



peter savage

EMBLEM
DIVIDE

EMBLEM DIVIDE

Peter Savage

Published by Peter Savage

4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3

Copyright © Peter Savage, 2009

This book is made available subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent recipient.

First published in Great Britain in 2009 by
Peter Savage

Proofread by Lisa Savage & Damien Chavarria
Logo Design by Damien Chavarria
Front Cover by Peter Savage & Lisa Savage

For any contact, please email
emblemdivide@googlemail.com

For my darling Lisa,
who waited so patiently for
over six years to hear
the end of my story.

This is for you.

01

Initiation

He held the weapon tightly in his hand. The leather grip felt warm and enticing, almost as if the weapon were an extension of his own body. He knew that beneath the warm grip lay a cold metal, waiting to shock somebody's skin with its temperature. He had come to think of the weapon as being an entity in itself. It seemed to have moods, sometimes as black as the night, but other times as warm as a hot summer's day. He found it particularly ironic. This weapon was meant to kill. The thought had been circling round in his head all day. As he stood there he could feel his own body's temperature rising and suddenly he felt sure he was going to pass out.

2 Peter Savage

It wasn't as if Oken hadn't killed before, he was an elite member of an underground culture. He was almost an ambassador of death. It was true that Oken was one of the best, but even he shuddered at this new weapon which threatened the very existence of every human being on the planet. To be truthful, he wasn't particularly interested in 'every other human being' on the planet; he was only interested in one. He merely desired to put on a good show for the crowds who had gathered to watch him fight. It wasn't the popularity that fuelled him, but the noise, the aggression, the atmosphere.

The world had become increasingly unstable during Oken's lifetime. Various governments had attempted to exact rule over territories to which they had no claim, acting like wolves from a pack, scrapping at every last piece. It had certainly made the world an 'interesting' place. Interesting, but terrifying. Oken had been one of the soldiers of a since collapsed government. Like a student without a master, he had wandered far and wide in search of a calling.

Oken's calling had been discovered in the form of illegal underground bouts, in which he was fast becoming a star, a prodigy, a ruler. He had no time for his own status amongst the people. His only driving force was to be the best and to beat the rest.

It was not as if he was unintelligent either. An accomplished physicist and chemist, Oken had been recognised as a child, as one of the brightest youths of the century. That was until the Temporal War in 2028, which had been a horrific struggle from start to finish. The world before the war was very different to the present day. Certain governments had developed temporal weapons; that is, weapons that affect time and history. These weapons were able to obliterate people from existence, not only from the current point in time through to the future, but throughout history, leaving no trace that they had ever existed. Time-lines had been altered and history had changed forever.

The assassination of Emperor Wong-Chee by a terrorist group, who had stolen a temporal

weapon in 2027, had removed him from the world forever. The removal of this man erased his triumphant victory over Al-Capor in 2024 from history. This changed the course of history, allowing the terrorist country to once again claim the right to rule themselves. To most people, this is how it would have always been. The general population would have had no knowledge that anything had ever transpired at Al Capor. The only people who would remember the events that had taken place would have been those who had been protected by a temporal shielding of some kind.

The world had finally regained some stability when the Emblem had been established. The Emblem was a governing body consisting of six continents, Alendria, Prestone, Phenley, Cantaris, Ranshaw and Liast. The governments of the world had crumbled under increasing pressure from society and had all joined forces. It was concluded at a general assembly that the collective experience of all previous governments had the best chance of bringing peace and

stability to the world and so they coalesced and built the Emblem.

Each Emblem construct had its own rules, laws and forces, which caused difficulties but seemed to offer unilateral stability. In essence, though one huge country, each Emblem effectively operated as a separate state, a by product of the differing cultures present around the globe. One law was constant however, a law above all others. This law detailed the use and development of temporal weapons.

Temporal weapons had effectively been outlawed from the very beginning, but controlling and policing this had proven to be difficult at best. A special force had been set up to try to detect and police temporal violations. The G-TEP, or Global Temporal Enforcement Programme, was created to try to detect the development of any temporal weapons and to crush their creators before they had a chance to use them, or develop them further. Many people had protested against the use of such violence but

it was deemed a necessity by the majority to protect the Emblem's way of life.

Oken had developed a temporal weapon. He had built temporal shielding around his apartment and had tried at all costs not to leave the house with anything that the G-TEP could ever detect. Today would be the day. Today he would unleash his weapon on the underground culture and perform the greatest show ever seen.

Oken had built a special scabbard, into which he had included temporal shielding. It was into this that he now slipped the deadly sword. Oken had always considered the word 'sword' as rather crude, especially to describe something as beautiful as he had created. He preferred the words 'blade' or 'weapon', as they seemed, to him at least, to be indicative of power, of might.

It was not uncommon for people to carry swords and other offensive weapons through the towns of the Emblem. In Alendria, Oken's home construct, it seemed to be more prevalent than anywhere else. As he walked along the roads he glanced at the people he passed. He wondered

about their lifestyles, about their histories. If he cut one of them down right now, would anyone realise they had gone?

He noticed a youth, terrorising another young man. His hand went for the sword, but he stopped and realised that this wasn't the time, and that here was definitely not the place. His hand still stuck to the grip of the sword, hoping that the thug would turn his attention away from the young man so he could use his 'blade' and rid the world of this terrorist nature.

Oken was not a violent human, however years and years of fighting, both in the zone and in the war, had left him with an all too strong desire to fight to survive, instead of trying to co-exist. He had never married, and had never had children. He was fast approaching his thirties and showed some definite signs of ageing. His hair had turned grey at the age of 24 and in all honesty he could quite easily be mistaken for an age of 40. There were, of course, treatments available to change his hair colour back to the jet black that it

had once been, but Oken had always opted for the natural approach.

Oken felt lonely and as he walked along to his showcase event he felt somewhat sad that he had nobody to share his achievement with. He had no idea whether he would make it out alive. In essence it was partially a suicide mission of pride. He wanted to show off his achievement, to be the first fighter to sport a temporal weapon. Yet in his heart he knew that if the G-TEP forces came, it could be the last fight he ever took part in. In fact he could scratch the 'could be'. It was damn sure to be.

His heart began pounding again. He saw the cars zooming along the road, sleek and streamlined, although largely unchanged in the last 60 years. Attempts had been made to produce hover cars, but trials in these had always resulted in deaths; occasionally on horrific scales.

One particular crash, or 'accident', had occurred when the nuclear reactor of one such hover car exploded, wiping out an entire village, in the southern construct of Prestone. There was,

at the time, talk of sabotage by terrorist groups. Some even said that the government had been involved. It was alleged that ministers were trying to stop the technology becoming commonplace. At the time, the government of Prestone had been creating large revenues by exploiting fuel workers in eastern Cantaris. If the switch was made to nuclear fuel, then a large source of Prestone's income would be lost.

As Oken rounded the corner he realised that death had become more than a way of life in the Emblem. A girl lay motionless on the pavement after being hit by a car. Crowds of people were gathering round, yapping endlessly into their phones, some even taking pictures. Oken wasn't sure if any of them were calling for help, or whether they were just relaying information to their co-workers that the main route out of the suburb would be blocked for at least a couple of hours. The girl, in her late teens, lay in a pool of blood.

The smell of death filled the air. It was obvious that she had died on impact. Her fragile

bones hadn't been able to cope with the stresses that the car had imparted upon her. Her legs were a tangled mess of bone and muscle. Blood oozed from the crack in her head and Oken was sure he'd heard one passer by exclaim that parts of her brain were visible. In the distance he could hear the wail of the emergency services siren. All too often they took so long to reach the accident scenes that victims that had a good chance of surviving usually died because they didn't receive medical treatment in time.

Oken started thinking about the young girl's family and realised how important her life would have been to so many people. On her clothes a school crest was visible and she was wearing a purple blazer, an instant indication that she was of the highest intelligence at her particular institution. Oken suddenly wished he was able to bring her back. He wished he was able to give her a second chance. Maybe one day he would be able to.

Throughout his thoughts, he hadn't stopped walking. He didn't want to be one of the hoards

of hungry panthers, craning their necks to get a good view of the corpse lying in the road. He walked by the accident, seemingly unaffected at the sight of the event, as his sign of respect for her life. It was unlikely that any of the onlookers would have classed him as insensitive for doing so. It was his way of dealing with it, and it was far better than being one of the crowd.

The driver of the car was sitting on the pavement sobbing quietly, rocking to and fro. Several passers by were trying to comfort the female driver, telling her that it wasn't her fault. Others took to screaming abuse, asking why she wasn't watching where she was going. Oken wondered if that was truly the case or not. There was no way of him knowing, for he had not seen the accident first hand.

A few more months and maybe he would be able to go back in time with Bethany, see who was really at fault; the woman, or the girl who now lay there forever more encased in death.

As he rounded the corner he smelled the freshly baked bread that the old fashioned bakers

still made and thoughts of the accident quelled. He considered going inside to get himself an iced bun or a doughnut even, but decided quickly against it. He didn't want to draw any more attention to himself than he had to.

Oken walked through the park and marvelled at creation. He saw the trees standing tall, the grass as green as it could be and he could hear the birds chirping in the bushes as he walked by. Even the smaller animals marked their own territory in some way he mused. He noticed how each bird's song was intricately different and how complex some of the tones were. He saw a rabbit bounce out into the field beyond and scamper around in a wild frenzy, without a care in the world. The grass swayed back and forth in the calm breeze of the summer.

It had taken him over three years of his life to develop this blade. Over those three years people's opinions of him had changed drastically. He had first discovered the underground meeting place, popularly called 'The Zone', by accident on his way home from his regular job at the library.

He had taken a back alley, something he was unafraid of doing and when asked if he was a fighter or a spectator by a large surly man at the door to what looked like a disused warehouse, he had instinctively replied 'fighter'. It was his nature. He was immediately whisked into a small room with several other people dressed from head to toe in armour of various kinds. More worryingly he also noticed that they were armed to the teeth.

The fights normally lasted about fifteen minutes. They were not classed as bouts to the death, but several extremists believed that this was the only honourable way to conclude a battle. There were no real rules to the fights. As long as you stayed in the ring, which was a platform of a disused railway, and fought as hard as you could, you'd be fine. Defeat was declared when the opponent was either dead, or when they left the platform of their own accord. If you didn't save enough energy to make it out of the ring on your own, that was your hard luck.

Oken's first fight had only lasted thirty seconds. A skinny, stealthy looking fighter was his opponent. Oken had never fought "In The Zone" before and had no idea what was going on. He stood in the small room waiting to be told what he was supposed to do next. Before he could ask any questions, a man entered and told him that it wasn't going to be an easy fight, but that if he won, he'd receive four million credits, no questions asked. Oken, who was desperate for money, accepted. His job at the library barely paid the bills. If he could add a little extra to that, he could afford more time to work on Bethany.

He walked out into the ring and saw his opponent standing across the platform. Oken was drenched in ambivalence, feeling both fear and excitement coincidentally. The fear he suppressed, the excitement grew on him. All around the platform, spectators clawed at the reinforced glass, chanting and shouting till their lungs were hoarse.

Water dripped from the ceiling in a steady rhythm and Oken used this to retain a sense of

timing. He had no idea what weapons this guy would possess; he assumed that he would be as well armed as the fighters he had seen earlier. His heart began pounding. He felt sick, but it was not an unpleasant sensation. It was the kind of nausea one feels before their birthday or on completion of a difficult problem.

Oken tested the ground with his feet, it was solid. He looked up at his opponent. Was he supposed to kill this guy, or merely injure him? As he glanced around the platform's spectators, he noticed several banners with the words 'Hand 2 Hand Ronnie' scrawled in large friendly letters. 'Maybe this guy only used his bare hands?' Oken thought.

He was in luck. He'd stumbled, unknowingly, into one of the beginner hand to hand combat bouts. His heart raced further still. What was he doing here? Why had he said fighter? His answer was quick. Pride, and it was pride that wouldn't allow him to walk away from this fight either. He heard some music start up in a dim corner of his mind. It was not a track that he

recognised. It was purely electronic, a simple lead line designed to psyche up competitors. Ronnie began moving his arms and legs in what Oken could only describe as a Thai Chi kind of motion.

Oken dusted off his jacket and removed it. He was really going to do this. He was used to fighting, the war had taught him enough of that, but not hand to hand and certainly not illegally. Even though no one had said as much, Oken had gathered that the goings on of the Zone couldn't possibly be legal.

Ronnie was still performing his ritualistic dance of movement and mime, and Oken was sure he'd seen Ronnie gesture a twig breaking action with his hands. Oken raised his eyebrows and for the first time all of his fear and anxiety left him. He dropped his jacket on the floor and prepared to fight.

Suddenly he was unaware of anything else but the water dripping from the ceiling. Time seemed to slow down and he followed one drip from the ceiling to the floor. He could almost hear it

rushing through the air like a speeding bullet. He could see a blurry Ronnie in the distance standing stock still. He could see the crowds moving, jumping with anticipation. He smiled, this would be fun. In an instant, the water droplet hit the floor, the host screamed go, the music hit a climax and the crowd roared. Ronnie also started running very very fast towards him, funnily enough; this was the last thing Oken noticed.

The next thirty seconds were a blur to Oken, but he still remembered exactly what happened. He began to run towards Ronnie, each step making a thundering crash on the floor. He didn't consciously think about what he was doing, it just seemed to come naturally to him. There was a pillar slightly to the left of him, about three steps ahead. He put all his effort into reaching the pillar. In one fluid motion he began to run up the wall. First one step, and then with the second he thrust himself away from the pillar in the direction Ronnie was travelling. Ronnie had no time to see where Oken was and was hit completely unaware when Oken dropped from the

skies onto Ronnie's back. Oken felt the crack. Ronnie sure as heck felt the crack. The crowd heard the crack through the thumping rhythm and reeled back at the noise.

Ronnie and Oken fell to the floor in a confused union. Oken managed to quickly turn his fall into a roll and ended up standing next to his fallen opponent, who was now left groaning on the platform's asphalt. Ronnie was not dead, nor was he mortally wounded, Oken had managed to break a vertebrae or two in Ronnie's back which would definitely put him out of action for at least three months. That was the diagnosis that the doctor had given at any rate.

* * *

The culture of the Zone was so brutal that the doctors certificates were used as trophies by the victors and copies posted up on boards next to fight descriptions, written by hopeful young journalists. The feeling Oken had experienced by winning had been indescribably good. He was a

hero. As soon as the fight was over, hundreds of people swarmed onto the platform to congratulate this new fighter on the status he had now achieved. To the present day, Oken held the record for the shortest fight ever in the history of the Zone.

It was not long after that that things had taken a turn for the worst. Fighters started arriving at the Zone with drugs and mechanical advantages to help them win their battles. It was not against the rules, but it turned the sport into a much more specialised field. Four million credits was a lot of money, almost a third of what Oken earned in a month and he realised that he could make a tidy profit by occasionally fighting here.

Since his first fight, he had spent all his spare time developing new fighting tools and weapons; after all he needed to keep up with the game. Super-Humanity was nothing new. All the new kids had it. It was the way in which it was used that made the fighter either successful or dead.

So elusive and secret was the Zone and its members that if anyone was caught using any

weapon or tool intended for battle, outside of the Zone, their membership would be revoked and it would be likely that they would be killed by Zone extremists. Oken remembered one kid using his Super-Humanity tools to rig a college basketball game on a Saturday night. The poor soul never got to see the subsequent Tuesday.

Oken reached the Zone shortly after 6pm. It was a good twenty minute walk from his apartment and he was greeted by loyal fans and ring organisers.

“So you in the Zone tonight Okie?” said one enthusiastic fan. Oken didn't answer, he didn't like being called 'Okie' or anything else besides Oken.

“Saw you last weekend man,” came one comment, “you were awesome.” Oken was used to comments like this and he'd begun to take them with a pinch of salt. If you were popular you were popular, but if you lost a fight, that was your fame gone.

“So, what you got for us tonight then my friend?” Oken looked up to see a dark skinned

man standing in front of him. It was Ruben, a long time bouncer at the Zone and one of Oken's oldest friends. Ruben gave him a pat on the back and slapped him five.

Oken returned the gesture with the words, "We'll have to wait and see Ruben. We'll have to wait and see." Ruben had known Oken for a long time, and a comment like this could only mean one thing; he had something special planned for tonight. He nodded towards Oken and quickly ran off to ask another bouncer to cover his shift. Oken was swamped by hordes of fans asking all kinds of questions and shoving electronic devices under his nose for him to sign. It was the buzz that drove him. Not the attention, when would they realise that, he thought.

Through the years, Oken had worked his way through the ranks to become one of the favoured fighters in the Zone. He had also made several enemies, usually by forcing opponents to withdraw and then subsequently losing fame and fortune as a result. Although these enemies had lost their followers, they still posed a significant

threat to him. They were driven by revenge, an extremely powerful emotion.

Oken walked slowly through the crowds of bustling people. He could feel their anticipation, their excitement. It seeped off them in waves, and Oken absorbed it all, feeling more powerful with each and every step. He'd grown to love his walk from the front door to the fighter's lounge, or the 'Chiller' as it was known.

The Chiller was a place for participants to rest before their matches. Inside, they talked about various things including new tools and weapons that they were developing. Oken was one of the most well respected oracles in this ironic little room. His knowledge was quite literally overwhelming. If anyone had a problem with their technology, Oken knew how to fix it almost instantly. He was that sort of person. He never worried that the information that he gave may lead to his defeat one day, he just enjoyed helping people. Besides, it made things a lot more interesting in the long run.

One of the barmaids walked in with a tray full of drinks. She set it down on the table in the centre of the room. It was a large round table about half a metre in height with a glass top and mahogany legs. It was definitely not the sort of thing one would expect to find in an underground fighting arena but then there were a hundred and one things that were ironic about this place.

“So Oken, I got a problem with one of my Sup-Hum devices,” said a fairly new fighter known only as Skins. He was tall and rather skinny and appeared to be covered from head to toe in technology. The term Sup-Hum, had referred to Super-Humanity devices.

“What's your problem?” replied another fighter. Oken who had been looking at the floor turned his head to look at Skins and nodded for him to continue and share the problem with the group. 'It all seemed so civilized' thought Oken as he sat there. These people were about to go and beat the life out of each other in the next few hours and here they were discussing the finer points of physics and chemistry.

“Well,” continued Skins, “I’m finding it hard to keep the reactor from topping out at 359 Kelvin. I just can’t cool it fast enough.” He took a swig from his hipster bottle and carried on. “I’m scared it’s gonna blow and take my back out with it.” He looked down at the floor rather sheepishly at relaying a fear to the others. Several of the other fighters chuckled.

“Mmmm, fried flesh,” said Oken. “Sounds like you need to vent the exhaust quicker. Try using a turbo charger on it.” He took a sip of his red wine and raised his eyebrows, awaiting an acknowledgement from Skins. After a short pause Skins nodded. He said nothing, knowing full well that it was a fairly simple solution to a fairly simple problem. He felt rather ashamed.

The door knob turned and all but one of the fighters looked up to see who was about to enter the inner most circle of the Zone. It was Jessie, an arrogant, overenthusiastic, hyperactive idiot who was despised by most of the fighters for his boyish good looks and charm. He spoke in a cool

tone which seemed to have a range of accents built into it.

“Aww man,” he exclaimed. “Did you see that accident down on Caster Street. Dumb blonde never saw it coming.”

Oken was on his feet. He lunged towards Jessie and took him by the throat. His arm extended, thrusting young Jessie's fragile body into the wall, knocking over a smaller table complete with drinks and glasses. The glasses smashed to the floor and shards lay strewn everywhere. Jessie was finding it hard to breathe. It was obvious that he'd been winded by the blow, which had taken him completely by surprise. All of the other fighters watched on in earnest. They had no quarrel with Oken. In fact, most of them thought that Jessie had had it coming to him for a long time.

“You've made quite a mess there Jessie,” said Oken in a calm unwavering tone. “Now clean it up, and watch your mouth. Have a little respect for the dead.” He emphasised the last 'd' in the word dead. Jessie nodded in between struggles

for his breath, his nose twitching in anger. Oken cocked his head to one side and raised a single eyebrow, waiting for an answer from the wimp before him.

“Y-y-y-es,” Jessie coughed. Oken dropped him to the floor and he sat for a while in a crumpled heap regaining his breath, but losing his dignity. The other fighters continued attending to their drinks unaffected by the events that had preceded. A barmaid came hurriedly through the door and as she flung it open, it connected with Jessie's head. The noise was enough to make all of the fighters wince and then laugh. Jessie got up quickly, if a little shakily, and leaned on the door handle to help gain his balance. The barmaid made a quick apology and Jessie was gone, slamming the door behind him.

No one had noticed the big black holdall that Oken had brought with him into the Zone. It now rested beside him on the floor, its contents unknown to all except Oken. He knew what was in it, and it was wholly necessary in order to preserve his dignity and pride.

The black material of the bag absorbed the light that fell on it, creating a void that seemed to be endless. The bag was fairly old, worn in places and had an odour to it which Oken had always found comforting. He had packed the bag before leaving his apartment in a routine, almost ritualistic fashion. This time however, the contents were far from routine.

02

Bethany

Inside the bag, packed as tightly as it would allow, were various tools and weapons as well as some of the most advanced Sup-Hum devices ever developed but Oken wasn't interested in these. It was the new additions that he was waiting to try out. He had packed four temporal shield generators; after all, what was the point in sporting the most advanced weapon ever made, if no one would remember its effects afterwards? He had also packed Bethany. That was what he had decided to call his ultimate weapon. It would be his private name for the 'blade' knowing full well that publicly announcing his new weapon as Bethany could result in years of ridicule.

Again, Oken began to feel very nervous and hot. He was beginning to realise the full extent of what he was about to do. He was about to use a weapon that was inherently banned globally, in a place that was totally illegal, against a fighter that was as yet unknown. He looked around the room. He knew everyone there. He thought it would trouble him, knowing that he may have to kill one of them soon, but it didn't. Oken mused further. All the fighters were well aware of their potential fate, he thought. They all entered the Zone knowing full well what they were letting themselves in for. Every fight could be their last. It was how they lived. To his knowledge, none of these people had families of their own.

As Oken sat there in complete silence, half listening to the quiet banter that was going on around him, he tried to recall what Bethany looked like. She was very thin and sleek and made from a brushed metal which made her seem as cold as ice. Close to the grip the blade had a hole cut into it, into which a crystal like object rested majestically. It offered a pale blue glow

which was enough to light up a small room to some degree. The grip was made from a synthetic leather to allow Oken comfort in use, but also to protect the workings of the device.

Oken remembered the months he had spent in the library researching temporal mechanics and the like. He had spent so much time there in fact, that he was offered a job in the science department. He enjoyed his job there, helping people to find the information they needed for various projects and school work. The pay was far from adequate, but then Oken had no real need for it now anyway. The money from winning a Zone match was more than enough to pay for Oken's lifestyle. The job was more of a cover than anything else, allowing Oken to blend in with society and to hide his secret underground connections. Many of the other fighters had jobs too. Skins was a pharmacist, Ruben was an antique clock dealer. Each one of them had a 'real' job and used it to hide their secrets.

Outside the room the crowd was growing impatient. There were rarely fights in the

spectator stands but today was an exception. A man in a black t-shirt and blue jeans decided that the guy standing next to him was annoying him more than he could possibly bare. He promptly punched the antagonist in the face which resulted in an eruption of cheering and shouting. The victim fought back with a swift uppercut to his opponents chin knocking him to the floor with a crash.

It wasn't long before Ruben was on the scene. His dumper truck sized fists clenched, ready to do his worst to retain peace inside the Zone. He picked the first man up off the floor and dragged him to a room known as the detention cell. Anyone who caused trouble inside the Zone was locked inside one of these cells for the duration of the evening.

The man struggled and protested but Ruben had seen what had happened and knew that the limp body of this kicking and screaming idiot had been the mastermind behind the first punch. Ruben threw him into the cell and slammed the metal door shut. He opened the shutter that was

located near the top of the door and shouted inside to the little man.

“Be nice in future.” Ruben too was an educated man who had been spotted by the Zone's creator six years ago. Since then Ruben had attended every meeting at the arena which occurred once a week. He was tired of these low life jerks, who seemed to believe that they could do anything and get away with it. He walked over to the man who had been attacked and shook his hand. “Nice punch,” he said. The man nodded towards Ruben who slowly walked away.

Before the matches started, the platform was opened up to the spectators who used it as a dance floor. People from all walks of life visited the Zone and revelled in its atmosphere. Several younger members of the crowd were playing a game of tag, weaving in and out of the pillars which lined the platform. The train tracks were terminated by brick walls at each end and large speaker stacks were situated above these. There were also large television screens lining the back wall opposite the tracks. These showed various

music videos and advertisements before fights, but during the matches, these were turned into gigantic action replay panels. The platform was littered with tiny remote controlled cameras, the size of flies, ready and waiting to transmit footage of the fights back to the producer who chose the shots to display.

The control room was outfitted with an impressive array of technology. The owner hadn't skimped on anything. During the day, he rented out this platform as a recording studio for both music and television. He had recorded several albums here and was known in the underground music culture for his decent rates. The normal crew were lined up in their executive chairs, waiting for the fights to begin. One crew member had begun to mess around with one of the hover cams, following various people through the crowds, until he was brashly told to 'stop it' by the producer.

Five ash trays adorned the control desk, innocently sitting there waiting to catch the hot by-product of the owners bad habit. Almost all of

the control team smoked. All but one. Darren sat in the corner with a bandanna covering his mouth, coughing occasionally in a display of protest at his disgust of the other crew member's appalling habit. They all knew he didn't like it but they couldn't help a life long addiction. Though it was uncomfortable at times, Darren was getting used to the smell. All the crew members got along fine and Darren didn't want to cause any ill feelings. It was more for attention than anything else.

The first match was a newbie bout. Two young recruits had been drafted in, much in the same way that Oken had. They were now making their way to the platform, dazed, scared and confused. Bouncers and ring organisers began ushering people off of the platform and up into the spectator stands ready for the first match of the night. Oken was busy talking to the Zone's manager, asking him if he could place these new high resolution cameras in each corner of the platform. He was of course referring to the temporal shields which he required to be placed at specific points around the arena, in order to cover

the entire spectator and platform range. Oken was unsure of what the manager's reaction would be to him using a temporal weapon in his arena. He decided it would be best to leave it till the end of the show and explain it in full later.

Oken moved to each corner of the large platform, carefully removing the shield generators from his bag, placing them on the floor, and plugging them into the power sockets as he went. He dearly hoped that the sockets would be able to provide enough juice, temporal technology was power hungry, real hungry. His own electricity bill for the last few months had been through the roof. It had been so high in fact, that he had been concerned that an inquisitive G-TEP official may visit his residence to see just where all the power was going.

He finished setting up the last generator and dully tested their operation with the remote control device he had also developed. Their lights turned from red to green and back indicating that they were fully working. Oken opened the control device's top to check the small

illuminated display which lay inside. All of the shields were working within normal parameters. Phase one was complete. Now he just had to wait until it was his turn.

The first fight ended fairly abruptly with one of the contenders giving up after acquiring a bleeding nose. The jeers and the shouting was tremendous and Oken briefly felt sorry for the poor young soul who had had his hopes of becoming a Zone master crushed at the first hurdle. The blood trickled down the poor boy's face and Oken was sure he could also see tears, mingling with the red stuff as it descended. The drips of blood collected on the floor building a red patch that seemed to know no bounds. One of the bouncers handed him a towel and told him to get into the spectator crowds or get out. The boy rejoined the spectators, hoping to gain another glimpse of the awesome power that he had sought so dearly.

The second fight was a lot more interesting. Both competitors were sporting Sup-Hum devices, which they were really using to full

effect. One of the competitors, a Chinese man in his early twenties, had configured a device to double his own body weight, obviously with no hindrance to his performance. His punches and kicks were so powerful that he had been told to steer clear of the pillars, even with their reinforcement. The other competitor, a local guy, had configured his device to lower his local gravity to just under half the normal level. Consequently, he was agile and incredibly nimble, much more so compared to his Chinese opponent.

The two competitors stood facing each other across the platform and Oken was reminded of how he had felt the first time he had experienced the same thing. It had been scary, but anticipation had won him over in the end. The music began and the crowds flared. The two tigers roared at each other. The Chinese fighter was raining blows down on his opponent, who seemed to be taking them with a pinch of salt. The density enhancer had failed, the poor Chinese opponent was fighting with just his usual level of strength.

The local boy fought back and both of them exchanged numerous Kung-Fu style blows and punches. The fight was well into two minutes already. A good start thought Oken.

With the music blaring and the crowds shouting, Oken found it hard to concentrate on the two warriors fighting for dignity and their lives below. He was now standing at the front of the spectator box taking in all that lay below him. He knew the landscape well, that much was obvious, but it took more than that to win a fight and from his brief analysis, the Chinese competitor definitely had what it took. Even though he was at a significant disadvantage, he was still very much in command of the fight. He was calling the shots. Oken had noticed that the local boy was struggling to keep up; even with his gravity altering device.

With one final blow the Chinese fellow sent his opponent sprawling to the floor. His opponent couldn't get up; it was time to finish it. With a quick kick to the head it was all over. The crack of the young boy's neck sent a shudder down

Oken's spine, but it felt somehow ironic. This was the sport he was in, he should be used to it by now.

Oken had not really seen any need to kill the boy, but then it was always the victor's choice. Oken was glad he had never done that. If he had killed his opponent, it had always been in the thick of the fight, never when it was clear that they had already lost. That wasn't fighting, that wasn't honourable, that was just murder.

Two bouncers went into the ring and dragged the body of the boy off for immediate incineration. It was vital bodies were disposed of quickly and effortlessly less the government should find out what really went on there. No one in the spectators stands had any idea what happened to the corpses, the victims of the Zone's insatiable appetite for destruction, but then no one really cared. Once a fight was over, the loser was generally forgotten. Most spectators just assumed he would be dumped in a park somewhere and it would be dismissed as a drunken brawl by the authorities.

Oken returned to the Chiller. He sat down and poured another glass of wine. He sat back into the chair and put his feet up on the glass table in the centre. It wasn't a big room by any stretch of the imagination. Adorning the walls were posters of previous death blows and doctor's certificates detailing various chilling injuries. Hanging from the ceiling was a chandelier style light fixture. Oken watched the pattern the light made on the white painted ceiling as the chandelier swung gently back and forth, moved by the air from the ventilation system.

The door swung open and the Chinese fellow victoriously entered, hands held high in the air by fellow fighters. He picked up a bottle of beer from the table and began to hurriedly drink it down. Oken took little notice of the panting animal and instead turned his attention to one of the weekly newsletters lying on the table. The electronic paper changed to show the face of the Chinese man standing next to him and the story appeared below. 'Hung hangs local star,' read the headline. Oken gathered that the young man's

name must be Hung. He was a new fighter, not one that Oken had seen before. To him he just seemed to be another young hopeful who would soon be sipping his mid-morning milk through his nose, just like all of the other young kids who became too proud, too fast.

The door opened again and Ruben poked his head round. Oken had always found it mildly amusing at the amount of light that was reflected by Ruben's bald head. Today was no exception and he almost felt like shielding his eyes in jest, but he knew from experience though, that Ruben would not take kindly to jokes about his appearance.

“You're on next Oken my man,” said Ruben as he looked around the room at the quietly chatting fighters. He clicked his fingers and pointed at Oken. “Make it a good one,” he said, “I took the night off for you.”

“I'll do my best Ruben,” said Oken, though deep down he already knew the fight would be utterly spectacular. Though he had tested some of the weapons abilities, he had no idea what would

be the result of killing someone with a temporal weapon. Would there be a shower of sparks, a ray of light, a big explosion? He knew not, but he had heard stories of the consequences in the many temporal mechanics books he had read.

Though temporal weapons were abhorrent creations, banned and restricted the world over, the general public knew that they existed. They didn't however have any real knowledge of what these devices could actually do. The G-TEP was a terrifying force, definitely not one to be challenged. Yet the thrill of developing something so dangerous, so sought after, had driven Oken from the beginning.

The G-TEP had obviously been temporarily shielded, they could see echoes of temporal events a few days, sometimes even weeks before they would occur. It gave them time to prepare, and if luck was in their favour, to stop the event from taking place. An impact analysis was always carried out, and the G-TEP forces would try to predict what the eventual outcome would

be, taking into account whatever evidence they had at the time.

Throughout the development of the temporal weapon, Oken had discovered that not only could he obliterate things from existence with the technology, but that he could also affect the flow of time. He was able to slow time down to a tenth of its normal speed, with his own body remaining unaffected. He had built this technology into Bethany also. To activate it, he just had to squeeze on the grip and linearity would do the rest. The harder he squeezed, the slower time passed. It took tremendous amounts of power to run the temporal devices and though Oken had never run them for more than a few seconds, he knew the power source in the hilt of Bethany wouldn't hold out for long.

Oken picked up his holdall and grinned at how light it seemed, now that the four shield generators had been removed. He took one last look around the room and walked out shutting the door to the Chiller behind him. Unbeknownst to him, the other fighters in the Chiller were all

lining up ready to take up their positions in the spectator stands to watch what was rumoured to be the most important and monumental fight in the Zone's history. Ruben had to be thanked for that. He could spread a rumour quicker than a rash.

Oken walked down the stairs to the platform below. He noticed how cold and clinical the place felt. The stairs were constructed from solid concrete and he could see the light from the platform below billowing up the stairwell in a sort of cosmic mist. He continued to walk slowly down, checking his watch at the last step, 8:05pm. With any luck he'd be home before 10:00pm.

The crowds were jumping still and Oken was amazed at how much energy they seemed to possess. Many of them were drug takers, fuelled by an obsession which would eventually kill them. Oken had never taken drugs. He had never seen the point, the effect only lasted a short time, and take the wrong combination and you'd be dead. He drank a little alcohol, but nothing that

would affect his performance; just a little to settle the nerves.

His opponent was making his way down the opposite stairwell. Oken knew him. His name was Yaz. Yaz was famed for his technology and his speed. Oken found it fitting that they had been pitted against each other in what was a sincere clash of two titans. He hoped that his time-bending would teach Yaz a brief lesson; Speed wasn't everything. All of a sudden they were there, standing across from each other. The music thudded a dull beat that Oken found incessantly boring. Thump, thump, thump. He felt as if his head were about to explode.

Oken recovered the remote control from his pocket and activated the four temporal shields. Their lights changed from red to green. All systems go, thought Oken. He opened the black holdall and removed Bethany, still in her scabbard. As he slid her out of her shell, he could hear the metal scraping against the inside of the sheath, setting his teeth on edge as it did so. He was holding the sword out in front of him and he

could see Yaz with his staff, performing complex patterns of twists and twirls. Oken pulled the tip of the katana from the scabbard with a delicate finesse. He held her in his hands knowing that soon he would be able to test her in her native environment; the battlefield. The scabbard he was now placing on the floor was of an ancient Japanese design. Oken had designed Bethany specifically to fit inside. He hadn't made the scabbard. As luck would have it, three days before beginning construction on the blade, he had found the sheath in a charity shop in the commercial district.

He now stood facing his opponent and Oken joined in the ritualistic twisting and twirling of weapons, first left then right, each time getting closer and closer to his own body. He could hear the noise that Bethany made as she whisked through the air. It was as clear as day, even through that incessant thumping. It wasn't the low whoosh that weapons normally made, but more of a soft screech, largely due to the hum of the generator sitting inside the grip. With each

movement Oken became more and more hypnotised by the sound she made.

The crowd started pointing out at Oken. They were knowledgeable and knew that he was not sporting his normal array of specially customised weapons. Oken had something different. One guy tugged at Ruben's shirt.

“Hey man,” he said, “what's he got there?” Ruben chuckled to himself and turned to speak to the excited fan.

“Your guess is as good as mine my brother,” he replied. The rest of the crowd was shouting and exchanging their own hypotheses as to what Oken had brought with him. It was this frenzy in particular that Oken loved. Their excitement of the unknown, their electric anticipation. This was what had driven him to creating Bethany.

No one could figure out what Oken was carrying. It was a sword, that much was obvious, but the spectators knew there would be a sting in its tail. Several members of the crowd thought it was some kind of energy weapon, others thought it was super light. None of them even came close

to the truth. A few started rhythmically banging their hands against the toughened glass, hoping to start a giant riot to catch Oken's attention

As the temporal master was performing yet another twirl, he gripped the handle tightly and watched as time slowed to a snails pace. He looked around at the crowds jumping in slow motion. Their clothes caught in viscous ether. He saw Yaz still twirling, the anger on his face, the concentration. He saw a man's drink being knocked out of his hand and the liquid glistening in the harsh lighting. He looked back across the platform and noticed the water dripping from the ceiling as it had done three years ago when he had first fought in the Zone.

He watched one drop fall from above and followed it with his eyes till it reached the ground. He released his grip on the handle and time quickly returned to normal with a slow whoosh. He hadn't noticed the music slow down, but now that he listened to it, it seemed unnaturally fast. The crowd went wild.

In the control room, the crew member who had been disciplined earlier for playing around with the cameras was given another lecture about not fiddling with the cameras operating speeds. The poor man protested that he had nothing to do with it, but the producer yelled back all the louder.

“You play with those damn cameras one more time sonny, and I'll stick 'em down ya throat,”

The crew member decided that arguing back just didn't seem like a good idea. He'd been a hard working technician for going on five years now and it didn't seem worth blowing all that on a little argument. He needed the money to send his daughter to college.

The time was fast approaching for the beginning of the battle. The music had thinned to a bass line and Oken sensed that in a minute or so, the manager would yell 'go' and they'd be off. It was always the manager's prerogative to begin the fights. Sometimes he passed on the opportunity. Tonight he was there in spades.

Oken decided to try one more little experiment. He gripped the handle tightly and once again felt time begin to slow. He walked slowly over to the water that was still dripping and sliced a single drop in half. He watched as the drop split into two globules, and then he performed another slice, managing to cut both the droplets in half again. At this speed, it could be accomplished by anyone. Despite this, Oken felt proud of his achievement. He returned to his starting position and released his grip. The crowd roared. Oken had become immortal, at least in their eyes. This was something the likes of which they had never seen before in their lives.

Yaz, disappointed at losing the crowds attention, twirled his staff even faster in a desperate attempt to win back their admiration, but he could do nothing to turn their attention away from the grey haired figure standing not twenty metres from him. Oken turned to face the crowds and held up his sword with both hands high above his head. The crowd cheered all the louder. The man standing next to Ruben went

mental and was shouting “You the man Oken, You the man” at the top of his voice.

Yaz stopped twirling and shouted across at Oken,

“Fancy trick Oken, but aren't you a little old to be playing these games.” Yaz chuckled to himself. He spotted an empty beer bottle standing in front of him to the left. He gingerly put the end of his staff into the neck of the bottle and with one fluid motion flung it towards Oken's head. Had Oken not seen it coming, he would have been knocked out for sure. Yaz was very fast, very strong and his reflexes were nothing to be sniffed at.

Oken watched the bottle coming towards him and gripped on the handle of Bethany. The all too familiar whoosh rang in his ears, like the striking of a gong, and once again time slowed. The bottle was still in mid air, slowly making its way towards him in a graceful dance of silent mime. Oken swung his sword just when the time was right and sliced the bottle clean from neck to base, right down the middle. As he released the

grip he twisted the blade slightly and saw the two halves fly past him and shatter as they hit the wall behind. Oken looked down at the sword which was now stock still in front of him and the child inside him screamed, 'This is a cool toy.'

In the control room the producer was shouting. "Did you get that? Tell me you got that." The shot was replayed on the big screens and for once Oken allowed himself a quick glance. It had been captured in slow motion and it looked even more spectacular on screen than Oken could have imagined. His body moved with a majestic stillness whilst the whole universe ran at an even lower speed. He could see the gaze of his fans watching him in the screens. He could feel the vigour, even though it had been silenced.

Yaz now looked more than a little worried. It was obvious to him that Oken could win this fight easily if he wanted. Yaz had never seen or heard of a weapon that could do what Oken was doing right now. To the crowds, it seemed as if Oken would suddenly slip into some kind of

hyperactive spasm, the results of which would not be fully realised until he slowed down once again.

Oken's heart was beating fast, very very fast and he wondered whether it was excitement or fear that drove his heart to pound at these speeds. He wanted to experiment more, but knew that the time had come to start the fight. Yaz's heart was beating fast too. He knew that this would probably be the end of his career and his life. Yaz had foolishly requested this fight against Oken. He now regretted it. His hands were sweating and as he performed one of his many twirls and twists, the staff left his sweaty palms.

As it fell to the floor, it bounced from end to end, making a racket that would have echoed for an eternity had it not been for the volume of the music which was still playing, drowning out the noise and softening Yaz's humility. Oken could hear the instruments building up and up. He looked down at his shoes and closed his eyes. It was getting there. His time was coming. He took a deep breath, looked up and opened his eyes. In the milliseconds that it took for his eyes to focus,

he saw the manager open his mouth and scream one word down the microphone.

Already Oken knew what the word was going to be, but the loudspeakers didn't. The signal travelled along the copper wires at an almost infinite speed, through the mixing console, through the amplifier and onto the loudspeakers' cones. It pushed the cone in and out in, bursting the air as it did so, screaming the word every single person on the platform wanted to hear, every single person but one.

“GO!”

03

Go

The manager's voice echoed through the platform as the music hit its climatic section. Yaz had decided, in an extremely short amount of time, he was still going to do his best, despite the high probability that this would be the last fight he ever saw. He was a respected fighter in his early twenties with no real job and nothing to lose. He wasn't a weapons developer, he was just a user. He bought old tools off of previous fighters and then hired some tech-heads to enhance and integrate them.

It was at that instant that Oken knew his dream had come true. He was about to unleash his weapon for the very first time. He ran

towards Yaz and engaged in some showmanship blocking and advancing. Yaz knew the game all too well and cottoned on to Oken's idea fast. Oken wanted Yaz to meet his end with his honour and respect intact. They were both well aware that Oken could end the fight any time he wanted. Whilst itching to unleash the deadly power that lay at his finger tips, it gave him great pleasure knowing that he had already won. The chances of Yaz managing to overpower him, were very slim indeed.

The two of them flipped around, dodging each others attacks, defending masterfully. The music was still raging and the crowd was still jumping. The loser of the first battle stood stock still and gazed on in amazement at the way in which these fighters were duelling. There was absolutely no way that he would ever be able to match their level, they were in a class all of their own.

The two fighters below became locked in a struggle, Oken pushing his sword against Yaz's staff, and Yaz forcing back against Oken's sword. In an explosive instant they flew apart from each

another with expert precision, each knowing the others rhythm and timing down to the very last microsecond.

They both somersaulted and landed about five metres apart, trying to regain their breath as the music thinned once again to a stonking bass line. They both made advances towards each other, little steps trying to entice the other into a frenzied attack. It was almost as if they were dancing.

For a moment Yaz forgot all about Oken's super powers. Then it was time for Oken, once again, to show his superiority. The music blared once more and Oken tightened his grip on the handle. The leather felt warm and inviting. So effective was his weapon at slowing down time, that he could actually pause to consciously analyse the feelings in his hand. He also had time to think about his rumbling stomach and time to notice the pretty blonde girl standing in the third row from the back, second one in.

She was in her early twenties Oken decided and for a moment he allowed himself to imagine

what it would have been like to be married, what it would have been like to have children. He looked over at Yaz, who had begun a desperate lunge towards him. It was time to finish this.

Yaz was closing in on him now and Oken took the initiative to side step the incoming staff butt and spin round to once again face his foe. Yaz began to turn his head to locate Oken. The immortal began thinking how cruel it was to play games like this with a warrior as serious as Yaz. At this point in time though, Oken didn't really care about honour or fairness, his time had come to show what he had created, to show what he was really capable of.

He released his grip on the now sweat ridden handle of Bethany and Yaz wheeled round in awe at the older fighter's speed and finesse. He made another lunge at Oken who decided once again to make full use of his advantage. He squeezed the handle and slid down underneath Yaz. In one fluid motion he bent his legs and placed his feet on Yaz's chest. The muscles in Oken's legs bulged, and he released the coiled springs and the

grip simultaneously. Yaz was airborne and had no idea how it had happened. He was flying through the air and he had never even seen it coming. For a moment it even felt good.

The voice in Yaz's mind reminded him that Oken probably had something to do with it and a quick spin of his head saw the figure of Oken standing to his feet. With a quick twist, which Yaz was sure had ruptured a ligament or two, he managed to propel himself in such a way as to land on his feet. Oken was just delaying the inevitable and Yaz was quite sure he was enjoying it.

By coincidence, the pretty blonde in the third row from the back, second one in, was also having the same thought. She had been a follower of Oken's career from the very start and had always admired his sportsmanship, precision and tenacity. This time though it was different, she was disappointed in Oken, who seemed to be just toying with his prey. The girl, Jay, was one of the young journalists who had been assigned the Oken - Yaz fight. Her report would

undoubtedly detail Oken's skill and mastery in full, but she was already thinking that a criticism of his over confidence would also be justified. The word bully sprung to mind, cocky even.

With a final burst of energy Yaz ran towards Oken using the speed as only he knew how. Oken looked at Yaz, then down at Bethany and squeezed the grip. As he did so he saw a droplet of sweat fall from the handle and make its way gracefully to the ground, spinning and pulsating. He sidestepped the incoming Yaz and held out Bethany making sure to cut Yaz in such a way that he would feel as little pain as possible. The blade was aimed across his chest and though Yaz was aware of the blade's position, he never had time to change direction. His opponent ploughed into the blade, so sharp, that it made no sound in cutting through the flesh, muscle and bone of Yaz's body.

As Oken watched the final blow in its grim slow motion, he noticed that no blood spilled from the wounds. It was as if it was being sucked into a void which began at the bare flesh made by

that spiteful Bethany. As quickly as the cut was made, Yaz was gone. It started from the lacerations in his chest and then very quickly moved in opposite directions towards his head and his feet. Oken wasn't quite sure what it was devouring his opponent, but before the two parts of Yaz's body could hit the floor, he was gone. Erased from existence by Oken's magic marker.

Oken released the grip and watched as a hot ethereal air column rose from where Yaz had once stood. The show had been spectacular. It was true that he felt some level of remorse for what he had done, but nothing could overcome his feeling of pride and superiority right now. The crowd went wild with amazement. The producer was screaming instructions to replay the shot again, and Ruben? Ruben just stood there. He had known it was going to be a fantastic show, but this had just dumbfounded him.

Oken looked up, turned to face the crowds of screaming, blood thirsty wolves and raised Bethany up to sky. He held her with both hands above his head and revelled in the mania which

he had just created. Behind him the screens replayed the final blow over and over with pixel perfect quality. The look on Yaz's face was that of pure fear as he faded into non-existence. His death had been quick, and from the expression on his face it didn't look as if he had suffered much pain, if any.

Oken gripped Bethany tightly again and familiarised himself with the whoosh once more. He wanted to savour the moment, and savour it he did. With time slowed down he could fully appreciate the crowds expressions and sentiments. He stayed as still as possible. The time for showing off was over, now he just wanted to revel in the atmosphere he had created. Three years of his life. His most arduous task to date, yet he had completed it, and added some style while he was at it.

The crowds began to pour down into the platform below them. The music increased in volume and Oken flung his head back and roared. He released the grip and his world was once again loud and proud. This had been the night he had

been waiting for; The night when people had seen what he was truly capable of. His parents had sent him off to war when he was nineteen even though he had begged them not to. Oken was an academic and he would have much rather stayed at home and continued with his studies. Despite the attention the schools, prospective universities and colleges gave him, Oken's parents classed him as a dud and a freak. They had decided his future for him and that was that.

As the hundreds of excited, drugged up nuisances rushed the field. Oken felt a sudden sense of panic. He quickly and expertly replaced Bethany in the scabbard and made his way to one of the stairwells, kicking Yaz's staff as he did so. He reached the stairs and began to push past the almost fluid like stream of human flesh which was making its way in the opposite direction. Oken imagined how much easier it would be to reach the top if he used Bethany to cut down and obliterate the hungry mob that barred his path, but was just an inner joke, he never wanted to harm them.

He reached the top and Ruben granted him an unbelieving shake of the head. It continued as Oken walked slowly towards him, the light reflecting off Ruben's shiny shaven head once more. This time he could afford the joke. He held up his hand as if being blinded by the light from his friend's bonce and they both laughed. Excited fans were running past, slapping Oken on the back and shouting numerous compliments in his face.

“Well done my friend,” said Ruben, “well done.” Oken could feel the admiration almost seeping off of Ruben's body. It joined the admiration of a hundred more and filled the atmosphere that fuelled the frenzy. Ruben put his arm around the older fighter and took him off in the direction of the Chiller. They didn't reach their destination however. The Zone's owner was running towards Oken. For a second, Oken could not tell with any certainty whether the old man wanted to congratulate him, or to rip his head off. He was panting from running so fast and

extended his hand for Oken to shake. He accepted the offer and smiled.

“Oken.....You.....Fantastic,” panted the executive. The words had trouble leaving his mouth which was dry and in desperate need of a drink. He too put his arm around Oken and the three of them walked slowly to the Chiller in order to celebrate this latest achievement. The crowd was still jumping around, both in the spectator stands, and on the platform below. He was being bombarded from all directions with hands, pads and the most insane questions he had ever heard.

“Oken, are you a god?” shouted a drunken man swaying wildly and looking very very ill. It wasn't long before the man promptly threw up all over the floor and he was removed from the arena by a couple of Ruben's burly associates. The man began kicking and screaming and once again emptied the contents of his stomach all over himself. The bouncers shook their heads. It was amazing how much of a mess some of these so called fans could make.

Oken was ushered to the door of the Chiller and both Ruben and the manager, Zeus, took a step back, as if to let the fighter have the full glory of walking into this throne room. Inside, everyone was waiting for him to enter. Many of them had guessed that the weapon had been of a temporal origin, but none of them realised the implications, or thought it possible that it could be turned into a Zone weapon.

The master walked into the room and was met with an almighty cheer. Ruben and Zeus pushed him forward and all the fighters took their turn at ruffling the grey mop which sat atop Oken's head. Jessie was standing in the corner and even he was smiling. Oken presumed that he had been forgiven for his earlier actions. He looked around at the faces of the fighters in the room. They were all smiling, some laughing and Oken knew that they all shared his sense of achievement. It bothered him a little that no one seemed to be scared of him. Here he was, sword in hand, and everyone was treating him like an old friend. Perhaps that was why.

Ruben motioned for the other members of the Zone's inner most circle to quieten down. Everyone began to hush except for one man sitting in a chair next to Ruben. He was laughing his head off and Oken could see that he had had extensive dentistry. Ruben gave him a swift slap to the back of the head and the man spun around clutching his head in pain.

“Pipe down Marty,” said Ruben, “Oken's got a couple of words to say,” Oken didn't remember telling Ruben that he wanted to make a speech, but everyone was looking at him and even Jay had been allowed in to the Chiller to make comments on Oken's post match speech. It proved how monumental this fight really was, journalists such as Jay had never previously been allowed into the Chiller and the notion of a young female in amongst these savage beasts had an irony that Oken found quite disturbing. Jay was not in the least bit worried about the huge monsters that surrounded her on all fronts. She was there to do her job and to get paid. It was all

an experience to her, a way to gain an insight into writing for a business client.

Oken walked into the middle of the room where the table had once stood. If it had been alive, it would probably have been jealous that its once prominent position in the room had now been given away to someone else. If the table had been alive though, it probably wouldn't have argued with Oken directly, not with a sword like that at any rate. Oken put down the drink which some random fighter had forced into his hand and cleared his throat. Jay leaned forward, hanging on his every breath. Oken opened his mouth and was aware for the first time of the silence that had fallen. He didn't like it. He lived for the paroxysm and now it was gone.

“Come on man, talk!” said one impatient listener. He thumped his fist on his leg and then realised that it had been a bad thing to do. It hurt like hell. Oken spoke.

“I don't know how it happened,” he said, with such sincerity that Ruben thought he was about to cry. “It became an obsession and I just couldn't

stop. In some ways I wish I could go back.” He turned and walked away. The crowd was left dumbstruck. It was not the triumphant speech which they had been expecting. He opened the door of the Chiller slowly and the noise from outside leapt back in, filling the room with pressure fluctuations that drowned out the surprised gasps and chatter of the inmates.

In a way, Oken had been glad of the music and the crowds. It made it all the easier for him to slip away unnoticed. He made his way through the jumping crowds and back down the stairwell to collect his shield generators. He took the remote out of his pocket and switched them all off simultaneously. Making his way to each corner of the room, he packed the generators into his bag which had been pushed to one side, out of harms way.

Jay watched from above. It wasn't that she was attracted to Oken, she just found his character so interesting. She had been waiting for an eternity to be assigned an Oken fight, knowing that she could explain the fighter in intricate

detail. Now, after his surprise exit, she was lost. Maybe he wasn't the man she thought he was.

Her predetermined descriptions of fire and rage that were to leave the fighters mouth were gone. She had nothing. She took a deep breath and decided that it was time to talk to Oken about it, face to face. She walked down the stairwell and found him unplugging his precious generators. As she got close, the crowds encircled her in their endless dancing. When the path cleared again, he was gone.

* * *

Oken walked down the street in the twilight with a slow majesty that had become more or less a trademark of his. He looked back at the place where he had just performed the impossible and smiled a simple little smile. The event had been over quicker than he had imagined. He hadn't wanted to leave the platform. He had wanted to stay isolated down there, watching the crowds shout and cheer from afar. He had never liked

being in tight spaces. Indeed, a few times after he had fought, the platform had seemed to be the place he felt most at home in. It was so large and spacious.

Jay opened the back door and saw Oken up ahead. She ran to catch up with him and he made no attempt to outrun her. She finally reached him and Oken was surprised that it had taken her so little time. He could hear her high heels tapping on the concrete surface, making a rhythm that sounded somewhat unnatural. He slowed. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed the pale coloured clothes that she was wearing and noticed too that she had some kind of recording device in her hand.

“I’ll speak to you,” he said, “but not with that thing running. I want you to work for your report.” Jay smiled. She was already beginning to see that his quick exit had been a deviation from his normally humorous and sarcastic nature. She started to say something and paused, her mouth half open. She closed it and started again.

“That was quite a show you put on there,” she said. A compliment never went unheard she had remembered her journalist lecturer saying.

“So what was wrong with your first question?” He asked. Damn it. She didn't think he'd heard the almost silent whisper that had escaped her lips. She guessed she shouldn't have made such rash assumptions about a man as knowledgeable as Oken. She was sure it had been drowned out by a passing car, but quickly noted that it would be in her best interest not to assume things from this point forwards.

“You still not thought of an answer?” said Oken. She hadn't realised it had been that long, but from the tone of Oken's voice she guessed it must have been at least ten seconds. She went to answer but realised that to her horror, she had forgotten the question she had been asked. She decided it was time to change tact and for her to begin a new line of questioning.

“How did you come up with the idea of making a temporal weapon?” she asked, almost grinning to herself at the cheekiness of the

question. All at once he was in front of her and this time, it was not due to the use of temporal weapons either. It was due to Oken's unmistakable speed and the fact that Jay had been looking down at the road while they walked. Oken hadn't meant to make physical contact with the delicate young woman, but he found himself holding her arms by her sides, against a wall.

“Don't you ever say that out loud in public again,” snapped Oken. Though she had meant the question to be of a fairly intrusive nature, she had not realised just how dangerous it was to say the 't' word in public. She decided quickly that she would have to be exceedingly careful about what she said from now on and offered up a humble apology.

“I'm sorry,” she said. Oken nodded in acceptance and the two of them continued on together in silence until they reached the end of the road.

Oken loved the summer and in particular the summer evenings. This particular evening was quiet, all except for the children running around

in the park just ahead and the parents yelling after them from the comfort of the dozen or so benches which lined the edges. A car came up behind them and slowed beside them. It was Ruben, the fast blend of techno and electronic trance blaring out of the unmistakable Lotus sports car.

“Need a lift my man?” asked Ruben, shooting a wink at Jay. He crawled slowly alongside the pair and started making kissing noises.

“I’ll walk. Thank-you Ruben,” said Oken without looking at him. Ruben couldn’t see his face but Oken was smiling. He found Ruben’s sense of humour hilarious.

“Now I know why you were in a hurry to get out so fast,” Ruben exclaimed in an all knowing voice. The bouncer was still hanging out of the window and Oken turned to him with a grin and said,

“You’d better watch the road Ruben. Don’t want to be knocking over any old ladies now do we.” It was only then that Oken was reminded of the young girl he had seen earlier, and secretly scolded himself for the remark. Ruben chuckled

to himself and took the hint. He pressed the button to wind the window up and drove off in a cloud of dust that gently rose and seemed to hang in the dim evening air. Jay had secretly been pleased that Oken had declined the lift, even though she would never have revealed it. She still wasn't sure about Oken, he seemed harmless enough but she could not let herself forget that finishing blow. It had been so calmly executed that for a moment she wondered if Oken had been a hit man in a previous life.

They rounded the next corner in silence and Jay saw some steps leading up to a tall apartment building. Oken sat down on the steps and gestured for Jay to do the same. She felt a little uncomfortable at doing so but she needed the information for her report. Oken turned to her and spoke. "I'll let you come up to my apartment providing you keep that recorder switched firmly off." Jay had not been expecting such an invitation but understood that Oken was just trying to help her out. She nodded silently.

* * *

Oken's apartment had a strange smell to it which Jay found rather intoxicating. Unbeknownst to her it was the smell of the many temporal and electromagnetic shield generators which were happily humming to themselves, protecting his life from the G-TEP pigs. The sound they made summed up to a quiet whisper and Jay stood in the middle of the room examining the apartment in minute detail.

The first thing she noticed was the wooden floor. It was so shiny that she could see a partial reflection in it. The wooden theme continued onto the tables and chairs too. Jay had always liked beech and suddenly felt rather jealous of Oken's abode. He offered her a drink but she declined. He motioned for her to sit down on the plush cream coloured sofa which stood on its own feet on the wooden floor. She did so.

Oken decided after five minutes of silence that it would probably be better if he started the conversation, since she had made no attempt to do

so. In all fairness, neither had he, but that wasn't the point.

“It started out as a daydream,” he said. “One day I was sitting here all alone watching some classic films. It was about two weeks after joining the Zone, and the idea just came to me. I started looking it up in books at the library and it grew from there.” He saw her nod and start to hurriedly write down notes on her electronic notepad. Oken drew in his bottom lip and bit down gently. He saw the way her arm darted in quick flashes of movement and the way her hair hung in a curtain that covered her face. He could not see her expression; it was one of sheer panic.

After a short while, Jay settled into the interview, never leaving the corner of her seat. She even allowed herself a few laughs at Oken's many psychological jabs at his former self. It was a gentle evening and even Oken was having fun. He told her about the time he had messed up a temporal reactor and the blast had removed his eyebrows leaving him with a very difficult explanation to find before 9:00am the following

morning, when he started work at the library. He told her many more stories too, all to be kept strictly off the record. These were his exact instructions.

For some reason he felt he could trust her, her face so sincere and friendly. He wondered how on earth she had wound up in a place such as the Zone and ventured the question. She told him that once when her brother had gone out to one of his 'secret meetings', she had followed and had immediately fallen in love with the atmosphere. Later when she had taken up journalism, she had decided to use the Zone as a practise run before getting a real job. Oken had laughed at the words 'real job' and reminded her that he was twenty-nine and still worked in the library as a book stacker, but he could not shake the feeling that she had been a little hurt by his chuckle.

By the time Oken looked at his watch it was a little after eleven thirty and he pondered on how quickly the time had passed by. He remembered the old phrase of 'Time goes quickly when you're having fun,' and allowed himself the possibility

that maybe he had had more fun than he had originally thought. Jay was looking tired. She had stopped writing about forty minutes ago when the conversation had taken a more informal turn.

After an exchange of goodbyes, Oken closed the door and Jay walked away, stopping once and looking back to see if he was looking back at her. He wasn't, at least not with the door open. He was actually on the other side, peering through the peep-hole of the antiquated building. He turned and leaned his back against the door and smiled.

04

A Deal

Oken and Jay's was not the only meeting to have taken place that night. A little after the party at the Zone had finished, Jessie made a short visit to the local police station and inquired as to where the nearest G-TEP office could be found. Oken's reading of the boy's forgiving nature had been far from the truth and now Jessie sat there in this office, which smelled faintly of liquor and waited for the police chief to make his entry. Accusations of G-TEP violations were serious business and every effort had to be made to ensure that the perpetrators were caught and crushed.

Jessie looked out across the park which was now only lit by the hovering lights, one of the parks many attractions. Jessie pondered whether Oken would have expected it to be him who turned him in to the G-TEP. The thought excited him as he concluded that Oken would probably never have suspected him. This was going to be glorious, he was going to get back at the idiot once and for all. Oken had often made jokes towards Jessie. It was never meant to hurt, yet Jessie had always taken it that way.

As the hover-lights danced around on the parks surface they made playful shadows on the walls of the interrogation room in which Jessie was now situated. He raised his hand up and played with the light like an innocent child. The windows were slightly open and the bars which secured them joined in the puppet show. Jessie could see no pattern in the lights movements and likened it to a symphony. One set of shadows moved one way, then another set darted in front of it, all the time creating a complex light show

which intrigued Jessie's mind for well over ten minutes.

When the police chief entered, Jessie immediately shrank back into his chair. The chief frowned at him as if to question Jessie of his actions. The snitch's expression was that of a five year old boy. He didn't belong here. The chief, who was wearing the normal black police uniform, sat down opposite Jessie and pressed a few buttons on the computer keyboard which lay in front of him. He turned the paper like screen which was mounted in a stiff frame, so that Jessie could see it. The young man could see the chief scrolling through reams and reams of records. He presumed they must be G-TEP related.

“Do you know how many G-TEP allegations we receive every month?” the police chief asked of Jessie. The boy shook his head and the policeman noticed the large bump, which had appeared after the door incident. The chief continued, “Over six hundred.” He paused, “people seem to think that they can use it to easily remove others who are making their lives

difficult. Now that isn't what's happening here now is it Jessie?" Jessie once again shook his head in a schoolboy like manner. It had just occurred to the police chief what Jessie reminded him of, a weasel.

The law enforcer shook his head and looked over at the small being that sat across from him. "I'm sorry Jessie," he said, "but I just don't believe you." Jessie wasn't surprised in the least. He took a small object from his pocket and placed it down on the table.

"I had a feeling you were gonna say that," said the boy, "so I brought you a little proof." The object turned out to be a data disk. The chief moved his hand forward to retrieve the disk but Jessie slid it away from him. "When do I get my money?" he asked.

"When the offender is dead," came the reply of a second man who had just entered the room. The police chief took the disk from Jessie and loaded it into one of the computer's many drives. Various accessing noises were heard and finally an image appeared on the screen. It was obvious

that Jessie had taken the footage from the producers control room. His hands were sweaty and his heart was pounding. The images showed Oken defying the laws of physics quite spectacularly and Jessie couldn't help but be a little impressed with his enemy's moves.

The police chief and the G-TEP enforcer were also impressed by the implementation of Oken's weapon and Jessie revelled in the attention that his footage had obtained. It was, of course, the nature of the footage that had gained their undivided attention, but Jessie was not about to admit to that. His ego was on a major trip and that would end no time soon.

As Oken moved, swiftly and skilfully, the light from the screen filled the almost black room. The hover-lights in the park had been turned off since and the only external light now entering the room was that of the moon. The enforcer took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it. He puffed several times and nodded slowly. It looked like Jessie was telling the truth. It looked like he was

about to get his hands on the first temporal directive violator in the last three years.

The enforcer was, of course, still wary. Computer animation was almost photo-realistic and even he couldn't tell the difference between some of these films and real life. There was also the fact of the source to be considered. Sitting there quietly playing with his fingers, the enforcer could not help but feel sorry for the pathetic little loser who sat before him. There was a small part of him that felt a little jealous. If Jessie's claim was indeed genuine, then he would be up for the reward approaching a sum of 25 million credits.

The only way to know for sure though, was to be there and the enforcer was already planning his deployment of troops, in order to trap and contain the acrobatic dancer who was performing unimaginable tricks on the screen in front of him. He turned to Jessie and began to speak.

“Jessie, you understand that as of this moment you are now under the G-TEP secrecy act of 2030. If you so much as breathe a word of this operation to anyone, not only will your reward be

forfeit, but it is probable that you could be incarcerated for a period of no less than 45 years and in the extreme cases, the offence is punishable by death.” His words were stern and throughout the whole speech Jessie never looked up once.

There was a pause in which there was enough time for the police chief to swat a fly dead. Jessie knew exactly what the enforcer was trying to say. If Jessie bungled the operation, then his life would effectively be over. He didn't like the tone that the G-TEP enforcer used, but at the same time, he knew how important catching Oken must be to him and his team.

Jessie looked up and spoke in a chilling tone which disturbed the other two men in the room. “I want to bring him down. I saw what he did and he deserves to be punished.” The police chief squirmed uneasily in his chair. For a moment it seemed as if Jessie was the one interrogating the two law enforcers.

The G-TEP enforcer nodded, “OK then Jessie. After a brief investigation, we'll begin the

planning and deployment of troops to crush this guy. We want to bring him down as much as you do. Remember that.” Jessie nodded and his brief moment of superiority was gone, evaporating into the ether as quickly as it had come. It didn't bother Jessie in the slightest. They believed him and Oken was finally going to get what was coming to him. Jessie performed a grim little smile which the police chief could only describe as half-evil, half-weasel.

The enforcer left the room and closed the door behind him. Jessie could hear his shoes making a slow tapping noise as he walked down the long corridor to the reception area. The police building was an old one, full of long corridors that wound their way from room to room, sporting various off-shoots along the way. In the hour or so that the meeting had lasted, Jessie had been unaware of the hum of distant traffic that now seemed to fill the room. It was the early hours of the morning now, and Jessie's eyes were tired. He rubbed them, and the chief realised that through this hard exterior lay a small boy who

hadn't yet grown up. Jessie's hard nature was all a façade.

He spoke to the boy. "You go home now Jessie," said the rounded figure of the police chief. Jessie was sure he could detect a hint of chubbiness in the man's voice. He decided that it wasn't worth dwelling on now, stood up, and reaching down, picked up his coat which he had neatly folded and placed on the chair next to him. He held the small package of material by the collar and shook it. In one swift motion the package unfolded with a whoosh and Jessie put the long black coat on. It was definitely not new and some holes were visible, along with a rather weird smell. The chief guessed the smell that was emanating from the costume in front of him was a cocktail of various alcoholic beverages.

Jessie looked up at the police chief and for a moment he felt the urge to reveal his dislike for him. He quickly concluded, it was not the best of ideas. Even though he didn't like it, Jessie needed this man and his balding friend, who had departed not five minutes before. He opened the door of

the room and the click from the latch echoed around the reverberant chamber like a pistol shot. He paused, gave the police chief one last knowing look and then closed the door behind him.

As Jessie walked down the long corridor he could feel the swish of air on his legs, made by the swaying folds of material which hung off of his body. His dark black boots made a crunching tone on the stark tile floor and occasionally left marks in the layers of polish which had built up over the months. The police stations in the Emblem were fairly quiet places now and it was not uncommon to go a whole half-day without a single customer.

Jessie was being watched by the police chief who had exited the room in order to check on the weasel-esque figure who had now reached the reception area. Jessie never paused to listen or reply to the electronic receptionist's friendly greeting. Instead he barged his way through the automated doors, not waiting for them to open for him, and made his way home.

It looked as though Jessie was angry, though there was nothing that he had to be angry for. He had gotten what he wanted. He had obtained the police and G-TEP's backing. Now all he had to do was to wait and not give the game away. Easy, thought Jessie as he began his long walk home. Easy.

05

Meeting

The next morning when Oken awoke, he was reminded of the surprising length of time that it had taken for him to get to sleep. He reminisced about the evening's events and of course Jay. Oken didn't want to think about it. Every time he did, a strange feeling began to wash over him. He looked over at the half open window and saw the many trees which blocked his complete view of the sun. He could hear the birds twittering in the branches which hung outside and he smiled.

It took him double the normal time to get up. His mind was on other things. Had he been asked though, he would not have revealed that a good ninety percent of those other things included Jay.

He had tried to remove her from his mind as he sat down to watch cartoons over breakfast. It was always good therapy for a troubled mind Oken assured himself. He poured out a bowl of cereal and covered it with milk. He stuck the spoon in and began to swirl it round. All at once his thoughts were no longer on the cereal and were once again fixed on Jay. Oken was unaware that he was swirling faster and faster. Nor was he aware of the closeness of the milk to the edge of the bowl.

The milk left the bowl and Oken jumped, sending the rest of the milk and cereal jumping too. Most of it landed in his lap, but some made it to the floor. He began to mop it up and realised that he'd now have to change again before work. Of course he blamed Jay for his little mishap, but deep down he knew that it was his own fault. He just couldn't stop thinking about her. It was truly maddening.

He didn't want to admit it though and instead thought it best to avoid the subject for as long as humanly possible. He finished his breakfast in

between fits of hilarity at the comedic insanity which performed before him, spewing forth from the rectangular shaped panel on the wall. He switched the television off and put his bowl in the sink. He looked down at his watch and realised that he was already five minutes late for work.

He put on his shoes at the door, which were now an off-black grey, largely due to the amounts of dust in both his apartment and the library. The laces were also looking grubby, distorted by the numerous times they had been left undone and had been trodden on all day. Flakes of mud flew off as he tied the laces and he decided that he ought soon to invest in a new pair.

Oken was, by nature, a relatively clean man, but today he had just run clean out of time. He couldn't believe how long it had taken him to do his normal routine and the child inside him immediately shifted the blame to someone else. Jay. Had it not been for her, it would have been the makers of the cartoons, or the manufacturers of the toothpaste dispensers which he had

wrestled with for at least three minutes during his ritualistic morning routine.

Oken didn't have a car, not yet anyway. In some ways he was glad he didn't, less expense and less harm to the environment, but in other ways he wished he did have. Today was one of those days and as he half-walked, half-ran to work, he couldn't help thinking that maybe on his way home he'd buy a car, in case of emergencies such as this, he certainly had the finances.

He passed the shops and places that he usually saw everyday, but somehow they all seemed a little more insignificant than usual. Jay had been the cause of this too. Man, why did she keep popping into his head? Sure she was nice enough, but she wasn't his type, was she? Did he even have a type?

* * *

He reached the library quicker than he had expected. He pushed open the larger than life door and made his way to the sign-in desk. His

shoes made an all too familiar thumping on the carpeted floor and Oken realised that this was not the first time he'd been late. He arrived at the desk with a smile for the waiting receptionist. She was real, unlike in the police station and her tone of voice cut through him like Bethany had cut through Yaz.

“You're a bit late today Oken, aren't you?” she said in that unmistakably smug tone to which he had become accustomed. Oken apologised and for a moment was about to explain that it was all Jay's fault, but then he realised that Jay had nothing to do with it and that it was all in his mind. He apologised again and made his way to his section.

The library itself was huge and stored all the books one could ever need, some in electronic format, which was more common in the science section and some in the more traditional paper format. The tall stacks towered over him and Oken felt the same dwarfed feeling he normally felt when walking past them. The books were all arranged neatly in alphabetical order and the

stacks looked much tidier than they would have in a library years ago. This was largely due to the standardisation of book sizes in 2033. Books were now only published in three sizes, small, big and extra big. Oken had always despised the term 'extra-big' but it had been a government decision and he was at no liberty to argue. Since most of the Emblem had been converted to a common language, the word 'big' stood out as easy to read, write and say.

It was at this moment that an elderly gentleman approached him holding a copy of *Kreshtik Skeltars - Of The Spirit Of Time* and asked him if he had a copy in 'extra-big.' Oken shuddered and moved off to the stacks, motioning for the old man to follow. The pair looked in vain for over ten minutes but the library clearly didn't have what he was after. They never did.

He apologised to the old man who looked at him thoughtfully for a second. "Did I say Extra-Big," he said, "I meant Big." Oken took the opportunity to remove the old man from his

presence by closing his eyes. Who had come up with these new standardised names.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but we don’t have this particular book in.....Big, either.” The old man muttered under his breath, probably something about the younger generation Oken thought. He replaced a rogue book on the shelf and made his way to his desk. As he looked down at the mounding paperwork and the lamp which had gathered copious amounts of dust, he thought about how nice it would be to have a picture of someone special on his desk like the other workers seemed to. A voice in his head asked him if he would like the picture to be of Jay. He gave no reply.

He looked down and noticed the scrap of paper he had been idly doodling on. In fact he had been writing a poem. As he looked down at it, he re-read the words and his stomach knotted. It was one of the lamest things he had ever read and as he sat there, he scribbled it out feverishly. He had been trying to capture his feelings, in a

creative manner of course. By the look of the piece of paper, it had backfired spectacularly.

Oken was feeling very very strange. He had never felt like this before. A part of him wondered if it was love, but he was too proud to admit it. He did admit though, that he was looking forward to seeing her again at the next Zone match, if she was there. He sat down in his chair and looked at the piles of work he had to do. Some of them were dated six months ago. Many of them were requests for books which Oken was sure were no longer needed now. Even so he had to get on with it. He picked up the first request, "Comparisons of modern and pre-temporal science" by "Erwin Padrio." He walked over to the appropriate section and looked through the books.

His gaze was startled when he saw the first book he had ever read on the subject of Temporal Mechanics, "The temporal nature of time" by "Jamilio Hadrenkes." He pulled the book out of the stack and caught a glimpse of someone standing on the other side. Oken noticed

something strange about her. For one thing, she was female. This troubled him. He didn't see many females in the temporal mechanics section, nor in the science section come to that. As he looked closer he could see her bright red hair almost burning in the mid-morning sun.

She turned and Oken was shocked to see that the female with the bright red hair was Jay. She had obviously dyed it that night. He couldn't help notice how different she looked. She spotted him quickly and shone a dazzling smile which made Oken once again feel this funny feeling. She reached the end of her stack and entered the one which Oken was currently attending. She walked up to him and smiled once more.

“Thought I'd come and say hello,” she said and continued, “as I was in the area.” She could see that Oken looked a little awkward, even put out, by her presence. She wondered if he would have preferred it if she hadn't come at all. All Oken was really wondering was just how long had she been standing there? Had she been

watching him? He was sure he would have noticed.

He spoke. "How did you find me?" he asked. From the moment the words left his mouth he realised the full extent of the stupidity of the question. The library was the only one for 200 kilometres, and he had already told her that he worked in the science section. She almost laughed but then decided against it and instead opted to change the subject.

"So," she began, "have you written any books here?" Her voice was so soothing thought Oken. He knew he hadn't and thought better of it than to lie to her. Instead, he decided to tell her about the book he was holding.

"No. I haven't written any books. I'm not bright enough for that," he said. "I wouldn't know where to begin. But this book here is the first book I ever read on Temporal Mechanics." She took the book from him and opened the cover. With her head down, Oken found it difficult to see her expression through the shiny red hair. Her face was a picture of pure

amazement. She understood absolutely nothing and as she turned the pages, she realised that this man had a lot more to him than she had first thought.

She remembered how he had been at the Zone, incredibly strong, both in character and in physique. Then, even though he had been at his own apartment, he had been somewhat shy and reserved towards her. She had contemplated that perhaps it was just because he didn't like her, but something inside her had hoped it wasn't.

She too had found it very difficult to sleep that night and had decided to give university a miss for the day; primarily so that she could go and visit Oken, although there was no way that she was going to tell him that. She had kept thinking of the kind man that she knew lay behind the rough exterior. A part of her wanted to stay there all day, but she knew that she had a thousand and one things to get on with.

She looked up and saw Oken looking at her. She thought it would scare her, but in fact it made her feel slightly special.

“Wow.” She said, handing the book back to him. He nodded and smiled.

“It takes a little while to get into.” he replied, “but the ending's a killer.” As he thought about it, he realised the truth of his statement. She chuckled and all at once Oken forgot his seriousness and realised how good it felt to make her laugh. He wished she could stay all day, even if she just sat in the corner and read a book. Things got so lonely sometimes and to have someone there would have made all the difference.

“I'm sorry,” she said, “I have to get back. I have a tonne of work to do.” Oken motioned to the stack of papers that lay on his desk and she smiled. “I'll see you at the Zone.”

She walked away and Oken sighed. Deep down he had known that she wouldn't stay, but he had secretly hoped she would change her mind. She looked back to give him one last smile, and maybe a wink, but he was gone. She saw him sitting at his desk, head resting in one hand, and pen in the other.

Oken picked up the first book request again, 'Comparisons of modern and pre-temporal science' by 'Erwin Padrio.' He had carried it with him back to the desk for reasons unknown. Now he returned to the stack. He could still smell Jay's perfume hanging there in the air. It was a beautiful glistening scent, full of sweetness and cheer. It was definitely not at all like the current trend of fragrances which some bright spark had made mood dependant.

He picked out the requested book and carried it back to his desk. It was in electronic format so all it consisted of was a thin sheet of e-ink paper, designed to show any of the books pages at the touch of the screen. The little tab which protruded from the edge of the book was made from an ageing plastic and Oken could see that this one was in desperate need of repair. He decided to leave it and bill the borrower who had requested the book when it was returned.

When the time came for Oken to return to his humble abode, he piled the remaining paperwork on his desk. He had only gotten through the first

twelve book requests. It was true he had been doing other things, besides just book requests, but his productivity had dipped to below twenty percent of his normal efficient speed.

After a quick shower, Oken lay down to go to sleep. He knew that it was going to take him a long time to drop off, but he lay there anyway. He turned on the television and flicked through the four hundred or so meaningless channels. Finding nothing interesting in the first fifty, he decided that it was time to try sleeping. He turned over and began to think about all that had happened in the past few days. Within a couple of minutes he was sound asleep.

06

Beaten Track

The train was moving faster now and he was sure he couldn't stop it even if he wanted to, but he had to try. He was sure it was his destiny. He was meant to stop this. If he didn't? Well he really didn't want to think about that. The consequences were too much to bare. This was a decision he'd made unreservedly and he wasn't about to back out now.

As he ran through the first carriage, he mentally programmed his destination. Though he had never driven a train before, he knew they were normally controlled by one of the end cars. Weren't they? Since he had started at one end of the train, logically he would need to reach the

other end. It was a straight path, but his time was running out.

The train was older than most, probably around 40 years. A real veteran by the present day's standards. The older trains were still used as show pieces at exhibitions, or sometimes to transport freight slowly from one destination to another.

It moved through the tunnel at blistering speed and the air around it was completely at it's mercy, being compressed and thrown against the tunnel walls. The lights on the front of the train had a hard time keeping up with the moving scenery. It was almost as if the light was trying to grab hold of the weeds and gravel as it zipped through the deep dark tunnel, but just couldn't quite make it. Sparks flew from the trains wheels as pressure from cornering became too much.

He reached the end of the first carriage and hammered on the button to open the adjoining door. Nothing happened. He took a step back and kicked it. Still nothing. He fumbled and pulled on the manual door release. His heart was

pounding and he wasn't quite strong enough to move the metal clasps. He turned and looked at the metal kick railings running across one side of the train. One section in the middle of the carriage was slightly loose. Kicking it with all his might, he gained himself a lever and ran back to the door.

This time the clasps gave way easily and he managed to pull the doors open. His face contorted with the amount effort he was required to expel. He had never worked so hard in his life. Air rushed in through the doorway, throwing grit and sand into his face. The surround covering the gap between the two carriages had eroded a long time ago, and flecks of rubber were still being torn away as the train ripped through the air.

Making it through the next doors proved more difficult. The clasps had seized, though he couldn't see it at first. He tried the same trick he'd used on the previous door, but to no avail. This time the door was stuck fast. The sheer desperation on his face was clear. He had to do it. His mind was racing. He had to get through the

door, no matter what. He looked up, climbing along the top of the train carriages was certainly an option.

The ladder to the side of the carriage was easily reachable and he climbed it with ease. It was almost exciting as the air rushed past his face, distorting his cheeks and playing with his hair. As he reached the top, a cable hanging from the roof of the tunnel hit a protruding part of the train, causing it to slap round to the side of the carriage, catching him in the face. He screamed out as the sharp end of the cable lacerated his cheek. Blood was being pulled from his body by the pressures created by the speed and it hurt.

He grit his teeth and bit back on the pain, channelling it deep down. He had to push on. The roof no longer seemed an option. Rapidly running out of time his frustration was turned to the glass window in the door ahead. He looked at the tool still in his hand and then looked towards the window. His hair whipped his face and the decision was made. He slammed the tool into the glass again and again. Tears began to well in his

eyes. He couldn't give up now, he just couldn't. The noise of metal against toughened glass still couldn't really be heard above rumbling of the carriages against the ageing rails.

Finally the glass gave way in an explosion of shards. Most flew drearily into his face and body, managing to avoid the pull of the air. Had they been caught by the rushing tornado he would have been cut to shreds. The gap was narrow and in climbing through to the next carriage he managed to slice his leg just above his ankle. Almost not realising he continued, spurred on by his recent success.

As he ran through the second carriage, he tripped on a cable that some careless worker had left strewn across the floor and fell. He hit the ground hard and it must have been about three feet before his body eventually came to a stop. His chin had hit the ground and sent a shock-wave up through his bones to his cheeks, which began to pulsate in pain. His eyes went blurry and he could feel himself losing consciousness. "No," his mind shouted. "Don't give up." But it

was too late. He felt the last trickle of conscious thought slip through his neurons and collapsed.

* * *

When he came to there was no period of disorientation whatsoever. He checked his watch, that beautiful old watch. 6m32s remaining. He picked himself up and gasped at the pool of blood which he had left behind on the floor. He was probably going to need that later. He was also going to need some kind of medical attention if he made it out of here alive.

He began running again, and at the end of the second carriage, caught a glimpse of himself in one of the side door windows. He was a real mess. His clothes were stained in blood, and not the freshly coloured red blood either. This stuff was thick and dark, making a kind of paste with the fabric.

There was no time for self pity now. Motivated by his own progress he began to attack the door in front of him. Up in the top right hand

corner of the door, almost smiling at him, was the number of the carriage, seemingly self illuminated by it's own material. 264. He smashed his way through the door, having been unable to open the clasps once more. He now realised that all the doors had been locked. He had to move faster.

Above him to the right was an advert for Doxoproctamil, the wonder drug, though recently it had been discovered that it's long term effects were far from wonderful. Doxoproctamil had been invented as a pick me up drug with apparently zero side effects. It was supposedly a miracle for modern medicine, using only natural ingredients and promoting wakefulness and increased brain activity in the subject. What the pharmaceutical companies had neglected to do was to perform long term studies on animal subjects, having been petrified of action by animal rights agents.

Any pharmaceutical company testing on animals has always, throughout history, had a bad name. The leading Doxoproctamil developer had

managed to keep its testing out of the limelight so far, but the more rigorous testing that this drug so desperately needed would require a whole new facility and creating a whole new facility meant questions, inspections and guided tours.

The result was a drug that worked fine for about ten to fifteen years of usage. After a certain amount of the drug had been ingested by a subject, the body just stopped caring about everything. Metabolic rates slowed, people became fatter and lazier. Their brains, ravaged by an untested drug became slow and sluggish. Doxoproctamil users were given the nickname 'zombies'.

After about two years, conversation and general day to day interactions with the zombies became impossible. They literally wandered around like their namesake, picking up food where they found it, and sleeping wherever their body gave up for the day.

After the euthanasia bill had been passed globally, much to the disgust of many religious groups, the zombies didn't stand a chance. Police

workers had been given the power to shoot people in that state in a supposed act of compassion. The truth of the matter was far from it. Some police workers used the excuse of ending a zombie's suffering to humiliate them and turn it into a game.

He saw the advert and it immediately made him remember a story he had been told by his father. His father had told him about the time he had seen a police officer playing a game known only as 'riddled'. Essentially, a police officer loaded their gun and tried to shoot the former human being as many times as they could without it falling over.

Once Doxoproctamil had been discovered to cause such effects, the suppliers trading days were very much numbered. Several religious and extremist factions, terrorists in all truth, collaborated and planted high yield explosives at all Doxoproctamil sites, before killing the president of the company and destroying all known stock of the Doxoproctamil drug.

* * *

Smash. Another window. He'd made it to the third carriage now. The glass glinted in the light from the carriage lights and produced distorted patterns all around. He was blissfully unaware of the tiny glass shards which were now embedded into his shoulders. His mission was too great. His drive was too extreme. He had to get to that last carriage and for a second his mind stopped, though his body continued. What would he do once he got there? What did he expect to find? How in the name of all things temporal was he going to stop this thundering beast?

The designers of the train had done a good job of stopping people being able to run through the carriages. He managed to bruise himself at least three times in this carriage, smashing his shins and arms into various protruding pieces of wood as he clumsily made haste through the narrow gap between the two sides of seats.

He was almost sure he could see the end of the train now. His steps became heavier and his

energy was getting sapped by the second. Each step seemed to take an increasingly large amount of time. His reserves were running low and he wish he'd eaten more of that breakfast. His shoes were in almost as bad a state as he was. The laces were worn from being trodden on, and to add to that they now had beautiful red streaks down them, hand painted by the blood oozing from his legs.

Smash. Another window. Surely he must be there by now. As he stopped for a breath, he saw the electronic sign displaying the information "This is coach 3 out of 8." The LEDs in the display were faded and many were missing. He almost had trouble making out the words, but was thankful when he did. He was almost there.

With his heart pounding that little bit faster he broke through into the next carriage. A portion of the floor was missing here and he could see the ground merrily flying past him, not stopping to say hello, or to help his fear to subside. He could easily run and jump over the gap, but how sturdy was the floor close to the hole? He had no idea.

He thought back to using the roof again, but a quick touching of his cheek made him a) wince with pain and b) realise that the roof was still not an option. If anything the train had increased in speed since then. Looking upward he saw the railing which passengers used to hold on to when the number of seats was less than the number of passengers wishing to sit in them. Even though it was old, the metal still shone. Good old stainless steel, he thought.

He grabbed hold of the rail and immediately left dirty marks all over. The blood stained, grubby, fingerprints of a man on a mission were smeared all over the otherwise spotless railings. He managed to hoist his body up, though how he managed it was a mystery to him. He flung his legs over the railings so that he was now essentially hanging from this horizontal pole.

The idea had been good in theory, but he had forgotten all too soon about his bad leg. As soon as he had swung his leg into the air, the blood rushing to it excited his neurons and gave him a quick indication that this really wasn't the best of

ideas after all. This was no time to be giving up however and inch by inch he worked his way along the railing, dripping blood and sweat into the void below.

At about halfway along the railing, directly over the hole, one of his hands slipped. It could have been the blood or the sweat or both, but something didn't want him to get to the other side. As his weight shifted, his other hand was no longer able to hold all the mass of his body. He fell, but luckily his reactions were a little quicker than gravity. He tensed his leg muscles and locked his feet together. As the rest of his body fell, the weight on his legs pushed his wound onto the railings and blood sprayed out all over the train and all over him. His free-falling body was stopped by a chair, which had inappropriately been left half destroyed and overhanging the hole.

His head slammed into the metal chair's railings and he instantly realised why this chair hadn't just fallen into oblivion. Metal was hard. Metal hurt. A part of him wished the chair had given way at that point. Put him out of his

misery. His mind was fuzzy and all he could think about were doughnuts with pink sprinkles. Which was strange as he hadn't eaten a doughnut, let alone one with pink sprinkles, for many years.

He could feel himself losing consciousness again. His head had been put through it's paces recently and it was all getting too much. A voice started shouting. "Get up. Do it. Carry on. You must. Get up. GET UP" In an instant everything was quiet, as if his mind was clearing the way forward. He put all his effort into pulling his body up and grabbing the railings.

He was only two or three feet from the end of his overhead journey and he so desperately wanted to finish. Everything hurt. He carried along, moving faster and faster. Thinking how proud he was of himself as he got closer and closer to his goal. The voice inside spurred him on, and he finally reached his destination.

What happened when he got there was a moment of sheer ambivalence. His muscles just gave way and he fell five feet from the railing to the floor. Half of him was pleased that his

muscles were able to relax, if only for a moment. The other half berated him for hitting the deck so hard. He couldn't win and yet he must.

* * *

The speed of the train had now begun to make the small air cracks in various parts of the chassis whistle tunes. For a second he lay there, wondering how different tones were possible. He couldn't help it, it was the academic inside him. It would most likely be linked to speed. Not the speed of the train so much, as the speed of the air rushing past the gap, though obviously the two were related.

With the width of the tunnel varying slightly in places, the same amount of air was being pushed through larger and smaller surface area spaces between the train and the tunnel wall. Smaller gaps mean the air had to travel faster to get the same volume through per second. Elementary really.

The tones still troubled him. These tones were all over the shot. Maybe it was his blurry brain, maybe it was his lack of coherent thinking at the moment, but these tones did not seem natural. He got up and looked around before seeing what he feared most.

There was a figure standing at the end of the first carriage, in the drivers section though he knew he was no ordinary driver. He was gripped with uncontrollable fear. Just how was this going to go down. He hadn't been spotted yet. He looked all around him for something to give him an edge, but there was nothing. He hadn't remembered his trusty window smashing tool, which had been left over the other side of the carriage. That's the trouble with clouting your head with metallic objects he noted. It was good advice.

When he looked back at the engineers section again, the figure was gone. There was no shadow, no figure, no indication that anyone had ever been there, aside from the unmistakable speed of the train hurtling towards it's target. He

managed to get the next door open without using any tools. Maybe he'd gotten stronger, or maybe this one was just loose.

In the final carriage, he was immediately aware of the smell of blood and death. It seemed to be a sense he had. He looked over to his right and walked forward, there was something there. As he got closer, though his blurry vision he could see it was a person. A person in a train drivers uniform. The shiny label on his shirt spelt out the name 'Markus' and it was marked on a gold background in red letters. He noticed the pool of blood cradling the man. It seemed almost as if he belonged there.

He'd reached his destination. With one mighty push, he managed to open the door to the engineers section. The control desk was spread out before him, but he had no idea what buttons to push. In the bin next to him, a small fire was raging. He bent down and was able to just about make out some of the text on the front cover. "Eng..... Tr..... Manu...." Engineers Training Manual he guessed. Damn it.

Just as he was about to give up he heard coughing from behind him. He spun round to see Markus the train driver spluttering. Blood was being projected from his lips and was spraying over the train floor. His head was cocked to one side and hung in an odd fashion. It was only now that he'd moved slightly that he could see what had caused his injury. Several shots through the stomach. He ran over to Markus and knelt down beside him. He felt bad for what he was about to do, but he really had no choice.

“Hey there, look I'm sorry for what's happened here, but I have to stop this train. I must stop this train.” he said. Maybe Markus had heard the sheer desperation in his voice, or maybe he just didn't care, but he slowly nodded to his new companion. His death partner. Markus looked out of the window. The train was going really fast now and the lights in the tunnel, which could usually be used as a good indication of speed by counting time between them were just a blur. Markus knew in his mind there was only one real way to stop the train.

“De...de...deral” he said. Even though Markus' pronunciation was a little off, he still understood what had been said. He had to derail the train. Though he had never driven a train before, he had even less experience in derailing one. He guessed he'd need to make the carriage jump off the track by putting things in it's way. But what exactly? The train was heavy, and he just couldn't think of anything suitable. Then he had an idea, it was risky, but it was all he could think of.

* * *

As he swung the oversized fire axe towards the window he suddenly had a feeling of dread. He had experienced high speed air currents at earlier points in the train, but the holes had been smaller then, and the train going slower, what the heck would happen now?

The axe tip flew through the air and sliced it's way to it's destination making a practically inaudible whoosh as it went. As the blade struck

the reinforced window, he realised that he had twisted a muscle in his shoulder, but that would just have to wait. The tip dug in hard and forced a small shard of glass to fly out into the world outside the train. It struck the tunnel wall and shattered into a further thousand pieces.

It was almost half a second later when the window exploded inwards. The tip had shattered the glass, but the force of the air pressure had pushed it over the edge. The window went from transparent to opaque in a matter of milliseconds as thousands of cracks wound their way to the edges of the frame.

Shards and plates flew towards him. He threw up his arms around his face to offer some protection. At this point he didn't really care much what happened to him. Some smaller shards dug into his arms and other exposed flesh, making his face grimace with pain. It was like taking a shower with a thousand knives.

The wind was almost unbearable and he was sure that it was driving the glass deeper and deeper into his arms. He had to do this. He had

to stop caring. He gripped the window frame with both hands and realised his mistake. Through the slitted eyelids, protecting his vision, he had neglected to notice the few shards still sitting in the frame, now embedded in his palms. He threw his head back and screamed.

The grenade in his pocket had seemed almost unnecessary when he had left. Now it was going to be his saving grace. He leaned out of the window and found a suitable location on the outside of the train, just above the window frame. Elementary physics told him that applying a force at the top of the train would be much more likely to tip it, than applying it the lower down. He had found some tape in the drivers cabin, and with this he taped the grenade to the side of the train. He plastered the grenade with as much of the sticky stuff as he could muster.

A thin rope had been also coiled up nicely in the engineers cabin. He attached the rope to the pin, and uncoiled it. It wasn't a lot, but it would do. It should offer him enough time to get out of there. His plan seemed crazy but deep in his

mind it didn't matter how stupid it seemed, he had to do it. He had to save her. His adversary was an oversized bullet, travelling through a barrel which twisted and turned to its eventual destination, and he had to do everything in his power to stop it reaching it.

His heart was pounding more than ever before. He may not make it through this, but he had to try. He ran to the nearest seat, hid behind it and tugged on the rope gently, nothing happened. 1m12s the watch displayed. Damn. There was no time. It really was now or never. He pulled the rope harder and this time pin flew out inadvertently becoming one with the tunnel wall. The roped whipped away from him, almost taking his fingers as it went. He got up and started running. He made it through the first door before the explosion hit and pressed the button.

The pressure wave generated by the explosion was so intense, it almost ripped the carriage from the chassis. Luckily, the structural rigidity of this 40 year old train cabin held, and it tipped and fell. The pressure of the explosion threw the carriage

against the wall of the tunnel, catching one of the many support columns that protruded from the side.

The column ripped through the top of the carriage like butter. The carriage, now on it's side screeching along the rails and ground was being opened like a tin of sardines. The seats and furnishings were shaken from their fixings and rattled around, some falling out along the way.

Eventually, the tin could be opened no further and it jackknifed across the rails. The noise from the metal on metal was unbearable. Almost all of the windows had now shattered in the first cabin. The force of the other carriages ploughing into the side of the jackknifed bullet pushed it over, once, twice and it started to roll along the tracks before friction kicked in, and the rigidity of the cabin gave out.

The carriage crumbled and created a kind of ramp for the rest of the train to launch from. As the connections between the carriages gave way and they made their way dangerously along the tracks, they seemed to dance to the speed. It had

been a long journey for this newly promoted carriage but it was coming to an end. In a crescendo of sounds the carriage left the rails and ramped over the debris towards the end of the tunnel.

The end of this particular tunnel was different to most. Most tunnels end in an opening of some kind. This one ended in a brick wall. A solid brick wall. Though the train had slowed it was still able to punch through the air with ease. Had his watch been there, it would have been ticking 10:42:58, 10:42:59, 10:43:00.

The train hit the wall.

07

In Anticipation

The rest of the week passed fairly slowly and Oken did not see Jay again. She was very busy with her university work and although she dearly wanted to see Oken, she knew that Friday night was only a few days away. It was what had kept her going. Oken had also been wishing for Friday to come and now he had finished the week and it was finally here. It was the chance for him to show, once again, his mastery.

The anticipation of the fight was still there, pumping through his veins. He knew all too well that he had to concentrate and not let the thoughts of that sweet young woman get the better of him.

He suspected that her presence may actually make it easier to concentrate.

It was already five pm and Oken had arranged to meet Jay outside the Zone at six thirty. He sat on the cream coloured sofa and gazed out across the cityscape which stood in all its majesty before him. He could see the cars whizzing their way through the mazes of tarmac, beeping their horns as they went. It was an amazing sight and Oken had been extremely lucky to have been able to afford such a luxurious apartment. Below him were thousands of people who were all leading their own lives, unaware of the towering figure watching their every move.

Oken picked off a single car and watched it as it zoomed its way through the streets below. The car didn't seem to follow a significant pattern, in fact the path it followed seemed rather random. Oken saw it reach it's destination and from his vantage point found at least three routes which would have enabled the car to complete it's journey in at least half the time.

Most of buildings below Oken's were a good deal shorter, and it was easy for him to see the roadways which had been laid out before him. He wondered how close Jay lived. He picked out a little house on one of the roads and had already begun to plan his route there. Take a left onto Janson Street, right at the traffic lights. It would have been an almost perfect route to walk as it passed through the park. The likelihood of Jay living in his town were slim, the likelihood of her living in that particular house were second to none.

Oken looked down at the table which sat purposefully in front of him. He saw the caustic pattern of light made by the water filled glass which was standing there from yesterday. Oken rarely drank anything apart from water. Not only was it good for the system but he liked the taste. He knew that the water companies added in various minerals and vitamins to the water supply as part of their never ending plan to help the growing youth, but this didn't deter him from drinking it, as it did the growing youth.

As the water rippled in the early evening breeze, the pattern danced and gyrated on the table's surface. The synthetic beech wood top had a slight orange glow to it which shone in the lights pattern. Oken watched the distortion of the image that he could see through the water filled glass. He began to imagine the surface of the water as time. He watched how it distorted and twisted and it suddenly hit him that Bethany allowed him to do that for real.

Oken picked up the glass and drank from it. It wasn't that he was particularly thirsty, but he needed something to do to pass the time. His black holdall had been packed since 4:30 and he was desperately searching for things to do.

Last week had been easier. There had been tonnes of final checks to be made and charging of devices to be completed. Oken looked out of the window again and saw a motor cyclist weaving his way through the traffic. The constant swerving and turning of the bike made Oken feel almost seasick. The glass was still in his hand and he placed it back on the table. He looked at

his watch 5:10. This was pathetic. He decided to go for a short walk.

As he left the apartment building, he felt the warm sun beat down on his neck. It had always bothered him when the sun was this hot and he pulled his collar up to cover as much of his neck as he could. He put his hands into the pockets of his trousers and walked down the steps that he and Jay had sat on only a week ago. He could almost see her sitting there listening intently to his every word. He closed his eyes.

He started his walk to the Zone. It seemed to take longer than usual. Perhaps it was the anticipation of the fight, or perhaps it was the anticipation of seeing Jay again. He didn't know. He crossed the road where the young girl had been knocked down exactly a week ago and could still see the blood stains on the tarmac. Flowers had been laid by the roadside as a sign of respect for the young girl who had meant so much, to so many people. Oken was saddened by the fact that he had forgotten about her himself. He hadn't ever met her, but seeing her in that fragile state,

Oken had felt a sense of connection that he wanted to preserve. He hung his head in a silent thought for her and continued to walk.

As he was early, he decided to take the scenic route to get to the Zone. The park was in full bloom and Oken felt a subtle sense of irony at the way in which he adored nature. Oken loved the trees, the birds and the flowers. Of course he would never admit that to anyone else, not even Jay. As he thought about it more and more, he decided that perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if Jay found out about his love for the good things in life. He just couldn't put his finger on the feelings that he had for her and as he walked through the park, he wondered whether he was seeking just friendship from her, or whether he desired something more.

He decided that he would probably know the answer to that question upon seeing her that evening and promptly decided to forget all about it. The lake in the park was already a buzz of life before Oken reached it, but as he passed, he disturbed the wildlife even further and a flurry of

water and feathers filled the air. He smiled as he continued his journey.

The light was getting a little dimmer now, and Oken could see the sun, now low in the sky, bathed in a ring of flame. The heavens looked as if they were a burning inferno which would gradually be extinguished over the next hour or so. By the next morning it would be a cool blue once more. Oken looked down at his watch and smiled. Not long to go now he thought.

As he walked through the wooded section of the park his footsteps made crunching noises as they snapped the twigs which lay beneath his feet. In a childish way, it made him feel superior. He was the master of the wood. He brushed past the trees and pulled a leaf off as he passed. He threw it to the side and watched it float to the ground.

The Zone was only another few minutes away and Oken already knew that he was going to be early, very early. He had estimated that he would get there at around 6:00. His elongated walk had doubled his usual journey time but it was still not enough. Oken contemplated going into the

bakers once again, to get a snack before reaching the Zone, but again decided against it. As he rounded the last corner he saw the warehouse up ahead. The big steel door already being guarded by Ruben had begun to rust in places and for a moment Oken wondered about its rigidity.

The door had three locks on it, spaced evenly along the opening edge. Rust was forming below each of these too, where the water dripped off after the rain. Oken also noticed a large dent which distorted the otherwise perfect shape. He presumed it must have been the result of a brawl or fight or something similar.

Ruben spotted him and shot him a beaming, knowing smile. Oken felt as though he were an animal caught in the glare of headlights. He stopped still and saw Ruben turn and speak to someone out of his line of sight. Ruben's golden jewellery sparkled in the light of the setting sun.

He found it almost ironic that Ruben was always dressed so smartly. Oken had, once or twice, asked Ruben why he had never taken up fighting in the Zone himself. Ruben had always

been quiet about this subject, until one evening after a particularly heavy drinking session, Ruben revealed that he wouldn't fight because of his mother.

She had been a God fearing woman and had tried in vain to impart her religion on Ruben. He had been there when she had died and her final words were a prayer that he would grow into a nice boy, would look after people, protect them and do what was right. Ruben had seen his job as a bouncer as just that. Protection.

The unknown figure that Ruben had spoken to stepped round the wall that was blocking Oken's view and he was surprised to see that Jay was already here waiting. He looked down at his watch which read a little after 6:00. He saw her standing there with her bright red hair once again, glowing in the sunlight. She was smiling and as Oken walked closer, Ruben shouted out to him.

“She's been here since quarter past five.” he said, giving Oken another beaming smile and Oken could see Jay beginning to go very red. “Said she was doing some research or something

but I haven't seen any notepad if you know what I'm saying.” Oken did know what he was saying and smiled back. Jay had lowered her head in embarrassment and Oken decided to come to her rescue.

“But you know Ruben, that's why I'm here early too.” Jay looked up at him and gave him a look signifying that she needed no defence, but Oken continued anyway. “I'm doing some research too.” He had now reached Ruben and Jay and he smiled at her apologetically.

Ruben intervened, “You can go in now if you want.” His voice was one of a long time friend. He was always doing favours for Oken. Be it getting him into the Zone early or obtaining parts for his weapons development, Oken knew he could always count on Ruben.

Oken nodded and replied, “That would be great Ruben.” The big man gently unlocked the bolts that were preventing the door from opening. Oken was surprised at how easily the locks turned. Judging by the amounts of rust on the door, he would have expected them to take a far

greater force to overcome hysteresis. Ruben pulled the door open and gestured for Jay to enter. She did so and Oken followed, nodding in thanks to Ruben who closed it behind them.

The Zone was the quietest Jay had ever seen it. There was no music, no jumping crowds, just a couple of production crew members walking round checking that everything was in order ready for the show. The Zone had lost its special something without the crowds and the music. It now looked bare and uninviting. A part of her wondered why she was even here at all. She looked round at Oken who was still standing slightly behind her. He smiled at her and walked towards the Chiller. Jay followed with a renewed sense of intrigue.

The door to the Chiller made an echoing shriek in the silence of the Zone. The noise boomed around the chamber and the platform below and Oken saw several of the crew members turn their heads to see who the culprit was. They both walked into the room where they had been present a week ago when Oken had made his

surprise speech. Jay sat down on one of the chairs at the far end of the room. Oken sat in a seat which was directly opposite from her. It was almost as if they were scared of each other, and on some levels they were.

“I think I'm beginning to understand you a little better now Oken,” Jay said. “At first I thought you were just an efficient fighter. Now though, I see you have a shy side too.” Oken didn't like being called shy but he could definitely see where she was coming from. She had sat down first and if he had wanted to, he could have sat right next to her, but he didn't. He sat opposite her, with the table in the middle guarding the no man's land.

“Things aren't always as clear cut as we think they are,” said Oken. He could see her watching him and decided to change the tact slightly. “Did you manage to finish your report?” he enquired without giving her time to reply to his previous statement. She nodded and took a sheet of paper out of her bag, which Oken hadn't noticed that she had brought with her. He gestured a look at the

report but was denied as she snatched it out of his vision.

“You're not allowed to see it until it goes up on the board.” Jay said in a motherly tone. Oken smiled and he realised that the decision had been made. He really did like Jay. He could see them being happy together but, being the cautious man that he was, there was no way that he was going to reveal that. He would wait for her to make the first move, if indeed there was to be any moving at all.

They talked for the best part of the next forty five minutes until the rabble started to enter the Zone. At first the music started out quietly but pretty soon Oken could feel it thumping on the steel door which lay between them and the party outside. It felt like an angry mob was on the other side banging on the door, trying to get inside and entice the occupants into dancing. Oken didn't feel like dancing and neither did Jay. They were happy just enjoying each others company.

Oken switched the giant television screen on which hung on the Chillers wall and they saw the platform alive with energy and alcohol. It was not a sight that pleased Oken, but then it was the only place that he could fight like this. The atmosphere was one thing, but sometimes the people could be real idiots. Over the past few years, Oken had begun to live for the fighting, but now he felt ready for a change of pace. He looked over at Jay and wondered if she would be a part of this new pace.

The normal crowd started to gather at the Chiller door and pretty soon the room was abuzz with life yet again. Oken saw Ruben enter the room and he walked over to his friend, half smiling, in a sort of wicked excitement. He tapped Oken on the shoulder and began to speak.

“Hey Oken, you're up against the El Morra tonight,” he said rather quickly. Oken raised his eyebrows in surprise and Ruben continued, “Yeh, he requested it himself.” Oken nodded slowly and his bottom lip protruded a little. El Morra was well known in the Zone. He was more of a

legend than a regular. He only showed up a couple of times a year, but when he did it was normally to vanquish the top dog of the day. Oken had seen him battle several times before. He was quick and strong and normally sported a large array of impressive weapons.

The quiet chatter of the crowd gradually grew to a flutter of excitement. Several people had overheard what Ruben had said and now the news had spread not only to the Chiller but also to the outside. People were already cheering even though the main match wouldn't start for another few hours or so. Even the people down on the platform below had begun to hear the news.

Zeus and the production crew were already in their little box, testing the cameras out and making sure that each was set-up with the correct slow motion parameters in order to capture Oken's majestic style. Even Darren, who would normally be donning his bandanna at about this time to avoid breathing the smoke that was regularly purposefully projected in his direction, was feverishly testing cables and radio links to

make sure that not a second was missed. This was to be a spectacular fight. Oken against El Morra, the two champions. Neither of them having ever lost a fight. El Morra had been attending Zone meetings from the very start six years ago, though Oken had the upper hand in that he had, statistically at least, won more fights.

Almost everyone there was sure Oken would win. There were rumours that El Morra was in serious financial debt and wanted a way to end his life with glory and honour, rather than being captured by the GFC, the Global Finance Committee. The GFC had a habit of going after people like El Morra, people who didn't generally owe that much, but who were picked on either because of their ethnic origins, their geographical location, or a sad combination of both.

Oken took a swig from his drink, which had been courteously poured for him by one of the barmaids, and relaxed a little. Jay was now leaning on the arm of his chair smiling. Almost everyone in the room sensed that there was something going on between them, but nobody

wanted to say anything. He sat back into the chair and let out a big sigh. He didn't want to tell them but today would be his last fight, whether he won or lost.

It was a shock to Oken too, but he had decided in a short period of time that enough was enough. Sure, it was exciting to be a member of a highly secretive elite underground fighting culture, but Oken wanted more from his life now. Now that he had met Jay that is. For the first time he had met someone that he could see himself being with. For the first time he had met someone who seemed to return the interest. Oken had been thinking about it for the whole week and the fight with El Morra had clinched it. Today would be the day when he would retire.

* * *

Earlier that day three workmen had approached Zeus with news that they were afraid of a pressure build up in the train tunnels that would cause the collapse and maybe explosion of

the walls which terminated the tracks. Zeus was informed that there was a simple procedure to rectify the situation that would involve cutting some small rectangular holes in the walls and reinforcing them with steel plates. The owner was not informed however that these men were actually G-TEP enforcers, sent out by the same team that Jessie had spoken with. His name was Viktor, General Viktor to be exact, but few people outside the G-TEP knew this.

The enforcers had cut the holes that afternoon and had fitted the metal plates which were there to 'reinforce' the wall. The holes were fairly small and only measured a foot wide by two inches high. Zeus had also not been informed that these holes were actually to act as gunning points for the troops to aim through, in order to try and pick off Oken and his weapon.

The men had finished around 3:00pm, way before anyone from the Zone's gathering had turned up. Zeus tried his best to keep at least two hours between normal business meetings and Zone meetings. After being assured from the so

called workmen that everything was in order and that there was no need to panic, they left.

Now, on the other sides of the wall, in both sections of the tunnel, were two sharpshooters poised and ready to take the shot that would end Oken's reign of temporal terror. On the left hand side was Lieutenant Ric Palmer, a veteran sniper from the G-TEP's special training camp in Phenley. On the right was Lieutenant Leon Jackson, a fairly new recruit who was fresh from the same camp.

Leon hadn't been feeling well all day and now he had a splitting headache, made worse by the hundreds of screaming fans and the intolerable music. He was sure that he was also running a fever and he felt more than a little shaky. He dropped back from his position at the gunning hole, and sat down on the train tracks. He took a small bottle of water from his jacket, and sipped it slowly. He had been briefed on the mission that morning. It was common practice not to reveal any details about a mission before the day it was to be carried out.

As Leon sat there, he became much more aware of the tunnel in which he was situated. It wound its way down for about fifty metres before branching into two directions. The walls were filthy and the smell was horrendous. It smelt like someone had died down there and had never been found. Leon looked up at the ageing lighting which hung from the ceiling. Water dripped from the bulb and Leon was glad that the railway had been closed down; for he was sure it was a safety hazard.

He checked his weapon over once more and took one last sip from the water bottle. He placed it back into its pouch and turned around again to once more face the music. Leon had been top of the training camp. The building was now littered with pictures of him achieving various marksman awards. As well as being an A-grade sharpshooter, Leon was also fairly well versed in the intricacies of temporal mechanics. It was something that came with the territory.

Through the gunning hole, he could see the plethora of people jumping around and dancing.

A part of him wished he could join the crowds but he had a job to do. He found it difficult to believe that these everyday people could just sit by and watch murders without even batting an eyelid. This place had been going for six years, that was the intel, and Leon thought that it was about time it was shut down for good.

As he was standing to his feet there was a crackle from his radio and a voice spoke, “OK, intel says the target should be arriving in around forty minutes. Stand fast until then. I repeat, take no action until target has been confirmed.”

Leon picked up the radio and pressed in the button to reply. “Rodger GRT.”

His voice sounded rather dry and he could hear his croaky tone. He was definitely not well. The sweat began to pour off of his head and he closed his eyes. Only another couple of hours, he thought. He held his weapon tightly and began using the public in front of him for target practice. They continued gyrating in front of him, blissfully unaware that he was even there. The orders had been only to fire if Oken used a

temporal weapon, or on the command of a higher officer. The orders had also specified that if people inadvertently got in the way, then they were authorised to remove them from the equation.

* * *

The first fight was about to start. The Chinese fighter from last week was back and this time he was up against a much more experienced opponent. Oken was sure that the veteran would win but even so, he considered it a good match. The door to the chiller opened and the two men exited, knowing full well that one of them probably wouldn't make it back again.

Oken noticed the blade that hung from the veterans belt. It was fairly short and was still in its scabbard. The handle was decorated with incredible detail. There were two dragon heads with their necks intertwining around the circumference. Oken liked the design, probably of oriental origin. He guessed that the sword

itself may have been an antique, buffed up for the fight.

The fighters were now out the door and the chattering began as to whose money was on who.

Jay leaned over to Oken and asked excitedly, "So who's your money on?" Oken chuckled and shook his head. Jay had come to love the frenzy created by the fights, in essence the vivid brutality that Oken had once sported had somehow seeped into her. She seemed to crave the atmosphere as much as he had.

"I try not to make bets." Said Oken. It was true that he rarely placed a wager on anything, but it was more out of respect for the other fighters in the context of the Zone. He didn't want to profit from someone else's death. That was just the way he was. Jay seemed not to have realised that. She had thought she had Oken all figured out. She thought she had mapped him out completely, but she was reminded once again that there was still work to do.

Their attention was drawn away from each other and onto the television screen in the Chiller.

The two tigers were about to be released out of captivity and into the wild, their thirst to survive as prominent as ever. The music had once again slowed down ready for the fight to begin. It was the thumping bass line that rattled the crowds, thought Oken. The music personified the fighting perfectly; the calm before the storm. The crowds knew what to expect next, an explosion of action and a symphony to the ears.

The bouncers started clearing the platform away and no one seemed to resist. It was time for the fight. They had been dancing for well over an hour now and they were tired and ready to sit back and watch the action. Ironically enough, there was never anyone sitting in the spectator stands.

Oken felt the hot air from the dance area outside the door flood into the room. He felt as though he had been caked with human sweat from head to toe. It was not a feeling he welcomed. The smell of hot bodies and mixed cologne was definitely not inviting, at least, not to him anyway. The room felt a little smaller now, and

Oken found it difficult to breathe properly, for fear of infecting himself with the insanity from outside. He motioned for one of the other fighters to shut the door, so that he could once again breathe fresh air. The door was closed and Oken relaxed a little.

* * *

Leon watched as the crowds made their way back up the stairwells to the spectator stands. He still found it difficult to believe that people were still engaging in pointless raw brawling as entertainment. He once again readied his weapon and began practice aiming. It was difficult to aim through the gunning hole. Had it been made a little larger Leon would have found it a lot easier. He was still sweating and a large part of him wondered if he was going to last the evening.

The two fighters met on the platform below and had anyone looked carefully enough, they would have seen Leon's rifle barrel aimed and ready to answer the call, just behind the

reinforced hole. Leon tightened his grip and prepared to fire. His radio crackled and the voice spoke.

“These two are not the target. I repeat, they are not the target. Stand fast.” The speech ended with another radio crackle. It seemed funny to Leon that despite all of the technological advances in the modern world, there was still a crackle on a communications radio such as this. Unbeknownst to him it was now a feature, as opposed to a flaw, designed to alert troops of both the incoming and termination of messages.

Leon picked up the radio and replied, “Rodger GRT.” His voice still sounded rather raw and Ric, overhearing his reply, wondered whether he was capable of the task ahead. Leon surveyed the battle arena that lay before him through the small slit in the wall. The pillars could make it difficult to get a shot, however, the holes had been strategically placed to ensure that if one sniper was unable to obtain a clear shot then the other stood a much better chance. Leon followed one of the competitors as he made his way onto the

starting position, marked out by a simple taped line.

The music became even thinner and for an instant Leon wasn't sure it was still playing. Then the loudspeakers screamed that all important word. GO.

* * *

Oken and Jay were now in the spectator stands, at Jay's request. Oken had never really watched a fight from up here and he was bewildered at how small everything seemed. He watched the two fighters run towards each other as the music blared once more. Oken wasn't an old man, but he was sure his eardrums were about to pop. He looked across at Jay, she seemed so calm in such a sea of chaos. The crowds were jumping up and down, cheering for their favourite fighter. Some of them looked so ferocious that Oken was sure they would have felt more at home in the ring, rather than in the stands alongside his delicate Jay.

He looked back down at the fight below. The competitors were exchanging numerous blows and blocks, never once letting up and all the time checking their surroundings for anything that they could use to their advantage.

It was about five minutes into the match before one of the fighters found his advantage. He was being chased by the veteran and he was running towards a pillar. He launched himself from the pillar into the air, performing a hundred and eighty degree spin. His legs were coiled up to his body and with one fluid motion he exploded one leg towards the side of the veterans head. His foot met with his opponents skull with a resounding crack. The veteran was dead on impact. Once again the Chinese fighter had proven that he really was as good as the rest.

The veteran fell to the floor, lifeless and Oken couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. The fight had only lasted five minutes and it hadn't been all that impressive. It hadn't seemed to bother the crowds at all. Through the numerous

cheers and chants Oken could sense the overall support for this new comer.

Oken and Jay returned to the Chiller as the bouncers began removing the body of the late veteran. The burly removal men had no respect for the sad, limp body of the fallen hero whatsoever and from the television screen in the Chiller, Oken saw them dragging him up the stairs, his head hitting every step, hard. Would he have been treated in the same way?

Oken had become friends with many of the bouncers and hoped he would be shown just a tad more respect than that, though deep in his mind he really wasn't sure. They were there to do a job after all. Showing respect to the loser of a fight? It just wasn't the done thing here. This was a house of violence and brutality.

Oken picked up his drink and began sipping it once more. He felt the cool liquid quench his undying thirst. The beverage wound its way down his throat and all the while it soothed and calmed his horse innards, caused not from shouting but from the anticipation of the

upcoming fight. Oken could see the Chinese fellow entering the Chiller. He got up and walked towards the victorious man and offered a hand shake. The out of breath man accepted and Oken pulled him forward to whisper in his ear.

“You're not invincible. Just remember that. Don't let it go to your head.” Oken's voice was chilling and for a moment, even he was a little scared by it. The Chinese fighter nodded and walked past him. Oken had always offered his support and advice wherever possible. He could see that the power and glory was already beginning to go to this guys head. He just wanted him to see that fighting was the not the be all and end all.

A part of him yearned to shout hypocrite, as fighting was all that Oken had lived for, for a very long time. It was only since Jay had appeared on the scene that he had begun to think otherwise. He felt ready now though. After fighting for so long in the war, the spirit had begun to leave him. He felt ready to start his life again with something new, someone new.

* * *

Leon had never seen anything like it in his life. His expression was one of amazement and disgust. For the one part, the sheer speed and agility of the fighters made him envious, on the other hand though the brutality of it all was very difficult for him to take in. Leon had heard the crack of the man's neck as the Chinese fellow had kicked him. It had been a cold murder, one which would have had him locked up for a good many years, if the police had been involved. Leon had been a police officer before becoming a G-TEP enforcer. How he wished he could go back to those days now.

The police weren't there however. The G-TEP was above the law. The government had deemed it necessary to give the organisation complete control over situations of a temporal nature. These enforcers were given special dispensation to kill anyone who they deemed necessary, to preserve the accurate flow of time.

There had been many protests over the power that the G-TEP enforcers held over the general population. One particular demonstration in Liast had seen over three thousand protesters marching to the government building in the capitol, screaming at the tops of their voices for the government to repeal their decision and to prevent such atrocities from occurring. It had started off peacefully, but very quickly had turned into a bloodbath. Two hundred people lost their lives amid the stampedes and police crowd control. Dead bodies had lain everywhere and the news of this event sent shock-waves through the far reaches of the Emblem.

Leon had remembered that day well. The news had come while he had been studying for his final G-TEP entry exam and had made him second guess his decision to join this ruthless force. He didn't want to be hated by the world, but at the same time, he felt like he had a job to do, that he had something special to offer.

Suddenly Leon's stomach got the better of him and he promptly vomited down the side of the

train tunnel. He cleaned himself up and looked away from the mess he had just made. He couldn't smell the revolting pile of sick that was festering on the floor. The odour seemed to be so at home in the tunnel that Leon noticed no difference. His hands started shaking and his self confidence wavered uncontrollably. Was he up to the task? He reminded himself of the sights he had just seen and recomposed himself. This was one of the most important missions he would ever go on wearing his G-TEP uniform. It was his first.

08

Missing

The tension was rising inside the Zone and the second match between two mediocre opponents was about to begin. Oken watched them leaving the spectator stands, one at each end, and slowly make their way down the stairs to the platform below. One of them was holding a staff, much like Yaz had used, the other had two medium length swords.

The blades typically used in the Zone were far more sophisticated than those of thirty years ago. They had razor sharp edges, and were reinforced with unnaturally strong alloys. They had been machined down to incredible accuracy and were usually protected by layers of Neo-Tough, a

strong engineering alloy designed to keep blades edges sharp. They were incredibly powerful and could cut almost anything. Oken had given Bethany a Neo-Tough coating. It had taken him an age, but it had been worth it.

As Oken looked down at the floor of the Chiller, he decided to sit this one out. He wanted to conserve his energy for his fight against El Morra. Oken could see the many bloodstains which had been worn away by years of hustle and bustle of the Chiller. There were shoe scuffs, chewing gum, and scratches presumably made by people accidentally dropping their weapons on the floor. He had even seen one or two people leaning on their blades, ruining the tips of their weapons on the cold surface of the floor. It had sickened him that they showed so little respect for the facilitators that kept them alive in battle.

Oken looked across at Jay. She motioned for him to join her out in the spectator stands, but he shook his head and gave a tired expression. Jay immediately understood and sat back down in her chair. Oken had instantly thought her reaction

incredibly sweet. He was glad that she hadn't wanted to leave him. He smiled at her and mouthed the words thank-you. With the Chiller door open she wouldn't have known if he had actually spoken the words anyway. She smiled back and winked. Ruben who was now sitting next to Oken saw this and nudged his elbow to get his attention. Oken turned to Ruben who gave him a double wink and made his famous kissing face once more.

Oken smiled and shook his head. Ruben had a habit for blowing things out of proportion. The two of them hadn't even been out together on a date yet, plus there was the age difference to consider and the fact that she had a lot of work to do whilst still at university. Oken stopped abruptly. It sounded like he was considering asking her out. His brain halted for a while. Full stop.

Amid the confusion of his mind, images of the fight began to enter. The bout was lasting a lot longer than had been expected due to a combination of some expert blocking and

attacking. No sooner had one opponent finished defending, than he was back on the attack again. Oken could see the concentration on the fighters faces. They were very strong, and fast too.

The twirling rhythm of the fight was totally hypnotic. Oken had never realised before exactly how beautiful a fight could be. It was fantastic. Here were these two dancers, performing what he could only describe as art in front of his very eyes. The blows, although powerful and devastating, were also graceful, building up into a crescendo of fury. Music began forming in Oken's head, not the incessant rhythmic thumping that the crowd were dancing to, but a symphony of instruments, carefully coordinated and choreographed to match the fighters moves. He suddenly became aware of the intricate pattern of the match.

It was at this point that Oken could tell the pair were evenly matched. The music was so steady, so harmonious, that Oken couldn't see an ending to it. The ending would be abrupt and unexpected when it happened, and it was.

The staff fighter managed to butt his opponent in the chest, forcing him to spit the air that was contained in his lungs, clean from his body. He then twirled the staff around to whack the wounded creature in the face, sending his head snapping sideways. The move was incredible. The staff fighter managed to grab one of the swords from his opponent, jump in the air and rotate the weapon three hundred and sixty degrees, slicing the now defenceless character across the chest.

There had been no noise audible above the roar of the crowds and the insanity of the music. There was however an awful lot of blood. It started as a trickle coming from the wound, and then, as the two halves of the man's body fell apart it gushed forth, covering the floor. The crowd went wild. It wasn't often that a fighter was defeated in such a way. The blood started trickling its way across the floor like tiny little rivers. It meandered round the various bumps that lay in its path, and built little ponds where the dips occurred.

Oken couldn't help but feel a little sick by the sight that lay before him. He knew that his upcoming fight would be postponed for a little while now. It would take the clean up crew some time to remove the mess of the body that lay on the platform below. The bouncers quickly arrived on the scene and began mopping up the blood and carting the carcass away. They used large buckets and plastic bags for most of the remaining rubbish. Meanwhile, a hungry photographer, presumably working for one of the junior journalists, was snapping away, lighting up the Zones platform in flashes of intricate detail.

There was another person however, who was not impressed by the display of blood and guts.

* * *

Leon felt very sick once more. He had been shocked by the first fight, but this latest slaughter rocked the very centre of his existence. It was against everything he believed in. He believed in peace, love and justice. That was why he had

joined the G-TEP in the first place, to uphold that way of life. Justice had become almost like a religion to him.

The sight of the clean up operation was too much for him to bear. He thought he was going to be sick again, but luckily he managed to contain the churning feeling that was erupting deep in his belly. Leon had already decided that he would take a long holiday after the mission was over, but in the back of his mind he couldn't help from wondering exactly when that would be. When would this mission be over? When could he go home and relax?

The questions continued but no matter what the question was, Leon realised he knew none of the answers. As he stood there, prone, ready to take out the man who had broken G-TEP law, he thought about the family of the fighter who was now being mopped up with a sponge only ten metres from his face.

Leon could smell the blood. It started off faintly, but soon grew into a stench that he was sure was amplified by the atmosphere. It

sickened him. Leon checked his weapon over once again, in order to be ready for the task which lay before him. He couldn't mess it up, that much was certain. For the past six months he had been waiting for a mission in which to prove to himself that he was all that he could be.

The training missions were normally concerned with ambushing a temporal weapon transport ring, or destroying a cache of munitions. Nothing they had trained for could possibly prepare them for this. The landscape was odd and the perpetrators insane. There hadn't been a G-TEP violation since Leon could remember. Now Oken had managed to cause a serious stir in the upper ranks of the Emblem. Their instructions had been simple. Take him out.

Already the bouncers were beginning their final sweep of the floor. The blood was fading already, the vigorous scrubbing performed by the hired muscle leaving only a faint sign that anything significant had ever taken place.

Leon knew that this mission was important. Not only would Oken be eliminated, but the Zone

would be permanently shut down. It was a house of brutality and crime and had to be stopped. Leon allowed himself a slight smile. Today was a good day for justice.

* * *

As Oken sat in the cool Chiller he couldn't help but feel a sensation that something was wrong. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was something not quite right. He wasn't allowed to continue his train of thought though, as El Morra burst into the room. The Chiller fell totally silent. Several of the younger fighters got up out of their seats in order for the legend to sit down. He obliged, sitting in a seat offered to him by a particularly ruthless looking young fighter. Oken flashed a smile towards El Morra who promptly smiled back. They knew each other fairly well. They had met before, but never fought.

El Morra was wearing a black suit and carried with him two black holdalls which went largely

unnoticed. His hair was pulled right back over his head and gelled down. It was an ancient hairstyle, but El Morra liked the classics. His shoes were also black and so shiny that you really could see your face in them.

The Legend was around forty years of age. He was the oldest fighter in the Zone and knew that his time was coming to retire. He admired Oken and had seen the tapes of his previous fight. El Morra was fully aware of the splendour that brewed in his opponent. It may be his last fight but that didn't concern him in the slightest. He had the same philosophy as Oken, he enjoyed the atmosphere, the fury.

El Morra's hair was a jet black that reflected the light perfectly in the presence of the gel. His eyes looked tired and wrinkles had begun to form at the edges. El Morra was tired of fighting too. He wanted it to be over but he also wanted to end it as a champion. He wasn't going to give in to Oken. He would do his best to kill the master. El Morra realised that Oken's weapon would give

him a definite advantage, but he too had a few tricks up his sleeve.

On the wall above Oken's head, pictures of the previous fight were already beginning to appear. The final blow was seen in its horrific detail and the contrast of the image had been altered to make the blood look even more real.

Jay was still sitting next to Oken. She tapped him on the shoulder and gave him a smile. She knew Oken could beat the ageing El Morra. After all, Oken had beaten Yaz without acquiring a single injury. Jay moved closer to Oken's ear and spoke in a soft tone. "You'll beat him without a doubt Oken."

The confidence that the young woman had in him was very flattering. He couldn't help thinking about his decision and wondered whether to tell Jay that he would be retiring after this battle. He decided to save it for later. It would be a surprise. He knew now that his feelings for her had far surpassed a simple liking. He now wondered if it was actually love. He

looked across at her and at once smiled. He thanked her and saw her expression change.

She was the most beautiful woman that Oken had ever seen. He still didn't think it was right that she came here. It just didn't fit her personality. She was the kindest, sweetest person he had ever met. He wasn't about to give her up. He wanted to be with her.

Ruben entered the room and stood among the excitement. He motioned for everyone to quieten down and then spoke.

“Today's fight is between the legendary sombrero El Morra and the Time-Bending Oken Brown.” Ruben had thought the names up by himself. They had sounded somewhat cooler when he had been repeating them to himself earlier, but now they seemed to sound rather childish and silly. The eyes of all the Chillers occupants fell on Ruben with a renewed silence. Ruben smiled.

He gestured for Oken, his long time buddy, to get up and say something which would rescue him, but Oken shook his head and said, “You

made the names up Ruben, now you live with the consequences.” Everyone laughed and even Ruben through the clenched angry teeth, chuckled a little. It was true, they were truly terrible names.

The chiller returned to its normal hustle and bustle and Oken decided it was time for him to start setting up. He reached down for his black holdall which was always at his feet, ready to answer his call, and froze. It wasn't there.

* * *

Leon had just been informed that the target would be entering the arena shortly. Revised instructions had been made but the core was the same, he was only to commence firing if Oken used a temporal weapon. The tension was mounting in Leon's mind. The instructions cut through him like Bethany would have. In a little while, he may have to kill someone in order to preserve the Emblem's way if life. It was a

simple statement, but one which had dire consequences if Leon messed it up.

He had checked his weapon no less than twenty-six times since he had arrived on the scene, and now for the twenty-seventh, he checked it again, knowing that it had to be working perfectly. The rifle shone in the dim light of the tunnel. Leon had been sitting here for well over two hours and his ill feelings had not gotten any better. He decided that as soon as he got home, he would rest and not get up the following morning.

The water which had started to leak into his shoes was incredibly cold and squelched when Leon pressed down. He let out a small groan and decided that tomorrow he would also buy a new pair of shoes. The smell was still there, and Leon knew it was getting closer and closer to the time. The tunnel reeked of death and blood, death, blood and vomit. On the other side of the tunnel, Ric smelt the scent of death too, the difference being that Ric had smelt it before and knew exactly how to deal with it.

Leon took the safety catch off of his rifle and prepared to fire. He felt like a coiled cobra, waiting to spring out and shoot his deadly venom into his victim's bloodstream. Leon suddenly felt a strong sense of power. It made him feel good. He aimed once again through the gunning hole and made sure that both he and his gun were steady, the odour of hot sweating bodies darting in and out of Leon's lungs as he breathed heavily.

* * *

Oken was instantly gripped with unmistakable fear. His beloved Bethany was missing. All too quickly the thoughts came flooding back to him. He had packed it early that afternoon, even remembering to pack the film which Jay had wanted to borrow. He had stowed it away in his hidden safe zone. All of a sudden the fear turned to a shot of realisation. He hadn't picked it up on the way out. The temporal shields were in place, arranged earlier by Oken himself, but the main

requirement, the star of the show, was waiting patiently at home.

His thoughts had been of Jay and not of how he would win the fight against his opponent. He had completely forgotten the tool which he would require in order to win. His heart sank. It wasn't until he realised the full effect of what he had done that he started to feel very sick. He would lose for sure. El Morra was a fantastic fighter and he would have needed the advantage that Bethany provided to even stay even, let alone win.

He looked over at Jay who was smiling sweetly at him. It was too late, he thought. There was no way he could back out of a fight, it just wasn't allowed. He thought about getting Ruben to drive back to the apartment and pick the bag up for him, Ruben knew where the hideout was, but he knew that there just wasn't enough time.

What should he do? He couldn't fight without a weapon. He got up. The fear had gripped him so tightly that he stumbled when rising. Ruben quickly supported him and shot him a grin. In the midst of his fear he hadn't noticed El Morra

getting to his feet and preparing to head down to the platform below. Oken took hold of Ruben's arm and pulled him to one side. Jay got up and attempted to walk over as well but Oken held up his hand and she knew that it was an important private conversation. She respected his gesture and stayed back.

“Ruben, I've been real stupid. I've forgotten the blade,” said Oken. His voice was as dry as ice and Oken knew that Ruben wasn't going to believe him the first time round. He looked up at his long time friend who had a serious look on his face. The serious look turned into a big grin.

“You can't fool me with that one man,” came Ruben's reply. “I've known you for too long.” It was true that Oken had known Ruben a long time but through their times together Ruben had never known Oken to look so serious and so sad. His expression of happiness turned to that of concern for his amigo. When he next spoke it was in a much more concerned tone.

“Oken, you're not kidding are you?” he asked of the grey haired figure that stood before him.

Oken shook his head and Ruben felt the same fear that had gripped Oken only moments before. It felt like it was crushing his larynx and made it almost impossible to talk. Despite this, Ruben was still able to add a glimmer of hope to Oken's now almost futile battle. "Oken man, you just tell me anything you need, and I'll get it for you."

Oken knew the words that Ruben spoke were the honest truth. Ruben would have done anything to help out his old friend, but Oken didn't know what he could ask for that would actually have any real effect. He knew he had to have a weapon if he were to stand any chance of holding his own in the fight.

Ruben already had an idea of what his request may be and without waiting for Oken to say a word, he ran to one of the metal cupboards in the Zone where confiscated weapons were stored. He punched in the code to undo the electronic lock. The tears were welling up inside him, not yet present in his eyes, still somewhere deep down in his throat. This would certainly be the end for Oken. His brother.

Oken hadn't been a good friend to Ruben, he had been the best. They had been like brothers. Ruben picked out a sword which bore some resemblance to Bethany and removed it. He saw how the shine of the scabbard reflected the hungry crowd as they waited, thirsting for more blood. Ruben's heart sank. It seemed that they were about to get their wish.

He walked back over to Oken and handed him the weapon. Oken gave him an appreciative smile. They were men of few words but both knew the other well enough to read their expressions precisely. Ruben gave a half smile back at the man who stood before him. He was looking older now and Ruben had not realised just how old until now. The worry of his impending doom weighed heavy on his moderate frame.

El Morra walked past them and Oken heard him shout something about getting the show on the road. He knew it was time. El Morra was making his way down the stairs to the platform. Jay came running out of the Chiller door and

threw her arms around Oken, who was ultimately shocked. He had never experienced this kind of physical attention before. It felt so good. He'd been admired for years now, but it was a totally different feeling to this. This felt like love. He could feel his stomach begin to knot and for a second he forgot all about the fight which he was about to enter. This moment was all about him and Jay.

He hugged her back. He loved her, it was true. He had been hit by love at first sight. Never believing it was possible, or indeed probable, it had taken him completely by surprise, but he loved her. If, by some sheer quirk of fate, he made it out alive, he would tell her so. He could feel her warmth seeping into his cold body. He didn't want to let her go.

He could feel her breathing heavily and knew that she was crying. He wanted her to stop. Dear God, please let her stop. She had no idea about his chances of getting out alive, she was just worried for the man she had grown to care so much for in such a short period of time. He didn't

want to fight any more but knew that if he refused he probably wouldn't make it out of the Zone alive anyway.

He stroked her hair and whispered words of confidence into her ear. "It'll be all right Jay, it'll all be OK." He didn't believe the words himself, so why was he pretending now? He loved her and though it ripped his heart to shreds, he just couldn't let her know the truth. He had to try to comfort her. Through her whimpering and the heavy dance music her words hit him like a blow to the head.

"I love you," she said. He wanted to return the words but wondered whether it was fair. If he told her he loved her and then he died in the ring would she end up hating him, never truly believing him? Knowing Jay it wouldn't be the case. On the other hand maybe it was what she needed to hear. Oken spoke slowly and purposefully.

"I'll be back soon," he said. The words left his mouth and upon receipt at Jay's ear, she lifted her head to show Oken her beautiful face. Her eyes

were red and her make-up had run slightly, but Oken could still see the inner beauty in Jay shining through. Their eyes met and Oken noticed the sad soul which had so wished for those loving words to be bestowed upon her.

She hugged him even tighter and Oken smiled and hugged her tighter too. Through the crowds of jumping insanity, there stood two people deeply in love, but afraid to show it. Oken released his grip on the petite woman. She relinquished her hold over him too and they stood there for a minute just gazing into each others eyes. Ruben entered their scene and tugged on his friend's sleeve.

“Time to go my man,” he said, his eyes already tearing at the sight. His oldest friend had found love at last, something he could retire with, but in all probability he wouldn't even be breathing past the next five minutes.

* * *

Leon had not seen what had transpired up in the spectator stands. In truth, even if he had seen it, it would have been doubtful if it would have moved him. Leon was now hell bent on getting the man. He wanted Oken to die, so that the Emblem's way of life would continue, honouring the traditions of peace and tranquillity. Once his mind was set, Leon's determination always won through.

He watched as Oken made his way down the stairs and onto the platform below. The dark figure moved with a delicate finesse which Leon found incredibly ironic. It took him little time to aim up on the figure as he stood opposite him about twenty metres in distance. The aim of his assault rifle hungrily ravaging the sight of Oken the temporal violator.

Leon began to feel hot once more, his hands started shaking and the radio crackle startled him so much that he nearly fired. "Alpha 2 : That is your target, repeat that is your target." He slowly picked up the radio, not once looking away from the perpetrator that stood before him.

“Rodger GRT,” he replied stealthily as the two men began performing the ritualistic swordplay. Leon could only see Oken, but had he been able to see El Morra too, it would have been obvious who was the better trained. El Morra.

Oken's blade whisked through the air and flew past his side at unimaginable speed. A part of Leon actually now wanted to watch the show. He enjoyed action movies, with explosions and cocky clichés. He watched as the masterful Oken swung the old battered sword in front of his eyes. The assault rifle felt almost alive in his hands and he wanted to let his anger out now and kill this poor excuse for a civilised human. Leon had no idea of Oken's desire to retire that evening and return to the society that he believed had deserted him when he had gone off to war. In truth, it was his parents that had betrayed him.

09

Consequences

Oken stood facing El Morra. The sword he had been given was heavier than Bethany and Oken felt sure that some inexperienced cretin had been using it to hack at metal pillars, judging by the dents in the blade. Oken wanted it to be over, but he also now wanted to live, something that he had never felt before in the ring. He wanted to look up at Jay but decided against the idea. He wasn't putting on the show he had last week and she would only worry about him.

The music, which Oken had been unaware of until now was thinned down once more, eager to answer the call of the DJ and spring into life, dosing the platform up with a cocktail of sound.

Oken's heart was pounding. This was it. He was ready.

The word 'go' came fairly unexpected for both fighters. El Morra ran towards Oken who, in turn, ran towards El Morra. They both sported swords and their blades glistened in the spotlights of the arena. Oken felt the heat from the lights almost burning his skin, but continued on towards his enemy.

El Morra swung his sword at Oken who masterfully blocked it and added a swipe of his own. It hadn't been as difficult as he had remembered. In his head he had planned out the fight using Bethany. It would have been so much easier. Oken had no time to think about that now though, as El Morra rained down blow upon blow, it was obvious that he was definitely out classed.

El Morra was a little disappointed that Oken was not using his new technology and the crowds too were getting impatient. Jay was confused and looked over at Ruben who was standing next to

her. She saw the worry in his eyes and ventured a question.

“Ruben, what's happening, why isn't Oken winning?” The words sounded so innocent, so childlike that Ruben felt as though he were talking to an infant. He didn't want to tell her, but knew he had to. He could see how confused she would be if he didn't.

“He forgot the blade,” said Ruben. He saw her mouth drop open in amazement. She had thought that maybe it had gotten damaged or needed more development, but she had never once suspected that Oken had plain forgotten it. It was so simple. She soon realised that she had probably been the cause of the mishap.

It felt like someone had just stuck a dagger through her heart. If Oken died now, it would all be her fault. She should have met him at his apartment. She should have made sure he had everything. She could have been his wife. She would have loved to have been his wife. To protect him. But it was almost certainly all over now.

“It's my fault he forgot it,” said Jay. Her face look so contorted, as if she were about to cry but was trying to hold it in. She looked so distraught that Ruben couldn't help but put his arm around her and pulled the devastated body towards him, cradling her and shielding her from the sights of below.

“It's nobody's fault Jay, it just happened,” came Ruben's, soothing reply. He held her next to him and tried to offer as much comfort as he could. Her eyes were now filling with tears. She loved Oken more than anything else in the world. It was true she had only known him for a week, but she had noticed him a long time before their first meeting. She had seen the strength in his eyes and the passion for his sport. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

In the instant the tear hit the ground a large number of things happened. The fight between El Morra and Oken had intensified and now the two of them stood locked in battle. In that split second El Morra swung a last blow towards Oken who deflected it masterfully; unaware of the

second sword that El Morra had just pulled from his back harness. Later in that same split second, El Morra thrust the sword into Oken's chest, ploughing through the muscle and flesh to reveal the blood which lay within.

Oken didn't feel the sword go in, in fact he was about to take another swipe at the enemy before him when he noticed the sword sticking out of his chest. He looked up into the spectator stands. Time slowed down. In the absence of Bethany, it was a much more natural retardation. Oken's eyes became a little heavy and all he wanted to do was to go to sleep.

He noticed Jay up in the spectator stands screaming, set apart from the crowds by her brilliantly coloured hair. He watched on as she ran in slow motion to the stairwell that lead down onto the platform. He was unaware of anything else in the arena besides her. El Morra was a blur in the distance. Shouts from Ruben of 'LET HER THROUGH' could be heard.

Oken fell to his knees and then onto his back, the sword now pushed clear from his body. He

was dying. He'd never felt like this before in his life. His very essence seemed to be leaking from the hole that cleaved his chest. He could feel little pain from his physical wounds, but the pain of his heart was strong. Why hadn't he told her how much he loved her?

Jay reached Oken and in his slow motion he saw her fall to her knees beside him. Her fragile figure slumped forward and she held him in her arms and hugged the man that had been so brutally ripped away from her. She had never kissed him, never heard him say those words that she so dearly needed to hear. It was as if he had never existed. She leant over his face and whispered in his ear.

“I love you,” she said.

* * *

The move had taken all of the G-TEP forces completely by surprise; no one had expected Oken to lose. It was clear that he didn't have his weapon with him. Leon and Ric stood by. Leon

was unaware that he was the only enforcer with a clear shot. The instructions came across the battered old radio. "Watch him like a hawk, it could be a trick so stay on him Alpha 2, you have the shot, I repeat, you have the shot."

Leon was unable to reply. He couldn't do anything. He was frozen on the spot. His fingers were shaking at the murder that had occurred before his eyes. He wondered why it bothered him so. His mind was a mess and he couldn't think straight at all. His eyes were blurry and his mouth was dry. His hands shook more and more. He had no idea what was happening. His mind told him to get a grip on things, but he couldn't. He had no grip on anything.

Everything around him was a blur. The platform, the people, even Oken. He had to stand fast and watch him; watch him like a hawk. Leon had never known himself to feel like this before. He was a wreck.

* * *

Jay was still clinging onto the man whom she loved. The body that lay in her arms seemed lifeless. In the slow motion that still persisted, the crowds were jumping and the music was still pounding. El Morra was jumping around and screaming in excitement. Jay was crying. She once again leaned over the head of her beloved Oken.

“I love you,” he said. Had she heard that correctly? Had he said those words? She knew that he had but she just wanted to make sure. Oken smiled and began to turn his head.

* * *

Leon's gun fired. He wasn't sure how or why, but it had. He had seen Oken turn his head and had immediately tightened his muscles in fear. His shaky finger had not been exempt from this reaction and the gun had fired. It was still firing. Leon released his finger. Through the gunning hole that stood in the wall in front of him the platform once again regained focus and he could

see the damage that he had caused. He had unknowingly sprayed the platform in bullets.

* * *

Oken didn't feel the first bullet, or the second, or the third. The fourth one hurt a little and the fifth one almost killed him. The sixth missed him, but he watched in horror as it ploughed through the body of the woman next to him. His little Jay had been hit several times. He had never got the chance to show her how much he had loved her. It was all over. He was angry at the entity who had done this to her, but in a split second it didn't matter any more. Oken was dead.

Jay's last thoughts were of happiness. She had heard what she needed. The man she loved more than anything in the world had reciprocated her feelings. Granted the relationship had lasted a mere five seconds, but that was five seconds more than nothing. She had wanted him to say those words more than anything else in the world. Her wish had come true. Her body became weak and

she slumped down onto Oken's bullet ridden chest. She too was dead.

Amid the explosions of gunfire which were now being exchanged between angry Zone addicts and G-TEP officers, lay two bodies. They looked so peaceful in amongst the confusion of the battle. As the bullets rained down on the platform, several hit Oken and Jay. It was a final insult to their lives. They were already dead and there was nothing anyone could do to bring them back.

As the bullets continued to fly they hit the ceiling tiles that were hanging high above. One of these tiles shattered upon impact from a G-TEP round. The pieces fell, twisting and turning as they did so. They all hit the ground in a crescendo of applause.

10

The Lesson

The history lesson had started very slowly, and Zane had wondered at various point throughout its duration, how much longer it was going to take. He had never had a particular interest in the past, thinking it to be a useless recollection of mankind's mistakes. He looked around the room he was sitting in and breathed a sigh.

There were about fifty chairs and tables in the room, each one occupied by a young human being of around seventeen years old. The more enthusiastic of these had books and stationary adorning their desks. The less enthusiastic, like Zane, preferred a more relaxed approach. He had

his legs stretched out and he was sitting in a kind of slump in the polycarbonate chair.

Around the walls were posters and pictures of various historic events. Zane didn't think he'd actually ever looked at one closely. The lecturer scanned the class room and her beady eyes met with Zane's. She gave a disapproving stare at the way in which the young man was sitting, and after a while he shifted his position in order to stop the eyes which had begun to burn through his skin.

The floor was made from a granite composite and looked all shiny and new. It was the only part of the room which Zane found remotely interesting. Perhaps that was why he spent most of his time staring at it. It had been coated with a special protective layer, to stop the chairs from scraping it when the rebellious mob left their tedious lectures.

The window caught his eye next. Outside, there was an array of students playing various games on the fields which surrounded the college building. He saw how happy they all appeared

and a part of him wished he could join them but then he remembered how much he hated sports. He just wanted to be out of this damn lecture. He was studying Physics as his major, and why he had to take a damn history lesson he would never know. Supposedly it broadened their horizons. 'Kept history teachers in work more like,' he thought.

After about fifteen minutes or so Zane's attention was suddenly drawn to the screen upon which pictures of a grey haired man were being shown. Zane sat up and listened. It wasn't often that they got to see pictures in the lecture, despite all the advances in technology. Normally research of this kind was set for homework.

The lecturer began commenting. "Oken Brown," she paused, "He looks harmless enough but he was one of the most ruthless criminals ever to have graced God's earth." Suddenly Zane became interested. "He developed the first hand held temporal weapon, and used it in an underground fighting arena only twenty years ago." The lecturer had begun pacing and she

could see that other people in the class had begun to show some interest too. She was a small woman, in her late twenties with her shortish brown hair swept back and tied in a small pony-tail.

“He was born in 2009 and was sent, as a young man to fight in the temporal war.” The students were never taught much about the war, it was mostly an unapproachable subject deemed too horrific to talk about. “After this, he returned home a changed man. Before going to war he had dreamed of becoming a respectable physicist, hoping to work at the university, developing temporal computation devices. But the war changed him into a ruthless killer.’ She emphasised the words ‘ruthless killer’ in a way which made it sound like a child’s story. One of the students laughed and was promptly thrown out of the class amidst the chuckles and giggles of his fellow classmates.

“Now if I may continue,” said the teacher, “Oken Brown found a job working at a local library in the science section. He stacked books

all day everyday, but at night, once a week; he would go and compete in one of the most brutal sports known to man, at the Zone.” Zane was getting more excited. They never normally put the projector on for one picture. There had to be more. There just had to be. He sat there in his hungry anticipation and waited for the pictures to roll by. Maybe they would show Oken's temporal weapon. Had Oken been there at that moment he would probably have smiled at the attention his picture had created.

“Oken killed over thirty people during his three years attending the Zone's meetings.” The pictures on the projector screen changed to show the doctors certificates that the Zone attendees had used as their trophies. “These certificates were put on display as trophies to show off the fighters skills.” Through the flicking of the pictures, Zane noticed two words cropping up almost constantly, Oken Brown. Several of the pictures had bullet holes visible somewhere in the image.

The teacher continued, “On a bright summer day in 2038, Oken Brown brought a temporal weapon to the Zone. The following video footage may disturb some of you.” The projector changed its constant hum to a high pitched whistle as it began to play video footage of Oken's first battle against Yaz.

It was at that moment that Zane first saw Bethany. He saw Oken begin to twist and turn the metallic beauty. It cut the air, leaving a trail of amazement behind the sharp blade. Zane had never seen a sword like it. It was a cross between science fiction and fantasy. The crystal hanging majestically in the centre of the blade gave it a sci-fi look, while the oriental handle gave it a more fantasy feel. Zane was truly astounded.

The lecturer continued, “What you are about to see is actual footage, shot at actual speed. There is no camera trickery involved.” The video showed the moment when Oken had first squeezed the handle of Bethany tightly. For an instant, Oken seemed to slip into some sort of hyperactive dance. It looked as if the camera had

been replayed at a higher speed, but Oken still retained his majesty and skill.

Some of the students started shouting out in disgust. Jeering at the teacher and yelling about trying to corrupt them with fake videos. Zane knew different. It wasn't only his faith in temporal mechanics, but he had seen something the others had not. They were continuing to badger the fragile teacher as she shrank back at her desk. She had tried to get a word in edgewise, but had failed. Zane stood up.

“Hey guys, shut up.” His voice was stern and the class reeled at the volume at which the words had left his mouth. Some started jeering at him but he continued unabated. “Jolie,” he said, addressing the lecturer, “play the video again.” She nodded and the video began again. Several people threw their arms up in disgust at the idea of having to sit through the façade again. Zane took the lecture over. “Notice how the rest of the building is reacting to his movements, albeit at a slower speed,” said Zane. “Notice also the reflections of the lights in the blade.”

The students were astounded. It was at that point that they too saw the unimaginable power which Oken had possessed. Several of them raised their eyebrows at what they now saw to be genuine, but one of them still couldn't make the leap of faith and protested to Zane.

"It's CG man. It's been done on a computer." He shouted. Zane looked over at him with a tired glance. This particular protester was always a pain when it came to discussions. Zane felt it best to end it there, rather than protest any further.

"You believe what you like, I know my truth." The class roared in admiration for Zane. He was well liked among the students and held a certain rapport for being a peacemaker. It was true, Zane was a peacemaker, and a good speaker too. He had been brought up well by his parents who had died in an accident shortly before his sixteenth birthday. Unlike some people who tended to derail in these circumstances and rightly so, he had found strength in the memories of his parents and had been able to live a practically normal life.

Zane was beginning to enjoy this lecture even though he had vowed that he never would. There was something about this Oken character that intrigued him. It wasn't the fact that he had been a cold blooded killer, or at least, that's what Zane had immediately classified him as, but his dedication to science. The fact that one man had single handedly created a temporal weapon with little more knowledge than what he had read in books. This guy must have been a genius.

Jolie regained control and continued, "A week or so after the shooting of this video, this man, Oken Brown was killed, along with his lover, and several other people in a G-TEP raid at the fighting arena." Zane's eyes widened with surprise. He had expected this great man to have escaped the authorities. He had expected better from him. In the short few minutes that Zane had been acquainted with Oken, he had developed a certain affinity for him. Now he was angry with him. Zane had wanted to see more. More of this skill. More of this sheer mastery. "It is not known exactly how the fire-fight started, but it is

believed that Oken had decided to use the weapon against innocent bystanders and that the G-TEP forces opened fire, purely to save lives.”

“It was shortly after this, that not only were all people who had had exposure to temporal weapons massacred by the government, but all literature related to temporal mechanics was sought out and destroyed to try to prevent any more events like it.”

The class idiot who had earlier been removed from the lesson made a good eighty percent of the class jump by slamming his face against the window and making groaning zombie noises as he smeared his ugly mug up and down the window pane. Zane didn't jump. Neither did Kiele who had been staring at the window, waiting for the inevitable to take place. Jolie shot the boy a glance, waiting for his idiocy to subside. When, after around 45 seconds it hadn't she walked towards the door and exited.

Throughout the entire episode of the disciplinary hearing taking place in the corridor, complete with jeering and general noise making

from the rest of the class, Zane sat in complete silence. The current situation owed him no attention whatsoever. To him, the current situation was a nuisance and an annoyance, hindering him from hearing about a subject that he had only recently started paying attention to. Zane stared at the slowly pulsating image on the wall. A slight distortion ran down the image at regular intervals, and prompted a quick concern about the quality of the equipment from Zane. The face of Oken seemed weathered and old, though he could only have been around thirty years of age, he thought.

Little did anyone in the class realise, but Zane had a secret passion for the temporal things in life. Temporal mechanics was a closely guarded secret these days. Many in fact, didn't know it was a separate physics subject. Zane had been told about it by his father who had been a retired G-Tep enforcer prior to his death. Zane's father had told him many stories about working in the G-Tep, but none about any actual, real missions, involving real temporal terrorists. It had always

annoyed him somewhat, but he had respected his father's profession and his decision to hide certain truths from him.

Zane remembered one such story about a woman who had filed a claim that her boyfriend was a G-TEP violator. The lead up to the operation had taken several months, with the woman providing information on a weekly basis. Time and motion studies, reading habits and even bedroom encounters. The G-TEP mounted a huge force and one morning stormed the building, only to find the man in bed with the woman's best friend. The claim had been false. The woman had wanted only to get back at her husband by gracing him with a visit from the G-TEP forces. What she had failed to foresee, was the shooting of both her best friend and her lover, whom she had already forgiven in her heart.

Zane's father hadn't been present on the mission, but had told Zane the story many times, as an encouragement not to cry wolf, and to always tell the truth and strive for justice. He had also told his son that true forgiveness harboured

no ill feelings, or revenge, that he believed that the woman couldn't have ever really forgiven her boyfriend. The woman was ordered to be executed for her part in the atrocity.

As it was, these storied fascinated Zane, and had made him yearn to understand temporal mechanics one day, despite its outlawed status. The video of Oken had only served to drive him further forward into his fantasy of one day controlling a temporal device. His love of physics was clear and he had been awarded several prizes already for his work and experiments, even at such a young age.

The disciplinary in the hall way had escalated to the point of a student throwing a chair through a window. Zane sighed. This was supposed to be a good school. One of the best in the region. He watched as the glass fell to the floor and scattered itself in disarray. In the distance, Zane gathered that the principal had been called to the scene and the student was now being dragged away by security officers beating him as they went.

* * *

Though times had become much more peaceful in recent years, it had been seen by many to be only as a result of a society living in fear. It was true, most people went around their daily lives doing exactly what they were asked, exactly what they were supposed to do, but it wasn't so much that they were good people, rather that they were scared of the consequences of doing something, doing anything wrong.

Almost every building now had a security officer assigned to it to assist in keeping the peace. The overhead of this new civic service was extreme. Taxes were high and people were generally poor. If you lived in a particular part of town, you would all generally have the same cooker, the same washing unit, (which had come to unite the dishwasher and washing machine), the same media unit, even the same curtains and often, front door. Clothing was practically the only thing to distinguish the throng of people in their daily daze.

The world had become bland and boring, but certainly not uneventful. Though the frequency of terrorist attacks and criminal activity had decreased, the scale on which these events now happened had increased dramatically to compensate. A father disheartened with his lifestyle and the fact that his wife was having an affair didn't just kill his family any more, he killed the whole damn street. Anyone who spoke to his wife on a daily, weekly and sometimes even monthly basis was a target. Society lived in perpetual fear.

Zane had, like most, grown up in this society knowing nothing of the previous world. The youngsters of the day were starting to bring back some of the good old mischief that Zane's father had occasionally told him about. The fear was slowly regressing. Tearaways like the mischievous student were becoming more common place. Life was returning to normal.

* * *

Jolie returned to the class looking flustered and tired. In the preceding battle she had lost her usually prim and proper hairstyle and looked, to all intents and purposes, as if she had literally been dragged through a hedge backwards. She scanned the class, presumably looking for other potential trouble makers. The large beating stick of the security officer standing to her right was a quiet symbol of the undying peace she was expecting from the rest of the lesson.

Zane felt sorry for Jolie. She had been teaching at the college for several years now but he had never really gotten to know her. She taught history and he loved physics. Having said that, the previous history teacher had been bland and inoffensive, but Jolie had tried on several occasions to spice up the lessons and the curriculum with trips out to locations of famous battles or events, usually ending with either boredom for all involved, tears from one of the girls in the class at losing some item of jewellery or make-up, or a little bit of both.

She just didn't seem to know how to engage her students, until today of course when her choice of subject had hit jackpot for Zane. For some reason he would never be able to understand that just because he was interested in the subject it didn't mean everyone else was. He wasn't a particularly selfish person, he didn't believe the world revolved around him, but he had a strange perception that most other people agreed with his tastes. He put up his hand as Jolie was sitting in her chair at the front of the class. "Jolie, do you have any more footage to show us?" Zane asked. The class groaned. It sounded like a fog horn that ships used to use in the 1900s.

"I don't have any more footage to show you Zane, but I do have some more information," Jolie replied, as she sank back into her chair. She placed a data disk into the console in front of her. The spinning disk built up speed almost instantly and data began streaming to each of the pupils consoles sat neatly on their desks. Her chair cast a stark shadow against the wall at the back of the class as the low mid afternoon sunlight streamed

in through the window. If Zane moved his arm slightly to the left he could make it look like the chair only had three legs. A passing thought, as the reality of Jolie's comment sunk in, and the noise of the console brought him to life.

The screen turned blue, and a report about Oken was displayed, it detailed his war efforts, who his parents had been, and had a link to a report about Jay. It was obvious that someone had either misinformed the researcher, or they hadn't dug as deep as they could have done for they listed Jay as having lived with Oken for three years before his final battle, and that they were about to have a child together.

Zane studied the information carefully. So Oken had worked at a library, Zane read. Was this where he gotten all his knowledge from? Zane sighed. He'd never be able to do the same. The books were long gone. There really was nothing left. It saddened him that the government seemed to follow the same recipe every time. If there was something they didn't understand, or couldn't make money out of, they destroyed it.

Zane had read about a disease that was ripe in the early 21st century called cancer. It had been cured by a man called Jacob Toulouse, but had caused such a significant drop in pharmaceutical sales and medical development that the government had papers drawn up, showing that his research was flawed, and when people spoke out against their 'findings' they mysteriously disappeared. Once public knowledge of this had spread, people began to distrust the governments of the world, and the rest as they say is history.

Oken had been a well educated man, why had his life taken the route it had? Zane mused over Oken's military career and the obvious effect it had imparted on him. There was nothing really detailed in the report, just a few pieces of information here and there. Why was Jolie telling them about this? What did it have to do with the course? Jolie's next words would explain all.

“I'm teaching you about this event because we are living mere miles from the origin of this event, and the epicentre of the repercussions that would eventually spread throughout the world.”

She stood up and bent over to face her students, leaning on the desk in front of her. The desk was old in style, but new in manufacture, made of poly-wood, the all purpose plastic wood alternative, so the singing termites chimed on the advert.

“This man single handedly changed history. Our history. It wasn't long ago that this man used to walk the same streets we walk today. It wasn't long ago that his dark and benevolent nature was rife in this very town.” Jolie could feel herself getting carried away with her own words. Why would they care that she had written her university D-chat, on Oken and his effect on society?

She slowly thought back to the months she had spent researching and painstakingly piecing together evidence about the last few years of Oken's life. It had been an obsession that she had never wanted to end and truth be told it hadn't. She was still on the lookout for information, spending her weekends delving into papers and researching leads on the web. She knew she had

gotten some details wrong, but overall, she had been pretty pleased with the result.

Jolie had good reason to be impressed with herself, she had passed the course that year with a grade at least two steps higher than anyone else in her class. Zane would never have let up questioning the young teacher if he had known, it was lucky for Jolie that he hadn't read the name of a certain historical paper that used to grace his fathers desk from time to time.

“Tomorrow, I'm taking you all to the site of the Zone itself.” She said. “Many lives were lost there, and to some it can be a disturbing place, but it should help you complete your assignment for this week.” She turned and began to write on the blackboard. Zane could hardly contain his excitement.

Kiele was bored. It was strange to find a blackboard in such a modern school, but recently it had become a hip new trend to bring back some of the old teachings tools to create a contemporary rustic feel to a school.

The words began to form as the white cylinder deposited its life force on the board. The thousands of words it would write somehow contained, almost constrained within its body, itching for someone to use it and release its wisdom. In the hands of some, it would bear great fruit, in the hands of others, only bad advice and ill thought words would come forth.

The wand finished its journey across the black landscape. The handwriting of this young enthusiastic teacher was riddled with loops and fancy curls that most would find difficult to read. Zane was used to this kind of scripture. His father had made him sit down many times and write pages and pages of cursive writing. It was his insurance that if all electronic devices failed Zane would be a king among men, able to still write properly and elegantly. Most schools and colleges now taught writing in block letters, using a varied form of the Arial font, prevalent in the early 21st century. Zane's father had despised the decision and had vowed to teach his son how to write properly.

“How do you think Oken would have felt knowing the impact of his actions during his last fight? Discuss.” It wasn't real history for a change. Zane was actually a little excited at this assignment. It was creative writing, something Zane had always wanted to have a flair for, even believed that he did have a flair for at one stage, until that blasted Cacey Rustle had started reading his poem out in class, much to the amusement of everyone present.

A siren sounded, indicating the end of the lesson, and in fact, the end of the day for Zane and his class. His classmate who had been thrown out earlier was now outside in a cage, awaiting transportation home. It was a common sight to see a troublesome student, even at university level, being confined to a cage. Many had protested against the practice, but it seemed to serve a purpose. The students were made to feel like a monkey for a day, or even just an hour, and the next day they were model citizens again.

As the class filtered out of the room and into the hallway, Zane and Kiele were the only two

students left. Jolie walked over to them, pausing briefly to let a rabble of marauding monkeys go past. “He’s a pretty interesting character all right.” She motioned to the board, where Oken’s face was still being emblazoned into the wall. “I often wonder what he would have done, if he had known what was coming.”

“Perhaps he already knew.” The voice was new, new to today’s cacophony of sounds anyway, a mile away from the primates that had left the room only seconds before. Softer than the siren, and more serene than Jolie. It was Kiele. She started again, “I mean, perhaps he had already seen the future and knew it was the right thing to do. It’s possible. Right?”

“There is no evidence to suggest that Oken could see the future Kiele. I’m sorry to tell you, that all he seemed to be able to do was affect the flow of time.” Jolie seemed already tired with this line of questioning. It was as if she’d asked the same question many times herself, and no matter how hard she’d tried, she hadn’t been able to come up with a shred of evidence that there

was any decency inside the dark figure that was Oken Brown.

“All he seemed to be able to do.” Zane repeated the words coldly. “All he seemed to be able to do?” Both Kiele and Jolie were a little taken a back by the words that just fell out of the mouth of the young boy sitting staring at the picture on the wall. “The guy was a freakin' genius. He read books at the library and made something that affected the flow of time.” Zane still seemed to be in a daze, mesmerised by the image, still flickering not five meters in front of him.

“But people had done it before Zane. Oken was not the first.” Jolie seemed to be in an argumentative mood today. It ticked off Zane. She sat on the corner of one of the desks and knocked off a dictation device. She bent down to pick it up and Zane noticed for the first time a small tattoo in the small of Jolie's back.

“Nice tatt Jolie.” He said softly, his anger fleeting for a second. The teacher turned a pale shade of pink and even Kiele felt for her. Zane

seeing the tattoo had been a mistake. Though she had nothing to hide, that small indiscretion was something she was not proud of. It was almost as if Zane had violated her trust, almost as if he had seen her naked.

She continued, ignoring his remark, “Besides, Zane, Oken probably had help from friends making the device. I doubt he could have achieved something so complex on his own.” This last sentence seemed to have marked the end of the conversation in Zane's mind. Already he was exploring new possibilities. Not even caring about the response just aired.

“I bet he even had a name for his sword” Zane ventured. Kiele giggled.

“Yes Zane, I'm sure he named a piece of metal.” She tittered away to herself, and though he would defend his statement, he managed to release a slight grin.

“People used to name their cars back in days gone by. It was a way of associating with an object which they would often spend a great deal of time with.” Zane's smile vanished. “Perhaps it

was a way to justify spending so much time with an inanimate object. Personifying it.”

The luminosity of the classroom had grown dim and just then the automatic lighting switched on, bathing the room in a warm yellow glow, not dissimilar to the current hue of the dying sun. The beams of light from the twelve overhead tubes covered their faces in photons, changing their appearances ever so slightly and making their features softer and less angular. The diffuse filters in front of the lights removed the stark sharp shadows engraved by the sun and replaced them with fuzzy edged areas of grey. There was no black and white any more. Grey filled the room.

“Maybe he wanted to give his life meaning,” Zane began on another line of thought rather aggressively. “Maybe he wanted to be remembered for something”

Kiele scoffed. “For killing loads of people?” she asked before answering her own question very quickly with a sarcastic. “Great.” Zane wasn't biting. Sarcasm didn't tend to affect his

demeanour; another lesson from his father. He got up and walked to the window before leaning out of it.

“Perhaps it was all he had.” Said Zane solemnly. “Perhaps it was the only thing in his life which actually held any meaning for him.” His voice had lost all aggression and was now actually quite soothing.

Kiele looked at her watch before exclaiming out loud, “Oh shute, I’m late.” She hurriedly packed her bag with her gear, dropping a few things which Zane dragged himself away from the window to help her with. “Thanks.” She said.

She started for the door, before turning back to give a last comment for analysis. “Perhaps he never intended to kill anyone at all.”

Jolie who had been silently listening to the lively exchange of ideas nodded before adding, “Perhaps Kiele. Perhaps.”

Kiele walked out of the room, her short skirt bouncing with her quick sharp steps. Zane watched her exit the building and walk out of the school yard. He had never really paid much

attention to her before and it was only now that he realised that she was in fact quite pretty. Her hair was tied back in a simple pony tail and was a beautiful blonde shade. Zane had heard the rumour that blondes were often quite scatty, but had never once witnessed this from Kiele. She wore a fairly tight fitting top, but nothing so as to cause alarm from teachers, or elevated heart rates from the males in the class. The design on her top was simple and political in nature, reading, "The scientists were wrong, global warming was a big tease." The blue denim skirt was faded and was starting to show signs of wear. It was after all Kiele's favourite.

Jolie also watched Kiele as she exited the school. She saw a strong confident female member of the class, brimming with potential and intelligence. 'The clothing is a front', she thought, 'this girl could be so successful.'

As the caretaker bots began to scrub the floors clean from all the slung 'poo' of the day, Zane pulled himself away from the window and began to pack his bag. "You two have quite a lot in

common you know,” she said. “I look forward to reading both of your assignments.” She stood up and walked to her desk and began arranging things for the next day. She didn't really have much to organise, but it was getting late now and the desk had begun to dig into her thighs.

“I must admit,” said Zane, “I'm quite looking forward to writing it.” He threw the bag over his shoulder and started for the door. “Thanks Jolie.”

“Whatever for?” Said the young teacher, genuinely astounded at the boys remark.

“Thanks for a cool assignment.” He looked back and smiled at her, and then so that she didn't get totally the wrong idea he added, “for a change.” They both laughed and Zane left the room, whilst Jolie watched him trace almost exactly the same path that Kiele had taken. They were both keen on route optimisation she observed. They had both worked out, either subconsciously or consciously, the quickest route from the door leading out of the college to the gates. It intrigued her and she hoped dearly that their assignments would spark off an interest in

the subject she enjoyed so much. She wondered if any of the class would come up with any new ideas or theories about the man that was Oken Brown, the man she had studied for so long.

It was as if he had been a part of her life now for so long that she couldn't break away. His face was still glowing on the wall. She stood up, walked to the wall and ran her finger down the side of his outline, casting her own shadow on the wall as she did. Projection technology hadn't changed much, and still remained very prevalent in schools, especially those with reduced funding.

The caretaker walking into the room got the wrong idea completely. "I wish my wife gave me as much attention as that" he said.

She laughed and remained facing the board before saying under her breath, "What were you like, Mr Brown. What were you really like?"

11

Field Trip

“And this is where the courageous G-TEP enforcers took up aim to take down Oken Brown.” Jolie was pointing to the rectangular holes cut into the walls. The arena hadn't changed much. The Zone had kept its lustre, if it could be called that. The lustre of death, loneliness, fear and anticipation.

Little did the students know but they were part of only a very small handful of people who had ever been allowed into the room. Temporal sites were always regarded as almost hallowed ground. Sacred areas scattered throughout the globe that people feared to trifle with. Better just to board them up, and slap a court order on them for

protection from redevelopment. They held residual temporal energy and the G-TEP preferred to auction the sites off to collectors to maintain in a state of perpetual stasis.

The room was practically untouched since the end of the last battle. The blood of Jay and Oken could still be seen on the floor, though why wouldn't it, no one had ever tried to clear it up, Jolie thought. Some cameras were still in place, though they had ceased rolling a long time ago.

Two of the gorillas who had been allowed on the trip started up mock play fighting, making whooshing noises as their imaginary swords sliced and diced each other into an honourable pile of imaginary blood and guts. "Disgusting," thought Zane. These idiots obviously had no respect for what had happened here. One of the cretins tripped and fell, slamming his knee into the ground, adding his own blood to the stained memories which adorned this palace of death.

The monkey quickly jumped to his feet, and Zane heard him shout, "I'm OK, I'm OK." Though he wondered if anyone actually cared.

The injured party started hobbling but instead of learning a lessons from his encounter, he used it as a display of his 'woundedness', limping and wincing in pain, whilst continuing to spar with his partner. He was the heroic warrior, continuing fighting though his leg had been ripped off. Stupid.

Zane looked around the room. It was large, but the echo somehow didn't sound quite right. It seemed more sullen, like the room was actually moping in depression. The whole place filled him with a feeling of fear and dread. Just what had it been like to come out here, knowing that it may be your last few minutes alive.

Oken was a brave man. Zane already knew that. He wasn't stupid either. The master wouldn't ever have entered the ring knowing he would fail. It wasn't him. The student's mind wandered. Maybe he was coerced into it. Maybe someone forced him to do it. The tap on the shoulder was a wake up call and Zane spun round so fast that he almost knocked Kiele over.

“So how does it feel to actually be here?” she asked. Her eyes sparkled in the dim light and Zane could see a level of excitement definitely missing from yesterday's encounter. It was as if being here had sparked her interest, had forced her to come to the reality that what had transpired here was truly influential. It wasn't about a man on a mission any more, Zane could see that Kiele had started to sense a real passion for the man with the sword. The man he wanted so desperately to find out more about.

“I don't know how it,” he paused, “feels. But I know I want to know more. This was a very influential event. Plus,” he looked down at his shoes. The pause had gone on too long to make his next words part of the previous sentence. “I'm failing history, and I need to do well in this assignment. Really well.” He looked back up and grinned at Kiele, “looks like this one came along at the right time.”

Jolie called the class over to look at some markings on the wall. There were deep gouges where various weapons had hit with extreme

force. In certain places, tiny shards of metal, still embedded in the wall, glistened in the dim light. Several members of the class took out media devices to capture the sight.

Zane, uninterested in what everybody else was looking at, turned and walked over to another wall and ran his fingers over it. The ridges and grooves bore the history of many battles. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine what it would feel like to dodge one of those devastating blows. He must have gotten a little too enthusiastic because a giggle from Kiele brought him back to his senses.

She seemed so much happier than when he had seen her the other day. She wasn't so stern, so still. He hadn't even noticed that he had been dodging imaginary blows from phantom swords, until Kiele had laughed at him. Kiele was so cute when she laughed, Zane thought. Damn. What was he thinking? He wasn't interested in all that relationship rubbish. He needed to concentrate on his studies. His father had always told him how important study was. He would do well. He

would impress people, but there was something about that smile she wore, something so interesting and cute.

“Something on my face?” Kiele asked. She tilted her head to one side and looked directly at Zane.

'Damn it', Zane thought, it's happening again. One of the other members of the class must have cottoned on to what was going on.

“Oooooooh,” Janus jeered, “Come on you two, get a room.” Zane turned and faced the wall, but unfortunately Kiele did the same. The class laughed and Zane's face turned redder than the bloodstains on the platform floor.

Jolie called the class over and they went up the stairwell to the control room. The smoky atmosphere, though absent for years still seemed to linger somehow. The equipment had long since been removed, but the design of the room still spoke volumes as to its purpose.

Zane looked out of the observation window which was made up of four large plates of glass. He could only imagine how exciting it must have

been to stand here and see this for real. Oken was fast becoming a hero of Zane's, even though the boy wasn't really aware of it yet.

“This control room was where the remote and static cameras were controlled from. They would mix live video and display it on the large screen over at the far side of the platform.” Jolie continued. “The money from working here was pretty good compared to an average days wage. People would give up a large portion of their hard earned cash to get into the Zone, and this money funded the equipment, wages and the advertising, which drew in more punters.”

Jolie was of course referring to the very subtle forms of advertising that the Zone was renowned for. If they were too obvious, the cops would have been all over them. It mostly relied on paying off certain regulars to spread the word to people they trusted, who would be invited to attend a special one off event. Once they had been to one fight, they were usually hooked, and the Zone had procured another valuable monthly income.

Jolie turned and looked out of the window, leaning against the desk in front of her. “The Zone at its peak, had over three hundred regular viewers. Videos were also posted out on the Mediaweb and due to clever image filtering were totally untraceable.”

* * *

The Mediaweb had been created as an extension of the Internet. In the early 2000s, the Internet had become saturated with video, music and images. Internet companies eventually started to shut-down because they were no longer able to honour their service level agreements. Service uptime regularly dropped to below 65% and soon it started affecting businesses too.

To facilitate this, the government created an entirely separate “Internet” called the Mediaweb. This was used to house all of the countries media sharing. The music industry had all but collapsed, but it wasn't due to the high level of piracy per se, moreover, the fact that download

limits had effectively been removed meant people could take whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, within seconds.

Soon the governments realised the error of their ways and tried once again to unite all media and information traffic into one network. This failed and led to the start up of many smaller networks by proprietary companies, using proprietary protocols, which made intercommunication between these smaller nodes difficult and expensive. Strangely enough though it seemed to work better as a model for communication. Piracy crumbled, in part due to the intercommunication issues, and in part due to improved copy protection technology.

* * *

The tour was rounding up now and Jolie was trying to ensure that no stragglers got left behind. True, it was only a short walk back to the college, away, but she was responsible for them and

looked upon them almost as if they were her own children.

“So remember people, the title of the assignment is what, Mikael?” Jolie asked. She turned her head to look at one of the gorillas who had been play fighting earlier. He looked blankly back at her and then down to the floor. Then he seemed to remember something, his face contorting with the pain of retrieving a difficult memory from the depths of his brain.

“Sorry Jolie. I got nothing,” he blurted out. Zane and Kiele simultaneously tutted at the oaf. Why hadn't he been listening, thought Zane. It's not as if it was a hard thing to remember.

The other gorilla, in an effort to redeem himself for his earlier indiscretion offered up his version of the title for the assignment, “How would Odin feel after killing all these people? Discuss.” He knew he had the last bit right, Jolie always ended her assignments with the word 'discuss'. He sure of this because he hated it, the assignment would have been a piece of cake otherwise. 'How did Odin feel after killing all

these people?' : 'Bad' he would have thought. That would have been it, job done, next assignment. 'Discuss' meant he had to read, and write neither of which generally ended well for him.

Jolie, who was looking in the other direction sighed and slightly rolled her eyes. 'No, Daniel you idiot,' is what she'd have liked to have said, but Jolie being Jolie just simply stated the problem again. "How do you think Oken would have felt knowing the impact of his actions during his last fight? Discuss"

Daniel piped up, "that's pretty much what I said Jolie." He knew it wasn't perfect, but he'd been at least part right.

"You called him Odin you great pleb," said Zane. He wasn't looking for a fight but was simply trying to point out the inaccuracy of this idiots responses.

"I have a problem remembering names dumb-ass" was the response. "It's a medical problem, I've got pills for it an' everything."

The entire class laughed. Whenever there was a serious moment, you could always count on either Mikael or Daniel to lighten the mood. Zane however, dissatisfied, decided to fire off one more remark.

“What're they called, I'm-a-pleb-oxymol?” He mentally slapped himself in the head, the retort was stupid. Some of the other students laughed and Daniel had managed to find a cardboard box lying around which promptly hit Zane in the head.

“Come on guys,” offered Jolie. “Let's wrap this up now.” She started to walk towards the exit before turning back to add one more piece of information. “Oh, and I managed to get special access to this place again tomorrow. Does anyone want to come and visit here again?”

Tomorrow was a Saturday. No one was going to want to come here on a Saturday, but Jolie always liked to offer her students as much help and extra material as possible. Unsurprisingly Zane's hand popped up and he credited the teacher for her effort, “I'd like to come back

Jolie?" The class jeered. Now he felt stupid, but he stood his ground. "Is that OK?"

Several of the class members took the opportunity to rib him over his previous statement, repeating it endlessly in different voices. 'Is that OK?' they asked rhetorically. Of course Daniel and Mikael took it one step further 'Is that OK Jolie my love?' became their chant as they walked towards the exit.

Jolie motioned for the class to exit. She walked back to Zane. "Ignore them, Zane," she said. "They know not what they do." Zane knew the reference was a biblical one. Jolie was always embossing her everyday speech with quotes from the bible. Not that she was religious in anyway, she was just very learned. The boy raised one side of his lip and shrugged a single shoulder. He didn't really care what the class thought. He was failing history and needed to do well. Finally he'd been given an assignment he cared about. He was not about to mess this one up.

Jolie handed him a letter. "Here," she said, "knock on the door at this address and tell the

woman that I sent you, she'll let you in.” Zane nodded and received the letter. It was scrawled on standard white paper, yet in the light of the Zone it seemed almost grey. The letters imprinted on the page were written in Jolie's hand, once again, curly and expressive. It was a good job he was the one reading it, thought Zane, had the recipient been any of the others, they would have probably spent most of the morning trying to decipher it. He carefully folded the pristine piece of paper in half, and then in half again, garnishing each fold with an added score with his nails.

He placed the paper in his pocket and followed Jolie out of the exit. The rest of the class were already on the street, awaiting the return to the school. Zane took the opportunity to look back at the hall of pain behind him. His view was obscured by the winding stairwell. Never mind he thought, there's always tomorrow. As he walked down the road he spotted Kiele. Deep down he was a little disappointed that she hadn't asked to join the trip tomorrow too. He

shook his head quickly, as if trying to dislodge an unpleasant thought. It wasn't that the thought was unpleasant, more unwanted. Kiele was very pleasant to look at. Zane again shook his head and silently shouted the word 'No.' He wasn't going to think about her right now. As if by magic, Kiele turned round and shot him a winning smile. Zane smiled back inanely. 'Damn it'

12

A Prayer

As the applause of debris and bullets died away, the chaos began to ensue. People started running wildly, some in the direction of the exits, some just in any direction that didn't look paved with blood. The atmosphere stank of anxiety and fear, a stark contrast to fifteen minutes ago. Ruben had been watching intently at the funfair unveiling before his very eyes. He walked slowly through the swarm of human liquid, which crashed against him like the ocean against the shore.

Ruben couldn't hear anything, and all he could see was the man he had such fond memories of, lying there, dead on the ground before him.

Surprisingly, he looked almost at peace. Jay was lying awkwardly on top of his torso and from Ruben's angle he could just about see her face. She was smiling. He couldn't quite believe it.

The gunfire had stopped long ago, but Ruben didn't care. His friend, his very good friend was gone. All his memories, his thoughts, his knowledge, his companionship. He had been more than a friend to Ruben, he'd been his brother. A while back, Ruben had gotten himself into trouble with a loan shark. He had foolishly bet on a fight that he had heard some insider information on.

Poor Ruben had had no idea that the information was false and he would never have suspected that it had been crafted specifically to entice him to place a bet. Though well educated, people often used the word gullible to describe Ruben. Oken had known different. He had known Ruben as a very genuine soul, who always took what people said at face value. Maybe he was just too trusting.

Ruben wasn't the kind of guy to shy away from a fight, but when dealing with mob gangs it was either pay up, or end up in a grave. Ruben had heard of their reputation, going after families and friends. He didn't want that on his conscience. Despite his rather robust appearance, Ruben was actually a very loving man. So he did what any man would have done in that situation, he told his best friend.

Oken had withdrawn the money for him the following day. It took him longer than expected because he had lost his bank identification card. The gang got their money, and Ruben got to keep his life. The event had brought the two closer together. They were brothers now. At least that's how Ruben saw it. It hadn't been the first time Oken had assisted him in a time of need.

Now, his brother was lying there, dead on the floor. Though he was dead, the blood oozing from his lacerations made Ruben question the status of his friend's mortality. The crowds were still running around in fear. Had the attackers

been of a darker persuasion, it would have been like shooting fish in a barrel.

Through the commotion Ruben still found it hard to believe what was happening. He knelt down next to the two corpses and carefully pulled bodies so their heads rested in his lap. A single tear freed itself from Ruben's eye. It skilfully navigated through the raging perturbations in the air, caused by the noise all around it. As one girl screamed, the sound waves excited the tear into a mambo, before it hit Jay's cheek and collapsed onto her skin, covering a small patch with Ruben's love.

Ruben pulled them further towards him, protecting them and resting their heads in the crooks of his arms. He reached down to their hands. The difference was unimaginable. There was Oken with his strong, large, rough hands, compared to Jay's tiny, soft, delicate pads. It was at this point that Ruben's self control started to dwindle. His breathing became erratic and his heart was pounding.

'These were good people,' Ruben thought. Why did they have to go? His chest heaved uncontrollably. Why did they have to leave him? The tears were fighting to get out now, pushing and shoving at the corners of the dark man's eyes. He looked up to the heavens. His chest heaved once more and the grip Ruben had of their hands tightened. He lifted them up and tried to speak. Nothing came out.

The well of tears that had been held back for what seemed like an eternity suddenly sprang forth. Like a family of wildebeest running from a predator, the salt water galloped down his face. When they hit his lips, they spread sideways, enhancing Ruben's already erratic breathing with a hissing noise.

"P-p-p-please Lord," the words came bursting from his lips like cooking popcorn, "they were good people, and they were my friends." The tears continued to stream down his face leaving wet patches on his friends scalps. He continued through the sobbing reinvigorated and a lot louder, "Dear Father in heaven, these were my

best friends in the world.” He sniffed and heaved once again, “An' the only reason that they did what they did, was because they could see no other other way...than this.” At this point he began shouting, “Please Lord, listen to me, I know I've done bad stuff too, but I know they are sorry.....THEY ARE SORRY.....but they can't tell you now. Let them into your Kingdom. I beg you.”

Ruben had been unaware that throughout his prayers two things were happening; one, people were fleeing the Zone in their hundreds but two, they were being replaced very rapidly by G-TEP soldiers, who were keen to cleanse the area of temporal disturbances. Constructs had been placed into quarantine for much less than this. An entire continent in quarantine? It had been sheer hell.

Martial law had been declared throughout, families split up as soldiers set up same sex camps. Truth be told it was more about providing a quick and efficient workforce than it was about anything to do with temporal disturbances. Such

was the stigma behind it though, that it was used as an excuse for an abundance of crimes against humanity.

The G-TEP forces had pretty much occupied the entire floor by now and one soldier in particular was making his way over to the only civilian, or 'criminal' as he saw it, left alive on the platform. His stance was firm and he stared down at the blubbering heap of a maggot that was splayed on the ground before him. The soldier, a one Richard Palmer, extended the arm that was down by his side till it was straight. The gun he was holding in his hand glistened in the stark lighting of the platform. Cold and calculating the weapon responded to its masters movements. In a swift moment Ric tipped the gun to its side, and pulled back the reload mechanism. The mechanical click echoed round the entire platform, but was unheard by Ruben, still concentrating on his petition to the Lord.

“I Ric Palmer of the G-TEP force, order you to stand to your feet.” He hadn't realised that his voice sounded so authoritative. The man before

him ignored him entirely. It was as if Ric had never been there at all.

Ruben continued his prayers. "I never
...e...ver..got....to thank..you...my friend.....Lord,
please....tell this good man....." His voice was almost unintelligible now. To an outsider, an outsider such as Ric, it seemed like Ruben was sitting there hissing gibberish through his teeth. Ric had had enough. He moved his arm and fired his weapon into the ceiling for a good 10 seconds. Ruben didn't even flinch.

Ric, looking up to the ceiling shouted out "Stand to your feet punk." It wasn't as if Ruben wasn't listening, the words just had no meaning to him. His attention was focussed entirely on the two slumped figures in front of him. Ric shouted again, this time slightly more aggressively, but Ruben still made no point of moving.

The temper of the G-TEP soldier suddenly snapped and he brought the muzzle of the gun, still super heated from the recent discharge, and planted it directly under Ruben's chin. The burly man screamed out in pain, gripping his friends

hands as he did so. The flesh burned well and as parts of it seared, others cleaving to the shiny black muzzle, intent on torturing Ruben with its heat.

Ric ripped the gun away, tearing yet more flesh from Ruben's already misshapen jawline. Blood dripped on to Jay and Oken's hands and it was at this point that Ruben took his turn to snap. Ric had intruded into his world of pain by introducing yet more agony. Wasn't it enough that he and his friends had already taken what family he had. He didn't want to listen to Ric, but he was sure as hell going to tell him something. "I'm praying for the souls of my.....my friends," he screamed. "Can't you leave us in peace, Oh Holy Father take him away...take him away....."

Ric just stood there all the more resolute. His hair, hidden by his helmet, was starting to get itchy. He hated these damn uniforms but more importantly he hated being ignored and he definitely hated being told what to do. Ric had been through countless missions and had always hated being bested by anyone. He was a driven

man, driven to be the best. This sniffing wreck in front of him had no right to talk to him that way. Not only was he involved with criminals but he was a cry baby. It never even entered Ric's head that his state of mind could have been remarkably similar if anything had ever happened to his family or friends. For now, Ric was king. He leaned over to speak into Ruben's ear, purposefully and slowly and as he did so his dog tags slipped out from his shirt and jostled gently against the shoulder of the burly man.

“Don't you realise cretin, that I have the power to grant you life or death?” Said Ric through clenched teeth. He turned to Leon, who had joined him on the platform and gave an evil little smile. To his colleagues he always seemed to be driven by hatred and desire, never by love or justice. His decisions were always made so quickly and with such precision, but consistently lacking in emotion and feeling. He was, to all intents and purposes, a robot. Following orders was the name of his game, and he didn't mind one

bit. “Well, cretin? Do you realise the power I hold over you?”

Ruben's face contorted. His teeth clenched and his mouth was dry. He was more angry than he'd ever been in his life. Angrier than when his brother stole his little red fire truck. Angrier than when his wife had left him for a “better” man. It could have been said that right now Ruben was the epitome of anger. His veins pulsed and he turned to face Ric's ear before whispering. “Thoust would have no power over me, if thoust hadn't been given it from the Lord above.” The words flowed so freely that Ric had to turn his head to see if it was still the same man that sat there before him.

The two remained motionless for a moment, eyes making complete contact, both absolutely still, calm and calculating. Ric smiled, turned his head back to the centre and said, “You call him your Lord?” He made a small noise of acknowledgement that sounded like a muffled hmm, before continuing, “Your Lord could never

love you. You can't even follow my orders, so how could you possibly follow his?"

As Ric withdrew his head and shoulders, the anger rose in Ruben once again and noticing the dog tags as they gently caressed his collarbone, he grabbed hold of them with his right hand and thrust his fist downwards. Ric could never have dreamt of the speed with which Ruben's arm could move, nor the speed at which his head could move, exceedingly fast towards Ruben's shoulder. The head met the shoulder with a crack. His nose completely crushed, Ric felt blood start rushing to the affected area, before billowing out all over Ruben's shoulder. It looked like a miniature red waterfall as it made it's way from Ric to Ruben and then on to the floor.

The other soldiers in the room all readied their weapons and began to take aim at Ruben as Ric stumbled backwards. Coincidentally, Leon wasn't the only one with a headache that day. Ric's head was throbbing and his ego had been more than crushed. Ruben grinned before saying calmly, "It's not about following orders cretin, it's about

trying your best always.” Upon regaining his balance and with absolutely zero remorse, Ric swung his gun up over his head and brought it crashing down on Ruben's poor skull. The oversized man cocked his head to one side and fell backwards. 'Unconscious fool,' thought Ric.

Leon joined Ric and the pair of them grabbed Ruben's arms and tried in vain to drag the hulk to their holding vehicle, Leon all the while, trying to hold back the vomit lingering all too closely in his throat, and Ric trying to stem the bleeding from his crushed nostrils. Ric stopped and motioned for Leon to do the same. It was no use, the man was far too heavy for them to move on their own. Sighing, Ric motioned to one of the lower ranking soldiers to bring a gurney on which to wheel the behemoth back to their lair. As they waited, the veteran surveyed the platform of the Zone. “Sure kept this secret” he mentioned.

“You're telling me,” replied Leon in a shaky tone. “It's a wonder no one found out about this place before.” He walked over to one of the walls

and ran his fingers along it's rough surface, as if reading it's history.

“Intel said it's been here for over 5 years,” added Ric. He had to admit, he was rather impressed that such an illegal arena had been kept secret for so long. The supplies, the bodies, just how had they managed it? In some ways it mattered precious little now. The Zone was at its end.

“Leon,” started Ric, his voice changed in tone from banter to authoritative, “we.....we need to talk.” The pause indicated that Ric was less than impressed with the young recruit's performance. Though in Leon's mind he had proved his worth a thousand times over. G-TEP forces were known throughout the world for their absolute zero tolerance of anything they disliked. Many civilians and criminals alike had tried to bring G-TEP agents to trial with little success. They lived by their own law and made up their own rules, but Leon was different. He didn't see the world the same way as these other gun-ho, trigger happy, zealots.

Leon walked over to Ric, and the two of them trailed after the gurney, which was now fully laden with an unconscious Ruben. "I'm not going to deny you did a great job today," said the officer, "but I get the feeling that it wasn't completely as planned. "You have to be willing to be cold, to kill without emotion."

He waved his gun around as he tried to explain his reasoning. "These people are scum," he began before tasting yet more blood on his lips. "They deserve to die." He wiped the blood on the sleeve of his uniform. Leon had slowed slightly and suddenly stopped, head down shoulders slumped. Ric turned round, still pressing his finger to his philtrum, testing to see if he had managed to stem the flow of blood. His nose wasn't broken, but it sure hurt like hell and he wasn't about to let the new recruit see that he was actually feeling his injury.

Leon looked at the ground. Just what had been accomplished today? Really? Jay and Oken were not the only ones to have been injured. Had it all been worth it? Leon just couldn't decide.

He backtracked in his mind, they hadn't just been injured, they'd been killed, and by his hand too. The courage welled inside him and he spoke. "I wonder if I've made a mistake Ric," he said quietly, keeping his head exactly where it was.

"What on earth are you talking about?" said his superior abruptly. "You're a natural killer, you just gotta stop thinking about it." Ric had taken out a small handkerchief and was dabbing his nose with it. There was no denying that Leon was a first class sharpshooter, but his dedication wasn't to killing. He'd taken the shot, but not consciously. A subconscious reaction to a predefined stimulus. Oken moved, Leon fired. That had been all. 'Ric knew this, and yet he was saying very little,' thought Leon.

Ric continued talking, "You popped that guy good." He was smiling, but Leon couldn't see that. "The scumbag had it coming to him one way or another," Ric sneered.

Finally Leon had the courage to speak out. It was the biggest confession of his life. His heart was pounding and as he looked at the ground, he

could see his reflection in the wet asphalt. It had been raining since the evening at the Zone had begun and now the ground was covered in a silky lining, offering any onlooker a mirror version of the world to peruse.

“I really didn't mean to kill him,” said the young recruit. His resolution of earlier to 'get his man' was gone. He was choked up, almost crying and could never have anticipated what would happen next.

Ric ran towards him, arm outstretched, right hand making a gigantic C shape, purposefully designed for cupping young men's throats and forcing them against immovable objects. In this particular case, the destination was a wall, about two metres behind his victim. Leon raised his head in response to a grunting roar which had begun to emit from Ric's general direction. The veteran's blade of a hand hit Leon squarely in the throat, throwing his head forwards into its previous downward position. As Leon was pushed backwards he lost his footing, but Ric was

strong enough for the both of them as he held up the little reject that hung before him.

The force with which he hit the wall took them both by surprise. Leon's head was snapped back up by the sudden change in momentum, only to be flung back down again as a result of coming into contact with the wall. The wall had responded to being impacted by scratching a large amount of skin from the back of Leon's scalp. He winced in pain, but just hung there, making no attempt to break free. He deserved this. He wasn't cut out for this, and Ric was about to tell him just that. Wasn't he? Leon couldn't be sure. His head was pounding and it seemed like nothing mattered any more. His family seemed a million miles away and he wished he could have been picking raspberries in the fields with his wife, as he had done so many summers ago.

13

Fruit Picking

It had been the most wonderful summer for the both of them. Just recently married they could have almost classed the time on the farm as a honeymoon. Leon had met Shana there at the farm several years previous, whilst picking raspberries. Though most of the green areas had been either built on, or demolished, a few still remained and it had become a fairly popular idea to grow fruit on them for the public to pick and buy from the land owners.

Shana looked across the rows of raspberry plants. Her new husband was about three rows away from her, feverishly picking away at the lush raspberries that stood before him. She

picked off a raspberry. It was an exceedingly plump specimen, far too good for her husband she chuckled as she popped it into her mouth and bit down on the soft crimson fruit. She picked off another raspberry, this time in rather stark contrast to the previous one. It was small, and slightly shrivelled. 'Perfect for my hubbie' she thought and smiled.

She carefully took aim for an overhead bombing of the love of her life, and tossed the raspberry. It almost floated through the air before landing on Leon's head with a soft plop. Except, Leon didn't notice. He was so intent on grabbing the most delicious specimens for him and his wife that he hadn't even felt it as it caressed his giant melon. Shana had always joked about Leon having a larger than average sized head, and he had always replied that that was what made him more intelligent than her.

Shana unphased by the lack of interest from her husband, picked off a few more runts and threw them singly at Leon. Again they met with no reaction. 'Well', she thought, 'if he wants to

play it like that.' She grabbed a whole bunch of berries feverishly picking yet more little runts from the bush. She pulled her arm back and threw them, this time in a much more direct manner. The up and over approach clearly didn't have enough force, so this time she threw them as hard as she could.

At least five hit their mark and one, a little squishier than the rest, actually managed to explode on Leon's face. He looked up at his wife with an unimpressed little grin and then laughed. "Don't you have anything better to do than throw our hard earned provisions at me?" he asked. As he did so he picked up a small twig and threw it back at her.

"I wasn't throwing the good ones at you," she said ducking out of the way, "You're not worth that." They both smiled at each other. Their relationship was of the kind that they could say anything to each other in jest and it would never be taken to heart. They loved each other so dearly that Shana couldn't actually remember

them ever having a fight. Not a real one anyway, not like you see on TV.

“What were you so deep in thought about anyway?” she asked. The reply wasn't what she had hoped for. This was supposed to be their time away from worries and troubles, but somehow Leon found it difficult to switch off.

“I was just thinking about the G-TEP offer,” he said. They had both been finding it difficult to earn money lately. Shana had a degree in Ancient History, which was all very interesting, but difficult to bring in the money. Leon on the other hand had been a police officer for several years. He had been called in as backup on a hostage situation and it was his expert shot that had saved three civilians. Following this, he had been scouted by G-TEP central command who had offered him a very generous salary.

He still hadn't decided though. He had three days left until the offer expired. Did he really want to go into that line of work? It seemed like it was too good to be true; new house, new location, more money, generous benefits. G-TEP

seem to be the cream of the crop. Yet something inside him didn't feel right. Shana climbed her way through the holes in the bushes and joined her husband. She put her arms round his neck and kissed him sweetly.

"You're not supposed to be thinking about work," she said. "We agreed on no work thoughts for the entire weekend." It was true, Leon knew it, yet such a big decision in his life, in their lives, deserved a great deal of attention.

"I know sweetie," he said lovingly. He truly was sorry that it had encroached on their weekend, but it seemed like now it was here, it was a good time to talk about it. He continued, "I just really needed to think about it, and...." Shana had turned and was watching a butterfly skitter around the sky with the ease of a leaf being blown in the breeze. He gently turned her head back towards him. Placing his finger and thumb on her delicate chin. "I needed to discuss it with you."

"I'm scared Leon, that's all." Her voice seemed particularly sad, and he wondered if that was a result of him spoiling the day by bringing

up work, or if she was genuinely disappointed in him for considering the offer. “You're a good man Leon, you protect people and you are so just, it's scary sometimes.” She afforded her self a little smile. Her head had slipped down so she was looking at his neck and she started playing with the daisy chain that she had crafted for him earlier. Initially he had rejected the gift, but a short sharp look from Shana always had an uncanny way of changing his mind.

She twisted one of the stems of the chain carefully to and fro between her finger and thumb, trying her hardest not to listen to, or become engaged in the conversation at all. Leon lifted her chin up with his fingers again. In the setting sunlight he could scarcely believe how genuinely beautiful Shana was. 'Many girls are pretty,' he thought, though he'd never tell Shana that, but he knew of no other that was just so radiant with natural beauty. She'd had no surgery, and rarely wore make up, entirely in contrast to the way society viewed beauty.

“If I take this job Shana, I'll be protecting even more people. In an even greater way. Protecting memories and loved ones.” Her eyes met his, but still she didn't seem convinced. She wondered what it was that really drove him. Was it the money? The power? No. Leon wasn't like that. Deep down she knew all Leon wanted was to protect people in a just and peaceful manner. Her mood changed. She knew her husband.

She smiled at him before remarking, “You just want to wear a new fancy uniform, cos you think it impresses me.” Leon returned the smile and removed her arms from his neck before turning and walking away. As he did so he joked back, “Well, what can I say, I know how you feel about men in uniform. After all why did you throw that bottle at my head the day we met.” Shana's faced changed to show a an unimpressed glance. Leon looked back over his shoulder and poked, “I had no choice but to arrest you, you know.”

He laughed and she ran towards him as he tried to dart away from her. She jumped through the air and tackled him to the ground. The two of

them lay there on the ground looking into each others eyes. "I really love you Leon," she said. "No matter what you do, your heart will always guide you to what's right.

"Thanks Shana," said Leon, "You know I'm kinda fond of you too." She widened her eyes in surprise and disbelief at how cheeky her husband had just been. She grabbed a handful of raspberries from Leon's basket and smooched them onto his cheek. "Oh Shana", he shouted, smiling and laughing. It was truly the happiest moment of his life.

* * *

"You're a coward Leon," shouted Ric, "a freakin' coward." His grip was still strong and Leon was snapped out of his thoughts once more. "How the hell you managed to get into this squadron I'll never know. Sure, you're a sharpshooter, probably one of the best, but there's no way your sorry ass will last if you carry on showing your emotions like that." He was

shouting so loudly at Leon that it masked the noise of the gurney being inserted into the ambulance.

As he hung there it hit him. He wasn't saving civilians any more. Sure he was getting the bad guy, but so many of the G-TEP missions ended in death and destruction. It was their mark, their way. It wasn't him. This wasn't the way Leon Jackson worked, it wasn't in him. He began to feel the anger once again and desperate to regain some of his honour and some control over the situation shouted back, "I'm not like you Ric, I..."

Before he could finish Ric snapped back all the louder, "You're damn right you're not like me. You're nothing like me" He drew back his spare hand and with the force of what seemed like ten men he punched Leon in the side of the head. As he did so he relinquished his grip of the young man, tossing him to one side as if he was a worthless pile of garbage.

The new recruit lay there, unable to find either the will or the strength to get back up. Suddenly his stomach could last no longer and he promptly

vomited out yet more of his lunch, along with the last remaining portions of his pride. Ric laughed at the weak little being lying there on the ground. He turned and motioned to the other soldiers.

“Come on 'men', let's get out of here.” He emphasized the word 'men'. He walked to the G-TEP assault vehicle and climbed inside. Before shutting the over-head door he looked back at Leon and said, “by the way, this will all be in my report.” He smiled smugly and pulled the door shut. The vehicle sped off at great speed, narrowly missing an elderly pedestrian as it did so.

Leon squeezed his forehead with his hands. Just how had he gotten into this in the first place? It was never supposed to be like this. The academy had been a walk in the park, training had been easy. Yet the real deal, actually taking aim and calculating to shoot someone. That wasn't Leon. Shana had been right all along. She had always voiced her concerns that he wasn't up to this, that it wasn't in his nature. He'd tried to palm her off with excuses about justice and

honour, about protecting the innocent. In reality, the G-TEP was nothing like that.

The ambulance containing Ruben's unconscious body still hadn't left yet and Leon felt the urge to accompany him to the hospital. After all someone should probably guard him until he was questioned. The driver of the ambulance climbed up into the front cabin. Leon shouted out for him to wait and the driver obliged, stepping back down again. Leon walked slowly over to the ambulance driver.

"I saw the whole thing man," said the driver, "why d'ya take that from the likes of him?" Leon said nothing. The driver continued, "I'll be a witness if you want to press charges against him." Leon shook his head. It wouldn't help. It never did.

"Can I ride with him?" Leon eventually asked. The driver nodded and opened up the rear door for him. Leon climbed in the back and sat there motionless, surveying the innards of the vehicle.

There lay Ruben, still as the night's sky, his skin almost shimmering from sweat. It looked

like he'd been painted with diamonds to appear in a stage show. Leon had always liked stage shows. They were rare nowadays, people much preferring to see the latest films in 3D, though even the cinemas were fading now.

He looked up at the drip hanging from the rail above. Probably not a necessity Leon thought, just keeping him comfortable. The thin tube made its way down to Rubens arm, before terminating in a sonic needle. The high pitched hum of the micro-compressor was totally inaudible against the roar of the Ambulance's engines. There were no sirens, none were needed, Ruben wasn't critical.

As the ambulance made off down the road Leon looked out of the window at the passing traffic. The people outside had no idea what he'd done, what he was responsible for. They probably didn't even care. Leon wasn't looking forward to going home. He couldn't bear to tell Shana that she had been right all along. It wasn't as if he was a proud man. He felt guilty more than anything. He had promised Shana that

everything would be OK. He had made a solemn promise. How could he ever look her in the eyes again. She would forgive him of course. She always did. She was that type of person. To Leon, she was an amazing testament to the goodness that was still prevailing in an otherwise seemingly evil world.

14

Beautiful Bride

His beautiful bride sat before him in the meadow. He still found it difficult to believe that she had betrothed herself to him, especially forever. She smiled at him, the wind blowing softly through her hair, gently lifting her slightly clumped ringlets. They had spent the afternoon swimming in the lake and had finally decided to retire to the grass to dry off. The sun, still very visible in the sky warmed their skin and quickly dried the remaining water from their bodies.

He had laid out a picnic for her under a huge oak tree. It was as if there wasn't another soul in the world at that moment. He picked up a sandwich and bit into it, the cucumber cooling his

mouth as well as quenching his thirst. He had always been fond of cucumbers, the way they tasted, their ability to satisfy both hunger and thirst coincidentally.

“Can you think of a more perfect day?” he asked her. She shook her head, unable to speak as she herself had just bitten into her own sandwich. The two of them continued to chew in silence, listening only to the sound of the water running quietly in a nearby stream, and the gentle breeze touching the trees with its presence. She lent forward and put her hands down in front of her, gently placing her sandwich on a plate as she did so. Then she turned round and lay back into his lap.

He sat there with a sandwich in one hand and began to play with her hair with the other. The strands of her hair seemed to glow luminously in the sweet light of the setting sun. He had imagined he would begin to feel cold by now but no, everything was perfect. It was unimaginable.

“I love you,” she said. “I love you with all of my heart.” Her eyes looked up into the sky above

her, so bright and round, full of wonder at the lives that lay ahead of them. She lifted up her hand and looked at the ring on her finger. She twisted her hand so that the diamond in the centre caught the sun and winked at her. She giggled. He hugged her gently. "I never thought you'd have enough to buy it for me," she said. He gave a brief smile.

"I'd find the world for you," he returned. He meant it too and he was still in shock and awe that the most beautiful woman in the world, not just in his world, but the entire world, was lying there in front of him.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked.

She carried on with her train of thought, almost ignoring his query. "Not that I expected such a precious gem," she ensured him. "I'd be happy with you just the way you are."

"Just the way I am eh?" he replied. "You sure you're not going to leave me for a better man?" As soon as the words left his mouth he regretted saying them. There was something about them that rang in his head. The word 'better' repeated

itself over and over again. He looked down at his hand which had found it's way into hers. The contrast of his dark skin against her milky white silk was magnified by their difference in sizes. His muscular clench could have completely crushed her delicate bones. Of course he'd never have wanted to do such a thing.

As he sat there a little longer something began to feel wrong. His hand began to tighten around hers. First gently and then tighter and tighter, like a boa constrictor. He tried to let go, but found himself unable to. She began to gasp, and with her other hand started clawing at him, first his hands, ripping into them like a rake to a lawn and then up to his face. She dug her nails into his chin and pulled away hard, leaving Ruben with a huge gash.

As she struggled she yelled out, "You fat oaf. You're hurting me." In an unforgettable instant she was suddenly in front of him, free from the ogre's grasp. "So where did the money come from then Ruben? You stupid spac! Why would you do that? I didn't need the sodding ring, I

loved you for who you were.” Ruben withdrew. Still sitting, he used his hands like oars to propel himself backwards.

The love of his life now on all fours continued after him before standing up and walking towards him. The sun, now an angry red was behind her and lit up her hair, making it look as if it was on fire. Ruben began to stammer, “Yazmine, darling,” she kicked him in the leg as Ruben ran out of ground and hit a tree. He seemed surprised. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. “I love you Yazmine. I love you,” he blurted out like a fool.

“You love me??” she shouted at him, “YOU LOVE ME?” She picked up his foot and began to drag him. Ruben thrust his hands down into the ground. He wasn't even sure where she was taking him. “If you loved me so damn much why did your precious little friend have to bail you out?” She was of course talking about Oken. Oken. His best friend. Suddenly it all came screaming back to him. Of course this wasn't real but his head made it feel real, oh so real.

“Yazmine stop. Oken's dead. We can be together.” In an instant he felt a ripping in his heart. Yazmine had never been able to accept that Oken had bailed Ruben out when he hadn't been able to pay off the debt of the ring, just like his little betting accident. She held it over him like a treat to a puppy, making him jump whenever she wanted, torturing his very existence. His heart hurt so badly right now. Tearing for the love he felt for both Oken, his life long brother, now deceased, and his bride no longer, whom he had loved so dearly.

“How dare you,” she said. “You would be so quick to betray the memories of your friend?” The word friend echoed around his head once again and the ripping in his heart grew stronger. Suddenly Ruben knew where she was dragging him. His fingers tried in vain to grip the surface of the earth, but unsurprisingly he couldn't prevent his journey to the lake. At least that's where Ruben thought he was going; the lake. She was going to drown him in the lake. Except

the lake had been replaced with a ranging sea of fire.

“Welcome sweetheart,” she said. “Welcome to your own personal hell. On behalf of everybody here,” she continued, “I hope you rot here and burn in what you created for yourself.” Ruben began to sob. The tears streaming down his face as his heart ripped further with every inch closer to the furnace of his mistakes.

All of a sudden the heart inside Ruben gave up and at that instant Yazmine threw him into the fire. As the flames licked up around him, he screamed out. Not in pain, but in regret. Had he really caused it all? Was it all his fault? The flames burnt his body away and cleansed him. He began to feel a relief, the kind of relief one feels when everything seems like it will be OK.

As the flames grew closer to his heart the feeling vanished and was once again replaced by the guilt of his mistakes. His body was no longer present. Ruben was a lifeless soul floating where his body once existed, hanging on to his heart for dear life. One single lick of the fire flicked his

already fragile heart. It was all too much. His heart exploded, splitting into a million shards.

* * *

Ruben coughed and woke with a start. It shocked Leon, who hadn't believed he would wake up so soon. He'd received quite a blow to the head. Leon was also now fully aware of the strength of the veteran that was Ric. Ruben groaned and spluttered as he became fully conscious. Leon banged on the side of the ambulance between himself and the driver. He was surprised to see another man sitting in the cabin. It was this second occupant who responded to Leon's call and stepped back through to the rear of the vehicle.

The man, in his early fifties, leaned over Ruben. Leon just sat there, head in his hands.

"You're going to be OK," said the second man. "My name is John. I work for the hospital. We're going to take good care of you." Leon admired the fact that John seemed to harbour no

ill feelings towards Ruben. He wouldn't have blamed him even if he did but he admired him all the same.

John began to check various instruments from the medipanel looming over the bed. Most of the treatments were administered from there nowadays, however there was still some preliminary work that the paramedics preferred to do themselves. Preparing an IV was such a task. John was about six foot tall and wore the same blue uniform as his partner. They had been working together for about thirteen years and during that period had become very close friends.

“How's he doing back there?” asked the driver. He turned his head to ask the question, but the roads had become increasingly busy and he couldn't afford to look back any longer.

“Mac, he's gonna be just fine.” He afforded himself a little joke, “If you can keep us on the road that is.” Mac laughed. Being slightly younger than John he had complete faith in his partner. They'd been through some pretty rough patches together.

'Just who was this guy?' John thought. He certainly didn't seem like a G-TEP soldier. Mac had told him that they had been ordered to keep him under close guard at all times. Said he'd been told this dude was a real troublemaker.

Ruben still lay there, but now looked over at Leon. The mask on his face supplying oxygen was digging in to his chin. Leon was actually surprised that the mask had been used, especially considering Ruben's injury. It was then he noticed the cut out that John must have made. They had done their best to make Ruben as comfortable as possible.

Ruben's eyes locked onto Leon. He spoke softly at first, then becoming audible, "You." Leon looked up. "You were there weren't you?" he asked of the G-TEP agent.

Leon desperately wanted to say no. Unfortunately it wasn't in his nature to lie. It's what had gotten the lieutenant so angry only a few moments ago. He lifted his head and made eye contact with Ruben. John had finished attending to the medipanel and began to return to

his seat in the front. Before he did so, he placed his hand on Ruben's shoulder.

"I'm here if you need anything," whispered John to Ruben. "Just holler." Ruben gave a weak nod before redoubling his efforts on Leon.

"You were there, I saw you," came Ruben's next accusation. His hand almost pointing, but in actuality just extending a finger, not even in Leon's direction. The urge to confess was overwhelming and Leon could stand it no longer.

"Yes," he said. "I was there." Ruben nodded in acknowledgement. He felt better now that he knew where he stood with this stranger. He could sense that there was something this solemn figure wasn't telling him, but for now Ruben's energy levels wouldn't permit him to press the soldier further.

Leon looked at the doors to the outside. Oh how he so badly wanted to be out of here now. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, when Ruben had been unconscious. He once again put his head into his hands and could feel the tears welling up behind his eyes. He had seen how

upset Ruben had been at the death of his friends. His conscience kicked him in the gullet. Admitting to being there wasn't confessing. It was time to dig deep and grow a spine.

Leon began, "I..."

Ruben interrupted him before he could say anything further, "What's your name soldier?" he asked. Ruben felt compelled to talk to this man. Something inside him told him that he had something important to say.

"Leon," replied the man. "My name is Leon and," there was no stalling any further, "and I shot your friends." Ruben grimaced. He hadn't expected the something important to be so cutting. His mind was telling him to get up and punch this no good son of a gun in the face, but his body was telling him otherwise. His body was telling him that he barely had the strength to talk.

"Why?" asked Ruben. Unable to continue looking at the G-TEP scum before him, he turned his head. He had really hoped it had all been a dream. He had prayed so hard that it would all go

away, but nothing had worked. Had God deserted him? As Leon tried to find the courage to speak again, the ambulance slowed down to a crawl. The traffic lights had changed to a deep red and Mac obeyed without question. The ambulance tipped slightly as the brakes were released and the handbrake applied. Many of the constructs had fancy new ambulances with FeelDrive fitted. This one, however, was an old model.

Leon watched as some kids played merrily in the street, blissfully unaware of the cruel reality of the world around them. He remembered what it had been like as a child, spinning and jumping without a care in the world. No one to worry about, no responsibilities. Then the world had taken hold. It happened to everyone in one way or another.

“It was an accident,” said Leon. The words had just left his mouth without him even realising. He cursed his subconscious and felt the bitter urge to complement the statement with an explanation. “I mean, I was part of the task force, but I accidentally fired my weapon.”

He could hold on no longer. Leon fell to his knees and wept. "I'm sorry" he shouted out, "I'm so sorry" He sniffed long and hard, but the tears just kept coming. "I never meant to kill anyone." He couldn't even see any more, his eyes awash with salt water. "It was a mistake, I should never have joined. I never really wanted to." His breathing became uncontrollable and as the ambulance turned a particularly sharp corner, he was thrown against the side of the vehicle. John looked back into the rear, but Leon motioned for him to ignore the incident.

Ruben lay there, tears coming to his eyes. He gathered enough strength to drop his arm to his side. "Take my hand" he told the broken little man. Leon looked at him confused. Ruben nodded at him slowly. The soldier reached out and took hold of the hulks hand. His skin was so rough and rather sweaty, but Leon didn't mind. "Close your eyes," came the next whispered command. Leon obliged.

Ruben closed his eyes too and tightened the grip on Leon's hand. "Oh dear Lord in heaven,"

he began, “before you is a broken man. He is very sorry for what he done.” Leon's sobbing took full hold of him now and he started wailing in pain. His heart was aching. “Lord you can forgive him of this and all of his sins if he so wishes you to.” Leon's crying paused briefly as Ruben motioned for him to speak, but nothing came out. “Ya gotta ask him, if you want to be forgiven” said Ruben, and he gave Leon a smile.

“Lord, forgive me” sobbed Leon, “forgive me...oh please Lord forgive me.” He kept repeating the phrases over and over as Ruben pulled him close. The two of them locked together rocked as Leon sobbed inconsolably. The rocking hurt Ruben's head, but he didn't mind. This man had been placed in his ambulance for a reason, a reason only he could answer the call of. As the ambulance made its way through the streets, the two men sat there and talked until they could speak no more, brought together by the death of a titan, the death of Oken Brown.

15

An Unexpected Gift

Zane walked down the street towards the Zone. In some ways he rather regretted his rash acceptance of Jolie's offer to revisit the place. It was a beautiful day and he could have been outside doing anything. Instead he was going to be stuck in a disused train platform, looking at bloodstains and concrete for most of the morning. He had decided that the best way to approach this assignment was to actually begin writing it 'in the Zone'. He hoped it would give him the drive and inspiration to really get inside Oken's head space. After that he would retire to his room, where he would continue his efforts.

The boy lived in an apartment, a hotel really. His room was his only room, save that of a small bathroom at the rear of the place. It had become government practice to all but abolish foster care. It seemed to add too much of a drain on society; social service costs, psychiatric care, medical fees. It really wasn't worth the effort. Adoption was still available, but checks made against prospective parents were often poor. If a child was old enough to look after themselves, the government rented them a cheap apartment until they were the age of eighteen, when they would be expected to begin paying their own way. If they were under the age of 14, they were taken to one of many orphanages. If someone was willing to look after the child, it was classed as an adoption and the newly created family would be sent on their merry way.

Zane enjoyed living on his own. His time was his own, his space was his own. Sure it got lonely sometimes, but it allowed him plenty of time to study, plenty of time to make his parents proud. Though he wasn't of religious background, Zane

believed in heaven. It was that belief that kept him going, that his parents were somehow in a better place, looking down on him constantly. Everything he did was for them, to please them, to win their approval.

He kicked an empty can as he continued on the road. He pulled out the piece of paper Jolie had given him and turned it over a few times before beginning to flick it with his right hand. Rhythmically, he started humming along to 'Koken's – You ain't seen me till I'm Dead' an odd track about life as a zombie. As he got more into the track he started shifting his shoulders from side to side. His mouth hung open in a kind of gormless gaze and he puh'd the rest of the song, his gaze never leaving the folded piece of paper. He'd have to unfold it pretty soon he thought.

Bump. He hit something soft. He'd been concentrating on the paper for so long he hadn't realised that he'd still been walking and had actually crossed two roads in the meantime. The drivers of the cars had shouted at him, presuming he was using a mindman; the most advanced of

all personal media devices. In truth he'd just been stuck in his own mind; no enhancement necessary.

Zane looked up and was taken aback by the sheer brilliance of her blonde hair. The denim skirt had been chosen again today but Zane wasn't counting. His glance continued upwards till his eyes met hers. He stood there frozen, as if caught in her gaze, unable to talk, walk, or even squawk. Finally he recovered enough to say something. Only it wasn't a word, more like a gasp.

"An apology would be fine," she said. His mind raced, 'an apology? What for?' Then he remembered that he had been so intent on his piece of paper that he'd walked straight into her. She could see that he was struggling to compose himself. To make his humiliation complete, she gently took hold of his lower jaw and mockingly made him speak. "I'm so sorry Kiele." He batted her hand away before trying to redeem himself.

"I didn't know you were coming today," he ventured. Had she come because of the assignment, or because of him. Why did his brain

keep going down these paths? He didn't care if she liked him or not, because he wanted nothing more from her than help finding the address Jolie had given him. She leant against one of the many street lamps and as the wind dusted her hair she popped a lollipop back into her mouth.

Taking a quick suck on the sweet strawberry flavour she removed the lollipop and added "So if I were someone else, you would have apologised?" Zane was trapped. Damn her, she'd got him again with her quicker thinking, or maybe it was just because Zane was currently incapacitated by her beauty. This blonde was definitely not stupid. She knew exactly what she was doing. She threw him a line as the silence was killing her,

"I wasn't going to come. But when my dad heard there was an extra session and that some loner idiot was going, he decided I should go too."

Though she said it in a tone that would have indicated resentment, Zane felt that she actually didn't have a problem being there. True, it

probably wasn't her first pick of things to do on a Saturday, but she didn't seem to be acting as hostile as she could have been. Zane managed a fairly unimpressive, 'Oh', before holding out the piece of paper to Kiele. He hadn't even unfolded it yet, but in his mind he assumed Jolie would have given it to Kiele had she known she would be joining him.

Kiele silently unfolded the piece of paper. A car zoomed past them at breakneck speed, followed shortly afterwards by a police car. In the distance Zane could see them darting in and out of pedestrians and other vehicles before turning a corner about half a mile away and disappearing from sight. The siren had shocked Zane and re-engaged his brain. Kiele in contrast hadn't even really noticed the chase as it had zoomed past her body.

The girl read the paper quickly and folded it back up again. She handed it back to Zane and he quickly pocketed it, pleased that she had acknowledged that he was the one in charge. Deep down, both of them knew Kiele was in

charge, but they both seemed to prefer it this way. “I think we need to go this way,” she said, pointing to a small alleyway.

Zane looked at her dainty finger, aiming at some nondescript passage way. It seemed so smooth. There were no lumps or bumps, not that people usually had lumps and bumps on their fingers. Hers were just perfect. Her veins, almost invisible, left slight raised tunnels across the back of her hand.

“Really?” he questioned. “You want us to go this way?” Zane was teasing her now. He looked up and down the alleyway. “I'm not sure at all,” he said and then raising a hand, whispered in her ear, “I've heard it's haunted.”

She tipped her head to one side, completely unimpressed by his sarcasm. “You're such an ass” she said as she flicked her head to the side causing her hair to slap Zane in the face. She began to walk towards the haunted passage. 'Haunted indeed' she thought. Whoever heard of such nonsense in their lives. The distance between them increased. Zane was still standing

there. Her hair had smelt so damn good. A part of him wanted to ask her about her brand of conditioner and shampoo, but no self respecting man would've done so. Damn his little brain why did it keep getting stuck in loops involving Kiele.

Zane was still mesmerised when a small rock hit him in the forehead. He yelped in pain and looked up to see Kiele waiting for him. He had no hard evidence that she had thrown the rock, but in all seriousness, there was no one else around. A passer-by who had seen Kiele throw the stone commented on the situation and then walked between the couple, "That's a real love/hate relationship ya got there."

Zane thought long and hard. Really? Did she actually like him? His subconsciousness stepped in. 'Zane my boy, do stop thinking about this girl and get on with things.' He walked towards her and the two of them continued down to the address which was written on the paper.

As they made their way down the street the door they were heading for became oddly apparent. It was the only one in the small row of

houses that had a different coloured door. The houses were all two story and terraced. There must have been around twenty houses in the same run, on both sides of the road. There was little traffic here and around ten to fifteen children were playing in the street. When the police car had rushed past, all the parents had poked their heads out of the windows and called them inside. Now the drama was over, the little animals were once again let out of their cages, their parents glad of the rest.

Each house had a tiny garden, not more than thirty square foot or so. Some had decided to pave the area, whilst others had replaced the original paving, from when the houses were first built, and had opted to replace it with small hydroponics labs. In these they grew vegetables and herbs as it was far cheaper than buying them in the shops and plus the fact, you could be fairly certain of the source. There had been instances of thugs injecting harmful substances into the bays, or even replacing the plants with drugs.

It wasn't uncommon for dealers to find an unsuspecting elderly lady, break into her hydroponics bay, and have her cultivate and tend to their marijuana plants. One lady had even caught a guy admiring her large stash of drugs. Little did she know that these plants were actually illegal substances. She also had no idea that the delightful young gentleman she was speaking to, was the one who had switched her prize young saplings for the naughty plants.

Each roof was the same grey colour, coated in solar panels. The panels had been coated with a special laminate to ensure minimal reflection of sunlight. In the early twenty first century, the various governments of the world had begun to fit solar panels to houses in an effort to rely less on fossil fuels. As the number of them increased a very specific problem had been introduced. Houses higher up on hills would reflect sunlight down onto roads in valleys, creating a serious driving hazard. The accident rate increased dramatically until one manufacturer decided to

incorporate a special anti-glare laminate into their designs to mitigate the issue.

The house they were headed for had no hydroponics bay, nor grass, nor concrete. Outside this house was rubble. Old bricks, some metal rods and a vast array of different coloured tarpaulin. The garden, if it could be called such a thing, like every other house was fenced off with the same wooden fencing. Two posts defined the three sides of the garden at the corners. Most of the fences were painted black. They were constructed of the typical vertical panels with pointed tops, alternating with white space to give at least some light into the garden. The fence posts of this particular house had been eaten away by some kind of insect. The tops of them were degraded in such a way that it made it look like a miniature landscape, raised high on a stalk.

Kiele and Zane reached the house and Zane gestured for the girl to go first. It wasn't as if he was scared, she just seemed to take pleasure in taking the lead. She walked up the two steps to the front door and looked to her left. 'Just who

lived here?' she thought. The front door was roughly in the centre of the garden as was the same with all the houses. She looked back up at the door and found an old fashioned knocker. It was a rare sight to see one of these around, especially in these parts of town.

She took a few seconds to study the device. A jaguar's head and neck formed the base of the design, with the knocker being hinged at the far end of the neck. It looked like it was made out of brass, but Kiele wasn't sure. The eyes had been garnished with a single gem each, obviously not precious enough to be real stones, though Kiele could see some knife marks where eager thieves had tried to make themselves a quick bob or two.

"You pull it back, and then hit it against the door," Zane ventured. He enjoyed ribbing her. She breathed in deeply and closed her eyes, waiting for the annoyance to pass. Who was she kidding, the 'annoyance' wasn't going anywhere. She pulled back the jaguars head. It was heavier than she had imagined and with definite purpose she thrust the head against the brass plate. On the

second knock, she noticed the pattern of previous knockings on the plate behind the head. It had evidently been there for a great number of years. The look of the houses suggested it may have been removed from a previous home, before being added to this one. All the other houses had thumb-plates, but some people just loved to be different.

The door shook slightly with the weight of the jaguars head ploughing into it and the two of them waited for the jaguars call to arouse the occupant of the establishment. A curtain to the right fluttered as the owner checked to see who was knocking. After a few moments, the door was slowly opened and caught by a glittering sliver chain. What was it with the old technology? thought Zane. A withered face peered round the door. The face belonged to an elderly lady, not too dissimilar from an auntie Zane had once visited. She squinted before looking them up and down.

“You the two young oiks that Jolie sent?” she asked in a raspy voice. She had seemed

approachable, even frail before she had opened her mouth. Zane had put her age at around nine thousand mark, Kiele, a little more understanding, at around ninety. Her face was wrinkled and her stance hunched.

“We are two of her students, yes.” came Kiele's polite reply. Zane grinned a big beaming smile in the direction of the old lady. People had often told him he had a look that could melt anyone's heart.

“What are you grinning about, wise ass?” she barked at Zane. Whoever had commented on his smile had been lying. He obviously hadn't melted the old lady's heart and the jury was still out on Kiele's. Zane pulled his neck in and managed a brief little shake of his noggin. The old lady closed the door to, and the students could hear the sound of cursing and a chain rattling. She was quite probably having difficulty opening the door.

“Would you like a hand?” Zane offered. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He was an A grade student, but even he had forgotten that he would

need to be inside first in order to be able to help her.

“Oh thank you sweetheart,” she hollered from inside. Zane and Kiele were both pleasantly surprised until she finished her sentence. “Why don't you just pick up one of those bricks from the front lawn and break one of my bloody windows, then you may be able to help out?” Though the old lady was quite sure that Zane had enough intelligence not to even entertain the idea, she still found it necessary to add, “Touch the bricks and I'll pop a pellet in your behind.” 'A gun carrying old coot,' Zane thought, 'great.'

Eventually the door opened fully and the old lady waved them both in, stopping only to place a key on a small vintage table in the hallway. As she tottered off down towards what Kiele assumed was the kitchen, she shouted out, “Would either of you two like a good old cup of real tea?”

Zane began to answer no, but Kiele beat him to it. “Oh that would be lovely,” she said. For

someone who may have had an interest in him, she sure enjoyed torturing him.

“Oh gee, thanks Kiele, how will I ever repay you?” he mocked.

“I’ll be back in a jiffy,” the old lady called, “do make yourselves at home.

The two of them walked into what must have been the old lady's living room. It was so vastly different to the outside of the house that Zane wondered if he'd been teleported somewhere else. The room was square, about twelve foot in each direction, with a single door leading into it. The room was adorned with the same whitewashed furniture that Zane had back at his hotel room. It wasn't the most expensive furniture in the world, but it certainly wasn't the cheapest either.

Atop each item in the room were various trinkets, most sealed away in tiny display cases. As Zane got closer he could see that almost all of them were either clocks or watches of some kind. He bent down to take a closer look at one. Not being in anyway informed about the vintage timepiece scene he had no idea it was a 2014

Rumchum Exo 4, with the rotating bezel. Only 14 had ever been made. This was the last surviving specimen, and to a collector, worth over \$12,000. He extended an arm gingerly to rotate the case to get a better look.

“Look with your eyes lad, not with your hands,” reeled off the old lady. Kiele tittered. It really wasn't turning into Zane's day. The old dear had just appeared at the door with three cups of tea on a tray. She set it down on a whitewashed coffee table in the middle of the room. The tray seemed ancient, but then, apart from the furniture, everything in the house was; a real testimony to days gone by. Everyone had, of course, seen items like this before but it was seeing them all together that was staggering. Kiele supposed it was the most beautiful room she had ever seen. Much more beautiful than her own house, her dad leaving tools and junk everywhere.

The three of them sat down in silence. It was somewhat awkward but then both the students

were used to moments like this. Kiele decided to break the ice.

“Excuse me ma'am, but we don't even know your name.” It was a statement, not a question. If she chose to take it as a question then she could, if she chose to acknowledge it as the true and leave it at that, then that was OK too. Zane's ears pricked up at this moment. He had been busy studying another of the ancient timepieces in the room, but he found himself wanting to know more about this strange old lady.

“You can call me Kaitlin,” she said, offering nothing more than a token. It could have been her real name Kiele thought, but it most likely wasn't. Zane went back to studying the watch. He'd been told to look with his eyes, not with his hands so now, instinctively as he arose from the chair to gain a closer look at this particular time piece, he put his hands behind his back, one hand gripping tightly on the others wrist.

“Jolie took you down to the platform yesterday didn't she?” asked Kaitlin.

“Yes” responded Zane simply, before adding, “She’s given us this awesome assignment on Oken Brown. Have you heard of him?” It wasn’t a stupid question, but Zane figured that she must know something about the history of the platform.

“I have heard of him, yes” she said. “I even knew him once.” Her eyes turned to sadness before looking out of the window. They glazed over, with all the indications of someone recalling a very precious memory. “But that was back when he was a little boy. We had some fun together.” She smiled and turned back to her guests.

“You look incredibly familiar young lady,” Kaitlin said. “Have we met before?” Kiele looked across at Zane who gave her a weird confused face. The young girl shook her head.

They sat there for a few more minutes, each party not wanting to disturb the others thoughts. Zane had a million questions for Kaitlin, but decided out of respect to keep his mouth shut. She shouldn’t have to listen to his mindless banter, plus if she only knew him as a boy, it was

unlikely that she could tell him anything too interesting. Kiele too had questions, but of a different nature. She was more interested in the origins of her fascinations with clocks and watches. Kaitlin on the other hand, was just enjoying the company. It wasn't often that she got visitors now. She was too old.

Kaitlin had been young too once; full of the joys of childhood. How she wished she could bring back some of that feeling now. She'd had her hip replaced a few years back. It hadn't gone as well as she'd hoped. The new surgical methods seemed to disagree with her old body. 'Leave them for the youngsters,' she had thought.

Three years later and she was still struggling to get up and down the stairs. How she wished for a helper, but the government would never send one. No, she would have to rely on help from neighbours and friends, but with a garden like that, no one ever came near her house. Even the retro window cleaners skipped her place, unable to use their ladders and not thinking it profitable to use the d-scaff on such a small

house. Truth is, she would have paid them in gold, quite literally.

The three of them had all nearly finished their tea and Kaitlin supposed it was nearing time for them to leave. Lately, she found it so hard to keep a conversation going. Her mind seemed to run in its own circles, musing on the past, wishing she'd made changes, praying she could make a difference some day. She was caught in a loop of dismay over her past actions. She wasn't happy with many of the choices she'd made but after talking to some of her friends, it seemed many of them weren't either.

"I need to find the key," she announced finally. "Can't get in without a key." As she tried several times to get up unsuccessfully Zane moved over to her and offered a hand. She smiled at him and grasped hold of his arm. He wasn't a bad lad after all. She walked slowly over to a chest of drawers and began systematically opening each one and rummaging through it. Kiele and Zane both thought it a little odd that she had to 'find the key' when she'd obviously given it

to Jolie the other day. Maybe she was losing her memory.

“Ahh.....found it,” she said triumphantly. Zane had returned to studying the watch. It was an older model than the rest, mostly black, with hints of grey, it looked new, yet old at the same time. A chronograph, it had one main dial, with three smaller ones round the outside. It looked beautifully made. The strap was a thick black leather, which seemed to offset the black of the bezel even more perfectly.

Zane looked up at Kaitlin and she made her way over to him. Zane was a little apprehensive. Was he about to get another telling off? Or was she actually going to hit him now?

“You like that one the best?” she asked.

“Yes ma'am” he replied. He looked at it some more before his gaze was broken by Kaitlin removing the display case from his field of view. She reached inside and took out the watch. Turning it over a few times in her hand, she appeared to be deep in thought. Then she then looked up at Zane.

“Put out your left hand,” she commanded. Zane obliged and the old lady placed the watch on his wrist, turning it over to do up the buckle. It seemed weird that she had presented trouble opening the door, but seemed to have no difficulty in doing up a small watch buckle. On second thoughts, with this many watches, she must have found a method that just worked for her.

“There you go,” she said, “take it.” Zane's eyes widened.

“Oh no, I couldn't” He meant it too. These watches and clocks seemed to be her life. It would have felt like he was taking a part of her away with him. Maybe that's what she wanted.

“All I ask in return is that whenever you tell the time, you think of me.”

As if by magic her mood changed, and she was once again tottering off towards the front door to let them out. Kiele stood to her feet before mouthing the words 'say thank you' to her partner.

“Thanks” managed Zane. He was in shock.

As the two students made it to the door, Kaitlin was waiting for them, key in hand. She gave it over to Kiele, naturally. Zane wasn't insulted. As the two of them walked over the threshold to the warm day outside, Kaitlin cheered, "Now, you two have a lovely day together. Just post the key through the letterbox when you're done. I'm going to have a sleep now."

Kiele smiled and nodded before uttering a thank you of her own. Zane raised his hand in a wave and they both began walking away. They were not ten feet from the door, when the cry came, "and no drunken naked parties, I know what kids are like these days." Before either of them could reply, the door was slammed shut and they were once again alone together.

16

Defence Mechanism

“I still can't believe she just gave it to me,” exclaimed Zane in excitement. He'd been banging on about the watch for what seemed liked an age, even though it had only been five minutes in actuality.

“I know Zane, I was there.” She wasn't really angry with him, she just really didn't want to hear about that damned watch again.

“Sorry,” he offered. They reached to entrance to the Zone. The highly secretive hideout was almost unnoticeable on the street. There was no singular point anyone could put their finger on, the door just seemed a little off. People probably passed it on a daily basis, never once giving it

another thought. The paint was faded and the words, 'Best Time Ever', were just faintly visible beneath the whitewashed surface. It had clearly rained the day they had painted this door as the whitewash had run and was exceedingly patchy in several places.

The padlock, for which the key mated, was rusted and worn. It still held strong though, and Zane gave it a sharp little tug, rattling the lock and the door. Kiele stepped forwards and placed the key into the lock. It twisted free as if brand new and she wound the cylinder of the padlock through the holes of the brackets on the door.

They both stepped through the door simultaneously, but it was Zane who found the light switch behind some old mop handles on the right. Turning it on, the crimson glow of the mop heads became abundantly clear. Zane wondered just how many people were a part of those mops, they had clearly been used for sweeping and soaking up blood and guts. He had to stop thinking about that now, else his stomach wouldn't allow him to go much further.

Unsurprisingly the layout of the room hadn't changed since yesterday. The door to the right still led to the control room, whilst the door ahead of them was the vault door to the location's crown jewels. The smell of death still lingered in the air like an unwanted fragrance. Though the doors had been opened only yesterday, it seemed as if the platform itself emitted its own odour as a testament to the events which had unfolded within its four walls.

A rat ran past the control room door, making Kiele shriek. It was true that now it was just them, the whole place did seem a lot scarier. Undeterred they continued forward, pushing the vault door open and heading for the spiral staircase. Ironically enough in the Zone, the stage was actually the lowest point of the whole building. The layout of the train tracks, still faintly present, had been there for years. The ground which would usually have held up hundreds of busy passengers, had been lowered to meet the level of the tracks. The owner had had so many complaints about people falling off the

back of the platform that in the end he had decided just to do away with it altogether.

This time it was Kiele who went first. She gingerly made her way down the short spiral staircase and exited once again on the stage below. She walked into the centre of the stage which was actually fairly well lit now. The lights streamed down upon her and she felt for a second, as if she was playing a part in some musical. She did a quick little tap jump. As her feet landed back down it made a thunderous raw, which echoed around the platform far less than it should have done.

“I was expecting that to be a lot louder,” she said to Zane.

He looked up and down the walls before exclaiming, “either they coated the walls with some special sound absorption material, or there's an active filter still running.” His knowledge of acoustics was pretty good. “They'd have to do something, else the music would have sounded awful.” He had a point, and Kiele was briefly impressed by the boys statement.

“It's kind of amazing how they managed to last so long down here without anyone knowing,” she said. Zane nodded. Though initially she had been less than impressed at Jolie's assignment, she had to admit that now she'd gotten into it, it wasn't all that bad. “How do you think he lost?” she asked. The tapes for that particular fight had been lost and details from eye witnesses who were interviewed by the G-TEP forces were sketchy at best. It didn't matter, they were all dead now. She continued, “I mean, he had a weapon of unimaginable power. How could he possibly have lost?”

Zane had been asking himself the same question for many hours now. It had been claimed that he had simply been bettered by his opponent. How could that have been? Did his blade malfunction? Did he refuse to end the fight? It didn't make sense.

“Maybe he just grew tired of it all?” conjectured Zane. It wasn't something that Kiele had expected him to say. For the past forty eight hours, Zane had displayed nothing but the utmost

respect for Oken, now he found himself wavering. He was upset. Overcome with emotion, yet he couldn't understand why. Oken should still have been alive. It hadn't been his time to go. Why? Why??!!

“I guess something could have happened to break his blade,” she offered and to be honest to both of them it seemed the most likely solution. Zane hadn't noticed but his hands had turned into tight fists and he was staring at the ground. Kiele was looking back at him. She'd offered the cause of death to try to calm him down. He seemed to be taking it pretty hard. In point of fact, it was Oken's sheer determination to create something against all the odds which Zane admired.

The two of them stood there in silence a little longer until Zane broke the stillness by saying, “One day I'll be like Oken.” Kiele was a little taken aback. Did he mean he wanted to kill people? Suddenly she got quite frightened, had she walked into a trap. There was no one else around, and the thick heavy vault door would mask any screaming that she attempted.

Suddenly the idea of going on this trip seemed not to have been so good, however her father had been exceedingly insistent.

“You mean you want to kill lots of people for no reason?” she'd said it before she could stop herself. It was make or break time. Either he would offer up a reasonable explanation, or he'd turn to her nod his head and exclaim something like, 'and I want to start with YOU!!'

Zane's voice broke her train of thought. It wasn't at all what she had expected, slow soft and with a hint of sadness.

“I want to be as knowledgeable as Oken. Though illegal, he accomplished something amazing.” Kiele wasn't following. “Think about it Kiele. The governments were so confident that no one would be able to piece everything together, that books on temporal mechanics were still allowed in libraries.” She continued listening, but started to walk around the room. Zane continued, “This man taught himself everything he knew, he researched everything himself and created this weapon.” He found

himself gesturing the giving of a weapon, most likely a long ninja blade to an imaginary recruit. Had Kiele been closer to him, he would have probably have 'given' it to her instead.

Kiele finally began to understand where he was coming from. He wasn't a psychopath, he was a driven man. Even at this early age, Zane was driven by some force to do well. To break all the boundaries. "Do your parents encourage you much?" she asked.

"My parents are dead," he replied bluntly. "Both of them killed in an accident." She gasped slightly louder than she had wanted to, possibly as a result of the acoustics of the room.

"I'm OK Kiele, I've been living in a g-tel for a while now." The term g-tel referred to the government run hotels, one of which Zane lived in. Kiele was beginning to see a whole new side to Zane.

At first he'd seemed academic, but cocky. A product of parents with drive, but no vision. He'd seemed like the kind of guy that new he would get what he wanted through good looks or money,

but still had the brains to back it up. Then he'd seemed quite scary, pushed to the brink of explosion by overbearing parents that forced him to study 24x7.

Now she saw him for who he really was, a lonely soul, pushing to always better himself to satisfy the parents that he kept within his heart. The more she thought about it, the more beautiful it seemed. The memory of his parents was kept alive by striving to do better in everything he did. Though they could never actually praise him for his work, Zane himself knew when they would approve and when they would disapprove.

“Do you miss them?” she asked. What a stupid question, of course he missed them. She berated herself for asking. Yet Zane unreservedly answered her query.

“Sometimes.” He looked up to an imaginary sky. “Sometimes I like to think of them looking down on me, seeing everything I say and do. Like gods.” He smiled up at the heavens. “They give me the power to continue,” he said quietly, “everyday, they give me the strength to go on.

“I lost my mum before I was even born,” said Kiele. “I was an In Vitro child.” Zane sensed a feeling of embarrassment in her voice. “My mother couldn't have children apparently, so my dad decided to have me grown in a lab.”

She seemed to be distressed by this and so suddenly her temper grew, intensifying more and more each second. “Why couldn't he have been content with his memories,” she shouted. “I never wanted to be this....this...freak!” The tears were genuine. She had lost much more control than she should have. Her eyes welling up once more, Zane walk towards her and comforted her as best he could.

“I don't think you're a freak Kiele,” he said gently. “In fact I think you're a pretty amazing person.” She looked up at him as he placed his hands on her biceps. Those tiny biceps, he thought, hardly even enough there to lift a banana. Kiele wasn't super thin, but she was underweight. Her father wouldn't let her eat much, citing a multitude of reasons, from weight gain to money, to the fact that she would just turn

out plain ugly. That would never do he had told her.

“You must be the only one,” she said. “My father hates me. All day long I just have to do his bidding.” She'd said enough. She pushed his arms away and turned around. Her eyes were hurriedly dried and she recomposed herself. When she spoke again, her voice was completely different. It seemed totally unnatural and somewhat off-putting to Zane. It seemed to be something that she had had a fair amount of practise in, to be able to turn her emotions off just like that.

“So did you want to look at anything in particular?” came the dry unwavering voice of this rock solid young lady. Zane, still slightly taken aback, attempted to break her shell again.

“You can talk to me you know.”

“About what,” she said, “you know Zane it's pretty difficult to talk to someone when there's nothing to talk about.”

He said nothing and noted to himself that this was a subject to steer clear of in the future. She

was scared of her father, that much was sure, but just what had he asked her to do? It was at that moment that Zane decided he wanted to protect Kiele, with his life if he had to. Unknowingly he had giving his heart to her. He had totally fallen in love. His brain of course hid the emotion. It was gentlemanly, nay noble, to protect a damsel in distress. The camouflage was adequate and Zane could continue his exploration of Oken's lair without too much more thought.

The two of them stood in emotional disarray, each unsure of the others state of mind. It was a kind of a stalemate but at the same time, a pleasant stalemate. Neither of them wanting to break the silence, they both walked around avoiding each other for at least two minutes before it hit Zane first. He couldn't take it any more.

"I'm sorry Kiele," he said. "I never meant to pry, or to hurt you." Even though his mind had told him to drop it, he just had to say something else. He feared the worst as she turned round to face him, the lighting appeared different to

before. Though bright, it had a definite softness to it. She made definite eye contact with him.

“It's OK.”

As the two of them stood there a little longer an unfamiliar sound reached their ears, first Zane's and then Kiele's. It wasn't that the sound itself was unfamiliar, but the context. Here they were in a disused platform that was used to host underground fighting bouts. The noise got louder very quickly. Kiele looked worried, but Zane, quick to display his affection shouted out. It's probably just a train going down one of the other tunnels.

Instinctively he looked down at his wrist. He never usually had a watch to look at. Today was different and he actually felt quite proud. Why he was looking down at his watch was another question. It wasn't as if he had memorised the timetables. He watched the seconds tick by 10:42:58, 10:42:59. As the clock hit the minute an almighty explosion spewed forth from the wall behind them. With every ounce of strength Zane threw himself at Kiele and pushed her clear.

Rocks and debris flew through the air, dancing and play fighting with each other all the way. Some were large and heavy, pushing the others out of the way with minimal effort, others less so, daintily showering the larger ones with tiny pitter patters. Ultimately though, they all had one general direction, and that was towards Zane.

Kiele tumbled to the floor, scraping her legs and arms as she did so, her blood augmenting the stains already left by the victims of the Zone. Her bones were almost to the point of breaking as she hit the cold hard floor beneath her. She managed to capture a glimpse of Zane through the messy air and tried in desperation to call out to him, something, anything. In the end a jumbled mess of vocal grunts was all she could muster, but it didn't matter, he wouldn't have been able to hear her anyway.

Rolling on to her side, she caught site of his figure as it became airborne from the blast of pressure emanating from the broken wall. The wall was cracked in so many places that is was a wonder any of it was still remaining. Kiele could

see Zane's body as it headed towards a pillar, the motion appeared to slow down as she continued watching.

Had she been at home watching it in a movie, she would be cringing and wincing right now, chewing on popcorn. His new watch flashed a beam of light across her eyes, with it's Neo-tougheline coating, it was likely to exit the incident relatively unscathed. Her only expression currently was one of horror and shock as the body of a young man hit the pillar and was peppered with debris.

Still caught in the momentum she was unable to prevent her head slamming into the concrete below her. The pain was almost unbearable and for a second she was sure she was dead. Instead of dying her brain decided to take time out, and she blacked out. As she closed her eyes she was instantly aware of a train hanging through the hole, broken and wrecked, in a sea of rubble. Only a glimmer of light still breaking through her eyelids, she tried to turn her head to see what had happened to her saviour.

Her eyes closed and darkness ensued. Damn her father.

17

Visitors

The ambulance was heading towards the hospital really fast now, zipping through the traffic like it were hot butter. The rhythmic beeping of the monitor made her nervous. She was still shaking as she pulled out her phone. One of the paramedics turned round and noticed her using it. “Ma'am please,” he said, “not in here. It can have adverse effects on the equipment.” It didn't even matter, she couldn't have worked the buttons even if she had wanted to. She just sat there. A part of her wanting to hold his hand, part of her wanting to climb out. She knew what she had to do but the situation didn't make it easy. She felt sick to the stomach.

The monitor continued beeping slowly, tortuously. Kiele had always hated those things. It always seemed like a constant waiting game. Like measuring whether a person lived or died by the distance of the gaps between the beeps. The silence was agonising. Beep.....Beep.....Beep. In this case the silence wasn't really silence at all. It was filled with the noise of the engine, the radio chatter, clanking of various items in cupboards which adorned the ambulance. In fact, now that she came to think about it, she had to strain to hear the beeps clearly.

She looked at the young man laying motionless on the gurney. He looked so peaceful, yet Kiele couldn't imagine the amount of pain his body must be in. The drugs appeared to be doing their job well. He was stable, the beeps had just the right amount of silence between them. There was a fair amount of blood on his clothes. The focus of her mind shifted. Why had he done that? Why had he saved her? She wasn't worth saving. Not after what she had done.

One of the paramedics looked back at her. “You doin’ OK?” he asked. Of course he knew the real answer, but he just wanted to hear her speak. She nodded to him and let out a small but audible ‘yes’. The radio chattered and interrupted their brief conversation.

“Accident on 6th avenue, you’ll have to go around it Jim.” Jim acknowledged the information and instructed the driver to turn left at the next available opportunity. ‘Just their luck’, thought Kiele. It was at this moment that the constant beeping suddenly became less constant. The bright trace of the monitor was bobbing up and down fast now. Kiele shouted to Jim. It was a single word, but one which Jim knew only too well. ‘Help’.

With blistering speed, Jim was in the back of the vehicle. It had seemed almost as if a monkey had swung back there. As the ambulance turned corners sharply, Jim was holding on to whatever he could find as he scrambled to obtain the correct gear to try resuscitating Zane. It was only now that Kiele realised how lucky she had been.

A slight bump to the head which had knocked her out was nothing compared to the trauma of Zane's injuries.

Jim grabbed the defib kit from one of the cupboards and ripped apart Zane's shirt. He had been wearing a simple cotton design, with bright embossing down one side. It wasn't his favourite but then, he hadn't expected to be joined by company. He also hadn't expected to be in the back of an ambulance receiving serious medical attention. Jim twisted apart the two magnetically held pieces of the defib kit. Like most things these days they were as small as possible. Joined by a small thread of retractable cable, Jim pulled them further apart until he could reach the parts of Zane's chest he needed.

Kiele was beginning to get worried now. What if he didn't make it? What if he died saving her? Why was her father so insistent on her meeting him? Jim shouted 'clear', even though there was no one around to stand clear apart from himself. Truth be told it was probably either protocol or force of habit. The jolt from the DFK

was enough to send Zane's body a good half foot into the air. Still the monitor let out a single beep as the ambulance literally raced against time to deliver Zane into more expert hands.

Kiele started to cry. She didn't know quite why. The emotions had gotten too much for her. She was being pulled in two directions at once. It wasn't fair. The tears started running down her cheeks leaving two parallel wet lines down her face. When the tears reached the edge of her chin, they left her skin and landed on her lap, dampening the material.

"Clear," shouted Jim as he tried again. Still nothing. "Damn it Marty, we need to get him there now." Marty put his foot down a little harder on the accelerator and the ambulance lurched forward. The siren blaring outside made it almost impossible to hear what was going on inside. Kiele couldn't even remember it being switched on, yet there it was screaming louder than ever. The monitor too continued to scream.

"Don't go now," Kiele started whispering, "Please don't go now." She repeated her phrase

over and over. It became a chant and through tearful eyes she reached out to grab onto his hand. She wasn't more than a foot away when the word 'clear' brought her back to her senses. She withdrew her hand and made it into a tight fist. The tears started streaming again, the monitor still sang and the siren wailed in chorus.

* * *

He awoke in a very clean room. The curtains seemed to be the only thing that wasn't white. Instead they were a pale shade of grey. He tried to sit up, but couldn't find the energy. It felt like someone was sitting on his chest. Why couldn't he move? Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted someone walking past a window of the room he was in. Where was he? More to the point, where was Kiele?

The curtains fluttered in the breeze and the person now identified as a woman in a nurse's uniform walked on by without looking into the room. He tried desperately to shout out but he

couldn't seem to make any sound. What was wrong with him?

A vase was sitting on the table to his left, once again white in colour, but filled with a beautiful array of flowers. Some red, some blue, some yellow, they reflected the light from the overhead strips to decorate the walls with a subtle hint of colour. The water in the vase was almost gone now, sucked up by the hungry plants. The glass was semi transparent with a geometric motif. Someone had been a little careless in watering the flowers last time as a few drops of water could be seen sitting on the top of the surface, begging to be absorbed by the atmosphere.

Zane looked down at his hands. There were still there. His legs also. That was a relief. The bed he was laying on was composed primarily of polycarbonate with a few pieces of metal thrown in for good measure. The mattress was less than comfortable, but perfectly adequate for his needs. Come to think of it, what were his needs? Why was he here? Zane remembered the accident with all the detail of a child's first crayon drawing. He

remembered a train. That's it there was a train.....some graffiti....and a loud noise.....and Kiele. Where was Kiele?

Again he tried to call out and this time made a real noise. It was a muffled shout, the kind a person makes when having a nightmare when they are sound asleep. The room seemed so quiet and cold. He just wished there was someone else there. A doctor walked by the window, but again Zane was unable to get his attention. The worst part was that his foot had started to itch and he had no idea how he was going to get to it.

A nurse entered the room and seeing Zane awake quickly exited the room again before Zane could grab her attention. She had faintly reminded him of Kiele. Same build, but not as beautiful. When she returned, doctor in tow, Zane was ready. He tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come out. Just grunts and squeaks. The doctor could obviously sense the frustration on his face, the nurse too, as she moved closer, put a hand on his shoulder and told him it would be all right.

Zane managed to move his arms and with his left he grabbed the doctor's bicep and pulled him close. He tried just to utter one word, 'Kiele'. He desperately wanted to hear she was OK. The doctor almost seemed to know what he was trying to say as he turned to the nurse and muttered something about him 'doing it again'. It was then Zane saw the pad and paper on his left on the table. He reached out and managed to grab both, knocking a box of tissues onto the floor as he did so.

The pad, a cheap one from the hospital shop, seemed heavy in his hands. He rested it on his legs, which were stretched out in front of him and held the pen, crayon style. He traced the words of his protectee, K..I..E..L..E. As soon as he finished he pointed to the word and widened his eyes before looking at the doctor. He managed to nod feverishly as if asking the question by nodding Morse code.

The doctor sighed. "We've explained this to you before Zane," he started, "and it pains me every time I have to break it to you." Zane

started to panic, what did he mean? His hands started involuntarily making fists and then relaxing several times per second. He was shaking a little. He lifted his finger and pointed once again at the word, the name of the girl he had suddenly felt so much for. The doctor was taking too long. What was going on? Where was Kiele?

“I regret to inform you, that Kiele never made it to the hospital alive. The ambulance that you were in crashed and she died at the scene.” Zane shook his head and started trying to speak once more. He started managing to say the word 'no'. His head still shaking, he tore the top piece of paper from the pad. The fibres released from the tearing settled gently on his bed. He very carefully wrote on the pad, C...H...E...C...K.....A...G...A...I...N.

The doctor's face was one of plain sadness and the nurse had turned away from Zane. Her hands now back by her side, she walked around to the other side of Zane and picked up the box of tissues, before taking one out and using it for

herself. He looked up at the doctor and pointed to his words once more. The man of medicine looked distraught. It seemed this poor lad was suffering from acute memory loss. This was the fourth time he had given him the news that the female he had been found with was in fact dead. It got harder and harder each time, but Zane was always so insistent, they could never calm him down before he asked the question.

“There is no point checking again,” he said bluntly. “She's gone.” A tear rolled down his cheek and at this point Zane seemed to recover some use of his speech.

“How....what.....happened?” he asked. The doctor, who was genuinely surprised to be hearing him speak for the first time pulled up a chair from across the room. This was the first time they had been able to talk since he had arrived.

“Some drunk driver in an ESUV pulled out in front of the ambulance. It hit it and crashed. I'm sorry Zane”

The cripple lay there completely dumbfounded. He had sworn to himself to protect her, with his entire being. Now she was dead. He had.....loved her. The words rang inside his head. He hadn't wanted to admit it before but now seemed like the only good time. He had loved her so dearly. Though they had only really known each other a short time, he had desperately wanted to get to know her better. Why was life so hard? Why didn't he have the power to save her? He was weak. A stupid weak cripple of a man.

Zane's anger grew. He thumped the bed, taking both the nurse and the doctor by surprise. He thumped again and again. The doctor tried in vain to restrain his arm, fearing the boy would do himself more harm than good. Zane shot him a death glance. 'Leave me alone,' he thought. He stopped thumping anyhow and just lay there.

After a few minutes the doctor asked him, "Do you feel up to a few visitors?" The boy sat there in silence, "I know we have some of your family here." Zane was confused, the only family

he knew of in the local area was one auntie, a sister of his mother, but she wouldn't have come to visit him, she hated him. According to her, he had caused his parents death. Zane's confusion was borne out on his face, but he nodded all the same.

The beeping monitor had increased its rhythm slightly in Zane's anger. The doctor arose from his chair, mutter something to the nurse and then left the room, mentioning something about going to get his visitors. Zane looked at the young nurse, the resemblance to Kiele was becoming more apparent now. She could have been her sister, still definitely not Kiele, but reminding him of her nonetheless. Poking at his memories, angering the remnants.

The nurse offered him some water which he was able to drink successfully, the cool liquid killing the flames in his throat. The water hadn't been sparkling, but the millions of tiny bubbles on the side of the glass had suggested so. He gave the glass back to the nurse who placed it on the white side cabinet.

Zane looked out towards the window. It was definitely starting to get dark now. The late evening sun streamed in through the window. Had he really been there all day? It had seemed like he had only just woken up, yet the doctor had alluded to the fact that he had been awake before, and heard the news about Kiele before. Not true. He would have remembered. Thinking back, he found it hard to recall the exact events of the accident. He remembered throwing himself at her. He also recalled having to fight the urge to hold on to her instead of pushing her away. That had been difficult. He would have been quite happy if he had died in her place. She deserved to live on. He had quite obviously failed in his task.

Three figures were walking down the corridor towards Zane's door now. He recognised one immediately, the doctor from before. The other two looked familiar. One was a man, tall and dressed in smart trousers and a shirt. His hair was black with hints of grey. The other, a woman, her dark brown hair bouncing around her shoulders.

The doctor seemed to be explaining something to them as they rounded the corner.

Zane couldn't see their faces until they appeared at the doorway, and when they did he lost all comprehension. Mum.....Dad.....how? It didn't make sense. They were dead. He couldn't understand. People who were supposed to be dead, now weren't and people who were supposed to be alive had died.

The woman, his mother, ran over to him and hugged him tightly. It didn't hurt as much as Zane had imagined it would. As she released him, his father did much the same, holding his son in love. They didn't speak yet, just looked at him. Their eyes looked happy thought Zane, as did their faces. They were pleased. Zane was happy. For a second he had forgotten all about Kiele. His parents were alive, and they were happy.

“We're so proud of you son,” said his father. Zane smiled. “You will do great things, but you must fight him first.” His face looked confused. Zane didn't understand. He looked at his mother,

who was standing beside her husband. “We love you,” she said. He turned to look at the nurse who was now sitting by his side. He had been unaware of the fact that she had also taken his hand into hers. As he looked closer she appeared to have changed a little. He peered at her, confused at what seemed to be taking place.

The nurse, who was now identical to Kiele looked up and smiled at him. Zane gasped and jolted in shock. She was alive. Kiele was alive. Tears were running down her cheeks but she was alive. Was that why they were proud of him? Had he actually saved her? Maybe they were playing a prank on him? That had to be it. She had been there all along, silly Kiele, always making jokes, always teasing him.

He looked back at where his parents were standing, but they appeared to have gone. Vanished into thin air. He blinked, but they were most definitely gone. It was then that he noticed the coffins raised up off the floor, two of them to be exact. In one lay his father, and in the other

his mother. Exactly as they had looked not a few minutes ago.

This wasn't real he finally concluded. No one could die and be placed in a coffin that quickly. Could they? But what had they meant when they had said he should fight him? He looked back at Kiele who was still holding his hand. It felt warm and oozed confidence. With her there, he could fight anyone, anything. He was strong. He could take it. His mind became confident. Bring it on.

As he turned back to see the coffins one more time, he noticed that the flowers in the vase had all died. It was more apparent to him than the fact that the whitewashed furniture was now blacker than the ace of spades, or that the sun had exploded in the sky, or that Kiele was now wearing an outfit fit for a funeral. The petals of the once vibrant flowers now lay strewn across the black surface. The coffins were no longer there, but a figure stood in their place. It was the doctor, no longer wearing a white coat, but now drenched in black.

He took a step towards Zane. "It's for your own good" he said, as he took a jet black pillow and placed it over Zane's face. At first it felt funny, like when Zane would play fight with friends when he was younger. It didn't feel at all like death creeping up on him. He started to get a little anxious, the doctor obviously wasn't playing games with him. This was serious. He was still holding onto Kiele's hand. The monitor in the room had started beeping incessantly and it was hurting his head.

He began to writhe in pain. The pillow was completely blocking his oxygen supply. His energy was zapped, but he could feel power flowing from his hand; from Kiele's hand. He grabbed it tighter, to ensure that he could make it out the other side, wherever that may be. The pillow was crushing now, and Zane could see nothing else but blackness. Suddenly there was a blinding pain through his heart.

He screamed out. This was hell. Hell in a dream. Maybe it wasn't a dream so much any more. The beeping had been replaced by a single

tone that cut through him like butter. He could hear Kiele, still holding onto his hand, crying.

“No Kiele, be strong,” he said, his words muffled by the devil's pillow. The bag of feathers was crushing now. Its texture replaced by that of a large slab of concrete, cold, crushing and complex. This couldn't be how it ended. He fought back, pushing himself up, all the while holding on to her hand. She was giving him strength. He could feel it pulsing through his veins. Another shock to his heart. The devil was really trying to pull him down now, but he had other ideas. It hurt so damn much.

With one last push he let go of Kiele's hand and slammed them down onto the bed, pushing upwards, inching upwards. Slowly, little by little, like playing a tug of war to the death. If he fell backwards, he died. If he made it upwards he lived. He pushed back again, the monitors song still shrieking strongly and ringing in his ears. Then her hand touched him again.

He felt a pulse of pure energy through his heart. Not like last time, this time it was

different. With one last push his face burned through the pillow. The concrete turned back into pillow again before melting into something even softer, marshmallow perhaps. The colour changed also, from a black to a brilliant white. He continued pushing, but it had become easier now, almost as if he needn't bother any more.

He was pulled upwards towards brightness, still lying down, his hands falling beneath him. The monitors scream was getting fainter now as he shot upwards. He wasn't holding Kiele's hand any more, however it hadn't been as if he let go. He could still feel her there, pushing him onwards. As he got higher, he hit a transparent membrane. He brought this hands up from behind him and punched straight through. His eyes failed in the brilliance that shone above him and he passed out.

18

Boyfriend

His body convulsed and spluttered into life. Kiele could hear him gasping for air which of course there was now plenty. She breathed a sigh of relief. Zane was alive once more. The monitor returned to its steady plod and for once Kiele was happy to hear the gaps between the beeps. Jim looked at the now awake young man before him.

“Are you in any pain right now?” he asked. Zane thought long and hard. Obviously he took a little too long because the paramedic repeated the question again, except this time with a little more urgency and with the word Sir at the beginning.

Zane replied, “Not any more.” The voice was weak but Kiele heard it, and it was music to her

ears. It had been the hardest thing in her life to watch a friend lying there, at death's door. She never wanted to experience it again. She wanted to hit him for scaring her like that, her feelings towards him drowned in ambivalence. As he lay there moving, slowly and purposefully, she wondered what would have happened if he had died. What would her father have said?

Kiele's thoughts were jolted by a large bump in the road which threw all the occupant of the ambulance into the air by a few inches before gravity took over and hoisted them back to the ground. Zane winced in pain, some of the pieces of rubble were still in his flesh and slapping them with the bed was in no way comfortable.

“How many times have we told them to remove that bump,” shouted Marty after hearing the young boy gasp. “I’m sorry lad,” he continued, “I completely forgot it was there.” Zane managed a short chuckle. Though it had been painful, he didn't mind it one bit. He was alive, but more to the point, so was Kiele, he had saved her.

* * *

The hospital doors were flung open with all the drama of a TV show. The gurney was wheeled though at top speed, doctors and nurses joining the cart and leaving it again as if part of some dance routine. Occasionally there were words exchanged but other than that the trolley moved in almost complete silence. Zane was a lot less critical now than he had been and what he needed now more than anything was a good long rest. Kiele had been placed into a wheelchair and was being pushed along by Jim. He had supposed to be off shift right now, but instead had opted to take Kiele in and make her comfortable.

The wheels on the gurney squeaked slightly and that, combined with the moving ceiling tiles made the horizontal boy rather queasy. It would be very embarrassing to hurl right now, thought Zane, so he closed his eyes and tried to imagine he was somewhere else other than on a gurney moving and shaking. His mind took him to a

ship, to-ing and fro-ing on the waves. It didn't help at all. Quietly Zane cursed his mind's eye. Damn this nausea.

He opened his eyes once more, and turned his head to look at one of the orderlies who was pushing his train. Keeping an eye on him helped and the nausea drifted away.

Kiele was more intent on keeping an eye on Zane. She wanted to be sure he was going to be OK before she left him. Unfortunately the decision was not hers to make and her wheelchair veered off left whilst the young lad zoomed on straight ahead. Kiele turned her head too sharply to try to follow her hero and cracked her neck. She let out a yelp.

“Be careful there young missy,” said Jim, “don't want you sustaining any more injuries whilst you're in our care.” He said it jokingly, but was also deadly serious. If there was one thing that pained him more than anything else, it was patients who left the hospital in a worse state than when they arrived. He'd seen it countless times, nurses prescribing the wrong dosage of drugs,

doctors misdiagnosing patients, charts getting mixed up. All these things were still prevalent, despite all the advances in medical care. Doctors and nurses relied far too heavily on what the computers told them, unable to bring themselves to the realisation that someone had to enter the data initially, and that that was a human process and hence was prone to error.

Jim took her down another hallway and through a further set of double doors. It looked like the hospital was almost brand new. It was exceedingly clinical and reeked of the smell of disinfectant. The walls were coloured depending on the department and right now Kiele was being wheeled down for an MRI scan. Her other injuries had all been classified as minor, but the bang to the head had been pretty severe.

The young girl held on tightly to the watch which Kaitlin had given Zane. As they had neared the hospital, Jim had commented on it, and recommended Kiele keep hold of it for safety's sake. Apparently there were a number of members of staff with sticky fingers at the

hospital. Jim had developed an affinity for the pair of students and would have hated for anything to upset them further. She turned the watch over in her hands as the wheels of the chair trundled along. The more modern hospitals would have had electric chairs, with mini navigation units in them. The staff at the hospital programmed in the department of destination and the chair would take them there. It freed up the staff to get on with other matters that required a more human approach.

As she turned the watch over again, the light hit it the back plate and Kiele noticed an inscription. She wondered if Zane had noticed it yet. Looking at it more closely she read it;

*TO ROB
HAPPY BIRTHDAY*

It seemed to Kiele to be a little impersonal, but then it wasn't a gift to her, so why should she care? The letters were all in capitols in a standard block typeface, none of the swirly calligraphy.

She tried to imagine who Rob could have been. She hoped he had been a little like Zane, a driven man, like the watch had been passed down from generation to generation. It seemed almost like a fairy tale idea.

Truth be told, she didn't know if Rob was old, young, tall, short, happy or sad. Maybe his birthday had been made by the receiving of this watch. On the other hand, she supposed it could also have been broken by it.

Jim started whistling a gay little tune as they wound their way through yet another set of doors. She'd heard it before somewhere, but couldn't remember exactly when. It was the kind of tune you hum for an hour and then chronically hate with your entire being. It would be fun to hear once or twice through, but then it would stick in your head and drive you crazy. She tried in desperation to think of another song. Ironically the only one she could think of was 'Colour Me', by C-bex Lunacy. The words went round in her head, garnished with the imagined sound of

distorted guitars punctuating each line with a quintet of strumming.

*Colour me stupid,
Colour me green,
All I gotta tell you,
Don't call me Jean.*

*You can give me pigtails,
Colour in my hair,
All I gotta tell you,
Is that I don't care.*

*I will love you always,
Till the end of time,
I preach to the whole world,
That you are mine.*

Not only was the song similar in annoyance to Jim's little ditty, it also made her think of Zane. She had to stop thinking about him like that. Sure he had saved her and everything, but her father would definitely not approve of such a union.

She'd been given strict instructions, and she was not about to disobey him again, not after last time. The wheelchair stopped and Kiele could see they had halted next to a lift.

“Would you do the honours?” asked Jim. Kiele obliged and pressed the lift call button. The light illuminated indicating the impending arrival of the carriage. The button was acutely rounded at the edges and had the symbol of a man shouting, with his hand to his face. Some bright spark had decided long ago that symbols had to become more human. In all truth it actually made them much more difficult to decipher and the whole idea had been scrapped a few years later. The lift stood as a legacy to that dumb idea.

After a few verses of 'Colour Me' the lift arrived and the doors opened accompanied by an audible voice announcing that very fact. Jim pushed her chair into the carriage and pressed the button for the fourth floor.

“He'll be fine you know,” comforted Jim. He wasn't supposed to make such sweeping statements but he could see this young girl was a

sensible woman. She wouldn't hold it against him personally if anything happened to the lad. She seemed to have far greater things on her mind.

"I've seen people come out of it in far worse conditions than that," he added. Kiele looked upwards at his smiling face. A youngish man in his early forties, Jim had still retained his boyish charm.

"Thanks," she said. She meant it too. It was increasingly difficult to find people with a genuine character in the medical industry. All too often, doctors and nurses became power crazed zombies, trying to climb the medicinal ladder as fast as they could.

Though she already knew the answer deep down, she still had to ask, "When do you think I can go and visit him?" Jim was hesitant to answer. The truth was he really didn't know. The injuries that Zane had sustained had seemed life threatening at the time and he had almost died in the ambulance, but his condition had stabilised. The truth was, it was just too early to tell.

“Soon I'm sure,” was his response. The girl looked back down again at the watch and started playing with it again. Jim seemed to have quenched her suspicious mind. He decided to try to break the ice a little, “He's a pretty hunky kinda guy,” he said smiling before adding, “Is he your boyfriend or something?” Kiele shook her head. A part of her maybe wanted to say yes, yet deep down she knew the answer was no, it had to be, there was no other way. Jim noted her response and decided to forgo further questioning.

The lift reached the third floor and the doors opened. A small boy with his mother entered the lift. They walked behind Jim and Kiele and stood there, obviously hoping to get to the fourth floor also. The little boy pointed at the wheelchair stricken Kiele. “Look mommy, she's got wheels. Can I have some?” The mother batted his hand down before uttering something about not being so rude. Kiele smiled, it was the only thing that had brightened her spirit since the accident. The boy remained quiet for the next few seconds whilst the lift trundled on up to its destination.

The bell rang and the announcer spoke her parable. Jim pushed Kiele out of the lift and she could hear the young boy, now certain they were out of earshot, shouting, 'mommy mommy, I want wheels too.' Kiele couldn't hear the response, but she imagined it wasn't particularly positive.

Jim pushed her a little further before arriving at a small room. The door said MRI01 in a nice readable font. Next to the door was a light with a sign saying, do not enter when red light is on, more for patient confidentiality than anything else. Jim knocked on the door and a muffled 'come in' was the response. He pushed down on the handle and opened the door. Inside was a large bed covered with a semicircular strip. As they entered the strip began to rotate and retracted into one side of the bed.

"Please remove all items of jewellery and lay down on the bed," came the almost robotic instruction. Kiele took off a metal bangle she had been wearing on her right hand and coupled it with the watch. As she looked around for some where safe to put it. Jim held out his hand.

Somehow she felt she could trust him and she tipped the contents of her hand into his.

“Kiele Matthews?” asked the robot again. She acknowledged her name and climbed up onto the bed. It was a good metre off the ground and it seemed to Jim, who was looking on, to be a fairly poor design. The poor girl looked pretty scared thought Jim. He waved at her from across the room and she gave a small nod in response. She had mentioned something about having a father come meet her, but Jim hadn't seen anyone yet. Though his shift was over a while ago, he wasn't about to abandon this young girl, who seemed in such desperate need of someone to care.

The machine started up and a small semicircular strip protruded from the right hand side of the bed and followed an arc until it hit the left hand side. Shortly afterwards there was a humming noise, as the equipment charged the drive heads. The scared little girl looked around. How she wished that someone was here to look after her right now. She was very grateful to Jim, but she would have loved a familiar face to

comfort her. Someone like Zane? her mind suggested. Damn it! Why did he keep polluting her thoughts like that?

It wasn't long before the scanner heads started flying back and forth along the semicircular strip. Though it was protected from flying off by a sheet of thick acrylic, Kiele still closed her eyes in fear. It had only been a short while ago that she'd witnessed other projectiles flying towards people and she hadn't been too fond of it then either.

* * *

Zane wasn't in the operating theatre long. The surgeons wanted to ensure that none of the debris had punctured vital organs. Some had been removed by the nurses, but there was yet more that had required surgery. The surgeons, highly skilled at their craft, sliced and sewed Zane's battered body back together. Whilst under the anaesthetic Zane dreamt of nothing at all. He just slept.

19

Under Contract

She wasn't sure if the address was correct, but the description of the house appeared to be accurate. The bent bicycle wheel and the old cushions suggested that this was definitely the place she was looking for. It was a fairly rough neighbourhood. Had she been going there at any other time in the day she would have been particularly frightened. As it was, the sun was high in the sky, and the usual hustle and bustle of the commercial district spilled into this otherwise quiet town.

A car behind her suddenly sprang into life, taking her by surprise. The vehicle sped off, leaving a trail of dust in the air and a bad taste in

her mouth. 'Idiot', she thought. She'd walked over five miles to get here and she certainly wasn't about to give up now. This could be it, the place she'd been in search of for many years. A place of refuge, but also of vast amounts of information. Could it be?

The door bell was fingerprint activated, installed by the needlessly paranoid, it gave the occupant of the house a way to verify who was calling. She pressed her thumb to the plate, and a soft buzz was heard. Removing her thumb, she saw her fingerprint fade from sight. A bell rang inside somewhere, but she couldn't locate it. It sounded faintly like an old fashioned alarm clock. She put her hand back by her side and waited.

After a while, a voice spoke over the intercom. "Yes?" She had expected more but there was nothing. The question was repeated again, but slightly more aggressive.

A little nervous, she replied to the voice, "I'm looking for Michael Stapes." The intercom seemed to cut out. The light which had indicated someone was listening vanished. Was that it?

Had the occupant decided against engaging in conversation? A buzzer sounded somewhere close by and it sounded as if the door had clicked open. She gingerly pushed it forwards and walked through the hole it created in the wall.

Inside the house was an absolute tip. There was mess everywhere, echoing the look of the outside in a much more real way. A man walked towards her. The lighting was so low that she could hardly make out his figure. All of the curtains had been drawn for maximum removal of light. The occupant was either photosensitive, or rarely entertained guests. No shoes on his feet, the figure walked closer to her before stopping about a metre away. She could just about make out the shape of a man.

“Are you Michael Stapes,” she asked conservatively. The reply was nothing like what she was expecting.

“I guess so”

She decided to push a little further, he seemed harmless enough, if a little weird. “Well are you or not?”

He became aggressive and she could see for the first time a bottle of what appeared to be alcohol in his hand. "This is his house isn't it? Do you see anyone else here? If I'm not Michael Stapes then who the hell is?" He was shouting now and had taken several steps forwards. She step backwards in fear, not noticing the pile of old magazines at her feet. She tripped backwards and fell.

She was surprised when she didn't hit the ground and all of a sudden noticed an arm cradling her. The figure had prevented her hitting the ground rather effectively. Had light been a little more prevalent, it could easily have been the final scene in a superhero movie as the figure triumphantly held his girl. A gust of cold air navigated its way down the hallway and ruffled her skirt, sending a spine tingling sensation down her back.

"I apologise" he said, helping her up. "That wasn't meant for you. The truth is I haven't had many visitors lately." He flicked on a light switch and the room was dimly lit at last. It was

suddenly apparent why he preferred to live in a dimmer world. His face had been disfigured in places. He gestured to her to follow him and the two of them made their way to the kitchen. On the way they past piles of boxes of various description. It appeared that Michael had moved in, but never unpacked.

The kitchen was much cleaner than the rest of the place and it certainly came as a breath of fresh air. The window was open too, which blew in smells and ideas from the commercial district, still buzzing. He began to make a coffee for himself. He needed something to sober up. He offered the coffee granules to her and she nodded, saying, 'yes please.' She never usually drank coffee, but in this case, she was willing to make an exception. She sat down on one of the bar stools which had been placed next to a breakfast bar on which Michael was now brewing their beverages.

The kitchen was small but most definitely comfortable. About three to four metres in length and width, it seemed luxurious, but without the

added headache of being a nightmare to clean. It was quite obviously taken good care of, perhaps it was the only room that Michael lived in. She took the time to study the items in the room. A huge fridge stood in the corner, one of the ones with the built in media centres, so you could bake to the sound of your favourite song, or watch a TV show during breakfast. There was a dish washing machine in another corner, almost as big as the fridge. It looked untouched, and it wouldn't surprise her if it had never been used. If he really was the only one living here, she couldn't imagine he got through much cutlery or crockery.

“I pretty much live in this room” came a voice. He seemed sad and confused. He had no idea why she was here, yet he was treating her like an old friend. Perhaps, she mused, he just needed someone to talk to. By the looks of the house, he had been living here alone for quite some time. He pushed the now completed coffee towards her and she took a sip, noting the abnormally high temperature of the liquid and the

abnormally high coffee flavour. He clearly didn't make coffee too often either.

She had to start talking, but was afraid to. She knew she must say something soon, else it would have appeared that a stranger had just walked in off the street and sat down for a coffee with this odd man. She had been looking for him for a long time. Now she was fairly sure she'd found him. The pieces fit, but she had no idea how he was going to react. Michael Stapes may not take kindly to what she was about to say.

She offered up some idle banter to pass the time, whilst her courage brewed. "Have you lived here long?" she asked.

"Long enough that I've forgotten anywhere else that I've lived" came the reply. It was definitely meant to be solemn, even a little depressive. Until now the man had been standing a few steps away from her on the other side of the breakfast bar. The bar had incorporated an overhanging section of shelves, containing fruits and spices. Except in this house the phrase was, once containing fruits and spices. A lonely apple

and a small jar of pickles were the only things adorning these shelves. The section had made it difficult for her to see Michael, and she had spent most of the last few minutes with her neck bent, trying to watch him as he spoke. Upon realising this he moved forward and sat down.

They now faced each other, eyes making contact. She was a little scared, but she couldn't have imagined how scared he was. Eventually he snapped, the tension had been brewing in him for a while and when she had offered no explanation to her visit he had assumed one instead. Living on his own for so long seemed to have zapped his patience. It appeared, however, oddly normal.

“There's no need for you people to keep checking up on me,” he said, lowering his head and looking into his coffee. He dipped one finger in the beverage and she winced. How could he withstand that heat? He withdrew the finger and made a small droplet of coffee rest on the surface of the breakfast bar, his finger red and most certainly burnt.

“I’m not checking up on you,” she said. “I came here to talk to you about something.” He appeared to be listening but she couldn’t be sure. She added, “Something that you may not want to talk about right away.” Still his head stayed down. The coffee his main focus of attention. Part of her wanted to swipe the mug from the bar, but doing so would probably have invoked a rage from this well built man, and she certainly didn’t want to do that.

“Go on,” was his reply. He continued dipping his fingers into his drink and making droplets on the counter. After a few more, she could see he was making a geometric pattern of some description.

“My name is Jolie,” she said. “For a large portion of my life I have been studying something.” No reaction from the beast. “Something which happened many years ago,” still nothing, “which I believe you may have been involved in.” She sat back to take a breath. That had been harder work than she had imagined and she still hadn’t really told him the real reason for

her visit. “I'm here to talk to you about Oken Brown.”

She had expected some kind of reaction. She had even planned for it, a can of mace in her bag, but what happened was completely unexpected.

“How did you find me?” he enquired. He was past the point of caring now. It had been so many years since the events of old. He wondered if it even mattered any more. Officially he was still bound to secrecy over the events that had taken place. Officially, if the G-TEP found him talking about them, he would be obliterated. They always liked to scare people. There was never any talk of people being killed. In their terms and agreements people would always be subjected to summary obliteration.

Jolie was so taken aback by his candid response that it was a good few minutes before she could find the courage to talk further, so much so, that Michael looked up to see if she was still there. It had suddenly occurred to him that this woman was actually quite beautiful. She reminded him of someone he once knew.

“A friend gave me your name,” she said. That was the truth. Michael didn't need to ask anything further, he already knew who that friend would have been. How she had become acquainted with them would probably be a whole different story but that he didn't care about right now.

“I guess you'd better ask your questions then,” he said sullenly, “since you clearly have no interest in me.” It wasn't that he really cared either way, but he rarely had visitors and if they weren't trying to sell him bibles or broaches for his 'significant other', they were checking up on him. Making sure he was obeying the rules. Why they hadn't just installed CCTV throughout his house he'd never understood. It would have made things a lot simpler. He'd even suggested it at one point. They had reeled off some passage from their code about privacy policies or something equally stupid.

The world of the day was odd when it came to rights, especially for the G-TEP. Peoples privacy was paramount, so sacred, that nothing could

break it, but to that very same organisation, peoples lives clearly meant very little. The G-TEP was permitted to kill anyone it deemed necessary, but they couldn't install CCTV for surveillance. The whole system reeked of convenience and he hated it for what it had become. No one respected life any more, but privacy was paramount. His doorbell was a testament to that fact.

She drew in a deep breath and plunged in her first question. "What was he like?" she asked. It had seemed an odd one to start with, but she needed to just dive in there, no more time for thinking and analysing the best method of attack.

"Quite simply, he was the greatest friend a man could ever have." His focus now on some distant object hovering in the sky, she supposed he was recalling memories of a lost comrade in arms. "He took care of them, like they were his family. He never got on well with his real family, not after they sent him off to war. He never really recovered from that you know?"

It was believable, the war had been described by many historians as the most brutal clash between human factions that the world had ever seen. One side broke the rules, the other side did even worse and it escalated from there. People had been gassed, maimed, tortured, beaten, you name it. All in the name of protection and a love for one's own country. It seemed more like it had been in the name of aggression and a hate for another's country to her.

He continued, "He met a girl, just before he died," his eyes glazing whilst recalling, "she was sweet, oh she was the sweetest thing you'd ever seen."

She interrupted him "This was Jay?" she asked, "the woman he had been living with for a few years?"

"No," he corrected her, "the two of them never shared a house. They had only known each other a short period. I could tell they was meant for each other though." He smiled as his eyes began to well slightly. Jolie smiled too, this was incredible. Very quickly she remember that it

would probably have been best she took some notes.

“Would you mind if I wrote some of this down?” she asked. He shook his head, most of what he said would could have easily been conjecture and speculation anyway.

“No names,” he said, “that’s all I ask.” She nodded. They were reasonable and acceptable terms. The midday sun streamed in through the window and onto the breakfast bar. Both occupants of the kitchen had their hands and lower arms on the bar. The suns rays heated her hands to the point where she withdrew from the sunlight. It seemed strange that he had chosen this room as his refuge from the rest of the building. It was the only room that was lit adequately, every other room drenched in a thick darkness. When the door to the kitchen had been opened, it had been like walking into heaven. It was warm, inviting and felt safe.

Jolie pulled the pen and notepad from her bag. A small book, with a leather binding, crammed full of her knowledge about Oken. She had once

been asked why in this day in age she still kept a physical notebook. Most people would have used voice dictation device and stored it on a memstick. She preferred actually writing things down, then she knew that she had actually seen the information first hand. All the virtual technologies seemed rather unreal to her at times. Plus in the late evenings, she could flick through her notes and muse about the man and his methods, often spending hours at a time thinking and feeling.

“Did he have many friends?” she asked.

“A few,” he replied. “He was well respected in the community, both in the Zone and near his house.” He corrected his bad sentence. He had never been good with words but he felt like this lady needed him to be. So each of his answers he thought out thoroughly before uttering. “What I mean was, in his in his local area.” It still didn't sound right, but he had tried. Jolie jotted something down that Michael couldn't see.

“How come you're still alive?” was the next one. It shocked Michael to the core. She was

jumping all over the place and it had thrown him for six. He hadn't expected a blunt question so soon. Jolie, noticing his expression apologised.

He shook his head, informing her that a sorry wasn't necessary, "It's OK," he added. "The G-TEP took great pleasure in torturing me for information." He pointed to his scars. "In the end I made a deal with them and I gave them information in exchange for my life." He seemed sad. It was as if he had been broken again right before her eyes.

How terrible it must have been, to hold out for so long, to have been inflicted with so much pain, and then to have relented at the end, making all the suffering null and void. It sickened her that the G-TEP were able to get away with such atrocities, but the world was what it was now.

"I never told them what they really wanted to know though," he said. "I never gave them everything." He appeared to take great pride in this and his face lightened when he told her. "They pushed me for days, weeks, months even" he said, "whipping me, punching me, cutting me,

I gave them something, but not what they were really after.” For some reason he trusted her, she seemed so genuine that the words gushed out. Maybe he had just decided it was time to let go, time to stop caring. Plenty of times he'd thought about ending it all. She sat there listening intently, her forehead held up by her two fingers and thumb. She looked at him in disbelief. He'd been through a lot. He'd truly been to hell and back.

“Did you know him well?” she asked tentatively. He sat back and chuckled to himself, obviously remembering something, an inside joke maybe, or something other than the bad times.

“Lady, he was my best friend,” said Michael. “There was nothing I wouldn't have done for that man.” He was smiling broadly now.

“You still think about him often don't you?”

“I think about him a lot,” he said, “I pray for him a lot too.” His faced became more sincere and saddened a little. “That man needed a lot of prayer for what he'd done,” and just like that he became more upbeat again, “I sure do hope he's in

heaven now, then one day I can see him again.” He looked at her directly in the eyes, as if telling a secret. “If I get there that is.”

He was a simplistic man, she thought. Not mentally challenged, just simple. His needs were few, that much was obvious, but the G-TEP had taken everything he had, that was painfully obvious too. She waited a while before changing the topic again. “Have you always lived alone?”

Michael thought long and hard about this. He felt weak and wasn't sure he was able to recall any more of his history. “Yes,” he answered. It was a lie and he felt terrible for lying to such a pretty young woman, but he had no choice. He just wouldn't have been able to take it. The memories were painful, sometimes too painful.

Jolie had finished off her coffee and was trying to write down more of her notes. She was noting not only the answers which he gave, but also her perceptions of his impressions, his life. As she sat there a small tabby cat pushed it's way through the door. It was barely a year old, still kitten like and oh so cute.

“Yours?” she asked. At first, he didn't know what she was talking about. The fridge? The breakfast bar? The house? Finally it clicked, she was talking about the cat. He nodded, and bent down to stroke the feline.

“Benzo” he said abruptly.

“Benzo?” she replied. This time she was the one who was confused.

“Her name is Benzo.” The realisation set in and Jolie's mind was once again in a state of cohesion. Benzo circled the stool which Michael was sitting on a few times before he managed to scoop her up and place her on the bar. She wandered over to Jolie and sniffed her inquisitively. Jolie giggled. She hadn't seen a kitten like this in a long time. Michael pointed over to a saucer that was sitting on the counter behind her. “Would you mind?” he asked. Jolie realised he was asking if she could pour some milk for the little kitten.

“Sure,” she answered. She walked over to the fridge and cowered in its presence. It was truly stupendous, far too large for a single man's needs.

She opened it and was markedly unsurprised at the lack of anything inside. On the right were several cartons of milk. Most of which seemed to be edging towards the out of date checkpoint. As she looked closer, she could see they were lined up in date order. It really was like a race to the finish. Who would reach their use by date, before being drunk.

Michael noticed her looked at the milk. “Yes,” he said, “they are all open.” She hadn't been looking at that, or for an explanation, but since he had brought the subject up she took the opportunity to ask.

“Any particular reason why?”

“My brain doesn't work so good in the mornings.” He chuckled a little, “it's kinda of a leftover from what they did to me.” Michael was of course referring to the savage beatings and torturing he had received at the hands of the G-TEP, his fellow countrymen. Glancing over her shoulder, Jolie could see him rubbing his forehead in apparent pain. He continued, “but then, I guess I can't put the blame squarely on

them. After all, I was there and I knew full well what he was doing. I just couldn't tear myself away.”

Had she detected a hint of regret coming from the large man in the kitchen? She picked out the newest carton of milk she could find and carried it over to where the saucer was.

“Bring it over here,” he said. She picked up the saucer and placed it on the bar in front of them. Then she retook her position on the stool and poured some milk for Benzo. The little kitten was beside herself with joy. She licked a few times and then scampered around to the other side of the saucer in apparent joviality.

The two of them watched the kitten for a while, licking, scampering, looking back at them, cleaning herself, waiting for more milk. The hairs on the pretty little creature were so well formed, she truly was a beautiful cat.

“Why did he do it Michael?” she asked softly. For a second the man seemed to have completely ignored her. He was in his own little world, watching Benzo beg him with her eyes for more

of the white stuff. After a full minute he came to and realised that Jolie was waiting for an answer from him.

“I'm sorry,” he said, “I thought you were talking to someone else for a second. The name still confuses me.”

She frowned. What did he mean? The name? His name was Michael Stapes, wasn't it? He hung his head a little lower, trying to avert eye contact. If he wasn't Michael Stapes, then who the hell was he. For a second her mind race with improbable scenarios. Maybe he was a hitman, sent there to kill her for her constant digging up of Oken's past. Maybe this man had killed Michael and was squatting in his house, taking on his persona. After all, she'd never seen a picture of him. She had no idea what he was meant to look like. His face was disfigured, maybe there was no beatings, maybe he was from prison, maybe he did it to himself. Her mind took a breath before continuing it's onslaught. Her train of thought was caught short by an interruption from what's-his-name.

“Michael Stapes isn't my original name,” he said. She was confused. The burly man had sensed her confusion after his blunder. Of course no one was meant to know it was him. He had been Michael Stapes for so long, but every once in a while he tripped up. Maybe it was the simplistic mind.

Jolie decided to mount her high horse. “So what is your real name then?” she almost shouted, speaking a lot louder than his soft confession. She stood up from the stool, frightening Benzo as the feet scraped on the hard stone floor. The little kitten leapt down from the bar and ran out of the cat flap. She watched him go, regretting scaring the little thing.

Michael stood up and pleaded with her to sit down. “I'm sorry,” he said. “I'm not allowed to talk about my past really. I thought it would be OK if you didn't know my name, and I hadn't had anyone visit in such a long time.” He seemed really sad now, “I was just enjoying the company.” Jolie stood there, her arms now

folded, still awaiting an answer from the ogre who had lied to her.

“My name is Ruben,” he said.

“Come again?” she asked.

“Ruben,” he repeated once more, “my real name is Ruben.”

He hadn't needed to add a surname and she hadn't needed to ask for one. Ruben was a legend of the Zone story. A defiant figure who stood up to the G-TEP forces and against their oppressive regime. He now stood before her in all of his glory, but in Ruben's mind he was standing there naked, unmasked and guilty. She continued to stand there in shock. Complete shock. So many times she had tried to contact him, or find out where he was. Never once anything close to a reply. She had hypothesised that he had been killed in the massacre, because he certainly didn't seem to have existed on earth any more.

* * *

The truth, was that the G-TEP had done a damn good job of hiding him. Leon had played a part in the scheme and had played up to Ruben's good behaviour and information, which had led to the recovery of some of Oken's equipment. Leon and Ruben had become friends during their encounter in the ambulance and true to his word, Leon had guarded and protected Ruben all he could.

His name had been changed to Michael Stapes and he had been given a small house as a thank you in compensation for the savage beatings and torture he had received. It was true that the G-TEP global commander had been attempting, for a while, to turn the force into a more caring, more considerate organisation. Leon had shown great aptitude in this and the commander listened to his recommendations intently. However, one of the most effective and ruthless of all soldiers also deserved his attention. Ric had been instrumental in the capture of many temporal mad scientists, hell bent on destroying or reviving something or other.

Ruben had been living at the house ever since. He had been authorised to move if he desired, but why would he want to? His past would follow him there too. Ruben wasn't under house arrest, but he had known they watched him. Plenty of times he'd wanted once, just once, to visit the Zone again, to pay his respects to his fallen comrade in arms. Or to visit the graves of his friends. He had never plucked up the courage.

The G-TEP kept close tabs on him and visited him every three months like clockwork, ensuring he wasn't divulging information, making weapons, or tinkering with anything remotely linked to temporal mechanics. At one point he had even joked with a G-TEP officer that he should maybe turn over his watch. For his insolence, he had received a almighty punch in the stomach. He had wanted to retaliate so badly, but Jesus and his fear of the consequences stopped him.

Since leaving the Zone and living in this place, his priorities had changed. Hell, his whole outlook on life had changed. He regretted his

misspent time at the Zone. He regretted the death of his friends. He had no one now.

A few years after the events of the Zone he had tried to search for Yazmine, hoping, praying that she would drop her life for him, that she would see how pathetic he was and feel the urge to care for him, to love him. A private investigator was hired, and began reporting back information. She was living in some distant region that Ruben couldn't even pronounce. Apparently she had a new husband and three beautiful children. The PI's description of the children had been so accurate that Ruben could have sworn he had seen them in real life.

The G-TEP had stepped in and asked him to cease his activities. Apparently he was breaking his conditions. The very next day Ruben, unable to believe them had looked up the conditions of his release. He saw nothing in there about any private investigators. True, Ruben wasn't a lawyer, but he understood plain English. When he reached the end of the document he saw the clause to which they must have been referring;

“G-TEP reserves the right to modify create, and delete any other clauses as they see fit, backdating if necessary, with or without the consent or the knowledge of the persons to which this agreement pertains.”

In short, the G-TEP could do anything they liked. They could have stopped him keeping Benzo, had they desired to do so. He had signed his life away and at that point he wished he was dead. It wasn't Leon's fault at all. Ruben had been grateful to him for all he had managed to do for his sorry excuse for a soul. It was Ric's way of having the last word. As if the scars weren't enough.

* * *

Jolie still stood there dumbstruck. She couldn't even think of what to say. Finally after what seemed like an eternity to both her and Ruben she spoke. “I am so sorry,” she said. “I

never meant to.....” She started again, “If I'd have known.....” He walked over to her and drew her close. His once insanely muscular arms gripping her tightly. She'd had no idea who he really was. She thought she'd struck gold when it had transpired that he was a good friend of Oken's, but she could never have hoped to meet Ruben.

He continued to embrace her and the tears started to flow. She'd been so cold, thinking of him as just a pump she could work for information. It sickened her somewhat. No, it sickened her to the core. She'd become almost as heartless as the G-TEP. She felt his warm arms holding her tight. It was nice. She could tell he'd forgiven her for everything.

“It's OK,” he said. “It's really OK.” As they stood there locked as one, something started to sing in Jolie's bag. It was her phone. She broke free of his embrace and quickly rummaged for it. In the few seconds it had taken her to find it, the volume of the ringing had increased to an ear splitting level. It was playing a theme from

Beethoven's Moonlight sonata, the third movement to be exact. She slapped the phone open and put it to her ear and Ruben was left standing there, arms still partially outstretched. He hadn't hugged anyone in such a long time. He'd scarcely had time to even realise that it was a hug he had been in the middle of.

He could hear a rather hurried voice on the other end. Through the ear piece the sound was muffled, he definitely heard something about an emergency. Jolie listened intently, "Oh my....." she trailed off. After a few seconds she slung the phone down onto the bar. "I have to leave now," she rushed. "I'm so sorry." He nodded and she picked up her bag. After slinging the phone into it, she rammed the container on to her shoulder and headed out of the kitchen door.

She found her own way to the front door leaving Ruben alone once more. It had been a short meeting, but an enjoyable one. Ruben wished she hadn't had to go. It had been nice to talk to someone who had appreciated him and

what he had been through. He missed talking to Leon.

Now outside, Jolie had all but forgotten about the meeting she had just left. The phone call had been to inform her that two of her students had been involved in an accident whilst visiting the Zone. She was beside herself with worry and though she could have walked to the hospital on any other day, today she just couldn't imagine being able to do it. She really was in too much of a state. She walked over to the taxi stop and leaned into the window of a vacant vehicle. The driver asked her destination and she got in.

As the taxi pulled away, she found herself thinking the worst. Maybe they were dead, why oh why had she let them go there alone? When she had asked Kaitlin, there seemed to be no doubt in her mind that it was the right thing to do. It wasn't an official trip, so she hadn't had to jump through the usual bureaucratic hoops that schools employed these days, bringing with them a crowd of job titles that just had to be filled.

She couldn't even bring herself to look out of the window, preferring to look down at her shoes, deep in shame. The taxi driver tried to lighten the mood, “you look like somebody died love” he said carelessly. She ignored him. Until she arrived at the hospital she had no way of knowing.

20

Family Home

Leon hadn't been feeling good all day. Now he'd arrived home he felt even worse. The clock read 19:05, but he couldn't see it properly. Leon was blind drunk. It had started as a pick-me-up idea but had very quickly turned into a whole different saga. He was nursing a black eye which he had received from some random guy in the bar, after he'd called him an impatient pig. It wasn't like Leon and it was a damn good thing that Shana was out at her parents.

Leon sat in the chair. It was his chair. The only chair he liked to sit in. He'd become much more reclusive lately and he and Shana had started to fight on a regular basis. It wasn't that

he wanted to argue with her, it was just that she was always so right. All the time, like a sickness. Not in a funny sitcom way, but in everything they did. Leon always seemed to be the one to make the mistakes and it was really starting to tick him off.

As he sat there musing, he reached across and grabbed another beer from the table. He'd brought a six pack of light beers home with him to chill out to. 'It wasn't fair' his head thumped, 'it wasn't as if he never did anything to help around the house.' He threw his shoes off in a fit of rage. One spun off a little too far to the left and knocked over a glass vase that had been perched quite safely on the table only seconds earlier. The vase hit the floor and its contents, some flowers and their water, joined their receptacle in a clumsy disarray. At first, it appeared he had gotten away with it; the vase hadn't shatter like he had expected. Then a tall candlestick, which Leon hadn't noticed teetering on the edge, fell off too, piercing the vase and exploding it into a thousand pieces.

In anger at the mess he had created, Leon picked up another can of beer and hurled it at the glass topped coffee table which had been supporting them for many years. The can hit the surface of the table and in an instant the safety of the surface was no more. Small trinkets and his half eaten dinner made their way to the floor to join the flowers, vase and water. That should do it, thought Leon, have to give the little lady something to bitch about.

A part of Leon's mind started itching, scratching away at him. Why are you doing this? It screamed. This isn't you. Where is the real Leon? The small voices were drowned out by the much larger voice which seemed to be taking pleasure in the destruction of his living room, 'His' living room. He paid for it after all. If he wanted to destroy things, then he was perfectly within his right.

The day hadn't gone well. It had started off with him thinking about them again. Though he swore a million times he wouldn't, he had. He hadn't been able to help himself. It was like a bad

dream that he would never be able to wake up from. Though two months had passed since that fateful event, he was still no closer to being healed for what he had done. He had shot and killed three people. In cold blood. The small voices were back, claiming it was an accident, that he hadn't been of sound mind or body. The bigger voices shouted back, he had been prepared to go to whatever lengths were necessary to complete his first mission.

Leon wished he'd never joined the stupid G-TEP. It wasn't as if anything good had come out of it. If just one person had told him not to go ahead with it on the morning of that first mission, he'd never have completed his training, or stayed with G-TEP. On his arrival back from their trip to the Zone, Ric had taken great pleasure in telling his superiors and the entire base that it was he who had taken the shots.

Ric had told them all of his glee at watching the bullets enter their targets bodies, and then explode out the other side. His friends had lapped it up. They'd been as hell bent on benevolent

violence as he was. Leon had cowered in the corner as Ric had also recounted the tale of how he had punched the new recruit in the face for his back chat. That had given them all a great laugh. Leon had left the room at that point, totally uninterested in anything anyone had to say.

The young recruit was given a desk job, but hated it. The constant berating, the ever cocky Ric it was all just too much. Several times he'd tried to transfer to another section, even leave the G-TEP altogether, but they had rejected every single proposal. It was either their way, or an exceedingly miserable life.

The television was displaying a football game from the 2000s, a sport Leon had always enjoyed playing as a young lad. Today though, he was watching, and he was angry. Definitely not a good combination. "Come on you stupid cripples," he jeered. The next door neighbour banged on the wall as the sounds of smashing coffee tables and jeering had finally gotten too much. Leon arose in another of his rage fits and started hammering on the wall. If the neighbours

could encase the room in yet more noise, then why the hell couldn't he?

The man on the other side of the wall stopped and so did Leon, confident that he had asserted his authority over Tim and Joan next door. He never had liked them that much anyway. Shana had been so overjoyed when they had discovered the pair living next door. Leon had found them both boring as hell. Tim with his love of ancient civilisations was about as interesting as a brick wall and Joan? Well you could have stuck her face on a BBQ and she still wouldn't have been an interesting topic of conversation.

The voices tried to make an impact again. 'This is how Ric behaves,' they said. 'This isn't you. Please listen to us.' Leon responded by taking another swig from his beer can. He'd practically finished it and turned around from the chair he'd mounted to respond to Tim and Joan's intrusive rudeness. He noticed the beer can lying in the middle of the now defunct coffee table. How convenient, he thought.

He opened the can quickly, the pressure squirting some of the contents over the lounge. A fine mist of beer hung in the air for a brief period before dissipating throughout the room, coating everything it touched with a slightly sticky film. Let her moan about that, was his reasoning.

One of the idiots in the office had really wound him up today. Everyday for the last month the cretin had told him how meaningless Leon's job seemed to him. He remembered his words, 'How can you live with yourself, knowing you're doing nothing at all to help anyone?' It had hurt, but with every passing day, it had begun to shape him. He started wanting to be stronger, to be more like Ric. Until today. The weasel had come in asking him if he it bothered him that Ric had taken the shot on Oken and not him.

Apart of him had wanted to tear the freak's head off there and then, but Leon had opted for the more subtle approach. He would wait until there was the least amount of suspicion, and then pounce on the unsuspecting rat and rip him a new air hole. The anger had been growing inside him

for weeks and weeks, and now it had made a home in Leon. It was here to stay and unfortunately today, he had brought it home.

It was the anger and outbursts that had forced Shana to leave for a while. She was visiting her parents and had suggested that Leon take some time for himself, to clear his head. Of course Leon had taken it as a sign that she wanted to get rid of him, and had turned it into a scene. After refuting the fact multiple times, Shana ended the argument by carrying her already fully packed bags out to the car herself and slamming the front door. That had been two days ago. How quickly he had descended into chaos without her there.

Leon's head was really pounding now and he started to look around for a form of relief. Sleeping wasn't going to cure it, so he went to the drawers in the kitchen to look for some pills. Whilst in there he saw the crockery that his in-laws had bought for their wedding anniversary. He hadn't been keen on it from day one. 'Why are you being so light-hearted about this?' asked the

big voice. 'You hate those plates. You've always hated those plates.'

In point of fact, the plates were actually rather pleasant. A solid colour with an oriental looking pattern around the edges, gave them a look of both class and expense. Leon had a vendetta against them now though and so they had to go. He plunged his hand into the rack on which the crockery lived. It took him several attempts to grab hold of something firm, before he ripped it away from its current position and sent the crockery flying towards him.

Using his arm as a shield, the plates and bowls bounced off Leon and impacted various locations around the kitchen. All but one of the items smashed, sending broken pieces of porcelain skittering across the floor. Unfortunately Leon spied the surviving plate. It offended him with its presence. He lifted it high into the air, as if winning some award, and then in a sharp explosive moment hurled it towards the sink. It smashed against the taps, covering the entire area with dangerous shards.

No one could tell him what to do now. He was his own boss. He staggered around aimlessly. Again the little voices piped up, 'remember what Ruben said'. 'Pfft. Who cares,' came the reply. He found the drawer he was looking for and took out a box of Dixumin. He couldn't even remember the recommended dosage and there was no way he was going to be able to read the instructions. He took two, and washed them down with a swig of beer.

He went back into the lounge and flicked the volume up on the television. The football match was still going strong and Leon decided to get cosy for the night. He'd watch the game and then he'd go to bed. Not when Shana said, when he said. That's what a man did, that's what Ric would have done.

It suddenly dawned on him that he had been acting in the most stupid of ways. He hadn't realised it before, but he had accomplished what the age old phrase had stated; He had become the thing he had hated the most. His mind turned

from rampant anger, to total and utter despair. What had he done?

He looked around at the 'family home', now decorated with his hatred of Ric. He needed to clean it all up before Shana came home or she would kill him, quite literally. Now that wasn't a bad idea. The big voices in his head became his greatest enemy. Why did he need to stay around here? What did he actually do on this earth that was of any use to anyone? As far as he could tell, absolutely nothing. He had killed innocent people, wrecked his house. He was a shell, a completely empty shell.

He had no idea what he was even fighting for any more. The cause of justice and peace had gone. Why? Then it hit him. He had become the thing he despised all his life. All this time he had been fighting and he hadn't ever realised it had been against himself. That's why he woke up each morning struggling to find something to live for. Sure there was Shana, but even she'd all but given up on him now. Truth be told, she was just

giving him some space, some time to do exactly what he was doing. Time to reflect on his life.

Damn that G-T-E-P. He wished again he'd never joined. It was his biggest mistake, but then again it was exactly that. It was 'his' biggest mistake. As the television roared on louder and louder he discovered his epiphany. All the mistakes he'd ever made, were his fault. He'd made made them, on his own. In truth any reasonable person would have agreed with him, of course his mistakes had been his, no one else could have made them for him. It was obvious his mind wasn't all there. Yet he had decided that all the wrong decisions could have been avoided somehow, if only he had been a better person.

'There's only one way to escape' a single voice in his head told him, 'remove yourself from the equation. If you're not here, you can't make wrong choices any more. You can't ruin people's lives.'

Was that really what he'd done? He thought about it. Of course. He'd ruined the families of Oken, of Jay of the other victims. He'd ruined his

own wife's life. How many more would be subjected to the onslaught of Leon the wrong decision maker.

The pills were having no effect. Leon needed a way to make the pain stop for good. He'd never wanted to hurt all those people. He'd never wanted to inflict so much pain. They wouldn't forgive him. Some of them never could. They were dead. Ruben had told him that they would forgive him from heaven when they got there. 'Pffft, what did he know?'

He remembered seeing some suicides in his training missions. Most had hung themselves. It seemed like the easiest way to go, or to avoid being caught. He hated taking pills and couldn't imagine having to swallow large amounts of them. No, the best way would be to hang himself. Shooting himself would arouse too much suspicion, Leon wanted to slip away silently.

Leon's mind was set and so he went about the house to gather the items he would need for his endeavour. Rope. He made his way to the bedroom. He remembered a coil of the stuff he

used when decorating one part of the house. It had been a clever idea. He had taken the rope and made a border up the stairs with it. It gave a maritime feel as one ascended to the first floor.

The rope wasn't in its usual place, Shana had blatantly tidied it away in one of her cleaning missions. Damn it. Undeterred, Leon thought again. A belt. Of course a belt would hold his weight, but then it would be difficult to secure to the ceiling. Come to think of it, how was he going to attach anything to the ceiling. Slowly, Leon's plan was falling apart. He was failing once again. The voices loved it. 'Can't even work this out, can you?' they jeered.

With renewed vigour, the extension lead that Leon used when doing DIY sprang into view. It was sitting under the bed, glowing bright orange and was just perfect for the job. He whipped it out and instinctively checked its strength. As he left the bedroom he noticed that the loft hatch was open. Shana must have been tidying yet more things up there. His rope was probably hidden away in the depths of the attic. Never mind, the

thought, as he went to close the hatch. Then all at once it hit him, the hatch could be used to stage his performance.

The man on a mission went looking for a beam or a bar which he could place up into the attic across the hole, from this he could tie his noose and get down to business. He had a mission once more. Leon, in his state of utter disarray was so focussed on the task in hand, he hadn't noticed the television had switched itself off, sensing no one was in the room, it had switched off to save power.

Moving downstairs, Leon went past his maritime theme and made his way to the garage. There just had to be some wood in there. The doorway to the garage was thick with different coloured paints adorning it's surface. Leon always used this door for testing colours before putting them on the walls. When they had moved in, Shana had wanted to redecorate the entire house, and Leon had obliged. He loved her so much. This was why he was doing this. If he was dead, he could never hurt her again. The

voices neglected to mention that by his actions he would be hurting her more than he could have ever imagined.

The door handle clicked downwards, and swung open. Leon, now inside, found what he was looking for. It was a little smaller than he'd hoped, but it would do the job it was told. He also grabbed the small steps, requiring something to raise himself up with. The ceiling in this particular house was abnormally high, especially on the first floor. It made the whole house seem that much more spacious, but also made it so much difficult to heat in the winter.

Leon almost ran back to the landing area, leaving the garage door unlocked. It was lucky that Tim hadn't caught him, he was in no mood for conversation now. He set up the steps and began to tie knots in the extension cord. The plugs and sockets danced as Leon faffed around with the cables, trying to get things just so. His mind was still blurry, so was his vision, but he had managed to sober himself up a little, thinking about the mission to hand.

Leon wasn't aware of the proper knots one should tie when making a noose. He remembered seeing the old western movies, where the nooses always looked so finely crafted. Leon's looked like a six year old had tried to coil the cable, gotten it in a mess and thrown a monumental tantrum shortly after. He had tied successive knots in the cable, to ensure maximum strength. To save time, he had also tied the knots in the cable with it already round his neck.

He pulled it upwards. Now that was a fine noose, he heard himself thinking. As he climbed up onto the ladder, he slipped the wooden bar through the knot farm he had tied in the other end of the cable. He was really going to do this. The little voice shouted as loud as it could. 'Please stop.' Leon had noticed that his voices had become a lot more audible. No longer just thoughts in his head, but sounding more like real voices. People he knew. The little voice was Shana and she was begging him to stop.

"It's best for all of us," he said out loud. Ric agreed with him. Reaching up he tried to put the

bar up into the attic hatch, but found he was too short. Luckily for Leon there were another two steps left. He climbed further and managed to lift the bar through the hatch. He twisted it ninety degrees and rested it on the two longer sides of the hatch. There was little slack on the cable and the time had come to make the final decision.

If anyone had come in now and told him to stop he would. He had started shaking and the effects of the pills had started to kick in. Dixumin was a great painkiller, but it also made the patient rather drowsy. As he stood there fully upright he closed his eyes and imagined standing in line at the police academy, waiting to be greeted by the Global G-TEP commander. His commander and chief had visited the police base once and Leon had felt very privileged to shake his hand.

Eyes still closed, the tears began to stream down his face. Shana started crying too, screaming at him to stop. Yet everyone else seemed to be telling him to go. Finally she could be heard no longer. Unsure if it was a good thing

or not, Leon's feelings burst forth once again and he broke down in tears.

With one final effort he bent his legs as much as they would allow and prepared to launch himself backwards. His legs would then drop downwards and he would swing forwards, knocking the steps over and completing the mission. His mission. His final mission. He pushed back and swung away from the steps as planned. As his momentum shifted from backwards to forwards he kicked out with his legs, sending the steps flying forward, collapsing as they went.

The strain on his neck was unbearable and he found himself unable to breathe. As he hung there, he felt the most at peace he had ever felt in his life. It was all over, everything was complete. As he began to lose consciousness, aided by the drugs now coursing his veins, he could almost sense the pull of death as he tried to breathe.

But as the weight of the man on the cable persisted, the wooden beam found itself unable to take the strain. It had been dampened in the

garage, and now decided that it was time to give up the fight. Leon never heard the splitting of the fibres, but he did feel the sudden slack in the cable, followed by a short period of free fall, culminating in a harsh landing on a set of small aluminium step ladders.

21

Alone

Leon was in pain, but could still move. His wounds just superficial, he was able to sit himself upright. He began to sob. The pain around his neck was dreadful. Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror in the bedroom, he could see the bright reddy purple mark tracing its way around his throat. Just a few seconds longer, he thought, just a few seconds longer and I would have been rid of this world.

The voices in his head were laughing now, Ric amongst them. Laughing at the fact that he hadn't been able to complete his final mission either. He could hear Ric joking that that made him zero percent successful. The pain was

excruciating. Not physical pain, but psychological agony of seemingly failing at everything he did. In the distance the phone started ringing. It had been set to auto answer, and there came worrying sound of Shana.

“Leon honey, please pick up,” she said. “Tim phoned me saying he was hearing a lot of noise coming from the house.” She paused “Are you OK? Another pause, “Listen, I'm on my way home. I'll be there soon.” Leon hadn't heard her. He hadn't wanted to. If he tried hard enough he could still complete his mission. He remembered the gun in his jacket. He hadn't wanted to use that. It reminded him of what he had done to those people. He had no other choice though. He saw his jacket hanging on the post of the bannister. He could even see the gun protruding from the inside pocket.

As he reached inside to get the gun, the tears began again. He felt the soft fabric of the jacket against his hands and found the pocket. The tears were coming faster now, his sobbing rhythmically bouncing his head and torso. This really was the

end. He wished things had turned out differently. He remembered that time in the picking fields once more. How happy Shana had been that day and how quickly he had been able to ruin that.

Leon felt so guilty, for that and for killing those relatively innocent people. He'd had no personal vendetta against them. Had they hurt him? No. Sure they enjoyed hurting each other, but that was their business. Resolute and strong Leon pulled himself to his feet. He was still a little shaky from the fall. He winced in pain and closed his eyes tight, putting the barrel of the gun to his head like it was an extension of his own body.

The gun, a Triflex 83, was jet black and cold. Oh so cold against his skin. Leon was running a high fever and the gun offered such amazing relief from the pain running around inside him. The voices reassured him that the gun could make it all better. He would be free, happy, no longer tied down to this life.

He dragged the barrel of the gun across his forehead as he stood to attention. Eyes red and

head in pain he stood there at the top of the stairs. He pushed the barrel into the side of his head as if menacing himself. 'I have the power to do this' he told himself. 'There's nothing you can do to stop me.'

The phone rang again and auto-answered as it had been requested. It was Shana and this time her voice managed to cut through to him. "Are you there Leon?" she asked hurriedly, "please answer me, for heavens sake I love you."

"I'm here," he said, keeping the gun to his head. Unwavering in his resolution to end himself. "I'm going to make things all better."

This worried Shana, she couldn't see him, she had no idea what he meant. Better? That could mean anything; I'm baking a cookie, I'm eating shallots, I'm about to kill myself. "Leon hunny, are you OK?"

Of course he was OK, what was she babbling on about. He was more OK than ever. In a few minutes he'd be the most OK he had ever been.

"I'm fine," he managed to say. "You don't have to worry any more," he said, starting to cry

once again, "I'm going to make things OK for us." His voice was wavering and Shana feared the worst. Little did she know that her worst fears were already coming true.

Shana tried to reason with him for a few minutes, telling him that she loved him, begging him to step outside and go and see Tim. Hearing that name had only enraged him further and he had stood there hissing and spitting about how much he hated that man. The gun was pressed further and further into his skull, making a mark that felt kind of good.

As they continued to discuss it, a sharp rap came at the door, Leon's muscles tensed, and in a moment of complete lack of concentration, the trigger was pulled. The bullet left the barrel and entered the landscape that was Leon's skull, the bone pressured into splitting apart, allowing the bullet to travel further. It ripped through his brain tissue and exited on the left side of his head, exploding forth with blood and calcium in a fury of madness. The Triflex 83 was a powerful weapon, the preceding event could have been

replayed in slow motion at a sales conference as a testament to its sheer effectiveness as a weapon.

The bullet seemed to speed up on leaving Leon's skull and embedded itself in a nearby wall. Leon never felt a thing. His body lost its delicate balance and fell forward down the stairs, assisting Leon on his lonely descent into his own personal hell. His body bounced and flopped against each stair and when he reached the bottom he just lay there motionless in a crumpled heap, blood shrieking from his head. The exit would was small, but complete, and blood began to flow quite steadily from the family man gone wrong.

Shana had heard the shot and had started screaming at Leon. "Leon, for heavens sake," she screamed, "please answer me. I'm so worried about you." Nothing. She screamed his name again in frustration, hoping that it was a joke, that he was playing some kind of sick trick on her. It was infinitely better than the alternative. The phone hung up as Shana realised that joke or not, he wasn't going to answer.

Tim had heard the shot and started knocking on the walls and the door in alternation. He had no keys and so couldn't get in, but he was fully aware of what Shana could expect when she arrived home. How could he tell her. Only 10 minutes earlier he'd been banging on the wall with Leon in a game of who can annoy their neighbour the most. Usually a calm and considerate person, Tim had taken to playing Leon at his own game, but the game was far beyond that now. Leon was dead. His final mission complete, no one would know that again, it had been an accident.

He hadn't meant to pull the trigger, not so soon anyway. He wanted to take the opportunity to pray for Shana and Ruben. He wasn't sure where he was going after he died, so he had wanted to ensure he got the time to say the things he needed to say whilst he was still in the land of the living. It was one of the first things that had entered his mind when he had dropped from the ceiling, that he had been given an opportunity to pray.

As the blood trickled down his skull and started to ooze on the carpet, the room started to fill with the stench of death. It crept into every nook and cranny of the room and then started to seep through into every room in the house. The ladder, noose and wooden beam lay motionless at the top of the stairs, a permanent reminder to whoever found Leon, that this had been entirely premeditated. He had wanted to die. He had wanted to be free.

Tim started hammering on the door again. There was no way he would be able to gain access to the house until authorities arrived with the override code. Home security had become a lot more sophisticated in recent years and doors were now reinforced to the point that only the owner of the building or the authorities with the override code would be permitted access.

* * *

Shana arrived home to a frantic Tim. The authorities hadn't arrived yet and he still had no

idea what had transpired in the building. Shana had phoned again in desperation during her journey home but her calls had met with no response. Anyone inside the building would have known the reason why. Tim tried to explain the events as they had happened, but his mind was all confused and all he wanted now, was to get inside the building to help Leon.

* * *

Though Leon hadn't been particularly fond of Tim, Tim had in fact quite enjoyed Leon's company. He would have described his neighbour as a little strange, very calm, but always with something interesting to say. Once, over a beer they had discussed the world's economy and the falling of the global market. Tim had never heard anyone talk about it with as good an insight as Leon, and Tim was an investment banker. He should have been able to counter Leon's every argument for the reason why the government could have prevented the tragedy.

He hadn't though. He had just listened to the man speak.

They had talked way into the night, Leon offering his opinions and Tim occasionally offering his counter argument. In the end Shana had returned from the bedroom and called Leon up to sleep. He'd been reluctant to leave, but had obliged. He didn't want to make Shana angry, he'd never made her angry. He loved her with all of his heart and only wanted to make her happy.

* * *

Shana pressed her thumb to the plate and swiped her DrKey. The system acknowledged her access and opened the door. She walked in first, her body shaking in absolute terror. Tim followed her and was joined by a policeman in his early forties. The authoritative figure had turned up just as Shana had been authorised to enter the building. The police officer had called out to her to step back out of the house, but she hadn't heard him, or had ignored him. The officer continued,

apparently it was a crime scene and they wanted to get inside first to collect any evidence.

“I'm going in first,” she said. “It's not my fault you took your own sweet ass time getting here.” The officer had grabbed hold of her arm as he had pushed past Tim. Now she shrugged him off and stepped forwards. For a woman who was expecting to find her husband dead she showed a surprising amount of self restraint.

She didn't have to go far before the sight of blood met her eyes and instantly she knew Leon was dead. Her head lifted by a few degrees and the body of her beloved husband was now clearly visible. The grief overcame her in waves. First, causing her to clasp her hand to her mouth, less she explode with fury at some – thing. Next her legs gave way, less she tried to run away from the sight before her. Finally her head tipped back and she howled like nothing Tim or the officer had ever heard before.

Tim bent down next to Shana and held her close. She turned her head to sob into his neck and Tim immediately felt the soft, wet, sensation

of her tears. He hadn't even looked up at the fallen figure of his friend. He afforded himself a quick glance but it was too much. He turned his head away in disgust at Leon's body lying there, so disfigured and lifeless.

The blood had begun to congeal now, leaving dark patches on the carpet of the stairs. It had obviously rushed out pretty fast to begin with, as the officer could see a trail of the red substance as it wound its way down the cream shag-pile that adorned the stairway.

He turned to Shana who was still sobbing uncontrollably, "Ma'am, we need to get you out of here." She sat there still, unable to move. Wanting to with her whole being, but totally frozen to the spot. "Come on ma'am," he said again in the calmest of voices. Tim stood up and two men put their arms under hers and lifted her free from the the ground she had been glued to. The three of them exited the room, leaving Leon alone. Dead and alone.

22

The Plan

She'd been sat there for a while now, next to the young man who had saved her life. She'd been watching him sleep and silently stroking his hand with hers. The room in which Zane slept was comfortable, but definitely without luxury. Similar to the room in his dream, it was filled with the same whitewashed furniture. Zane had remembered it from when he had visited the hospital where his mother had died. His father had died on impact, completely crushed by the force of the other car hitting theirs. His mother had survived the accident and had been rushed to here, Majilna Hospital, supposedly the best there was, at least for those without insurance that is.

Kiele wondered what he was thinking. Where was his mind? In truth Zane was doing exactly what his body looked like, resting. He wasn't plagued by nightmares or dreams, his mind and body just slept, safe in the knowledge that he had managed to save the damsel; that Kiele was safe.

The monitor beeped, though it was largely unneeded now. Zane was no longer in a critical condition, he just needed vast amounts of attention, and an even larger amount of rest. The drip hanging above his head was doing its job nicely thought Kiele. She didn't think she'd ever seen anyone so at peace. She'd watched her father sleeping many times in the past, when he had come home late from work and had started yelling at her. She'd always found it impossible to get to sleep after that, her adrenalin pumping and her heart racing, she'd usually waited until he'd fallen asleep before watching him. Just for a while. It was the only time he seemed really human any more.

The door to the small room opened and the doctor walked in. “Any change Kiele?” he asked. She shook her head. The hospital had been dealing with another large emergency at the time Zane had been brought in, and they appeared to be severely understaffed. The doctors had seen how much Kiele had cared for this young lad, and had left her in charge of monitoring him. It was risky, but there were plenty more patients needing much more urgent medical attention.

“He'll come around soon I'm sure,” said the doctor. He appeared to be in his late fifties, that was Kiele's guess anyway. He had a sweet face, with a tuft of grey hair billowing from his head. He looked like the kind of man one would normally associate with being a granddad. The corners of his eyes were home to several crows feet but it still didn't entirely rob him of his youthfulness. He wore a large long white coat that appeared to be at least two sizes too big for him.

“Is there anything I can get for you?” he asked, “Any one you'd like me to call?” Once

again she shook her head. A girl of few words thought the doctor.

“My father should be here soon,” she said. He smiled. It was always better when a patient could go home with family he thought.

“I’m pleased your scan was all right,” the doctor said with total sincerity. It was a pleasure to find a well mannered teenager in today’s society. So many of them had been turned evil by the media, inciting desire, hatred and fear in to so many young hearts. If he hadn’t become a hospital resident, he would have gone into psychiatry, in an attempt to heal the hearts broken by the world of tomorrow.

Kiele said nothing more and the doctor knew he had out-stayed his welcome. She liked him, but at the moment she just wanted to be alone with Zane. It wasn’t meant to be though, as a pretty young woman knocked on the door and entered the room. It was Jolie and Kiele was overjoyed to see someone she knew. She jumped up from the chair she had been perched on the corner of and ran to Jolie, throwing her arms

around her as she went. Jolie was taken a little by surprise. It hadn't been quite the reception she had expected.

The two of them stood there for a while as the doctor made his escape. No doubt he would see them again soon, but he wanted to leave the two alone for a while. They parted and Jolie could see Kiele had tears in her eyes.

“It was horrible,” she began, flustered and almost excited at the same time. “He threw himself in front of the train and saved me, and I saw him get hit by all this rubble, and I didn't know what was going to happen, and the ambulance took an age to get here.” Kiele trailed off, she had been limited by the oxygen in her lungs and she found her self breathing heavily to regain her composure.

“I'm so sorry,” said Jolie, “Kiele I'm so sorry.” The teacher stroked the side of the young girl's face. She had felt so guilty after hearing the news about her students, that she had almost been sick in the taxi. Upon arriving at the hospital she had spoken to reception who had informed her that

both Zane and Kiele were alive, and that Zane was just having some minor surgery to remove some debris. She had slumped to the floor when she had heard the news and the nurse on duty had run around from her little enclosure to ensure that the poor young woman hadn't banged her head as she had fainted.

As it transpired Jolie hadn't fainted at all, but the news of Zane and Kiele had been too much to take in all at once. They weren't her children, but she'd always paid more attention to these two. They were the only pair in the class who didn't have stable parental figures in their lives. She had met Kiele's father once and had not been impressed with what she had seen and felt. He had seemed nice, but something underneath worried her. He appeared to care more about her grades than her happiness, which was usual in some parents, but it had seemed creepy, almost as if there had been an alternative motive.

Standing there together one could have sworn they were indeed mother and daughter. They held the same chiselled features and bright eyes. Kiele

brought up a chair for Jolie to sit on and the two of them rested their legs by Zane's side, both facing his bed. Jolie had seen a doctor who had told her Zane's condition, but she wanted to hear from Kiele how he really was.

“How has he been?” she asked the young girl.

“He hasn't woken up from the operation yet,” she said, “but the doctors think he'll make a full recovery.” It was the best news both of them had heard all day. Kiele looked at Zane and placed her hand on his again.

“Jolie?” she said. Jolie acknowledged her with a hmm. “He almost died in the ambulance,” she said. “I was so scared that I'd lost him,” she corrected her self, “that we'd lost him.” Jolie turned to the side and smiled. Kiele had taken quite a shine to Zane since he had saved her. They had seemed like casual acquaintances before, bickering like the young adults they were, but now there seemed to be a whole different depth to their relationship.

“He's strong,” said Jolie. “You know that.” It was true. Zane had been through so much, and to

survive it all as he had, was a show of his strength of character.

“I know,” said Kiele. She placed her fingers on top of his and rubbed his palm with her thumb. It was soothing. Not for Zane, but for Kiele. Jolie waited a while and the two of them sat there in silence, looking at the strong lad.

Finally she asked, “Is your father coming to pick you up?” It was a question she didn't want to answer. She'd told the doctor what he wanted to hear, that her father had been called, but she had no idea when he would actually arrive. She felt so embarrassed to be telling her teacher that she had no idea when her father would come to pick her up from hospital. Once he had heard she was OK, he hadn't cared much. He knew that if he didn't go to pick her up, she would find her way home eventually. Heaven help her if she didn't.

At that moment he appeared. First behind glass, and then through the door. The girls had no idea how long he had been standing behind them. He was about six foot and had short black hair.

His face looked weathered but he wasn't what you would consider ugly.

He hadn't seen them hugging, that much was known, Jolie, who had been facing the doorway, would have seen him. As the door opened, Kiele quickly released her soft grip of Zane's hand and shrank back into her chair.

"Hi there," he said in an almost cheery tone. Jolie was perplexed. Did the man have no feelings whatsoever? It was obvious that Kiele was in pain, both physically and emotionally and his candid attitude was definitely not helping. "Heard you knocked your head pretty bad?" The question was directed at Kiele but she didn't really want to answer. Jolie stepped in for her.

"Kiele is fine," she said, "but she's very upset, and needs a lot of TLC right now."

"Oh.....sure....sure," he said, making wink wink gestures at Jolie. She wasn't biting. Her earlier suspicions had been unfortunately confirmed today and she found herself wishing she could just take Kiele home with her. He looked at Kiele and touched her gently on the

arm, "Can we have a little word before you say goodbye to your friends?" She nodded obediently and the two of them walked out of Zone's room.

Jolie was left to sit and stare at the young student of hers. He was so bright, so brilliantly bright, a really gifted child. He rarely showed it in her classes, but she'd heard rumours from the other teachers that problems they put up on the board to be solved over summer, were solved by Zane in fifteen minutes. He hadn't liked to brag about it though and had waited until after class before showing the teacher his answer. He'd even managed to point out a fundamental flaw in one of the math teachers problems. He'd pointed out that the problem wasn't solvable unless you made a terribly generic assumption. Zane solved the problem completely, the rest of the class however made the terribly generic assumption. Maths was the only lesson he dared speak out in.

* * *

Outside the room Kiele's father took on a completely different form. He grabbed her by the forearm, crushing her delicate wrists and she found herself completely unable to flex her fingers. He dragged her into a spare room and closed the door. The room was dark, there were no lights on and it seemed to spook Kiele more than usual. Though she was in a public place, she was scared of her father, more than anyone else on the planet. To be perfectly honest, she had been almost more scared of her father coming to get her, than she had been of Zane dying.

“Let go Mark,” she said furiously, “it's hurting.”

His voiced raised and hit the ceiling, “Don't you call me that, don't you ever call me that. My name is 'dad' understand.” She nodded. Why in the hell had she said that? She was just angry she supposed, angry at his blatant disregard for her friend and her life. She shouldn't have spoken to him like that. It wasn't going to grease the wheels.

“What the hell did you do?” he shouted at her. “Are you trying to ruin everything?” She looked up at the man she so desperately wanted to call dad. He was far taller than her and she spoke softly and purposefully.

“I don't know what happened,” she said truthfully. “One minute we were there talking, the next, a train had flown through the wall and....”

He cut her off, “Do you realise what I could have lost today?” He was mad, really really mad. She didn't think she'd ever seen him quite this angry. Usually he lost his head, shouted, threw a few things, broke some of her things, but today, he was so calm, so collected. She didn't answer, but instead looked out in the direction of Zane. How she wished she could have been in there with him and Jolie right now. Maybe he had woken up, he could be talking right now.

Her train of thought was rudely interrupted as he slammed his hands down on a nearby work surface and said, “and don't you dare fall in love

with that boy. I have enough to deal with without that.”

She looked longingly for Zane, hoping to be able to see him through the door, the chance was slim as there was an opaque blind in the way.

“You can't control my feelings,” she said under her breath, almost a silent whisper.

He became even more angry. “What did you say?” he barked. When she didn't respond he lunged for her and grabbed her round the neck with both hands and flung her tiny body effortlessly against the nearest wall, knocking into a whitewashed unit as he did so. The items on the unit scattered all over the place, making an incredible racket. He held her up so her feet were off of the floor and she gasped for breath. Her hands grappled with his, grabbing and scratching, trying desperately to get him to release her. Yet his grip was too strong.

When he was done toying with her, he lowered her just enough so she could touch the floor on tip toes. A medical student had carelessly left a brand new scalpel out on the side

of the opposite unit. He grabbed it, releasing one hand from around her neck, but ensuring all his weight was maintaining her position against the wall.

Kiele's heart was pounding now. He'd never been quite this violent towards her before and she was genuinely frightened at what he was going to do next. He waved the scalpel in front of her eyes to gain her attention. She followed it to and fro, to and fro before he stopped in the centre and watched her eyes cross. There was no denying she was a beautiful young girl.

Dad moved the scalpel towards one of her eyes. As she turned her head to try to keep as far away from it as possible he released his grip on her neck and quickly flung the side of his forearm against the side of her head. It hit her hard and reminded her of the pain she had felt earlier in the day. Stupidly she had pulled her head slightly away from the wall when he had released his grip, only to have it slammed into the wall yet again.

Kiele's head was held in a sideways position. She breathed heavily. Her neck felt so sore and

she was finding it more and more difficult to breathe. He moved the scalpel close to her eye again. This time she just stood there, feet barely touching the ground, lungs almost ready to give out with fear. With the delicate finesse of a master calligrapher he stroked her eye lid with the back of the blade.

“Just you remember who the boss really is,” he said. She couldn't nod, but then, she couldn't speak either. She was in a vice. “Just you remember your place in things.” She managed to let out a small squeak which he took to mean yes. 'He was talking about the plan again,' she thought, 'but just what was it that he was planning?'

He released his grip suddenly and Kiele found herself falling through the air. Unable to fire the neurons to her leg muscles quick enough, she collapsed in a heap, smashing her head into a metal bar on the bed.

He chuckled, “Careful. We wouldn't want you hurting yourself now would we?” She couldn't tell if he was joking or not. She also couldn't tell if she was bleeding or not. She

prayed she wasn't, it would mean she would have to go home straight away without seeing Jolie or Zane. If Jolie noticed her bleeding it would raise too many questions and Mark wouldn't want that. She had managed to at least right herself, and put up her hand to see if her head was bleeding.

“Relax,” he said, “you didn't hit it that hard.” She hated him right now. She wasn't fond of him at the best of times, but today, she really hated him. Why had he and his mother decided to have a child if he didn't like having her around. Was it her? Was it something she'd inadvertently done? Perhaps when she was little she'd done something to upset him? She would never know. She so desperately wanted a father, someone to love. She'd have given up Mark any day of the week. It was true he paid for her meals and she never went without, but it wasn't done out of love. It was done so that she could live in servitude to him, her almighty master.

“We'd better get back in there before they get suspicious,” he said to her and as he turned, “Now, you say anything to that bitch of a

teacher,” he started, “you mention just one word and I swear I’ll cut you girl.” He was deadly serious. He’d never made a threat on her life before, and although he could have meant he’d just make a small incision on her skin, she knew he meant something much more. He meant to cut her open, to gut her like a fish.

* * *

She’d tried so many times to run away, but he’d always found her. Sometimes she’d disappear from school for weeks at a time. When she returned Mark would always say they’d had a family emergency, or they’d gone on a last minute holiday to somewhere exotic. It was always a lie. He couldn’t tell the truth; that she’d run away. He couldn’t tell them that she hated him that much that she wanted to be rid of him forever. A few times the devil had tempted her to kill him. When he was sleeping, she’d occasionally heard the voice of temptation pushing her onward. It wasn’t her thoughts, she could never do it. To kill Mark

would mean she was stooping to his level, worse in fact.

She hadn't called him dad since she was about ten years old and he had come in to her room in a blind rage and broken her favourite dolls house. He hadn't just absent mindedly broken the door, he had come in and smashed the thing to smithereens. It had lain there in a million pieces. She'd cried herself to sleep that night and vowed that if he didn't feel like her daddy, then he didn't deserve to be called daddy. It was a brave thing to do for such a small child, she'd lost her daddy long ago. He was just a guardian to her now, and not a good one at that judging from his actions in the hospital.

One time she'd fled to her alleged grandmothers house, only to find it empty and deserted. He had scrawled the address down in a book by the phone, he rarely used electronic devices, and she had looked it up when he had been late home from work one day. She'd packed up her things and left the house. When she arrived at the cottage, she found it in a dilapidated

state. The paint was falling off the walls literally. Small children were playing in the old place as if no one had ever lived there. She'd sat outside crying for half an hour before her father turned up.

Mark had laughed and called her a silly girl. When she asked him where her grandmother was, he'd simply said, 'well she was never there, that's for sure.' She'd asked him why he'd written down a false address, and he'd replied that he had to know where she was likely to go hiding out. It had sickened her that she had fallen for his trap. She was thirteen, and just starting to blossom into a young woman, but he didn't care. He had trodden all over her dreams, squishing them as if they were the dark skinned people he hated so much.

She had never understood that either. Mark was awfully racist. Though the acceptance of dark skinned people had increased over the last fifty years, it had made the people who couldn't accept them even more extreme. Mark was one of them. It embarrassed her so much.

Once when they were out, she was only nine at the time they had taken the train into town. The train had been packed and they had taken to standing until Mark noticed a 'darkie' sitting in a seat behind him. He spat into the newspaper that the man had been reading. 'Go on' he had told his young daughter, 'spit onto this man's shoe. He isn't worthy of sitting down.' She had shaken her head and refused, so he had swiped at her with the newspaper he had been keeping rolled up under his arm. No one challenged him, as he forced his young daughter to spit on a stranger's shoe. Unsurprisingly the man relinquished his seat and moved to another carriage, where ironically, a youngster gave up his seat willingly for the old man.

* * *

“You remember your part right?” said Mark as he reached out for the door handle. “You keep him interested, but nothing more and remember what I said, don't you dare fall for him Kiele.”

She nodded. A part of her wondered if she already had, but she wasn't about to let Mark know that. He opened the door sharply and rustled the blind which hadn't been fixed properly at their lower edge.

They crossed the hospital hallway and entered the room where Zane still lay asleep. Jolie looked up as they walked in and the victim adjusted her collar to hide the fading evidence of Mark's aggression. Jolie didn't even notice her temporary scars as the two of them walked in. Kiele hadn't quite believed Mark when he had said she wasn't bleeding, but now she guessed he must have been right.

Zane stirred, his breathing becoming slightly erratic. Jolie and Kiele quickly rushed to his side and the teacher pressed the button to call the nurse. Mark looked across the room at Zane. It was hard to believe that this boy was going to change his life forever, hard to believe that he was the key to it all, but enough of that now, he was lucky that the boy hadn't been more seriously

injured. The kid needed to rest if he was going to be of any use to him.

The call to the nurse had been a false alarm as Zane settled back into his rhythmic coma. Mark took the opportunity to try to drag Kiele away. "Come on," he said, "it's time to go." Kiele sighed despondently. She'd desperately wanted to see him wake up, just to hear him speak again. Mark had other ideas. "Get your stuff and let's go," he repeated, "unless you know of another way home that I don't."

Jolie had almost been waiting for this moment. Slyly and ever so carefully she spoke up, "I can take Kiele home at the end of visiting hours, if you have somewhere you need to be." Mark couldn't argue. He hadn't seen the nurse come in, but now he was in a bind, three against one and the argument was very reasonable. He let his daughter win this round.

"OK," he agreed, "But you need to be back home by 10pm." The fact that it was only four in the afternoon hadn't deterred Mark from asserting his authority. On the one hand she'd gotten what

she wanted, but Kiele couldn't help but wonder if she would pay for it later. Mark walked over to her and kissed her on the forehead tenderly. "I'll see you at home sweetie."

"See you," she said quietly.

Mark walked out of the door and closed it behind him. The nurse was still tending to the young man and she spoke as she checked the monitor, "Did he say anything when he stirred?" she asked.

"No," said Jolie before adding, "We're sorry for wasting your time."

"Not at all," smiled the nurse.

Jolie genuinely felt bad for calling the nurse out on a false alarm. They must have a million and one things to deal with, she thought, how careless of her not to have waited a few more minutes.

The nurse was about twenty years old and had shoulder length brown hair. She pressed a few buttons on the monitor to recall the moments of the blip, checking his brain activity, breathing, pulse, amongst other things. The snap shots

showed a small peak each time, but nothing significant. She switched to one of the neurological graphs. “Your friend isn't even dreaming,” she mentioned as she showed them the graph.

Both Kiele and Jolie moved closer, eager to see what the graph had to say. The nurse traced the line with her finger tip which glowed from the luminosity of the screen. “You see this section here?” she asked. They nodded as she pointed to the small peak. “That's when he stirred. The brain fired off the signals to move his muscles that's all,” she said. She hadn't meant to sound so condescending or patronising, but it had seemed to come out that way. Jolie and Kiele hadn't noticed, they were transfixed on Zane and the monitor.

The nurse finished up her tasks cheerily and walked to the door, her pretty short skirt bouncing as she did so. How ironic that her cheery nature hadn't invoked the same disgust as that which the girls had felt for Mark when he had first visited.

“Visiting hours will be over shortly,” said the nurse as she exited the room. The door closed behind her and the two just stood there.

“Thanks for saying you'd take me home,” said Kiele. “You really didn't have to.” Jolie looked at her and smiled. She had known how badly Kiele had wanted to stay, and having it denied by Mark had brought her into action, like a soldier in the reserves.

“It's fine Kiele,” she said. “I know how badly you wanted to stay with Zane.” Kiele sat down again and took up his hand again, now that the coast was clear and Mark had left. He was breathing so peacefully again now and she so desperately wanted to take hold of him and wake him up. Though she wouldn't admit it, Jolie would have liked to do the very same thing.

The two of them sat there in silence for the next few minutes before an announcement came over the tannoy to signal the end of visiting hours. It had hardly seemed worth fighting Mark now, but it had been a small victory for both women. Neither of them wanted to leave, but they'd much

rather have followed the hospitals rules that the rules of Mark, the evil dictator.

As Jolie moved to the door Zane stirred again, and they both rushed back to his side but alas, it had been another false alarm. It was getting frustrating now. Jolie returned to the door and put an arm out to guide the young Kiele as she desperately tried to outstay her welcome. The two of them exited the room and closed the door.

23

Mt. Taleberg

As they sat there in the taxi on the way home the world seemed to whizz by in a blur. It had been a long day for both of them. Jolie had visited the legend that was Ruben and had been called away because two of her students had been involved in a horrific accident. Kiele had been in that horrific accident and survived with little more than a few scratches and a bruised neck. They were both tired and as they sat there Kiele could almost feel herself nodding off.

The taxi had been painted green by the owner of the fleet. Looking to make a statement, each taxi in the fleet had been painted its own unique colour and had the name of the colour inserted

into the phrase 'The **** Taxi', which was visible in large letters on the side. They were riding in the 'The Green Taxi' right now and though the ride was smooth, the driver was going a little too fast for Jolie's liking. It wasn't like he was about to crash, Jolie just much preferred taking things at a nice easy pace.

The interior of the taxi was nice, decked in a plush cream ripstop leather with wooden accents. It felt like they were riding in a limousine. She guessed that's what the owner of the fleet had been trying to capture and in her eyes, he'd done a fantastic job. The cars were classy, yet purposeful.

“Is everything OK?” Jolie asked. She'd hardly had time to think before the words came tumbling out. Kiele looked at Jolie, what did she mean? Had she seen the way Mark had treated her? Impossible. Maybe she just had a good sense for these kind of things? It was impossible to say for sure.

“Yeh,” Kiele answered. Had she believed it, she would have said it with a little more

conviction, but as it was, she had replied in a rather weak tone. Jolie picked up on this instantly and decided to try to press just that little bit further.

“If you need to talk I'm here,” the teacher said. “I know sometimes it can seem like there's no one around to share things with, especially when people don't always act in the proper manner,” she was of course referring to Mark. She continued, “but I want you to know, you always have a friend in me.” She meant it too. Though Kiele was not her daughter, the presence of a strong female role model in her life was something Jolie felt of great importance. Kiele was silent. She wanted to say thank you, but the Mark inside refused to let her.

“You don't get on well with your dad do you?” asked the teacher, wondering instantly if she had gone too far. She hadn't wanted to spook the girl, just help her.

“Who does?” came Kiele's reply. “Everything's fine at home. He just rubs me up the wrong way sometimes.” Inside, Kiele's head

screamed. 'You mean when he throws you up against walls?' it asked. 'Or when it tries to cut your eyeball open with a scalpel?' She quenched the anger and sat there in apparent harmony with herself. It wasn't as if she didn't want to talk, but the stern warning her father had given her about the educator was still very fresh in her mind. It would take a lot to dissolve the memory of having your head rammed against a wall, and a scalpel almost slice into your eye.

Though Jolie knew she was hiding something, she let it go, not wanting to upset her or put the young girl through any more stress. Jolie had known her for a few years now and though she progressed steadily, Jolie couldn't help but imagine how much further she could have gotten with the encouragement that she so desperately sought.

The taxi rounded a corner and Kiele's neck, still sore from the trauma, flopped over to one side. It happened to be the side that Jolie was sitting and Kiele managed to catch it before it hit her. Still, her head was at an odd angle now and

she left it there. After a few seconds she let it drift the rest of the way onto Jolie's shoulder.

* * *

Manufacturers, driven by the constant threat of financial meltdown, had tried to shave everything off the cost of production. If this meant a less luxurious product, then so be it. The consumers would understand they had assured themselves. The manufacturer of the Taxi, a one Shubara Motors Inc, had made the assumption and had impressively managed to shave forty six percent off of the cost of production across all models. This particular model had been a hit, with taxi firms. Unfortunately the consumers didn't seem to understand so well. Instead one manufacturer actually increased the cost of production of one model by thirty percent. Against all the odds, it outsold all others by a factor of seven percent. Incidentally, Shubara Motors Inc had gone into administration the next year.

* * *

Jolie sat there with the young girl resting on her shoulder. She wanted to ask her more, but couldn't bring herself to break Kiele's apparently peaceful mood. Jolie hadn't ever seen her angry, but as the old saying went, 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it.' Finally it was Kiele who broke the silence.

“Do you think Zane could hear us?” she asked the learned woman. Though she already knew Jolie wouldn't know the answer, she hoped that her reply would insight some reassurance that Zane was going to be OK. The doctors had said he would be fine, but he still hadn't woken up yet.

“I'm not sure,” said Jolie with little reassurance. “But I like to think he did.” She smiled and Kiele did the same.

The poor thing, thought Jolie, all she can think about was Zane. She needed a break, something to distract her, just for a few hours. It seemed as if she wasn't going to get much sympathy from home. Without thinking she tapped on the divider

between them and the driver. The glass became transparent and suddenly they could hear the music blaring away in the front of the car.

“Do you think you could drop us off at the commercial district instead?” asked Jolie loudly. The driver nodded, whilst singing the second chorus of Metallica's 'Unforgiven II'. For a brief second Jolie was unsure whether he was head banging, or whether he was nodding. He complemented his actions with a thumbs up for confirmation and once again the divider became opaque.

“What are you doing?” said Kiele angrily. Jolie hadn't expected such a fearful reaction. “My dad said I had to come home at ten!”

Kiele clearly wasn't thinking properly and Jolie calmly replied, “It's only just gone five. We have plenty of time.” Kiele calmed down and looked at the watch; Zane's watch. She had put it on her wrist for safe keeping, fully expecting to give it back to Zane that very afternoon. Jolie noticed it and commented, “that's a very bulky watch isn't it?”

“It's Zane's,” she said, “Kaitlin gave it to him earlier. He was so excited.” She hung her head a little. “He's gonna be mad if he wakes up and finds it gone.” And just like that they were back to Zane.

* * *

The young man in bed fifty eight stirred again. His monitor beeped erratically for a few seconds before settling down to normal. The nurse had been in not five minutes before, plumping pillows and arranging flowers. The room looked really relaxing and the nurse couldn't help but wonder if anyone would mind her taking a kip in here. Of course she'd never do it, but the room just seemed to expel sleepiness. She yawned. She'd only been on her shift fifteen minutes. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

When they reached the commercial district they had exited the taxi and had paid the fare. Most taxi companies now took payment up front, but this one liked the touch of the good old days. Jolie had been expecting to pay more for her trip, but seeing as they had stopped sooner than expected, the price had been proportionally decreased.

They had walked past several outside shops and Jolie had tugged Kiele into the main shopping precinct. It was beautiful in there and for a moment Kiele forgot about her day completely. They walked past an electronics store, which had been eager to show them the latest in home entertainment and media management. They pressed on through, for Jolie was on a mission.

Jolie had suggested that they first hit Mount Taleberg, a well known and highly sought after fashion outlet. Kiele had protested that they were far too expensive and that there was just no point in even looking. Her teacher had insisted that they try, after all there might be a sale on, she had dreamed.

Jolie and Kiele both lived in a fairly affluent neighbourhood, considering the world around them and they could afford to treat themselves once in a while. 'Today was different though,' thought Jolie. It wasn't about her at all. Today was all about Kiele. Her plan was to find a dress that Kiele found absolutely irresistible and buy it for her as a thank you gift for looking after Zane.

They stood in front of the store. It really was quite magnificent. There were stone pillars, quite clearly not made of real stone, adorning the entrance on either side. Above the top of the entrance, a slogan was carved into a horizontal slab of stone. "If it ain't Taleberg, it ain't unique."

* * *

It was an odd slogan. It implied that every other store copied their style and designs, when the truth was almost the reverse. Taleberg had been sued many times over their twenty year history for creating what was known in the trade as fusion pieces. They would take two designs

from two highly successful stores and merge them together to create a unique item of clothing. It was true, the clothing was unique, but Taleberg designers never had to do any real design work.

The fashion industry had been up in arms. Designers had filed law suits left, right and centre, but none of them could stop the awesome force of Mount Taleberg. The red carpet events were littered with outpourings of their designs. Partly because they were so highly fashionable, but also because Taleberg bribed celebrities into wearing their outfits in return for ridiculous sums of money.

* * *

Kiele was the first to break. She almost ran inside. It couldn't be classified as running as she had kept both feet on the floor at all times. It was more of a power walk. She started to pick out a few items of clothing and hold them up against herself. She yelled over to Jolie who smiled and walked inside. Her plan appeared to be working.

As Jolie entered, she noticed the tall security guard eyeing Kiele as a potential shoplifter. He kept his vision fixed on her whilst he moved his hand to press the button on his comms device. He opened his mouth to speak, but Jolie got there first.

“She's with me,” she said. The guard looked at the young woman before him. She was pretty, very pretty. He looked back across at Kiele and then back to Jolie.

“She's my daughter” Jolie offered. This seemed to grease the right wheels with the guard and he nodded knowingly. His mouth closed and his hand dropped back to his side. He rolled back on his heels and began to survey the shop once more, piercing each customer with his razor sharp vision.

Jolie left the man's side and walked over to Kiele. She was beside herself with excitement. “Look Jolie,” she said excitedly, “this one's actually half price.” Jolie looked at the price tag. If this was half price, her brain didn't want to do

the mathematics required to calculate the full price.

“Wow,” said Joile genuinely enthusiastically as she felt the material, “that is a really nice top.”

The two of them continued to walk around the shop, one occasionally calling the other other to look at a particular item that had caught their fancy. Kiele had never been on a trip like it in her life. Having never had a mother, and living with her 'demented' father, the only items of clothing she had been allowed to buy were of the cheapest brand possible.

She hadn't cared, not being one of the fashionistas, but it had pained her occasionally to see all of her friends in beautiful dresses, and yet there she was in the latest tat. Mark had never understood. He had never wanted to.

As they rounded yet another long rail of beautiful clothes, they hit upon something different. Taleberg was known for their slightly kooky looking fashion, but what stood before them was a truly beautiful dress. It was made from a silky material and had a floral pattern on

it. The print was made up of mauve and white flowers but from afar it looked like a pale shade of pink. The skirt was slightly gathered and it flared as it reached just below the knee. The back was left with a large piece cut away, starting wide at the top, before tapering to a point about five inches from the base of the spine.

Kiele walked towards it in pure awe. It was beautiful. Nothing too special, but so feminine and pretty. The material was a soft cotton now she had taken a closer look, lacquered with some kind of spray. She reached out to grab the price tag, but her companion stopped her.

“How about you just try it on first,” Jolie said. Kiele, who had wondered why she had been denied access to the tag smiled. She took the dress and as she walked away heard Jolie say, “Don't look, just try it on.”

In the dressing room she mused over the day as she carefully undressed. Her body was red in places with scratches and grazes from the events proceeding, her emotions had also taken quite a beating. She had been able to cope with Zane,

just about, but the addition of her father had been too much. She adjusted her bra straps, making herself feel a little more comfortable. She picked up the dress and slipped it over her head and onto her slim figure. It fit perfectly. She stood and looked at herself in the mirror for a good five minutes. It was the most beautiful she had ever looked, or felt.

The young girl put both of her hands up to her hair and pulled it into a bunch at the back. Two shorter strands of hair fell out at either side of her face. 'Not bad Kiele' she said to herself, 'not bad.' She heard a titter of laughter coming from a nearby cubicle. She really hadn't noticed that she'd said it out loud. She released her hair, ruffling it and blowing a kiss into the mirror. She had never felt so good in all her life. How ironic that it was her teacher that had been the parent she had always wanted? She guessed it often happened like that.

Kiele replaced the beautiful dress with the denim skirt and brown top she had been wearing earlier. Her father, the pig, hadn't even brought a

change of clothes when he'd come to try to drag her home. What an ass. Her top was covered in dust and dirt. No wonder that security guard had given her a funny look upon her entry into his domain.

Though Jolie had told her not to, it was too hard to resist looking at the label. After all Jolie had told her to 'try it on first' and she had. 'She technically wasn't breaking any....' her brain stopped as she noticed the price. 39,000,000emb. It was about the same price as as two weeks work. Even for the upper class it was an expensive purchase. Something you 'invested' in rather than bought.

She felt a little dirty. There was no way she was worthy of trying on a dress like this. It was far too good for her. As she pulled back the curtain of the changing rooms she noticed the how heavy the dividing fabric was. She had been in far too much of a rush when she entered, and had thrown the curtain closed, not really caring if it was properly concealing her or not. Now she had the opportunity to feel how out of place she

really was. This wasn't her world. She didn't deserve it.

* * *

Jolie hadn't expected to see him so soon, she certainly hadn't expected to see him right now. As she had been waiting for Kiele to emerge from the changing room she had spotted a rather odd looking figure standing about twenty metres away. It wasn't a particularly cold day, yet here was someone wearing a huge overcoat, topping it off with a large hat. The colour of the two items of clothing were a dark brown and they stuck out like a sore thumb against the bright blue of new denim jeans.

Ruben, now seeing Jolie was alone, quickly walked over towards her. She had recognised his figure the moment she had seen him, even though she hadn't seen his face. His walk was hurried yet slow at the same time, the size of him presumably being the culprit for making him look so

awkward whilst doing the most ordinary of things.

“Are you following me?” she asked the huge man. She was a little concerned. They had only met the once and here was this guy, legendary or not, creeping up on her in public places. It just seemed wrong.

“No,” he said, “but I need something from you fast.” His voice was wavering and now Jolie could see his face she could also see he was in a little bit of a panic. It didn't surprise her, the clothes gave away the fact that Ruben hadn't been outside properly in a long time. What could he possibly want from her? She hoped Kiele wouldn't come out whilst Ruben was there. That was an explanation she didn't want to have to produce.

“I don't understand,” she said, “how did you know I was here?” It was a very good point. If Ruben hadn't been following her since earlier in the day, how the heck did he know where she was. In truth she wanted to know the answer, in truth she also didn't.

“It's not important now,” he snapped quickly before seemingly getting to the point. “Your students, the ones in the accident?” he asked.

“Yes?” enquired Jolie. It was highly probable that the news story had broken by now, they never stayed quiet for long. Journalists were like vultures these days and she was almost surprised no one had swooped to try to interview her already.

Ruben continued, breaking her trail of thought, “Did they say anything about any writing on the train?” Jolie's face turned to one of utter confusion. Writing? What the heck did he mean?

24

Unwanted Engagement

Jolie wasn't Ruben's only visitor that day. Shortly after she left, there had been someone else requesting an audience with Michael Stapes. Ironically, though Ruben had welcomed his previous visitor with open arms, even though he had no idea who she was, the next visitor he would have gladly left waiting on the doorstep, had he had the choice.

The door bell had rung and Ruben had walked slowly to the door. Thanks to his paranoid installations, he already knew who was there and so he took his time. Eventually he reached the door and pulled back the metal shutter that was placed at eye level. It was about five by twenty

centimetres and revealed a hole of about the same size. Through it Ruben spied on his visitor.

“I don't have all day Michael,” said his visitor coldly.

“What a coincidence,” started Ruben, “because thanks to you, I do.”

It sounded like typical friendly banter, but it was far from it. Ruben blamed his guest for his confinement and rightly so. He closed the shutter up and waited a good few minutes. A rhythmic banging started on the door. He wasn't going away. Then there was the sound of something charging. It started off low in frequency and then increased rapidly. Suddenly Ruben was overcome with fear. His company was getting ready to knock down the door by force.

Ruben dived for the floor as the caller released the force of the sonic ram. A huge metal cylinder about three feet long ten centimetres across suddenly shot forward and smashed a hole in the door, pretty much in the centre.

“We can do this the hard way or the easy way Michael,” said the voice as the dust and shards of

wood cleared. Had he been allowed, Ruben would have fitted one of the top of the range security doors, but being under constant watch by the G-TEP made it difficult. In addition to that, the G-TEP could open any door they wanted at the click of a button anyway. They held all the keys.

Ruben picked himself up off the floor and dusted off his coat. There had been no need for that. Though Ruben wanted to put off the visit for as long as possible, he would have caved eventually. Now he had a hole in his door, and an even angrier caller standing on his door step.

“There was no need for that Mark, you freakin cretin.” shouted Ruben. “I’m not going to disobey the G-TEP am I?” He slowly walked towards the door.

“You refused me entry Michael, what choice did I have?” He put his hand through the door and released the lock. Ruben had chosen an elderly looking lock, highly effective on houses fifty years ago. Now it offered the same level of security as locking a bike up to a thief. Very

little. The door swung open and swept much of the debris along with it.

“See, I even cleaned up after myself,” said the cretin. Ruben left him where he stood and walked into the lounge. It was darker in there and he felt more comfortable. As comfortable as he could with Mark in the room anyway.

Mark followed him into the the lounge and sat down in a chair. The room was distinctly different to the kitchen he had shared with the pretty Jolie earlier. There were mountains of books in every corner and a small desk lamp in one corner was the only illumination in the entire room. Mark picked up one of the books. It was a fiction book. A story. He threw it across the room. Ruben winced as it hit another stack of literature and the entire tower toppled over.

“I’m not due for another visit for three weeks,” said Ruben. “Why the heck have you decided to grace me with your presence this time?” He always managed to sound infinitely more intelligent when Mark was around. He tried extra

hard so as not to look foolish in front of his enemy.

Mark remained quiet. He enjoyed toying with the dark skinned man. He hated him after all. All that he once stood for, all that he once did, Mark hated him for it all. That and the fact that Ruben's skin wasn't the same colour as his. Ruben believed in God too. In short, there was nothing about this man that Mark liked. The only thing he admired was his ability to keep a secret for so long. Yet the secret would soon be voiced, then there would be nothing to admire at all.

He picked up another book hurled it across the room, but this time aimed for the log fire which was burning listlessly on one side of room. Ruben had it too good here thought Mark. He deserved a slap in the face every now and then. If Mark had had his way the man would have been dead a long time ago. However they had wanted to keep him alive. His employers. The G-TEP.

Ruben had never revealed the location of Oken's weapons. They had tried desperately to make him talk, but Ruben had stayed quiet for

years, preserving the integrity and honour of his friend by keeping safe the one thing he held precious besides Jay; his beloved Bethany. It was the only way Ruben could think of to keep him going. He held a small part of his friend, locked away safely.

Had the G-TEP possessed temporal weapons themselves they could have found the device. It would still have taken months of work, tracing back Oken's life, but they would have gotten there in the end. Oken had been careful to shield the device as much as possible. The G-TEP had seen pockets of temporal energy cropping up, but they had no idea where or who was making them. That was until Jessie had turned up that is. Jessie had put the final piece in the puzzle and made Ric a very happy man indeed.

The G-TEP had vowed never to use temporal weapons to carry out their duties. The global commander had built the force on this founding principal. Though they were brutal in nature, the sheer hypocrisy of using temporal weapons would

go against everything they stood for, it would make them as bad as the enemy.

Anything even remotely suspicious was checked into, both inside the headquarters and out. Devices were installed in employees homes and routine scans were initiated every three weeks to test for the presence of any temporal residue.

Mark picked up another book and hurled it across the room, aiming for another stack and successfully knocking it and about ten others over. He understood that this was all Ruben had now. Books. His life was lived through fiction. Mark had taken everything else away. He was proud of his achievement. This man was just a living shell, broken and empty.

Mark had heard something about an accident earlier involving his daughter, but that could wait. She wasn't dead, that was the main thing. The boy he needed so desperately wasn't dead either, that was also a plus, training the little witch again for a different target would have taken too much time, time he didn't have. He would stop by the hospital later and play the loving father. Until

then this was the most important thing on his list of things to do today.

As Mark picked up the next book, Ruben, who had been pacing the room behind him, grabbed his arm.

“Stop this,” he said. “Just tell me why you're here.”

Mark looked thoughtful and nodded faintly. “OK,” he said finally, “Seems you haven't been entirely truthful with us Michael.”

Ruben thought hard, what was he talking about? He hadn't been there earlier in the day. How could he have known what he said to Jolie? His mind raced. Had he said something? Left some evidence somewhere?

Mark allowed him a moment or two to think. “She was quite a pretty lady you met with,” he said. Ruben said nothing but just stood there. He sidled his way round the sofa to a chair and sat down.

The G-TEP had had their eye on Jolie for a while. She had proved to be a most useful resource. Her 'research' was largely what their

continuing investigation had been based on. It wasn't that she was more capable than the G-TEP, but she had put the time and effort into something she was passionate about and had gotten good results. Why redo work which had already been done?

The G-TEP had used much of her writings in their reports. It wasn't underhanded in anyway, they were just using the resources made available to them. They had kept her under surveillance for several years and though the supreme court order had expired, the G-TEP still maintained a close watch of her. She was useful.

Ruben hadn't known, but counter to their strong stance against the use of surveillance, they had installed it into Ruben's house and had been watching him 24x7 for years. Mark had been assigned the case, and had been hoping that one day, just one day, Ruben would slip up. He had.

"You were watching me?" asked Ruben quietly.

"Yes"

“After that whole song and dance about privacy and rights, after I begged you to install it to clear my name and you refused?” Ruben was getting angry now. His whole trust of the organisation which he had come to accept, almost respect in a weird way, had just been torn down before his very eyes.

“Yes,” said Mark, “the whole time.” He threw the book that was still in his hand. “The whole damn time.” He was starting to get a little angry now. “Do you know how boring it was watching your sad pathetic life? Do you know how many times I just wanted to come over here and end it for you?”

It had crossed Mark's mind on multiple occasions, but he still needed Ruben. Only this man knew where the blade was; sweet Bethany, nameless to her seeker, and her power. Power that Mark desperately wanted for himself. It was true he'd had to make some compromises over the years, getting a senior officer involved in his plan, but Ric had seemed as passionate about it as he was.

Mark continued, "Today you made the biggest mistake of your life. You let me know that you knew where it was. The blade of course." Ruben shuddered. Mark knew. Mark knew everything. All except the final detail. The location of Oken's creation.

"I'm not going to tell you anything," he said resolutely. He was standing firm in his mind now. Mark could do what he wanted, torture him, he'd survived that, berate him, that was a regular occurrence anyway. Kill him? Sure why not. If it pained him so much to let Ruben live, he'd die for his cause, for his friends.

Mark sat there calmly. It had all been worth it. The last seventeen years had all been worth it. He knew he was finally going to get his hands on the one things he wanted more than anything else, the power was going to be his. With the boy his slave of daughter was securing, he'd soon be able to turn the weapon into a real device of power. It had been said there hadn't been a time machine built in over twenty three years. The G-TEP held

a special celebration ceremony every year to mark the occasion. He was about to break that streak.

Mark laughed. It was all coming together. “So if you're not going to tell me anything,” he said, “I suppose I'd better provide you with an incentive.”

Ruben seemed insulted. “There's nothing you can offer me that will make me talk.”

“Oh, I beg to differ little man,” he said ironically. Ruben was far from little but Mark enjoyed cutting him down to size verbally. Ruben wasn't the brightest of the bunch, but he had learnt so much from his years of reading. “In fact I think I have just the thing for you.”

Mark pulled out an e-ink screen. It had gotten slightly crumpled in his pocket, yet now it sat there in his hand, a testament to his seriousness and dedication to his cause. He put it down on the table face down. It's glow could be seen emanating from underneath. In the dark room it let out a nice greeny blue aura on the table surrounding it.

Ruben stood there still. He didn't want to move. Mark couldn't have anything on that piece of paper that he would want. It was ridiculous to think he could be bought so easily. Yet something at the back of his mind pushed him forward. He walked over to the table and looking at the intruder picked up his bribe and turned it over.

It was a picture of a young girl. She was pretty, thought Ruben. Her blonde hair flowed unbounded around her face. She must have been around seventeen thought the titan. Suddenly he was snapped from his thoughts as a book hit him squarely in the forehead. Ruben reeled and almost toppled over the table. He righted himself and shook his head.

“Stop gawking at my daughter you pervert” shouted Mark. He was having the time of his life. Never before had he been so certain of an outcome. He could do what he wanted and he would still win. He could have toyed with this man all day, but there was the matter of business to attend to.

“Your daughter?” said Ruben in disbelief. “So what are you offering me, her hand in marriage?” He threw the paper back at Mark. “Not interested pal, I'm not as sick as perhaps you think I am.”

“I'm not offering her to you. I'm offering you the opportunity to save her.”

The words had been playing in his head for the last five minutes and Mark was satisfied with how they had been voiced. Menacing, yet calm, almost calculating. Ruben suddenly felt sick to the stomach. What kind of sick game was he playing at? He had known Mark a long time, but he had never displayed any behaviour that would suggest he was capable of murdering his own daughter.

Ruben had to remain strong, Mark would never want to kill his own daughter, he was evil, but not that evil. He had to call his bluff. Ruben wasn't going to give in without a fight.

The fire had eaten through the book now, and the cover flared, a result of the lacquer used in the printing process. As the flames consumed the

books shield, Ruben looked down at Mark, his own defences being routinely punctured.

Mark really was a pitiful little weasel. Though he acted big and tough, Ruben could have flattened his face in one punch. The only reason he held back was the fear of the G-TEP and of course, his eternal well being.

Through gritted teeth Ruben hissed, “Why would I want to save your daughter? I have no interest in her whatsoever. If she's anything like you, the world would be better off without her anyway.”

“Pretty though, isn't she?” his nemesis chirped.

“Appearances can be deceptive.”

Mark looked thoughtful again, before bursting out, “Don't you just love it when a plan comes together?” He paced a few steps in a circle, “I've been planning this since your incarceration in this dump.” Ruben suddenly felt worried and awkward. Though he wasn't known for his mental capacity, Mark could be inherently devious when he wanted to be.

“What are you talking about?” asked Ruben, though he was sure he didn't really want to know.

“Her name's Kiele,” he said wistfully, “she really is beautiful, don't you think?” There was no denying it, but at this point Ruben didn't want to give Mark anything, not an inch, not even a millimetre. “She should be,” he continued, “her mother was gorgeous.”

Ruben couldn't quite make the connection that Mark was alluding to. Then all of a sudden it fit, all of the pieces fit. He couldn't have? It would explain a lot, but surely even he wasn't that evil, was he? Ruben's expression must have changed because Mark now smiled.

“You know now right?” he asked, “You know the big secret. Kiele's mother is Jay.” He continued on whilst Ruben turned as white as a sheet. The man looked back down at the sheet, the similarities were all there, he just hadn't noticed until now. “Now who could I pick as a suitable father?” he began.

“You're insane, you're freakin insane.” Ruben started towards Mark, pointing and waving as he

did. He knocked over several of his own book stacks. “Do you seriously expect me to believe this?”

Mark continued, ignoring Ruben's ranting. “A father who was strong of heart, whatever that means.” He was enjoying this far too much. It had been worth the sacrifice. The seventeen years of caring for that brat. She had been trouble from the start and though he had protected her for her entire life, he had only done it so she could become her purpose, a bargaining chip in his sick quest for power.

“A father who you knew rather well I think.” He turned to Ruben. “His name was Oken, Oken Brown. Ring any bells.” He chuckled.

Ruben could take it no longer. He threw himself across the arm of the chair, aiming for Mark's neck with his left hand. He pined the squirming weasel down like a vet about to perform a procedure on an injured animal. He drew back his other arm, made a fist and punched his enemy squarely in the face. Ruben didn't even feel the pain as his bones crunched against the

skin and cartilage of Mark's nose. The animal let out a yelp as his attacker withdrew from the procedure and stood over his prey.

Mark touched his hand to his nose and felt the blood. It seeped out in small bursts, covering his hand and his shirt. Ruben threw him a rag, which had been hanging over the back of one of his chairs. He neglected to tell Mark that Benzo used it as his sleeping blanket. The patient held the rag to the base of his nose. Mark smiled, but his expression was invisible, covered by Benzo's sleepy blanket.

“I guess I deserved that one,” Mark said. “Now let's talk business. Surely you're not going to let their child die. You swore to protect that which Oken held dear didn't you? What do you think he'd hold closer to his heart, a temporal weapon or his own flesh and blood?”

Knowing what had happened in Oken's past, Ruben knew exactly what Oken's views on family were. He would have protected his family above anything else, risking everything. It had been one of the things that Ruben had admired most about

his friend. Oken had taken on board the short comings of his own family and had turned them into strengths, the strength to protect his friends, to keep them safe at any cost.

Ruben began thinking. Was the temporal weapon a justified cost to save this poor girl's life? What kind of life had she been subjected to? How could he know she was really their child? That seemed like a good starting place. He'd work backwards from there.

"How can I tell that she really is their child?" he said slyly. Mark gave him a video and some documents on an e-ink screen. It couldn't be faked. The evidence was irrefutable. This Kiele girl was Jay and Oken's child, there was no doubt.

Ruben walked over to one of the chairs and sat down, nursing a now slightly sore fist. Mark looked over at him and stared, his eyes boring into the once soft skin of a broken man. "We could set up a little rendezvous for you two if you like, a nice candle lit dinner."

"Cut it out Jessie," snapped back Ruben, "Just, cut it out." He hadn't been thinking

properly and had blurted out Mark's original name. Mark was Jessie, the inconsiderate idiot that had been berated by Oken all those years ago. In his head he had sworn revenge but it hadn't stopped at getting Oken and his girlfriend killed. Jessie had taken things to a whole new level.

"I never gave you permission to use that name," barked Jessie. "Keep your cool retard."

Ruben's temper began to flare, but this time he settled for questioning him instead.

"How could you do this?" asked Ruben.

"Everyone has a child for a reason Rubie," started Jessie, "Some want a continuation of their legacy, others want to change the world from within." He picked up another book and tossed it into the fire. It raged once more and Jessie continued, "Some just want a guardian in their old age. Me?" he smiled evilly, "I wanted a beautiful little bargaining chip."

25

Cryptic Message

Ric and Jessie had hit it off from the start. After the raid on the Zone, Jessie had been taken to Ric to be interrogated. They seemed to have shared some common roots as the discussion had turned from interrogation to banter. Ric had then drafted Jessie into the G-TEP, citing his knowledge of the underground scene vital to future investigations. His name had been changed to Mark and though he still lived in the same town, his facial features had been 'altered' to 'protect' his identity.

Ric and Jessie had spent a large amount of time together. Jessie had shared stories of Oken's mastery to a fascinated Ric. His detesting of

temporal offenders was much more of an outward display than he cared to admit. Deep down he had admired Oken for doing on his own, what it had taken groups of people years to do.

Then had came the fateful day, Jessie and Ric had been at lunch at an out of town café when Jessie had mentioned of his thirst for the same power that Oken had wielded. Both of them knew Ruben had full knowledge of the blade's whereabouts, but they had no proof. They had beaten him till he was half dead, and yet he still hadn't talked. He would have made one incredible operative Ric had joked.

The thought of holding that much power in his hand intrigued Ric and over the course of the next few lunches, Ric had probed Jessie for loyalty. How far was this weasel prepared to go, to get the power he so desperately sought? As it turned out Jessie passed his little test, and surpassed all expectations. Ric's job, now becoming mind numbingly boring since the massacre, needed a new lease of life. Obtaining a time machine was

just the ticket, especially whilst doing it under the noses of the G-TEP crew.

A few weeks later Ric invited Jessie over to 'talk.' He fleshed out his plans to avoid detection whilst developing a temporal weapon, but left it at that. He made no attempt to suggest methods for obtaining the base device they would need to complete the task. Nor did he mention how they would get hold of someone with enough brains to turn a temporal weapon into a time machine.

It was Jessie who had had the brainwave after one too many beers one night. The brainwave of his life, something that just couldn't fail. When he had told Ric, he had been beside himself with excitement. Ric had supplied the DNA samples from the G-TEP archives and had helped Jessie obtain the necessary documentation and permits for the birth. No one could say these two men were not dedicated. Now they just had to wait for Ruben to slip up.

It had taken seventeen years, but to be honest, once complete, they would have all the time in the world. The culmination of events had been

foretold. Ric had informed Jessie that some temporal activity had been spotted in the time-line and that it had matched the signature of Oken's weapon. Through the surveillance on Jolie, Zane had been found by chance, as a suitable candidate for completing the work. Zane was, after all, the top academic, not only in his class, but within a two hundred mile radius.

Jessie had set his 'daughter' to work on Zane. Her task was to incite interest in her and keep him on a short leash. She had done her task well as far as Jessie was concerned. He had no idea that she had fallen for the boy.

His plan had turned into an obsession. His life was the plan, he lived and breathed for the moment that he would wield complete and unrivalled power over the earth. Ric as his co-pilot, they would control anything and everything. It was a dream, a dream that had taken him through nappy changing, temper tantrums, screamings of 'I hate you'. Once she had gotten a little older he had fully asserted his authority and

the backlash had all but stopped. Ric had steered well clear, leaving Jessie to do all the hard work.

The final task was to obtain the weapon itself. Once again, Kiele was to be used here. It was true, Jessie would never have used his own daughter as a chip in his bargaining. He knew he would have to prove his seriousness to Ruben. He would probably have to kill her eventually anyway, else she may spill the beans on their plan to the G-TEP.

It was an extreme plan but so far everything had started to fall into place. Jessie had needed something special to convince Ruben to give over the most powerful weapon on the planet. Kiele was that something special. It had been a sacrifice losing all those years to caring for a child that wasn't even his, but if everything worked out, it would be worth it. They would finally be able to achieve what they both wanted. What the world needed.

Throughout the seventeen years, Ric's ambitions had grown steadily. He no longer

wanted just to possess a time machine. Now he wanted something more. Something grandiose.

* * *

Ruben couldn't process it all. Oken had a daughter. A daughter he had never met. A daughter he would never know he had. Jay too. It was getting too much to bear. He put his hand to his face. His mind was becoming confused. It wasn't working properly. Ever since his dealings with the G-TEP, Ruben had suffered from strong panic attacks. They came at various times, when he was stressed, worried, or sometimes even happy.

Would he really give up Oken's most treasured possession to save Kiele? 'It was a beautiful name,' thought Ruben. If Jessie had picked it, it was quite possibly the only good thing he had ever done for her. It still upset Ruben that he could no longer use the name his mother had given him. Ruben, meaning 'see, a son' had been chosen by his mother as a reminder

that his father had expected him to be a girl. When Ruben had been born she had even exclaimed the phrase. The name had stuck. Ruben had loved his name. Michael Stapes just wasn't befitting for him.

Ruben mused further. He could take whatever Jessie could throw at him. He could take the torture, the abuse, the hatred, but Kiele? He couldn't subject her to it, he just couldn't. Oken's daughter, he had to protect her.

“My daughter was in an accident today,” Jessie said, breaking the silence. He thought quickly, his earlier phone call gave him an idea. It just might work.

“I caused the accident, or rather I will cause the accident.” He smiled grimly. “Once you have given me what I have asked for I will travel back and show you just how serious I am. It should be adequate proof that sooner or later you will give it up.”

Thinking hard for a way out, Ruben found a flaw in Jessie's outlandish plan. “How do I know it was you that caused the accident. That's no

proof.” He was pleased with his reasoning. His brain had won through again.

“I’ve seen evidence at G-TEP, the accident was caused by a traveller from the future and I’d like to put bets on that being me.” Jessie had been expecting that question too.

“How do I know you didn’t just create the accident in the present?” asked the learned man.

“I’ll leave you a message,” he said, “on the train. Give me a time and a place in your history and I’ll go back and listen to what was said.” Embracing his theatrical side he added, “Then I’ll spray paint it on the front of the train for all to see.”

Ruben had to give it to the weasel, it would definitely prove it. He only had to think of a time and place that no one else in the world would possibly know about. It would have to be before the Zone, before this cretin had started monitoring his entire life. Yazmine? No, he could get to her, make her talk. It had to be something else.

Then he remembered; His first date with Yazmine. She had never shown up. They had

supposed to be meeting under a tree in old man Jones' field. He remembered his words at the time. 'Guess I can go watch football instead.' He had been so dismayed that he had actually spoken the words out loud. He knew the exact time of day the event occurred because he remembered looking at his watch, waiting for Yazmine to show. "October forth," he said, "twenty thirty, at around lunchtime. Old man Jones' field."

"You got it," said Jessie. "Guess you'd better go and find out what was on that train." The little man arose and went to walk out of the door. "When you find out what was written there, when you believe that I'm serious, call me."

With that, Ruben was left in his room alone. His heart was pounding still and his legs collapsed from under him. Lying there on the floor a panic attack ensued. He began trembling, slowly at first, and then more violently. The paresthesias had spread to his feet and hands and it felt like his whole body was tingling, whilst almost convulsing at the same time.

Tears appeared in his eyes before streaming out of the sides like tiny waterfalls down the sides of his face. Damn that Jessie, damn him. Damn it. He sobbed in pain. Pain for his lost friends, Oken, Jay, Leon, he'd lost everyone. Now he was about to lose the only thing he'd managed to hold onto all his life. Oken's Bethany.

As the attack got worse his brain stepped into save him and he passed out. The stress on his mind and body had been too much. A visit from Jessie he could have handled, a visit from Jessie with his normal jibes about how much Oken had deserved to die. Ruben could have even handled the time Jessie told him how he had pushed Leon over the edge. However the combination of what he had been told today had been far too much. His body, now still, rested. When it awoke it would have to find that train.

26

Interrogation

Ruben repeated his question and embellished it by gripping her on the biceps, “Did they say anything about any writing on the train?” Jolie's face turned to one of utter confusion and she pushed his strong hands off of her.

“No,” she replied. Just what was with this guy? A few hours ago he'd been a sad lonely figure, in a decrepit house, with not so much as a few words to say. Now he wanted to know about writings on trains.

“Damn it,” shouted Ruben, alerting the attention of the security guard. He repeated his curse once again, banging his palm to his forehead in frustration before adding, “If you ask

them, and.....and they tell you, please, please let me know.” He handed her a scrappy piece of paper with a number on it.

She took the paper, and looked down at it. 4243799870012. The writing was very messy, she had had trouble deciphering several of the digits, but she was pretty confident she had them all now.

“What is all this about Ruben?” she asked worryingly.

“I'm sorry,” he said, “I can't risk telling you.” With that he had turned around and was already walking off quickly into the distance. No explanation, no nothing. She fought the urge to chase after him and force the reasons out of him. She was there for Kiele, she could deal with some crazy man later.

It had been incredibly odd though. He had turned up out of the blue, entirely out of the blue, knowing exactly where she was, and was talking about writings on a train. It seemed bizarre, like the plot of some twisted novel. She watched as Ruben tried to subvert the gaze of the security

guard. It worked and he skulked away into the distance, half walking, half running back to his lair.

When he had awoken from his attack he had immediately visited the local store and bought an e-ink paper. In it details about the crash were starting to come in, including details about the teacher whose students they were. Ruben had scarcely believed it when a link had sent him to a picture of a glowing Jolie.

Ruben had immediately called in to the local hospitals and found the one housing the young boy who had been injured. He hadn't wanted to visit, not yet. Jolie was a great link to the information he so desperately needed. He had followed her, hoping to catch her at home, but the precinct had been an even better opportunity.

* * *

As Kiele walked out of the changing area, head down, the clerk waiting at the door scanned the item to ensure it was as it had been when she

entered. The scanner had taken a digital imprint of the item before she had used the changing room and was now in the process of matching it against the scan just taken. Criminals had begun to make small fortunes by carefully slicing off delicate pieces of expensive clothes at multiple stores and sewing them back together to make their own Mount Taleberg unique items.

The clerk smiled as the machine confirmed her suspicions that the dress was completely intact. “Was it to your liking?” she asked. What a stupid question, of course it had been to her liking and had it not cost the earth and then some, she would have considered buying it. It was the most beautiful she had ever looked.

“It looked great,” she replied and then thinking quickly, “But I can't afford it this month.” She gave it to the clerk who put it back on the rail behind her, ready for reimbursing the empty space which now stood where the dress once was.

Jolie walked over to her smiling. She'd decided to put Ruben out of her mind completely. "Did it fit?" she asked the girl.

"Yes," said Kiele. She wasn't about to lie to Jolie.

Jolie frowned, "Then why are you putting it back?" she questioned. The store clerk stood in the middle of this exchange, not knowing what to make of this mother and daughter squabble. Jolie held out her hand to the clerk. For a moment the clerk stood there in apparent confusion. What was she being asked to do? Then it dawned on her that the mother wanted the dress back. Obviously she had picked it out for the girl to wear, the girl had hated it, made up an excuse and now the mother wanted to buy it anyway. She couldn't have been further from the truth.

The clerk obliged and gave the dress to Jolie. She turned and walked away smiling. Kiele ran after her, the two of them now engaged in a power-walking contest to the finish line, the tills. 'Just what was Jolie thinking?' pondered Kiele.

The dress would have been more than an expensive purchase for Jolie too.

Though many stores had done away with 'point of sale' areas, Mount Taleberg still insisted that it offered the ultimate in customer care and satisfaction. They also enjoyed being that little bit kooky. Having a till on a desk was retro, very retro.

Jolie hit the desk and was followed quickly by Kiele. She seemed a little more angry now. "You don't have to do this," barked Kiele. "I can handle the fact that I'll never wear a dress like that." Her voice was sad, but the anger carried it forward.

"Let me do this for you," uttered Jolie. The words had come out wrong. Kiele wasn't a charity case but Jolie had only wanted to explain her intentions. She wanted Kiele to feel wonderful for a change. "Besides," she said, "think of the look on Zane's face when he sees you in it.

Kiele smiled and she even let out a little huff of laughter. Why was Jolie being so nice to her?

She didn't deserve it. Years of conditioning by her father had forced her to believe she was worth nothing. Now here was Jolie spending half a months wage on a dress for her, just to make her feel good.

The girl had to admit, it did feel good. Her only concern now slipped into her mind. Her father. He wouldn't like the dress one bit, nor the fact that Jolie had bought it for her. She thought a little more and resolved that her dear old dad would just have to get over it and live with it. 'Kiele!' she thought, 'are you really getting a little rebellious?'

For too long she had lived in the shadow of her father, existing, breathing, eating, sleeping, only when he said so. It wasn't living, it was fearing and slowly but surely she was going to pull her way out of it. The dress would be a perfect start. He couldn't rip it up, else Jolie would ask where it was. He couldn't ban her from wearing it tomorrow, as Jolie was expecting her to. Little by little she would take her power back. She grinned. Kiele had only just discovered the

power this item of clothing was going to have over her father.

She hadn't realised that the dress was already over the counter, and one of Taleberg's gatekeepers was now passing the tag near the reader. Jolie was instructed to press her thumb to the plate and enter her passcode. Two factor authentication had been introduced many years ago, as a way of safe guarding peoples credentials a little more than pin codes alone.

The dress was folded carefully and laid to rest in a beautiful stone coloured box, embossed with the words 'Mt' and 'Taleberg.' The clerk placed the box into a Taleberg branded paper bag and put it on the counter, rotating it so that either one of them could grab the handle. Jolie's arms stayed firmly by her side and she let Kiele be the one to receive the gift for the first time.

The bag was barely large enough to hold one Mt. Taleberg box. The heavy paper, being manufactured in a brownish tone, made it sit well with the stone tone of the box itself. The handles were made from small sections of rope and were

soft to the touch. As Kiele grabbed the handles the softness rubbed off on her and a smile crept across her face once more. She pulled the bag off the counter and placed her other hand underneath to stop it from falling. Jolie had never seen such care being taken over a paper bag before, but then it wasn't the bag so much, its contents were what mattered, she thought.

The bag was positioned by her side, and the two girls walked towards the exit. The security guard tipped his imaginary hat towards them as they exited the store. They had made a purchase, he thought, good for them. He'd never be able to afford clothes from here, not on his salary, but it always made him happy to see the smile on girls faces when they left the store, some guys too come to that.

Jolie had suggested that they get something to eat after their visit to Mount Taleberg, and they now wound their way from one side of the precinct to the other, with their destination being the food court. It was getting on for half past six now and most of the shoppers had retired to their

homes for their evening meals. This gave the girls free reign of the food court.

“Where d'ya wanna go eat?” asked Kiele. She was starving hungry. They had given her some food at the hospital, but nothing substantial, and now after traipsing round just one store, she felt like her stomach was ready to burst from the cage within.

“You pick,” said Jolie, “I really don't mind.”

“Hmm,” mused Kiele. If they went to 'Burgers'n'All' it would be an extremely greasy meal. 'Plump Muffins' just sold muffins, unsurprisingly. No, the only real contenders were the pizza place and 'Grey's Old Bakery.' Kiele opted for the pizza place. “How about Jahred's Pizzeria?” she enquired.

“Sounds good to me,” replied the teacher.

The two of them continued to weave in and out of the dwindling numbers of shoppers. It was amazing to think of how many people used this place on a daily basis. The precinct was massive, covering the area of about five football pitches. When Kiele had been meditating on their choice

of restaurant she had limited herself to the few that were available in the eastern food court. There were in fact three more areas identical in size to this. It was sheer madness thought Kiele.

As they approached Jahred's establishment, Jolie saw a figure sitting down inside the restaurant. She almost doubled back in fear. Was it Ruben? She had almost forgotten about their meeting in Mt. Taleberg. As they got closer Jolie slowed, whilst Kiele began to decide what pizza she was going to have. "I think I'm going to go for the spicy one," she said. "What about you Jolie?"

Jolie wasn't thinking about pizza, she was carefully analysing the figure inside the pizzeria. If it was him, she didn't think it wise to go in. He'd probably try to harass Kiele about the 'writings on the train'. What was he doing here? All of a sudden Jolie saw the figure twist its head and it became apparent that it had a large blonde ponytail. She was off the hook. Kiele repeated her name, and she broke free of her stare.

"Jolie?"

“Sorry,” she said, “I must have been some place else. What were you saying?”

Still occasionally flitted her eyes back to the figure whilst Kiele spoke. “I asked what pizza you wanted,” she was unaffected by Jolie's apparent lack of attention, “I'm going to have the spicy one.”

Jolie looked over the menu which was illuminated high above their heads. “I think I'm going to have a pepperoni,” she said.

They walked towards the counter and placed their order. They had been first in the queue and there was only a handful of people left in the seating area. It looked quite smart with its combination of red plush seats, and silver chrome support work. All the walls were covered with a base colour of either red or white and where the two met, a wide transition area could be found detailing interlocking squares of each rivalling colour. It was quite clear that the proprietors enjoyed the look of a good colour scheme. The menus followed the same design theme too, with the top half being white and the bottom red.

The waiter had said their food would be ready in about two to three minutes. Steamation cooking was all the rage now and boasted the best flavours, coupled with the shortest amount of time to cook. They sat down at a table that was supposed to seat four. Kiele placed her bag on the chair next to her, so she could keep it in sight at all times. It amused Jolie that the young girl was taking so much care of the dress. She wasn't even wearing it, and yet she was protecting it like a bodyguard. Would she have taken a bullet for it? Probably.

“I take it you enjoyed Mt. Taleberg?” asked Jolie.

Kiele nodded, it had been fantastic, the most amazing shopping trip she had ever been on. Realistically, the only real shopping trip she'd ever been on. Jolie had felt like a mother to her, and she had liked it.

“It was amazing Jolie,” she said. “You really didn't have to buy me that dress. Browsing would have been just as much fun.”

Jolie itched her tattoo subconsciously, “You mean I could have gotten away without spending my life savings?” she asked jokingly.

“Stop it,” whined Kiele, “you’re making me feel really bad now.” They both smiled at each other. She knew Jolie was joking. It’s what she liked best about her. Though she was a teacher at the school, she was regarded by a good half of the population to be a friend more than an educator. Maybe it was because they were so close in age, or maybe it was just because she cared more.

“So,” Jolie began, “are you going to visit Zane tomorrow?”

“I’d really like to,” she replied, “but I don’t know how I’m going to get to the hospital.”

She hadn’t been fishing, but Jolie’s reply was music to her ears. “How about I pick you up on my way through?”

“You mean it?” she asked excitedly?

“Sure.” She smiled at Kiele before adding, “I want to be there to see the look on his face when you walk in in that dress.”

They both laughed. Kiele couldn't wait either. There was something about Zane that she was really starting to like. Though her father had sternly warned her off, she just couldn't help but feel a certain affinity with the strange young man. It was as if destiny had thrown them together.

Who would have thought it? A week ago she'd never have looked at Zane as potential boyfriend material. Sure, he was oddly cute, but he didn't have that 'Je ne sais quoi'. Now it was an entirely different story. She thought back to a quote she'd once heard; 'They say relationships based on intense circumstances never work'. Pah, what did they know.

Kiele hadn't realised that she had been looking off up into the sky, day dreaming. The waiter had arrived with the pizza and was just standing there, awaiting the princess to remove her arms from the table. Eventually his patience ran out and he let out a poignant 'Ma'am'. Suddenly she realised her mistake and apologetically moved her arms out of the way.

The waiter put down their pizzas and walked off tutting to himself. It had been a long day and he was really tired. Time to knock off early and go play Devil Hunter Dreamscape 3. Man he loved that game.

“You really like him don't you?” enquired Jolie.

“Is it obvious?”

“Not entirely.”

It was supposed to be a cryptic answer. It was supposed to entice her into asking more. Yet she seemed to just accept it without saying anything further. Finally the curiosity got the better of her.

“Do you think he's a good guy?” Kiele asked the teacher.

Jolie sat there for a good few seconds before answering. She already knew what she was going to say, but part of her wanted to confirm it, and the other just wanted to tease Kiele.

“I think you two would make a great couple,” she said finally. Kiele beamed and nodded. It wasn't often she talked about things like this with anyone. She had a few friends at school, but

having a father like Mark made it difficult to keep any good ones.

They sat there in silence for the first slice, both exceedingly hungry, fulfilling their appetites. It had been a very long day and Kiele was really tired. It had been a nice idea to go out with Jolie, and she was so grateful for all she had done for her, but all Kiele could think about now was getting back home and going to sleep. She knew she would have to face her father sometime in between those two events, but she guessed she could handle him now.

Jolie wanted to know more about the young girl before her. She felt she owed it to herself, and before she could take it back, she'd asked a very personal question.

“So, what happened to your mom?” she asked. It was instantly regretted. Not that Kiele's reply was anything other than polite or interesting, she just hated herself for being so blunt with the poor girls feelings.

“I never met her.” For an instant Jolie looked confused. Kiele continued, “I was born In Vitro.

My mother died about two years before I was born. Mark decided he wanted a living memory of her. So he created me.”

The words rang through Jolie's head coldly. He 'created' her? How arrogant. How bloody arrogant. How did he feel he had the right? She was angry. It wasn't as if In Vitro births were uncommon. Around five percent of all births now were a product of the lab, but it wasn't usually done for such selfish reasons.

The technology had been improved since the early twenty first century. Babies could now be born with any number of characteristics. In the cold cold world of the present day, mummies and daddies could choose everything about their baby. The choices had to go past a governing board, to prevent too many infants being born with certain characteristics, but on the whole, it was fairly easy to design and create your own child.

“Does it bother you?” Jolie asked.

“Which?” said Kiele smiling, “that I was born to fulfil a desire to fulfil a purpose, or that I was a product of a lab technicians afternoon.”

Clearly both perturbed her and to reel off a sentence like that meant she had thought about it long and hard before.

“I’m sorry,” said Jolie, “I never meant to be so cold.”

Kiele was quick to put her in her place. “Don’t you dare apologise.” She said sternly. “You didn’t do this to me. You’ve been nothing but nice to me ever since I first met you.” It was true. “I’ve never been able to talk to anyone about it quite like this.”

Though her voice had been stern, Jolie had known the sentiment. There was anger there, but it was meant for Mark and quite rightly so. It was all getting a little too much for Kiele, and Jolie only just noticed the tear running down her left cheek. There weren’t cascades of tears, just a lone soldier, who had managed to fight his way out and was now escaping the prison in which he’d been trapped so long.

“I’m so sorry,” said Jolie, reaching across the table and grabbing hold of Kiele’s hand. “Let’s

talk about something else. Did you decide what you're going to do after you leave school?"

The question was different enough to shock Kiele out of her current state of mind. In truth, she really hadn't thought about it too much.

"I've always liked cooking," said Kiele. "I'd love to have my own bakery one day." It was a nice dream, but possibly nothing more than that.

"Really?" said Jolie, genuinely surprised. She'd imagined the girl to have so much more ambition. So much more drive.

"Or maybe a doctor" she offered, ignoring Jolie's question. Her two career choices were currently very different indeed. She really hadn't thought about it much. It was glaringly obvious.

"It takes a long time to become one of those," Jolie advised her.

Kiele just sat there musing. She had no idea really what she wanted to do. In some ways it scared her, but in other it just seemed kind of natural. She went with the flow, a product of living with Mark, if he shouted jump, she jumped,

if he left her alone for an afternoon, she chilled out.

Jolie had been thinking too, but now as she sat there she was reminded once again of the figure who had been to see her earlier in the trip. It was a hat and coat in a shop window which had brought the memories back. She'd looked over and panicked, thinking she was being stalked again by that brute Ruben. The question he had posed repeated itself in her mind. 'Had they seen any strange writings?' No wait, that wasn't entirely accurate, Ruben hadn't described them as strange.

As Jolie sat there, curiosity finally got the better of her and she decided to voice some question about the 'writings.'

"Kiele?" she said, "Did you.....did you notice any writing on the train?"

"Writing?" The question seemed very odd indeed. "I don't know what make of train it was, if that's what you're asking." What was Jolie getting at? Why change the subject?

“Don't worry,” she said. “It was just a silly thought.”

It wasn't a silly thought, Kiele meditated. It had been phrased too delicately. What did she mean writings? Where had that question come from?

27

A Small Victory

When she arrived home it was already approaching eight and she felt the need to sneak in to avoid detection. Mark had told her to be back by ten, and here she was coming home two hours early. Jolie had hired another taxi to take them both home and Kiele was now exhausted. She had fallen asleep in the taxi a few times on the short ride home and now all she wanted to do was get to bed.

“You're late,” came a voice from inside the lounge.

It was Mark. He sounded angry, but why? He had given her a strict deadline and she was home

way before the curfew. What did he have to be angry about?

“You said ten pm,” she said foolishly.

“Come in here,” he barked, “You know how much I hate talking to you through a brick wall.”

She walked into the room with the Mt Taleberg bag hanging from her delicate hands in front of her.

“And what the heck is that?” he snapped. “I’m not made of money Kiele.” It had been a mistake to bring the bag into the lounge. Mark wasn’t stupid. He knew who Mount Taleberg was, and he also knew they were the most expensive fashion outlet in the history of time.

“It was a present from someone,” she replied. It was the whole truth and there was nothing he could do about it. It wasn’t as if she had coaxed Jolie into it either. She had offered, unreservedly. She had no idea how ‘dad’ was going to react next. In her mind she often called him dad, but it was used in much more of a derogatory sense. When she said it out loud, people assumed it as a term of endearment. In her own head, she could

twist it to be whatever she wanted. Right now it read this; 'Dad' - a foolish man who has just discovered he has been placed in checkmate by his test tube of a daughter.

As he stood there all he could feel was his anger. He tried to push it aside so as to think somewhat rationally. He had to remember his plan, at all times, nothing could jeopardise that. If he destroyed the clothing, whatever it was, it would arouse suspicion from that teacher. If he left it alone, Kiele would think she could walk all over him. His plan didn't have far to go now. The wheels were already in motion and soon neither of those events would matter anyway. He decided to let her win. Just this once.

“Well then I guess you're a lucky girl”

It wasn't the response she had expected, but secretly it had been the one she had hoped would come true. It was almost like a dream. She had outsmarted her father. Well, Jolie had in any case. Knowingly or unknowingly, it didn't matter, Kiele was proud of this moment. She

turned to walk out of the lounge. Mark said nothing as she left.

* * *

She hadn't slept that well during the night, tossing and turning for most of it. Yet when the morning had come, she had felt largely refreshed. It was a typical Sunday morning, the birds were singing high in the trees and she could hear the choir in the nearby church faintly in waves as the wind carried the sound. She had never been to a church in her life. It had never really seemed like the right thing for her. She believed in a higher being, a god if you will, but not in the sorts of things the usual churchy people did.

Her father had apparently been a church goer in his youth. He had told her this one drunken evening in front of the TV. As a result he hated church, church goers, church songs, church ministers, in short, anything that had ever been inside, seen or listened to anything to do with a church.

Kiele climbed out of bed, her muscles aching from the day before. The refreshment she had felt had seemingly been confined to her mind. As she stood up straight her body screamed at her to sit back down. It wasn't ready to get up yet. Kiele on the other hand was. She was going to see Zane again. As she made for the door, her eyes caught the sight of the Mt. Taleberg bag sitting on her chest of drawers. She smiled sweetly.

The young girl walked out of her room and entered the next door along, the bathroom. Mark clearly wasn't up yet as the room hadn't taken on its odour of cologne and man. She locked the door, turned on the shower and slipped off her nightgown. As she looked at her body in the full length mirror, she was amazed at how little damage she had sustained. A few bruises here and there, the odd cut and graze. She was so lucky to have avoided the types of injuries Zane had had inflicted upon him. She rethought the statement, she hadn't been lucky, Zane had saved her.

When the water's temperature felt right, she stepped into the shower unit. The liquid began to run down over her body. She winced as it hit the grazes on her legs and arms. She had been so tired the night before that she hadn't bothered to have a shower and had collapsed in bed, confused, but pleased that she had finally gotten one over on Mark, the evil dictator. She began to sud herself with soap and had to hold her breath and bite down to ease the pain. The soap had been even worse than the water on its own. Deciding to make it a fairly fleeting visit, she turned off the water and took a spare towel from the pile.

Expertly covered by the towel, she exited the bathroom and re-entered her room. It smelt sweet in the early mornings. She had set the fragrance generator to a combination of candy floss, spring meadow, and had thrown a little bit of toast for good measure. She found it helped her get up in the mornings. She looked at the clock, 8:45. She had half an hour until Jolie was due to arrive.

Kiele hadn't told Mark that Jolie was coming to collect her. Sundays were Mark's days. He did

what ever he wanted on a Sunday and she did the same. The truth was Mark did whatever he wanted every single day of his life, it was just that he made her consciously aware of it on Sunday. No work, no cooking, no cleaning, no talking. Just beer, TV and food.

The young girl opened the Mt. Taleberg box and put on the dress. Looking in the mirror, she was still pleased at how good it looked on her. She twisted left, then right, then left again. 'Come on Kiele' said a voice in her head, 'we have to get ready to go.' She picked out some appropriate shoes and walked into the kitchen. It was long and thin, with what appeared to be a drinks bar on one side. It would have been a breakfast bar, except it faced a wall. It was great for preparing food on, but kind of pointless for trying to have a conversation with a family. It suited this family well, they hardly spoke much unless Mark wanted to shout at her for something and they usually ate in separate rooms anyhow.

The fruit in the bowl looked like its contents were getting old fast and she wasn't about to make

herself feel ill. She picked out a cereal box, not that Mark had left her much to go on and filled up a bowl. There was a small amount of milk in the fridge, but she dare not use it. Mark would have hunted her down and thrown her against the wall again if she didn't leave him any milk for his morning tea. Looking for an alternative, she tipped the cereal back into its box and prepared to make herself some toast.

The bread was loaded gingerly into the toaster and the dial set. She always found it amazing that out of all the enhancements to technology, the toaster still reigned supreme in the kitchen for cooking bread. As she watched the heat panels begin to glow, she was sure she could see something reflecting in the shiny chrome surface of the toaster, over the other side of the room. She turned around and sure enough there was a small package sitting on the bar.

It had been wrapped up expertly, so precise. 'Should she open it now?' she thought. Who was it from? As she approached the package she saw that it had been addressed to Zane. Had Mark

really gotten him a gift. She picked it up. Clearly a book, she thought. Mark had bought Zane a book. How peculiar. As she stared at it a little longer, the toast popped out. Kiele ignored it. Her eyes were transfixed on the book. "T....em.....nat.....me" The title was practically unreadable through the thick wrapping paper, yet she couldn't help but wonder what was inside.

Kiele turned around, still holding the package and picked up the toast. She hadn't even realised it had been sitting there for a full two minutes. Buttering the toast, she gave the book's cover another going over. It was no use, she couldn't decide what was depicted on the cover. It looked like a monkey. Why would Mark buy Zane a book about a monkey?

She supposed she could open the package and then re-wrap it again. It had after all been Kiele that had taught Mark how to wrap presents. After he had seen how good she was at it, she was even allowed to wrap up her own Christmas and birthday presents. It didn't matter to her too much, they were never anything particularly

exciting. Mark just didn't care about her enough to buy her anything she would have wanted, let alone loved.

It was the fact that he had never bought her anything really nice in her life that made this book seem all the more insulting. Deep down it was like a small spear had just been pushed through her already dysfunctional heart. He had bought something for Zane, wrapped it up, and left it on the side for her to give it to him. She knew Zane was wanted by her father for something, but she had no idea what. Until now she hadn't cared. The facts hadn't really sunk in, primarily because she had been falling for him. All she had been told to do was become good enough friends with him that he could be asked over for dinner one evening. That had been weird enough, but now the book. Just what was her father planning?

She had never been allowed a boyfriend before, not ever. She wasn't even allowed one now. Mark had specifically told her not to fall for him. He didn't have to know. She just wouldn't

tell him. Kiele had become a fairly good actress during her lifetime with daddy. When he had gone off at the neighbours, she had told them that he was dealing with a lot of stress right now, acting the part of a strong confident young woman oh so well. It was for her benefit more than his, though she hated living with him, it was better than the alternative.

The plan. She'd heard Mark talk about it on the phone several times. He had been on about it for a long time. She knew nothing about it. She supposed he had been thinking about moving away. Maybe when she was eighteen he would kick her out. Maybe that had been the plan. Now, it seemed a little different, like he was trying to get Zane on side. The clock chimed its cheery little song. It was 9:00. She crammed as much of toast as she could fit into her delicate little mouth and ran into her bedroom.

Quickly applying some make-up she tried in vain to make herself prettier and to hide the fading evidence of yesterday's encounters. She adjusted the dress quickly and fixed her hair as

best she could. 'Fifteen minutes to get to the rendezvous,' she thought. That wasn't a lot of time. She had told Jolie not to pick her up at the house, as it may wake the giant. Instead she planned to walk halfway down the road. Jolie had booked a taxi for them both.

Kiele picked up her small hand bag and almost sprinted for the door. She was stopped by a figure standing in the doorway. It was Mark. He grabbed her by the jaw and pulled her close. She couldn't help but notice how violent he had become lately.

"Where is it?" he questioned.

"What are you talking about?" she answered truthfully. Then she realised. The book. "I put it in my bag to give to him," she said obediently. Mark twisted his head slightly and squinted out of one eye, as if testing her for truth.

"You make damn sure it gets to him in the condition it was when you picked it up."

She nodded. "Sure," she said. "What is it anyway?"

“That's none of your concern,” he said, “but I guess you'll find out soon enough.”

She thought he was going to tell her what it was, but instead he dropped her jaw and went lumbering back to his room. She flexed her jaw muscles. It hurt, but no way near as much as yesterday. She recomposed herself and left the house to meet Jolie.

* * *

When they arrived at the hospital it appeared as if nothing had changed. They walked past the room where Kiele had been savaged and she shuddered ever so slightly. The curtains were still drawn over the windows and she instinctively tightened her senses.

Jolie had picked her up on time. It would have been OK, had Kiele gotten there on time also. She had only been three minutes late, but it had caused Jolie to worry and she had almost called the house. Luckily as the phone had reached her hands, Kiele had knocked on the

window of the taxi and startled the young teacher. The ride to the hospital had been uneventful, punctuated only by the traffic lights and police cars which seemed to be present en masse today.

As they reached the room Kiele's heart sank a little, Zane still wasn't awake. Part of her was pleased, she had so desperately wanted to be there when he awoke. The other part of her was sad. She had hoped he would be better today. She wanted to see that cheeky smile again.

As Jolie walked through the door, Kiele's bag knocked against her. The weight of Mark's gift felt apparent now, almost heavy. Kiele still had no idea what was inside, but he would know if she disobeyed him. He had an uncanny knack for that.

There was no one else in the room. The nurse had already done her morning rounds and had tended to the patients. Jolie took a brief look at the chart and Kiele walked over to his side. The sun was streaming in the window now and creating light patterns on the wall where it hit the shiny chrome of the bed.

She picked up his hand in hers and whispered sweetly, "Why won't you wake up?" As if in response, he stirred. The monitor bleeped in its alerting fashion and Jolie was roused from the chart.

"It says here he's been doing that all night," said the teacher. Kiele pulled up a chair and sat down next to the silent boy. In the early morning sun he looked much more pale than yesterday. His eyes were closed and his breathing was steady. Kiele wanted to give the watch back, but he wouldn't have been able to do anything with it even if she did.

There was a fresh vase of flowers on one of the side units and their smell seemed to break the normal clinical odour of hospitals. Jolie replaced the chart and sat on a chair on the opposite side. She took up the remaining hand and placed it in hers. She had no duty to be there, just something inside her had told her that she wanted to. It had been an odd feeling, breaking into her subconscious at the end of yesterday. She had so many questions running round in her head.

Who had crashed the train? Why wasn't Zane waking up? What had Ruben meant when he had spoken about the writings on the train? Why was Kiele's father such an ass? She hadn't been able to sleep, most of the night filled with musing and meditation. Now she was back there again with compassion and wishful thinking, praying that Zane would come round.

There was a rattle as the door opened and the doctor walked in. He picked up the chart that Jolie had been studying and spent the next two minutes flipping over pieces of e-ink paper, before finally letting out a small 'hmm.' He replaced the chart and asked, "Are either of you family of the boy?"

Jolie was the one to respond, she was the grown up after all, thought Kiele. "No," she said, "Zane doesn't have any immediate family in the vicinity."

"I see," said the man in the white coat, he was the same doctor they had seen the day before and though he had been lenient then, his stance was a little more solid now. "Well may I ask who you

two are then?” he enquired. The two girls seemed frightened to tell the truth, like they had been caught doing something mischievous by their parents. In Jolie's case, frightened she would get a telling off, as his teacher she probably wasn't supposed to be there. In Kiele's current situation, wondering if she would wake up with a knife embedded in her eye.

Again it was Jolie who answered the doctor's question, “I'm his primary teacher at the school he attends, and this is his girlfriend.” Kiele's eyes widened in shock when she heard Jolie's words and she had to run them through her own mind once or twice. When they reached three times round she blushed heavily. Jolie knew she had to make it convincing, the doctor wouldn't let her stay if she was 'just a friend', but a girlfriend, well that put a whole different spin on things. As it so happened, Jolie was right.

“Ahh, young love,” the doctor mused. “I had a girlfriend once.” He turned towards the door before adding, “I've been married to her for twenty nine years now.” Jolie smiled, but it didn't

last long. She was anxious to find out Zane's condition. When was he likely to wake up?

“Do you know what's wrong with him?” she asked in a worried tone. The doctor silently apologised for the joke with his eyes. He hadn't meant to be insensitive. He hadn't quite realised how important this boy was to them. All patients were cared for by loved ones, some more than others, he thought.

“He should be waking up any time now,” he said. “He just needed a lot of rest after his surgery. It can take a lot out of a body, especially if it's already been damaged.”

Jolie and Kiele both nodded. Kiele had seen how bad Zane had looked when he had been in the ambulance. She had been by his side while he went to hell and back. Now all she wanted was for him to wake up.

The doctor walked towards the door and opened it. “I'll be back a little later,” he mentioned offhandedly. “Please don't hesitate to call someone if his condition improves.” He walked through the opening and closed the door

gently behind him. The sullen sounds of the hustle and bustle of outside faded once more and they were once again alone with the boy.

As Kiele looked at his bandages she couldn't help but feel a little guilty. It should have been her that was lying there. Not him. He needed his rest. He needed to get up and about. He was going to be part of her fathers plan. How had that last one gotten in there? She sighed; The book. It was still hanging off of her shoulder and was a constant reminder that 'he' was in the room with her. In her thoughts, in her actions, Mark was there. Cretin.

Kiele couldn't wait till he awoke, she could give him the book, and he would toss it to one side and chat with her the entire night away. It could of course, never happen like that. Visiting hours had to end sometime. Maybe she could slip under the covers and hide there with him. No one would know. Then they could spend the night talking, getting to know one another. It was so romantic. A voice in her head, who only

appeared when she was getting carried away spoke, 'Kiele, you're being silly now'. Derailed.

As they sat there, watching, waiting, the hand that was in Kiele's began to move. Slowly at first and then more purposefully, flexing and bending his fingers as if testing the water with his toes before jumping in.

“Jolie look!” exclaimed Kiele. Jolie turned to where Kiele was pointing. Her eyes widening and her mouth smiling. It seemed like the prince was awakening. He squeezed her hand once, twice, three times. “Zane,” she whispered, “Zane, are you awake?” A groan garnished the room as the young man started slowly but surely rolling his head.

“I'll go and get a nurse,” said Jolie, rising to her feet and hurriedly leaving the room. In an instant Kiele was alone with him. Alone with Zane. She slyly bent forward and kissed him on the hand. As she retreated, she smiled sweetly. It was no use. Despite her fathers instructions, the fickle beast called love had ensnared her. She couldn't tell him straight away, but as soon as her

father was done talking to him about his stupid plan, they could be together.

Zane began gasping a little, before coughing and finally coming to. He blinked a few times, still unable to focus on anything in the room. Jolie had returned now with the nurse and the two of them took up a defensive position on the left hand side of the bed. The nurse went over to the monitor briefly to check his vitals before turning and facing the patient.

“Zane,” she called slowly, “Zane can you hear me?” He made no audible reply and she pulled out a small device and shone a light into his eyes. She tugged at one side and a small e-ink screen dropped down. “He's waking up for real now,” said the nurse.

“Where am I?” came a very groggy, squelchy voice.

“Zane you're in the hospital, do you remember?” said the nurse.

“Yah,” he replied a little clearer now, “I remember.” He was still turning his head left and right as he spoke, trying to focus on anyone or

anything. It was proving difficult but not impossible. He saw what looked like a Jolie shaped figure, followed by a Kiele shaped young woman, and finally a blob he hadn't seen before. The blob was the nurse.

“Is there anything I can get you?” she asked the young man.

“Can you wash my hand,” he said seriously, but still with a definite croak. “My left hand, someone appears to have dribbled on it.” Though he had been semi-conscious, Zane had felt Kiele's tiny indiscretion. Her face went redder than a poppy, and Jolie couldn't help but laugh.

“There's nothing wrong with your senses hey Zane?” laughed the nurse. “He'll wake up properly over the next few hours,” she said, “although by the sounds of it, he's already getting cheeky.” She turned to Kiele, “You wanna nip that in the bud,” she said, “else he'll be walkin' over you for the rest of your life.” Kiele, still bloodshot red let out a smile. If she really did want to have a relationship with Zane someday, she was going to have to get used to that.

It wasn't her fault she kept her feelings behind such a high and solid wall. Her father had made her that way. If she had shown weakness, she had been ridiculed. Once she'd made the mistake of telling Mark she fancied a boy in her class when she was around ten years old. He had responded by pointing to him when he dropped her off the next day and saying, 'Is that the one you told me you wanted to kiss?' It had been cruel and she had never lived it down. So she'd hidden away. She'd hidden everything away. Now, finally, she was breaking free of his hold.

Zane turned his head back towards Kiele. His eyes were beginning to focus a little more and he saw her, now standing, in the Mt. Taleberg dress. She looked absolutely beautiful, as if she had been called away from a trip to the theatre or a fancy restaurant. He couldn't quite believe his eyes. Kiele saw him looking her up and down, blinking several times as he did so. When his eyes finally met hers she tipped her head to one side and curtsied. The dress billowed slightly at the hem.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“Wow,” he replied.

He blinked again to make sure he wasn't dreaming. Had she really dressed up to come and visit him? Jolie looked on at the two young hearts. She remembered what it had been like to feel so in love, but that had been years ago now. She remembered the happiness she had felt at meeting that someone special for the first time. She smiled.

“Kiele, you look amazing,” he blurted. 'It had all been worth it,' thought Jolie. He was literally gob-smacked. The dress accentuated her figure and the way she had arranged her hair fit perfectly. She performed a little twirl to solidify the image. He closed his eyes tight, trying to take a mental photograph. If this was the last thing he saw, he wouldn't mind at all. If he died, right there, he would die a happy man.

28

Really Good Book

Zane's condition improved over the next hour or so and by midday he was chatting happily with his visitors, making jokes and embarrassing Kiele. He was on his way to making a full recovery and much quicker than expected it seemed. Already he'd been talking about getting up and walking, but the nurse had warned him she would have to bring out the straitjacket if he tried to do anything other than rest.

Kiele was happy, it seemed Zane really was going to be OK. After the incident in the ambulance and the surgery, she had been fearful that her hero would never awaken. She had to be careful now. Zane was clearly falling for her, she

was a woman, she could tell. The words of her father still ringing fresh in her mind. His threat had been real, if she disobeyed she would have an 'accident' a serious 'accident.' Was she clever enough to satisfy both criteria successfully, loving Zane and keeping her father's wishes? How difficult was it to hide smite anyway?

The two girls had been for lunch and were now returning to Zane's room. As they paced down the long corridor, Kiele noticed nurses running towards his room carrying all manner of apparel. Something was wrong. Seriously wrong. Doctors were now arriving too. The young girl slid down to her knees and grappled for Jolie's hand to steady her. She couldn't take this any more, the too-ing and fro-ing was getting too much. Jolie walked forward and broke away from Kiele, she ran towards the room and looking up, Kiele could hear her shouting 'What's happened? What happened to him?' but she heard no reply.

Had her father found out what she really thought of the boy? What was wrong with him?

He'd seemed so much better when they had left. It was hard for Kiele to think of anything other than the worst. It seemed as if fate was playing a cruel trick on her. She already had to deal with the threats from her father, and the accident. Now it seemed as if Zane wouldn't make it through the day.

The nurse who had attended to Zane prior to lunch ran towards Jolie. They exchanged words and Jolie clasped her hand to her mouth and walked slowly back to Kiele. As she reached her she knelt down. "It's not him," she said to the worried young girl, "it's not Zane."

Kiele looked confused. "Are you sure?" she asked in disbelief. Her mind had raced through so many possibilities for the cause of Zane's demise, several involved her father.

"I'm sure," she said. "He was doing so well that they moved him to a different ward." Kiele looked up to the heavens in obvious relief. She closed her eyes, let out a huge sigh, and swallowed hard. Jolie hugged her tightly and the

two sat there for a second, reeling from the shock of the gut-wrenching moment.

The nurse walked up the corridor and helped the two young ladies up, “I really do apologise,” she said. “Someone was supposed to come and inform you that he had moved.” She was genuinely sorry. The nurse hated the way people seemed to just forget things they were told round here. The member of staff decided she would escort them down to see Zane, it was only fair after what the hospital had put them through.

* * *

Zane was now in a ward with other people, and not in his own room. It made him feel a little self conscious and nervous, something he wasn't accustomed to feeling for such long periods of time. As he turned his head, he noticed Jolie and Kiele coming through the doorway. Previously he had been looking out of the windows at the city below. The hospital was up on a high ridge and Zane had managed to sweet talk a nurse into

giving him a position next to the window. His cheekiness was returning all right.

He found it odd that a hospital would be built in such a vulnerable location. They didn't experience many earthquakes in Alendria, but he still found it odd to position a building of such importance on what he considered unstable ground. Planning permission had been sought in a rush, bribes exchanged hands and the hospital had been built, but of course, Zane had no knowledge of these events.

The boy beamed as he saw his two favourite people in the world coming to visit him again. He had felt so lonely when they had gone to lunch. They had promised to come back but Zane hadn't held out much hope, he thought it was a tactic to allow them to escape, but they seemed quite content with spending their entire Sunday by his side. It warmed his heart no end.

An old man in the bed opposite saw the two young women walk up to Zane, Jolie gave him a hug and Kiele leaned over and very gently kissed him on the cheek. "I wish I had your visitors" he

shouted across the room. The woman sitting next to him, obviously his wife, hit him with her handbag before exclaiming, "Well you're married to me so be thankful for what you've got." Zane laughed, or tried to. His body was still sore from surgery and every part of him just generally hurt. It wouldn't have been so bad if he could reach the damn itch on his foot. They both sat down.

"How are you feeling?" asked Kiele.

"I'm OK," he replied, "I'm always OK." It was a lie, but Kiele knew the sentiment. No one ever really wanted to know how people were feeling.

"Come on," she said, "how are you really feeling?"

"You've opened up a flood gate," he joked before reeling off a huge list. "My back is killing me, the skin on my chest is burning off, my foot itches, my eyes are sore, my shoulders feel like someone has been standing on them and I managed to throw up on that pretty young nurse over there at lunch time." At each item in the list he had tried to indicate it with his hands, as if

talking to someone who was entirely unfamiliar with the human body.

Kiele had resented his description of the nurse as pretty. Surely she was the only pretty one there? Her thoughts were put on hold as she turned to look at the woman Zane had been referring to. She was a large woman, in her early fifties Kiele supposed, not that there was anything wrong with that, but she could tell immediately that she was not the young, pretty nurse Zane had been describing. She smiled.

“Had you going on that last one didn't I?” he said gleefully.

“You didn't throw up?” she asked.

“I meant more about the young and the pretty,” he replied, “I threw up good.” He smiled a knowing smile and as he did so, his good friend the nurse looked round. He shot her a wink and she scowled at him before storming out of the ward. “I think I've made a friend there,” he said softly, before wincing in pain at turning over.

They sat there in silence for a few minutes. The afternoon visiting period had just begun and

many of the other patients on the ward were receiving visitors too. Some hugged their loved ones, some sat down and held their hands, one or two had to be quiet as their friend or family member was sleeping. A soft breeze was blowing in through the open windows at Zane's end of the ward. The old man opposite was still transfixed on the beautiful women who were sat out of reach before him.

“We were really worried about you Zane.” It was Jolie who had broken the short silence.

He smiled at her, “it'll take more than a speeding train to stop me.” Though he was joking, Kiele could see how seriously the incident had affected him. He had never considered his own mortality before, he had never considered that he may die so young. He had always felt invincible and it had always seemed to him that you had to hit a certain age before death became possible. To Zane, death was a function purely of age. The older you got, the more likely you were to die.

As she sat there, Kiele once again felt the book weighing her down, coincidentally Jolie was also feeling pressure. She had to ask Zane about the writing on the train. If not for her own sake, for Ruben's. Kiele reached into her bag and pulled out the small package.

“This is for you,” she said. She refused to tell him it was from Mark, but then she also didn't want to lie to him. Her statement gave no extraneous information away, whilst maintaining the criteria of not lying. It was true the package was for him, but she hadn't bought it, she didn't even know what was inside.

“Thanks,” said Zane.

“Aren't you going to tell him it's from me?” came a voice from behind them.

The girls had been so intent on Zane, that they hadn't noticed Mark walking up behind them. Zane too had been engrossed in either conversation or trying to pull off his hospital tag with one hand. Mark was standing there in jeans and a rotten tee-shirt. Holes were appearing in multiple locations, but he didn't care. The girls

sat there dumbstruck, Kiele especially. She hadn't expected to see her father at the hospital again.

“Thought you may enjoy it,” he said smiling, “open it later. OK?” Zane nodded and put the package to one side. Kiele was angry now. She had been waiting for hours for him to open the package and see what her father had bought him. Having said that, this was Mark they were talking about, he would have probably found the most disgusting looking old book he could and wrapped it up for a joke.

Mark looked over at Kiele and touched her gently on the shoulder. She flinched slightly but not so that anyone other than Mark noticed. “Can I have a moment of your time young lady?” he asked. She was looking at him now and his eyes had started to make holes in the back of her head. She nodded slowly and the two of them got up and walked away. Slowly at first and then their pace quickening.

Jolie sat there looking at the recovering student. Though she didn't mind visiting him, it would have been so nice if he had had some

family to look after him. As she pondered their being alone, the question Ruben asked once again started pushing in her mind. If she was going to question Zane on it, now was the only opportunity she would have for a while.

“Zane,” she started. He ceased trying to break the hospital tag again and looked up at her. “I have something to ask you.” She began to lay out her emotional landscape, “But if you don't want to talk about it that's fine, and it's going to sound a little odd, I'm sorry.” She looked down and recomposed herself.

“Zane,” she started again, “did you happen to see any writing on the train?” He frowned. What in heaven's name was she talking about? Writing on the train? She fleshed her question out, “I don't know, anything painted or sprayed.” He began to slowly shake his head, still frowning and totally in silence.

All of a sudden his body jerked and his eyes widened. It was as if he was suddenly in intense pain. In truth, he was just having a profound moment of realisation.

“I remember something, it was red. All in red.” he said.

“Go on,” said Jolie.

“Guess I can.....” he trailed off. “Something about football. Does that sound weird?”

She shook her head. “Not at all. Anything else?”

He tried to recall the memory once more, “Guess I can go watch football instead,” he said completely. “That's it, that's what was written. How did you know Jolie?”

He looked confused. Jolie had expected this. After all, if someone was hit by a car and friend asked if there had been a message on the front it, what would the victim think? It all seemed rather suspicious. Zane asked again.

“Jolie?”

“It was a question the police asked” she lied.

He nodded and turned to look out of the window again. They were up on the third or fourth floor now and several birds flew past the texiglass windows in infinite grace, their wings hardly even flapping, just gliding down to the city below.

Though he was feeling more comfortable now, he just wanted to go home. His body was tired all over and he longed for his own bed in which to relax. The government medical insurance wouldn't last long anyway. He would be out in a week maximum. Unless he was on his death bed, they would try their best to get rid of him. Now that he thought about it more though, he wondered if Kiele would give him the same amount of attention if he were at home.

* * *

Outside the ward Mark and Kiele stood knee deep in repugnance. Mark had visited the hospital to make sure of two things. He needed to see that Zane had received his gift, the starting point of their friendship. He also needed to ensure that Zane knew it was from him. His task was complete, but he took the opportunity to remind Kiele of her place once more.

“How is he?” asked Mark.

“What do you care?” she snapped back fiercely. It had been a mistake. Mark hadn't started off aggressively, maybe now he should change tact as the young lady was obviously looking for a fight.

“Cut it out Kiele,” he said. He was serious and though they were just standing in a corridor, she still felt vulnerable. These people couldn't save her. Neither could Zane. She decided to cooperate.

“He's doing well,” she said. “He's woken up fully now.”

“Any brain damage?”

“Not that they can see.”

It was good news. It had been troubling Mark since the accident. He needed the boy, the accomplished physicist. If anyone could make the damn thing work it was him. Mark nodded. There was a short silence.

“Don't distract him from his reading, understand.” She sighed and nodded at the same time. She was sick and tired of his plan. He turned and walked away. Not even asking once

how she was, or whether she would be home for dinner. He didn't care. It was the honest truth. She turned and walked back into the room. At least she hadn't been thrown against a wall this time.

29

Out Of Character

Over the next few days Kiele had visited Zane a lot. Though it had been during the week, the school had been surprisingly lenient with her attendance and had allowed her to leave early from lessons on several occasions. Of course, the rest of the class knew where she was going, and a cheer of Oooooooooooooo, would erupt whenever she did so, but she didn't really care about them any more. She'd even started to stop turning that embarrassing shade of red, answering back with comments like "You're obviously all jealous, or stupid, and I just can't decide which."

Today she was going to visit him again. It was Thursday, almost a full week since they had

learnt about Oken for the first time. So much had happened during those few short days that Kiele found it difficult to process everything. Jolie had said she would be visiting this afternoon also. Kiele marvelled at how awesome Jolie had been to her. The dress, the lifts too and from the hospital whenever she was able, letting her go early from lessons. It felt good to have someone look after her properly, for a change. She finally felt like she knew what it was like to have a mother.

Having only had a male role model, and not a good one at that, she had been forced to learn everything about being a woman from either books, friends, TV or the net. Conversations had been difficult and she had often heard the comment “didn't your mum ever?.....oh yeh.....sorry Kiele.” Each time it was like a dagger through the heart. She was different to everyone else it seemed. Though there were many In Vitro children around, she felt particularly isolated by it, and considered herself, to all intents and purposes, practically an orphan.

When she had been in her first few years at primary school she had often told people she was an orphan. It was the only way she ever received any special treatment at all from the other children. They would sit next to her at lunch, give her hugs and generally ensure that she was feeling OK. Unfortunately, a teacher overheard her telling her tale to another student one day. Knowing that Kiele had a 'loving' father, she berated the child in front of the whole class, telling them that this girl was the epitome of what they should look out for as they were growing up. The teacher had made Kiele stand in the corner of the class room for most of the day, it had been one of the single most devastating moments in her life. Coincidentally, when the teacher had rung home to tell Mark, he hadn't cared in the slightest.

Kiele looked up at the clock, merrily ticking its way through the day. Its slow beating could be heard over the classes hushed whispers. They were currently studying biology and most of the class sat there in a state of disinterest. It wasn't

that the subject matter was particularly boring, it was the person delivering it.

Mr Jugard, or 'Jughead' as they called him, was one of the most monotonous public speakers in the world. It was practically impossible to impart any kind of enthusiasm into their work when each word seemed exactly like the last. He occasionally tried to wake the class up by saying things like 'Come on class, I know you know the answer' but they had been drugged into a lethargic abstinence and were unable to contribute.

He had been their teacher for a few years now and Kiele wondered if during that time she had ever enjoyed one of his lectures at all. She smiled as she remembered one particular lesson when Ol' Jughead had managed to set his tie on fire, teaching them about the calorific value of food. It had been hilarious. As he had realised what was happening he had danced around at the front of the class for a few seconds shouting 'Help me, Help me' in a robotic tone, before plunging his tie into the nearest sink. As he withdrew the tie from the murky water, he had exclaimed, 'Oh, that was

my favourite tie.' In his monotonous nasal voice. It had set the class into fits of hysterics and the phrase 'Oh, that was my favourite X,' became a long running joke among the students.

Kiele hadn't realised that she had smiled, but Jughead had. "Something funny about aerobic respiration miss Matthews," he asked. Kiele was so bored. She shook her head. "I suggest you leave your mirthfulness outside next time, less it should interfere with your cogitation." What an ass.

She had another thirty minutes at least before she would be allowed to leave the class to see Zane. Janus, was sitting next to her and they were situated near the back of the room. In fact it had been surprising that Ol' Jughead had seen her without his big old glasses.

"Bet you just wanna skip out and see him again right?" asked Janus. Kiele nodded. They had been acquaintances for a while but had never really hit it off. Janus was one of the popular girls. Kiele, despite being one of the most

beautiful in the class, had always been a little too reserved to make 'popular' status.

“Are you two going out?” Janus asked. Kiele answered 'no' quietly and rather ashamedly. She would have loved to say yes to that question. She picked up her pencil and began to doodle on the front cover of her notebook. Most of the class used various e-ink pads now, but some still couldn't afford it, and others preferred the tactility of traditional pen and paper. Kiele was the latter of the two.

“Still,” said Janus, “I bet you like him a lot right?” Kiele smiled and nodded. Just what was with the third degree anyway? Suddenly it hit her. Did Janus have feelings for Zane too? “I used to have a big crush on him,” she said, confirming Kiele's suspicions. “But I can see he likes you.” Kiele hadn't been expecting that sentence. Now she had heard it, it made her feel rather special. Secretly she had been hoping Zane was falling for her. She had been pretty sure he was, but if Janus' had noticed it too. It had to be true. Right?

“You really think he likes me?” she said after a pause.

“You bet,” smiled Janus.

The two girls sat there whilst Mr Roboto continued his incessant ramblings about oxidation and the Krebs cycle. Kiele drew a heart on her book and inside wrote KM 4 ZK in true teen style. She drew the arrow through the heart catching the attention of her fellow classmate. Janus giggled and Kiele contagiously obliged also.

The robot had heard them. “And so ATP stands for what, Kiele?” It wasn't fair. She had only giggled. This guy was a real jerk. Most of the other teachers let them chat whilst in lessons, doing so got them respect, respect meant the kids actually listened, and eventually led to good grades. Jugard didn't let them talk. Hell he wouldn't let let them do anything besides listen and write notes.

She knew the answer but something different left her mouth. “Aliens Take Prozac?” she ventured. Where had that come from? In an

instant she remembered. 'Aliens Take Prozac' was the name of a punk band she had used to listen to. Jughead wasn't pleased. He relinquished his position up on his podium and quickly, but purposefully, walked towards her, finger outstretched.

"Young lady, would you kindly step out side, since you obviously have no intent on doing any learning today whatsoever." He stopped short of her. In the staff room meeting at the beginning of the week, the teachers had all been informed of the accident and had been asked that they be gentle on Kiele for the next few days at least.

Juggard had no intention of being soft on this insolent brat who quite clearly needed to be taught a thing or two. He stood their waiting. Slowly but obediently, Kiele packed her bag and stood up. She hadn't just been bored for the sake of it, she had studied aerobic respiration the previous year. As she walked out of the room she offered up a piece of advice.

"You've spelt Adenosine wrong." The class roared. Jughead, furious now, followed her to the

door quickening his steps, seemingly desperate to catch up with her. The class had broken into a round of applause. She crossed the threshold and jumped as the door was thrown into its frame by an angry mechanical creature, severing her connection to admiration from her peers.

The girl walked down the corridor, kicking a can as she did so. She had never been thrown out of a lesson before. Kiele hadn't meant to upset the old man, she just hadn't cared. Her mind had been completely elsewhere. Her mind had been with Zane.

She supposed she should wait outside till the lesson was over, but she had no intention of doing that. There was no point. Jughead would only shout at her, and she refused to be put into a bad mood before she visited Zane. She walked out of the corridor and into the hot sun. It was getting close to autumn now but the sun was still quite warm. She decided to head to the cafeteria. Maybe they would serve her early.

As she entered the large hall she was called over by a large lady standing at the serving hatch.

Her name was Betty and she knew Kiele well. It was usually her who served the young girl lunch everyday. They often had a chat about the weather, or certain members of the rabble queueing up.

“I hear you were in an accident darling?” asked a concerned Betty. She had already started dishing out Kiele's lunch, so it seemed as if she wouldn't have to ask after all. “I almost had a heart attack when I heard, I was so worried about you.”

Kiele smiled. She liked Betty. The lady was always smiling, a true ray of sunshine in an often harsh environment. Kiele wouldn't say she had a hard life at school, but when the combination of a bad day and her father were getting her down, it was nice to have a friendly face who could make her day just that little bit sweeter.

“I'm OK,” she said assuringly, “but Zane is still in hospital.” It seemed as if Betty already knew this as she nodded whilst piling up yet more food onto Kiele's plate. She often over filled it,

but Kiele never complained, Betty was just looking out for her after all.

“I heard dear,” she said. “He's the good looking one in your class isn't he?” Kiele blushed slightly. Betty hadn't even really mentioned her in the sentence, apart from as an identification of the class, but she still felt somewhat embarrassed. “And a little birdie told me that you two could soon become something special,” said Betty as she waved her serving spoon at Kiele.

Now Kiele really did turn red. Betty saw and ceased her current line of questioning. She hadn't wanted to make the girl feel uneasy. “I'm sorry,” she said, “Your secret's safe with me.” Kiele smiled and thanked her. She took the tray of food and enquired how much she owed. “No charge,” said Betty. Kiele was ordered to go eat her meal before it got cold, to which she obeyed, sitting in a corner of the hall. It would be fifteen minutes before anyone else came into the cafeteria, hopefully she could be finished before then.

Jolie had dropped Kiele off today, as she had some errands to run. It would be the first day that Kiele would visit Zane entirely alone. She still hadn't managed to see what the present was that her father had given him. Each time she had brought it up, Zane had changed the subject. Was it something embarrassing? Something about her?

As she walked through the corridors today, horrible though it was, it felt natural, like slipping into a warm bath. She knew exactly where she was going. As she got to the door of the ward, she stood there for a while, looking in at Zane. He was sat there reading his book with his legs up in an upside down 'v' shape. He looked deep in concentration, his brow furrowed and one hand holding his lower jaw pensively. She walked in slowly, trying not to arouse his attention.

As she approached him, she accidentally squeaked her shoe on the hard, shiny, laminate flooring, which had obviously been polished that morning. Zane looked up and upon seeing Kiele

hurriedly closed the book and hid it under the covers. She gave him a look, entirely unimpressed.

“What's the book Zane?” she asked.

There was no escaping now. He had to give her the full explanation. He had managed to hide it for a mere few days, but finally he could hold off her onslaught no more. She could be very persistent when she wanted to be. He motioned for her to come over. She sat down on the single chair next to his bed. As she looked across to the bed on his left, it seemed as if the patient there enjoyed one hell of a visit prior to her arrival. At least ten chairs sat there in quiet audience in the presence of a now sleeping sufferer.

Zane slowly, but deliberately took the book out from under the covers. As the cotton sheets slid over the front cover of the book, the author first became visible. 'Jamilio Hadrenkes.' She'd never heard of him, or her come to that. It was a name with which she was entirely unfamiliar. It sounded like the author of a seedy romance novel. Was that what he was so embarrassed about?

As the sheets completed their journey across the cover, the title became visible also. “The Temporal Nature of Time.” She looked confused. A science book? Really? Her father, Mark the dumb-ass-culous, had managed to pick out a science book that Zane would actually be interested in? As she looked back up at the boy she could see an almost fearful look on his face. Was he that scared by her finding out that he enjoyed reading books about scientific theories? She wasn't that shallow. Was she?

Suddenly Zane's body twitched and he winced in pain. It seemed as though he wasn't one hundred percent better yet. As his body flicked the covers, the book fell to the floor and a small piece of paper slipped out. Zane, now relaxing once more looked down. He could see the book and the paper, but there was nothing he could do about it.

“Please,” he said, “pick it up now.” He sounded genuinely scared. “You can read it if you must, but please pick it up now.” She obliged, recovering the book from its strewn

position on the floor and passing it back to Zane. As she bent down a second time she had to stretch a little further to reach the paper, tipping her chair forward as she did so. Her hair fell either side of her face and created a shield, through which she could remain expressionless. Righting herself, she read the note which had been scrawled in her fathers handwriting;

'Zane. I know what it feels like to have a passion for something. Here's a little something special to prevent you going crazy whilst recovering. It's not what you would call an 'available' item any more. Please keep it entirely to yourself. You can probably understand why – Mark'

She looked back at Zane. Was it really? Had her father given him an abolished book? Where had he managed to get such a thing? More importantly why had he given it to Zane? The poor boy still sat there, a look on his face of pure horror at her having read the note. 'A little

something special.' The words tore through her like a carnivore through meat. Since when had she been given anything even minutely special, and now here he was getting gifts of almost priceless value. She had had an her expensive dress bought for her by her history teacher. She hadn't noticed her hands curling into fists. The right one hanging down by her side, the left one, now void of the note, screwing up the cotton sheets.

"I'm sorry," said Zane, "I should have told you when you asked the first time."

She snapped back piercingly, "Damn right you should have told me Zane Krecker." People rarely used his full name. The surname, of Deutsch origin, was apparently hard to pronounce for some, the rolling of the first 'R' causing the most difficulty. She was quite obviously mad, and Zane was fearful of more outbursts of frenetic behaviour.

"That wasn't meant for you," she said. "It's just," she paused, "my father hasn't ever given me anything a little special." It wasn't jealousy. She

just couldn't understand what Zane had brought to him that she hadn't. She had no idea what Mark had planned for the young lad, no idea at all. It was infuriating, yet it was totally unfair to release her anger on an entirely innocent party. Zane had nothing to do with her fathers actions. He apologised again and she smiled at him. She couldn't stay mad at him for long.

“What does he mean about keeping it to yourself?” she asked naively. “Why isn't it available any more?”

“This book should have been destroyed years ago,” replied Zane, “It's a left over from the temporal period. I've no idea how your father got hold of it, or why he gave it to me, but it's a damn good read.”

Kiele looked worried, “Zane, are you sure you should be reading it? If it was supposed to be destroyed, it was probably for a good reason right?” Zane had never seen her face look so concerned in his life. She was really disturbed by the presence of the book. He should have listened to himself. He had vowed the day he had opened

it to only read it at night, that way no one would question what it was he was reading. The pages had gotten the better of him however, enticing him further and further into the depths of its hidden secrets. It was true, it had been a truly fascinating read but as a consequence, it had been harder and harder to put it down.

It had started with sneaking a page or two during his lunch but very quickly he had cottoned on to the fact that if he pulled his knees up, he could hide the cover effectively. On several occasions, he had made himself stiff by sitting like it all morning. Kiele had visited a little earlier than usual today and he hadn't had a chance to hide it as he usually managed.

"I really don't think it's anything that bad," said Zane roughly. "You know what governments are like. They always try to ban things which they don't understand. They probably destroyed any physics book with the word time in the title."

He gripped the book tightly. He was grasping at straws now. He had already let Mark down by

telling Kiele, the note had been specific, 'Please keep it entirely to yourself.' Damn it. If only she hadn't walked in at that moment, if only she hadn't come to visit him. His mind halted and another voice stepped in. 'Is that what you really want?' it asked. 'You really want her to go?'

"I'm sorry Kiele," he said sheepishly. She was looking at him with a real effort of confusion. She couldn't understand just what was so important about this book. Neither could Zane. It was something about the combination of Physics and it being a forbidden text. It felt like it had been written by an ancient civilisation or something and he was unearthing it for the first time. He couldn't tell that to Kiele, she would think him a fool.

She said nothing. Still she sat there. Mark was doing it again. He had given her something, the opportunity to meet Zane, and now he was taking it away again. She backtracked. He hadn't just given her the opportunity, she had had that already, Mark had consciously told her to flirt with Zane. Her feelings had done the rest. She

hadn't been able to contain those strong feelings, itching, scratching to get out. She had fallen in love. So quickly, so deeply, but she was there, and now once again Mark was breaking her heart.

"It's, just," she started and then backtracked, "Zane, I really like you and I want to trust you, but," she was finding it difficult to see the words, "when my father gets involved, things generally go bad for me." She didn't realise that her head was down now. She was now looking at the hem of an orange skirt. It held a history with it. Slightly frayed, she had repaired it several times, yet as she studied it, even she couldn't tell where. She was ashamed, ashamed of her father.

"He seemed like a nice enough guy to me?" Zane said untactfully. He had only met the guy twice, maybe three times, but he hadn't been able to detect any malice in his actions.

"A nice enough guy eh?" said Kiele. She decided not to push it any further. Zane would soon find out what her father was like. Mark was probably trying to deliberately drive a wedge between them and she wasn't going to let that

happen. She would fight him to the bitter end. Zane was hers, and he was going to have to realise that. At the same time she reached her triumphant resolution, she also felt very scared of the preceding conversation. If Mark found out she knew about the book, things could turn bad anyway. As she mused further she remembered her fathers comment about 'finding out about it anyway.' Maybe things would be all right after all. At least on that front.

"I guess you could be right," she offered. It was time to change the subject.

The sun was fading already, though it was only three o'clock. The light streaming in through the window created long shadows which seemed to touch everything in the room. It had become quite hot and sticky on the ward and Kiele wished she had worn something a little lighter. It would have been nice to take her top off and feel the cool breeze against her skin, the she remembered who was sitting in the bed next to her. Zane would have just loved that, she thought.

As the trees lining one side of the hospital entrance blew in the light breeze, their branches played with the light. It was as if the leaves were the fingers of a young child, discovering water for the first time. Inside the hospital, the perturbed light was dancing, or maybe it was the shadows that were dancing.

Zane looked down at the book, entirely shaded by the curtain on his left hand side. Its cover was brown and thought it was a twenty first century book, it had been published to look like an old text. In truth it was probably destined for the popular science section, a misclassification by the publishers. The text on the cover was difficult to read against the the rest of the background. There was no outlining or highlighting, or even a change of colour, the text was just an embossing. Years later the text would probably fade into oblivion, worn away by years of shelf action.

It was a fairly thick book, around about one inch and Zane was already half way through. The spine had slight tears at the top and bottom and he could sense the book had definitely been read by

a large number of people. He was actually holding a G-TEP copy of the text. It had been confiscated by the force almost thirty years ago, and was used to teach new G-TEP recruits about the fickle nature of time.

“I bought you some things,” said Kiele, making the change of subject that was so desperately required.

Zane smiled, “You didn't have to do that.”

As she fished around in the bag that had accompanied her, Zane once again was dumbstruck by her beautiful face. The light coming through the curtain lit up every feature and Zane was once again very much in awe of her gorgeously chiselled features.

“I know I didn't have to,” she said, “but I wanted to.” She fished out a data disk, and a few e-ink pages. “I bought you some magazines to read,” she said as if the book never even existed, “and I thought you might like to listen to this.” As she handed him the data disk he turned it over in hand. On the side it read, 'Colour me stupid – C-bex Lunacy.'

Zane knew the song. He knew it well. It had been going round and round in his head for weeks now. A part of him hated it for that, another had a strange respect for it. Either way, it was an awesome feel good song. He let out a big grin.

“Thanks Kiele,” he said, “I really like that track.”

“It's not just one track,” she replied, “they named the album after that one song.”

Zane took a second look at the data disk, as if he could somehow read the data from it with his eyes. He turned it over again saying, “Oh cool.”

A nurse arrived and began to prod at the monitor. Neither of them had seen her coming. It was the 'friend' Zane had made earlier. Kiele and Zane sat there in complete silence, neither one wanting to speak whilst in the presence of the ogre. She was rather terrifying and Kiele couldn't help but re-study her skirt once more. She crossed her legs and as she did so she clipped one of the chrome rods of the bed with the toe of her shoe. It clanged loudly and the hospital bouncer

turned around and glared at them, seemingly melting them both with her laser eyes.

“Don't stop talking on my account,” growled Natasha. Zane had read the name from the badge on her tunic. It seemed such a pretty name, why on earth was it hanging around someone so hideous? He smiled at the towering column of hatred and spoke in a strong accent. “Oh we wouldn't dream of it, would we Kiele?” On hearing Zane's words Kiele almost burst into laughter. She was smiling too much and she couldn't lift her head now. Instead she just shook it. Thanks a bunch Zane, she thought, why did he have to drag her into his quarrels with the staff.

With that, the ogre was gone, stomping off into the distance. Zane was sure he could sense small tremors in the ground, but there were none. Kiele looked up, still smiling. He shot her a grin.

“I almost burst out laughing then,” she said in an angry tone. It wasn't real anger of course, but Zane responded with a shrug of his shoulders and she retaliated by slapping the back of his hand with a very purposeful grimace on her face.

Oh how good it felt to be laughing with her again Zane thought. He had hated the tense moment they had shared but a few minutes ago. Kiele had hated it too and her thoughts were largely in tandem with his. Though she had slapped his hand, it had stayed resting on his. He could feel her hypnotic warmth seeping through into his comparatively cold body. Her skin was so soft, and for a moment he had no idea where her hand ended and his began, the only indication being the heat potential that glued them together. He didn't want it to move.

Kiele hadn't wanted to move her hand either. She felt connected to Zane. It was true, he had saved her life, but it felt much more than that. Much more than simply an infatuation with a heroic figure. Zane was handsome enough, but Kiele felt something different from him. Something she had never experienced before, at least not so abundantly. He was honest.

Mark had been telling her lies for years; She couldn't go to the park because aliens roamed the neighbourhood looking for small children to

eviscerate, not that she had known what that meant; There wasn't enough money for him to even buy enough food, let alone a new dress for her; The woman who was staying in his room was going to be her new mum.

In time the truth of all the lies had found its way out. There were no aliens at the park, he could afford anything he wanted, including a new TV and the woman in the room, she had only been there one night and Kiele hadn't ever wanted to know the real truth. The only one that had mattered was that the woman wasn't going to be her new mum.

30

Avoidance

“So you believe me now?” said Jessie in the coldest tone possible.

“I guess I have no choice,” came the reply. It was Ruben. He couldn't believe that it was all coming to pass. There was no way it could have been overheard by anyone. Maybe it had been extracted from his mind under hypnotism, but then if that was the case, why hadn't they tried to obtain the details of Oken's secret location earlier.

Ruben was out of ideas, he had to give it to Jessie, it was a damn fine plan and he hated him for it. He hated him for everything. Ruben had no idea what Jessie was planning, he had no idea

that he was collaborating with Ric. Just why did he want the technology so badly?

The worried man scuffed the floor like a disgruntled teenager whilst he listened for the man at the other end to state his demands. It was crucifying him. Throughout the entire time the phone had been pressed to his ear, Ruben was asking forgiveness from Oken. He was betraying his brother, his best friend, so as to save Oken's daughter. It was an impossible situation and for a second he felt he was about to have another attack.

He closed his eyes and concentrated his minds eye on a single point in space. Everything was relative to that point. Everything would be OK. He just had to relax. He grabbed hold of the breakfast bar in front of him with his left hand and rested on its cold surface. His brain was going into overdrive now, the single point had been replaced by thousands. There had to be another way. There had to be something he could do to stop this mad man.

“I’ll come by to pick you up” said Jessie. “Just be ready, we won’t be hanging around.” He was deadly serious. He didn’t want to give the G-TEP any ideas about what was going on, it was strictly an in and out job. He had visited Ruben only a few days earlier, visiting him again would be suspicious but he had no one else left to entrust picking the retard up with. He had toyed with asking Ric to do it, but something he had said earlier had made him think otherwise. It was up to him. He would do it. He would receive the wonderful gift, the power that would redeem the world. His thoughts ran away from him and he dragged himself back down to earth.

Ruben swallowed hard, “I’ll be ready,” he said, “but you’d better keep one eye open at all times.” He slammed the phone down, hoping dearly to kill Jessie with the force. It hadn’t gone the way he had wanted. Jolie had phoned him earlier in the day and told him the phrase he so desperately hadn’t wanted to hear. He hadn’t quite believed it and though Jolie persisted, Ruben said nothing of the consequences of the

message she had just delivered. It was better that way. She was a nice lady and he didn't want to risk getting her involved in his problems. Especially as they had now escalated severely.

* * *

Jessie arrived and walked up to the door. It was already half open and sported an unimpressive attempt to fix the damage he had caused only a few days previous. Jagged bits of wood stuck out at all angles and Jessie smiled as he remembered the look on Rubens face when he had entered. It had been one of horror and terror combined. Oh! had it been glorious.

The agent kicked the door the rest of the way open and it flung against a unit inside the house. Ruben didn't have many items in his house, but those he did have he treasured, even though he found it harder and harder to drive himself into taking care of them. Dusting and polishing had been a thing of the past a long time ago, and

Ruben had let his once rustic living area fall into a deep depression.

As the door hit the sideboard, it made fifteen of Ruben's mothers antique plates jump as they were propelled by their usually solid footing. Jessie shouted, "Come on idiot, time to go." When Ruben didn't reply he kicked the door squarely in the centre and sent it swinging towards the sideboard for a second time. It carried with it the full force of Jessie's foot and his slightly too large G-TEP issue boots. The reinforced frame of the door made contact with the sideboard again, sending the plates toppling forward, leaving contact with the shelves they had been sat on for so many years.

Had Ruben been around he would have winced as each one fell through the air to its eventual doom. Some hit the sideboard on the way down, others, had been given enough energy in order to be thrown clear of the furniture entirely. It mattered not their route, each one ended with the same fate, smashing into hundreds of pieces. The legacy of Ruben's mother's

collection lay in complete tatters. One lonely plate remained on the sideboard, defiant at the sight of its friends demise. Jessie took out his side arm and jabbed the butt of it into the centre of the plate, showering himself with shards of broken porcelain.

He shouted out again, "Come on retard. I warned you." Still there was no reply. Ruben was no where to be seen. Jessie had a problem. All of a sudden his rage brewed to the surface and he picked up a nearby chair and hurled it towards Ruben's coffee table. It hit the table and once again the room was filled with a crescendo of breaking glass and anger.

Jessie reached in his pocket for his phone and dialled a number quickly. As he stood there waiting for the recipient to answer he began kicking at various items of Ruben furniture. First a chair, then a glass door of a cabinet, before finally Jessie's foot became one with a piano. The lower boards of the upright piano couldn't hold out against the force of Jessie's boot and they caved under the pressure, unable to prevent the

intrusion of this evil force. The piano screamed in pain.

On the other end of the phone, someone picked up. “What the heck are you calling me for? You know what we agreed.” It was Ric, he wasn't happy at being disturbed at work, on duty, by the weasel that was supposed to have had the job done two weeks ago. He hadn't been impressed when he had learned about Jessie's little train crash, but nonetheless had allowed him to carry out his plan. Jessie was a child, and occasionally Ric had to pander to him to get what he wanted. This had been one of those occasions.

“He's gone,” shouted Jessie, “he's freakin' gone.”

“Well where the heck could he have gone to?” screamed Ric down the phone. This was not how it was supposed to be. He knew Jessie had to get the device somehow. He knew that 'someone' had travelled back in time in the near future, but he couldn't tell who it was. He had erased the records as soon as they had appeared so as not to raise any suspicion from any of the other G-TEP

agents. One such agent had indeed questioned the evidence that had been so quickly deleted from the system. Ric had explained about the difference between residue signatures and echo signatures. The agent, only a junior, had no idea what he was talking about and had left the room before his ego had been bruised further.

Jessie was thinking hard now, he had no idea where the cretin would have run off to. Didn't he care about Kiele at all? His plan was falling apart. Had Ruben actually grown a spine? Maybe he was trying to find Kiele right now? Jessie didn't think so. Ruben wasn't about to dash into the fray to save her. He was the kind of man to take the path of least resistance. That's how Jessie viewed him at any rate.

“Jessie. Concentrate.” Shouted Ric. Ric used Jessie's real name regularly. Mark was reserved only for outside communications. He had been used to calling people by dual names, he had been in the G-TEP for years after all. “If you don't find him, it'll be your life in danger, not.....”

“Don't threaten me,” Jessie snapped back interrupting Ric and startling his superior slightly. “I'll find him. I know how important this is.” He hung up on Ric. This was not going well. He shouldn't have called. Ric was furious and that was a situation that could well have been avoided. Jessie was well aware of Ric's connections both in the G-TEP and in the underground circles. If Ric wanted Jessie dead, it would be so.

He hated how his partner had become his superior. It had been Jessie's idea in the first place anyway, had it not? He couldn't remember now but his current situation was certainly not good.

Jessie racked his brains. Where would Ruben go? Then it hit him, the only person who had attempted to visit him whilst he had been on trial. The old lady. What was her name? Kaitlin. He picked up his phone and began using the built-in directory to search for her address. He knew she wasn't far from the Zone, but far enough that to search every house would have taken him all

afternoon and would have raised some suspicions at the same time.

Damn Ruben. Damn his tiny little brain. Ruben couldn't hope to outrun him or out smart him. The address popped up on the small screen and Jessie loaded it into his navicom. It began giving him verbal directions, but he silenced it, "I know where it is ya freakin piece of tat." He kicked his foot into yet another item of furniture and stormed out of the room.

* * *

As he ran down the road, Ruben rediscovered how out of shape he really was. He had decided to give Jessie the slip on the spur of the moment. Even his own mind hadn't fully understood what was going on. He had to make a stand somehow, he had to stand up against the regime. For some reason Jessie wanted that device, and he had to keep it out of his hands.

His feet were moving faster now as he settled into the rhythm. He hadn't taken a taxi, that

would have allowed him to be tracked too easily, biometrics and all. He had decided the best way to proceed was to quite literally make a run for it. He could almost imagine the rage that was brewing inside Jessie as he discovered the house empty and his prized possession slipping from his fingers.

Ruben was scared, not just a little nervous. Ruben was terrified and he was heading towards one of the only people who could make it all better. She had been like a mother to him on countless occasions and now he was going to ask his 'mother' for one last piece of advice. Deep down Ruben didn't expect to make it away from Jessie forever. This was his last ditch effort. She may have a secret card up her sleeve, she may be able to help him out just this one last time.

He rounded the corner of another road and was almost knocked over by a red car. The driver shouted at him, but Ruben was in a world of his own. He felt almost invincible as he pressed on down the street. He was fairly certain that Jessie was acting alone, or in cahoots with only a small

group of people. This worked to his advantage, it meant Jessie couldn't call on the small army which was the G-TEP to come and flush him out. It was Ruben against Jessie, Jessie against Ruben. Who would win? He really couldn't say.

As he continued down the long road, he noticed the almost hypnotic pattern the old wooden fences made as he ran, it was almost stroboscopic. His head was at ninety degrees as he ran forward, until a dog barking in front of him brought him back to his sense. The dog, on a lead, continued barking at him as he gave it a wide birth. The owner scowled at Ruben as he ran past. When would people look where they were going, thought the pedestrian.

Ruben's lungs were beginning to fail on him. He was breathing hard and sweating all over. He was a wreck. He hadn't been out of the house properly in over eight years. Jessie had seen to it that his life could be a misery no matter where he went. So he had secluded himself in the house. Once a week he had ordered a new set of books and once a week they had turned up on his

doorstep. He hadn't cared for the newer fiction at all, no, Ruben had fallen in love with the sound of the late twentieth century. It sounded like such a simpler time. Only a few years before he and Oken had been born.

Bang! A car door slammed next to him and in his confusion Ruben believed wholeheartedly that he was being shot at. He dived for the floor, scraping off both elbows as he did so. He continued crawling along the floor whilst the owner of the car, a young woman in her thirties shouted after him. She was asking if he was OK, but Ruben could only hear anger in her voice. She was obviously out to get him too.

Finally he reached the door he had been looking for. It was wooden, painted green with an old fashioned knocker in the centre. With a definite purpose, he pulled back on the knocker and attacked the door.

“Please be in, please be in, please be in.” He repeated the words almost as if he were casting a spell. He started looking round him left, then right, then left again. The woman who had shot

at him earlier was gone and the neighbourhood was once again quiet. Ruben could hear someone walked around inside and without thinking he slammed his hands on the door. "Kaitlin!" he shouted. "Kaitlin, it's me Ruben. You have to let me in."

The door opened and the worried face of Kaitlin appeared, just what kind of trouble had Ruben gotten himself into now. She looked tired and worn, Ruben had no idea he had awoken her from a well deserved afternoon nap.

"Ruben," she started, "What in heaven's name is the matter?"

Ruben was jerking around on the door step like a young boy in desperate need of visiting the toilet and it was obvious he wanted to go inside. Sighing, Kaitlin let him in and closed the door behind him.

"Bolt it," he said. When she didn't obey his command he lunged for the door and bolted it top and bottom.

"Ruben stop!" she shouted, "Just stop."

The man stood there. Now in his late forties Ruben looked wildly out of place cowering behind the locked door. Kaitlin took him by the hand and pulled him into the lounge.

“He's after me,” he huffed, “Jessie. He's after me.”

Kaitlin shook her head as she looked at the mess before her. He was crumbling before her very eyes and she knew that if she wanted to get any information out of him, she needed to calm him down, else he would shortly be having a panic attack.

“Ruben, he's dead. Remember? There was an accident, and he died.” She rubbed his back slowly in large circles as the old man gasped for breath. Now it was Ruben's turn. He shook his head.

“No.” He coughed, “He's still very much alive. They changed his name Kaitlin. They changed is damn name!”

Her eyes widened in fear. Had they really done such a thing? Jessie had been disliked by a large proportion of the community and the G-TEP

in an attempt to cover up a) the events at the Zone and b) the annoying brat who had been so highly recommended by Ric, they had changed his name to Mark Matthews.

“Ruben,” she started, “are you sure?”

“Yes,” he wheezed, “He's been visiting me since the Zone.”

“Oh my. Why didn't you ever tell me?” she asked. Before he replied, she already knew the answer. They would have killed him if he had. He didn't reply, seeing the realisation on her face. She looked at the sad lonely man in her lounge. He was a shadow of the man she once knew, a skilled watchmaker and loving husband. She had always loved Ruben like her own son, and she had known that Yasmine wasn't right for him, but could never bring herself to confess it to his face.

“Why are they after you Ruben?” She thought it prudent to ask. Though he was a kind and loving man, sometimes he had a habit of doing the wrong thing. She wondered if this was one of those times.

“I hid something from them,” he said, starting to cry. “I hid something from them and now they want it.” He had almost reverted into a childlike persona. Tears began welling up in his eyes. “I never wanted them to find it Kaitlin,” he wailed. “It was never supposed to be found. They heard me talking to a woman.”

Suddenly she pounced on him like a hawk. “Which woman Ruben? Which woman did you talk to?”

“The one from the school,” he said. “She was nice to me and we just talked.”

Kaitlin put her hand to her mouth. It had been her fault. She had told Jolie where Ruben was. In a roundabouts way. She hadn't given her the exact address, but she hadn't exactly kept her mouth shut. She'd known Jolie for years and trusted her implicitly. Was she really a bad egg? Had she really given Ruben up to the G-TEP forces for keeping something from them. She couldn't believe it.

“Did she do this to you?” Kaitlin asked. “Is she responsible?”

“No,” he said sorrowfully, “It was Jessie, she knew nothing about it.”

The two of them stood there as Ruben tried to regain what was left of his breath.

“Go and wash yourself up Ruben.”

He plodded off and Kaitlin sank down into one of the chairs. With her head in her hands, she prayed for a miracle.

* * *

He wasn't going to let that sniffling excuse for a human being get the better of him. Ruben hadn't left long before he had arrived, he couldn't have gotten far, and the most likely place for him to run to was Kaitlin's. He couldn't believe that the broken little man had gone behind his back and managed to out smart him. Why hadn't he seen it coming? He slammed a hand down on the dashboard of the car. There was a muffled click as part of the dashboard broke away inside but Jessie didn't care, it wasn't his car anyway.

He ripped through the streets of Alendria in the chase of his life. If he didn't find Ruben soon, he would be found instead. Ric could quite easily invent a story about Jessie going rogue, after all, to all intents and purposes, he had. Ric had managed to keep himself distanced just enough that he could deny all knowledge of the plan. The G-TEP would never use a brain scan on such a high ranking officer. It would have sent shock waves through the entire organisation and that was the last thing the global commander wanted.

The car responded to his every movement. Like a magician waving a magic wand, he commanded his vessel through the flow of traffic. Though he was a G-TEP employee, his rank didn't require him to have a car with traffic dispersal mechanisms. He had to rely on his skill at driving in order to make it there. For a second he eased off the gas, why was he rushing at such great speed? What was Ruben going to do, realistically? Kiele was currently under supervision, a little gift from her father, Zane was incapacitated, and Kaitlin? Well she was an

interfering old biddy that should have died a long time ago. Unless Ruben knew how to get the device working?

He stepped on the accelerator once more, pushing hard. Ruben had no idea how to turn a temporal weapon into a time machine. The guy had read a lot of books, but from what Jessie had seen, these particular books were more of the fictional variety. Ruben didn't have any where near the skill and brain power to make the device work.

The engine roared as the internal computer changed gear. The car was getting on in years, and though most people had now switched to solar power over the good old internal combustion engine, the G-TEP required a car to have a certain maximum speed. The solar powered cars of the present day were becoming more and more efficient with every generation. Continuously variable transmission had been perfected and was now installed in every model. There were no gears any more, just a smooth transition from low to high speed.

Jessie hated the solar cars. There was no grunt, no sudden thrust from the gear change. Modern day cars were sissies. He loved his internal combustion engine. Many times over the years, the G-TEP had tried to get Jessie to switch to one of the new solar models, but each time he had refused and apparently it seemed as if G-TEP agents got whatever the hell they wanted, kings in a land of peasants.

He pushed on faster. The navicom was showing that he was approaching his destination. Just a little further now, he thought. Jessie was going to get his man, he spoke slowly and purposefully, "I'm gonna cut you so deep."

* * *

The water splashed against his face and soothed his sweating pores. Ruben hadn't been a particularly good runner when he was younger. Now he was nearing fifty, his body felt all but dead. He looked up into the mirror and saw his ageing face. He couldn't give up now. He needed

a way round this, and fast. He looked at the droplets of water running down his disfigured face. Had he always been this ugly? No wonder Yazmine had left him. His head dropped. Yazmine.

Suddenly there came a furious knocking on the door. Instantly Ruben knew who it was. It had to be Jessie. He looked around. There was no escape. The window of the bathroom only opened a small way and was then trapped by the wall of the house behind. He started breathing heavily as the door was attacked once again. What should he do? There was only one doorway out of the place as far as he knew and running for it would cause problems. Jessie would see him for sure and then game over.

Ruben could hear Kaitlin beginning to walk towards the door, asking subversively who it was. He slipped into the shower cubicle and pulled the door shut. Luckily, the door sported an opaque pane of glass, frosted and without anyway for an outsider to see what or who was inside.

Kaitlin opened the door, or at least tried to. As soon as he realised that the bolts had been loosened and that the catch had been unlocked he planted his foot in the middle of the door and forced it open. It hit Kaitlin in the chest and sent her flying backwards, hitting the wall behind her. She slumped to the floor in a daze.

The large boots of Jessie entered the building and he slammed the door shut behind him. He knew the little cretin had to be here. As Kaitlin nursed herself into a sitting position, Jessie began searching the house room by room. The kitchen was at the far end of the house and he began there.

“Come out you freakin coward,” shouted Jessie as he tipped over the kitchen table, sending cutlery and dishes crashing as he did so. He was rather enjoying this sudden rush of power, this surge of energy. No one would stand in his way.

“Stop it!” shouted Kaitlin, still lying in the hallway. “There's no one here.” She had been careful not to say 'he's not here.' It would have given the game away that 'he' really had been

there. It wasn't much, but it could mean the difference between Ruben leaving alive or dead.

“Shut-up Kaitlin,” shouted Jessie. “I know he's here.” He moved on to the next room, kicking the door to the bathroom wide open. Ruben froze in fear. He had heard everything up to this point. He knew Jessie would find him eventually, yet he stayed quiet. He didn't want Kaitlin to get hurt, but then he couldn't bring himself to give up either. It wasn't for his own safety, but for Kiele's. She had seemed like such a happy young girl. He couldn't condemn her to death just like that. Ruben knew that once Jessie had what he wanted, Kiele and whoever else he was holding hostage in his sick game of power, would be killed, or mutilated as he had been.

Jessie looked into the room. Not seeing anyone immediately he moved down the hallway once more. Ruben's heart was pounding really fast now. Had he seen Jessie, it would have been pounding a whole lot faster. He was brandishing an assault rifle in his right hand. The boy had

escaped this time. Would Jessie leave now and go home?

It was such a childish thought that Ruben almost gave himself up there and then. Who was he to stand up to Jessie? He forgot what carton of milk he'd used the previous day. He ate olive green bananas because he thought the yellow ones were poisonous. He wasn't all there. Yet here was Ruben at his most resolute. Staying silent and making the decision to stand tall against this crook of an enforcer, this bully. He had to be stopped.

Jessie continued on down the hallway. He went in the bedroom on the opposite side of the passageway and looked under the bed.

"Guess you couldn't fit under there could you," he screamed. As he stood back up he saw his reflection in a full length mirror attached to a large cupboard. Blind with rage, he swung the rifle at his own face, smashing the reflector and sending shards twirling all over the room. One or two made it from the cupboard to his shoes and

the evil figure kicked them off smashing one into a further three pieces as it hit the wall.

Jessie exited the bedroom and started for the cowering Kaitlin. As he walked past her, he pointed the barrel of the gun at her old wrinkled face and pushed it forward, making contact with her ageing forehead and forced it against the wall.

“I’m coming back for you Kaitlin,” he screamed. He removed the gun from her head and she felt it flop forwards. How could she have been so careless. In her attempts to help one young woman overcome an obsession that was driving her crazy, she had inadvertently informed the G-TEP that the case hadn’t been completely closed. She began to cry, slowly at first, then tears began streaming down her face.

Jessie was now in the lounge. It was just as it had been when Zane and Kiele had visited not a week ago. Jessie couldn’t see Ruben anywhere, yet he hadn’t done any looking with his rifle yet. He swung it around and took out several of the display cases as he did so. Ruben clearly wasn’t here either. Jessie had obviously been out

smarted. No. It wasn't true, there was still one source of information entirely untapped.

Remembering the old woman lying precariously in the hallway Jessie turned round. He stomped towards and heard her gasp as she realised she was next. She started to try to scabble away, but Jessie was too fast for her. He grabbed her by the leg and pulled her limp old body into the lounge.

With the rifle still in one hand he lifted her up into a sitting position with the other. He pointed the barrel at her head. She was terrified, blubbering like a baby but still managing to hold out against the forces of evil. Ruben, still cowering in the shower had heard her cries as she had been dragged into the lounge. Jessie flicked the safety catch off of the rifle. Kaitlin began screaming.

“No, no, no, please, no, please no,” she said. “You've taken enough from me already.” Jessie's face turned slightly pensive.

“Don't like that approach eh?” he said with a grin. “How about we make it a little more

personal then?” He threw the rifle to one side and reached for his hand gun. It felt cold against his skin and he gripped it harder to assist the draining of the heat from his hand. He pushed the tip of the barrel to the side of her face, and smooched her cheek into her jaw.

“Where the heck is he?” he shouted, cocking his head to one side expecting an answer. She was blubbering still and he had to get her to recompose herself. He knew she would let up eventually. He took the gun away from her face and moved it to her mouth, forcing the cold metal between her teeth. She started screaming through gritted teeth, biting down on the barrel.

“Tell me where he is and I'll make it stop.” He was actually serious. He had no intention of killing her just for the sake of it. She continued screaming, her lips occasionally finding the cold metal and reeling back in fear.

He shouted at her again their faces less than six inches apart, “Tell me where he is, you stupid witch of a woman.” He took her support away and she fell backwards to the floor. Her mouth,

now missing the gun, remained open at the shock of the relatively short free fall. Within seconds he was standing over her, the rifle back in his hands. “Well then I guess I have no further use for you.”

He had built this moment up to a climax, so she would feel there was nothing more. He had toyed with her feelings both physically and emotionally and now he drew back the sword for the final thrust through her heart.

Poor Ruben could take it no longer. He stood to his feet and exploded forth from the shower. He hadn't meant to break the glass, but it had been so thin it had just happened. The door to the bathroom was still open and as Jessie began to look up to locate the source of the noise, he was immediately aware of the lumbering giant coming towards him.