

Backward



By Richard Dawson

This is a story of intrigue. A story of questioning the past and theorizing about the future. You may think that this story is real. You might even question whether it is piece of unrevealed history. The answer to this question remains shrouded in mystery.



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Preface

The dirt walls crept inward bit by bit, a cold lifeless blanket threatening to suffocate him beneath its oppressive weight. Despite all of the logic that his mind held up in defense, something within him refused to internalize it. That other part of him, that less coherent part, only kept repeating that he was *Trapped!* It kept pushing his arms and fists as if it were possible to merely force the lifeless dirt away from him in a desperate plea for the open air.

It wouldn't be long now before he found it impossible to move. Ritem struggled to remain calm, but staring around him in pitch darkness was a seeming reenactment of the horror stories written of people being buried alive. He hadn't considered himself claustrophobic before now, but this oppressive trench that left barely 15 strams of movement in any direction was a bellows stoking the flames of panic.

His temporary nightmare was interrupted by a familiar voice drifting down from the surface. "Come on Ritem, that hole needs to be at least 20 strams deeper before we can put the foundation blocks in. If you want to have some privacy in this house, you're gonna have to put some sweat equity into getting this trench started for it."

The statement needed no repeating as he'd heard as much many times already from his father. Now that the work was begun, he did have cause for celebration, and it would be a huge relief to get a respite from his sister Kaya, but the

family had little currency to hire any help. Thus he was stuck digging the channel himself until it was big enough for the big gravel blocks to be set into the still unexcavated void. He endeavored to distract himself from the trembling, focus instead on the big picture and what a great relief it would be to command his own solitary oasis at long last.

It took 20 more minutes of digging, before he was finally able to perceive some appreciable degree of progress. Only a couple more straws and there would be room for the next block. After that, he intended to demand a pause for something to eat, despite a fatigue that was more mental than physical. This decision gave him the stamina to attack the dirt wall with renewed gusto until the spade suddenly thrust forward almost of its own volition. He pulled back the tool intrigued, and felt around with the tool more carefully now. Something strange happened when he pushed the ground in one particular spot. The spade moved only a little way through the dirt before all resistance disappeared, as if there was nothing but empty space beyond. Putting the tool aside, he brushed at the area with his hands until a faint glow presented itself. Little by little he saw more of it. There was a strange material that looked much like the smooth clay on any house. But instead of being dark brown it was more of a milky whitish color, like the soot plants once they started dying back. There was a slight luster to the surface which gave his pitch-black cavern a haunted ambiance.

He stared enraptured as he brushed soil away more energetically now. Somehow this spot formed a barrier

which defied all that his logical senses told him. It was eerie in that he could clearly see the barrier as if it were solid, but he felt no resistance at all when he tried to touch any part of it. His fingers sought out in vain for confirmation of what his eyes described. But for all the attempt, there was no conflating the visual description with the tactile one. When he pushed against the apparently solid pane, there was nothing but emptiness as far as he could reach.

Now overcome with curiosity, he carefully brushed the strange material all the way to its perimeter and eventually revealed a space only just slightly wider than his shoulders. But now he was struck with another conundrum. What should he *do* with this newfound discovery? Telling his parents would be futile, his dad of course would be incapable of squeezing within the cavity, even if he might be convinced to try. But the more he thought about it, the more brightly his curiosity burned over what lay just beyond the boundary of the mysterious vision. Slowly and with great trepidation, he worked up enough courage to finally push his head through.

Chapter One

The first glance was utterly disappointing. The view which presented itself was of a thoroughly unremarkable and dimly lit room. Along each side, were stacks of drawers covering the entire wall from base to cap. The ceiling was low, less than 6 feet high and the lighting was barely brighter than the gloomy twilight behind him. He pushed his head slightly further in hopes that he might develop a greater breadth of understanding. What he didn't expect was the most peculiar sensation along his head and neck. He required no physical effort at all to keep his head erect. The portion which passed through the barrier seemed to just merely float freely as if surrounded entirely by water. It was the strangest experience of his entire life (next to the barrier itself of course). He put his hands out in front in an attempt to learn more of this invisible supportive force. Something went wrong then, and he somehow managed to lose hold of his position. He spun wildly about and 'fell' all the way into the room. Of course once he came fully into the room, all notion of up or down, falling or rising was thrown by the wayside. He found that he could drift about in any direction with the slightest push on any wall. It took a few revolutions before he noticed the wall through which he'd passed. What began as mild interest quickly changed to panic as he searched first with his eyes and then with his hands over what was clearly just another row of drawers now.

He was trapped! This time for real. He smacked the

nearest drawer and felt only solid material, so too with the one above and below. He smacked all the ones in reach and got the same result. In desperation he banged on every one that he could, desperately searching among the dozens of bins until his frantic attention was interrupted by the sound of a door opening.

“What's going on here!”

“Who in the world are you? And just what do you think you're doing?”

The woman was short, barely five feet tall and so skeletal as to barely seem alive. Her cheeks were sunken and her short hair floated lifelessly around her pale scalp. The face was so dry and cracked with sores that it looked as if it hadn't been touched by water in a lifetime. She had some kind of one-piece covering that looked as dirty and worn as she was. The rest of her body looked like a shrunken doll with four sticks poking out of it. The scene more resembled some ghastly apparition than an actual person. He stared at her with emotions that swung back and forth between confusion and terror, without ever settling on a one.

She floated through the door as if she were swimming and as she closed the distance between them, he noticed the black circles around her eyes widen along with the eyes themselves.

At first he was so distracted by the gaunt face which barely

hid the skull underneath that he could think of nothing to utter in response. A faint 'um' was all that escaped his rigid lips.

The woman folded her stick-like arms in front of her thin chest. "Whatsamatter. You didn't get enough of a water ration to be able to speak or somethin'?"

The strangeness of her statement finally did free up his own mouth, not that it made him any more coherent. "No. I don't know. I was just digging and somehow I found this... this, passageway I guess you'd call it."

The woman gave him a strange unrecognizable look. "What do you mean you were digging. Are you looking for parts? Cause most of that stuff doesn't work anymore. And how come I've never seen you before? And how come you're so *tall*." She said the last with the reverence he might use for some festival strongman.

He squirmed inwardly without fully understanding why. "I, I don't know. I've never seen this place before. What is all this?"

It took a moment for the awe displayed on her face to transform as she finally acknowledged his question. Then her expression softened back to the mundane "Oh it's just a scrap parts room. Not many people ever use it now. We'll probably be shutting off the O₂ in here."

That comment confused him even more than the others had. "Shutting off the O₂? What do you mean?"

Somehow his comment caused a different reaction in the

woman. She drifted closer towards him and he found himself pinwheeling around to move out of her way. His eyes must've been as big as dinner plates while the floating skull fixed him with a piercing stare. She came easily within a handsbreath of his face, his own efforts to keep his distance utterly futile. She analyzed him the way a healer might examine a skin rash. "My! You look so healthy and well fed." Suddenly her brows lowered into a frown. "Have you been stealing extra food? Did your parents get past the safeguards?"

He was starting to grasp a hint now of what caused this woman to look so guant. Something must have interrupted her food supplies. Clearly he would need to say something to keep her from viewing him as some kind of criminal.

Unless it was woman who had somehow created that passageway. He entertained that thought only briefly before tossing it aside. The room had been empty and supposedly unused when he'd first appeared.

So instead he did what he could to dispel her suspicion. With hands held out to his sides, he strangely floated before her. "No no, I've never touched your food. My, my family grows food in the yard. We've got almost a hectare out back."

Now her face looked almost cartoonish. "A hectare?! Come on, that's really cruel. How could you make fun like that. Geezkrishna, what kind of a monster would make such a ridiculous statement!"

Her face transformed into a fierce scowl which only accentuated the fierce skeletal lines of her face and if not for her diminutive frame, he might've expected her to float over and just eat him then and there. The reaction was unlike anything he might've expected. He held his hands even further apart now, hoping to dispel the woman's anger and cynicism. "But honest. It's true. I just spent all day yesterday helping my dad plant Trux."

Instead of looking at him, she put her nose close and took a sniff. He was taken aback by the gesture and would have thought it incredibly weird, except that everything about this place seemed equally strange. He again struggled unsuccessfully to stifle his own reaction and also to keep his distance from the skull hovering less than a foot in front of him. "Hmm. You don't smell... quite right. I think you better come with me. We'll talk to Jessa and see if we can figure this thing out."

With that, she 'swam' toward the door and it immediately opened by sliding to one side. He barely had time to register the magic of such a thing before she motioned for him to follow.

This brought him to wonder if it was safe to go along with such a ghoulish being. Would the place she was leading to be more dangerous than this magical one? Would these monstrosities attack him after all? But then again, there was nothing for him in the 'scrap' room either. The bizarre passageway had completely disappeared somehow, leaving him to the mercy of whoever was at the other end of this

trail.

So with a brief prayer to the Holy One, he shrugged his shoulders and pushed away from the wall and towards the unusual door.

Once past the door they drifted into a circular tube that stretched several straits in either direction. It was also dimly lit by several impossibly thin tubes of light which produced no heat or flicker such as he was used to. Like the room he'd left, this space was horribly cramped, though obviously not so much for these diminutive people.

The feeling was not much different from that of being down in the underground tunnel where the anxiety had threatened to wrap its cold fingers around him. Following behind the woman, he noticed that her suit billowed out randomly except in spots where her body touched it. Gazing up, or perhaps across at her he couldn't escape from the feeling that he was traveling with some kind of animate skeleton. The woman's knees and feet stuck out sharply where the fabric pulled taut and the feet were barely larger than Kaya's were. It was far worse than any nightmare he could've invented back home.

The woman however showed not the slightest concern as she guided herself effortlessly along a pair of slender rails which ran parallel to the lighted ones. Mimicking her, he found that the cool solidity of the rails gave him more assurance than the loose dirt back home, and the worry ebbed away in small stages as they progressed along.

As they traveled, he became aware of a strange vibration along the hand rails. It was kind of like when a hoardz was trotting close by and the ground shook a little. But this didn't get faster or slower, it remained as a constant steady hum mimicking the shiver which was running along the back of his neck. Not really understanding any of this, he acted the same as he had in the tunnel and focused on the more prescient details instead. He took careful breaths and looked directly at the wall or the handrails. Meanwhile, the two of them continued 'down' past two more doors until she pushed a button and drifted through the final door, motioning him in as well.

He found himself in another room somewhat brighter than the first but still with no obvious lamp. The whole ceiling produced the same faint and even light as the passageway and 'parts' room. It was shaped like a pie wedge there were large counters running along the edge of the quarter-circle area with lights going randomly on and off along their surface. Facing these surfaces were a series of chairs with three people of equal frailty seated at them. A fourth woman was floating in the middle and looking across at them with a calm curiosity.

"Jessa, this boy was in the spare parts room, I've never seen him before but he's said some pretty strange things. I thought you might be able to help figure out what his story is all about."

The woman Jessa was only slightly taller than the first one,

with equally short-cropped hair that was so gray it was almost white. Her gaunt frame and sunken cheeks confirmed to him that this group of people were all suffering a great calamity of malnutrition. They looked worse than Danic up the road who was always spending whatever money he earned on a bottle instead of on a meal.

“Young man, you should know that there aren't enough people on this ship for anyone to live here unnoticed. So I'm going to ask you one simple question-”

He didn't even register the woman's full statement. His attention was quickly consumed by the word 'ship.' That was completely impossible. Ulak was more than a week's ride from the ocean. None of the people he knew had even *seen* a sailing ship before much less had the opportunity to travel the great seas in one. There was absolutely no alchemy which might allow someone to travel in an instant all the way to some ocean plying vessel.

“I can't believe it. I was digging in the ground just a few minutes ago! How could I be instantly transported to a ship on the ocean like that?”

Before the captain could answer, the other woman looked at her superior with a shrug of her protruding shoulders. “See what I mean captain? I think he's nuts or something.”

The captain now drifted closer to him as well and gave him the same inquisitive stare that her associate had. Though now he found himself better able to fight down the revulsion from before. “You're right Nisu, he *is* mighty strange. And

the fattest huemean I've ever seen. Boy, what section are you from. Who are your parents?" Come to think of it, I don't think we've even had any births for the past, um-" The woman's eyes looked up and then kind of glazed over. "Oh hell who remembers."

Ritem felt like he was living in some otherworldly dream from which he might (he prayed) soon awaken. Nothing here conformed to the logic that his mind screamed out for. Starving people, the feeling of floating in a room with no water, the strange ceiling that glowed but with no obvious daylight. He just put his hands up in a gesture of peace and calmly told the adults what he could. "Ladies, I really don't know how to explain it. Only a few moments ago I was digging a foundation channel in the yard, then I came across this weird material and went through into that room where you found me."

"Captain, what does he mean by digging? I thought he meant he was digging for parts. But I don't know what a 'foundation' is. I doubt there's one in the parts room-"

He couldn't imagine what would convince them that he wasn't crazy. "Look, I was digging in the ground, in dirt. See my hands..."

They were interrupted by one a man who turned from the counter to face them. "Captain, we've spotted another planet on the long range scan. It might be close enough to the host star to support life. Should I launch the probe?"

The woman, now distracted, looked over her shoulder at the

person who had spoken. Her voice grew low and disconsolate as she answered. "Oh. I don't know. It's our last shot... maybe we should get closer before we take the ris-"

But before she finished, it finally struck him. Ship, planet. "Geezkrishna!! You mean this... this place exists outside in the great ethereal above the heavens?! We're in outer space?!"

Suddenly all eyes in the room fixed him with the same intense stare that was becoming almost commonplace. He could feel every eye penetrating the layers of his body as if seeking to digest it. The captain immediately turned back again, drifting close and focusing him with the full intensity of her stare. "Okay, how in the vast universe can you be on board the *Faint Hope* and not know that we're in the Mauritanian nebulae? Just where exactly did you come from?" The woman looked ready to grab him by the shoulders, though she clearly wouldn't have had strength to do anything more threatening than that. "First you have more muscle on your bones than any living being I've seen in my life, then you talk about something called an ocean, and now you act surprised to be on this ship traversing the empty vacuum of space. Just what is your deal boy."

Confusion now dominated his mind as he looked around at the rows of hollow faces. He paused to consider any one of a dozen answers. But not a single one sounded the least bit plausible. After all, if *he* couldn't believe it, how could he expect to convince these people? Finally though, he just

took a gulp of air and babbled the truth with all the [genesequa] of a three year old. "Well, I'm from Ulak. It's, it's not a very large town, but it's on the outskirts of Medria." He looked around again and was met with only blank stares for his trouble. "Um..you've never heard of Medria? Okay, well it's the capital of Philadrog." Now he became even more perplexed by the utter lack of recognition. Every face held a completely blank expression, as if they were not just starving, but mute as well.

"What? Have you people never even heard of Nedune at all?!"

Now finally, a series of gasps exploded throughout the room. He heard the name repeated over and over, reverently, almost like a prayer. "Nedune." "Nedune."

"He's from Nedune?!"

The words were whispered with the same veneration he might use to describe a statue of The Holy One. Looking into their eyes, he was reminded now of the expression which the girl had showed when she first commented on how large he seemed.

It took a long moment before the captain regained enough composure at last to put words together. But the look of wonder was now replaced with an angry hawk-like stare. She folded her stick-like arms as the other woman had before and scowled at him. "Nedune? *Nedune*?! How in the world can you be from there? We left Nedune 150 years ago! Everyone on that planet must have rotted to dust by

now.”

“Lucky stiffs” Someone commented half-heartedly from the counter.

The people here might have been too weak to harm him, but those words alone struck him more forcefully than a punch to the stomach. If not for the apparent weightlessness, he was certain that his legs would have collapsed beneath him.

“Dead?! Over a century ago? But that's impossible? I was standing on the soil of Nedune less than twenty mynduz ago?”

The first woman spoke in a hushed whisper to the other one. “Captain, I think the hunger has sent him into delusions of fantasy.”

“Well sure Geela, that would seem obvious if it weren't for his size. I mean look at all that muscle. The only way someone on this ship could be so fat was by eating a dozen other crew members. And you remember Juntayli was shoved out the airlock last week for even *trying* such a thing.”

“What the duece should we do with him?” Not a thing that kid says seems to make any sense.” One of the people seated at the counter now joined the surreal discussion.

“If it were up to me I would just toss him out the airlock.”

He looked at one of the other people seated at the strange counter with an uncertain dread. The term ‘airlock’ wasn't anything familiar, but the man's tone said more than the

best encyclopedia could.

“Iprulkup, have we really descended to that? I mean if we really have lost the very last vestiges of our civility then what’s the point of us going on anymore?”

He saw the captain pull the first woman aside and speak with her in a hushed voice.

Chapter Two

“However he got here, we absolutely can’t afford another mouth to feed.”

“Well obviously Jessa. But the bigger concern for me is somebody looking at him and seeing the only solid food source on the whole ship.”

“Geela, we can only pray to the heavens that the example I made of Juntayli has put an end to that. It’s not even certain that we have enough people left on this ship to breed a new population assuming we *do* find a habitable planet to live on. We really can’t afford to lose anyone else, even to make an example.”

“But captain, he’s so strange. And he doesn’t seem to know the slightest thing about being on an interstellar ship. Even if we did have enough algae for him, I wouldn’t even trust him to run the waste cyler.” She paused and looked over towards a locked door as her tone filled with remorse. “If only one of the stasis tanks were still functional.”

“Oh Geela. Let’s not bring that up anymore. We can’t go back and change the past. We’re here now and we have to deal with this mystery without longing for the impossible.”

Ritem had caught tiny snippets of the conversation and he also pondered what his relationship might be with these people. Would he become their prisoner? Might he become – as disgusting as and terrifying as it sounded – a source of food? Much as he sought within himself for some greater understanding, he could discern no possible alternative choice then what they described.

The whole situation was utterly surreal, how could he confirm to these people the truth behind the memories that were only a few mynduz old for him? “Look folks, I don't know how to convince you. Look at my hands, there's dirt on them, my clothes are dirty-”

“Hold on, one moment Geela.” The captain swung around to face him again. “What is your name son?”

“Um.” It took him a few moments before his brain could switch from his own thoughts and focus on her question. “..well, my name is Ritem.”

“Okay Ritem. Do you know your parents names? Are they still alive?”

“What?” He couldn’t imagine such a thing. “Of course they're still alive. My mom's name is Shriya and my dad is Kritar. They're farmers on the east end of Philadrog.”

The woman looked thoughtful for several minutes. “I don't remember anyone named Shriya or Kritar on the list of

surviving. But then... well it's hard to remember much of anything these days.”

The captain 'swam' back over to one of the counters and pushed several buttons. “Well, I don't understand it, there's no record of those two people and no one in the ship looks as pudgy as you. I can't imagine how an unknown person could just show up here.”

“But look. This stuff under my nails. It's dirt. I swear!”

The other woman took hold of his hand and examined it. “Well there does seem to be some kind of dark brown stuff on his hands. It's not like anything I've seen before. It smells mighty odd.”

“Captain, we just can't afford to support anyone else on this ship. Someone's got to take on the unpleasant task of getting rid of this kid.”

The woman turned from him and responded with a voice bereft now of vitality. “Oh Virab what difference does it make. If we survive a month or six months or even another dozen. There hasn't been a habitable planet in seven years and we're down to our last probe. There's really no use in keeping up our charade any longer is there?”

The scene was so disheartening and empty of hope that he could almost predict the answer to his next question... almost. “Um, what charade do you mean?”

The captain now spun around with such a degree of fury that he couldn't have imagined anyone here would have the energy for. “What charade? What charade?! Oh come now,

surely you know. It's the same story we've been repeating for decades now. *Some* day we'll find a planet. *Some* day we'll be able to grow enough food to keep away the hunger. *Some* day we'll have something more than a shoddy daydream that our species can somehow escape extinction."

Once again he felt certain that if there had been a downward force, his legs would have dumped him straight to the floor. Even so, his limbs felt hollow and his eyes grew as wide as a hourdz's. "You mean... the entire race is down to just the people on this ship in space?! But how is that possible? How.." He swallowed deeply. "How many are left?"

The captain returned her deep inquisitive stare towards him now. "You... you, really don't know do you? No, I can see it on your face. This whole situation is completely unknown to you. Geezkrishna, I hate to be the one to tell you this. You seem like a nice enough kid Ritem." She looked aside in thought for a moment before continuing "there are only about... um" The woman paused again as if searching for something in the dark "let's see Shrinar died last week, so about... maybe 85 people left."

Ritem felt the blood drain completely from his face as his jaw hit the floor. "What in the world happened to all of you? The whole species is down to just eighty-five souls?"

The captain looked at him pityingly. Young man, generations ago, Nedune was a dying planet. Our species had destroyed it in our hubris. The lust for dinars and the processing of kowl had rendered the whole planet unlivable

and there was barely enough food to keep a few hundred souls alive. There was constant fighting just to even get a bit of algae each day, at least for those that saw any worth in staying alive at all. Nisu's forebears along with all of our ancestors took a last desperate gamble and launched the *Faint Hope*. We've been heading for... for... Virab where are we heading again?"

"Captain we're heading into the Lindra cluster."

"Right... geezkrishna I haven't had algae in- um- I guess at least two days."

"Jessa, your our leader. You have to keep your strength." Someone else exclaimed.

"Oh Dissur, I'm alive, what more do you want of me?"

"By all that is holy, captain... do you think that this is the end of all Huemean's everywhere? It's so- so hard to believe."

The woman continued to look exasperated. But the fury was gone, leaving a hollow defeat in it's wake. There was no longer any strength left behind her words now. "Oh Ritem, look around you. Most of us are lucky to get one carefully measured serving of algae a day. Nobody even has hope enough to get pregnant, what do you think will happen when the last woman grows too old to give birth? Even if we found a planet... pretty soon there wont be anyone to carry on the species regardless."

Despite the previously comfortable temperature, his arms felt cold and the air seemed to have become thicker, more

oppressive somehow.

“Geezkrishna! This is horrible. Isn't there any way to stop this?”

“Didn't you hear the captain doof! Even if we found a planet, there aren't even enough of us anymore. It's the end of all Huemean's... every damn one of us. Go tell that to all your fat-”

The captain interceded on the man's speech. “Now now Iprulkup, I know your hungry, and we all get short-tempered when we're hungry. If you need a sedative, you're welcome to take one. The more we sleep, the less energy we'll burn and the less algae we'll need.” Slowly, she turned back to him. “Ritem, you're welcome to explore the ship here. Most of us have nothing else to do and there might be someone who'd enjoy hearing about where you came from. But there's no food here. Not much water either.”

Now the other woman looked at him with a strange new expression. Her eyes were pleading as she stared directly into his, then she turned to Jessa. “Captain, do, do you think it would be possible to follow this kid back to where he came from? I mean, if they have an acre of trux we could eat, we might be able to find a future there... by the Holy One, to have real food for just once in my life!”

Ritem thought about what she said. Eighty-five new people. Sure they had food, but would it be enough for all of them? Then again, he couldn't refuse and let them all starve to death. He was in the middle of pondering what his parents

would say at the sight of dozens of starving refugees when his thoughts were interrupted.

“Captain I would like to volunteer as a scout and see if it would be possible to escape back to where this boy came from.”

Ritem saw the pleading in her eyes, as if she was begging for her very life which, he finally realized, was exactly the case.

“Please, Jessa?”

Ritem fought a war within himself. He felt that it would be criminal not to give them at least some faint spark of hope and offer what help he could. But even if there was enough room and food, he didn't even know how he *could* get back. He'd tested every drawer and panel within reach and had not the slightest success in discovering the strange passageway home. He couldn't push that obvious fact aside for long, but the woman's pleading eyes finally won him over for the moment and he decided to keep his peace until he could discretely search through their storage room again.

Ritem looked back at the captain and saw her deep in thought while the room itself seemed to hold it's breath in anticipation.

“Geela, I realize how strong the temptation is to jump at the first chance of salvation, no matter how slim. But we know nothing about this boy, or his world. We know nothing of Nedune save for the stories from our ancestors who

managed to escape. And those were quite horrif-

Ritem saw the woman move over to the captain and grab her by the shoulders in a mad desperation. It seemed that while these people lacked any real physical strength, they managed to put a surprising amount of energy into their words and expressions.

“By all that is Holy Jessa! Think about it, in seven generations we haven't seen one single planet that could keep us alive. I don't know where this kid came from either, but wherever it is... this **has** to be the best chance we have of holding onto more than just a bare starving existence!”

Ritem felt his eyes getting wet from the intensity of emotion in the woman's voice and it was clear that her pleading had made an impact on the captain as well. The woman, Jessa, put her own arms onto Geela's and spoke in a low and very calm voice. “Alright. I'll tell you what.” She turned to one of the people at the strange counter. “Virab, how far do you estimate that planet is?”

The man turned around and showed a serious expression. “Captain, sensors indicate that it's twenty million clicks.”

“Thank you.” She turned back to the woman in front of her and her expression softened further. “Geela, let's give it half a day. We should be close enough to get a more accurate reading by then. If this planet looks like it could support us, then we're going to need everyone's help to get things set up on the surface. If not... well, we wont have any alternative anyway.

Chapter Three

Though he'd never met a single person here before, the whole crew of this strange ship in the heavens now treated him like an honored guest. People asked over and over for stories of what it was like to harvest food and their hungry mouths hung slack at the stories of whole fields of trux or punkrins. He told them about the weekly trips to the market where his father traded their harvest for clothing, or tools, or sometimes a few dinars.

For himself, he had thousands of questions of his own, and there were so many things he didn't understand. How did all of their food run out and why did they abandon Nedune? Why was it that not a living soul on the ship had even heard of wood, or even a tree for that matter?

He asked these questions over and over, but even the mere concept of Nedune was barely more than a myth for the desperate mass of people. Their entire existence was limited to the narrow confines of this floating container that barely kept the dark specter of death at bay for eighty-five starving souls.

Through it all the thought kept nagging him in the back of his mind that if he didn't manage to find the passageway back, then memories would be the only thing left of his own comparatively blessed life on Nedune as well` .

The idea that he might be forced to live a short and starving existence among these people never left his thoughts through every conversation and every trip through the claustrophobic passageways.

A conversation that he was having with a frail looking teenager was interrupted by a disembodied voice that seemed to come from somewhere up on the walls. "All senior staff. Report to the bridge."

The voice sounded like the captain, and it had the same beleaguered tone that he sensed in all the people that he met here. The man saw him gaping at the voice in the wall, but he didn't know how the 'intercom' worked. Ritem looked around at the walls, but, he could not figure how the woman's voice could be coming from several places at once when the captain was nowhere to be seen. He was still pondering this, when Geela casually drifted towards them, her skull-like face wearing a concerned look.

"Ritem, you might as well come along with me. If this planet is finally the one for us, then you can go back to Nedune knowing that all of us will survive. And if not-" Her voice trailed off into a pregnant pause. "Then we'll have no option but to try this corridor of yours, and may the Holy One be merciful with us."

Back on the bridge he saw the captain turn from the strange counter to face them. Her own face was a tortured mask of pain as she motioned Geela towards her. The long embrace

between them told Ritem that the news couldn't be at all good.

“Oh lord no!” It was less a statement than a scream, but one which spoke not of anger or fear, but the most tortured and hopeless despair that he had ever witnessed. For himself, he was still unclear as to the reason behind it, but he expected that whatever it was, he would not like it one bit.

He looked from one to the other of them, desperately wanting to know what silent news was showing in those glazed expressions. But it was clear that this was a deeply personal time for them and so he stood aside and let them confront the situation in their own way.

It took a long while until the hugging and tears finally subsided before the captain addressed the other woman and threw a glance at Ritem as well. “It seems that you've gotten your wish Geela. We have no choice now but to trust our future to this boy. Both of you go and check back as quickly as you can. I don't know how long I can keep the bad news quiet. Chances are, someone will just open an airlock and put an end to *all* of our suffering at long last.

She turned then back to Ritem. “Young man, I'm sorry that you have to witness this. If you value eating or having a life at all, I suggest you find a way to get back home. There... there's nothing left here, nothing at all.” She paused and like the other girl, looked at him with the mournful eyes of the condemned. “And if you *do* get back-” she hung her head and her voice fell to a barely perceptible whisper “eat a serving of Trux for me.”

“And for me.”

“And me.”

The sentiment echoed among the wide collection of hollow eyes, the weight of their sorrow felt stronger even than the downward force back on Nedune. If this was what the future held huemeanty, he certainly wanted to stay as far from it as possible.

So Ritem followed the woman back through the corridor, holding the handrails as he drifted along behind. Through the whole trip, his own fear was now dominated not by claustrophobia, but with the very real possibility that none of them would get back to Nedune. In hopes of distracting from the worry and fear, he asked his companion the details of what had caused all of their upset. He guessed that there wasn't going to be food for them, but the details were beyond him.

“Geela, what happened back there, I mean, with the captain?”

She paused in her progress to stare back at him with a look of empty fury. “You mean you don't know?!”

He wanted to tell her the obvious, that he'd never been on a ship like this and he hadn't been with the captain when whatever information had been discovered. But these people were clearly at the point of utter hopelessness and so he merely shrugged.

“It didn't work! Dammit! The planet is too young! There's so much lava all over and the air is full of carbon. We won't have anything to breathe down there.” The woman put her face in her hands and mumbled something that he had to ask her to repeat. “There's nothing else *for us* Ritem! Following you back is the only option we have to stay alive. It's... it's that or the whole lot of us dies.”

Once again, his legs felt dead as he stared into this woman's sunken and forlorn eyes. Clearly there was nothing for it. If dad became angry, then so be it. He couldn't let these people all suffer a slow and starving death out here in, some nebula or whatever.

They floated through a doorway and Ritem found himself back in the room with all the drawers. He wasted no time in once again checking all the faces of the drawers from floor to ceiling and from right to left.

He said a silent prayer to the Holy One as he then made for the the final wall opposite him. Feeling the drawers, he touched over a dozen of them. Each time he struck solid metal his hopes fell one more notch. By the time he reached the 16th drawer, he wondered if he might indeed suffer the same fate as the rest of the skeletons on this ship in the heavens. He banged on the floor, on the ceiling, everything was unyieldingly solid.

Looking back at the girl he saw her head fall to the floor. “Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god-”

“Jeezkrishna. I'm too young to die!” He started beating on the drawers with all his strength. Soon he was leaving dents in many of them, which seemed to have no effect whatsoever on the numbed woman. She seemed to be too bereft of any emotion whatsoever by this point. He almost did fall on his face finally, when his fist punched straight through into empty air.

“I found it! Geela, I found it. I found it!”

She pushed towards him, put her arms around his neck and squeezed with what must have been all the strength in her fragile body.

“Oh Ritem! We're saved. We're saved! Jeezkrishna, to actually see food, and plants, and this... dirt you talk about.”

Without wasting any time, he gently guided the woman into the passageway and told her to squeeze his hand twice if she needed help.

Barely a second passed after her head disappeared before she was frantically squeezing his hand and he pulled her back. Her face was covered with dirt and her eyes were wide with terror.

She looked as if she'd just discovered that she really *was* no more than an animate skeleton. “I don't believe it. After all these years, decades even of hoping and praying...” Her voice now fell to a barely audible whisper. “We never even knew.”

With her seeming incoherence and her eyes glazed over, Ritem took a moment to carefully wipe the woman's face and saw her eyes cloud over with tears that soon grew to a torrent.

“What is it Geela? What is it you never knew?”

It took several moments before she managed to look up at him. “Gravity Ritem. Fluppin gravity!!! Geezkrishna we've spent our whole lives in zero-G and it never even occurred to us that we needed muscle in order to withstand the gravity. But... but there's just never been enough algae.”

She wrapped her skeletal arms around his neck one more time and her body shook with the utterly hopeless grief of the damned, while he did his best to comfort her. He could think of nothing to say, nothing that could carry sufficient tenderness to counteract such a vast immeasurable despondency. So he just continued to hold her until her crying was spent.

When finally she gazed at him again, the pleading was gone. It was as if she were a deflated gas bag with no anger, no frustration, not even any bitterness left. She absentmindedly brushed the bubbles of water beneath her eyes away in a voice completely devoid of emotion. “Ritem, you'd better go. There's nothing more you can do to help us, but,” here she swallowed deeply. “I appreciate that you at least tried.

“I'm sorry Geela. I don't understand. What does gravity have to do with you coming back to Nedune?”

Now, she managed one last time to show some emotion. But it wasn't at all the one he would have preferred. "Look at me dammit! All of us here are nothing but skin and bones! Geezkrishna don't you get it? I couldn't even keep my head off the ground in there. I have no damn muscle to support my weight against gravity! Even if Jessa could find a planet for us tomorrow. We'd all be too weak to stand up on the surface!" She looked at him again and her expression softened back to the apathy he'd seen earlier. "I'm sorry Ritem. I don't want you to remember us this way. But, it's best that you go back to your home, and say a prayer of gratitude every night that you can at least have a few morsels of food to put in your stomach."

Now his own eyes too were brimming with tears which bubbled up, making it impossible to see. He gave the skeletal woman one last hug and she kissed his cheek briefly before he slowly pushed himself into the passage.

The last sound that he heard was a door opening and great blast of wind began tugging at his body. He almost got sucked back from the drawer and he was finding it difficult to breathe. But he managed to get his head through the strange material and took a deep breath before yanking his arms against the dirt.

Chapter Four

His whole body was filthy now, but it didn't matter. He was home! There was solid ground here, his family, and *food!*

“Ritem, are you finished with that spot? Geezkrishna boy, we can't spend the whole week on this. I have to get back to the fields.”

It took a long moment for him to reorient himself to his old reality. The downward force of gravity and the oppressive dirt walls served to remind him that while the nightmare may be over, the confusion wasn't.

When he finally managed to accept that things had returned to what he accepted as normal, his first instinct had been to rush out of the hole and clutch his father in joy and relief. But then he thought about how it would sound. Secret passageways, ships in the heavens, starving huemeans, dad would think he was crazy.

“Ritem! Answer me. Are you alright down there? I thought I heard a scuffle.”

“Sorry dad. I was working on this one spot and found a big rock. I must've hit my head or something.”

Now the frustration the man's voice was replaced with concern. “Ritem are you okay? Boy?”

He didn't like to be deceptive and he felt guilty for the reaction the comment brought in the man. “Oh I'm fine. But I think we'll have to shift the building over two freetz. This big rock is too heavy to move.”

Sounding disappointed, the voice came back down. “Alright. Well why don't you come on up and we'll have your mom check you out. No project is worth getting banged up over.

Chapter Five

His mom was the first to notice that something unusual was going on. As much as he strived to convince her that everything was fine, there was no plausible explanation that he could give for the shift in his personality. The time spent among a group of starving people had aged him in ways that his young mind wasn't consciously aware of. It was becoming impossible to concentrate on his chores around the farm and he found himself occasionally refusing food out of a strange sense of guilt.

The nightmare itself may have ended, but the memories refused to give him a moments rest. How could he describe what he'd seen to a pair of regular Trux farmers who never saw a person suffering through more than a single day of hunger. How could he convince him that he'd seen a place where only 85 huemeans were left alive.

Some unknown conversation must have happened because he discovered that he wasn't allowed to work on the foundation blocks anymore. Both his parents kept a close eye on him and he found that he was never doing chores by himself these days.

Every time they had a meal he would stare speechless at his plate while thinking of Geela and the captain, and all the other skeletal people on that ship. What could have

happened to them in that far off horrific place. The feeling of floating in the air, the algae, the search for another planet, it was like nothing he'd seen, even in story books.

What could any of them do to help such a huge number of starving people? Even if he could raid their full stock of winter punkrins it wouldn't provide more than half a meal for eighty-five people.

Chapter Six

Mom and Dad were arguing. It was happening more often now and it was obvious that money was tighter than ever. There hadn't been enough rain and the harvest was slim. Worse yet, he learned that his father had hired one of the neighbors to help finish the foundation. He had made every attempt possible to convince his parents that he could finish the job himself, but nothing he said had proven the least bit convincing. They had gotten the help needed, and now the woman was demanding payment. The food situation wasn't critical yet, but there wasn't any extra left over to pay debts or make repairs. When the tension and the squabbling became overwhelming, he found his solace in the one place where he wasn't faced with his parents or with Kia. That being the woods behind his house.

The small oasis provided a convenient escape into an environment free of money woes, fieldwork, and his family. These days, when the tension in the air was palpable, the place was his one and only respite.

It was more difficult now for him to relax and with his parents having forbidden him from going back into the tunnel, even the *possibility* of helping those wretched people was denied him.

Sitting among the trees now, he thought back again to the strange place he'd found and what it could possibly mean. He was finding that he couldn't live with himself in a place surrounded by food plants while those people were eating some kinda algae soup.

Even a half pound of soats would be an amazing gift for a group of people like that. It was a tough decision, and he didn't know if he could find the courage to go through with it when actually facing the barrier, but the memory of those gaunt faces just wouldn't leave his conscience alone.

Finally, his mind made up, he grabbed a little that would've gone to the animals and started digging next to the wall. The blocks had all been installed now and it was harder to find since the memory of it's location had disappeared into the past. He dug pilot holes in several places searching for the one spot that might bring him back to that ship. He kept making small holes out from the trench until at last the peculiar white surface presented itself again.

Chapter Seven

By the time he finished, he was covered in dirt and completely exhausted. He pushed against the strange

surface and once again his trowel disappeared straight through, having no resistance at all. He brushed the dirt aside and peered in, but there was nothing that he could see at all this time. It was so dark that he couldn't even tell how large the space was or if anyone was alive anymore. Finally with a shrug, he heaved through and this time fell ungainly to the ground. He fell on something soft that smelled horribly bad. Immediately the air was filled with a putrid stench and he spat out several times from whatever it was. He picked himself up and felt along the walls to try and get a sense of *where* this place was.

“Hello?” The echo told him that he was in a room not much bigger than his bedroom. Nobody answered so he decided to feel his way around for a door. He couldn't figure out why he didn't float like last time. He also noticed that it was quieter, last time there had been a strange humming vibration. Here it was as quiet as the trench in which he'd been digging earlier.

As he felt around blindly, everything seemed to be broken. There were sharp edges and irregular lines all over. The air smelled odd and he couldn't help coughing over and over. It took an eternity to find another door without killing himself in the process and he almost tripped a dozen times. When finally he did find an opening, it was so small that he barely fit through and he bumped his head on the door frame. The next room had a dirt floor and once again he had to move carefully to keep from tripping over the random debris

scattered haphazardly about.

Eventually he made it across to another door and reached the outside. There was a tiny flickering fire off in the distance, but everywhere else was flat black. He couldn't see the moon or stars of any kind. He tried to make it across to the flickering light, but he almost fell sprawling over something just outside the building. The air was thicker here and his chest hurt. So he decided to wait in the doorway until it was light enough to see.

His eyes drooped and he must have dozed off because when he looked up again, it felt like dawn. There was a faint light streaming through the doorway but it was just barely enough to see. He was amazed then, when he looked out and saw, not the edge of dawn, but a faint outline of sunlight far above the horizon. The sky was thick with dark black clouds and the sun was dim enough that he could look directly at it without squinting. There was only a slight breeze and the ominous clouds piled slowly across the sky, having no particular place to hurry off to. He was looking out at full day, but everything around was barely brighter than what the full moon would show. The only time he had ever seen a sky like that was before a huge storm approached, and then the clouds flew across the face of the sun like a galloping hoardz. There were precious few buildings that looked whole enough to provide even a modest shelter, and strewn all around in every direction were random piles of rubble. His chest was hurting more now and it felt like there was sandpaper in his throat. It was worse then that time Shrik had convinced him to try

putting a wad of trux leaves in an old cob pipe.

The scene around him was scary enough that he pondered just giving up and heading straight back to the passage. But then he saw a person sitting up against a pile of rubble. At first he couldn't tell if they were alive or dead. The body just seemed to lay there unmoving. There was a geologic hill of rags piled around them and even the rags were caked in a black dirt that smelled of urine. The face was black and the only part with any color were his half-closed eyes.

"Excuse me."

"Oh bugger off. Leave me die in peace." From the pitch of the voice and the lack of any stubble, he realized that it was a woman.

Ritem noticed that the woman was lying on a pile of moldy cushions that he couldn't imagine using even for an animal. Just like the people on the ship she was barely skin and bones, with big circles around her eyes.

The whole scene was so overwhelmingly sorrowful that for a second he again considered honoring the woman's wish and heading back. But his curiosity nudged him forward with an invisible and unrelenting hand. "What's so bad though?"

The woman laughed bitterly and a tooth flew off into the street. "What's so bad?! What's so bad?" Her cackling went on for a long while, like some kind of raving lunatic.

"What's so bad he says. Amazing." The woman now looked at him directly. "Have you been living under a damn rock all these years? Geezkrishna. I didn't make the cut! I didn't

get ta go on the ship!”

Now the woman looked at him even closer and he began to squirm a bit. “My my boy. You look positively FAT.”

“The ship? What ship?”

“What ship?” The woman gave another maniacal laugh.

“What ship. What ship he says.” She acted like she was talking to some other invisible person. “Like Huemeanty sends up so many spaceships that they have to have a damn serial number on them.” The woman looked back at him again. “Boy, how could you not have heard of the *Faint Hope*? And the lottery, and the rioting?” There was a short pause. “Hm, maybe I’m just losing my mind and your an illusion.

“No... honest this is the first time I've ever been here. I'm just wondering what happened to make this place so- sooo-”

“Shitty. Really boy. You must be a complete dunderhead to not know about Megacorp. The greedy bastards made billions of dinars and got control of the whole army, but in the end it didn't do them a lick 'o good, now did it.” The woman swung her frail arm around and laughed a long bitter laugh. Nope, didn't do them but *one lick 'o good*. I hope they rot in hell for all the shit they did.”

He stared at the woman and the horrific scene surrounding them. “But why would anyone want to do this to the land? I mean, don't they eat too?”

For a second, the woman looked pensive. “Well now that’s an interesting question. I don't really know. The last few

years some people have thought that they might just be some kinda robots. No feelings at all. Given what they've been doing it'd sure make sense."

A few of them tried to bribe their way onto the ship, so at least *those* scalawags would have been huemean. But eventually the folks stocking the ship wised up and killed the last coupla greedy bastards.

"But what *about* this ship? How can a simple ship be so important if there's no way to grow trux, or soats, or..."

Once again the woman peered at him, and this time those dark eyes drilled straight into him like the living skulls he'd seen on the spaceship. "Boy, what's this you spouting about some extinct plants for. Aint nobody seen a gram o' that stuff since before I was born."

This sounded just like the situation he'd seen before where he remembered the captain talking about having to eat algae. Suddenly it struck him like a smack to the head. "Oh my god! The ship I was on...they called it the *Faint Hope* too. So you people also have no food?"

"Geezkrishna boy. With you lookin so fat and not knowing anything... are you from another *planet* or sumethin?"

"Well, it sure feels like it. The last time I traveled through this strange material and found myself on a ship, but not an ocean ship. A ship in space. There was no... no force pulling me to the floor. People swam through the ship the way we would swim in a lake. The people were all skinny and they were looking for some, uh, planet. They were

talking about not having much algae.”

The woman lost her intensity now and returned to the sullen despondency which had blanketed her before. “Boy why don't you go spout your crazy somewhere else.”

He didn't know why, but suddenly it seemed important for him to make this person understand. But that only brought him to another puzzle. What could he possibly say to a woman living in an utterly surreal hell, the likes of which no one could ever imagine? What brilliant dialogue or gesticulation might bring this sorrowful woman to realize that he was telling the truth?

If didn't even make sense to *him*, then it wasn't at all possible. Not in a thousand years. But then he remembered the handful of soats. He showed it suddenly to the woman and her eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets.

“Oh my dear dear lord! Are those really plants?? It can't be. Nobody's seen real plants here for decades. Geezkrishna the last one I heard about went extinct when I was about your age.”

It was so hard to believe all of this. He couldn't imagine what could've happened to create such a desolate scene. “Wow, you mean you folks don't have any soats at all here?”

Now, impossibly, the woman's eyes actually managed to grow even wider. “Soats?! You've actually got *soats*?” She stared at Ritem's hand as if it held a million dinars. “Geezkrishna I wish I could eat that. How absolutely shitty, to finally see real food again and have no teeth left to eat

with. Curse it all!" She threw a stone out into the distance with a feeble jerk.

Turning back again, the woman looked up with a wholly different expression... it more resembled the reverence which the people on the ship held for him. "Just where in this universe are you from, dear boy?"

Ritem had to think for a minute. "Well....I'm from Ulak, which is near Medria. Where I live the air is clear and we grow fields of trux, soats, and punkrims. We're poor, but at least we have food to eat."

"The woman continued to stare wide-eyed. "My god, punkrims?! I've only heard about those in stories. Are they sorta...roundish with seeds in em or somethin?"

"Well, yeah. Some o' them are orange and some are more yellowish and they have kind of a hard outside with flesh inside and seeds at the center. They grow to be about this big." He held his hands 40 straums apart.

"Geezkrishna! A punkrim that big could feed a man for five days." She paused and looked back. "Listen, you don't want to be spouting this stuff too loud. There's some folks here still have the strength to walk. They'd sneak behind you and kill you for a chance to get to that land. Me, well, I barely have the strength left to even keep my head from falling over. Not that it makes much difference anymore."

"You poor soul, I'm so sorry to hear all of this. I wish there was something I could do."

The woman looked thoughtful for a second. "Well, it's been

mighty lonesome. Would you mind telling me some stories about this fascinating place where you live?"

So just as he had with the people on the ship, he sat with this woman for an hour or so talking about the farm, and harvesting the trux. He talked about Kaya and how she always complained about having him as a babysitter. He talked about finding the strange stone-thing and finding himself on the ship. This last brought her interest back enough to ask questions.

"Yeah, and this funny ship, were there people on it, like yourself?"

"Sure, but they were all real hungry, they were skinny like you are. They couldn't believe me when I said I was from Nedune."

"Oh well sure. That makes sense. *No one in the world* would believe someone as well fed as you could be from *this* planet."

He almost fell over from hearing her. "So *this* is Nedune?!" How could it possibly be that he was staring out at the same planet he'd lived on his whole life?

"Well of course. Where do you think you are. Man do you got some kinda brain disease or sumethin?"

He was trying not to get offended, but it was all so [surreal]. There wasn't any slightest part of this adventure made sense. "No of course not. But the Nedune I left just a few hours ago had big fields of punkrins and trux.

“Good lord, so why in the world would you come here then? Stay where you are and say yer thanks to the powers above every night that yer not starving to death in this place.”

Now he felt more uncomfortable. Well, I just wanted to get away from my parents. They've been fighting over money late-

He was interrupted by a bellowing laughter from the woman followed by a long hacking cough. A tiny rivulet of blood meandered down her chin as she looked up again. “Boy, if it's money you want, just wander around. All the folks still alive are the ones with the money to buy the last of the food. Now they're stuck, cuz guess what?” She laughed again for a long while. “Ya caint *eat* pierlz 'n rubyz. So now they just litter the ground.”

Now it was Ritem's turn to be shocked. “You mean you've got pierlz and jemz just littering the ground?”

“Boy, didn't you hear what I just told you? All the idiots that sold their food for money found that they couldn't eat their profit an they died.”

“So are you people eating algae like the people on the ship?”

“You kiddin? We put all the algae tanks onto the *Faint Hope*, every one of us sacrificed our minuscule chance for survival on the possibility that the *Faint Hope* might find another place for huemeans to live.” Now he looked more intently. “But you said the people on the ship were skinny like me. So did they all die too?”

Now Ritem wondered to himself. Should he tell the woman about what the captain had said? Could he really be the one to share with this fragile shell of a huemean that those people had all given up? No, he decided to let this person die with some spark of faith within her soul. "Well, when I got there, the folks were low on food, but one of the people reported a habitable planet on some kind of scanner. They were about to launch something called a probe. Maybe that's where Huemeans will make a new start."

"Goddamn lucky stiffs." she muttered. Soon the woman's head lolled and hse started snoring. Ritem's heart ached for her, but it didn't look like there was anything more he could do. The whole tragedy just felt too monumental for any huemean to solve.

Remembering what the woman had said and hoping that he could find *something* sanguine in the endless sea of desolation, he started wandering around looking for some of the jemz or pierlz. As he walked, there were an overwhelming number of skeletons laying near the decrepit shells of old buildings and lots of four-wheeled metal carts that were burned beyond recognition.

He found one building with half of one wall still intact and peaked inside. There were a couple of skeletons, some broken furniture and a few scraps of metal. In one corner was the remains of a fire pit with scraps of paper laying around. He picked one of them up and his legs almost gave way. It was a 10,000 dinar note, and there were *dozens* of them. He quickly stuffed what he could into his pocket.

Geezkrishna, even a single bill like that would pay for a new hourdz. The woman had been right, there were riches here beyond his wildest dreams. He moved on and saw another building riddled with holes and with it's roof collapsed into a pile. Peaking in this place he saw the bones of one wall exposed, like an accusing hand pointing into the room. But underneath them in a corner he saw a pile of precious jemz, rubbys, and a few more bills laying haphazardly on the floor. He took what he could and stuffed it into his pockets before the rest of the place collapsed on them.

But it didn't take long before the feeling of emptiness looming ever more oppressively over the land began to chip away at his greed.

He glanced up at the sun and decided it wouldn't be safe to be in a place as haunted as this after dark. So he took a last look around and prepared to hurry back the way he came.

“Hey! Get back here! Who are you?” He heard a voice coming from a box next to the building he'd just left. Looking cautiously around the corner he saw a man stand up slowly and with no small amount of difficulty. The man looked even older than his father did but shorter, and he wore a suit that looked like it had once been expensive. The man pulled himself up to his full height, but had to shift some of his weight to a short gray cane. His sunken eyes peered out through black circles in his skeletal face. The flaky skin of his cheeks clung tenaciously to the skull beneath and there was barely a hint of flesh anywhere on his body. But this man still had just a hint of fire in his eyes

as he stared intently back. Unlike the woman before, this man seemed to find the strength to speak up.

“I'm talkin to you boy! You stole my stuff. I saw you do it! Don't you dare lie to me!”

At first he didn't know what to make of this character. If what the last person said was true, then money was useless here. Still, his father had taught him morals and he wasn't going to lie to the fellow.

“I'm sorry mister. I didn't think there was anyone who owned this-”

But the man cut through his words with the sword of his voice. “What's that you got there. What's that in yer *hand* boy!”

He looked down and realized that he still had the soat stalks. That gave him an idea of how to get out of the situation. “Oh, I found these in a safe. I think it's food. You can have it in exchange.”

The man peered at the stalks in his hand and like the other fellow, his eyes bulged out of his sunken face. “Boy, you may be holding the last plants on the face of this whole damn planet!” His eyes then narrowed though as a cloud passed across his features. “Waaaiittt a minute. Why would you be offering your last food to me just fer a bunch of those worthless rocks in there?” The man paused in thought for a second. “You must have more of this somewhere. Jeezkrishna, you must be the wealthiest kid on the entire planet!”

Now the man, with what appeared to be all the effort he could manage, pointed the metal stick at him. "And your gonna show me where yer hiding it, right... **now!**"

Ritem knew the guy was too frail to be much of a threat, but his voice displayed an authority that easily made up for the lack of muscle. He felt paralyzed. What could he tell someone like this? What could he tell anyone?

"Boy, I aint gettin any younger. I said NOW!" The man raised his other hand slowly and Ritem saw a sizeable rock that the man held with obvious difficulty.

A half second flew by and then he saw the man's arm swing through the air. At first he panicked, but there hadn't been enough strength behind it for the rock to hit him with any serious force. He was knocked down, but not critically hurt. As he saw the man coming towards him, he quickly got up and pulled back away.

That was when he saw the metal stick fly too. He clearly didn't want to risk another second on the man and hurried back along the road towards the place he thought the passageway was in. As he ran, he barely caught the man's last words.

"Wait. Wait! I was playing. Really! Just one more handful of food. I'll give you three times as many pierlz...no no four times! Four times as many. Pleeeeeaaassee!"

The man's voice faded into the background and with his heart dragging behind him along the lifeless ground, he made his way through the waning light to the dilapidated

structure. Everything felt different now with even the meager light faded to a dust-filled shadow behind him. He had to take a few moments feeling about before he could even find the doorway from before. Once he was inside, his eyes were again useless and his legs cartwheeled randomly among the broken wood, the pieces of bent metal, and finally found the one intact doorway that he'd bumped his head on. But where was the passageway? There was nothing in the room but broken furniture, and a pile of moldy fabric. He felt along all the walls, the floor, even next to the doorway. There was nothing but solid surfaces. It was just as terrifying as the feeling back in the ship. In panic he began banging on every spot he could, fearing once again that this little adventure could leave him facing a slow and horrible death.

Finally in desperation he even started banging on the ceiling. A faint and cracking voice told him to keep it down and let a woman die in peace. But then near the corner, his hand punched through. The hole was in the ceiling! He let out a holler of joy which brought more complaint from the voice upstairs.

His hands searched about fiercely in search of anything that he could boost himself up on. It was awhile longer before he found what felt like a stable enough chair. After shoving the moldy fabric out of the way, he got the chair underneath and managed to reach into the opening. Then he was joyously pushing out into the hole.

Chapter Five

It was really confusing to have his sense of up and down thrown about like that. But the thrill of seeing healthy soil again quickly drowned out any upset. He laughed with joy at taking a breath of fresh air. But with the second breath he started coughing and a fire erupted in his throat. He coughed for several minutes until something dark colored and gross finally flew out. He sprang up to the surface and gazed joyously at the clear night sky and the thousands of stars. Now with his throat back to normal, he drank in long deep breaths of the clean air and ran gratefully over to the well for a drink.

If he'd been grateful before to get back to a place where nobody was starving, he was doubly so now. He made his way over to the nearest field and ran his hands lovingly through the stalks of trux as if it were the most precious thing in the world. Which, in fact, it was.

The realizations truck him that if ever he felt that farm life was boring, tedious, or frustrating, all he had to do was go through the passage and remind himself of how blessed he was to have food and water enough to be healthy and alive.

But now he had a new conundrum. He'd made it back in one piece with the jewels, and it had to easily be enough to pay off the farm and maybe repair the barn on top of that. But how could he make dad believe that he'd come across

thousands of dinars worth of wealth all on his own? Dad would think he'd stolen it.

He spent hours in his small playhouse mulling it over, but each idea would just get him in trouble. He couldn't give them to someone else to give to his parents without risk of the person stealing it. He wasn't old enough to have his own account in a banq. Hiding it in the house would just arouse suspicion. It took most of the night before a solution finally came to him. With just a hint of blue kissing the horizon, he carefully made his way out to the field. He started digging at the edge of the field, but worked his way down at an angle until he was just touching the lowest roots of the trux. He buried the pierlz and jemz among the roots and hoped that his dad wouldn't destroy them with the plow.

A few weeks later, the whooping and hollering drifting over on the wind told him that his plan had worked perfectly. Dad raced straight for the house and before he could even walk out and pretend confusion his parents were hugging and speaking in hushed voices.

Realizing that he might not be so adept at feigning ignorance, he instead closed the door and pretended not to notice. Instead he dug down and pulled the metal box from under the bed. Inside were the partly burnt remains of 10,000 dinar bills. It was the one thing he kept in his possession to prove that the whole experience hadn't merely been a fantastic dream. Looking now at the money in the daylight, it was clear that they were useless. There was a picture of someone he didn't recognize, a bunch of strange

writing, and a date 720 A.R. He didn't know what 'AR' meant and he could only assume that nobody would take the money seriously.

As he stared at the old bills, the thought of all those desperate people kept nagging at his consciousness. Was he wrong to have taken advantage of them by stealing their wealth in exchange for a handful of animal feed? He wished that there was some way he could offer more to those starving people. But their plight was so monumental. How could it be? The whole of Nedune a barely habitable wasteland. Buildings destroyed and a few ragged survivors battling for scraps of algae? How was such a planet-wide devastation possible? And what did that man mean about something called kowl? It was so confusing. How could he have been in a ship, and then later find himself somewhere on a destroyed part of Nedune. It didn't matter how many times he spun the experience around in his mind, there was no making sense of it.

Chapter Six

Finally he decided that even if he could only help one or two people, that would be more than nothing. He'd do it in secret so a crowd didn't muscle him out or attack him. He made a stew of the few punkrims that wouldn't sell at the market. Then he packed that into a container that he

stuffed into a raggedy backpack. On impulse, he brought a carving knife for protection as well. He started down towards the hidden spot where he could reach the strange surface. But then he paused, remembering how close he'd come to losing the way back.

This time he also took a small plank of wood and tied some rope to it so he wouldn't suffer the same mistake again. He packed the food in a clay pot tied tightly closed and with no small amount of trepidation, crawled back into the hole. After a few minutes of searching, he found the strange material and brushed away the dirt. This time instead of exiting out of a wall, he ended up crawling up out of the ground. Once again, his sense of 'up' and 'down' were confused for a few minutes while he worked to reorient himself.

He took some time to get his bearings, and was again depressed by the uninterrupted wasteland surrounding him. At first he didn't see anything but a bare and empty horizon. It was the same type of devastation that he'd seen before except with no ruined buildings. Here his gaze revealed not a single plant or tree in the whole panorama. The eerie scene was one of endless emptiness marching up to a row of barren hills in the distance. He crawled out and started looking all around before a voice drifted over to him.

“Hey! Where did you come from?”

“Is that guy with the cops?”

“Naw, can't be, he's got no uniform.”

He carefully took a breath, but thankfully the air wasn't quite as horrible here. The clouds were thick and dark, but it was no worse than a normal cloudy day back home. There were giant machines on wheels crouching in the dirt and a group of five defiant-looking people were staring at him from their position huddled against one such machine. He initially dismissed the people as he strained his neck trying to absorb the fantastic size of the contraptions. They were the largest things he'd ever seen in his life. It was a gargantuan web of metal as large as their entire farm back home and they crouched on great oval-shaped wheels the size of a small house. At one end was gigantic metal arm that reached seemingly forever into the distance.

Finally he heard some whispered comments and focused again on the people. There was an older fellow with a long gray beard and a barely perceptible stomach. Next to him were a pair of young adults who looked like brother and sister. Another woman about his mother's age with an arm wrapped around the nearer boy's shoulders, and finally a slender girl a few years older than he was.

"What are you people all doing here?"

"What are we doing??! How could you be out here without knowing about the protest?" The girl was slender but not as gaunt as the people last time. Her sand-colored hair almost perfectly blended in with the lifeless ground on which all of them sat. She wore a t-shirt with the word 'Megacorp' and a big red 'X' over it. She looked at him with the same piercing stare as the dying woman in the last place, but this

woman's expression showed resolute determination in sharp contrast to the hopelessness of the people on the ship. "Say, you don't work for megacorp." She peered closer then, "do you?" Her stare felt intimidating in the vast emptiness. "Nah, you'd be wearing nicer clothes and you wouldn't be caught dead out here in this wasteland."
"Wait. I've heard of Megacorp. People were saying that they destroyed the whole of Nedune."

Now the middle-aged man spoke up. "Well they haven't managed to destroy the *whole* planet yet, but they sure seem to be doing their best. What do you think we're *here* for?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I've just arrived."

"Now another person peered at him closely, a pattern he sadly realized he'd have to get used to. "You just got here from, where?"

"Well, I'm from Ulak...that's near Medria."

Someone gave a bitter laugh. "Oh well goody for you, you're from the same town as Roquelfeliay."

This was something new. "Who's that?"

Suddenly, an explosion of laughter, erupted into the sky from the whole group. "You don't know Roquelfeliay?! Man are you one lucky damn SOV!"

He could gather no reason for the group's laughter but it obviously spoke of something deeper. "Why would you say that?"

“Why? Ha! Why indeed.” Now the older woman spoke with a voice full of fury. “Well, because he was the devil personified. The guy started all this.” The woman swept her arm around in a wide arc. “Not a living thing around for a thousand freedz in every direction. All so megacorp can earn more dinars. Why do you think we're locked up to the machines? Someone's got to do something to keep at least a little of the planet left alive.”

“But what do these giant machines do?” He stared in awe at the monstrous structures.

Now the teenager stared at him the way he often looked down at Kaya. “You seriously don't know about the diggers, and the land stripping? Where in the world have you been?”

As tired as he was of the repetition, he went through the same old explanation of the strange passageway, the farm that he lived on, and how he seemed to randomly pop out in a different place.

It seemed that the girl who seemed to be there with her brother believed him, because she was willing to explain it. “These things are the giant diggers that Megacorp uses to tear apart the land so they can get to the kowl. Nothing and nobody stands in their way... and nothing is left alive by the time they're finished destroying everything.”

He thought about that for a moment. “Well, it's not as bad as the last place I found myself in.” He told them about the land where the air was hard to breathe and all the people he saw were dying of hunger.

“Sounds like what some people have predicted will happen here if Megacorp isn't stopped.”

“Well if there's any way that I could help, I'd really like to. I brought some food with me since the people I saw before seemed to all be starving. It's punkrin stew.”

“What?” The sound rippled like an ocean wave through the group. “Did he say punkrin?”

“Punkrin? Really??”

“Um... yeah. You're welcome to have some. This is from a couple that didn't look good enough for the market.”

Now the middle-aged man fixed him with his intense stare, “Boy, you'd have to be rich enough to work for megacorp to have punkrins. It's the most expensive food you can buy.”

“Really? Well in the last place I was in, the man said he'd only heard about them from stories.”

“That's not surprising. No one but the Megacorp goons could afford to actually buy one in real life.”

So one by one, he gave each of the protesters a taste of the food. After trying it, they gazed at him no less awe-struck than the woman he'd shown the soats to.

“You *sure* you don't work for megacorp?” The older woman eyed him again.

He began thinking furiously. He didn't want one of them to attack him like last time. “Well, if I did work for them, wouldn't I try to stop you or something?” He'd heard about

protests from some of the old farmers when wages were low. It usually involved the army coming in with guns blazing.

“Hey! I see a truck coming. It must be the cops!” The woman now looked at him again. “Listen. Wherever you come from, you'd better get back there quick. If those goons find out you got punkrin with you, they'll just assume you stole it and that shit's super expensive so you'd be lookin at one *long-ads* jail sentence.”

He didn't relish the idea of being stuck in this time any more than the earlier ones. But he was curious what the cops looked like. He began looking around for the passageway which he gratefully found with less panic thanks to the rope. He stood next to it until he saw a large wheeled vehicle heading directly towards them. It had no cows or hoardz pulling it and traveled incredibly fast. As it closed in, a loud and commanding voice flew at high volume towards them sounding a little distorted. “You are trespassing on private property. This is your last warning to disperse or face arrest!”

With that, he pulled into the hole and back home. Instead of launching himself joyfully up to the yard though, he sat thinking over what he'd seen the last three times. First there was the ship in space with only a few souls left. Then there was the polluted and murky ghost town filled with dying people, and jems littering the ground. Then finally the protesters fighting against this 'Megacorp' which was destroying the land. He thought it over for a long while, but

couldn't make heads or tails of it. On a whim, he poked his head back through the material and looked carefully around. This time he saw the same hills in the distance, but there were large machines tearing up fields of soats and leaving bare dirt beneath. A large machine like the ones he'd seen before was sitting off in the distance at the edge of the work area. He pulled his head back in and wondered if he was looking at the place being transformed from a farm to an empty field where they dig for that kowl stuff. Finally as he sat there in that hole next to his old playroom, it struck him. Each time he went through, it must be an earlier time. The first place he went was the far distant future and the end of his race. Then each successive trip took him a little closer to his own time. He was watching the future of Nedune in reverse order! Now his legs finally *did* give out and he collapsed onto his keester. What in the world was this material? How could he travel to all these places seemingly in an instant?

More importantly though, what could he *do* about what he'd seen? Wasn't there any way of saving his world from such a horrible future? Endless possibilities tumbled about in his head, but none that seemed feasible to a poor teenage farm boy. No matter how many ideas he thought of, they all required either lots of money, many many hourdz, or some mighty powerful weapons. The problem felt way too big for him. An entire planet with nothing to eat. A giant organization with huge machines bigger than a farm. What could he do? He needed Shrik. That kid was a genius and if anyone could think of something, it'd be him.

Chapter Seven

He was sitting with Shrik under the old Mugilla tree at the edge of his dad's farm. Like before, he felt the words tumble about like leaves in a storm. It took a lot of repetition and explaining of details and still Shrik didn't believe him. It wasn't until he showed the kid one of the 10,000 dinar bills that his friend was finally convinced it wasn't a big joke.

“Ritem, man that's the craziest story I've ever heard. If it wasn't for the strange way you been acting the last few weeks, I wouldn't've believed you even with that fake money. You be sure not to tell any of the adults now, they'll think you've seriously lost your marbles.”

“But that's just it Shrik, that's what *everyone* keeps thinking. None of the people that I met would believe that I lived on a farm full of trux and punkrins.”

“So you really were out on a ship in... space? Did you see The Eternal then? Or monsters or somethin?”

“Nah, just a bunch of starving people. They smelled weird and had these big dark circles around their eyes. They seemed so, so hopeless. I swear it was the most awful and heartbreaking thing I've encountered in my whole life.”

“And you think that each time you go through, it's an earlier

time?"

"I... I guess. Cuz there were the protesters where the big machines were at first. But then I came back here for to escape the cops. And then when I poked my head through again a few minutes later the place was just startin to get destroyed."

"Wow. Hey is it okay if I tell my brother Jateem? He got a scholarship to go to college, so he can read up on some of this stuff yer talkin about."

Ritem thought about it. It all sounded so ridiculous that he couldn't imagine anybody taking the story seriously. "Well sure, if you don't tell him it was me, then that's fine. I don't want nobody sending me to the loony bin. Dad's gonna need my help with the soat harvest pretty soon."

"It's a deal my compatriot." They slapped hands in the private pattern that Shrik had made up last year. Then they played hoardz until his dad called for him to get back to work. He was reminded again of how his dad wouldn't let him do chores by himself and he worried that if Shrik's brother found out who it was, his situation at home would get a whole lot worse.

Chapter Eight

It was only a week later that Shrik came running down the path towards their field. "Ritem, Ritem!" He looked around quick. "I need to talk to you!"

Ritem hurried away from where he was checking the plants to see if they were ready for harvest. He followed Shrik until they were back near the old Mugilla tree. The boy's eyes were bright with joy and he was taking air in huge gulps.

"Ritem, you're never going to believe it!"

"Shrik, come on man. Tell me what's going on already!"

The boy took a deep breath and finally spilled it. "I talked to Jateem and asked if he could check with anyone in the astronomy department. I told him just some of the stuff you said that I thought might be verifiable. He told me that what that woman said about O2 checks out. O2 is the periodic name for Oxygen, that's what we breathe. Without 'O2' we'd all die."

Ritem dug down into his memory. "Um... well the woman said they might 'turn off the O2' in the room I appeared in. I guess that meant they didn't plan to use it anymore, like when we put towels against the door to Aunt Shira's old room to keep from heating an unused space. That makes sense."

"But Ritem, it gets better. He told me that what you described about people floating around on that ship is

unproven. Nobody's ever *been* up in space, so they don't know what happens. He said that there was this one scientist who theorized that once a person gets far enough from Nedune, the pull from the planet will get weaker and weaker until it's gone completely. He said that everyone was awed that a person could imagine such a thing. I told them... that I didn't know the name of the person, you know like you asked, but they insisted that you'd have to have several years schooling in science to even understand this stuff."

Now he was filled with exasperation. He grabbed his friend by the shoulders as if, by doing so he could physically bring an understanding to the kid. "But Shrik, I don't understand it! All I'm telling you is what I *saw*. None of it makes any sense to me at all. People starving to death, protests against this megacorp thing, it's like some kinda weird nightmare. Every time I go there, I feel like I'm gonna wake up in my bed with the pillow soaked with sweat."

Shrik didn't flinch at that. He just stared back intently. "Well listen. Could I go with you next time? Ya know, check it out too? It'd make this story of yours a lot easier to believe."

At first he was thrilled at the idea. It'd be so much easier to figure this out with his friend along for the ride. But then the image of that man with the rock surfaced in his mind and he pulled back. "Well sure, Shrik. I'd love to be able to prove it to you. But you can't imagine how dangerous it is. Several times I wasn't sure that I'd find the way back. One

guy tried to kill me in that ghost town with all the starving people. I was lucky that he was too far gone to be a much of a threat or I wouldn't even be sitting here talking to you."

His friend's expression became more sober then. "Well, are you gonna try going through again?"

This got him to stop and think about the situation. "Um... I don't know. It is super scary. But I'm also curious of course. I'm really worried that there wont be a way to stop whatever it is that's supposed to happen."

"Well I hate to be the one to tell you this my friend, but there doesn't seem to be any way to help either, until you can learn more about what's causing the whole mess."

Ritem noticed now a slight trembling at the thought of returning to that hellish place of starving people. He felt like he was trapped between a nightmare and a horror tale.

"I'm afraid you may be right" he finally managed to whisper.

Chapter Nine

Ritem sat in the hole for an eternity staring at the strange material. He checked his pocket again for the knife, and made sure to have the sack of trux with him. But he still wasn't sure he could go through with it. The thought of walking skeletons trying to attack him felt all too real sitting there in the pitch black trench surrounded by dirt. He

thought over all the things he'd seen, all the destruction, and all the people. It felt like when he was younger and he would play on the zeeshaw. Could he actually risk getting killed or being trapped in some kind of nightmare land? And if not, could he live with himself for doing nothing while the whole of Nedune was torn apart? He could see no easy way out of it. So finally he took a few deep breaths to build up his courage before pushing through the strange material once more.

He looked around in all directions and saw a perfectly clean room, with nice and perfectly straight walls. There was a sink on one wall in front of him and a tall metal structure that he couldn't identify. He walked out the door into a hallway lit by strange lamps that gave a steady light but with no flame. How such a thing could work was beyond him, but that clearly wasn't important right now. He pulled open the nearest door and found himself in a large room with half a dozen people. A woman sitting behind a glass panel motioned him over and handed him a thin wood board with several sheets of paper held by a metal clamp. She barely glanced at him as he took it. "Fill these out and we'll call your name."

Not quite having an alternative idea, he took the board with the papers and the pen that she handed him and sat in a chair to try and figure out what it was.

A young man was sitting one seat over and glanced at him with a sly expression. "Man, you're applying to Megacorp wearing that? Ha. They wont even give you a first call

back. You need to dress the part, boy.”

Ritem looked down at the form and saw the words 'MegaCorp' with a fancy logo drawn on the top of the sheet. “MegaCorp? My god, these are the devils everyone was saying is killing Nedune!”

Now the man looked at him with a sneer. “What? You one of them damn hippies? If you believe that crap, then why are you applying here anyway?”

“Me? I'm not applying here-”

“Look kid, I just saw you sit down with an application, I aint just some stupid country boy you know.”

“No really, I just walked in and the woman handed me this. I would never work for them. I've already seen them destroy good farmland.”

The guy laughed and made a funny motion with his hand.

“Oh blah blah blah. Well some of us have to keep a roof over our head. Why don't you go work for one of those eco-fascists then. See if you can earn a living sticking plants in the ground.”

He was so frustrated by the guy, that he did in fact walk out. With clenched fists, he stormed right down the hall and followed some strange signs saying 'exit' which led to a beautiful landing. For a moment he was so impressed by the light streaming in the giant windows and the gorgeous brickwork that he almost forgot about Megacorp. But just barely.

At the bottom of the steps there was a big open space with large potted trees, magazine racks, and a big peculiar sculpture. Near the doors was a man behind a desk who watched him leave, and then he was out in the open air. There was a wide stone walkway and a whole cacophony of vehicles in the street. A few carts pulled by animals, other carts that traveled with no animal power like the ones used by the 'cops' earlier, and a larger vehicle with a metal contraption on top that pushed against some overhead wires. It was all terribly confusing. He felt overwhelmed, and a little scared too. It seemed like the best course was to repeat what he did last time. Go back home and wait a few minutes before trying this place again. But then it struck him, he needed to get back to that room in order to reach the passageway. Could he find it again? He hurried back inside and was about to start backtracking his steps when the man behind the desk put an arm out to block his path.

The man towered over him as he spoke firmly. "Sorry son, they don't need any more applicants upstairs."

"But I'm not applying for anything. I just arrived here and need to get back to... to." Barely had the words flown from his mouth before he realized that there would be no way for him to explain the situation in a way that this man would understand. He looked around in desperation and saw the man fold his arms in front of him and furrow his eyebrows.

"Look buddy, the secretary already told me that they've gotten all the applicants they need up there. So I'm going to have to ask you to leave peacefully. We don't want to give

you trouble young man.”

He was about to protest, but he quickly saw that the situation was hopeless. The only way home was in the control of this Megacorp and he couldn't imagine any way now to get back up there with this security person blocking the way.

He was stranded. Not only in a foreign town or city, but in a time that he knew nothing about. There seemed to be no way out now. His countenance fell to the floor and his shoulders slumped as he shuffled back to the street. There was nothing the least bit familiar outside except the few horse-drawn carts. He hung his head and mourned the hopeless predicament. After all the times that he'd taken the risk to explore the strange passage, it seemed that his luck had finally run out now. He was stuck here in this foreign place... forever.

“Hey buddy, can you spare a 1/2 dinar?”

Looking over, he saw an older man in dirty and torn clothes sitting almost out of sight next to the building. The man wasn't as destitute as the people in the ghost town, but he wasn't far from it either. With nothing else to do, he walked over to talk with the man. He hoped that a person with nothing to lose would be less likely to put him in some loony bin.

“I'm sorry mister. But I don't have anything on me. I'm a complete stranger to this place.”

The man looked at him a little more. “Hmm. Yeah. Come to

think of it, you do look different from the rest of these people. More uh... country-like.”

“What is this place called?”

Now the man's eyes widened further. “Wow, you really don't know where you are at all? This is Medria, the biggest city in Philadrog. How could you be standing here and not know that? You some kinda cripple? Er, you mental or somethin”

He felt almost physically knocked over. Medria? The bustling little town of a few hundred people? “But... but this looks like a huge city! I was only in Medria once, but the town that I remember was filled with two or three story houses, dirt roads, and none of these strange wires over all the streets.”

The man gave a bitter 'harrumph' and looked even more closely at him. “You say that *you* remember that? Boy Medria hasn't looked like that in over a century. And you sure don't look like you're over a 100 years old.”

So he told the older man the story of his travels and what he'd seen. How the travels seemed to take him backwards in time and closer to his own era with each trip.

The man whistled quietly and stared even more intently. “Holy cow, boy that's one heckova story. So does that mean you're stuck here?”

“Well, it sure seems like it. Even if I could get back to Ulak, who knows whether my family still owns the farm there or not.”

The man seemed to think for a minute. "Well, you could try one of the history professors at the University Medria. They won't be too sympathetic to any anti-Megacorp ideas, but if you skip that part I bet someone might listen to you."

"Really? But why would people support a company like this?" He pointed an accusing finger at the giant building. "If they're causing so much destruction, can't people stop them?"

The man laughed briefly. "You kiddin' me? Those bastards own this town boy. Most every job in Medria is for Megacorp. They donated big dinars to the university, and I bet half the cops' r on their payroll too."

"Geezkrishna!"

"I'm afraid there's nothing the Holy One can do about it boy. Listen, I gotta make some dinars if I wanna eat tonight. If you head down that street and turn left at the third intersection it'll lead you straight to the university. Prob'ly yer best chance."

"Thanks a lot, you've been a huge help. Um. I wish you luck with getting a good meal tonight."

"Well, thanks for that. Oh and keep an eye on them motor carriages. They'll knock ya down fore' you can say watchout."

"Thank you again."

He walked down the sidewalk and followed the man's directions. He found the road leading to the university and

soon the roads became less busy and the buildings became less intimidating than the monstrous ones downtown. There were older kids milling about or staring into books as he walked across a huge field of short-cropped trux. Aside from the pleasant looking buildings and the sporadic Mugilla trees, it was as alien to him as the center of town was.

Chapter Ten

He saw a particularly strange looking woman sitting on a stone wall near the path. Her hair was close-cropped like the women on the ship, except that there was a strip of bald scalp running straight up and over the middle of her head. The remaining hair was an exceptionally dark black, like his room after the candle goes out. As he got closer, he saw her shirt had the same logo of megacorp with an 'x' over it like the one that the protester girl had worn.

The girl looked up briefly from her book and gave him the barest of a glance. "I aint yer type little boy... beat it."

Her tone caught him off guard, this city felt like it sucked all the huemean qualities straight out of people leaving a cold shell in it's wake. He thought back to his walk and how nobody even raised a hand in greeting when they passed. How the man had told him about how the motor vehicles run him over. It felt as if the people here retained no more

warmth then the stones that the buildings were made of.

But then he remembered what the man on the street had said about how Megacorp had so much control over everyone. He decided to try one more tactic with the girl, seeing as she was the only person to say two words to him since he'd left downtown.

“Miss. I wasn't tryin to be mean to you. I wanted to say that I like your shirt.”

Now the girl looked at him a little closer. Her lip pulled to the side in a kind of strange sneer. She seemed to be scrutinizing every struam of his body at once. “Yer too dirty to be a secret cop, but then again, ya don't look like you got the guts to stand up to Megacrop.”

He decided to try a little white lie. “Well, I joined a protest against one of their destructive fields. A bunch of people were attached to machines to slow down the cops.”

“Yeah?” She seemed to look at him a little less coldly. “What was Megacorp doin there?”

That one was easy. “Well it was pretty horrible. What used to be a huge field of soats got torn up and destroyed so they could get at the kowl underneath.” He was ad-libbing, but it made sense based on what he'd seen of the landscape before and afterwards.

“Well duh. That's what those monsters do. They exploit the people, steal their land, and dig it up for the kowl. Most all the farms around here are gone, with nothing to show for it but lifeless dirt and poisoned water.”

“But isn't there anything that can be done?!”

“Well sure. We been protesting and...” she paused and he inferred paragraphs more in that pause. “Other stuff. But them Huems got control of ever-thing. Anyone does something to their property sits in jail for a *long* time.” Now she looked at him really carefully. “Hey, if you've been to a protest, how come I never seen you.”

She quickly gathered her things. “Hold it, I bet you *do* work for them. Maybe you *are* some kinda secret cop or something.”

“*Please!* Miss, I swear that I'd never work for them. I'm... new in town. Just got here this afternoon.”

The woman's eyes furrowed into a frown. “Boy, if you're tryin to be undercover, you doin a crappy job at it. How the hell could you be in a protest when there aint been any protests anyplace near here?”

“Oh, there will be.”

Now her brow furrowed so much that he thought it would break and she gave him a hard stare. “What?! What'r you, some kinda future-reader?”

“Um” He didn't know how to respond at first. “..well you could say that. Have you got a few minutes?”

She stared at him for several seconds. At first he expected her to just blow him off given her contemptuous tone. But she ended up surprising him. She looked at a strange metal band on her wrist before favoring him with a cool stare.

“Well... sure, okay. But if your hand comes anywhere near

me I'll knock you into next Shruddesday."

"I swear that I wont." So he told her the same story about how he'd gotten to see visions of Huemeanty's future to the very distant end. How the searching for this kowl stuff had killed off everyone's food supply.

The woman now gave him the same piercing stare as everyone else in these strange places. "Kid, you gotta be high on somethin fer sure. You tellin me that you just kinda leap from one place to another, randomly? Someone around here should stick you in the loony bin."

With the way things kept happening, he began to wonder if he might actually *be* mad. The people on the ship had thought so, and the woman in the ghost town. Even his mom acted like it. Maybe right at this moment he was actually laying in bed mumbling some garbage about the end of the world while his father spent their last dinar on some healer. The thought was no less worrisome then what he perceived as reality around him.

So he described everything he could about the giant machines and how he'd watched the protesters chained to one of them and then when he'd poked back up a few minutes later the field still had some trees on it.

Now finally, the woman seemed to show a more serious expression. "Wow, I always thought they were evil, but who coulda thought they'd destroy the whole damn planet."

He sucked in his breath. "So you believe me now?!"

"Well, I guess so. You stick out around here like a sore

thumb. Ya aint too scared to talk truth about Megacorp, and ya look like some country bumpkin just off the wagon.”

“But that's just it. My family came out to Medria when I was younger, but the streets were dusty, the buildings were only two stories tall, and they didn't have any kind of university like this-”

But he let his dialogue fade away when he saw her looking off into the distance. “Hey Grejayne! Come on over here.”

Turning around he saw another adult about the girl's age but taller. The kid wore a black jacket, his hair was cut really short and there was a strange pattern shaved into it. He looked at the girl briefly and then Ritem felt his cool stare.

“Who's the droob?”

The woman motioned for the new guy to sit down. “Grejayne this is..uh..hey what was yer name?”

“My name's Ritem, what's yours?”

“Hey, enough with the 12-step crap, what'r you all about?”

The kids expression was as sneering as the man with the cane had been. He hoped there wouldn't be a fight this time, because this guy easily had enough muscle on him to be dangerous.

“Hold on Grejayne. Look I don't know if this kid is actually fer real or just some psycho. But one thing's fer sure, he tells a hellova story.” She looked back at him. “Yo, give us an instant replay.”

So he told the story once more for this new kid hoping that he wasn't going to end up having bigger problems because of it.

“Wow, yer right Krisha, dude tells one hellova story.” The guy looked closer once again. “Doesn't seem too credible though. An you say you were part of a protest against Megacorp?”

“Yeah. I gave them some punkrin stew and they acted like it was the most incredible thing in the world.”

Now the kid looked less combative and more thoughtful.

“Well, my dad's been complaining cuz the stuff went up two dinars a pound last year. So it's easy 'nough to guess that they could be super expensive if these adswholes keep tearing up the farms.”

Now the question that had been nagging him for months took over. “But how can we *stop them*?! Isn't there any way to make them see what they're doing?”

Now the other boy sounded bitter again. “Sure. Just go on up to Roquelfeliay's office and tell him you've seen the future.” He gave a bitter laugh. “I'm sure he'd be just *thrilled* to hear you out.”

He thought back to what the other man in the interview room had said, but it didn't make sense yet. “Is Roquelfeliay the one who runs Megacorp?”

“Holy crap! Krisha I think this droob really *is* telling the truth! What an absolute dunderhead.”

“Wow, this is totes outa this world.”

He didn't know how, but it seemed that both of them were really convinced now. “Well, can you tell me who this Roquelfeliay character is?”

The guy blew out a breath of air and snorted. “Can't believe it. Aint a huemeanbeen alive that doesn't know the name Roquelfeliay.” The guy looked around once and then started the tale that changed Ritem's life forever. “Look, it was, uh something like 160 years ago that we first started hearing about Roquelfeliay and Megacorp. It started out as just a small operation digging up kowl on this little farm. But pretty soon, they were grabbing up land right and left to get at the stuff. With Roquelfeliay's money, they were able to find all kinds of uses for it. Made electricity, turned it into fuel for the autocars, used it for cooking, you name it. The company started making thousands of dinars, then millions. Now they're the most powerful company in all of Philadrog. Even Prime Minister Yotak can't touch them. Nobody can even get into the company cuz Roquelfeliay always passes control to his oldest son. Ya know like those kings from the old country.”

“GeezKrishna! Then that means I finally *am* stuck here.” With his head hung low, he didn't see their confused expression until the girl asked him what he meant. So he told them how he'd gotten through and how he'd accidentally found himself in a room of people looking to work for Megacorp.

The big guy started laughing and he started to get mad at

the man. "Hey, this may be all a big joke to you two, but we're talkin about the future of the whole planet. Seriously!"

Finally the big guy's laughing calmed down. "Na no, droob. I aint laughin at that crap. It's just pretty hilarious that you popped into this world through the shitroom, but you didn't even know it."

"Yeah, well ha ha ha."

The other girl fixed him with a scornful look. "Come on Grejayne. Sounds like the kid's been through enough already."

Now the big guy turned his seemingly uninterrupted scorn to the girl. "So now you're all goodygoody with this droob?" He made little kissy noises and the girl punched him hard in the shoulder.

"Screw you Grejayne."

But he seemed to not hear it. Suddenly the man seemed to be a thousand kilometres away.

"Hey! I got it." The guy paused for emphasis. "Look, we're always talkin about how we'd love to stick it to Megacorp right?"

The girl nodded her head and the guy Grejayne looked encouraged. "So if this kid knows about a secret way outa their building, we could put a bomb in there, and then just escape right through it!"

Ritem had never considered doing anything like planting a

bomb before. He didn't even know what such things were made of. The most he'd ever done was put a capfull of lamp oil under a soap-pan to watch it fly up to the trees.

But unlike the other two, he'd already witnessed what Megacorp would be responsible for. He'd already seen the planet as nothing but a lifeless hell. It *did* feel like something drastic needed to be done to stop them. "Well I bet a plan like that would work, and now that you know what's coming, it'll be easier to convince people to help."

The big guy swung his sneering face over to within 10 straws of Ritem's. His menacing eyes were even more frightening than the living skeletons on the ship. "Listen droob. We aint tellin no-stinkin-body. Megacorp's got ears in every damn hallway, so you just keep yer ignorant kiddy mouth shut. You got it?" The man pressed hard enough on his shoulder to bring him to wincing.

"Wait a minute Grejayne." The girl looked back over to Ritem. "Ritem, if we do this, where are we gonna end up? Are you like, livin in the stone age or something?"

He immediately saw where she was headed and felt his barely awakened hopes crumble. He stared at the ground as he answered. "We actually live in the ninth century, but it wouldn't make much dif..."

"The what?" Krisha's eyes bulged wide. "How could you live in the ninth century when we're still in the second century here?" The woman folded her arms in front of her like the security guard had done.

“Hey Krish. I bet this kid doesn't know the new dating system. The ninth century in the old dating system would put him....oh a few years B.R.”

He looked back at the big adult. “What does that mean, B.R.?”

The guy laughed, but without any real humor in his voice. By his expression it looked like he was about to make another snide comment, but Krisha interrupted him.

“Ritem, we recently changed over to a new dating system. This here's the year 158 A.R. which stands for 'after Roquelfeliay' and the time before is called B.R.”

In an almost trancelike voice he mumbled, “Before Roquelfeliay.”

“Exactamento.”

Just then it hit him and his legs gave out.

Chapter Eleven

He was momentarily puzzled as to why he was laying down and gazing at a cloudless mauve sky. A weird looking woman was staring down at him and he wondered momentarily what kind of nightmare he was in. The combination of worry and doubt sweeping across her face at last reminded him that a nightmare wasn't far from the truth for him. He groaned and shook his head while the woman's concern now faded away and the tough-girl persona returned.

"The hell happened to you?"

Staring up at the strange looking girl, he began to wonder again if he wasn't actually dreaming this up while laying in a bed somewhere.

"You'd never believe me."

This brought a slight giggle to his lips despite the vast gulf separating him from his home.

Then strangely enough the girl laughed a bit too. "You kidding droob? You already spoutin some crap about seeing the end of the world and I aint got bored enough yet. Caint get much weirder." Then the big angry guy's face entered his field of view. "Can it?"

He gulped a little before sitting up and facing them. "Well, after I got home from the second trip, I pulled out the box full of some money that I'd grabbed and looked closely at it.

There was a picture of this guy I'd never seen and at the bottom it said 720 A.R. I didn't know what A.R. meant, but it was clear that nobody would believe that money could be real."

Krishna involuntarily put a hand to her mouth before the words came out. "Holy crap. That's *hundreds* of years in the future."

"Man this droob just keeps soundin freakier and freakier each minute."

"Okay, but that still means that if we go back through this-" She paused briefly "hole thing, we'll be stuck in some prehistoric dead-end wont we?"

"Well it's not exactly 'prehistoric' but there wouldn't be any of these fancy buildings. You'd be as alien in my home as I am here. Once you go through that 'passageway' or whatever, there's no return... forever. Even when I peaked back through to where the protest had been only a few minutes after being home, it seemed to be half a year earlier."

That obviously caught the big guy off guard. He tried to look tough, but it was clear that he was thinking furiously. Ritem watched as he seemed to vacillate between his cool disdain and something like actual fear. It took awhile as the emotions battled it out across his features, but it seemed that the former eventually won out.

"Yah know what? It aint worth that crap. Look, aint like I don' believe you-" he frowned deeper for a moment "but

goin back to the stone age?? Man, screw that.”

Just then, the girl cut in, surprising them both. She didn't seem very sure of herself anymore. “Well, 's like you said Grejayne. There aint no future for us if Megacorp stays in control. But, yeah I know. The only way to stop them is through that crazy passage of his. It just seems so, sooo-”

Ritem was becoming more scared by the minute as he watched what looked like his only escape slip into nothing. His mind churned at top speed trying to think of how he could shift the conversation to win their favor.

Seeing that these adults were always talking tough and cursing, he tried following their lead. “Well look, maybe we can go through and if we get back to my own time, we can catch this ads before he gets too big to touch.”

“Well yeah. That'd be great, but, I don't know. Leaving Junar, and Twans, and, you droobs don't got electricity there do you?”

He couldn't look her in the eye this time. His pitiful attempt to act tough dribbled away to nothing. “Sorry, but I don't know what that is.”

“Well crap. That sure sounds like the stone age to me.”

It was starting to feel worse then hopeless and he wondered if he'd end up having to find a living here in this crazy future, when the big guy seemed oddly to take a different approach.

“Yeah, but you wanna grow up workin for Megacorp some

day? From what this kid says, they're gonna get big enough to control the whole planet."

That bit of encouragement gave him the push he needed to nail the board home. "Just think about it, uh-

The girl looked only slightly annoyed. "It's Krisha, droob."

"Just think about it Krisha. You two could end up being the greatest heroes on the whole of Nedune. I mean, has any huemean ever saved an entire planet before?"

The girl kicked a stone off into the walkway. "Well frack. Doesn't seem like we have a choice, do we?"

Finally, at long last it seemed like he had their support. But knowing how tough they were, he made sure to keep his expression cold and mellow. "Well, it's up to you of course. But I say it's worth the one-way trip."

"I guess it's better'n jail, which is where I'm sure we'd end up if shit keeps going the way it has." The boy's jaw tightened and he started talking about what they could use to make a big enough attack. It seemed that the stuff people used to run the autocars was the easiest way to create a really big explosion."

"We don't know what kinda security they got in there. But chances are there's at least one security guard and plenty of alarms."

"What about weapons?" The girl looked pensive, and a few feeble cracks of huemeanity were beginning to show.

"Oh there's a guy I know who could get me somethin like

that. Thing is we aint got a lot of dinars." Now the boy looked back coolly. "You got anything we could use to finance this little... protest of ours?"

Ritem fished around in his pockets. There wasn't much on the farm of value. All he had was the little carving knife which he showed to the two radicals.

The boy held the knife carefully in his hand. "Holy crap. That thing is ooowwald. I never seen an antique like it." The girl turned to her friend. "Grejayne, how much you think we could get fer this?"

Now he was seeing red. They were just going to steal his dad's knife and sell it. "Hey, that thing belongs to my dad! I aint gonna just let you have it." He snatched desperately at Grejayne's hand

But the boy held his flailing arm easily and fixed him with a winning grin. "Would you rather be stuck in this time forever? Cuz that's your only other choice droob."

He wanted to stay angry. He even wanted to punch the boy. But before he could act on those thoughts, he realized the guy was right. There was no way that he could get back into the megacorp building without help. He stared down at his hands in defeat. "Yeah. I guess yer right."

The guy's cool confidence was in endless reserve. "Course I'm right."

Looking even more sure of himself, Grejayne started working out a plan that involved driving an autocar in through the front door at top speed and running for the

upstairs while leaving a fuse on a big store of fuel.

“Just think Krisha, if we go back with this droob and find out where grandpa Roquelfeliay lived, then nothing we do to Megacorp in this time will ever happen.” He paused momentarily, looking doubtful. “Least I think, I don' know. Krisha you know anyone takin advanced science classes?”

Now the girl looked outright shocked. “Me?! The hell makes you think I'd hang out with those losers. I bet even Hawking wouldn't know enough about this weird stuff to be useful.”

He shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. “Alright. Well worth a try I guess. Most o' them types'r prob'ly on Megacorp's leash anyway.”

Krisha looked around once more to be sure nobody was too close. “So how long you think it'll take to put the shit together?”

Grejayne looked up at the sky, exploring some unknown series of mental calculations. Well if I can get at least ninety for this super old knife, that'll give us about three barrels of fuel. Then pulling a favor with Jerkuzen over on the next block to 'borrow' a truck. Another few days to scout the place out and be sure we know who's there, when, and what kind of reinforcing those doors might have.”

Finally he paused and looked at them both. “I'd guess about a week or so.”

Ritem was horrified. “A week?! I gotta spend a week here?” But when he looked at the two, there wasn't the faintest

spark of sympathy in their eyes.

“So which one of us is gonna babysit the droob in the meantime?”

This last insult finally pushed him over the edge. “Hey, I know you two don't think I can pull my weight around here. But I was digging crops and mending fences from the time I was three freetz tall!

“Yeah? You ever drive an autocar? Or put together a mozoltov-coktayl?” The older guy seemed to sneer in response to everything one of them said.

He searched through all the crevices of his thinking for some kind of witty response that would equal the guy's own pretentiousness. There had to be some retort that would cut him down just a notch. But all he came up with sounded childish and ineffectual. Before he could even put a word up in his defense, the guy drew a conceited smile and commented “Yeah, thought so.”

“Well listen. Just cuz I don't know all the newest gadgets don't mean I'm a damn baby. I know the roads well enough. I'll wander over towards Ulak and see what the place looks like.”

Now the other guy looked at him even more intensely. “Yeah? Well before I let you outa my sight in this little fantasy, you tell us exactly where this 'magic portal' of yours was. I aint stickin my neck out on this only ta get stuck up in those adswholes' prison.

“Alright. Well it was up, um two flights of stairs and there

was a long hallway. The door was plain white where they had the job forms or whatever. Let's see. I'd gone into the first door, after getting to the hallway, so it'd have to be right next to that. I think there was a sign on it-

"Well duh. Of course there's gonna be a sign telling people where the toilet is." He let out the hint of a sigh "dumb droob."

The cauldron bubbling in his soul finally spilled over and he spat fire at the guy. "Hey! Enough o' that shit! You call me Ritem. I aint some dipshit honky... you-"

"Yeah?" The guy's conceited eyes laughed at him. "Well you just remember that you need us more then we need you. We're not the ones trapped in some weird place and time."

"Oh you think?" He was just one more snide comment away from launching himself at the stupid adult. "An do you know how far that last future I saw really is? Cuz *I* sure don't. Maybe in 50 years you yourself'll be one o' those guys chained to a giant digging machine or.. or maybe Krisha gets thrown in jail by those cops I saw!"

All he got for his speech though was laughter from the guy. It was the last straw and he threw his fist right into the guy's laughing face. Unfortunately the adswallow was faster.

Before he could even register the movement, the big guy's fist wrapped around his comparably diminutive one like a blanket. "Well well, finally we get to see some fire in you." Grejayne was still holding his clenched fist in his own vice-like grip, but surprisingly there was little pain. He leaned in

real close before speaking again and his breath was like compost that never got turned properly. “Thing is, guys that don't have enough fire in them, they up an' surrender to the cops when things get tight. They tell the cops *whatever those shits want* just so they can save their own keester. An you can bet yer prehistoric ads that I wont be lettin myself get thrown in Megacorp's jail cuza you. If I stick my neck out ta do this thing and find there aint no 'passageway' or whatever outa Megacorp-” they guy leaned in even closer now, “I'll just kill you myself-” He paused for emphasis. “Nice'n slow” He threw the fist aside, got up and stalked off down the road.

Ritem watched him go and wondered if his only chance of getting home had, in the end, just disintegrated.

“I think you finally impressed him.”

He almost fell down again as he spun to look at her. “You screwing with me?! Didn't you see how that ads just up and walked away?”

“Ah, don' worry bout that. I's just his way. He likes to talk big. I think we can pull this thing off. *IF* we can count on you.”

“Well you heard what he said. I don't seem ta have a choice, now do I?”

The girl was silent for a long minute as she looked at her hands. “So... we're really gonna do this, aren't we?” It was impressive how reluctantly that huemean persona showed through, and how quickly it got stifled when things got just

a little tough.

For now, he enjoyed the slight opportunity to witness the slender crack in her tough girl improvisation. He wisely chose more peaceful words in hopes of letting it show through a bit more. "I guess we have to do what's right, no matter what happens."

"Yeah...I guess so. Man how the hell do I say goodbye to people and tell 'em I'm gonna go disappear into some prehistoric backwater?"

He tried to think about his talk with Shrik, but couldn't think of anything helpful. He put his hand lightly on the girl's shoulder. "I'm sure you'll think of the right thing to say."

"Man, this is such a downer." She reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a short cylinder. She tapped it a couple of times and shifted something that caused smoke to come out. Her pained eyes started to relax and her muscles drooped a bit.

It smelled familiar... a little, but not enough that he could place it. "What's that stuff?"

She grinned peacefully at him. "It's Metha-" Her voice cut off and she leaned into him very close. "-wuonia. I'd offer ya some but, a-" She playfully tossed a cinder over onto the path. "Yer underage little boy. 'Sides, the shit's mighty expensive."

"Really? Mewon... expensive? Heck we make paper and clothing out of it back home. It's one of the most useful

crops there is. Is it so hard to grow here that makes it expensive? I mean, what do you make clothes out of otherwise?"

She looked back contentedly, "Don' know. 's all made by Megacorp an they aint likely ta tell you their secret, *ingredient.*" By now she was purring like a tigress. It was clear that she was too far gone into her own little world to offer anything more useful.

Chapter Twelve

Krishna went off to one of her classes, leaving him to mull over what he could do with the time here. It wasn't as deadly as the other places, but he was still trapped in a foreign land with no money and little idea of how to keep out of trouble. Krishna had made it clear to him that plenty o' folks would be happy to tell some megacorp goon what they were planning and that he needed to keep tight-lipped about all their plans of destruction.

It seemed that he was stuck in this strange land for however long it took the two of them to get their plan worked out. It was a fragile new alliance they'd created and as loathe as he was to admit it, there wasn't much of anything that he could foresee providing.

So with nothing else to focus on, he hoofed it through the sparse woods in the direction of Ulak. He hoped that a long walk and some time to think would spur some greater clarity that he could use to make things right again.

As he left the university behind, he noticed the houses gradually go from simply futuristic to stately and soon they became gargantuan. There were long driveways with iron fences across them and thick bushes carved into unusual shapes. It was worlds different from the humble farm town that dad had taken him to for the trade fair all those years ago. Not a single road showed a speck of dirt. It was paved brick from curb to curb with neatly trimmed plants along either side for as far as he could see. The whole of it all was

topped by a canopy of arching trees that would make the old mugilla look like a meager shrub.

Near the end of one road, he found a deep shady grove of trees to wander through. Compared to the few patches of forest back home, these trees were even more enormous. But unlike his own farm, this had a more manicured feel to it. There weren't any downed trunks and the path was smooth and unobstructed. The place was incredibly peaceful and he found himself lost in thought wandering the nicely maintained footpaths. He walked for half the day before spotting a bench. It was made entirely of one huge tree trunk and the surface was beautifully carved with dozens of ornate nature scenes set into the backrest. He sat there and closed his eyes just relishing in the peaceful chirping of birds fluttering through the branches.

He must have drifted off because suddenly the rhythm of hoardz feet chased towards him with uncompromising speed.

"Hey you! This is private property! What do you think you're doing here?"

He looked up and saw a stout man wearing a smart blue uniform and riding the tallest hoardz that he'd ever seen. As soon as the man saw him lift his head though, a strange transformation washed over the uniformed man. He held out his hands peacefully and his eyes grew wide in what seemed to resemble fear.

"I, I'm sorry young sir. I didn't know it was you. Please

accept my most fervent apologies. I would never accuse you of anything sir.”

It took a moment for him to register it all. The man on the hourdz was obviously some kind of security person. But why was he apologizing? Ritem couldn't make sense of it. Still, he couldn't stand to see the man trembling the way he was, and it relieved him that he'd avoided the trouble that might have otherwise been very dangerous. “Don't worry about it. You're just doing your job.”

The man exhaled forcefully. “Thank you young sir.” Then he rode off quickly without even a backward glance.

He meditated on the event for a long while. How could anyone in this strange land think they recognized him? The only people he knew at all were a couple of radical adults studying at the university. That place was over an hour's walk from here. But thinking back to all the sorrow and death he'd seen in these future worlds, he decided he needed to be on guard at all times. He moved off the path and kept to the meager underbrush once he felt sure that he was out of earshot from the security person.

The more wild sections did their job to slow his breathing and calm his mood. There was a great serenity here and it didn't feel as manicured as the trail had been. Now he could wander aimlessly, letting his mind drift away from planetary destruction and fears of some powerful demigod.

He came to the edge of the woods and found a huge expanse of the same short-cropped soats as the university

had. There was a beautiful house at the far edge and a perfectly flat carriageway forming a perfect circle around the field. The place was easily as large as any of the buildings at the university and covered all over with beveled glass windows. Not one surface held a trace of mold or debris as far as he could see. It was all so well maintained and elegant that for a long while he just stared awestruck. Every corner was softened with beautiful moldings and ornate carved animals. He burned with curiosity to see who lived in such an incredible house and he even started taking a step towards it. But he immediately thought back to the security man. What if he got put in jail for being on this person's land? Despite the reaction of the man on the hoardz, these people looked rich enough to be the owners of Megacorp. If he wanted to hold any shred of a chance to get home, he couldn't risk going anywhere near that house. With a sigh then, he just sat staring at the mansion from afar, trying to imagine who could afford such lavish opulence. Where did they come from? How were they so rich? He wasn't sure exactly where he was, as there didn't seem to be many landmarks now, but he felt like he was somewhere near the farm that Shrik's family had owned. Keeping an eye out for anyone outside, he skirted the edge of the woods to the back of the house and saw similarly impeccable grounds. There was a clean looking stable which looked as polished as the main house and he could hear the sound of a hoardz whinnying inside. Next to that was another small building with the sound of someone hammering on metal. As his gaze swung closer to the house, he saw a large pool of water that looked cleaner than

even the pond at the edge of town. It was surrounded by a perimeter of the smoothest stones he'd ever laid his eyes on.

Once, he saw an older woman wearing an ornate turquoise dress and carrying a parasol. But she quickly vanished behind a corner of the building, leaving him no closer to solving the mystery than he'd been before.

He sat watching for an hour more hoping for some telltale event, but there was nothing noteworthy to see in the vast manicured property. Finally out of boredom he turned back into the woods and looked for a way back to Medria.

Despite being so close to his old home, everything here was radically different. The trees, the pathways, even the smells were alien to him. For awhile, he became hopelessly lost and he worried briefly if he'd have the misfortune of running into the owners by some stroke of terrible misfortune.

Chapter Thirteen

It was another hour before he came to a smaller break in the woods. At first he ran forward hoping it might lead to a road of some kind. Instead though, he stumbled on a small shack. This structure stood out not for it's elegance, but for it's converse. Where everything else in the area was clean and well-maintained, this little shack was so dilapidated that it was on the verge of collapse. Judging by the construction, he guessed that it must be the oldest structure on this

entire property. The roof was little more than a pile of maypul slats beneath a random pile of fallen branches. The wood siding was warped and bowing out where the rain had gotten through, but a thick blanket of ivy was doing a passable job of holding them still in place. If not for that, he suspected, the whole thing would likely have collapsed long ago. It looked like the sort of place a pauper would live in while gleaning leftovers from the fields.

He walked around several times trying to understand what something like this could be doing out here surrounded by such opulence. It looked barely large enough for an adult to sleep in, so it couldn't be an old house. With no outward clues, he was left to see if the door could be opened. Somehow, that part had managed to stay in one piece, thought it was heavily weathered. Set nicely in the middle of it was a small round window, like the eye of a strange monster. He peered through it and was taken aback to see someone's eye staring right back at him. His legs almost gave out in stumbling back horrified. At first he was too shocked to even go near the door again. He listened against the door for several long mynduz. But with no sound coming from inside, he finally gathered the courage to peak again through the window. Now as he gazed, he noticed that the eye stared straight ahead without any movement. Feeling even more puzzled, he tried pulling the door.

Miraculously, the doorframe was in reasonable shape still and the handle turned with only a little resistance, but it took a couple of sharp shoves before he was finally able to open it enough to gain entry. Once he got inside, his eyes

nearly bulged out of their sockets. The place was dimly lit with a greenish light streaming in through a vast network of cracks in the walls. Each corner was crowded with webs and there was easily a half stratum of dust over everything. The weak light that he'd seen was soon even further clouded by the dust plumes that he kicked up. At first he was so overcome with a coughing fit that he hunched over and had to poke his head back outside. But after a little while the dust settled down and he could finally get a look at the place.

Smack dab in the middle, and dominating the whole the room was a beautifully ornate picture frame. Set within, and staring straight back at him was the relaxed and smiling face of his friend Shrik. Unlike the boy he knew, this version was an adult and wore a beautifully tailored suit. Even with the years showing on the face, there was no questioning the sly confidence behind the eyes of his friend. Ritem stood there awestruck. Shrik, the kid who had to work all day in the field so his brother could go to school? The kid who seemed too smart for his own good? Why would his likeness be preserved here in this broken down shack?

In front of the picture were two delicate vases, each holding the dried remains of some type of flower. Between the vases was a large and beautiful metal bowl with soot along it's bottom.

He poked around, careful to move slowly to keep the dust from sending him into another coughing fit. On either side

of the 'alter' were several dimly lit rows of little drawers. So, with nothing else to do, he peered closer and pulled open one of them. The drawer was filled to overflowing with letters. Some looked only yellowed with age, but most were decayed beyond recognition. He saw one with a blue heart on it and reached for it, but barely had he touched it before the envelop crumbled to pieces. He carefully reached for another that looked to be in better shape. This time he took his time and slowly opened the fragile paper. When he finally saw the careful handwriting inside, his eyes bulged out of his face.

"Dearest Kaya

The weeks here without you are torturing my soul. Your glistening eyes like the twin moons shine down through the treetops and I imagine that it's really you smiling on me from above. Your last letter brought trembling throughout my heart as I smelled a puff of your perfume. Alas it will be another moon yet or more before I can wrap you in a loving embrace. In it's stead, I gaze upon your speckled cheeks in my memory as I drift to sleep and join you in the land of dreams.

Eternally yours,

Shrik

There was another one that looked a little newer, but still quite yellow.

Shrikypoo;

My heart yearns for you in the sky. I see you in the moons, in the stars, even the pattern of light on the trees. This one small refuge can't contain the endless expanse of my longing. The others say it's wrong, but I often seek for this lonesome existence to end so that I can join you up there in endless peace. The next time I try, it will be quiet. Nobody to know but you and me. I feel certain without question that we will share a future together once again. This and only this is the focus of my every waking thought.

Yours forever;

Kaya

There were several more goopy letters that were written the same way. He couldn't believe it. His best friend Shrik fawning over Kaya who wasn't big enough even to ride a hoardz yet. And little Kaya as well, talking like a crazy person over him. As gross as it was to read the romantic junk, he kept hoping he'd find something that might give him a clue of how to understand what had been happening since his own time. The next letter crumbled where he first grabbed it, but there was at least enough left to add a few

more clues to the mystery.

"My dearest;

*They told me what happened to you. It carved
open the deepest chasm.....soul.*

*The thought of never gazing upon.... I don't
know how a girl could go on. I know it was R.....
He denies it of course. But he must have known
about.... He must have found.... I'm so sorry my
love, but I simply can't conceal the singing in
my.....over y....*

There must be.....has to b.....where we can

The longing for you.....

Yours eternally

Ka....

In all the drawers it was the same. They must have sent thousands of letters to each other over the months or years since. There was another one that looked less goopy, so he took a chance on reading that one. The envelope fell to pieces on the floor and he had to hold the old paper with utmost care for fear of losing the words forever.

"My dearest;

I fear that these notes are being seen, so this must remain obscure. I pray that you will catch my meaning and understand that I only do what must be done with the heaviest conscience. The one we know has become frighteningly dangerous. I know you may not believe me, but I feel certain that my brother was killed because he found out too much. Many people are clearly afraid even at the mention of his name these days. I can see it in their eyes. You can be sure that I do not embark on this voluntarily. But I worry that if I fail, we may all suffer a worse fate than he did. Please know that my devotion to you will continue to the end of time, and please don't judge me too harshly.

Your beloved

The words were too obscure to be of much help. But it seemed important, maybe Shrik would know what it was about (assuming, that is, he could ever get back home). He stared at the ancient paper and thought deeply about it. The sheet was so brittle it was already beginning to crumble. He decided to see if he could copy it. There wasn't anything around to write with and all the paper was on the verge of crumbling to dust. He looked through more drawers hoping for something... anything useful.

Finally, while digging about in a lower drawer, he felt something poking his waist. He felt around in his pocket

and remembered the pen from megacorp. Grinning, he now only needed something to apply the words to. But what paper could have remained whole this long time? There seemed to be nothing in the room that was less than a century old.

He was about to leave in failure when the last drawer proved to be different. There weren't letters this time, but some kind of powder. He opened one of the sacks carefully and smelled it. The stuff smelled faintly like mewon, but it was a lot different than the stuff they grew in the back plot. He grabbed several bags and put them in his pocket to see if Krisha recognized it. Then in the back of the drawer he found a beautifully ornate cloth a little bigger than a handkerchief. The edge was stained with something red, but otherwise it was in good condition. He felt a little guilty writing all over such exquisite handiwork, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Besides, this place was on the verge of collapse anyway. He copied the faded letter word for word and then respectfully placed the crumbling paper back with the others.

He browsed about some more, but there didn't seem to be anything to find except candles and old goopy letters. So he stuffed the cloth into his pocket and reverently pulled the door closed. His thoughts now were tumbling like Ruisik Creek in the spring. What did Shrik get involved with towards the end? Who was it that he feared so much that he was willing to risk so much? And did his sister actually commit suicide out of love for him? He couldn't wait now to get back and see if Krisha had any ideas about it all. She

might not be the best mind, but she was the only person trustworthy enough to discuss it with.

That thought reinforced his worry about the current predicament. He still had to find his way *out* of these woods, and the daylight was fading quickly. It seemed impossible that he'd be able to make his way to a street of some kind in the rapidly approaching twilight. He scouted in all directions around the shack, but found nothing more than trees in every direction. He was afraid of going too far on the chance that he might run into a security man again. So with sad resignation, he returned to the shack and curled himself into a ball for the night.

Chapter Fourteen

It must have been late morning when he woke up, the meager sunbeams looked far too bright for it to be dawn. His stomach grumbled and his mouth felt like it was filled with some of those musty letters. He hoped that the daylight would help him to find his way back to Medria. Even Grejayne would almost be a welcome sight by now.

He looked carefully around in all directions and saw a small hill off to the side. At least that would give him a vantage point. It was an easy slope and it took less than an hour or so hiking to the top. Once he reached the edge, he could finally see bits of houses interspersed between the trees and

some tall buildings in the distance. Now finally, he knew what direction to go and he joyfully ran back down the hill and towards what he hoped would be a road.

When finally he broke through the trees, he did gratefully see a road. Strangely, there were two rows of metal rails along the center going off in the direction he was heading. He couldn't figure out what such a thing would be used for, but the road looked to be in very good condition at least. The houses as well were only slightly more humble than the ones which he'd seen on the way out here. The walls were clean and the windows were large. Along the side of the road's edge or in a few short carriageways sat sporadic groupings of the autocars sprinkled here and there. The streets were clean and the yards were as well manicured as those at the university. Each one was covered in the same close-cropped soats that he'd seen before and they were rimmed with neat wooden fences.

It all stood in stark contrast to the other places he'd traveled to and he constantly struggled to wrap his head around it. The whole thing seemed so impossible, walking down this pleasant lane and imagining the whole great expanse one day turning into a starving hell full of rubble, skeletons, and thick black clouds. He tried to ponder in his mind what Megacorp and their kowl had to do with it all. There just didn't seem to be any creation of huemeanty that could do such a thing. He just couldn't imagine how those places and this one could exist together on the same planet.

Still lost in thought, Ritem found his legs meandering back

towards Medria. It didn't happen all at once, but gradually the noise became more pronounced, the trees more sparse, and the smells more confusing. It reminded him, as if he needed such, that this land was at least as foreign as any other place he'd been. So with no idea of what else to do, he shrugged his shoulders and strolled back to the university.

Chapter Fifteen

He wandered across the field of short-cropped soats towards the central building. Now that he had more time to explore his surroundings, he found himself deeply impressed by the quality of the place. There was a row of giant stones running a straight line along the base of each building to support a lighter colored stone wall marching up at least three stories with the whole capped by a quality roof made of some strange metal shake. There were carvings and motifs set into the corners beneath the roof, giving the buildings an almost religious feel. If he hadn't been to all the other lands, it would at least be possible to see the attraction in all this wealth. Compared to the farms he was used to, these buildings were more stout, more handsome, and more spacious. It gave the whole landscape an air of majesty.

With seemingly endless hours to spend, he could think of

little else to do in such a foreign place, and so wandered into a classroom to explore what people studied at this university.

The first room was nicely lit with windows even taller than he was and there was an enormous slateboard mounted in a solid wooden frame at the far wall. He silently closed the door and walked to the back of a large cluster of chairs. Finding a sturdy Maypul chair near the back he sat down as quietly as he could. Unfortunately though, the teacher was not blind to his entrance.

“Young man, when I start class, each of you are expected to be present and punctual. Do I make myself clear?” The man was old and stared at the room with eyes as sharp as an axe blade from beneath his neat felt hat.

Not wanting to attract attention and hoping to learn more about what was on the board, he just played the part. “Yes sir. Sorry sir.”

The man didn't favor him with any further attention. He quickly turned back around and continued speaking about the order of magnets placed around an iron cylinder which was attached to a large wheel. He then spoke about how the heat from the kowl would drive the wheel and how the magnets turned the kowl's energy into power which could be used for lighting. It was all pretty confusing, but it explained how the person who controlled kowl would have a great deal of power. Power like Roquelfeliya did.

By the time class was over, the shadows were long and the

overhead lamps struggled with little success to maintain a dim luminance. He waited in the vast shadows of a corridor covered in dark wood paneling hoping that he might find one of the two adults. It was doubtful that they would know anything constructive about the mystery, but he didn't have anyone else to turn to in this strange land.

It wasn't until the final bell rang that he finally spotted Krisha meandering out of class by herself and called her over to the corner he was waiting in.

“Oh come on. You don't scare me with that sinister dark corner crap. I could knock your block off before you blinked.”

A brief cloud of fury passed across his features as he opened his mouth in retort. Until it occurred to him that she really could follow up on her threat. “No, hold on.” He lightly touched her arm which she shook it away as if he were some spider crawling along it.

“Listen Krisha. Do you know what this is?” He carefully pulled one of the cloth bags out and held it for her to see.

She reached for it dubiously. Her dirty fingers touched the edges of the bag as if there might be a mouse in it. But as she put it closer to her face her eyes opened full and then even wider still.

“Holy frac-” She dropped her satchel and quickly put her other hand over her mouth. She carefully held the bag and squeezed close to him. Her breath smelled like old wine as her blazing eyes fixed his.

“How in the fuck did you get yer virgin hands on this stuff?” Her voice was a whisper, but what she lacked in volume, she made up for in ferocity. “Geezkrishna, there must be 500 dinars worth of methawuonia in this bag.”

So he told her about the strange shack in the woods with his sisters' letters and the giant portrait. “And there were vases that must have held flowers and half a dozen bags of this. Maybe she burned it like an incense to him.”

Her eyes continued to spout fire as she looked at him. “You kiddin little boy? She'd have to be the richest person on the planet to just burn this much mewon.”

He was getting tired of being talked down to just because he was younger and so he spouted some fire of his own. “Hey though droob. You forget that this stuff just grows all over the place back where I'm from. It woulda been no different then burning rusmary if this shack is as old as it looked. So maybe you don't know all *that* much.”

There was a hostile battle of expressions for just a moment as she seemed to look for any crack in his shield. But finally she let go. “Alright, I'll give you that. Maybe this kid Shrik got into Megacorp and owns that huge mansion.”

The thought horrified him. “Shrik? Geezkrishna no! He may be smart, but he's my friend. He aint anywhere *near* cruel enough to do all this.” He pointed in the direction of the Megacorp building.

Krishna looked unconvinced, and maintained her usual indifference. “Okay well whatever. It looks like you just

paid off this little operation in one afternoon. As crazy as it sounds. I'll go hook up with Grejayne and see how this takes care of things." She carefully put the bags down on the floor and packed them in among her books. She wrote a quick note on a blank sheet and handed it to him. "This is my address. You can sleep in the barn for now and we'll see how much this mewon goes for."

"Excuse me?!" He still kept to a whisper, but just barely. "The hell is this. I just hand you hundreds of dinars and you tell me to sleep in a storage barn?"

She gave him her usual smug look as she replied. "Clearly, you don't know what good explosives cost these days." She looked at him closer and must have read his anger because her condescending persona melted just a bit. "Look, you aint my friend and we aint goin steady or nuthing, but, I guess you've earned some respect Ritem."

With that she walked away towards the door clutching the bags with all his newfound wealth. He really felt like some country bumpkin now as he was left standing in the shadows. He was in some strange future town, he'd just given away hundreds of dinars worth of mewon, and now he had nothing but a piece of paper to guide him in this world. Feeling empty and sullen, he made his way among the last of the students towards one of the strange electric lamps so he could read the paper more easily. The woman had drawn a detailed map of the university buildings, the roads, and a thick circle where her place ostensibly was. Above it was a big smiley face which stood out in stark contrast to the

stony mask she normally displayed when they talked in person. The woman was such a crazy enigma, and he still didn't know if he could completely trust her or *especially* the other fellow.

He spent awhile meandering along the streets and getting a picture of the town so he wouldn't get lost again, before at last making his way to over to Krisha's place. The streets were quiet and only a few houses showed lights burning which made him think that in Krisha's neighborhood they must be too poor to have a lot of candles. If the alpha moon hadn't been three-quarters full, he'd have probably spent the whole night figuring it out.

"Hey boy!"

The tone of the voice set him instantly on his guard and he jumped back at the sight of a guy swinging a sharp piece of metal towards him. The blade barely missed him by one struam, but he quickly saw things go from bad to worse as he bumped into another man behind him.

"Whadya think Bratchun? Kid looks like easy pickins."

"Hold onta him, let's see what's he got on him."

Ritem struggled and fought, but the adults were too big for him.

"Kid aint got nuthin on him but a scrap 'o paper." Ritem tried to grab at it, but the other man was holding him too tight.

"Oooh, the little boy's got a *girlfriend*." The guy sang

tauntingly as he looked. "Wait, hey. This is.."

The guy never finished what he was saying. Ritem felt a rush of air and the guy fell straight to the ground.

An instant later the man who'd been holding his arms pinwheeled back several steps.

"Hey man. We wuz just playin. Serious, look. Kid aint hurt or nuthin."

His eyes must have jumped right out of his face as he saw Grejayne step over the fallen guy's body and tap the board menacingly into his other palm as he threw a menacing smile. "Yeah? An how'm I supposed to know that?"

"Yo Grejo. What's it to you? We're just mesin with some droob."

"T'aint nun 'o yer business. Take a trip, yo."

Feeling too shaken up to turn around, he listened to the sound of the other adult's footsteps fade away. He slowly looked at Grejayne, trying to discern what was going on behind the cold expression.

"Man, you gotta be the luckiest droob I ever met in my life. Caint fer the life of me imagine what the chances are of those guys jumpin you half a block from Krisha's place." He paused and thought for a second. "Course the chick shulda been with-it 'nuf to warn you 'bout this street. Guess she was too distracted by all that mewan you had on ya."

Finally he found his voice enough to speak. "Well, thanks Grejayne. You really saved my life."

An explosion of laughter leapt from the guy's mouth then. "Yer life?! Ha. Those kids wouldn'a done more'n rough you up and take anything they could sell. Man, good thing Krisha grabbed the mewon off you, er those ads-wypes woulda been halfway to Philadrog with it."

"Um, well. Still, thanks for helpin me out."

The guy focused on him more closely now. "Yeah, well you can thank me by helpin take out MegaCorp. Nuthin else worth worryin about at this point. Now git yer antique keester over to Krishas. I aint yer stupid bodyguard."

Feeling confused and incredibly relieved, he grabbed the paper off the ground and headed off again the way he'd been going.

The house that the map led to was small and low with cracks in a couple of windows and random debris in the yard. Several pieces of siding were pulled away from the walls and the yard gate squeaked horribly when he went through. A candle soon appeared in front of the house and he heard a deep voice call out. "Who's there. Show your face, now!"

Not being able to see who he was dealing with, he held up his hands. "My name's Ritem and Krisha said that I could stay here for a bit. Is this the right place?"

The person came closer and looked at him over the candle. The light gave him a haunted look, not unlike the starving people he'd seen in the first ship. His hair looked greasy and he had two missing teeth. But his tone quickly relaxed

after a moment. "Oh yeah. She said to expect you. Told me you paid for room and board right up front." The guy squinted at him again over the flame. "Mighty trusting of you boy." He kept looking at Ritem for a few seconds more though. "Wow, you're young. You don't even look old enough to be in college." The guy shrugged and stuck out a hand. "By the way, my name's Cermisd." They shook hands and he followed the older boy up to the house. "There's still some porridge on the stove that yer welcome to. Krisha said none of us should have to worry about food for awhile thanks to your donation, so don't feel shy."

The smell of the porridge renewed his hunger and he attacked it as ravenously as the protesters had soaked up the punkrins.

Chapter Sixteen

There was little to do while he waited for the two adults to get the equipment. He snuck into classes during the day, making sure to keep his head down and go to different departments so that he wasn't noticed.

Though the subjects were hard to understand, nearly all of them focused on various uses for kowl. Whether for heating, making the strange electric power, or driving great ocean ships the uses seemed limitless. It was clear that whoever controlled the kowl also controlled the people. But

it was also clear to him that the entire focus of this school was to *create* a dependence on it. A detail that he was sure Roquelfelie understood all too well.

On the third day, he found one class that seemed to be about designing buildings. The professor was standing at the board drawing a large box with a diagram next to it that wasn't familiar.

“Alright. We'll go over yesterday's midterm problem. You were asked to find the temperature that a five hundred square freetz building could be heated to given 200 kill-grams of kowl and a building that's constructed of Mugilla wood. First we calculate the heat differential created by the kowl and subtract the loss from the waste gases. We then take into account the temperature difference times the window area and we get-”

The man looked back at the class and pointed to a woman two rows in front of him. “Shantia, what did you get?”

After a brief silence, the woman's voice floated above the room. “Sir, I got 280 Kelvin.”

The professor offered an approving smile. “And that wouldn't be very warm, would it?”

Now there was no hesitation in the girl's voice. “No sir, it would be quite chilly.”

The professor continued. “So what would be the recommended solution to this problem...” He looked around and pointed in Ritem's direction. “You in the back.”

Ritem looked around him in panic. But he'd chosen a seat by himself, so there was no chance that the professor had called on someone else.

"Yes, you. What would you recommend?"

Ritem thought furiously. His own house was usually no warmer than that in the winter so he didn't think there was a reason to change this hypothetical problem.

"Come on young man."

"Well sir. Our house usually is at 280 in the winter. It hasn't been a problem for us."

The room soon filled with quiet chuckling which the professor quickly put an end to. "Young man, your name is?"

"Um, Ritem sir."

"Okay Ritem. Now I'm sure we all enjoy a good chuckle now and then. But the classroom is not the place for it."

He turned to another part of the room. "Moyard, what would *you* suggest?"

The boy who was called upon answered quickly. "Sir, if the amount of kowl available for heating was increased to 220 kill-graums then the building could be heated to a comfortable 294 Kelvin."

"Much better." The professor turned back to Ritem who's stomach sank again. "Young man, I expect you to have your facts straight next time."

The rest of the day he pondered over what had happened in

the classroom. It wasn't just that these people were using the kowl for things like making electric lights work, they were becoming so dependent on it that they actually laughed at the idea of enduring a little discomfort. The whole concept was crazy to him, especially after the horrific consequences that he'd seen.

But that was just it. They *hadn't* seen the consequences. Nobody here could even conceive of their planet transformed into a lifeless desert full of choking fumes. Nobody had the forethought to consider what this kowl might be doing. Even *he* didn't understand how such richness could have been destroyed.

Chapter Seventeen

They sat in the backyard on the last day and poured over a sheet of paper. Everyone was wearing black and Ritem had on a black jumpsuit that Krisha had given him. Grejayne labeled the last street and addressed them both proudly. "So I been watchin their guard situation for a couple days. They don't seem too paranoid. Which is easy to guess since they own the whole police force. There's one guy who sits half asleep at his desk till an hour or so before sunrise when he wanders out and locks the door.

The building's damn huge, so I figure we want to know *exactly* where we're going beforehand." He looked intently

at Ritem once more. "You better be *completely* sure where yer goin for all the risk we be takin."

Ritem was starting to see that the tough-guy attitude was how this clan worked. "Yo doof. Don't you get that I'll be stuck, just like you if this doesn't work?"

"Yeah, that's right." The guy showed an intense stare nevertheless. "Just remember that I wasn't joking before." The guy then continued on and he felt like he'd finally learned to speak their lingo. "So what does the inside of that place look like?"

Ritem thought back to his first day here. His mind had been on a thousand other things, so the memory was confused. "Well, there's this big opulent lobby with a statue and magaz-"

"Yo, we don't need every detail, just rooms. Got it?"

Ritem sighed and continued. "There's a big decorative stairway leading up to a landing. At each end of the landing there's a smaller stairway that probably goes all the way to the top. The hallway that I first saw was on the second level up, I think."

"Yeah, well it sure as hell better be." He turned and then addressed them both again. "Okay. So we'll take the truck, it's got a big wood beam strapped on the front, and ram through the door here." He pointed to where the road made a 'T' in front of the building. "It's gonna make a lot'a noise so there's no doubt we'll have cops racing in right quick. Now I'd bet my last mewan puff that he's got all the critical shit

up on the top floor. But thanks to your little 'contribution' I was able to get my hands on these." He held up a glass bottle that wasn't filled with liquid but with some opaque powder.

"It may not look like much compared to what megacorps goons probably have, but we got a *whole bunch* of this fire powder. We'll spend the day filling every glass jar we can and putting a wick at the end. Then we just throw it at something and it explodes. Nice'n simple."

Now the girl looked at him real serious. "Grejayne, are you *sure* about this? Did you test this stuff?"

He looked back at her with a mixture of surprise and anger. "What?! Of course I did. Took a tiny bit out to the woods with a fuse and set a metal pail on top. The thing launched as high as the lecture hall roof. Serious Krisha, the stuff's perfect."

"So we just ram through the door, throw these mini-bombs around and jump through the portal?"

The guy seemed to be letting his ego do the talking. "Well not exactly. Krisha is gonna guard the stairs while I bust apart the top floor, *then* we jump through this secret passage that *you're* gonna locate." He pointed his finger square at Ritem's chest.

The girl put her hands on her waist and looked at Grejayne. "An how come you get ta see the big guy's office? *I'm* the one found this droob."

He fixed her with his usual cocky stare. "Cuz *I'm* the one

that got the explosive, *and* the autocar, *and* put the plan together.” He looked as contented as a cat with a fresh mouse. “So let's start filling bottles. If we get done in time then we go tonight, if not, well then we go tomorrow.”

They had some food and spent the afternoon filling all the bottles they could. Each one was sealed with wax and set carefully in crates. By the time they were done, at least six dozen bottles were packed in crates behind the house.

Chapter Eighteen

They moved the autocar slowly to within 200 feet of the building and watched carefully for the guard to leave. The minutes and hours stretched out interminably as they sat hidden against the side of the strange vehicle. Their breath was blowing in puffs of vapour by the time the electric lights went off and they saw a man pause by the door and walk away down the street. It took another ten minutes before Grejayne was willing to start up the autocar. At first he seemed to have trouble with it and they all tensed up as he cursed and fiddled with some controls. On the fourth time the engine finally sputtered to life and they roared down the street and right through the door. Glass shattered and expensive maypul carvings flew like splinters as the cab pushed into the enormous lobby.

Grejayne was already looking around and spouting orders.

“Quick! Get all the crates up on that landing. I'm guessing the stairwell we need leads up from that side of it. Ritem, once we got the crates moved, you run like hell for the bathroom and make sure we know how ta get outa here. Krisha, you keep an eye on the door and if any cops get past, then start chuckin bombs.”

Everyone moved like clockwork. In no time the crates were hauled up to the landing and the sounds of sirens could be heard far off in the distance. Ritem went as fast as he could up the stairs alongside Grejayne, only turning off two floors up. He found one door labeled 'men' and bounded through. It looked familiar enough, the big metal structure was there, and a slick white thing in the wall that went from stomach height down to the floor. He remembered the sink and felt around in the wall opposite. With increasing panic he felt all over the wall, the floor, he even grabbed a mop handle and poked at the ceiling. But every surface was stubbornly solid. With increasing terror he banged on every surface, but to no avail.

Now he began to wonder who would kill him first, Krisha, Grejayne, or the cops. With terror in his soul and head hanging low, he dragged 10 kilo feet out of the room only to face another doorway on the other side of the hall.

Of course! The women's room! He ran excitedly in and searched again, only to find his hopes dashed against the rocks once more. The room was as much of a dead-end as the last one. In mad desperation, he went down another flight and tried the bathrooms there. The men's room was

another dead end. He wandered trance-like into the women's room and almost fell down when his hand finally punched right through the wall. He'd actually found it!

He ran down to the landing to see Krisha lobbing the bottles with a lit fuse on the end towards a group of men standing around the smashed truck. There were small burning fires randomly scattered throughout the lobby and the big statue was badly charred. The minute one of the bottles hit its target a huge fire erupted. She barely favored him with a glance before shouting above the explosion, "You find the way out?!"

"Yeah. It's just one floor above us. As soon as Grejayne finishes, we'll ditch!"

She had to pause intermittently to be heard above the loud gunfire that exploded whenever she wasn't keeping the goons at bay.

"So what the hell is taking that ads so long? These guys aint gonna just stand around waiting fer us!"

He favored a look at the stairwell, as if their cohort would just appear on cue. "I don't know Krisha."

"Well, we're only gonna have enough of these little bombs for a few more minutes, so that droob better get his ads down here!"

A small explosion blew out a chunk of wall just above them as if to drive the point home.

It was several more mynduz before they finally saw him.

Ritem threw a quick glance which soon grew in length as he saw the stunned look on Grejayne's face as the man came down the stairs. All the cool arrogance and all the confidence of the previous day were gone now. He walked almost trancelike to the bottom of the stairs and towards them. Before he quite reached the landing he spoke something that was difficult to hear over the explosions.

He looked not quite *at* Ritem, but kinda *through* him. "Can't believe it... just can't- In a million years, who coulda" His words though soon were cut short by a lucky shot from one of the cops. Krisha saw it first and screamed in fury before the big man even fell to the floor.

"Oh my god no!!" She ran to the fallen man horrified.
"Ritem, you keep those goddamn fracks away!"

So Ritem concentrated on lobbing the bombs wherever he could see a cop, all the while praying that this future nightmare of killing really *could* get wiped out of history. He reached down and fumbled for another bomb only to see the box down to four bottles. He threw one at the biggest group and shouted their desperate situation Krisha.

"We've got to get outa here! There's only three bombs left!"

"No Ritem! We can't! We can't leave Grejayne. We just can't!!"

"Look, we're both gonna join him if we don't move it, and I mean NOW!" He wasn't sure if he could drag her along if she resisted. But the next shot just 15 strauss above her head was enough. Ritem threw another bomb blindly

towards the cops and she finally allowed him to lead them racing up the stairs. He lobbed another bomb back down the stairwell when they reached the top.

“This way!” He half dragged Krisha down the hallway and shoved open the door. She was still in shock, but it was starting to wear off.

Staring at the wall she turned to give him a sober look. “So this is where it ends, huh?”

He didn't favor her with a response, just guided her into the spot where his hand had passed through the wall. They hurried through and found themselves crowded into the dirty hole.

“Hey, get your damn virgin hand offa me ya perf!”

They both hurried out of the hole and he gave a whoop of joy to be safely back in the quiet safety of the farm. But then he saw Krisha and let his enthusiasm fall.

“My god, I can't believe he's dead.” With the panic subsiding, her eyes began brimming with tears. Not knowing what else to do, he hugged her and let the grief have it's way for the time being.

She cried for a long time. Sometimes it seemed that she was pulling away and tried to speak, but then she would choke up again. He guessed that she was mourning not just Grejayne, but the loss of her whole world, of everything she knew. *That* at least was something he could empathize with.

Eventually though, her head rose and she was able to face

him again. "What am I gonna do Ritem? He was the only guy in the whole town that could be trusted." She looked around with scorn in her eyes. And now we're stuck back here in the stone age."

He tried to stay sympathetic, but the toughness had worn off on him. "Look, it may not be a world of autocars and electric lamps but at least we don't have Megacorp to deal with."

"I don't know kid. I'm beginning to wonder if this might be worse."

Chapter Nineteen

Since there was no reason to force her into the present right away, Ritem invited her to relax in his old playroom and he moved his things into the loft above the hoardz pen. She sat by herself in there for several hours before he finally spotted her wandering back out. From the look on her face, he got the impression that she was finally able to talk seriously about the future. Ritem guessed that she and Grejayne must've been dating or something.

"So what are you going to tell them about me?" They sat on a couple of short logs out next to the barn as the sun moved slowly towards the western hills.

Ritem sat thinking for several minutes mulling over what he

could say. His voice was pensive and quiet. “Honestly I'm not sure. My dad's very smart, so we'd have to come up with something convincing.” He thought a little more and then looked straight at the woman. “What were you studying at the university?”

Still looking sullen and with none of the fire that she'd had a week ago, she spoke slowly. “Well, I was studying medicine. So many people around the town were getting sick from all the crap in the water. I wanted to help the people who were being screwed over the most by Megacorp.”

“But what made you think that people were getting sick because of them?”

Like the crack of a whip, the tough-girl was back. “Oh come on droob. You think people get sick in all the places that Megacorp was tearing apart the ground and there isn't a connection? Maybe the professors can say it's all just coincidence, but I'm one-hundred-percent sure that it's cause of those adswholes.”

“Okay look. I didn't know that there was a pattern. I'm sorry okay?” He softened his voice hoping to help her drop her shield again. “Look, if you've been studying this stuff, then you know a lot more than me. Plus you're older too. But think about it this way. Megacorp doesn't exist here. We don't have any kowl, and the water isn't poisoned.”

She did soften her voice, but only a little. “Well... sure. But that doesn't mean it wont still happen in your, in our future. Geezkrishna this is confusing.”

“I understand Krisha.”

Barely a glance from her hardened eyes told him to change course.

“Okay check that. I *don't* understand. I've never gone back in time....given up all my friends.” He purposely relaxed his face and risked putting a hand on her knee. “What I'm trying to say is, I'm here for you. I'm willing to be your friend, and... help you find a place here.”

“Alright droob. Well it doesn't look like I got much choice. Grejayne's dead, all the other people I know haven't even been born yet, hell I don't even know if this hair dye's even been invented yet. I guess, you're all I got. Crazy as that is”

She pulled away a little and once again stared with furrowed brows. “But I'll still knock yer block off if you try to touch me.”

“Honest Krisha. I wouldn't try anything.” He kept his hands up defensively, but then he saw her smile.

“Just kidding droob.” She punched him lightly in the shoulder and he left her to sleep for the night.

The whole night he tossed and turned, worrying for what he could say about Krisha, what he might be able to do about Megacorp, and how he'd avoid getting in trouble with his dad.

Chapter Twenty

“Ritem! Ritem where are you!” Shrik's voice floated down to where he was weeding the punkrins. His friend sounded panicked and he hurried off to see where the guy was. He found Shrik running over to him as fast as he could, but a strange limp kept his speed in check. What Ritem couldn't understand was that he wasn't coming from the south, he was coming from the direction of their own place.

“Shrik, what's wrong. Barely had he said the words when his friend came in sight. And what a sight he made. Shrik's shirt was torn and he had a giant bruise around his eye.

“Shrik, are you alright? Did you get kicked by one of the hoardz's?” He grabbed the boy by the shoulders and got him gently to the ground.

But in his excitement, Shrik was talking a mile a minute and it took a few seconds for things to clear up.

“The girl, woman, I swear I didn't see anything. Well, not much. But man, she hits just as hard as a hoardz would. Who... where on Nedune did she come from?! Is she your girlfriend? But she couldn't be. Some-”

Ritem spoke very slowly and eventually got Shrik to look into his eyes. “Shrik my friend. Just tell me this. Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“Well I, I don't think so. I... ow geezkrishna!” He rolled over onto his side a bit and Ritem looked him over as well as he could. “I think she got me in the keester, but I ran real

fast." He kept staring wide-eyed though. "Ritem, just who is that?"

"The name's Krisha ya little droob. And if I catch you peeping at me again, you'll get a lot more than just a kick in the ads. I'll give you something more permanent to remember me by."

"Krisha! Come over here now!" He was seeing red and he didn't care right then what she thought of him.

She sauntered over like a cat going after an injured mouse. "Well well, aren't we the forceful one today."

"Krisha I want you to say you're sorry!"

"Wow, you really have lost yer marbles. If you think I'm gonna--"

"Krish. He didn't know you were here and besides, he didn't deserve this!" He pointed a finger accusingly at Shrik's eye.

"All right, all right. Sorry for messing up yer little droob friend."

He was still furious. He wanted to get her to say something nicer. But he guessed that was the most she'd give. So he switched gears and tried some diplomacy.

"I'm sorry we didn't tell you. Shrik, this is my friend Krisha. Krisha, this is my friend Shrik."

"Hmmp. Can't exactly say it's a pleasure."

"No more for me."

“Ritem, where in the world did you find this, woman?”

“Ha. Where not in the world ya mean.”

Shrik's eyes grew big as saucers despite the bruise and his mouth opened and closed for a second. “Is... she one of those people on that, ship you talked about?”

“Nah way droob. I aint from that far forward. Probably 120 years ahead of you. I was born in Kvichara. If ya don't know geography, that's about two day's ride from here by hoardz.

It took over an hour to go through the whole story with Shrik and convince him that Krisha really was from the future. But Ritem knew that he was the easy one. None of them yet had an idea of what to say to his parents. How could he explain a woman staying with him who was wearing perfectly fitting clothes, a belt made of a metal nobody'd ever seen before, and with that weird colored hair. The three of them went round and round throwing ideas like pollen into the air. Krisha and Shrik almost came to blows again once, but she managed to keep from killing him, barely. The squabbling finally came to an end with a compromise that Krisha accepted with her usual grudging anger.

Ritem prayed to all the gods that she could manage to be a better actress than a diplomat.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Good day young lady. How can I help you?” The tall man looked at the girl with just a hint of suspicion, but mainly with puzzlement.

“Good day to you. Is your name Kritar?”

Ritem watched carefully from a hidden spot in the bushes. He'd schooled Krish as much as he could, but now the woman was on her own. They'd cut off her hair (not without enormous protest) and given her some simple clothes that would help her blend in.

“My name is Krisha and I'm the apprentice to the medicine woman over in Kvichara. This is my time of wandering and I was told by a young boy named Shrik that the people here in this town might be in need of a woman with healing skills.”

“Well, it's certainly nice to meet you Krisha. It sounds like you were fortunate to run into Shrik. He's good friends with my own son and quite a smart young lad. We do have a healing woman who lives just down the road. But she's becoming old enough to have trouble reaching everyone. I imagine she could use the help of a strong young lady like yourself.”

“That sounds most agreeable.”

“Alright. Well I'm afraid that I still have to get our wagon repaired, but I'll see if my son can show you the way to her farm. Give me a few minutes.”

Ritem had to quietly jog over near the barn to keep from giving away his hiding spot, but he managed to get far enough away by the time his father came around to the backyard.

Both of them feigned ignorance when his father introduced them and soon Krisha was following him down the road to Niposuhn who was the closest thing their village had to a doctor. The woman was older than his father even, and she always seemed nice. Ritem wasn't sure if the two of them would get along, but he did his best to smooth things over beforehand.

“Krisha, I'm sure it's going to be pretty strange at first. No doubt the medicine of your time is a lot more advanced than it is here. But *please* don't lose your temper with her. You could teach us a lot about science and healing, but only if you don't arouse any suspicion.”

“Well, like you said droob. It doesn't seem like I have much choice. And hey, I probably know more than any professor here would, so I don't need to take any more o' them stupid college classes.”

They both laughed a little, but Ritem still worried about her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

He checked in with Krisha several times over the summer when the heat of the day had passed. The walk was a nice way to relax and he still worried that she'd somehow give away something to arouse suspicion.

Whenever he visited, he brought a little bit from the fields, knowing that Niposuhn wasn't healthy enough to earn a great deal of food. Krisha was always grateful for his gift, but the stony mask was never far below the surface of her face. She constantly reminded him of how much pain he would be in if he touched her, as if he needed reminding of that.

This day he found her out in the fields behind Niposuhn's place gathering plants. He waved hello when she looked up and she watched him approach with her usual cool disdain.

“What's up droob?”

As much as that frustrated him, the title wasn't one that he'd been able to get her to ditch, so he'd had to grudgingly accept it. “I brought you some trux.”

“Well well. Aren't we the little gentleman today.” But when she took the sack she put a hand on his shoulder. “Thanks.”

“How're you holding up here in the stone age?”

The woman fixed her eyes on the healer's cottage in the distance. “Well, it aint no party tha's fer sure. Niposuhn seems to think these funny plants here have the same thing that we got in asprun back home. She wants me to make a tea out of it and bring it to Ptolgren up the road who's got a sore back.” She took a second to sit down in the grass. “I tell ya, I don' know if the medicine here is merely primitive or if it's actually doing more harm then good. I'd just about kill right now for a microscope to get an idea of what's in some of these funky plants.”

“Well Krish. For as long as I've known her, Niposuhn hasn't lost a patient yet. And for 'the stone age' that's really saying something.”

He was expecting an angry retort, but he was actually more surprised by he passivity. “Sure, I guess. But I still miss Grejayne. I sure hope that one of us manages to find out how to stop Roquelfeliay back here. At least then his death wont be fer nuthin.”

He thought then of all the deaths. Not just Grejayne but the woman laying by the street, the people in the ship. Even the people who were protesting. It was such a vast amalgamation of suffering that he couldn't even come to grips with it all. Somehow he still needed to find out where Roquelfeliay was and work out some means of stopping him before it was too late.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The leaves were falling and he was hanging out with Shrik by the old mugila tree taking a break. The harvest wasn't quite done, but they were both exhausted from hauling punkrins all day.

“Hey, isn't that yer mate over there?”

Ritem's stomach sank half a dozen straums. Shrik was always referring to Krisha as his mate, even though she was at least 7 years older. He couldn't imagine what would bring her here during harvest season, but he gathered that it wasn't good news.

“Ritem Ronningfield I can't believe you talked me into going back to this damn backwater!”

“I'll give you two lovebirds time to be alone.” The boy whispered as he got hurriedly to his feet.

“Coward!” He hissed in a loud whisper.

Shrik made no reply but threw a kissing gesture as he hurried off to his own parents' farm.

Meanwhile Ritem sighed and resigned himself to dealing with Krisha. He'd learned to keep his voice very calm and slow when she got into one of her tempers, which was nearly all the time.

“Alright Krish. What's the problem. I'm always here for

you.”

Her mask fractured for a split second. “Yeah, I know.” Then she was holding her arms folded in front of her and staring at him fiercely. “That... that woman is nothing more than a witch-doctor!”

He very carefully and gently coaxed her to a sitting position so she could hopefully calm down (though he'd learned from experience that this was hit or miss).

“You know what that woman did this morning?! She gave moonshine to a man with a raging fever! I mean the stuff's not too bad for a buzz. But anyone with half a brain knows that you don't dehydrate a man when they have a fever! And two days ago, she tried to fix a woman's broken leg with two sticks! I mean they don't even know about surgery out here! Geezkrishna, they use leaves and booze more often than they use actual medicine!”

“Alright Krish. Please calm down. You can't expect to bring medical science a century into the future right away. People have to be led into it slowly.”

Instantly she was on her feet again pacing. “But Ritem. These people could die! We're not talking about hoardz wagons or the ridiculousness of using candles. We're talking about actual lives!”

He thought furiously for a minute, hoping to come up with something that would actually sound helpful. Finally, he put his hands slowly on her shoulders. “Krish. Try to think about it this way. In your own time these people have been

dead for a century. Whether you save a life or not, your talking about people who would've died *anyway*. Even the tiniest thing you do will be of enormous help to them.”

He wasn't sure what to expect. He figured she'd probably get mad, or maybe just stomp off. But her reaction was, unquestionably the most unexpected thing he could ever have imagined.

With tears running down her cheeks, she collapsed on his shoulder and wept for a long while. At first he didn't know what to do. The iron maiden who barely even let him touch her knee and still called him a droob, was crying on his shoulder like his sister used to do sometimes. But then she shocked him even more, if such a thing were possible.

Pulling back, she stared intently into his eyes and looked serious again. “You know Ritem I don't think anyone here, even Shrik, has the degree of perception that you do. I've met brainiacs before, and lotsa the professors were smart of course. But you...you've got *people skills*. You know how to calm down someone's frustration, even mine, better than anybody. I actually do feel a little better. Not great of course. But... well I think I can deal.” Then she gave him a very long hug that made his stomach turn over.

Chapter Twenty-Four

During the next year, they had similar conversations half a dozen more times. Ritem was sure that this was the most difficult thing that she'd ever been through. Even worse then watching those cops murder Grejayne. This was up close and personal for her on a daily basis. And try as he might, Ritem could never quite understand it. For him, this was normal. People lived, they got sick, they died. He'd never heard of surgery before, or antiseptic stuff, or other things that Krisha talked about. But one thing he did know, she was smart *and* she was skilled. This both impressed him and also scared him. The latter because she was not much older then him but with a century of knowledge to draw from. He wasn't at all confident that she'd be able to hold back enough to keep from being seen as some kind of magician. Or worse, that she'd go off spouting to someone about microscopes.

His question was finally answered one spring day when Krisha stomped up to his spot under the tree in her usual furious demeanor. But this time he could sense that something was different. Krisha wasn't wearing her healing robe and she didn't have anything with her.

She looked deeply at him and he could see the war going on behind her eyes. Like clouds passing in front of the sun she would look furious for a second, then sad, and then furious again. Her hands were working with almost as much

emotion as her eyes. They gestured, then stopped, and finally he saw that they were trembling.

“Ritem, I... I'm sorry but I'm leaving.”

The anvil fell on his head and knocked him cold.

“Look. You did your best, I'll give you that.”

She wasn't the tough girl anymore now. She was just a sad and scared adult and he was just a scared boy standing in front of her. This time he could see clearly that there was no talking her out of it, but he hoped against hope that he'd manage to come up with something.

“But where else could you go? All the towns here have the same technology. It wouldn't get better if you went to Medria or Kolinsker.”

She shook her head and her auburn hair flew out in a storm around her. “I don't mean to go to any of those places.” She looked serious again. More serious even than when they'd been planning the attack on Megacorp. “I'm going through that hole.”

The other shoe finally dropped. “But, you can't!” He blurted it out before even thinking.

“I can, and I will. Nothing you say is gonna stop me.” She was back to being the tough girl and Ritem ran circles in his mind trying to figure a way out of this. It wasn't until she finally said it that the reality sank in.

“But you can't because-”

Now her brows furrowed and she looked at him with a

burning rage. "Don't! Don't you bloody dare say it."

"Because I love you."

"Geezkrishna Ritem! I told you not to."

"You told me not to because you feel the same way."

"No way! You're just some droob helped me deal with some outa this world crazy shit. Don't be an ads."

He could see that it would be too much to get her to admit it, so he let her win. "Alright, alright. If you say so." Still, he racked his mind frantically in an effort to come up with some way to keep from losing her.

"I'm sorry Ritem. There's nothing you can say this time."

"But Krish. If that thing goes to an earlier time on each trip, you might just get sent a couple years into the future. It might not make the slightest difference--"

"And it might make a whole hell of a big difference. Look, I just don't know unless I try."

"Unless, we try."

Her eyes opened wide and she pushed him away, hard. "Oh no Ritem. No you don't.

Don't you *dare* start gettin into this we belong together crap!"

Now he saw where her fears were coming from. "Oh, I didn't mean that Krish. I'm not talking about that 'follow you to the end of time' junk. But think about it. I spent a week

in your time, and it was only a few hours back here. We could explore wherever that thing leads to and I'd still get back here in time to help finish the harvest."

Finally, he saw her face relax. It wasn't as good as having her stay in Ulak, but he was willing to risk a trip through once more if it meant that they could stay together awhile longer. Not that he wasn't scared to heaven and back of course.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Geezkrishna, maybe it'll be me that invents the electric bulb or somethin." With that, she disappeared into the strange block and against his better judgment, Ritem followed her.

The room was very dim, just like the ghost town and he felt lost for a second until he heard Krisha's voice. "Hold it, I think this is a light switch-"

Ritem saw something flash before his eyes and Krisha crumpled to the ground next to him. The next instant he threw himself at the attacker without really understanding what was going on. It took a minute or so of struggle before he registered the man's face.

"Shrik!" There was no mistaking it. Older yes, and with several days stubble but it was definitely Shrik. He'd been

holding a thick board which he dropped in the struggle.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?!”

“Listen, sorry about this boy, but I just can't let this horror continue any longer.”

In panic he saw the man's hands reach for his throat. It felt like a horrible dream that he couldn't get out of.

Everything seemed to slow down in a weird way as this older version of Shrik slowly wrapped his hands around his neck.

“Shrik wait! Don't you see who I am?! It's Ritem! Don't you know your own best friend? It's Ritem, from Ulak.”

In an instant, the man's arms lost all their force and he was able to get his own hands free and back away. “Holy... Geezkrishna!! It really is you. But, how?”

“Nevermind that, Krisha's hurt!” He hurried over to her and felt his stomach do somersaults as he gazed at her still body. He couldn't tell what was wrong, and the only person who had any medical training was the woman who was laying on the floor with a pool of blood seeping out. He remembered how she'd talked about blood movement and some other weird stuff. He held a finger near her neck and then felt around her heart. He praised the sun and the stars when he finally detected a faint rhythm.

“She's alright. Help me get her to the bed.”

“Geezkrishna Ritem, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt anyone else. Man, I never woulda guessed. I, I'm sorry.”
“What do you mean, 'anyone else?' Who in the world were you attacking?”

Shrik looked at the floor a long time before he answered. “I was going after Roquelfeliay III.”

Suddenly he remembered. “Oh my gosh. The letter! The one you wrote to Kaya.”

“Ritem, how on Nedune could you know about that? I took every possible precauti-”

“Shrik. I found it in the future. In your, um *her* future.” He quickly summarized his trip to the 'shrine' which he'd forgotten to mention up till now.

“Oh, so you knew about Kaya and I-” He saw a whirlwind spinning along Shrik's face. “Well it doesn't matter anymore. I'll never gaze into her incredible eyes again-”

Now it hit him like the kick of a hoartz. “So this was a suicide trip. You never actually *expected* to survive at all. Geezkrishna Shrik. I never really believed it could be true.”

Shrik's head fell and his eyes drilled holes in the floor. “No Ritem. You must understand, there are some things that are bigger than she and I-”

“Are you kidding?! Of course I understand!”

“Ritem, I-”

“Shrik, remember I'm the one that saw the whole of Nedune turned into a wasteland. I'm the one that saw the starving

men in the street!”

His thoughts were interrupted by Shrik grabbing his shoulders and shaking him. “Ritem, will you just shut yer damn mouth for a second! This is important, and we're not going to have much time. Listen. You're also the one-”

A high-pitched scream shattered the silence. They both looked over to see someone staring at them from the open doorway.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Oh my god! There's a murderer!”

The woman was older, about his parent's age, wearing an ornate dress and expensive earrings that flew out from her head as she spun around to address someone out of sight. He couldn't see who the woman spoke to. But her tone of voice said that things were becoming very dangerous. With the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps, Ritem felt Shrik's hand shove him towards the door frame where the two of them had first appeared. Instantly grasping his meaning, he frantically felt around for the opening just as two hardened men appeared in the doorway.

Ritem's hand pushed through the opening a split second after an explosion ripped into Shrik. He stared horrified as the man's chest sort of caved in and his mouth opened in

shock. The last sight he saw was a spray of blood fly towards the wall and land on a beautiful white cloth.

Without even a conscious thought, he dove into the opening and was back in the hole. But barely had he made it through, before a hand reached through behind him and got hold of his ankle. The sudden silence was eerie as he couldn't hear anything from the other side, but the pain of the vice-like grip on his leg was more than enough to convey the killer's meaning. With one foot planted against the dirt, he frantically looked around for anything to keep from being this horrible man's next victim. With his leg painfully slipping back towards the strange wall, he finally grabbed a stone and slammed it against the massive hand over and over until finally the grip from the bloody hand faded. He scrambled back to the surface just as the man's vicious face pushed through. In a panic now, he threw handfuls of dirt into the hole with all his strength. Over and over he threw the soil into the hole until there was nothing left to be seen of the face or the strange pale material. Without stopping, he jumped up and down on the spot with all the force he could muster. Nothing could penetrate his mind but the lone thought of burying that horror for the rest of eternity.

When the hand fell on his shoulder, he swung around and threw his fist blindly with last shred of strength he had.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Hey, hey! What's gotten into you?! It's me remember? Shrik, your friend... at least I *think* I am.”

For a second he just stared blankly at the boy who he'd just seen murdered. Then with his strength evaporated, he collapsed into Shrik's arms. He couldn't think straight and his body shook with sobs and his mind flip-flopped as he struggled to rejoin the present.

“Well, uh... it's good to see you too. I guess.”

Several minutes passed before he could manage to stand on his feet and stare back at the boy.

“Ritem, what on Nedune has happened to you?! You look like you've been fighting in a war or something.” His expression became serious then. “Did you go back to one of those starving future places?”

Finally, very slowly, Ritem regained control of himself and was able to sink down to the ground, motioning Shrik to sit next to him. He looked very seriously at his friend before he could finally form the words in his mouth. “Shrik. I... I just saw you get murdered.”

Now it was his friend's turn to lose control. “You what?! Whadya mean? How the hell could you see me get killed when I'm sitting here next to you?”

“It was that other place. That, future place. You were an adult.”

Now the boy looked at him more seriously. "You know Ritem, this whole thing sounds like some kinda two-bit paperback. But the way you're reacting, man I aint never seen someone look as scared as you did just now."

Ritem wished that he'd thought to bring something back with him. Something that would prove to Shrik that it wasn't just some made-up story. But as it was, he'd barely escaped with his life. Another second and he might never have come back at all.

"Shrik, I realize you don't believe me. That- that's what the older 'you' said also." He waved his friend aside when Shrik looked ready to interrupt.

"Look, it doesn't matter. As terrifying as that future is, I've got to do something. You, um the older you, told me that you were planning to kill Roquelfeliay III before he could become too powerful to be stopped. But that failed. And it failed because **I** got in the way. There's no denying it anymore. I'm the only one who can stop this before it's too late."

Shrik looked at him with widening eyes. "But you, do you mean to say you're going to, *kill* him?! Kill an adult?" Shrik had grasped his shoulders and was shaking him. You CAN'T Ritem! That's murder!"

Until the words had actually been spoken, he hadn't quite appreciated the gravity of it all.

"Murder." He whispered the words, almost reverently. Could he do it? Could he actually take another huemean's

life? He thought back to the horrors he'd seen, the devastated landscapes and the starving half-dead people. Finally he realized that he didn't have a choice. He'd never be able to live with himself if he allowed it all to happen.

Now, finally, he understood what had driven the older Shrik to try and murder Roquelfeliay's son. The monsters had to be stopped, at any cost. With an almost serene disconnect, he pushed Shrik's hands down. "Shrik, you don't understand. That man is going to put events in motion which will destroy the lives of every huemeanbeen on the planet. What is one man's life, his or mine, compared to that?"

Shrik looked dumbstruck, the boy's cool confidence was gone, as was his innocence. "You're, really serious. This isn't a prank."

"Krishnamuerta I wish it was man. And there's a good chance that I wont come back this time. But-" He took a deep breath as the thought of that sank in. "There's too much at stake here for me to shy away from this. It's... I guess it's my destiny."

They just looked at each other for several minutes, both of them unable to think of an appropriate response. Finally Shrik managed to find his voice. "So, um, how would you do it? What would you use?"

Shrik's acceptance went a long way towards cementing his own resolve and Ritem began listing off and then rejecting each option in his mind. "Well this Roquelfeliay is powerful

right? He's also an adult. So it wouldn't be possible for someone my age to overpower him physically. I'd have to find some kind of weapon.”

“Ritem, we're not living in war-torn Cerbenika. This is Ulak. We don't keep stockpiles of weapons laying around”

“Well, I'll have to look. And if we can't find one here, then I'll have to figure out a way to steal one.” He looked intently at his friend. “We're talking about the future of our whole planet Shrik. Millions of huemeans lives are riding on this.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

With a final wave of the hand, his mom closed the door and he breathed a sigh of relief. She'd tried in vain to get him to join her in the weekly hike over to Norma's farm, but he'd managed to convince her that he had a headache and would need to stay in bed. At first she'd accused him of just being lazy and trying to get out of chores, but he managed to be convincing enough. Now he listened carefully to the sounds of their gate creaking shut.

With his father working hard out in the field, he figured it was safe to do some thorough searching for a weapon of some kind. He started in his parents room, then the cellar, and finally he climbed up into the attic. The last was filled

with old machines and parts. It wasn't as dusty as the shack in the woods had been, but there was a distinct resemblance. A broken spinning wheel that his dad was planning to fix sat in one corner, a spare harness for the hoardz, and a suit packed carefully into a cedar chest.

He was covered in dust and exhausted when he finally spotted something small and rectangular under a hat box. He pulled out the box and gazed at the faded grain of the oiled wood. The anticipation took hold and finally he unlatched the lid and opened it.

His eyes practically jumped out of his head as he stared at an old, but functional revolver. It's barrel gleamed with a thin sheen of oil and there was a small set of cartridges packed in next to it. But his next glance finally sent his heart leaping into his throat. Engraved into the wood were the letters 'K. Roquelfeliay.' His arms lost all their strength and the box fell clattering to the attic floor. There it was, the name which had struck terror and dread into the hearts of millions. But who was he? And how did his pistol end up in their attic? What scourge of horrid fate had put this box in his small hands?

Now finally, that he'd found a solution to this great nightmare, providence had transformed the puzzle into an even more complex mystery. He stared at the box for a thousand years, as if merely drilling the name on the stage of his mind could bring some kind of revelation.

With a shake of his head, he finally made up his mind. The only thing that mattered was stopping Roquelfeliay. Everything else, even the origin of the weapon, was secondary compared to that.

With shaking hands, he put the cartridges back in the box and carefully closed the latch. He climbed down and was just putting the ladder away when he heard the front door close. Panic gripped him by the arm and yanked him towards his room. But the hallway was too exposed and from the corner of his eye he saw the outline of his father.

“Stop!”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

He was sure it was too late, but he also knew that the fate of the whole world was riding on this. And of course his father wouldn't understand, couldn't understand. Despite his better judgement, he bounded towards his bedroom door.

“Ritem Morris Ronningfield you stay right where you are!”

His brain ran at a mile a minute. What would his father say if he saw the gun? How could he explain that the future of everyone they knew was hanging on his shoulders? He had to do something, anything! But despite all his strategizing, his mind was as paralyzed as his body now. He felt like

those animals they would trap at the edge of the woods and parade around in cages.

Footstep by footstep his father's frame moved towards him. And with each step, Ritem's hopes collapsed further and further. He almost wished that he himself were dead now. How in the world could he live with himself knowing that he'd failed in the most immense way?

It wasn't until the man was within arms length that he looked straight at Ritem and said only two words.

“Show me.”

Still he hesitated. Once his father saw it, there would be no going back. And he knew it.

Now the man's face flushed. “Ritem, I will not ask you again.”

With shaking hands, he fumbled and finally the precious box crashed to the floor. The silence was shattered as completely as his own future was.

They stared at each other for an eon. Ritem in horror, and his father in shock. Ritem couldn't stop trembling now, not just in fear of his father's anger, but in the hopelessness of knowing that his last chance to stop Roquelfeliay was rolling around uselessly on the floor.

“Into the den. Now.” The words carried no emotion. His father's expression was now a blank wooden board. With hunched shoulders and his stomach dragging between his knees, he trudged the kilometer-long hallway to their den.

“Sit.”

They both sat in chairs facing each other. It was a mental showdown between them. An eternity went by with neither of them moving body or tongue. It wasn't until Ritem began to think his father a statue that the latter's mouth parted.

“Ritem, I'm only going to ask you once. What were you doing with that box.”

He scanned an encyclopedia in his mind, searching for any words that would might get him out of this impossible prison. But any cunning that might have existed to aid him in the past was now betraying him.

“I, I can't say. I-”

“Ritem. Seeing you with that, it scares me, terrifies me right to the core. This is more serious then you can possibly imagine.”

“Oh, I'm sure I can.” he barely whispered it. But the words carried far in the stillness of the day.

“What on Nedune does that mean? Ritem, I insist that you explain yourself.”

But try as he might, Ritem was paralyzed. His mouth opened and closed with an almost mechanical quality. He gave a blank stare as he struggled with all of his strength to regain control of his own body. Then, in abject desperation, he played the only card that he had. “Who is Roquelfeliay?”

“Ritem, this is *you* that we're talking about. Don't try and

change the subject.”

Finally, like the click of a trigger, his tongue managed to obey his mind again. “Dad I can't answer until you tell me about Roquelfeliay. It's more imp, more important than anything else on the face of Nedune, please. You've got to believe me.”

The man's eyes bored into him for another eternity. But his father's apparent uncertainty managed to strengthen Ritem's own resolve. “Believe me dad, I'd never contemplate taking something like that if it weren't such a gargantuan crisis.

And with a long slow exhale, he knew that he'd won.

“Alright son. I guess you're old enough to hear the truth. I was going to have to tell you soon enough anyway.”

Ritem scooted to the edge of the chair as his father continued.

“Son, I've done the best that I could to provide for you and your sister, but it didn't come easy. Before I met your mother, I was a rogue, a thief, a criminal. I swindled people out of thousands of dinars. I'd never learned any real skill and this was something that I managed to pull off damn well. It even earned me enough to put some money down for this farm.

But when your mother and I decided to get married, well. I just couldn't face the possibility of raising a family with such a shameful past. So I changed my name from Roquelfeliay to Ronningfield, a nice plain name. I had hoped that it

would spare you and your sister from having to live down the reputation that came with my sordid past.

But now, seeing you clutching that box, and clearly hoping to deceive me. Well, I'm sure you can understand how scared I am at the thought of you following in-

It took a long moment for him to grasp what his father was saying. Once again his mouth worked open and closed, his whole body trembled and he almost collapsed from the weight of it.

“Krishnamuerta! You, we, I. **I** am a Roquelfeliay?!!” He shot up and paced the room. There *had* to be another explanation. Maybe it was a joke. Maybe Shrick had gotten to his father hoping to keep him from doing something rash. He paced the floor in circles mumbling and muttering. His mind worked furiously. It couldn't be, it simply couldn't! Could dad have found out somehow? Was he doing this to protect him in some way? No, that was impossible. It just *didn't make any sense*.

Finally his father had to come over and physically grab him by the shoulders. The big man got down on one knee and stared straight into his eyes. His face was devoid of all color and the fear that he saw only served to exacerbate Ritem's own terror.

“Son. There's more to it than that, isn't there.” His eyes once again stared deep into Ritem's soul. “Son, what is it that you're not telling me. I... I won't get angry with you, whatever it is, I swear.”

This was the moment of truth. His father had already spilled his own secret. Now it was Ritem's turn. But this story made his father's look like a sand pebble by comparison. He looked back carefully at his father and saw the older man's face soften. He led Ritem back to the chair and took his hand. "Whatever it is son. I'm sure that we can get through this together."

Finally, praying that his father wouldn't think that he'd lost his senses. He spilled the whole thing. The ship in space, the starving men and women, the stolen jems, the university where they taught about kowl, the fields ripped apart by the machines, and finally the sight of Shrik being murdered. Recounting the last part sapped his little remaining strength and, like before, he fell sobbing into his father's arms. He didn't know what would happen now, didn't know if he'd ever be considered sane again.

For a long while his father just held him and stroked his back, like he'd done years ago. But it wasn't until his father pushed him away at arms length and stared again into his tear-streaked eyes that he finally saw the compassion show in his father's eyes.

"Ritem. I must say, you tell one heckova story." He opened his mouth to protest, but his father put a finger over it.

"Let me continue. If you hadn't mentioned burying those jems at the edge of the field, geezkrishna I never would've believed you. It was always a mystery how that one stash of precious stones could've been in the field without anyone else having come upon them." The man let go of him and

reached into his pocket. “Ritem, I used the money from those stones to pay off my sordid past and to put the final payment on this farm. But, there's something else that I was going to tell you. I was saving this for your ascension ceremony. In digging around that spot and looking for any more jems, I came upon this strange rock. It was blacker than any rock I had ever seen and when an ash from my pipe accidentally fell on it, the whole thing lit up and began to burn. Well let me tell you, as somebody who'd never seen a stone burn, I was mighty intrigued. I took a piece of it to the university out north and asked one of the scientists to look at it. The man I spoke to said that it resembled something in one of his books. The man dug around for awhile and found this volume that mentioned a people called the Haya who used to smelt iron. Their legends spoke of a material that burned like charcoal, but was not made of wood. He told me that a fuel source such as I had found would have enormous value.

Ritem, I swear to you that I was thinking only of your future and well-being. I spent the last of the money from the stones founding a company called MegaCorp and financing some digging equipment in order to get access to the amazing stuff.” The man pulled out the envelope that he'd been holding and handed it over.

Ritem slowly and with trembling hands, opened the envelope before pulling out the official-looking papers. At first he couldn't read it, his hands were shaking so hard. It wasn't until he let the paper sit in his lap and wiped his eyes for the hundredth time that he could make out the words.

“On this date 17th of Tishre 962, Ritem Roquelfeliay is in full ownership of MegaCorp and all equipment listed below. In addition, Megacorp and Mr. Roquelfeliay alone are in possession of the patent for extraction and distribution of the kowl located at 19145 Mabel lane. Any resources on or beneath the surface of said property are the exclusive possession of Megacorp and the Roquelfeliay family.”

As he finished, Ritem saw that now it was his father's hands which were trembling. The shock of it all left him completely speechless.

“I'm sorry son. There's no way I could've known what all this would lead to.”

Conclusion

Ritem and his father sat in the cold yard staring at the endless expanse of stars. With his father giving him silent encouragement, he took over the task. He set a small pile of sticks inside an old tin pail. Once he'd gotten a steady flame started, he tossed in the legal papers and watched as dozens of tiny burning embers rose into the sky to join their comrades above. He was about to throw in the pen from the megacorp building as well. But then he saw it just disappear in his hand. He stared at his empty hand for several minutes, thinking of all the people who's lives might be saved. As they watched the flickering light turn the paper into black wisps his father put an arm around his shoulders and finally he knew without a doubt that, at long last, everything would work out okay.

The end