

DILLON HUNT AND THE  
MASK OF TIME



CHAD STEWART



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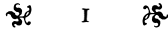
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*For my sister Brandie who has supported me in all my writing endeavours. Thanks for reading my stories, giving me feedback, and encouraging others to be a part of Dillon Hunt's world!*





## THE STAFF OF HARASET

**D**illon, the thirteen year old boy with wavy blonde hair, thin build, and striking blue eyes, moved through the thick forest effortlessly. He stopped and glanced back as his friend Sarah who pushed on towards him. He smiled as he saw her coming through the brush like a girl possessed with the same adventurous spirit as himself.

The only regret he had about their excursion this morning was not having his dog, Bruno, beside him on this adventure. Just a few months earlier his family had to put Bruno down when they discovered he had cancer. It was too far along for them to do anything about. It was a sad time for the Hunt family and Dad couldn't bring himself to get another dog so soon after his passing. It was a loss that Dillon felt deeply and Sarah was there to comfort him in his pain.

She was his best friend and one of the ways she comforted him was to come along as often as she could on these adventurous hikes. She was shorter than he was, with

medium length brown hair, and deep brown eyes. He felt he could tell her anything. Well ... almost anything.

“What are you waiting for?” Sarah suddenly asked, jarring Dillon from his thoughts. “You don’t think I can keep up?” she accused.

“Wait ... what ... I didn’t ...” Dillon stammered.

Sarah laughed. “Just kidding Dil. You get flustered so easy.”

Dillon could feel his face reddening. For some reason, unknown to him, Sarah always had a way of catching him off guard. It was probably because he really cared about what she thought of him; more so than any other person.

Sarah smiled disarmingly and motioned for Dillon to continue.

He smiled back and nodded as he turned and trudged on.

“Where are we going anyway?” Sarah asked.

“Nowhere in particular. I just like hiking these woods and I’ve never been to this area before. I’ve heard that there’s an awesome waterfall around here some ...” Dillon stopped suddenly and glanced to the right, down a small decline into a low valley.

“What is it?” Sarah asked, concern creeping into her voice.

“There’s something down there,” he replied softly—mysteriously.

“What? Like an animal? Maybe we should go Dil.” She grabbed his arm, but he pulled away and started to descend the small hill and into the clearing at the bottom of the valley.

“Dil!” Sarah whispered loudly. “Dillon Stephen Hunt! You get back here!”

Dillon barely even noticed her pleas as he came into

the clearing and approached the line of trees on the other side. He heard a crash behind him and noticed that Sarah had unceremoniously tumbled down the hill behind him. She lifted herself off the ground and shook the leaves from her jeans and jacket. She did not look impressed!

“What are you doing?” she whispered loudly again, anger brimming her voice.

Dillon turned and pointed into the tree-line. “Does that look normal to you?” he asked.

Sarah came closer and squinted into the bush which was about ten feet away at this time. “I don’t see anything.”

Dillon grabbed her hand gently and walked toward the trees. As they got to the first of the large pines Dillon moved some branches away so Sarah could get a better look. Nestled in the middle of the pines and spruce trees was a single little palm tree!

“What!” she exclaimed. “How is that even able to grow here? And how did you see it from up on that hill?” She accentuated her point by motioning back up the hillside which was about thirty feet from where they were.

Dillon was about to respond when she waved her hand at him dismissively. “Never mind. I know I should stop asking you these questions as you don’t even seem to know yourself!”

Dillon knew she was referencing the many times he had found something or observed something that should be impossible to see or find. Like last year when he found a watch hidden in a small natural alcove in the side of a hill under some roots. That watch had led to other events which unraveled for the young boy later that summer when he and his family went to Desert Oasis Resort. Finding that watch was a test by the secret organization known as the

Orion Group. They needed Dillon's special gifts to help them find their missing man, John Taylor Sebastian. And they needed to make sure he was the right one for the job, which he evidently was.

Other than the finding of the watch, Dillon had never really told Sarah anything else that happened to him at the resort. He was going to, but couldn't. He couldn't let Sarah know he was responsible for killing a man, or that there was a secret terrorist organization willing to weaponize chemicals and harm innocent people. He couldn't tell her about Derek, a man who was kind but comfortable with death. And he definitely couldn't tell her how he felt about her.

Dillon turned and went further into the tree-line. He approached the palm tree and knelt down in front of it. As he ran his hand down one of its smooth leaves he noticed that there was something behind it. Sarah just walked up behind him, hunching her back as she went in order to duck under the wide branches of the pine and spruce trees, when Dillon scooted around the palm.

Just on the other side of the out-of-place tree was a small hill and there, covered by earth, pine needles, and shrubbery, was what appear to be a board. He pulled some of the earth and debris away from it and uncovered a large piece of plywood.

"Okay ... what is that?" Sarah asked as she approached.

Dillon shook his head. He looked around and felt the wood with his hand. He knocked on it and listened. "Ah ha! I know what you are!" he exclaimed as he looked down.

"What! What is it?"

"It's a mine shaft."



“And how do you know that?” Sarah asked skeptically.

“Because ... we are standing on tracks,” he replied as he scooped down and uncovered some rusty old rails that led under the wooden panel and into the side of the hill.

“There’s gotta be a way we can get through this,” Dillon mumbled, more to himself than to Sarah.

Sarah grabbed his shoulder. “Just because this is here doesn’t mean you need to go into it.”

Dillon didn’t even hear her as he continued to dig around in the dirt.

“Dillon! Did you hear me?” she asked, frustration beginning to build in her voice.

He continued to dig.

“Dillon! Dillon!”

He finally turned around. “Oh come on Sarah! How often do you find an abandoned mine shaft?” he pleaded, his blue eyes boring into her.

“Oh no you don’t,” Sarah responded. “You can’t pull that ‘I’m so cute so you have to do what I want’ trick on me. We’re leaving.”

“But what about this mysterious palm tree? I know there’s something in here that *wants* to be found.”

“Wants to be found?” she asked with a snort. “You talk about these things as though they draw you in somehow. Like there’s some invisible power that calls to you and you have to obey.”

Dillon was silent. In truth, he had to admit to himself that the way Sarah described it kind of accurately portrayed those feelings he did get once in awhile. The previous year when he found John Taylor Sebastian’s watch, and then the arrow head at the gas station while on their way to the resort, were similar to what he was feeling

now. He knew there was something important here, but he just couldn't figure out why he knew it.

"Come on Dil. We're going," Sarah declared with finality as she turned and began to make her way out from under the branches.

Dillon sat there for a moment, watching his friend storm away. He didn't want to leave this place untouched without at least seeing what was behind the panel, but maybe Sarah was right. His curiosity got him into trouble last year even though he was able to help save John, and others, when he assisted the Orion Group to solve the mystery of the Desert Oasis Resort. His new friend Derek Vico from Orion said it was a big deal, even though Dillon didn't quite see it that way. He was just happy to have survived and that Jordan and Gwen made it out alive as well. It's not like Orion needed him anymore anyway. In truth he really didn't want to be in contact with them, either. He was just an ordinary kid now, and he wanted it to stay that way.

Maybe this was just stupid?

Sarah turned back just before entering into the clearing. "Coming?"

"What ... oh ... yeah," he stammered, her question jolting him from his thoughts. He took one last look at the boarded up hillside before turning and following his friend back the way they came.



DILLON STARED DOWN AT HIS PLATE AS HE MOVED SOME OF the carrots around absentmindedly with his fork. He just couldn't get the image of the boarded up mine shaft out of his head. Then there was that feeling in his gut. It was

almost a tug that he got sometimes when weird things began to happen to him. He was scared and yet excited all at the same time. It was strange and he knew he couldn't explain it to anyone without them thinking he was crazy. He didn't even talk to Derek about this even though Derek claimed that it was because of his special abilities that the Orion Group called upon him to help them out last year. Derek never really spoke to him in detail about what Orion knew he had which made him suspect that they were as much in the dark as he was. The question that was never answered was: How did they know he had these abilities? Unfortunately, the conversation never came up between solving the mystery and just trying to stay alive!

"You okay Dillon?" he heard his Dad ask which suddenly ripped him from his contemplations.

Dillon looked up. "What?"

"You haven't touched any of your food and you're staring off into space like you're actually on another planet."

"Ya, I'm fine. I'm just thinking about a school project I have to finish," he lied.

"Oh really? What kind of project," his Mom asked.

"It's nothing," he replied. "How was your day?" He knew that he needed to change the conversation fast so they wouldn't probe too deep, which would probably make him say something stupid as he wasn't really good at coming up with things on the fly.

"Maybe you're thinking about Sarah?" Claire chimed in with a chuckle.

Dillon's face went pale. "How ... what ... I ..." he stammered but couldn't come up with a response.

The rest of the family chuckled at Dillon's discomfort, but Mom eventually patted her hand in the air to quiet

them down. “Oh work was good; better than I expected it would be,” she replied with a wink to Dillon.

Dillon quietly sighed in relief as Mom came to his rescue as she went into the details of her day. He glanced over and noticed that Jordan was looking at him with that penetratingly inquisitive look that he had at times when he knew that something was up. Dillon hated that look! After last year at Desert Oasis Resort the young boy discovered that he couldn’t underestimate his older brother. Jordan was much more than he seemed, even though he didn’t like others knowing that. Dillon knew that he was potentially in trouble when Jordan started to suspect that something was amiss. He knew he had to play things cool around his all-too-observant brother.

“So ... how was your football tryouts?” Dillon asked Jordan, trying to get his inquisitive mind off of him.

“Hmmm ... good,” was all that he replied with as he went in for more of his pork chops, all-the-while staring at his little brother.

Dillon nodded and put his head down as he started eating.



DILLON STARED AT HIS COMPUTER. FOR WHATEVER REASON he just couldn’t get the thought of that mine shaft out of his head. Almost on cue his phone buzzed with a text. It was Sarah.

*“Look, Dil, I know you,”* it read. *“I know you’re probably obsessing about that mine. So check this out.”* There were three links pasted into the body of the text.

*“The place is probably cursed,”* her message went on, *“and we could’ve gotten hurt or killed going in there!”*

Dillon knew she was trying to persuade him to drop it altogether but, unfortunately for Sarah, her warning had the opposite affect on him! Now he *REALLY* wanted to find out what was in there.

He clicked the first link and began to read. After a moment he moved over to the desk and opened up his laptop. He then grabbed a small pad of paper and began to scribble some information down. In no time at all he was completely immersed in the information being displayed across the screen.

He found out that there was in fact an abandoned mine in the area, and that it was closed due to some sketchy circumstances. Weird things started to spook some of the miners: hearing voices in the darkness, and freak accidents that caused injury. When the workforce was being depleted due to men not wanting to mine in this particular spot anymore because of the strange occurrences, the foreman tried to keep production going but then mysteriously disappeared.

Apparently, shortly after that—so the urban lore stated—there was a staff that was found within this mine, but when the miners tried to remove it from the shaft there was a terrible cave in which killed nineteen of them. After that, the mine was closed and boarded up, never to be unearthed again.

A local professor at the university named Clive Johnson found out from some of the eyewitnesses that survived the collapse that they had discovered this staff. Clive wanted to go in and find it but was prevented by the local authorities and then died suddenly in a house fire a few days after petitioning the mining group to go after the item.

Before he died, however, he discovered that the staff was probably the Staff of Haraset, which was named after

a great Shaman who used the properties of the material the staff was made of—some sort of strange metal that seemed to hold heat from the sun—to create elixirs that gave his warriors great strength and speed. Before the discovery of the staff the story was merely local legend until word that the item had been found started to circulate.

At that time—Dillon continued to read—there were quite a few treasure hunters who also planned on going into the mine in order to acquire the artifact, but they all shied away from the expedition once word of Johnson's untimely demise began to spread. They all viewed the staff as a curse.

Dillon sat back for a moment, trying to digest the information. He rubbed his eyes as they began to tire from the dull light of the screen. He blinked a few times then leaned forward once more, fully captivated by the story that was unfolding.

He continued to read. Over the years the mine shaft had been forgotten and trees overgrew the entrance. The only thing that marked the whereabouts of the shaft was the presence of a tiny palm tree—so the story said—which is impossible to grow in the northern midwest climate. Many over the years had searched for the entrance to that mine—and the palm tree—without any success, which is why most people thought it was just a myth.

“But I saw that tree,” he whispered to himself, almost shocked by the revelation. “This *has* to be true. Or at least based on some truth.”

“Dillon! It's time for bed!” he heard his Dad holler.

“Sure thing Dad!” he yelled back as he closed up his computer after taking one more look at the data on the screen.

He stretched and arched his back trying to loosen up all the tightness that developed from him leaning over for so long. After a huge yawn he turned and jumped into the softness of his bed. He knew the legend would still be there for him to look at tomorrow.

Dillon quickly drifted off to sleep; thoughts of the staff of Haraset fresh in his mind, and ... in his dreams.

## DREAMS

All was dark. Dillon could hear the men talking, but couldn't make out what they were saying. It was as though they were speaking underwater, or had a cloth placed over their faces in order to muffle their voices. Even though he couldn't see them he knew there were at least two. He didn't know how he knew, he just knew.

Suddenly a small speck of light appeared in front of him. It was slowly getting larger and he could feel himself running toward it. As the light continued to expand he was struck by the fresh scent of the forest air just beyond the darkness.

He heard men screaming from behind him which caused his heart to skip a beat and spurred him to move faster. He could feel his legs pump harder and begin to ache with the added exertion. As he burst forth from the darkness he saw two men closing in on him. Despite his apparently desperate situation he observed that both men were wearing light jackets with golden insignias on the shoulder of a triangle circled by four stars.



His eyes went wide as he glanced over and saw that he was carrying, in his right hand, a large wooden staff.

Bang!

*A gun shot?* he screamed in his head.



DILLON'S EYES POPPED OPEN. HIS BREATHING CAME IN great heaving gasps. He turned his head to the side and saw the multicoloured reflections of the light dancing off the wall that were coming from the prism hanging by his window. The street light just outside always caused that effect when his blinds were slightly open. He was in his room, dazed and disoriented.

It was a dream. But not any ordinary dream. This was one of *those* dreams. It was a dream like the ones he had during his time at Desert Oasis Resort. Those dreams were special in that they seemed to indicate to him possible future events; that is, events that seemed to come to pass yet with some differences. He knew this was one of those dreams.

He sat up in bed to better catch his breath and clear his head. He grabbed his phone from his nightstand and looked at the time: 1:38. He put the phone down and brushed his hand through his hair.

“What is happening to me?” he whispered to himself. “Will I get shot?” The disturbing thought rolled around in his mind as he considered it.

*Was it a warning? Do I find the staff only to be killed in the process?* His mind buzzed with all the possibilities. He knew he couldn't fully trust the images he received as there were important details that were often modified as in the case of the dreams at Desert Oasis Resort when he saw the

symbol, the snake, and he saw his brother Jordan and sister Gwen with him in the underground caverns of the Oasis. Those visions—if you could call them that—painted a rough picture or outline of the events which were about to take place, but the outplay of the situations were different from what actually happened.

“Why am I having these now?” he questioned out loud. The feeling of dread started to well up in him and he could feel his chest tighten a little.

He picked up his phone again and pulled up his contacts. He stared at the name he retrieved from the list for what seemed a long while before turning the phone off again and placing it back down on the nightstand.

He laid his head down and dared to try and go to sleep once more, not knowing if he was going to dream *that* kind of dream again before the night was out. He was tired and needed the sleep. But what he needed more than sleep were answers. He knew, however, that the more prudent thing to do was to get the rest and wait until morning before getting those.

*I will call him*, he determined.

Dillon drifted in and out—his brain refusing to decide if it wanted to be awake or asleep—for the rest of the early morning until his alarm finally pulled him completely into consciousness. He sluggishly removed himself from bed and ambled to the bathroom. The cold water he splashed onto his face felt refreshing, but the effect only lasted momentarily. He looked up into the mirror and noted the redness of his eyes. He couldn't get the images out of his mind as the dream, his living dream, seemed so real. Whenever he had one of these dreams they were different than a normal dream: they were more real. Many of his normal dreams seemed real,

but these ones he knew *were* real, or rather, were about to be real.

He had never talked to anyone about the dreams he had at Desert Oasis Resort, not even Sarah. But he knew now that he had no choice. He needed help. He needed Orion again. More specifically, he needed Derek Vico again.

He walked back to his bedroom, sat down, grabbed the phone, and made the call.



DEREK FELT THE STING OF THE PUNCH ON HIS FACE AS HE rolled with the blow, trying to soften the impact. Before he was able to fully recover another flurry of blows was launched at him. He managed to block most of them but one got through his defenses. He felt the dull thud of the impact at his ribs and winced with the hit. He blocked low and to the right as a leg came in, then knife-hand blocked up and to the left deflecting another punch.

He jumped back as a roundhouse kick came in narrowly missing him. Before his opponent was able to complete her spin Derek lunged forward with a low kick that caught her in the thigh which threw her off balance. She tried to retreat, but Derek was there with his own flurry of blows, aiming mid, high, then low. The agile woman was pushed back on her heels and Derek knew he had finally gained the upper hand.

“Sometimes all that it takes is one mistake and then you’re fighting for your life,” Derek said with a smile as he pressed the attack.

She grimaced and clenched her jaw. Derek smiled all the wider as he pressed in.

Derek clipped her on the side with a low punch and was about to go high when his phone rang from the side: the distinctive ring was the sound of the door chimes from the Desert Oasis Resort Information Center.

Derek had managed to find that specific ring tone after his mission at the resort was done and programmed it for Dillon Hunt's number so he would know when the boy was calling or texting. For Dillon to contact him he knew it would be important. He glanced over, and the momentary distraction was all that Chyna needed. Derek felt the force of the punch on his face. The blow put him into a half spin and sent him to the mat.

"Sometimes all it takes is a distraction for your enemy to end you," the young woman, Chyna, commented with a smirk. She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her forearm then reached down and offered her gloved hand to Derek.

Derek smiled as he took the woman's hand. He was becoming more and more impressed with this newer recruit to the Orion Group. They had sparred many times since she was scouted, but this was the first time she had put him on the mat, albeit with some help from Dillon.

"Thanks. I'll remember that next time," Derek replied with a laugh as he scooted over and grabbed his phone.

"Hello. Derek speaking."

"Hi Derek. It's me, Dillon."

"Dillon! It's been a while since we spoke," he glanced over to see Chyna perk up when he mentioned Dillon's name. "How are you? Is everything okay?"

"I'm ... ah ... am okay," Dillon said weakly.

Derek paused for a moment, waiting to see if his friend was going to offer anything more. Silence. "Come on

Dillon,” Derek prompted. “You can tell me whatever’s on your mind.”

“I ... um ... I had a dream.”

“Okay ... I’m going to assume that this dream is very important somehow as we haven’t spoken in over a year.”

“Listen Derek. I never told you this when we were at the resort, but I sometimes have dreams that come true ... sort of,” Dillon replied.

Derek was silent.

“This is going to sound crazy,” he continued, “but when I was at the resort I had dreams about that symbol I told you about, and about the snake attack, and the fact that Jordan and Gwen were going to be with me in the underground caverns and that we were going to be attacked by those spider creatures.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before?” Derek asked. He looked up and saw that Chyna was now standing beside him, an inquisitive look splayed across her delicate features. Derek held up his hand to her and turned away slightly.

“I don’t know. I wanted to, but I ... I don’t know why I didn’t tell you. I haven’t told anyone. It sounds crazy.”

“Not in my line of business,” Derek reassured. “Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because as I just said, I had another one.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“It’s hard to explain, but these dreams are different than normal dreams. They’re real. I can’t explain it as I know people have real-seeming dreams all the time, but these ones I *know* are real.” Dillon paused for a moment and Derek could sense that he was trying to collect his thoughts.

“The most disturbing thing about these dreams is that

they are representations of things that will happen except that the events don't unfold exactly as I dream. They're real, but the circumstances are slightly different when the event actually happens. Does that make sense, or am I just losing my mind?" Dillon asked, a nervous edge creeping into his voice.

"You're not crazy Dillon," Derek reassured again. "You have a gift and this must be a manifestation of that gift. Now, why don't you explain this dream to me."

"Okay. Yesterday my friend Sarah and I were hiking through the woods near my house and I discovered an abandoned mine that was boarded up. The weird thing was that the reason I found it was because I saw a small palm tree in the midst of the other trees. And, as you know, these trees can't grow up here. So, when I did some research I found out that there might be a staff buried there called the Staff of Haraset.

"A professor named Clive Johnson discovered it but was killed in a fire before he had the chance to unearth it." Dillon paused after his summation of the story.

"And what about the dream?" Derek prompted.

"Well ... this morning I had a dream that I found this staff in the mine shaft but was chased by some people who wore an insignia on their arms. It was a golden triangle circled by four stars."

"The Scavenger Syndicate," Derek replied without skipping a beat.

"You know who these guys are?"

"Yes. Orion has run into them a few times in the field. They're not to be messed with," Derek replied sternly. "Okay Dillon, I want you to sit tight and wait for us to show up. Don't do anything until we get there."

"But how long will that take? I have a feeling that these

guys are going to find this staff today. If we don't act now then it will be taken and urban lore, if it has any truth, says that this staff has some sort of power. If these guys aren't good then we can't let them have it."

"I understand Dillon. But I don't want you getting hurt. Remember, we're a team just like at the resort. But you need to trust me. I can be there tomorrow," Derek explained.

"But it will be gone by then, I'm sure of it," Dillon argued.

"I understand, but your safety is more important. Promise me that you will wait."

There was a long pause. "I promise," Dillon stated hesitantly.

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow then. Good bye Dillon." Derek hung up the phone and looked over to meet Chyna's dark eyes.

"Pack your things. We're leaving in twenty minutes," he said.

"But I thought you said the earliest we could be there was tomorrow?" the young woman asked.

"That's right. I did. But you don't know Dillon," stated Derek seriously. "He's not going to wait for us."

Chyna smiled at him. "Sure, you just don't want me to kick your butt again," she said with a wink as she left for her personal quarters to pack.

THE SCAVENGERS

**D**illon really did mean to wait for Derek. He wasn't lying when he promised that he would. But he knew he couldn't. Tomorrow would be too late. The feeling in his gut tugged at him to act. He didn't understand these feelings he got, all he knew is that he couldn't ignore them. It was as though something in him awakened when he was at Desert Oasis Resort last year. He knew that, before the events which transpired at the resort, he was good at finding stuff, but he always just thought he was lucky. It wasn't until he was recruited by Orion that he found out that it was something more. He just didn't know what. And the impressions he now got when confronted with a mystery—like this pulling at him and driving him to solve it—were a lot stronger than they used to be.

Then ... there was the dream. He still had the last part of the dream in his mind where he heard a gun go off, but he shook the thought away, trying to focus on the fact that he never actually saw himself get shot, and that his dreams weren't exact. As he thought on it, he wondered why he



hadn't told Derek about that part. Maybe it was because he was afraid that Derek would further guilt him into waiting? He didn't really know the answer to that. He felt quite silly, not even able to understand his own thoughts or actions at times. In any case, he pushed all that aside and started his preparations.

He hurriedly put some supplies in his backpack: a flashlight, some matches, gloves, a few feet of rope, a granola bar, and ... an extra pair of socks because you never know when you need a dry pair for your feet!

As he rummaged around for his gear he made sure to avoid the rest of the members of his family. He didn't need anyone asking questions, especially since he was terrible with making up excuses on the fly. And the one he knew he really needed to avoid was Jordan.

Despite the fact that Jordan appeared to be your typical shallow seventeen year old, he sometimes surprised Dillon with his depth of thought and observation. One of the reasons that Dillon was able to make it out of the resort alive the previous year was actually because of Jordan and his hidden heroic nature that came out when Dillon needed him most. Dillon often silently lamented the fact that the Orion Group had taken those memories from his older brother after the events at the resort. More than any other time in his life did he feel a real connection to Jordan, but now that was all gone as their relationship went back to the way it used to be.

As he silently exited the house an hour later, looking around in order to make sure he wasn't discovered, he noticed that the morning sun was just coming up. He darted over to his bike that was chained to the patio, unlocked it, took one last look, then sped off down the street towards the forest.

He rode as far as he could into the trees before laying it aside. He was about to continue on foot when he heard someone coming through the woods from behind him. He tried to ditch his bike in the underbrush but wasn't fast enough as he turned to see ... Sarah come bounding up the path on her bike.

Dillon breathed a sigh of relief when he saw her and just shook his head as she approached. "What are you doing here?" he asked in a frustrated tone.

"I would ask you the same thing Dill!" Sarah spouted back as she dismounted from her bike. "I told you that this place is dangerous and yet here you are!"

"Yes Sarah, I am here! I don't know why but this is something I *have* to do." He thought about telling her the truth about everything at that moment: Orion, Desert Oasis Resort, and his dreams; but knew he couldn't.

He was expecting Sarah to enter into a tirade at that moment, but what happened next shocked him. After a few seconds of silence and her penetrating gaze, she nodded. "Then I'm coming with you."

"You ... you're ... what?" Dillon sputtered.

Sarah smiled and took off her bike helmet. "Yes Dillon. I'm coming with you, and I'm going to help you in any way I can because you're my friend and I don't want anything bad happening to you."

Dillon was stunned! They had been best friends for a few years now, but never before did he realize how deep that friendship went until now. "Thank you," he replied. "But I can't have you risking yourself for me."

"Oh really?" she said with raised eyebrows. "Like it or not Dillon, I'm coming with you."

Dillon sighed in frustration as he realized there was no way she was backing down from this. "Fine," he replied

through gritted teeth, “But you need to promise me something.”

“Sure. Anything.”

“You need to do exactly what I say and don’t question what you’re about to see, no exceptions.”

Sarah was silent for a moment with a confused look on her face.

“I can’t explain Sarah, but you will understand when we get there.”

“Ah ... okay,” she replied hesitantly.

“Good. We need to get moving.”

They ditched the bikes and continued on foot. Dillon pushed them on as fast as he could, hoping they would make it to the mine’s entrance before anyone else. He silently wished he could somehow outmaneuver his dream if that was even possible. And, having Sarah here with him, gave him hope that this *was* possible as she wasn’t in the dream at all.

The two made it to the edge of the tree-line that led into the low valley where they discovered the mine. And that was when they saw them: the men from his dream!

“Who are those guys?” Sarah whispered, a tone of shock in her voice.

Even though Dillon had experienced these strange occurrences at the resort, he was still nonetheless stunned as well when he saw the men standing there! He breathed deeply in an effort to calm down as his heart began to race. *I guess it’s not possible to avoid the dream, he thought to himself, or at least certain aspects of it.* “Those are guys who are looking for the staff,” he replied.

“So that thing is real?” she questioned skeptically.

Dillon nodded. “Remember back there I told you that you needed to listen to me no matter what?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I need you to stay here as I sneak into that place,” he stated.

“What! You’re going to do what?” Sarah asked in exasperation.

“We need to get that staff before they do,” Dillon responded calmly, “and our best chance of doing that is for one of us to go down there. If we both go then we’ll be seen for sure.”

“But—”

“Listen Sarah,” Dillon cut in, “you said you wouldn’t question what you’re going to see. Just listen to me. Everything will be alright.”

Sarah was silent for a moment. Dillon could see the internal struggle happening in her. Finally she nodded her head. The young boy was about to slip away when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Sarah’s eye’s rimmed in tears. “Be careful,” she said.

Dillon was touched by her concern and placed his hand on hers. “If something happens to you down there I’ll kill you Dil,” she stated coldly as she removed her hand and wiped the tears from her eyes.

That statement took Dillon aback for a second, but he quickly composed himself again and began to make his way through the brush, trying not to disturb it as he moved down the side of the hill and into the valley. Thankfully, the men looked more bored than anything.

“So did you see the game last night?” the shorter man asked his friend as they easily strode around the perimeter.

Dillon stopped for a moment and observed that they didn’t seem to be terribly concerned that anyone might be around.

He noted that there was now a small clearing that

surrounded the mine entrance. This group had obviously cleared it away as they desecrated the aged place, but they left the palm tree unharmed which Dillon found curious.

The young boy had no idea how many people were in this group as his dream only showed him these two. He remembered hearing someone from behind him as he sped away with the staff, but he had no way of knowing how many there were. These two wore jeans, t-shirts, and light jackets. One was tall and skinny while the other was medium height and stalky. They wore golden insignias of a triangle circled by four stars on their jackets. He immediately recognized it as the symbol from his dream, and he remembered that Derek told him that it was connected to a group called the Scavenger Syndicate.

The men walked back and forth talking easily. He was about twenty feet away now and knew, if he wanted to get in there, he would have to time it just right. The sun was now high in the sky which washed away any of the shadows that would have been near the entrance of the mine shaft if it were earlier in the day.

He snuck around the edge of the clearing, just inside the tree-line so he wouldn't be seen, and tried to get to the side of the entrance.

"So what do you think of Clayden's new ride?" the tall man ask as they walked to the far side of the clearing.

"I think it was way overpriced."

The men laughed.

"Hey, the Tower doesn't pay you guys to sit around and gossip! Get back to scouting the perimeter!" a voice shouted from inside.

The two men looked at each other and just shrugged before continuing their walk around.

Dillon knew he had to make a break for it before they

turned around and came back. With as much stealth as he could muster, he slipped out of the clearing and darted around the brush and toward the entrance. As he crossed the threshold he accidentally stubbed his foot on a rock and stumbled, causing him to scuffle as he fell to his knees.

“Did you hear that?” the shorter man asked.

Dillon was able to slip behind a small bush before they spun around. He held his breath.

“I don’t know what I heard,” the other responded as he pulled out a gun from under his jacket. Dillon’s heart pounded as he sat motionless undercover at the side of the entrance of the mine. The taller man closed in on his position. Dillon didn’t move a muscle.

Suddenly he heard a loud cawing sound coming from somewhere up on the hillside from where he and Sarah had come from. He knew Sarah was trying to provide a distraction for him and cringed a little as the cry didn’t sound quite birdlike. He sucked in his breath, hoping that the men wouldn’t discover her ruse.

He heard them stop.

“What kind of bird is that?” the man closest to him asked.

“I don’t know, but this forest is full of critters. You’re all worried for nothing. You probably just heard a squirrel over there,” the other responded.

The tall man grunted and put his gun away. “Ya, you’re probably right,” he replied as he turned away from where he was and stalked around to the other side of the clearing.

Dillon knew he had to go. He had to go now! He silently thanked Sarah then quickly, without another thought, came out of the brush and sprinted as quietly as he could into the tunnel.

He glanced back as he ran. The silhouettes of the men came into view about fifty feet from where he was. He dropped down flat against the ground hoping that the tunnel was dark enough to hide him from view. He tried to turn his head back to see what the men were doing. He could hear them mumbling something but couldn't make it out. A moment later they both turned around and went back to their guarding the outside of the clearing again.

Dillon blew a sigh of relief as he got up and continued down the passage. He saw a light that was emanating from the floor of the tunnel ahead. As he got closer he could hear talking and digging.

"This stupid thing better be in here," he heard a gruff voice complain. "And it better not be cursed. That would really put a damper on my day."

"You worry too much my friend. Besides you can't believe everything you read," another man said in a smooth voice.

"Then how are you so certain that the staff is in here if you can't believe everything you read?" came the logical retort.

"Because ... I just found it!" His voice was almost melodic at this point as it rang out from the hole.

"What!" the gruff man replied. Dillon managed to make it to the edge and peer over just as one man dropped his pick and rushed over to his friend. He disappeared from view as Dillon looked on.

The pit appeared to be about fifteen feet deep. A ladder stretched from the floor of the pit to just above the edge of the hole.

"It doesn't look like much," the gruff man commented.

"Ah ... my friend, that's usually the way of things: appearances aren't always what they seem."

“Like Transformers? You know ... they’re more than meets the eye.”

There was silence for a moment. Dillon could almost sense the other guy shake his head in disbelief at his simple friend. “Yes. I guess you could put it that way,” he finally replied. “Now come on! We have to get this to the boss.”

Dillon moved to the other side of the hole as he heard the men scrambling to get to the ladder. He had no idea what he was going to do. He just knew he had to do it quickly.

He sucked in his breath as he saw the ladder begin to shudder with the weight of the men who were shambling out of the hole. His heart began to race; the agonizing moments waiting for them to emerge were excruciating! Finally, he saw a large dirty hand grab the top rung of the ladder. Then the head of the man popped up, long locks of brown hair dangled at his shoulders as he maneuvered out of the hole.

Dillon slid back and tucked down as low as he could, hoping the darkness would hide his form. As the man came out he turned and offered a hand to his friend. Dillon knew he had to act quickly as he saw the hand of the other man emerge holding the staff.

The staff looked like a plain wooden rod, except for the small symbol that was fastened to the top. The symbol was round with a small metal rod that seemed to come out of the core of the staff and attach to the apex of the circle. Around the rod protruded smaller metal tines that also extended to the edges of the circle, but these ones were multicoloured, not like any metal Dillon had seen before.

The man in the hole finally grabbed hold of his friend’s hand as he extricated himself. Dillon knew he had to move now! He bent his right knee and placed his foot



solidly on the ground, ready to spring. As he moved the large man suddenly looked up at him.

Dillon exploded into motion. He sprung from his position and grabbed the staff as he leaped over the hole. The large man, surprised by the sudden movement, yelled, let his friend go, and fell back. Dillon heard the man on the ladder scream out as the staff was yanked from his grasp and he fell back into the hole.

The agile boy continued his flight over the large man and started to run as he hit the ground, but felt himself pulled back suddenly by the strap on his pack.

“Oh no you don’t,” the man proclaimed as he tried to right himself.

Before he could use his other hand to get a better hold of the boy though, Dillon squirmed out of his straps and sped for the exit.

“Stop! Help!” Dillon heard as he neared the exit.

He was mere feet away when suddenly the form of one of the guards stepped into his path. Dillon pumped his legs as hard as he could and swung the staff around right into the man’s knee. The force of the blow caused the man to spin back and crumple to the ground. He groaned and grimaced as Dillon flew past him and into the clearing.

He looked around quickly as he ran out of the entrance, but found himself flying to the side as something hit him. It was the other guard!

Dillon and the guard wrestled for a moment but the young boy was overpowered and the staff was yanked from his grasp. He looked in horror as the guard jumped off him and pointed a gun in his face.

“Get up!” the man yelled.

“Okay, okay. Just be cool!” he said as he rose.

“And who might you be?” the man asked.

Dillon didn't respond. He heard a scuffle from the side where the other guard went down after being slammed in the knee with the staff.

"Lookee here," the injured guard said with a wince from the pain in his knee, "we found another little rat." Dillon's eyes widened when he saw Sarah being held by the men. She hadn't been in his dream! She must have come down to help when she saw him run out of the cave.

"That's okay. Not knowing your names will make killing you easier," the stocky man holding Dillon said with a wicked grin.

He straightened up and pointed the gun closer to Dillon's head as the boy shied away and closed his eyes, thinking that his life was about to end.

"Noooo!" he heard Sarah scream.

A shot fired and Dillon flinched, but he didn't feel any pain. He looked up and saw the man shaking his hand and jumping around in agony. The gun was no longer in his grasp. He noted that the other men were all looking in the same direction with their hands up. Sarah came running over to him and wrapped him in a huge hug.

"That was so scary," she said. Dillon could feel her shiver slightly against him.

"It's okay, he reassured as he turned around he saw Derek standing near the edge of the clearing with his gun out.

He smiled at Dillon. "You okay?" he asked.

"Ya ... I think so."

Sarah extracted herself from Dillon and looked over at the tall muscular man as he approached. "You know him?" she asked.

"It's a long story."

Two other men and a woman came rushing out of the

forest and down into the clearing—guns out—as Derek stopped in front of Dillon and Sarah.

“It’s a good thing we showed up when we did,” Derek said. “You know Dillon. You really need to have more patience. I might not be here to save you next time.”

“Well you did owe me one” Dillon stated with a smile. “Remember I saved you last time!”

Derek laughed. “Yes you did. I guess we’re even now.”

Sarah looked confused.

“Wait, how did you know where I was anyway?” Dillon asked.

“We have our ways,” the operative replied with a smile and a wink.

Dillon wasn’t sure if he should be impressed or concerned.

“And who’s this?” the man asked looking over at Sarah.

“Oh ... this is my friend Sarah. She wasn’t supposed to be here.” He stated that last sentence sternly as he eyed her.

Sarah blushed a little and just shrugged. Dillon was amazed that she was finally at a loss for words!

The woman agent with a slim build, long brown hair, and green eyes came over with the staff in her hand. “Here it is Derek,” she said as she handed it to him. “I guess you were right, Dillon wasn’t going to wait for us.” She looked at the boy and smiled.

Dillon was immediately disarmed by that beautiful smile.

“And it looks like Dillon was right,” Derek replied. “It really couldn’t wait. Dillon, this is Chyna. She’s new to Orion.”

Dillon held out his hand. Chyna shook it and continued to smile. “It’s really nice to meet you. Derek has

told me lots about your mission at the Desert Oasis Resort.”

Sarah stood there staring at everyone seemingly dumbfounded.

“Ah ... thanks. It’s nice to meet you too,” Dillon replied awkwardly. This was the first Orion operative he had met besides Derek. Even John Taylor Sebastian from Desert Oasis Resort wasn’t technically an Orion operative as he actually worked for Trichem Labs, being one of the creators of the Genesis serum. But now, here they were, three more operatives.

“So this is what all the trouble’s about,” Chyna said, looking back at the staff that was now in Derek’s hand. .

“Do you think it has the powers that it’s rumoured to have?” Dillon asked.

“I don’t know,” Derek replied honestly. “But if anyone can find out it’s Orion. Okay let’s pack it up!” he called to the other agents, who had bound the Scavengers, even grabbing the one from inside the mine entrance.

“Wait! What is going on here?” Sarah finally burst out. “What is that staff? Who are you guys? Dillon, what’s happening?”

“Before Dillon could explain, Derek turned to Chyna. “Chyna, this is Dillon’s friend Sarah. She’s not supposed to be here.”

Chyna nodded slightly and took Sarah by the arm and began to lead her away. “Well Sarah, Derek and I belong to a secret organization called the Orion Group and Dillon here has been helping us out.”

Sarah’s eyes went wide as she glanced back at Dillon and Derek.

“And we can’t afford you knowing about this so I’m

going to have to remove your short-term memory of these events,” Dillon heard Chyna explain.

“You’re going to what!” Sarah shouted in shock, then grimaced as Chyna jabbed her in the leg with an auto-ejector syringe, similar to an Epipen.

“Ow! Wait ... what did you ...,” she began to say as her body went limp.

Dillon ran over to where they were as Chyna caught the young girl from hitting the ground hard. “Don’t worry, she’ll be okay. We’ll get her back to her house and she won’t remember any of these events.”

Dillon looked at Chyna with concern.

“Your secret will be safe,” Derek stated as he walked over to them.

The problem was that Dillon wasn’t sure he wanted his secret to be safe, not from Sarah at least. But then he remembered the danger they had been in just moments earlier and knew within himself that this was for the best.

“Thanks for the help again Dillon,” Derek said as he patted Dillon on the shoulder.

Chyna and another operative gingerly picked up Sarah and carried her away. Before leaving, Chyna turned and flashed Dillon that beautiful smile again then she was gone.

“How do they know where she lives?” Dillon turned to ask Derek.

Derek smile, “We—”

“I know, I know,” Dillon interjected with a wave, “you have your ways.”

Derek laughed, then nodded to the boy and turned to leave with his team. He stopped just before going into the forest and looked back at his friend. “I’ll be in touch,” he stated, then was gone.

Dillon was left standing there alone. He looked to the

entrance of the mine and noticed that the palm tree that started this whole event was withering right before his eyes.

He knew there was something special about that staff. And even though he didn't know much about the Orion Group, he knew Derek and trusted him. If Derek said Orion was going to find a good use for it in order to help the world, then he had to trust that it was going to happen.

The only problem was that he had that sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach that something wasn't right. He just didn't know what that was. Yet.

## THE MASK OF TIME

Jake stood at the large window staring out at the vast lush grounds that housed the magnificent mansion. The grounds keepers were busy at work pruning and maintaining all the vibrant vegetation that dotted the landscape. He could feel the warmth from the sun radiating through the window and could smell the freshness of the greenery wafting in from the small open window adjacent to the large one he was standing in front of.

“It’s quite stunning, isn’t it?” he heard Kace ask as he entered the room and closed the door behind him.

Jake turned to regard his friend.

“It doesn’t matter how many times you come here, the beauty of the site always captivates the mind,” Kace continued as he came up beside Jake.

Kace was a little younger than Jake, with his boyish looking face, short cropped brown hair, and thin dark beard. He had managed to climb the ranks of Orion at an astonishing rate. His skills as an administrator were remarkable, and his organizational ability was second to

none, which had allowed him to do well within the operation.

He smiled at Jake and extended his hand. "It's good to see you again." Jake took the outstretched hand and smiled back as he nodded slightly. "It's been a while since we've had a chance to talk in person." Kace motioned for Jake to sit down at a chair opposite his desk.

"It has," replied Jake as he moved over and sat down. "I have to be honest, your summons here was pretty cryptic," he continued. "Normally you give me at least a hint of what it is you want to talk about, especially if we're meeting in person."

Kace sat down in his chair at the desk. "Sorry about that, but I needed to be careful about the amount of information I could share ... more or less openly."

"Really?" Jake mused as he sat back and crossed his arms. "Why is that?"

Kace stared at the man for a moment, almost as if he was trying to decide whether or not he should be talking about the subject matter he had in mind with Jake.

Jake, being an experienced man in the way of human interaction didn't miss the small inflections in Kace's expression; the small tick in his right cheek, and the way his eyes darted slightly to the left before coming back and looking him in the eyes. Jake knew he was struggling to find the exact words he wanted to say that would reveal enough, but not too much.

Finally, the man leaned over and put his arms on his desk. "I was impressed with Dillon Hunt's mission last year. He and Derek worked well together. And now I hear that Mr. Hunt has found another item for us; one that we weren't even looking for. The really impressive thing is that we scooped it out of the hands of Tower Six which is,



apparently, who those goons from the Scavenger Syndicate were working for.”

“And your point is?” asked Jake, letting the question hang in the air, waiting to see what Kace would do with it. In truth, he was just as intrigued as Kace was, but he wasn’t going to let him know that. Why, he wondered, was The Tower looking for this stuff? What piece of intel had led them to discover it? And how in the world did it just happen to be that close to where Dillon lives?

Kace cleared his throat and leaned back again. “Well ... I can’t help but think that Dillon would be invaluable as a permanent asset to Orion.”

Jake suppressed his smile as Kace was coming to the same conclusion that he had many months earlier, except that Jake didn’t know how he was going to convince his superiors that they needed to officially conscript the, now, thirteen year old. The Orion Group often made some—what one might call—questionable decisions in their pursuit of artifacts for the betterment of humanity, but never before had they actively brought in a member so young. Jake was rejoicing inwardly that his desired end result of having Dillon a part of the membership was easier than he thought. And it was mainly brought about by Dillon’s abilities that were unquestionably unique, profound, and invaluable! Not to mention, necessary.

“So how are you planning on assimilating Dillon into Orion? There are, after all, a number of problems with taking in a thirteen year old. There’s a lot that can go wrong in dealing with a kid who has other responsibilities. Training to be an operative is intense. I’m not sure we can manage that without being found out by someone close to the boy: a family member, friend, etc.”

Kace smiled. “That’s where you come in, isn’t it? I

understand you have quite a bit of experience keeping family and work ... compartmentalized.”

Jake was stone-faced. He didn't want Kace to suspect at all that this was where his plan was leading all along after conscripting Dillon to help at Desert Oasis Resort. His superiors had only sanctioned the use of Dillon after they had exhausted all other possible means to find John Taylor Sebastian and the Genesis chemical. It was only Jake's insistence that the Hunt boy was a possibility, and the fact that they had no other options, that brought Dillon forth as a candidate for the mission. He had gambled on the fact that Dillon had the same powers that his Grandfather, Dr. Stephen Hunt, used to have. And when he found out that he was right, the door of possibilities swung wide open. It also brought Jake closer to confirming something he had stumbled upon years ago while on a mission in Egypt; something he never spoke to anyone else about.

“Who do you think is capable of taking on such a task?” Jake asked, already knowing the answer. He just wanted to hear Kace say it.

“Derek Vico has developed a relationship with the boy. Is that not so?”

Though Jake remained stone-faced, the elation he felt on the inside was incredible! He had done it without actually saying what he wanted to do! He had put Derek and Dillon together. This was vital for everything else he was planning. He knew that it was essential that they worked together, but he also knew he had to play it safe and not let on to anyone else how essential it was. If anyone else knew, it would spell disaster for Orion and the world.

“Yes, I think Derek would be a great choice,” replied Jake evenly. “But, just so you are aware, I am going to

include, officially, one of our new recruits who is already paired up with Derek as his new partner, Chyna Alexandra? She has many skills that Derek doesn't that would be good to develop in the boy. I think the two of them would make a great team in giving Dillon everything he needs. Besides, it would be a bit of a hassle to redeploy her elsewhere at this time.

"I know this setup isn't normative for the way in which Orion works with our training program, but I believe the benefits outweigh the standard operating policies of one-on-one focussed training in this case."

Kace was silent for a moment. Jake knew he was performing his internal calculations, trying to see if there were any disadvantages to the decision. Kace had a reputation for making complex calculations of probability within a matter of seconds. That's how he managed to gain his position and reputation within the organization. And it was also why Jake had to be so very careful in dealing with the dangerous man.

Jake held his breath, hoping that his own calculations would hold up to the scrutiny of the younger man.

At length Kace nodded. "Alright," he stated confidently. "You can have your two operatives, but Dillon needs to be mission ready by this March."

"Why?" Jake blurted, then silently berated himself for his lack of self-control. He quickly composed himself and asked again in a softer tone, "Why? Is there a mission that you need him for? March is only six months away. That's a pretty tight time-frame."

Kace smiled. "There *is* a mission we need Dillon *and* his handler, Derek, for."

"Am I privy to the details? Or is this beyond my level?"

Kace sat back in his chair again. “You know me Jake. And you know that I don’t believe in coincidence.”

Jake felt intrigued as to where this conversation was going as he also didn’t believe in coincidence. He always considered himself the orchestrator of events that worked out in his favor.

It was no coincidence that Derek was back working for Orion after departing from them for a couple years due to a sharp disagreement they had. It was also no coincidence that brought Dillon and his family to the resort the previous year, but rather, a cleverly planned out event. And now Dillon was being trained as an operative just as Jake had planned.

No. There was no room for coincidence in Jake’s world. He couldn’t afford it.

“Do tell,” Jake stated as he leaned forward, showing Kace that his interest was piqued.

Kace smiled. “You know of the staff that was found recently by none other than Dillon himself? They call it the—”

“Staff of Haraset,” Jake finished. “Yes, I know of it.”

“Well this staff is the key to finding an item that will be tremendously helpful in our mission to better the world.”

Jake didn’t know where Kace was going with this, which unbalanced the man more than a bit as he always prided himself in being a step ahead of everyone else, even his superiors. That’s how he survived in this business for so long. He had done some research on the item himself and there didn’t seem to be any suggestion, that he could find, that it was connected to anything else. He knew Kace was resourceful, but what he was claiming now elevated him to a new level in Jake’s mind. He knew now that he had to,

more than ever, be extremely careful around this cunning man, so as not to expose any of his real plans to this Captain of the Orion Group. “And what might that be?” he finally asked.

“The Mask of Time.”



JAKE STARED LAZILY AT HIS GLASS OF GOLDEN LIQUID. HE barely had one sip; his thoughts swirled within him like a raging hurricane.

Even though he didn’t know much about the Staff he definitely knew all that could be known about The Mask of Time. He was shocked that the Staff was the key they needed all along in order to get the Mask, and he berated himself for that major oversight.

“How could I be so stupid,” he whispered to himself as he swirled the liquid in his glass around.

The thought of possessing the Mask both excited and scared him. He knew that if Orion was able to secure the item, then they would be one step closer to the inevitable.

*But why was it hidden in such close proximity to Dillon?* he asked himself. *The one boy that most assuredly would find it! The mathematical odds are staggering! It just happened to be in the same town that Dillon lives in. The one item that will find the Mask that will fulfill the ...* He let the thought drop off as he lifted the glass to his lips and took a sip.

“You doing okay there?” he heard the waitress ask.

“What ... ya. I’m fine,” he responded, waving her away.

He sat there for what seemed to be a lifetime, finally draining the glass. The waitress must have seen him pull

the card from his wallet as she appeared shortly thereafter with the debit machine.

“Will that be all for you?” the plump older lady asked Jake.

“Ya. I’m good.”

In truth, however, Jake didn’t feel good about any of what was going on. He thought he had more time before the Mask showed up on the scene. Apparently he was wrong.

As he got up to leave he resigned himself to the fact that, in his line of work, the only absolute that he could count on was the absolute fact that things change. And now he knew that he had to change his plan for the sake of the end goal. Maybe he wasn’t completely in control of all situations like he believed he was? That thought disturbed him greatly.

He was now convinced that Dillon didn’t have time to undergo the full training program of Orion like he had hoped. Instead, the boy would be thrown into the fray like he was when at Desert Oasis Resort. He only hoped that Dillon would make it out of this. He needed him to make it out of this.

As Jake walked to his car he was conflicted, which was a bit of a new experience for the man who was always so confident about his direction. He wondered now, since Dillon was going to have a compressed training time, whether or not he should let the boy know more about himself: his powers and reason as to why he was so valuable to them. Jake was worried, despite the boy’s achievements at Desert Oasis Resort, that Dillon wasn’t going to be able to cope with the tightened timeframe.

The man took a deep breath as he unlocked his vehicle and climbed in. His thoughts swirled. No. He decided. He

had to have faith in Dillon Hunt. Dillon would be trained as soon as possible to the best of Orion's ability and the plan would play out, hopefully, in Jake's favor.

Without Dillon there was no hope.

Without Dillon the world would perish.



## SARAH AND EVAN

“**H**ey Dillon! Wait up!” Dillon turned to see Sarah running up after him. He offered a weak smile and hoped she wouldn’t be asking too many questions.

Ever since the incident with the mine a couple days earlier he had avoided her, feigning one excuse or another. He really didn’t want her remembering that they had gone back and nearly gotten themselves killed. That would definitely put a damper on their friendship! Especially when she found out that the people Dillon works with took those memories from her!

But now he realized that he couldn’t avoid his best friend forever. Nor did he want to. He enjoyed spending time with Sarah. He saw in her a kindred spirit: having the same enthusiasm for adventure that he did. The only difference was, that he actually had *real* adventures. The kind where his very life was in jeopardy as was seen, even by her, though she couldn’t remember it. He didn’t want that life for Sarah. He guessed that was probably the main



reason he never told her about what he had gotten himself into.

“Oh ... hey Sarah,” he said as she finished her jog up to him.

“You feeling better?”

“Ah ... ya, much better. I don't know what I got but the rest of the weekend was pretty much a right-off,” he lied, as he turned and started off toward the bus stop once more.

“And how are you feeling?” he probed, making sure he couldn't pick up any trace or implication that she knew anything.

“Oh, I'm good, except ...”

“Except what?” Dillon prompted.

“Oh nothing. It's nothing,” she replied with a smile. “It's good to see you. I had a pretty boring weekend. All Alecia and Tanya wanted to talk about was their latest crush at school. I would have much rather hung out with you and gone hiking again or something. Anything but listen to those two! They're so boy crazy.”

“Ya ... stupid,” Dillon replied weakly.

There was a little bit of awkward silence between them as they walked slowly toward the bus stop. Finally Sarah looked over at him. “Listen Dillon. I'm sorry I stopped you from going in that mine. But you have to admit, it was a pretty crazy idea. I mean ... they make movies about kids going missing down mine shafts!” She laughed.

Dillon managed a small chuckle as well, trying to make light of it.

“You sure you're okay? You don't sound like yourself Dil.”

Dillon knew at this point that he needed to step up his

game if he was going to convince Sarah and avoid any penetrating questions. He knew he needed to get her off the topic of the mine shaft at all cost! “Ya. I’m totally good. I just got this math test today I’ve been worrying about.”

“What math test?” Sarah asked, an edge of concern in her voice.

*Man! Am I stupid!* Dillon screamed in his mind. *We’re in the same math class this year!*

“What! We don’t have a test today? Well that’s a relief,” he declared with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. “I must have gotten the dates mixed up or something.”

Sarah looked at him for a moment then laughed again. “You’re funny Dillon. Which is probably why I like you,” she stated as she punched him in the arm.

She must have realized instantly what she had said as her face went red. “Well ... you know what I mean. I don’t *like you* like you. You know ... like a friend. My best friend. Yup. Best friend Dillon.”

She looked back toward where the school bus was pulling up. “Look! The bus is here,” she declared as she hurried her pace toward it.

Dillon looked at his friend with amazement. Never before had he seen Sarah get so flustered like that. He had seen her frustrated before, particularly at him—as a matter of fact, quite a bit at him—but never flustered like this. He wasn’t exactly sure what was going on here with Sarah. He definitely had feelings for her, but wasn’t sure that she felt the same way, and now he was confused by her reaction to him. Did she like him more than a friend?

He thought about saying something to ease her discomfort, but decided against it; he would probably just make the situation worse. He didn’t know why but he had to admit that he liked seeing her like this: totally speechless

and a little embarrassed. Maybe it was because he was the one who was normally in that position, not her. No. A little role reversal might be good this time.

The bus ride to school was no less awkward than their last conversation. In fact, Dillon noted with great amusement that Sarah decided to sit with Alecia and not him despite her earlier rant about Alecia and Tanya's obsession for boys. It didn't bother him though. He just plopped down beside Evan, his other close friend from the neighbourhood.

"How's it going?" Evan asked as he maneuvered his large backpack aside so that Dillon could have more room on the seat.

"Not bad. So ... what's in the bag?" Dillon replied, rather amused as he noted the stuffed backpack.

"Oh this," replied Evan as he unzipped the top of his backpack. "It's nothing. Just a little project I'm working on."

Dillon looked inside and saw what appeared to be large chunks of shale rock. There were probably about four pieces mixed in with his text books from school. His books had a thin coating of dust all over them.

"Do I even want to know?" Dillon asked dryly.

Evan looked around suspiciously, as if to see if anyone was listening in. "I'm making an ancient sundial on the southeast part of the school property, just beyond the parking lot," he said excitedly, though in hushed tones.

"This isn't another earth systems project that's going to explode, is it?"

Evan always had something on the go at school. Like the time he had to do a solar system replica project for the science fair where he had to position all the planets, at their relative sizes and distances, away from the sun. The

problem was that he used propane instead of helium for the balloon planets and an aluminum perforated ball for the sun that was attached to a metal rod that fed to a propane tank and an ignitor. He should have realized that he made a mistake when the propane balloons didn't float and he had to hold them in place with solid rods, but he didn't. He somehow managed to access the gym and set up his project before any of the teachers could see what he had done. He cleverly hid the propane tank and ignitor switch off to the side so his display looked like a bunch of planets, that were nicely designed, revolving around a dead sun. That is, until it came to his turn to demonstrate his display.

When the teachers and observers had gathered, he flicked the switch and the sun came to life! It was quite amazing for about three seconds when Mercury suddenly exploded which set off Venus which caused the apocalypse of the Earth and so on.

Thankfully Evan's exhibit was close to the fire extinguisher which the Gym teacher, Mr. Perry, quickly pulled and extinguished the project before he set the entire gym on fire. It was really too bad that, when Mr. Perry discharged it, he managed to get most of the teachers as well and some of the onlookers who were too stunned to back away quickly!

Yes, Evan was definitely an interesting kid.

"No. This one's perfectly safe," Evan replied.

"I'm putting it in that small clearing just beyond the tree line?"

Dillon rolled his eyes.

"It's the perfect spot! The way the sun hits the clearing is really good, and the fact that it's somewhat hidden from view makes it a prime location."

Dillon shook his head, not sure how to respond to Evan's eccentric nature. In truth, Dillon was just as much a weirdo as Evan was with his imaginary adventures and this strange ability—almost supernatural ability—at finding things. This latest encounter with his *powers*—if you could call them that—had almost gotten him killed again. Derek had told him it was a gift and that he was destined for something great, but he wasn't so sure. He was starting to view it as a curse; one that could lead him to an early grave.

That last thought caused him to shudder. He was starting to question his decision in calling Derek about his dreams, or even the action he took in going to the mine. He knew he was way over his head in stuff he didn't understand and wanted to be as far away from it as possible. He resolved then and there not to get involved. *I'm not doing that again*, he thought to himself.

Dillon shook himself from his grim thoughts and noticed that Evan was speaking this whole time. He must have been describing for him all about the sundial, but he hadn't heard a word of it.

Dillon tried to listen to his friend as the bus rolled away from the stop, but his mind just wasn't into it.



“SO THIS IS WHO I'M HERE TO FIND.” THE TEACHER'S chair creaked behind the desk as he pulled a picture from the file.

He studied the picture for a moment before placing it down. He then began to read the material within. There wasn't much to read, however, as his target was a mere boy, but pieces of the information were definitely intriguing. He

scoffed as he read that his prey was not to be underestimated.

*How can this boy be a threat to anyone?* he mused to himself. *I almost feel guilty even coming after him ... almost.* He laughed.

Yes, this was going to be an interesting day.

He picked up the picture again, turned it over, and read the inscription on the back.

*Dillon Hunt, age 13*

## THE SUBSTITUTE

**D**illon could hear them coming. He was able to move slightly in order to absorb some of the impact of crashing into the locker beside his.

“Hey Hunt. You gonna go on any of your stupid ‘adventures’ again at recess?” Jason asked as he spun Dillon around to face him.

Jason was shorter than Dillon, but stocky for a 13 year old. He scowled at Dillon as he pushed him into the locker again. Around him were his three friends who were always backing him up.

“Oh. Hey Jason. I see you’re going for the classic bullying in the hallway again. Don’t you think this is a little overdone?” Dillon replied.

Jason shoved him again.

“What are you doing?” Dillon heard Sarah ask as she rushed up beside him. “You know ... bullying is actually frowned upon in our day and age. As a matter of fact, there’s strict guidelines at school that prevent such actions from taking place,” she stated.

Jason sneered at her. “You’re always hiding behind

your girlfriend aren't you Hunt," he said as he went to push him again when one of his friends pulled him back and pointed down the crowded hall to where Mr. Bunyan stood, monitoring the traffic. Jason let go.

Dillon and Sarah both blushed a little as Jason mentioned them as girlfriend and boyfriend. But then Sarah seemed to compose herself quickly. "See ... it's really not worth all the hassle is it?" Sarah asked. "This is just one step down the road of a life of crime for you. Before you know it you're in juvie, then arrested for misdemeanours, then it's the big house where you're scrubbing toilets and inscribing your name on the inside of the cell you're in wishing that, in seventh grade you never bullied that innocent young boy."

Jason backed up and his scowl got even deeper. "You have fun with your girlfriend Hunt," he said with a smirk, which elicited a laugh from Jason's gang, before he turned and walked away.

"You okay?" Sarah asked.

"Ya. You know I had that under control right?" he stated more than asked.

"I just thought I ... I mean ... I just wanted to ..." she stammered. Her face suddenly went red. "You know you're hopeless Dil!" she shouted before she stormed away.

"What was that all about?" Evan asked as he walked up after Jason, his crew, and Sarah had left.

"It was nothing," he explained with a scowl.

"So ... Jason pushed you again and Sarah came to your rescue?" Evan stated as much as asked.

Dillon shook his head, still scowling. "Come on or we'll be late for class."

The two darted down the hall dodging groups of kids as they made their way to Mr. Patterson's class. As they



rounded the final corner they ducked inside room 1020. Instantly, Dillon noticed a large man. The man brushed the medium-length brown hair from his eyes. The boy noticed almost immediately that there was a large scar running down the left side of the big man's cheek.

"You're late," the sub said to the boys in a deep voice.

"But, sir, the bell hasn't rang yet," Evan replied.

"If you wait for the bell to ring, you won't be ready to start class. Therefore, you are late," came the cold reply. "What are your names?"

"Evan and Dillon."

"Well, Evan and Dillon, I'm Mr. Dirks. I'll be filling in for Mr. Patterson until he feels better."

He extended his hand. Evan shook his hand then scooted to his desk as quickly as he could. Dillon reached out and shook it next. His grip was incredible as the large hand enveloped around his. He had never felt so diminutive as he did at that moment. He tried to manage a smile, but felt suddenly awkward for some reason.

"Oh ... ah ... hey. Nice to meet you," Dillon stuttered.

The teacher smiled then the smile shrank into a smirk. "It's nice to meet you," he replied coolly. "Sit down and get ready for class. *Now.*"

Dillon shuddered and swallowed hard.

He noticed that Mr. Dirks' hand was really calloused, and his knuckles looked swollen or inflamed though they didn't evidence any bruising. He definitely didn't look like any teacher he had ever seen before, except for maybe that one gym teacher he had a couple years ago who wanted to be in the UFC. That man hurt himself in training more than anyone else Dillon had heard of. One day he just stopped coming to school and they got a replacement teacher. He overheard the Vice Principal talking to another

staff member about him getting paralyzed or something from the first fight he was in.

As Dillon took his seat he kept looking over at Mr. Dirks and noticed that he stalked towards his desk the same way Derek moved: with precision and purpose. Dillon couldn't put his finger on it, but something wasn't right. As the man reached down to flip the page in his agenda sheet, his shirt lifted up just a bit and Dillon noticed that there was a tattoo on his right arm, just above his wrist. He couldn't get a good look at it, but it seemed familiar somehow. It was that gut feel again.

He shook the feeling away, thinking that he was just overly paranoid.

"You okay," Evan asked as he sat down in the desk beside Dillon. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

"What ... oh ... ya I'm fine."

"Good. Because I need you in good spirits when we go to put that sundial together at lunch."

Dillon shook his head at Evan as he sat down and pulled his books out.

"Good morning class. I'm Mr. Dirks," the large man stated clearly. "Your regular teacher, Mr. Patterson is ill today so, therefore, you are stuck with me."

He scanned the room with his steely grey eyes. The look he gave the class froze everyone in place. Dillon felt as though he was telling everyone with that look that he was not to be toyed with, as was the habit of some of the kids whenever a substitute took over for the day.

"Now. If you have a question about the lesson you are to put up your hand. If you have to go to the restroom you have to put up your hand. If you would like to answer a question I put forth to the class you need to put up your hand. Failure to do so will be met with strict and swift

discipline. Is everyone clear on that?" he said in a firm and even voice that sent a chill down Dillon's spine.

"If you need to sneeze, raise your hand," one of the other kids, Jeremy Cross, quipped. That elicited chuckles from the other students.

"What was that?" Mr. Dirks asked, his voice low and deadly. He pinned Jeremy with his gaze and stalked toward him, much like a python freezing its prey before eating it. He reached the student's desk and leaned on it, towering over him. The desk groaned under his weight. "Would you like to repeat that?"

Jeremy's face blanched under Mr. Dirk's scrutiny.

"Wow. This guy is serious," Evan whispered to Dillon.

"What was that Mr. ... Clifton?" Mr. Dirks asked as he raised his voice.

"Nothing sir," Evan blurted back.

"Are you trying to test my resolve?"

"No," Evan squeaked. "Not at all."

The class was silent as Mr. Dirks' eyes bore into the poor boy. Evan looked as though he was about to pass out at any moment.

"Good. That was your only warning. Understood?"

Evan bobbed his head up and down stupidly. Dillon thought he kind of looked like one of those bobblehead dolls that people sometimes put on the dash of their cars.

"Okay. So now that I have your attention please open your books to page one hundred and fifty eight."

The class complied without hesitation. Dillon knew that this hour was going to be excruciating. When he flipped open his book he noticed that Mr. Dirks had taken them to the chapters on the American Revolution. He thought this was odd as they weren't supposed to be studying the revolution for at least another month.

*What is going on here?* he thought to himself.

He put his hand up.

“Yes Mr. Hunt,” the teacher asked.

Dillon was shocked that he somehow knew his full name. *He must have a seating chart in front of him*, he reasoned.

“Well, I was just wondering why we’re studying the Revolution today as we aren’t supposed to be on that subject for a month or so?”

Mr. Dirks smirked. “It’s because I want to. Besides, I know that when Mr. Patterson comes back he will progress naturally through the subject matter and eventually talk about the American Revolution, but I wanted to take a more broad approach.”

He paused for a moment as though he was collecting his thoughts. “I would like us to discuss the nature of revolution.”

He walked around his desk and sat on the front of it, looking out toward the students. “You never know when another revolution will happen,” he stated cryptically.

Dillon was taken aback by that statement. It looked to him like the whole class was. Dillon put up his hand again.

“Yes?” Mr. Dirks asked.

“What do you mean by that?”

“What I mean Dillon is that the world is changing and we need to be prepared for it as it could take many forms, and one of those forms is revolution.

Now it was Evan’s turn to put up his hand.

“Yes Evan.”

“Are you talking about physical revolution or something else?”

The big man smiled. “All physical revolutions first start in the mind do they not? This is the first step and then they

spawn into physical conflicts—or manifestations—where each side believes they are right.

“Do you agree with this assessment Mr. Hunt?”

Dillon didn’t know what to think. Was this new teacher hinting at something that was to come, or merely stating the reality of possibility? He spoke so mysteriously that Dillon almost felt as though he knew something that the rest of the world didn’t; or at least maybe a select few who were behind the scenes. Behind the scenes! This whole conversation was starting to make Dillon’s skin crawl. It reminded him of Orion and now the Scavenger Syndicate.

“Well?” Mr. Dirks prodded as Dillon didn’t answer right away.

“Ah ... well ... I suppose you might be right,” he stammered.

“Good,” the teacher replied with a grin. “Now you are ready to understand the deeper things of the world ... the hidden things of the world.”

Dillon was frozen. He didn’t know what to think.

“Now then,” Mr. Dirks began. “If everyone is now on page one hundred and fifty eight we’ll begin the lesson.”



“SO ... HOW’S YOUR DAY SO FAR?” SARAH ASKED DILLON and Evan as she plopped down her tray of food and sat at the cafeteria table with them.

“You’re not still mad at me are you?” Dillon asked sheepishly.

Sarah was silent for a moment. “No Dil. I’m not mad. I just wish you would show me some appreciation when I come to help.”

Dillon wanted to shout at her that he didn’t need her

help, but he knew that would not end well. So he sucked up his pride and took a deep breath. “Thanks Sarah,” he said. “Sorry.”

She smiled back at him then started eating her lunch.

Dillon was glad she didn't stay away for long, especially after embarrassing herself at the bus stop, and getting mad at him in the hall after the Jason incident. “My day's good so far I guess,” he said.

“It was actually kind of crazy!” Evan blurted. “We had this strange substitute teacher for Socials class. He was pretty intense. I actually thought he was going to kill someone just for the fun of it. I mean ... that guy looked more like a serial killer than a teacher.”

Dillon chuckled. Yet inside he still felt strange about the whole situation and lesson.

“That sounds nuts! What was the lesson about?”

“I don't want to talk about it right now,” Dillon interjected before Evan could explain.

Evan and Sarah stared at each other for a moment. Dillon knew they wanted to ask him why not, but he was silently hoping they wouldn't. He didn't know why, but there was something wrong with Mr. Dirks; something apart from his outwardly “different” characteristics, and he just didn't want to talk about it.

“Oh ... okay. Maybe you can tell me about it on the bus ride home after school.”

“Ya ... about that. Dillon and I are staying after school to do some extra work. My mom's gonna pick us up after,” Evan explained.

Dillon looked at him, not quite understanding at first, then he remembered that they had decided to put that sundial together after school instead of at recess or lunch. Evan, after giving it more thought—and discussing it with

Dillon at first recess—felt it might be more prudent when there were fewer teachers and kids around.

Sarah looked at Evan as if she was trying to prod more information from him.

Evan collapsed under the scrutiny. “Okay!” he blurted, then leaned looked around making sure no one else was listening in. “We’re putting together a sundial in the field just out on the edge of school property,” he whispered.

“We’ll catch up with you tonight after dinner,” Dillon promised. “Unless you want to come and put this thing together with us?” he offered.

Sarah shook her head. “No, that’s alright. I appreciate the offer, but that’s kind of your thing. Why don’t you guys come to my house after dinner and you can tell me all about your Socials class and this sundial while bouncing on the trampoline?”

“That sounds great!” Evan replied excitedly.

Dillon smiled at Sarah. He always loved her fun nature.

“Hey guys, I’ll be right back,” Dillon said after a moment as he rose from his seat. “I have to go to the washroom.”

“No problem,” replied Evan as he stuffed more fries into his mouth.

Dillon hurried to the restroom closest to the cafeteria. He scooted inside and made it to the urinal just in time. After he was finished he went to the sink and began washing his hands. As he scrubbed with the soap he heard the door open. He glanced up into the mirror and his heart skipped a beat as he saw Mr. Dirks standing at the door, smiling at him.

Dillon knew he was in trouble! Alarm bells went off in his head.

Mr. Dirks began to move slowly toward him. Dillon

hurriedly rinsed the soap from his hands and reached over for the paper towel. The substitute grabbed it before Dillon could. The boy pulled his hand back in shock. Mr. Dirks smiled and handed the towel to him.

“You’re a little jumpy aren’t you?” the teacher asked. “What did you think I was going to do, attack you?”

Dillon didn’t know what to say, he was too stunned at seeing the man. He took the paper towel and wiped his hands. “Th ... thanks,” he stuttered. “I thought teacher’s weren’t supposed to use student restrooms?” Dillon asked after he collected his thoughts.

Mr. Dirks laughed and walked by him toward one of the urinals. “The faculty ones suck,” he stated bluntly.

Dillon’s heart pounded. *Is this guy for real?* he shouted in his mind.

He ran to the door, threw it open and darted back outside. “What is wrong with that guy?” he whispered to himself. He hurried away from the restroom as fast as he could but accidentally bumped into Jason of all people!.

Jason pushed him back. “Oooh, Dillon’s in trouble! Saw Mr. Dirks going in after you. What’re ya doing in the bathroom, lover boy? Sarah in there?”

Dillon scowled at him as he darted away, hearing the mocking laughter of Jason and his gang as he headed back to the cafeteria.

“Are you okay?” Sarah asked as he sat back down at the table. “You look like someone just kicked your cat.”

“Oh ... I’m okay. I just ... ah ... tripped on the way out of the restroom.”

“You didn’t hurt yourself when you fell did you?” Sarah inquired.

“No. Nothing like that. It just startled me, that’s all.”

“Oh. Okay. I’m glad you didn’t get hurt.”



Dillon nodded then started to dig into his lunch without saying a word.

Evan shrugged and continued talking as though nothing had happened. Sarah seemed to be listening intently to him discuss all the science projects he wanted to try this year, but Dillon didn't hear a word he was saying; his thoughts were consumed with that all-too-weird meeting with Mr. Dirks.

JACOB GRIFFIN

**D**illon spent the rest of the day looking over his shoulder, all-the-while trying to appear nonchalant. He knew there was something weird going on with Mr. Dirks. He entertained the possibility that this new sub was somehow here for him given the strange encounter he had, but he shrugged that thought away. He knew he had gotten himself into some deep messes before with Orion, but he just couldn't believe that anyone else—or any other organization for that matter—would take an interest in a thirteen year old boy.

No. He came to the conclusion that he was just paranoid with all the events of last year, and now the most recent one with the Staff of Haraset, looming over him. He even laughed to himself at how absurd that line of reasoning was.

He smiled at his own paranoia as he unloaded the books he didn't need back into his locker.

“You coming?” Evan asked, patting Dillon on the shoulder.

Dillon jumped as Evan startled him from his thoughts. “Dude! Don’t scare me like that!” he exclaimed.

Evan laughed. “Easy man. It’s not like I meant it. Hey, are you ready to go do the sundial thing?” he asked excitedly.

Dillon nodded, mentally telling his rapidly beating heart to be still. Evan looked like a dog waiting for his master to toss him a bone. “Okay. We can ...” His voice trailed off as he noticed Mr. Dirks walk by them heading toward his class room. The tall man smiled and nodded at the two boys as he walked by them.

Dillon and Evan didn’t say a word as he strolled by. They didn’t even nod back, just watched him with stunned expressions on their faces.

“That dude is creepy!” blurted Evan after Mr. Dirks had rounded the corner to his room.

“Yep,” Dillon agreed. “Hey, listen man. I’ll be there in a minute. You go get things set up,” he said as he closed his locker, moved around Evan, and began walking down the hall toward Mr. Patterson’s room.

“But ...” Evan began to protest.

“Don’t worry. This won’t take long,” Dillon reassured him as he looked back and smiled.

Evan shrugged and walked away.

The boy scooted down the hall and around the corner. As he approached Mr. Patterson’s room he slowed up. The halls were still filled with kids and teachers mingling about. He played it cool as he came closer to the door, leaning on the wall beside it as a teacher passed by quickly. After he was gone he quickly peeked his head through the glass window that covered the top half of the door.

He saw Mr. Dirks shuffling through some papers on his desk, and then the man grabbed a manila colored folder.

He opened it up, glanced at its contents, then put it into the side drawer of his desk.

Dillon quickly darted his head back from the window as Mr. Dirks turned toward the door. He scooted back the way he had come around the corner. He waited there for a second, composed himself, and then walked back towards the room. He rounded the corner and almost ran into Mr. Dirks.

“Oh ... hey Dillon,” Mr. Dirks said as he maneuvered out of the way.

“Oh, sorry Mr. Dirks,” Dillon replied. “Hey. I just wanted to say that your Socials class this morning was really intriguing.”

Mr. Dirks smiled. “I thought you would find it interesting. Revolutions are always interesting—some would say appealing—to young people.”

Dillon nodded, unsure of what else to say.

“Well, I look forward to our class tomorrow. See you then.” Mr. Dirks stated as he walked around the corner.

Dillon waited a moment longer just to make sure Mr. Dirks wouldn't suddenly come back around the corner, then he turned toward the class once more. He grasped the door handle then was struck by a thought. *Tomorrow?* He turned his head and glanced back to where Mr. Dirks had disappeared around the corner.

“How does he know Mr. Patterson will be off tomorrow as well?” he whispered to himself. *Unless Mr. Patterson already told the school he needed more than one day off.* Dillon laughed again at his paranoia. Or was it paranoia? He knew that he could confirm that right now by going into the room and seeing what Mr. Dirks was looking at.

With that thought in mind he turned the handle, secretly hoping the door was locked.

Click. It opened.

He held the handle for what seemed an hour debating whether or not he should go in. His heart was pounding again and he didn't feel particularly brave at this moment. Instead, he closed the door again and walked away.



MR. DIRKS, OR RATHER, JACOB GRIFFIN, WATCHED THE young boy exit the school and run to the south side field. He smiled to himself as he saw his prey head to the edge of the school grounds. He was about to follow then decided not to. He was having too much fun toying with the boy. He loved playing mind games and, despite the fact that he had specific orders to bring Dillon in, he decided he would wait a little longer.

Almost on cue his phone rang. He looked at the display and visibly sighed when he saw who was calling. He knew he had to answer it even though the thought of a conversation with Lance made him want to physically throw up!

“Hullo,” he said in a less-than-enthusiastic voice.

“Hello mate,” Lance replied in his thick Australian accent. “So ... how's the hunt for Mr. Hunt?”

“It's good,” Jacob replied.

“Good, as in you have him? Or good as in you are going to have him?”

“Good as in everything is on pace,” Jacob stated cryptically.

“Which means you are going to have him delivered on time?”

“Yes ... more or less,” was all that Jacob responded with. He didn't want to give Lance more than he had to, and he loved getting under the man's skin.

Lance was silent for a moment. “Okay *Jake*,” he began, a tone of frustration evident in his voice. “I know you like to *play* with your subjects’ mind first, but you better not mess this up. You have your fun and do it your way, but you need to deliver the target to us within the week.”

“Understood,” Jacob responded, then hung up the phone.

“Jerk,” he whispered as he put his phone back and continued to look to the edge of the forest where Dillon disappeared.



LANCE HUNG UP. HIS FACE RED AFTER THE insubordination portrayed by Jacob. But he quickly calmed as he took a deep breath.

“Something wrong,” he heard the smooth voice behind him.

He turned to see Brighton, an Asian man with a muscular build, dark eyes, and olive skin, standing there.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” he said with a smile.

“You should have sent me,” Brighton stated. “The boy would already be here if you had.”

“Yes, but we just can’t afford your haphazard ways right now,” Lance retorted. “You tend to let personal vendettas get in the way of the mission.”

Brighton narrowed his eyes, and Lance knew that he hit a sore spot with the man. A few years back Brighton failed on a mission in South America partly due to the fact that he wanted to kill Derek Vico in hand-to-hand combat even though he had numerous opportunities to end the man the *modern* way. He wasn’t willing to let anything like that happen in the acquisition of Dillon Hunt. It was too

important for their organization. And he knew that Dillon was now connected to Derek after the events that happened at Desert Oasis Resort.

No. Brighton would be redeployed elsewhere ... for now.

“So are you just going to wait and let Jacob do it his way then?” Brighton dared to ask.

Lance flashed him a threatening stare for a moment then quickly composed himself again. “No. We have one more option we can try before Jacob bumbles the whole thing.”

“Which is ...”

“We use the girl.”

Brighton’s face screwed up at that statement. “But I thought that the technology wasn’t that advanced yet?” he asked incredulously. “And since we haven’t used it on her in a few months, wouldn’t the biochemical components have significantly degraded by now?”

“So what, you’ve suddenly become a Biochemist?”

“No. But I do listen,” Brighton replied dryly.

Lance walked toward the open door and into the hallway. “As a matter of fact—though I’d hate to admit it—you are right: the technology isn’t reliable this long after implantation, but it’s the best we have.”

“But what about Jacob?” the Asian queried as he followed.

“If the girl fails then Jacob gets his shot. If not, then we get what we need.”

“That is, if the girl doesn’t kill him first,” Brighton interjected.

Lance shrugged. “It’s a risk I’m willing to take. Besides, if she does kill him, then at least Orion will lose their precious asset as well.

“It’s hard for us to keep eyes on Dillon all the time, which is why we haven’t moved in yet. But,” he paused and looked at Brighton as they walked, “Orion has the same problem, so my source tells me. The saving grace for us is that Orion doesn’t know that we know about Dillon yet. If they did, I’m sure they would do whatever it takes to tighten their security on him.”

“So, despite Dillon’s importance to Orion, they have seemed to let their guard down,” Brighton concluded.

“That’s right, which has given us an opportunity to move in. The challenge is that we don’t know what their schedule of surveillance is and my source can’t access that data,” Lance clarified.

“Which is why you sent a beast like Griffon to get close to him and do the job,” the Asian concluded.

“Exactly. But if it weren’t for his egotistical, arrogant, self-absorbed ... *unusual* ... ways, the job would probably be done by now.

“So instead, we will just have to activate the girl and hope that Orion isn’t watching at the time.”



DILLON ENTERED THE CLEARING AND SAW EVAN PULLING the grey shale rocks out of his pack. At the sight of the ancient-looking stones Dillon’s imagination started working overtime.

“Cool!” he exclaimed.

Evan looked up, his face beaming. “I know! This is going to be awesome!”

“So where did you get this stuff anyway?” Dillon asked as he knelt down beside his friend and started helping him to arrange the stone.



“Well ... you know my Dad runs Sunrise Growers gardening store in town.”

Dillon nodded.

“These were all leftover chunks that were cracked and broken that no one wanted. Well, I told Dad about my crazy idea to build a sundial and he must have listened to me as he showed up at home with these!”

“That’s awesome!” Dillon replied.

Dillon imagined that he and Even were famed tomb raiders who just discovered the lost dial of Charion: an ancient civilization that was more advanced than any at the time. They had the ability to harness the power of the sun from their dial. Each of the twelve positions of the shadow on the ancient rock generated a power for the twelve champions of Charion.

Dillon was making up and explaining all the intricacies of Charion’s society, and the powers that the champions were able to harness, when he suddenly had *that* feeling he often got when something was amiss.

He stopped in mid-sentence. Evan gave him a quizzical look. “What is it Dillon?”

Dillon turned around slowly and the blood drained from his face as he saw Mr. Dirks standing at the edge of the tree-line looking at the two boys; a grin creased his rugged face.

CLAIRE

“**N**ow what are you boys up to?” Mr. Dirks asked as he stepped slowly into the open grove. “What? Ah ... we’re just making a ... sundial,” Dillon stuttered. His thoughts whirled within him.

He had felt that there was something off with Mr. Dirks earlier, but that feeling abated after he lost his nerve when he was about to go into the man’s room and snoop around. He really began to think that he was just being paranoid because of all the weird stuff that had happened to him in the last year. But now, seeing the man approach with a smug smirk on his face, made Dillon sick to his stomach.

“Ya,” Evan blurted. “We’re not hurting anyone by doing this here. We just thought it would be cool.”

“Well that *is* interesting,” Mr. Dirks replied calmly as he approached. He looked down at the pieces the boys had assembled. “It looks like you guys have everything except for the Gnomon.”

“The G what?” Dillon asked as he backed away a little.

Mr. Dirks looked and smiled at him. “The Gnomon is the rod, or arm, that’s used in order to cast the shadows that are needed for you to be able to tell time with the different positions of those shadows on your dial. Without it ...”

“We won’t be able to tell time,” Evan finished for him.

“That’s right Evan,” Mr. Dirks commended.

Dillon’s heart began to slow and his nerves calmed as he saw Mr. Dirks talk about the sundial. The teacher seemed different than he was before. He appeared almost fatherly, like he was interested in teaching the boys some life skill. He almost seemed eager to share some of his knowledge with them. In Dillon’s mind he was the oddest sub they have ever had—despite the obvious character quirks and his look—as most of them leave the grounds when the students do, but here he was!

*I am totally paranoid!* Dillon thought to himself. “You seem to know all about this stuff,” he commented.

Mr. Dirks looked over at him, “Well I am a school-teacher,” he replied dryly.

“Oh ya. That’s right,” Dillon admitted, feeling a little embarrassed now.

“Are you okay if we keep building this?” Evan asked in almost a pleading tone.

Dillon could tell that Evan would be heart broken if he had to give up the project which had currently sparked a passion within him.

Mr. Dirks thought for a moment. “Well, I am only a substitute, which doesn’t really give me any authority. And I can’t see how this project is breaking any school rules. So I guess it’s good with me.”

Dillon and Evan both visibly sighed.

“Thanks Mr. Dirks!” Evan replied excitedly.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said as he turned and began walking away. “Just make sure that it doesn’t distract you from completing any of your assignments. Okay?”

“Sure thing sir!” Evan spouted.

After he left the clearing Evan put a hand on Dillon’s shoulder and chuckled. “Man! I thought we were in trouble for a minute there.”

“Ya. I did too,” Dillon replied as he continued to watch the area of the trees where the strange man had disappeared. “I did too.”

At that moment Dillon decided that he wasn’t going to suspect Mr. Dirks anymore. He couldn’t keep tying himself up in knots expecting bad guys and monsters around every corner. He had enough of his paranoia! He really felt like the stress was going to kill him.



“IS THE SIGNAL STRONG ENOUGH?” LANCE ASKED AS HE stared at the computer screen over Justin’s shoulder.

Justin blew a strand of his long brown hair out of his eyes as he continued to type. “It should be good enough to get the job done,” he replied in his raspy voice.

“Good. How long will it take to make the connection?”

“Probably about twenty minutes. But remember, we may not be able to control her that precisely. She has had the implant for more than a year now and with the chemical degradation in her system the commands might come out differently than what we intended. Plus the signal strength might be an issue as we need to—”

“I understand,” Lance cut him off coldly. “Can you get her to pick up the chemical at the designated location? It

will be a good test run since we haven't activated her in months."

Justin looked up from the computer screen. "Sure thing boss."

"Have her hide it where no one will accidentally stumble upon it," Lance said as he turned to walk away. He looked down at the man and put a hand on his shoulder. "Report back to me when it's done."

"What? You're not staying to see if it works?"

Lance stared at the man with that all-too-cold expression of his. "No. I have other business to attend to. I just hope for your sake that it works mate."

Justin swallowed hard.

Lance smiled and walked out of the room.

"Man. That guy is a special kind of crazy," Justin whispered to himself—low enough so that Lance couldn't hear him as he left.

He turned back to the screen and began to run the neurotransmitter program. "Alright miss Claire. Let's see what you're up to."



CLAIRE SCRIBBLED DOWN THE ANSWERS ON THE PAPER. Math was *not* her favourite subject, but she knew she had to power through it if she wanted to get a good grade. She knew the honor role was within sight this semester even though they were only part way through it, and she was determined to make it. She figured that if she could just discipline herself to achieve those standards now in grade ten, then it would be easier for her to develop the much needed work ethic to shape her goals into reality in the

following years, thus solidifying her entrance into a good university after high school.

She tried to work out the next problem in her head, but her mind kept drifting off to ... Jeff Hogan. "Don't think about Jeff.  $3x + 4y = \dots$  I wonder if Jeff ever misses me. No, concentrate, Claire!  $+ 4y = \dots$ "

Her and Jeff dated for a few months the previous year, but shortly after her family came back from Desert Oasis Resort Jeff decided that he wanted to see other girls. Of course Claire was heart broken. Jeff had been her first love and she took the break up hard!

She tried and tried to put him out of her mind but just couldn't. Every time she saw him at school he reminded her of the pain she felt when he told her that it wasn't working out between them. What did that even mean anyway? For goodness sake, they were only in grade nine at the time! Even though it had been a year since the breakup she still couldn't move on. Jeff, of course, had no problem dating other girls. Claire did a quick mental calculation and tabulated that he was on girlfriend number four since her. The very thought of it infuriated the young girl!

Then there were the ... blackouts. Her fingers tingled and panic ran up her spine. "Don't black out!" she yelled to herself. She hadn't had one since finding herself in Dillon's messy room."

Claire had only had a couple since the trip to the resort, but each time she did it unnerved her. She would wake up some place she had no recollection of going to. Each time she "woke up" it was somewhere familiar to her, the issue she had was that she didn't know how she got there. It was as though her memory was erased of the event. It was scary. But she never told anyone about it. Who would believe her anyway? No, this was some-

thing that she would figure out on her own. She hoped that it was just some phase of something she was going through. Maybe the stress of losing Jeff was affecting her?

That theory never held much weight to Claire, however, as the first blackout occurred right at the end of their vacation to the resort. It was the last day actually as they were packing to go home. She remembered being in her room alone. Gwen had already headed to the lobby with Mom, and she was just putting the last of her things in the suitcase when she suddenly felt weird. The next thing she knew was that she was out in the hallway. Dillon came out of his room shortly after she woke up. She was facing away from him and he was calling her. She just stared off down the hall. She remembered hearing his voice from behind and then feeling the tug on her arm. When she turned around Dillon was there, asking if she was ready to leave. She remember that he also asked if she was okay.

After that occasion it happened once more within the first four months of them being home. At that time she woke up in Dillon's room. The place looked like it had been ransacked! She knew Dillon was messy but she couldn't believe that he left his room like this. So she hurriedly put all his stuff away—at least where she thought it should go—and ran out of his room as quickly as she could.

After that incident she seriously thought about getting help but she didn't know who she could talk to without them thinking she was insane. She could just see them putting her away in a mental institution! No. That was not going to happen to her. Instead, she threw herself into her studies and buried her misery and pain in books, trying to

prove to herself—and everyone else—that she was worth something and not crazy.

As her thoughts wound up she put the pencil down. She knew she needed a break. She brushed her dirty blonde hair back with her hands and stretched as she rose from the desk. Her eyes were tired.

*Maybe this is enough work for tonight*, she thought to herself. She glanced over at the clock and noted that it was already 11:07 PM!

*Enough's enough's!* she declared to herself as she walked to her dresser and pulled out her nightgown. Claire quickly changed and headed for her bedroom door. As she neared the exit she suddenly felt fuzzy-headed. Her vision began to change. The world started to turn ... yellow.

“No!” she mouthed as her consciousness drifted from her. “Not now! ...”



“AH HA!” I’VE GOT YOU!” JUSTIN DECLARED AS HE NOTED the secured connection on his screen. “Just ... one ... more ... moment,” he said as he hurriedly typed away.

“There!” he yelled with one last key stroke and the monitor to his right lit up with the video feed. He saw Claire’s hand holding the door handle to her bedroom door. Justin laughed with glee. He was as giddy as a high school kid who had just been told that final exams were canceled for the year!

He put in a command for Claire to look right and she did. Look left. She did. “Excellent!”

“Now, let’s see if you’ll accept the coordinates from your GPS.”

He typed in the location where the agent was able to



hide the chemical compound they needed her to retrieve which was only about three blocks from her house. His organization knew that Orion, when they do surveillance, only forms a two block perimeter. They couldn't take the chance that Orion would discover them within the zone. That was the first hurdle with the plan.

The second hurdle was the variable in the equation which was whether or not Orion was watching over Dillon tonight? If that was the case then, Justin knew, they might intercept the girl and their plan would be shot. But ... he had no choice but to try.

Before he sent the command to go to the coordinates he sent a simple order for her to get dressed warmly. He couldn't have her freeze in the autumn evening air. It would be a waste of an asset. After the command was received Justin walked over and poured himself a cup of coffee. He knew the next hour or so were going to define the direction of the mission and he wanted to remain sharp.

When he got back to his terminal he noticed that Claire was ready so he executed the command, ordering her to exit the house as quietly and discreetly as possible.

That was the best part of the neurogenic technology that was developed at the resort. The chip interfaced with the person's—or creature's—neural pathways and gave them a certain amount of autonomy to execute the commands to the best of their ability with their own experiences and intelligence, yet under complete control. This is how they were able to get John Taylor Sebastian to develop the Necrotoxin while he was under the control of Neurogenics. Unfortunately, they needed to take the good with the bad as it was also the reason that John was able to make a fail-safe in the chemical that made it react aggres-

sively when it came into contact with Genesis, or any substance that had Genesis in it.

Justin watched as Claire silently crept around the house ensuring that everyone was already in bed, or occupied before heading to the front door. It was almost unnerving for Justin, who had only used this technology once before, for him to see and hear everything that Claire was seeing and hearing come through the monitor. It was as though he was watching a first person shooter game with the slight difference that this was real!

He watched intensely as the young girl slipped out of the house and down the street. He held his breath a few times as he heard noises, through the monitor and Claire's connection to the neurogenic transmitter, coming from alleys and yards as she ghosted down the street. Claire didn't seem concerned about any of that as she made her way precisely to the coordinates the GPS pointed her too. She eventually ended up in the back alley of Graffiti Pizzeria, which had the reputation of having the best pizza in town. She looked around and saw a regular looking tin garbage can positioned half way down the alley leaning up against the wall of the building.

Justin typed in the command for her to go to the bin. Once she was there he told her to feel around the back of the bin and look for the button that was recessed there and push it. It took her a moment to find what Justin wanted her to do, but once she pushed it a panel opened up on the side which revealed a keypad.

20, 15, 23, 5, 18, 6, Justin typed into the computer and Claire pressed the buttons on the pad. A small compartment opened on the can and there inside was a bottle about four inches high and two inches in diameter. It was cylindrical in shape and contained a clear liquid. Although

the man couldn't tell the color, as Claire's vision appeared yellow in the monitor, he knew it was clear. Justin saw Claire's hand reach forward and picked it up.

She turned it gingerly in her hands and the label came into view: chloroform.

CLAIRE'S ASSAULT

“**W**hat! Are you mad?” Derek yelled as he leaned forward in his chair.

Jake put his hands up in defense of the man’s explosive retort. He looked around in order to see if anyone had taken an interest in their conversation. A couple of odd stares came their way, but nothing out of the ordinary.

“Hey listen. I’m on your side,” Jake said in a lower voice, trying to keep the clearly irritated man calm. “I think it’s completely off-base too, but that’s what has been decided from the top,” he lied.

Derek sat back in his chair and rubbed his hand over his bald scalp, bald by choice. “How can Ori ... the group, justify conscripting a thirteen year old boy as an operative?” he asked, his voice bordering on disgust.

“You didn’t have a problem last year at the resort,” Jake argued.

“Actually, if you recall, I did have concerns which *you* dismissed,” Derek fired back. “And besides, that was one mission, hardly operative status.”

“Well, things have changed. And that mission would have failed without the boy”

Derek stared at Jake for a few heartbeats before asking, “Have you told Dr. Hunt?”

“Not yet, but we will,” Jake lied again without missing a beat.

“When?”

“Soon,” replied the cunning man as he picked up his coffee and took a sip. “He will come to understand our need.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Does he really have a choice?” Jake responded coolly.

Derek just shook his head and reached into his pocket and produced a bottle of pills. He took two out and downed them with his water.

Jake smiled. *Does anyone really have a choice?* he thought to himself.



DILLON WALKED INTO DAD’S OFFICE. HE REALLY NEEDED something to read. He was feeling particularly adventurous and began scanning through the many books that lined the shelf. Dad always tried to keep his shelves organized but, unfortunately, they became a dumping area for all loose books any family member felt they didn’t need anymore. This made it difficult finding any genre in particular, and brought great frustration to his Dad. Despite this difficulty Dad still managed to keep a couple of his shelves organized and neatly stacked.

The young boy scanned these organized shelves with his finger. He passed by books on leadership, budgeting, magazines, binders full of work material, and even old

comics. Finally his eyes fell upon something that intrigued him: a science fiction adventure book that he hadn't read before. "Perfect." Dillon said to himself as he grabbed the book.

He was about to turn and leave when he got one of those gut feelings. He knew something was amiss, he just didn't know what. His eyes darted around the room and it was at that moment that something caught his eye behind the scattered papers and binders of one of the disaster shelves. He bent down and moved the papers away. Shock riveted its way through him as he stared at the item on the shelf.



"IT'S BEEN A COUPLE DAYS NOW SINCE WE'VE ACTIVATED THE girl and there has been no sign of activity from Orion. I don't think they suspect a thing," Lance stated to Justin. "Let's execute on the operation."

Justin nodded as he turned his chair toward the screen.

"What about Griffin?" Brighton, standing to one side of Lance as they both hovered over Justin asked. "Have you totally given up on him?"

Lance snorted. "That buffoon hasn't made a move yet, and someone of Dillon's ... ability ... will sniff him out soon enough."

"Even if Dillon does discover Griffin's intent, will it matter? By the time he does won't it be too late?"

Lance looked at the cocky Asian. "As I stated in Griffin's operational file, the boy is *not* to be underestimated. And he has powerful friends at Orion."

"Like Derek," Brighton stated, his tone revealing his disgust for the man.

Lance laughed. "You and your pettiness. Remember that you wouldn't be here right now if you hadn't made that uneasy alliance with Derek Vico when you were trapped in Guardian City."

Brighton visibly seethed which made Lance laugh all the more. "I think it was mutual," the Asian replied through gritted teeth. "He wouldn't be alive without me either," he stated matter-of-factly.

"Why do you hate the man so much?" Lance asked, sincerely interested in knowing.

"I have my reasons," Brighton stated coldly.

Lance knew that was all the reply he would receive from the stubborn man. The Aussie waved at him dismissively and returned to check on Justin's progress with the girl.

"The functionality of the chip seemed to hold up," Justin explained. "She was activated for forty three minutes in total and there was only a minor deviation in signal strength which lasted for thirty seven seconds." He pointed at the screen showing Lance all the data that was recorded during the relatively short mission.

"Good," Lance replied as he patted Justin on the shoulder. "Proceed with the operation at 01:00 hours Dillon's time."

He turned to Brighton. "Have an extraction team ready to grab the boy once they are outside the Orion perimeter. Our scouts have assured us that there are no operatives in the zone, but I don't want to take any chances of having direct contact with Orion. If our intel is wrong then they'll definitely grab the kids before they're out of the perimeter.

"You have eight hours to get your team ready, get

there, and set up for the mission,” Lance stated. “Is that enough time?”

“Yes,” Brighton responded coolly. “I have a question however,” he went on. “How exactly is a fifteen year old girl supposed to get her thirteen year old brother out of the house without making any noise whatsoever?” Brighton asked skeptically.

Lance looked over at him and smiled. “That’s one of the great things about these neurogenic transmitters: it gives the subjects more strength than they normally have when under the influence of the tech. It’s not incredibly significant but it should be enough for her to get him out to where we can extract him.”

“Should?” Brighton asked incredulously. “You’re hanging this operation on a *should*?”

Lance shrugged and turned back to look at the screen. “If anyone in the house wakes up we will merely deactivate the girl. Claire will think she’s going crazy with the black-outs, and I don’t think Dillon will be able to begin to explain what happened to him at the resort last year.”

He looked up at Brighton and smiled; that perfectly devious smile he often flashed when he knew he had a situation locked down. “It’s all about deniability. Orion prides itself on its secretiveness and will protect that to the end. Dillon is stuck keeping his secrets from everyone.”

He paused for a moment as a truly delicious revelation just came to him. “No. He’s stuck keeping *Orion*’s secrets from everyone.” His smile got all the wider with that disclosure spoken aloud.

Brighton looked hard at the man before scoffing and walking away, slamming the door behind him as he went.

“That guy’s got a bit of an attitude,” Justin commented



as he turned and looked to the door the hotheaded Asian stormed through.

“Ya, but he has his uses. Uses that allow him to get away with ... *some* ... attitude,” Lance replied with a little chuckle. “Attitude ... and anger that we often redirect to get what we need done.”

Justin smirked at that then pulled his focus right back to the screen, readying everything he needed for the operation.



CLAIRE TOSSED AND TURNED. BEADS OF SWEAT FORMED ON her brow as she scrunched up her eyes. She moaned slightly and whimpered as she shook under her covers.

“Nooooo,” she managed to mouth softly.

“No,” she whispered again just before her body went still.

Her eyes shot open. Everything was yellow again. She knew what she had to do. Quietly, the young girl slipped from her bed and crept easily to the partially opened door of her room. She peered out either way down the hall. All was dark and quiet. Strangely, the glow from her eyes allowed her to see more easily down the darkened hallway. She glanced at Dillon’s room which was right at the end of the hall, but she knew she had to retrieve the special chemical first. As silent as a shadow she managed her way down the stairs. As she made it to the last rung the stair creaked beneath her weight. She paused as soon as the sound echoed out. Claire waited a few heartbeats as she held her breath. Silence.

The young girl stepped off that last stair and slid silently to the left, through the dining room, passed the

kitchen, and into Dad's office. She knew exactly where she had to go. As she entered the office she turned to the right and scanned the shelf of books that seemed to be haphazardly strewn all over the place.

Only a couple of shelves in Dad's library were well organized with the books placed in a logical sequence as to genre—for the most part. The shelf that Claire was looking for, however, always looked as if a nuke had hit it! Mom would often store some of her scrapbooks, empty binders, magazines, craft paper, and such that wouldn't fit in her disaster of an office downstairs up here onto this shelf. To top it off, any of the books the kids didn't want in their rooms anymore made it down here as well to the chagrin of Dad.

This was the perfect place to hide the chloroform. Claire sidled up to the junk shelf, pulled a few items away as quietly as she could from where she had hidden it, and ... found that it was gone!

Frantically she began moving books, binders, papers, out of the way. The chemical was gone!



“WHAT'S SHE DOING?” LANCE ASKED.

“That's where she hid the chemical when she brought it back, but now it's gone,” replied Justin. “It was there! I saw her put it there myself!”

“Well who could have taken it?”

“I don't know!” Justin exclaimed. “I don't know.”

“We've been compromised. Shut it down,” Lance stated emphatically.

Justin's fingers began to fly across the keyboard.

“Shut it down now!” Lance stated more forcefully.

“I can’t! I’m trying.”

“Well try harder!”

“The chip’s not responding,” Justin explained.

“What’s she doing now?” Lance asked as he saw her pause for a moment. It appeared to the man that something had caught her eye.

“Maybe she found it?” Justin squinted at the screen as though he was trying to make out what she was reaching for under the mess of books and other stationary.

“No. No she didn’t,” Lance said nervously as he looked and saw that Claire had pulled out what appeared to be letter opener. It was shaped like a small knife with a wavy blade about four inches long. The handle resembled a dagger with spider webs criss-crossing around it and a small spider carved on the hilt.

“What’s she doing?” Justin’s fingers froze as he saw her produce the letter opener.

“She’s going to kill him. Did you tell her to kill him?” Lance asked accusingly.

“What? No! Of course not.”

“Then shut her down! We don’t need the boy dead.”

“I thought you didn’t care if the boy was a casualty?” Justin spouted.

“It’s not optimal,” Lance shot back. “Now shut her down!”

“I can’t. I’ve tried, and she’s not responding to my commands,” Justin looked up at Lance, fear in his eyes.



“DILLON,” THE VOICE WHISPERED. IT SEEMED DISTANT YET near all at the same time.

“Dillon,” it said again with more urgency. It sounded like a woman’s voice. It was strangely familiar somehow.

“Dillon. Wake up. Wake up!” The whisper turned into a shout.

Dillon's eyes shot open. His heart leaped within his chest when he saw those glowing yellow eyes standing overtop him, staring at him, boring into him! Those terrifying, all-too-familiar, glowing yellow eyes from the resort.

*But how are they here? he questioned in himself. Am I dreaming? No. I'm awake!*

Before he had a chance to get up the dark figure standing over him raise an arm. It held something, but Dillon couldn’t make it out. It held a knife! No. It was smaller than that, but the person held it up like a knife.

*He's going to kill me! Dillon screamed to himself. Move! Move! Move!*

The weapon came down with terrifying speed but Dillon managed to roll to the side as it plunged into the pillow. He scrambled away but the dark figure pulled the blade and slashed at him. He managed to get his arm up in time to block. The person was about the same size as Dillon, but the blow hit Dillon’s blocking arm with incredible strength, cutting a thin line in his tender flesh. He grimaced and rolled with the strike right off the end of the bed. Quickly, he gained his footing and ran to the door. He slapped the light switch on and was about to call out down the hall for help when he glanced back and noticed that the dark figure with the glowing yellow eyes and small weapon was ... Claire.

She stared without blinking as she slowly turned to face him.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Dillon breathed. “This can’t be happening.”

It was at that moment that further solidified in his mind that he couldn't call for help. He couldn't involve any more of his family members in this—whatever this was. He knew he had to handle it himself and get help from Orion. He also knew now how a small mystery to a puzzle he stumbled upon the previous night in his Dad's office fit into all this.

"It's okay Claire," Dillon said softly as he closed the door and held his hands up. "You don't want to hurt me."

Claire stopped for a moment as if she was contemplating her choices, then she started to slowly stalk toward her brother once more.

Dillon gulped and glanced over to the night stand that was beside his bed. He knew he had to make it there. He flinched left then right, hoping that he could deke her out, then he broke right. As he went by her she managed to backhand him with her free hand. It felt as though he was struck by a tree! Pain exploded through his shoulder as his feet left the ground and he was catapulted onto the bed. He shook the pain off, knowing that Claire would be on him in a moment, and reached into the drawer.

Dillon managed to pull his arm back just in time as his sister came down with the letter opener.

"Sorry sis," he said as he dowsed the sleeve of his pyjama shirt with the contents of the bottle he had grabbed from the nightstand. Claire slashed again and Dillon managed to suck in his stomach enough for the letter opener to just miss him. Once the weapon sailed by, the agile boy leaped forward, burying his sister beneath him as he clasp his soaked sleeve over her face.

She struggled as they both went down onto the hard floor, but her struggling quickly subsided as the chloroform

began to take effect. Her hand relaxed and the letter opener fell from her grasp to land on the soft carpet.

Dillon grabbed the weapon and threw it away, not knowing how long this stuff would last for, and definitely not wanting to repeat the encounter. He then pulled himself off her and leaned his back against the bed, breathing heavily.

He got up and went to the door. He cracked it open, looked up and down the dark hallway, and waited for a few seconds. There were no sounds of movement from any of his other family members. He blew a sigh of relief then silently shut the door again.

“What’s going on?” he asked himself as he turned and stared at his unconscious sister.

He didn’t know where to even begin in order to unpack the many thoughts that were whirling through his mind. The only thing he knew for sure is that he didn’t know much and needed to get help.

He needed to call Derek.

## CONSCRIPTED

“**T**here you go! The boy survived,” Justin stated as he leaned back from his computer and brushed both hands through his thick brown hair.

“No thanks to us,” Lance responded curtly. “Is she going to be connected when she wakes?”

“No. Only if we use the neurostimulator that’s equipped with the chip. That’s how we woke her up in the first place. If we just leave her now, the unconsciousness will then sever the neurologic signal as her conscious mind has gone dormant,” Justin explained.

“Good.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

“Who you calling?” Justin asked curiously.

“Well I don’t think we need the extraction team anymore do you?” he asked sarcastically.

Justin held up his hands in submission.

“The operation is a no-go,” he said as soon as Brighton, the lead member of the extraction team, answered the phone.

“Because I say it is,” Lance said forcefully. “Now, I

need you and the other members of the team back on the plane ASAP and returned to The Cave. I have another mission for you to go on.”

Lance listened to Brighton’s rant. He rolled his eyes and shook his head as the fiery man went on and on. Finally, at length, he cut him off. “That’s all very interesting, and I know that you have skills that would potentially allow you to go grab the boy, but we’re just going to have to leave him in Griffin’s hands now and hope he doesn’t screw it up. We can’t chance you being exposed if more of the operation goes further south than it already has.

“Now I need you and your team here in the next four hours. Do. You. Understand?” He enunciated the last three words, biting off each one clearly, and, condescendingly.

Justin laughed.

Lance clenched his eyes and rubbed his temple with his free hand as he heard Brighton’s last bit of rant, then he hung up. *He always has to have the last word*, Lance thought to himself.

“I hope that attitude’s worth it,” commented Justin with a snicker as he leaned forward again in order to focus on the data on the screen.

“So do I,” muttered Lance as he turned and left the room.



“WELL. WHAT DID THE BOSS SAY?” TAYLOR ASKED AS SHE brushed the dirty blonde hair from her eyes. “It didn’t sound good.”

Brighton flashed a dangerous look her way, then softened up a bit. Just a bit. “The extraction is canceled,” he



replied as he looked to the other two members of the team: Harvey, a smaller man with olive skin and greying hair, and Tristan, a taller, heavily muscled man with medium-length dark hair.

“Why don’t we just go in there and grab the boy if he’s so important to The Tower?” Harvey asked with a thick Spanish accent.

Brighton smiled at Harvey’s use of the name “The Tower” as the organization’s heads hated the slang term for Tower Six. Harvey had almost the right amount of insubordination that the Asian liked. That was probably why they got along so well.

He snapped himself from his thoughts as he realized the team was waiting for an answer. “Because the boss said not too,” Brighton replied through gritted teeth. “Besides, he needs us deployed elsewhere. Now come on!”

Brighton always knew what the right amount of rebelliousness was—where the line was and how to walk it—and he knew that disobeying Lance this time would have serious ramifications for him, even if they were successful. No. It was better to be a dutiful soldier ... this time.

The others merely shrugged and followed Brighton’s lead. He knew he would get a chance to use his skills soon, he would just have to be patient.



DILLON SAT ON THE EDGE OF CLAIRE’S BED. HE MANAGED to get her back to her room without making too much noise. Thankfully the rest of the family were heavy sleepers and, despite the fact that he missed Bruno terribly, he was glad that the dog wasn’t around: bounding up and down, tongue flying, barking, thinking that

Dillon and Claire were playing a game that he needed to be involved in! He could just see his Dad waking up to the dog's barks and asking: "So Dillon ... why are you dragging your unconscious sister back to her room?"

After that, he called Derek and told him what had happened. Surprisingly, the man said he would be over soon. He was too distraught to even register much of the conversation, but just talking to the man had calmed him down.

He held the chloroform bottle in his hand just in case his sister began to stir. After he had laid her down he was able to web-search how long chloroform would last; the general consensus being about twenty to forty minutes as an average. He knew he was nearing that time frame and was ready to apply it again if need be.

His thoughts raced as he replayed the incident over and over again in his mind. *Who was that voice in my head?* he queried. *If it wasn't for her telling me to wake up then I'd be ...* He let the disturbing thoughts trail off as he turned his head to consider his sister. She appeared to be sleeping soundly. She looked so innocent. Even though Dillon had seen the neurogenic transmitters in play before, it still shocked him how they could turn someone so easily into a killer.

Dillon sighed deeply, then he got a shiver up the back of his neck. He shot his head around and saw Derek walk through the door. As the man came in he slowly closed the door.

"What happened?" the man asked as he came and sat down beside Dillon on the bed.

Dillon's eyes welled with tears. He felt as though he was holding back a flood, but knew that this wasn't the time.

He choked them back, and wiped the glistening moisture away with his hand.

“I ... I don’t know,” he responded shakily. “As I mentioned on the phone, Claire has one of the neurogenic transmitters in her and she tried to ... she tried to ...”

Derek put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay.”

Dillon’s eye’s reddened as he held back the tears. All he could do was nod at Derek’s reassurance.

“I have a friend—the woman you met from the mine, Chyna—coming soon to administer the neurogenic implant degrader. That same chemical we gave to John and Gwen at Desert Oasis Resort. Remember?”

Dillon nodded.

“It take’s a little bit to brew up, but Chyna’s extremely good at chemistry.” He offered a disarming smile.

“On the phone you mentioned that you knocked her out with some chloroform you found in your Dad’s office,” Derek stated as he reached for the bottle that was in Dillon’s hand. “How did you know to take it instead of asking your Dad about it?”

Dillon shrugged and gave it to Derek who inspected it. “I don’t know. I just had a feeling that it was out of place and could be important somehow.”

“Like John’s watch?”

“Ya. I guess,” Dillon admitted.

“And you know there’s no way your Dad would keep this in there?”

Dillon shook his head.

“How did it get there then, I wonder.”

Dillon shook his head again and shrugged.

“Well it was a good thing you listened to your gut. This stuff saved your life tonight.”

Dillon nodded again, then a thought struck him. “How

did you get here so quickly?” he asked. “I mean I know you never really told me where your secret operation is as that’s classified, but I was sure it was a ways from here.”

Derek looked at the boy soberly. “Well,” he began, then cleared his throat. “The decision has been made to make you a full operating agent and have you trained. So ... we’ve created a mobile Orion site for just that purpose not too far from here, and we have also started—just yesterday—a rotating surveillance unit on you just for your protection.”

Dillon just about fell over! “What are you talking about? You realize that I’m only thirteen right?” he stated incredulously.

“I know, but do you remember what I told you last year after we finished our mission at the resort?” He paused in order to let Dillon ponder the question for a moment. “I told you that you were destined for something greater.

“Now I know that might seem scary, and maybe it is a little scary, but I’m going to be with you all the way.”

Dillon was stunned. He didn’t know what to say; what could he say? *How could this be?*

“I don’t know exactly what’s going on Dillon, but I get the sense that something big is happening in the world and Orion is gearing up for whatever it is. There’s a lot they don’t tell me, but I have to believe I’m doing what I am in order to make a difference when we’re faced with it.

“And it’s apparent that other organizations are also working behind the scenes for their own ends.” He motioned to Claire. “And obviously you’re seen as a threat to them.”

Dillon swallowed hard. He didn’t like the fact that his abilities were so desirable and, obviously, threatening, as whoever it was that activated Claire wanted him dead

tonight. “But I thought Orion rounded up all the bad guys at the resort. How is Claire’s activation even possible?”

Derek sighed as if he was struggling with how much to disclose to Dillon. “Remember when we were at the resort I mentioned that there was probably someone else who was helping the Tokala tribe?”

Dillon nodded.

“Well, those are the ones who assisted them with their tech. There was no way the tribe could have done it without them.”

“It was the group that is represented by the boxed in pentagram with the eye in the middle of it! Isn’t it?” Dillon blurted. It felt as though some of the pieces were beginning to come together in the young boy’s mind. “Who are they? You never did tell me.”

Derek put a hand on Dillon’s shoulder. “There’s lots you still don’t know, but we will talk about it later, when your training begins.”

Derek’s phone chimed. He took it out of his pocket and, after looking at it for a moment, turned and smiled at the young boy. “Chyna’s here with the degrader,” he explained. “There’s just one more thing I need to do before we let her into the house.”

Dillon cocked his head curiously as Derek produced a small bottle from his other pocket. “It’s bottled anesthetic; just to make sure your parents and siblings don’t wake up and find us in here.”

Dillon sat back, unsure of how to respond. He didn’t like having to sneak around and essentially knock his parents and brother and sister out—or, at least, making sure they don’t wake up while he does work with a secret organization! *Well ... knocking Jordan out would be okay though,* he reasoned to himself with a slight smile. *This is surreal!*

“Don’t worry. It will just ensure they have a really good sleep. I promise,” Derek replied with a smile. He got up, but Dillon grabbed his arm. Derek turned and looked at him.

“I should be the one who does it,” he said softly, “just in case someone wakes up before we can spray them.”

Derek was silent for a few heartbeats, then smiled and nodded as he handed the bottle to Dillon. “Now you’re starting to think like an agent.”

Dillon made quick work of giving his parents, Gwen, and Jordan two quick puffs of the anesthetic as Derek had told him to, then he went to the front door and opened it for Chyna.

The young woman nodded. “Hi Dillon. I don’t know if you remember but I’m—”

“Chyna,” Dillon blurted before she could finish. “I remember you from the forest. Derek said you were coming to help my sister.”

The woman smiled as she entered the house. Dillon noted that she walked with a sense of confidence and assuredness. Her face was soft and beautiful. She was only a few inches taller than Dillon, who was tall for his age, and her form was shapely and strong. Dillon immediately felt at ease around her which was unusual for the discerning young boy.

“That’s right Dillon,” she replied. “I have just the thing that will help Claire. We’ll get her back to her old self before you know it.”

Dillon led her up stairs and into Claire’s room.

“I had to apply another dose of the chloroform as she started to stir and you had my anesthetic,” Derek explained. Dillon looked at the bottle in his hand and shrugged as he gave it back to Derek.

Chyna moved up beside the young girl, pulled a syringe out of the small bag she carried on her shoulder, and injected it into Claire's arm. "There," she said. "That will take care of it and no one will be able to activate that chip again.

"She's probably going to have a nasty headache when she wakes up, and may vomit," Chyna explained as she looked to Dillon. "Don't be alarmed, but that's normal."

Dillon nodded.

"We should be going," Derek stated as he looked at his watch. "I'll be in touch with you so we can start your training. You understand Dillon?"

Dillon nodded again. He had about a thousand questions in his head that were screaming to leap forth!

"Wait," he called out as the man turned and was about to leave.

Derek nodded to Chyna who must have taken the cue and left the room. "What is it Dillon?"

"Don't I get a say in whether or not I even want to be an operative?"

"Well do you?" Derek asked in all seriousness.

Dillon was silent. He made up his mind earlier that he wouldn't contact Derek anymore, or get involved in any of Orion's business, but here he was, told that he was now to be trained as an operative. The whole thing was almost too much for him to process.

He sat down on the bed shaking his head.

"Are you okay Dillon?" Derek asked.

"Ya. There's just so much going on."

"I know it's a lot for you to take in."

Dillon nodded and began to think about the events that led him to this position. As he did, he suddenly had an immense feeling of peace wash over him. He couldn't

explain it, but it was a sense that he should accept Derek's offer. He didn't know why, but in that moment, he knew without a doubt that it was the right thing to do for him.

He stood up from the bed and looked Derek right in the eyes. "I'll do it," he said with confidence that shocked even himself.

Derek smiled. "Good," he replied. "You and I are going to become great friends."

Dillon smiled back. With all his doubts and fears he knew he needed to do this. The problem was he didn't know why.



## THE SENSE

Dillon had a surprisingly good sleep after the events of a few hours earlier. When his alarm went off he leaped out of bed, got dressed, and ran downstairs. The house was eerily quiet, which was unusual as Mom, Dad, and Gwen were generally up around the same time. He thought about checking on everyone just in case, but remembered what Derek said about them getting a good night sleep and being completely normal with the anesthetic. He trusted Derek so he merely shrugged the thought away and figured they would be up soon. As he passed by his father's office he glanced in and noted the spot where he had found the chloroform. He couldn't help but think what would have happened to him if he hadn't found that bottle.

After the incident, while he was waiting for Derek to arrive, Dillon had sat on the edge of the bed running through how he had discovered the chloroform. He remembered going into the office in order to look for a good book he could dive into. He was searching on the neatly stacked shelves, trying at all cost to avoid one of the

“disaster shelves of doom,” as Dillon often referred to them as, when he suddenly got that gut feeling he had at times when something was out of place. The feeling was telling him—or at least directing him—to move aside some of the books, binders, folders, and such on one of those shelves. As he did, he noticed the bottle. He knew instantly that it wasn’t supposed to be there and scooped it up, putting it in his pocket, and moving out of the office and to his room.

He had that feeling again that this was important somehow. After stashing the bottle away he did a quick google search and found out what chloroform was used for.

*Why would Dad have chloroform in his office?* he asked himself. He knew the answers would reveal themselves soon enough, he just didn’t know how. And he knew, for some reason, that he couldn’t go asking his family why this was in the house. He could just picture the conversation: “Hey Dad. I found some chloroform in your office today. You planning on knocking somebody out soon? Maybe we could use it on Jordan?” *Ya, that would go over well!*

After he had used it on Claire he silently thanked whoever it was that left the bottle there. If they hadn’t, then he knew he would probably be dead. Derek had taken it after he and Chyna finished with Claire. He said he would analyze it and see if he could get any finger prints off the bottle other than Dillon’s. Then they would be a little bit closer to understanding why this was in the house in the first place. There was no reason that Dillon could think of as to why his Dad would have it, but maybe there was another use for chloroform that he didn’t know of?

He shuddered at all the disturbing thoughts as he walked by and headed for the kitchen.

He grabbed a bowl of cereal, turned on the TV, and

sat down to his breakfast. He wasn't exactly sure how much time had passed but, just as he was about to turn the TV off and grab his backpack for school he heard a shriek ring out from upstairs. His heart instantly accelerated!

*Maybe I should have checked on them!* he screamed to himself as he put the bowl down and ran to the bottom of the stairs.

"Honey! Wake up! We're late!" Dillon heard his Dad call out.

Dad came shooting into the hallway like a man possessed. He reached Jordan's room and threw the door open. "Get up Jordan!" he yelled before moving to Gwen's room. "Gwen! Gwen! Get up!"

Dillon couldn't help but feel responsible for the family's current distress. Suddenly Mom ran into the hall and went into Claire's room. Dad came back out into the hall and was about to go into Dillon's room when he looked down the stairs. He stared at Dillon with a confused look on his face that turned to disbelief. "Why didn't you wake us up?" he blurted, clearly agitated.

"I ... uh ... got caught up in a show and lost track of time. I didn't think to ..." He didn't know what to say or how he could make this situation better. He was just glad they were all okay. "I'm ... ah ... am gonna head to school. Sorry I didn't wake you. Um ... try and have a good day?" he questioned more than stated. He didn't even consider the fact that he hadn't brushed his teeth yet! He just wanted to get out of there.

Dad shook his head in frustration and turned back toward his room as Dillon rushed to the door and hurriedly put his shoes on. Mom came into the hall. "I don't think Claire is in any shape to go to school today honey. She looks terrible. I'll call the sick line."

Dillon winced as he heard about the state of his sister. He knew he was responsible for the current suffering that his family was going through. The only problem was that he knew he was stuck. He had to accept Orion's offer and be trained or other organizations might try to take him out again. But he didn't want his family getting hurt. When Jordan and Gwen were in harms way at the resort the previous year, he was beside himself with worry for their safety. And now this ... He needed Orion and they, apparently, needed him, he just didn't want to sacrifice his family in the process. That feeling of peace he had when he confidently accepted Derek's proposal of being trained wasn't evident now. Now, he was scared and just as insecure as he had always been.

*Maybe I should just run away. Far, far, away so that no one else gets hurt and everyone—Orion and whoever else—would just leave me alone?* he said to himself. That thought only lasted for a moment though as the impracticality of such a course pressed down upon him. No. He knew he would have to stay and face whatever came at him.

As he grabbed his backpack he vowed that he would do everything he could to minimize the danger his family would be in, and he knew Orion would help; or at least he *hoped* they would help.

As he walked to the bus stop his phone chimed. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out. It was a text from Derek. "How are you feeling today?"

"Good. Everyone slept in, though. Claire's not feeling well. No surprise there!" Dillon typed back.

"Good to hear. I almost have everything set. We can probably start first thing next week. Take the weekend to relax. The training will be gruelling. You need to erase

these messages right afterward. DON'T FORGET! Talk to you soon."

Dillon was taken aback by that last comment about erasing the messages, but, after a moment of contemplation, he figured it was the way Orion had to operate. It made sense on one level so that no one would be able to gain sensitive information from the correspondence. He actually doubted that Derek would text anything too revealing anyway. The guy seemed smarter than that.

*Oh well*, he thought as he deleted the message.

"Hi Dillon." He nearly jumped out of his skin as Sarah came running up to him.

She laughed at his expense.

"Oh, hi Sarah."

"Is everything okay with you?" she asked as she eyed him suspiciously.

"Ya. Except for you scaring the heck out of me!" he exclaimed with a chuckle.

He was always challenged to "be normal" around his best friend even though everything in his life was turning upside down. Despite the danger of the mine incident he actually enjoyed having her along with him during that adventure and knowing a little of what he was into, except for them almost getting killed! That circumstance solidified in his mind why he couldn't tell her what was actually happening in his world. He didn't need her getting caught up in the craziness and being put in harms way again. No. He would keep her far away from this and be the best friend he could to her. She deserved that.

He thought about that statement for a moment: *she deserved that*. He looked at her smiling face and knew it to be true.



“MAN, IS OUR SOCIALS CLASS WITH MR. DIRKS EVER getting strange,” Evan voiced as he slammed the door to his locker. “Don’t you think it’s weird, the way he teaches, and the topic he’s chosen?” he asked Dillon who was leaning casually up against the lockers. “I mean, we already hear a lot about the American Revolution which makes sense as we are Americans!”

Dillon nodded. He saw that Evan was going to rant and just let him go with it.

“But now he’s talking about the French, Russian, Haitian, Serbian Revolutions,” he stated with a flourish of his arms. “He even went back to talk about the Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Chinese Revolutions!”

“How could I not remember when that’s all we’ve talked about for the last week,” Dillon replied. “I’m actually impressed that you remembered all that,” he said with a chuckle.

“Maybe the guy just likes to really talk about Revolutions?” Dillon reasoned, trying to bring some understanding to the man’s teaching subject.

“Ya. Like ... a lot,” Evan emphasized with a dramatic flourish of his hands again.

Dillon smiled at the display. In truth, he was still uncomfortable in the man’s class. He just had a strange feeling and, over the last year and a half, he had learned to trust his feelings. The problem was that they never really “told” him what to do. It was a little like walking down a dark hallway, knowing that there’s a door down there somewhere, but having to grope around in order to find it. It was incredibly frustrating!

Dillon did adjust a little to the man after the first day

when he met them outside putting the sundial together. He was sure that something bad was going to happen to Evan and him, but instead, the guy seemed really cool and helpful. Maybe all these feelings of impending doom—if he could call it that—were nothing more than his nerves? After all he had to deal with in the last little while who could blame him for being a little wound up? He wished there was a way he could somehow focus this gut feel and these senses he had, but that seemed impossible.

“Dillon?”

The young boy looked up at Evan and realized that his friend must have called him more than once but he hadn’t registered it.

“What? Sorry Evan,” he replied.

“No problem man. I was just asking if you wanted to work on the sundial after school again today?”

“Ya. That sounds great. I’ll meet you at the clearing.”

Evan smiled and practically skipped off down the hall.

Dillon shook his head at his friend. It was nice to have friends like Evan and Sarah.

Suddenly a shiver went down the back of his neck. He stood up straight and turned around. There, standing halfway down the hall was Mr. Dirks casually leaning against the wall and looking in his direction. He had a smirk on his his face like he was thinking of a joke a friend had told him earlier. He nodded toward Dillon before turning and slowly strolling down the hall and around the corner that led toward his room.

Dillon was frozen for a moment without understanding why. He shook his head and the shiver went away. He took a step toward the direction that Mr. Dirks had disappeared from but suddenly he felt a compulsion to stop. He shook his head again. He was about to continue when he sensed

another strong urging to stop. The boy looked around as though he was expecting someone to be there physically holding him back.

There was nothing, just the hustle of kids heading to their next class.

He shook his head again and walked in that direction anyway. Alarm bells rang out in his mind but he ignored them. He rounded the corner and saw Mr. Dirks standing in the hall talking easily with another student. He appeared friendly; he and the student were laughing and it looked as though Mr. Dirks was helping the student with his homework.

*See. There was nothing to be worried about,* he said to himself. *Mr. Dirks is just an ordinary guy and you're paranoid.*

He turned and walked the opposite direction and the sense disappeared. No shiver. No compulsion to stop.

He shook his head again as he carried on down the hall. *Am I going crazy?* he asked himself. These couldn't be the same types of powers he manifested at the resort or the mine; they were too strong and direct. It had to be all the stress he was going through recently.

*It had to be the Claire incident,* he reasoned. *Yes. It has to be that.*



THE ADVENTURE TURNS SOUR

**E**van smiled and stood up as he saw Dillon enter the clearing, the knees of his pant legs were covered in soft dirt and grass. “No one saw you did they?” he pressed, suddenly getting serious.

Dillon shook his head as he approached and unslung his backpack. He laid it just off to the side and stepped in to get a better look at the sundial. “It looks amazing!” he exclaimed.

The stones were all set and numbered. You could see the uneven seams of the stone where the boys had chiseled and filed the ends in order to get them to fit together. Evan’s Dad managed to get them some small stone numbers from the hardware store that were usually used for house numbering. These they glued into place using tile cement. Dillon would have rather the numbering been in Roman Numerals as that would have made the primitive timepiece appear even more ancient-looking. Despite that, however, he was really glad with the way it had turned out. The only thing that was missing was the Gnomon. Dillon and Evan had agreed earlier that they would place the rod in the sundial together.

If they were trying to be more precise they knew that the rod should have been placed before the rest of the tile, but Dillon thought it would be more climactic to put the rod in last.

Evan held out the eighteen inch long piece of steel rod they were going to use to Dillon. Dillon gingerly reached for the capstone of their creation and gently took it from his friend. "We need to do this right," he stated with a smile.

"What are you thinking?"

"An adventure of course."

Evan smiled at that reply.

"Let's start over here at the edge of the tree-line," Dillon said as he walked beyond the sundial and to the trees. Evan followed closely behind.

"Okay, now imagine this: You and I are the last survivors of Dekard's Demon Hunters Squad."

Evan's eyes lit up.

"We are carrying the Gnomon of Souls to the sacred dial. The Demons of Hlavel have in-prisoned the Angel Prince, Jaker, within the rod and it's our mission to release him so he can help defeat the Demons of Hlavel."

"Dude! How do you come up with this stuff!" Evan exclaimed, and Dillon just knew that his imagination was buzzing with anticipation. "Okay, what's the lay of the scene?"

Dillon got somber. "You are Dillitarian, the Sword Master, and, in our last desperate fight to get to this clearing your wife Adrianna was slain saving your life. She sacrificed herself so that we could make it here and release Jakar. The hope of vengeance against Demon-kind for her death is the thing that is driving you on at this moment."

Evan's smile disappeared and his face took on a somber

note. Dillon knew he was trying to get into character and loved it!

“I am Tanarius the Whistling Blade. From a young age I had walked alone, being orphaned by the very demons we now hunt. Vengeance has ever been my desire against those unnatural creatures that wreak havoc on the weak and helpless.” Dillon took upon himself a tragic posture as he recited his character’s brief history; speaking in such believable tones that even sent a chill down Dillon’s own back!

Evan pulled an invisible sword from his belt and crouched low.

In Dillon’s mind the clearing changed to a dimly lit cemetery in the midst of a dark forest. The trees around them transformed into large dead-looking stalks that appeared as though the very life-force of them had been drained. Owls hooted about and the silhouette of bats could be seen flying over-head. In his mind, Dillon was now Tanarius and Evan was now Dilitarian.

Tanarius slowly slid his curved scimitar from its sheath. As he produced the weapon the blade shone a light red hue and let off a low hum. “There are demons about,” he stated as he turned to his friend Dillitarian.

“Then let’s make quick work of this,” Dillitarian replied as he began stalking toward the dial.

“Wait!” Tanarius whispered as loudly as he dared. “There’s a demon to your left, just inside the tree-line on the other side of the clearing. And I see more to the right. I will attack that way while you take the left flank. Only after we have finished off the monsters will we be truly able to place the rod, because they will never let us get close enough to do that.”

Dillitarian nodded, took a deep breath and shot off as fast as his legs would take him. "For Adrianna!" he yelled.

Dillon—that is, Tanarius—couldn't help but crack a smile at his friend's explosive charge. In like manner he sprinted to the right, holding his sword high.

As he came in he saw a horned monster leap from the trees. He ducked the creature's incoming strike that was aimed for his throat and came up with a powerful swipe of his sword. The glowing blade severed cleanly through the demon's arm. The beast roared in pain as it retracted its stump.

Tanarius backed up a step and stared hard at the creature as a grin cret his face. The demon narrowed its eyes hatefully at the human, then issued a terrifying growl as it lunged forward. Tanarius sidestepped the beast and brought his sword across the monsters stomach. The blade whistled as he swung it, then the whistling stopped as it sunk deep into the demon's flesh, but resumed again when Tanarius brought it through.

He spun a complete circuit as he followed through and saw that the monster was now down on its horselike knees grasping at its entrails as they flowed forth from its abdomen. It turned its head slightly and looked at Tanarius for a moment before it collapse to the ground dead.

Tanarius stood up and looked over to where Dillitarian had run off to fight the other demon. He wasn't there. "Dillitarian!" he called out.

No answer. "Dillitarian!" he yelled again as he walked toward the dial.

Silence.

Dillon's heart skipped a beat. The scene he had imag-

ined in his head evaporated as fear for Evan filled him. "Evan!" he called out.

He knew something was wrong. It wasn't like Evan to just take off like that, especially in the middle of an adventure. Normally the boys would fight side by side ferociously against unnumbered odds and win the day because, of course, they were the heroes of their tales and always won the day.

"Evan!" Dillon yelled again. "Come on man. This isn't funny!"

"It's not meant to be," came a deep voice from the forest where Evan had gone to engage the demon.

Dillon's heart beat faster and his eyes went wide when he saw Mr. Dirks walk from around some trees. He instinctively stepped back.

"What's the matter Dillon? Didn't you *observe* me coming?" he asked sarcastically.

"I ... uh ... where's Evan? What did you do to him?"

"Oh, he's fine ... for now," Mr. Dirks replied with a wicked grin.

Dillon instinctively went for his phone.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Mr. Dirks threatened as he pulled out a small handgun. From his back somewhere he produced a long black tube-looking thing that he started to screw to the end of his gun. "Now throw the phone over here."

Dillon tossed the phone at Mr. Dirks feet who was still about ten feet away. "That's a good boy. Now come here."

"What do you want with me Mr. Dirks?" Dillon asked in desperation.

Mr. Dirks smiled. "The name's actually not Mr. Dirks, but Jacob Griffin," he replied coolly. "But you can call me Griffin."

The statement of the man's real name sent a shiver down Dillon's back. He silently berated himself that he was actually right to have suspected that something was off with "Mr. Dirks" from the beginning, but he didn't listen to his instincts!

"You're a smart boy Dillon," Griffin continued. "You can probably figure out what we want from you."

"Don't hurt my friend," he pleaded as he walked slowly forward with his hands up.

"I'll only do that if you give me a reason too. You see, you're apparently valuable to my employers. Although I don't see why," he said with a snort. "I've seen your school work, and, frankly, I think the talk of your *powers* is overestimated and exaggerated."

"Most definitely," Dillon agreed without missing a beat.

That brought a confused look to Griffin's face.

"I've always told others that I'm just an ordinary kid who is unremarkable, but no one believes me." As he said it he quickly glanced at his phone which was face down, then looked Griffin in the eyes. He hoped that the man saw the move. "They all think I have some ability they can harness, but, to tell you the truth, I was just lucky last year at Desert Oasis Resort. I tried to convince Orion of that, but they wouldn't listen."

Griffin did glance down at the phone. His grin went away as he bent down to retrieve it.

"And because they didn't listen they agreed to put me under twenty four hour surveillance which means they're coming right now."

Griffin grabbed the phone and flipped it over. There was a silent alarm that signaled on the screen which flashed over and over again: ALERT! His head snapped up to look at Dillon, the gun rising with his eyes. But it was too

late, Dillon was already swinging the Gnomon at Griffin's gun hand. The man grimaced as his gun went flying from his grasp.

Dillon turned to run, but Griffin reached out with his other hand and grabbed his pant leg. Dillon managed to tear his pants free of the man's grasp and bolted for the edge of the forest.

"Come back here!" the man yelled.

Dillon looked back to see that Griffin had retrieved the gun. As he ducked behind the first tree he heard something hit the trunk. Another bullet whizzed past his head as he ran by the next set of trees. He knew he would be hard pressed to make it out of the grove without Griffin putting a bullet into him so he jumped a low log and climbed underneath the small hollow that was under the downed tree. He squeezed under it as far as he could and laid deadly still.

He could hear the man's footsteps coming closer and closer, rustling through the thick underbrush. Dillon sucked in his breath as he saw the man's feet land inches from his face when Griffin jumped over the log he was hiding under. He could see that the man knew he was close. Griffin's feet slowly walked to the left then to the right. Then Dillon knew that it was all over when he saw the man slowly bend down. Griffin placed his hand on the log just above where Dillon was hiding.

Dillon felt as though his heart would pound out of this chest! It was all-too surreal. And everything appeared as though it was moving in slow motion as the man continued to bend down. Dillon knew he was caught.

Dillon scrunched his eyes up and dared to try to move further from the opening of his meagre hideout without success; he was as far back as the hollow would allow. He

saw the man's chin, then ... he flinched as Griffin screamed out and pulled his hand from the log. Sticking out of his hand was a knife! The man dropped his gun and pulled the knife out which sprayed a little bit of blood onto Dillon's face.

Griffin grabbed the gun and bolted up. Dillon didn't know what was happening. He heard the silenced weapon Griffin held go off a few times, then he heard what sounded like a fight and saw another set of feet. The battle raged for a minute or two, although Dillon didn't know how much time had actually passed.

Finally, all seemed to go quiet suddenly. He was about to cinch out of his hiding spot when he suddenly jumped back and screamed in surprise as Griffin fell right in front of him! His eyes were closed and a little bit of blood dripped from his mouth. Dillon didn't know if he should move. Was it Derek or someone else from Orion, or maybe an opposing organization that wanted him. He just didn't know and his nerves were shot!

"Its okay Dillon," he heard a familiar voice say. "You can come out now."

It was Derek!

He quickly scrambled out from the hollow as Derek moved Griffin out of the way. He got to his knees before Derek hoisted him up. He looked at the man, tears moistening his eyes. The man put a hand on his shoulder and offered a smile. "You did well," he said. "I knew that app on your phone would come in handy."

"I'm just glad you were close enough to get here in time," Dillon said as he choked back the tears and nodded his head slightly a few times. He reached up and wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve, then the thought struck him. "Where's Evan?" he blurted.



“He’s here,” came a woman’s voice not too far away.  
“He’s okay.”

Dillon ran passed Derek as he saw Chyna kneeling down in the brush a little ways beyond the man. He came to her side and knelt down beside his friend. “Evan,” he prodded. Evan didn’t respond, but seemed to be breathing.

“What’s wrong with him?” Dillon noticed some ropes Griffin must have used to tie him up with lying on the ground before him.

“He’s been momentarily sedated,” Chyna replied. “We had to, for his own good.”

“Why?” Dillon asked suspiciously.

“Because we need to call in a containment team,” stated Derek as he walked up beside them.

“Containment team?” Dillon questioned.

“Ya. We need to take care of your *friend* over there and reconstruct some of Evan’s recent memories, for his own good and yours.”

The way Derek had stated that last part, Dillon knew, had closed the door on any possible debate that was forthcoming from him.

“Is he ...” Dillon began to ask as he motioned toward Griffin.

“No. Just taking a dirt nap. He’ll be okay when we rouse him for questioning.”

Chyna cleared her throat loudly and shook her head at Derek. The man smiled at the gesture.

Dillon saw the exchange clearly and knew that Chyna was attempting to keep him innocent to their behind the scenes activities, but he also knew that he and Derek had forged a friendship where the man treated him more as an equal than a kid. It was refreshing for the young teenager.

“Do you know who he is?” Derek asked as he walked back to where the man lay prone on the ground.

“He said his name was Jacob Griffin, but, until now I only knew him as Mr. Dirks, my substitute socials teacher.”

“Socials teacher? Really. And what did Jacob here teach you in socials class?”

“He spoke a lot about ...” Dillon paused as the lessons that Griffin was teaching the class began to crystallize in light of these recent events. It was as though he was implying that something was coming. Dillon shook his head. “He couldn’t have meant that ...” he whispered to himself, giving voice to his thoughts.

“What? What is it?” Derek asked insistently.

“A coming Revolution.”

## TRAINING BEGINS

Lance rubbed his temples in order to help alleviate the stress. “Idiot,” he said. “So Griffin is now in the custody of Orion?” the man asked, not amused at all.

“That’s what our source says,” the young intelligence officer, Calvin, replied as he adjusted his dark-framed glasses. “What do you want to do about it?”

Lance looked at Calvin as if he had just said something ridiculously stupid which, in Lance’s estimation, he just had. “What do you think?” he asked disdainfully. “Nothing. Griffin can rot in Orion’s cells for all I care.”

“And what if he gives up Tower Six intel?”

Lance smirked. “I’d be worried if Griffin had any important intel to give up but, as it stands, he does not so I don’t care.”

Calvin smiled and nodded before turning and exiting Lance’s office.

The Aussie reclined in his chair as he crossed his arms. He stared absently at the screen before him. “Idiot,” he

said to himself again, referencing his feelings for Griffin. The man had numerous chances to nab the boy but chose, instead, to play his games and now he was with Orion. *Could things get worse?* he thought to himself.

Just then he saw a message flash up on his screen. His face blanched as he immediately noted the sender: Angel, the head of their organization.

“Please come to my office Mr. Coridan,” it read.

Lance took a deep breath to steady himself. Being summoned to Angel’s office without a defined scheduled meeting with the head of Tower Six wasn’t normally a good thing. But for all he knew every officer in the organization had received the message. He looked at who it was to and saw that he was the only one tagged on it.

He gingerly approached the keyboard. “I’ll be right there,” he typed.

The normally confident man didn’t wait for a reply as he knew one wasn’t coming, but rather, headed right out of the office; knowing also that Angel wasn’t a patient woman.

The fact that this summons came on the heels of losing Dillon and Griffin could not have been a coincidence, but in this game of moves and counter moves Lance knew there was always a way to progress forward from a setback. And that way was already formulating in his mind. He had decided then and there that he could use Dillon without possessing Dillon. The thought began to crystallize as to how he was going to do that when he approached the elevator that would lead to the top floor of Tower Six.



IN LIGHT OF THE INCIDENT AT SCHOOL DEREK HAD TOLD Dillon that he couldn't wait any longer to begin the training. With the help of Derek and Chyna Dillon had fabricated a story for his parents telling them that, because of his incredible imagination, he had been asked to join the Dungeons and Dragons club at school. This new gaming endeavour would see him commit around two to three hours a day after school and every second Saturday for at least four hours. Chyna figured this excuse would raise the least amount of questions. Originally they tossed around the ideas of community service groups, debate club, robotics club, and such, but there were just too many variables that could go wrong with upholding those stories.

The young teenager didn't find it that hard to make the story sound compelling to his parents. He did have a twang of guilt, however, as he didn't want to deceive Mom and Dad. He pushed the guilt aside with the justification that it was for their good. Still, the feeling of guilt lingered in his young mind.

Sure to Derek's claim, Evan didn't remember a thing of the incident that happened two days earlier. Dillon was thankful for that as the last thing he wanted was to entangle his friends in the craziness and danger of his life. No. It was better that they didn't know anything he decided. Better for them and better for him. Fortunately Evan did remember the sundial which he and Dillon finished the day after the event. It didn't quite work the way they expected, but it sure did look cool!

"So you want to hang out after school today?" Sarah asked as they stepped off the bus.

Dillon shook his head disappointedly. "No, unfortunately I can't," he replied. "I won't be able to hang after

school for a while as Mom and Dad are expecting me to walk to Gwen's school—which obviously means I won't be on the bus either—pick her up, and then help her with chores and homework when we get home.”

“That seems like a lot of work and time,” Sarah stated.

“It's really not that bad,” he responded with a shrug. “You know Gwen's school isn't that far from here and is on the way home anyway. It should only take an extra half hour.”

“Why haven't you been told to pick up Gwen at school before now?” Sarah asked, her voice full of intrigue.

“Well, Mom used to be able to meet her there and walk her home, but she recently got a new job and the hours don't allow her to do that anymore.”

Sarah smile. “That's really sweet of you.”

Dillon shrugged. “They got reading somewhere and found that a really good way to raise children was when they have a family community that helps them, including siblings,” he said, knowing that he should probably stop but really felt like he was on a roll! “It's an idea that's modelled after the Canadian indigenous tribes—”

“Indigenous?” Sarah cut in. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, in Canada they call their Indian people indigenous people.” Sarah looked intrigued.

Dillon laughed. “It *was* Indian, then native, then first nations, and now indigenous.”

“Wow! I thought we had issues down here!”

Dillon shrugged. “They're a very politically correct country I guess.” He was really glad at that moment that a couple weeks ago he happened to listen in to a documentary Dad was watching on TV about the Indigenous people of Canada.

“In fact, in the indigenous tradition, they believe that the whole tribe should raise the children, including aunts, uncles and neighbours.” Dillon chuckled. “Our neighbours aren’t actually into that. Not yet anyway, but I’m sure Mom will find a way to convince them.”

Sarah laughed. Dillon couldn't believe how good this story was working! He felt like he was getting a lot better at thinking on his feet.

“Anyway,” he continued, “that’s why I’m going to be tied up for a while. I’m sure it’s just a phase and Mom and Dad will drop it in time.”

Sarah smiled at him. “Well I think it’s cute that you’re willing to help your little sister like that.

“Hey! I’m kind of a neighbour. I would love to help!” Sarah said.

Dillon was stunned for a moment. He didn’t know how to navigate through this now. That was the last thing he was expecting her to say.

“Dil? You okay?” she asked after he was silent for a moment.

“What? Oh ya. I really appreciate the offer Sarah,” he began as he was formulating a way out of this mess in his head, “but I don’t think you would have fun helping my little sister with her homework and stuff.”

A look of disappointment began to shadow across Sarah’s face. “But ... how about I call you after dinner and I’ll come over to your house for a couple hours? That way you can use this time to get any of your own homework and chores done which will leave more time for us to hang later.”

Sarah didn’t respond right away, but then smiled widely and nodded. “That sounds great!”

The guilt settled in, but was softened by the compro-

mise he just made by agreeing to hang out after dinner. He knew his life would be super crazy with all his added responsibilities, but he also knew he had to make an exception and find time for his best friend. He didn't like the fact that he was purposely deceiving her, but it was for her own good. She needed to be as far away from this as possible.

Her safety depended on his deception. The more convincing the lie, the better it was for her. At least that's what Dillon kept telling himself. He just hoped it was true.



DILLON SLIPPED OUT THE SIDE DOOR OF THE SCHOOL, nonchalantly walked through the crowd of kids who were loitering around readying for the different sports teams they were on, and exited the grounds by the pathway that led through the small forest that encompassed the back part of the property. In short order he walked out onto the sidewalk of the adjacent community.

Waiting for him was a small white Tesla Model 3. He paused for a moment and looked into the driver's side where he saw Derek. He was shocked. He knew that these cars weren't cheap. The first thought he had rambling around his mind was how many resources Orion must have.

Shaking those thoughts away, Dillon went to the passenger side and climbed into the posh car. "Wow. This is nice," he stated.

"Not bad huh."

"Orion must have a lot of money," stated Dillon more than asked as he buckled in.

Derek shrugged. "I don't pay much attention to it," he



stated as he put the car in gear and took off. "I just work here."

"Ya but you must know something of how this organization works?"

"Not really," Derek replied. "I'm just a field agent. As long as they pay me for the work I do, I don't really care how the organization works."

"That sounds a little dangerous don't you think?"

"Dangerous? Why do you say that?" Derek asked as he glanced over at the boy.

"Well, I don't know ... don't you ever wonder what makes things work and whether or not they are doing it the *right* way?"

"What do you mean by the *right* way? Are you asking if Orion is bad?"

Dillon shuffled in his seat as that was exactly what he was wondering. He knew he should trust them as they seemed to be doing things to help others—at least that's what he thought from his experience at the resort. But he had to wonder if they were maybe doing bad things and calling it good. And if Derek didn't know about the greater workings of the organization, then how could he even be sure that his missions were produced by pure motives?

Derek must have sensed his uneasiness as he looked over and smiled at him. "Don't worry, I know a few people who went from being field agents to higher positions, and most of them are really good. I don't think they would be staying in those positions if they were forced to do bad things."

"What do you mean by *most* of them are really good?" Dillon asked.

"Well Dillon, you know that not everyone is a rockstar like us," Derek joked.

Dillon offered a weak smile and nodded, not quite convinced with that answer, but willing to accept it ... for now.

In a few minutes the car pulled up in front of a newer nondescript small warehouse that wasn't too far from where Dillon lived on Glenview Street. Derek pulled right up to the front door and parked the car.

"Welcome to The Studio," he said as he looked over at Dillon. "Don't worry, we are the good guys and we're doing what we do to save people."

Dillon nodded and exited the car. The air was surprisingly fresh given the fact that they were in more of the industrial section. As they walked up to the main door Dillon noticed no less than four, three hundred and sixty degree cameras positioned all along the front of the building at different angles and distances from one another.

"I see you're pretty serious about security," he remarked.

Derek looked at him and grinned. "You noticed, did you? Good, you'll make a great agent."

Dillon was taken aback by Derek's declaration of him becoming an agent. He still wasn't sure he wanted that. In fact, he wasn't really sure that's why he was here! The boy was immensely conflicted about the prospect as he had only ever *imagined* himself being an agent, or an adventurer, or a bounty hunter, and such, but never actually believed that he *would* be any of those one day.

He racked his brain for an explanation of his trepidation. Shouldn't he jump at this opportunity? He mentally laid out the pros and cons quickly in his active brain: Pro, get to go on cool missions; Con, could get killed; Pro, get to

use cool equipment; Con, could get killed; Pro, get to see more of the world; Con, could get killed. He definitely saw a pattern arising!

“You coming?” Derek asked, shaking him from his thoughts. The man was standing there with the door open and Dillon realized that Derek must have tried to get his attention a couple of times from the look that was splayed across his face.

“Ah ... ya,” he stammered then walked through the door.

The inside of the warehouse was nothing like the outside! As soon as they entered into the hall, high-tech lasers scanned them as they walked. “Welcome back Mr. Vico,” a woman’s voice chimed. “And welcome Dillon.”

“How does this thing know me?” Dillon asked, looking over at Derek.

“Because I told it to know you.”

“Oh. That makes sense,” Dillon replied dryly.

At the end of the hall was another door which Derek opened by punching in a code then placing his finger on the print scanner. After the scanner, he entered another code and the large double door slid open both ways.

This room looked more like a living room than a training room. There were two couches off to the side, it was nicely carpeted, there was a large big screen TV mounted on the wall, and there was a counter to the right which looked like a bar. Behind the bar was a fridge, and another counter top which had a sink in it. On a stand under the TV was a couple gaming systems, a streaming box, and computer tower.

“We call this the Decom room,” stated Derek as he held out his hands.

“Decom?” Dillon asked, unsure of what to make of the name.

“Ya. Short for Decompression.”

“Wow. The training must be really intense then,” Dillon stated jokingly with a little chuckle.

Derek was stone-faced.

Dillon’s smile disappeared in an instant. “The training *is* that intense?” he asked with a shudder in his voice.

“He’s just messing with you,” he heard Chyna say.

The young boy turned to see her padding softly toward them, smiling widely. Dillon looked back to Derek and saw him crack a grin. “Come on,” he said. I’ll get you set up with the first part of your training. We only have a couple hours and can’t afford to lose one second.” He turned and began to move to the door at the other end of the room.

“So where’s everyone else?” Dillon asked as he started to follow.

“Who do you mean?” Derek queried.

“You know ... all the other agents.”

“There are no other agents in this facility. Just us.”

“What? Why?” Dillon asked, completely shocked by the revelation.

“Because Orion cares that much about your training this whole building was set up for just you.”

Dillon’s jaw dropped. “What do you mean? I’m not that important. I’m no one. I’m just Dillon.”

Derek smiled back at his disarmingly. “I know it’s hard for you to grasp, so try not to think about that right now. Let’s just get started with the training okay. We don’t have much time.”

“Oh ... okay,” Dillon replied as he tried to shake off the shock. “And what’s the first part of the training supposed to be?” he asked after composing himself.

Derek grinned. “Hand to hand combat. It’s my favorite part.”

Dillon’s jaw dropped again.

“It’s not that bad,” Derek said, as though he was trying to ease the boy’s concerns. “You won’t get hurt ... that much.”

BACKSTORIES

**D**illon met with Derek and Chyna every day after school and every second Saturday for a month. He was able to expertly avoid anyone of interest seeing him leave the school grounds as though he was truly an agent of a secret organization. This was due to Derek and Chyna's training which consisted of more than just combat skills. He was starting to learn about logistics in reference to providing for operations, urban tracking and counter tracking, situational awareness, parkour, and logic.

The studies interested him so much that he found himself researching more of the subject matter on his off time after his chores were done and his schoolwork was completed. He tried to leave time for hanging with Evan and Sarah, but the schedule was daunting. He knew that, if he couldn't balance that part of his life, then things would start to unravel, and that was not an option for him.

He also had so many questions for Derek, but he seemed to never be able to get around to asking them as they kept him so busy during his training sessions and, by the time he remembered to ask, he was already back to his

normal life. Questions about that symbol of the boxed-in pentagram with an eye in the middle of it that he kept seeing at the resort and in his dreams while there, and, more recently, the Staff of Haraset, and what ever happened to Mr. Dirks came and went.

He also never got any personal information out of Derek at all! The guy was sealed up as tight as Fort Knox. Like: what was up with that Tattoo on the right side of his bald head. He called it a Kana, but Dillon wanted to know what it meant. The guy was a mystery that he wanted to crack. Why did he feel such a connection with him? Where was he from? How did he get involved with Orion? Derek had him so busy while they were together that he never asked anything.

“What are you thinking about,” Chyna asked. She must have seen Dillon staring off as he sat in one of the plush chairs in the Decom room sipping on some nice cold iced tea after a pretty aggressive session on the parkour course.

“What? Oh ... nothing.”

Chyna gave him that, “Ya right, kid,” kind of look that he got used to seeing from her once in a while when she called him out.

“Oh, I was just thinking that this whole situation is incredible and scary all at once.”

“Really? How so?”

“Well, for starters: I’m only thirteen and yet Orion needs me for something that I know nothing about. And you and Derek are nice and all, but I don’t know anything about you. And these abilities I have! I don’t know anything about them either!”

Chyna looked sympathetically at the young boy. She came over and put her hand on his shoulder. Dillon looked

up, jaw clenched tight in frustration. He saw a softness in those green eyes that brought comfort to his turbulent mind.

“I can’t speak for Derek, but I can tell you that I have three sisters and a big brother.” She sat down beside him. “I was raised in San Francisco. I love to surf, and dirt bike. I was always a bit of a Tom-Boy. I would rather be out racing, surfing, hiking, biking, than putting on make-up, and dressing nice.” She laughed.

“Now,” she wagged a finger at Dillon, “I would have you know that I can dress up like the best of them. And look as beautiful and feminine as any other girl, but it’s not my style, which is probably why I’m a good fit with Orion.”

“What about your family? How do you keep all this from them?” Dillon asked.

“It’s not easy,” she replied. “But it can be done. Unfortunately, the man who I thought I was going to marry couldn’t handle not knowing the truth.” She put a hand on Dillon’s knee. “Everyone has to decide for themselves how much they want the ones closest to them to know. There are pros and cons to both. Sometimes you can’t always tell them the things you want to because they would never understand, or they could be in danger.”

Dillon sat back and digested what this young woman—who seemed wiser than her years—before him was saying. She knew the cost, weighed the cost, and yet she still worked for Orion. Dillon considered her words carefully. He was scared of the path his life was heading down, but he seemed drawn somehow; drawn to know. He wanted to know what Orion was doing and what they required, and why they required it. He wanted to know why he had these



powers and where they came from. He wanted what he knew Orion could give him: answers.

“Why all the serious looks?” Dillon heard Derek ask as he entered the room. “You’d think someone just died or something.”

Chyna flinched a little at that remark and shook her head. She got up and walked toward the man. “Dillon has questions.”

“Oh ya? What kind of questions?”

“You know, the usual: Who are you? How’d you get into Orion? What’s with that tattoo on your head? Why does he have superpowers and what does Orion want with them?” Chyna stated with a smile.

Derek scowled. “You know those first three questions are personal,” he replied to her, but directed it more at Dillon. “And I don’t do personal very well. The fourth question is a mystery to me, and the last one should be self-evident don’t you think?”

Dillon took the hint and sighed as he put the almost full glass of iced tea down on the table in front of him. “Well thanks for the training, but I should be going.”

Chyna frowned at Derek, but the man merely shrugged. “I’ll take you home,” she said, eyeing the man for one more awkward moment before turning and heading out the door with Dillon.

“Don’t mind him,” she said to the boy as they walked to the door. “He’s insufferable.” She glanced back at Derek with an icy look before leaving.

The man merely shook his head at the comments.

Once they were out of the Training Center Dillon looked to Chyna. “I’m sure he’ll come around,” he stated.

“I love your eternal optimism!”

They climbed into the car and, as they drove away, Chyna looked over at him. "He'll come around."

"Ya, I guess. But don't you think it's weird that he has this very unusual kana on his head which he doesn't want to talk about, but it draws everyone in because it's so unusual? I mean ... it's like looking at a freaking train wreck! You can't not look at it! Why doesn't he want to talk about it then!"

Chyna laughed. "You certainly do have an interesting way of looking at things Dillon. I might actually use that logic on him. Between you and me we'll back him into a corner and force him to tell us," she said jokingly.

Dillon laughed. He really liked Chyna. He knew she had shared a little bit about herself in order to keep him sane, even though the information she told him was pretty superficial. At least it was a start he thought. Maybe it was the start of a deeper friendship? He could only hope that was the case as he was beginning to feel pretty isolated in his relationships because of the demands Orion was putting on him. He really needed a friend right now. A friend he could confide in.

He knew that all this was potentially the end of his childhood. That thought made him shudder a little, but for some reason he was still compelled by a mysterious internal urge to continue on. He didn't know where that urge came from. Maybe it was his personality?

Or was it something deeper?

The car stopped about two blocks from his house. Chyna and Derek always made a point of stopping at a different location each time when dropping Dillon off at home. They thought about doing the same when picking up at school, but, with the roads that were leading to and

from the property, it just wasn't practical. Drop offs were far easier.

"Thanks again for the ride," he said as he got out of the car. "And thanks for the talk."

Chyna smiled at him. "No problem. Any time!"

With that, she drove away leaving Dillon on the road alone. The sun was dipping low in the sky and he knew Mom would have dinner almost ready. He slung his backpack over his shoulders and started jogging toward home.



DEREK WATCHED DILLON MOVE DOWN THE ROAD FROM HIS perch on his motorcycle. He had tucked himself into a side street not far from the drop point and made sure he had a perfect view of the boy as he made his way home. After the Griffin incident Orion wasn't going to take anymore chances on possibly losing their asset, so Derek and Chyna would take turns driving him home, while the other would head to the drop point on the bike and make sure he made it to his house safely.

He watched Dillon until he made it into the house, then he fired up the bike and sped away. He knew the boy would be safe, as headquarters would let him know if any intruders tried to gain access to the house again. They could see everything that was going on around that house with all the surveillance equipment they staged there.

Yes. Dillon would be safe in that house.



DILLON SAW IT COMING FOR HIM: THE MASSIVE BLUE creature with a dog-like head and large canine fangs. Its

eyes were bloodshot and bore into the boy as it stared hatefully at him. He tried to scramble away but couldn't move! The beast approached menacingly with its large hands opened, displaying massive razor-sharp claws. It hunched over the terrified boy.

"You did this to me," it growled in its low guttural—almost demonic—voice.

"No ... I didn't ... you were ..." Dillon stammered, unable to come up with a justification for his actions.

He shied away as the monster put its face mere inches from his. Dillon dared to look the poor creature in the eyes, but he couldn't hold it for long: the guilt ripped through him. He was able to push the guilt away and somehow suppress it shortly after coming back from Desert Oasis Resort as Derek had assured him that he made the right choice. It was either Troy or his friends and family and he had found that he was able to live with that decision until the memories now so vividly came flooding back to him suddenly. He wasn't sure why, but here they were: the memories and the guilt shooting through his very soul like an arrow.

He turned his face away from the creature and heard that awful roar.



DILLON'S EYES SNAPPED OPEN. IT TOOK HIM A SECOND FOR him to realize he was in his room. He looked over at his nightstand and saw the time: 2:38. His forehead was wet with sweat and he felt the pounding of his heart.

*It was true. He thought to himself. I did turn Troy into that monster that almost killed everyone. And then I killed him.*

A tear trickled down his cheek as he laid there and

pondered the actions he had taken. Since that awful day just over a year and a half ago he had questioned himself over and over again about making the decision he did. And he always justified it with the fact that most of them made it out of there alive. Troy was going to kill him, his brother and sister, and his friends. He left him no choice. Or did he? It was all so confusing for the young boy.

When he first got home from the resort he had quite a few of these nightmares, but eventually they slowly went away. He took that as a sign that he was getting better, but since the Claire incident, and now his conscription into Orion, the nightmares had come back.

The prevailing questions that rattled around in his mind were: *Did I have to kill him?* And, *Will I have to kill again?* He thought he had reconciled the question of Troy, but apparently he hadn't. And now was added the more disturbing question of whether or not he would be forced to do that again.

He grabbed his phone and texted Derek. "I don't think I can do this anymore."

DILLON'S DEFLECTION

“So Dillon said he wanted out?” Chyna asked curiously.

“Well, what he actually said was that he couldn't do this anymore.”

“Doesn't that mean the same thing?”

“Probably,” Derek replied thoughtfully, trying to think through this dilemma. “The thing that young Dillon doesn't understand though is that Orion isn't going to let him go.”

“Does he know that?”

“No. And it's best if we don't tell him. If we do, then he'll most likely just dig his heels in and Orion will have to respond with more direct means,” Derek stated with concern.

“Then what do we do? If the boy doesn't want to stay then how can we make him? And why the sudden change?”

Derek shrugged and pulled out his phone. “Why don't we find out what's bothering him,” he said as he dialed Dillon's number.

“Hi Dillon. What’s going on?” he asked as the boy answered, then he patiently waited for him to tell his story.

“I know it might seem scary Dillon; especially when you are dealing with that kind of stress. But, speaking from personal experience, it does get easier,” he reassured.

“I know that was a tough call you made, but you did save us all remember?” he replied after hearing Dillon’s tale of his dream about Troy. “Chyna and I are going to be here with you the whole time.”

After another moment he said, “You are a good kid. You have great friends, are good to get along with, are skilled in so many areas, and honestly want to do that which is good for others; but you were forced to make a tough call long before you were supposed to do that. It was unfortunate, but you did it in order to rescue those you care about, and that doesn’t make you a monster, it makes you a hero.”

After a few more exhortations Derek hung up.

“Well? How did he take it?” Chyna asked.

Derek nodded. “He’s still in. He just needed to hear some comforting words. He had a dream where he relived the horror of the Desert Oasis Resort when he was forced to kill Troy using the Necrotoxin and Genesis in order to save us.”

Chyna nodded, having read the report of the incident where Derek detailed the encounter.

“He’ll be fine,” Derek stated confidently.

“Will he? I’m not so sure.”

In truth, Derek wasn’t really sure either. He knew the boy was resilient, but he also knew that he was just a kid. This assignment was like nothing he had ever been given before and he wasn’t exactly sure he knew what to do in order to action this challenge. The only thing he was posi-

tive of was that he needed to do something, and he needed to do it soon before the stress got too much for the boy.



“HEY DIL. DO YOU THINK IT’S POSSIBLE FOR US TO HANG out on Saturday?” Sarah asked as they walked to Math together.

It had been a couple days since he had spoken to Derek and he was feeling much better about the training and his involvement with Orion. He really liked the training—most of it anyway—but the best part about his life at this point was that he felt he was just starting to be able to manage all his responsibilities fairly well. So when Sarah came and asked him to hang out he was more than happy to. “Sure,” he replied with a smile. “I don’t think that’s gonna be a problem.”

“Are you sure? Because lately it has been a problem,” she accused.

Dillon looked at her quizzically. He was sure he was managing everything he had to with success.

“I mean, I think helping Gwen is great, and it’s noble for you to want to do well in school and catch up on homework, and it does seem like you’re juggling some things around so that we can hang out together, but quite frankly it would be nice to hang out more like we used to.”

Dillon took the verbal beating without saying a word. What could he say? Apparently the amount of time he carved out for friends still wasn’t good enough! He quickly pushed his anger away. The ease at which he was able to do that surprised him and made him immediately wonder if he was receiving help from his “powers.”

“Regarding the homework, don’t you get most of that



done in class?," she continued. "That's why they give us so much time while we are in class: *so we don't have to take it home!*"

Dillon looked over at her and saw that she seemed really frustrated. Her face was beginning to turn a nice shade of red. He knew he had to say something or risk the wrath of a teenaged girl which, who knew what could happen. There were literally any number of variables and paths this whole situation could take.

"I'm sorry," he said. *Great Dillon!* He berated himself. *You're such an articulate secret operative!*

Sarah stopped walking and just stared at him. "You're hiding something Dillon. And I'm going to find out what it is."

"Hiding something? That's ridiculous! What could I possibly be hiding?" he spouted.

"I don't know, but with you it could be anything," she replied as she narrowed her eyes.

Dillon swallowed hard, as Sarah walked ahead of him and into the classroom. He just stood there for a moment dumbfounded shaking his head before following her in.

After, what Dillon considered a long day at school, particularly due to having to dodge Sarah's suspicions and accusations for most of it, he was really looking forward to the training session. He had learned and done so much in the last month that it seemed to fuel the urge in him to do and learn more. It also kept his mind off the nightmares of the resort he was having.

As usual, he slipped out the side door and across the field. He was about to enter the trail that would lead to the road where he knew the car would be waiting for him when he saw something out of the corner of his eye. He glanced in the direction, employing the technique Derek

had taught him to allow him to look over there without letting anyone know he was doing it. It was simple yet clever. Dillon turned his head slightly and scratched his shoulder, glancing around without purposely making eye contact with anyone, using the general scene in front of him and in his peripheral vision to construct what was happening in that direction. He spotted someone but couldn't make out who it was.

He quickly turned his head back and proceeded through the path. His mind spun with what his options were here as he suspected the person would be right behind him. He definitely didn't want anyone to see him get in the car with Derek or Chyna. He needed to think of something, and think of something fast!

As he came out onto the road he immediately noticed that the car was right where it always was. He also saw Derek look in his direction.

Dillon quickly texted the man, "I'm being followed. Keep an eye out for who exits the trees behind me."

Derek's text rang back a moment later with a picture of Sarah.

"Okay thanks. I'll take care of it. Meet ya later," Dillon replied, with some relief and consternation as he continued to make his way down the road.

A moment later he saw the car drive away. One hurdle down.

He knew there was a community park nestled on the edge of a small lake through this residential area and a plan—or rather a story—was beginning to form in his mind.

He walked for ten minutes through the area, making sure not to get too far ahead of Sarah, until he made it to the park. There was a large open space with picnic tables

placed throughout. There were a few community fire pits and a large playground set with swings, a slide, and Jungle-gym where a number of kids—bundled in their snowsuits—were currently playing. The sun shimmered off the frozen lake.

He slowed his walk as he approached the edge of the lake. He bent down and made a snowball which he threw out onto the icy surface. Then he took another one and another one.

“What are you doing?” came the eventual question which he knew would be coming.

“Oh. Hey. What are you doing here?” he asked Sarah as she approached.

“I asked you first,” came her quick reply.

Dillon was silent, and looked as though he was struggling to find the words.

“It’s okay Dil. You can tell me. I thought you were supposed to be picking up Gwen from school?”

He swallowed hard. “My mom has the day off and said she would be able to pick her up for me, so I thought I would come here instead.

“My Grandfather and I used to come here together.” He tried to make himself to appear visibly upset by the voiced memory.

“He used to take me fishing here all the time. We had some of our best conversations right here on this shore, and he was the one who taught me how to skip stones.” He wasn’t completely lying. His Grandfather did teach him how to skip stones and fish, it just wasn’t at this lake.

“I notice that you never talked about your Grandfather before. Why is that and where is he now?” asked Sarah, suspicion beginning to rise in her voice.

Dillon looked out at the lake for a moment. “It’s tough

for me to speak about. He died a few years ago. There was no reason for me to share it with you,” he continued. “I mean, there was no reason to bring it up in any of the conversations we’ve had.” That part was all true. His Grandfather, Dr. Stephen Hunt, died of a heart attack he was told while vacationing in Spain, and he never wanted to talk about it with anyone. Dillon was just a young kid at the time and the memory of losing him was difficult.

“Oh I’m sorry Dillon,” she replied sympathetically as she put a hand on his shoulder. “And you come here sometimes to remember him?”

Dillon nodded. He fought to choke back actual tears as he remembered the passing of his Grandfather.

Sarah looked at him, then she put her arms around him and hugged him tightly. “I’m sorry Dillon. Thank you for sharing with me.”

Dillon hugged her back. They had hugged before, but not like this. This was more. Her soft brown hair smelled like a field full of flowers. She was his best friend and he hated deceiving her, but he tried to satisfy his conscience with the fact that it was *mostly* true.

After a long while she let go and he held her at arms length. Their eyes met and Dillon felt a knot forming in his stomach. He didn’t know what it was and was beginning to feel uncomfortable. Their faces slowly inched closer until he could feel her breath on his face then, suddenly, Sarah pulled away.

“I need to be going!” she blurted.

“Ah ... ya. Me to.”

“Good. Good. Good,” was all that Sarah seemed to be able to say in that awkward moment. She turned, then turned back again. “See you tomorrow.” She walked a few steps then turned again, nodding awkwardly. “See you.”

Dillon raised his hand and waved. "Bye," he called after her.

"Yep. Bye," was all she said as she turned and ran away.

Dillon was stumped. *What had just happened?* he asked himself.



"WHAT DO YOU MEAN HE'S GOING TO BE LATE?" CHYNA asked.

Derek just shrugged. "The boy was being followed by his friend Sarah and texted me saying he would catch up later."

As if on cue Derek's phone went off with the distinctive ring tone he gave to Dillon: the chimes from Desert Oasis Resort.

"Hey man," he answered. "Ya, sure I can pick you up. I'll be there in a couple minutes."

Derek hung up and looked at his partner. "He wants me to pick him up now," he said as he walked back to the door of The Studio. "You wanna come?"

"Gee, Derek, I thought you'd never ask," she said with a smile. "You buying dinner, too?"

Derek looked at her and rolled his eyes as he exited the building.

Chyna laughed.

About half way back to the rendezvous point they spotted Dillon. Derek wheeled the car around and pulled up to the sidewalk. Dillon jumped in.

"Hi Chyna," he said as he buckled himself in.

"Hey Dillon," she replied as she looked back at him. "So are you going to tell us what that was all about? Or do

I have to beat it out of you during training today?" she teased.

Dillon laughed. "It was nothing. Just my best friend Sarah. She's been getting suspicious about my after school activities and decided to follow me today. I had to deflect her away from what we're really doing."

"And how did you do that?" Derek asked as he glanced in the rear view mirror.

"I led her to the lake near here and told her that I went there to remember my Grandfather. He and I were really close until he died a few years ago."

Chyna glanced over at Derek as the man shifted uncomfortably. The comment about Dillon's Grandfather, Dr. Stephen Hunt, made the man uncomfortable as he knew that Dr. Hunt was still very much alive. He looked in the mirror and noticed that Dillon was looking at him curiously.

"Are you okay?" Dillon asked. "Did I say something—"

"No. Not at all," Derek interjected quickly. He knew he had to get the boy off the topic as Orion didn't want any of his family, especially Dillon, to know that Dr. Hunt was still alive. "I do have more information now on a topic I know you will be interested in though," he improvised.

"Oh really? What's that?"

"Well remember when I told you that I'd be able to share more information with you on that symbol of the boxed-in pentagram with the eye in the middle of it?"

Dillon seemed to perk up when Derek mentioned the symbol.

"As I said after the incident with your sister, now that your training has begun I can share this intel with you.

"Remember again when I told you that the Tokala tribe had to have had outside help in order to do every-

thing they were doing at the resort?" Dillon nodded. "They were receiving assistance from a group known as Tower Six, and that symbol is their mark."

"Who's Tower Six?" By now Dillon looked like he was on the edge of his seat.

"Tower Six is another secret organization whose objectives aren't entirely clear. We've encountered them a few times in the field. They seem to be after similar items that Orion is.

"You know when you saw their mark in the underground lab?"

"Ya."

"Well we found that the whole underground facility was an old Tower Six operations center. They must have given it to the Tokala tribe and helped them build the resort over it. And we know now that they were weaponizing the Necrotoxin in that facility and suspect that Tower Six was going to control the distribution of the chemical."

Dillon sat back appearing to be deep in thought.

Derek knew that he had successfully derailed Dillon's questioning from his Grandfather. He knew the boy still had a ton of questions regarding what happened to him at the resort. He was actually planning on telling him as they made progress in their training, but he figured this time seemed to work as good as any; more-so now that Dillon was starting to talk about his Grandfather.

Derek pulled into the parking lot of their training center. "Because we've wasted a good portion of an hour we're only going to have time for some wilderness survival theory today."

Dillon sighed and slumped his shoulders.

"Come on. It's not that bad," Derek stated as they got

out of the car. "I know it's not your favorite class but Chyna will make it more interesting this time. I promise."

Chyna gave Derek a deprecating look. The man chuckled at her display.

"Go on in and get set up, Dillon. I need to have a word with Chyna before we start."

Dillon nodded and headed into the building.

"Orion doesn't want Dillon to know about Dr. Hunt," Derek said once Dillon was gone.

"Why not?" Chyna asked as soon as Dillon disappeared through the door.

"I'm not exactly sure why the status of Dr. Hunt is supposed to stay quiet," Derek replied with a shrug. "But I suspect it has something to do with Dillon's developing powers. Jake is pretty tight-lipped about some aspects of the boy, and this is one of them. He has told me not to tell him, and I have to listen."

"Because you always do what you're told?" Chyna chided.

Derek shrugged.

"The Derek Vico I heard about was headstrong, rebellious, tough—some would even say dangerous," she stated seriously, yet her tone seemed to carry some sadness to it as well.

"I don't know. Maybe I've matured?" he said as he took a bottle from his jacket and downed a couple of the green pills.

"It looks like you're almost out of those," Chyna noted as the man capped the bottle once more.

"It's okay," Derek replied, as he climbed out of the car. "I know a good supplier where I can get more."

Chyna smiled, though it never reached her eyes, and exited the vehicle.



FEAR OF THE PAST

Dillon went through the movements of the Kata with ease. His arms and legs were beginning to respond well to the martialarts training. His body was also responding well as he was now leaner and more muscular. He was starting to enjoy hand to hand combat now that he was getting better at it, but inside he really didn't want to use it. *If I had known this before the resort, would Troy still be alive? Or would I have been able to incapacitate him a different way?* he asked himself.

Derek had told him that he was learning it just in case. Dillon really didn't like the idea of "just in case." Derek also said that Dillon needed to know self-defense in order to be a well-rounded operative. Dillon tried to remind him he was just a thirteen year old kid. Derek told him he was more, but Dillon didn't feel like more. Since becoming involved with Orion, he had endangered his siblings, lied to his family, attracted the attention of a competing secret organization, and killed a man. Those weren't accomplishments he was proud of, even if he did enjoy the mental and physical exertion of the exercises..

He quickly executed three opposite knife-hand blocks, but lost his back-stance on the last move noting that his legs were in the wrong position. He corrected the errant form as he came to the end of the routine, shouted the Kei and held the pose for a moment before returning to the starting position. He put his feet together and bowed in the traditional way of ending the Kata, showing respect for the art, his Sensei Derek, and those who were watching which, at this moment was only Chyna.

Derek walked over and clapped him on the shoulder. “Good work Dillon.”

Dillon managed a slight smile, and nodded as he moved to grab a towel. He had messed up on the last form and berated himself for not being better. He knew that if someone were to come for him or his family members again then he was the only one who would be there to stop them; he had to be better. He was also tired. Getting to sleep lately began to be increasingly difficult. He was having more dreams about the resort—about Troy—and that scared him.

“Hey. You okay?” Derek asked.

“Ya,” he replied as he wiped his face.

Derek gave him that look that told him he didn’t believe a word of it. “Come on man. You can tell me what’s going on.”

Chyna came closer and sat down on the bench just off to the side. Dillon glanced over and saw concern etched on her delicate face. Then he looked up at Derek. “It’s just that ... I mean I ... well, you know ...”

Derek put a hand on his back and led him to the bench, motioning for him to sit down beside Chyna.

“It’s okay Dillon,” Chyna said softly. “You can tell us.”

Dillon sat down and took a deep breath. "It's just that things are so weird."

Derek cocked an eyebrow. "That's our business," he said flatly.

"I know," Dillon replied back, "for you it's just another day at the office. But for me ..."

Chyna put her hand on his shoulder. "It's okay. You can tell us whatever you're thinking."

Dillon nodded and took a second to collect his thoughts. "It's just that ... it's ... I don't understand why people are trying to kill me!" he blurted. "I don't know what Orion wants from me except that they somehow, for some reason, need my special abilities which I'm not even sure know how they work!"

Derek and Chyna were silent, as if they wanted him to vent, even encouraged it.

"What if Orion is putting all this faith in me and it's really just a big mistake that get's me or someone I care about killed?"

A few tears slid down Dillon's cheek. "I killed him," he whispered softly. "I killed him," he repeated as he cupped his head in his hands and began to sob.

Chyna moved over and wrapped her arms around him and let his tears play out. Derek sat down on the other side and waited.

After a few moments Dillon pulled his hands away and wiped his face with his sleeves.

"Who are you talking about?" Chyna asked.

"Troy," Derek answered for him.

Dillon looked at the man, his eyes searching for answers. "You think about it often don't you?" the man asked.

"When I returned from the resort I had a few night-

mares about it but, over time, they decreased in frequency and intensity until they disappeared altogether for a few months. Then ...”

“Then what?” Derek asked.

“Then I got caught up in all this again and had the first Troy dream I’ve had in a long time a few days ago when I called you and told you I wanted out. Now I *do* think about it a lot. It’s like, the similarities in what’s happening now and what happened at the resort have somehow brought those thoughts and regrets back and amplified them.

“Does that make any sense?”

Derek nodded. “You will probably think about that day off and on for the rest of your life, but it will get better.” Derek paused as if trying to formulate his next words very specifically. “The pain won’t be as raw as it is now,” he reassured. “It will be like a thunderstorm on an otherwise sunny day. It will come and pour some gloominess on your day, but the sun will come out again. And, as time goes on, those days will be more and more infrequent, and the storms will be not as long and less intense.”

“But what if I don’t want the storms to come at all?” Dillon asked, desperation creeping into his voice.

Derek smiled. “If that happens then you’re not human. All of us have to live with pain—some more than others—but it’s our lot in life. This world is full of it, but we have a choice to make it different in the things we do for others.

“Some choose to live for themselves and make others pay for the price of their actions, feeding on human suffering like a parasite. It’s that kind of attitude that we fight against.”

Dillon knew that Derek was now speaking from personal experience. The man spoke with passion and

conviction. “What does it mean?” Dillon asked. “What does it really mean?” he pressed.

“Never forget,” Chyna whispered. She blushed when she saw Derek's shocked look. “I looked it up shortly after we first met ... when you refused to tell me what it meant.”

“Never forget what?” Dillon asked.

Derek was silent. He took a deep breath as if he were going to answer. Let it out. Took another. “It means ... It means that I lost someone. Someone I cared about and never want to forget. When the pain of her loss is there, I remember. I remember her and push myself to do what she would want me to do, instead of trying to forget it like I used to.”

“Was she your wife?” Dillon asked softly.

Derek nodded. “She was more than that. She was my best friend. My soul-mate. My ... everything.” His eyes moistened.

“What was her name?”

“Her name was Samantha. She was a doctor who worked for Orion.”

“How did she—”

“She worked for Orion and was killed on a mission,” Derek said somberly.

“Sorry,” Dillon replied, not really sure what else to say.

“I was lost without her. I lost myself for a long time. All of my demons came to the surface and drowned out the good. I let the thunderstorm darken my world for too long. But then Orion offered me a mission I couldn't refuse and I took it. I took it because it's what she would have wanted me to do. And when the mission was over, so was my thunderstorm. Now, when the dark clouds loom, I remember her and hold on to what she would think is right.

“She gave me strength. She still gives me strength,” he

stated resolutely as he pointed to the tattoo on his bald head. “I just want you to realize that bad things happen and we can choose to be overcome by them or overcome *despite* them.

“Do you understand?”

Dillon nodded.

Derek smiled. “Good! Then go get showered and changed and we’ll take you home.”

Dillon stood up. Before he got very far though Chyna wrapped him in a warm hug. “It’s all going to be okay,” she said softly as she kissed him on the forehead.

He really liked the woman. She was so strong, yet had that motherly touch that comforted him. He felt like he was in the best of hands and appreciated that he got to work with these two.

“Thanks,” he said to them as he walked away to the change room. His fears were allayed for the time being. He just hoped they wouldn’t come back, but in his heart he knew they would. His next challenge—his next mission—would be to face those fears head-on.



CHYNA LOOKED AT DEREK AS DILLON PADDED AWAY TO THE change room. “I thought you would never open up,” she stated.

Derek shrugged. “It felt like the right thing to do.”

“Why?” Chyna asked, intrigued by what it was that caused Derek to open up. She had been his partner now for just over a year, having been assigned to him shortly after the operation at Desert Oasis Resort, and he had never opened up about anything personal.

“I don’t know. Maybe I have a sweet spot for the boy?” he said as he chuckled.

Chyna saw through the fact that he was making light of it in order to hide something deeper, but she knew Derek wouldn’t likely open up again anytime soon. “You’re frustrating to deal with Vico!” she exclaimed in exasperation, using his last name to emphasize her point.

“What do you want me to say?” Derek asked, beginning to raise his voice. “Do you want me to tell you all of my sad stories? Because I have a lot of them!”

“Ya. A few wouldn’t hurt!” Chyna retorted.

“Why? So you can feel sorry for me?”

“No! So I can understand you better,” she exclaimed. “So we can understand each other better,” she then clarified. “So we can be better partners.”

“Is that all?” Derek asked accusingly.

Chyna was confused. “What do you mean?”

“Are you sure it’s just so we can be better partners?”

“What do you mean?” She thought about it for a moment, then realized what he was saying. “Oh ... you thought I was thinking of us becoming something *more*. That’s not it at all”

“Sure it isn’t?” he asked seriously.

“You’re out of your mind Derek if you think I want something more than our professional relationship.”

“Am I? Then why do you care so much about knowing more about my story? It’s not like you’ve opened up to me? Come on, Chyna, tell me all of your most painful memories. So we can understand one another better!”

“Well ... I ... just ...” she stumbled, not able to articulate an answer. Her face tightened and turned bright red. She then waved her hand at him dismissively and stormed away.

*The nerve of that guy!* she said to herself as she walked through the door that lead to the Decom room.

The problem was that she couldn't quite figure out why his conclusions had stung her so much. Did he hit on some deep down desire that she was suppressing? She shook that thought away as ridiculous.

No. That logic was totally off base.

At least that's what she told herself.



DREAMS AND GUILT

**T**he sounds of the jungle came to the young boy's ears as he slipped easily through the trees. He could smell the freshness of it all. It was different than the forests he was used to back home in the north west of the United States. No. The humidity was warm and soft. He could feel the sweat forming on his brow. He lifted his arm in order to wipe the moisture from his forehead. As he did his eyes went wide when he noticed that he held, in his hand, the Staff of Haraset! He looked over the item; it appeared exactly as he remembered it when he first saw it. After a few heartbeats he wiped the sweat away again, held the staff to the side, and turned his attention back to the way he was walking.

It was near nightfall. His eyes began to adjust to that twilight phase of the evening and, as he rounded the next tree he saw, through the gloom, a stone pillar. The pillar was about three feet in height and half that wide.

He approached cautiously. He could feel his heart rate increase and, just as he was taught, he consciously began to control his breathing in slow even inhales and exhales. It

took a moment, but his heart began to slow, and his whole body seemed to calm. After a glance to the sides, he reached forward and pulled the overhanging tangles of brush away from the pillar so he could get a better look at what he was seeing.

He moved his hand across the surface, brushing dirt and other debris away to reveal markings—markings similar to that of the staff. He held the staff up in the dwindling light and noted that the head was of the same shape and design as the markings that were at the center of the slab. In fact, the markings appeared to be made out of the same strange metal as the staff's head. He moved his hand gently along the etchings, scraping the dirt away from it, then he pulled the staff close and put a hand on its head. He touched the head to the etchings. Nothing happened.

He pulled the staff back again and began feeling around it, looking up and down the head again. As he did so he noted a seam where the head and the shaft of the staff met. He grabbed the head tightly and tried to pull. Nothing. He pulled again, more forcefully this time, applying pressure back and forth as he pulled. He was about to give up when he suddenly felt it loosen. He worked on it more urgently and, with great effort, the head came free.

He looked at the head for moment then moved his attention back to the stone slab. He took the staff head and placed it in the etched symbol. The fit was identical! As soon as he placed it on the symbol the head began to get warm and sink into the stone as though the metal on the etching was melting. Dillon pushed the head firmly into the stone and sunk it in until he couldn't push it in anymore.

He took a step back and saw that, somehow, there was

what look to be a key sitting at the bottom of the stone. Suddenly he was in a clearing and a brilliant flash of sunlight streaked across the horizon. He looked to the left and saw that he held the staff in his hand and that a shadow streamed from it making a long line across the ground. Then he was back in the forest again looking down at the key. Dillon bent down to pick it up when he suddenly froze. He heard what sounded like a hiss coming from the forest.

He slowly turned his head and peered into the darkness. He wanted to move but couldn't! It was as though his legs were fastened in concrete. He wanted to scream but couldn't! The smell of rotting flesh hit his nose and he wanted to vomit but couldn't!

A horrific shriek pierced the air. There, from the darkness, it came.



DILLON HIT THE FLOOR AS HIS EYES FLUTTERED OPEN. HE felt a jolt of pain erupt on the left side of his face. He groaned as he laid there looking under his bed. The sunlight streamed in through his window illuminating the room in its soft glow.

"Are you okay?" he heard his Mom ask from the door. Then he felt her soft hand on his shoulder.

Dillon rolled over and looked up into her caring eyes. "Ya ... I think so," he replied groggily.

"Oh, just look at that red mark on your face," Mom said as she gently moved his head to the side in order to get a better look at it. "Let me grab an ice pack for that."

She helped Dillon to his feet and sat him on the bed.

“Thanks,” he said with as much of a smile as he could muster.

“You wait right here. I’ll be back with that ice pack right away.” She padded away quickly.

“Is he okay?” Dillon heard his Dad ask as soon as Mom exited the room.

“He’ll be alright. I think he just fell out of bed.”

Dillon looked up to see Jordan laugh at him as he walked by.

“Shut up,” Dillon chirped.

He rubbed his head. The dream was so real. The smell of rotting flesh almost seemed to be stuck in his nose. *How could that be?* he thought to himself.

This dream was definitely different than the nightmares he was having about Desert Oasis Resort. Those were memories; twisted and modified albeit, but based on events that already happened. This one had the same feel of the ones he started to have while heading to the resort. Experiencing this kind of dream still had a shocking effect on the boy and he didn’t think he would ever get used to it.

*It’s happening again! Why? Why? Why!*

Mom walked back into the room a few moments later with the ice pack. The cold felt good on his face. He loved his family, even his siblings though, at times, Jordan and Claire were huge pains in his butt! As if on cue Jordan walked by his room again, snickered, and shook his head as he walked on.

“I’m okay Mom—really,” Dillon said as he took the ice pack from her and stood up. Mom rose up and looked at him hard. “Alright, but if you get dizzy or it starts hurting more than it does now, you let me know immediately.”

Dillon nodded as he followed his Mom to the door

then closed it behind her. He glanced back at the clock on the side of his bed: 10:19 AM.

“Oh no!” Dillon exclaimed to himself. *I’m supposed to meet Sarah at 11:00!*

He quickly changed and ran downstairs. Gwen leaped out of the way with a yelp as he charged into the kitchen.

“Whoa! Where are you going in such a hurry?” Dad asked from the living room.

“I’m supposed to be at Sarah’s by 11:00 so we can hang.”

“Oh. Okay. What do you guys have planned?”

“Oh, nothing much. We’ll probably just game, or maybe go sledding” Dillon replied.

Dad went back to watching his program he had on Netflix. “Make sure you dress warm. The forecast says it could snow today.”

“Sure thing Dad. That’ll make the sledding that much better!”

Dillon quickly ate a bowl of cereal and ran for the door. He checked the time on his phone: 10:48. He knew he was going to cut it close in order to make it to Sarah’s on time. “I’m going to be a couple minutes late,” he texted.

“No problem,” the reply quickly came back.

He smiled and continued to the door almost running into Claire.

“Oh. Sorry,” he said as he moved to the side.

Claire only responded with a nod. Her face was downcast and her shoulders were slumped. “You okay Claire?” he asked.

She nodded and continued to the kitchen.

Dillon had seen her quite a few times in the last couple months since the incident and she mostly seemed like she was normal. There were a couple of times,

however, where what she did was a little out of sorts. He hoped it wasn't because of the neurogenic transmitter. He knew that Chyna had been able to successfully dissolve it like they did for Gwen and the others at the resort, and managed to erase the memory of the blackout that occurred while under its influence. At least that's what they said. But the thought remained with Dillon: *Why was she so depressed, at least more than she had been before?*

He felt another twang of guilt as he opened the door and exited the house. This was all his fault.



DILLON HAD AN AMAZING SATURDAY AFTERNOON WITH Sarah two days earlier, although the sight of Claire when he left the house had been playing out in his mind. He wished there was some way he could help her.

Being distracted with the thought he barely ducked the incoming strike then brought his right arm up in order to block the next blow that was coming his way. He shook his head to get his mind back in the game then quick-stepped back as Derek pressed the attack. He blocked three more times as he was pushed back to the edge of the mat. He knew that Derek would win the match if he was pushed outside the bounds so he ducked the fourth incoming strike and dove to the side in order to put some distance between him, the edge, and Derek.

The man turned around quickly—faster than Dillon had anticipated—and came on with renewed fury. The boy dove to the side again, rolled and came up just in time to meet the press. Dillon just barely got his arm up to block when Derek suddenly kicked out with his right leg, landing a

solid kick into Dillon's chest. The force of the blow rocked him back and off the mat.

Dillon landed with a thud on his back. He laid there staring up at the ceiling. Derek came over and offered a hand up. The man smiled widely. "You're getting better," he commented as he easily hoisted the boy up.

"Ya, but still not good enough to beat you."

Derek patted him on the back. "You need to remember that I've been studying martial arts since I was a boy younger than you. And you've only been at it for two months." He chuckled.

Dillon managed a smile at that. "Ya, I guess you have a point."

"Don't worry. You're catching on to it like a pro." Derek tussled Dillon's hair eliciting another smile ... just for a moment.

Derek must have noticed the downcast expression. "What's wrong now?" he asked, moving over to the bench where the towels were. He grabbed one and threw it to Dillon, then picked up his own.

"Oh ... nothing. It's just ..."

Derek was silent, as if he was quietly prodding Dillon to continue.

"It's just my sister," he started. "She's ..."

"She's what?" Derek pressed.

"She seems really depressed. I mean, more than normal. It seems to come and go, but ever since that incident a couple months ago she just doesn't seem the same."

"That's normal, so I'm told, from being under the influence of the neurogenic transmitters," Derek replied in a sympathetic tone. "But she'll come around."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know for sure, but I have to trust those who

have had the opportunity to study it and be under its influence. Men like John.”

Dillon knew immediately that he was referencing John Taylor Sebastian, the man that he helped to find at Desert Oasis Resort. “And John said it’s normal to be depressed after being released from the mind control.”

“It’s actually more than just depression,” they heard Chyna chime in as she strolled over.

Derek frowned.

“What I mean is that it was easier for John to recover from the effects of the neurogenics because, in his waking hours, he knew he was under its influence which gave his brain a reason for the blackouts he experienced. Right now, Claire can’t reconcile them.”

“But I thought you wiped her memory of the event?” Dillon asked. “Would she even remember a blackout.”

“Our memory blockers are only good for specific memories, which we program, and can only go back a couple weeks.” Chyna paused, as if she was looking for the right words on how to explain this.

“If she was implanted with the neurogenic transmitter at the resort over a year ago, then it’s safe to say that she has been activated at least one more time before the events that happened in your room—probably outside the two week window. And those memories are untouchable for us.”

“Which would—” Dillon started to say.

“Which would still leave her in full memory of the other blackouts she has had,” Chyna finished for him. “Our only hope now is that, because she’s not going to have any more memory lapses, that she’ll return to her normal self in time.”

Dillon didn’t like the sound of that. He didn’t like the



fact that his sister's fate was left to a hope, but what other choice did he have? He had no idea as to how he would even approach the subject of her blackouts with her without jeopardizing his secret life and possibly putting her into more danger. He simply nodded and accepted the possibility that, because Claire was still young, she would bounce back from this.

Derek smiled at him, then got up and headed toward the showers. Just then Dillon remembered his dreams. He frowned and leaned forward, rubbing his hands on his knees. Was now the time to mention his current dreams to Derek and Chyna? He jumped up. "Actually, Derek," he said, grabbing the man's arm, "there's something else."

Derek turned back and looked at the boy.

As soon as he did he seemed to lose his nerve. He didn't know why, but he suddenly felt afraid to tell Derek about his current dreams. It didn't make sense, but he mentally pulled away from his course.

"What is it?" Derek finally asked as Dillon paused and just stared at him.

"Oh ... I ... um ... just wanted to say thank you for all the training and the help," he managed to say.

Derek smiled. "No problem kid. Enjoy the rest of your night."

"Ya. You too." He looked at Chyna, managed a smile, and quickly scooted away to grab his stuff and go.

He didn't know why he felt like he couldn't tell Derek and Chyna. He just couldn't. It was weird, and not like him. He was able to tell him about the dream that led him to the staff, so why not this one? Was he losing his mind like Claire due to the trauma of the events he was embroiled in?

With those disturbing thoughts in his mind and heart,

the thirteen year old hurried out of the training center and  
back home.

Back to his family.

Back to his comfort.

Back to his ... dreams.

## THE SPY

Jake walked down the hall to where they were holding the prisoner. Due to his other duties and obligations this was the first time he had been able to come and talk to him personally since his capture just over two months earlier. In that time he had been piecing together clues that were leading him to believe that Orion might have a spy in its midst who had been feeding information to Tower Six about their operations. In classic Jake style he had kept all his findings to himself. This allowed him to hold all the cards in his favour so he could manipulate the situation to his advantage.

“So what kind of revolution is he talking about?” Jake asked Douglas Turner, one of Orion’s highest intelligence officers who was just exiting the room, as he approached.

The large man rubbed a hand through his short brown hair, although lately his hair was showing more flecks of grey than it had ever before. He looked tired, almost worn out, Jake noticed. Turner shook his head. “The man speaks in riddles. We’ve had him here for a while now and haven’t gotten anything of substance out of him.”

Jake smirked at the statement. "Aren't you the master of seeing through the riddles?" he asked.

"Maybe I was at one time," the man replied humbly. "But now the intrigue and drama makes my stomach churn more than a little."

Jake was shocked by the blunt statement. He had heard that Turner was starting to consider moving on to other work, but he always assumed it was just talk, or unsubstantiated rumours. Maybe he was wrong.

Turner laughed. He must have sensed Jake's momentary hesitation. "Don't mind me. I'm just tired, that's all. I'm sure I still have a few more years left in me yet."

Jake smiled, trying to ease the awkward moment. "Can I talk to him?"

"Be my guest," replied Turner as he motioned to the interrogation room door. "If you get anymore out of him than I did you let me know."

Jake nodded then placed the fingers and thumb of his left hand on the pad that was beside the door. After a moment the light went green on the pad and the door clicked open. Jake came into the room and saw the grizzled face of Jacob Griffin sitting at a table. A deceptively strong thin cord kept him bound to the tabletop.

"And who might you be?" Griffin asked in his rough voice.

Jake didn't say anything. Instead, he shut the door, took his jacket off, placed it over the back of the chair that was opposite to Griffin, and sat down.

"A socials teacher? Really?" Jake asked incredulously. "You couldn't have done better than that?"

Griffin didn't respond.

"So tell me about this revolution," Jake said as he leaned forward. "It must be something special."

Griffin tightened his jaw.

Jake reached over to the control panel that was tucked on a rolling tray just under the left side of the table in order to shut off the audio-video equipment as he didn't want this questioning to be recording. When he rolled the tray out and glanced at the panel he noticed that it was already off. He didn't let the shock show on his face, knowing that Griffin was watching his every move.

*Rookie mistake Turner*, he said to himself. Jake knew he had his reasons for not wanting the conversation recorded, but he was sure there was only one reason Turner had to shut the equipment off. And that reason didn't sit well with him. Not at all.

Now playing the game, he flicked a few switches which really didn't do anything, just, more or less, put on a show of him doing something with the equipment.

"What? Are you trying to intimidate me?" Griffin asked incredulously. "If you are, you're doing a terrible job."

"I'm not here to do any of that," Jake replied smoothly. "I just want to know one thing." He looked up and stared the man in the eyes. "How's Angel? I assume she's doing well."

As soon as Jake mentioned Angel, Griffin's face went pale and he lost all his composure. Jake smiled. He knew he had the man off guard as no one outside Tower Six was supposed to know anything about Angel.

"Oh yes. I know all about your beautiful—mischievous—leader," Jake replied. "Her and I have ... history."

Griffin stared at him blankly. It was almost as if the information Jake had dropped on him was too much for him to handle.

"What? Oh, I get it," Jake said as he sat back. "You've

never even seen Angel. Well she is really private and doesn't let people in much does she?" Jake was enjoying himself! "Only her top officers ever have the privilege of being in her company don't they? Which, I guess, makes you expendable."

"What do you want from me?" Griffin growled, seeming as though he was finally able to overcome the initial shock.

"What *I* want is irrelevant, isn't it? I guess the question is: What does Tower Six want? Or ... if you you prefer: What does Orion want?"

Griffin looked confused.

"Look Jacob," he began, using the man's first name in an attempt to soften him up a bit, while he leaned forward and looked the man in the eyes, "your life and my life are irrelevant to the plans of these organizations. In fact, we are irrelevant in the big picture of the world aren't we?"

Griffin didn't say anything, he just narrowed his eyes as Jake spoke.

"I think you and I might be able to work together for mutual gain. How does that sound?" Jake proposed.

"You mean Tower Six and Orion?" Griffin clarified, but Jake was shaking his head.

"I mean you and me." He let that thought linger in the air for a moment. "Aren't you tired of playing for the man or, in your case, for the woman?"

Griffin laughed.

"Why do you think that's so funny?" Jake questioned. "Is it because Douglas Turner, the man that was just in here, offered you the same thing?"

Griffin's immediate expression told the truth to Jake's claim. He tried to quickly cover up his reaction, but Jake, this master of human interaction, saw right through it.

“Thank you Jacob. I knew we had a spy among us, which is how you were getting the intel you needed on Dillon Hunt. If you won’t tell us what this revolution is that we’re all heading for, then maybe he will.”

He pulled his phone out. “Yes, can you please detain Mr. Turner for me?”

Griffin had a horrified expression on his face. “Sorry that your deal fell through,” Jake said, feigning sympathy. “But you know ... these things happen.”

“When the revolution comes there will be a choice to make: either accept it or be swept aside,” Griffin blurted.

Jake grabbed his jacket off the chair. “Well then I guess I’m going to have to do everything I can to stop it,” he stated, then turned quickly and slipped out the door.

“You won’t be able to!” he heard Griffin scream before the door drowned him out.

“I do love the intrigue,” Jake said aloud as he walked calmly down the hall.



“DEREK, WHAT ARE WE REALLY DOING HERE?” CHYNA asked sincerely.

The man looked at her quizzically.

“Come on. It’s not standard operating procedure to train someone this hard, particularly someone of Dillon’s age.” She almost seemed shocked by her own statement and laughed after she had spoken it. “Actually, I don’t think it’s normal at all to train a thirteen year old!”

He had his orders to keep quiet. But surely they were close enough now? He weighed the decision in his mind and finally said, “Unfortunately Orion has decided that we

need to have Dillon ready for another mission which is to take place in a few months.”

Chyna's lips tightened, a spark of anger lighting her eyes. “Orion told you but not me? I thought we were partners!.”

Derek scowled, “I had my orders to keep quiet,” he snapped. “I'm not even certain I should be telling you now! How am I supposed to know what Orion does or doesn't want you to know?”

Chyna snorted. “Sure, Vico, sure. Orion keeps you in the dark, so you keep me in the dark. I see how it is.” Derek took a step closer to her and she backed away, hands up. “Or maybe Orion isn't the problem and you are. You're so used to hiding from yourself that you don't know the difference anymore! We've been partners for a year and I've never ...” Her voice trailed off. She shook her head. “Look, forget about it. I'll just go make sure I've got what I need for a mission.”

Derek didn't know what to say. He wanted to tell Chyna everything, but just couldn't. He had built this wall around himself since the death of his wife, Samantha. And that wall got even higher after he was deceived by Samantha's sister, Brianna, who tricked him into helping her revive the Diablo of Guardian City in South America. Brianna had done it because she believed the creature would make Derek love her if she helped him rise, but that didn't happen, and the ensuing conflict cost Brianna her life.

To make matters worse, right before Brianna died, Derek learned the awful truth that she was the one who was responsible for the death of Samantha! It was a horrifying moment to learn that Brianna's infatuation with him had brought her to that place.



And now Chyna was trying to get close to him and his instincts told him to push her away.

Derek watched her walking away, his anger flaring hot for a second. He stalked to the kitchen area and poured a glass of rum. He downed the glass and slammed it onto the countertop.

Just over a year? He'd known Brianna far longer than that ... and the woman still killed her sister—his wife!—and then tried to force him to love her with a curse. And Chyna just expected him to drop everything and trust her?

His hand fumbled at his pocket and he quickly swallowed two pills. Immediately, his anger cooled. He took one breath, then another. He looked up. Chyna had just reached the door. She was part of Orion, and if Orion would take care of everything, then maybe she needed to know more. “Please don't go,” he said softly, hands braced on the counter.

Chyna paused, glancing over her shoulder. “Please,” he repeated.

Chyna gave a short nod and he indicated she should sit. He shifted his weight. “I don't know where to begin,” he said.

She looked at him with anger in her eyes.

“Please,” he pleaded.

Her expression softened. Derek motioned again for her to sit down on the sofa that was in the living area of the training facility. After a moment, Chyna took a seat. Derek sat down beside her, not exactly sure what he was going to say.

“It's okay,” she said softly. “I'm your friend. You can trust me.”

Trust. There was that word that he had trouble with after all he had been through. Could he trust her? He

surely wanted to. Where would he even start. Where *could* he even start.

“This is hard for me,” he began. Chyna didn’t say anything. “And I don’t know how much I can tell you right now, but I do want someone I can trust and share with.”

The young woman smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. “Why don’t we just start with being honest about Dillon and what it is we are up to with him. The rest can come in time.”

Derek managed a weak smile and nodded slightly. “I know I only told you a little bit about Dillon Hunt, but the kid is really special.”

“I know you mentioned his abilities of observation and the fact that he helped you at Desert Oasis Resort, but—”

“Help! That’s an understatement,” Derek interjected with a short laugh. “Without Dillon we would never have found out what was going on at that resort. It was because of him that we saved John Taylor Sebastian and the rest of those who were captive there. He helped us stop a major catastrophe that had worldwide implications.”

Chyna sat silently, listening to the man.

“But ... personally, it was Dillon who gave me more hope for people than I have had since my wife was alive.

“I worked for Orion and went through the motions, but in Dillon I saw a truly good kid who would do whatever it took to help someone in need, even if it meant that his own life was in danger. Dillon gives me strength that I thought was gone.”

“Have you told him this?” Chyna asked.

Derek shook his head.

“Maybe you should.”

“I wanted to at times, but just couldn’t,” he replied as his eyes moistened with tears.

“Why is it so hard?”

Derek choked back the tears, looked away, and shook his head.

“Why Derek? Why?”

Derek looked up, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I can't help but think ... Dillon ...” He wiped angrily at his cheeks and turned away from Chyna for a second. “It was a boy. Samantha and I were going to have a boy ...” He broke down, his sobs shaking his shoulders and causing his words to become incoherent.

Chyna put her arms around the man. Derek's arms tightened around her, his face buried in her shoulder as he sobbed. She rubbed his back, swaying slightly as she held him.

Eventually, Derek's cries quietened and he pushed away, rubbing his tears from his cheeks again. He took a deep breath. “So, you see, it's a joy and a grief.” He got up and went back to the counter pouring another glass of rum and offered the bottle to Chyna who had followed him. “There, you happy now? You've got my story.”

Chyna firmly took the bottle away from him and put it away. “Actually, I don't think that's the whole story. But, at least it's a start.” She left the kitchen area and headed for the stairs.

Derek fumbled in his pocket for his pills again. At the sound of the medicine rattling in its container, Chyna stopped and glanced at him. For a moment, Derek thought she looked conflicted. But then she had turned back around and disappeared up the stairs. Derek watched her go.

He swallowed the pills and finished his drink. She was right. There was a lot more he could tell her. But not yet. For now, everything was all right. Everything would be all

right. He sighed as his muscles and mind relaxed. Orion would take care of him. Orion would take care of everything.

## THE GIFT

**T**he tender flakes of snow floated gently down from the clouds giving the whole air a crisp scent of freshness. It was chilly, but not strictly cold. Dillon loved the snow and, as he watched other kids make snowballs and, despite the no snowball fight on school property rule, began a massive battle on the playground, he smiled. School monitors exploded into action trying to cause a cease fire. A couple even got hit in the crossfire which caused Dillon to smile all the wider! He longed to join them but felt a sense of responsibility that he couldn't shake. He craved for a time when he could play one of his imaginary adventures again, or just enjoy being a kid, but he couldn't. Dillon had always dreamed of great adventures, but now that he was in the middle of training to be a real agent, he found that the idea of pretending wasn't as appealing. It was almost frightening.

He knew that Orion was counting on him for something big that would require his abilities and he knew he couldn't let them down. He couldn't let Derek down, or any of his family members, as he knew there was a very

real possibility of them getting mixed up in whatever it was he was mixed up in and he couldn't let his guard down for a moment.

Instead of engaging in the fun he maneuvered through the crowds of kids again, heading for the path that would lead to the waiting car. He almost made it to the tree-line when he felt an explosion of snow hit him square in the back!

He whipped around to see Sarah standing there with an all-too-innocent look on her sweet face. Dillon smiled and dove his hands into the fresh snow. Up he came, snowball in hand, but Sarah had already reloaded and fired. This one hit him in the right shoulder.

He laughed and let loose. Sarah managed to duck just enough for the ball to sail right over her head. Dillon was quicker to reload this time and let loose. It hit her in the side. She laughed and ran toward him with a fist full of the cold, dry, powder. As she closed in Dillon instinctively crouched into a defensive stance. Sarah came in and, as she neared, suddenly found herself on her back. Powdered snow flew up into the air like an explosion.

In an instant Dillon was on top of her. Sarah wore a shocked expression on her face as she stared up at her friend. Dillon knew that she didn't expect to be thrown down so easily. In fact, the reaction scared Dillon a little. How easily he took her to the ground without even thinking about it!

"Oh ... are you okay?" he stuttered as he tried to get off her.

"Ya ... I think so. Where did you learn to do that?" she asked as she propped herself onto her elbows.

"What? That? It was just luck," he said, trying to shrug

it off as no big deal. He stood up and offered her his hand. She grasped it and stood as he helped her up.

“You going to the lake again?” she asked, motioning toward the path.

Dillon glanced over to it then looked back at her. “Ya. I thought since it was the last day of school before Christmas break I would go to the spot one last time.”

“Oh. Okay. And I’m assuming that you don’t want any company?” Sarah’s voice took on a tone of hope that maybe Dillon would invite her along.

“Well ... maybe you could walk me to the lake. But you’ll miss the bus if you stay and I wouldn’t want you to get in trouble.”

Sarah smiled. “Okay, just a walk and then I’ll leave you to your memories.”

Dillon’s stomach knotted. He couldn’t tell if it was the lies or her smile. He felt like he’d just stabbed her in the back, but at the same time, he felt like flying as she trudged through the snow beside him. The two walked in silence until they reached the lake. Dillon took a breath. A quick one to try to slow his racing heart. His hand darted out to squeeze Sarah’s. She smiled at him, squeezed his hand back, and then ran back up the street and to the path to the school. Dillon watched her go before running to the waiting car.

“So what was that all about?” Derek asked as he climbed into the back seat.

“Nothing. Just a walk with a friend.”

“Just a friend?” Chyna asked slyly as she turned and smiled at him.

Dillon squirmed uncomfortably.

“Are you sure this isn’t going to get in the way of your training?” Derek asked seriously.

Chyna scoffed. "Come on Derek! It's just a teenage romance. What harm could that be?"

"It's not a romance!" Dillon blurted back. "She's just my best friend and understands me."

"I hope she doesn't understand you too much," Derek commented. "She can't find out about what you're doing here."

"Ease up a bit Derek. He just has a crush. It's harmless," Chyna replied.

"No! There's too much at—"

"Enough!" Dillon yelled. "I don't have a crush and she's not going to find anything out. Just please stop fighting," he pleaded.

There was silence for a moment then Derek turned to look at both of them. "Sorry," he said softly. "Sometimes I get too wound up in my work."

Chyna nodded then turned away from him and sat in silence while Dillon stared out the window for the rest of the ride.



DILLON WIPED THE SWEAT FROM HIS BROW AS CHYNA brought over a nice tall glass of Sweet Tea for him.

"You did really well today," Derek remarked. "Your skills on all levels are coming along nicely. Before you know it you'll be a force to be reckoned with."

Dillon smiled. "Thanks."

He thought about reacting on instinct when Sarah charged at him and knew that Derek's comments weren't said to make him feel better about himself, but housed truth within them.

"Hey. Since this is the last time we'll be getting together



until after the Christmas break I have something for you. Think of it as an early Christmas present,” Derek said.

The man walked out of the room for a moment. When he returned he held a small black box in his hand. He came over to Dillon, who had just put his drink down after draining it, and held it out before him.

Dillon took it and looked from Derek to Chyna who gave him a reassuring smile. “Thanks!” he stated as he opened it up.

Inside was a new phone. It looked just like his old one, but Dillon knew this would be different. He took it out and examined it. “Awesome!” he exclaimed.

“Now, this isn’t just an ordinary phone,” Derek explained. “It has all your old tech but can also disarm most electric locks, disrupt security cameras, has an app to help hack into computer systems, has an infrared camera which will pick up heat signatures, and has a handy emergency button that will alarm on mine and Chyna’s phones if something bad is going down; much like the button we programmed into your old phone.”

Dillon didn’t know what to say. This was the coolest gift he had ever been given! “Can it utilize those attachments you had at the resort?” he asked expectantly.

Derek laughed. “Of course!”

“Yes!” Dillon exclaimed. Ever since he saw Derek use some of his gadgets at the resort he wanted to get his hands on them and now he had a phone that would allow for those functions to be activated!

“And the best part about it is that it looks exactly like your old phone so your parents won’t even be suspicious that this is something totally different,” Derek explained.

“Now you go and enjoy your time off,” Chyna chimed in. “And don’t worry about what’s happening here.”

Dillon smiled. He was about to grab his backpack and take off when he suddenly had a twinge of guilt. He knew he hadn't been totally honest with Derek. He hadn't told him about the dreams and that weighed heavily on the boy. He had been thinking about why he hadn't told Derek because, after all, Derek was probably the only person on the planet who would even remotely believe him; or understand for that matter! He also had another feeling aside from the guilt as he considered disclosing the dreams: a gut feeling; that same strong compulsion he had experienced many times in the past. He knew then that *now* is the right time.

"Is everything okay?" Chyna asked. She must have noticed Dillon's hesitation.

Dillon turned and got suddenly serious. "There's something I need to tell you," he said, looking at Derek.

Derek arched an eyebrow.

Dillon reached up and nervously pulled at his ear. "It's ... ah ... going to sound weird, but—"

"But what? You think I haven't seen weird stuff before?" Derek replied with a chuckle. "Do you even remember the creatures we fought at the resort?"

Dillon conceded the point. This is exactly why he knew Derek would listen.

"So what is it Dillon?"

He took a deep breath. "Well, it's just that I've been having dreams again."

Derek and Chyna were both silent, as if urging him to continue.

"As I mentioned, these dreams are not like normal dreams. The things in them come true to a point, and when I have them I know they are different than normal ones. It's like I know they are too real to just be dreams.

“Am I making any sense or do I just sound crazy?”

“It’s not crazy,” Chyna reassured. “Can you tell us more?”

Dillon nodded. “I told you this before, during the mine incident. When my family and I were heading to the resort, before I knew that the whole thing was a setup by Orion, I had dreams which had parts of them that turned out true. I mean ... the events were a little different when they played out but essentially what I saw happened. That’s how I knew about the Tower Six symbol.

“This is the same thing that I mentioned to you when I found the Staff of Haraset. I had a dream the day before of the events that actually happened. And now ... now I had one where I had the staff somewhere in a jungle ... I’m not sure, but I know it was one of those dreams that will come true. What does it mean? What’s happening to me?” Tears began to rim the boy’s eyes.

Chyna put her arm around him. “It’s okay. You’re not going crazy. You have powers that helped you at the resort. Powers that Orion sees as a gift and that’s why you’re here with us.”

“That’s right,” Derek added. “I don’t understand why you have these abilities, but they’re definitely not a curse but a blessing.”

“Are you sure?” Dillon replied a little more sharply than he intended. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Derek reassured. “Remember again that I told you before that you were destined for something greater? I meant it. I just hope now you are starting to understand it yourself.”

Dillon nodded.

“Now, for real, go and enjoy your time off! You earned it. We’ll figure all this out together.”

He might have second thoughts often about what he was doing here with Orion, but it was times like this which made him want to give up whatever he needed to in order to work with them, and he would do anything in order to help them.



DEREK SAT AT THE DESK IN FRONT OF THE COMPUTER screen. He watched the monitor showing the static image of Dillon's house. Not that the camera was static. It was just that nothing was happening. Just like Derek's life. His thoughts were interrupted when Chyna entered the room, suitcase rolling behind her.

"Are you sure you don't want to come enjoy Christmas with me?" she asked.

At Derek's startled look, she hastily amended, "And my family?"

Derek shook his head. "It's nice of you to try and include me in your family but I'll be fine. Promise." He offered a slight smile. "Besides, someone needs to be here keeping an eye on our boy."

Chyna sighed. "I'm sure Orion can find someone else to keep watch."

"Probably," Derek admitted. "But I feel like I should be the one to stand guard."

"He's not your son, Derek," she said softly.

Derek looked away, his hands curling into fists.

"Fine. Have it your way. But I'm going to enjoy myself and have an actual vacation. With real live people."

That last remark stung Derek a little more than he expected. Probably because he couldn't remember the last

time he had a vacation which made the comment even that more relevant.

After Samantha's death, Derek found life wasn't worth living anymore. Unable to follow Samantha in death, he became reckless and uncaring, half hoping an accident would end his pain. But it didn't. Then, Brianna needed him. Really needed him ... at least, that's what he thought when Orion contacted him for the mission. Seeing the evil lurking so close, waiting to destroy the world, Derek found himself pulled unwillingly back to life. He lived now to keep others safe, so no one else would need to feel what he felt about Samantha. It wasn't really living, but having lived so close to the edge of death, Derek knew he needed time to adjust. Not knowing what else to do, he drowned himself in work, accepting whatever assignment Orion threw his way. Eventually, he would figure out what life looked like for him. But not yet.

“Bye Derek.” Chyna’s voice shook him from his thoughts and, by her tone, he realized that this probably wasn’t the first time she had said bye to him.

“What? Oh. Bye Chyna. Enjoy yourself.”

The beautiful woman brushed her brown hair to the side as she shook her head in dismay at the man. “Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone,” she stated, a tone of sadness creeping into her voice, as she headed for the door.

“Do you need me to drive you to the airport?”

“No, that’s alright. I called un Uber.”

“I could—”

“It's all right, Derek. It should already be here.”

“Oh. Okay.” Derek frowned at the disappointment that filled him. If she took an Uber, he would be able to keep an eye on Dillon. It shouldn't bother him that she was leaving. He stood from his chair, walked to the door, and leaned on the

frame, watching Chyna climb into the car. He saw her turn to look at him through the back window and their eyes met. For a moment, he thought he saw sadness in her bright green eyes, but then she turned back around. He closed the door, turned around, leaned his back against it, and stood there for a few moments just staring into the empty place. Maybe Chyna had a point. Maybe it wasn't good for him to be alone.

Maybe that was part of living? He pulled out his cell phone, his fingers tapping buttons until Chyna's name came up. He opened a chat and typed in a request for her address, in case he wanted to come by later. His fingers hovered over the send button.

The screen across the room flickered and he glanced up. Sarah and Evan stood at Dillon's front door. They'd be heading out, no doubt on some imaginary adventure.

His gaze dragged back down to his phone, his loneliness eating away at him. Finally, he swallowed and deleted the message. It was better to be alone. No attachments.



LATER THAT NIGHT, DEREK FOUND HIMSELF HAVING DINNER in his car while watching Dillon's house from a distance. Every once in a while he would pull out the binoculars and look around the premises and in the windows of the house just to make sure that nothing was amiss.

He didn't know why he felt compelled to do this, as Orion had made sure the security around the house was tight, but he just found himself there. Maybe he didn't want to be at The Studio by himself? He really didn't know, and that was the maddening thing for him!

As he sat there in the near-dark silence of the car, he

pulled out a picture of Samantha. She was beautiful. Her smile held back no illusions that she was merely playing at being happy, but showed a sincerity there that everyone around her picked up. She was always so positive and gracious.

Derek often wondered why she chose him to love. He felt that he didn't have many personal redeeming qualities that would make him desirable to any woman, particularly one as beautiful, kind, and gifted as her.

A tear rimmed his eye as his thoughts drifted back to those precious times they spent together.

"I still love you," he whispered to himself. "And I miss you desperately." Tears flowed down his cheeks.

He quickly put the picture away and wiped his eyes, concentrating on the surveillance. As he saw Dillon playing with his little sister in the window he began to wonder if he was doing the right thing by training him.

*If I just left the boy alone wouldn't his life just get back to normal? And what about Chyna? She had family to go back to, people who cared about her. The more time I spend with her, the greater the likelihood that she would get hurt ... or killed, like Samantha,* he thought to himself.

He could feel his anxiety rising as he pondered the course he was on. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the bottle. He opened it up and popped two of the small green pills into his mouth. A few heartbeats later his anxiety abated. He breathed deeply and calmed once more.

He knew at that moment that he would give his life for these two if he had to. They would survive at all cost. He would see to it.

With those thoughts spinning around in his head he

knew he needed more help. He picked up his phone and made the call he should have done a long time ago.

“Hello,” the older man answered after a few rings.

“Dr. Hunt?” Derek asked.

“Yes. Who is this?”

“It’s Derek Vico.”

Dr. Hunt sighed. “Derek, if you’re calling about a mission you know I can’t help you. As you’re well aware, my powers are not what they used to be.”

“I know, it’s just that ... well, we’re working with your grandson Dillon. We’re supposed to be training him to be able to better use his powers, but none of us understands them. I was hoping you could help.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. “Dr. Hunt?”

“Forgive me. I’m just ... He’s only thirteen, Derek!”

“I know. We wouldn’t have involved him if we didn’t have to. And I’m watching him. Can you help me to help him?”

“There’s nothing I can tell you that will assist you in the development of what he has,” Dr. Hunt replied. “There’s not much I can even do except to explain to him what is causing him to have these abilities. In order to do that I would like to speak to the boy myself face to face, but Orion has me really busy with other work right now, and besides, the boy thinks I’m dead. Wouldn’t that be a shock if he found out otherwise!”

“Why didn’t they ask *you* to help him in the first place? Wouldn’t that have made more sense?” Derek asked.

“As I said, there’s not much to train about. These abilities need to be developed in their own time and all I can do is explain *why* he has them.”



Derek sighed. “Okay. I understand. Sorry for disturbing you Dr.”

“Derek, I trust you and know that you will keep him safe,” Dr. Hunt replied. “I’m just sorry I can’t help you but, as I see it, he’s in good hands.”

“Thanks for your confidence in me Dr. I’ll do everything I can to give Dillon the skills he needs to keep him safe. Good bye.”

The conversation now crystallized in Derek’s mind that he would do everything in his power to make Dillon the best agent he could. And he had to believe that the powers would work themselves out.

THE MISSION

**D**erek breathed deeply then exhaled slowly. He tried to focus his thoughts on the good he had experienced. He needed to calm his spirit and refocus. His hand reflexively went to his pocket as he felt his anxiety rising. He could feel the small bottle of pills that he always carried on him in order for him to deal with his anxious spirit.

He had been prescribed these little green pills by Orion doctors after his ordeal at Guardian City, and they seemed to help, but he was never comfortable relying on the meds. He wanted another way through his pain. He needed another way through his pain.

The method of calming he was currently employing is what he called a centering activity which helped him with the stress he often underwent due to his work. He learned it from a Sensei of his when he was younger and still dealing with the death of his mother. Many of his counselors told him that he needed to talk to someone about his experiences, but, to him, that was more difficult than searching for a rumoured artifact that had been buried a

thousand years ago somewhere in the Sahara! No. It was much easier for him to refocus on the next mission, to stay busy. At least, that's what he kept telling himself.

Unfortunately, for him, it was proving to be difficult. He had so many terrible experiences that they seemed to block out the good. He thought of Samantha, but that only brought up the fact that she was no longer with him. Thoughts of his family brought pain, as his Mom was killed when he was young, and his Dad never truly recovered from that ordeal. Sure, in time his Dad got better, especially when he met Ichika, a beautiful Japanese woman who was soft-spoken, incredibly classy, kind and tender, and smart. But he was never the same man he'd been before Derek's mother died. At first, Derek resented Ichika, but after a while she won him over like she won his Dad. But even those memories were tough for the man to process.

After Samantha's sister, Brianna, deceived him, confessed to killing Samantha so that she could have Derek, and almost unleashed The Diablo upon the world, then was killed, he had cut himself off from being too connected with anyone. That is ... until he met Dillon.

Dillon was the only bright spot in Derek's life at this point. The boy gave him hope and he genuinely enjoyed training and working with him. He wanted Dillon to grow up to be a man that would do great things for the world and, if not, at least be one of those people who was kind in his intentions, caring to all, willing to help the oppressed; generally a really nice person that he would be proud to call a friend.

Then there was ... Chyna. Derek didn't know what his feelings for the woman were yet. He knew he felt a physical attraction for her as she was quite beautiful, strong, and

smart. The only issues were that she was his partner and relationships between partners were generally not a good thing. He was also really hesitant to get into another relationship after Samantha even though it had been about five years now since her death.

The man shook off those thoughts and tried to refocus.

“Am I bothering you?” he heard a man’s voice ask.

He spun around, still on his knees, and moved so fast that it almost looked as though his gun just appeared in his hand. He saw Jake standing there, leaning against the door frame with that mischievous—almost cocky—smile he often wore on his face.

“How did you get in here?” Derek blurted, then waved his hand as he holstered his gun and stood up realizing how stupid that question was. “Never mind.”

“You obviously have no plans for Christmas,” Jake commented. “Why does that not surprise me.”

“Your concern is so touching,” Derek commented sarcastically as he moved toward the man. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to talk about Mr. Hunt.”

“You mean the boy?” replied Derek, trying—probably futilely he knew—to remind Jake that Dillon was just a boy.

Jake nodded, not showing one way or another whether he cared about Derek’s distinction.

“What about him?”

“Well, we need to move his timetable up a notch.”

“What do you mean? You said I had a year to get him up to where Orion needed him with his basic skills.”

“Well that has changed,” replied Jake rather nonchalantly. “We need him to be ready by the beginning of

March as the mask can only be accessed four times a year—the equinoxes and the solstices.

“What!” Derek blurted. “That’s only two months from now!”

Jake didn’t answer, but instead moved back through the door and to the kitchen area where he began to rummage through some of the cupboards. Derek followed. “Ah, here it is,” Jake said as he pulled a bottle of scotch out, then went to another cupboard where he grabbed two glasses.

“It’s because of the coming equinox as I said and ... the dreams,” he replied as he poured the golden liquid.

“Dreams? What dreams?”

“Come on Derek,” Jake replied, sounding a little disappointed. “Dillon’s dreams. You know, the ones where he sees something that’s about to happen and then it does.”

Derek blinked in surprise. “You’ve actually read my reports.” He was shocked. He didn’t think anyone—particularly Jake—paid any attention to his reports”

“Yes Derek. Your reports have been very insightful.”

“What is the significance of these dreams anyway?” Derek asked. “Besides the fact that they tend to come true, at least certain aspects of them? I mean, why are these the things that now convince you that Dillon needs to go into the field again so soon?”

Jake smiled as he handed Derek the drink he had poured for him. “You just need to trust me on this one Derek. When someone with Dillon’s abilities starts to have these types of dreams it means that the event is going to be happening soon. From our estimate it’s anywhere from immediate to three months.”

“And you know lots of people with Dillon’s abilities?” Derek asked dryly.

Jake smiled. "We're sending the Hunt's on another vacation."

Derek took a sip.

"We're sending them to a resort in Mexico: Playa Del Carmen to be exact. There's an artifact in one of the Mayan ruins that we need. We have reason to believe that it houses something called 'The Mask of Time.'"

A few years ago Derek would have balked at the name of such an item, but in his experience with Orion he had learned that there was some pretty strange stuff out there. "Okay. So what does this Mask of Time do?" he asked, intrigue building within him.

"Well that's the thing isn't it? We just don't know exactly. Some think that it does nothing. Others believe it has the power to keep someone alive longer than they're supposed to live, and still others think ... well, it doesn't matter what they think."

"And you?"

"Me? I think this is one of the most powerful items we could possess!" Jake replied enthusiastically.

"Why is that?" Derek asked suspiciously. He never fully trusted Jake. He would work with him, but always kept looking over his shoulder. He didn't know why exactly. It was just a feeling he got from the guy.

"I think it has the ability to look into the future."

"Whose future? The world in general, a person, a nation?" Derek asked, irritation beginning to creep into his voice.

Jake shrugged. "We don't know. That's why you and Dillon need to find it."

"Just me and Dillon? Or can I bring my partner, Chyna?"

Jake waved his hand. "Yes. Yes. Of course you can."

“I’ll also need all the intel you’ve gathered ... asap,” replied Derek sternly, “which, I hope, also details the reason for the equinox.”

“Of course. It’s all in there. Let me be clear, there’s a distinct connection to the fact that Dillon’s dreams have been activated and the spring equinox with the Mayans is one of the four times in the year the mask can be found. Don’t mistake that. These events are not a coincidence.”

Derek was silent and a little shaken by the comment. Jake’s face took on a shadow of intensity and seriousness that he hadn’t seen in the man before and it unnerved him.

“Is there anything else?” Jake asked as the intensity suddenly passed.

Derek thought about it for a moment. “What if Dillon’s Dad doesn’t want to go since he and his family just got back from another vacation at the resort last summer? Bruce Hunt might only have so much vacation time that he can use and may not want to waste it on a winter vacation.”

Jake paused for a moment as though he was processing Derek’s concern. “Don’t worry,” he finally said at length, “we’ll make it sweet enough for him to accept. But if he is hesitant, I’ll send you something that will help persuade him; or at least make the suggestion of going, more easily convincing.”

Derek narrowed his eyes at the man. It was stuff like this that made Derek wary, but he really didn’t have much choice but to trust him. Even though he had consented to be Dillon’s handler, he still had mixed feelings about involving the boy in Orion’s affairs. He reasoned that Orion would conscript Dillon whether he was involved with it or not and he figured, for the sake of Dillon, that he should be involved. He could see Dillon going down a bad

path, a similar path to himself, and didn't want that for him.

He felt the anxiety rising again. Before he knew it the small green pill was in his hand. He stared at it for a heartbeat, then popped it in his mouth and downed it with the scotch in one gulp.

Jake watched him, a small smile on his face as he sipped his own drink.

Derek slammed the glass back down on the counter and walked back into the training room. Even before he got there he began to feel better.

*Orion knew best*, he thought to himself.

*Orion always knows best.*



## THE LITTLE GREEN PILLS

**D**erek swung his arms back and forth, loosening them up for his training session with Dillon. It was hard to ignore Chyna's glares, but he managed.

“We should tell him,” she said, when Derek refused to acknowledge her.

Derek frowned. “We will. I just don't think—”

The door burst open and Dillon came bounding in. The break from training had seemed to rejuvenate him. “So, what are we doing for training today?” he asked, grinning from ear-to-ear.

Chyna stared hard at Derek. Dillon would have had to have been blind to miss it. “What's going on?” he asked.

Oh, nothing,” Derek started. “It's just that—”

“Orion has moved up the date for the mission,” Chyna cut in.

“What!” Dillon exclaimed. “When? I'm not ready! I can't ... I mean I ... what if ...” he stammered.

“You'll be fine Dillon,” Chyna interrupted. “You were

born to do this and we'll be helping you all along the way. It's not like it was at the resort where you were thrown into the fray. We now have a plan, you're being trained, and we have more information now than we did then."

Derek turned and scowled at her. "What? I know you're concerned about the timetable so I thought I would help you explain it to him."

"Help me? You just blurted it out without ... without ..."

"Without what? Some sensitivity?" Chyna snapped back. "We certainly don't have time to beat around the bushes on this."

Derek was struck with her sharpness. Up to this point Chyna had seemed like the good cop in the relationship, and he felt like he was driving Dillon on. "Is everything okay?" he asked sincerely.

"Ya. Why?"

"It's just that you seem a little intense."

"It's nothing. I'm fine. I just think that now we are fast approaching game time, and we're not near as far ahead as we should be. We need to train harder than we have before."

"Oh, because we were complete slugs about it right!" Derek snapped back defensively. He could feel his anger begin to rise.

Chyna was about to respond when Dillon cut in, "Guys! Stop it! There's no use in fighting about it. I guess there's something important that Orion wants us to do. Right?"

"And I might not feel ready, but if there's one thing you taught me so far is that we are never truly one hundred percent ready."

He paused for a moment and looked to Derek. “But you still haven’t answered me.” Derek could feel the intensity in that look. “When?”

Derek and Chyna glanced at each other for a few heartbeats then turned toward Dillon again. Seeing the young boy looking at them expectantly brought a sense of peace to Derek. He offered Dillon a slight smile. “It’s set for the middle of March.”

Dillon began shaking his head. “My Dad never takes any time off during that part of the year.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Derek replied. “We have a free trip to Mexico planned, some encouragement from his boss, and this—” He lifted up a small white pill in front of Dillon.

“What is it?” Dillon asked as he took it from the man.

“It’s a pill that helps *encourage* someone when a suggestion is made. You need to wait to use it, as your Dad needs to have the trip presented to him first.”

Dillon looked at him with a shocked expression splayed across his face.

Derek laughed. “I’ll give you some instruction in what things you should say in order to *help* your Dad make the right decision.”

“You want me to drug my Dad?”

“Well, when you put it that way it does sound horrible. Let’s look at it like *helping* your Dad along the path.”

“The path that we want?” Dillon asked skeptically.

“Dillon, it isn’t taking away his ability to choose. It’s just lowering his normal inhibitions. He won’t say yes to the trip unless he wants to say yes and is only saying no because he thinks it’s the responsible thing to do,” Chyna responded.

Dillon stared at her. "You sure?" he asked skeptically.

"Of course I am. I helped create it."

"That's not helpful," Derek replied in an irritated tone.

Dillon must have seen another argument about to happen. "Fine," he replied as he pocketed the pill.

Derek patted him on the shoulder and flashed him another smile. "Go get into your workout gear. We have a lot to cover."

Dillon nodded and headed for the change rooms.

Derek turned back toward the woman. She brushed the long brown bangs from the side of her face. "What happened to you when you were on break?"

"Nothing," she answered not meeting his gaze. "Now if you don't mind, I too need to get ready for Dillon's training."

She walked away leaving Derek stunned with the sudden change in demeanor. He knew she wasn't telling him the truth. He just hoped the truth wasn't something that would distract her enough to jeopardize the mission.



AFTER SPARRING WITH DEREK FOR AN HOUR AND LEARNING how to handle some small hand-held weapons: bow staff, knife, nunchuck, and such, Dillon found himself sitting at the table and continuing his Spanish lessons with Chyna. She had told him that now they knew the mission was taking place in Mexico, she thought it was best to focus her efforts with him on the language.

As they talked back and forth, Dillon noticed that Derek had come into the room, walked over to the kitchen area, pulled out a bottle of pills and popped one. These were the same pills he had seen the man take

before. He noticed that, as he took them, his demeanour seemed to calm and he appeared more relaxed. A feeling that something wasn't right suddenly pressed upon the boy.

"Dillon? Did you hear what I said?" Chyna asked him, which is how he knew that he must have been noticeably absent from the conversation for a few moments.

"Huh. Oh yeah. Sorry about that. What did you say?"

Chyna shook her head slightly. "I think we're done for the day. Why don't you grab your stuff and I'll take you home?"

"Okay," he replied as he got up and went over to Derek. "Hey man. I was thinking and I was wondering if you had another one of those pills for my Dad?"

Derek look at him suspiciously.

"I mean, what if I lose the one I have or if something happens where I mess up giving it to him. I mean ... a lot could go wrong with the plan and don't you think I should have another one just in case? You're the one always telling me that I need a backup plan."

Derek nodded his head slightly. "I suppose you're right. Just give me a second." He turned to go and Dillon eyed the pill bottle on the counter. He was about to grab it when Derek suddenly turned around and scooped it up. He put it in his pocket as he walked away.

Dillon knew something was up with those pills, and he knew he needed to find out; he had that gut feeling again. He also needed to do it such a way without Derek knowing he needed to find out.

He walked back over to where Chyna was. She looked busy on her computer and didn't seem to notice him come over.

"Hey Chyna," he said softly.

The woman looked up and smiled. “You ready to go now?”

“Ya. I am. I just wanted to ask you a question.”

She turned to him, showing with her body language that she was giving him full attention.

“It’s just that ... um ... I understand if you can’t tell me the answer, but I ... um ... was just wondering if you happened to know what medication Derek is on?”

“Medication?” she asked, not seeming to understand at first. “Oh, you mean those green pills that Derek always has with him,” she replied as she glanced over to the door Derek exited through. “He says they’re for his anxiety.”

“And you believe him?”

Chyna shrugged. “Why shouldn’t I? From what I have learned about our dear Mr. Vico,” she said in an almost aristocratic voice, “is that he has lived a pretty hard life up to now. His mind and nerves are probably beat up.”

“He doesn’t seem beat up to me,” Dillon replied referencing the fact that Derek appeared to be in great mental shape.

“Maybe he hides it well,” Chyna responded with a smile. “Now if you don’t mind, I have to get you home as I have a lot of work to catch up on.” She stood up and motioned for him to follow her to the door.

Just before they left Derek came back into the room. “Sorry Dillon,” he said apologetically. “That’s the only one we have and I can’t get anymore.”

Dillon nodded. “That’s okay. It was just a thought. You know ... trying to anticipate problems and all, just like you taught me.” He hoisted his backpack onto his shoulder and followed Chyna out of The Studio.

This conversation with Chyna only strengthened his

resolve as to what he knew he needed to do. He needed to get one of those pills.



THE CHILL OF THE WINTER AIR BIT AT DILLON'S FACE. He zipped his jacket right up and pulled down his hat, trying to cover the bottom parts of his ears in order to stave off the cold bite. He made sure to be as quiet as possible when closing the door. The skills he was learning with Orion's training were definitely paying off as he snuck out of his house.

Thankfully his Mom and Dad were deep sleepers. The only one he knew he needed to worry about was Gwen, as she tended to get up at all hours for any number of reasons. In order to mitigate any issues he snuck to her room and made sure he closed her door as quietly as possible. That seemed to help as his exit from the house went smoother than he expected.

Knowing that Orion was surveying the outside of his house, he opened up the scramble app on the phone Derek had given him—which he found while playing around with all the options and settings earlier—and, after locating all the equipment with their specific electronic signals, he scrambled them for five seconds. This gave him just enough time to dart into the shadows, but allowed for it to appear as though it was only a momentary loss of signal integrity: a glitch that was quickly corrected.

Once away from the house he picked his course carefully, staying mostly to the shadows and backstreets. The wind assaulted his face as he moved with urgency, but he was determined to do this. He needed to find out what those pills were that Derek was taking.

When he and Derek worked together at the resort he hadn't noticed him taking those meds, but he also wasn't around him nearly as much as he was now. In that circumstance, the longest he had spent with Derek was when he and Jordan helped to free Derek and the others from Troy. So Dillon had no idea how long his friend had been taking them for.

Dillon just knew—and he wasn't completely sure how—that there was something up with them and he needed to find out.

Before long Dillon found himself coming into view of the training center. He knew where all the security cameras and sensors were so he quickly disarmed the sensors and scrambled the signals for a few seconds which allowed him to enter through the front door. Before going in he disarmed the laser identity scanner as well. Dim secondary lights lit up the hall. When he got to the finger print and retinal scanners he was amazed that his device was able to bypass those as well as their backup systems!

He glance at his phone: 3:47 AM. He knew Derek and Chyna would be in bed. Derek was pretty intense and probably didn't get as much sleep as he should, but the guy wasn't a robot. At least Dillon hoped that he wasn't a robot!

He shook those ridiculous thoughts away and proceeded upstairs to where the living quarters were. He had never actually been to this part of the center so he didn't really know what to expect.

He made it to the top landing silently as a ghost. It was during moments like these where he really appreciated the skills he was learning from Derek and Chyna. He now knew how to walk in such a way so as to pass through most terrain as silently as he wanted to. It was all in the place-



ment of your feet, the shifting of your weight from one side to the other, and how much you should adjust your body position on certain surfaces. This was one of the classes he really enjoyed and one that he was really good at. His lean and light form also contributed a lot to the mastery of this particular ability.

Dillon noted two doors as he ghosted down the hallway. He wasn't sure which one was Derek's and which was Chyna's. He looked back and forth for a moment at the doors, then shrugged and approached the nearest one. He reached for the handle.

*No*, a woman's voice whispered.

The sound startled him. He jerked his hand away and spun around, looking for the source. No one was there.

He shook his head and reached for the handle again.

*No!* he heard more urgently. It was still a whisper but louder.

He looked around again, then backed away from the door. He thought for a moment. He had heard that voice before but couldn't remember where. Then it hit him: it was the same woman's voice that warned him about Claire when she attacked him! And she clearly didn't want him to go into this room.

He shook his head then walked from this door to the next. He tenderly reached his hand for the door. Nothing. No voice.

Dillon grabbed the handle and, using the technique he was taught on how to open a door quietly, he cracked the door open.

The young boy slid inside the dark room and closed the door quietly behind him. The room was almost pitch black except for the small sliver of light he saw coming from the

crack between Derek's blinds and the window from the street lights outside.

He tapped his phone and it began to glow. It started dull, but gradually brightened and, when it got to Dillon's desired level of brightness he tapped it again which stopped the illumination at that level. He didn't want too much light as that might alert Derek to his presence, but he needed enough to find what he was looking for.

He scanned around the room. He could hear the rhythmic breathing coming from his left and to the back of the room. The glow from the phone only illuminated a circular area of about eight feet. He scanned the phone to the left and saw someone in the bed that was against the wall. As he silently approached he noticed that it was actually Derek as he immediately noticed the Japanese Kana tattoo on his shaven scalp.

His heart skipped a beat and his thoughts whirled when he considered that the woman's voice in his head guided him to the right location. He stumbled back at the revelation, but quickly composed himself. Dillon knew he would have more time in the future to ponder the mystery, but right now he had more important things to do. He took a deep breath and started scanning around.

The faint glow cast its light throughout the room. Beside Derek's bed was a small one-drawer table. On the table sat a glass with some liquid in it, his plugged-in phone, and a framed picture. Dillon was immediately captivated by the girl he saw standing in the photo. He gently picked it up. The woman was strikingly beautiful, with long brown hair that hung gingerly off her delicate shoulders; her piercing blue eyes captivated Dillon. She was smiling widely and appeared to be holding up what looked like a seashell in one hand and was posing with one

leg up while pointing to the shell with her other hand as though it was some great discovery. The background was that of a beach with clear blue water and white-capped waves lapping up on the shore.

The woman appeared really happy. As happy as anyone he had ever seen in his life. “Samantha,” he whispered before he could stop himself. He clapped a hand immediately to his mouth and looked to Derek who rolled over a bit, but didn’t appear to wake.

He shook his head and gently put the picture down, then scanned around the table more in the dim light but didn’t see anything else. He knew, by the way that Derek was acting when he took the pills—almost euphoric—that they would be close.

He reached out and grabbed the handle of the drawer. The boy held his breath as he slowly pulled it open. He even amazed himself as to how quiet he was at his task. When he got it open he noticed a gun with three extra loaded magazines, a notebook, and ... the bottle!

Dillon quickly scooped the bottle from the drawer. It didn’t have any labels on it which seemed a little odd to the boy. There was no description, dosage, cautions, or anything else. He twisted the top off and positioned his phone so he could glance inside. It was about half full of small green pills. He looked over at Derek who was still sleeping soundly, then tipped the bottle sideways until one of the pills popped out and into his hand.

Swiftly and silently he capped the bottle, placed it back exactly where he had taken it from—this was another trick he had learned in his training: that you need to quickly and efficiently memorize the contents and order of a room, drawer, closet, and such—then closed the drawer.

Dillon turned to go when suddenly the hairs on the

back of his neck stood up. He didn't have time to process the feeling, but instead dropped ghostlike to the floor and rolled under the bed and tapped his phone off.

He laid there, staring up at the underside of Derek's bed, daring not to breathe. He actually felt kind of stupid lying there in the stillness of the dark; that is, until he heard the bed above him creak as Derek rolled over and planted his feet on the ground.

THE VACATION

Dillon didn't know if he would ever breathe again!

*What would happen if Derek found me here?* he questioned to himself. *Would he ever trust me again?* *Would they kick me out of Orion?* His thoughts whirled and spun.

He heard Derek shuffle around with something on the table, then heard what sounded like the glass being placed down. The bed creaked again and the tension on the springs released as the man stood up.

Dillon heard him move away and head to the ensuite washroom that was to the side, then he saw a light filter into the room. He dared to peek out from under the bed and noticed that the door to the washroom was partially open.

*Now!* he heard the woman's voice urge.

Before he could give it another thought, the agile boy slid out from under the bed and glided across the room to the bedroom door. He grabbed the handle and opened the door a crack. He could hear that Derek was now washing his hands. He quickly opened the door as much as he

dared then slipped out, closing the door behind him as silently as he could.

He wasn't sure if Derek had heard any of that, but he didn't want to stick around to find out. With as much speed and stealth he could muster he glided downstairs, through the front hallway, disengaged the sensors and scrambled the cameras, then went out the door.

When he was sure he was far enough away from the training center he put the sensors and cameras back on-line again.

Before heading home, he pulled the little green pill from his pocket and shone his phone's flashlight on it so he could look at it for a moment. "What are you?" he questioned allowed.

He knew that something was going on with this medication. And he knew he had to find out, no matter what the consequence.

He just wasn't sure exactly how.



A COUPLE DAYS LATER DILLON FOUND HIMSELF STARING AT the strange little pill. He texted Derek the day before and told him that he needed to spend some time with his family as they were getting suspicious of his extra-curricular activities, and that he wasn't going to be able to make it to training for a few days. It wasn't a total lie as he noticed that Jordan seemed to keep a closer eye on him than he used to. But, as always, Jordan's suspicions never held as he would end up getting distracted by his social engagements, or some new game that came out.

It wasn't just Jordan though. Dad started asking more about his Dungeons and Dragons club and the things he

was doing. The lessons he was receiving from Chyna and Derek about thinking on his feet and gaining control of a conversation really helped him navigate these talks with Dad. The thing that kept stinging him though were the lies. He had never lied to his parents before about anything—at least nothing as important or big as this—but here he was, living a totally different life! The guilt pricked at him and he didn't like it, but he understood why he had to do it. It was for the greater good. At least that's what Derek kept telling him.

The thought of him being part of something bigger than his little world thrilled and yet scared him all at once. How could he, a thirteen year old, affect that much of a change? He didn't think he could, but others seemed to; at least Orion did, so they told him.

Of course, after he explained his concerns to Derek, the man lectured him about preparing for the mission. He even told Dillon that his Dad would be approached with the details of the vacation soon, and that he had to be ready to use the hypno-suggestive drug if necessary.

Dillon's stomach churned with the idea of drugging his Dad. The thought was almost unbearable! How could he do that?

His thoughts turned from the mission to Derek's green pill. He turned it around in his hand and absently shook his head. He didn't, for the life of him, know how he was going to find out what it was. He thought about his chemistry teachers in school, but dismissed that outright. He even laughed at the idea.

*Oh ya, I could totally see that conversation: Mr. Goodyear, could you please check the chemical properties of this pill?*

*What is it Dillon?*

*That's a great question! I'm hoping it's something normal like a*

*painkiller, antidepressant, or something like that and not anything weird like a pill that gives you superhuman strength, super intelligence, or the ability to fly!*

Dillon laughed at his own exaggerations. In truth he was hoping that it was something normal like a painkiller, but he had that gut feel that something *wasn't* normal about this.

As he thought more about it the answer came to him. Chyna! She was an *actual* chemist. How could he not have thought about her before? The only issue was that she seemed pretty indifferent to his questions about Derek's meds when he asked her about it earlier.

She said they were for his anxiety but Dillon didn't buy it. And he would have to convince Chyna that it was in their best interests to find out what these actually were.

"Dinner!" he heard Dad holler from from downstairs which ripped him from his thoughts.

He quickly stowed the pill in a cloth in his nightstand then jumped up and headed for the kitchen. His dilemma with Derek would have to wait until later.

"So how was school today?" Dad asked Dillon as he sat down.

"Oh, pretty good. Science is always interesting," he replied as he scooped up the mashed potatoes.

"Oh yeah? What are you learning in science?"

"Oh it's not the science itself, but actually Evan," he replied with a chuckle.

"Really? What has Evan done now?" Mom asked as she put some veggies on Gwen's plate. When she put the plate down and turned to focus her attention on Dillon he noticed that Gwen actually put some of the veggies back. He stifled back a chuckle that surely would have gotten Gwen in trouble.



“Well Evan accidentally created an explosive without even knowing it! Thankfully Mrs. Pike realized before it was too late.” He laughed, but noticed that Mom didn’t appear too impressed.

“I’m not sure about that boy,” she stated.

“Oh he’s fine.” Dillon waved his hand dismissively. “He’s harmless ... mostly.”

Mom didn’t look convinced.

“And how was your day Dad?” Dillon asked, trying to change the subject.

“Oh, not bad.” He looked as though something was bothering him. Dillon could read his Dad like an open book.

“What’s wrong?”

Dad stared at his plate for a moment before looking up.

“What is it honey?” Mom pressed, picking up Dillon’s cue.

“Well ... it’s actually a good thing, but I think the timing is all wrong. I was hoping to talk to you about it before I mentioned it to the kids.

“It’s okay honey, I’m sure we can talk about it now. What do you mean by timing? For what?” Mom asked.

“For a vacation.”

Those words rocked Dillon back! He knew he should have expected this, and that he shouldn’t have been shocked in the slightest, but he was. The shock probably came from the realization that the plan was now in motion, and exactly what he feared was coming to pass: Dad was on the edge of saying no!

“What vacation?” Jordan asked, suddenly looking up from his plate.

Dad sighed. “The Desert Oasis Resort is apparently

networking with a property in Playa Del Carmen Mexico and wants to send us there, free of charge in March.”

“What!” Jordan exclaimed, spraying bits of food from his mouth.

“Jordan! Manners!” Mom yelled.

Jordan ignored her and pressed on. “And you’re debating whether or not we should go?” he asked incredulously.

Dillon knew what he had to do. “Mom, I’ll be right back, I just need to go to the washroom.”

“Oh. Okay honey.”

Dillon was thankful that Jordan seemed distracted at this point as he didn’t need him being suspicious of him right now. Claire, however, looked at him suspiciously.

“Well it’s just that I like to, as you know, reserve my vacation time for later on in the year. You all know I have too much work to deal with at this time, especially this year. The forecast for our firm is looking really good, and I’d hate to leave and have others pick up the slack,” Dillon heard Dad say as he left the kitchen.

“But I think we can make an exception!” Jordan responded. “I mean ... this is Mexico! In the winter!”

“Honey, are you sure we can’t make an exception?” Mom asked, seeming as though her excitement was rising as well. “Or maybe you can ask them to allow us to take it in the summer instead of the winter?”

“I already asked. Unfortunately we have to take it now or lose it,” Dad’s voice trailed off as Dillon ran to his room.

He dashed inside, dove into his nightstand drawer, and extracted the pill. He looked at it for a moment and shook his head slightly not believing what he was about to do.

When he got back to the kitchen he was relieved to find

that the family was still discussing the opportunity before them. He walked up beside the table and made it look like he was going to pass by Dad when he tripped. As he went down he grabbed at the table, making sure to knock Dad's glass of water over.

"Hey!" Jordan scream as he got up. It wasn't just Dad's glass that he managed to tip, but also Jordan's. "Watch what you're doing klutz!"

"Oh ... sorry," he stammered as he unceremoniously got up. He looked over at Dad apologetically. "Here, let me get you more water."

Before Dad could say anything Dillon scooped up his glass and headed to the fridge. He pushed the glass up to the button on the fridge that would dispense the water and started to fill it up. As he did, he slipped the pill in and watched as it foamed up then dissipated in the water.

"What are you doing Dil?" he heard Jordan ask as he strode over.

"Wha ... What do you mean," he stammered.

Jordan came over and looked in the glass, then handed Dillon his empty one. "Here. Fill mine up too," he said as he glanced at Dillon with that penetrating stare he often used when suspecting that something was up with his brother.

"What are *you* doing man!" Dillon exclaimed as indignantly as he could, then pressed Jordan's glass up to the fridge.

Dillon could feel Jordan's gaze locked on him as he headed back through the door to the dining room.

He filled up the second glass then went to the counter and put them down while he searched for a towel. When he got back to the counter he froze as he stared at the glasses of water. *Which one is Dad's!* he exclaimed to himself.

“No, no, no, no,” he mouthed aloud as he bent down and looked into the clear liquid of both glasses. They looked exactly the same!

He went through his head and tried to piece together the details of the last few minutes but he just couldn't remember which one was which. The worst part was that he knew he was taking longer than he should and was sure that Jordan was going to suspect that something was up if he didn't get back to the table soon. Finally he decided to just grab the glasses and hope that he had chosen correctly.

He took a deep breath and composed himself as he placed the water down before Dad.

*No!* he heard in his head. Before Dad could grab it he scooped it back up.

“Sorry Dad, I just remembered that's Jordan's glass. Here you go,” he said as he replaced it with the other one.

“Thanks Dillon,” Dad said as he took the water.

“No problem. It was my fault anyway. I'm just sorry I made such a mess.”

After giving Jordan his water he dried up as much of the spill as he could then sat back down. Jordan eyed him for a moment, but then resumed eating his meal. He watched Dad take a big drink of water out of the corner of his eye. He tried to keep his eyes down as the guilt began to sting him like a hot knife.

“It's okay if we can't go on the trip,” Mom said, picking up the conversation where it left off before Dillon's accident. “We understand about your demands at work and that sometimes the timing is just off.”

Gwen groaned and Jordan sighed heavily in disappointment. Claire, on the other hand, had an uncharacteristically emotionless expression that made it hard for anyone to read her thoughts. Dillon knew he had to say

something in order to get the drug working so he could salvage the situation, just like he was taught by Derek.

“Don’t you think it would be a great idea to go some place warm for the winter Dad?” he asked.

Dad looked as though he was about to respond, then he paused as if he was deep in thought.

“I mean, an opportunity like this doesn’t come along often, if ever,” he continued, gaining confidence that something was happening with the drug. “Don’t you think we should accept this gift and appreciate it for the benefit of the whole family? I mean ... how many times do you think we will have the chance to go on an epic *free* trip like this?”

“Dillon. Your Dad has already made his decision and we—”

“You know Dillon, I think you’re absolutely right,” Dad cut Mom off.

Mom cocked her head and looked at him curiously. “Dear?”

“It’s okay. I’m sure my boss will give me the time off.” He looked around at the whole family, almost as though he was in a daze, but still in control. Dillon noticed it because he knew what was happening, but the look was so subtle that he knew no one else would pick up on it. The rest of the family was silent. Claire even had her mouth opened in shock. It wasn’t often that Dad was able to be swayed after he had made a decision about something!

“Besides, Dillon is right. We don’t get these opportunities very often and it would be foolish for us to let it slip by,” he finished.

Everyone looked around at each other for a moment then broke out into cheers and laughter—everyone that is, except Dillon. Dillon’s stomach was twisted up inside. He felt like he would be sick. Dad merely began eating his

dinner again as the others chattered excitedly about what they were planning to do in Mexico.

Dillon hung his head over his plate and took a couple mouthfuls of food, then abruptly got up. "I have to go to the washroom again," he declared, then briskly walked from the room.

He ran to the washroom and closed the door. He sat on the edge of the toilet rocking back and forth as tears formed in his eyes. He knew he needed to do that for the mission, but he felt awful!

As he sat there in the silence he heard the text chime sound on his phone. He took it from his pocket and, as he glanced at the screen, his heart sank and he sucked in his breath as he read the text from Jordan.

*"I know you're up to something!"*

## CONFESSION AND FRIENDSHIP

Dillon stared up at the massive demonic-looking face that was carved into the stone. It had large uneven eyes, and the mouth was full of jagged looking teeth. Recessed into the carving was a large open doorway. All that could be seen within was darkness.

Dillon looked around to see where he was, but everything seemed foggy. He sensed that he was high up but wasn't sure as he couldn't view what was beyond the railing that encompassed the landing he was on.

"Hssst!" Dillon suddenly heard come from the darkness. The sound startled him and caused his heart to skip a beat and jump back a few feet.

He crouched down and narrowed his eyes, trying to look more intently into the darkness.

"What are you doing Dillon?" a girl's voice asked from the side.

Dillon spun around and there, standing not more than three feet from him was Gwen!

"Don't worry Dil, I know you'll be able to find me,"

she said in a somber, flat, voice as she walked toward the darkness.

“No!” Dillon yelled as he reached out for her, but he was too late. Gwen slipped by him and disappeared into the darkened doorway. He tried to step toward the darkness but his feet wouldn’t respond to his commands.

“No!” he cried out again, this time in frustration.

He heard a high-pitched raspy laugh coming from the shadows. It started quietly then began to gain in volume. As it got louder the pitch got lower until it was a low, guttural, demonic laugh. He cupped his ears, fell to his knees, and put his head down, trying to escape the horrific sound. After a moment of the taunting laughter he dared to look up.

That was when he saw them. Bright white eyes in the darkness. Then the darkness around the eyes began to dissipate revealing ... a carved blue mask.



DILLON ROLLED OVER AND TRIED TO CATCH HIS BREATH. Beads of sweat rolled from his forehead. It took a moment for him to realize that he was safe in his bedroom. There was no demonic face, no doorway into darkness, no missing Gwen, and no horrifying laughter.

He pulled himself from the bed, stumbled out of his room, and to the washroom. After splashing some cold water on his face in order to more fully wake himself he glanced up into the mirror.

“You look awful,” he mumbled to himself.

He ran his hand through his dirty blonde hair before cupping some more water and splashing it onto his face and head.



*I don't think I can keep doing this,* he silently remarked to himself.

Even though these dream incidents weren't frequent, they still disturbed the young boy. He knew, through experience, that at some point in the near future he was going to be facing a door with a demonic head around it and Gwen would probably be dragged into this whole thing again.

*Great! That's reassuring. Why couldn't I have some superpower that's simple like super strength or speed. At least then I would know my limitations and be able to activate it at my own will. But no, I have to have strange dreams that don't always tell the whole story,* he thought sarcastically.

*But Dillon, you can find stuff!,* he continued in his head using Derek's voice sarcastically.

"Great!" he mouthed aloud. "I notice things that should be impossible to notice," he said deprecatingly.

He sat on the edge of the bed staring at the floor. "I'm a mess."

His thoughts were all over the place. He knew he was going on this mission whether he wanted to or not. There was nothing he could do about it and that's what troubled him the most. He no longer had a choice, and he couldn't share any of this with anyone.

As he thought more about it his thoughts kept drifting to Sarah. He hadn't spent as much time with her as he wanted. But every free moment he got he did hang out with her and those moments were always a breath of fresh air. He imagined her smile and bright eyes beaming at him. Whenever he said anything that was goofy or classically "Dillon" she would put her hands on her hips, roll her eyes, and give him this sassy look that said, "You're such a goof, but I love it!"

The more Dillon thought about it, the more he realized that he needed to share this with Sarah, despite his previous inhibitions to do so. He knew it was the right thing to do and right now, with all the lies, living a second life, and medicating his Dad, he needed to do something good, something right. This was right.

Later that day Dillon found himself swaying lazily on the swing set that was in the park near his house. Sarah was beside him chattering away about some of the stuff that was going on in her world. Dillon just listened. It was nice to hear her voice and to see her exuberance. He almost couldn't believe how little time he spent with her these past months. With all the stress he was going through he knew he needed this. He needed his friend.

"So what do you think Dil?"

The question caught Dillon by surprise which made him realize that he must have drifted off in his thoughts and missed what she was saying.

"Were you even listening to me?" she asked accusingly, but half jokingly.

"Oh ... ya ... I was totally listening to everything," Dillon replied enthusiastically. "You were telling me how your house was attacked by terrorists and you managed to fight them off before the police arrived, which was really awkward for them, as a thirteen year old girl did their job for them." He smiled.

Sarah punched him in the arm playfully. "You're such a nerd!"

"Ya, and that's why you love me. Uh ... I mean ... like me ... because I'm your best friend," Dillon stumbled.

Sarah smiled as he tripped all over himself. He knew that she was enjoying this as much as he enjoyed her stum-

bling all over herself at the beginning of the school year when she made the comment about loving him.

The two laughed. After they settled back again, Sarah looked at Dillon seriously. “So what was it that you wanted to talk to me about?”

Dillon shuffled uncomfortably. He wasn’t sure even where to begin. He knew he should have had this conversation with her a long time ago, right when he got back from Desert Oasis Resort, just like he planned. Unfortunately, he chickened out and lost the opportunity. But now, here they were.

“I ... um ... need to share something with you,” he began.

Sarah became very focused at that moment, even leaning in a little, but didn’t say anything.

Dillon swallowed and continued. “Remember how you’re always telling me that it’s kinda creepy that I find stuff?”

“Ya.”

“Well, there are other people who think that this ability is something that is useful.”

“What other people?”

Dillon looked up and started to absently fumbled with the zipper on his jacket. He wasn’t sure exactly what he wanted to say, or how he was going to say it, so he just looked straight at her and blurted it out. “I was conscripted by a secret organization called Orion and now I’m working with them to help keep the forces of evil at bay in the world ... I think.” Even to him that explanation sounded ridiculous!

Sarah looked at him for a long moment then got really serious. “That’s not funny Dil,” she said accusingly. “Your

pretend adventures are one thing, but lying to me about this! That's low."

She got up and started to storm away when Dillon caught her by the arm. "No. It's true. Every word of it. Orion sent my family up to go to the Desert Oasis Resort so I could help them find John Taylor Sebastian. I was contacted by an agent named Derek and together we were able to find John."

"Enough Dillon!" Sarah screamed at him. "I don't want to hear any more of this! I don't know what's gotten into you but—"

She stopped in mid sentence as Dillon thrust a note in her hand.

"What is this?"

"Just look at it. You'll see."

She unfolded the paper and began to read it. It was the letter that Derek had given Dillon at the end of his time at Desert Oasis Resort. She looked up after reading it. "And you expect me to believe that this was given to you by Derek Vico of the Orion Group?" she asked skeptically.

Dillon nodded and pulled out the phone that Derek had given him at Christmas. "I also have this."

"Your phone?" She rolled her eyes.

"It's not my old phone, but a special one that was given to me by Orion," he explained.

Sarah scoffed.

"No really. Look at this." He began showing her the features the phone had and he could tell from the expression on her face that she was beginning to realize that this was not your ordinary cell phone. She stared him in the eyes for a long and intense moment. Dillon felt as though his life was hanging within the crucible of judgment.

"So why haven't you told me any of this before?"

Sarah asked with a tone of hurt in her voice as she sat back down again.

Dillon shuffled his feet. “Because I didn’t want you to get drawn into this. You saw from the letter that Jordan was already a part of the events that happened to me at the resort. And Gwen as well, even though their memories were taken from them. I just couldn’t imagine what would happen to you if you knew.” He thought about telling her about the mine incident, and that her memories were taken as well, but quickly ruled against that. He really didn’t know how she would respond to that additional—disturbing—information and didn’t want to take that chance.

Sarah got up again and turned away as if she was going to storm off, but then stopped. She looked back at him. “Why are you telling me this now then?”

“Because ... I ... um ...”

“Well?” Her impatience seemed to be rising with every moment.

“Because I need someone I can trust to talk to,” Dillon finally blurted out. “I need my friend to understand why I haven’t been able to hang out, and why I’m acting weirder than normal.”

Sarah frustration seemed to ease and she offered him a soft smile. “You can tell me Dillon,” she said sweetly.

The two moved over to the Jungle-Gym, sat down, and Dillon told her everything. She sat there patiently letting him explain what has happened to him since his family got the free trip to Desert Oasis Resort.

She had shocked expressions at times, particularly when Dillon told her about the coyotes and other creatures at the resort. Dillon’s eyes filled with tears when he spoke

of how he defeated Troy, and that he had killed the man-turned-monster.

Sarah leaned over and gave him hug as he began to sob, recalling that incident as though it happened yesterday. After recovering from the story he explained to her what he found at the mine, gauging her reaction to see if she remembered any of that.

She slapped him hard on the shoulder. "I told you not to go there!" she yelled.

"I had no choice," he replied weakly, realizing to his relief that he now had his answer.

"What do you mean? Of course you have a choice."

Dillon searched his mind for a good illustration he could use to explain it to her. "It's like an addiction."

"What! Like drugs?"

Dillon realized that the illustration was probably not the best one he could use, but he pressed on anyway. "It's not an actual addiction in that way, but a strong compulsion to follow the feeling you have."

He sighed. "I know it sounds crazy."

"Ya! Maybe a little Dil!"

"Well it get's crazier."

Sarah stared at him with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

"I think ..." He paused, not knowing how to explain what he was about to, or if he should even say anything. "I think ..."

"Yes. What is it Dil?" Sarah asked, changing her tone to one of comfort.

Dillon looked at her, a pained expression upon his face. He had never told anyone what he was about to tell Sarah, not even Derek. "I think ... I think there is something, or someone else, that is helping me. A woman."

“A woman?” Sarah asked skeptically. “Is helping you? Who? How?”

Dillon shook his head. “I don’t know, but I’ve heard her ... in ... in my head.” *Wow! That didn’t sound right at all!* Dillon thought to himself.

“So, let me get all this straight. Because you can find things, Orion arranged last year’s vacation for your family. You found a mind-altering chemical set to be unleashed on the world. Now, Orion is training you and preparing you for more missions?” Sarah leaned back and stared at Dillon with those large brown eyes.

He nodded and swallowed. He felt like he might fall over at any moment. Then, she moved in and hugged him tight. “Whatever this is, Dil, I’ll help you in any way I can.”

Dillon felt as though he was about to fall over! The weight that was just lifted off his chest was enormous! He never dreamed of how good it would be to share his life and struggles with someone, and he was happy that it was Sarah.

After a long hug Dillon pulled away and told her the rest of what had been happening to him these past months: his encounter with Claire, his encounter with Mr. Dirks, his training, the next mission, and his most recent dream. He left out the part about having to drug his Dad as he still couldn’t come to grips with that yet.

When he was done the two of them just sat there in silence for a long while. Sarah threaded her fingers in his and they just held hands. Normally this would have felt weird to Dillon, but, for whatever reason, it didn’t. In fact, it felt right, even though Dillon couldn’t explain it.

He looked over at Sarah. She smiled softly at him. Their faces were only inches apart. Dillon’s heart started to pound as he noticed that they were moving closer to each

other. It felt as though an outside cosmic force was bringing them together, a force that couldn't be broken. The distance closed. He felt her breath on his face and could smell her sweet fragrance.

*What is happening?* he screamed to himself. Then he heard the woman's voice in his head again. *Just go with it*, she said in a playful tone. All at once Dillon's inhibitions and doubts about telling Sarah the truth melted away in that beautiful moment.

Their lips were only an inch away from each other when suddenly his phone chimed loudly. They both jumped back. Sarah blushed as she let go of Dillon's hand.

He looked down and saw an alert: "We need you Dillon!"



MEXICO

“**S**o this is what we know,” Derek stated as he pulled up the Power Point. “The staff which you found is known as the Staff of Haraset, an ancient artifact that’s from Mexico.

“Some believe that the Mayan’s used the properties of the minerals which are contained within the construction of the staff’s head to make elixirs of healing, strength, speed, etc, but we believe those reports are false. Our researchers have dug into every piece of literature they can find on the thing, which isn’t much as the Spanish Conquistadors destroyed most of the Mayan’s written material. There are actually only three Mayan books left in existence: one in Spain, one in France, and one in Germany. Interestingly enough though, some of our knowledge of this staff actually came from some of the Spanish Conquistador writings themselves, and some of it comes from depictions on slabs of stone. It’s not a lot of information but we managed to verify that the staff’s metal is unique and is somehow connected to an item called The

Mask of Time: an object that some say—even though it’s unsubstantiated—has the ability of foresight.”

Dillon put up his hand. “You mean like telling the future?”

“Yes Dillon. That’s exactly what I mean,” Derek replied without missing a beat. “Our scientists and historians, after examining the staff, have determined that it’s probably the thing the Mayan’s used to make the Mask, or at least a portion of it. We theorize that it was created so that someone could transcend life, death, time, and space in order to tell what is going to come to pass and then react before that happens.”

“The Mask of Time?” Chyna asked as she arched her eyebrows. Her tone almost sounded skeptical.

Derek smiled at her. “Yes Chyna, The Mask of Time.” He moved through some slides that had depictions of the mask drawn on ancient tablets. “I know that you’re probably skeptical about this stuff as you’re fairly new to field work and haven’t seen much action yet, but Dillon and I have seen things that make this story sound plausible to us, the things you yourself have read in my reports from the resort. And I know it’s one thing to read about those experiences and quite another to *live* them.”

Dillon nodded his head up and down vigorously, looking almost like one of those bobblehead dolls.

“The things we hunt often sound like fairy tales,” Derek continued. “but there is usually more truth to them than anyone would like to admit. You’ll see when you get fully out into the field.”

Chyna shrugged. “So if this mask is supposed to tell the future then why didn’t the Mayan’s use it to avoid the conquest of the Conquistadors?”

“Maybe they did,” Derek stated, “at least to a limited

extent. Some of the Mayan city's, of which there were hundreds, if not thousands, were suddenly abandoned without any understanding as to why. Some speculate a number of different possibilities but no one is really sure. Maybe they saw something and left? We don't really know."

"So how did the staff get all the way up here then?" Dillon asked.

"That's a great question, but, unfortunately, it's one we aren't able to fully understand. We think it was stolen somehow and made its way from Central America into North America via trade, merchants, and such. But no one can be dogmatic about that."

Dillon shot his hand up again. "What does dogmatic mean?"

Derek laughed. Despite all his efforts to make sure Jake and others at Orion remember that Dillon is only thirteen he just used a term that no thirteen year old has probably ever heard.

"It means that we can't be a hundred percent sure," Chyna chimed in. "Dogmatism is the belief that your position is the only true one."

"Oh. Okay," replied Dillon.

Derek nodded at Chyna and continued. "Our operatives have found evidence that the Mask of Time does exist, and that it is near a place called Ek' Balam, Mexico.

"Ek' Balam—which means Black Jaguar—is an ancient Mayan city site that was rediscovered by an Archeologist in the 1800's with a long French name, but we'll just call him Charnay. Then, in the 1980's to 1990's two other guys named Ringle and Bey continued to expand their research. And no, Dillon, Ringle and Bey are not a pop music group, comedians, or magicians."

Dillon laughed, and Chyna smiled.

“The problem was,” he continued, “that the site is quite large and there still remains un-excavated buildings around the area. These endeavours are quite expensive and time-consuming.

“What that means for us is that we need to figure out, amongst all the buildings on site—excavated or not—which one houses the Mask of Time.”

Dillon put up his hand again.

“Dillon, you’re not in school. You don’t have to put up your hand every time you have a question,” Derek stated.

*It feels like I’m in school*, Dillon thought, but didn’t say. “How do we know that the Mask is in Ek’ Balam?”

Derek smiled, then flipped to the next slide. It was a picture of the Staff, more specifically, the head of the staff with its strange design. Near the bottom of the head, on the handle, were dots in a seemingly indiscriminate pattern. Along with those dots was strange writing. “You see this,” Derek said, pointing to the dots and the writing. “Our scholars tell us that this is ancient Mayan which translates to solar coordinates which point to this site.

“The ancient peoples of Central America were astronomers. They used the stars for navigation and location. Without getting lost in the details, as I just said, they have found solar coordinates that lead to this place.”

Dillon felt sick to his stomach as his mind began to work through the obvious question about the staff. Derek turned to the next slide which showed a slab of stone that had the very same kind of writing on it.

“This is a piece of stone that currently exists at the same site, except for the fact that the image of the glyphs—which is how the Mayan’s wrote—had been digitally extrapolated and reconstructed by our tech department.

The actual stone is so weathered that you can't make this out clearly, but, with our modern tech, we were able to get the faded stone to reveal its story to us once again. And that story is connected with the Staff of Haraset."

Dillon's face paled when he saw the stone slab. It was the one from his dream! He knew it was! And there was a connection with the staff and the stone? He knew he needed to ask the question.

"So now onto—"

"I had a dream about this stone slab," Dillon blurted before Derek could continue. "It was one of *those* dreams."

Derek and Chyna were both silent. It was as though all of the air just got sucked out of the room. "You've seen this in your dream? What happened?" Derek asked.

"I pulled the top off the staff and pressed it into the stone. It opened up and showed me a key."

Derek looked satisfied. "So, the question isn't what do we need the staff for. The question is where's the lock that key belongs to?"

"You said that the staff contains coordinates, and that's where you were able to find the city right?" Dillon asked.

Derek nodded.

"Then there must be a way of finding out what building has the door for this key?" Dillon reasoned. "What else were the Mayan's into?"

Derek and Chyna looked at each other. "From everything I've read they were also into calendars, solar positioning, and mathematics," Chyna offered.

"Solar positioning?" Dillon asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well ... they had a solid understanding of the seasons and circular rotations of the sun; it was actually a part of their religious system of rebirth and renewal. If I

remember correctly, they positioned all the faces of their temples to face exactly North, East, South, and West, and were able to tell when the equinox's and solstices happened by the shadows which displayed on those temples."

"Now you're getting ahead of me," Derek interjected. "The briefing does mention that the intel we've gained points to the fact that the only time to be able to identify which building the mask is in is during either an equinox or solstice, but it doesn't mention why."

"Well what if the staff is both the item that finds the key *and* the building?" Dillon asked.

"We're listening," Derek said.

Dillon stood up and began to pace, trying to collect his thoughts. "What if the staff is also a gnomon?" he looked at the both of them as he spoke excitedly.

"A g what?" Derek asked confused.

"A gnomon," Dillon stated again. "You know, the rod of a sundial. My friend Evan and I built one earlier this year, in that field where you saved me from Mr. Dirks. Except that this sundial, instead of telling time, would point to the place the mask is which is why we can only use it on the equinoxes and solstices."

"That's a great theory Dillon, but how do you prove it?" Chyna asked.

"Because in the same dream that I had about the stone slab and key I also saw a flash of sunlight and a beam of shadow that emanated from the staff. I wasn't sure what it meant at the time, but now I am. There has to be some sort of sundial structure in those ruins as well."

"Okay, so how do we find this sundial?" Derek asked.

Dillon shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe the answer will come clear to us when we're there? But I am certain it exists."

Derek and Chyna looked at each other and then back to Dillon. "Okay," Derek replied. "It's not much to go on, but you've demonstrated your abilities in finding clues over and over and I trust that your powers will not let us down."

Dillon sat back down. He still had a nagging question he had to ask. Derek was about to continue when he spoke up again. "Derek, before you continue somethings been bothering me."

"What is it?"

"I need to know how it's possible that this Staff just happened to be in an abandoned mine only a few miles from my house?" he queried. "And how is it that I just *happened* to find it? I mean ... doesn't this just feel a little coincidental to you guys?"

It felt as though he had just dropped a bomb. Derek and Chyna stared at him for what seemed a long time, but in reality it was only a few seconds.

Finally the man sighed. "Well Dillon, that's the million dollar question everyone at Orion has been trying to answer since we found you. How is it that you are drawn to this stuff? Or is it that it's drawn to you?"

A shiver went up Dillon's spine. He had never thought about it that way before. Was he drawn to this weirdness, or was it drawn to him? "So what you're saying is that there's something supernatural at work here?" Dillon asked skeptically.

"I don't know. But what I do know is that there's lots about the world that I don't understand. There's lots that you don't understand," Derek stated. "I've seen some pretty strange stuff in my short years on the Earth. Maybe there is such a thing as fate, or destiny, or divine providence?"

"No one that I've spoken with about this has given me

any satisfactory answers as I asked the same question you just did. All I do know is that there's something big happening here and now, and we all have our parts to play.

"Regarding the dream: I would say that's confirmation that we're on the right track, wouldn't you?"

Dillon thought that Derek's speech—or pep talk if you could call it that—was pretty good, but it did nothing to ease his mind or his fears.

Chyna put a hand on his shoulder and smiled warmly. "We're with you in this," she reassured. "Until the end."

Dillon smiled back weakly, trying to look confident but knowing he failed miserably.

*What end is that?*

After the presentation was over Derek began to lay out the mission details. "So this is how I see the mission working. We'll make sure your parents have a trip booked to Ek' Balam on the nineteenth of March—the spring equinox. It's a day early this year due to the leap year. Chyna and I will come along as tourists. Your job, Dillon will be to find the stones and discover what you can about the key. We also need you to see if you can find the sundial. Once you discover where you think the sundial is you are to text Chyna with that information. She will have the staff with her."

"Obviously without the head piece," Chyna interjected.

Derek nodded. "Exactly. I'm sure you can pass it off as an ordinary object—maybe a walking stick or something."

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it."

"Good. So your part of the mission is to find out what building the shadow points to so we can find out where the mask is located," Derek continued.

"What if I can't find out where the sundial is?" Dillon



asked. He felt his anxiety beginning to rise with the pressure that was being placed on him.

“I know you will,” replied Derek without losing a beat. “I have faith in you. You just need to have faith in yourself.”

Dillon swallowed hard. He appreciated that Derek believed he could do this, and a part of him said that he could as well, but the other side of him continued to dredge up fear and anxiety. He pushed those feelings away and tried to focus on the rest of the briefing.

“And what are you going to be doing?” Chyna asked.

“I’m going to be taking up an overwatch position just outside of the main site in order to watch your backs.

“Anymore questions?” he asked.

Dillon and Chyna both shook their heads.

“Great. Once we get the intel we need from Dillon, and Chyna hopefully discovers the location of the mask, we will convene and debrief later that night in order to map out the next phase of the plan.”

“Which is?” Dillon heard himself ask even though he knew the answer to the question.

Derek smiled. “We go in and get the mask.”

“Just like that?” replied Dillon dryly.

“Probably not,” Derek stated matter-of-factly, “but that’s always the exciting part about these missions: the unknown factors; that is, you just never know how it’s going to turn out and what obstacles we might face.”

Dillon didn’t like the sound of that, but he wasn’t totally shocked by it. After all, that’s pretty much how things happened at Desert Oasis Resort.

“There’s one more thing that I thought you two should know,” Derek stated before continuing with the briefing. “Orion considers this a low priority mission which means

they don't suspect any outside influence and won't be able to devote any more resources to it. So it's just us."

Dillon wasn't sure what to make of that statement. Should he feel good that it's low priority which logically means it should be less dangerous? Was Derek telling him this in order to calm his nerves? He just wasn't sure and didn't know if he should ask so he just kept quiet.

After the briefing Dillon found himself alone with Chyna. He knew that now would probably be the best, and maybe only time, for him to approach her about Derek's pills. He reached into his pocket and was about to pull it out when he heard a woman's voice in his head. *No* it whispered.

"No?" Dillon instinctively said aloud, startled by the sound in his mind.

"What was that?" Chyna asked as she walked over to him with two glasses of orange juice.

"What?" Dillon responded.

"You said something."

"Oh, I must have ... um ... been thinking about something then spoke aloud," Dillon replied. "It's something I do once in a while. You'll get used to it, or creeped out by it," he laughed.

Chyna smiled warmly and handed him his glass.

*Not her*, the voice said, which caused Dillon to jump a bit.

"Are you alright Dillon?"

Oh ... ya ... I'm totally okay. Not losing my mind at all."

Chyna looked at him quizzically.

"Thanks for the juice," he said as he put it down on the coffee table. "But I have to run." He darted for his jacket and backpack.

“Oh ... okay. You don't need a ride home?”

“No. I'm fine. It's a nice day for a walk.”

“Okay. I guess we'll see you in Mexico then.”

“Ya. In Mexico!” the young boy reiterated as he dashed out the door, feeling as though he was losing his mind.

*What is happening to me?* Hearing the voice unnerved the boy, even though she—whoever she was, which could very well be some sort of manifestation of him losing his mind—had helped him out in the past. He didn't think he would ever get used to hearing an audible voice in his head, especially since she seemed to show up without warning.



“THIS IS PRETTY COOL, ISN'T IT?” MOM BEAMED AS THEY all exited the bus at the resort. “Especially since it's so close to your birthday Dillon.”

Dillon smiled back. He soaked in all the fresh smells from the surrounding palm trees, flowers, and especially the Caribbean Sea. The resort they were at was right on the water. The warmth of the sun hit him, penetrating his every pore, melting away all his chills from the winter they had left behind. Despite the fact that he was actually in Mexico on a secret mission with Orion, he knew he was going to like it here. It was also pretty cool that his birthday was only three days away! Soon he would be fourteen. So much had happened to him in the last two years that he felt much older than fourteen, but he tried not to let that distract him from enjoying the beautiful, humid, weather.

Jordan walked by him as though he was invisible. His eyes were fixed on all the beautiful girls that mingled around in the sun. He turned back and looked at Mom. “I

know I'm going to like this place," he said with a smile that took in his ears.

"Easy Jordan," Dad said with a chuckle.

Mom frowned, Claire rolled her eyes and growled as she pushed by Jordan, and Gwen giggled.

It took an hour for the Hunts to get checked in and settled in their rooms. Mom and Dad narrowly avoided the executive club membership speech, mainly because Gwen was so bouncy, and none of the kids wanted to take care of her when she was in that state, thus leaving her with their parents. This time it worked in their favour as they were able to duck out of the spiel using her as an excuse.

Dillon and Jordan had their bags laid out in their room, claimed their beds, and had changed into more comfortable clothes. "I'm heading to the pool," Jordan declared to Dillon as he stepped toward the door.

"Oh ... okay ... I'll be there in a moment," Dillon replied. "I just want to sort a few things out with my luggage."

"Whatever." Jordan waved his hand dismissively as he walked out.

After Jordan had left the room, Dillon pulled his phone out and called Derek.

"I see that you're settled," the agent said as he answered.

"What? No: Hi. How was the flight? Did you enjoy the meals? It's good that you haven't been killed yet. Don't forget to drink bottled water as you don't want to get explosive diarrhea." Dillon responded sarcastically.

"Ya," Derek replied dryly. "Listen, we don't have much time. We have booked you and the family an excursion to Ek' Balam for tomorrow morning. Chyna and I will be on the bus with you as tourists.

“Once we get there we need you to get away from your family for a bit as you investigate the stone slab.

“As I mentioned in the briefing, it’s one of the exhibits on the site that they unearthed. You need to look around it and see what you can find, then we’ll debrief later that night.”

Dillon took a deep breath as he could feel himself getting anxious about his task.

“You okay Dillon?” Derek asked. He must have felt Dillon’s anxiety as the boy was quiet for a moment.

“Ya, I’m fine. Just trying to focus and process what I’m supposed to do.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll do fine,” Derek reassured.

Dillon's stomach clenched as he thought of everything that could go wrong. At least at Desert Oasis, he only had to react. All of this knowing beforehand was freaking him out a bit. It was new territory for a boy who always accidentally found things and accidentally solved puzzles. Now, they wanted him to do it on purpose—and he didn't even know if he could. Doubt and second-guessing churned in his belly, and Dillon didn't know how to handle it. He'd never had to before. “Thanks,” he replied, hung up the phone, then promptly ran to the washroom and threw up.



DOUGLAS TURNER LOOKED AROUND NERVOUSLY AS HE grabbed the handle and opened the door. He found himself in a small dimly lit room that had filing cabinets tightly packed against every square inch of the walls. Leaning casually against the far cabinet was Jake who appeared to be skimming through a file. The man looked up when he saw Douglas, smiled, and closed the file.

“Douglas. I trust you are well?”

Douglas grunted, not impressed at all. After Jake had discovered his secret alliance with Tower Six through his interrogation of Jacob Griffin, the man found himself in an even more precarious situation than before. Instead of just being a traitor to Orion, he was now a traitor to them *and* Tower Six as Jake was now his puppet master, pulling his strings whichever way he wanted to.

“I did what you asked,” Douglas stated with a frown.

“Come, come, Turner. We both know that it’s better this way,” Jake replied smoothly. “I could have just turned you over to Kace, or one of the other heads of Orion for them to decide your fate which would have been much worse. Trust me.”

Douglas snorted. He also caught the fact that Jake had just used his last name when referring to him. He dropped the familiar term of his first name for the more distant, professional, designation. To most people the change of reference wouldn’t have been a big deal, but Douglas knew Jake, and further knew that every word Jake used was carefully selected and was said for a particular reason. The change of reference signified that he was a tool now; one that Jake would use for his own purposes.

“Good,” Jake purred as he walked right up to the man. “And they didn’t suspect a thing?”

Douglas looked away from the ever-penetrating gaze of the man. “Of course not,” he said disdainfully.

Jake walked over and patted him on the shoulder.

Douglas turned to look at the man again. “I just don’t understand why you wanted Tower Six to know that the boy and his handlers are in Mexico, and exactly where they are.

“You know they’re going to send operatives and try to

take what it is that Orion is after. And they might even harm or kill the boy and his handlers.” Douglas was shocked to find that he was actually sickened by Jake’s move here. Sure, he had betrayed Orion by feeding little pieces of information to Tower Six for a price, but it wasn’t major intel like what Jake had coerced him to do. He was beginning to think that maybe he should turn Jake in, but then remembered that he would go down too and the risk for him was too great, especially this close to retirement.

“What are you up to?” he dared to ask.

Jake merely smiled. “It’s all part of the plan to stop the Revolution.”

Douglas scoffed. “You or I don’t even know what this Revolution is that the Tower is planning. How are you going to stop it?”

“Just watch and see,” the man responded coolly. “Just watch and see.”

DREAMS AND REVELATIONS

“**D**illon!”

The sound pierced the darkness like a bolt of lighting. Dillon’s heart pounded furiously. He couldn’t see where he was: the darkness was so thick that everything around him was practically invisible, even his hand in front of his face. The one sense that was jacked up was his hearing and he definitely—clearly—heard the scream. The scream of his sister!

“Gwen!” he shouted back into the blackness.

“Dillon!” It sounded further away now, somehow moving far from him.

He took a step toward where he thought the scream was coming from but suddenly jerked back as something grabbed his throat. It was strong. Really strong! Whatever it was lifted him off the ground.

“You can’t save your sister,” a deep-throated voice from out of the darkness told him. He knew that voice but it couldn’t be him!

He nearly gagged when he smelled the foul breath coming from the creature in the blackness. He knew it was



Troy from Desert Oasis Resort. All hope at that moment fled from him. Instead of being this special agent trained by Orion who had powers that had been his ally these past years, he was just a frightened little boy who wanted to go home with his family and forget that these events ever happened.

“Gwen,” he managed to whisper as the air supply to his lungs was being slowly cut off by the iron grip.

“Gwen,” he said one last time before he fell into another type of darkness.



DILLON'S EYES SHOT OPEN AS HE INHALED DEEPLY. HE TOOK a few more sucking breaths as he climbed out of his bed. After getting his breathing under control he glanced over to see that Jordan was still soundly snoring away in the bed opposite to his.

He grabbed his phone from the coffee table, slipped his sandals on, and promptly exited the room as quietly as he could. As soon as he was far enough away he dialed Derek.

“Ya,” a groggy Derek said as he answered the phone. “What is it Dillon?”

“Dude! I just had another horrifying dream that seemed so real but it couldn't be! I can't do this!”

“Whoa. Just hang on a minute,” Derek replied, seemingly instantly awake now. “Where are you? I'll come and see you and we'll talk.”

“I don't want to talk anymore Derek. I want my life back. I don't want my sister to get hurt. I don't want this *power* I have!”

“Where are you Dillon?”

Dillon was silent for a minute. “You don't understand, Derek. Gwen will die. I have to be done.”

“Dillon—”

Dillon hung up the phone. His heart still raced from the dream. He was too amped up to go to bed. His feet carried him down to the all night buffet.

The night air was actually quite warm, and the smells of the flowers along the path seemed to calm Dillon's troubled spirit. There were a lot more people out and about than the boy ever expected would be at this hour. He appreciated that, since the last thing he wanted to be right now was alone. The dream had troubled him more than any other up to this point as he was now fearing for his life and the life of his sister. And why was Troy in there? *What's happening? This can't be right! I'm so confused.*

He made it to the large outdoor buffet. The smells of the foods drifted on the light breeze to Dillon's nose. He inhaled deeply. It wasn't gourmet food by any stretch, but it was exactly what he wanted: crispy chicken, fries, hotdogs, burgers, non-stop soda, and such. He gathered up a plate full of the delicious food then found a table to plop down at.

“So, what's going on?” Derek asked as he approached the table.

Dillon stared at him, food halfway to his mouth. “How—”

“Come on, Dillon, you don't think we'd give you that phone without having a tracker in it, do you?”

Derek was wearing kakis shorts, a plain black shirt, and an Under Armour ball cap. He slid into the chair across from the boy.

“So what's going on?” Derek asked again.

That was one of the things Dillon really liked about the man: he was forthright. He always got right to the point.

Dillon swallowed the chicken before answering. "I'm done," he declared as he put the bone on the plate.

"What do you mean: you're done?"

"I've had it with this. These dreams. I've never been afraid of my pillow before until I got mixed up with Orion and these 'powers' started manifesting themselves. Now I'm afraid of what may happen when we go to Ek' Blamo, or whatever it's called."

Derek smirked a little when he purposefully mispronounced Ek' Balam, since Dillon has pronounced it correctly several times before. Then his expression got really serious again. "I know how you're feeling, Dillon. I walked away from this work after the death of my wife. I thought that Orion had taken her from me. I became bitter and mean. I didn't want to live anymore. But, in time, I realized that I was so hurt and alone that I lashed out at everyone and anyone I could. It was a terrible time in my life. All was darkness."

"What did you do?" Dillon asked, being drawn into the man's complexities.

"I found the truth that the very people I lashed out at were the ones who were trying to help me. I made a choice. A choice to live again. And that made all the difference in the world."

"But I'm scared," Dillon admitted, tears rimming his eyes.

"It's okay to be scared," Derek reassured. "Courage isn't the absence of fear, it's doing the right thing in the face of it."

Dillon was shocked! He felt as though he was hit right between the eyes by the wisdom of this man. His fear was

still there, but he felt a renewed determination to do what needed to be done. For all he knew, another chemical weapon was being prepared to be unleashed on mankind again. If he let his immediate fear of Gwen getting hurt stop him now, she could be more hurt later. Dillon nodded to Derek..

Derek smiled at him as he rose from the table. "You'll be alright, and we'll be there to have your back. I know you always have mine

"Maybe these dreams are a blessing?" he said seriously.

"What do you mean? How could these be a blessing?" Dillon asked skeptically.

"How many people in the world do you know have the ability to glimpse a very specific experience in the future?"

Dillon shook his head, clearly at a loss.

"Maybe it's someone's way of telling you what's coming up so you can better prepare for the experience? You yourself said that they aren't always exact in what happened. Maybe that's because you have the ability to change the experience by these glimpses?"

Dillon rocked back. It was like he was hit by a bolt of lightning! He had never even entertained that idea before. Could he change the event by preparing for it? He thought back to Desert Oasis Resort when he and Jordan were trapped under the Information Center. He knew that the battery in his phone was going to die and he wouldn't be able to use the flashlight so he made sure that John's backpack had the light, torch, and oil in it.

He also remembered the spiders and maybe that knowledge allowed him to fight them off so well? Suddenly new possibilities came into the boy's mind. And besides, he knew this dream was already wrong as Troy was dead and couldn't possibly be there. There's no way!

Derek nodded and turned away, giving him a quick wink before he did. As the man walked away Dillon silently appreciated the fact that Orion had made Derek his mentor.

Dillon quickly downed the drink and threw out the left-over food as he suddenly wasn't hungry anymore then began to head back to his room. He was still a little dazed at the thought that he might be able to manage the outcomes of the experiences he saw in his dreams. It was at that point that he determined to write down everything he could remember in those dreams. He also thought that it might be a good idea to sleep with a pad of paper by his bedside, just so he could record the details while they were still fresh in his mind.

As he pondered those thoughts he was suddenly grabbed from the side and pulled off the path and into the small copse of trees that lined the walkway.

"Hey!" he yelled as he was jerked sideways. He caught his footing quickly and spun around to meet his assailant. He crouched in a defensive stance.

"Easy," came a familiar voice.

Through the gloom of the trees he saw Jordan standing with his hands up, a stern look upon his face. "What are you up to Dil?" he asked as he stepped forward, putting himself only inches from Dillon.

Dillon relaxed and stood up straight again. "What do you mean?" he asked defensively. "I was hungry."

"Riiiiight," Jordan said slowly. "Which is why you threw out most of the food you took."

Dillon didn't know what to say.

"Who was that guy you were talking to then?" Jordan asked. "He looked kind of familiar."

"What. Oh, you mean the guy who sat with me for a

minute,” he replied, trying to collect his thoughts. “No one. Just someone who was asking what the best food at the buffet was. He seemed harmless,” Dillon lied.

“Well I’m sure Mom would frown upon you talking to strangers this late at night, or rather, this early in the morning,” he said disapprovingly as he looked at the time on his phone.

Dillon waved dismissively, trying to downplay the concern. He went to walk back onto the path but Jordan blocked his way as he brought his arm up and rested his hand on a nearby tree. Dillon looked at him then tried to go around him the other way, but Jordan blocked that path too.

“I’m not letting you out of here until you—” he started to say when Dillon grabbed his arm, twisted it up and around, then crouched lightly and swept out Jordan’s feet from him with his leg. He remained in perfect balance as he threw his brother to the ground with incredible control. The movement happened so fast!

“Nothing’s going on,” Dillon said evenly as he let his brother go. “Now if you don’t mind, I’m going back to bed.” He could feel the anger building in himself but quickly pushed it aside.

Jordan glanced up at him, a shocked expression evident upon his face. Dillon knew his brother was trying to process what had just happened but didn’t know exactly where to start. He also knew that this wasn’t the last he had heard of Jordan snooping around, and that his actions of putting him on the ground would only heighten his brother’s curiosity. It definitely wasn’t the wisest thing he had ever done, but, at this point, he didn’t care. He just wanted to be done with this mission.

He moved to the path and walked to his room without another word.



JORDAN WATCHED HIS BROTHER LEAVE THEN GOT UP AND brushed himself off. *What the heck was that!* he thought to himself. Never before had Dillon been able to so easily put him down when they wrestled.

*Well, he did catch me off guard,* he reasoned. *Yes. That has to be it.*

Jordan, being almost four years older than Dillon, was at least twice his weight, even though his younger brother was the same height. But it wasn't just the fact that Dillon had put him on the ground so easily that really troubled him, it was the skill in which he did it! Dillon had never trained in any martial art or hand-to-hand combat. So how did he do it? YouTube?

Jordan shrugged that ridiculous thought away with a chuckle as he made his way back onto the path and began to head to the room.

As he walked he was troubled though by the familiarity of the man Dillon spoke to. Jordan knew he had seen him somewhere, he just couldn't remember where. For some reason his thoughts went back to his family's first visit to Desert Oasis Resort. As he tried to remember specific details of the vacation he attempted to visualize that man in the same setting.

He brushed his hand through his medium-length brown hair then brought the hand before his eyes. He clenched it tightly, then released it. Suddenly a flash came into his mind! He saw a hand reach for Dillon: a large hand, a threatening

hand. Then he saw his own shoot up and grab the wrist of that person who was reaching for his brother. He felt strong. Stronger than he had ever felt; then the feeling passed.

He grabbed his head with both hands as he felt a sudden sharp pain, a piercing headache that erupted for a moment throughout his whole skull and then faded as fast as it came on.

“You okay?” he heard a man ask.

Jordan looked up to see another resort guest approaching him. “Ya, I’m okay. Just a sharp headache,” he replied. “I just need to get back to my room and lie down.”

“No problem,” the man said as he moved on.

Jordan quickened his pace back to the room, unsure of his sanity at the moment. Maybe a little rest would do him some good, he reasoned.

Little did he know that his dreams this night would take him back to the resort. To the events that had *actually* happened at the resort: to the underground lab, the monsters, the fight for their lives, and ... to Derek Vico.



“Come on Jordan! We’re going to be late.” Dillon threw a pillow onto his brother’s face in order to accentuate the point. Jordan merely grumbled, grabbed the pillow, and curled up tight to it.

Dillon sighed and waved his hand dismissively as he walked away. “I’ll let Mom and Dad know you’re not feeling well.”

Dillon walked across the open walkway to his parent’s room on the other side. Gwen came flying out of the room to his right and nearly ran him over. “Whoa! Easy!” he yelled as he nimbly dodged out of the way. Gwen laughed as she ran out to the path that led to the main part of the resort.

“Gwen!” Wait up!” Claire yelled to her, picking up her pace in order to catch their charged-up sister.

Dillon smiled as she went by. He turned and was about to knock when the door flew open. “Hey man,” his Dad greeted. “You ready to go on an adventure?” he asked enthusiastically.

If only Dad knew, Dillon thought to himself.

“Is Jordan already at the restaurant waiting for us?” Mom chimed in as she walked out.

“Uh ... I don’t think Jordan will be joining us today,” Dillon responded. “He doesn’t look well. At least, I mean, he’s tougher to wake up than normal, which is saying something!”

Mom’s smile disappeared as she went into the boy’s room. Dad joined her and, after a few moments, came back out. “I think you’re right Dil,” Dad said somberly. “He probably just needs more rest. It doesn’t look like he slept a wink last night.

“Were you guys up late?”

Dillon shook his head. “No later than we normally would be,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Oh. Okay. I guess Jordan is just going to have to sit this one out,” Dad said as he moved passed Dillon and to the main path. “Come on. We only have an hour to eat breakfast and meet the bus at the front lobby.”

Mom smiled as she grabbed Dillon by the arm and followed Dad. “This trip to Ek’ Balam is going to be so much fun!” she exclaimed.

Dillon tried hard to smile. He had gotten a lot better at faking his emotions since his time at Desert Oasis, but he still felt awkward when he did it. Pretending to feel something he wasn’t feeling was probably going to be one of his greatest challenges in being an agent he knew. Unfortunately, the only way he would get better at it was to practice the art which meant more missions, more deception, and more danger. He just really hoped that he would never have to drug his Dad again!

An hour after breakfast Dillon found himself on the air conditioned van which ferried them to Ek’ Balam. The drive was beautiful, despite the sickening feeling Dillon had

in the pit of his stomach. He worked hard not to look back at Chyna and Derek who took up two of the rear seats. Derek was wearing a pair of khakis shorts, a tight fitting Under Armour shirt which showed his ample muscles through the material, running shoes, and a Toronto Blue Jays ball cap which ably covered up his Kana tattoo.

Chyna looked beautiful! She wore a flowered summer dress, tight fitting sandals with straps that twisted halfway up her calves, and large-rimmed sunglasses. Her hair hung down to bounce lightly off her delicate shoulders. She looked princess-like, but Dillon knew that was definitely not the case, having sparred with her on a number of occasions. She was every bit as dangerous as Derek was, maybe more when she got angry!

When they were being picked up at the resort Dillon smiled to himself when he saw that Chyna was using the rod portion of the staff as a cane, appearing to have a bit of a limp. They obviously discovered how to take the head off so it didn't look too out-of-place.

Now, she sat with the staff easily between her legs as she and Derek talked and laughed all the way to Ek' Balam. Dillon marvelled at how easy they made the act look! If he could only be half as good as that. He also thought that it seemed too surreal to him that she just held this ancient artifact easily with no one around them having a clue that this thing was older than probably most of the cities or countries any of them were from!

He let those thoughts trail off as a pang of guilt rang through him. Did he really want to be good at deceiving people? Particularly the ones he loved: his family and friends?

He shook off the disturbing thoughts and tried to focus on the task at hand. *No distractions*, he told himself.

About twenty minutes into the ride Dillon's phone chimed in his pocket. He pulled it out, looked around to make sure Mom and Dad hadn't heard it, and then looked at the text from Derek. Gwen leaned over. "Who's that?" she asked innocently.

"No one," he replied quickly as he turned the phone just slightly so she couldn't see what was on the screen. "Just a silly Instagram notification."

He looked closely at the message and saw an aerial view of the site they were going to. Then another message showed up. "Turn your phone to silent, unless you WANT your parents to discover you!"

Dillon quickly flicked the switch and silently berated himself that he hadn't done that earlier.

"Now remember what we discussed: find the key and where you think we need to use the staff. I'll be overwatch on this part of the mission, and Chyna will be close by."

"Got it," he texted back.

After he viewed the map in detail he stowed his phone back in his pocket. Gwen was playing games on her tablet while Mom and Dad were chatting easily with one another in the seats across from them, and Claire—who was in a seat in front of him—just stared out the window.

Forty minutes later the van arrived. The warm breeze hit him immediately as he drank in the freshness of the surrounding forests while exiting. Mom must have been so excited to see all the ruins, pyramid, and other buildings the archeologists excavated, as she hurried to gather the kids together so they could hear what the tour guide had to say.

Dillon looked around and saw Derek make eye contact with him and nod. He turned away, trying to appear inconspicuous.

Dad put his arm around Dillon and smiled at him. "Come on son, this is going to be a blast," he said with a wide smile. "Too bad Jordan couldn't make it."

Dillon nodded and smiled back.

"Now we're going to have to get in line for our tickets for entrance to the site," the tour guide, a small beautiful Mexican woman, said in her thick Spanish accent as she brushed her long dark hair to the side. "After that, you can explore the grounds on your own or I can guide you through and explain what it is we are looking at.

"There is also a gift shop where you can buy souvenirs of your time here. Just make sure you are all back here at the Van by 12:30. After the tour we are going to be having lunch not far from here at an outdoor pavilion where you will be served authentic Mexican cuisine."

Dillon glanced at his phone and saw that it was 10:30. He had only two hours to find the stone and investigate it. He also had to somehow find the sundial and, he suspected, needed to activate in at 12:00 noon. He wasn't sure why or how he knew that, he just had a feeling that it would only work at noon, and he trusted that feeling.

The first challenge was to get away from Mom and Dad, but he already had a plan for that.

The Hunts grabbed their tickets and entered the site. They came out into a huge grassy area with large stone buildings all around. Trees sprouted throughout the area in small clusters, but all around the large stone ruins was clear, having been excavated so that others could enjoy the scenery.

Most of the buildings had large stairways which led up to the sides and tops of the structures. They walked through a few narrow passageways that led to other parts of the grounds and Dillon felt like he had just been trans-

ported back in time. His imagination started firing as he saw, in his mind, what this place might have looked like when it was in operation thousands of years ago.

As he came through to another clearing he heard the tour guide talking to some of the tourists about the ball field which was a couple hundred yards away from where they were. She explained about the games the ancient Mayans used to have. There were two large slabs of stone about fifty yards or so long that sloped upwards at about a twenty degree angle for about ten feet and, at the top was a stone wall that was about four to six feet high then receded back a few feet and another stone wall rose another six feet or so. The ground between the slabs was flat and grassy. The distance that separated these two slabs was about twenty to thirty feet. The hoops for the ball weren't anywhere to be found when the archeologists discovered the area and so have been lost to antiquity.

Dillon was breathless! He looked around starry-eyed until he felt the vibration of his phone which jolted him from his amazement. He looked around to see if any of the family was looking his way. Fortunately, they were just as mesmerized as he was.

He quickly looked at the display and saw the text from Derek: "Stop swooning over the sight Dillon! We have a mission to complete."

Dillon shook his head and regathered his thoughts. *Right. I need to find this stone I saw in Derek's briefing and the sundial*, he thought to himself. He knew that now was the time to break away from his parents.

"Hey Dad," he said as he approached his father. "I have to go to the restroom. Do you mind if I head back? I'll catch up with you after."

Dad thought about it for a moment. "I don't see any

harm in that,” he replied. “You’re getting older now, and you have a phone if anything happens. I think you can go by yourself.”

Dillon smiled. “Thanks Dad! I won’t be long.”

He was about to take off when he heard Mom pipe in, “That’s right, you are getting older now. Can you please take Gwen with you as she hasn’t gone since we left the resort?”

Dillon visibly sighed as Gwen walked over and grabbed him by the arm. “But ...” he started to protest then stopped when he saw the look that Mom was giving him. “Okay Gwen. I’ll take you, but you have to listen to everything I say. Got that?”

Gwen smiled and nodded.

Dillon shook his head as his mind began to whirl with how he was going to handle this now that he had his nine year old sister tagging along with him. He knew he would have to adapt and overcome. That’s what Derek would say to him anyway.

“We’ll meet you at the temple!” Dad hollered to him as he sped away.

Dillon dropped Gwen off at the women's restroom then went to the men’s. Once securely in a stall he texted Derek. “I’m going to check out that stone slab thing first then we’ll go from there.”

After a few seconds Derek’s reply came through. “Sounds good. We’ll keep an eye on you from a distance and follow your lead.”

Dillon took a deep breath then went back out into the lobby. He stood there waiting for his sister to be done. The seconds seemed like hours! Finally, he couldn’t wait any longer. He approached the restroom door and was about to push on it when it flew open. The boy

jumped back, startled by the sudden movement of the door.

“Oh. Sorry about that,” a tall woman with dirty blonde hair, thin build, and dark eyes, said as she exited the restroom. “Are you okay?”

“What? ... Oh ... ya, I’m fine. Just waiting for my sister,” replied Dillon.

“Is she the short one with brown hair and a delightful giggle?”

“Ya. That’s her,” Dillon replied.

“I’m sure she’ll be out in a moment,” the woman replied as she smiled at Dillon then moved away.

Dillon looked at her go. He felt strange for some reason, like something was off, but shrugged it away, thinking that it had to be the nerves. A moment later Gwen came bounding out of the restroom.

“You good Gwen?”

She nodded as she smiled.

“How are you always so happy?” Dillon asked almost absentmindedly. “Like really! Sometimes I think we’re not even related!”



“THE BOY IS ON THE FIELD,” TAYLOR SAID AS SHE BRUSHED her dirty blonde hair aside in order to depress the communication device that was in her ear.

“Good. Move into position then. Any sign of Vico?” the voice of Brighton replied in her communication device.

“Not yet, but I’m sure he’s not far away if the intel is correct.”

“It is. Do not, in any way at all, engage Derek if you see him,” came Brighton’s firm reply. “He’s mine.”



Taylor paused for a moment then responded, "Understood." She knew a little about Brighton's obsession with taking down Derek himself and wasn't about to get in the way of that. Brighton frightened her more than a little. He always seemed on the edge of eruption, but usually kept it under control. She shook the disturbing thoughts from her mind. "The boy is with his youngest sister right now. What are we supposed to do about her?"

Silence.

"Brighton? Do you copy?"

"I heard you. Leave her alone if possible. If not, take her as well. Our two objectives are to get the staff *and* the boy. Anything less will not do."

"And if he doesn't have it?" asked Taylor, starting to see this operation as more complicated than it first appeared.

"Then we take the boy and negotiate with Derek to get us the staff."

"Copy that," replied Taylor as she watched Dillon and Gwen slip back into the archaeological site.

"I'll get him," she declared with determination as she followed through the entrance.

CONTACT

Dillon pulled Gwen toward the large stone pillars that were unearthed when this place was first found. The slabs themselves were held upright by a stand that was made for them so visitors could get a better look at them on all sides. There was a big plaque to the right of the slabs which detailed information about the finding of the stones and information as to what the significance of the rocks were.

Dillon didn't care much about the information which was presented and, instead, went right to the rocks themselves. He looked around them intently. One of the rocks was just as faded as Derek had indicated during the briefing.

Gwen looked up at her brother. "What are we doing here Dil?" she asked. "I wanna go and see the pyramid."

"We will Gwen. I was just hoping I could take a look at these cool rocks first."

He took out his phone and quickly snapped a picture of both stones. "Wow, these are exactly like the ones I saw," he said aloud, amazed that he was actually staring at

the stones in the briefing. The reality of being on mission again shocked him and seemed a little surreal.

“What was that Dil?” Gwen asked.

“Oh nothing. I was just talking out loud. These are the same ones I saw when doing some research on-line,” he lied. “Except ... the pictures only showed me the front. Hmmm I wonder—”

He walked around to the other side of the slabs and, at first glance, they looked like plain rocks. But he just had that feeling. He moved his face closer to the one on the right, scanning its surface for anything unusual, then he moved over to the one on the left and did the same thing. These stones were supposed to be pretty near identical—so Derek’s briefing docs said—and yet Dillon knew that something was out of place.

A flash went through his mind as he suddenly recalled the dream he had about one of these stones. He remembered that the staff’s head felt warm. He turned the camera app on again and switched it to detect infrared, then began scanning the rocks. As he made his way down the stone slab on the right he stopped suddenly, for there, right in the middle of the stone was an outline of a circle with a line running through the centre of it. There were other curving lines that appeared attached to the bottom middle, rounded up, and then attached to the top of the middle line. It looked like the head of the Staff of Haraset! Somehow, under the surface of this nondescript stone was the image of the staffs head, but it was only on the slab to his right.

“Dillon. Are you almost done?” Gwen whined.

After snapping a picture of the image in infrared on the stone, Dillon popped his head around and was about to say something when a sudden shiver went down his spine.

He stood up, almost propelled by the feeling, and glanced around. The couple tourists that were close to the stones when he and Gwen first came to them had moved off.

Dillon walked to his sister and glanced over Gwen's head to see the blonde from the restroom walking toward them. She was merely fifteen feet away when he noticed her.

"Hi Dillon," she said in a cool voice.

"Who's that Dil?" Gwen asked as she grabbed his arm and moved closer.

"No one Gwen," Dillon said to her with a smile. "Why don't you go to the pyramid? I'll meet you there in a moment."

"But Mom said you were supposed to stay with me," she protested.

Dillon bent down. "I know Gwen, but the pyramid is just over there and we were supposed to meet Mom, Dad, and Claire there before they went to the top of it. They'll be there, and I'll be along shortly."

"What am I supposed to tell Mom then?"

"Just tell her that I wanted to take a look at these rocks," he said with a disarming smile.

"Fine. But you're gonna be in a whole lot of trouble."

Dillon nodded. "I know, but you're bored and I have something to do first."

Gwen looked as though she wanted to ask another question but bit it back. "Alright," she finally replied with a shrug, then bounded away toward the pyramid.

"Smart. Getting rid of your little sister so we could talk more openly," Taylor stated as she finished her approach. She looked around as if to see if there were any more tourists coming in their direction.

Dillon also looked around. No one was even close to

where they were, but the grounds were still crawling with people. But one person stuck out to him from just across the yard: Chyna. She walked around appearing to admire the pieces of unearthed architecture. Dillon hid his smile when he noticed his friend.

“You know, I could call out and get a dozen people here in an instant,” he stated confidently.

“And what would you say? I’m just here to talk.”

Dillon thought about it for a moment. “Talk about what?”

“About you helping us find The Mask of Time.”

“And who *are* you?”

Taylor stared at him with all seriousness. “Come come, you know who we are.”

“Tower Six?”

The woman nodded.

“Then why would I help you?” As he asked the question he moved his thumb over the emergency button on his phone that would signal Derek and Chyna that something was wrong. He did it so subtly the woman didn’t seem to notice.

“Because if you don’t, or you call out for help, then we’ll release video footage of you in the lab at The Desert Oasis Resort.”

Dillon took a step back. The shock of her statement rolled over him like an avalanche. He had never even considered that such a thing might exist! He was about to respond when he heard a whisper, if you could call it that. It wasn’t audible, but was definitely more than a feeling. It was the woman’s voice again. *She’s lying*, the ghostly voice impressed.

Dillon shook his head but knew he didn’t imagine it, and he felt, beyond reason, that he could trust her. He

steeled his expression suddenly, squared his jaw, and looked straight at the woman. “You’re lying,” he said with unnerving confidence.



SHORTLY AFTER DEPARTING FROM THE VAN, DEREK AND Chyna made their way into the grounds ahead of the Hunts and the rest of the tourists. Derek told her that it would be prudent for him to take up a position somewhere near the edge of the site where the trees were abundant and someone could disappear entirely if they wanted to. Before he set up he instructed Chyna to mingle around the ruins, keeping an eye on where Dillon was.

When she saw the tall woman approach Dillon and Gwen at the stone pillars she initially thought nothing of it. It wasn’t until she saw Gwen bound away and Dillon’s body language change that she started to worry.

The skilled operative continued to appear thoroughly entranced by what she was seeing, although, without anyone noticing, she kept an eye on Dillon and this strange woman before him.

Suddenly, her phone buzzed. She looked to see “Emergency!” scrawled across the display. Immediately her heart leaped in her throat, but she quickly calmed herself. Dillon was in trouble and she needed to help. She took two deep breaths and very subtly veered ever so slightly so as to be walking with a sense of urgency in the general direction of the stone pillars with the limp suddenly going away.



DEREK TUCKED INTO THE THICK TREE-LINE JUST TO SIDE OF

the main site. He was amazed to discover how full the bushes were, but just back behind the initial lineup the trunks of the trees separated enough to allow free movement through the forest.

He couldn't see Dillon from this spot, but thought it was best for him to be in the shadows anyway. That's the way he liked it, and he knew that Chyna would be his eyes for the op.

After his initial message to the boy he settled back, pulled his phone, and began to review the mission details. Being this close to the theatre of the action always heightened Derek's senses whenever he was on mission. It was a skill he had developed over years of training and practice in field operations. So it was no surprise to the honed man when he heard the slightest of footfalls that should have been impossible for anyone to pick up. But he did.

With the speed of a lion he pocketed his phone, pulled the small knife from under his pant leg, and spun around in a defensive crouch.

"Hi Derek," the smooth voice said to him with a smirk. "It's been a while."

Derek, despite his skill and training, almost toppled over when he saw the familiar Asian standing before him. Brighton stood tall—passively—with his hands to his sides. He hadn't changed a bit in the almost three and a half years since he had seen the man in the depths of that cursed temple of the Diablo in Guardian City—that hell hole deep in the Amazon jungle.

"So you did make it out," Derek said as he stood up, staring at the man.

"Yes, but I'm sure you already knew that."

In truth, Derek didn't already know. Orion could only verify that he and a fellow named Hernan had made it out

alive. The battle in Guardian City was too chaotic for further verification. But now, standing in front of him, was one of the fiercest operatives Derek had ever known: Brighton.

“I’d ask you what you’re doing here, but I think I already—” He felt the buzz of the phone in his pocket. Brighton smiled. Derek turned to dart through the tree-line but Brighton was ready for him to do just that and lunged forward with incredible speed, launching a lightning fast side kick into the man’s ribs.

Derek rolled to the side with the blow as he turned a full circuit to face the man head on. He knew he wouldn’t get out of the forest with this skilled agent coming on like a caged animal.

A knife appeared in Brighton’s hand almost out of nowhere. He shot forward, but Derek quickly sidestepped the strike as he moved around the trunk of a tree. He then rolled to the side, trying to put some distance between him and his attacker.

Brighton came in with a growl. Their blades connected three times as Derek expertly parried each strike. He then ducked the fourth incoming blow and struck out with his palm right into the chest of Brighton. The Asian fell back a step from the shock of the strike.

Derek saw his opening to go onto the offensive and swung his knife around, but Brighton was quicker than that and blocked the swing with his free arm. He then tried to stab Derek in the stomach, but the Orion operative grabbed the man’s wrist with his left hand. Derek pulled back his knife hand slightly and re-angled it for a low strike, but Brighton again blocked. This time he put more force into that block, smashing Derek hard on the forearm.

The pain from the forceful block jolted up the man’s



arm, but he stubbornly held onto the knife. He went high for the next strike, but Brighton again bashed his arm forcefully. This time the knife flew from Derek's grasp.

Brighton then issued a series of open-handed strikes at Derek with his free arm, but the man blocked each one, then slid under the last attack. As he did so he grabbed Brighton's arm which held the knife with his free hand as well, spun underneath that arm, and twisted. The Asian grimaced as his arm began twisting awkwardly, but before Derek could get it fully around Brighton leaped into the air and flipped, untangling his arm. As he landed he shot his foot into the stomach of Derek which caused the man to let go. The move cost him though as his knife went flying from his grasp.

Before he could lunge for it Derek moved back in and punched him hard across the jaw. Brighton rolled with the blow and spun around, leaping into the air, and stretched out his leg as he went. The spinning kick caught Derek by surprise as he took the hit in the head. Pain erupted from the blow, but Derek shook it away and came in again.

Each man issued a series of blows: punches, elbows, knees, and kicks, each one blocked or turned away by the other just before they could connect. The two spun and fought, neither gaining ground over the other.



“NOW WHY WOULD YOU SAY THAT?” TAYLOR ASKED THE young boy. “Why would you think that there was no way we could have footage of you in that underground lab?” the woman purred.

“Because. Haven't you heard?” Dillon began, “I know stuff.” He tapped his forehead for emphasis.

The woman scoffed.

“It’s true. It’s my power. That’s why Orion and Tower Six both want me. Didn’t they tell you that? There’s nothing you can say that would get by me.” Dillon hoped that his confidence in his powers weren’t misplaced. Even he didn’t know the extent of them, but he knew he had to play this ruse if he was going to get out of this. He knew Tower Six would probably have other agents on the field, but he also knew that he had Derek and Chyna.

He looked at the woman and grinned.

Taylor stepped forward. “What are you grinning at? I have the upper hand here.”

“Do you now?” he asked as he saw Chyna close in on the woman. He purposefully averted his eyes to the side slightly and made sure that the woman saw it.

Taylor had a slightly confused look on her face and turned in time to get a fist in the face. She staggered back, blood dripping from her nose.

“Is this woman bothering you?” Chyna asked as she lifted her sunglasses from her eyes and perched them on her head. She then gripped the staff in both hands, held it in front of her chest, and slid her right foot back slightly into a defensive posture.

“Not anymore,” the boy replied as he walked calmly away.

Taylor growled and looked hatefully at Chyna, who merely smiled and shrugged as she turned and walked away.

Dillon’s cool only lasted a moment, however, as his phone began to ring with the warning: “Alert! Alert! This is your mother calling. Alert! Alert! This is your mother calling.” He was tempted to answer, but thought against it as it was probably better to take her wrath face-to-face and

receive his lumps. He broke into a dead run for the towering Pyramid.

He ran swiftly across the grass. There was a slight breeze that carried on it the smell of the fresh greenery from the encompassing forests. He rounded one building and was determined to speed on—seeing that the pyramid was only a couple hundred feet ahead of him—when something caught his eye to the right. He slowed up and glanced in that direction. People were mingling around. The chatter of the guides filled the air as they explained the different aspects of the site.

He heard one such guide mention the pool where warriors would bath before being sacrificed; he was mere feet from that archeological find. Despite the urgency of needing to get back to his family, and the trouble he knew he would be in for the delay, he approached the area. The guide and the rest of the tourists moved on from there heading toward the pyramid. He looked around the stone basin. It was about four to five feet in diameter and sunk down into the ground about three to four feet. He thought that it was kind of creepy that this was essentially a pre-death bath!

He shook his head and was about to leave when his toe stubbed on something that was just under the grass beside the bath. He bent down and quickly unearthed a round stone that had a glyph carved into it that looked like the Staff of Haraset!

“This is it!” he said aloud.

His phone blared again. He quickly texted Mom, “Sorry, I’ll be right there.”

The boy then glanced around trying to find the sundial. There was nothing. He looked under the grass all around the bath and was about to give up when he saw

something down in the bottom of the stone tub. There was a small hole at its base. He looked around in order to make sure that no one was watching then quickly jumped into it. Dillon bent down and poked his finger in and around the hole. "This has to be it."

"¡Oye niño! ¿Que haces alla?" He whipped his head around to see what looked to him to be a grounds keeper yelling at him.

"Oh, um ... nothing. I mean, nada! No ... um ... yo no hacer nada. Uh, I fell, I fell ..." Dillon scrunched his eyebrows in concentration. How would Chyna say this?" He clambered out of the hole, sighed, and did the best he could. "Yo caer?"

The grounds keeper waved his hand dismissively at him as he scooted away.

"I found the sundial!" he texted to Chyna. "It's in the bottom of the death bath."

"The what?" came her confused reply.

"The stone bath where the warriors used to wash before being sacrificed."

"Okay. I'll figure it out," she replied.

"And hurry! It's already 11:48."

His phone blared again.

He shook his head and ran full out toward the pyramid. "I'm in so much trouble."



AFTER A FEW MOMENTS THE TWO COMBATANTS BROKE OFF, both sucking in as much air as their lungs would allow. The men had minor bruises and scrapes as each began scoring hits on the other as the battle raged on.

Brighton smiled. "You've gotten better. I'm impressed."

“And you’re still a jerk,” came Derek’s curt reply.

The Asian laughed. “Well, this was fun Derek, but we’ll have to carry it on later as I have other things to attend to.” With that he quickly flipped his knife up from the ground, turned, and ran into the forest.

Derek bent over with his hands on his legs, still sucking in the precious air, and shaking his head. After a few more heartbeats he grabbed his phone and called Chyna.

“Is everything okay? Is Dillon alright?” he asked as the woman answered the phone. “Okay good. And he thinks he found the sundial? That’s awesome!

“Well I think this just got a lot more complicated,” he explained after Chyna told him that she was heading to test Dillon’s theory. “Text me if it works. And we’ll talk later about the complications. Just make sure no one else comes close to the boy.

“I’m calling Orion. Now that Tower Six is on the field, we need more resources.”

Derek’s thoughts spun within him as he hung up the phone. *Why did Brighton just break away and leave?* That question greatly unnerved the man. He knew that Brighton always had a reason for doing everything he did, no matter how idiotic Derek thought it was, but he just couldn’t figure out what purpose this whole encounter played. *Maybe it was mere distraction? And how did Brighton know exactly where to find me?* This mission had just gotten that much more dangerous for all of them.

After trying to clean up the best he could he slipped out of the woods and made his way to the restroom, trusting that Chyna would be able to handle anything else that would come Dillon’s way until he got there. Having Tower Six on the field now, especially Brighton, unnerved the man more than a little and he needed to think through

how he was going to handle this new dynamic of the mission.



TAYLOR GRIMACED AS BRIGHTON WIPED UP THE DRIED blood from under the woman's nose. The two had made it back to their vehicle and started cleaning up after the encounters.

"I fail to see how this was a success," the woman stated.

"Your ignorance of the situation isn't your fault," the man replied bluntly. "You've only been told part of the story. You were told that the boy is special somehow, but now you know a little bit of what we're dealing with."

Taylor looked hard at the man.

"You said that the boy knew with full confidence that you were lying to him and mentioned to you that he had some powers of discerning that. To be honest I had my doubts.

"Besides, the contact you had with Dillon wasn't the primary objective here."

"But you said—" Taylor began to argue.

"I know what I said!" Brighton snapped back. "I suspected there might be a problem getting the boy so I had an alternative plan."

"You used me as bait," she accused.

"Brighton laughed. "Don't be so dramatic. If you were able to get the boy then great, but if not I had to make sure our encounter was progressive."

He paused and pulled back from his work on the woman's nose. "While I fought with Derek I was able to plant an audio tracker in his blood stream via this." He held up a small needle for Taylor to see. "There's no way

we would have been able to plant this on the boy, not with his keen abilities, but Vico on the other hand—”

Taylor smiled and nodded, beginning to understand. “So my contact with the boy was, at minimum, a distraction to allow you to face Vico alone. And now that the audio tracker is implanted we can know where he is *and*, in a sense, piece together conversations he has using the audio vibration technology in that little chip which should give us an idea as to what he’s planning.”

Brighton nodded. “We knew there was another operative around, this woman they call Chyna, and we needed her to be distracted just in case she came to Derek’s aid. I needed to face Derek alone. And, as you say, we will be able to listen into what he’s saying when we activate it.”

He sat back, almost reflecting on the encounter, then smiled. “No. I wanted to face him alone.”

THE MOUTH OF THE PYRAMID

“Dillon! Where were you?” his Mom asked sternly, shaking her phone at him, as he jogged up to meet the family at the base of the pyramid.

“I ... uh ... was—”

“You know you’re not supposed to leave your sister alone.” Her face reddened as she spoke.

Dillon didn’t know what to say. He knew there was nothing he could do except take the verbal beating.

“And why didn’t you answer your phone?” she fumed.

“Well? What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry. The phone was on silent,” he lied. “I was looking at another exhibit and knew that Gwen was getting bored. I figured that she would have more fun with you and knew that she could find her way safely to the pyramid.”

Mom was still seething. Dad and Claire discretely walked away from the awkward event.

“I wonder about your judgement sometimes!”

Dillon shrank under the disciplinary glare of his mother. He could help secret organizations, battle



monsters, find obscure artifacts, solve mysteries, and even predict future events through his dreams, but he just couldn't hold up under the displeasure of his Mom.

After another awkward moment of silence, Gwen went over to him and grabbed his hand. "It's okay Mom," she said as she looked up into the displeased face of her mother. "Dillon didn't mean for me to get hurt or lost, he just trusted that I was smart enough to make it to you guys on my own, and I did."

She looked Dillon in the eyes and smiled. "That's one of the things I really love about my brother: he always looks out for me. I can trust him, and so can you."

Dillon squeezed her hand and smiled back.

Mom seemed to soften a bit then her face tightened once more. She grabbed Gwen by the arm. "That's nice of you to say dear, but your brother needs to learn more about responsibility. But we can talk about that later."

She spun around with Gwen in tow. "But for now, I would like to see this Pyramid."

Dillon grabbed Gwen's other arm and bent low as they walked. "Thanks Gwen," he whispered into her ear before straightening up. She looked up at him and flashed him that cute smile she always had.

Dillon chuckled as they hurried to meet the others.

Dad and Claire were waiting at the bottom of the massive structure. It was a giant stone Pyramid that had a large, wide staircase ascending the center of the main building. The stairs were uneven, some being eight to ten inches high while others were a little higher than that. Dillon figured that this had to be due to the architectural technology of the time. Their manufacturing equipment (hammers, chisels, and such) weren't near as precise as modern computerized machinery was.

“Be careful Gwen,” Mom warned as they began to ascend. She must have noticed the same inconsistencies in the stairs that Dillon had.

Dad smiled and looked to Dillon. “Race you!”

“You’re on old man!” the boy yelled back as both of them began leaping up the steep staircase. Claire shook her head and started up slowly behind them.

“Bruce!” Mom yelled. “You guys be careful.”

Dillon knew Dad would just ignore her as he continued to bound up the stairs, which is exactly what he did! They didn’t dare take any of the stairs two at a time like you might do in a house, or any other staircase. No. These stairs were too unpredictable and steep.

As Dillon bounded up them he couldn’t help but imagine how many ancient Mayans died from falling down the treacherous incline.

About two thirds of the way up they came to a patio that broke left where there appeared to be a viewing spot for the entrance into the acropolis—which was another name for this particular structure. Dillon stopped and looked back to see that Dad was almost to him, huffing and puffing.

“I guess I’m not in as good of shape as I thought I was,” Dad laughed as he followed Dillon onto the walkway.

“What’s this?” Dad asked as he looked around.

“I don’t know. It looks like the entrance,” Dillon replied as he looked around. He saw a doorway that looked as though it had a more modern door affixed into the stone. Probably to make sure no one disturbed the inside he figured. All around the entranceway were intricate carvings in the stone, and above and to the side of the door were carvings of men. There was a wooden fence that was put

up by the walkway so no one could enter the area of the door. And just beyond that fence were strange stones that were protruding out of rock. These stones were about two feet wide, curved up to about two feet, and were evenly spaced.

Dillon looked up and saw that the same pattern of stones was above as well, coming down though. He stepped back and took a good look at the whole scene. His heart skipped a beat as he saw the face with the open mouth, just like his dream!

“Are you okay Dil?” Dad asked as Dillon stumbled back a bit.

“What? Oh ... ya, I’m okay. I must still be tired from the climb.”

“Well, this is pretty cool,” Dad stated as he put his hands on his hips and surveyed the sight. “Kind of a creepy looking design with the mouth and all. Don’t you think?”

Dillon was too shocked to say anything. This was the place where he heard the voice, where he heard the screams of Gwen in the darkness. It was where he had the life choked out of him by ... Troy. He shook his head to clear his thoughts.

Suddenly he saw a thick line of a shadow shoot passed him and hit the door. He turned and saw that the shadow stretched from the death bath. He could barely make out the person that was standing inside the bath but knew it was Chyna. He glanced at his phone and saw that it was 12:00. Then, as quickly as the shadow appeared it vanished as Chyna leaped out of the tub and scooted through the crowds before anyone really knew what was going on. *Okay, that wasn't a normal shadow from a sundial,* Dillon said to himself, marvelling at the strength and preci-

sion of the beam. *There must be something more at work here than simple mathematics and solar positioning.* It was, however, reminiscent of the shadow he saw in his dream.

His heart leaped. He now knew beyond a doubt that the mask was in there, but that was now the last place on Earth he wanted to go.

“What was that?” Dad asked as he looked down to where the shadow came from.

“What was what?” Dillon asked, trying to play dumb.

“What do you mean? That ... that shadow that just flashed up here.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about Dad. Maybe it was just a cloud that covered the sun for a moment,” he replied nonchalantly as he shrugged.

His Dad looked like he was about to say something else but instead just shook his head as Gwen, Mom, and Claire made their way onto the walkway. Gwen went running up to the face and looked intently at the door and everything surrounding it.

“Gwen!” Dillon reflexively yelled as he lunged for her. As soon as he made it to her he immediately pulled back. “Oh ... I just thought that she ... ah ... would fall through the fence,” he fabricated.

Dad put a hand on his shoulder. “I think she’ll be okay.”

“Ya,” Dillon responded, trying to sound as normal as possible but failing miserably.

Dillon felt sick to his stomach. He didn’t want anything bad to happen to Gwen, but his dream seemed to suggest that it was inevitable. Or was it? He remembered that Derek had mentioned to him that maybe these dreams were a blessing as they forewarned him of things that *might*

happen. What if there was a way for him to alter the outcome of the foreseen event?

Again, he remembered that his other dreams hadn't turned out exactly as he had seen. Could this have been due to actions he took before the event happened? That thought gave him hope and helped his anxiety of seeing Gwen in front of this place abate.

"Well, shall we get to the top?" Dad asked, shaking Dillon from his thoughts.

The family agreed and made their way off the walkway and back onto the stairs where they ascended. The view from the top was amazing! Dillon could see all the other unearthed buildings, the vast tracks of forests, and the big blue open sky that seemed to stretch forever. He marvelled at the beauty of it all.

After they had enjoyed the scenery for a while, the Hunts made their way back to the van. The trip home was exhausting for Dillon. His mind wouldn't quit whirling with possibilities as to how he was going to change the aspect of his dreams which included his sister. He knew he needed to protect her from this. He needed to protect her at all cost.



"I KNOW YOU SAID THAT THIS MISSION WAS LOW PRIORITY and that you wouldn't be able to devote more resources to it, but you also said that you didn't expect any outside influences," Derek said in a frustrated tone. "Didn't you hear what I said? Tower Six is on the field! They know where we are and probably have a pretty good idea as to what it is that we're looking for. Doesn't that matter at all to you?"

Derek shook his head as he looked to his partner, Chyna. He couldn't believe he was hearing what he was. Orion didn't have any resources for them at all.

"How did they even know we were here in the first place?" Derek asked accusingly. "That's a pretty massive breach of intel, wouldn't you say?" Derek was trying to keep his voice low as other people mingled about the area, but found it difficult due to his level of frustration.

He listened to Jake's rhetoric, all-the-while shaking his head. "You know, I can never tell when you're lying or not," he stated bluntly. He had never held his punches with Jake in the past and he wasn't about to start now.

"Fine!" he yelled at length. That outburst did draw a few stares his way. Chyna merely smiled at them and shrugged it off. "We'll figure it out as we always do."

The young woman didn't say a word when Derek finally hung up. He really appreciated that quality about her: she knew when he needed to process the information and would leave him alone until he was ready to talk.

Finally, he looked over at the woman as he paced around on the soft grass. "It looks like we're on our own."

"Shocking. I couldn't tell from the conversation," she said.

Derek reached in his pocket and grabbed his bottle of pills. He popped one in his mouth. He appeared to visibly calm almost immediately after swallowing it.

Chyna came over and put a hand on his shoulder. He turned to her and offered a weak smile. "We can do this," she reassured.

Derek nodded. "I know. I just don't want the boy to be in more danger than he already is," he confessed.

"That's why they put you with him. You're one of the

best operatives Orion has, and they recognize this. You *will* keep him safe.”

“Will I?” Derek asked as he walked away. Chyna followed “When we were at the resort, Dillon, his brother Jordan, and sister Gwen, were very close to being killed. And me? Where was I? Oh ya ... I was locked up in a cage with no way of escape. In fact, it was Dillon and Jordan who ended up saving me and the rest.”

Chyna smiled mischievously at him as he turned to face her.

“What?” he asked, confused about her response to his painful story.

“Maybe you shouldn’t worry then as we have Dillon who can save you?” she quipped.

That brought a smile to the man’s face. Perhaps she was right.

In any case, despite the fact that Orion couldn’t spare the resources to help them out he knew that, somehow, through it all, Orion would take care of him. It seemed almost illogical to think that due to the conversation he had just had with Jake, but he knew it to be true. He just didn’t know how he knew it.



“MORE OF YOUR GAME PLAN?” DOUGLAS TURNER ASKED disgustedly as Jake hung up the phone.

Jake merely grinned at the man as he sat back in his chair. “There are things going on that you don’t understand my friend,” Jake replied.

Turner just shook his head. “You’re an enigma, Jake. I never pegged you as a double-agent.”

“Double-agent? You’re one to talk.” Jake smiled. “I’m

not a double-agent, I just know how this game needs to be played.”

Turner snorted. “Pray tell, how is that?”

Jake sat back, thinking to himself how much he could divulge to the man without jeopardizing the mission. He knew that Turner would only tell Tower Six the information that he wanted him to know as he had the man on a short leash with his knowledge and proof of Turner’s betrayal. How much could it hurt if he let the man know why he was getting him to leak information to Tower Six?

At length he leaned forward, placing his hands on his desk with one atop the other. “You know what? I will tell you the little bit that I know. I don’t think it will hurt, then maybe you’ll have a better appreciation for what we are doing here.”

Turner appeared very interested at that point.

“Not many people around here know why Dillon is able to do the things he is, but I know. I also know what it is that triggers his abilities to charge and heighten so we can get the most out of them.”

“And what is that?” Turner asked, leaning forward a bit.

Jake grinned. “You know how everyone has a fight or flight response when faced with danger?”

Turner nodded.

“Well, that fight or flight response acts differently in Dillon. The adrenaline that is released into his system during this response is what feeds his abilities to activate to the level they do.”

“So you’re saying that Dillon needs to be scared or in danger for his abilities to function at their peak performance?” Turner reasoned.

“Exactly.”



“Which is why you have been using me to apparently disrupt the mission by feeding intel back to Tower Six so that they will be used to give Dillon that heightened response, and why you just denied any help to Derek.”

Jake nodded slowly. He could see Turner’s mind trying to process the information.

“So Derek is in the dark about how Dillon operates?” Turner asked.

“There are only a couple of us—you included now—who know about this aspect of Dillon’s powers.”

Jake sat back in his desk, his face getting suddenly serious. “It needs to stay that way,” he said coolly—threateningly.

Turner looked at him stone-faced. After a long moment he nodded.

Jake knew that Turner wouldn’t divulge this information to anyone. He had too much to lose.

JORDAN AWAKENS

“**D**id Jordan ever get back to you dear?” Dad asked Mom as they exited the van.

Mom nodded. “Ya. He said he would most likely be by the pool.”

“Probably checking out all the girls,” Claire remarked sarcastically which brought a giggle to Gwen.

“Well we still have a couple hours before dinner time anyway. Why don’t we all go get our swimsuits on and meet pool side in fifteen?” Mom replied.

Everyone agreed and hustled toward their rooms. Dillon feigned excitement but lagged behind as the rest of his family sped off. He looked around and saw Chyna and Derek as they headed to their rooms as well. Derek gave the boy a nod before turning away.

Dillon’s mind felt crowded with all the events that happened earlier in the day. He knew he would have an opportunity to unload it all with Derek later as they met in order to plan the next phase of the mission. He just didn’t know if he could wait that long. He gave an extended sigh as he knew there was nothing he could do

about it right now, and resigned to the fact that he was forced to wait.

He made it to his room, reached for the handle, and was about to turn it when he got a shiver up his spine. He knew that something was amiss. Immediately his thoughts went to Jordan. What if he was in trouble?

He turned the handle and swung the door inward. The room was dark. All the curtains had been drawn shut.

“Jordan?” Dillon asked as he walked in. He flicked the light switch on and made it three steps before he felt another shiver. Instinctively he turned to the right just in time to see someone reaching for him. He moved his right leg back, and brought his left arm up to block. When he connected with the attacker’s arm he twisted his hand around and grabbed the person’s wrist. He continued to spin as he reached his right hand around and grabbed his attacker on the shoulder. With tremendous speed he continued his spin, pulling the attacker with him and using the person’s own weight and movement to bring him around and flip him down to the ground.

There was a huge crash as the person hit the night stand and cried out. Dillon let go with his right hand and pulled it back, thinking to lay a solid punch in the face of the intruder, when he noticed that the person he had taken down was Jordan!

“Take it easy Dil!” Jordan said as he tried to get up from the floor.

Dillon backed off him and let him rise. “What were you thinking? Trying to jump me like that.”

“I wasn’t trying to jump you,” Jordan argued. “I was coming to talk to you.”

“In the dark? With the blinds drawn?” Dillon motioned to the covered windows.

Dillon walked over to the patio door. He pulled the blinds back; the warmth of the sun flooded into the room and the light instantly brightened everything up.

“Don’t open those! Someone might be watching us!” Jordan shouted.

“What’s going on Jordan? Who would be watching us? I thought you were supposed to be by the pool?” Dillon didn’t like where this was going.

Jordan shook his head as he backed away from the patio doors. “I just told Mom that so she wouldn’t worry about me.”

“What is it Jordan?” Dillon reiterated again as he came to stand beside his brother.

Jordan looked at him, his expression serious. “I think I’m going crazy.”

“Crazy? What do you mean?”

“I had a dream last night, only ... I don’t think it was a dream, but more of a memory.” Jordan walked away and sat on the sofa. “You were there, Gwen was there, and so was ... that man you were talking to yesterday: Derek.”

Dillon tried hard not to show surprise at Jordan’s recovering memories and the fact that he remembered Derek’s name!

“Ya. I know who that guy was. We were in an underground lab of some sort and there were creatures, there were cages, and ... a ...” Jordan’s voice trailed off and he sat there silent for a moment.

“What?” Dillon prompted, truly curious now as to how much Jordan had remembered.

Jordan shook his head as though he was fighting the very idea of what he saw. He put his hand to his throat and rubbed it. Dillon’s eyes went wide when he realized that Jordan had relived that awful night when Troy, who

had become the monster, had nearly choked him to death.

“Hey man, it was just a dream,” Dillon said reassuringly as he patted his brother on the shoulder.

Jordan shook his head again. “No Dil. I don’t know how to explain it but it was real. I know it. I don’t know how I know it but I do.” He looked up at Dillon. “And I know you’re into something with this Derek guy, something that you’re not telling anyone.”

Dillon shrank back a little from the accusatory stare his brother was giving him, but quickly steeled his expression. “I don’t know what you’re talking about bro. I don’t know what that guy’s name was who I spoke with at the snack bar as he never gave it to me. As I said before, he was simply asking me for my opinion then he left.”

Jordan looked unconvinced.

“You just had a bad dream,” Dillon continued as he walked over and righted the nightstand he and Jordan had knocked over. “These things happen. I don’t know how many times I’ve woken up from a realistic feeling dream only to discover that it was just that: a dream.”

He then walked over and took his swim trunks out of his suitcase. “Now if you don’t mind, Mom and Dad are expecting us down at the pool. You coming? Or should I tell them that you’re just taking it easy for a bit?”

Jordan stared at his brother for a moment. Dillon could feel the penetrating gaze go through him as though his very soul was being searched. Finally Jordan rose and headed for the door. “I guess I’ll see you poolside in a few minutes.”

He couldn’t tell if Jordan had accepted his story or not. He was so cool with his statements. Dillon really admired that quality about his brother. Jordan was always so cool

and collected while he was so awkward. He often thought that Jordan would have made a way better operative than he would have for Orion, but, for other reasons—his powers being prime among those—he was the one Orion had chosen. He only hoped they had chosen correctly.

After he had put his swim trunks on, he was about to leave the room when his phone buzzed. He glanced at it while opening the door: “12:30 AM at the snack bar.”

He sighed. *I'm sure vacations are a lot more fun when you're not on a secret mission,*” he lamented to himself.

He put his phone in his pocket, closed the door, and turned to leave when he stopped cold in his tracks. His eyes went wide and his mouth hung open as he took a step back which put him right against the door.

The only thing he could say at that moment in his shock and dismay was, “Grandpa Hunt? I ... I thought you were dead?”

THE SYMBIOID

“**C**ome Dillon. It’s not safe for us to be seen here. Let’s talk inside,” Grandpa Hunt said as he motioned for the door.

Dillon was still in too much shock to respond right away and it wasn’t until after his Grandfather had moved to the door that he pulled out his keycard and unlocked it for them.

“Look at you Dillon. I can’t believe how much you’ve grown!” Grandpa Hunt exclaimed as they moved inside and closed the door. “You must have lots of questions.”

Dillon didn’t respond.

Grandpa Hunt chuckled and put a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, you’ll get used to the strangeness of it all. Expect the unexpected my boy!”

Dillon nodded stupidly.

“Yes then. You’re probably wondering first, why I am here.”

“I thought that you died a few years ago,” Dillon responded. “We had a funeral and everything.”

“Yes, yes, and I’m sure it was a lovely affair. But fortu-

nately the details of my demise were inaccurate,” Grandpa Hunt stated with a warm smile.

Dillon couldn’t help but run over and give his Grandfather a hug as tears welled up in his eyes. Grandpa Hunt hugged him back and stroked his curly blonde hair gently. “It’s okay Dillon,” he said reassuringly. “But we must talk as we don’t have much time.”

Dillon pulled away and wiped the tears from his eyes.

“First off, I would just like to say good work at Desert Oasis Resort. John is very grateful that you rescued him and most of his team from there. Apparently Jordan had a big part to play as well if I am correct?”

Dillon nodded, still too much in shock to register that his Grandfather knew of his workings with Orion.

“I’m just sorry that you boys got pulled into this,” Grandpa Hunt said, a tone of sadness in his voice. “I had always hoped that the powers I possessed would die with me.”

“Wait, you mean that you have the same abilities that I do?”

“Correction Dillon: I *had* the same abilities,” Grandpa Hunt responded as he began to pace. “I used to be able to observe when things weren’t right, even to the tiniest detail. I could tell, for the most part, if someone was lying to me, or if I was in danger.

“Now, mind you, it wasn’t always one hundred percent accurate, but it was enough so that it allowed me to be a great asset to the military.”

“You were in the military?” Dillon asked, dumbfounded by the revelation. Then he thought about it for a moment. “You are also in Orion,” he stated clearly, his brain finally connecting the logical details of their conversation together.



“Yes my boy. But my military service was eons ago, and you are correct: I am an Orion operative; a researcher now and have been for many years.” He paused for a moment and took a deep breath; appearing as though he was contemplating his next statement carefully. “In fact,” he began, “it was the military that gave me Bironscovaniktel.”

Dillon stepped back and shook his head, wondering if he heard that right.

Grandpa Hunt laughed. “I just called him Biron.”

“Called who Biron?”

“Biron was my symbioid,” Grandpa Hunt replied. Again, a tone of sadness entered into his voice.

“What’s a symbioid?”

“It’s a microscopic organism that was discovered by the US military back in the early seventies, and I was one of the team of scientists who was privileged to do some research on it. I was a young man back then.

“For some reason Biron liked me and we formed a mental bond with one another. He also needed a host body in order to share a physical bond as well and, therefore, convinced me to have him live inside of me.”

“You have Biron living inside of you?”

A sad expression grew across Grandpa Hunt’s aged face. He almost seemed to grow older at that time. “Sadly no. Biron is no longer alive.”

Dillon didn’t know what to say. He felt sad for Grandpa, but was still somewhat confused by the tale.

“You see, Dillon, symbioids have a limited lifespan, even in the body of a host. Biron and I worked together for years, but eventually he went silent and I could no longer use the abilities he provided.”

Dillon listened, starting to unpack in his mind what his Grandfather was telling him.

“It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement Dillon,” Grandpa went on. “I provided the body for Biron to live in, and he gave me access to his unique powers of observation. It’s actually a form of psychic ability where Biron could see through what was merely on the surface and give me information by feelings, thoughts, and ... dreams.”

Dillon rocked back as the revelation hit him. “And I have one of these ... symbioids ... living in me?” he asked, not sure exactly how he felt about having another sentient organism living inside of him.

Grandpa nodded. “These organisms are passed onto the offspring of the host, but they don’t always wake up in that host. There has to be a strong connection between the two in order to bring the symbioid into an active status.

“In truth, I had hoped that Biron’s offspring wouldn’t find a connection in any of my children or ... grandchildren, but apparently that wasn’t the case.”

Dillon paced to the other side of the room, his thoughts whirling with everything his Grandfather was telling him.

“I know this is a lot to take in,” Grandpa Hunt said. “But I knew you had to be given this information sooner rather than later.”

“And Orion thought that now was the right time? Right before we finish this job?” Dillon scoffed.

“Actually, Orion doesn’t know I’m here,” Grandpa Hunt replied. “Orion doesn’t always, in my judgement, proceed in the best interests of their operatives. Plus, they don’t understand the full scope of what it is you have inside of you.”

Dillon instinctively put a hand on his stomach as though he had eaten something that was going to give him gas. Grandpa Hunt chuckled.

“Your symbioid isn’t a disease; it’s a friend. At least it will be.” Again, Grandpa Hunt’s voice trailed off and became sad.

Dillon's heart lurched a bit inside his chest, grief for his grandfather's loss weighing on him. He acted as though it was his best friend, someone he could tell his deepest secrets too. The young boy wasn't sure what to make of all this.

“So how will I know what my ... my symbioids name is?” he asked.

Grandpa Hunt walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “It will tell you when your connection is made stronger, and when it is ready to do so.

“From the accounts I have heard of so far, you are having the dreams which helped you in your mission at the resort. Soon you will be able to hear it speak to you.”

Dillon looked into Grandpa Hunt’s deep blue eyes. “I think I already have,” he said in a soft voice. “There were a few times now where a woman warned me about something that was about to happen. I don’t know how to explain it. It was weird, like a—”

“Whisper on the breeze,” Grandpa Hunt finished for him. “That’s how it starts. Soon she will reveal herself to you my boy. Fear not, for she will be one of the best friends you have ever had. And you will learn to trust her.

“It fills me with joy knowing that you have one of Biron’s daughters living inside of you.”

Dillon nodded, still trying to digest this information.

Suddenly Grandpa Hunt grew very serious. “Now Dillon, you need to listen to me very carefully. Orion, as an organization, doesn’t know that your powers come from a symbioid. They think it has something to do with extra sensory powers, or ESP, that no one has been able to fully

understand yet. At least that's what I have led them to believe. I was very thorough—and had a few friends in the military help me—modify the records of my service so that no one knows for sure where I, or you, get your powers from. So it's imperative that you do not tell them anything that I have told you here. If they find out, then I fear what they would do to you or to your symbioid.

“As far as I know there is only one person in the organization who knows the truth, and I'm not even a hundred percent sure where his loyalties lie.”

“Who's that?” Dillon asked, his curiosity rising.

“A man named Jake,” the old man replied as he patted his grandson on the shoulder. “But don't concern yourself with that right now. The critical thing is that you know the truth, and build that vital relationship with her.”

“How can I build a relationship with *her* if I don't even know her name? I mean come on! I've only heard her speak a few times!”

Grandpa Hunt smiled as he pulled his hand away from Dillon. “She'll reveal her name when she's ready and as your connection gets stronger.

“Don't worry, you will have a great friendship when that happens.”

Dillon gave his Grandfather a skeptical look which elicited a chuckle from the old man.

“Now, I have to go before I'm discovered.” He grew suddenly serious again. “There are things I need to do from the shadows in order to help protect you. There are forces at work which have world-altering potential.”

Dillon's mind raced. “Wait!” he yelled. “I have like a thousand questions. How long have you been with Orion? What do you mean they don't work for the best of others? Why haven't you contacted us before? Why now? Don't

you want to see mom and dad? Is this the last time I'll see you?"

Grandpa Hunt put a hand on his shoulder again. "Dillon, I don't have time to answer any of those right now, but one thing I can tell you is that I will get in contact with you again."

"Why didn't you come and tell me all this after Desert Oasis Resort?" Dillon blurted. "That would have been really helpful," he said in a more accusatory tone than he intended.

He looked toward the window and then back at Dillon. The boy could sense a profound sadness in his Grandfather which sent a shiver of guilt through him. "I hope you'll understand one day that it's for the best," he said.

As Grandpa Hunt walked toward the door Dillon suddenly heard a soft voice in his mind: *The pill*, it whispered. He knew at once that it was his symbioid! And he knew what she wanted him to do.

"Wait!" he yelled.

Grandpa Hunt spun around with a confused look on his face.

"I need you to do something for me," Dillon explained as he went to his suitcase and extracted the plastic bag that housed the small green pill he had taken from Derek. He ran up to his Grandfather holding it out.

Grandpa Hunt took the bag from Dillon's extended hand. "What's this?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I need you to find out for me. These are the pills that my partner Derek is taking pretty regularly. He told me they're for his anxiety, but I just have a feeling there's something more."

The old man cocked an eyebrow, "A symbiotic feeling?" he asked, his voice dripping with intrigue.

Dillon nodded. "In fact, just as you were about to leave I heard her."

"Really?"

"Yes, and she reminded me of the pill. I haven't been able to get anyone to analyze it yet. I tried to get Chyna to do it, but she wasn't interested." Dillon shook his head. "Actually, my symbioid also warned me not to give it to her," he clarified.

"This must be important if your symbioid directed you to give it to me. Well done! Well done indeed, trusting her." Grandpa Hunt put both his hands on Dillon's shoulders, then pulled him in for a crushing hug. When he released him Dillon could see tears welling up in the old man's eyes.

Grandpa Hunt took a quick look at the pill before pocketing it. "I'll find out what this is," he declared. "Then I'll find a way of letting you know."

He was about to walk out the door again when Dillon blurted, "Jordan's getting his memory of the resort back and I fear what he'll do, or what trouble he'll get into if he does."

Grandpa Hunt didn't seem phased by the disclosure. "That doesn't surprise me. Memory eraser is more difficult on older people and, he's a Hunt! Far from being weak-minded he has strength he doesn't even know of yet. I know you'll do what's right for him." He then slipped through the doorway and disappeared.

Dillon slumped down on the couch. He felt mentally exhausted. His Grandfather was alive! More importantly, his Grandfather was working in the shadows helping him somehow. That brought strength to Dillon. He also felt more confident with his powers knowing now that it was this symbioid who was, and would, continue helping him.

Those thoughts flittered from his mind as he realized

suddenly that he needed to head to the pool before Mom got too worried about him so he darted out of the room, slamming the door behind him. He bolted around the corner, stumbled to the side, and rolled, as he ran into someone that was tucked under the window just off the path.

He quickly righted himself and wheeled around, ready for a fight. His mouth hung open and his heart skipped a beat as he looked into the eyes of Jordan.

“I knew you were up to something!” Jordan exclaimed.

THE MISSION GETS MORE  
INTERESTING

**D**erek and Chyna were in the snack bar area waiting for Dillon to arrive. They had planned to meet the boy and debrief on the events that happened in the morning while at Ek' Balam.

Derek didn't like waiting this long in order to debrief about mission events, but working with the boy was different than working with regular operatives. Other operatives didn't have to worry about what would happen if their Mom and Dad found out they were working with a secret organization!

No, out of all Derek's field work, working with Dillon was definitely his most challenging work he had done up to this point. Not challenging as in a physical sense, even though that was always a factor, but more so from a planning perspective. He had to be careful about calling and texting the boy, often leaving that communication up to Dillon to initiate, and their meetings had to be planned carefully and timed just right.

Derek glanced at his phone when he took a sip of his



coffee: 12:25 AM. "So you never really told me that much about your family," he said to the young woman.

Chyna put her tea cup down on the table. "Well, as you already know, I have three sisters and brother. They're all older than I am and have families of their own. My brother is an architect, one sister is a successful business woman, another one is a lawyer, and the other is a stay-at-home mom."

"Wow, that's quite impressive," the man replied. "And you decided to focus on the sciences?"

"That's always been my passion. I love delving into the natural laws of the world and finding out what makes things tick."

"So how did you get involved with Orion? There must have been something special about you that made them stand up and take notice?" Derek observed a slight shift in the woman's posture which indicated that she was uncomfortable with the question.

"I don't know actually. I was working for a pharmaceutical company when a job opportunity showed up on my LinkedIn account. It intrigued me. They were looking for a pharmaceutical professional with a masters in science and a few years of working experience in that field. The starting pay was twice what I was making so I applied."

"And the rest is history," Derek concluded. "Which was about five years ago? Right?"

Chyna nodded as she took a sip of her tea.

Derek was about to ask another question when he looked over Chyna's shoulder. The woman must have noticed the stunned look on the man's face and turned to glance back.

"Hi Derek. Hi Chyna," Dillon said as he approached. "You guys both know my brother Jordan." With a quick

glance at Chyna, Dillon quickly amended, "Or at least, you know of him."

Derek didn't know what to say. Chyna looked back at the man as if to silently ask, "What's happening here?"

"It's okay," Dillon began, "Jordan knows everything. His memories are back."

"What!" Derek exclaimed.

Dillon nodded. "Can we sit with you? We have a lot to talk about."

Derek looked at Jordan.

"It's good to see you again Derek," Jordan said as he sat down. "I thought I recognized you."

"But how is that possible?" the man stammered.

"Jordan was having dreams about what happened at the resort and started to see images of those events. Then, when he saw you and I talking last night, it must have kick-started something in his memory again.

"The memory erasers must not have worked that good on him. I only hope that Gwen won't start remembering what happened at the resort."

"That can happen sometimes," Chyna confirmed. "Those drugs can erase certain short term memory cells, but the older someone is—the more developed their brain is—the harder it is to keep those memories from coming back. Gwen will probably never remember that time."

"What do we do about you now?" Derek asked, as he glanced at Jordan.

Dillon shifted a little in his seat as he and Jordan glanced at each other.

"I know you helped out at the resort, but we hardly have any Centrigenix on hand this time."

Jordan blushed, and Derek knew that he must be

remembering all the events that happened on that fateful night almost two years ago.

“I’m sure it wasn’t Centrigenix that saved you at the resort,” Chyna piped in, “It must have been Jordan’s presence of mind and willingness to act. The compound without a host was worthless,” she explained as she winked at Jordan.

His face brightened even more.

“You know, I was thinking about how Jordan can help this time and I have an idea,” Dillon replied. “Remember when I told you that I was having dreams again about Gwen getting mixed up in this?”

Derek nodded.

“Well, you made the observation that the glimpses are hardly one hundred percent accurate, and that maybe the dreams are a mercy in telling me that these are things that *could* happen, not necessarily things that *will* happen?”

Derek nodded again, starting to follow the logic.

Dillon took a deep breath and looked to Jordan. “Maybe Jordan,” he began as he turned and looked over at Chyna, “and Chyna could act as a guard for Gwen while you and I find the Mask?”

“Wait a minute—” Chyna began to protest, as Derek put a hand up to quiet her.

“That is an intriguing idea,” Derek commented.

“You want me to be a babysitter?” the woman retorted with indignation.

“We all have a part to play in this,” Derek argued as he looked the woman in the eyes. “And if keeping Dillon’s focus by safeguarding his sister is going to help us be successful in this mission, then that’s what we have to do. Plus, if any of them need to be drugged, you’d be the best to administer it and monitor their status until we get back.”

Derek turned to Jordan. “You’re uncharacteristically quiet. I’m surprised that you don’t want to charge ahead with your brother and kick some butt again!”

Jordan shook his head. “Dude, I just wanted to come to Mexico, hang out on the beach, and check out the girls. I’m totally *not* interested in doing whatever it is that you’re doing.”

Everyone had a good chuckle at that which seemed to ease the tension a little. Chyna still seemed a little miffed, but Derek knew she would come around. She was a good agent and would do what is best for the mission.

“Okay, now that that’s settled what information do you have for us Dillon?” Derek asked.

Dillon pulled out his phone and retrieved the pictures he had taken. He laid the phone on the table and activated the 3D holo-projector. The image came to life as the phone projected the picture of the stone slabs in the air a few inches above the phone.

Jordan’s eyes went wide when he saw the tech activated. Dillon grinned when he noticed his brother's reaction. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“So what are we looking at Dillon?” Derek questioned.

“These are stone slabs that were found in the archeological site when they first excavated the ruins. Most of the glyphs have been rubbed off over time; in fact one of the stones was far worse off than the other. The archeologists believe that this is the case because one of the stones was face down in the ground which helped to preserve it while the other was face up and exposed to the elements. Anyway, that’s not really relevant. But what is relevant is the infrared picture I took of the back of the one stone.”

Dillon scrolled to the next picture and enhanced the

image. “You see this?” he asked, excitement entering into his voice. “What does that look like to you?”

Derek looked at the image for a moment, then his eyes went wide. “That’s the same design as the staff of Haraset!”

“Exactly! I think that the staff and this stone are connected somehow.”

“But why are you able to see the infrared image clearly imbedded into the rock?” Jordan asked. “Shouldn’t the whole stone be the same temperature?”

“Unless—” Chyna interjected, “the material that’s making this image has a different heat absorption quality than the rest of the stone around it. That would cause us to be able to see this image clearly under infrared scrutiny.”

“Okay. The thing I don’t get though is how were the ancient Mayans able to see this without our technology? Wouldn’t it make this unusable?” Derek asked.

“Unless the glyphs on the stone gave them clues as to how to operate this,” Jordan put in.

Dillon looked at Jordan with a surprised expression on his face. “You know, bro, you’re smarter than you look,” he responded with a laugh.

“Oh just shut it you little twerp!”

Derek and Chyna both laughed at the sibling banter.

“So what do you think it means?” Derek finally said after the laughter died down.

“I don’t know, but I think the only way we’re going to find out is if we bring the staff to these stones. I think then the mystery will start to unravel,” replied Dillon as he picked up his phone from the table. “In one of my dreams I saw this stone and I had the staff’s head. When I put the head to the stone it got warm and began to sink in. Then I pushed it which activated something.

“In my dream I then stepped back and, at the bottom of the stone, appeared a key. I think there is a key in that thing which we can only get by using the staff’s head.”

Derek sat back and digested what Dillon was saying. “Okay,” he finally replied as he leaned in and began to speak in hushed tones, “then this is what I propose. Tomorrow evening Dillon and I will make our way to Ek’ Balam, sneak into the site, and start digging around.

“While we’re gone, you two need to keep watch over Gwen so that Tower Six won’t be able to use her against us in any way.”

Derek noted that Chyna still didn’t look happy about her part in the assignment, but to her credit, she never said a word against the plan.

“With any luck, and a great deal of skill,” Derek said as he looked at Dillon, “we’ll find the key and be able to use it to get the mask. We already know that the mask is in the pyramid due to Chyna using the staff to find that out.”

“You’d better be back before sunrise or Mom will massacre your little protege here,” Jordan stated matter-of-factly. “And I mean ridiculous massacre! Like, you won’t even be able to recognize him anymore type of massacre.”

“I get it bro. I think we all get it,” Dillon replied as he rolled his eyes.

“It’s good to have you back on board Jordan,” Derek said with a grin.

Jordan managed a weak smile.

Derek laid out the rest of his plans for the mission to the team and made sure everyone knew their part. Before they were done he had traded phone numbers with Jordan just in case either needed to call for any reason. He was becoming fond of these Hunt boys and knew deep down that he could trust them. They had shown themselves

competent at the resort and he was pleased they were working together once more. It was hard for him to keep in mind that they were just kids.

“Okay, does anyone have any questions before we proceed with the operation?” the man asked as he looked around at the group.

Everyone was silent as they glanced around at each other. Derek nodded his head and was about to get up when Jordan asked: “I don’t know much about secret organizations and all, but it seems to me that Orion is much bigger than it appears to be and, if that’s so, and if this mission is so important, then where’s the backup?”

Derek and Chyna glanced at each other uncomfortably. The look must have given Jordan more confidence as he continued: “I mean, it seems strange to me that you’re relying on two kids to help hold this whole thing together. Now, I know that Dillon has these powers that have helped out a lot so far, but I’m just a regular seventeen year old kid—who’s almost eighteen—and you’re counting on me to help keep my sister safe? It all just seems like there’s a lot of risk there. Where’s the cavalry?”

Derek knew these kids were perceptive, and he hadn’t told Dillon yet that Orion claimed they didn’t have the resources to help them right now even though Tower Six was on the field.

“You know, that’s a good point Jordan,” Dillon commented, shooting an accusing stare Derek’s way. “Where is the rest of Orion? They weren’t there at the resort until it was time to clean things up, and they’re not here now ... except for you two of course.”

Derek looked to Chyna for support again, then he sighed. “You know what Jordan, you’re absolutely right. Orion *should* be here backing us up, but they can’t afford

the resources right now, so they tell me. I had this exact conversation earlier with my mission lead and he was unable to commit any backup to us.”

The man began to rub his hands together anxiously. He could feel his heart begin to pound faster and his palms get sweaty. He reached into his pocket, but the pills weren't there! He frantically began to rummage through the rest of his pockets. Suddenly Chyna put a hand on his shoulder and handed him a bottle.

Immediately he calmed as he took the pills from her. “I thought you might need those,” the woman said as she moved a glass of water toward him.

“Thanks.”

Jordan glanced at Dillon with a confused look. Dillon shook his head slightly.

Derek downed a pill with a gulp of water. He felt the refreshing liquid slip down his throat, but, more importantly, he knew the pill would help dispel the anxiety. After a moment, he looked up at the boys who were giving him a quizzical look. He knew he had to say something to dispel any prying questions.

“Look. I know how it appears, but these are here to help me with my anxiety,” he said, holding up the bottle. “I have been doing this for a long time now and once in a while the stress heightens, particularly when I feel we're in a tight spot.”

*Damn!* He mentally berated himself for indicating that there might be more of a challenge in the mission than he tried to let on. “What I mean is that we need to work with less help than I thought we had, but we'll be alright,” he tried to explain so the boys didn't doubt his ability to keep them safe.



“Despite the lack of support right now, Orion will take care of us.”

For just a second, Chyna’s face appeared downcast when Derek explained about the pills, then she seemed to shake the look away and stiffened up.

Jordan looked confused and appeared as though he was about to say something when Dillon put his hand on his arm and shook his head. “We get it,” he said reassuringly before Jordan could say anything. “And we’re ready for the challenge.”

Derek smiled and knew that they would be successful. They would be successful for Orion.

THE KEY

“**W**hat the heck was that?” Jordan asked as he and Dillon made their way back to the room.

Dillon didn’t have any answers, not yet anyway. But he knew he was going to get some.

“Did you see the way Derek was acting at the end? He seemed like he was coming unhinged when he spoke about the lack of support, then he took one of those pills and—”

“Everything got better in his mind,” Dillon finished for him.

“Exactly! It was weird.”

“I noticed this about him a few months ago,” Dillon replied. “I even stole one of those pills because I have a feeling that they’re not just for his anxiety. I was going to give it to Chyna so she could analyze it as she’s actually a chemist by trade, but my ... my symbioid told me not to.” He looked at Jordan in order to gauge his reaction at the mention of his symbioid.

Jordan stared at him for a moment. “Don’t worry, I

heard you and Grandpa talking about why you have these powers,” he stated. “Your secret is safe with me.”

Dillon visibly relaxed when Jordan said that. He was glad to have Jordan working with him again, like at the resort.

“Why, I wonder, were you not supposed to give it to Chyna?” he asked. “She seems like a great girl to me. Not to mention a total babe!”

Dillon rolled his eyes. “Anyway ... I don’t know, but Grandpa told me that I needed to trust my symbioid. This happened before I even knew there was a symbioid but the feeling was so strong that I listened anyway.” He suddenly stopped and looked at Jordan. “When I look back at my experiences I think I was able to usually distinguish between my own feelings and the ones that are impressed upon me by her. She’s able to somehow know when things aren’t right. I don’t know how it works yet, but Grandpa said it has something to do with ESP that the symbioid has. He also implied that I will find more about her as we get use to each other. Do you understand?”

Jordan stared at his little brother for a moment. “Not really,” he replied, “but I trust Grandpa. “I just wished I could have spoken with him.”

“Why didn’t you come in when you knew who I was speaking with?” Dillon asked. “You thought he was dead too.”

Jordan looked down, as if he was ashamed. “It’s because I was scared about what was going on ... with ... with me and ... with you. I wanted to know as much as I could, and I knew that if I barged in on you two then the conversation would probably have been a lot different than what it was.

“I know we’ve had our differences in the past, but I want to trust you now bro.”

“Just like at the resort,” Dillon remarked with a wry grin.

“I don’t fully remember what happened there, not yet anyway, but I get the feeling it was pretty awesome.”

“Correction bro, *you* were pretty awesome!”

Jordan smiled and patted his brother on the shoulder. “Well I hope I can live up to your expectations again.”

“You will,” Dillon replied with a smile.

“Did *she* tell you that?”

“No, this feeling’s coming from my faith in you. You’re smarter and stronger than you let others know you are. I think it’s a defense mechanism you use,” Dillon stated with confidence.

“It sounds like you just found out my super power: the power of deflection.” Dillon laughed as they continued to walk toward the room again.

Dillon felt as though a huge weight was lifted from his shoulders. He now had another person other than Orion operatives he could confide in about what was going on in his life. Now that Jordan and Sarah knew what was going on with him he felt a kind of peace that he hadn’t known in a long long while. He also felt a connection to his brother he had never experienced before.

Jordan looked at his brother in all seriousness. “Look, Dil, I know Derek is a good guy, but if those pills are doing something to his brain, what should we do?”

“I don’t know. I gave it to Grandpa and told him about my concern with it. Maybe he will be able to tell us what it is. If he does, then we will know better what we should do.”

Jordan nodded.

They got to the room and as Jordan was about to open it Dillon got a shiver down his spine. He shot his head straight up. Jordan glanced at him curiously. "What's up?"

"I don't know, but there's a problem." He glanced around then, and, as he looked to his sister's door right across the outdoor open area he saw, ever-so-slightly, that the lock was tampered with! "The girls!" he gasped.

"What!" Jordan whispered loudly as he went to their door. He grabbed the handle and swung the door open.

The entranceway was dark. Dillon moved passed his brother with his phone out and flashlight on. He scanned around the room as he came into the main area where the girls' beds were. His heart pounded in his chest as he approached the first bed. He reached out for the covers but knew before he even pulled them back that Gwen was gone.

Jordan flicked the lights on and gasped as the sheets flew to the side revealing an empty bed. He looked immediately to Claire's bed and threw back the sheets. Claire was laying there sleeping soundly. Jordan shook his sister. "Claire," he said as he rocked her back and forth. When she didn't respond he got more aggressive but it was no use. She was out cold.

"Wha ... What is going on!" Jordan exclaimed as he brushed his hand nervously through his thick hair. "Where is Gwen? And why won't Claire wake up?"

"Gwen is with *them*," Dillon replied cryptically as he held out the note he found on Gwen's pillow.

"With who!" Jordan shouted as he moved over and snatched the note from Dillon's hand. His eye's widened as he read the lines.

. . .

*DILLON, DON'T DISAPPOINT US. WE EXPECT YOU TO FIND THE Mask and hand it over to us. If you do, then your sister will be safe.*

*You have only ten hours to comply with this, at which time your parents and Claire will wake up to a most unfortunate reality: the loss of Gwen. But don't worry, they won't be in anguish that long as the poison we put into them to keep them asleep will turn deadly shortly thereafter, thus making them sleep forever.*

*It's too bad we are the only ones who have the antidote. That would be a shame if you can't get the Mask to us in time in order to save Gwen, Claire, and your parents.*

*BRIGHTON HIROTA*

DILLON QUICKLY PULLED UP THE CONTACTS ON HIS PHONE and dialed the number putting the device to his ear. As the phone rang, he paced faster and faster in the room, his heart picking up speed to match his pacing. "Come on, Derek. Pick up. Pick u—"

"Easy, Dillon! I'm on the phone. What's going on?"

"Derek!" Dillon shouted. "W ... we ... they ..." He couldn't get the words out.

"Breathe, Dillon. Deep breath. Gimme one word."

"Gwen!" Dillon blurted. And with that one name, his tongue loosed. "Gwen is gone! They took her. They took my sister!" he cried.



DEREK LOOKED AT THE NOTE AS THEY SPED DOWN THE narrow road. Chyna maneuvered the car through the Mexican country side with as much speed and skill as she

could muster. The passengers were pushed from side to side as she glided around the corners.

“Hirota,” Derek whispered to himself. “Why does his last name sound so familiar to me?”

“Well, you already mentioned that this Brighton guy seems to know you somehow. Maybe you actually do know him; or rather, know of him?” Chyna queried.

Derek shook his head unsure where he knew this man’s last name from.

“Don’t worry man. I’m sure it will come to you,” Dillon replied reassuringly.

Derek just nodded and looked ahead to see where they were. They were close now: he recognized the countryside, having memorized every aspect of the mission details in the previous weeks.

“I don’t get it though,” Jordan suddenly put in, “there’s no point of exchange mentioned in the letter. How are they to know where we are and when to make the switch?”

“This is Tower Six we’re talking about Jordan. They’ll find us,” Derek replied as he turned to face the boys in the back seat. “So tell me again Dillon, you don’t recall having any dreams that indicated that Brighton was the one who took your sister?”

“I already told you,” he snapped. “I only saw Gwen in trouble at the pyramid.” He paused and looked around as if trying to choke back the tears, or even collect his thoughts. “The dream didn’t even indicate how she got in there. It was weird. There was some sort of creature almost hissing from the darkness. It sounded a lot like Troy.”

“Troy from the resort?” Derek asked, confused.

“I don’t get it either,” Dillon stated as he shook his head.

The boy put his head in his hands. "It's just like at the resort! Why aren't these making sense?"

"It's okay Dillon," Chyna reassured. "I'm sure your powers just need to be trained and developed."

"Ya," Derek interjected. "At least we weren't taken totally off guard by this." He felt like an idiot at that moment, trying to console the boy with his flawed logic because, in truth, their most recent plan called for protection around Gwen but somehow that plan was tanked, and now the whole Hunt family was in danger. He was sure before when they talked about this that Dillon would be able to change the outcomes of what he was seeing in his dreams, but now he wasn't so sure.

The car spun around a few more corners then Chyna slowed as they neared the site. She pulled away from the road, into the trees, then turned off the ignition and lights.

There was a moment of silence as the four seemed to issue a collective sigh. Derek knew that Tower Six was in the driver's seat for now and had no choice but to play along until an opportunity to change that presented itself.

"Okay. So are we all good with the plan?" he asked, looking around at each member of his team.

They all nodded their agreement.

"Good. Then let's go and get your sister back."

Dillon and Jordan looked at each other then gave a quick fist bump before exiting the car.

Derek opened the trunk and grabbed a small black bag. He unzipped it and took out a Glock 17 9mm handgun. He lifted it up before him, pulled the action back, and released. Then he grabbed two extra mags and placed them in his back pocket. He grabbed another handgun and tossed it to Chyna with two extra mags, then he zipped the bag up again and slung it over his shoulders. As he did



so he noticed Jordan looking at him with a stunned expression.

“It’s okay bro,” Dillon commented. “It’s all part of the mission.”

“The only question I have is: Where’s mine!” Jordan exclaimed.

Derek chuckled. “Nice try kid. You’re not even a trained agent.”

“What about me then?” Dillon asked eagerly. “I’m trained! ... sort of.”

“You, my friend, aren’t even old enough to drink. You think I’m going to trust you with a gun?” Derek replied with a smile.

“Do you have the staff’s head?” Dillon asked.

“It’s in the bag. Now come on. We don’t have any time to spare.”



TAYLOR LOOKED AT THE GROUP WITH HER INFRARED binoculars approaching the site. She saw them slip easily onto the grounds, avoiding any security personnel and cameras that were there.

“These guys are good,” she said as she looked to Brighton.

“Derek’s one of the best,” Brighton replied with a smirk. “We’ll give them thirty minutes to see if they can find out where this mask is, then we’ll make our move.”

“Sounds good. The only issue I’m having with the tracker is that the communications are starting to die. It’s hard to hear what they’re saying now.” She readjusted the earpiece

“That’s because the chip has a very short lifespan. It

degrades quickly in the human body,” Brighton clarified. “It’s okay though. We’ll head to a better vantage point. From their conversation earlier we know that they’re heading to the stone display you approached Dillon at earlier.”

Taylor nodded. “And what about her?” She motioned to Gwen who was tied and gagged lying a few feet away.

Brighton walked over to the young girl. She was staring up at him with wide eyes. The fear showed clearly in those large blue orbs. He bent down and stroked her cheek lightly. “We bring her with us of course,” he said with a wicked grin.

Gwen tried to scream out but the cry was muffled by the rag that was wrapped around her mouth. Tears flowed freely down her delicate cheeks as her shoulders heaved with sobs.

Taylor merely laughed at the display.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be reunited with your brother soon,” Brighton teased as he hoisted Gwen up over his shoulder.



THE GROUP APPROACHED THE STONES AND DILLON immediately went to the back side of the one he had seen the design on through the infrared imaging scanner on his phone. Derek pulled out the staff’s head from the backpack and tossed it to Dillon, then he and Chyna took up positions around the boy as he went to work. They stationed themselves in such a way so as to block out the light Dillon was using so that if someone was to glance in their direction they would have a hard time seeing what was going on. Fortunately, for the group, the moon was full—actually

a super moon—and the stars shone down from the sky in all their brilliance which provided a dim lighting in the night so they weren't shrouded in total darkness but could still stand at a distance from someone without being noticed.

Dillon fired up the app on his phone again and tried another scan. The imaging was much weaker this time, but he could still make out the image of the staff's head imbedded in the stone.

"Whoa! How was anyone supposed to know that was here?" Jordan asked as he looked from the picture on the phone to the staff-head Dillon had been carrying.

"Pretty cool huh?" Dillon responded with a smirk. "Now, I'm betting that the weird metal on this staff's head and the metal that's in this rock which makes it warmer than the surrounding stone are somehow connected." He handed the phone to Jordan.

Dillon put the head up to his face while Jordan shined the light he had from his phone angled down at the stone. He then held Dillon's phone up so his brother could see the image on the stone so they could better see what they were dealing with.

The young boy placed the head of the staff in the exact spot on the stone that was indicated from his phone. He held it there for a moment, almost expecting something miraculous to happen but there was nothing. He looked to Derek who just shrugged. He returned his attention to the stone and staff head. He held it there for what seemed a long while and still there was nothing. The young boy was about to pull it away when he heard the whisper in his mind, *Not yet.*

"Not yet?" he whispered to himself. He knew it was *her*, his symbioid. "Grandpa said to trust you," he whispered.

“What was that Dillon?” Derek asked as he crouched beside the boy.

“Just a little longer. This will work.”

*Be ready*, she said to him.

“Be ready,” Dillon said to the others.

“Be ready for what?” Chyna was the first to ask.

“I don’t know, but just be ready,” came Dillon’s cryptic response.

Chyna sighed and clicked the safety off on her gun.

Derek removed himself from Dillon and took up sentry on the other side.

“Bro, what’s going on?” Jordan asked, his voice shaky.

“I don’t know, but *she* does,” he whispered so that Jordan was the only one who could hear him as he continued to focus on the staff’s head. Suddenly the strangely colored metal on the head began to warm and glow slightly. Jordan flinched when he saw the glow. Dillon could feel the warmth but it wasn’t uncomfortably hot ... not yet.

After a few seconds the glow intensified and the head began to sink into the stone directly overtop of where the infrared had indicated the staff-head design. Dillon pushed slightly as the head sunk in. Suddenly the metal on the head flared. Dillon and Jordan had to shield their eyes from the intense light, but the flash lasted for less than a second then was gone. When Dillon’s eyes adjusted again to the dimness of the phone’s light he saw that the head was implanted into the stone. Just below the staff’s head was an image burned in the stone that was shaped like a key. He touched his hand to the spot and noted that the stone was now brittle and flaking apart.

“Quick, grab me a knife!” Dillon whispered loudly.

He took the blade Derek had produced and began to

scrape at the stone. It peeled back easily and out dropped a metal key. The boy grabbed it as it fell from its stony encasement.

Jordan's eyes widened as he saw the item. Dillon smiled at him. "And that is how it is done," he said with a grin.

His smile was cut short, however, as an otherworldly shriek suddenly pierced the silence of the night.

Dillon and Jordan stood upright, both looking to Derek and Chyna.

"What was that?" Jordan asked.

"I don't—" Derek began to say when another shriek rang out, then another, and another. He and Chyna spun at every sound, pointing their guns in those directions, trying to pinpoint where the sounds were coming from.

Dillon moved beside Chyna. "This is what we were supposed to be ready for," he stated.

"Ya, but it would have been nice if we were told what *they* were!" Chyna retorted, her tone full of annoyance.

Another shriek broke through the air, and Dillon flinched as he saw the shadowed form charging at him from through the darkness.

It was the creature from his dream!

CREATURES IN THE DARKNESS

**J**ose rubbed his eyes. Even though he had been working these night shifts for more than a year now his body still wasn't totally on board with being awake all night and sleeping most of the day. He didn't mind it that much though as it was easy money. Rarely did they have anyone come onto the grounds after closing hours which is just the way he liked it. Once in a while he had to chase away kids who were just roaming about causing minor problems just for the sake of causing problems. So when he looked at the screen and saw something moving just outside the main doors he figured it was some troublesome kids again.

“Hay movimiento fuera del edificio principal,” he said into the radio, trying to get a hold of his partner Harvey. There was no response.

“¿Me escuchas, Harvey?” he asked, a little more urgently.

Silence.

The middle-aged man sighed deeply as he rubbed a hand through his greying hair and shook his head. He

stood up and moved from the desk of the security room and into the main entrance.

Jose approached the door and peered through the window out into the darkness. The security lights only lit the outside area for about twenty feet from the doors. Beyond that was utter blackness. He squinted his eyes, trying to see if there was any movement anywhere.

The man shook his head and reached for the handle. He called on the radio again, but still, there was no answer. He grasped the handle to the lock and began to turn it, but jumped back and yelped as a black form slammed into the glass door.

It had no face except a mouth. The creature's fingers were long and bony and ended in large claws. The rest of its body was lean muscle, but dark, as though it had been rotting or burned, or even just covered in filth. It seemed to growl at Jose, showing him its massive fangs, as it slammed into the glass once more. It issued a horrifying shriek which caused the bewildered guard to flinch and jump back again.

The terrified man's mind was locked in a state of disbelief and dread as he reached, with shaky hands, for the gun that was in his holster.

The creature slammed on the glass again and again. Jose pulled the gun. The glass began to crack, spidering up and down the length of the large window. Fear gripped him like never before. His finger glided over the trigger but he couldn't bring himself to pull it.

The creature hit the window again, and again, and again. Smash! The glass shattered into thousands of pieces as the monster charged into the building. Bang! Bang! Bang!

Only one bullet hit the beast as it charged in, and that barely slowed it down as it barreled into the man.



“DID YOU HEAR THAT?” TAYLOR ASKED AS THE WOMAN stopped to look back at Brighton who was carrying a terrified Gwen over his shoulder. “I heard some shrieks and the sound of gunshots.”

Brighton nodded. “I heard them too. Whatever is going on with Derek and his crew has probably unleashed hell. And hell isn't as bad if you can get to the right location.”

“So what do we do?”

Brighton pulled his one handgun from its holster at his back and smiled. “What we always do in a situation like this: be ready for anything.”

The look on Taylor's face showed that she was a little shaken by the sounds but she steeled her expression anyway and drew out her gun. She turned to continue down the trail but stopped suddenly.

“What is it?” Brighton whispered from behind.

Taylor crouched down a bit as if she was trying to look deeper into the darkness. The only light she had on was the small flashlight she carried in her left hand. Brighton shined his light over to where she was looking but couldn't see anything.

“Come on,” he said, “your mind is probably just making your eyes see things.”

She nodded and was about to move when they both heard the snap of a twig to the left. The agents turned in unison, guns aimed into the darkness. Then they heard



another snap to the right. Again, they pivoted and trained their weapons. Another was heard ahead of them, and another behind.

Gwen whimpered as she was spun around by Brighton.

Brighton's heart began to pump furiously as adrenaline coursed through his system.

A shriek pierced the darkness, then another, and another.

Taylor backed a step, then turned and fired into the darkness. Brighton looked in that direction and saw the shadowed form come out of the forest. He was about to fire when he heard the rushing sound of someone running toward him from the left. He spun and fired as the creature bared down on him. The bullet entered the thing's chest which staggered it for a moment, but it recovered and continued to come on. The man unceremoniously dropped Gwen to the ground who grunted as she landed.

The creature moved in on him. It swiped at him with its clawed hand, but Brighton sidestepped it and shot the thing in the head. It went down hard. He heard four shots ring out and glanced over at Taylor. She was down and being swarmed by three of the creatures. The beasts clawed at her viciously. Brighton knew he had to help. He leaped over to the nearest monster and kicked it in the head with all the force he could muster. The monster went down.

Before he could finish it off another creature lunged from the darkness and raked its filthy claw across the man's shoulder. He spun away from the blow, lessening some of the impact, then shot it three times: twice in the chest, and once in the head. It went down, flying passed him as he dodged aside from the flailing creature. As it hit the ground

he got a waft of the stench of rotting flesh. He didn't notice the smell when the creatures first attacked, but the stench now almost caused him to reel and vomit. He choked back the feeling as he put his arm over his nose and turned to survey what was going on.

"Damn," he said under his breath as he noticed that one of the creatures that was attacking Taylor had hoisted her up on its shoulder and was carrying her into the forest.

The agent leaped forward, but was blocked by the swinging arms of the other monster. He expertly dodged and parried the strikes then stepped back and fired three times, hitting it twice in the face and once on the shoulder. The beast tumbled to the ground hard. He stepped over the thing's body but turned back to look where Gwen was and saw that she was wasn't there anymore. He knew there was no way she could have ran away on her own as her arms and legs were securely tied. They had taken her.

More shrieks rang out as five more beasts came out of the shadows.

Brighton turned to meet them but suddenly felt shaky. He reached to grab his other gun that was holstered on his leg but felt his fingers becoming numb and couldn't grasp it. His legs were also losing their strength. He looked to his shoulder where he had been raked as his eyes began to grow heavy.

"Damn!" he mouthed as he dropped the gun in his hand and the darkness overcame him.



DEREK STEPPED IN FRONT OF DILLON AND FIRED INTO THE creature's chest. The thing stumbled but kept coming. He

fired again, this time in the head, and it went down right at his feet.

Chyna glanced at the fallen creature, frozen in shock.

“Chyna, behind you!” Dillon screamed.

She spun as three more ran from the trees. She managed to pull herself from her shock at seeing the creatures and shot five times, but only downed one. Derek spun and fired as well, taking another one down. The last monster swung at Chyna with its clawed hands. The agile woman sidestepped the strike and shot it in the head point blank. The monster twisted and fell.

Jordan nudged one of the fallen creatures with his foot then jumped back as its body twitched. “What are these things?”

“I don’t know,” replied Derek. He looked to the field behind them as another shriek broke through the air and five more monsters ran into view. “You guys need to go,” he said urgently. He unslung his pack and threw it at Dillon’s feet. “There’s too many of them. We’ll catch up at the temple as soon as we can.”

Dillon looked into Derek’s face and saw determination there. He knew that the man would do what it took to get the job done, and that he expected Dillon to do the same thing. With a nod Dillon grabbed the pack and Jordan’s arm. “Let’s go bro.”

“But ... we ... how ...” Jordan stammered.

“We don’t have time!” Dillon yelled.

Derek and Chyna turned and began to fire into the creatures that sped toward them.

Jordan flinched when the shots went off but recovered quickly and ran with Dillon toward the temple.

Dillon sped off as fast as he could. He ducked and turned behind ruins and trees, hoping that Jordan was still

behind him; hoping also that he would live one more day so he could see his fourteenth birthday! When he came to the base of the pyramid he glanced back and saw his brother about twenty feet behind him.

His eyes went wide when two of the creatures lurched out at Jordan from the side. Jordan swung out at one, hitting it in the face, but that barely slowed it as it tackled him.

“No!” Dillon cried out.

He ran back to help his brother, but the other one had jumped on Jordan as well and there were more coming. “Go Dillon!” Jordan screamed from in the midst of the tangle.

The young boy stopped and shook his head. How could he leave Jordan to this fate? “Go now!” Jordan yelled out again. “Go for the sake of Gwen!”

Dillon knew there was no way he would be able to get his brother out of the mess of monsters. His only hope now was that Derek and Chyna would be able to make it to him in time.

Tears streaked down Dillon’s face as he turned and began to ascend the uneven stairs. As he climbed he glanced back and saw that the creatures had taken Jordan away from where he was and that the remaining monsters just stared up at him from the base of the pyramid. For whatever reason they did not come after him. He didn’t have time to ponder the reason as he pushed himself onward. Before long he made it to the platform that led to the door.

He stared at the mouth-shaped entrance for a moment and wiped the tears from his eyes, then climbed over the rail. Dillon came and stood at the modern-looking door that was fitted into the frame by the Yucatan government

in order to keep tourists out of the inner ruins. He grabbed the handle, turned, and pushed hard on the door. To his surprise the door swung open.

The chill that went up Dillon's spine at that moment rivaled any of his previously horrifying moments he had to date. The darkness pressed in on him so thick that Dillon could hardly breath. The icy cold wasn't a physical cold, but a spiritual cold that numbed Dillon's heart and soul. This place held no light, no love, no hope.

Dillon dropped the backpack at the door and pulled out the LED flashlight. He turned the light on and it flared to life illuminating the whole area right in front of him.

He shouldered the pack again then entered and found that he was in a room that was about fifteen feet by fifteen feet. The room was bare with no other exits evident from his cursory look.

"This doesn't make sense," the young boy whispered to himself. "Why would this room be here at the top of the pyramid with nothing in it?"

*Maybe there were artifacts here when they first discovered the place, he thought, but they removed them?*

He walked around the edge of the room, feeling the walls with his hand and shining the light carefully along its surface as he went.

He pulled the key from his pocket and began examining it in detail. As he rubbed the dirt from it he noticed that the color of the metal matched that of the staff's head. Quickly he fumbled around for his phone. When he had it in hand he turned on his infrared scanner and began looking at the walls in detail. All was cold. He searched every ounce of the walls but there was nothing.

He let out a frustrated growl and was about to throw the key down when something caught his eye. He shined

the light around the floor and saw it: the stone blocks that made up the slab didn't look quite right. It was pieced together by smaller stones, much like the stairs of the pyramid that allowed you to ascend it, but the center seemed too perfect. The stairs were different heights and widths which made it a challenge to climb safely, and most of this floor was made of stones of different sizes and shapes, except for a section in the middle that was about three feet by three feet. This area was worked stone of different shapes, but the workmanship, to Dillon, seemed too perfect: the seams were too well made. The mortar was too smooth and Dillon could tell that the stone was worked in such a way as to hide something. It was as though the craftsman tried too hard to make that section of floor blend into the rest.

Dillon silently thanked his symbioid—whoever she was—for helping him see what was not easily observable, and began to scan the stones with his phone. It only took a moment for him to see it: there was a small spot on the floor where there was a small heat signature. It was in the shape of the key's end.

Dillon held his breath as he placed the end of the key onto the spot and waited. It didn't take long for the metals to react and the key to sink into the stone. He pushed it as far as it would go, then straddled the three foot square section before turning it. There was a loud click and a grating sound as the section of floor fell away. It swung inward and slammed hard onto the side of the hidden passage below the room.

He shined the light into the passage and noted a small tunnel that was about six feet below the floor of the room. Without hesitation, Dillon jumped into the hole. As he hit the floor he felt a rush of wind and heard a loud raspy

voice echo from the darkness, “Come and get your friends before it’s too late,” it hissed. He wasn’t sure if the voice was audible or in his head.

Dillon froze. He knew this voice. He had heard it before in one of his dreams.

FEAR AND JAMEICA

**B**righton looked around. He saw the all-to-familiar floral blinds hanging from the large front window of his family's house where he grew up. He heard the sound of the nearby train that rattled down the tracks no less than three times a day and could smell the fragrant incense his mom often burned that sweetened the aroma of the entire house.

He shook his head trying to remember the last thing he could. This didn't make any sense. Monsters! There were monsters attacking them. The little girl he had kidnapped, Gwen, and his partner Taylor, were taken. He was about to call out for Taylor when he heard shouting from the other room.

This whole place made no sense to him. Why was he here. This had to be a dream, yet it seemed so real. He quickly rounded the corner and stopped dead in his tracks. The sight made his knees go weak. He saw his dad standing overtop his mom. His Dad shot his hand across and smacked his wife in the face. The woman spun and hit



the floor hard, her dark hair stretching out to cover her face.

Brighton took a step back, his heart in his throat. He remembered this. The smell of the alcohol on his father's breath, the spray of blood from his mom's busted lip.

He wanted to step in and stop him, but what could he do? He was just a boy. Brighton looked down at his hands and blinked in confusion. He held them up as if he had never seen them before.

They were a man's hands: large, thick fingered, scarred and strong. He made a fist, veins popping out on the back of his hands. He looked up at his father, determination filling him.

Brighton leaped forward and grabbed the man by the collar. Despite his sudden appearance his Dad didn't seem shocked to see him standing there. Brighton brought his fist in and smashed the man in the nose. The blow sent him hurling back across the room and over the table that was there.

Brighton's Dad stood up and wiped the blood from his face. "Did that feel good son?" he asked in his broken Japanese accent. "Is that what you wanted to do ever since you were a child but could not?"

Brighton was stunned. He didn't know what to say. What could he say? He turned and looked over at his mother and saw, standing behind her, himself as a boy!

"You know why we were fighting, don't you Brighton?" his Dad asked.

"Because mom was leaving us for another man," child-Brighton said. His voice was high pitched, a child's voice, but cold and emotionless."

The feeling that he needed to protect her flew from him at that moment as he remembered. Mom had left

them for *him*. It was this event in the young boy's life that began to fuel the anger and hate that had consumed him all those subsequent years. And now, for some reason, he was reliving this dark turning point.

He turned back to his Dad. The man stood there smiling wickedly. "It was your Mom's infidelity that has made you into the man you are today. Embrace the anger, the hate, the ... fear."

Brighton cocked an eyebrow at that last word: fear. How could he feel fear? What was his Dad talking about? He looked around in confusion.

Before he had time to ponder the thought further he saw the man responsible for all the pain in his life walk up behind his Mom. He was tall and strongly built. His dark hair was speckled with grey, and his chiseled jaw showed a strength and confidence there. His light blue eyes were as the eyes of a demon to Brighton.

Brighton screamed out, unable to contain the rage and leaped forward.

"If you give into the anger Brighton it will consume you," he heard his Mom say as he pushed her and young Brighton out of the way to get at the man who ruined his life.

The man stepped back as the dangerous Asian approached.

"I don't care! I don't care about any of that!" he screamed.

A part of him knew that he was trapped in a dream—a nightmare—and that he should break free from it, but that was now buried beneath the unchecked anger and hate he had no control over. The rage had now consumed him, snuffing out the spark of reality that previously held his mind in check.

“Good,” his Father said. “Make him pay.”



DEREK STARED OUT INTO THE CITY SKYLINE. IT WAS raining, but that seemed to soothe the man. He was staring down from an apartment up high that overlooked a fair portion of New York city. This was his apartment.

Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked over and saw the delicate fingers of a woman. When he turned he flinched and stepped back into the window as he was staring into the face of Brianna! Her auburn hair danced off her shoulders, and her smile lit up her beautiful face.

“Aren't you glad to see me?” she purred as she stepped forward, putting a hand on his chest.

Derek stared at her. “Brianna ... what are you doing here?”

“Doing here?” she laughed. “You're so silly! Come back to bed,” she invited, her lashes dropping alluringly over her cheeks.

Derek shook his head and stepped back. “You can't ...” He stared into the rain, his heart rate picking up. “Orion,” he muttered, patting his pocket. “My pills! Where are my pills?” He scanned the room, frantic.

“Pills? You don't need pills when you have me,” Brianna said.

Derek moved away and tore open drawers in his search for his pills. He knocked a book open onto the ground. The writing caught his attention. He stared at it for a long time before he realized what was wrong. He couldn't read it. “A dream,” he breathed. He looked up at Brianna. “This is all a dream.”

Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly before a smile crossed her face again. "Yes being together is like a dream."

"No!" Derek yelled. "No! You're ..." He closed his eyes, squeezing the side of head. "You're ... you're ... dead," he sputtered.

"Am I?" she asked as she moved in, her face only inches from his.

Derek spun away from the woman. "This isn't real!" he shouted. "You're dead, and you killed your sister, my wife, Samantha."

"It was all for a good cause," the woman said with a wicked grin. "I love you Derek."

"That wasn't love!" the man spat back. "How could you take from me the one really good thing that had ever happened to me?" he questioned as tears began to form in his eyes.

Brianna snorted. "What! You mean my perfect sister? The thought of it makes me want to throw up!" Brianna walked over to the bed at the other side of the studio apartment.

As she did, Derek noticed there was someone under the covers but he couldn't tell who it was as their face was covered.

When Brianna got there she grabbed the end of the blanket and pulled back. Derek almost fell over, his knees getting weak. Lying there in the bed was the body of his beloved! Samantha had a serene look on her beautiful face. Her long brown hair stretched down and over her shoulders.

"No, no, no, no," Derek said as he came to the bedside. "No!" he screamed out, cupping her tender face in his hands. Suddenly her eyes shot open, but all Derek saw in

them was deadness! He stumbled back as his dead wife slowly rose from the bed. The only thing he could hear from behind him was Brianna laughing wickedly.

Samantha turned and looked at Derek, “This was all your fault,” she said in a cold voice.

“Nooooooooo! This is just a dream!” he screamed as he backed up.

“This isn’t a dream,” he heard Brianna whisper gently into his ear as she wrapped her arms around him and began to kiss him softly up and down his neck. The smell of her perfume was intoxicating and he felt himself lose his pain in that fragrance. *Maybe this is better?* he thought as the line between dream and reality began to fade.

He turned and looked into Brianna’s deep green eyes. Her full lips pressed against his. His first reaction was to pull away, but then, as he felt the softness of her lips and inhaled the intoxicating aroma he lost all will to fight. The line between reality and nightmare fizzled away like the last remnants of a lighted candle wick displaying its final flame before being extinguished.



BREATHE,” SHE BEGGED. “BREATHE!” BUT HE DIDN’T. SHE fell back on her butt, exhaustion robbing her strength. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she stared at the body of her little brother lying in the sand.

Chyna backed away. “No. It can’t be!” she exclaimed. He looked so peaceful; too peaceful.

After working through the initial shock of what she was seeing the woman moved up to him again, and stroked his short brown hair. “This can’t be happening. That was twenty years ago,” she said aloud, trying to understand

what was going on. Why was she reliving this memory, this nightmare?

She began to weep.

“It’s okay my girl,” she heard a familiar voice say to her from behind.

Chyna wiped the tears away as she turned and looked into the face of her uncle.

“We’ll help you channel those emotions you feel about losing Danny. I know you blame yourself and that’s good,” the man said with a grin. “You need to use that ... that reality to spurn you on.”

Chyna’s heart sank. Ever did she blame herself for her brother’s drowning, and so did her ... parents. The sight before her now was almost too much for her. “Noooooo!” she screamed out as she began to cry again.

“You’re weak,” came her uncle’s characteristic reply. “but I will make you strong. You need to be strong for the sake of our mission; for the sake of the world.”

“No, no, no, no. This can’t be happening?” she said in frustration. “It’s someone’s sick mind game.”

“No it’s not,” the man’s voice stated evenly. “This is real. These events really happened, and you need to accept them; accept them and use them. Make them a part of who you are.”

“Chyna,” she suddenly heard a familiar voice call from behind. She turned to see Derek standing there.

She rocked back with his appearance and looked around trying to make sense of what was happening. Her uncle was standing to the one side, her brother’s lifeless body was laying before her, and now Derek was there. Her thoughts spun and whirled and she felt as though she would collapse with the confusion. Instead, she rose and ran to Derek. “What’s going on?”

“You need to accept and live with what you did, and not fight anymore,” he replied.

“What? What are you talking about?” she asked, confused and disoriented. “Isn’t this a dream? How are you here?”

“It’s not a dream,” the man replied with a smile.

That statement took her off balance and made her shake her head. *How could it not be a dream?*

She looked into Derek’s face, trying to discern the truth of the matter and found that she was lost in his smile. Oh how she loved his smile! But she couldn’t have a relationship with him. As if reading her thoughts she felt his warm hand on her face. Tears formed in her eyes. She knew she wasn’t worthy of this affection; she wasn’t worthy of any affection. How could she be after all the terrible things she had done?

“No! This can’t be real!” she screamed, turning her face away from his.

“Yes it is,” Derek replied softly as he turned her face toward his once more. “You and I can be together,” he reassured her. His lips were inches from hers.

The part of her that wanted to turn away and run began to disappear; then, as Derek pressed his lips onto hers, was consumed altogether. Her will to fight and find the truth dissipated completely as their kiss became more urgent and impassioned.



TAYLOR LOOKED AROUND AT THE BUNKS IN THE ROOM. SHE knew where she was: one of the many orphanages she stayed at during her long childhood. She shuddered when she began to recall the place. This one was the worst!

The pain she felt—physical and emotional—hit in waves as memories flashed back to her in a torrent. It was enough to rock her back, causing her knees to go weak, so that she had to grab the frame of the bunkbed for stability.

*Why are these painful memories coming back to me?* she screamed out in her mind.

The woman had put up mental barriers over the years to block out such pain and suffering from her past, but now, she was right in the midst of one such memory, or at least seeing the place where lots of the bad experiences happened! But why? How?

She suddenly felt like that little scared girl all those years ago as flashes of the abuse began to rock through her mind. Taylor ran for the door but it was locked. She threw herself against it with all her might, but it wouldn't budge.

"Let me out!" she screamed. "Let me out!"

Her heart felt as though it would burst through her chest at any moment. The woman moved to the nearest corner of the room, crumpled down in a curled position, and placed her hands over her ears. "Noooooo!" she screamed out as she rocked back and forth.

The door creaked open and her heart sank even more as she looked into the dark, dead, eyes of *that* man: the man she hated more than all others, the man who took so much from her.

He closed the door and began to walk toward her. She trembled so badly that the bunk bed she was near began to shake. "It's just a dream," she told herself. "It's just a dream. It's just a dream!"

"No Taylor," the man said in his deep grating voice, "it's not a dream." He reached for her.

"No! It's just a dream! Make it stop!"



“It’s not a dream Taylor. This is your life now. You and I forever.”

Taylor screamed out again as the man touched her leg. The sensation of his hand on her was too much for her mind to process. *How could this be a dream with such real sensations?* came her emphatic plea, but no answer was forthcoming. It was then that she knew the nightmare *was* her reality as her will to fight was crushed under the weight of emotion.



JORDAN GASPED FOR AIR BUT NONE WOULD COME. HE stared into the blood shot eyes of the monster. Its canine fangs glistened in the light as it growled. Jordan felt all the fear of that day rush back to him in a flood. He remembered thinking that he was going to die; thinking that Dillon and Gwen were going to die because of his inability against this beast.

This was more than a memory though; it seemed real somehow. He felt the hand of the monster around his neck and grimaced as its claws dug into his tender flesh. He struggled to get free but couldn’t. He recalled that Dillon was there, saving him with the Genesis serum, but he wasn’t coming this time—it was just him and the monster.

His heart pounded as the air was choked off but he wouldn’t die, he was locked in that moment, that terrifying horrific moment, and he couldn’t get out.

*This is just a dream!* he screamed to himself.

“Is it?” the beast asked as if reading his thoughts. “Then why don’t you just will it to be done and wake up?”

Jordan didn’t have a reply for the monster. How could this be real. He was confused. The pain on his neck was

real, and the lack of air was beginning to cause his vision to blur. It was at that moment, where the greatest despair he had ever felt in his life, hit him like a freight-train. His will to survive dissipated like smoke on a soft breeze.



GWEN HEARD ALL THE FIGHTING JUST OUTSIDE HER HIDING spot. She somehow recognized this place. She cracked the door open slightly and saw her brother, Jordan, leap away and attack an enormous blue monster! As she looked on, a large spider suddenly jumped down in front of her hiding spot. The girl yelped and scooted back as far into the cupboard as she could and closed the door.

Now she remembered where she was. She was in the lab under Desert Oasis Resort! And she somehow knew that the trouble Dillon and Jordan were now in was due to her. She had pushed the alarm which caused them to get captured. Her brothers were going to die now because of her! She cupped her face in her hands and wept uncontrollably.

She knew it should be her out there. The guilt was almost too much for her to bare. She should be the one who died, not them!

With that thought Gwen opened the door and stepped out into the chaos that raged all around her. The spider wasn't there anymore. She walked out into the center of the room as the battle exploded around her. The young girl held out her arms wide, her face to the ceiling, as if in sacrifice. She heard the growls of the coyotes, the hiss of the snake, the click of the spider's mandible, the roar of the monster and just knew the others were all now depending upon her.

The guilt was too much for her and she knew this was how it should have ended before, with her death. She didn't know why she couldn't remember any of this before now, but having it brought back to her consciousness racked her with guilt and she wanted to end that guilt. She needed to end that guilt.

With her arms outstretched and the war raging around her Gwen drifted into darkness.



DILLON WALKED SLOWLY DOWN THE DARK PASSAGE. THE flashlight illuminated the area about fifteen feet in front of him as he descended into the heart of the pyramid. At times the slope was more severe than at others and the boy slipped twice on the loose stones that were littered through the tunnel. He quickly recovered both times and continued on.

He felt the air cool considerably the further he went down. The tunnel twisted and turned, until finally it straightened and flattened out. As soon as he got to what he could only assume was the bottom, he heard groans coming from somewhere down in the darkness. Then there was a scream: the scream of a woman. Dillon froze. Then he heard the scream of a man. More moans echoed through the place. The sounds assaulted his ears as they were the sounds of pain, but not physical pain: more like anguish. It was the pain of the soul and heart.

The young boy breathed deeply in order to calm his racing heart. The fact that he heard the sounds of people suggested to him that his friends and brother were probably still alive. He also recalled that the voice mentioned

his friends. This brought hope to him that they were still alive.

He unslung the pack, opened it up, and rummaged around for a moment until he found the item he was after: a long combat knife. Derek always made sure he was prepared, Dillon just wished he had left an extra gun in the bag instead, but such was not the case. He knew he would have to make do with the knife—which he had begun training in—so he merely shrugged, did up the pack again, and slung it back over his shoulders.

More groans rang out from down the passage. Whatever was happening down there, he knew he had to end it. Fear gripped him as he began to walk. He tried to push it down but it bordered on panic. One of his legs began shaking so badly that he was afraid it would hinder his movements if something were to attack him. He tried to take a few deep breaths in order to regain his focus, but they just came in stuttered gasps. He could feel the sweat begin to drop from his brow.

He inched closer and closer. The sounds became louder and more pronounced. He heard a man growl as though in anger, another screamed out “Nooooo!” and then a woman whimpered.

The light suddenly broke through an opening at the end of the tunnel. As soon as he saw the opening he stopped. Fear hit him like he had never experienced before. It felt almost like a wave that blasted at him, causing his knees to go weak. Another shot hit him—this one carried with it guilt as well, incredible guilt—as he suddenly got a flash in his mind of the monster, Troy, from Desert Oasis Resort.

He crumpled to his knees as he saw those large blood-shot eyes.

“You killed me,” he heard the deep guttural voice of Troy state in his mind.

“No,” Dillon whispered as he cupped his head in his hands. The anguish he felt was almost too overcoming for him. “You were going to kill us, all of us,” he declared, trying to fight back against the onslaught.

He heard the deep laughter. “You keep telling yourself that, but you don’t believe it,” the monster stated.

Dillon knew that he was caught in one of his horrific nightmares. He didn’t know how he knew, but he did; except that this nightmare was going to lock him in and destroy him. He looked up to see Troy standing—towering—over him. His foul breath blasted into the boy’s face as the monster snorted. Dillon’s heart raced and his eyes widened in shock.

“This can’t be real,” he whispered in disbelief.

“Oh it is real,” the monster replied in its guttural voice. “But this time it is you who are about to die.”

“How ... Wha ... I ...” Dillon stammered searching for an answer.

Confusion rocked him and the shadow of guilt descended like never before, coursing through his very being. It was too much! The boy’s heart raced so fast that his chest began to burn. He grabbed at his heart and tried to will it to slow but it wouldn’t respond. His breaths came in short quick gasps.

“I ... can’t ...” he whispered. His will to continue to fight on was almost depleted.

He was about to collapse, face down, on the hard stone ground when he suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder. The touch was gentle, yet firm. He glanced over to see a woman’s hand. Her fingers were long and delicate. Her skin was medium brown and looked soft. Her touch

imparted goodness to him, and strength. His leg stopped shaking, his heart slowed, the pain in his chest went away, and his breathing stabilized.

The young boy looked up and saw a beautiful smiling face looking down at him. She had shoulder-length raven black hair and dark eyes that seemed to sparkle with such life. Her silhouette was lined in a sort of otherworldly light. She wore jeans and a black sleeveless top that was fitted perfectly to her shapely body.

The rest of the fear and guilt he felt suddenly flashed away from him and he rose shakily to his feet once more. He stood beside her, looking into those sparkling eyes, and that infectious smile. She was slightly shorter than he was.

“I’m Jameica,” she said in an almost melodic, familiar voice. “I’m your symbioid.”

She turned to look straight ahead. Dillon followed the movement. Troy was still standing there, towering overtop of them. He looked shocked at the sight of Jameica.

“Shall we push him out of your mind?” Jameica asked with a determined look.

THE MASK

Dillon looked to Jameica stunned. “How can this be just in my mind? It feels so real.”

“That’s the power of the mask you feel,” Jameica responded in her soft voice. “It incapacitates people that are close to it, sending them back to some of their most horrific memories, twisting and distorting those so that they feel the pain, guilt, and fear of the thoughts they have about those events that happened to them. In that state, you will relive the doubts, the pain, the sorrow, the anger, and the fear all over again to a heightened degree.”

As she spoke Dillon noticed that Troy was gaining his composure once again. He snarled at him and suddenly lunged, fangs bared, going for the boy's throat. Dillon flinched back thinking he was about to die at that moment, but before Troy could reach him, Jameica stepped in front and held out her arms as though she were shielding him.

Troy slammed into her. As the beast hit, a shimmering golden shield of energy sparked to life just in front of the beautiful woman causing the monster to bounce back. He

struck again, and the same shield flared to life. He hit it again and again and again, but each time he was repelled.

The monster growled in frustration.

“What’s happening?” Dillon asked, extremely confused about what he was witnessing.

“I’m protecting your mind from him, or rather, from the mask.”

“My mind? How?”

“You and I are joined,” she responded softly as the beast continued to hammer into the shield. “It is due to this joining that we gain mutual benefit from one another. I can lend you my abilities and you allow me life through your physical form. We are one and yet different.”

Dillon thought about what she was saying for a moment. He had a million questions but knew that it wasn’t the time to ask them. He had more pressing matters to attend to.

Almost as though she was sensing his thoughts Jameica extended her hand to him. “Let us be done with him together,” she said.

Dillon took her soft hand. As soon as he touched her he felt a power surge through him like never before. The guilt that was wracking him for the last year and a half felt as though it was leaving him for good. No. Not leaving, he realized. He was forcibly pushing it out. His mind was flooded with all the possible scenarios that would have happened had he not taken down Troy the way he had. They all ended up with the death of him, Jordan, Gwen, Derek, John, and the others. No matter which way the events unfolded, if he hadn’t used the Necrotoxin and Genesis on Troy they would have perished in that underground lab.

He also saw creatures—multitudes of Necrotoxin



morphed creatures—attacking innocent people. This would have been the result of them weaponizing the serum and using it in warfare. Because of his actions Dillon now saw that he had stopped that from happening. The price had been the death of Troy and in that moment of clarity he suddenly realized that he had no other choice. Troy gave him no other choice. The guilt washed away.

The monster roared in protest. It smashed into the shield again, but this time it was launched back to land hard on the stone floor. It stood up and glared at the two. “You killed me!” it roared at the boy.

“Yes, I did kill you! Your choices forced me to end you in order to save those I love. And I’ll not have you twisting my thoughts.” He looked to Jameica and saw her calm face staring back at him. She nodded her approval. “You gave me no choice Troy. I am done with you.”

The monster stood to his full height, roared, and ran at them. It hit the shield with tremendous force. The golden force flared again, this time bigger and brighter than any of the previous times. Troy screamed as he hit the barrier then his form flashed with the impact and disappeared.

Dillon closed his eyes due to the brightness of the light and when he opened them again he saw that he was standing in the dark passageway alone; his flashlight shining off the surrounding tunnel walls. Jameica wasn’t there and neither was Troy. He shook his head trying to figure out what had just happened. It felt so real, but he knew the events had happened in his mind.

The biggest change the boy sensed was a feeling of relief. He had faced his guilt at the events that happened at Desert Oasis Resort and knew that Troy had left him no other choice. He had made peace with that decision thanks

to Jameica and he now knew that the mask had no power over him anymore.

Dillon was jarred from his self-reflection by more sounds of agony coming from the room just ahead. He took a deep calming breath then walked the rest of the way down the tunnel and into the room.

What he saw stopped him in his tracks. He found himself in a circular room that was about thirty feet in diameter. Straight ahead, up on a raised ledge about three feet, was a stone slab that seemed to be about the same size as the one outside that housed the key. On top of that slab was a mask. It glowed brightly—a light blue color—in the dimness of the cave which illuminated the room in its glow. A soft white, almost pulsing, light emanated from the eye holes.

The ledge on which the stone slab sat looked to be about two feet wide and circled the room to the left and to the right. Beside the stone slab that housed the mask sat a black stone jaguar stature. Its eyes shone with that same soft white glow that the mask had.

On the floor below the mask laid Derek, beside him to the right was Chyna, and beside her was ... Jordan and Gwen! The woman who approached him and Gwen the day before while he was looking at the stone slabs out in the courtyard was to Derek's left and beside her was a man he hadn't seen before: a muscular-looking Asian. And beside them were, what appeared to be, two night guards. They all looked to be in torment: their faces at times twisting with fear, anger, sorrow, pain, and the like. Dillon could only imagine what kind of nightmares they were being subjected to if his encounter with Troy was any indication.

“How are they here with no other exits in this room?”  
Dillon asked aloud.

*The creatures that took them had the ability to move through the walls of this pyramid, or rather, the earth that this place is made out of and then closed up the openings when they left,* Jameica responded.

“Where are they now?”

*They went back to their domain, in the earth. Once they deposit their victims they return from where they came. It is their curse for not being given masks of their own. The Mayans used to place masks on their dead so that they would have identities in the afterlife. These cursed creatures didn't get masks which is why they are faceless. Now, their only identity is to serve the one mask when it feels it is threatened by someone coming close to finding it. Which is why the creatures were risen when you discovered the key. The faceless walkers are bound to the mask and feed off the emotions and experiences of their victims which is the true mask—the true identity—of each person.*

*The Mayans who created the Mask of Time knew the potential danger it posed for those who found it, which is why they have guarded it so carefully.*

“Maybe we should just leave it alone then,” Dillon stated. “I mean ... if it's so dangerous then why disturb it?”

*It's too late for that now Dillon. Your friends are in danger and only you can save them. We have no choice but to go forward.*

Dillon felt the pressure keenly pressing down on him. “How do you know all of this?” he asked before he properly thought about the question he was posing. After all, Jameica had been giving him the ability to find and observe situations and items, and had been giving him insights into the future through his dreams.

Jameica issued a playful laugh in his mind. *Don't worry, you will get answers to your questions as we get more used to each other and become more connected.*

That statement just made Dillon want to ask more questions, but he knew he didn't have time right now. Instead, he just refocused on the task at hand.

Even though he could see in the dim light of the mask's glow, the young boy shone the flashlight specifically around the group on the floor and what he saw caused him to take a step back. He saw that they were laying on skeletal remains of dozens of people.

*Don't be afraid Dillon, he heard Jameica in his thoughts. I am protecting you from the effects of the mask. Those are the remains of the people who couldn't break free from the power of their fears, regrets, and anger. They died in the grip of despair. But you won't.*

Dillon took comfort in Jameica's calm assurance although the sight of all the dead people's remains unsettled him greatly.

"What am I supposed to do?" he whispered into the air.

*The only way to save them is to remove the mask from the stone pillar. That should disconnect its power over them,* Jameica responded.

"Should?" Dillon asked.

He felt Jameica smile.

"Here goes," he said to himself. He took another step into the room and, as he did so, he heard a low growl coming from the jaguar. The boy froze. He shined the light right at the stature and saw that it began to move! It stood up and began to circle to Dillon's right; its glowing white eyes bore into the boy.

Dillon stumbled to the left. He glanced at the meagre knife he held knowing that this was going to do nothing against the stone of that creature.

The jaguar moved in purposeful steady movements around the ledge, inching closer and closer to its prey.

Dillon knew he was in trouble. He looked around the room frantically for something, for anything; his eyes suddenly settling on a gun which was holstered on the leg of the Asian.

He inched toward the man, not wanting to make any sudden movements. The large cat steadily circled, its ears were flat against its stone head, and its fangs became more pronounced as it hissed and growled. Dillon was almost there. He reached for the gun; his fingers were mere inches from it, when suddenly the beast roared and leaped from the ledge. Dillon barely managed to dive to the side in time, dropping the flashlight as he moved. The creature slammed into the ground where he was just a moment earlier; its sharp claws cut deep grooves into the stone ledge as it swiped at him. Fortunately for the Asian, the stone cat missed him as it landed and swung.

Dillon scrambled away, trying not to climb over any of the prone people. He knew he couldn't risk them getting caught in the line of attack. He managed to stand up, his back against the ledge away from the creature. He turned to the right and jumped up on the ledge, trying to see if a little more height might help him out. He inched toward the mask, but the cat followed his movement with its head. He sucked in his breath as he saw the creature place his paw right beside Gwen's head.

Quickly, he changed directions in order to lure the cat away from them. He knew he had to act fast. He had to get that gun. The cat followed his movement. Dillon suddenly broke into a run around the ledge leading away from the mask. As he did so he pulled his pack off. Just as he suspected the cat followed, breaking into a run for him. It leaped! At the last moment Dillon threw the bag into the air, planted his foot against the wall, and pushed

with all his might, trying desperately to reverse his direction.

The cat soared in, claws and fangs bared for the kill. Dillon flew just under the swiping claws as the cat grabbed hold of the bag. The boy hit the floor hard, but rolled with the impact, putting his shoulder under him which took away most of the sting. He came out of the roll onto his feet, running full out for the Asian. He grabbed the gun from the holster and spun around.

The cat was still tearing at the bag. Dillon pulled on the trigger but it didn't depress. Panic set in. Derek hadn't shown him how to use firearms yet! He looked around the gun trying to find the safety. The jaguar had recovered from its frenzy and had spun around to stare at the intruder.

It roared again and crouched as though it was going to leap. Dillon found the safety and pressed it. He pointed the gun at the cat and fired. The bullet struck the great cat in the shoulder which tore huge chunks of stone from it. It flinched and looked to its wounded side, then straightened again and roared. Dillon fired a second time blowing its left ear from it. The cat shook its head.

Dillon clenched his jaw as his determination grew. He started walking toward it and fired again, and again, and again. Stone chips flew everywhere in a spray of destruction. The cat growled and hissed, but the sounds were lost in the echos of concussive bangs of the gun, and the bullets piercing its stone body, blowing chunks of rock into the air.

The jaguar backed against the wall as Dillon approached. Its legs were too badly injured to allow it to move far as it squirmed to get away from boy with the gun.

Its white eyes looked up hatefully at Dillon as he stood over it, the gun mere inches from its head.

Without a word Dillon pulled the trigger one last time and blew apart the beast's head.

Dillon stood there staring at the destruction he had caused. The jaguar was in pieces strewn throughout the room. He knew the thing wasn't really alive, but that did little to deaden his senses about blowing it apart. The thing that really troubled him was the callousness with which he fired those last few shots. Was he turning into a killer? No. He decided right then and there. He wasn't a killer, but rather a defender of those he cared for. He was a preserver of life. The creature before him, like Troy from the resort gave him no choice. They pushed him and he responded.

He looked at the gun for a moment then threw it down as his hand began to tremble. A tear streaked down his dirty face.

*It's okay Dillon. You saved everyone,* he heard Jameica reassure in his mind.

He ran over to Jordan and shook him. "Jordan! Wake up!" His brother merely groaned and twitched but didn't wake up.

"Gwen! Derek! Chyna!" He shook them all but got the same response.

*It's not going to work Dillon. You need to remove the mask,* Jameica instructed.

He nodded and took a deep steadying breath then turned toward the mask. As he approached, the eyes began to flare brighter and brighter. The agile boy jumped up on the ledge beside the stone slab, then reached out and carefully took the mask from the pillar. As soon as he removed it the eyes dimmed then went out altogether. The only light

left in the dark room was that of the flashlight he had dropped during the battle with the jaguar.

He jumped down and grabbed the flashlight. He found that he was transfixed by the mask as he examined it.

“Dil?” he heard a girl ask distantly, but didn’t respond. The mask was calling to him.

He moved the mask closer and turned it around. The mask was calling to him.

“Dillon! No!” he heard a man scream, but didn’t register the urgency of the warning. The mask was calling to him, even more now that it was mere inches from his face. He knew he had to put it on. With one quick motion he put it on.



DEREK SHOOK THE DIZZINESS FROM HIM AS HE PUSHED himself to a kneeling position. He saw Dillon about to place the mask on his face and screamed out but the boy didn’t listen. Before he could get to his feet Dillon put it on. The eyes of the mask flared angrily to life and Dillon threw his head back. He began to gasp for air and issued grunts and groans as if he was witnessing something unpleasant.

The operative heard movement to the side and glanced over to see Brighton and the blonde woman extricating themselves from the mess of people and skeletal remains. The Asian looked at him for a moment. He reached for something on his leg, but then looked up in confusion. Derek leaped over before Brighton had a chance to respond and slammed him back to the hard stone floor.

“Where’s the antidote?” Derek growled in his face.

Brighton didn’t respond. He just stared up at him with a hateful look.



Derek grabbed the front of his shirt, lifted him a bit, then slammed him down hard again. "Give it to me!"

Brighton groaned with the impact, then he glanced to one of his vest pockets.

Derek took the cue and opened the pocket. He found the vials, stood up, and backed away from the man. He knew that Brighton was hurt and probably didn't want a fight right now—he hoped he didn't want to fight right now. "Go," he said in a cold tone.

The Asian fixed him with that same hateful look for a moment, then grabbed Taylor, who was beginning to stir, by the arm and limped out through the tunnel Dillon had come in from.

He looked around and saw that the others were beginning to stir. He moved quickly to Gwen and began to untie her. She whimpered and wrapped her arms around Derek when she was finally free.

Derek accepted the hug then moved her back to arms length. "You're safe now."

She nodded.

"Is he going to be okay?" she asked softly, motioning toward her brother who was moaning and grunting.

"Yes, of course," Derek stated, even though he wasn't really sure.

"What do we do?" Jordan asked, watching his brother in emotional distress.

"We might have to let it work through whatever it's doing," Chyna said as she stood up and brushed herself off.

"We can't just leave him like that!" Jordan exclaimed. "We have to help him."

"If we take that thing off we have no idea what will happen to him," Chyna replied sombrely.

“Derek stood up. “I agree with Chyna. Let’s see what happens and, if the signs of distress worsen then we’ll intervene.”

He pointed at the guards who were trying to get up at this point. “Make sure they’re okay Jordan,” he commanded. He knew that the best thing he could do for Jordan right now was to get his mind off his brother. Jordan nodded and went to the shaken men.

Derek walked over to stand in front of Dillon who was still flinching and grunting. He felt helpless but knew it was for the best.

“I’ll go and help Jordan,” Chyna said. “We’re going to have to administer damage control for them and the other two.”

Derek knew that meant the mind-wiping drug even though it wouldn’t be as effective on the men as it would be on the kids. The best he could hope for is that those guys would begin to remember in a couple weeks but the story would be so outlandish that no one would believe them. She was about to walk away when he grabbed her arm. “Not Jordan,” he said.

“But—“

“No.” Derek said with finality.

She looked at him for a moment then nodded.

Dillon continued to grunt and moan then suddenly he screamed out. Derek grabbed him, fearing he would topple over. The eyes of the mask suddenly flared brighter again then died out. As soon as the glow dissipated Derek grabbed the mask and pulled it from the boy’s face. It was hot to the touch so he threw it to the side. Dillon’s body went limp. Derek held him firmly and gently guided him to the ground.

“Dillon? Dillon? Can you hear me?” His eyes were

rolled back and his eyelids twitched rapidly. "Dillon?" Derek asked again.

Suddenly his blue eyes straightened and he looked right at Derek with a horrified expression on his face. "Dillon? What did you see?"

"Death."

## EPILOGUE

**D**illon laid in his bed at home staring at the ceiling. They made it back to the resort after the events in the pyramid. The chemical which Derek grabbed from Brighton worked perfectly on his parents and Claire.

Chyna administered the memory wipe on Gwen again so that she wouldn't recall what had happened. Dillon knew it was for her own good. He wished, at times, that they would have given him that chemical. There were definitely things he wanted to forget, but on the other hand, he was really glad he got to know Chyna, Derek, and especially Jameica. Unfortunately, Jameica had been quiet ever since they left Ek' Balam. He didn't know what that meant. Maybe he had done something wrong? Maybe he tasked her abilities too much in the ordeal under the pyramid? He felt frustrated and alone.

Derek had made the decision to let Jordan have his memories. He knew that the boy was getting too old anyway and that it probably wouldn't work long term. Besides, he realized that Dillon was going to need help if

he was to continue living a double life. He needed Jordan to support him. In fact, Derek had a lengthy conversation with the older boy and received commitments from him that he would act in a supporting role to his younger brother. Jordan had changed and matured in the last couple of years and was more than willing to assist which almost knocked Dillon off his feet when he heard that!

Dillon was even more shocked to see that Jordan spent the rest of the vacation as his usual flamboyant self as he enjoyed the sun, the pool, the ... girls. He wondered if maybe Orion had made the wrong choice in selecting him instead of Jordan! His big brother seemed like more of a natural fit to this secret operative type stuff than he was, except that he didn't have Dillon's abilities—Dillon's symbioid.

Dillon laughed at all those thoughts as he turned over and drifted off to sleep.

"Dillon," he suddenly heard and sat up.

He found himself on a beach, the waves gently lapped upon the shore. He could smell the freshness of the sea and felt the warmth of the sun.

"Dillon?" he heard again. It was the voice of Jameica!

He turned around and saw her smiling at him. She wore a silky flower dress. The one side of her hair was pulled back and tied in place by a rose. Her brown skin seemed to shine and glow.

"Jameica!" Dillon exclaimed. "Where have you been?"

She laughed playfully. "I'm always with you."

"Ya, but you've been silent the last couple of weeks. Why?"

Her face turned more serious, but still held the shine it did before. "I'm more active when you are in distress."

Dillon's face screwed up as he didn't understand.

“Being a symbioid I’m connected to you physically, mentally, and emotionally,” she started to explain, “and I have more ability when you exhibit an adrenaline response, or when you’re asleep which is why I can contact you at times like now.”

Dillon gave her a sideways look. “You’re only active when I’m scared or I’m out?” he asked skeptically.

Jameica walked up to him and took his hand. “For now,” she said with a reassuring smile. “But there will come a time when we are more used to one another that those barriers will be no more.”

She let go of his hand and walked toward the water. The sun was low in the sky and the orange light shot across the horizon like fire spreading out across a large plain. “There’s only so much I can tell you right now, but in time you will learn.”

“Learn what?”

“Learn why, how, and for what purpose we are together,” she responded cryptically. She looked back at him. “Until then, you just enjoy being you and live life to the fullest. That’s what I ask of you Dillon Hunt.”

Dillon had so many questions, but he knew he would have to wait to get the answers. There was one question he had to ask, however. He walked up to her and took her by the arm. “Why can’t I remember what I saw when I put the mask on?” he asked.

Jameica looked at him for a long moment, then turned back toward the beautiful scene of the ocean before them. “It’s because I’m blocking them right now,” she admitted.

“But why?”

“Because you’re not ready to know yet.”

She turned to him and reached up and touched his cheek with her soft hand. “You’ll know soon enough

Dillon.” She smiled again and Dillon felt a warmth go through him that soothed him to the core. The boy took her hand as they both turned and watched the waves lap up onto the shore once more.

Dillon slept soundly that night, more soundly than he had since Desert Oasis Resort.



JAKE LEANED FORWARD IN HIS CHAIR AND PLACED HIS ARMS on the desk. “So I read your report. It was most ... illuminating. So you stated that the creatures that attacked you had must have had some sort of knockout chemical imbedded in their claws, and the medical reports we performed on you seemed to confirm that assessment. That’s very interesting.

“The only issue I had with the mission was the part when you explained how Dillon was unable to tell you anything about what he saw when he had the mask on,” the man stated seriously. “Do you think he was lying?” he asked bluntly.

“Of course not,” Derek replied indignantly. “The boy is one of the most honest and innocent people I know. He only lies when he needs to; that is, when *we* need him to,” he explained derisively.

Jake was quiet for a moment while he digested the comments. “And do you agree with this assessment Chyna?” he asked as he turned his attention to her.

Chyna glanced at Derek for a moment then looked back at Jake. “Yes I do,” she said confidently.

“I see.” Jake sat back in his chair. “So do you have any explanation as to why you think the mask seems to be just a regular mask now that we have it in our possession?” he

asked. He knew these two wouldn't have any sure answers, but he wanted to ask anyway just to see how much they suspected.

Derek and Chyna glanced at each other for a moment then looked back to Jake. "I don't know," Derek stated. "Maybe it has something to do with that place?"

Jake smiled, then stood up. "Okay, that's all I need from you," he said. "Your mission, Derek, remains the same: continue the boy's training."

Derek clenched his jaw as he stood up. "Don't you think we've asked too much of the boy?" he asked accusingly. "Shouldn't he enjoy just being a kid? I can't help but feel that we are robbing him of his childhood."

"And if it weren't for this boy you and the others would be dead right now? Wouldn't you?" Jake snapped. "As a matter of fact this is the second time that Dillon has pulled through for us. Don't you think that's worth investing time and effort in?"

"Ya, but at what cost?" replied Derek in barely a whisper.

"That's always been the problem with you Vico," Jake replied coldly, "you are looking at the world too narrowly. You need to expand the scope of your vision if you are going to see the whole picture."

Derek returned Jake's biting comment with a sour look.

"What? You want to dispute that fact with me?" Jake asked harshly. He let his question hang in the air for an awkward moment. "If you could step back and see what the entire world needs done, and not just one person, you'd be out of the field by now!"

"Now get out of my office," he said sternly.

Derek narrowed his eyes dangerously, then spun around and stormed out of the room.



“You shouldn’t push him so hard uncle,” Chyna said after the man had left.

“It’s because I need him on edge that I push him,” Jake replied. “Is he taking his medication?”

“Yes, but he resists the influence of the drugs. Do you think it’s smart that we keep him controlled that way?”

“We need him,” was Jake’s firm reply.

“So much that he has to be medicated?” Chyna asked skeptically. “There’s no way we can just rely on his choosing to operate under his full free will?”

“Unfortunately, his future is too important to let him choose if for himself,” Jake said as he walked over to a filing cabinet. He opened the drawer and pulled out a white bottle that had a pharmaceutical label on it. The label contained Derek’s name with a prescriptive dose of three times per day, or as needed. He walked back over to Chyna and handed her the bottle.

“Here, make sure he gets these. The dosage is higher and will ensure his thoughts are right,” he explained.

“Right for Orion, you mean.”

“Right for the world my dear niece. Right for the world.”

