too pulled his pistol out. Navarro’s clip emptied first, then Moyer’s. They both whipped out their combat knives and watched three Decayed creep up to them. Moyer and Navarro locked eyes acknowledging this was their last stand. The two soldiers braced themselves, keeping a distance between themselves and the drooling, snarling, and smiling monsters. A roar was heard behind the creatures. Everyone looked towards the pool to see a bloodied McClendon

firing his assault rifle on the last three Decayed, cutting them down.

“McClendon!” Moyer called.

McClendon staggered out of the pool and lifted his heavy arm. “I’m sorry Captain. I’m sorry. I lost my head. Those monsters tore my brother apart. I watched them devour him.”

Moyer helped drag McClendon on to land and put a hand on his shoulder and said, “I’m sorry about your brother.”

McClendon dropped on the dirt and cried. Navarro was on the ground as well exhausted.

“Let’s get back to the vehicle,” Moyer ordered.

He stood up and left the cave and the others followed. Battered, bloodied, and bruised they made it back to the vehicle within thirty minutes.

“Let’s go home. We’ll order a drone attack to bomb the hell out of this place,” Moyer announced.

“Sounds good to me. Send these bastards back to hell,” Navarro said in agreement.

McClendon dragged his feet getting to the vehicle when a clawed hand shot out of the sand and grabbed McClendon’s foot. The creature pulled him down into the sand. McClendon pointed the assault rifle to the ground and opened fire. When he got to his stomach in the sand the pulling had stopped. McClendon looked up and saw a clawed hand slash out from under the vehicle at his throat. McClendon grabbed his bleeding neck as he saw a wide jagged grin that stared at him.

“McClendon!” Moyer roared.

Moyer grabbed the Decayed’s arm and pulled it into the sun. The creature twisted, thrashed about, and yelled trying to avoid the sunlight. Navarro slammed her blade between the

creature's eyes and ceased its thrashing instantly. McClendon's body was dragged fully under the sand with one quick pull. Moyer peered down the hole and tossed a grenade down. He dove over Navarro as the hole exploded and sealed itself in. They both sat up, and with no time to mourn they climbed into the vehicle and drove back to the wall of the Haven. The vehicle idled as the colossal steel door rolled open and allowed entrance. They didn't hesitate. Moyer stopped in front of Riverbrook's glass tower and turned the ignition off.

"What are we doing here?" Navarro asked.

"Getting some answers," Moyer said. As he stepped out of the vehicle, a soldier approached.

"Captain Moyer! Are you two alright?"

"Give Navarro some medical attention. I have some unfinished business with the Leader." Moyer went into the building and the soldier rushed to Navarro who sat in the passenger seat not moving. She was too tired to move. The soldier looked her over.

Moyer got out of the elevator and kicked open Riverbrook's door. Two soldiers inside instinctively reached for their pistols as the Leader sat behind a desk barely raising an eyebrow.

"I see your back from your mission Captain Moyer." She sounded disappointed.

"What was Charlie team doing out there? That wasn't a regular supply run. We never use those routes."

The Leader stopped typing on the tablet and stood up.

"Leave us," she ordered the soldiers.

The two soldiers obeyed and Moyer watched them exit.

“Who sent Charlie team out that way?” Moyer hissed.

“I did of course,” The Leader said, as she walked to the bar and poured herself a drink. “I’m also the one that brought up the distress call to Velasquez while you were snooping around in my mother’s room.”

“Why?” Moyer gritted his teeth. “You not only sent Charlie team into a death trap, but got my team killed as well!”

The Leader shrugged her shoulders and sipped her drink. “That was the plan Captain.” She swirled her drink. “I knew you wouldn’t let my mother’s death go,” she looked him in the eyes, “once I killed her.”

“What did you do?” Moyer barked.

The Leader continued, “I changed the supply route that night knowing an army of Decayed was out there. After words, I made the distress call on Velasquez’s tablet. You were all supposed to have died out there as heroes Captain, but your more resilient than I gave you credit for.”

Moyer slapped a full clip into his pistol and aimed it at the Leader. “Why did you do all of this?”

The Leader showed no fear or remorse. “Change Captain. This is my empire now. The old ways were weak and imperfect as are your team. I needed to wipe the slate clean to bring about a new era. A new era of soldiers, soldiers that are completely loyal and do not care about the death of an old foolish woman.”

The Leader pushed a button on her earpiece when she turned her back to Moyer.

“Do it,” she whispered.

Navarro stared blankly at the streets before her, thinking about Saxton, Abrams, McClendon, Velasquez. They were her family and friends. Now, they were gone. She didn't want to start over with a new squad, so she thought about retiring. She also thought about working up the courage when Moyer got back to finally ask him out for a date. She held in feelings for him for years, but never showed them. Now, she didn't care. Life was short and she didn't want to live with regrets.

The soldier checked Navarro over and heard the Leader's voice in his ear.

"Do it."

A hand landed on his shoulder. The soldier turned to see a guard in a solid black exoskeleton armor, face shielded with a helmet and visor. The Leader made it known to the soldiers once Moyer and the team left that these new exoguards were in charge and the soldiers must follow their orders because their orders come from the Leader.

The soldier hesitated then nodded and walked away. The exoguard stood by Navarro's side. She was unaware that this person now stood by her. The exoguard reached down and pulled up a glowing pistol. He steadied it at the side of Navarro's head. She imagined what life would be like leaving this life behind and sharing a new one with Moyer, happy together. In that moment, a shot rang and Navarro's head hung limp to the side. A plasma burn smoldered at her temple.

The exoguard radio into the Leader through his helmet, "Subject terminated."

The Leader received the transmission in her ear, and she turned and smiled at Moyer. Moyer pulled a photograph from

his vest of a younger Riverbrook, a man, and a boy then tossed it on the glass table between them. The Leader gazed at it.

“How did you kill my mother?” Moyer asked.

The Leader could see the resemblance of Moyer and the boy. “My how the plot thickens. I don’t even know what to call you...son? Brother?”

“The hell are you talking about?” Moyer kept the barrel of his pistol pointed at the Leader.

She picked up the photo and dangled it at him. “Don’t you see the resemblance?” The Leader said. And with a blur she knocked the pistol out of Moyer’s hand and lifted him in the air by his neck. Moyer gripped around her wrist but could not break the hold. “I am Riverbrook’s clone. I am perfection and you are not.”

Moyer punched the Leader in the face, but she didn’t flinch.

“You want to know what I did to our mother.”

Moyer choked and gasped for breath.

The Leader grinned. “I did this to her.”

The flesh around his neck turned gray and fell away like ash from a cigarette. He yelled in pain and narrowed his eyes with rage. He fought as much as he could, but like Riverbrook, his body crumbled to ash. The Leader dusted off her hands.

“That takes care of my lose ends.” She sat back down behind the desk and typed away at the tablet.

The next day she went on the media and stated how she was attacked. That Moyer and his team tried to assassinate her due to new shifts in the change of leadership, but her new squad of exoguards saved her life. This helped pushed her agenda for the new changes with exoguards and for other Havens to be

built in surviving cities. They all had sworn allegiance to her. The Leader's empire continued to grow, and she seized it by the neck. Everything seemed to be falling into place.

Chapter 44

Thirteen sat chained to the chair unaware of how much time had passed. He didn't care; all he could think about was Chanta. The feel of her embrace, the taste of her kiss, the sound of her voice, and the smell of her.

I let her down. I failed her, he thought to himself.

Lost within his own grief and failure, Thirteen didn't know what he wanted anymore. He wanted to wither away and die somewhere so he could be with Chanta again.

He had Chanta, held her by the hand and he could not hold on. No matter how hard he tried, he just could not.

The door opened and an elderly woman slowly walked in. Thirteen lifted his gaze when she stood next to him. She stared at him for a moment then wiped his forehead with a wet hand cloth and sat on the table's edge. She touched his lips with

a bottle of water and tilted it for him to drink. Thirteen was puzzled by the woman's unexpected kindness.

"You are human," he said.

"I am," she responded.

"How long have you been defective for?"

The old woman shrugged. "For a long, long time dear."

"What do the flaws call you?" Thirteen asked.

"Human," she responded.

"What do you call the flaw?"

"Human." She smiled, "Every human is flawed, and every flaw is human. We are not that different from each other." She got up and staggered to the chair across from Thirteen and said to him, "How are you holding up?"

"I do not know," Thirteen answered honestly. "I am tired. I failed someone that I cared about, and I do not even know if she is alive. I...I just do not know what to do anymore."

The old woman nodded. "I felt the same way when I lost my husband. It was many years ago. I was so devastated. I was left alone to raise three children. I didn't know what to do either. I wanted to just curl up and die somewhere, but I didn't. I could not. I pushed on. I had three children that needed me and a whole life to live for him, so, that's what I did." The elderly woman held on to Thirteen's gaze with a hint of sorrow.

"Does it ever get easier?" Thirteen asked.

"No, but we learn to live with it. In Quanser's case, it destroyed him."

"Been with Quanser long?"

"Ever since he was young. This establishment was created about sixty years ago, when a Bastard saved me and my children from his own squad."

Thirteen raised his eyebrows.

“Remember me now Devil? I never forgot about you or your kindness. I know for a fact that you have changed. You proved it with me, all those years ago.”

“I can’t believe it...” Thirteen was stunned. “It’s you...how are your children?”

“They are well, with families of their own. All thanks to you, Thirteen.”

“I am so happy that you all made it.”

“Me too,” she said. “The one you lost, you must have really loved her.”

Thirteen nodded and said, “I do. I do not even know if she is alive.”

The old woman stood up and walked back to Thirteen’s side. “Are you just going to sit there and wonder or are you going to find out?” She placed a key into the pad lock that held the chains together. She turned the key, which in turn, unlatched the pad lock and the chains fell to the floor.

“But Quanser...,” Thirteen protested.

“Don’t worry about Quanser. I will tell him even a Devil can have a change of heart.”

Thirteen grinned and said, “I never got to know your name.”

The old woman approached the door and before she opened it, she turned to face Thirteen and spoke gently. “Patricia LaHaye.”

“Wait...so Quanser is...”

“My son,” Patricia said as she finished Thirteen’s sentence.

“But you had two kids last time I saw you, two boys.”

Patricia let her hand rest on the doorknob. “I was pregnant when you saved us. With a little girl named Kala.”

“Then you know all those years ago...”

Patricia cut him off. “I know you tried to save her. It was your brother who killed my daughter. I also know you tried to protect your brother, to save him from the life of destruction. Just know you can’t save everyone Thirteen.” Patricia opened the door and Quanser appeared at the doorway. Patricia caressed the side of his scarred face and said, “Learn to forgive son.”

Quanser stared at the floor not knowing what to say.

“Tell him,” Patricia said.

“Tell me what?” Thirteen asked standing up.

Quanser glanced around debating in his head until he finally decided to tell Thirteen what was on his mind. “Your lady friend, Chanta, she’s alive.”

“Alive?” Thirteen could not believe his ears.

“Last time I saw her she was carried onto a ship by a woman that looked soaking wet and a tall lanky dead man.”

“Two and Five. They have her. She must be in Haven. I must get her out! She does not have long.” Thirteen made his way out the door and became blinded momentarily by the sun that loomed over head.

“How are you going to get into Haven? It’s a fortress. Always guarded, always secured,” Quanser snorted.

“Chanta managed to sneak in and out of Haven for years. She told me about an old tunnel system she used, if I find it that will be my ticket in.”

Quanser shook his head. “They’ll kill you on sight. Not that I’m complaining.”

Patricia glared and Quanser shrugged his shoulders.

A stream of black smoke rose around Thirteen and slammed him into the side of the hut. The boards buckled, snapped, and collapsed the frame. From on his back, Thirteen squinted up to the sky. The smoke formed into Six who stood over Thirteen with a sinister grin.

“Hello brother.” Six kicked Thirteen in the gut.

“You!” Quanser shouted.

“I,” Six said flatly.

Quanser reached for the plasma pistol at his hip and opened fire. “I’ll make you pay for Kala!”

Six forced his body to become smoke allowing the plasma charges to make its way harmlessly through him. Six laughed as he approached Quanser whom still fired relentlessly, not doing any damage whatsoever.

Other members of the Hidden City community joined in and opened fire as well. This resulted in the same outcome.

Thirteen rolled to his feet and saw that Six had created a shroud of smoke which crashed into people from all directions.

Quanser had the pistol slapped from his hands as Six lifted him with a hand around his throat, squeezing the life out of him.

Thirteen ignited his fist and leaped into the air crashing down with a punch across Six’s jaw, singeing the flesh. Quanser was released from the grasp and fell to his back gasping for breath. Six staggered from the hit with blinding white pin marks dancing around in his head. Thirteen swung his elbow which landed squarely between Six’s black soulless eyes.

“Damn you!” Six raged. “It isn’t bad enough you betrayed us, but now you have made me an outcast as well for failing the Leader! I cannot go back without you! Do you not understand that?! Do you not understand what you have done to me?!”

“You think bringing me back with you will get you back into her good graces again? She’ll kill you too,” Thirteen explained.

“No! You are wrong!” Six didn’t want to believe that Thirteen maybe right. “She would not do such a thing! Not to me!”

“Why?! Because she cares about us? She cares about nothing! Not you, not me, nothing! Nothing but herself and her own agendas. We are nothing to her but pawns. She does not care if we live or die. Why can you not see that after everything already?” Thirteen argued.

“No!” Six barked as he formed smoke funnels from his arms and blasted Thirteen with them. Thirteen crossed his arms to block the impact. The action helped a bit, but he skidded back about a foot. “We were her favorite until you fucked it all up!” Six said.

“You cannot seriously believe her when she tells us that do you? If one of us dies she does not shed a tear or bat an eye. She just makes more Bastards,” Thirteen argued.

Six dismissed the idea and sent smoke clouds from his body which replicated into multiple clones of Six. They all swarmed around Thirteen kicking and punching rapidly. Thirteen managed to block and dodge them all while landing a few of his own. The few smoke clones dissolved away. Two

smoke clones grabbed Thirteen's arms, restricting him as another smoke clone punched Thirteen in the abdomen.

Thirteen lit his body on fire and burned up the smoke clones that held him until they were charred ash. Thirteen clapped his hands which delivered a short shock wave of fire, burning up most of the smoke clones.

A few flaws opened fire on the smoke clones, and they quickly dissolved, but there were still a handful more.

Thirteen took a guess and blasted a flamethrower at a smoke clone only to get a lucky shot at the real Six. Six propelled back and the other smoke clones disappeared. Six lifted his head and rolled to his side. He looked up to see Quanser standing over him leveling his plasma pistol.

"Got you now you son of a bitch!" Quanser slammed the butt of the plasma pistol over Six's head and knocked him out cold. Quanser lifted the plasma pistol and aimed it at the unconscious Six. His finger edged its way to the trigger but Thirteen placed his hand on the barrel, melting it off.

"Are you kidding me?" Quanser growled.

"No, I need him alive," Thirteen said not backing down.

They locked eyes challenging one another until Patricia nudged Quanser. He took a deep heavy sigh, "Fine." Quanser pointed to two flaws off to the side. One with three legs and the other with spikes protruding out of his spine. "You two, chain him up and take him back to the shack. Our new guest will be attending our prisoner shortly." Quanser stared at Thirteen. "With his powers he will be able to get out of those easily, so be ready when he comes to."

Thirteen nodded.

Quanser stepped towards Thirteen so they stood face to face and said, “I’m not done with him yet, Devil. Not by far.”

Thirteen met Quanser’s eyes. “Me neither.”

Chapter 45

Chanta was seated at a table next to an exoguard. The guard took her hand and forced it flat on the table.

“Come now. I’m sure we can all play nice,” Kandice said pulling out a syringe with a long thick needle.

The exoguard said nothing.

“I guess not,” Kandice scrunched up her nose toward Chanta. “I tried. Now don’t worry sweetie. This will only sting for a second.” Kandice jabbed the syringe into a vein on Chanta’s hand, which the exoguard still held flat out.

Chanta grimaced. “What are you doing?”

“Taking some blood samples. Our Leader’s orders. After all, we must study you because of the unique special cargo you are carrying,” Kandice said and pointed to Chanta’s stomach. “First of its kind really. The Leader is very interested in it. Don’t fret though, she wanted to kill you and your baby,

but I managed to convince her into sparing both your lives...for now anyways, so we can study in the name of science.” Kandice drew Chanta’s blood into the syringe and she pulled the needle out of Chanta’s hand. “There, all done,” she exclaimed.

The exoguard released Chanta’s hand but restrained her completely.

Kandice inserted the syringe needle into a vial and injected the blood filling the vial up. “Who knows, maybe I can convince the Leader into cutting the baby out before birth and we can raise it to hunt your kind.”

“I’ll rip your heart out before you get that chance,” Chanta threatened.

Kandice stared blankly in disbelief but after a moment of silence shook it off as an empty threat. “Promises, promises,” she teased.

“It’s more than a promise, it’s a guarantee,” Chanta glared.

Kandice didn’t know what to say or how to react. She unconsciously placed her hand over her heart and caught herself doing so. “Get this thing out of here,” she said to the guard.

The exoguard lifted Chanta by the arm and marched her out of the room. Once they were out of sight, Kandice put the vial away and slipped out of the room. She wandered the brightly lit hallways until she entered a conjoined room that was separated by a thick glass barrier. On the other side of the glass, a heavily sedated bald gray skinned man laid on a steel chair with his arms and legs strapped down. A few scientists were drawing blood from the individual and running bio scans. Kandice saw that the Leader standing alone looking through the glass, watching what was going on.

“Looks like the revival of Alpha Zero was a success,” Kandice said standing next to the Leader.

“Indeed, it was. How did it go with the flaw?” The Leader asked.

“It went as expected. I collected the blood sample. I have other studies I need to conduct.” Kandice scanned through her holotab swiping right and pulled up a few charts projecting them on the glass for the two of them to look over.

The Leader said to Kandice, “You have to conduct your research. Just keep the Flaw alive at least until the abomination is born.”

“Until the abomination is born? You’re not going to kill the child?” Kandice asked.

“Not yet. Like you said, it’s a scientific first and perhaps it has some...value to us. Could give us a better breed of soldiers or a means to the end of the flaw,” The Leader said coldly.

“The possibilities we can use or even learn from the child could open new doors. It certainly is exciting,” Kandice said with eyes wide with wonder.

“Don’t keep your hopes up. I may just decide to do away with the flaw before the thing is born especially if the new breed works out. I do admit though, curiosity has its hold on me,” The Leader said as she watched on through the glass.

“New breed? What kind of breed my Leader?”

“Something that came to me. Imagine a nightmare creature that is a perfect predator with a Bastards’ power and under our complete control. This predator...this Apex, I will be calling them, will hunt down all the flaws, Decayed, and strong enough to kill any Bastard that gets out of line. The perfect

killing machines,” The Leader said as she cracked a smile at the thought.

“Is that why you have revived Alpha Zero?” Kandice inquired.

“Yes. He is one of the elements needed. I need his blood to provide a binding agent within the mixture.” The Leader studied the scientist in the other room drawing blood from Alpha Zero.

“What are the other elements?” Kandice probed.

“I’ll show you,” The Leader said and walked out of the room with Kandice following closely at her heels.

The two women entered another room that was similar to the room they had just left. The Leader extended her arm for Kandice to proceed further towards the glass barrier that separated them from a room they could see into.

Kandice obeyed by slowly stepping closer to the glass barrier, not seeing anything in the room. She placed a hand on the thick glass and looked around. “I don’t see anything.”

A burnt fleshed creature with gouged out sunken black eyes and jagged sharp fangs smacked against the glass with a hiss.

Kandice nearly jumped out of her skin with fright. “That’s a Decayed!” she screamed.

“I know. Five brought them to me and it dawned on me that I can use them to create the Apex,” The Leader said.

“You are going to mix Bastard genes with that of a Decayed?!” Kandice gasped.

“The perfect killer,” The Leader admitted. “Come now doctor; tell you you’re not just a little curious about the experiment.”

“How could we control it?”

The Leader held up a small microchip. “With these,” she said. “We implant the chips into the Decayed’s brain before the mutation takes place and once it has fully changed, it will have to obey me.”

“Amazing but frightening as well,” Kandice exclaimed as she examined the Decayed sniffing around on all fours in behind the glass barrier.

“This one already has the implant within its brain. We just haven’t activated it, yet,” said The Leader.

Gas filled the room and the Decayed freaked out. It jumping from wall to wall until its breathing became ragged and the it slowed down. The Decayed growled then collapsed.

“Looks like we are about to witness the experiment first hand,” The Leader said and grinned folding her arms stoically.

Three scientists entered the room in gas masks and oxygen suits while the Decayed laid unconscious. One scientist put a vial of Alpha Zero’s blood into a mixture machine that another scientist had wheeled in. Blood was drawn from the Decayed and put into the mixture machine as well with another glowing pulsating violet substance. The mixture machine combined the different vials together creating a single vial of a newly made mixture.

The scientist inserted the formula, which pulsed violet with tints of neon green, into a small gun and placed the barrel on the Decayed’s neck. He steadily pulled the trigger, and the gun injected the formula into the Decayed’s bloodstream. The scientist backed away and left the room quickly.

The Decayed twitched a little then flopped rapidly on the ground screaming. The creature’s body and limbs stretched

out painfully as the formula scalded throughout its veins. Bones snapped and reassemble. Its claws and fangs grew longer and larger.

The two women looked on.

“You used the same mystic minerals we used to create the Bastards. I thought there was no more of the minerals left?” Kandice said as she watched in horror as the Decayed rapidly mutated in to something else.

“I was able to keep some left over for such an occasion,” The Leader said just before she was interrupted by the creature’s screaming that deepened and became more monstrous. “Look at it. Isn’t it beautiful?”

“It’s terrifying,” Kandice whispered.

The new creature let out a deep low monstrous roar to announce its birth into the world from old flesh. It was a nightmare waiting to be unleashed. The creature’s roar was heard throughout the entire laboratory. Many of the scientists and exoguards stopped in their tracks, searching around for the source of the dreadful sound which was deafening to their ears.

Sitting alone in her cell, clutching her stomach, Chanta tried to make out the awful sounds that snatched her out of her dream. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up with each savage roar.

She imagined a mixture of pain and rage.

“What the hell is that?” she muttered.

The screaming roar worsened and became more erratic. It sounded as if a huge animal was thrashing around. The entire foundation of the building felt like it was going to crumble and fall down around them all.

This place is a nightmare. I must get out of her., Chanta thought.

She could not bear the image of her unborn child being cut out of her, then experimented on with needles and probes for the rest of its life, or worse. She remembered Thirteen telling her about how they raised and trained him in the labs. Her heart broke for Thirteen, and the thought of that happening to their child...Chanta would rather die than to have that happen.

Chanta tried to come up with different ways of escaping from these ghastly thoughts. She began wondering if Thirteen was out there alive, and was he looking for her? What would their child look like? Would the child possess powers of a flaw or a Bastard? Would the child resemble herself or Thirteen? A flaw had never given birth to such a child.

Would I be able to survive? Chanta wondered.

She knew her child was special, how so, she had no idea. It was a feeling she just could not shake, a feeling that her child could change the world forever; if she could survive and escape the laboratory of Haven first.

Chapter 46

“How dare you come between me and killing that monster!” Quanser growled as he tossed the melted plasma pistol across the room. “You know damn well what he has done!”

“I know all too well what he has done, yes, but he is still my brother, my responsibility. I can change him. I know that I can reach him,” Thirteen reasoned.

Patricia silently sat on an old chair in the corner of the room observing the growing conflict.

“Your responsibility!” Quanser sneered. “I agree that he is your responsibility and that you both should die for what had happened to Kala! My mother may have spared your life for saving ours so many years ago, but I can never forgive either of you.”

“If you really want to avenge Kala, then help me destroy the Leader and bring the Haven’s down, to end her tyranny once and for all. To make sure what happened to Kala does not happen to anyone else,” Thirteen disputed.

Quanser stared at Thirteen with eyes of fury and at a loss for words. Quanser would love nothing more than to destroy the Haven’s, kill the Leader, and end the suffrage of his kind. Ultimately, how could they? They won’t be able to make it past the wall. It’s all just fantasy’s, that’s all it ever would be.

He dismissed the idea entirely and waved his hand indifferently in the air. “You are a fool if you think you can change him and a bigger fool if you think you can bring Haven down as well.” Quanser took a deep sigh and said, “Try if you must, but I will not put the lives of my people in danger. They have all been through enough...I have been through enough.”

Despite how Thirteen felt he nodded his head in agreement and said, “I understand I really do. Something to think about though...doing nothing is the same as helping the Leader continue slaughtering your people. By doing so, you have the same amount of blood on your hands as she does.”

Quanser picked up a bottle of whiskey, unscrewed the cap and took a swig. “Just go do what you need to do with that monster.”

Thirteen waited a moment, looked at Patricia who gave a slight nod and a smile, then left the room.

Quanser leaned against the wall and circled his thumb around the brim of the bottle.

“He’s right you know,” Patricia broke the silence.

“Not you too, mom,” Quanser protested.

“Doing nothing, we are just as guilty as the Leader.”

“I can’t send more of our people to the grave. I’ve done that enough, years ago in the wars against Haven. I have led our people to their slaughter when I was arrogant to believe we could have burned the Haven’s down. It got us nowhere.” Quanser sat behind a table and took another drink.

“We didn’t have him helping us before,” Patricia said as she motioned to the door Thirteen exited a moment ago.

“You seriously think that thing,” Quanser pointed toward the same door, “can help us burn Haven down? Come on mom.”

Patricia shrugged and said, “Burning things down seems to be his thing.”

Quanser chuckled and shook his head. “It’s insane! To trust someone that has hunted our kind for hundreds of years. Do you know how crazy and irrational that is?”

“It’s better than doing nothing. Who would we become if we continue to allow our kind to be hunted down like animals? Now someone is standing against the Leader, and you don’t want to join the fight. I am ashamed.” Patricia struggled to stand but had done so.

“I can’t lead any more of our people to their deaths, mom. I can’t do that anymore,” Quanser sighed.

“Son, I don’t think that is your choice to make yourself,” Patricia said and staggered out of the room.

Quanser sat there alone with his thoughts and frustrations, which was nothing really new those days. His thoughts were beginning to be old friends that haunted him constantly, not wanting to leave. He lifted the whiskey bottle to his lips which was usually the remedy to such occasions but now he paused before taking a drink. Instead, he tossed the

bottle aside with a frown and stewed with the ghost he had made.

“Son of a bitch...”

Thirteen entered the shack that Quanser had Six bounded up in. The same rundown shack Thirteen was confined in himself. Thirteen slammed the door behind him which resulted with Six stirring awake.

Six wiggled in the chains then stopped with a curious gaze. “Chains? Really?” he said.

“I know. I thought the same thing,” Thirteen said.

“Amusing, considering I can form into smoke and be out of these,” Six said as he hoisted up his arms as far as he could to show the thick metal links.

“Yeah, I know. I thought we could talk before you do though,” Thirteen suggested.

“Why not? I do not have anywhere else to go. Not without you anyways.”

“Still think the Leader will take you back, don’t you?” Thirteen said as he took a seat where Quanser once sat interrogating him.

“If I bring your worthless corpse to her she will gladly accept me back.” Six readjusted himself to get more comfortable.

“She will not take you back. She will kill you the second you present my body to her.”

“No, you are wrong,” Six said as he shook his head.

“Really?” Thirteen laughed. “Have you ever seen the Leader forgive anyone that had failed her? Let alone failing multiple times.”

Six looked down at his boots not knowing what to say.

“Exactly. What makes you think she will forgive you and take you back?” Thirteen questioned.

“Because I am her...”

“Favorite?” Thirteen completed Six’s sentence. “She probably says that to all her Bastards.”

“You do not know that.”

“Of course I do. She says it to me all the time. She says it to you all the time as well,” Thirteen protested.

Six shook his head again, annoyed.

“Deep down you know I am right, that even if you do bring my body to her, she will kill you,” Thirteen said.

Six slacked in the chair, then said, “I have to find out. If I stay out here, eventually I will die anyways by a flaw, Decayed, or some mutated creature out in these wastelands. If I bring your body back, at least I have a better chance.”

Thirteen stood up and grabbed a bottle of water. “Better chance of her murdering you.”

“Better than dying out here at the hands of those things,” Six declared.

“You are so delusional,” Thirteen remarked.

“And you are a traitorous fool!” Six retaliated.

Thirteen opened the bottle of water taking a drink then sat it down. “There is another way you know.”

“Oh? And what could that be?” Six mocked.

“Help me take her down, end her reign, and be free from this madness.”

“Ha! Why would I do that?” Six asked.

“Because we work well together and together, we can bring down the Leader and Haven.”

“Now who is the delusional one?” Six replied.

“Together we can do this. Killing these people cannot possibly be a fulfillment of your life? Surely you feel there is something more to this life other than pointless bloodshed?”

“Like I have told you before brother, I feel nothing,” Six stated.

Thirteen stared intently at six and studied him. “I do not believe that.”

“The role of the hero does not suit you. You are the bad guy. The flaw fears you. You have slaughtered thousands of their kind. They call you the Devil for crying out loud! You are one of us!”

“Not anymore,” Thirteen glared.

“Bullshit.”

“No, you are bullshit. Your logic is bullshit. What they have trained us for is bullshit. Everything coming out of your mouth is bullshit. Worst of all, you believe it,” Thirteen growled.

“Because it is true.”

“It is not! How many years now have I tried to convince you otherwise?” Thirteen queried.

“Too many years,” Six groaned.

“And not once has it ever crossed your mind that I might be right?”

Six did not have an answer. On numerous accounts Six had often wondered what life would have been like free from the Leader’s oppression. To do what he had always wanted: to live a life of his own. Yet he could not accept it as a possible reality. That thought, so foreign and new, scared him. He had known nothing but what he had been trained for all his life. It

had been something he had grown accustomed and comfortable to. He never had to second guess his orders. That was until Thirteen had done so.

“I know a decent person is in there somewhere. It just depends on you to bring him out,” Thirteen said.

“Your high hopes sicken me,” Six sneered.

“What do I have to do to get through to you? Are you really so blind?” Thirteen said, then turned his back on Six in frustration.

That was the opportunity Six was waitin for. He dissolved into smoke and slipped out of the chains, catching them before they hit the ground. He was careful not to make any sound whatsoever. Slowly he rose to his feet gripping the chains tight and crept behind Thirteen getting ready to make his move. Then he paused...

Chapter 47

Chanta screamed as the device strapped around her head caused her searing pain. The steel table restrained her when her body stretched and arched in agony. A flimsy metal circle fitted around Chanta's head sent Nero waves lthat felt like drill bits punching their way into her skull. The device's purpose was to explore her thoughts, memories, and secrets. Painfully forcing those thoughts, memories, and secrets into a projected image on Kandice's holotab.

"Fascinating," Kandice said as she flipped through the holographic images seeking out whatever caught her attention.

Chanta thrashed on the table and her bottom jaw flared open.

"Now, now, you'll be fine. True it may sting a bit, but you will survive...perhaps," Kandice snickered.

"I'll kill you!" Chanta spat.

“No need to be so nasty. It’s not doing any harm to the child, just you. Take comfort in that,” Kandice teased. “You have lived a very interesting life. So sad what Shoffner did to your family, but you came out alright finding Scott. I guess that’s why he destroyed one of the military bases, to save you. For the longest time we could not figure out what sparked that whole massacre.” Kandice waltzed around the table and turned the device off then removed it from Chanta’s head.

“What are you doing?” Chanta asked, regretting it immediately.

“I am readjusting the wave velocity. Might sting a bit more since I am raising the velocity channels,” Kandice warned.

“What is the point of all this?”

“The point is to study your life and your living habits. It’s not every day we bring a living flaw in to the labs, especially one that is carrying a Bastard’s child. Quite ironic I must say, considering you know, a bastard is a child who is fatherless, but your child has a father who is a Bastard.”

“I’m dying inside from laughter,” Chanta said starkly.

“You are not dying yet,” Kandice mentioned as she placed the device back on Chanta’s head. “It’s time to go again.”

“I’m going to enjoy killing you,” Chanta growled.

Kandice didn’t know how to react for a moment. She fumbled with the controller in her hand and the holotab in the other. Finally, a smile sneaked its way across her face as she pressed the button.

The pain exploded within Chanta’s skull, more intense this time. It felt like nails being dragged across the inside of her

cranium and the outer surface of the brain. The machine dug deep leaving trenches. It hollowed out everything she had ever seen, done, felt, and experienced.

Chanta's screaming echoed throughout the hallways and rooms. The sound trailed into a room where the Leader stood in front of bulletproof glass that divided the room.

Something moved on the other side of the glass. A hulking sized creature lurked around within the darkness. It heard the screaming that traveled around the facility and the creature roared in response. The power from the roar shook the glass.

The Leader watched with awe at the size and the raw intensity that the creature possessed. She held her holotab and swiped on the projected screen. "Send in an exoguard to room 47B."

"My Leader our charts show us that room is housing the Apex experiment," a voice responded.

"Just send in the guard" The Leader said as she became aggravated.

"Right away my Leader."

The Leader positioned herself at the glass, not flinching when the creature slammed against it.

A long spiny tongue slithered up the glass followed by a deep chuckle matching that of a hyena on steroids.

"You are so beautiful," The Leader said as she placed her hand on the glass.

The creature sensed something and leaped to the ceiling disappearing back into the comfort of the darkness.

The Leader marveled at its stealth as an exoguard armed with a plasma assault rifle walked into the room. The armed

guard looked around bewildered and raised the rifle. The door sealed shut behind the guard catching him unaware.

With the rifle raised, the guard looked around him but did not seeing anything. Walking through the dimly lit room, the guard used caution.

A long steady stream of drool dripped to the ground behind the guard as a long tongue slowly wrapped itself around the guard's hand unnoticed, then tightened. The spines on the tongue turned to razors and severed the hand clean off. The guard dropped the rifle screaming.

The creature leaped down to devour its live prey. The Leader watched on with fascination, thinking of all the things she could accomplish with this new creation, the Apex. She imagined an army of these huge creatures being unleashed upon the world, wiping out the flaw and the Decayed. With those imperfections gone she had no more use of Bastards, and the Apex would get their real challenge by eliminating them. With the Bastards gone and a new vast army of nightmarish creatures under her control, nothing and no one could stand in her way. She could rule other Havens. She will have her perfect army in her new perfect world.

The thud of a bloody hand slapped against the glass in front of the Leader leaving behind a bloody smear print that trailed down towards the floor.

“You are so perfect,” The Leader said as she traced her hand along the bloody print left behind. The guard screamed as his limbs were ripped apart by a shadowey beast whc chuckled like a depraved hyena.

The creature roared a deep guttural growl. The growl carried out of the room, down the hallways, and heard by a

barely conscious Chanta as she was dragged out of the room where Kandice had been conducting her Nero waves experiment.

Chanta's body slumped in the exoguard's arms as the guard escorted her to her containment unit. Once she was placed inside, she slowly retreated to the corner of the room. As the guard exited the steel door sealed closed, shutting Chanta away. She clutched her stomach and whimpered with frustration.

The sound of the unknown creature growling broke her out of her trance. She knew she had to escape, but an opportunity hadn't presented itself yet. She knew it had to be soon unless they decided to feed Chanta to that creature she heard constantly roaring, shaking the walls of her holding tank.

"Don't worry little one, I will get us out of here," Chanta whispered to her stomach.

She could not help but to wonder what her parents would have thought about her being pregnant. What would they have thought of the baby? Or of the father for that matter. Would her parents have approved? Then it hit her, of course they would have. As long as she and the baby were happy it wouldn't have mattered, especially if the father was a Bastard. Her parents were always forgiving and would have loved him. A tear spilt down her cheek with thoughts of her parents playing with their grandchild.

Suddenly something popped in her mind that she hadn't recalled in a long, long time. She acted instantly on the impulse. Cradling herself she softly sang a song that her mother had sung to her as a child, so long ago.

It was the same song Chanta had sung to herself when she thought she was going to die alone in the merciless

wastelands until Scott had saved her. A song that she had not sung in a long time.

“My little one, you have my heart. You are my soul, you are the best of me. My little one, you are the sun. You are the joy that fills me. You will never grow old because you are my little one. My sweet little one.” A smile crept across her battered and bruised face, and she carried on humming the song.

She laid on the concrete floor singing a song that gave her so much joy and love. Now she got to pass that on to her unborn child. Eventually, she passed out on the floor and for the time being she was free from torture and the pain, for the time being anyways even if it's for the night.

Chapter 48

The glass surface of the dunes and lingering massive stone pillars stretched to the heavens. They shrilled with the human like screams in the wind as it permeated the glass ventricles burned into existence across the sands. The disturbing shrieks are only matched by the blood curdling howls of the Decayed that wandered out from their dark crevasses and abysmal dens.

The sun high in the sky and slowly lowered. Many of the Decayed clawed out their own eyes so they could prowl within the sunlight, relying on sound and scent. The creatures scattered around in a frenzy after their home had been destroyed by Thirteen's destructive force. Many of the Decayed feasted on their own dead.

There was no mistaking their foul stench; not for the little Sporg. He knew it to be something strange even for the

Decayed. It was as if the few feral beings dispersed around were patrolling rather than roaming.

Nevertheless, the Sporg was determined. He was trapped under the glass debris, but his will was strong and he wouldn't allow himself to die like that. Taking deep breaths, the Sporg used his legs to lift up the stones. His legs shook and buckled leaving the stone back on top. The Sporg readjusted itself under the pile up. He quietly clicked angrily at himself. The Sporg uncomfortably moved his legs around whimpering because of his cramped sore body.

The Sporg knew it must free itself so he could find the only one who cared for him- his mother who loved him. He silently vowed to return to her side, to protect her and the new life she bares inside. The Sporg knew she was pregnant; he could smell it. He must get to her and the baby, his new family.

The Sporg once again placed its foot against the glass stone and drew in all the strength it had and slid the glass stone over. Sunlight spilled upon the Sporg warming its translucent skin.

Luckily for the Sporg, the Decayed did not hear the sliding glass stone. The Sporg squirmed out of the rubble he was buried under. He then took a moment to gain his strength back before picking up on her scent. However it mingled with the man haunted by the perilous odor of Death. It was all thanks to that man that she was in danger- the Bastard.

Unfortunately, the scent of the red-eyed man was faint, disappearing, but what of hers?

The Sporg's intuition pulled him in a direction that he knew all too well to be certain death for the likes of him. Deep down he knew in his heart he would find her in the place of

machines, concrete, and steel. A place they called Haven and he would gladly give up his life just to be with her once more—that was of course if the Decayed doesn't get to him first.

The Sporg traveled across the Decayed Pits and was able to safely avoid detection from the snarling and cowering Decayed. He ducked down between a few boulders, but now his only route was to make his way in a straight shot across the opened glass surface of black sands. It would be risky. If the Sporg moved too slowly the Decayed would pick up on his scent. He would be a quick and easy snack as soon as they heard him make a break for it. One thing was for sure though; the little Sporg does not have the time to sit and wait to think it over any longer. His instinct called for action.

The Sporg was about to dash across the glass surfaced landscape, taking the chance of drawing attention, and possibly becoming a meal when he spotted a small broken glass stone by his foot. Without further hesitation the Sporg decided to do something else. He wrapped his tail around the small glass stone and whipped the rock with a quick spin.

The stone sailed through the air and ricocheted down the canyons of the Decayed Pits behind him. Instantly the Decayed reacted and immediately swarmed after the noise in response to the rock clanging against the valley walls. The little Sporg did not delay at the opportunity. He leapt out from the boulders and sprinted across the glass surface.

He made it far out to a hole in a mound and waited until it was safe to travel at a quieter and steadier pace. The Sporg rested without a sound, gathering in all that he could sense in the area. The eerie silence made him wonder why that damned stench had not yet subsided despite the fact he was almost out

of the forsaken Decayed Pits. Then it hit him as he heard the gurgling cracks from the contorting head of the Decayed; two had followed and they found him! The Sporg realized it too late when a rotted face of charred flesh appeared in front of him cackling madly.

The Sporg bloomed his head open brandishing a rows of razor-sharp teeth and two small beads of eyes. The Sporg stared at a foe that would never understand the concept of intimidation.

The Decayed responded in kind with a scream, but oddly did not advance. Perhaps toying with its meal, the Sporg thought. The little Sporg stood his ground in the standoff when suddenly the second Decayed emerged, erupting through the mound behind the Sporg.

The Sporg barely reacted in time to grab the Decayed's arm with his three-pronged foot. He tossed the Decayed straight into the remaining ceiling of the mound, ripping the Decayed's arm off in the process.

Then the first Decayed sprung after the Sporg. The Sporg swiftly evaded as the half-shattered mound caved in on itself burying the two Decayed with it while the little Sporg slipped away unscathed.

The little Sporg looked back and clicked, snickering at the way things had played out. He promptly carried on after hearing the roars of the other hordes awakening deep within the Decayed Pits off in the horizon.

The Sporg pushed on for hours until he noticed a small crater and decided to take refuge within. Luckily for the Sporg there was a small puddle to rehydrate. He replenished himself and felt a tremble across the landscape. He looked up and

spotted a huge hovercraft passing over head in the sky, soaring with a purpose. He watched it go by and to his surprise he picked up a faint smell of Chanta or maybe that was a memory like a euphoric recall.

No...Chanta's scent was near, the Sporg was sure of it as it sniffed the ground of the crater until his nose touched a cloth heavy with Chanta's scent. The Sporg realized it was a piece of Chanta's shirt that had been carried by the wind.

The Sporg had been tracking her torn shirt cloth, not Chanta. The Sporg became frustrated not knowing if he was on the right trail or not, but then there was also another scent. One that sent a shockwave down his spine.

The Decayed! Both? No.

He sniffed the air again. *Only one, but how? And this far out?*

The Sporg waited, his body tensed expecting an attack from above but nothing happened and yet the scent continued to grow stronger.

He did not realize it until it happened; a Decayed suddenly erupted out of the ground underneath him. Emerging headfirst, it bit into the Sporg's leg, sinking its fangs deep violently shaking the Sporg.

The Sporg used its other free leg and kicked the Decayed off. The Decayed staggered with its jaw dangling then popped its jaw back into place and it cackled.

The Sporg squealed in pain and fell over attempting to claw at the Decayed with its only good leg. Ultimately, he could only hold back the charred corpse with his tail, prolonging the inevitable.

The Sporg felt that all hope was lost as the Decayed drew upon him licking its chops of jagged razor teeth.

The Sporg felt that all hope was lost as the Decayed drew upon him licking its chops of jagged razor teeth. He could not believe it. To think he was so close, close to finding her- to being with her, with them, but now, he's just zombie chow.

Suddenly, the air all around them was filled with smoke which engulfed the entire crater in pitch black. The smoke swirled in to the Decayed's mouth and nose and caused the creature to spontaneously spasm and convulse.

The Decayed's body swayed, and the skin bubbled before exploding all over the Sporg. Catching the Sporg by surprise, a man was left standing before him. The man had smoke pouring fourth from his body which draped him like a black cloak.

The man of smoke turned to face the little Sporg. He looked down upon the Sporg laying on the ground, bleeding from his wound.

"Aren't you the Sporg that belongs to that flaw?" the smoke man inquired.

The Sporg recognized the man; his scent was like that of the red-eyed man. He was the one who kept tracking down the red-eyed man and invaded many homes in the wastelands.

The Sporg helplessly watched him. He expected the smoke man to do the same to him as he had done to the Decayed. The Sporg could sense that the smoke man was considering what to do about the Sporg. The Sporg waited to see what his fate was about to be when the smoke man relaxed a bit.

“Interesting,” the smoke man said as he kicked away some loose charred flesh by his foot.

The Sporg watched the smoke man disappear into a black mist which floated away towards the mountains in the distance. The Sporg hated the fact that he owed his life to that demon who hunted his family- it left a bad taste in his mouth.

Wait, wasn't the smokey Bastard after Thirteen? That's right he was!

The Sporg struggled to his feet realizing the smoke man will always be after Thirteen and the red-eyed man would never stop looking for Chanta.

Neither would the Sporg.

The Sporg slowly, carefully climbed out of the crater and after he had licked his wound, he tasted the air with his senses.

The Sporg knew now where he was going, to follow the smoke man.

Night had fallen as five flaw soldiers and a human sympathizer gathered around a campfire next to a small shack outside the base of the Redwood Mountains.

A generator could be heard running in the distance. It powered a holographic projection dome around the mountains they had all sought refuge in. The holographic projection dome projected an image of the mountains devoid of life. This allowed the Ifaws to remain safe for observation crafts. Within the dome however, it was actually flourishing with an abundance of life.

Many of the flaw and human sympathizers had families. They hide within the mountains where they were able raise their

off-spring with nature, and the remaining animal and plant life that surrounded them there.

This was why it was called the Hidden City. Mainly due to the protection from holographic projection dome which kept the life within the mountains hidden from a cruel and diabolical world.

The five flaw and the human sympathizer were a small part of a larger army. It was their night to patrol the perimeter and make sure no one from the Havens stumbled upon their Utopia.

The Utopia and army belonged to Quanser LaHaye, who had many undisclosed bases and cities about the area. One of them was Crater City until it was wiped out. Much like Crater City, the other hidden bases and cities were dwindling fast. This was due to the Leader's exoguards and the Bastards ruthlessly hunting them down.

The four men and two women armed with knives and outdated plasma assault rifles were preparing themselves a small meal over the blazing flames of a fire pit.

They enjoyed themselves, swapping stories of romance and war. They laughed as the older teased the younger and less experienced.

The time passed in a blink of an eye, and they sat around full of food and of themselves. Boasting of their fantasy of what they claimed they would do if they ever came across any soldiers of Haven, or even a Bastard for that matter. But it was very certain that none of them ever really experienced any real confrontation with a Bastard or anyone outside of their own kind. Except for their much beloved General Quanser LaHaye whom had on many occasions came across exoguards and

Bastards and held his own. They all regarded Quanser with high honors and respect.

“So, boss?” a grunt inquired to their outpost commander. “Those exoguards, how are we supposed to penetrate their armor with our outdated gear?” The grunt held up the plasma assault rifle that had been heavily repaired.

“Don’t worry ‘bout that youngin.’ Quanser’s working on getting us all new gear before we storm the beaches,” the Commander replied.

“Beaches?” wondered the human.

The old commander grinned and waved it off. “Never mind, the term is way before your time son. Jack, you just hand me that there water jug.”

The human named Jack complied and passed the canister to the old flaw Commander. The water sloshed inside while the Commander took a long drawn-out drink and wiped his chin clean of any droplets.

“Ah, that’s better.”

“Hey, uh boss?” stated Jack. “You got something on your face.” Jack pointed out a neon green oval lingering on the Commander’s forehead.

The old man slapped his palm against his forehead. “Did I get it?” he asked removing his hand.

“Yeah.” Jack assured him. “It’s gone...”

Something jetted past Jack with a blur and stuck itself onto the Commander’s forehead.

The old man looked up to see a small rod with a blinking white light sticking out of his face. The white light blinked faster and faster as everyone looked upon their Commander,

paralyzed with shock he took a deep gulp and stared deep into Jack's eyes then calmly said, "Run."

Jack quickly turned away and the old flaw's face exploded, destroying his head with a massive shockwave and a blinding hot white flash.

The Sporg made sure to keep his distance while he followed the smoke man's mist a half mile away from the mountains that lay out before them.

The smoke man floated behind a boulder and formed back to a bodily form.

The Sporg stayed within the dark and kept low to the ground. He was just relieved that the Decayed Pits were a couple miles behind them, but the stench of death lingered in the air with a tint of sickness.

The Sporg tried to see what the smoke man was giving his focus and attention to. The Sporg looked past the smoke man and saw an armored hovercraft lightly and stealthily touching down. A small team of exoguards exited the craft.

"You sure about this Sergeant?" an exoguard asked the other.

"Yes Captain. I am reading anomalies and a high-powered surge here. It has to be another hidden outpost of the flaw," the Sergeant exoguard replied.

"It looks barren," the Captain said.

The Sergeant walked a few feet ahead and signaled for the Captain to stand next to him. Once the Captain had done so the Sergeant stared at him with a sly grin. "Hold out your arm straight ahead of you."

The Captain gave a skeptical look, but obliged to what was asked.

Upon lifting his arm and straightening it out, up to his elbow had disappeared. “Sneaky bastards,” the Captian exclaimed.

The Sergeant nodded with agreement. “It’s a holographic projection. That is why we never see anything flying over this area. The flaws are only showing what they want us to see.”

The Captain put his arm down holstering his plasma assault rifle. “Let’s show the flaw what *we* want them to see. Move out.”

The exoguards formed together gripping their weapons and walked in unison into the holographic projection, disappearing to the other side.

Six watched on with a wide grin. “Hmmm, intriguing. Seems the flaw have tricks of their own.”

Six waited a moment then dashed across the plains and into the holographic projector.

The Sporg followed suit and ran across the plains and through the holographic projector as well.

Out of nowhere luscious shrubs and trees appeared before the Sporg. He was surprised at first and almost ran into the trunk of a tree but skirted to the left barely missing it by inches. The Sporg took a moment to sniff around and continued his pursuit.

He travelled a few moments then stopped. A few yards away the smoke man was hiding behind a bush, watching the exoguards up ahead who were hiding out as well.

The Sporg saw the exoguards giving one another hand signals. Then an exoguard slowly raised a rifle up, and took aim.

The Sporg followed his eyes to what the exoguard was aiming at. A neon green dot appeared on an old flaw's forehead who was sitting around a campfire with other flaws.

A young human sympathizer gestured at the neon green dot and the old flaw slapped his forehead. The green dot was gone and the exoguard pulled the trigger.

A small object shot out of the rifle's barrel and into the old flaw's forehead. He said one word then his head exploded.

The Sporg turned his head away from the bright flash and the exoguards made their move.

Jack could only fall to his knees as he turned to see the rest of his comrades stumbling about blinded and disoriented. He too was discombobulated by the bang that went off where his outpost Commander's head used to be before it turned into a shower of red mist and chunks of flesh.

One by one his comrades suddenly dropped to the sound of sporadic plasma blast; shot dead as three exoguards crept out from the darkness.

Jack's only choice was to run into an old beat-up shack in hopes that he could hide. But even that was futile as the exoguards followed him into the room.

Poor Jack was cornered with nowhere to go and no way to fight. When the blast went off, he accidentally dropped his assault rifle amongst the confusion and chaos.

The exoguards approached him while he stood bravely in the face of death, quivering only slightly, yet the exoguards did nothing.

“Sergeant, take the cadet. Do a perimeter sweep,” the Captain ordered while drilling a hole through Jack with intense eyes.

“Roger that, Captain,” the Sergeant replied and exited with the cadet behind him.

The Captain pulled up a chair and gestured for Jack to take a seat.

Jack took his seat trembling more than he wanted to show at the thought of what would become of him.

“So, tell me,” the Captain began as he scanned Jack with a device on his wrist and waited for the instant analysis. He then continued, “Jack Cisek. Intel has it that the sympathizers are the spies for the flaw, and as history has it, spies have all the information on both sides.”

Jack said nothing as he tried to calm his breathing.

The Captain nodded his head. “How old are you son? 18? 19?”

“17,” Jack answered regrettably.

The Captain leaned back. “17...” He whistled. “Let me guess, you fell in love with a flaw and abandoned your own kind to follow your heart. Am I right?”

Jack nodded.

The Captain took a sigh as if being concerned for Jack’s wellbeing. “I bet nobody told you the consequences of turning on your own kind.” Jack looked as if he was about to answer but the Captain placed a finger to his pursed lips. “Don’t answer son, its hypothetical and irrelevant because I am going to tell you what we do to sympathizing pieces of shit like yourself. We kill them on sight and with extreme prejudice, period. They do not deserve to breathe the same air as the rest of us. The only

reason you are alive right now is because you have information that I want.

Don't be mistaken son, you will be brave and not tell me anything at first. I have been through this a thousand times, but rest assured I can be very persuasive." The Captain pulled a long serrated blade from his boot. "We are about to enter a strategic dance between us, and I will hurt you, I will threaten you and your loved ones, I will break you. In the end son, I will get what I want from you. I will kill you and then I will kill all that you love and hold dear to your heart. I get pleasure from it, sometimes, a little aroused. It's exciting! Let us begin, shall we?" The Captain reached over to Jack. Jack whimpered, trying to swat away the arm drawing near with the sinister looking blade. "Shhh, come now son," the Captain teased grabbing Jack by the back of the neck, squeezing tightly and then pulling Jack closer to him. The Captain leveled out the blade pointing it at Jack's eye, almost touching the razor sharp tip to his pupil.

Jack shook violently and tears streamed down his face. "No please," he cried.

The Captain held the knife in place ready to cut itself a home. "I want to know where Quanser is. I want to know how many men he has. I want to know if he has come across a Bastard called Thirteen. I want to know where the Hidden City is, and you will tell me or I..." the Captain abruptly coughed and cleared his throat.

"Or I will..." again he paused to clear his throat more aggressively this time.

He backed away from Jack rubbing his esophagus. His coughing worsened and he started to gasp for air, but try as he might, he could not seem to breathe.

“What the hell?” Jack muttered, unable to make sense of what was happening when the Captain finally dropped to the floor; the life seemingly choked out of him.

Jack stood up and nudged the Captain’s lifeless body with his foot, still flabbergasted by the unexpected death that transpired before him.

Black smoke began to leak out from the Captain’s corpse, taking the form of a man; of a demon; of Six.

“Holy shit!” Jack cried as he fell back into his seat.

Six looked down upon the defenseless young man with an emptied gaze of reluctance whether the kid died or not.

Six grabbed the pitiful human and a voice called out behind them.

“Hold it right there Six!” Ordered the cadet that had returned to update his Captain only to find him dead. He pointed the assault rifle at Six’s back. “The Leader wants your head als...” The cadet cut himself short as he noticed his now dead Captain. “Shit, Sergeant!” he shouted. “The Captain is dea...” Something lunged at the Cadet taking him down by the arm.

The little Sporg had come to repay his debt to the smoke man. Before the Cadet even knew it, the Sporg tore into his neck thrashing the Cadet’s head left to right and ripping it clean off.

“Huh,” Six said, surprised by the sudden turn of events.

Two shots rang out, both of which, missed the Sporg but him off.

The shots came from the Sergeant who was trying to avenge his fellow exoguard; He checked the room and only saw Jack sitting alone in the chair.

Jack shrugged, unsure what to say, but before he knew it the Sergeant was launched backwards by an unseen force.

Once the Sergeant recovered to his feet, he looked around but only seen smoke lingering in the air.

“Fuck!” the Sergeant realized. “Six!”

The smoke materialized confirming the Sergeant’s deduction as Six appeared before his sight.

The Sergeant reached for his side arm, but Six swiftly disarmed him in a flourish, taking the pistol from the lone exoguard.

Six shot him once in the neck.

The Sergeant instantly fell flat.

Six stood over the exoguard draining the power cell of the plasma pistol into his body. Six tossed the gun aside once he had emptied the pistol and approached the frightened human, Jack.

The Sporg had also returned, shaking its head clicking at Six, communicating that the life debt Six knew nothing about was repaid. All that the Sporg needed was for the smoky demon to take him to the red-eyed devil.

Six stared at the Sporg with intrigue. “Curiouser and curiouser,” he noted.

Six returned his focus to Jack while the Sporg patiently waited. Six proceeded to speak with Jack.

“Do you love your family sympathizer?” questioned Six. However, before Jack could answer, Six continued, “You see that Sporg? I will use it to track your family after I have it rip your face off.”

The Sporg tilted its head confused, and Six carried on.

“I will skin them alive limb by limb. Maybe I will spare you so you can watch as I slowly suffocate them one by one unless you tell me everything those exoguards wanted to know.

If you refuse to tell me...well, you have seen what I did to them.” Six was bluffing, the Sporg would never help Six, but he wasn’t lying about the torture; one way or another he will get the answers he sought. “Where did Quanser take Thirteen? I know he has him by the scent of the flaw filth.”

Frustrated with the evening’s events, Jack did not hesitate to answer. “The Redwood Mountains, he’s in the Hidden City! Just keep heading East and you will find the trail! Please! I beg of you, don’t kill me or my family!”

Six laughed and said, “That was easy. Tell you what, I will think about it. I will leave you alive so you can wonder if I killed them or not.”

“What?! Please...” Jack went on to say but was punched heavily in the face Six. Jack collapsed in a daze and toppled over the chair. He watched Six vanish into black smoke and leave the room.

The Sporg clicked at Jack, bidding him farewell as he chased after Six’s scent.

Jack exhaled with relief then hastily searched out the communicators in the room. Jack tried to dial up headquarters in Hidden City but could not get a signal.

“Hello?! Hello?! Six is heading your way! You know the smoky Bastard?! Hello?! Hello?!” Jack angrily threw the microphone to the ground, cursing at it. “Damn it!”

Many hours had passed as the Sporg tirelessly tracked Six’s scent and it was not until he took a moment to rest that he noticed something. The place he was in, it was beautiful. The little Sporg had never seen such an environment, and even more so smelled such an aroma. All the wonderful different smells of

the Redwood pines, the mountain dirt, the flowers, the plants, and all the different animals. The place was different from the rest of the world; it did not carry the scent of death, only life, an abundance of life.

He wished he could spend the rest of his three lives living here with his family. Chanta, the baby, and even the red-eyed man whom he was somewhat growing accustomed to.

Sporgs typically live over three life spans, each life span could be lived fifty years or more unless killed by something. When a Sporg dies its body decomposes rapidly over three days or less and a very small round egg that resembles a seed gains the nutrients from the rotting corpse, kind of absorbing it. The seed starts to hatch and sprouts a very small translucent stock with a round bulb at the top. A baby Sporg grows within that bulb and hatches out of it. The baby Sporg would be an exact copy of its former self, retaining all its previous memories. After a year of growth, the baby Sporg will reach its same height and weight before it had died. A Sporg could do this three times then it will finally die, no longer able to resurrect itself. Unless the Sporg had been burned to ash then it cannot live the rest of its life cycles because the fire not only destroys the body, but the egg like seed within as well.

The Sporg snapped himself away from the dream of beautiful sounds, sights, and smells. No matter the elegance and the enchantment of it all, he must follow Six's scent deeper into the mountain terrain to find Thirteen. The only one he knew that could have helped him find Chanta.

After much time had passed, the Sporg finally came across Six. He halted, staying safely away as he noticed Six prowling around in solid form.

But why?

Then it hit the Sporg, realizing that Six was observing an encampment, a small citadel at the entrance to a city, the Hidden City.

They had found it.

The Sporg silently crept closer and watched Six make his move to attack the encampment vanishing within.

The Sporg could smell the red-eyed man, the odor of sulfur and fire. It could be no one else but him.

He was here! But now to find him.

The Sporg moved about in the city carefully not to be noticed amongst the chaos of gunfire, smoke, and the screams of war and death.

The smoke man was making himself known.

The Sporg navigated unnoticed as well as uncared for due to the focus solely being upon Six.

The structures were amazing. Most of the buildings were carved in or out of the stones and rocks of the mountain side and were not made of concrete and steel. Green vines wrapped around most surfaces and draped along the edges.

Eventually the little Sporg reached an area where the scent of fresh air mingled with the smell of blood, plasma burns, and...*Thirteen!*

The Sporg poked his head out from the side of a building that must have been a market due to all the delicious scents of food and watched the smoke man fighting the red-eyed man.

The hate the smoke man had for the red-eyed man seemed to be insatiable. A hate that will not be stopped until one or the other were dead.

The Sporg was trying to make the decision of intervening and help Thirteen or let it play out.

“Got you now!” A voice called out behind the Sporg.

The Sporg turned his head to see the human sympathizer, Jack. Jack hammered down the butt of his assault rifle across the Sporg’s head, knocking the Sporg out cold.

Chapter 49

Chanta slept soundly cradled in a ball on the cold steel floor. She stayed awake as long as she could, but her body gave out on her. The continuous mind games, experiments, and torture the Leader and Kandice kept putting her through had taken its toll. Chanta was both mentally and physically fatigued. She did not know what time of day it was anymore, they all blended in together. Her main concern was surviving for her unborn child.

She slept for the first time in a while free within her dreams; her dreams of Thirteen and their child, together as a family and taking trips. Free from any Haven and from the Leader's grasp. Free to be themselves, accepted by one another, and loved by one another.

The steel door rolled open and two exoguards rushed in with a heavy high powered fire hose. They turned it on and blasted the water at Chanta.

Chanta screamed as she was blasted into the wall by such unbearable water pressure. Howling with rage and furious like a hellcat., she turned around so her back took the full force of the water. The water kept forcing her into the wall, finally stopping as Kandice waltzed in and stood next to the exoguards.

“That’s enough, turn it off,” Kandice said to the guards.

The exoguards did what was asked and shut off the water.

“Good morning!” Kandice chimed. “We have a full day ahead of us. Shall we begin?” Then, Kandice smirked and twirled out of the room.

Chanta lashed out growling with fury and dashed towards Kandice, but the exoguards intervened. They grabbed her and one pf the guards punched Chanta across the face. She fell limp into the other exoguards arms. The two exoguards each grabbed one of Chanta’s arms and dragged her out of the room.

Chanta was dazed and spat blood out of her mouth. There was a ringing in her ears. She tried to regain her senses but what she could tell from her blurry vision was that she was being dragged through the hallways. The lights blinded her at first, but her vision became clear again and the ringing stopped in her ears. She could see Kandice leading the way.

“I’m gonna enjoy hurting you,” Chanta growled.

“Promises promises,” Kandice teased.

Kandice led them to another room with a stainless-steel table with straps across it. “Strap the vile thing down,” Kandice said.

The exoguards lifted Chanta and placed her on the table then proceeded to fasten the straps on to her limbs, torso, and head. They then stood patiently by the door.

Two strolled in swaying her long purple hair. Her ultraviolet eyes locked on to Chanta’s glowing green eyes. “What pleasantries are you going to do to the flaw today?” asked Two.

Kandice smiled and said, “I am testing her nerve system to calculate if they are at our speed. If the flaws are faster or slower than us.”

Two approached Chanta and leaned over to stare at her.

Chanta watched the water drops fall on to her black matted hair which pressed against her own face.

Two sensually slid her fingers through Chanta’s hair, as if aroused by the flaw being tortured. “Sounds invigorating.” Two kissed Chanta’s forehead and said, “Have fun.”

A rage like no other surged through Chanta as she fought against the straps.

Kandice brought over a huge syringe full of a fluorescent yellow substance. She placed the needle against the back of Chanta’s neck and said, “Don’t worry this won’t hurt the baby, but you are going to feel everything.” Kandice shoved the needle into the back of Chanta’s skull and injected the substance into her.

All throughout her body Chanta’s nerves felt as if they were on fire. She screamed from the agonizing pain as her body convulsed erratically. Her bottom jaw split open and flared out.

She closed her eyes and fought to stay conscious as long as she could, but it was too much to bear. Chanta went quiet but her body still thrashed while the substance burned its way out of her nerve system. Finally, after a moment, her body stopped.

“Amazing,” Kandice said as she looked over the holoscreen of her computer. “Her central nerve system is much more complex than ours.”

The substance made it easy for Kandice’s scanners to project an image of all the nerves in Chanta’s body. This image floated just above Chanta herself.

The table shifted into a standing position.

“She has nerves in places that we do not. I wonder if it provides more of a stimulation to touch or cause greater awareness, intriguing,” Kandice said.

Two did not seem that impressed. “Who cares, I want to inflict as much pain as I possibly can on her. Have my way with her. That is where the real fun is at.”

“I am starting to think torturing flaws gets you off,” Kandice replied.

“Maybe it does.” Two grinned, “And I so desperately want to get off with her.”

“You will get your chance,” Kandice assured Two with great unease. She then signaled the two exoguards and said, “Unstrap her. I need her in the next room to further my studies.”

The two exoguards made their way to Chanta. The first exoguard unstrapped her feet. The other exoguard undid the straps that held her arms, picked her up and slung her unconscious body over his shoulder.

Everyone within the room was unaware that Chanta was still conscious. Her hand grazed across a steel plate where the

emptied syringe rested. Chanta grabbed the steel plate and slammed it against Two's oblivious face.

Two reeled back with blood gushing from her nose. She hit her head against the steel wall and slid down unconscious.

Chanta's bottom jaw flared open and clamped down around the exoguard's neck with a crushing force. She tore out a chunk of his flesh revealing the guard's spine.

The dead exoguard collapsed on top of the other pinning him to the ground. Chanta lifted her foot high and slammed it down on the living exoguard's throat, crushing his esophagus. The exoguard struggled to breathe and ultimately died.

Kandice trembled with fear of what she witnessed, then she tried to run.

Chanta grabbed her by the back of the hair and yanked down hard to the floor. Kandice was frozen in place stunned by the impact. Chanta looked down at Kandice and opened her bottom jaw then closed it. "I told you, I am going to enjoy killing you bitch."

Kandice screamed as Chanta slammed her on to the stainless-steel slab, then strapped her down.

"Please...I'm sorry!" Kandice begged.

Chanta looked down and found the emptied syringe. She picked it up then looked on the table with the computer and spotted a container full of the fluorescent yellow substance.

"How much of that did you put in me?" Chanta asked.

"I only put in a quarter or less," Kandice whimpered.

Chanta gazed at the container and plunged the needle of the syringe into the top and filled it all the way. "What would happen if I injected you with the whole thing?"

"Please don't!" Kandice pleaded.

“Let’s experiment and find out. You know, in the name of science.” Chanta smiled and grabbed Kandice by her hair. She lifted Kandice’s head up and thrust the needle into the back of her neck hitting the spine then injected every drop of the substance.

Kandice screamed in agony as the nerves under her skin began to show with a sickly yellow color. Her body quaked and racked while thrashing rapidly about as it felt like liquid fire burning its way throughout her body. Blood trickled out of her eyes, ears, and nose. She screamed but there was no longer any noise coming from her mouth. Her limbs pressed hard against the straps and her nerves started to liquefy. Then the substance seeped unforgivingly into her veins which caused them to glow from under her skin. Chanta could see the substance traveling through the bloodstream and into Kandice’s heart.

In turn Kandice’s heart pounded rapidly with no restraint. Her eyes remained open unable to blink, her mouth gaping wide. Kandice gurgled spitting up white foam froth from her lips. Her heart went faster still while the fluorescent yellow substance pumped through the heart until it exploded. Pieces of bone from her ribcage stuck through her unlevelled chest. Her body frozen in an excruciating pose that appeared to be uncomfortable to be in. Kandice’s head rolled to the side with lifeless eyes forever staring into the unknown.

Chanta spat on Kandice’s deformed corpse and said, “Cunt.”

She made her way out of the room and carefully sneaked around the hallway’s long corridors.

A man in a black lab coat exited a room next to Chanta, spotted her, and then froze. He quickly snapped out of it and tried to grab her, but she punched him in the throat which dropped him to the floor gasping for air. Chanta then kicked his head into the steel frame of the adjacent room. The man lay on the steel floor in a puddle of his own blood.

Sweat glistened off her body while her eyes darted around for either an exit or somewhere to hide.

Two started to move sluggishly and saw the killed exoguards and Kandice's corpse staring back at her.

"Aren't we full of surprises?" Two smiled and hit a button on the wall that sent out a loud monotone alarm throughout the laboratory with flashing lights painting everything red.

Two staggered out from the room, turned the corner, and saw Chanta standing over another scientist's body.

Chanta examined the sound of flashing lights that alternated red and white in a slow sequence. Chanta turned around and saw Two eyeing her like a rabid dog closing in on its prey.

Two was grinning ear-to-ear and had dried blood under her nose.

"My turn," Two said and thrust her arms out and blasted a powerful stream of water that pinned Chanta against the wall.

Chanta's back was taking the most damage from the water jet stream that was still trying to compress her body into the wall. Chanta tried to push off the wall, but the stream was steadily growing stronger. She grunted fighting against the force and noticed a panel next to her. Chanta punched into the panel a couple times until it bent in the middle exposing a lip

on the top. She grew out her claws and ripped the panel off revealing the wires and fiber optic cables underneath. Chanta used all the strength she had and slid out from the stream to climb on the side of the wall. Her claws cut through the wires as she tugged them out and tossed them at the stream still connected to the wall.

An electric shock traveled up from the water stream and electrocuted Two.

Two's face contorted with pain while the surge of electricity moved up and down her body. Two shot Chanta into the air and across the corridor. She landed hard and slid across the floor a few feet.

Chanta watched the smoke rise from Two's body. She quickly made a break for it when she saw Two stirring.

Chanta ran down the long hallway as the sound of the alarm could still be heard. Her breathing was ragged as she reached an opened room where she saw a huge steel plated door labeled: 47B.

A key code panel rested on the wall next to the door. She looked over the digital key code and detected smudge marks on certain keys. Chanta punched in the keys with smudges, but the door didn't open. She heard Two heading down the hallway and in her general direction.

Chanta punched the same keys but in a different sequence and this time the door opened granting her access.

Chanta stepped in and the door closed behind her. She found herself in a darkened room with fog that was waist deep. Chanta felt uneasy realizing she may have made a mistake coming into the room.

She silently leaped up to the ceiling and looked around. She could sense something under the fog within the dark. A creature was breathing ragged and heavily, kind of a deep wheezing.

The door opened and Two stormed in not noticing Chanta above her.

“Where the hell are you you filth?!” Two barked.

The creature stirred in the fog instantly catching Two’s attention.

“Think you can hide from me?” Two raised her arms and shot a stream of water that hit the creature. “I am going to drown you, resuscitate you, and drown you again.”

Chanta watched in silence from the ceiling as the room filled with a deep guttural cackling.

“The hell?” Two muttered.

A hulking creature draped in shadows slowly rose, towering over Two. The creature must have been thirteen feet tall. A huge, clawed hand swiped the air striking Two across her body. Massive gaping gashes revealed themselves along Two’s abdomen and chest. Her throat was slashed and her shoulder severed leaving her arm hanging from her body. Two yelled with fear and pain while a vast wide mouth with many rows of long jagged fangs slammed down over her head. The massive jaws clamped shut and cut her head clean off with one bite.

Chanta could not believe what she was witnessing as the creature ripped into Two’s corpse with a savage rage. Never in her life had she seen something kill a Bastard so easily.

Chanta leapt down and slid out the door, sealed it leaving the creature behind her.

That must have been the creature she kept hearing roaring throughout the place, she thought to herself

She shuddered at the thought of having to face something like that.

Chanta faced the huge steel plated door trying to forget, as well as make sense of, what she had perceived.

“Found you,” a voice called out from behind her.

Chanta prepared herself for whatever she must take on. She quietly vowed that she would make it out of this hell for her child’s sake.

She turned towards her assailant, ready for the worst. Not willing to give up. No, she could not give up.

Chapter 50

Quanser struggled in the dark room with his thoughts. The window had been blocked off by a thick blanket to keep out the sunlight. The shattered bottle of whiskey he had disregarded much like his heart was still left on the floor across the room.

He could still see his sister's face etched in his mind. He carried the guilt of not being able to save her. Her laugh echoed throughout his thoughts as her name escaped his lips.

“Kala...” A few tears followed soon after.

His life had never been the same with that failure looming over his head. He couldn't maintain long healthy relationships with anyone. The fear always crept into the back of his mind, lurking, that he would fail them, too. Quanser could not figure out why the hell anyone would ever follow him.

What he didn't know was that he was a natural leader. Always putting others before his own needs. He had sacrificed so much for the fight against Haven so his own kind could survive. He would give his own life for his people and they knew this and loved him for it. They considered him someone worth fighting with. It was an honor to die with him, if it ever came down to that. There had been a few times, but he always had a plan. Ultimately, Quanser never knew how to give up and he became an inspiration for many to always keep pushing forward. What the people didn't know was that Quanser longed for death because it might silence the demons that plague his mind.

Quanser does not see this though. No, to him he was a shell of a man haunted by mistakes and failures. Anyone that he had lost, he had taken it personal and to his heart. He wished that he could save them, all of them. Deep down he knew that was not possible.

He could not help but be tormented by the horrific images of his sister Kala reaching out to him. Calling to him for help as Six's boot rested on her chest before crushing her skull with it. The image haunted Quanser every night. He vowed to get revenge on both the Bastards that wronged him and Kala. Now they were in the Hidden City. His mother had forgiven the Devil and the Devil was trying to save his brother, the Demon.

What about saving Kala? What about honoring her and making things right? Quanser thought to himself.

He could not help but to feel that Kala been forgotten about.

It isn't right! his mind screamed at him.

His mother's words swarmed into his ears. *Doing nothing we are just as guilty as the Leader...I am ashamed.*

Quanser gritted his teeth, "Damn it."

He stood up and leaned against the table. "I can never get any damn peace, can I?"

"Sir?" A voice behind him had broken Quanser out of his trance.

Quanser turned around to see Jack.

Jack and a few others were supposed to patrol the perimeter at night but considering that Six had made it through they obviously did not do that well of a job.

"Explain to me how a Bastard got past you and entered Hidden City?"

Jack shifted uneasily in his stance. "We were ambushed. I tried to radio it in, but the communicator wasn't working."

Quanser placed his index finger and thumb over the bridge of his nose. "Of course it's not working...another thing to fix. So, Six made it past you and your team, then what? Where are the others?"

"That's the thing sir," Jack chimed in. "The rest of the team is dead."

"Six killed them?" Quanser asked.

"No, it was exoguards...three of them."

"Exoguards? Where are they?"

"Six killed them," Jack answered.

Quanser shook his head with disbelief. "Six killed them? Wha- alright, alright. Let me get this straight. Three exoguards ambushed and killed the team, but then Six killed the three exoguards. His own men. Am I getting this right?"

Jack nodded. “Well, Six killed two of the exoguards. The third was killed by a Sporg.”

“A Sporg helped a Bastard kill an exoguard.”

“Yes,” Jack replied.

“Where the hell were you when this all went down?”

“I, uh,” Jack stuttered. “I was being questioned by the exoguard then Six killed him and threatened to have the Sporg kill my family if I didn’t tell him about Hidden City. I’m sorry.”

Quanser shook his head disappointed. “Have some balls next time Jack and take the torture. I didn’t see a Sporg with Six when he came in.”

“That’s because I was able to capture it sir.”

“Hmmm.” Quanser raised his eyebrow the said, “There might be hope for you yet son.”

Jack smiled at the possibility that he had redeemed himself.

“Take me to the Sporg,” Quanser ordered.

Jack hastily led Quanser, with his chest puffed out, towards the Sporg. They exited the rundown hut, entered the outside air with a cool breeze and the sun still hanging above. Jack and Quanser entered a windowless hut which resembled a supplies hut, which it was.

Upon opening the door Jack presented the Sporg whom was on his back entangled with rope. The Sporg was chewing through the rope when they came in and it was almost free. The Sporg stopped and looked at them quizzically tilting its head to the side as the rope dangled from his mouth. After a moment it wagged its tail a few times.

Jack and Quanser stood staring at the Sporg silently. Jack wanted to laugh, but held it in.

“I think I know this Sporg. It’s the same one that was with Thirteen and that woman, Chanta when they were in Crater City.” Quanser turned to Jack and said, “You said this Sporg helped Six?”

Jack nodded.

Quanser turned back to the Sporg. “Last time I saw this Sporg it was helping to protect Chanta against those other Bastards that were after them. He must have been tracking Six because he knew Six would do anything to find Thirteen and Thirteen would lead him to Chanta. Am I correct little Sporg?”

The Sporg nodded his head and clicked in agreement.

“Cut him loose,” Quanser ordered.

“But...it helped Six,” Jack stammered.

“He wasn’t helping Six, he was using him. Now cut him loose.” Quanser stared coldly into Jack’s eyes causing Jack to shrink with intimidation.

“Okay.” Jack surrendered and pulled out a pocketknife cutting the Sporg loose.

The Sporg got to his feet and shook off the remaining chewed strands of rope. He looked around and before he went outside, Quanser stopped him.

“Hold on little Sporg. I will take you to Thirteen. He is interrogating Six. Follow me.”

The Sporg followed Quanser back outside. Children ran past them giggling and playing. One child stopped to pet the Sporg whom wagged its tail with approval. The Sporg watched families pass them by enjoying the day and time together without any fear. The Sporg wanted to experience that himself with his family. He hoped it would be soon.

A few people were cleaning up the damage caused by Thirteen and Six, luckily for them it was nothing compared to Crater City.

The Sporg had a disturbing thought, *what if other Bastards come to this place? Six already managed to find it and so have the exoguards. What if Crater City's fate will be Hidden City's?*

The Sporg pushed the thoughts away. Right now, the important thing was to find Chanta and to do this he must see the red-eyed man.

A few people walked by armed with plasma assault rifles patrolling the area, making sure there were no more surprised visitors. They all eyed the Sporg as they went by.

Quanser not once bothered to look back to check to see if the Sporg was still following, he just knew he was. Call it intuition or whatever the case maybe, he just knew.

They approached another windowless hut, but Quanser stopped at the door.

"I don't know what to make out of all this," Quanser said as the Sporg stood silently listening. Quanser further elaborated, "I have spent most of my life fighting the Leader and her army of exoguards and Bastards, but nothing had ever come from it other than loss, suffering, and pain. The Leader always comes out on top. I started questioning myself whether to keep fighting or to finally just let go. I thought what's the use when it all comes out the same in the end.

"Then out of nowhere a Bastard that had tormented us, hunted us, fell in love with one of us. He then learned what it was like to be hunted, like one of us. I have never seen the Leader so hell bent on finding him and Chanta. I can see why.

He has come out on top no matter what she throws at him. My mother suggested that we fight with him. That with him, we have a chance against the Leader. I just don't know...I guess I am not still convinced, but I get this nagging feeling that the Leader is scared. I don't know. I don't even know why I'm bothering talking to you about this." Quanser glanced at the Sporg and had took a deep sigh and said, "Anyways let's get this going."

Quanser opened the door and they both stepped inside.

Thirteen and Six were nowhere to be seen. Chains were lay on the floor; a chair and table were flipped over. It appeared that there was a struggle of some sort and from the way it looked, Quanser thinks that Six might have gotten the upper hand on Thirteen.

The Sporg sniffed around then made a clicking sound in confusion.

Quanser irritated, rubbed the temples of his head. "Shit."

Chapter 51

Exoguards and droids marched along the inside and outside perimeter of Haven. Hover assault crafts and hover ships landed while others flew off with bright lights that filled up the night sky.

A spotlight surveyed the wastelands surrounding Haven. The colossal steel door sealed the entrance shut making its dominating presence known.

A hover ship appeared flying through the dark clouds then landed about fifty yards away from the steel door.

An exoguard had taken notice as the ship's cargo doors opened, and something that was illuminated inside exited. The exoguard shouted, "Halt! Do not come any closer!" This alerted the others.

An army of exoguards and droids swarmed with plasma assault rifles raised.

The spotlight swiveled on the magnetic stand, hovering in the air, and focused on a shadowy figure carrying something over its shoulders.

Six revealed himself from the shadows and dropped Thirteen's body to the ground.

The same exoguard called out again, "I said do not come any further Six! The Leader wants you dead!"

"She might change her mind once I present her with this! Call her! Let her know I have Thirteen's body!" Six hollered, chest puffed out with accomplishment.

The exoguard radio the Leader. "My Leader Six is at Haven's gate, he has Thirteen's body."

The Leader's voice could be heard over the communicators. "Let him through and bring him to me."

The exoguard signaled Six to proceed and waved his hand in the air for the colossal steel door to open.

The army of exoguards and droids lowered their plasma assault rifles.

Six picked up Thirteen and put his body back over his shoulders.

The steel door opened enough to allow access to Six while ten exoguards and four droids escorted him.

They crossed streets, intersections, and an assortment of buildings. People all stopped what they were doing to watch Six carrying Thirteen to the front of the Sky Tower.

Multitudes of exoguards and security droids all exited the tower, barricading Six and his prize from the public's view.

One exoguard stepped forward and pointed to the front entrance that slid open and said, "The Leader is waiting."

Six gave a nod and proceeded to enter and walked into the elevator. He sat Thirteen's body down and propped him against the mirrored reflection in a slump. The elevator doors closed and started its ascent.

Six stared forward then looked down at his brother, lifeless. "For what it is worth...I am sorry brother."

Six thought he would have been happy, but he felt worse. He could not shake the feeling that he had been the betrayer.

Maybe Thirteen was right. I had it all wrong, Six thought.

A gentle ping alerted Six that he had arrived. He reached down and picked his brother up with both arms, cradling Thirteen against his chest.

The door opened and he walked with Thirteen through the threshold into the hallway to the only room that laid before him.

Two exoguards stood by the front of the Leader's door, waiting upon Six's arrival.

Six approached them and the exoguards stood aside allowing passage.

The door opened. Six walked through and saw the Leader at the piano playing a tune that sounded much like Moonlight Sonata, but Six wasn't quite sure. It was darker and slower in tone.

She knew he was there but continued to play. Her fingers danced across the keys like spider legs. Creating notes of terrifying elegance until she found the spot in the song that she wanted to end her playing on. The last note she played resonated within the air; a lonely tear streamed down her face.

Her hands rested above the keys with her eyes closed while the note finally faded into the unknown, where all things eventually do. She turned her head acknowledging Six as he sat Thirteen's body down on the floor.

"I give you Thirteen my Leader, as promised," Six announced triumphantly.

"So it seems," The Leader stated and stood up to face Six. She stared down at Thirteen who lay on the ground before her feet. "Looks like you finally got what you wanted. Congratulations, Six. How does it feel to do something no one else has been able to do, to kill the Devil?"

Six stood for a moment searching for the feeling but utterly replied, "Empty."

The Leader smiled and replied, "How...disappointing it must be for you. To defy all odds, the anguish you had been put through, the burning hatred, failure after failure all to experience, emptiness. Sad really."

The Leader lifted her grey lifeless eyes to meet Six's soulless black eyes.

"I have done as promised my Leader. I ask you for forgiveness and to regain my status as one of your most trusted Bastards."

The Leader pondered on the thought as she swiftly moved closer to Six by stepping over Thirteen's body that had been lain between them. She lifted her hand up to caress Six's face with tenderness and love.

Six closed his eyes as he felt the cold of her touch.

"I would love nothing more my dear sweet Six, but you did fail me, multiple times before finally succeeding in your

mission. You know how I feel about failure, about how I feel of imperfection.”

Six opened his eyes. “But I still succeeded in bringing you Thirteen’s body.”

The Leader’s hand gripped tightly around Six’s throat while she hoisted him into the air. “I am sorry,” she said, “but I cannot allow imperfections in Haven. I do hope you understand.”

Six gasped for breath and tried to break her hold but could not as the Leader squeezed tighter. He was powerless against her strength.

Suddenly, The Leader’s legs were kicked out from under her, and she collapsed to the ground dropping Six.

Surprise sprawled over her face as she saw Thirteen staring at her with his red eyes. Thirteen sent a flaming fist smashing into her face. She was rocked back as her skin singed.

Thirteen got to his feet and helped Six up. “I told you she would try to kill you,” he said.

Six rubbed his neck. “Yeah, yeah, but I had to be sure.”

The Leader glared wide eyed and enraged. “What the hell is this?!”

“A rebellion. One that should have happened long ago,” Thirteen answered.

“You dare defy me?! You come into my perfect empire with your imperfections!” The Leader shouted with fury as she rose to her feet.

The door flew open and two exoguards rushed to the Leader’s aid. Thirteen caused them to self-combust, and they dropped to the ground burning to ash.

Six disappeared into a mist of smoke and reappeared behind the Leader. He punched her at the back of her head, and she stumbled forward while Thirteen punched her in the face causing her to fall backwards.

Before the Leader fell to the ground completely, she spun around with grace to face Six. She was ready to strike when a fireball hit her in the back.

She winced at the pain and Six disappeared once again. She quickly spun around with unnatural style and dodged Six's fist, but she could not dodge Thirteen's flaming fist that nailed her between the eyes. She reeled back and Six swept her legs out from under her. She hit the ground hard and received a punch from both Thirteen and Six that sent her skidding across the floor.

The Leader leaped back on to her feet and in a blur, she ended up behind Thirteen and Six. They both turned around to catch a foot in their face that knocked them both down.

In a blink of an eye, she ran over to where they lay. Standing over Thirteen, she lifted him by the throat and tossed him over the piano. She turned to get Six, but he was already on his feet waiting for her.

Six shot himself forward as a stream of smoke collided into her chest which sent her flying across the room hitting the wall.

The Leader stood back up as broken glass fell from her back.

Six multiplied himself using smoke clones that all looked the same as the original. One by one, the smoke clones rushed the Leader, and she endured a flurry of punches from multiple fists and multiple kicks from all directions. She

punched back at a few smoke clones, and they dissipated back into smoke.

The Leader used her speed and grabbed the throat of whom she believed to be the real Six, the only one that wasn't attacking her. When she squeezed Six's throat, all the other smoke clones disappeared. Once again, she lifted him high above her. Six tried to punch and kick, but it wasn't working. The Leader's eyes glowed a solid grey like ash as she spat blood to the floor.

Thirteen got to his feet and Six yelled at him, "Get out of here! Go save Chanta!"

The skin around Six's neck turned grey and peeled away crumbling to ashes.

"Go save her!" Six choked as he started turning grey. "I loved you," He whispered to the Leader.

She stopped for a moment, confused, but then continued.

"I love you brother," Six said.

Thirteen with tears swelling in his fire red eyes screamed, "No!" He stretched his arm out.

Six's body turned completely grey and the Leader released her grip as the remaining ashes of Six fell to the floor, crumbling to powder and dust.

"Stupid Bastard," The Leader hissed.

Thirteen's entire body immersed in flames, the Leader tried to shield her eyes from it as she backed towards the glass window overlooking Haven and the wastelands.

Thirteen's eyes glowed with intensity and rage as he stretched his arms out propelling a massive flamethrower blast.

The Leader was launched out of the window falling amongst the broken glass that twirled around her in midair.

Thirteen collapsed to his knees next to his brother's ashes. His hand glided over the remains. He shifted his hand through the ashes., taking a handful and lifting it in the air. H then let it all fall and get blown away into the wind. Thirteen hung his head with grief while he recalled the first time he met Six as children.

A small child with black eyes placed a hand over Thirteen's chest and said, "Brother?"

Thirteen nodded his head and placed his hand on the chest of a ghost no longer there and replied, "Brother."

He watched the ashes and dust get blown to the shattered window and carried off with the wind.

Thirteen stood up and left the room and went back into the elevator. He knew there was only one place Chanta would be if she was still alive. Thirteen waved his hand towards the part of the glass that made it light up.

'Laboratory.'

The doors closed and he descended to the basement. A place where he was created, turned into the Devil that he became, and now he was going to find his love.

The doors opened after a moment to a gentle ping. Red and white lights flooded everything they touched. An alarm filled the air as Thirteen dashed into the halls and glanced into all the different rooms that may hold whom he was seeking. But they were empty. That was until he came to a room where two exoguards lay dead on the floor along with a raven black haired woman in a black lab coat with green embroidery that spelled:

'Kandice.' Her chest revealed an open hole from something that exploded outward.

"Damn," Thirteen muttered.

He kept going, and after another moment he had saw someone covered with blood facing a steel door that read: 47B.

He knew it was her.

"Found you," he called out to her.

Slowly Chanta turned around to see Thirteen. She did not know what to do. A tear left her cheek as she spoke his name.

"Thirteen."

She ran and jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around him. They embraced and kissed. They touched each other's faces and savored one another.

"I didn't know if you were still alive," she whimpered. "I'm so happy to see you."

Thirteen kissed her some more. "I am too, but we need to get out of here."

Chanta nodded her head and climbed off Thirteen.

They heard a ping and the sounds of exoguards responding to the alarms entering the hallways.

"Come on, we have to leave," Thirteen said as he grabbed her hand and went to go in to 47B to hide, but Chanta dragged him away.

"No! Not in there!" Chanta said.

"Why not?" Thirteen asked.

"Just trust me." Chanta started running off still holding on to Thirteen's hand.

Thirteen did not resist and went with her. They entered another room closing the door behind them.

“We will wait for them to pass by, and we will head for the elevator,” Thirteen instructed.

Chanta agreed and looked around the room they were in. She noticed a visor covering a whole section of a wall. “What is that?” she asked.

“I do not know,” Thirteen responded.

They both approached the visor and Thirteen touched the surface allowing the visor to disappear so they could see what was on the other side.

A bald man with a muscular physique and grey skin appeared before them, staring at Thirteen and Chanta with different colors swirling around his eyes.

Thirteen stared intensely. He had the feeling that he should know this being, that they were somehow connected.

“Who are you?” Thirteen asked.

“I am you,” the being spoke without using his mouth, but it filled Thirteen's and Chanta's minds. “I am all the Bastards. I am Alpha Zero.”

“Alpha Zero? I heard scientists talk about you, but I thought you were just a story,” Thirteen replied.

“I am most real, I assure you, my son.”

Thirteen looked upon the being with wonderment. “So, we were created from you. In a way you are our father.”

Alpha Zero nodded. “I can sense great power in you, but greater power within her.” He pointed at Chanta.

Thirteen looked at Chanta and said, “What does he mean by that?”

Chanta touched Thirteen's face and replied, “I'm pregnant.”

Thirteen became gripped with confusion. “What?”

“I’m pregnant,” Chanta smiled.

Thirteen could not help but to smile as well. “I am going to be a father?”

“Yes,” Chanta said.

They embraced and hugged each other, overwhelmed with joy.

Alpha Zero watched them celebrate and smiled. “Congratulations to the both of you. Never had there ever been a union between a Bastard and a flaw.” He pointed to Chanta and said, “Protect the child at all costs. He is the bridge between us and the future to saving this world. I have foreseen it.”

A door opened behind them, and two individuals walked in behind them. Bastard One and Five made themselves known as One used his telekinesis to pin both Chanta and Thirteen to the glass barrier.

“Glorious! Simply glorious! A reunion that trumps all others. I finally get to experience a Bastard’s soul if we do have one. You on the other hand,” Five pointed to Chanta, “have to be taken alive unfortunately, but we will have our moment believe me.”

Thirteen and Chanta struggled against One’s mind powers.

“Yes, fight it! Keep struggling for we do enjoy it!” Five exclaimed.

“Stop this.” A voice echoed throughout all their minds.

One and Five peered at Alpha Zero.

One pressed Thirteen and Chanta on the glass some more out of spite of being told what to do.

“What do we have here?” Five vocalized as he observed the grey figure. “I can feel a connection to this individual. Who are you?”

Alpha Zero put a protective barrier over Thirteen and Chanta so they could not be harmed by One or Five.

One tried to flatten Thirteen and Chanta, but nothing happened.

He then tried to concentrate harder, still nothing. One could not believe it. He had never been overpowered before. Five could only stare dumbfounded.

“This was never your purpose. My sister has warped your minds,” Alpha Zero projected into their minds. Alpha Zero put his hand against the glass and the whole wall shattered and the pieces floated frozen in midair. Alpha Zero walked calmly through as all the floating pieces reassembled themselves back into a solid wall like nothing had even happened. “My children, stop this madness and allow them through,” Alpha Zero chimed into their thoughts.

Five rushed towards Alpha Zero and grabbed him by the wrist trying to snatch Alpha Zero's life force, but again, nothing happened.

Instead, Alpha Zero glared at Five's as his arm up to the elbow rotted and disintegrated away.

Five screamed clutching his severed arm, and ran out of the room.

One stood by and watched.

“I am highly disappointed in all of you. Only Thirteen was able to question his purpose and actually find love with your so called flaw. In truth, they are more human than anything

in this forsaken Haven. I am sorry for this,” Alpha Zero projected into One's mind.

One sneered and went to charge at Alpha Zero, but was stopped in mid stride and exploded into dust.

Thirteen and Chanta were surprised at the sudden turn of events.

Five ran down the corridor and stumbled in front of the steel door labeled 47B. He pounded on the digital key code panel to no avail. So, he then decided to dissolve the door with his touch. The door crumbled away, and a massive creature lurked in front of Five.

“Oh my...it is death incarnate. You are so beautiful,” Five panted. The creature's huge jagged fanged mouth chomped down over Five's head and bit it off. The creature's monster sized clawed hand swiped at Five's headless body which sent it smacking into the wall. Swallowing the head, the creature roared which caused the walls of the laboratory to shake. It caught the scent of more potential victims and sprinted on all fours down the corridor.

Alpha Zero sensed the creature was coming. “You two need to leave now, the Apex is coming.”

“What is that?” Thirteen asked.

“Something terrible,” Alpha Zero concluded.

“Come with us,” Chanta urged.

“No, that is not my purpose. Now go,” Alpha Zero spoke into their minds, pleading.

Thirteen and Chanta dashed to the doorway as something crashed through the ceiling.

“Go now! Protect the child! He is our future!” Alpha Zero ordered.

Thirteen and Chanta ran off, and Alpha Zero readied himself for what was to come. A hulking creature with black charred skin and a heavy muscular body with long arms and medium sized hind legs. Its head touched the ceiling as it grinned with long jagged fangs and no eyes. It looked like a Decayed, but much larger and more powerful.

“Alpha,” the creature said in a heavy deep guttural growl then chattered its fangs and drooled.

“Apex,” Alpha Zero projected into the Apex's mind. “I was wondering when we would meet.”

“Alpha dies...Apex hungry,” The Apex growled.

“Then let us begin,” Alpha Zero spoke into the Apex's mind.

The Apex swiped its huge, clawed hand at Alpha Zero. Alpha Zero used a mind barrier that barely withstood the powerful swipe. The barrier shattered on the second swipe, and he used his telekinesis to throw the Apex across the room. The Apex hit the wall but sprang back at Alpha Zero and sliced across his chest.

Alpha Zero backed away with five deep claw mark's bleeding from his chest and abdomen. Alpha Zero winced in pain and the Apex extended a long spiny tongue to lick the blood from his claws.

It hacked out a few cackles and prowled on all four to stalk Alpha Zero.

Alpha Zero used speed to run around the Apex in a blur, landing punches and kicks all over the creature.

The Apex hissed and sent out a powerful charge of lightning that shocked Alpha Zero.

Once Alpha Zero recovered they both circled one another like two predators fighting for survival.

Alpha Zero used his mind to send a powerful push of force, but the Apex did the same and it became a battle of the minds. The force of the push on both ends started destroying the room around them. The walls, ceilings, and floors began to quake and tremble at such power. Neither one backing down, the entire ceiling caved in on top of them, burying them both under a ton of rubble.

Thirteen and Chanta made it on to the elevator and down to the ground floor when they felt a strong tremor. They dashed out of the building and hid in the shadows of the night.

“Where can we go? They will check my place,” Thirteen whispered as exoguards drove by in an armored assault vehicle.

“I know a place,” Chanta whispered back.

She led Thirteen down the shadowed areas careful not to be noticed.

On the street below the Sky Tower, scattered amongst the broken shards of glass, the Leader's body laid still as a few security droids rushed over. A bone snapped into place then another and another.

The cuts and gashes on the Leader's body healed and she sat up with glowing grey eyes.

A security droid helped her up as her foot popped into place.

She snatched a holotab from the other droid and accessed the Apex's mainframe.

A computerized voice spoke out, "Please vocalize the orders requested."

The Leader straightened herself and screamed into the holotab.

"Kill the Bastard!"

The debris and dust settled in the destroyed laboratory room. Steel and concrete were scattered about the area along with bent and broken rebar rods. Something stirred around underneath the rubble. One of the piles shook and the Apex busted forth roaring with defiance, then chattered its fangs.

The Apex clawed its way out and spoke in a gravelly deep voice,

"Kill the Bastard..."

Chapter 52

A door opened to an empty room with old furniture that had not been used for a long time. No lights were on and not a person about in any of the adjoining rooms. There was no dust due to the ventilation system pumping in clean air and pumping the stale air with dust and debris out. It was an air purifier of some sort. Every structure in Haven had them.

Thirteen and Chanta walked through the front entrance and quickly locked the door behind them.

“Where are we?” Thirteen asked.

“This use to be Scott's home. Still is I suppose,” Chanta answered.

She glanced around and noticed a few things were missing. She knew after Scott's death the exoguards and soldiers must have ransacked the place for weapons, clues, something to explain why he did what he had done.

The holographic picture frames were knocked off the walls in the hallway. Many of them broken, others were still glitching images of Scott and his family for a few seconds, then off, repeating the same pattern.

Chanta reached down and picked the glitching holographic picture up and placed it back on the wall where it belonged.

Scott, his wife, and daughter smiled back at her as Scott embraced them both, hugging and kissing them. The images glitched out and replayed back over.

Chanta smiled at the images and said, "I'm home dad."

"You loved him a lot, didn't you?" Thirteen spoke delicately.

"He raised me, took me in, and showed me a future worth having."

Thirteen stared at all the other broken holographic picture frames. The sound of broken glass crunched under his boots.

"You know," Thirteen said, "The Leader tried to cover up the real reason why he sacrificed himself. She did not want anyone to find out that he loved a flaw and raised her in Haven, but the people still found out about it. It leaked somehow; she could never figure out how. She was furious. His sacrifice, his death, sparked a growing revolution of human sympathizers who began to question the Leader by abandoning Haven to help the flaw fight. She controlled the media so that was never mentioned other than them being traitors and spies." Thirteen looked at Chanta and said, "He became the real hero."

Chanta could not help but to smile and treasure that fact.

“Come on.” She grabbed his hand and took him to Scott's room.

“What are we doing?”

Chanta searched the bedrooms and felt along the walls. “I'm trying to see if they were able to find dad's hidden weapon supply.”

Her fingers traced lightly over a hidden scanner that unlocked a secret compartment with Scott's fingerprints or hers.

The panel of the wall slid up and steel shelves rolled out, equipped with multitudes of plasma assault rifles, sniper rifles, handheld plasma guns, plasma grenades, a plasma grenade launcher, a few combat knives, and swords, extra charge packs lined the racks as well as different types of scopes.

“Looks like they didn't find it,” Chanta said, relieved that they were not defenseless.

“Damn, no shit,” Thirteen remarked. “I have a feeling I would have really liked the guy.”

“He would have liked you. Take what you need,” Chanta mentioned while she grabbed a plasma assault rifle and a few plasma grenades.

Thirteen grabbed the same items and spotted a black bladed Katana that called to him. The center of the blade glowed green from the hilt all the way to the tip. He seized the Katana and gave it a few quick swipes through the air satisfied with the weight and balance.

“Beautiful.”

Chanta approved as she watched him with the sword, glowing green streaks twirled in a blur.

“What do we do now?” She asked sitting on the bed.

Thirteen stood silently with the Katana in hand then sat it down while his fingers nimbly touched his wrist communicator. He opened a projection of a three-dimensional map that hovered above his wrist. He zoomed in on the location of the Hidden City, gaining access to all frequencies there.

“Quanser are you there?” Thirteen called through the coms. “Quanser are you there?” he tried again.

“Who is this?” a voice shot back.

“Quanser it’s Thirteen. I found Chanta.”

“How did you know our radio frequency?”

“Never mind that, Quanser. We are in Haven hiding out. I need an evacuation for Chanta.”

She shot Thirteen an irritated look. “What are you doing?” she demanded to know.

“I cannot have you here when I take down the Sky Tower,” Thirteen replied.

“An evacuation...from Haven? Ha!” Quanser laughed.

Chanta ignored him. “I’m not going anywhere. We are bringing it down together.”

“It is not safe for you or for our child. You have to leave here,” Thirteen tried to reason.

“Child? What child?” Quanser interrupted.

Again, they ignored him as Chanta refused to listen. “I’m not safe anywhere but by your side. We have gone this far together, and we are going to see it to the end, together, as a family.”

Thirteen stood silently, contemplating. He knew it was dangerous either way, but not with help... “Scratch the evacuation Quanser...how about an invasion instead?”

“The hell you talking about?” Quanser demanded. “We won’t make it through the gate.”

“You can with us on the inside. We can get into the Sky Tower. All the self-overriding controls for everything in Haven are in the Sky Tower. We can open the gate, shut it down, and disable all hovercrafts, vehicles, and heavy guns. We can even shut the droids down. Equal the playing field a bit,” Thirteen stated.

“You can do all of that?” Quanser asked.

“Yes. How quickly can your army be here?” Thirteen inquired.

“In about three hours. Have the gate open and everything shut down before we get there,” Quanser ordered.

“It will be open,” Thirteen assured him.

Thirteen and Chanta heard clicking on the coms.

“Alright already, I’ll tell them you damn pest!” Quanser shouted then spoke back through the radio. “Your little Sporg is here, alive. He had been tracking you. I guess he will be there too.”

“Determined little guy,” Thirteen smirked.

“See you in about three hours. This better work or else not even my mother can save your ass.” Quanser ended the call.

“You should get some rest for an hour before we break into the Sky Tower,” Thirteen suggested.

“Lay down with me until we do,” Chanta asked.

She put her arm out and Thirteen accepted it. He laid down next to her and held her.

Chanta yawned. “What should we name our child? Alpha Zero spoiled it by saying it’s a boy.”

“A son, I cannot believe it,” Thirteen grinned.

“He is going to be a new light in this world. Alpha mentioned he is our future.”

Thirteen kissed her neck. “Then how about we name him...Lux Nova? It means new light.”

Chanta smiled and said, “I love it.” She placed her hand over Thirteen’s and put them on her stomach over their child, Lux Nova.

Thirteen hoped to be able to do this again once Haven was destroyed, but there was no way of telling. Thirteen wondered about what the outcome may be. He sensed that Chanta quickly fell asleep. He stayed a few moments longer savoring the moment, then he quietly crept out of the bed. Thirteen silently snuck out of the room and went into the bathroom.

He looked in the mirror and saw his red glowing eyes staring back at him. He turned away from his image and sat on the toilet.

Lifting his arm, he activated his computer and reopened the audio log then continued where he had left off.

“I awakened to a crack of thunder with a deafening roar. I observed Chanta and saw she was still asleep with the Sporg nestled next to her. Thirteen glanced around and it was still dark. I got up and stretched when he heard cackling close by. It sounded as if it came from inside the building. I decided to check to make sure, last thing we needed was one of the Decayed getting in...”

Thirteen told their story up until he could and was assured that Chanta could fill in the rest, so he decided to make another audio log. One that was meant for Chanta and their

child's ears only. After thirty minutes he ended the new audio log.

Thirteen thought about what his son Lux Nova would look like? What kind of powers would he possess? What did Alpha Zero mean by 'he is our future?' What was in store for Lux Nova?

He was relieved to have a new purpose now and hearing it from Alpha Zero made Thirteen certain. He has a family now. A place in the world. No longer alone and he will fight to the end to protect them.

Chanta tossed within the bed unaware that Thirteen was not in the room, but something did creep about in the shadows. Smelling the air as it entered the bedroom.

The Apex slowly made its way towards the bed and lurked over Chanta while she slept. The Apex climbed quietly on the bed over Chanta. The Apex looked down at Chanta as drool seeped down slowly pooling next to her.

Chanta stirred. She opened her eyes and saw a large crooked mouth revealing rows and rows of razor long fangs and a long slimy tongue licking the side of her face, tasting her.

"Hungry..." The Apex growled.

The creature's head tilted with confusion when an electric charging sound made itself present.

Chanta held a plasma assault rifle towards the Apex's chest and said, "Eat this."

Chanta unloaded on the Apex, blasting him off and clear across the room.

The creature roared with fury as Chanta rolled out of bed narrowly dodging a huge clawed hand slicing through the

mattress and digging deeply across the floor creating scratch marks. The Apex flung the bed to the side of the room.

As she bolted down the hallway, Chanta fired charge after charge at the creature, with no effect. She almost made it to the living room when she froze in mid-stride, not able to move a muscle. She struggled as much as she could, but to no avail.

The Apex prowled up behind Chanta. She could hear its ragged breathing and cackling.

The creature went to take a bite out of Chanta, but a fireball slammed into the back of the creature's head. The Apex shook it off as its flesh sizzled.

"Run, Chanta!" Thirteen yelled.

The hold on Chanta diminished as she staggered forward picking up speed again.

The Apex turned to face his attacker. "Thirteen..." it growled.

"The hell are you?" Thirteen responded.

"Apex..." The creature roared and sprinted after Thirteen down the hallway.

Thirteen darted into the bathroom and shut the door. The door exploded from an invisible force, but the pieces floated in the air as if there was no gravity and stayed there.

The Apex jumped through the opening biting wildly at the air, barely missing Thirteen. The creature levitated Thirteen with its mind and propelled him through the wall and into the next room. The creature pursued after him relentlessly sending Thirteen through another wall once again with its mind.

Thirteen teetered to his feet gripping the crumbled edges of the wall.

The Apex cackled with the enjoyment of playing with its prey. A sudden blast smacked into the side of the creature, and it howled with pain.

Chanta stood in the doorframe with the smoldering barrel of the plasma grenade launcher. She fired again, but the Apex managed to dodge the blast and hissed back at her.

It crawled the walls to the ceiling in an instant and swiped at her.

Chanta tumbled out of the way and dashed down the hallway huffing with the plasma grenade launcher in hand.

Digging its claws through concrete and steel ceiling with ease, the creature quickly gained on her. The Apex spat acid her way, luckily for Chanta she cut the corner to the living room and the acid hit a sofa, dissolving it away through the floor.

The Apex turned the corner and saw Chanta waiting for it with the grenade launcher raised and a sly grin across her face. It tried to leap out of the way, but the blast caught its hind legs, spinning the creature through a wall leading to the streets outside.

Chanta's boot stepped over a few loose stones. She felt the fresh night air brush against her skin while she advanced forward, not worrying about being spotted anymore.

"Let them come," she muttered.

She was done with the shit. One way or another, it all ends tonight regardless.

The grenade launcher was aimed at a pile of rubble leading to dark shadows. Her eyes darted around for any sign of the Apex.

It was nowhere to be seen.

A hover craft had flew high above and cast a spotlight down on Chanta.

“Freeze or we will open fire!” a voice called out.

Chanta readjusted her aim a little higher and fired hitting the hover craft. Alarms sounded within the pilot’s cabin, and black smoke plumed out of the back end.

“Shit! Where the hell did it get a grenade launcher?!” the pilot hollered as he was losing control.

The hover craft crashed into the street and exploded.

Another spotlight shined down upon Chanta, only this time it opened fire with the plasma cannons.

Chanta rolled out of the line of fire and sprinted behind a thick tree.

The plasma cannons quickly cut the tree down with a few blasts.

Chanta waited for the onslaught to continue but the Apex leaped from the shadows and onto the hover craft.

“She’s mine!” it snarled hugging the glass windshield.

The hover craft bobbed and dipped because of the weight of The Apex, throwing the vehicle’s balance off.

“What the fuck is that?!” the pilot screamed.

The Apex slammed its head through the thick glass and clamped its jagged fangs around the pilot’s neck, shoulder, and part of the chair then sank its fangs all the way through, ripping out most of the pilot and the chair he sat in. The Apex jumped down on to the lawn and the hover craft smashed into a house, exploding on impact.

Thirteen stumbled outside and witnessed the chaotic scene. He spotted Chanta and quickly went to her side.

People within the neighborhood exited their homes to see what was going on.

Exoguards and droids armed with plasma assault rifles ran to the scene. Two armored hover vehicles zoomed past the exoguards and slowed to a stop. They aimed their huge plasma cannons that rested upon the roof of the vehicle towards the Apex.

“Open fire!” an exoguard yelled with authority.

Every plasma weapon lit up the darkened street except for a house on that was on fire and the burning wreckage of the hover craft in the street.

Thirteen and Chanta dived behind some large chunks of concrete with plasma charges, large and small, raining down upon them.

The Apex withstood the plasma assault rifles with ease but avoided the plasma cannons. The plasma cannons fired repeatedly at the Apex but missed.

All the missed shots hit the sides of houses blowing out chunks of the walls and hitting parked hover vehicles causing them to explode, and hitting a few civilians, killing them on impact. Other people scattered for their lives. The street was an utter warzone.

The Apex jumped on to one of the assault hover vehicles. The bottom of the vehicle bottomed out and scraped the metal plate against the road while it spun out of control. The Apex sliced its claws through the driver and passenger. The gunner tried to adjust his sights, but the Apex ducked and dodged before it finally latched on to the barrel. The gunner held his fingers on the trigger unloading the cannon wildly out

of panic. The Apex cackled madly, feeding off the fear and steered the barrel at the other assault hover vehicle.

“What are you doing?! Stop firing you idiot!” the other gunner screamed at his fellow comrade that could not hear him over his own screaming. The gunner kept firing not realizing the carnage he was doing to the area around him. The plasma burst hit houses, cut down trees, and exploded vehicles while the Apex directed the firing cannon towards the other assault hover vehicles that arrived for additional back up. The assault hover vehicles exploded and exoguards ran out of the burning wreckage on fire, before they collapsed on the street.

The gunner released the trigger once he became aware what he was doing only to have the top part of his body bitten off by the Apex. The creature crunched on his bones then swallowed the severed exoguard. The Apex lifted its head in a triumphant roar while the other exoguards and droids tried shooting the creature. However, the plasma assault rifles just could not penetrate the Apex’s hide.

Thirteen tossed a plasma grenade at a group of exoguards killing them with the blast.

Chanta fired the plasma grenade launcher at a separate group of exoguards killing them as well.

A few droids proceeded towards Thirteen and Chanta, but Thirteen had the droids combust and self-explode. The rest of the exoguards were focused on the real threat, the Apex. They kept firing at the creature, and the creature continued to toy around with them.

The Apex snipped at the air and cackled at the scared exoguards, stalking relentlessly. The Apex darted forward slashing at a couple exoguards cutting them in half.

“Take the mother fucker down!” an exoguard hollered over the continuous plasma fire.

“Hungry...,” the creature guttered, its fangs chattering together.

The Apex pounced into the center of the exoguards, biting and slashing with a fury. Flesh and blood splattered all over the street along with a severed rolling head or two and a few limbs carelessly tossed about. The creature chewed on the last exoguard, biting and eating the armor, flesh, and bone. The Apex stood on its hind legs, arms stretched wide, head tilted back and roared a loud, deep, guttural sound to the heavens damning them above.

With the creature’s mind further learning and expanding with its powers, it focused its attention on the houses. One by one, every house on the block blown up and burned. A building down the way exploded from top to bottom in a fiery display before crumbling down. Black smoke blocked out the night stars, and the Apex relished within the chaos.

“The power...,” The Apex barked.

Thirteen turned to Chanta behind the broken concrete barrier and said, “This is not good. It is discovering its true power and potential. That thing can destroy this whole place with a thought.”

“Maybe it should. Save us the trouble,” Chanta remarked.

“We cannot let the Apex reach that level of power. If it does, we might not be able to stop it. Besides we are going to be Haven’s downfall, not that thing.”

“Then let’s kill the son of a bitch,” Chanta said.

Thirteen smiled at her. “You are so hot right now.”

Chanta grinned.

Thirteen kissed her. Their lips pressed together enjoying the taste of one another. Reluctantly Thirteen pulled away, jumped over the rubble and tossed a plasma grenade.

The grenade hit the side of the Apex's rear leg and exploded revealing open flesh that singed.

Thirteen made the Apex self-combust into flames thinking it would do the trick, but the Apex enjoyed the comfort of the fire and shook off the flames. Thirteen stretched his arms forward sending a powerful stream of fire at the creature. Unfortunately, the fire stream simply washed over an invisible barrier the Apex had put up around it.

"Come on," Thirteen sighed.

The Apex blew frost from its mouth. Thirteen threw his forearms up to block it and the frost breath froze his arms into solid ice.

Thirteen ignited his fists on fire and melted the ice from his arms. He reached up and grabbed the hilt from behind his shoulder and brandished the black bladed Katana with glowing green from the hilt to the tip of the blade. The green glow heated the blade, making it easier to slice through anything, and hopefully the Apex's skin Thirteen thought.

The Apex sprang forward; claws stretched out and jagged mouth opened wide.

Thirteen leaped into the air over the Apex and thrust the blade into the creatures back slicing downwards.

The creature howled and to Thirteen's surprise the blade penetrated the hide just fine.

Twirling the blade in hand, Thirteen took a stance and waited for the creature's next move.

Two more hover crafts flew overhead, shooting down at Thirteen and the Apex.

The Apex used its mind and sent the two hover crafts smashing into each other. The flaming debris rained down upon them. Thirteen took the opportunity to advance on the Apex. The Apex turned to bite at Thirteen, but missed as Thirteen slid across the ground, thrusting the blade into the creature's chest and slicing down the abdomen.

Thirteen got to his feet and received a kick from the Apex's hind leg that sent him skidding across the side walk. He regained his composure and rolled out of the way when the Apex slammed its claws into the concrete breaking it to chunks.

“Die...,” The Apex growled.

Thirteen returned the answer with a defiant swing of the blade across the Apex's arm. The creature gushed blood and Thirteen jumped up slamming the blade into the skull of the Apex.

The Apex staggered left to right. Thirteen held on for the ride by the handle of the Katana. The creature unexpectedly grabbed Thirteen and threw him across the street and into the side of a parked hover vehicle, denting the side door. The creature still had the Katana through its skull and seemed to be disoriented as it swatted blindly at nothing in the air for a moment, then noticed Thirteen straight ahead. The Apex lurched forward and gradually picked up speed.

“Thirteen!” Chanta yelled catching her love's attention.

Chanta tossed the grenade launcher into the air, and it hit the ground sliding the last few remaining feet to Thirteen.

The Apex sprang into the air and Thirteen reached out to grab the plasma grenade launcher and hoisted it in to the air towards the opened jagged mouth of the Apex.

Thirteen fired two shots, each of which went into the Apex's mouth blowing half of its head off. The Apex's limp body skidded across the street and rested at Thirteen's feet. Smoke exited the left side of its blown open skull and Thirteen stood up then yanked the Katana out of the Apex's head, what was left of it. Thirteen exhaled a deep breath of relief.

The Apex was finally dead.

Chanta ran to the side of Thirteen and they embraced one another. They kissed each other passionately and Thirteen put his hand down on her stomach.

"You two alright?"

Chanta nodded, "We're both fine."

"Come on," Thirteen urged. "We have about an hour to open the gate and shut everything down."

Amidst the chaos and burning infernos of the devastation, Thirteen and Chanta slipped into the shadows making their way to the Sky Tower.

The real war was about to begin.

Chapter 53

Thirteen and Chanta reached the Sky Tower and stayed in the shadows, contemplating their next move.

“Here, take this,” Thirteen said as he handed Chanta his computer that he slipped off his forearm.

“What do I do with this?” she asked, as watching Thirteen place it on her forearm and it instantly fitted itself on to her. He programmed it for easy access to the navigation system.

“You need to go to the laboratory and find the mainframe control room. This will help you find it.” Thirteen slid his finger across a sensor and a small holographic map projected at eye level above her forearm. “Once you find the room put this device next to the main computer and slide you finger here.” Thirteen pointed to a sensor. “It will automatically sync with the computer downloading the system to the one on

your arm and you will have complete access to all the controls all over Haven. Just go into complete power shutdown and everything in Haven will shut down that is electronic: the droids, the hover crafts, the torrents, most importantly it will open the gate.”

“What are you going to do?” Chanta inquired.

“I am going to distract them. Draw the exoguards attention and then...,” Thirteen removed a small rectangular device and peeled off another piece that was thin as paper like a sticker. “This is a powerful explosive that can level this whole damn building, and this is the detonator for it. I am going to place it on the floating tower above and bring it all down. I will not detonate it until you radio me letting me know you are safe and out of Sky Tower.”

“How will you hear me?” Chanta asked.

“Speak into this by pushing this button.” Thirteen showed her. “I will be able to hear you through my earpiece.” He held a small pill looking device up and placed it into his ear. “Now let’s finally end this.”

Chanta grabbed Thirteen and pulled him close for a long kiss that neither one wanted to pull away from.

“Love you,” Chanta expressed running her fingers over his lips.

“I love you.”

They stared into each other’s glowing eyes, then Thirteen pulled away and walked to the front entrance. He aimed the plasma grenade launcher and opened fire. The front entrance exploded becoming a huge hole in the wall. A crowd of people screamed and ducked for cover.

Thirteen stepped through and glanced at them all with fiery red eyes. Once they had glared at him with disgust and now, they cowered in fear.

Neither feeling felt great.

“Get out now while you can!” Thirteen shouted.

The crowd of screaming, well-dressed people scurried out the hole that once was the front door.

Thirteen smashed a glass panel on the side of the wall with his elbow that caused a fire alarm to erupt while the people started to flee from the Sky Tower. Hordes of people came out of shops and their apartment rooms to examine what was going on around them. When they spotted a red eyed Bastard holding a grenade launcher yelling at them to get out, they did what they were told.

Chanta slipped by the hysterical mass of people running out the hole in the front of the building. She sprinted down to the side of the room shouldering a plasma assault rifle. She made it to the elevator unnoticed and started the descent.

Exoguards and droids filled the lobby and the top railings of the upper floors.

“Fire!” an exoguard ordered.

They opened fire and Thirteen rushed across the floor falling to his knees and sliding for cover. He fired a few grenade shots into the crowds of exoguards and droids, scattering parts of droids and limbs of the exoguards throughout the place.

Plasma charges shot from every angle. Thirteen concentrated and self-combusted the remaining exoguards and droids who had all collapsed and burned. Thirteen got to his feet and glanced around.

“Thirteen...,” a familiar voice rang out over the intercom.

“Leader?” Thirteen said looking around.

“That’s right, I am not dead. You know where to find me.” The intercom went offline.

He did know where to find her; he jogged to the elevator and went only one place, up.

The elevator’s gentle ping filled the corridor. A lonely exoguard turned to see who was stepping off. The doors opened and Chanta fired multiple shots killing the exoguard. She walked over the corpse and went down the corridor.

She raised her arm watching the three-dimensional map for directions on where to go. She went left for a while then a few rights before she found the room. Going inside, the holographic map pinged at a certain computer.

She approached it and put the computer on her arm next to the computer on the desk. She slid her finger across the sensor, and it started to sync. The information downloaded to the computer on her arm where she could see the loading bar. It took less than a few seconds when it beeped letting her know it had finished.

All the data appeared in holographic form. She was about to get out when something caught her attention.

A separate room with flickering lights and hundreds of huge containers lining the walls in stacks from the ceiling to the floor. What she saw inside each container made her take a step back.

“Shit,” she uttered.

Thirteen pushed the emergency stop sensor and the elevator stopped in floating part of the building. Thirteen opened the compartment to the roof of the elevator and climbed on top of the elevator. He placed the small sticker, a rectangular device, on the side of the shaft and climbed back into the elevator, continuing the ascent up.

The elevator stopped at the top floor and Thirteen exited into the hallway. He found himself staring down at the door that was at the end of the long corridor. Instead of opening the door he blasted it into burning kindle.

He lumbered through the flaming doorway and saw a white haired woman staring out of the shattered window that she had fallen out of earlier before. Her left leg seemed to be shattered and twisted yet she stood strongly on it.

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite Bastard.”

Quanser navigated in his hover craft with the Sporg beside him. Over the years he had hijacked many of the vehicles along with body armor and weapons. He was using all of them now. He did not know what awaited him or if the plan would work, but he had to believe it would. This was his chance to lead his people out of tyranny by taking the monster itself down. The symbol of evil and oppression that was known as Haven.

He was able to scramble up a small army around 500 flaws from other colonies for the invasion. He glanced at the Sporg who seemed to be excited, possibly at the thought of reuniting with his fellow companions.

The skies were consumed with dark clouds and lightning cracked in the distance with a flash of brilliance,

perhaps a warning or an ominous nail in the coffin to the old ways. There was no real way of telling.

It had crossed his mind that this may very well be his last night. He was being honest with himself and to those willing to fight with him, that not all of them would survive and they may not win. Yet, they still followed him to a possible and horrible death.

A chance for a change that was very much needed for a long, long time. Flying into the storm he knew time was almost up.

“This better work,” Quanser hoped out loud.

“Why would they do such a thing?” the words escaped Chanta’s lips.

She could not have looked away from the hundreds maybe thousands of clear tube containers with enormous creatures within.

They were Apexes, so many of them asleep in their captive stasis.

A computer holographic screen projected and flashed the words: Awaiting Apex Activation.

She knew she had to get out and shut down the power before they became activated. She backed away from the holographic screen and raced out into the corridor.

She reached the elevator and headed back to the surface. The elevator gave the ping indicating she had reached her destination.

The doors opened and two exoguards set eyes on her and fired.

Chanta took cover to the side of the elevator. Plasma charges rained inside like a heavy downpour and riddled the elevator with smoking burn holes. Broken glass fell to the floor; the two exoguards advanced forward still firing not letting up. Chanta couched low and dashed to the other side returning fire of her own.

One of the exoguards took a headshot collapsing to the ground and the other was shot in the chest and also collapsed to the ground.

Chanta poked her head out and confirmed she had killed both. She hurried out of the smoldering hole in the front of the building and sprinted across the street taking cover within the shadows of the alley.

“Thirteen, I’m outside. I’m shutting the power down now.” She waited in the cover of darkness for him to reply.

“How did you survive?” Thirteen asked looking upon the broken woman in front of him.

Her back was still to him as she stared through the broken window and into the broken world while a flash of lightning cracked the sky followed by a booming sound of thunder. Gentle raindrops began to fall from the sky. The Leader stuck out her hand and caught a few drops. The top of the tower rotated slowly, but it was not noticeable unless one looked out the windows and looked at the view of all of Haven and the wastelands.

“I am perfection Thirteen, that is how. You continue to amaze me, you know that? Your defiant ways and how you overcame everything that I threw your way. You are my greatest accomplishment.” She tilted her head a bit to catch a

glimpse of her creation. “From the moment I first laid eyes on you, I knew you were special.” For a moment she saw him as a young child once again with glowing red eyes. A flash of lightning and he had changed back to how he looked now.

The Leader gazed back out into the rain filled night sky. She saw within the lightning flash at least fifty hover crafts heading their way toward the gate. Thunder rolled across the sky and into the room they occupied like a Leviathan of the deepest parts of the abysmal pits.

“I see you brought an audience. Good, I want them all to bear witness to the ultimate perfection.”

“What are you talking about?” Thirteen probed.

The Leader smiled. “You didn’t think that was the only Apex I created, did you?” Thirteen’s glowing red eyes squinted. The Leader continued, “I cloned thousands of them. You have seen the power and destruction of what one Apex could do...imagine an army of them. The perfect creation. The perfect world killer.”

“You are insane,” Thirteen growled.

“Perhaps...,” The Leader said. “All I have to do is activate them and an unstoppable army will consume this world and all of its imperfections.”

The Leader turned to face Thirteen with a holotab in her hand. Her other rain-soaked free hand hovered over the holotab.

A voice entered Thirteen’s earpiece. “Thirteen, I’m outside. Shutting the power down now.”

Thirteen placed a finger to the earpiece and replied, “Do it.”

The Leader glared at him confused.

“Do it,” Thirteen responded.

Chanta slid her finger across the sensor and shut all the power down to Haven.

All the streetlights turned off, the power to the houses and buildings turned off, the holographic billboard with advertisements glitched and turned off. All the droids within Haven and those at the gate powered down.

“The hell’s going on?” an exoguard asked another.

The gate started to roll completely open.

“The gate is opening! Close it!”

“I can’t! There’s no power! It won’t let me!”

Exoguards screamed at one another in the dark. Haven’s hover vehicles shut down on them and hover crafts fell from the sky crashing to the ground, lighting the dark with their explosions.

“The torrents are down!” the exoguard in the tower called out.

The spotlights faded and left Haven completely dark except for the burning wreckages and the lightning that filled the sky revealing over fifty hover crafts flying their way.

“Incoming!” an exoguard yelled over the thunder.

Quanser watched Haven vastly approaching. His nerves hardened, but he felt queasy in his stomach. He watched as he saw all the lights in Haven shut off, hover crafts falling from the sky, the spotlights extinguished, and most importantly the gate...the gate rolled open.

Quanser radio to the other hover crafts, “The gate is open! Time to make our move!”

The other ships acknowledged, and they all flew faster to reach Haven, zooming through and over the gate. They swarmed like locust in a biblical plague, opening fire.

The exoguards on the ground ran around in confusion, trying to avoid the plasma cannon charges that scattered around them.

Quanser landed the craft and opened the cargo bay doors, releasing a hundred-armed flaws that dashed out blasting away with their plasma assault rifles. Quanser exited and so did the Sporg.

Twenty more ships landed and unleashed the hundreds of hordes of armed flaws from each ship. The other crafts continued their reign of terror from the sky. The discharges from cannons exploded across the ground and left craters behind. The cannons wiped out much of the exoguards and the powered down droids. The cannon fires lit up the darkened sky as much as the lightning had. Fires burned brightly on smoldering craters.

Quanser fired into a group of exoguards. The flaws and exoguards rushed into each other colliding, into a mass wave of bodies that intermingled and fought amongst one another. Bodies on both sides fell. Never have they ever managed to get this far past the colossal gate.

Perhaps there was hope just yet. I only wish Kala could have seen this, Quanser thought.

An exoguard got close and Quanser shot out the bone spike from his palm and impaled the man's throat, then retracted the bone spike. Quanser did not notice the exoguard sneaking up behind him with a combat knife held high in the air. Ready to strike Quanser down, but the Sporg clamped its

fangs around the exoguard's throat. The Sporg shook violently until he heard the exoguard's neck snap. The Sporg then rushed off attacking other exoguards.

Quanser unloaded on a few more exoguards that approached and tossed a plasma grenade into a cluster of them. The grenade exploded killing them all. Hover ships sailed over them all and continued the onslaught.

The Leader's finger slid across the projected screen hovering over the holotab at the same time the power shut down. Lightning filled the room. She looked out the broken window to the sound of a chaotic orchestra. She observed that the colossal gate was open and that invading hover crafts had flown through lighting up the darkened city of Haven with plasma fire. Her glowing grey eyes pierced Thirteen's glowing red eyes.

“What did you do?”

“Killed the power to Haven. The flaw invaded through the gate; it is over. Haven is going to burn to the ground. Your empire will amount to ashes,” Thirteen gloated.

The Leader smirked. “No matter. The backup power will be up in less than ten minutes.”

“What?” Thirteen queried.

“You didn't think the Sky Tower wouldn't have a backup power supply, did you?” The Leader pouted. “Once the power comes back up the Apexes will be activated and all those flaws that you now care about, will be ripped apart.” She glided her fingers along the glass desk. “What could we do in the meantime?”

Thirteen unsheathed the black bladed Katana with the green glow. “I have one idea.”

“You never cease to amaze me,” The Leader said as he took a fighting stance and waited for the first move.

Thirteen pretended to turn his back to her then twirled on the heel of his boot, throwing the Katana straight at her with incredible speed and force.

The Leader lifted the lid of the white grand piano and the Katana penetrated it, getting stuck halfway in.

“You used to be faster,” She taunted.

“Hmmm” Thirteen grinned. “Well, it was meant to distract you.”

“Distract me? Distract me from what?” She asked.

“From this.” Thirteen raised the plasma grenade launcher and fired rapid shots.

The Leader’s eyes grew wide, and she used her speed to dodge the grenades being launched at her.

Explosions filled the room as the glass windows shattered.

The Leader ran a circle within the room and Thirteen followed her firing grenade after grenade. Black smoke filled the room making it hard to see. The room became consumed with fire, broken glass, debris floating everywhere, and parts of the floor and the ceiling had holes in them.

Thirteen peered through the heavy smoke clouds, not able to see a thing that was until the Leader appeared with a flying fist to his temple and rocked him. She kicked him with her white high heels that punctured his chest. Blood ran from the small hole as he fell back.

He lifted the grenade launcher when she approached him, he pulled the trigger and she flinched, but nothing happened. The power charge canister had run out.

“Damn it,” He muttered.

The Leader kicked the plasma grenade launcher out of his hands and kicked him across the face.

Thirteen took the kick and rolled backwards to his feet then charged her, spearing her in the abdomen. He landed on top of her and punched rapidly at her face.

She wrapped her legs around his neck and squeezed. Thirteen tried to pry her legs apart but she constricted tighter like the snake that she was. He struggled to his feet with her wrapped around him. Finally getting his footing he hunched over her, picked her up, and slammed her down, yet she still held on. He lifted her up again and smashed her against the pillar next to him.

She let go falling to the ground and rolled to her feet. She summersaulted in the air and landed a punch and a kick on him.

Thirteen grabbed her by the arm and ignited his clenched fist into flames that engulfed her arm into fire. The fire cooked the flesh and left her arm charred. Thirteen released her and she groaned from the pain.

She turned her back to him clutching at her arm, then started laughing as she faced him and exposed her burnt arm that was healing back to fresh skin.

“You have to try harder than that,” she mocked.

Thirteen placed both hands out and conjured a flamethrower at the Leader, bathing her in fire.

Her body smoked and some of the clothes burned along with her hair, but she healed herself once again and her hair grew back. She ran in a blur, punching him between the eyes then tossed him against the piano. She sauntered over to him and gripped Thirteen by throat, hoisting him into the air.

“How does it feel?” she asked Thirteen, “to make it so far only to fail. To know, I will allow death to take you and your precious flaw along with your abomination of a child!”

Thirteen tried to break her hold but could not. He reached his arm out and felt something brush his fingertips.

Her eyes started to glow grey and flesh began to turn to ash peeling away from his neck.

“I loved you and you betrayed me,” she said as a tear left her cheek.

“Life’s a bitch ain’t it?” Thirteen gasped as his fingers wrapped around a handle.

He pulled the Katana from the lid of the piano and sliced the Leader’s hand that gripped him by the throat clean off. Thirteen tore her severed hand from him and glanced at the Leader screaming in pain and bleeding from her stump. The flesh around his neck turned back to normal while he took in a big breath of air.

“What’s taking you so long Thirteen?” Chanta whimpered to herself.

She seen multiple explosions along with heavy black smoke around the top floor a few moments ago which signaled that a raging fire was taking place.

She knew it had to be Thirteen, she just hoped he was alright.

Chanta felt something brush against her leg, looking down she had saw the Sporg which gave a happy clicking sound.

A smile spread from ear to ear, and she hugged the Sporg. “You made it! Thank goodness you’re still alive.”

The Sporg nestled into her arms. Finally, he was reunited with his family. The red eyed man was nowhere to be seen and it inquired about him.

Chanta pointed to the top of the flaming Sky Tower and said, “He’s up there.”

She could not take her eyes off the tower that slowly revolved and hovered above the bottom of the building.

Flames stretched out into the open air from the shattered windows. The smoke and flames danced within the night sky, and for the first time over the darkened Haven, stars twinkled above through some of the broken up dark rain clouds.

The rain drenched Quanser and all the men fighting. Mud splattered armor and faces. Screaming from fallen men was heard in the distace. Quanser and his men took cover from the exoguards who were firing their plasma assault rifles. Every now and then Quanser and a few soldiers stood up to return fire, then ducked for cover again.

Grenades were tossed on both sides combusting into explosions which killed many. Lightning flashed in the sky and a thunder boomed in their hearts that drove them to push on and fight harder.

Tonight, would be a grand and honorable death, Quanser thought to himself. Standing to his feet he returned fire then slowly advanced forward.

His men admired his ferocity and courage and they joined him, pushing the exoguards back.

“You bastard!” The Leader roared.

Thirteen twirled the Katana with his hands, slicing the air. He watched as her hand slowly started to grow back.

Lights began to flutter back on within the Sky Tower and in the Leader’s room.

She flashed a wicked smile as she picked up her holotab and slid her finger across the projected screen.

“No!” Thirteen yelled.

Within the darkened laboratory a computer flickered on, and a robotic voice echoed throughout the room of slumbering Apexes.

“Apex protocol activated.”

One by one the massive creatures stirred inside the incubating tubes. They roared a horrible cry while they started breaking out like rabid animals. Many slashed their way out, others repeatedly smashed their heads against the glass, shattering it. An unstoppable army flooded the room making their way out and to the surface.

The Leader tossed her holotab to the ground. “Now my perfect army has awakened and will cleanse this world of filth and imperfection. You were so close Thirteen, it’s a shame really.”

“It is not over yet,” Thirteen said holding up a small rectangular device and slid his finger across the sensor.

The device he planted at the bottom end of the floating part of the building, the magnetic base, exploded in a wide seismic burst, destroying most of the magnetic base.

The building shifted, became unbalanced and quaked.

“What have you done?” The Leader demanded.

The floating part of the building plummeted, and for a moment everything inside the room, including Thirteen and the Leader, floated into the air as if in zero gravity. The floating top of the building crashed into the bottom part of the building. Steel beams and rebar punctured through the floors of the top building impaling it as it sank lower down.

Thirteen and the Leader slammed on to the crumbling floor. The floors shifted and broke into different sections that collapsed into one another and exposed huge gaps of the inner structure. They fell through a couple floors as the building tilted and swayed until finally resting at an angle.

Chanta looked on with horror when she saw the building explode and topple into itself. She dashed further back with the Sporg to avoid the falling debris and broken glass.

“Thirteen!” she screamed.

Quanser, his soldiers, and the exoguards continued to fight; not wavering until all caught the sight of the Sky Tower collapsing into itself.

“That crazy Bastard did it,” Quanser mumbled to himself.

Quanser and his men raised their plasma assault rifles at the distraught exoguards that were witnessing their symbol of Haven, the Sky Tower, being destroyed. The exoguards knew

it was over, they had lost the battle. Haven had fallen. Hover crafts stationed themselves above with the plasma cannons pointed at the exoguards.

“It’s over!” Quanser called out. “Throw down your weapons and surrender or prepare to be executed!”

The exoguards could not help but to keep their eyes locked on the fallen Sky Tower. One by one they tossed their weapons down. The flaws all cheered and celebrated.

Quanser could not believe they had finally won.

Thirteen came to inside the wreckage of the building. He looked around hearing the steel beams creaking under the pressure. The building shook a bit and it shifted more to the side.

“I’ll kill you!” The Leader screamed. Jumping on top of Thirteen, punching him.

Thirteen placed his feet at her midsection and kicked her off.

Her back cracked against a jagged broken concrete and snapped her back into place. She stood with her back to a shattered window.

“You took everything from me!” she spat through her teeth.

A massive creature with half a head staggered through the window and sank its jagged fangs into the side shoulder and neck of the Leader.

“Thirteen...,” the Apex growled, biting into the Leader.

The Apex, Thirteen thought he had killed, tracked him down and wanted to finish the score.

Thirteen glanced over and saw the green glow of the Katana a few feet away. He scrambled to the sword and sprinted towards the Apex with the Leader still within its mouth.

Thirteen drove the blade into the Leader's heart and the brain of the Apex.

The Apex's feet gave out and ceased to move.

The Leader's hands slid down the blade and grabbed hold. She could not pry it out. She winced as blood left her wound and mouth.

Thirteen's face was inches away from hers. Breathing rapidly as he tried to steady his breath.

The Leader placed her hand over the side of Thirteen's face, and she kissed him. She pulled away examining him over.

"My favorite Bastard...you never cease to amaze me..."

Hundreds of Apex's could be heard roaring, digging, and slashing their way into the floor that Thirteen and the Leader were on.

Thirteen knew they would break free in mere seconds. He was out of options; there was no way he could take on all those creatures. Once the Apexes were done picking their fangs with his bones, they would be a plague on the world killing everything.

A couple clawed hands broke through the floor and a few heads popped through, gnawing at the concrete.

Thirteen knew what he had to do, the only thing to do.

He looked at the Leader and smiled a sad smile. He grabbed her hand gently. "Would you like to be a part of something perfect?"

The Leader, Cynthia Riverbrook, squeezed his hand. "More than anything."

Thirteen dug deep into himself concentrating on all his power, building it up. His eyes burned with fire, as did his body, inch by inch. Intense heat and flames expanded outward. He levitated into the air while the floor melted beneath him.

Multiple Apexes aggressively got through the floor and rushed towards Thirteen and the Leader.

The fire and heat pulsed from Thirteen's body, expanding even further.

The Apexes that were closer to Thirteen burned, melting the skin off their bones then into ash.

Thirteen thrashed his head back, his body convulsed to the magnitude of the power building up inside, seeping slowly from him. He screamed at the surge of fire that turned into a funnel of flames that stretched from the Heavens to the very bottom of the laboratory, many would have called it hell.

The Apexes screeched at the immense heat and their bodies disintegrated to ashes.

Cynthia's skin burned and peeled away. Tears welled in her eyes.

"Perfect..." The words escaped her lips and her body crumbled to ashes.

The Apexes were trying to flee but Thirteen unleashed everything he had and the funnel of swirling fire consumed the entire building.

The heat was so intense, everything started melting to glass, and others turned to ash floating in the wind.

Thirteen screamed with such pain while his own flesh peeled away to ash floating off his body like snowflakes.

The flaws took the exoguards as prisoners cuffing them all while securing the perimeter. Another group of flaws were knocking down the droids and using the butt of their assault rifles to smash in the droid's heads.

Quanser stopped and saw the Sky Tower becoming a tornado of fire that shot out to space.

“Dear God...what are you doing?”

Chanta shielded her eyes to the flames that emanated more heat than the sun.

The surrounding buildings melted and burned.

She had to back further and further away due to the oxygen burning up around them. It made it impossible to breath.

She stared into the uprising inferno knowing what Thirteen was doing. Tears welled and left her eyes while she screamed his name.

“Thirteen!”

The pain was unbearable but Thirteen kept pushing out everything, all of his power even if it meant destroying himself in the process, as long as nothing from the Sky Tower survived. Anguish filled his face and his voice strained from the screaming. The flesh peeled from his body, and he fell to his knees with clenched fist.

One arm crumbled away to ash, and he unleashed more and more power that incinerated everything around him.

All he thought about was Chanta and their son, Lux Nova. He held them close to his heart while his body turned to a statue of ash and slowly crumbled away.

The funnel of fire shot out to the sky disappeared. Glass shards remained stretched to the Heavens. A few bits of rubble and debris were left, and nothing else.

Hours later once it was safe and she was able to breathe again, Chanta and the Sporg walked into the remains. They sifted through the ash but there was nothing left, that was until a green glow caught their eyes.

She stepped over the rubble and melted shards of glass to pry out the black bladed Katana from the wall.

She held it in her hands, then tightly held it tight against her chest. The sword was unnaturally cool to the touch.

The Sporg sniffed around and nuzzled next to Chanta, comforting her. She and the Sporg stayed there for a while before walking away leaving only tears and shattered dreams behind.

Quanser and his army marched into the streets of Haven.

The citizens of Haven gathered around, scared that there were flaws in their city.

The media swarmed and stopped Quanser.

“What are you going to do to Haven? To us?” a reporter called out.

Quanser stared at the cameras as the sun gleamed in the distance peeking over the horizon.

A new day.

He thought on the question while examining all the terrified people gawking at the enormous army of armed flaws.

“Nothing,” he said.

The people looked amongst each other confused. Quanser continued, “What I want is for all of us to come together as one. To accept each other as equals. We are not flaw; we are human, too. No different from any of you.” Quanser pointed at the scared people. “The Leader was a lunatic with power. She tried to exterminate all my kind and for what? Because we look different? We bleed the same blood. We experience fear like you. We get angry like you. We love like you. We have families like you. What we want is no different from any of you...to be accepted and loved. That’s all.”

A man called out over everyone as they were exchanging thoughts. “But what about the gate?” he said. “We need to close it to keep out the dangers that are out there!”

Quanser shook his head and said, “Dangers are everywhere. It is part of life. Building a wall will not make all your problems go away. We need to face those problems. Not individually or segregated, but together like we should have been doing from the start. Let us come together to fix this world. Today marks a new day, a change for our era. Let us bring life back to this world and save it.”

The crowd sat in silence looking upon one another. Most of the people clapped, cheering for the new change and willing to embrace it. A faint few walked away disgusted.

Quanser knew change and acceptance will not come over night. In time though, perhaps it will come. For the time being, he had taken Haven. And with it, the acceptance of many, not all, but many and that’s a step in the right direction. It was victory whichever way you looked at it.

Quanser could sense it in the air. Change was coming thanks to Thirteen sacrificing himself to bring two worlds together, and Quanser will not let that go in vain.

Chapter 54

Chanta fixed up Scott's home and made it her own. She had plenty of help from Quanser, his mother, and of course from the little Sporg as well.

Her heart ached for her love, for Thirteen. She longed to be with him, but she could not. Not right now anyways because she had her and Thirteen's child to take care of, Lux Nova. She knew she will be with Thirteen one day, with time.

At night she lay in bed with the Sporg curled up by her feet, and she cried. Her hands reached over to an empty spot in bed. She closed her eyes, and she could see him there. Holding her, kissing her. She will never love another.

Chanta looked over at the nightstand and saw a flashing red light from Thirteen's computer. She slowly sat up and reached out to grab it. She lightly traced her fingers over the flashing red light.

A holographic image of Thirteen appeared next to her. He just sat in silence for a moment then cleared his throat and spoke,

“I’m a Bastard. I have no name, but a number. Thirteen.” He paused for another moment and Chanta could swear he was looking straight at her.

She placed her hand to the side of his face.

“Dark rain clouds plagued the midnight sky above. The heavens cried soaking the barren land of the damned. Patches of dying grass and weeds spread throughout the hard cracked soil. Tombstones protruded in rows. Their markers were decayed very much like the planet they had tried so hard to save. It was an already dead world. It was the year 2524 and all life was struggling to survive.

The rain holds a gothic beauty I suppose...”

Chanta listened to Thirteen tell their story throughout the night. She treasured hearing his voice and being able to see him once more.

Once Thirteen told their story he paused for another moment, then spoken again.

“I’m not sure what is going to happen next, but Chanta, Lux Nova, know that I love you both so very much. You will always be with me, and I will always be with you. Chanta, there is a separate audio file for Lux Nova that I made for him to help our son harness and control his powers, he will need it. I am so happy to have you both in my life and I would not trade it for anything.

Chanta, you are my heart, my soul mate, my forever person...I love you.

Lux, you have a long hard road ahead of you, but you will endure. You are strong. I hope that the sins of your father do not descend upon you. If they do, keep your head up and know I am with you every step of the way. You are the future of this world Lux. I could not figure it out until now and soon you will know it too. You are the best of your mother and I, and we could not be prouder of you son. I love you both.”

The hologram faded and the audio message stopped.

“We love you, too.” Chanta whispered.

Over the years she would play the holographic messages repeatedly for her and her child, Lux Nova.

Lux Nova was now six years old, and he had heard the instructional audio visual on controlling and using his powers. He had advanced quickly.

He had black hair, normal looking skin with a bottom jaw that flared out like his mother’s. His eyes were solid black with glowing green irises.

He lifted his arm and watched a mystical green fire engulf his forearm then he extinguished the green flame. He looked at the patch of dirt in the backyard and tossed a small green fire ball at it. The green fire singed the dry earth and he smiled, then ran inside the house.

Once Lux Nova was inside, something strange happened with the dirt he had fired at. A small sprout of plant life flourished from the barren dead patch and bringing life.

Lux Nova looked at the black bladed Katana that hung over the mantle of the living room and stared at his father’s hologram before it faded.

Chanta saw Thirteen in their child, and it was like he was still with them.

“Momma, I want to hear daddy tell the story again.”

Chanta sat next to Lux and hugged him, then gave him a kiss. “Okay.”

She lightly traced her finger over the panel and Thirteen appeared again.

He sat in silence and cleared his throat.

“I’m a Bastard...”

Epilogue

A cloaked figure walked up to the glass shards stretching high into the sky. They were left as a memorial to Thirteen.

The figure placed his hand against the twisted nightmarish glass shard that towered over many of the surrounding buildings.

Normal people and flaws walked together talking and laughing.

The cloaked figure stared across the street to see Chanta holding little Lux Nova's hand while they walked around with the Sporg.

Lux smiled at his mother, and they laughed at something she said.

The cloaked figure's solid black eyes watched them. He lowered his hood and revealed a shaved head except for two

patches of hair that looked like horns. He grinned, watching Chanta and Lux Nova.

“Do not worry, brother. I will watch over them,” Six said while he placed his hood back over his head.

His mind flashed back to their battle against the Leader and how he created smoke-clone copies of himself.

The Leader thought she had grabbed the right one, but she did not.

It gave Six the opportunity to sneak off to the side and out of the room. He had all the other smoke clones disintegrate but the one she held, causing them all to believe that he had died.

In reality, it was all just smoke and mirrors.

Six smiled at that fact, and strolled off into the streets of Haven. He slipped into a crowd unnoticed, disappearing from all eyes.

He knew that the battle was won, but the war was not over. There were other Haven’s, other tyrants, and other Bastards. The war will rage on, until then, he would make sure Chanta, Lux Nova, and even the little Sporg were safe.

That Lux Nova would reach his true potential to lead them all into battle...and that time was approaching.

About the Author

Michael Lee McKuin is a California State Prisoner who had been convicted of a heinous crime he did not commit. Regardless he was blamed for it when facts and the real killer were overlooked. He had been called a monster, a menace to society, and evil by a corrupt legal and justice system; by Prosecutors that fabricated a “story” and not the truth in order to give the Prosecutor the win. This is why being aware of Social Injustice is important, so they cannot keep doing this to people who are actually innocent and to end stereotyping others for their own agendas because it could be you in Michael’s shoes one day.

The real Michael is none of those things that the Prosecutor “claims” to be. Those that actually know



Photograph courtesy of Krystle Lisek, the Barefoot Photographer

Michael would say he is a proud father to three amazing children. That he is fun, loving, caring, compassionate, thoughtful, sacrificing, and a gentle individual.

He is an animal lover and an adventure seeker. He loves his family and friends. He is a metal head and a complete horror and superhero geek. He loves to write horror stories so be on the lookout for more! He had made a great deal of many mistakes in life even mistakes that left scars, but has never done the things he had been convicted for. He longs to be released so he can visit the ocean, go to the taco truck, and more importantly, to live life with his family, friends, and children. Feel free to reach out to him. He loves meeting new friends. You can find him on Facebook and at Twitter: @MckuinL

Kill The Bastard

Michael L. McKuin

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