

Badlands

An Underground Science Fiction Novel

By

Cecil Washington

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Chapter 1

A twenty-something, muscular black man was treading through the badlands. He wore a crude doo-rag and a worn, black overcoat. A dull, gray triangular badge hung on his left coat pocket—the badge given to identify yogin, the Grell bodyguards. His birth-pyramid was destroyed a few weeks before. The destruction was a punishment: his people violated Grell Law by practicing a human religion. Since then, he drifted from place to place, bartering for food and water and trying to control his grief.

An old black man was stalking Paris. The old man was dressed in a dusty winter coat that looked like it was a part of his skin. Paris had stopped and was eating some food when the old man made contact.

“You a long way from home, ain’t you, son?” the old man coughed through a toothless smile. “You one of them niggaz from down South?”

Paris glanced over at him. He reached into the sack of dried food he was carrying. “My name is Paris. Paris Jones. Do you need something to eat? There ain’t much out here. I’ve got plenty right now. You looking to trade?” Paris looked around. There was nothing but orange dust everywhere. With delight, his eyes finally spotted a large pyramid off in the distance. The only hint of life that was visible besides the old man and him was a drying pool of filthy water.

“No, young buck. I know that to you, there ain’t much out here, but I got my sights set on something else.” He grinned.

Paris put down his dried food and slid his right hand over the hilt of his sword. Then again, he thought to himself, this food is so hard I could probably kill him with it. “Well, the only thing I see out besides you is me. I hope you don’t plan on making me dinner.”

The old man laughed. Then, without warning, he attacked.

Paris leaped. He drew his sword and sliced off the man’s head in one motion. The head hit the ground before the body stopped charging. Then, the headless corpse collapsed and started going into convulsions. Paris smirked at the blood that dribbled from its neck.

The corpse changed into its true form. The dry skin and tattered clothing shaped themselves into clay-colored scales and bulges. Paris laughed sadistically at the creature’s attempt to fool him. He knew at one glance that the person who had been following him was not some human wanderer like him, but was instead a predatory man-eater: Homo Carnivorous. Homo Carnivorous—“carnies”, or “carnivores” as they were known by many humans—was a humanoid creature that was the mutant offspring of humans whose genes had been experimented upon by aliens. The results of their scientific sadism was that sometimes, a human being could end up giving birth to a highly intelligent, bipedal reptiles.

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These reptilian offspring would then prey on the flesh of their human ancestors and reproduce with their own at an alarming rate. They could also fool their human prey by shape shifting into a form that they knew their prey would trust.

Paris stared at the pyramid off in the distance. “I guess I can make it there by nightfall. I wonder if they’ll let me in, or if they’ll think that I’m a monster or something, like this thing.” He stabbed the carnivore with his weapon three times. “Damn carnie! That’s for my sister, my mother and my father!”

He went back to eating his meal. A mixed swarm of flying insects—flies, bees, wasps and other bugs—appeared out of nowhere. They made a disgusting lunch of the carcass as Paris gulped down a canteen of water. After his food settled, he stood up and continued onward towards the pyramid. He scratched under the badge on his chest and let his mind wander.

“So how do you feel about killing a carnivore after everything that’s happened?” asked an invisible voice.

Paris whirled around with his sword drawn. After he realized who it was, he put it away.

“Oh. YOU. What do you want, Ori?”

Ori sighed. He appeared in front of Paris. His physical form was that of the stereotypical large headed, big eyed, small-framed gray alien known as The Grells. Humans called them “grays” as an insult.

Ori stood about two feet shorter than Paris. “You’re one of my better ones, Paris. You make me think there is hope for your species. Perhaps it was wrong for us to not assist you humans when carnivores appeared.”

“If you didn’t cause them to appear in the first place,” Paris snapped.

“Your tone is irreverent, Paris. I am your master, you know,” Ori scolded.

“No you’re not. I have no more work to do for you. You stupid greys lost my loyalty after you wiped out my pyramid and let the carnies feast on the dead.” Paris made no effort to hide his anger. He tried to probe Ori’s mind, but his telepathic powers were more for combat than for controlling. Ori easily screened him out.

Ori’s tone was one of concern. “Your pyramid violated the First Directive: Humanity is not to have any religion. Your people’s return to Christianity signaled to us that they were going to revert to Pre-Invasion intolerance, ignorance and fear.”

“Ori, you don’t own me. I won my freedom from you when I broke your psi-chain on me. I nearly killed you in swordplay after that, remember? I only protected you after that out of loyalty.” He coughed. The orange dust bothered him sometimes. “Besides, if you were so down on human culture, why’d you allow me to train in the martial arts? Why the yoga and karate? You said that some of the things you taught had been lost by humanity long before the invasion, and yet you kept track of it and passed it on to yogin.”

Ori smiled. “We want you humans to be a resource for us, remember? That’s why we tricked your people into the pyramids. I told the First One your history proves that the best fighters among you tend to be fanatical warrior-thinkers. That’s why I was given such latitude with you.”

Paris laughed. “First One. Here we go again. Always talking about some invisible old grey. Yeah, right. How come I never him?” He gave Ori a dismissive wave. “Shut up, frog-head. All you ended up doing was creating someone who wants to destroy you.”

“No, Paris, you are the only yogin who wants to kill us. Your cousin Mauria is off somewhere doing her own thing. The rest of them are either serving us, fighting each other or renting out their skills to other humans for food, shelter or other favors,” Ori smiled.

Paris looked at Ori with contempt. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you didn’t put that carnie on my trail, just to see what I’d do. Just to see if I’d kill someone. Or, rather, to see if I’d kill him with the sword or with the laser gun or something. I’m just one big freakin’ experiment to you, ain’t I?”

Ori muttered a command in his alien tongue and began to vanish. “I’m still watching you, Paris. I think you will be the one to fulfill my plans. But you’re still not strong enough yet. Find Mauria. She’ll help you reach the next level.”

Paris attacked Ori’s vanishing body. But even with his speed, he was too slow to do any damage.

Mauria. Her name rang in his head for the past thirteen years, especially after he found out they were related.

Ori and a few other Grells had “convinced” his parents through telepathic suggestion that Paris needed to enlist himself in the yogin. Ori created their warrior regimen by reintroducing the humans to the mental and combative concepts from yoga and karate that were known to their ancestors before the invasion. At adulthood, they became highly trained human males and females who acted as bodyguards for the Grells both on Earth and in their visits to other planets. Yogin were taken at the ages of ten, eleven or twelve years old so that the Grells could form a permanent, unbreakable mental bond. Trainees were subjected to extreme levels of mental, physical and psychic training that only an adolescent human body could endure. The training usually lasted for ten or more years. During that time, they trained for every waking moment of their lives until the age of twenty-three or twenty-four. Paris, and only one other human, had taken a particular liking to the training. While Paris was considered to be a powerful warrior in his own right, there was one other human: Mauria.

She appeared to Paris in night and day dreams. A beautiful, strong dark chocolate woman with braided hair that was both thick and soft, she talked to him, called him outside of the pyramid once he became of age. He told his parents that he was leaving to become a wanderer in hopes of finding new

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challenges that would further develop his skills. On the day of his departure, his parents and several other families were gathering in a large hall that had been secretly converted to a worship area.

As they held hands and began singing praise to a human God, the Grells shattered the pyramid from above and allowed a small army of carnivores to attack. The human defenses were not enough. Since he was the only yogin in the settlement he was also the only person who had any real chance at survival. The Grells looked on stoically from the safe distance of a saucer. After the bloody battle, he took what provisions he could find, armed himself with his sword and took off into the orange badlands.

There were two guards standing outside of the pyramid entrance. They were dressed in worn looking fatigues and armed with shotguns. Paris knew that the Grells only let humans have shot guns to protect themselves against carnivores. Those weapons were useless against the aliens because they had developed dampening technology that could jam most primitive rifles and even lock the thoughts of most human beings as well.

Paris yelled and waved to the guards from a safe distance. They motioned for him to come forward.

He held up his hands in surrender. "Hi, my name is Paris. I've been wandering around here for a few days. My own pyramid was—"

"Look, we don't know you, and we don't mean you any harm, but it's getting dark and I'm afraid that we can't let you in. We've had too many incidents with strangers pretending to be from some wasted pyramid or something," the first guard said defensively.

"Yeah, look, man, we're really sorry, but, you know how it is," the second guard blurted out.

Paris felt suspicious. "Look, why can't you guys use a snoop? You do have dogs don't you?"

The guards looked at each other, then turned back to him. The first guard gave a condescending smirk. "Okay smart guy, hold on." The first guard waved his hand in front of a console. The entrance to the pyramid opened and he walked inside.

The second guard pointed his rifle at Paris. Paris rolled his eyes impatiently. Even an armed normal human was no match for a yogin. These people are stupid, he thought to himself; they should have yogins on these external posts, not normal humans.

Dread ran through Paris. He heard some staggering footsteps. He turned around. Both he and the second guard fixed their eyes on another wanderer who was wobbling towards them. The wanderer looked like an old, white haired, fair skinned man who looked like he'd also spent one too many nights in the badlands.

Paris wasn't fooled. He knew what it was. His hand went to his blade. But the guard pointed his rifle at Paris head.

"I don't think you can duck a bullet, can you?"

"Look," he explained, "you don't understand. That man is not what he seems."

"Yeah, right," the guard replied sarcastically. "I don't care what you say, boy, I'm not going to let you cut down some old, unarmed man to pieces for no good reason. When Tom gets back here with the snoop, I'm going to tell him to sic 'im on you."

Boy huh, Paris thought. Then it dawned on him. Okay then, fine. Fuck it. "I'll let you see for yourself." Paris released the sword hilt and stood relaxed.

The vagrant coughed, then walked towards the guard. "Please, help me, I need water. Water. I need something to drink," he rasped.

The guard lowered his rifle and caught the old man. "It's okay, mister. Here, I'll help you out."

Tom, the first guard, returned from inside the door with a bulldog. He held the animal on a leash. The dog barked violently at the three men standing outside.

"Earl, the dog's going nuts. One of them has gotta be a carnie," Tom yelled.

"Now do you believe me?" Paris laughed.

"Shut up, YOU. For all I know that dog could be barking at you, not the old man here." Earl held desperately on to his suspicion of Paris. He pulled the old man tight to his chest, holding him as if he were a wounded child. He turned his back on Paris.

The old man looked over Earl's shoulder at Paris. Paris drew his sword.

"Hey, freeze! Put that goddamn thing away, now!" Tom screamed. "Get 'im boy, get 'im!"

Tom released the bulldog. It made a mad dash. Paris walked towards it with his sword drawn. He whistled and made kissing noises to try to get the beast's attention.

But the dog sped right past Paris and jumped right onto Earl and the old man.

Earl screamed. Blood shot from his neck like a spring. He hit the ground hard. His rifle fell to the earth and discharged a round that scraped the bulldog on the throat. The dog yelped and staggered a bit, then continued its attack on the stranger.

Tom watched in horror at what happened next, while Paris was amused. The old man's teeth became fangs and his hands became claws. His clothing pulled back into his body and his face twisted. In a few seconds the old man reverted to his true form, that of a man-eating carnivore. The carnivore and dog made a bloody melee with each other while Earl rolled around on the ground. He screamed in shock and agony and held his neck in a vain attempt to stop the bleeding.

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“Well, Tom, aren’t you going to shoot?” Paris teased.

Tom shot at the carnivore three times and hit nothing but dirt. Had the ground been attacking instead of a carnivore, perhaps Earl would have been saved.

“You normal humans are such lousy shots,” Paris joked morbidly.

Tom stuttered. “L-l-l-look man, I’m sorry, okay? It’s just, that, you know, we uh, didn’t know you, okay? We’ve been hearing about how the carnies have been making themselves look like people lately, and we just thought that—”

“Yeah, sure, it’s because you didn’t KNOW me, right? I guess it was because I am a big man wearing a black—coat.” Paris glared at Tom. “I guess not too many people in black coats try to get inside your pyramid, right?”

Earl pulled himself to his feet and trotted a few steps towards them before passing out. He hit the ground face first. Paris looked at Earl and suppressed a sadistic urge to laugh.

“Go inside and get back up and help for Earl, here,” Paris ordered as he pulled out his laser rifle. “I’ll take care of this.”

Tom’s eyes bulged when he saw the weapon. “God! The grays only give those things to their bodyguards. You’re a sword-fighter, ain’t you?”

“Yogin,” Paris corrected. “Go! Hurry up!”

Tom ran to the door, opened it and sped inside.

A squad arrived a few minutes later. The medics ran immediately out to Earl while the rifle-bearers bolted towards Paris. He was sitting down on the carnivore’s body. He held the dog in his lap and was feeding it a few bits of bloody meat that he had cut from the thing.

One of the rifle-bearers was a young, attractive black woman. She caught Paris’ attention immediately. Her face, her body, her eyes, her hair, were perfect. At first he thought it was merely the time he spent wandering outside of the pyramid that made him her look so beautiful. But, he realized later that even after she began interrogating him, he beauty had nothing to do with his problems.

“That’s disgusting!” she snapped at Paris. “I can’t believe you’re feeding a dog that thing’s body. You know that makes you a psycho, don’t you?”

“No, that’s makes me a man who is making friends with a mutt,” Paris retorted. He held the dog up to the rest of the squad. “Look, your snoop here is hurt, and it needs to have something to eat.” He waved away the dust that the rifle squad had kicked up into the air. “My name is Paris. I’m from a pyramid a few days down south.”

The woman was shocked. The carnivores were particularly bad in this area. She wondered how any normal human could survive the journey from the South without some sort of vehicle or help from the powers that be. She took the dog and handed it to one of the men in the squad. Judging from the markings on her fatigues, Paris realized that she must be the squad leader.

“I’m Corporal Leah Daniels,” she said in an authoritative but sexy voice. It was the kind of voice that was melodic, raspy, yet powerful.

Paris stared at her deep, brown eyes, her smooth cocoa skin, her thick, rosy lips, soft, bushy hair, and her strong, muscular legs that he knew were oh so soft despite their strength. He wondered how it would feel to be between those legs, with her arched on her back, panting, and his mouth pressed gently on her—

“Hello!” she yelled.

Paris looked down and realized that she had extended her hand to him. He must have been drooling over her for at least thirty seconds, he thought. The men in the squad chuckled.

He went down on one knee in front of her, took her hand and gently kissed it. “Nice to meet you, Lady Leah.”

Leah drew her hand back in disgust. “Please! Look, you’re cute and all, but you need to get yourself a shower or something first, okay? Then, maybe we can talk. If ever.” She turned her back, rubbed her hand and her disgust quickly changed to delight. “He is kinda cute underneath all of that dirt,” she said to herself in a low voice. “He just needs to clean up a little.”

The soldier who held the dog made a comment. “Come on, corporal. I thought you liked your men a little rough around the edges. Don’t most women love to have a rogue or a bad boy?”

She cut the soldier a hostile look. She turned to Paris. “Come on Partridge or whatever your name is, let’s get you inside. You can stay in the guest quarters of the pyramid. I think you proved that you’re safe.” She faced the squad. “Okay, squad, let’s get this man checked in and get the other one to medical. I need a volunteer to finish out this watch before sunset.” She looked at the one holding the dog. “Private Ruben, you just volunteered, smart mouth.”

Ruben handed her the dog, gave an awkward salute, then walked towards the pyramid door while the rest of the party went inside the pyramid. Paris and Leah took turns taking brief glances at each other, then turning away quickly when one caught the other one staring.

Chapter 2

The inside of the pyramid reminded him of home. There was the artificial clear blue sky, the purified air, genetically engineered trees and grass, and sterile looking buildings that were evenly spaced throughout the interior. Aside from the designated recreation areas for children, there really was no place inside the large structure that a person could go to get away from it all. This pyramid, like his, was the size of a small city. A few dogs, cats and other domesticated animals that the Grells felt like preserving as human pets could be found walking around freely. The inhabitants of this pyramid seemed to know what the ones knew in his home: to the Grells, they ranked little higher than the animals.

Paris noticed that he did not see one yogin among the group. He also noticed that aside from Leah, he did not see anyone who was not white.

The group arrived at a check-in station after a few minutes. The station was empty, as usual, since travelers rarely survived when trying to cross from one human pyramid to another. The only people inside were bored administrators and security personnel.

There was a Native American administrator behind the main desk—a middle aged man who appeared to be anxiously awaiting the end of his shift. He wore a dull-looking gray shirt that had his name sewn on a tag: John Blackfoot.

“Mr. —” Paris began.

“Just fill out the paperwork, if can you read,” John interrupted. “If not, I’ll fill it out. Afterwards, take a seat and we’ll take you in the back for a shower. I assume that you aren’t carrying any unknown diseases or you would have set of the bio-alarms—that is if they’re working.”

“I can read,” Paris said, annoyed.

“You look like a fighter from the outside,” John responded. “Most younger fighter types these days don’t know much about the written word. The Grells just have them learn how to fight and shoot.” He handed Paris an old pen.

Paris began filling out the form. He looked around, then leaned over to John and whispered. “Why is this pyramid all white? I mean, except for you and the soldier woman that brought me inside. The pyramid I grew up in was mixed. My family and a few others lived in a part that was mostly black because we were all related, but other than that, I thought that the grays wanted us all to integrate into one race or something.”

John lowered his voice. “Not in this one. There aren’t that many blacks, Indians or anything else other than white people. In fact, I think the grays have pretty much forgotten all about us. Except for security, we don’t even have anyone here who’s armed with one of those anymore.” John pointed down at Paris’ laser pistol. “Or those,” he said, pointing at his sword.

Paris finished filling out the form. He slid it over to John.

“Watch your back,” John advised in a rasp. “From what I hear, there are people inside the pyramid who want to keep the population as pure as possible.”

“But that’s illegal,” Paris hissed.

“Like I said, I don’t think that the grays are paying much attention to anything anymore.” John was becoming nervous.

A security guard walked over as if he were on cue. “What’s the problem gentlemen?” he asked in mock amusement.

“Nothing,” Paris answered. He looked the man from head to toe and felt no intimidation whatsoever.

Ten minutes later, two of the guards who escorted Paris inside the dorm returned. Paris noticed that one of them was Tom, only this time he was dressed in a cleaner uniform.

The guards escorted him outside and walked with him through the bustle of bodies on the street. After a few blocks, they came to a taller structure that appeared to be a crumbling building on the outside.

“What the hell is that?” Paris asked. “It looks like something the grays forgot to knock down.”

“Haven’t you ever seen a hotel before?” Tom asked.

They walked inside of the building and found it lavishly decorated.

“Ever wonder how they find a way to keep live cozy inside of the pyramid, but yet let the world outside go to hell?” Paris asked.

“Labor,” the other guard answered. “Didn’t you go to labor when you were a teenager?”

“No, I became a yogin. I spent twelve years training,” Paris noted.

“Come on,” Tom ordered. “Let’s get you checked in so that we can go home. After you check in and stay for a few weeks you can apply for citizenship and work. Either that, or you have to leave.”

“Fine with me. I just may live here. I have no place else to go, really.”

Tom and the other guard stood with Paris as he checked into the hotel. They walked him upstairs into a room. Tom gave a half-hearted apology for suspecting that Paris’ skin color indicated he was a carnivore. Paris gave a false acceptance of the apology.

He walked into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. “Man, I look beat down,” he said to himself. He took off the dagger-belt he still had hanging at his waist and hung it inside of the shower. Paris stripped off the rest of his clothing, tossed it on the floor and stepped into the tub for a needed cleaning. He wet his black wooly hair, drew the dagger and used it to shave his scalp. Luckily, he didn’t cut himself. After that, he put the dagger back and continued bathing. “Ah, yes. YES!” he moaned in orgasmic delight as the hot water and soap made love to his dirty body. The tub filled with orange filth.

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“Are you mating with water now, Paris?” called a voice from inside the bathroom.

Paris reflexively grabbed the dagger and flung open the curtain. He looked down and found a familiar form standing in front of him that was just as naked as he was at the moment.

“You have GOT to be kidding me!” he yelled. “Ori, what in the hell are you doing in here?”

Ori sat down on the toilet bowl. “I need to talk to you.”

“Christ, man, don’t you have any sense of privacy or does that word not exist among your people,” Paris said angrily. He put the dagger back in the dangling belt and slammed the shower curtain shut. “Why in the hell do you think I’d want to talk to you anyway?”

Ori sighed. “It’s not a matter of want, it’s a matter of need. You’re in danger while you’re inside of this pyramid. This place is not like Pomonkey. It’s been neglected a bit. Or rather, different social experiments have been done here.”

“If by neglected, you mean it was not destroyed because its people didn’t buy the party line, then hey frog-head, I’m all for it.”

Ori was annoyed. He hated being called “frog-head” or “froggy”. “Look, you’re still MY human, understand?”

“You mean I’m your nigga.”

Ori fumed. “Stop using that word!” He shook his head, frustrated. “I don’t care if you did win your freedom, you’re still a yogin that I trained personally!”

“Yeah,” Paris interrupted, “by teaching me about my own human culture, which I would have been able to learn about anyway if you people hadn’t shown up and taken it from me.”

“Ha!” Ori spit. “You don’t know a thing about human history!”

“And whose fault is that?”

“Your people—you, blacks or African-Americans, and whatever else you called yourselves—your culture was gone when we took over. The whites had made you duplicates of them over the years. This part of the continent was once called the United States of America. It built itself on destroying the civilizations of your ancestors. I’d say that your family got a double dose of alienation. Many of you blacks have Native ancestors that where here before the States was formed. If you ask me, I’d say we did you a favor.”

Paris scrubbed his shaved head. “Look, I don’t know ‘bout all that, all I know is what I heard growing up. And from what I heard, things may not have been great for black people, but at least we didn’t have to live under a false structure. At least we didn’t have our homes destroyed from on high because we decided to pray.”

“You really don’t know a thing about humanity do you?” Ori jeered. “You humans have destroyed each other for years in the name of your God and did far

more damage to this Earth than we ever could have. If it weren't for us, the only intelligent life on this planet would be the carnivores."

Paris washed the soap off of his head. "Look, I'm tired of talking politics with my stalker. You know I don't like you, yet you insist on following me. So tell me what you want this time."

Ori was delighted to change the subject. "I came here to warn you that you are in danger inside of this place. Think of it as being almost as hostile as the outside in a way. The danger here is just a little subtler. I had my subordinates keep you alive after we destroyed Pomonkey because I knew you were strong. You survived the first test by getting here. Your second test for me will be living here and knowing when it is time to leave."

Paris leaped through the shower. He kicked Ori's chest. Ori's hit the floor. Before Ori could blink, Paris' sat on top of him. His dagger was at Ori's throat.. Ori flailed vainly, but could not budge Paris. The water from Paris' body dripped on Ori's rough, alien skin.

"I know you didn't see it coming," Paris said with forced calm. "That's because you cannot control me anymore. The only reason why I won't kill you now is because I know you know. You people are so spiteful that they'd probably level this place if they ever found out a yogin murdered one of you. I'm sick of your tests, Ori, and I want you out of my life."

Paris let him up. Shaken and winded, Ori moved back to the toilet seat and forced himself to sit down. "I'll leave. But remember I'm still watching you. You're still being tested because I have bigger things planned for you. That is, when you're ready." He muttered a few commands in the alien tongue and vanished.

Paris turned off the shower and tossed the dagger in the sink. As he dried off with a towel, he judged himself for not killing Ori. He also worried if Ori was right about living in a new city with hidden dangers.

Paris spent most of the next few days sleeping and eating. His mind drifted between grieving about the loss of his home, his family and dreaming about Mauria. Her image was burned in his mind whenever he closed his eyes. He felt pulled to her. She seemed to be the only source of comfort in his world of pain. The attraction became an obsession, as if she were the answer to everything. He wondered how he could be so pulled to someone—how he could see her so clearly in his mind even though they had never met.

"I've got to break this link with my cousin," he told himself silently. But he didn't. He needed her presence too much to let go.

It was the morning of his fourth day in the room that he decided to return to his regimen of martial practice. His sword was laid on the floor in front of him. He was breathing and stretching when a loud knock came at the door.

"Come in," he yelled.

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“I don’t have access,” a woman’s voice answered. “You’ll have to let me in.”

Paris hopped up.

“Are you there?” she yelled through the door.

“Yeah,” Paris answered. He threw on his pants, shoes, socks and tattered T-shirt, then walked to the door and opened it.

Paris looked down. The woman at the door was a short, slim, auburn haired white girl of about 18 or 19 years old. She was wearing some clothing that Paris didn’t recognize.

“I hope you don’t mind my asking, but, what type of clothes are those?”

The girl smiled. “Oh these? These are some old civilian clothes. We were digging outside the pyramid and we came across an old shopping center. This outfit I’m wearing was called a dress.”

He remembered. “Oh yeah, a DRESS. That’s right, my mother had one of those once when I was little. She wore it for a while, before the greys made her turn it in. They said they wanted the males and females to wear the same clothes so that there would be no gender wars.”

“You’re Paris, right?” the girl asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “I’m sorry, what’s your name?”

“I’m April,” she smiled. “I work for the hotel. Normally I don’t really have to do anything, but my job is supposed to be to welcome visitors to the town and help them get settled in.” April looked up at Paris. “Aren’t you going to let me in?”

“No, that’s okay, I’ll come out. Just a second.” He closed the door. A minute later, after he put on his coat and weapons, he met her outside the room.

“I can’t believe you left me out here!”

Paris apologized. “Oops. Sorry.”

She looked at his weapons, then at the wrap on his head. “Look, I have to tell you that you’re not going to be allowed to carry those weapons around inside of here unless you work for security or something.”

“I’m a yogin,” Paris answered.

“You can’t be,” April said in disbelief. “I thought you yogins either were bodyguards for the Grells or were assigned to protect your birth-pyramid?”

“I won my freedom from my master,” Paris began, “and those motherfuckers destroyed my home because we practiced religion.”

April was quiet for a second, thinking. “Well, I guess we can see if we can get you in Security or something like that. All adults in the pyramid have to have a job.” She gave him a look that said she thought he did not want to work.

“Fine by me,” Paris agreed.

April took him downstairs and through the hotel lobby. Soon they were outside and headed towards the center of the pyramid. Paris looked around and noticed that there were more people about. The clothing seemed a little newer

than the ones they had in his birth pyramid. He was glad the people in Philadelphia had unearthed something from the past that gave their appearance a more human look.

“You know what?” Paris asked.

“What?”

“I’ve been here about four days now and I don’t even know the name of this place.”

April talked about the history of the pyramid. “This is the Philadelphia Pyramid. The Grells built our settlement on top of a place that had a lot of history. While they have censored what they have allowed us to learn, they have made sure the best information is available in the libraries. They say that before they came along—”

“Humanity was nearly destroyed by its own doing. Yeah, yeah, I know, please spare me the propaganda.”

April looked confused. “What’s propaganda?”

Paris had tipped his hand. He didn’t want anyone to know that in addition to studying religions from the past, the people in his birth pyramid had begun reading books they had found among the ruins of a nearby city: Washington, DC.

“Oh, it’s an old word I heard my grandparents used. It means lies.”

“Don’t like the Grells much, do you?” April probed as they turned a corner and began crossing a street.

Paris looked up at the artificial blue sky and false clouds. He had seen in a book what real clouds were like before the aliens had “saved” the world. The ones that the Grells had put up appeared a little too symmetrical. “No, not really. Don’t you know that they made the ground all orange outside and what not so that they could live here on the surface?”

“That’s just a myth,” April debated. “Humans did that by using our old war technology.”

Paris turned his head towards her. “Haven’t you ever been outside the pyramid?”

“Yeah, once, when there was damage to one of the walls. Why?”

“Didn’t you ever bother to look up?”

April thought for a second. “No, not really. Well, I guess I did. But I had to run back inside because some meat-eaters were coming after us.” She paused. “Look, I’m not some big fighter-person like you are, okay? The police and security forces have to train outside, I don’t. I have a civilian occupation and I’m happy with it. You should be glad you even made it to Philadelphia. I heard you came from a pyramid that was way to the south somewhere.”

Paris sensed danger. He searched around them, scanning the crowd for anyone who did not look human.

April picked up on his concern. “What’s wrong?”

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Paris did not see any carnivores among them. “Nothing. It’s just that I felt like we were in danger or something.”

“Well, there are still criminals among us, you know,” April offered.

“No, this was stronger than the intent someone gives off when they want to rob you or something. It felt like-like someone really wanted to hurt me. The only time I ever feel anything that strong is when I’m patrolling for carnies.”

He stopped walking. April went on a few steps more before she stopped. The crowd merely flowed around them. Paris closed his mind and allowed his thoughts to settle.

There, confirmed his inner voice. He turned his head and opened his eyes. His gaze landed on a group of four young white men who were glaring at them from in front of a small building across the street. Paris turned and faced them, letting them know that he knew he was being watched. The men smirked at him and slowly disbanded.

April watched the confrontation and said nothing.

“Let’s go,” Paris muttered, shaking his head in disgust. He had read about such things in some of the old books they found in Pomonkey and had even heard some of the older people talk about it, but he was surprised that he’d experienced it twice in one week.

“Are you okay?” April asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s my second time dealing with something like that, but it still pisses me off.” His mind drifted to John and Leah. He wondered how safe they were in this place.

After a few minutes, he noticed something else. There seemed to be very few vehicles that took people back and forth throughout the city. There was perhaps the occasional cab that drove by them as they walked, but no real public transportation service was in place at all.

“Do you people walk everywhere?” Paris wondered.

“All we have are the cabs,” April told him. “We had more drivers and other vehicles, but most of them have been re-designated as construction workers. The Grells are allowing us to do some digging and rebuilding from the ruins we are finding. As long as we let them or one of their representatives supervise the activities.”

Paris was worried. The Pomonkey pyramid had been doing some rebuilding and expansion beyond the limits that were initially imposed on them before the Grells destroyed them. “You all may want to talk care not to build up things too fast. You might make the greys uncomfortable.”

April gave him a curious look. “You certainly sound paranoid.”

“You would too if you saw them destroy your home and let your family and friends get eaten by carnivores.”

She ignored him and pointed at a large office building. “Here were are! This is the Job Office.”

Paris looked at the large, flashing letters that read “Job Office” on the outside of the main entrance. “Obviously,” he laughed.

“Well, you’re one of the few fighters I’ve seen who can read well enough to know what it is without stuttering through it,” April riposted.

“You people must keep you soldiers dumbled down in Philadelphia,” Paris judged.

“We don’t, the Grells do. They say it’s better that way, and frankly, I believe them.”

April led Paris inside and helped him get checked in. She gave him a limp handshake goodbye, then left. Paris explained his warrior status to the guards who were inside and was relieved to hear that someone in Philadelphia was familiar with the yogin caste. One of them gave him a rag so he could clean his badge. He thanked them both, but was a bit disappointed that being a yogin did not excuse him from having to wait in an endless line.

“Number one-thousand. Thousand? Anyone in here with that ticket?” a nasal voice shouted.

Paris had dozed. He sprang up, nearly tripping over his sword.

He made his way to an impatient, pale, doughy male receptionist. The receptionist puffed on a cigarette. He was an older man who looked like the patron saint of chain smokers.

“Have a seat young man,” he growled through a friendly but flemmy cough. The smoke floated slowly around him, as if it had a mind of its own. Paris blinked his eyes and held his breath, a little irritated by the fumes.

The receptionist picked up a manila folder. He opened it and read a computer-typed note inside.

Paris was shocked. “The grays let you people have a computer?”

“Only recently, say within the past five years or so. They’re really letting us expand, you know. I hear that most of the other pyramids still use typewriters.” The receptionist coughed again. He put out his cigarette on a flat, aluminum astray.

“Technology huh? But no library, right?”

“Lie what? Oh, you mean a big room of books. We dug up one of those a few months ago too, right before we hit the ancient clothing store. Only thing is there was a carnivore nest in one part of the library. Most of the sword fighters like you died. The regular soldiers were lucky.”

Paris imagined the carnivore battle. He stopped. It reminded him too much of his last day at home.

The receptionist slid Paris the note. “We all just got this note yesterday. It’s about you. It says that you’re one of those yogin types and that if you came here

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looking for a job, we're to direct you to Pyramid Security. It seems like you're supposed to work for them if you ever apply for citizenship."

"I can read," Paris said defensively.

The receptionist gave him a skeptical look. "Most fighters can't read very well, you know. At least not in our pyramid. We pretty much get our career designations at a young age. I always knew I'd push pencils. I just never thought that I'd ever see a computer. I heard my great-grandparents talk about those things, though. They made it seem like there was a time when people could talk to each other all over the world on a computer."

Paris looked around the desk. "Where's the computer? My old master used one. He never taught me much about it, though."

"In the back someplace," the receptionist answered. "I'm not allowed to learn about it either. All the let me do is read printouts."

Paris read the memo. It had complete instructions on how to find the Security building. There was also a box on the bottom of the form that said he was automatically granted citizenship if he chose to accept the position. Paris smiled.

"I see you read the part about automatically becoming a citizen. Are you still going to apply?"

"Why should I?"

"I wouldn't want anything to go wrong with your records. We're going to move everything over to the computers if the Grells let us." That bit of news excited the receptionist.

Paris was not impressed. "Thanks," he said politely. He stood up and shook the man's hand. "I'm out, okay? I'd better go find this security place and get everything situated."

"Good luck," the receptionist called as Paris left the desk.

With paper in hand, Paris scratched his head and walked out of the building into the street. There seemed to be more noise, more cars and more people. He felt the piercing stares again and the hostile intent. This time it was coming from a couple of women who were walking towards him. One of the women, a blond, had an odd way about her. There was something about her body language that did not quite fit. The feeling of dread set in. He knew what she was. He folded his paper away and pulled out his laser pistol.

"CARNIVORE!" He screamed. "Everybody get out of the way!"

Everyone who was near Paris laughed until he fired his laser pistol. They all crouched to the ground save the two women who were glaring at him. The human woman—a chubby, red haired white woman—began yelling at him. The carnivore charged.

Paris caught the creature with two shots to the chest and one to the side of its head. The headshot was supposed to be a fatal blow but the creature dodged the laser. In seconds it was on him, scratching and biting at his face. Paris fell to the

ground with the beast as it revealed its true reptilian form. He grappled with the thing as a stunned crowd looked on.

Everyone gasped when they heard the crack of a neck snapping. Paris laid there, motionless underneath the creature. The carnivore stood up took two steps, then collapsed. Then, Paris sat up and shook his head. Apparently it was the carnivore's neck that was broken, not his. He was winded, scratched, but okay.

Paris stood up. He tried to brush the carnivore's blood off his coat. "Next time I'll just stick with the sword," he said off-handedly to a bystander. He pulled out the rag and wiped his hands, then tucked the rag on the inside of his coat.

The redhead who was with the carnivore was enraged. "God-damn you! That carnivore was not evil. She was a sacred blood-drinker. She was a priestess! I don't know what you did for a living wherever you came from, but right now you have just become a murderer!"

Paris pointed to his badge. "I'm supposed protect people from those things. It's all the greys had me learn, okay. Quite frankly, I'm surprised it got in this far. What, are you nuts? One of the guards at the front gate tried to kill me because he thought I was one of them."

"He must have thought that you were a bad carnivore. There are good ones, you know. Some of them only live on blood! They help overcome our fear of death."

Security arrived. They wore the same dingy uniforms that Earl and Tom wore at the front entrance. Asking no questions, they immediately grabbed Paris. Paris put up no fight and even allowed himself to be cuffed. One of the guards took his weapons. They escorted him over to a large white car that had been parked a half a block away. Paris was put in the back seat. As they drove away, a few of the onlookers chanted cries of murder while the rest were secretly relieved that Paris killed a carnivore.

He arrived at Pyramid Security in a fraction of the time it would have taken him to walk there. The police officers parked the car in a front. They grabbed Paris and his weapons out of the back seat and shoved him inside the entrance of the building. They led him in a hold room that from the looks of it hadn't been used in years. There was dust in every corner of the room and most of the cobwebs appeared to be the homes of a few small spiders. They sat him in an old wooden chair that created under his weight. The officers laid his weapons on a table in the center of the room. However, neither one of them bothered to take of Paris' handcuffs.

Paris had begun passing his wait by meditating on one of the spider webs. He made mental notes on the intricacies of the spider's design. He had turned his attention on one of the spiders itself when Leah barged into the room, alone but angry.

Cecil Washington

“I see they escorted you over to the Job Center but no one bothered to give you a de-briefing on this city, did they?” She gave him a blaming look.

But to him, she still looked beautiful—especially now that she was excitable. He could smell the sweet oil she was wearing. He liked it. “Look, all I know is that I saw a carnivore trying to pass itself off as human and I took it out. That’s one of the things I did after I got freed from my gray. I used the training to patrol around outside and inside of my birth pyramid for carnivores, okay? And after spending several weeks training in the badlands near home, I think I know a monster when I see one.”

Leah sat down in a chair opposite him. She smiled for a second as she realized she liked this newer, cleaner looking man who claimed to be a yogin. Then, she remembered her duty as an officer for pyramid security and regained her bearing.

“There are things about this place that you don’t know about, okay?” she said. She motioned to him to show her his hands. After she uncuffed him, she held his hands for a second too long. “I guess you don’t need medical attention.”

“Nope,” Paris said, oblivious to her flirting.

She looked into his eyes. “First, you have to understand that things may not be always how you may think they are. Paris, you and I are the only black residents in this pyramid in their twenties and thirties. John Blackfoot is the only Native American I’ve seen in here in the past five years. Too many people of color are either disappearing or leaving to try to find another place.”

“Why? What’s the dilly, joe?”

“Because there’s a racist hate movement going on here that’s gaining some momentum.”

Paris didn’t believe her. “You’re lying. I mean sure, I felt that a few people here and there didn’t like me, but you can’t expect me to believe there is a racist movement building.”

Leah glared at him for a second. “What is wrong with you, nigga? I heard about what happened to you at the gate. They thought your black ass was a carnie, didn’t they? Didn’t they!”

Paris discounted the incident. “That was just those two idiots.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. Just those two. And the four guys I saw earlier today.”

“And...”

“And what John told me when I asked him about how...never mind.”

Paris sat back in his chair, embarrassed. She had proven her point. “Well, it’s just that you know, where I’m from, we had to put up with a few things here or there but it was nothing we couldn’t overcome. Plus, once the Christian religion was rediscovered, it seemed like all of that stuff was being put to an end.” Paris shook his head in frustration. “Then, the grays put us to an end.” His eyes teared.

Leah was concerned. “What did they do? Don’t tell me they—”

“Yes, they destroyed it. I’m lucky I got out alive.” Anger and depression welled up inside. He put his head down in his hands. Leah walked around the table and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. Paris noticed how soft her touch was. It was nice to have someone show some concern after everything he had been through.

“Look, I left word down at the Job Center that if you were interested, there was a job for you here with us. I pulled some strings with my superiors. I’m not looking for you to become a regular. I want you to be more of an agent for us.” Leah smiled at him.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“Take care of the things in a way that we can’t.”

Paris knew where this was going. “You want me to find the racists and kill them don’t you?” He made a disgusted grunt.

“Well...” Leah confirmed with her tone, “perhaps. But, there’s more to it than that. It seems like this race thing is linked to some sort of cult that worships carnies. We think that the cult members are being manipulated by the carnies into bringing them sacrifices.”

Paris chuckled. “Look, this whole thing sounds like some bad science fiction novel or something.”

“Science what?” she said.

Paris made a mental note that the joke went over her head. Besides, the only science fiction he had read were a few anthologies that Ori had given him in order to warp his perception of the past. “Why are you letting carnivores inside your pyramid, anyway? Are you people stupid or what?”

“Well,” Leah explained, “we don’t always know who is human and who isn’t. There has also been some security breaches. We think that some of the guards may be part of the cult and may allow a carnivore inside.”

“Well, cult or not, those two idiots who wouldn’t let me in certainly aren’t the best and the brightest around here, are they?” Paris said.

Leah ignored his last comment. “Well, for all I know, they may be the only people in security who aren’t.” Leah let go of Paris and sat back down in the chair. Paris’ eyes followed her body.

Leah blushed. She gazed into his eyes and realized how handsome Paris was. After an awkward pause, she pulled herself together. “Your assignment begins now. All I want you to do is draw attention to yourself. I think that the cult members will find you. Once you find out where they are worshipping, I want you to take care of things for us.”

Paris frowned his forehead. “Take care of things how?”

Leah leaned forward. “You do whatever you think is best,” she whispered.

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There was the vagueness again. Although he was a bit naive, he knew that when humans were being deliberately vague it was because they didn't want to be blamed for committing any necessary evils. His distrust of her started to outweigh his attraction.

His thoughts drifted to his cousin Mauria.

Leah sensed the distance. "Hey, I'm sorry to put you in a predicament like this, okay, but you're the only one who can do it." She walked around the table to him again, leaned over him from behind and hugged him. "How about we get together after this whole thing is over, okay? I'll cook dinner for you," she cooed, struggling within herself to not let her feeling run too far out of control, yet knowing that resisting him was futile.

"How about we get together now?" Paris reached up and stroked her hair. He turned his lips to hers and kissed her. Leah responded with a deeper, more passionate kiss. Paris stood up and took her in his arms. Before long, the two of them were writhing on the table, fully clothed. Instead of making love to her in the dusty interrogation room, Paris used his strong, long fingers to massage her clitoris through her uniform. Somehow he managed to rub her without chafing her. He pressed her clitoris until she had an intense, sweaty orgasm. Leah unzipped the front of his pants and repaid him. She performed that act that the mouth cannot express with words, circling her head and taking half of him in eagerly. A true oral soldier, she carried out her mission to the best of her ability: she swallowed.

After their time together, Leah took Paris around to the weapons lockup. They returned his sword, pistol and dagger to him. He kissed Leah goodbye—on the cheek—when they were alone again. Leah told him that their relationship had to be kept a secret. Paris said nothing. He kissed her forehead, hugged her and left. She stared into space after he was gone and felt a little uncomfortable about letting her hormones take precedence over her duty as an officer.

He went to his hotel room. He needed time alone to meditate and develop a strategy for handling the cultists.

He sat on the floor with his legs crossed. He went deep inside his mind and made world around him disappear. His body filled with energy. His breath stopped working as two acts—inhale, exhale. It merged into one continuous stream. Images of a bright, comforting light flooded his mind. At that moment he felt peace. His strength was building; he became renewed. At last, an idea was coming to him that seemed to be perfect. Yes! He had it! He had the perfect way to bait the cult members.

Ori interrupted his meditation. "So I see that you and the female black have bonded?"

Paris fell out of the trance. He looked up and saw Ori standing over him. "Don't you ever knock you little frog-headed fucker?"

“You should be saying master,” Ori complained. “Or teacher.” He walked over and sat down on Paris’ bed. “You can’t stay here much longer. I know you humans don’t use money anymore, but they aren’t going to let you stay in this hotel place for nothing. Now that you have citizenship, you’ll need to find some other quarters”

“One thing at a time, Ori,” Paris answered. “Hey, I’ve got an idea: do you want to take care of that for me? I mean, you greys are the masters of mind control, right? You’ve certainly done a good job of running my life up to this point.” His tone burned with sarcasm.

“Well, I could. You know they’ll listen to a Grell. In fact, why don’t I do that? It really shouldn’t interfere with the test. It’s the least I can do.” Ori made a mental note to see about Paris’ living arrangements.

“Leave me alone, Ori,” Paris hissed.

“You know, you need time to grieve your loss. You’ve been so busy fighting and wandering that I really don’t think you have dealt with the loss of your home.”

Paris didn’t believe Ori’s compassion. “I don’t have time to sit around and mourn anymore. I’ll deal with it in my own way. Besides, I have an assignment here now. I guess you probably know that, seeing as you eavesdrop on my life. Why can’t you accept that I’m not one of your yogin anymore? Is it that hard for you to give up control?”

“You may be free, but you’re still one of mine. And besides, I have one more favor to ask of you. When you’re ready.” Ori rubbed his chin and studied Paris through inhuman, onyx eyes. This Paris human really puzzled him at times. So defiant, at times!

Paris stood up and drew his sword. “Look, tell me what it is you want me to do or I’ll cut you to pieces. Then again, what do I care? What can you give me, more training? You certainly can’t bring back everyone I’ve lost.”

Ori decided that this was the time to begin to reveal his plans for Paris. “Not everyone you loved was lost, Paris.” Ori coughed. “Look, I want you to help me liberate your species. But you’re not strong enough yet. You’re still too dependent on pyramid living. And besides, you’re not the strongest yogin. You’ll need to be the strongest in order to help me.”

Paris smirked. “So then why not go to the strongest one and get his help?”

“Her help,” Ori corrected. “I would, but Mauria will have nothing to do with me. She would help you though. In fact, she’s probably the reason why you were going to leave your pyramid in the first place. I taught her how to seek out others. Her telepathy is strong. She can’t enslave another human like we can, but she can certainly find a like mind if she needs to.” Ori laughed. “Besides, I think that you and she would make a great couple. I know that one girl you liked back in

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Pommonkey wasn't black. Judging from how you handled Leah today, you seem to have made a complete turnaround in that department."

Ori's teasing angered Paris. His last memory of Teresa, the girl he liked, was of her being mauled to death before he could get to her. He was too busy trying to fight the carnivores off his family to be any good to her or anyone else. Teresa's long brown hair and young, shapely body was covered with her own blood and the blood of others. He could see the blood on everyone around them, hear their screams, feel the explosions, and smell the burning odors of death and destruction. Then he thought about how even his sister Karen and his parents died. His father died in a one on one with a carnivore. His mother and sister were caught by an explosive dropped by one of the saucers.

Ori continued. "Look, don't worry about Mauria being your cousin. Among some humans, it's okay for third cousins to marry."

Paris leaped at Ori and gave a quick, sweeping blow with his sword. It passed right through Ori as if it were hitting air. Ori merely stood up after the attack and walked to the other side of the bedroom. He shook his head at Paris, as if Paris should have known better than to try to attack him a second time.

"I'm prepared for you this time, Paris. I've set myself out of phase." He pointed to a device that was on a belt around his waist. The material was so close to the color of his skin that to most humans, the Grells looked as if they wore no clothing at all.

Paris grudgingly put away his sword. "Humph. Well if she'll have nothing to do with your ass, then neither should I. I don't know why I even entertain you when you pop up around me."

"You can't help it, Paris," Ori continued. "As much as you hate me for what my kind has done, you know that right now, I'm the strongest symbol of your past. Besides, we have a bond. It may not be a bond that you like, but it's familiar and right now, you must be hungry for something that reminds you of yesterday. Even if it is me."

Paris knew that Ori was right; even though he hated Ori because he was a Grell, this strange relationship they had was the closest thing he had to a friendship now everyone else he knew was dead. Paris' mind drifted back to after the final blast. The only survivors he found were a few people who had been driven mad by the carnage and explosions. Those few mad people squatted on piles of rubble and dead bodies, crying and rocking themselves in a frenzied attempt to find some comfort.

"Am I still taking your little test?" Paris asked, trying to gain some semblance of control.

Ori folded his hands and stared back at Paris. "Your test right now, as far as I am concerned is this: you need to know when it is time for you to leave this place. That will show me that you have a good sense of strategy. After that, you

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need to find Mauria and learn what she knows. That will build your strength. You're the only surviving human from the Pomonkey Assault who did not go insane, and you made here to Philadelphia without dying in the badlands. That proves that you have endurance. You're going to need all of that and more when I come for you the last time."

Paris was curious. "So you really want to see us free?"

Ori uttered a command in the Grell tongue, touched his wristband and disappeared without answering.

Paris closed his eyes and tried to sense Ori. He couldn't.

Chapter 3

Paris had created a new job of himself: town oddity. From sun up to sun down he could be found in the middle of the Central Park area, going out of his way to make a spectacle of himself. Word of his antics spread throughout the pyramid within a week after his showcase began.

Paris stripped down to a pair of baggy pants that he had acquired from the men who were working on excavating the shopping mall. He found out that these were the same types of pants that were worn by humans who had practiced the martial arts before the Grell invasion. His feet and back bare, Paris practiced all of the kata (martial arts routines) and wrestling motions that Ori had allowed him to study. Whenever he took a break and decided to work on deep breathing exercises, he made it his business to be as loud and obnoxious as possible. During the times when he would attract a crowd of observers, he used his ability to fling his dagger into the air so fast that it reached halfway to the top of the pyramid. Seeing as money was an obsolete concept, curious onlookers often paid Paris with thank you notes, trinkets, bits of food or drink or at times, simple praise. One young lady of German ancestry was so motivated by his performance that she offered him her body. Paris declined the offer of sex, but did settle for a blowjob, the payment for which he took right there in the park. Parents and guardians covered their children's eyes and cursed him as they walked by.

The public blow job was the last straw. An hour after the "lip service", Leah showed up at Park. She was fuming with anger and jealousy.

Leah walked up on Paris as he was finishing a somersault in front of a crowd. She forced her way through the circle of people. "Just what in the HELL do you think you are doing! You call this being a yogin? You're supposed to be keeping the inside safe from disorder or keeping any more carnivores from getting in! You know what I hired you for, Paris. Don't play dumb with me!"

Her voice only attracted more attention.

"Look, I'm handling it okay? I'm going to find the 'thing' that you want me to find in my own way. You told me to do whatever I think is best. This is what I think is best, Corporal Daniels." Paris turned around and bowed to the crowd. They gave their applause, but seemed more interested in the fight he was having with Leah.

"Oh, so we're back to formalities now?" Leah snapped.

"You only came down here to see me ONCE in the past three weeks, remember. Good grief, woman, I see Ori more often than I see you lately. You don't come by my room at the hotel, send a note or send word—nothing!"

"Why can't you come see ME?" Leah asked angrily.

Paris looked at her and noticed the hurt in her eyes. “Look, if this is about the girl that just left here, believe me, she didn’t mean anything to me, okay? She gave me head that’s all. In fact, I’m still a virgin.”

The crowd roared at the word “virgin”. Leah blushed from embarrassment.

“Look,” she said, hanging her head in a loud whisper, “we can talk about this later, okay? I’ll come by to see you later tonight. But you have to promise me that you won’t do anything. No more head out here in public, either.”

“Why, are you jealous?” Paris teased.

“We’ll talk about that later,” Leah said abruptly.

Paris turned around and faced the crowd again. He heard a whirring sound coming towards his head. He ducked just in time to avoid a slap from Leah.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“For making me care what happens to you!” Leah stormed back through the crowd and disappeared into the pyramid. Paris went back to his attention grabbing antics.

He felt it again: the hatred. He looked around the ground after a demonstration of his flexibility and saw a group of ten people, males and females, with shaved heads. He also noticed that a few of them had a weird looking, twisted metal cross hanging around their necks. If memory served him, he believed it was called a swastika. Ori had told him that centuries ago, a band of white humans called Nazis had used that as a symbol to wage war on other humans they deemed inferior because of their ancestry. Paris also recalled that from some of the stories he heard about those humans from his elders, it may be possible that the Grells were behind that as well.

He made eye contact with the ringleader. The ringleader gave a menacing nod.

Paris felt another presence, coming from in front of him. He turned towards it and saw a small girl standing there with peculiar eyes and a rather large head. He smirked.

He went over to the girl and knelt down. “So you’re a Grell, aren’t you? Spying on me?” he said through a fake smile.

She gave no response. Paris turned his attention back to his performance.

It was late in the night when he heard a knocking at his hotel room door. The room was pitch black. Paris left a bundle of pillows and sheets on the bed to make it look like he was sleeping there while he sat curled up in the corner with his sword drawn.

He projected his voice at the bed like a ventriloquist. “Come in, it’s open!”

Half a score of people—nine men and one woman—flooded into his room. Armed with sticks, knives and bats, they all poured towards his bed and began attacking it. There were more people outside of the room and from what he could hear; it seemed like they had a few prisoners with him.

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“That ought to get the black bastard!” one of them said. “After what he did with my girlfriend in the park today, he should be strung up!” Paris recognized the voice.

“Come on Earl, you knew Cindy was a slut when you went out with her,” another one answered.

So it’s the guard from the gate, Paris thought. I should have known he was a part of the cult. Too bad he forgot to tell that to the thing that nearly ate him.

Earl laughed. “Yeah, but so what. The thought of her doing that with a nigger makes my skin crawl. It’s bad enough I have to work with that nigger-loving Tom every day on the outside.”

A third voice joined the conversation. “Why is he still a nigger lover when he hasn’t been out with Corporal Daniels for over a year now?” Paris knew that voice too.

“Shut up, Ruben. You know you have the hots for that nigger-bitch. I’m surprised you haven’t had her already, seeing as she was calling you Dale the other day. You two buddy-buddy now huh? First names and all? Well, have you had any of that nigger-pussy yet?”

Dale Ruben’s voice cracked. “Maybe I have!”

The female joined the conversation as she pulled back the bed sheets. “No you haven’t, Dale.” Paris realized that it was April, the girl who showed him to the Job Office. “Shit, people, he’s not on the bed. He’s not here. He’s fucking gone, okay?”

Paris skulked from the corner and closed the door. He locked it.

“Who closed the door?” Dale asked in a panicked voice.

Paris turned on the light. They were startled. He put away his sword and quickly drew his dagger. “It’s too many of you in here for me to use the blade. Not enough room.”

They were speechless.

“Look, we can make this go easy or I can kill all of you, your choice. Just answer a few questions and I won’t say anything about where I got my info. I’m really not in the mood for killing anybody tonight. Besides, it’s against my code for me to kill humans.” Paris rubbed under his chin with the back of his free hand.

“Fuck you!” April yelled. “There’s no way in hell you can kill all of us.”

Dale raised his stick and walked towards Paris. “There’s no way in hell you could kill me!”

Dale took a few steps towards Paris and swung his club. Paris dodged it and made a motion with the knife that was too fast to be seen. He whirled behind Dale and threw him back into the group. Paris stood with his back facing the corner. He pulled out his laser pistol with his free hand.

“Stay back, I’m warning you.”

Dale started screaming at him. “Ha! I don’t care if have a gun. There’s no way in hell anybody could—ack! ack!” Dale started coughing up blood. He put his hand to his neck and realized that his throat was cut. He looked at Paris’ knife and saw that he’d been cut so fast that the blood didn’t even have time to settle on the weapon. His eyes rolled up in his head and he collapsed face first on the floor, dead.

Shock waves of fear shot through the rest of the group. They all looked to each other for support.

“Anybody else want to end their life?” Paris threatened.

They all rushed him at once.

Paris took a blow to his ribs, a knife grazed his left leg, and one person’s stick brushed his left jaw. His left side had always been his weaker one, he thought. He went after everyone in the group with the frenzy and speed of a crazed cheetah. After two minutes of a blinding, bloody, screeching melee, he was standing in a room full of dead people. Their bodies were hacked and by his knife and burned by his gun. There was blood all over his clothes, the bed, the walls, the mirrors, the furniture, everything. The only person left alive, besides him was April. That was a matter of choice—on his part. Paris had decided to show mercy on her by letting her get by with only a few broken ribs.

She was curled up next to Earl’s body. She held her sides and cried quietly.

“Why’d you come here? To kill me? To sacrifice me? What? WHAT! Is this some kind of pleasure kill? How many of you are outside? Answer me!” He kicked her in the stomach.

She coughed up blood. “There’re three people outside—Leah, John and Tom. Leah and John are the only other darkies—I mean colored—I mean, people like you left in the pyramid.”

“Why?” Paris yelled. “Huh? Answer me!” He bent down and shook her.

“We’ve been sacrificing you muds to the carnivores. Once word got out about what was going on, most of the non-whites fled the pyramid. They said that there was another pyramid further north, a place called New York. It’s supposed to be a lot bigger than this one.” April was starting to pass out.

Paris knelt down and slapped her face to revive her. “Why are you feeding people to the carnies? Why?”

April recovered for a second. “They are gods. We believe that once the Grells help us leave the pyramid, the carnivores are going to rid the world of the weak races and allow the white people to restore the earth. They said that they get strength from the flesh of weak races and that they’d make us gods too if we helped them.”

“Oh yeah?” Paris laughed. “So why did one of them try to eat your dead buddy Earl over there?”

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Earl's lifeless eyes stared over at them. In a sinister way, it was as if they were being spied on by a dead man.

"There are good gods and there are evil gods. Sometimes they attack us in order to test our faith."

"What about the carnies that pose as black people, April?" Paris' judgment showed in his tone towards her.

April looked at him coldly. "The best way to kill a nigger is to pretend to be his friend."

That last statement cut Paris deeper than any of the blows he felt a minute earlier. He had thought that April was genuine in her friendliness and hospitality. "Where were you going to take me? Where?"

"I'm not telling you," she said stubbornly.

Paris pulled her up by her hair and dragged her into the bathroom. He threw her face first on the floor. She tried to get up and escape, but he kicked her again and slammed her head into the wall. She was dazed. Paris opened the shower curtain, plugged up the drain and turned on the water for the tub.

"What are—doing?" April muttered.

"If you don't tell me what I want to know, I'm going to drown you," he threatened.

"You won't do that? You're some kind of knight or something. You can't!" she demanded.

"I'm a nigger, remember?"

April's fear brought her out of her shock. She began blathering out so many things that Paris could barely make out what she was saying. After about a minute, the tub was full. He threw her into the water. Her head hit the wall as her body splashed about. Water was running out of the tub onto his feet and the floor. The place was becoming drenched.

"No, you can't! You can't drown me! Please, it's not right!" April begged. She sat in the water shaking as the blood was washed from her body. Soon, the water inside and outside of the tub was red.

"I'm not going to drown you, you idiot" Paris said. He stood up, found a bar of soap and tossed it at her. The soap smacked her in the forehead and plopped into her lap. "Clean yourself up, April. You're filthy."

Her fear turned to insult as she sat in the tub, sulking. Then, not knowing what else to do, she removed her clothing and bathed. Paris walked into the other room, wiped the blood off of his body and changed into another black karate outfit that he'd gotten for his performances in the park. He put the badge on, then opened the door to the room.

Paris scared off the one cultist who was guarding the prisoners outside. Tom, Leah and John were tied and gagged. He quickly loosened their bonds and gave a report of what happened inside the room to Leah.

“And yet, you changed your clothes through all this madness and left April alive in the tub,” she commented. “Paris, you are a weirdo, and a sadist. You must have some issues with women.”

He wondered if he did for a second, then realized that the problem was that he’d spent so much time training that he really didn’t know much about women in the first place. “Leah, she’s lucky I didn’t kill her considering how many times she stabbed the bed when she thought that it was ME under those sheets!”

“You’re still a sadist. That’s probably why you’re a yogin. You have the perfect license to go around beating people in the name of the Grells.” She looked at him with disgust.

“Come on!” John demanded. “We’d better get out of here fast! As soon as that girl gets herself together, she’ll probably come up with some sob story about how Paris killed everybody. We either need to get out of this place or shut their cult down once and for all.”

“Actually,” Paris said, “we need to do both. She told me where they were keeping the carnivores for tonight’s service. I say we go down there and kill those things first. THEN, maybe we need to think about leaving.”

Leah took charge. “No, Paris, we can’t do that. The three of us would only end up getting killed if we went down there with you. I don’t know how big this thing is, yet, but it’s probably worse than I think. Odds are, the security officers that are on duty tonight are probably not involved. We need to handle this thing with some sort of professionalism. That means I can’t put any civilians in direct harm’s way.” She turned to Paris. “Paris, you are supposed to be functioning as an agent on this matter. You’ll have to go ahead, alone, okay? See what you can do to shake things up—by any means necessary. You have the department’s blessing. I’ll take John and Tom down to headquarters, have them file a report and meet you there with backup. If you walked out of a room full of people bent on doing you harm with only a couple of scratches, I think that you can at least confuse the cult members until we arrive.”

“What if they attack?” Paris asked.

“Defend yourself!” John yelled as he grabbed Paris’ shoulder and shook him.

“Okay, okay, fine. I’ll see what’s up, okay?” Paris said with his hands up. He lightly pushed off John’s grasp.

“Paris, try not to kill any more humans, okay?” Leah begged. “I mean, your room in there—the scene shows pretty clearly that it was self defense. Plus, the fact that you didn’t kill April was good judgement. But if things get hairy at the cult site, stick to cutting up carnivores, okay?”

“Yeah, it’s probably not a good idea for you to kill any more white people,” Tom said.

The three of them gave Tom the raised eyebrow look.

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“What?” Tom asked defensively. “Oh I get it. I’m not supposed to say that just because I’m white. What, am I a bigot now? You out to know by now that I have NOTHING to do with that crazy carnie shit. Tell them, Leah! You and I used to date right? Right!” Tom went on and on, hysterically.

Ori watched the situation from behind a corner down the hall. “I still can’t believe how much humans can’t stand each other.”

Paris dashed through the shadows of the city. Keeping to the alleyways and side streets, he managed to run through the pyramid without attracting any attention. He made his way to an abandoned warehouse district. It was a ghost town of large, foreboding gray buildings that Philadelphia teenagers used for games of Truth Or Dare.

After creeping around for about an hour, he finally saw the torch lights trickling from inside of one of the warehouses. The dim lights made the windows appear as if they were the foreboding, watchful eyes of a concrete hydra.

“They could start a fire in there,” Paris said to himself. “I guess they’d rather use the torches for effect, instead of turning on the damned light switch.”

Something scurried off in the darkness. Paris darted his eyes towards it without moving his head. He saw the creature’s form; it was large and moved very low to the ground. It had a very long tail.

“Shit,” he whispered. “It must be a rat from outside.” The rats in the badlands were large, meat-eaters that were known to eat carnivores first, but ever once in a while would venture towards a human if nothing else were available. Ori told him the rats were the results of genetic experiments that were conducted before the Grell invasion, when humans still had a widespread understanding of technology.

The rat set its large, glowing eyes on Paris. Paris could tell that the rat was nearly as big as he was.

“Look, furball,” Paris said, “if you don’t give me any trouble, I promise you that I will provide plenty of carnie meat for you to eat in a few minutes. That okay with you, whiskers?”

The rat stood still for a second, as if it understood what he was saying, then scampered off into the darkness. He waited for its footsteps to die down before he continued.

Paris crept up to a window and looked inside.

The first floor of the warehouse was filled with various containers. The cultists had cleared away a portion of it that was lit with a large assortment of torches and lanterns. Paris could make out various markings and symbols that were both painted and sculpted throughout the room that he found unintelligible, but was sure that they held some sort of value for the cultists. There looked to be about three or four hundred of them inside—hardly enough to be considered a movement in a pyramid as large as Philadelphia, he thought, but certainly a cause

for alarm. He could not make out the figures that were on a large platform in the distance, but they appeared to be two humans, three carnivores and an alien. The Grell didn't look like Ori—its head wasn't big enough.

“What the hell would a grey be doing getting involved with religion? Not unless the religion helped them somehow.” Paris scratched his face. “Hmm. I've got to get closer so that I can hear what's going on.”

Paris continued creeping along the outside of the building. He headed closer to the circle of cult members. After about a minute or so, he could hear their demonic chanting.

“Praise be to Carnivores. Lords of Blood!” the mob said in unison.

“You must all feel welcome and love for the Great Carnivore,” a tinny voice called. Paris could tell that it was the voice of the grey. “It is his blood and gray blood that flows in your veins. It is that mighty blood that made your people superior before the Grell Coming, and will make you superior again in this pyramid and beyond!” Paris remembered that in many pre-invasion racist philosophies, there was a belief by some humans that they were superior because they had the blood of divine, alien beings in their veins. “He's using this race-royalty thing to get people to be manipulated by the Grells and worship the carnivores. Man, those greys are evil. I guess this is what Ori was talking about. He probably had something to do with this too.”

Paris looked up upon the platform where they were standing. He could see clearly. There were definitely three carnivores standing there in true form, along with the Grell, and two fair-skinned humans, one male and one female, dressed similar to him. The humans had their heads shaved as he did as well, under his head-wrap. They were both armed with swords, daggers and laser pistols.

He felt a bit of panic. “Two yogins,” he said in a low voice. “Man, things are complicated.”

The female yogin felt his panic. She leaned over and whispered to the male. The two yogins looked around with their hands on their pistols.

The Grell picked up on their concern. It looked towards them and appeared to be communicating with them silently. Paris knew that he must have a telepathic link with the two of them. He closed his eyes and opened his mind so that he could spy on their conversation.

The Grell's mind message consisted of only a few words. If it's him, find him and kill him. Now.

The yogins hopped down from the platform.

Paris drew his laser pistol and checked it. It was drained of energy and needed to be recharged. “Damn,” he said to himself as he put it away and drew his sword. “I'll have to hunt them now in order to kill them.” He made his way into the shadows and prepared for a game of Cat and Mouse. Paris focussed on

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suppressing the presence of his life energy so that the other yogin would not be able to sense him.

The cult chanting continued on the inside, making its own cadence. "Praise be to the Carnivore. Blessed are the human children who do not fear his wont for blood."

The other yogins were outside in less than a minute. They seemed to instinctually know Paris' last location. They stood outside the window where Paris was crouched and silently scanned for him.

"He's good," the woman said. "I can tell he's dampening his energy. It's TOO empty out here. I can't tell where he is but he's close."

"Well, where is he?" asked the man.

"Don't use your eyes, don't use your mind," she lectured. "Feel him with your spirit. If you try to detect him mentally, he'll distract you and cut you down in a heartbeat."

She's the senior, Paris thought to himself. Good. I'll get rid of the man first then.

Paris crouched next to a dumpster. The yogins began slowly walking in his direction. As soon as the male was in leaping distance, Paris pounced.

The male yogin fired three shots while the female fell back and aimed at them. The third shot was aimed at Paris' chest, but he managed to dodge the bulk of the energy with a twist of his torso to the left. That left him with a mild burn on his chest, but not enough damage to stop him. Paris' winding of his body allowed him to reach back with his sword, and with one, fast cut, the male's head fell from his body. Paris grabbed the male's laser pistol before his body hit the ground and fired at the female. She somersaulted backwards, completely dodging the attack. Paris put away his sword, tumbled into a shadowy wall and stood with his hands fixed on the pistol. He looked around for her. She had vanished. He felt around for her with his mind and could not detect her, either. His spirit, however, told him that she was still nearby.

The wound from the pistol was stinging and burning. The pain was affecting Paris's mind, which meant that he was vulnerable to psionic attack.

The woman sensed it. She formed a mentally energy dagger and launched it at his mind. He reflexively put up a mental shield. She re-grouped and sent a hail of psi-bullets pouring at his consciousness. Paris began firing the pistol blindly, hoping to somehow disturb her concentration. It did not work. Feeling overpowered, he focussed some of his energy into his body and retreated.

Paris heard her laughing in his mind. He could hear her chasing him on foot now. She alternated between firing physical shots with her pistol and mental projectiles with her mind. His mental shield held, but was weakening, while his body did its best to dodge her shooting. They had run ten blocks before her pistol

had grazed him on his side. Shaken, but still running, Paris turned a corner and waited.

He took a deep breath and put away his pistol. As he drew his sword, he began pulling energy into himself from the outside. His strength was starting to build and his wind was returning. He allowed his mind to step outside of his body and put his consciousness into his blade until he could feel it. Once he felt that his metal sword was alive and a part of him, he knew he was ready. His left hand pulled the dagger from his belt.

The female rounded the corner and came into view. She lunged at Paris, firing her laser at him with her left hand as her right hand drew her sword.

They fell into the slow-seeming rhythm of split-second timing. He avoided her gun's blasts at his head. Paris hurled the dagger at her left hand with so much power and speed that it destroyed the laser pistol, and gashed her hand. Before the pistol hit the ground, Paris' sword was starting to cut her face. She drew her sword and parried his attack and flowed immediately into a thrust at his head. Her thrust nicked the back of his neck. Paris bent forward, grabbed the arm that held her sword, and threw her in the direction of her attack. She flew into the air and did another somersault to avoid landing headfirst on the pavement. She landed with her back turned to Paris. She grabbed her dagger, fed her weapon some of her mental energy and hurled it at Paris. Paris barely managed to fend off the dagger with his sword. She whirled around, disappointed to see him still standing. She hurled another psionic blast at his mind but his mental reflexes had returned. His mind was now impenetrable.

"You're good, Paris" she said, attempting to distract him. "I heard that you were the strongest. Next to Mauria. I always thought everyone was exaggerating."

Paris made no reply. He held his sword at the ready.

"Cat got your t—?"

Before she finished saying "tongue", Paris was on her. She barely avoided a blow aimed at her face. She lunged wildly, but hit nothing but air as Paris fell to one knee. He stood up and sliced at the same time, delivering a deep, forceful cut with his sword up the center of her body. Paris turned his back to her and made a blind attack at a 45-degree angle. The blind sword blow cut her forearm from her body. Paris's fatal blow came before her lips could completely form for a scream. He whirled around with two hands on the hilt and decapitated the female yogin. The final attack was so fast that she saw her headless body standing in front of her before she died.

Paris felt the back of his neck. He was bleeding a little from where her sword had cut him. His mind felt worn from the psionic beating she had given him. He knew he would need some help if he were going to get rid of the three carnivores

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that were in the cult service. At the very least, he needed someone who would be willing to provide a distraction.

He grabbed the laser pistol from the dead male yogin and replaced it for his own. Then, he stood with his sword in two hands, closed his eyes and meditated. He focussed his thoughts on the rat that he had seen earlier.

The rat came to him. Paris tried a telepathic probe at the animal and found it to be a bit more intelligent than he thought. He offered the bodies of the yogin in exchange for the favor of serving as a decoy. The rat seemed to oblige on a primitive level. It took a few bites out of the yogins before he walked off with Paris towards the building where the cult was holding its service. They stood under the window where he first spied on the cult.

The cult service was in a fervor. The Grell was holding an old white woman in its arms. She looked like she had been beaten. "This woman is against the movement. She was found offering information to the police. She admires the evil yogin who wastes his time all day in the park when he should be serving you."

"Asshole," Paris interjected quietly from a distance as he peeked into the window. "Must be running out of enemies so now they have to invent them."

"Please!" the old woman begged. "I'm not for you or against you! I just want to live my life in peace! Please, don't let those things eat me!"

"Liar! Liar!" cried members of the cult.

Leah doesn't want me to kill any of those idiots, Paris thought to himself. He looked down at the rat that was waiting patiently. "Okay, Whiskers, I'll break the glass and you jump in."

The rat stared back at him and licked its paws.

Paris crashed the window open with his sword. As the glass fell to the floor, the rat jumped through the broken window. It landed on the floor, hissed at the cult members and ran into the crowd. They scattered. A few of the men tried to burn the rat with torches.

"Calm down!" the Grell yelled. Amused, the carnivores stood on the stage and watched the humans scurry about.

"Damn, I need to be as quick as that thing is," Paris joked. He used the commotion to slip in unnoticed.

He crawled close to the floor. He managed to make his way to the edge of the stage before a carnivore caught his scent.

"It's a human!" the first one yelled.

"Where?" asked the second.

"Here!" yelled Paris as he leaped onto the platform. He took them by surprise. He drew his sword and attacked in a blinding fury. They were dead before they could even think about getting off a counter-attack. The Grell backed away from him, horrified. Everyone else was too focussed on the rat to notice

Paris. He picked up the bodies of the carnivores and threw them off the side of the platform before turning his attention on the Grell.

Paris recognized the Grell. “Toriam!” he yelled. She was Ori’s daughter.

The crowd turned their attention back to the stage. The rat took that as an opportunity to slip behind the platform. It scurried over to a dead carnivore and dined on its payment of dead flesh.

“How dare you speak to a Grell like that!” one of the cult members screamed.

“Where are the carnivores?” cried another.

Toria smiled. She pointed a long, bony finger at Paris. “He killed them!” *I know you won’t kill another human being, she said in a telepathic quip to Paris. Haven’t you killed enough of them already?*

Don’t think I won’t, Paris thought back to her before putting up his mental barrier.

Toria probed at his barrier. She realized that his mind was strong, even for a human. She could not control him like she did her dead yogins; she could only attack him and hope that she could wear down his defenses.

She decided to call his bluff verbally. “Kill him! Kill him and we’ll take his body outside so that newer gods will come to us!”

Paris pointed a finger at Toriam. “Don’t listen to her. She is appealing to your race pride in order to control you. To control everyone! Divide, conquer and make empty promises. That’s all they do to humans. That’s why I no longer serve them. I won my freedom as their war-slave. I can teach you all how to free your minds so that we can free ourselves and rebuild our own world, our own way! The greys bring us nothing but death and bondage!” He ripped off his badge and threw it into the crowd.

Someone caught it and threw it back at him.

“Kill him!” screamed someone else.

The mob started towards the platform. Paris pulled out the pistol he’d taken from the male yogin. He shot in front of one of the front-line cult members. “Don’t think I won’t bust a cap in y’all ass!”

The mob stopped for a second, then continued their rush.

A crash came in from all around. All of the windows and doors to that part of the warehouse boomed open. Squads of armed security officers ran inside of the warehouse. Armed with sticks, pistols and other devices, they fell upon the cultists. The officers meleed with the crowd in order to regain control. Paris looked through the crowd and could see Leah leading a team against a few cultists who were putting up a rather difficult fight. “You go girl,” he screamed before he turned his attention on Toriam.

For the first time in his life, he saw how a female Grell looked when she was afraid. Toriam made a desperate attempt to hold Paris’ mind with her mental

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power. It failed. She muttered the same commands Ori used when vanished. Before she could finish. Paris was on top of her and with his sword at her throat.

“You know it is forbidden for a yogin to ever turn his sword upon a Grell,” she said with a fleeting tone of control.

“I am my own master. I have no allegiance to you, or Ori or any of you gray niggas. My path as a yogin is my own.” Paris stuck the tip into her chin. She bled a little. “I want some answers.”

“What do you want from me, human? I don’t know anything,” she begged. “I am only doing as The First One commands.”

“Who is The First One your father keeps talking about?” Paris asked.

“He is our leader. He is the last immortal Grell. First One wants me to use racism as a means of keeping you humans fighting each other. Father is against the idea. He thinks you humans should be liberated. But Father is powerless. First One is in control. In fact, he invoke Traakk Novvar and took me as his own daughter. He forbid Father from seeing me. But, Father still does.” She looked at him, trying to get some sympathy. “Please Paris, don’t kill me. Please!”

Paris remembered hearing from Ori during his many self-serving lamentations to anyone who would listen that Traakk Novvar was an archaic Grell tradition that allowed the oldest living Grell in a community to claim any child as his or her own if the parents were deemed unfit.

Toria forgot her fear and became confused. “I thought you yogin learned all about our culture?” she asked.

“All your father ever taught me personally was how to fight, protect him and protect others. He also did a good job of teaching me how to kill, too.” Paris dug the sword tip deeper into her neck.

“Don’t you yogin have a bond with your masters?” she whined. “I mean, even though you’re free, don’t you owe my father at least that much loyalty? What would killing one Grell solve, anyway?”

“Look,” began Paris, “I don’t care about you one way or the other. In fact, after what you people did to my home, I ought to kill you as an act of revenge. But if I do that, then I’m no better than he is.” He let her up. “I’ll let you go this time. Tell your father or First One, or whoever the hell is pulling the strings now that the next chance I get, I’m separating a Grell’s head from its fucking shoulders. Got it?”

Toria nodded yes—a very human gesture. She held her neck.

“Good.” Paris stood up and held his sword over her. “Now leave before my kindness turns to anger.”

Toria held her hand to her mouth, muttered the transport commands in the Grell tongue, and vanished. Paris felt as if he were being watched. He looked beyond the chaos around him and saw two large, black eyes watching him from the broken window. It was Ori. Paris opened his mind to Ori’s and sensed

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feelings of both relief and guilt from him. Paris assumed that the relief came from knowing that he didn't kill Toria and guilt that Ori had been a bystander when Paris' own family was destroyed. Or was it something inside that he was feeling? He wasn't sure.

The thoughts of his own family's death depressed him. Paris needed a way to ward off the pain for a little longer. He put away his sword and pistol and jumped down into the turmoil of security and cultists. He began grabbing, punching and choking cult members. He appeared to be helping the security officers, but it was really a way for him to vent his own pain.

Chapter 4

Paris slumped in the medical chair as a female nurse tended his wounds. She was a rather voluptuous redhead who was young, cute and tended to smile a lot. She also made a point to touch Paris' massive shoulders, telling him that it was her way of checking to see if there was any other damage.

"I heard about what you did out there," she flirted. "I always thought the yogin were a myth or a legend. I didn't know that they were so sexy."

Paris' ego smiled for him. "Well, yes, most of the male yogin are attractive, I suppose, or at least I am."

She leaned over on him laughing. Paris returned the laughter and slipped his hand around her waist. He pulled her close to him and gave a flirtatious tickle. Their chuckling filled the room. The lust of battle had awakened his other lust and he was starting to search for satisfaction.

Leah walked through the door, looking tired and worn from fighting the cultists. Her fatigue disappeared. It was replaced by jealousy. However, she kept her cool. "I see that you don't need any more medical attention, Mr. Jones?" she said with forced formality.

The nurse pulled herself away from Paris and sheepishly grabbed her medical supplies. She gave Leah a fake grin and bolted out of the room.

"You jealous?" Paris teased.

"I wouldn't say that," Leah lied. "I'm annoyed, that's all. I mean, I thought that I meant something to you."

"You do mean something to me, but you have never come by my place so you could see how much you mean to me," Paris answered.

"Well," Leah countered, "it's not like we've ever had a chance. It's also bad business for me to do that since you still technically work for me and the Security Office." She hugged herself nervously.

Paris probed her mind. He didn't like intruding on people's thoughts, outside of his protector or combative functions as a yogin. He could hear anything. He realized that she must be immune to telepathy.

He walked behind Leah, closed and locked the door. Before she could turn around, he was holding her. Scared and shaken at first, she looked into his big, brown eyes. She smiled, then closed her eyes and parted her lips so that they could meet his. Paris returned the gesture. They fell into a tender, yet passionate kiss.

"Leah, I'm a virgin," Paris confessed. "I was twelve when Ori took me. All I know is how to fight, really. He let me read some old human philosophy and history from the Americas, Old Africa and Old Asia. He let me read a human text called the Kama Sutra. He said it helped him out a lot when first started making

love to human females. He told me how to use the chakras for fighting and said that they can also be used for sex. I mean, I know all of the theory and the positions, but—well, you know. I've never really been with a woman besides maybe letting her—”

Leah put one finger over his lips, quieting him. “I don't care,” Leah interjected. “Do you want me?”

“Yes,” Paris answered.

“Do you love me?”

“I love being with you right now, like this.”

Leah smiled. “Then that's all that matters.” She kissed him again. He picked her up and laid her in the chair. Paris gently undressed her from the waist down. The smell of her sweaty mustiness drove him wild. He crouched down below her and cupped her cocoa hips in his strong hands. Paris pretended that his tongue was a sword and twirled it in the same motions as one of the yogin fighting exercises that Ori had taught him. He squeezed her hips and licked her clitoris and lips until her body was shaking. Her voice moaned and quivered as Paris brought her to orgasm.

She grabbed his head and pushed his face away from her pelvis after she came.

“What's wrong?” Paris asked innocently.

“I—I'm too sensitive right now,” Leah panted. She started to leave the chair.

Paris forced her back down. Leah was startled.

“It's good that your sensitive right now, right?”

Leah didn't answer. Paris pushed her legs open and continued fondling her vagina with his mouth and tickling it with his tongue. He held her legs around his head and would not let her leave until she came a second time. She coughed out a scream when she did.

The passion did not end in that office.

After they returned to her living quarters, Leah took control. She ripped off Paris' clothes and pushed him towards the bed. Paris enjoyed the feeling of surrender at her hands. He helped her undress and laid on his back. Leah's supple, soft, mahogany form excited Paris to no end. Leah slowly straddled Paris, easing his thick, long penis inside of her as her hands gripped his shoulders. The warmth of her vagina, the suction and caress of it made Paris feel as if both his body and his soul were inside of her. He sat up and pulled her breasts to his lips. He gently sucked from nipple to nipple as she ground her hips against his. Soon, he was matching her cadence with his own thrusting and losing himself in their rhythm. The bed beneath them creaked in time with their movements. He came at the same time that she did. The pleasure-pain of his ejaculation was so intense he let out a thundering grunt into Leah's heaving breasts. She collapsed on top of him. Leah held his penis inside him until all of

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his semen filled her and his hardness was gone. She rolled over on his left side and placed her head over his heart. He held her in his arms and slowly drifted off to sleep.

A strange dream came to Paris. He was standing in the middle of the badlands, naked and unarmed. To his left, off in the distance was the Philadelphia pyramid and to his right was a small building. A beautiful, dark brown black woman stood atop the building. It was Mauria. Beside her stood an all too familiar Grell: Ori. Ori and Mauria floated towards Paris. But, before they could reach him, a strong, unseen force was pulling him towards the Philadelphia pyramid. He turned towards the pyramid and saw it burst into flames. The fire engulfed him, and the pain burned like nothing he had ever felt before. Beside him in the fire was Leah. She was screaming to him for help. The fire vanished and suddenly Leah and he were thrown in the middle of a large stadium. Dozens of people from the pyramid were in the stadium, yelling and chanting for their blood. A doorway opened in the distance. Three carnivores sprang from the door and headed towards the two of them. Paris tried to grab Leah and escape, but he found that he could not move. He looked up and saw his teenage sister Karen staring at him from the crowd. She was crying and shaking in fear.

“Paris! Paris, wake up!” Leah shook him out of the dream.

Paris awoke covered in sweat. His heart was racing.

“Paris, who are Ori and Mauria? Who is Karen? Are they people who died in the attack?”

“What?” He noticed that it was morning. Leah appeared to have showered and changed. She was wearing a long, beautiful red dress, similar to the one that April had worn when she showed him around the pyramid after his arrival. He wondered how April was doing, considering the rough treatment she had when he interrogated her.

Leah asked again. “Paris, who are Ori and Mauria? Who’s Karen?”

“Ori is a Grell, remember? He was my master. Karen is my—was my sister. She was thirteen years old. Mauria is a woman I dream about. She’s my cousin. She’s calling to me because she either wants me to join her or she thinks she can teach me something.”

“Oh really?” Leah said. “So you dream about this woman all the time?”

Paris noticed the look on her face. “No, it’s not like that. I don’t think it is. Anyway, she’s been calling to me with her mind. I thought she was calling me here, but she’s not, so I stayed.” Paris paused for a second, thinking.

“What is it?” Leah asked. She sat down next to him. “Is she calling you again or something?”

“No,” Paris answered. “It’s just that I noticed that this time, it was her, Ori and Karen in the dream. I rarely ever dream about them all at the same time.”

“Well, tell me more about Mauria,” Leah pried.

“All I know is that she’s the strongest yogin. I’m always being compared to her. In fact, one of the yogin I killed last night compared me to her.”

“Well, what do they say about you and her?”

Paris put his hand in his chin. “They say that I am the second-strongest. Even Ori says that.”

“Aw, poor baby,” Leah teased. She kissed him on the cheek. “Well, you’re strong enough for me.” She rubbed her hand on his chest and touched the laser burn he’d gotten from the lady yogin. “This wound is pretty much healed already.” Leah kissed his lips and stood up. “Look, I have to go, okay? I have more paperwork to fill out and I’m already running late. I’m giving you the day off, officially. Take this time to rest up, okay? Tomorrow, though, I need you to come down to the Security Office and start writing a report on what happened. You need to document everything you did in order to help apprehend the cult, okay?”

“Okay, no problem,” Paris answered. “I’ll rest up here and wait.”

Leah kissed him goodbye and left.

Paris went back to sleep. He tried to direct his dreaming in order to get some answers from his subconscious about what his last vivid dream meant, but he turned up nothing. Then, his mind wandered. His consciousness fell deeper and deeper into a state of relaxation, until he felt like he was floating. He was suddenly snapped awake—or so he thought. He looked down at the bed and saw himself still sleeping. Oh God, did I die? he asked himself. No, he realized, he was not dead; he was merely separating his soul from his body. This was something he’d managed to do before in meditation. He wondered why it happened so easily.

Paris’ soul walked around the bedroom. Something was pulling him outside of his body. At first, the soul thought it was a Grell ploy to destroy him. Then it realized that there must be some other, more imminent danger. The soul allowed itself to relax. The answer it was looking for came to it shortly.

Paris’ soul was standing beside Leah in a large office inside of the Security Office. Leah was sitting across from an old white man. They were not aware of the soul’s presence. The man was one of Leah’s superiors. He was reprimanding her about something.

“Hold it! Look!” Leah said loudly, “I managed to get three carnivores out of this city and close down the cult with his assistance. Do you know he saved I don’t know how many people from being murdered by those weirdoes? Come on, Captain James! You told me I could use him and I did!”

The soul looked at Captain James.

“Corporal Daniels, this man is a menace,” James answered. “He killed nine of the cult members in his room at the hotel instead of calling and reporting a break-in to us. He also used an excessive amount of force in his efforts to help us

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restore order. Furthermore, I heard that he doesn't even obey the Grell that commands him. I'm sorry, but you know as well as I do that as long as we live inside of this pyramid, we have to abide by Policy. He's supposed to be part of a warrior class that protects our providers and serves them on this world and others. If he won't listen to their authority, how can I expect him to obey mine?"

"He hadn't given me any problems, sir," Leah pointed out.

The captain was firm. "Agent Paris Jones also has some charges filed against him by the young lady that he interrogated in the hotel room."

"You mean, by your niece, don't you captain?" Leah said angrily.

The captain stuttered, nervous. "Well—uh—yes, but the point is that he assaulted her. He used deadly force long after the threat was over. She's accusing him of police brutality. The council is going to hear her complaint."

"What?" Leah snapped. "According to him, she stabbed his pillow several times because she thought it was him on the bed. She came there with over a half dozen other people. She was going to sacrifice him to the carnies. Come ON Captain! Give me a break!"

Captain James would not budge. "According to the Council Elders, a yogin is supposed to be capable of restraint. If he shows any inappropriate aggression towards his master, if he is a threat to the powers that be, or if he abuses an unarmed civilian, he can be killed, according to the oath he took." James pulled out a cigarette. He lit it. "We—the people of this pyramid—are his masters as long as he is part of Security. If he violates one of us, he must be punished."

"Bull! Paris is responsible for helping us quench the flames on a dangerous fire of racism and cult worship that could have destroyed us all. Look at how many people of color have fled this place, preferring to take their chances in the badlands and gamble on reaching a new pyramid before they run out of food and water. Look how many white people are walking around trembling after what happened last night. Come on, James! You can't be that blind!"

The soul looked over at Leah. It wished it could touch her and offer its support.

James took another drag of the cigarette. "Look, if worshipping carnivores was that big a deal, the Grells would have stopped it themselves. The only problem we had was with the human sacrifices. We gave that assignment to you because we thought that you could handle it. I guess you couldn't, Corporal. Anyway, that threat is over. We now have to address the issue of that man's conduct."

Leah gave a frustrated sigh. She waved away the smoke. "Look, last night was a small part of the puzzle. We have to do something about the possibility that there are sympathizers and silent members of the cult. Some of those people may allow more carnivores inside and continue the practice. I still need Paris, at least for a little while."

Captain James gave Leah a false look of concern. But the soul was not fooled. It knew as soon as Leah broached the subject that James was a sympathizer. The soul was soon aware that there were many others who felt some sympathy for the carnivore worshippers and hostility towards Security in general. Much of that hostility was being vented towards Leah and Paris. They were going to be made the scapegoats for the problems surrounding those incidents.

The soul abruptly returned to Paris' body, jarring him awake.

"Time for me to leave," he said to himself quietly.

A loud knock at the living room door jolted Paris out of his contemplation. Paris bolted into the living room and looked through the peephole. It was John and Tom. After he let them inside, Tom and John plopped down on the sofa. They both looked frantic. Tom was pale and sweaty and John looked like he was ninety years old, instead of sixty.

"What the hell is wrong with you two?" Paris asked.

John spoke first. "We've been arguing all day with Security, civilians, the council, damn near everybody in this pyramid who has something to do with what happened last night. We're worn out as it is from being kidnapped. You'd think we'd suffered enough."

Tom continued. "Philadelphia is in an uproar about you killing the cult members in your room. There seems to be a rumor going around that you used some sort of black magic to bait them there for your slaughter, and then you tried to rape April. April has been going around crying and telling people that you had no reason for beating her, even though she was one of the ringleaders."

"Well, I mean, they WERE trying to kill me," Paris said. He shrugged his shoulders. "You know as well as I do that I did not rape that bitch."

John put his hand up to silence Paris. "Look, I know that, and you know that, but everyone's upset. They need someone to blame. One thing I've learned as long as I've been alive is that when things go wrong, the world needs a scapegoat. Hell, man, goats are nearly extinct these days and they still need a scapegoat." John shook his head. "Tom and I are in trouble along with you. Everybody seems to think that somehow we're your accomplices."

Tom gave a morbid half-chuckle. "Look, man, my family's been living here since before the pyramids were built. I've heard all kinds of horror stories about what an angry mob can do. They'll try to use the system against you first. I hope they do that and just lock you up, but there are some rumors going around that because you're a yogin, that means you're a slave to the city. They say that means that you should have never taken the life of someone who lives here, no matter what. They also say that by the rules of your warrior code, you should be killed."

"That's nonsense," Paris replied.

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John sighed, stood up and grabbed Paris's shoulder. "Look, Paris, you know as well as I do that my people and your people were in pyramids long before the Grells took over. Only then, the pyramids were invisible and were called places like reservations and ghettos by the white man. Now that the white man is in the pyramid with us, some of his children still feel the need to be on top somehow. That's why the worship of those lizard-things took hold so quickly."

Tom agreed. "It definitely gave the losers around here a feeling of importance," "Many people won't sneak around and read about the past like I did. Even when the Grells allowed us some reading materials after a while, most people didn't want to learn anything more than they need to know to move about the city or perform their jobs. If the Grells weren't allowing the computers and other things to slowly be re-learned in Philadelphia, I don't know what we'd be like. I swear that after most people take their Test for Citizenship, they don't use their minds at all."

Paris rolled his eyes. "Okay. We need to get out of here. Out of Philly. With Leah. You with me?"

They both nodded.

"Good," Paris said. "Now we need to wait here for Leah and see if she'll come with us. I don't want to take off without her."

They waited. Leah arrived at home a couple of hours later. She was already ahead of them. After her meeting with James, she secured a vehicle that they could use to escape the pyramid. The lie she used was that she had been assigned as a security officer to an excavation site that was approved by the Grells. The convoy was stocked with food, water and fuel. There was barely enough room for the four of them. Fortunately, there were more than enough provisions for them to make it safely to the next pyramid.

There was only one problem, an extra passenger had come along. It was the girl who gave Paris a blowjob in the park. And, she was starting to show that she was pregnant. There was something about the shape of her stomach that Paris did not like. Her belly did not have the normal, spherical smoothness that most women did when they were pregnant.

"What the—" Paris spit out.

"Cindy's part of the deal, Paris," Leah explained. "She's an excavation expert that the Grells trust with controlling which information is released to the general public."

"If the Grells trust her, that can't be good, Leah," Paris said.

Tom was getting worried. "Look, we don't have time to debate, okay? Right now, everybody thinks that you're a murderer and we're your helpers. I'm sure that none of them have the ability to kill a yogin, but they damn well could kill us two. And Leah's only safe as long as they value her status as an officer over the color of her skin. Now let's get in and get OUT. We can discuss character later."

“Does anyone here know how to deliver a baby?” Paris asked.

“I am a medicine man,” John confessed. “My family has been passing down our secrets in private.” An idea flashed on his face. “Hey, why don’t we go in the direct that my family was headed. They went west, towards some mountains. My cousin said she had a vision that the land up in the mountains was fertile and full of life. Perhaps we could live there instead of being cooped up in another pyramid.”

Leah took command. “Okay, everyone in. Now. Let’s go. We can haggle about directions later.”

Chapter 5

After the pyramid had disappeared behind them, Leah looked at the compass on the navigation board. She made a U-turn and pointed the convoy North.

The men crawled from the back area of the convoy. There were a few seats along the wall, near the cockpit. Tom peered over Cindy's shoulder and checked out the direction of the compass.

"North? What's north? I heard that a place called New York used to exist there. Do you think they have a pyramid?" Tom asked.

"North is the first direction we have to head in because of Paris," Leah answered. She turned to him. "Isn't that the direction Mauria's pulling you in? North?"

"Uh, well, yes," Paris answered. "But I don't know exactly where. I mean, I can only tell if the calling is strong or weak, but I can't tell exactly where it is until I'm there. I mean, I thought that your pyramid was where she wanted me to be, but when I got there, I realized I was wrong." He looked out of the window. "This does FEEL right though. It feels like I'm going where Mauria is."

"Who is Mauria?" John asked. "Is she a family member?"

"Yeah," Leah teased, "and she's his wet dream."

Paris's hung his head, embarrassed.

Cindy pulled out an old, dusty document that had pictures of lines drawn on what looked like a large land formation. Paris recognized it instantly.

"It's a map!" Paris called out. To be more precise, it was an old map of the former United States. Cindy pointed out that the area they were in was once called the state of Pennsylvania. The old highway was still somewhat visible over the orange, dusty soil that was the staple of the badlands. Cindy said that the Grells had erected a pyramid in a part of New York City that was still referred to as Brooklyn.

It took a few hours before they reached New York. They were surprised that the Grells had left the old bridges that connected parts of what was New York to the mainland. Cindy told them that the Grells left some remnants of the old human infrastructures intact for their own land vehicles. She suspected that the Grells might even have been guilty of joy riding along the bridges in old Earth vehicles. Everything on either side of the bridges was either flattened structures or more orange desert. The water under and around the bridge looked as if it could hold life or maybe even be drinkable. Paris had always wanted to go to the beach for fun. However, he was only allowed to swim in the rivers as a part of his yogin training. It had been about two hours when they arrived at the Brooklyn pyramid—or more precisely, where the Brooklyn pyramid should have been.

The area was in ruins. What appeared to have once been a large, thriving mega-pyramid was a pile of broken, charred rubble. Man-sized fragments of pyramid-glass lined the horizon. Tears came to Paris' eyes.

Leah reached back and gave Paris a comforting stroke on his chin. "Are you okay, baby? I know what this must remind you of."

He wiped his tears. "I'm okay. Really. I'll be fine. Let's just get out of here."

"Ouch!" Cindy held her stomach.

"Cindy, how far along are you?" John asked.

"Only a few months. I just started showing yesterday," she replied.

"You're awfully big to be three months," John said. He held his head to her stomach. "You must be carrying twins." He rubbed her stomach and laughed. "The spirits tell me that there are two hearts beating in your womb."

Two hearts? Paris thought to himself. He forgot his grief and focussed his mind on the life in Cindy's womb. A sinking panic set in. There were not two children inside of Cindy; there was only one. John had sensed two heartbeats because the child she was carrying was not human.

"Shit!" Paris cursed.

"What?" Tom and Leah asked in unison.

"Nothing—never mind, I'll talk to you about it later, Leah." Paris stared out of the window.

She knew that it was something important, but she decided to change the subject. "Okay, there's nothing to see here. Any other ideas?"

"I still say west," John answered.

"West sounds good to me," Tom seconded.

"Cindy?" Leah asked.

"I'm fine with that," she replied.

Paris panicked. He still felt the pull to go north, to where Mauria was calling from, but he did not want to leave them alone with the monster that was growing inside of Cindy's womb.

"I'll see you all along your journey, west for a while. Then, after I see that you all are okay, I'll head back to Mauria." Paris' answer sounded weak.

Leah was not buying it, but she went along with it in order to keep the group united. "Okay, then, it's west."

"I think we should slow down," Cindy said as she held her stomach. She looked queasy. "I think that we were driving too fast for the baby."

"Okay, fine then," Leah agreed. "We'll go at half-speed right now. Pull out the map and point us westward."

Cindy made a suggestion. "If we go southwest, we could run into a mountain range. There aren't any pyramids there that I'm aware of, but the Grells said that there are few carnivores there. There are also bands of wandering human tribes. The humans in that area live a hunter-gatherer, nomadic life-style."

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Leah and Tom were lost. "In English, Cindy."

Paris cut in. "She means that there are human tribes that hunt for food and move from place to place. Probably like most people did before technology. That would mean that there's an end to this big, orange wasteland." Paris smiled. "I guess some of the beautiful places I visited in my meditations weren't in other dimensions, they were right here on Earth."

"That certainly sounds like what my cousin saw in her visions," John added.

"I hope we can make it there alive," Tom worried.

"Don't worry Tom, we'll be fine," Leah replied. She placed her hand on Tom's leg out of old habit, then quickly withdrew it. She did not pull it back fast enough for Paris to notice and cut her a jealous look.

"It's over between us," Tom said nervously. "That was just force of habit."

That comment made Paris even more irate. He crouched up and crawled to the back of the convoy. Leah started to follow him, stopped, then turned to Tom. "You know how to drive one of these things right? Well, turn us around and go while I talk to Paris."

Tom drove.

Paris was sitting at the rear of the van. He held his dagger in his hand and doodled with it on the floor as he sat on a couple of fuel jugs. Leah came over and knelt down in front of him. She steadied herself from the rocking motions of the convoy before she started talking. Paris stared at her lips. He loved the way they looked when she talked. The sweet smell of her was wearing away his anger.

"Paris, I think you should know something. Tom and I dated for a while. It was about a year ago when we broke up. We're still friends and I'm—was his supervisor, but that's as far as it goes. I still feel close to him, I guess, but it is nothing like what I feel for you."

He looked at her. "I believe you, Leah. It's just that you're the first woman I've been with, and well, I'm a little jealous."

Leah kissed him. "Honey, you have nothing to be jealous of. Tom has had plenty of women back in Philadelphia and he still couldn't make me feel like you did last night. No man has ever made love to me like you do."

Paris grabbed her by her hair and bit into her neck. Leah moaned. Paris turned her mouth to his and kissed her deeply for over a minute. Afterwards, he pulled her down between his legs so that she was facing away from him. He lost himself in the softness of her body. He leaned down and held her closer to him, so close that he could feel her heart beating. They continued cuddling each other in silence for a few minutes before Paris spoke again.

"Listen, baby, I have to tell you something too. It's about Cindy." He hoped she would take the news well.

“Don’t tell me that’s your baby in there,” she teased. “Hey, I already know about the blow job and I’m over it, okay?” She really wasn’t over it, but she pretended to be so that Paris would feel comfortable enough to tell her the truth, no matter how ugly it was.

“No, it’s not about that, but it is about her baby. Leah, Cindy is carrying a carnie.”

“A WHAT?” Leah said loudly.

“Shhh,” Paris whispered. “Don’t be so loud. She’ll hear you. It’ll hear you too.”

Leah panicked. She remembered a few things she learned during her investigations of the Carnivore Cult back in the Philadelphia pyramid. Sometimes, a few of the cult members would get women to mate with the carnivores. Normally, a child was not born. But on rare occasions, hybrid offspring were often born that appeared more human. But, they still had a craving for human flesh. Most of the hybrids never survived child-birth, but a few managed to claw their way through their mother’s stomachs at the time of delivery. Leah had also heard that in extremely rare cases, the mother’s DNA would begin to change and she would begin to mutate into a carnivore herself—particularly if she were ill when the baby was conceived. The idea of having a baby carnivore and its mother on board were not ones that set well. Her heart raced at the thought of it.

“What are we going to do? You can’t just run up there and kill her in front of the others.”

“Well, we’ll have to stop soon, right?” Paris asked. “I can keep an eye on her tonight. If I feel like she’s about to change—”

A sharp horror ran through Paris. He used his mind to scan the cockpit. “She’s already changing. Damn! That’s probably why she was allowed to leave so easily. Some sympathizers in power were probably hoping she’d eat you and leave your body in the badlands. They’d be feeding one of their gods and getting rid of Traitor Tom and The Darkies all in one stroke!”

“Dear God. Help us.”

Paris had a premonition. “Leah?”

“Yes, Paris?”

“Hang on to something.”

Leah grabbed onto part of the inside of the convoy. “Why Paris?”

“Because. Something’s about to happen.” he answered.

“Oh. Okay.”

A loud, inhuman screech rang out of the front of the cockpit. The next sound that came to them was the painful, tortured wailings of Tom and the sounds of some beast. The convoy tumbled out of control and fell over to one side,

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knocking the provisions all throughout the inside of the vehicle. Paris grabbed Leah and held her close to him in order to protect her from the cargo.

The convoy slid on its side for a few hundred feet. Once the movement stopped, the screaming, horrific sounds rang from the front again. They heard John cursing at something.

Paris made sure Leah was okay, then he crawled over the clutter in the rear section and made his way to the front. He pulled out his dagger and held it in his teeth.

Paris reached the cockpit. He saw Tom covered in blood. Cindy had started becoming a carnivore, but was still human enough to look more like a vampire than a reptile. Her mouth and hands were covered with Tom's blood. The blood oozed from his neck and his stomach. The entire front of the cockpit looked like it had been lightly sprayed with specks of rich, red water. The control panel looked like it had been damaged from the impact of the accident.

"John!" Paris yelled of the squeals of Cindy's attack on Tom. "Get in the back! NOW. I've got to wrestle with this thing."

John gave no resistance. He pulled himself from behind the beast and made his way quickly past Paris.

Cindy turned her attention on Paris after Tom finally stopped screaming. Tom's dead body slumped over in the corner like an abused rag-doll.

"Food!" Cindy hissed as she sprang at Paris.

Paris turned his body slightly out of her reach. She managed to rip part of his overcoat, doing him no significant harm. Paris reached for the dagger in his mouth and slammed it twice into her left and right hearts. That was enough to stagger Cindy. She retreated. Paris was relentless about winning. He fell upon her with a blinding flurry and broke her neck with two twists of his hand. He then held her in his arms until he was sure that she was dead.

Paris flung open the passenger door on the cockpit. Blinded by the sun, he threw her body out as far as he could. The corpse landed on her back. What Paris saw next was truly frightening. Paris watched as the carnivorous infant chewed its way out of its dead mother. Disgusted, he pulled out his laser pistol and shot the thing twice in the chest and once in the head. "What the world need now," he sang to himself as he watched the little monster hit the ground, "is not another carnie."

It took them a while to sift through the convoy and find the tools they needed to make a grave. They buried Tom, Cindy and the baby in one common grave, but only paid their respects to Tom. Leah talked about how she had known him as a best friend and former lover. John talked about how nice he was whenever he ran into him back in the pyramid and how he had been able to show courage up to the very end. Paris said a Christian prayer for Tom called Our Father and asked that the Creator God of the Universe please watch over Tom's soul as he

passed into the next life. Inspired by Paris' display of faith, John taught them a simple Blackfoot prayer for peace. Even in the face of death, there was some comfort in them being able to practice their ancestral human religions. It was sunset by the time they had finished burying the dead and paying their respects. Paris suggested that they stay in the convoy that night and continue onward towards where Mauria must have been. Leah and John reluctantly agreed.

After a restless night, they gathered all of the provision they could carry in several packs they found inside the wrecked vehicle. They trekked northward, hoping that the mystery woman in Paris' dreams would have some way of pointing them in the right direction.

"Come on! Come on! Hurry up, y'all, we're getting close." Paris had to prod Leah and John on in order to keep a decent pace. He could not travel as fast as he would have been able to alone. He pushed them because he knew that if they dawdled in the badlands it would not be long before they were carnivore food. They had spent a week on foot, plodding northward in hopes of reaching either Mauria or a friendly human settlement, whichever came first.

The sun took their strength, making them use up their water sooner than expected. Paris compensated for this by lowering his intake of water and food. He drew in chi-energy from around him. When that stopped being a viable option, Paris started drinking from the small ponds and puddles they found here and there. He was running out of the water purification tablets that they had taken from the downed convoy. Leah had ran some tests on the water they had come across. The Grells had allowed her to learn a few military survival tactics as a part of her controlled police training. Her findings deemed the pond water totally unfit for consumption without the water tablets. In fact, she wondered how Paris had managed to stomach the liquid even after it had been treated. She chalked it up to his yogin training.

Paris had to fight off a few carnivore attacks. The battles left him unarmed, but they did deplete his strength. He had given Leah his laser pistol to use as a weapon, while John was completely unarmed.

"How much further is it?" Leah panted as she dragged herself up to him.

"The pull is very strong now," Paris answered. "I'd say we're a day away from Mauria, tops."

"Are you still receiving her callings?" John asked in a parched voice. He plopped down in front of Paris and decided to rest in the his shadow.

"Yeah," Paris replied.

"Well then," John suggested, "why don't you ask her to send someone out here to meet us?"

"I think she lives alone, John" Leah noted.

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“Maybe, maybe not,” John argued. “Who knows? All we know is that right now, this woman is either some sort of psychic or she’s an illusion.”

“I am not crazy!” Paris said defensively.

Leah kept the peace. “Look, guys, it is entirely too hot to be arguing out here. If we wanted to fight with people, then we could go back to Philly, right? Right?”

The men said nothing.

Leah continued. “And you, Mr. Blackfoot, you ought to be glad that he’s been with us. He’s kept us both alive and he’s also been going without food and fresh water so that there would be more for the two of us.”

“You’re right,” John said humbly. He offered a hand up to Paris who still managed to shield him from the sun, despite his anger. “I’m sorry, kid.”

“It’s alright, man, it’s alright,” Paris said as he grabbed John’s hand in friendship. “I think we all jus’ hot and tired.”

Leah opened the bag and checked the provisions. “We have enough for another day or two. Paris, drink some real water tonight, okay? I know you say you can gather energy from around you, but I don’t think that you can get enough to replace eating.”

“Actually, I can,” Paris corrected. “But it’s not good for a being to do that. Once a physical creature relies completely on the life force for its nourishment, it can become, well, some sort of demon. Like a carnie, only it will have a taste for chi instead of for blood. Or, it may even develop a taste for both.” Paris wiped his sweating brow. “That’s why you should use the chi energy to keep yourself young, to live longer. But even people who use it for that have to be careful not to live too long or they’ll become something else as well.”

“I don’t believe it! I don’t believe it!” John yelled as he stood up and pointed at the sky in excitement. “Look! Look up there!”

“Where?” Paris and Leah said in unison.

“There! Don’t you see it?”

Paris and Leah looked around the sky until they saw it. It was a big, flapping creature whose outstretched arms made it glide along the wind. Leah had only seen one other like it. Paris had seen it in his treading as a part of yogin training and once outside of his now dead birth pyramid. “It’s a crow!” Paris said happily.

“So?” Leah said. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a message from the Spirit,” John answered. “It means we are going in the right direction. It also means that there must be some sort of forest nearby. I guess the Grells have been lying to us about what is really outside of the pyramids.

“No, it’s not that,” Paris commented, “I mean, most of the world out here is hostile. Ori told me that when I was in service to him. A few small places here and there hold life and maybe even some free people. Most of the outside world, though, really isn’t worth traveling.”

“I guess you’re right,” Leah added. “Anyway, Paris, we need to take a break. I’m exhausted. I vote we call it a day right here and set up camp for the night.”

John stood up with his hand on his lower back. “I agree,” he grunted as he stretched his body backwards. “Looks like we’ll reach that Mauria woman tomorrow.”

They set up camp and did their best to hide from the sun under a small tent until nightfall.

Paris took first watch. He was practicing a combat pattern with his sword and knife when Ori appeared to him. This time, Paris was not startled: he was used to the Grell prying in on his life whenever he wanted to be left alone.

“What is, Ori?” Paris asked flatly. “I’m doing what you want, I’m going to Mauria. Aren’t you happy?”

“Yes, and no,” Ori answered. “I’m glad that you survived my first test, but I’m disappointed that you brought those two with you.” He pointed at the John and Leah. They were curled up next to each other in the tent. “Don’t you have enough to worry about keeping yourself alive? I’m sure they slowed you down tremendously.”

Paris continued his blade work. He spoke to Ori with his back turned. “Hold up, man, hold up, alright? Not everyone is as cold-hearted and clinical as you are.” Paris remembered Toria. “I see you weren’t so detached when my knife was at your daughter’s throat, huh?”

Ori grew silent.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Paris said in a spiteful tone. “Hey man, I got one more question for you; what the dilly with you and The First One?”

“He’s important to my plans.”

“Your plans, huh? And here you are, talking to me about respecting you because you trained me, and yet you have plans for the person above you. But that’s typical of you people, I suppose.” Paris laughed sarcastically. “Do you remember what you used to tell me during my history training—during what lies you passed off as history to me? You told me that many of the white humans in this hemisphere used to go out of their way to control my ancestors. In fact, you always like to throw that up in my face.”

“It’s true,” Ori replied. “I was alive back then and blending into human society. I should know. I’ve posed as a black man and as a white man in my day.”

“Well guess what Ori. By your definition, you’re probably the whitest Grell I’ve ever met in my life. I mean look at you; you let people destroy my home just because we re-discovered our own religion. You took me from my parents when I was a child and made me your servant. Yeah, sure, I’m definitely more powerful than I’d ever be if I weren’t a yogin, but until a few years ago, I was just your bodyguard. Really, I was your slave. I may have been one of the best

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you ever taught, but I was still your slave. And you knew about that Philly shit too. Teaching white people to call us niggaz again so that you can make a nigga out of all of us.”

Ori’s tone took on a human quality of offense. “That’s not true, Paris! You were my student! You have always been my student. You were promised to me when you were born. I watched you grow up from an infant and in fact, I even think of you like a son sometimes. But you know my people’s mission. I have to abide by that. The First One wants us to dominate earth and control humans so that is what I have to do ultimately. If it were up to me, Paris, we would be friends.”

Paris shrugged him off nonchalantly. “Yeah, yeah, sure, sure. How did that expression go? You say toe-maw-toe, I say toe-may-toe; you say your-student, I say your slave-o.”

“I won’t have you take that tone with me! No yogin should ever talk to his present or former master like that!”

“Yaw-suh, Massa!” Paris joked in the black American slave dialect.

Ori was pouting.

Paris laid into him. “I guess you don’t remember letting me watch that old Earth disc of ‘Roots’ before the yogin tournament championships. It was the year when I was the only black human competing at that level? You don’t remember telling me to use my ancestral anger to conquer my opponents? That’s a pretty good one, Ori, considering that where I grew up, the white people were stuck inside the pyramid right along next to the black ones. In fact, we were starting to get beyond our skin color differences. I guess that’s why you grays have a problem with humans rediscovering our religions; you’re afraid that we may use it to come together when the only reason why you put us in those pyramids was to keep us apart.”

Even though Ori’s face was utterly alien, he still managed to twist it into an expression of anger. “You just make sure you learn what you can from Mauria so that you will be ready when I need you.”

“I thought I had a choice on that offer, remember?” Paris prodded.

Exasperated, Ori muttered into his wrist device and disappeared again.

“He thinks that he can just walk in and out of my life and I’m not supposed to say anything,” Paris complained to himself. “If that’s not bondage then I don’t know what is.”

John had been spying on the argument from inside the tent. “Well,” he yelled through the tent walls, “if it’s not slavery, then at the very least, it reminds me of some of my relationships!”

Paris didn’t get the joke. He had been so busy training and fighting most of his life that he had never had a relationship except for the one with Leah. He

shrugged his shoulders and continued his blade work until it was time for Leah to relieve him.

The trio was up at sunrise. After they ate the last of their provisions, they continued dragging onward. Paris let the way. He was certain that they were very close to Mauria. The pull was very strong.

A few hours later, Paris was shocked at the sight of something he thought didn't exist outside of the pyramids. It was a rich, vibrant forest. "What? But I thought that there was nothing out here? I mean, I've seen a few trees here or there before, but nothing like this!"

"Remember the crow we saw yesterday?" John recalled. "I told you it was a sign. Now we definitely know that things aren't as bad as the grays made it out to be. If your cousin is in there, Paris, I bet she's living pretty well."

"I wonder how this place has survived?" Leah asked rhetorically.

John took it upon himself to answer. "This PLACE is not surviving, the EARTH is! She is reclaiming herself from the grays!" John ran on ahead into the forest. Paris and Leah followed.

The inside of the tree line was like a different world from the badland desert. The ground was soft and fertile, the air was cool, misty and moist, and the vegetation was richly green. Before long, the overhead brush was so thick that it made a nice blanket from the harsher rays of the sun. Leah jumped a few times at the various active but harmless wildlife that moved around them in the form of insects, birds and small reptiles. The rays of sunlight that did manage to peek through made a curious, yellow-green haze that seemed to put the three of them into a peaceful state of consciousness. Had the three of them hippies in the United States during the 1960's, they would have said being in the forest was a beautiful acid trip.

Paris sensed another presence. It was strange. It was as if the whole entire forest shared one consciousness. The presence was a comforting one.

John seemed to notice what Paris was feeling. "You feel it too, don't you? So do I. I suspect that is what life feels like when everything is living in harmony."

Eventually, they found a stream. Leah tested the water; it was clean. After that, Paris noticed that the stream fed into a large pond off in the distance. He stripped off all of his clothes except for a pair of underwear he had on underneath and made a dash for the lake.

"What on Earth are you doing?" Leah yelled after him.

Paris glanced back over his shoulder. "Something that I've never done before; I'm going swimming! For fun!"

Leah scrambled his clothing and his weapons in her arms and chased after him. John soon followed her. "Paris!" Leah called. "Wait! You don't know what could be in there!"

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“It’s fine!” Paris said as he reached the edge of the pond. “I don’t sense any danger!”

Paris had waded into the water up to his waist before he realized that he was about to be thoroughly embarrassed.

A tall, dark brown woman was watching him from across the pond. She was dressed in clothing that was similar to those he wore when he left Pomonkey. Her hair was wrapped in a dark cloth. Her clothes were more form fitting than his and appeared to be made out of some sort of flexible material. Instead of a large overcoat, she was wearing a black cloak.

She smiled at Paris.

Paris knew who she was; it was Mauria. And Paris was also aware of something else; the sight of his cousin had given him an erection.

“Hi Paris!” she called to him.

Paris waved and flashed her a nervous grin.

“I’m glad you finally made it here,” she yelled to him as she walked around the edges of the pond towards him. “I know that’s not a banana in your pocket since you aren’t wearing any pants. Can I guess that you’re you glad to see me?”

“Uh, well, um,” Paris backed out of the water and did his best to cover the front of his underwear with his hands.

Mauria leaned against a tree and began laughing hysterically. As soon as Leah and John had caught up with him, Leah dropped Paris’ belongings on the ground. Paris hurriedly threw on his clothing and his weapons belt.

“I guess my visions were right. You did bring company with you.” Mauria grinned and held out a hand to Leah. “I’m Mauria. I’m the reason why he brought you here.” She shook hands with Leah, then offered her hand to John. John obliged with a kiss on her knuckles. “I hope I haven’t caused you all any trouble.”

“No trouble at all,” Leah said, trying her best to conceal her jealousy. Paris didn’t say anything about how pretty she is, Leah thought to herself. I thought that she was supposed to be older?

“Follow me,” Mauria said. The three of them walked behind her. Paris followed her closely.

“So what is this place?” Paris asked. “How come it wasn’t affected by the grays like the rest of the world?”

“This place,” Mauria answered, “New Vermont, is my domain. I was the second human to settle here, but there are others now. We’ve built a village in the middle of the forest.”

“Yeah, okay,” Paris commented, “but how do you keep out the grays? I mean, what keeps this place from being destroyed?”

“Technology,” Mauria explained. “The first woman that lived here was my mother. She was a scientist for the Grells. They allowed her to start studying

some old human technical and historical documents because they thought they still controlled her. They were wrong. She excavated the library that I live in and found some documents that talked about invasion. One of them had plans in it for an alien counter-weapon. It emits an energy pulse that is disruptive to the Grell biorhythms but is completely harmless to humans. Whenever they come here, they and their weapons, including their machinery, are powerless. She also found a dampening device and repaired it. The dampening device is what allows things to grow around here.”

“How?” Leah asked.

“The Grells are keeping most of the world barren with a machine. Their machine affects the climate all over the globe and somehow has the ability to suppress the growth of plant life. Don’t ask me to explain it all to you. Mother was the science-wiz in the family. I can’t even explain some of the things I do sometimes.” Mauria laughed. “All I know is that it is strong enough to counteract theirs on a small scale. But, that scale is getting bigger every day.”

“Is that what Ori wants me to do, destroy your mother’s machine?” Paris wondered.

“No, I’m sure that’s not it,” Mauria assured him. “Besides, he already asked me to do that when I was enthralled to him and I still said no.”

Leah didn’t feel comfortable with the fact that Mauria and Paris had so much in common. “So, Mauria, do you know Paris or something? I mean, you have been trying to reach him in his dreams, right?” Leah cut Mauria a jealous look.

“No, I don’t know this handsome young man very well at all, really. I haven’t seen him since he was a baby,” Mauria replied. She turned around and flirted with Paris by stroking his chin. “But, I always become aware of warriors when they reach a certain level of strength. It’s up to them to either come to me or ignore my beacon and stay as they are.”

“How many of THEM”—them meaning men—“come to you?” Leah pried.

“Not many. Usually more men than women, though. The last one I had was a white girl, about your age. Her name was Anya. She went right back to serving Ori’s daughter Toria after she left me. I was trying to do more than just show her how to fight, I was showing her how to free her mind from the hold of the Grells.” Mauria shook her head as the four of them walked down a wood hill. “I mean, really, some people can see freedom and still be afraid of it.”

“Anya’s dead,” Paris confessed as they headed uphill again. “I had to kill her. She attacked me when I was trying to save an old woman from the carnivores. She gave up a good fight, even shot me across the chest, but in the end, she died.”

“I’m not surprised,” Mauria said dejectedly. “I always did think she had a bit too much of a taste for living the yogin way. Those who love the way too much always die.”

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“Well,” John added, “you know, some people are afraid of change. Even if it’s a change for the better.” He looked over at Paris.

Paris didn’t get what John was trying to say with his eyes. He was too busy fighting his attraction to Mauria. Leah, on the other hand, rolled her eyes, because Paris was so off in his own world. Again.

They walked for another hour. They soon came to a clearing that had a rural-looking settlement in the middle of it. Paris could make out several small farms and homes. It looked like one of the old Earth communities he’d seen in some of Ori’s photographs. Ori had always said that the photo showed human living at its worst, but secretly, Paris always longed to be able to live in a place like that, with no pyramid, no orange desert, only blue sky and real air.

As they came closer to the settlement, Mauria started up a telepathic conversation with Paris.

Paris?

Yes?

How old do you think I am?

Thirty-two?

No, try 92.

But how? You don’t look old at all.

It’s because I know how to control my chi and other things about my body.

I see.

So tell me, Paris, is that your wife?

Who? Leah? No, she’s my friend?

Girlfriend?

Yeah, I guess so. I’ve never had any one else besides her.

Oh, so she’s your lover then?

Yes.

Too bad.

Why?

Just because. You’re so handsome, you know.

Oh, so do I have to be your lover to be your student?

NO, you don’t have to, but if were, you’d certainly have more fun. Or at least I would.

She turned around and winked at Paris.

He felt horrified. She was phat—pretty, hot and tempting—but still, she was his cousin.

Leah sensed that something was amiss. “What’s going on, Paris? What are you two talking about?”

“Oh, uh, yeah, nothing. Just training that’s all,” Paris muttered.

“Oh,” Leah asked as they stepped onto the dirt road in front of the settlement. “I see,” she said, jealous.

“You’ll have to forgive me. I like to talk silently sometimes with my students. It improves their mental ability,” Mauria lied.

They were soon at the small, wired gate that ran around the perimeter of the settlement. A younger, fair-skinned Arabic male was standing at the gate. He was a yogin trainee of about sixteen and was standing at the gate. He was armed with a staff and a small dagger. Paris, Leah and John looked around at the bustle of people inside of the boundaries. The large majority, save a handful of Native Americans, and East Indians, were black people of every shade and age who appeared delighted in this new life outside of the pyramid. There were also lots of farm animals, dogs and cats scurrying about the area. The settlement reminded Paris of his relatives in Pomonkey.

“So THIS is where everyone went who left Philly,” Leah observed. She pointed at a little girl. “That girl looks like my cousin Phillis’ daughter.”

“I wonder if any of my relatives are here too,” John said. He ran over to a little boy and began talking to him. Following his lead, Leah dashed over to the little black girl and began asking her some questions.

Paris was happy for them. He was glad that at least someone got to be reunited with his or her families. “Maybe I could settle down here,” he said to himself. “I’m sure these people must need some protection from someone.”

Paris felt a surge of aggression behind him. He relaxed and waited.

“Hi-yah!” The young yogin attacked him with his staff. Paris managed to slip 99 percent the blow. A second attack grazed him across the top of his head.

Reflexively, Paris drew his sword and whirled around. Before his body was fixed, his sword was drawn and sitting up against the young man’s neck. The boy dropped his weapon and surrendered.

Mauria corrected them. “Gaurang! Boy, you did not suppress your intentions enough. He knew you were coming before you even moved. Why didn’t you look at him through your third eye? You’re way too bound by the physical!”

“Yes, Mauria,” Gaurang said, hanging his head in shame.

She smirked at Paris. “You, on the other hand, are entirely too slow. You’re also too trusting. You said that Ori sent you here, didn’t he? How do you know this whole thing is not some gray setup? How do you know that I won’t turn you over to him after I have you killed? You should not have left your guard down for a second.” Mauria moved close to him. She went around to his back and pulled off his head wrap. Paris stood still as she inspected him. “Just like a thought,” she said as her hand found a small lump. “He did get a little piece of you, but I’m still impressed. You really must be almost as strong as I am.”

“Thank you, sensei,” Paris replied.

“There is no need to be so formal with me, Paris. We’re family, remember?” Mauria said. Her hands fell from his shaved head to his shoulder. “That was just a simple test,” she cooed in his ear. “The real training begins tomorrow

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morning.” She left Paris and faced the four of them. “You all go get some food, water and rest. Paris, I want you to be up with the sun tomorrow morning. Understand?”

“Yes, Mauria,” he replied.

Mauria bowed to both of them. They returned the gesture. She left.

Gaurang showed the rest of them through the village.

The village streets were paved with gravel. All sorts of buildings were about, but none of them as large a structure that existed inside of the pyramids. The streets were fairly well populated with various vendors and browsing customers. A healthy din sounded throughout the area. There were various gardens here and there that spawned large, healthy vegetables. The crops looked more real than the ones grown in the pyramids, somehow. The people seemed to take no notice of anyone but Paris. Paris used his intuition to feel for surprise attacks, Grells, carnies—anything—but no hostility could be found, save the one merchant who’s wife stared at Paris a little too intensely. John noticed that even he was getting some attention from the older women. He smiled, proud that he still had it. Most of the white women in Philadelphia who would have given him the time of day left as soon as the carnivore cult became popular.

Paris noticed a large structure in the middle of the settlement. It had the appearance of being some sort of monolith. Paris assumed that it was the place where the anti-Grell weapon and the dampening devices were kept.

Eventually they came to a small white house. Gaurang knocked on the front door. An elderly black man answered whose skin was so fair he could have been easily mistaken for a white man answered. He looked at Paris and smiled. “You must be a new one of Mauria’s” the old man said warmly. “Come in. You can stay here during your training. I have a couple of rooms for your friends as well.” Paris, Leah and John filed in. Gaurang gave a wave and a nod, then went on his way.

Chapter 6

Paris and Leah were naked. Their bodies were shadowed under the blanket of night.

He was leaning up against her, with his back turned. His mind was on his training. He wondered if Mauria would try to blur the lines between teacher and student. Between cousins.

“Paris,” Leah asked.

“Yes?”

“Where is this relationship going?”

Paris rolled over and kissed her. The two of them had been making love a few minutes before hand. He snuck into her room after the three of them had dinner with the old man. They were holding each other and looking out of the window into a beautiful, full moon.

“I don’t know,” Paris answered. “All I know is that I like being with you and I thought that you liked being with me. Right?”

Leah rolled away from him. “I don’t know. It’s just that—well—you’ve finally met the woman of your dreams, you know? Literally. I just don’t know how I can compete with that. I mean, you two have so much more in common than you and I, that—”

Paris leaned over and silenced her worries with a kiss. Leah opened her legs and arched her pelvis to him. He looked down at her vagina. He thought it looked perfect. He gently eased his throbbing penis into her soft, warm, brown body. The two of them made love a second time before they drifted off to sleep.

Neither one of them noticed that Mauria was spying on them from a rooftop outside of the window.

Wake up, Paris. Wake up. It’s dawn.

Paris sprang up in the bed. Leah was still sleeping peacefully. He saw the sun peeking over the horizon. “Shit,” he whispered to himself.

Mauria? he asked mentally, Where are you.

Never mind. Go to your room and lock your door. Now. I want you to go there and meditate. Your first day of training begins on the dream plane.

Paris ran to his room, locked the door and dressed himself. He didn’t want to appear on the dream plane with an image of himself half naked and unarmed. He donned all of his clothing and sat down on the floor. His sword was in his lap. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, hissing breaths. After a series of a few breaths, his mind left his body.

Paris’s spirit was standing in front of Mauria’s. The two of them were talking in the middle of what looked like a large, sunny field. The field was bathed in a

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yellowish-white light that seemed to come from both everywhere and nowhere. A light, warm breeze blew constantly about them.

She smiled. “The first part of your training is for me to test your fighting spirit. We can work out here, and even kill each other with no permanent damage. We also get a lot more done in a shorter period. Time has no real meaning in this dimension.”

Paris was doubtful. “Why do we need to train here? What’s wrong with training in the real world?”

“Paris, this world is about as real as it gets. The place that yogin siddis”—siddis was a word for “powers” or “abilities”—“are truly honed is if you build them in your mind and spirit first. Believe me, Paris, if you can’t do it here, it will be virtually impossible for you to try it in the real world. Understand?”

“Okay. I’m ready.”

“Good. Now, attack me!” Mauria held her astral sword at the on-guard position.

Paris wasted no time. He leaped through the air and was on her with two attacks before she even breathed. Mauria, however, easily fended off the blows. She took a step back and sent Paris sailing below the astral surface with a blind-kick to his stomach.

“Uh! Dammit!” Paris awoke from the astral trance. He felt jolted, as if he had the wind knocked out of him. He looked down and he was again sitting cross-legged in the bedroom.

Come back when you’re ready to train, teased Mauria’s invisible, sexy voice.

“I’m coming!” Paris said loudly. Somehow, he managed to calm himself and bring his body and soul back into the trance.

This time, Paris did not materialize on the dream plane completely until he was standing behind Mauria. Sensing him, Mauria closed her eyes and made herself fall into the same phase-shift as Paris. She caught him again with a blind-back kick. This time, Paris rolled the kick off and moved to the side. With one smooth motion, he pulled out his astral sword and cut Mauria with it across her back. She screamed.

The sword did not cut deep enough to send her back to her body. But, it did cut deep enough to wound her pride.

“I see you’re a lot smarter than I thought!” she complained.

“Shut up and fight, Mauria!” Paris goaded.

Mauria relaxed her arms and closed her eyes again. Paris was confused.

Hey, what the hell—OUCH!

She hit him with a psionic attack. Paris mental shield was down. He fell flat on his back. Mauria leaped over to him, with her sword raised, ready for the final kill.

Paris rolled away from the blow, sprang up and pointed his finger at her. “There.”

“Huh?” Mauria said, confused.

Paris used the confusion as an opportunity to throw his knife. As the knife sped rapidly towards Mauria he also launched a psionic bullet spray attack; similar to the one Anya had used on him in Philadelphia. Mauria’s mind was quick enough to avoid the psi-bullets. However, her astral body was grazed across the side of her stomach by his knife.

She looked down. Her astral body was bleeding.

Mauria was enraged. She bolted straight at Paris. Before he knew it, he was laying back in his bed. Leah and John were standing over him. Behind them was Mauria—in the flesh this time. Paris felt a sharp pain in his neck. He felt it, then realized that it must have been a residual memory from his training on the dream plane.

“I thought if you died in your dreams, you died for real,” Leah said.

“Yogin don’t die in our dreams,” Mauria explained. “We also don’t die on the dream plane. At least the ones on our level don’t. Paris almost did though.”

Paris sat up and looked outside the window. The sun was setting.

“What the hell happened, Mauria?” Paris asked.

John laughed. “She killed you. She hacked off your head in the dream world. Your dream body was dead before you even knew what hit you. The shock of it sent you back into this body. It took so much out of you that you kept right on sleeping for the rest of the day.”

“What?” Paris jumped out of bed. He found his sword in the corner and put it back at his waist. “Look, I had you, okay, I HAD you. Enough of this dream stuff, let’s go out here in the real world and see who’s boss!”

Mauria held up her hand. “No, Paris. No. I am not accepting your challenge yet. You can challenge me when the training is over.”

“The training is bullshit if you ask me!” he yelled. “You know as well as I do that if I had really wanted to kill you out there, I would have.”

Mauria was nervously quiet. Her silence made Leah and John look at each other and wonder if what Paris was saying was the truth.

Mauria regained control. “Look, you scare me, I admit that, but you can’t kill me. At least not yet, anyway.”

Paris made another offer. “How about an unarmed challenge then. You and me, one on one. We can go for points. Full contact to the body, medium contact to the head and no joint-techniques.”

Mauria laughed. “What are we, children? Boy, if you want to battle me, we are going to go all out. Your body can heal, right? RIGHT?”

“No, not instantly. Sometimes, a wound won’t slow me down. Other times I can heal a little. Then again, I can rest but—”

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Mauria moved around John and Leah and punched Paris in the nose. Blood spattered everywhere. Paris grabbed her by her hair before she could evade and kneed her in the forehead twice with each leg. The third time he hit her with a palm strike that sent her sailing across the room. Mauria crashed into the wall, cracking it. Paris walked over to her and stood, holding his nose with his right hand and some of her hair in his left hand.

John and Leah were in shock.

Mauria was out for a few seconds before she came to. She smiled up at Paris, then winced from the pain. She closed her eyes a few times and muttered a couple of words that sounded similar to the commands that Ori used before he teleported. He body's wounds healed themselves. Before long, Paris was the only injured person in the room.

"You almost had me that time," Mauria complimented. "I mean hey, you did knock me out. I've never had a student do that to me before. But, you don't know a thing about healing yourself the way a yogin master can, do you?"

Paris let go of his nose. "I'm not bleeding anymore."

Mauria grabbed and twisted his nostrils.

"Ow! Ow! Jesus Christ, woman that shit hurts!" Paris smacked her hand away.

"It's healing already but it's not healed." Mauria motioned to a corner of the room. "Go sit over there. NOW." She looked around the room, then got on her hands and knees and felt under the bed. She produced a large, wooden stick that was once referred to on Earth as a baseball bat. "Here, John and Leah. Take this. I have some homework for you two."

"What is it?" they both asked.

"First, Paris must concentrate on his nose until he heals himself. Then, let him tell you where he wants you to hit him. Hit him there once with the bat, hard, okay? Once you've hit him, he should concentrate on healing. When he's healed, start the game again. Do it for a few hours today and all day tomorrow. I'll be back after that and see how things are going. You guys understand?"

"Okay," they both said in unison.

Mauria walked over to Paris. "I don't want you using any of your chi to be a blocker for the attacks, okay? We're training strictly tissue regeneration here. I want you to learn more about Mind Over Matter, even when that matter is YOU. Once you learn that, THEN you can combine it with your chi and your body will be able to withstand more than you might think is physically possible. Understand."

"No problem," Paris said obediently. "I'll lay of the chi in the beginning."

Mauria bent down and kiss him on the cheek. "I'll see you a couple of days, handsome."

Leah glared at her as he walked out the door, wishing she could hit HER with the bat. But then again, she could hit him.

She picked up the bat. "I'll go first!" She reached back like she was swinging a golf club. "Tiger Woods!" The name was used but the meaning had been lost. By that point, the legend said that Tiger Woods was a famous warrior, not a golfer.

Thump! The bat bit his bony ribs.

"Ow! Damn Leah, wait up!" Paris doubled over. Leah had hit him in the stomach. "You're supposed to wait until I heal my nose first, remember."

John went for the door. "I'm outta here for now. Besides, Paris, you're lucky she didn't hit you in the nuts."

The training went better the next day. Paris found that his ability to heal himself was getting faster. Leah would hit him in the spot of his choice and he'd be able to regenerate the tissue within five or ten minutes. The day after that, Mauria failed to show up, but Leah and Paris continued the game. This new found power did have a few side effects though. One, Paris found that even though he managed to heal his wounds, he felt considerably weaker. Two, he noticed that he had to eat and drink a lot more food and water than normal. Three, if a wound were of sufficient damage, he would have to concentrate on healing him at the exclusion of all else, sometimes up to an hour or more if the blow were bad enough to kill a normal person. Also, he also realized that if the same spot were injured in the same way, it would become slower and slower to heal. In addition, Paris' face aged. He had to stop the regeneration training completely by the end of the second day and sleep through the third in order to regain his youth and his strength.

Mauria returned at dawn on the fourth day. She was dressed in simple, loose fitting clothing that all but concealed her voluptuous shape. She was also unarmed, save a small dagger hanging at her waist. Leah let her in the front door and gave her a look that let her know that she was not welcome.

"What are YOU doing up?" Mauria asked.

"Nothing, besides wondering why you have me beating my man with a baseball bat," Leah snapped.

Mauria sat down in one of the wooden chairs. All of the furniture in the house, like most homes in the settlement, was a hodge-podge of hand-made wooden furniture and old, raggedy furnitureware that had been excavated from ruins nearby.

"You feel threatened by me, don't you, young lady?" Mauria said with an air of arrogance.

"Humph," Leah huffed. She stood by the entrance to the hallway and faced off against Mauria. "I don't know about all that. I want to know what you want from him. I mean, I know you're supposed to be teaching him to be a better

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fighter; I want to know what ELSE you have in mind. I mean really, aren't you two related?"

Mauria played with her thick, bushy hair. "Maybe Paris can braid my hair for me," she teased.

"Don't play dumb with me, bitch!" Leah said.

"Bitch?" Mauria raised one eyebrow. "Chile, please. I am old enough to be your grandmother."

"Well, um, I don't know about all that, because you certainly look like you're young enough to want a piece of my man. I am letting you know, right now, that he is MINE, okay?"

"Paris is an adult, Leah. He is a grown man with his own mind. I have been around long enough to know that you can't stop a man from doing whatever it is he wants to do. I'm not saying that I'm going after him, but if he wants to lay down with me, I honestly don't think that I'll stop him, either. He is a very strong, handsome, vibrant young man. I haven't seen another human being like him in ages."

Leah was furious. Her voice grew louder. "I'm warning you, Mauria! Don't mess with me. I may not be a yogin but I'll bust you upside the head with a rock if I have to! I'm from Philly, bitch. You better recognize!"

Paris walked in on the confrontation. He was fully dressed and armed. "You're warning her about what? Oh, you think that yesterday was too much or something?" He looked over at Mauria. "Hey, I learned how to repair my injuries now with little or no chi. But I got to tell you, even with the chi-energy, it's tough to try to accelerate your body so much. Certainly takes a lot out of you, I'll tell you that." He tuned into Leah's anger. "Okay, Leah, what is it?"

Leah glanced over at him and took two hostile steps towards Mauria.

Mauria stood up. Paris grabbed Leah from behind.

"Calm down, Leah, calm down," Paris said.

"Let go of me, Paris!" she demanded.

Mauria smirked and folded her arms. "Let your little girlfriend go Paris. Let her go. I won't hurt her too bad. I promise."

Paris let her go and stood between them. He faced Mauria. "NO," he said in a firm voice. "She is not trained like one of us. Forget it." He turned back to Leah. "Look, she is my teacher now and nothing more, okay? So will you watch it?"

"I think," Leah began, "that she is really not interested in teaching you anything more than sex education. Isn't that right?" Leah had her hand on her hips and her neck was moving with her words. Apparently, the ability of a black woman to "read" another person had not been lost by humanity. "I wonder if she molests all of her male students. Or maybe she molests the women too. You did say you had some white girl studying under you, right Mauria? Just how much studying did Anya do with you behind closed doors?"

Paris shook his head. “Let it go, Leah.”

Leah ignored him. “She’s a hoe! She’s a hoe, she knows that she’s a hoe!”

Mauria gave Leah the hand. Leah made another attempt to stand face to face with Mauria. Paris held the two of them apart from the middle. “This has got to stop, now, ladies, or I’m leaving this forest. I mean it! Training or no training, I’m outta here if you two can’t get along.” He turned to Mauria, “I mean no disrespect, but woman, you givin’ me a hoe lotta problems. Come on now, I can’t have you fighting with my friends.”

Mauria composed herself and went for the door. “I will be waiting for you outside. Tell your wife”—she said “wife” with a hostile tone—“that she’d better keep it together when I’m around.” Mauria walked outside the door and slammed it.

Leah grabbed Paris and kissed him as soon as the door closed. Paris took her arms from around him. “Look, girl,” he began, “You let me handle her, okay?” He gave her a reassuring look and supportive embrace.

Leah pulled away from him and sat down. “I was a Corporal back in Philly. I’ve been through worse than what mind games she can try to play with me. I’m just scared, Paris, scared that you’d pick her over me.”

Paris kissed Leah on the forehead. “You don’t have a thing to worry about, understand? To me, she is only a senior warrior, okay?”

“Okay,” Leah said sheepishly. “Where are you two going?”

“I don’t know, but I hope it’s not very far. I’ll be back soon.” He gave her a kiss goodbye.

Paris walked outside and stood next to Mauria. She turned to him and they bowed to each other in the tradition of Asian martial artist. Then, as is done in some African-American martial arts circles, they gave each other a pounding handshake and brotherly hug.

“You’re a troublemaker,” Paris said as he pulled away from her.

Mauria looked over at the rising sun, ignoring his accusation. “I know you haven’t eaten yet, right?”

“No.”

“Good. We have a long day ahead of us. We’re leaving New Vermont for a few days.”

“A few days?” He looked her up and down. “And that’s all you’re carrying?”

“I don’t need anything else.” She pointed at the door. “Do you want to go in and tell your wife?” Mauria said the word “wife” sarcastically.

Paris thought for a second. “Hold on.” He ran inside and told Leah that they were leaving on training for a few days. Leah warned him to be careful of Mauria’s moods and stated that she didn’t trust her or trust him with her. Paris reassured her a second time that he was going to be fine. Reluctantly, Leah gave him a kiss and let him be on his way. Mauria eavesdropped on what she

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overheard through the door and smiled evilly. She was thrilled that she was making Leah so jealous.

Paris came back outside. "Okay Drama Mama. Where we going?"

Mauria rolled her eyes. "Open your mind. Do you feel another calling?"

Paris closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Yes! I can feel it. It feels like the same call I'd hear whenever Ori needed me. What, do you want me to follow it?"

"Yes, I do. But, you're going to have to follow it running with me on your back."

Paris looked at her with disbelief. "You're kidding right?"

"No." Mauria walked behind him and hopped on his back. "Take in some energy and start jogging. We don't have any time to waste. Let's go!" He scooped her up higher on his back and began jogging towards the sun. The few villagers who were outside paid the two of them little mind.

Paris took a deep breath and began running towards the eastern edge of the settlement.

An hour later, he had reached another tree line. He was sweaty and tired from carrying Mauria on his back for such a long distance. He knew he was near the new presence. He stopped, let Mauria down and drew his sword. "What is it?" he asked. "What is this presence? It seemed farther off, but it's here. I can feel it, but it feels weak."

"First thing's first, Paris." Mauria leaped over to one of the trees in front of him. She closed her eyes, squatted and leaped up 20 feet and landed on one of the branches. She opened her eyes and looked down at him. "Let's try leaping first, Paris. Can you get up here without climbing?"

"I can jump pretty high, but not like that," Paris answered.

"Yes you can," she said. "Just believe and focus. The power of your body's chi is already strong, but you need to focus your intent. It is your intention, you will to do whatever it is you want to do that will get you true power, Paris. That is why whites in this country beat down our ancestors after they abducted us; they took away our will, our intention. You must be intent on doing something in order to make it real. You already know that, don't you?"

"Yeah. So?"

Paris closed his eyes and cleared his mind. He imagined himself standing next to Mauria on the tree limb. In an instant, he jumped up onto the branch. He had to steady himself a little after he landed.

"Good job," Mauria praised. "Now keep on. Fight me. Don't be scurred." "Scurred" meant "scared" in their dialect.

She whipped out her dagger and stabbed at his head. Paris easily dodged the blow and struck her in her stomach. She absorbed the blow with her body energy and redirected it into a hooking punch of her own. Paris blocked the hook and

grabbed her up in his arms in a bear hug. Mauria struggled to break herself free, but couldn't. She gave Paris a head-butt. Paris released her from his hold and leaped up higher to another branch.

Mauria leaped up where Paris was standing and took another stab at him with the dagger. Paris blocked the attack with his sword and backflipped. He landed awkwardly on the branches of another tree. He waved to Mauria and hid himself among the rooftop of the forest.

He finally had his balance in the treetops. Man, this is easier than I thought. All I have to do is center. Wait, here she comes.

Paris pressed his back against the tree trunk. He pressed his chi downward, into the tree. It was a technique that Ori taught him. It enabled him to hide himself from human—and even alien—detection.

Mauria ran right by him on the leaves and limbs. It worked! She did not see him. She could feel him, but she did not know quite where he was. "I know you're around here, Paris. Stop acting like a chump. You scared?"

Paris quietly put away his sword and drew his knife. If he was going to beat her this time, he wanted to do so with honor.

He fell upon her with a rainstorm of punches, kicks and stabs. He drove her off of the tree limb. Mauria had to jump and dodge several times to withstand the force of his attack. After a minute of leaping downward, the two of them stumbled to the ground. Mauria sprang up first. She hurtled her dagger at Paris' head, but used her mind to stop it just short of penetrating his skull. Paris looked up, for the first time in a while, genuinely afraid. Mauria's dagger twirled counter-clockwise in front of him, with the point of the blade barely touching his skin.

"Return," she said to her weapon. The knife returned to her hand as if it had a mind of her own.

Paris stood up, rubbing his head where the knife was. "Is that some kind of Grell weapon?"

"Sort of," she replied. "I mean, the metal is conscious, in a way. I can make it respond to my thoughts sometimes, as long as I keep the requests simple. That's really what you do with the weapons you have already. Only, you don't know how to communicate with it in its dimension."

"What are you talking about?" Paris asked. "I've done astral projection. I've even communicated with plants and animals."

"Have you ever talked to an object? Or do you merely use your sword to summon energy from the outside?" Mauria cleared her throat. "Chi and energy control is a good thing, don't get me wrong. It's probably a more efficient technique. But you have to approach your weapons from a perspective of Animism."

"Animism? What's that?"

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Mauria rolled her eyes. “Ori didn’t let you learn much about religion, other than that white people on this continent forced theirs on the blacks and the browns, did he?”

“Yeah, that’s Ori,” he replied. Paris leaned up against a tree. “I had to learn about animal spirits from a book my mother had hidden. I didn’t even know about God until the underground Christian movement in my old pyramid.”

“Well, God is in everything and she is reflected in many ways. You can become a better fighter if you’d fight with your weapon’s spirit. It’s spirit, along with your third eye and life force.” Mauria sat down with her legs crossed. “Give me your sword.”

Paris drew the weapon and handed her the hilt. She twirled the sword and stuck the tip of it into the Earth. “Sorry, Mother,” she said to the ground. She looked over at Paris. “Now sit.”

He sat.

Mauria walked around him. “Animism was a religious belief that everything on Earth is imbued with a spirit. This spirit is capable of helping or harming human beings. I know that you have seen the force vibrate in everything around you during your mediation. Well, this faith comes to us from many human societies in Africa, Australia, the South Pacific, and John’s people, the Native Americans.”

Paris had seen many of these places on the few maps that Ori allowed him to see. “So, what you’re telling me is that this sword of mine has a spirit, right? Girl, you must be crazy.”

She ignored him. “How do you know? Have you ever tried to talk to it?”

“No.”

“Well, good, now’s your chance.” She stood up and started walking away. “I’m going to find a creek. You can drink the water around her, you know. It’s not like living in the pyramids.”

Paris admired her hips as she walked off.

“Stop staring at my ass, Paris!” she yelled out playfully.

“What, were you probing my mind?” he asked.

“No, I don’t have to. You’re a man ain’t you?”

He laughed, then settled back into his training.

Paris focussed his mind intensely on the sword. He kept up the intensity for about twenty minutes, but nothing happened. He tried completely relaxing his mind—still nothing. He tried talking to it verbally, tried making a telepathic link—nothing.

He watched the shadows of the trees begin to ebb as the hours passed from dawn to noon. He was beginning to think that he was crazy. Who was this woman that dragged him out into the middle of nowhere? This was all Ori’s fault, he thought. He wished that he had never went to New Vermont, or at least,

not for training. He started thinking about Leah again, about how happy he could be in a place like the settlement. The settlement's black people reminded him of home, only in this place, blacks people and all people could be free of the prying eyes of the Grells.

As his mind drifted to the Grells he remembered something that Ori told him; the spirit will speak to you when it is read. He smiled to himself because he knew it was only a matter of time before the sword would talk.

Another hour went by. The sun was beaming on them directly overhead. Paris was unaffected by the heat. In fact, his mind was outside of the concerns and demands of the world. The only thing that existed was he and the sword.

Everything around him clouded and grew quiet. A bright, happy smiling face appeared in front of him. It was a long, cylindrical face that was sticking out of the ground—where the sword was. Eventually, the face took on a pseudo-familiar form that could only be described as half sword, half spirit. Paris became excited; he had reached the spirit of the sword at last.

“Hello!” Paris wasn't sure if he was shouting with his mind or his mouth.

“Hi. What's your name?” it said in a child-like tone.

Paris laughed as if he were talking to a child. “My name is Paris. Do you have a name?”

“No, I don't,” the spirit said sadly. “All I know is that I am supposed to cut. I like cutting. That's what I'm good at. I was sleeping before, though. I was part of a big rock!”

“Really?” Paris asked. “A big rock where?”

“Not here—not this—um, world, you would say. I was taken, and made by that man that makes you angry.”

“You mean Ori?” Paris asked.

“Yes, Ori,” the spirit continued. “He's the one who wields you, doesn't he Paris.”

“Yeah, I suppose. He used to,” Paris said. “So tell me, what's it like being a sword?”

The spirit reflected for a second. “Don't you know? Are you a weapon? You must be, because we sure do fight all the time.”

Paris felt uncomfortable. It certainly was perceptive, for a sword.

“Yes, but I am more than a weapon now. I have my freedom,” Paris argued.

“Good for you,” the sword cheered. “But freedom, I don't need that. I feel free when I cut. That's what I do. I cut and I fight with you.”

The sword seemed sad.

“What's wrong?” Paris asked.

“Well, there is one thing I'd like. I wish I had a name. When they made me, they didn't give me a name. I mean, no name at all.”

“How about Sword?”

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“Come on! You can do better than that!”

Paris laughed. “Okay, I guess you’re right.” Paris thought for a second. “Hey, I got one. How about Yolnir?”

“Yoal-nur? I like that. What does it mean?”

“Well,” Paris explained, “there was a group of white humans called Norseman, who believed in a war-god called Thor. Ori told me about him. He said that Thor’s best friend was a hammer named Mjolnir. I figured I could name you after the weapon, but make you unique by changing the name a little. I think the name means lightening or something like that.”

“What’s lightening?” the sword asked.

“Lightening is a powerful force in the sky. In fact, sometimes it can cut large trees. Hey, I guess lightening likes to cut, just like you do.”

“Hey, I like that! That’s my name then. Yolnir!” Yolnir was very pleased with his new name. “Well, good bye Paris. I have to sleep now. I need to rest up so that I can cut for you. Remember my name when you’re fighting someone who is really strong okay? If you call me, I’ll do my best to cut well. Okay?”

“Okay, Yolnir. Bye.”

“Bye!” Yolnir yawned, closed its eyes and became a normal sword again.

The jolt back to this plane of reality was staggering. Paris passed out as soon as the sword stopped speaking to him.

Chapter 7

“Wake up, Paris. Paris? Paris!”

“Yeah, momma, what is it?” He had been dreaming that he was a kid again. Then it all came back again. He jumped up and looked at the sky. It was mid-afternoon. Feelings of hunger, thirst and fatigue set in all at once, like an explosion, upon his body and mind. He staggered.

Mauria caught him and set him down gently. Paris looked over and saw that she had a fire going with some skinned game cooking over the flame.

“This type of training is murder on the mind. I bet you never went this deep with Ori,” Mauria bragged.

“Actually, I did,” Paris answered. “Just not this quickly, and not on an empty stomach.”

“Go ahead and eat. It’s rabbit.”

Paris grabbed one of the cooked rabbits so quickly that the fire didn’t get a chance to burn him.

“You’re getting faster already,” Mauria observed.

“I thought that rabbits were extinct outside of the pyramid,” Paris mumbled through a mouthful of food. “You got anything to drink? I’m thirsty as hell.”

“There’s a stream a few minutes that way,” she said, pointing over his shoulder. “And to answer your question, no, there is plenty of life outside of the pyramids. Most of the world is ruins and desert, but there are pockets of life that thrive. The Grells just don’t want anybody to know that. As long as human beings stay inside their pyramids or isolated in small groups, they’ll pretty much ignore a paradise like this one. Still, I’m glad the machine keeps them out. Know what I’m sayin’?”

Paris finished devouring the rabbit and burped. After he threw the bones away, he got up and started walking towards the creek. “You coming?” he asked.

Mauria laid down on her back. “No, I’m going to rest until you get back. I still have a lot more to teach you.” She put her hands between her legs and started rubbing. “So much more.”

Paris looked at her heaving breasts and soft legs. He couldn’t help wondering if some of the training would include a few lessons on tantric yoga. Ori had told him all about the theory of it, but Leah was the only woman with which he ever had any practical experience. However, Leah was not another yogin like Mauria.

The stream was more than a few minutes away, it was more like a half-mile. Paris was totally famished by the time he reached the water. He rushed to the edge and threw his face in, sucking and slurping as if he hadn’t drank for days. He was so engrossed in drinking that he didn’t notice the red dot that was targeted on his forehead until he was satiated.

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“Stand up human,” called a voice from beside him.

Shit, he thought to himself. I didn’t bring my sword with me. I have my dagger and my pistol, but they’d nail me before I could draw them. I’ll have to dodge first.

Paris stood up slowly and held up his hands. He turned to his left and saw three carnivores. Two of them were armed with laser rifles. One of them was dressed in attire similar to his. It was a reptilian yogin!

“Since when did they train you carnies to do anything intelligent?” Paris sneered.

“Shut up, human!” the yogin carnie answered. “Where is the woman?”

“What woman?”

“Mauria,” one of the ones with the rifles answered. “Where is she? Is she in the settlement or is she out here training you? Answer me, boy!”

“Boy!” Paris took offense. “I got your boy right here, swingin’ fool.” He grabbed his groin.

The yogin carnivore grew impatient. “We don’t have time for this. He’s not telling us what we need to know. Shoot him!”

They fired.

Paris avoided fire. He drew his sword and attacked. He killed the two rifle bearers within a few seconds. The yogin carnivore drew its sword and charged him. Paris meleed with the creature for a good minute before he disarmed it. Feeling no pity for the creature, he used an arm lock technique to take its sword. Then, sliced it across the back of its legs. It fell to its knees. A few seconds later, he ran his sword through its chest twice, killing it.

“Bravo! Bravo!” Mauria came out near the stream, clapping her hands. She had his sword tied behind her back. “If you had taken any longer killing those three weaklings I would have sworn that you would have needed my help.”

“I can take care of a few carnivores,” Paris said defensively. He threw the carnivore’s sword away and took Yolnir back from Mauria.

“Yes, but you hesitated when you saw that one of the carnivores had the same training as us, didn’t you?” she argued.

“Yeah. But look,—I mean—I’ve never seen that before. I mean, how was I supposed to know how good he was. Carnivores are stronger than normal humans are, so shouldn’t he be stronger by default?” he asked.

Mauria sighed. “You still don’t get it do you? Damn, nigga, no wonder Ori sent you out here. Look, man, just because someone is fast or strong, that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re a fighter. You and I are as strong as they are, and faster than they are, thanks to our training. But many of the carnivores I’ve trained over the years can’t advance as far as a human can because they can’t get pass their base, predator instincts. You have to move beyond those drives in order to have true spiritual power.”

Paris looked at her in shock. “YOU trained CARNIVORES?”

“Yes, I did. I was the senior yogin for years before I left Ori. I graduated to the adult ranks early, at seventeen. I was sixty when I left him. I’m ninety-five now. Did you know I knew your grandmother? She and I were first cousins. See boy, if you stay with your chi training like I have, you’ll look this young too when you get my age.”

Paris looked her up and down. “I thought you were younger than that. Didn’t you say you were ninety-two?”

She laughed. “Don’t you know that a lady always lies about her age when she gets older?”

He was confused.

“Listen, to me, Paris. A human being can have a life span of about two hundred years. And, you don’t have to look old, either. Of course, you’ll have to eat and sleep a lot—and I do mean a LOT. You said you were a Christian, right? Well, didn’t some of the people in the Bible live for a long time?”

“Well, that’s different. I mean, no one these days should be able to live that long. I mean, how?”

Mauria pointed at the area between her naval and vagina. “Here, Paris. With chi. Lots of deep meditation. Lots of rest. I take in energy from the world around me. But, I’m probably going to start showing my age in another twenty or thirty years.” She walked over to him and stroked his face. “In the meantime, though, I’m still young enough to enjoy certain things in life.”

Paris became nervous. And turned on. But, he restrained himself. “Um, shouldn’t we do something about those dead carnies?”

“Toss them in the river,” she said nonchalantly. “And after you do that, we have to go back to camp. From there, we need to continue east. There is something I want to show you. Okay?”

“Alright,” Paris replied. He was grateful that the task of handling the bodies of dead lizard humanoids. It diminished all forbidden desires in him for the time being. “Man,” he said to himself. “I hope I can hold out before I get home to Leah.”

Mauria began sparring with him unarmed as soon as he put the last body in the water. She attacked him lightly with various striking and kicking techniques, ordering him to defend only so that he could work on his defense. She continued her attacks on him until they reached their camp. Paris wrapped the cooked game up in his overcoat. He was not too enthusiastic about that idea, but then again, he did not know how or when they would eat again. Mauria did her best to flirt with him while they were cleaning up the campsite. She repeatedly bent over in front of him and made several innuendoes about the big, burning sticks of wood. Paris played along with the game, half out of his own naivete and half out of his own forbidden attraction to his teacher.

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Night fell. They made their camp next to a beautiful lake. Paris was surprised that the device that Mauria's mother made had extended its life-giving powers out so far. Mauria bragged about her departed mother and also said that the Earth was on the side of humanity.

They sat beside another campfire they had made. The rabbits that Paris had saved from earlier were being re-heated over the flame. She leaned over on Paris and asked him to keep her warm. She complained that she was feeling cold. Being a gentleman-and a fool-he cuddled up next to her with his gamy-smelling overcoat.

"So let me get this straight," Paris asked her. "You think that the earth is on the side of humanity in this war against the Grells? Ori always said humans had polluted the earth out of greed."

"Well," she answered, "we did. But, here's the thing; the Grells have been trying to ruin the earth for over ten thousand years now. Actually, a lot longer. They are the ones who infected humanity with greed in the first place. They've been trying to drive us under their control ever since they first made contact."

"Hold up Mauria," he continued, "you're telling me that the grays have been manipulating people all throughout history? Well that, I do want to believe. But the thing is, why?"

"Control Paris," she said. She looked up at him. "They need things from us. Our bodies, our psychic energy, everything. We are just a resource to them, a thing to be consumed and controlled."

Mauria ran her hands between his legs. "Speaking of control, you're certainly showing a lot of that tonight."

Her hands found their way right to his bulging hard penis. Paris' breathing quickened at her touch. Even though she was feeling his penis and testicles through thick denim, he could still tell how soft and strong her hands were.

"Umm," he grunted. "Stop it," he said with a weak amount of conviction.

"Paris, do you mind if I touch you there, baby?" she said in a deep, sexy whisper.

"No," he said in an erotic baritone voice. "But that's as far as it goes, okay. I—can—can't—sleep with you. Ok?"

Mauria reached her hand inside of his pants. She grabbed the head of his penis and began stroking it. "There are other things we can do, right?" Using the hand that at that point, rocked his cradle and ruled his world, she purred Paris into laying down upon his back.

"Close your eyes," she whispered in his ear, "Think of me, Daddy. Ok?"

"Yes, baby," he answered mechanically.

Paris closed his eyes. His spirit left his body and instantly me up with Mauria's spirit on the dream plane. It was the same field in which they had

fought a few days earlier, only this time, the field only last until for bedtime. Mauria's astral body was standing in front of his. She was completely naked.

"Take of your clothes Paris-I mean, your astral clothes." Mauria rubbed her body against his.

"I—I can't" Paris answered, feeling guilty. "Look, I'm attracted to you and everything, but really, I have something going with Leah and—"

"Paris, forget about her. And don't worry about us being together here, okay? As long as we aren't together in the flesh, this is not cheating, right?"

"I guess not," Paris answered. "But Mauria, we're cousins!"

"It's not like we'd be doing it for real. Now stop trippin'! Take off your clothes."

Paris obeyed. He made his astral clothes disappear. Even on this plane, he had a raging hard-on for Mauria. Mauria knelt down and sucked his dream penis. He didn't know that an astral blowjob could feel so good—so real. The warmth of her mouth and the cool of her wet tongue sent him moaning and groaning and soaring to the edge. Then, he came. Her luscious, dark dream mouth drank every bit of his dream seed. She swallowed. Then, she kept his limp member in her mouth and sucked him back to hardness.

Paris picked her up and rammed himself inside her. She was so hot and tight. Even though he knew it was only her image on the dream plane, he made his astral self hold her and pound her until she grunted in pleasure, pain and excitement. Her vagina fastened around all of him when she came the first time squeezing his cock so tightly that it felt like she was sucking him. They fell to the astral ground. He began thrusting her again and again. After a few minutes, he knelt up and she rolled over on her hands and knees. Paris took her from behind, filling and drilling her with his thick, long penis. He pulled her hair and pounded her hips until she came.

Mauria laid Paris down upon his back. She knelt down and licked and sucked his astral cock until he was ready to burst. She mounted him again, slowly grinding her waist in a sweet, circular motion. This time, Paris softened his thrusting pelvic blows and reverted to a softer, more sensual approach. Being a yogin herself, Mauria met with his anti-rhythms perfectly as the two of them engaged in tantra on the astral plane.

Their astral bodies moved slowly against each other for hours. Paris gazed deep into her dark brown eyes as he sucked and kissed her full lips. He went into her deeper and deeper, until he felt like he could push himself no more. Then, the orgasmic energy welled up inside of them. Their astral bodies climaxed together, exploding into a pleasure that was so powerful that it sent them both jolting back in their bodies.

Paris awoke. They were both covered in sweat. She gently pulled her hand out of his shorts and noticed that it was drenched with his semen. She smiled at

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him and licked it off of her palms and fingers. Mauria offered some of it to Paris, but he kindly refused. After she finished licking him, they held each other closely and drifted off into sleep. Neither one of them bothered to keep watch.

Across the distance, in a small house in New Vermont, Leah awoke crying and screaming from a terrible nightmare. She had an awful dream that night about Mauria and Paris. She dreamed that they were having an affair in the middle of the woods. John came into the room to comfort her, but his concern was of no use. The tears and the pain were too intense for any man to be able to soothe, no matter how kind his words or no matter how much he cared as a friend.

Eventually, John started her stories about his first failed marriage to a white woman and his second failed marriage to a black one. The third marriage, to a Native American woman, seemed to be the charm. They were married for years before she died of a heart attack. He had dated since then, but never really wanted to settle down again. His self-abasing humor and wise wit made her laugh a bit, but it still was not enough to take her mind off of Mauria and Paris.

“Don’t you trust him, Leah?” John asked, trying to defend Paris. “Okay, I mean even if he DID make a mistake-”

TYPICAL—Leah shouted in her mind. Men. Always standing up for each other in weakness.

“He doesn’t love her, Leah. He loves YOU. You were the reason why he stopped listening to her call back in Philly, right?” John put a fatherly hand around her and like a little girl she leaned on him. “The most he could EVER have with that woman is a physical thing. Maybe what you need to do is sit down and talk all of this stuff through with him after he finishes training. You may just need a little time apart in order for him to realize what he has with you. Paris may be very young, but he strikes me as being mature. He has a good head on his shoulders.” Well, at least he’s focussed enough to kill people, John thought to himself. That must take some discipline, right?

Leah brushed John’s arm away and stood up. She looked out of the window into the wide eye of the full moon. “I don’t care, John this is it! I’m going after them tomorrow. You can come with me or not, it doesn’t matter. Either way, John, I’m going! I can’t wait until he finishes his training with her, I need to know where things are going. NOW!”

They both began packing a few things in a few sacks that they acquired in the settlement. John promised to meet with her after breakfast so that they could go looking for Paris and Mauria together.

“You know,” he smirked to himself as he went back to his room. “Leah’s not a bad looking sister. It’s too bad I’m not back in my dog days or I’ve have worked this thing with Paris to my advantage.”

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“I heard that, JOHN!” Leah yelled through the door. “It wouldn’t have worked. I’m not as stupid as the women you went out with!”

Chapter 8

Paris awoke the next morning still holding Mauria in his arms. A new feeling came upon him, one that he had never felt so intensely before. Guilt. Guilt over Leah, and over the fact that Mauria was related to him.

He gently pushed Mauria away from him and went to the stream. He took a deep drink from the water, then washed his hands and face.

Mauria came up behind him and hugged him. He moved away.

“No, Mauria. Stop it. I can’t.”

She smiled. “What’s wrong?”

“It was a mistake, that’s what’s wrong. Besides that, we’re cousins.”

“Third cousins, Paris. That’s no big deal. Besides, it was a dream, Paris, that’s all. A dream that we shared together.”

Paris looked at her. “I didn’t dream about the hand-job, did I?”

“Okay, fine, then, maybe that part wasn’t a dream, but everything else was. Stop beating yourself up over it, okay?”

“We have to keep what happened from Leah,” Paris demanded. “If she found out, it would hurt her.”

“What’s the deal with you two, anyway? Are you married? Engaged even? If not, then as far as I’m concerned, you’re still single.” Mauria knelt down and began washing herself in the water. “It’s not like I forced you to do anything against your will.”

“Well,” Paris answered, “I don’t want it to happen again. It’s unnatural. Good lord!”

Mauria took off her clothes and sat in the water. Seeing her beautiful naked body nearly made Paris forget all about his ties to Leah and his relation to her. She looked up at him and gave a flirtatious grin. “Whatever you say, handsome. If you change your mind, I’m here for you.” She started feeling at his crouch. “I hope that what I felt last night was some reflection on reality.”

It took all of the strength of his being, but he managed to pull away from her. “I’ll go find something for us to eat. I think I still remember the survival training Ori gave me. Even though the animals he had me practice on were clones.”

An hour later, he returned with a few more rabbits that he had killed. Mauria was no where to be found. She did, however, leave a fire burning. Paris cursed her for not being around to help and went about the business of praying over the kill, skinning it and preparing it.

He felt the presence again—the presence that called him from the village to the woods. It was a little stronger, but still pretty weak. Who are you? he asked telepathically. The presence could only give an affirmation that it had heard him,

but it seemed to be distracted by something else to respond with anything more than a feeling. A very familiar feeling.

Ori? Is that you?

Yes.

What are you doing here? I thought this place was dangerous for your kind.

It is. That's why I'm so weak.

So why are you here?

Checking...on...you...and...her...

Ori's mind faded. *Must go now. You are almost ready. Almost ready. For...last...mission. You need help though. Your friends...can help...you...*

"Ori!" Paris leaped to his feet and looked around for the alien. All he saw was Mauria walking towards him on top of the water.

"How are you doing that?" he asked.

She stepped onto the land. "I think a better question is why are you so concerned about Ori? Or any Grell for that matter. All they do is cause trouble."

"He's the reason why we're out here, right? Then excuse me for showing some concern about someone I know."

"I helped him come in here because he said that you might be able to help us get rid of those bastards. Of course, he won't tell me HOW yet." She sucked her teeth in annoyance. "Typical. So typical. He is such a god damn control freak."

"Why hasn't he asked you to do it? To help him get rid of the greys?"

Mauria knelt down near the fire. She cut a hole in one of the rabbits and put it on a stick. "He did ask me. I said no. I told him they need to leave on their own and that I was not going to get myself killed on a long shot. He talked some shit about them not being allowed to harm each other unless it was by orders of The First One. I told him to go fuck himself."

Paris was confused. "I can't believe you wouldn't risk yourself to save humanity. Damn you're selfish."

Mauria cut him a hostile look. "Selfish? Hah! You need to go spend some time in my library. From everything I've seen, human beings have done nothing but destroy each other. If we did get rid of them, it's only a matter of time before they come back and start manipulating us all over again. People want the easy way out Paris. Hey, I'm happy right here near New Vermont. This place is secluded and no one is interested in coming in here, save a few stupid carnivores once in a while. And as long as I'm here, I can perfect my skills. Carnies make good sword and target practice. You should see how they run once a human's killed their pack leader." She laughed hysterically.

"You're evil," Paris said with a mixture of fear and disgust. *Fine as hell, sexier than a motherfucker, but evil as shit*, he thought to himself.

"I may be evil, but I'm also the first woman to free herself from the hold of the Grells. Maybe being evil is what it takes to be free." She poked a stick

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through another rabbit and put it on the fire. “Now sit down here and eat so that we can get back to training.”

Paris sat. “Why are you going through all of the trouble of training me if you don’t agree with what Ori wants?”

“I got to pass the time somehow, right?” she said flippantly. “And besides, I really like training you because you’re cute!”

Man, this woman is poison. I don’t know what I ever saw in her, he thought to himself.

Paris turned his attention to the food and the fire. He used them both as a meditation. He searched deep within himself so that he could begin to train himself out of his physical attraction for Mauria. What he found within was an even bigger feeling of love for Leah.

Mauria made him stand up after his food digested. “Get up. I still have a few more things to show you.”

“Hey,” Paris pried. “You never told me why those carnies came in here yesterday. Were they really looking for you? Who sent them?”

“Yes, they were looking for me and never mind who sent them. Let’s get back to work.” Mauria stood with her legs shoulder width apart.

“Hiding something?”

“Shut up, Paris. Come on, let’s get serious.” She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Paris felt an energy surge build up her. She torked her body suddenly and struck the air with her palm. Paris heard a loud clap and noticed nothing more until he saw a leaf fall off of a tree in the distance.

He gave a skeptical chuckle. “You’re trying to tell me that YOU did that?”

Mauria let out a loud yell and pushed her palm toward his chest. Before her hand could make contact, the energy from her strike sent Paris flying back twenty feet. His body built up a counter-energy field as a reflex, but it wasn’t enough to keep him from being flung. He landed in the creek. Paris tumbled out of the water and stood up. He was unarmed, but his hands were held up, open and read. He assumed the fighting stance. Drenched, he tried to give off a serious look in order to cover up his embarrassment.

Mauria wasn’t fooled. “You feel stupid as shit right now, don’t you?”

Paris let his guard down. “Yeah.”

“Good.” Mauria’s hand glowed. “YAH!” She threw a ball of visible light energy from her hands. Paris leaped over the attack and landed closer to her. He let off a psionic attack that went off in her mind like a bomb. It worked. She rocked back, staggered, and before she knew it, he was falling on her with punches, open-hand strikes and kicks.

She blocked all of his attacks. Then, she jumped back from him and let out another energy ball. Paris’ hand glowed. He parried the energy blast and for the first time, he let out an energy strike of his own. The blast struck Maria in the

chest, stunning her. Paris took to the air and came down on her with a hard crescent kick to her skull. Somehow, she managed to roll out of the force of the blow and spring to her feet.

She dug her feet into the ground and breathed deeply. She closed her eyes.

Paris struck again. His fist was aimed at her diaphragm. He thought that he had landed the perfect blow, but the fist passed right through her body. He attacked again and again. Mauria had managed somehow to shift her body slightly out of phase, as if she were a ghost. Now matter how hard and fast and hit her, it was as if he was hitting nothing but the air. However, he noticed that she was not countering his attacks either.

“So,” he said. “Your phase shifting is a strictly defensive technique.”

“Not necessarily.” Mauria dropped herself out of phase. “You could attack me if you were in phase with me. Also, some of the Grell-droid energy weapons are calibrated to be effective in more than one material plane. It’s complicated, but basically, if one of those things shot you, in phase or out, you’d feel it.”

“A Grell-droid?”

“They have members of their race hooked up with machine weapons as a part of their body. It’s considered an honor among most of their people.”

“Strange. They’re always up to something aren’t they? I’m surprised they haven’t tried that on us yet.”

“Give them time.” Mauria walked to Paris and placed his hand so that it looked like he was holding a large ball. “If you want to go out of phase, with me, don’t concentrate on changing yourself. Concentrate on falling away from the world instead.”

“Huh?” he grunted.

“That’s the best way I can describe it. Words won’t do, anyway. You have to catch it to understand what I mean. Now focus again on the energy in your body. Now, feel yourself falling away from the rest of the world.”

Paris closed his physical eyes and opened up his spiritual one. His third eye kept a look on the world. After about five minutes, he noticed something. He felt as if he were falling—not backwards or downwards—away from everything and nothing at once. The vibration truly was strange and he realized that there were no words for it.

He opened his normal eyes this time and looked at the world around him. Unlike his astral projections, in which everything looked like it vibrated with a strong, yellow light, Paris found that when his body was in its phase mode, everything around him looked like it was out of phase and he was solid. He began sinking into the ground. Instead of panicking, his instincts allowed him to levitate himself to the surface.

“Good,” Mauria prodded from that other, hazy world. Her voice sounded as if it were warbling. “Now walk around with it. Try to hold it until we get to the

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clearing. I at least want to see if you can walk through a tree before I try to get you to fight with it. Okay.”

Paris said “okay”, but no sound came out of his mouth. Judging from her reaction, Paris assumed that she must have heard him even though he did not hear himself.

They walked, then ran over to the tree line. He found that he had a hard time keeping up with her when he was out of phase. In fact, he also had a harder time breathing. They stopped outside of a large oak tree.

“Okay Paris,” she warbled to him. “Walk through the tree.”

Paris took a tense, deep breath, then walked straight for the tree.

The experience was strange. He felt as if his whole body was being scraped by the tree-bark. When he was inside of the tree, he saw every nuance of the plant and felt its life force. He felt excited when he saw the other side of the tree he grew excited.

His excitement caused something to go wrong.

Paris fell out of phase too quickly. He manage to clear the oak without materializing completely inside of it, but not enough to avoid doing significant damage to himself.

“Mauria,” he gasped. “I did it! I did it! It felt great, but—” he fainted.

Mauria caught him before he hit the ground. She could feel the life ebbing out of his body.

“Paris! Paris!” she pleaded as she held him. She laid him down on the ground. “Fool, wake up! Wake up! You’re not going to die on me in training unless I kill you myself. Understand? PARIS!” She shook him repeatedly, but he lay their. Limp.

His body convulsed like a dieing snake. He coughed up some blood.

“Christ! I knew I shouldn’t have taught him this technique. I haven’t taught it to anyone before.” She looked around for non-existent help. “Damn! I’d better take him home and see if someone can help him.”

Mauria threw Paris over her shoulder and ran towards the settlement.

Chapter 9

“What happened? Is he still alive?” said a man’s voice in the darkness. It was John.

“Yes, he is. But I need to get him to someone who is either a medical doctor or has the gift of spiritual healing,” Mauria explained. “He’s recovering on his own but he might need some help. I’m not really sure. I’ve never taught this technique to a student before.”

Paris was laid out, unconscious, beside a campfire. They were closer to New Vermont than before. Mauria had been carrying him for nearly half a day when she ran into Leah and John. Leah, somehow, seemed to sense the direction that she and John should be traveling earlier.

“I can feel that he’s hurting, John,” Leah said in a worried voice.

“That’s pretty obvious, Leah.” John kept examining Paris as best he could. “There doesn’t appear to be anything broken. To me, he just looks drained, somehow, like something has been sucking the life out of him.”

“Yeah,” Leah said as she gave Mauria a hateful glare. “I bet something has been sucking on him out here. It probably bent down on its knees and sucked the life out of him. I bet it even swallows, doesn’t it? I wouldn’t even be surprised if it didn’t enjoy eating out his asshole!”

“Look, girl, I’ve had just enough of your little jealous fits!” Mauria yelled. “What’s wrong? You can’t handle a little competition from a real woman?”

“Hello, ladies,” John interjected, “someone may be dieing, here, okay?”

Mauria rolled her eyes at Leah. “Don’t worry about it John. If she keeps running her mouth, Paris won’t be the only person out here who is unconscious.”

“I think we should just leave him here right now,” John said, trying to shift the attention back on Paris. “I’ve seen him do some pretty amazing things. He probably just needs to rest. We can all carry him back tomorrow—slowly.” John took out some water from his provisions. “Right now, he needs as much water as possible. One of you feed him some of this if you can, in little sips.”

Mauria snatched the canteen from his hand. “Thanks, John, I’ll tend to him.” She knelt down next to Paris and began dripping water into his mouth little by little.

John tugged on Leah’s shoulder. The two of them snuck away from the campfire while Mauria was preoccupied.

John whispered first. “Look, Leah, that Mauria woman is dangerous. She’s even more powerful than he is. I know you don’t like her getting next to Paris, but you have got to be careful. She may kill you. Judging from the condition Paris is in, I doubt that there is anything he could do to stop her.”

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“I have confidence in Paris, John. He wouldn’t let her hurt me,” Leah said quietly. “Besides, I’m a trained security officer. I can handle myself.”

“Leah, that’s horse shit. You can take ME out, but you know you can’t take out one of them. Have you seen how fast and strong they are? He ripped through the carnivores when your troops were fighting the cult members, right? Well she’s even stronger than he is!” John’s whisper cracked into a normal voice on the words “he is”.

“Shhh!!!” Leah admonished. “She’s powerful, but I’ve noticed something about Paris; he’s a quick study. If there is anything that she knows, he’ll figure it out sooner or later. He told me that he has survived out in the badlands for weeks at a time during his time with the alien—sometimes he was even unarmed. Besides, if this thing that hurt him is some trick she’s never shown anyone else, he’s probably almost done here, anyway.”

“That’s fine,” John continued, “but until then, I suggest you try to stay on this woman’s good side.”

A woman’s voice interrupted their whispers. “That’s a good idea, Leah. I wouldn’t want to see you get hurt.” It was Mauria. She had snuck up on them without their knowledge.

“Didn’t your mama teach you not to be spying on other people’s conversations?” Leah snapped.

“Didn’t yours ever teach you any manners?” Mauria snapped back.

“Come on you two.” John walked between them and put an arm around both of their shoulders. “I hate to see black people mad at each other. Let’s just get some sleep and check on him in the morning. Okay?”

“Fine!” they both said in unison.

The three of them laid down near the campfire. John took first watch. He amused himself watching Leah and Mauria. They both laid on either side of Paris and had a contest of the evil eyes going over his chest until they fell asleep.

“I wonder if part of his yogi-bear training was learning how to use his looks to drive women to stupidity,” John wondered to himself.

“I heard that!” they both yelled out in their sleep.

“Oh well,” John laughed. “At least they agree on something.”

Chapter 10

“Momma? Daddy? Is it really you?”

Paris called to his parents across from a bright, open field. The world around him looked similar to the one his spirit entered during his dream training with Mauria. Somehow, though, it felt different.

He looked around at everyone who was present. Most of the people were from his birth pyramid in Pomonkey. He cried with joy as he realized that he was finally with the souls who had perished in the attack by the Grells and the carnivores. That meant that the last training exercise he went through had either killed him or brought him very close to the brink of death. He hoped that it was the former.

Fred and Elizabeth Jones turned around towards their son, Paris. “Paris?” Elizabeth called out. “What are you doing here already?”

“I’m dead, Momma. I think that I died outside during training.”

Fred left his wife’s side and walked over to his son. “You can’t be dead yet. It’s too soon.”

Paris was puzzled. “What do you mean it’s too soon. I’m here, aren’t I?”

Elizabeth joined her husband and son. “Paris, baby, when we died in the attack, it was because it was our time to go. Our death was meant to be a reason for you to go on living and go on fighting. I know it may have looked bad to you on the outside, but honey, the Lord did not allow us to suffer much pass a brief second of pain. In fact, he took a lot of us before we even knew our bodies had passed. God doesn’t like what the aliens are doing to the human race any more than we do. The world had its debt to pay for all the wrong people had done to it over the years, but now, son, that time has passed.”

Fred looked at Paris. “Son, it’s not your time yet. You have to turn around and go back. You’re not meant to cross over, not yet.”

Paris became defiant. “But I don’t want to go back! I want to be here with you! I miss you all so much. You have no idea how hard it is for me to keep it all under control. I’m supposed to be a warrior, Daddy. I don’t have time to grieve.”

Fred sighed—a human habit that was engrained in his spirit. “Look, boy, I suppose you could let yourself die right now, if that’s what you want. But you know that’s not what’s best for you right now. Plus, from what we done heard since we been up here, you got yourself a woman waiting for you back there, don’t you?”

Paris panicked. “Uh, do you know which one it is?”

Fred and Elizabeth laughed. “We can’t tell you that,” Elizabeth said. “We can’t tell you much else of anything. We aren’t allowed to tell you if you are

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going to turn around and die as soon as you get back. All we CAN tell you is that right now, you must go back.”

Fred gave Paris a comforting look. “Don’t worry about us, son, we’ll be fine. And you’re not alone in the world, either.”

“What do you mean?” Paris asked.

“Don’t worry, son, it’ll all make sense in time.” Elizabeth gave him a hug and kiss on the forehead, just like she did when he was a little boy. “Now go head on back son. We’ll see you soon.”

“And son,” Fred advised, “I can’t tell you which one it’ll be, but I can tell you this; you can’t keep both of them women. I know you’d like to, ‘cause you’re a Jones, but the women ain’t going to stand for it.”

“Fred!” Elizabeth’s ghost gave her dead husband a slap on the arm. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

“Death done did us part now, baby, so I ain’t got to explain nothing,” Fred teased.

They laughed and hugged each other. Paris saw them move farther and farther away. They waved to him. He felt their love.

Chapter 11

“Bitch!” It was Leah.

“I got your bitch, Bitch!” That was Mauria.

“Come on you two, stop it! We’ve got to get going! It’s too early in the morning for this!” John was still trying to play the father-peacemaker.

Paris was jolted out of his coma by the fall of his spirit to his body. He woke up feeling a little dizzy, but more importantly to him, hungry, thirsty and happy. Even though he they weren’t with him in the flesh anymore, he took comfort in the fact that his parents were with him in spirit. And he hoped that their message about him not being alone meant that there may be other members of his family that made their way out of the attack alive.

He sat up. “H—” Paris tried to talk but his throat was parched. He needed some water. He dug around inside of one of the packs near him and began gulping down water from a worn, plastic bottle. He turned his attention quietly to the commotion.

Leah and Mauria were standing face to face. Mauria had something on her face that Paris had never seen before; a black eye! Leah was holding a stick in her hand. Paris knew that the only way that Leah could have ever hit Mauria was if she caught her while she was sleeping. He laughed quietly and began looking around for food. He found some fruits, meats, cheeses—a whole bunch of things Leah and John brought with them from the settlement. He wrapped them up in the rag that the guard had given him in Philadelphia when he was walking inside the Job Office.

“I can’t believe you had the nerve to be feeling on him while he was in a coma!” Leah yelled.

“I didn’t do anything to him that he wouldn’t want me to do if we were awake!” Mauria yelled, moving her neck, hands on her hips.

Paris remembered the hand job he got during their astral tryst. He decided that this would be a good time for him to practice his ability to blend in with the terrain. He scooped up some more food and crept towards a nearby tree.

“Did you fuck him?” Leah asked angrily.

“That’s none of your business,” Mauria answered. “My sex life is my business. But if you must know, then NO, I did not fuck his body.” She smiled evilly. “But I did fuck his mind in more ways than you could ever imagine.”

Paris had made it behind the tree at this point. He ate. The food tasted better than anything he’d eaten in a while. He chalked it up to fatigue and continued spying on the conversation.

John came over to them and tried to break up the argument. “Come on! Look, you have to act like adults!”

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Leah swung the stick at Mauria. She ducked. John, however, was not so lucky. It cracked him on the side of the head and knocked him out cold. He hit the ground with a thud.

“Oh my God! John! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” Leah knelt down and began shaking him. She checked his neck for a pulse and listened for breathing. She was relieved that he was still alive.

“He’s fine,” Mauria said, annoyed. “He’ll wake up in a minute.”

“See what you made me do?” Leah blamed. “You are nothing but a troublemaker, Mauria. I can’t believe you have the nerve to even call yourself a teacher.”

“You’re just afraid of what I can teach Paris about the Art of Love, instead of the Art of War, aren’t you, little girl?”

Leah tackled Mauria. Paris was surprised that she managed to grab Mauria and knock her down. “Man,” he said to himself, “she must be a natural. Either that, or Mauria is toying with her.” Mauria rolled around on the ground with her. She easily tossed Leah’s stick aside. Mauria tumbled onto her feet. Leah staggered up, winded, and assumed an attack posture that Paris recognized from the martial art of Kickboxing.

“Don’t start anything that you can’t finish,” Mauria threatened.

“I already started by knocking YOU down didn’t I?” Leah bragged.

Paris reached for his sword out of habit. It was gone. He looked back and saw it by the campfire. Then, he remembered the meditation when the weapon’s spirit talked to him. “Yolnir,” he said in a low tone towards the sword. “Yolnir—come!” The sword left its sheath and flew into the air towards his hand. He caught it by the hilt with ease. He was surprised. Then, he focussed on turning the food inside of his stomach into immediate energy. It worked! His training with Mauria had made him a lot stronger. Remembering something Ori told him about the earth, Paris pulled in energy from the ground itself. He had a feeling that Mauria would not be able to detect his energy build up if he gathered it from a different source. He was right. But, in order for him to return to anywhere near full strength, it would take time.

Leah attacked Mauria. However, Mauria was too fast. Any attacks that Leah did manage to get in were either blocked or ignored by Mauria. Mauria’s yogin training allowed her to absorb the blows with ease. It would take a martial arts master or another yogin to have any hope of being able to harm her.

Mauria gave Leah a left backhand to her breasts. The force of the blow spun her body clockwise. Leah staggered. Tears came to her eyes from the pain of Mauria’s attack.

Paris was livid. But he contained himself. Somehow, he continued gathering the power he knew he may need.

Leah rubbed her breasts, panting and drooling. “I guess you feel good, picking on people you know are weaker than you are.”

“Look, girl,” Mauria gloated, “I can kill you without even breaking a sweat. I would have went for your mind and knocked you out peacefully, but unfortunately for you, you appear to be immune to psionic attacks. That means I’ll have to kick your ass the old fashioned way if you don’t learn how to behave yourself.”

“Fuck you and your yogin bullshit!” Leah yelled with a hint of fear in her voice.

The fear fed Mauria’s sadism. She crept closer and close to Leah. She began pushing and poking her as she let out some taunts. “Fuck me, huh? Well fuck you! What are you going to do about it? There’s no one here who can help you. The only one who even stands a chance at helping you is in a coma. There is no law here, Leah. This is MY settlement. I AM the law here. I make the law, enforce the law and I rule. You got that, girl?”

Mauria pushed Leah on the ground. Paris calmly held his sword at the ready.

Leah looked around for Paris, hoping that by some chance he was awake. But Mauria’s body was blocking the campfire. There was know way she could know for sure. She could only hope.

Paris sensed her fear. He stood out a little from behind the tree where he was hiding so that Leah could see him. Leah saw his figure and smiled.

Mauria sensed something. Someone’s here. *Wait—is it Paris? No, it can’t be—it’s too strong to be him.* Mauria looked over he shoulder and saw that Paris was gone. She was scared. She realized that if he were the new presence she was feeling, it meant that he had awakened stronger than he was before. Maybe even stronger than she was. Her ego could not handle that. As far as she was concerned, she was going to be the strongest yogin, no matter how many people she trained for her amusement.

John sprang awake. He crawled up and rubbed his head. He turned to the direction of the campfire and realized that Paris was gone. “Paris? Paris! Hey, man, where are you.” He turned towards the women. “Hey, guys, look! Paris is up. His sword is gone and he—ah!”

Mauria pointed her finger at him. She hit him with a psionic attack. He passed out.

Paris scanned John for a second. He was out again, but no more harmed than he was by Leah’s mistake. Paris stepped out from behind the tree in plain view. His strength had fully returned to him. He was ready. “Leave her alone, Mauria. I mean it. Stop it!”

Mauria grabbed Leah by her hair. Leah flailed uselessly against Mauria’s grasp. Mauria pulled out her dagger and held it at Leah’s throat. “If you attack me, I’ll cut your little bitch’s throat, right here! Right now.”

Cecil Washington

Paris walked slowly towards her with his sword still held high. “There is no need for that, Mauria. Any problem you have with her can be handled through me. She’s just a normal human, anyway, she’s no match for one of us. We’re yogin trained, destined almost from birth. Killing her won’t prove a thing.” He thought for a second. “It certainly won’t make me want you, if that’s what you’re hoping.”

“Don’t come any closer! I’m still your teacher, remember? You better do what I tell you to do!” Mauria was starting to sweat.

Paris stopped halfway towards her. “I’m not your student anymore. It’s over.”

“It’s NOT over,” Mauria yelled. Leah winced in pain as Mauria yanked her hair. “Say it! Say it’s not over yet or I’ll yank her nappy hair out!”

Paris gave no response.

“Say it, Paris!” Mauria dug the tip of her dagger into Leah’s neck. The blade made a small prick. A small drop of blood came to Leah’s skin. Mauria was crying.

Instead of panicking, Paris noticed that Mauria was so manic and bent on controlling the situation that her mind was wide open for attack.

Paris sent a psionic blast at her mind. The blast hit Mauria full force, making her stagger for a few seconds and loosen her grip on Leah. That gave Paris enough time to speed towards Leah and pull her from Mauria. As he moved past Mauria, he sliced at her head. The sword seemed to slice at her head of its own free will, with Paris’ hand being at its mercy. Still disoriented, Mauria intuitively ducked the blow.

Mauria sprang up. She had fully recovered from the attack. She held her dagger in her hand and felt the back of her head. There was no blood, but she knew that Paris had hit something. She looked down at the ground in front of her in horror: a clump of her hair was laying at her feet. Paris had managed to chop most of the hair on the back of her head.

He held Leah at his left side and had his sword in front of him. “The next time I catch you laying a hand on her, it will be your head laying on the ground instead of a few nappy ass strands from the back of your neck.”

“You still belong to me, Paris,” Mauria growled. “You know the code. You’re not a Grell. It’s not enough for you to desire your freedom from a human who is on your level. I’m not granting your freedom because you can’t be held by my mind. I invoke the Rite of Final Combat.”

Paris smirked. “Go ahead, bitch. Claim the Rite. How are you going to explain it to the other yogin or to the Grells? What, that you challenged me as soon as I got out of a coma? That will make you look REAL GOOD, won’t it?” he said sarcastically. “Or better yet, how are you going to look when you get beaten by someone who just got OUT of a coma, huh?”

“I don’t care! Who’s going to know? Once I kill you, these two are as good as dead.”

Paris released Leah. “Come on, then. Huh? You scared? You punking out on me? Show me what you working with!”

Mauria attacked. As soon as she made a swipe at his head with her dagger, Paris simultaneously pushed Leah further back behind him and sent his body out of phase. Mauria changed into his phase shift and delivered a couple of blows that were easily dodged by him. Paris shifted back to normal before the phase technique could drain him. He was a little wobbly again, but still functional. He instinctively threw up his mental shield and waited. Mauria launched a futile psionic attack, then returned to physical warfare. She made another attempt at stabbing him with her dagger. Paris leaped over her and stomped her on the back of her head before he landed on the ground. Mauria invoked the name of her dagger and sent it hurtling towards his back. But Paris had reached a new level of skill. He called the name of his sword and deflected the dagger without looking. Within a split second, her dagger was lodged deep within the trunk of a large oak in the distance. The weapon had burrowed so deep into the trunk that only a hair of it was protruding from the bark.

Paris used his mind to make contact with the tree. It was similar to the animism technique that had put him in touch with his sword. Mauria and Leah stared. Their mouths fell open as the tree’s spirit honored his request. It sealed the dagger up inside itself so that it could not return to Mauria’s hand.

Leah was amused. “You still think you can beat him now, bitch?”

“Leah,” Paris said, “be quiet. I got this.”

Mauria was unarmed. He could see on her face that she was intimidated. Paris said nothing, hoping that he could give her the chance to save face.

She chose to be stubborn instead. “I’m giving you a week to heal up, then I’m coming for you, Paris. You’d better you girlfriend and pops over there to stay the hell out of my way. If not, I’ll be killing them after I’m done with you.” She ran off towards the settlement.

Leah breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank GOD you took care of her!”

Paris hugged her. “I’m sorry, Baby. I’m sorry I let that woman come between us. Don’t worry, we don’t have to stay around here for too much longer.”

Leah looked up at him with concern. “But what about her challenge? You aren’t going to just leave, are you? That woman is a maniac.”

John came to and somehow managed to fall into the conversation. “She’s right,” he said as he stood up, holding his head again. “Mauria is a nuisance. Plus, I don’t think her ego would allow this thing between you and her to go unpunished. If she doesn’t take her anger out on you, she might even take it out on the people in the settlement.”

Cecil Washington

Paris sighed. “You two are right, as usual. Besides, I need to fight her anyway. I need some proof to give to Ori. I need to prove that I’ve gotten stronger. I think it’s the only way that he’ll either leave me alone or let me accept his last assignment.”

They broke camp and headed back to New Vermont. When they arrived back at the settlement, there was clearly a buzz. An old woman that claimed to be a healer came over to Paris and offered to take a look at him. As the three of them went to the old woman’s home, they heard all sorts of rumors from different people about how upset Mauria was and how she was ranting about teaching someone a lesson they’ll never forget.

Chapter 12

Paris had gotten a clean bill of health from the healer. She had been a doctor back in Philadelphia before the Aryan reptile cult had become popular. Convinced that she was having some sort of psychic connection with the powers of the universe, she was among the first people who found Mauria's haven. Eventually, she traveled back and forth, helping the black and brown residents of Philadelphia escape on some sort of underground railroad without the notice of the Grells, carnivores or the pyramid security force that had recruited Leah. The healer had suggested that Paris rest up before his showdown with Mauria. Paris obliged and kept himself locked in his room, engrossed in meditation. He only emerged to eat, drink and bathe. He had even stopped being intimate with Leah, fearing that even sex would take away some of the energy he would need for the fight.

Leah, like many other residents in Philadelphia who remained in the pyramid after the cult began, had always assumed that the people who left were wasting their time trying to go to another pyramid. The Grells were not known for helping stray humans who decided to wander outside of the comforts of the pyramid cities. Even when her own family had told her that they had heard that a new life was possible elsewhere, Leah decided that the rational approach was to fight the growing racial problems from within the Grell's system instead of wandering off to who knows where, to some place that was probably no better than where they were. She was glad that she was wrong, and in fact, she had found quite a few of her relatives had miraculously survived the trek through the badlands, including her immediate family.

Still, despite having found that many of her loved ones had made it to the settlement, she was still bothered that Paris had stopped sleeping with her temporarily. She felt that even in this preparation for the final match, she had to compete with Mauria for his sexual attention.

It was the night before the battle. Leah burst into the room. Paris was sitting on the floor with his legs folded under him. The sword floated a few inches off the ground.

"Paris!" she yelled.

His mind dropped the sword. The sound of it rang through an otherwise silent room. He eyes drooped. He was still halfway in the trance. "What is it? Is something wrong? Are you hurt?"

"No, it's just that—I can't stand this not sleeping with you thing. It's ridiculous! I mean, why? Why now? What are you getting out of it? Do you want to end it between us? What is—"

Cecil Washington

“Leah, whatever gave you the idea that I didn’t want us to be together. If anything, the fight tomorrow is as much about you and I being together as it is about Mauria and I resolving our differences,” Paris reasoned.

Leah huffed. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. Her! I’m sick of her being in our relationship. I believe you when you said that you didn’t sleep with her, but I can tell that something happened. I just know it. And quite frankly, I don’t like it. You’re too close to that woman. Even though you’re supposed to be fighting her tomorrow, you’re obsessed with her.”

“No, Leah, you’re the one who’s obsessed,” he said, annoyed. “I already told you that I need every ounce of strength and concentration for this even. She’s probably been training around the clock to beat me. Please, Leah, right now I need to focus.”

Leah swallowed her feelings for the moment. “Okay, fine. Maybe I need to go for a walk.”

“Take my gun with you. I know this place is pretty much secure, but you never know.” He hoped that suggesting she carried a weapon would make her feel better.

“Asshole.” She stormed out of the room.

Paris heard her and shook his head. “Oh well, I tried.” He went back to meditating.

Ten minutes later, a sharp thought cut into his consciousness. It was a brief, intense dream that hit him more like a nightmare.

“Leah!” He grabbed his sword and bolted out of the house, allowing his mind to focus on her. As soon as he was clear of close structures he ran full speed. He hoped there was still time.

Leah had made her way to a clearing away from the settlement. She had been crying and did not want to explain anything to anyone. Bored, confused and angry, she had made a game of firing the laser into the grass, then seeing if she could hit the same exact spot of her previous shot. She knew it was a waste of its energy reserves, but she needed to do something to keep her sanity.

Then, she felt it. It was a hostile presence from behind a loud silence. At first she thought she was being paranoid and went back to shooting the pistol. Then, she heard it again—or rather, did not hear it again. Her instincts were telling her it was time to either fight or flight.

She chose flight. She ran as fast as she could back to the settlement, until she saw something running towards her. It ran as fast as a carnivore, it looked as big as a carnivore; therefore, in her mind, it was a carnivore. She remembered something Paris had said off-handedly about how intent was one of the strongest factors in combat. She focussed all of her mind and soul on the thing that was running towards her. The pistol fired before she was aware of shooting.

It hit the thing coming at her. The thing staggered to its feet and continued towards her. Before she could fire again, she noticed that it made a sharp detour to her left. It began circling her. The hostile presence came back into her mind, stronger than ever. Clearly this thing had been following her and was bent on destroying her. She centered herself and looked at the shadow that was moving steadily around her. Hmm, she thought to herself, it doesn't look like a carnivore. She saw its sword and dagger. Dammit! she yelled internally. It must be Mauria.

Leah took aim again and let her eyes relax. It was another trick that she had picked up from listening to Paris' ramblings about his training. She'd gotten pretty good with a sidearm—almost as good as he was.

"You're mine now," she said as she took aim.

A female voice called from two feet behind her. "No I'm not."

Leah froze in shock. It was Mauria. *If that's Mauria behind me then who was I shooting at? Christ! That boy at the gate must be stronger than I thought.*

Leah felt Mauria's dagger at her back. "One wrong move from you and she gets it!" she heard Mauria yell out to someone. But who?

Of course! "Paris! Paris!"

The shadow stopped moving and came into a clearer view under the moonlight. It was Paris. The left side of his face and neck had a large third degree burn that was visible even in the bright darkness of the full moon. The wound was just under his ear and ran along the side of his jaw. Paris ignored the pain for the moment.

"Let her go, Mauria. Can't you wait until tomorrow?"

"This is war, Paris," Maria cackled. "I figured that with your whore here missing or worse, your mind would not be where it should be. It's too bad you care so much about her that you followed her out here. Now you get to watch her die." She stabbed Leah through the back.

"Leah! Leah!" Paris screamed. He bolted towards her and caught her body before she collapsed to the ground. He ran off with her, back towards the settlement. He looked into her eyes and begged her repeatedly to hold on. For all of his power and training, he realized that he had not learned how to do the one thing that he needed to know most at that moment; how to heal someone.

"P-Paris," she coughed through a mouthful of blood. "I'm not going to make it. Put me down, Paris. It's no use. It's over. I love you, Paris. I love you."

"No, Leah, it's not over yet. Hold on." He held her tight. He was halfway to the settlement before she spoke again.

"Paris," she said, sitting up in his arms.

He had to stop. At the rate that he was running, she would have surely died if she hit the ground.

Cecil Washington

“Paris, put me down. I can feel that I’m not going to make it. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come out here. I should have known that she would try something like this.” She cried.

“No!” Paris held her tighter. “Dear God, if only I could heal this woman. With all the things I can do, all the power I have!”

But, he did know how to heal himself. Maybe, he thought, even though she’s a null, I can get her to try to let me in. I can’t control her, but maybe—maybe I can help her.

He laid her down on the ground and took off his shirt. He wrapped it around her body, trying to stop the bleeding. That worked some, but she was still fading fast.

“Leah—I need you to help me. I need you to open your mind up to me and let me see if I can heal you. You’re a null. I can’t do it without your help. You have to want it for it to happen. Can you do that for me? Can you?” Paris asked with tears rolling down his cheeks.

She was too weak to speak. She shook her head yes.

“I can’t give up now. I’ve got to try.” Paris cleared his mind and focussed all of his being on Leah. She had a natural psychic wall that protected her well in life, but was proving to be a burden to her at the worst time. Once Leah’s mind felt Paris, she let him in. Soon, the two became one. Leah-Paris convinced themselves that Leah’s body should not be harmed. The Leah-body healed the wound. But, the Paris-body was too bound by subconscious guilt to allow the wound to leave them. The Paris-body took the wound upon itself. The added pain from the new wound to the Paris body, severed their link, leaving Leah alive, but unconscious.

A moment later, Paris found himself racking with the pain from the knife wound. That, combined with the burn from the burn, made him stagger. Weakened, he set himself about the business of healing the wounds. In a moment, both wounds would be healed and he could take Leah back to the settlement. The healer could verify whether or not his psychokinetic healing attempt was permanent.

Paris had only healed the surface of the knife wound and reduced the scar on his face when Mauria struck again. She came from out of nowhere with a sword blow that was meant to decapitate him. Paris’ instincts warned him in time for him to dodge the blow and reflexively counter with a thrust to her stomach. Mauria parried the blow with her new dagger and came up with a knee to Paris’ face that sent him tumbling backwards.

Paris rolled to his feet and called upon his sword. “Yolnir—cut and return!” He hurled the sword at her end over end. Mauria leaped over the swirling blade with ease and invoked her new dagger. The dagger didn’t kill Paris but it grazed him across the shoulder before Yolnir could return.

Mauria landed. As soon as her feet hit the ground she sprang towards Paris. He fended off all of her sword and knife blows and even got in a few nicks and cuts on her with his own weapons. His blows would have easily killed a normal person, but Mauria was too strong and well trained for them to amount to nothing more than scratches.

Paris leaped back and paused for a second, gathering energy from the ground. In the next instant, his right foot cracked Mauria across the face with the explosion of a thunderclap. She tumbled head over heels, to her left, looking like a rag doll as her body was spinning. Yet, she still sprang to her feet seconds later. The kick left a large welt down the left side of face. Her face was swollen and she could not see out of her left eye.

“It’s dark out here woman, but even I can see I clocked your ass!” Paris laughed.

She put away her weapons. Then, she began breathing deeply and heavily.

Paris panicked. He knew what was coming.

He put away his weapons and went for Leah. Mauria’s body was glowing.

“Oh shit!”

He picked up Leah in his arms. As he ran, he did his best to put up a chi shield around his body, hoping that would protect him and her. But the wounds he had absorbed from Leah had taken their toll on him. The back wound had started to open again a little. He slowed down quite a bit, but continued running towards the settlement.

Then, it dawned on him. “Christ! If I run towards the settlement, her blast won’t just get me, it’ll get—”

It was too late.

Mauria’s exploded with a boom that was so loud his ears rang, even from that distance. A bright energy beam erupted from her that came straight for him. He tried to leap away from the beam but it caught him before he hit the ground. He let out a scream of agony as the blast threw him into the air. By some miracle, he landed on his back, scraping himself up, but leaving Leah unharmed. The impact jolted her out of unconsciousness. Paris pulled the two of them up in time for them to see Leah’s energy blast level a small house on the edge of the settlement before it dissipated.

“Paris, are you okay?” She asked. “Am I okay?”

“You’re fine,” he grunted. “I’m the one that’s banged up. Now get the hell out of her before she comes back.”

“But—”

“RUN!!!!”

She ran.

Paris stood up, banged, bruised and bleeding. He drew his sword and held it with two hands. He was too exhausted at that point to even think about drawing

chi from the ground or anyplace else. He stood there, heaving, praying to God that his wind would come back and that somehow he'd have the strength to separate Mauria's head from her shoulders.

She staggered into view a few seconds later. The energy attack had drained Mauria almost as much as it drained Paris. All of her psychic energy was spent, which meant that had Paris been alert enough to notice he would have been able to end the fight right there.

But their fatigue had made them both dizzy. Their normal yogin fighting approach had all but decayed under the extremes of combat. Where a male and female spiritual warrior would have stood, they were instead two savage combatants who were bent on destroying each other.

Paris lunged. He came down on her hard. She blocked the blow, but the force of his strength still drained her. She returned with several wild blows of her own that he parried. However, his parries resulted in an equal drain on his endurance.

They each invoked the names of their weapons again, with futile results. Every attack was met with a strong defense from both sides. Finally, they both committed to a final lunge at each other that resulted in both of them being injured at their sides, but still alive and fighting.

They faced each other, heaving and drenched. The perspiration made their brown skins sparkle under the bright eye of the moon.

"Give it up, Paris!" Mauria panted.

"Never. YOU give up!" he grunted back.

"You can't win," she taunted. "You absorbed one of her wounds. You'll probably pass out before you get a chance to run your blade through me. All I have to do is outlast you."

"I'm bigger and stronger than you are, Mauria," he answered. "Even though you're a yogin, I still have more mass. I can take both of these wounds and still outlast you."

"As if size matters more than technique!" she countered.

"Size also matters outside of the bed," he said with winded sarcasm.

"I don't I'd have to worry about your size in either place!" she said through a cutting grin.

Enraged, Paris moved on her faster than even she could counter. She made a quick thrust that would have easily severed the neck of any other warrior. Paris slipped the blow and brought down two large sword cuts—one, through her breasts and another upward, through her stomach. She screamed with each hack of the blade. Her body gushed open with blood. She fell to the ground, still swinging, but Paris made a final attack on her weapon itself. He hit her sword so hard that he broke her blade in half.

Mauria landed on the ground. Her arms and legs were limp. The best she could do was use her self-healing powers and chi energy to stop the bleeding

before she passed out. Had that attack hit any normal human, they would have died instantly.

Paris stood over her, drenched with her blood. His own blood trickled from the wound Mauria gave him with her sword and the one he absorbed from Leah's body. The last attack he delivered on Mauria made the wound re-open completely. He felt extremely dizzy and lightheaded. He realized that she had been right; had they continued on a little longer, he would have passed out and she would have won by default.

He debated killing her; killing her would be so easy and it would put an end to her stalking and abuse. He raised Yornir high above his head and prepared make the final blow.

But, the spirit of the sword spoke to his mind.

"No, Paris," Yornir said, "There is no honor in this. I like to cut, but I don't want to cut someone who can't protect herself. Don't worry, Paris. You did what Ori wanted. You're stronger."

Paris lowered the blade. He wiped the blood on his pants and re-sheathed the sword.

He felt the wounds on his body and noticed that the wounds had stopped bleeding.

Chapter 13

At first he felt like he was floating. Then, he realized that he WAS floating. He opened his eyes and saw that he had been placed in a large tube. Somehow, he could breath in the warm, yellow liquid that covered him and boiled around his entire body. He floated inside of the container naked save a small loincloth that someone had fashioned for him.

He looked over in the tube to his left. It was Mauria. She was still out cold. Slowly, he looked around the room and realized that he was on the inside of a biological-repairing lab that the Grells used to restore yogin that had been injured in combat.

There was nothing around him but a few Grells. One of them he recognized as Ori. Ori was talking to three other Grells in his own language. A female was among the other three; she was Ori's daughter, Toria, from the Philadelphia pyramid. The Grell dialect was still not something that Paris spoke fluently, but if he concentrated, he could often get the gist of their conversation. Ori bragged to his assistants that Paris was the strongest warrior he had created.

He darted his eyes around the room for a sign of Leah. None was found. He panicked. He began banking on the glass in the container for help. That got no response. Then, he decided to close his eyes and try telepathically talking to Ori.

Where is Leah, Ori? he thought.

Paris? Is that you? Are you awake? Ori turned around. You are! Good. Now take it easy, okay? We have John and Leah in a guest section. Don't worry about the humans in Mauria's settlement, they're fine. The people I have with me here are on my side. I am not the only Grell who hates The First One.

Paris projected his confusion. He wondered how he moved from the field to the Grell's home.

Your friends found you and Mauria collapsed in the field. I managed to use my mind reach John the next morning during one of his meditations. He told me everything that happened and how badly you two had hurt each other. Even with your abilities, you both could have died. When one yogin means to destroy another, the wounds go beyond the physical, they are mental and spiritual as well. Leah and John trusted me enough to bring you two to the edge of the human settlement, outside of the reach of the machine. I brought you two inside. You've been here for a week.

Paris relaxed. He was glad that everyone else was okay.

Ori walked over to the container and smiled proudly at Paris. "Congratulations," he said aloud. "You did it! You survived my second challenge. You've become as strong as Mauria. That was something I could

never do for you, no matter how hard I tried. You had to find that strength within yourself.”

Paris nodded. He then pointed to the roof of the container.

“Oh yes,” Ori said. “I supposed you want to get out now.” He moved his hand along the outside of the tube.

The liquid inside the tube was slowly sucked into the floor below as air was pumped in from above. Paris hacked and coughed as his lungs adjusted to breathing air. He stood up as the container was lifted. Still drenched, he managed to compose himself enough to ask Ori a question.

“What do you want me to do? What are you preparing me for? Why’d I have to almost die in order to be ready?” he panted.

“I’ll tell you after you’ve dressed and eaten,” Ori said nonchalantly.

“No, Ori, enough waiting. I want to know NOW!”

Ori paused, then relented. “Okay, Paris, here it is; the first thing I want you to do is to destroy the machine that keeps your planet barren and harnesses human energy through the pyramids. It is a heavily guarded fortress that lies at your South Pole. Your two friends who are here are promising. I think they may be able to help you complete that mission with a little training.”

“What’s the second mission?” Paris looked at Ori with skepticism.

“The second mission is much simpler, but will probably only be able to happen once my people are in chaos about the destruction of the machine,” Ori noted.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked again, impatient.

Ori placed his hand on Paris’ shoulder, as his father had done during his visit to the afterworld. “Paris, I want you to kill the First One.”

Paris was shocked. “What?”

“Yes, Paris. Only a human yogin will be able to get close enough to him to destroy him. He will underestimate you. In fact, most Grells think that my teaching humans to use your spirit is a waste of time. They think that your old philosophical and martial arts are limited. Paris, I know better. I know that you can do it. All I need from you is your word and your trust. Will you accept this last mission from me?” Ori asked.

“Okay, Ori,” Paris said. He looked over at the tube. “Ori, why wouldn’t Mauria destroy the machine for you?” He assumed that Mauria must have had a good reason. At least that way, he would not think that she was completely crazy.

“She’s stubborn,” Ori answered. “She would rather wait for her mother’s invention to re-flower the world than to destroy the machine that is keeping it a desert. Some silly human form of family pride.”

Cecil Washington

Paris walked over to the tube and looked at Mauria's body floating inside. He felt guilt and remorse about letting things get that far. While she certainly looked like she was healing, he knew that she would be out of the game for a long time.

"When will she be all right?" Paris asked.

"Soon," Ori reassured him. "In about a month or so. Now, let's get you dressed and fed. Your friends John and Leah are going to need training if they are going to be of any assistance. I suggest that as soon as I help them with that, you focus on training yourself. It will be hard for your friends to learn the technology, but I think I can teach them something."

"Technology is nice," Paris said, "but I think you should start them on the path of Yogin, too."

"No!" Ori protested. "That path is only available for humans who are in our service."

"If you want me back, you have to train them as well. Or allow me to do it. There is no way they will get as strong as I am, but they need to be stronger than they are now. Besides, if their machines ever fail them, they need something to fall back on. I don't care if all they get are the physical techniques, it's better than having them completely untrained." Paris rubbed his chin. "Leah has some pretty good training and is a good shot, but she's still bound by the physical. I'm sure you can teach her to open her mind so that at least she can be as lethal as a yogin when she's armed with a pistol. And John has some spiritual leanings. You could get him to develop those."

Ori was both offended and impressed. "Well, um, yes, I suppose you're right."

"Ori, I will respect you as my teacher, but don't forget, I did win my freedom from you in combat."

Ori laughed. "You only survived because I did not feel like killing you."

Paris gave him a stern look. "That's not how I remember it. Besides, do you still think you can kill me?"

Ori gave off a look that was obvious even on his alien face; he was intimidated. He changed the subject. "Get dressed. Go get something to eat and relax. Tell your friends their training starts in three days and their mission will occur one year after that. Tell them that they are NOT to discuss this with any other human—not even Mauria. You are also bound to silence. Understand?"

Paris gave a warrior's bow. "Yes, Teacher."

Ori was surprised.

"I give you my word that until the First One is destroyed, you will be my Teacher and Master. I keep my word."

"One more thing," Ori said. "You need to learn our language. I'll start you off on it, but when Mauria wakes up, she'll continue. Have her teach you that and about human history."

Paris laughed. “You say that like you think you can control her or something.”

Ori smirked. “She’ll be back under me, to some degree, even though I don’t have anything else I can teach her. A human hasn’t beaten her in decades, Paris. She’ll pester me for more training, when really, there isn’t any. She may not want to help me, but she will do anything if she thinks that she is really helping herself. Now get dressed.”

Paris delivered the news to John and Leah. They were both excited about undertaking the mission, but had their reservations. John worried that his age would be a problem in him learning new things about his mind and body. Leah worried that her relationship with Paris may end if he had to be away from her from so long. Paris reassured her and promised to use his astral powers to visit her in dreams. Secretly, he went to Ori and got permission to visit her aboard the saucer once a month. He knew that being there in the flesh was often more powerful than loving from a distance.

After the three of them had eaten, they returned to the settlement, escorted by a few Grells that went as far as they could before the device repelled them. John spent his time saying goodbye to newfound family and friends, as did Leah. Paris went to Mauria’s library, when he wasn’t making love to Leah, and began reading.

He found a large black book sitting on a table in the back of the room that had been written in Calligraphy. It was called “The Book.” Beside it were stacks of paper with Mauria’s writing. The writings were notes on his training. Paris pushed those aside and sat down. He began reading The Book.

Paris learned that the Grells had come for one reason only; to ensure their own survival. As a result, they were becoming sterile. They had destroyed their home planet Grellic in the center of the Milky Way because of their own greed and consumption. Pollution, wars and famine had made a world that was once like Earth turn into a desolate place. Their ancestral species had lived long past its usefulness to the universe.

Then came The First One. He was the first Grell to be born with gray skin. The other Grells were smaller creatures of a bluish hue with smaller eyes. Many blue Grells took his birth as a sign that their race was truly inferior and sought to destroy him. But the First One had a fanatical cult around him that protected him until his matured into adulthood.

With the First One’s maturity came unusual powers. He was born with many of the psycho-mental attributes that Ori had to train into the yogin. The First One mated with literally millions of blue Grell females, and within 100,000 years, he created a race of super-Grells endowed with abilities that, although they did not match his, were superior to their blue ancestors.

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The gray Grells bred their parent race out of existence. Grellic was uninhabitable at this point, so in order to survive, they set out to conquer new worlds. One of the new worlds they set their sights on was Earth.

The book spoke of Ori. He had been among the last Grells born on the homeworld. Somehow he proved to be another long-living, nearly immortal Grell. The typical Grell life span was from 500 to 700 years. But Ori's powers were nowhere near those of the First One, which made him rise to his place as a second in command of the new order.

The Book also talked about the Grell interaction with humanity; how they had been behind many of the technological advances of humanity after they realized that the hunter-gatherer societies would not make effective slaves. Primitive humans had a deep connection with the earth and the universe and would always find a way to call upon spiritual power and sometimes the power of Illogic in order to thwart the Grell's plans. Humanity had to be thoroughly educated and indoctrinated into accepting the alien motives of greed and power instead of the tendency to heed the collective/cooperative instinct.

The Grells divided the humans from one another by assuming their forms, teaching them to use language instead of telepathy and gesturing, and making them feel that humanity was above all other life on Earth. Eventually, they found two human flaws they could exploit: tribalism and competition. The Grells decided to go one step further and mutate those imperfections into racism and imperialism. Once this was under way, human beings were on their way into making the Earth so uninhabitable and chaotic that people would have to turn to the Grells for survival. That need for survival would ensure humanity's servitude to the Grells. Humanity begged the Grells to place them inside the pyramid communities so that they would be protected from one another. Those few humans who did not, who preferred freedom to safety, lived outside of the pyramids in scattered communities and spent their time avoiding the carnivores. Paris read that the Grells made the carnivores for one reason: control.

The Book revealed that the pyramids were actually devices that could harness both the body heat and mental energy of each human being little by little. The amount taken from each person was small, but combined with that of all of the people of the world, it made an excellent source of psychic energy. This energy was what The First One was using to keep himself alive.

Paris also discovered something he found amusing; Ori had taken a few female human lovers. This was despite the fact that he showed a sexual preference for males of his own species whenever he mated with a Grell. Ori and many other Grells had fathered some Grell-human hybrid children that were either sterile or mutated into the monsters and giants of old human legend. But one of those children did survive, and by all accounts, she looked human and lived among humanity for about two hundred years before she died. That woman

mated with a black man and gave birth to a daughter who would grow up and become a powerful human yogin. The daughter's name was Mauria.

“That little gray bastard is her granddaddy!” he laughed. “And the sister who created this machine that brings the life force back to this planet was half gray herself. Man, I tell you, this world is something else!”

Antarctica.

A barren, frigid white desert of snow, ice and blinding winds.

The Grell-droids—half metal, half alien hybrids who voluntarily served their race as cyborg warriors—were immune to the feeling of cold due to the genetic manipulation they underwent as part of their transformation. After their transformation, they were usually assigned to be the guards of the Antarticon, the Antarctic power fortress. This fortress was responsible for both maintaining the climate patterns inside of the humans' pyramids as well as creating the meteorological effect that kept the rest of the world barren by suppressing the life force of the planet.

A Grell walked towards the fortress from the distance. He wore a thick, parka-like outfit that looked more terran than alien. Following him were two human bodyguards who were wearing black thermal suits, goggles, and cloaks made from an artificial, weather resistant material.

Two Grell-droids stood guard outside. The wind blew fiercely, greatly reducing visibility. The guards, however, appeared to be immune to the cutting cold weather that swarmed around them.

The Grells began communicating to each aloud other in their own tongue. Grell-droids sacrificed all telepathic ability and vulnerability during their transformation.

“Halt,” called the first Grell-droid. “State the purpose of your visit.”

The walking Grell waited until he and his guards were right upon the guards before he answered. “My name is Ori. I am The Second. Step aside and let me in.”

The Grell-droids looked at each other. The second one laughed. “Ori? Well, it does not matter that you are The Second. We received word today that you are not allowed inside the fortress because you have fallen in more disfavor with the First One.”

Ori scoffed.

“That was very human of you, Second. So perhaps it is true. Perhaps you are barred because you have turned into a race traitor,” the first Grell-droid judged. “No other civilian among our people is banned from this fortress—as if any of them visit. No, Second One, only you. Strange.” He raised his hand up. Instantly it withered and was replaced by a large cannon-like weapon. The second Grell-droid did the same. “Leave, Second. Leave now. For all you have done for our

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people, it would be a shame for you to meet an end to your long life here outside of Antarticon.”

One of the humans, a male, made a comment in an Earth tongue. The Grell-droids did not understand. “Speak up, human!” the second Grell-droid ordered.

The human male changed to the Grell tongue. “I said, I can’t believe that we’re getting shit from a couple of walking vibrators. I know you know what a vibrator is, because it’s the only way you dickless wonders can give your females any pleasure, isn’t it.”

The first Grell-droid glared at Ori. “Control your servant, or I’ll kill it!”

The other human, a female, also spoke Grell. “You’re the only servants I see around here,” she mocked. “The way I see it, you’re just as enslaved as we were when we were foolish enough to stay inside the pyramids. Now let my master pass.”

Ori put up his hands in a peaceful gesture. “Everyone, please, let’s stop fighting,” he said diplomatically.

The Grell-droids glared at the humans. “We don’t have to tolerate disrespect from the inferior,” the first Grell-droid laughed.

Ori backed behind the humans. “In a minute, you droids will learn what respect is all about.” He folded his arms and gave the order. “Attack!” he yelled as he dove unto the ground in order to escape what was coming next.

The humans moved their cloaks aside. As they drew their weapons, the Grell-droids were firing on them. It looked as though the Grell-droids had destroyed all three of them with laser fire.

“Hey!” called a voice from above. The Grell-droids looked up and the last thing they saw were two swords being swung at their heads as the humans fell down on them. The eyes and mouths of the Grell-droids were still gaping open when their heads hit the snow. The human attackers were Paris and Mauria.

“Don’t let those two fool you,” Mauria warned. “The rest of them inside are no where near this stupid and weak. They usually put the new ones outside as a sort of rite of passage.”

“Christ, I can’t see shit in these things,” Paris said as he played with the goggles.

Ori got up out of the snow and brushed himself off. “Well, don’t take them off or your eyes will probably freeze shut. Not even a yogin has the power to defy nature.” He turned around and began walking away.

“Where are you going?” Paris asked.

Ori switched to English. “To hide until the first attack is over. Reinforcements will be out here in ten seconds. That is, if the roof cannons don’t finish you off.” Ori started to run.

Paris’ instinct caused him to phase shift as the first laser bomb hit from the roof.

Mauria tumbled out of the way of the blast. “Stop relying on your phase shifting in this one,” she warned. “They’ll adjust the frequency of their weapons to hit you whether or are phased or not. That’s why gray-boy ran for the hills!”

“Stop disrespecting your grandfather,” Paris teased.

The doors opened. The yogin were under fire from the rooftop and from the platoon of biomechanical Grell-droids who poured outside. Paris and Mauria fell back and took cover behind a large mound of ice. They futilely returned fire with their laser weapons.

“Mauria, we can’t fire on them with these,” Paris said. “Their weapons are way too powerful. Call for the ship. I’m going hand to hand. I know it’ll be harder for you to do it in the cold, but you need to call up an energy blast. Now!”

Mauria put away her pistol and began breathing deeply.

Paris ran from behind the mound at full speed. He went straight into the line of fire. His reflexes allowed him to dodge most of the fire even in the cold. However, he did take one minor hit to his side before he reached the Grell-droids.

Invoking the name of his sword, he killed two of the enemy with one strike. He pulled out his laser pistol and shot another Grell-droid in the face before one of them managed to kick him in his injured side. The kick knocked him backwards and into the arms of another one. The Grell-droid started crushing Paris. Desperate, Paris stomped on its foot and tumbled forward, just missing a laser shot that was intended for him. The attack ended up killing the Grell that was holding him.

Mauria’s body glowed. She walked from behind the mound. Paris sensed her energy build up and leaped into the air.

With a shout, she released an energy attack that crawled along the ground and exploded among the Grell-droids, killing only four of them. The attack drained her significantly. She panted and braced herself against the side of the mound. Two of the Grell-droids who were still alive started after her. She drew her pistol and fired. Two shots hit one of her attackers, wounding him.

Paris ducked as soon as he landed on the ground. He narrowly avoided an attack from one of the Grell-droids that had a blade protruding out of what was once its left wrist.

The Grell droids began getting the upper hand in the battle. As far apart as they were, Paris and Mauria somehow ended up fighting back to back. More Grell-droids poured out from inside of the fortress. Even though the ground was becoming stained with gray blood, Paris and Mauria were being wounded little by little. Eventually, Mauria was shot in the face, twice, by an energy blaster that was wielded by a rather large Grell-droid. She fell down to one knee and screamed in agony. Before one of the other Grell-droids could finish her, Paris grabbed her by the waist and leaped in the air in order to avoid the mob. As soon

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as he landed, he took their bodies out of phase long enough for him to run through the mob and get inside the fortress.

He returned to solid form and placed Mauria against a wall. Before the Grell-droids inside of the fortress fell upon him, he checked her face. Her powers were beginning to heal her, but she was still out cold.

He fought valiantly. Every movement of his sword was so fast, that it was unseen even by alien eyes. Every parry and thrust, every energized punch and kick either injured or killed an attacker. Paris' chi powers emerged despite the cold. He was killing them one by one.

But there were too many Grell-droids. The last thing he remembered seeing was a laser-blast aimed straight at his head. Then, there was nothing.

Darkness.

He was dead.

Or so he thought.

Or so he wished when he came to.

Paris awoke inside of a barred cell, wearing nothing but the blood, torn black clothing from the battle. His head ached. His entire body was covered with scratches, burns and bruises. He tried to summon up the energy to shift phase and pass through the bars, but he couldn't. He merely bumped his head on the bars, which made the pain worse. He collapsed against the steel.

"Your phase shifting won't work any more," called a voice behind him. He turned around. It was Ori. Ori had been beaten worse than he had. Paris looked around for Mauria. She was gone.

"Mauria's not here" Ori said. "Don't worry about her right now, think about yourself."

"Why can't I phase shift anymore?" Paris asked.

"Because of the head trauma, Paris. You both took a blast to your heads that would have killed most other people. If it weren't for your training, both you and Mauria would be dead. You'll both find yourselves without some of the mental powers you'd attained, but you'll still be far stronger than the others I've taught," Ori explained. "You'll still have your speed, strength, skill and reflexes when you heal."

"What? If we could lose those abilities so easily, then why on Earth did you train them?" Paris fell into a fit of coughing.

"Because," Ori said wearily, "if you weren't that powerful when we attacked this place, you'd both be dead right now!"

Paris laid on his side. He was becoming dizzy. The room was spinning and his headache was replaced by pain in his sides and chest. The pain made him remember what he'd forgotten; after the shot to his head, the Grell-droids kicked him around the battle area like a soccer ball. "God, I got fucked up," he half-laughed at himself. "What happened to the ship?"

“Leah and John came after you took Mauria inside. They managed to kill the rest of the Grell-droids that were outside and disarm the cannons. But they had to retreat eventually. There was too much ground fire, even for the saucer.” Ori began coughing.

Paris felt around the back of his mouth with his tongue while Ori was talking. He had a tooth missing. Then, he realized that his jaw was sore.

“At least I got Mauria out of here during all of the commotion,” Ori continued. “John was able to beam her aboard. The saucer was so damaged that they only grab us one at a time. By the time she was gone, I was found out. It was too late. The Grell-droids grabbed me, beat me, and threw me in here after they were through with you.”

“You mean kicking ME, don’t you?” Paris said. “God, I didn’t think it was possible for me to be beaten worse than I was when I fought Mauria. I guess all of the training in the world couldn’t prepare me for this.”

“Paris,” Ori answered, “I made a horrible mistake. Obviously Antarticon was expecting us. My sources grossly underestimated the number of Grell-droids that were stationed here. If I had known it was going to be this difficult, I would have tried to find as many sympathizers as possible before we attacked. I thought that my authority would have allowed us to come inside so that you and Mauria would be able to slip around unnoticed. Paris, I think it’s only by the grace of that God that you pray to that any of us even survived.”

Paris passed out from the pain. He dreamed of the battle again. This time he remembered being held up by his shoulders and made to watch Ori’s demise. Ori had grown considerably stronger than he was when he trained Paris. His chi powers enabled him to destroy a lot of the Grell-droids before they overran him. He remembered that Ori’s hands were tied behind his back. Paris was beaten and stomped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 14

Paris was awakened by a conversation in Grell. There were two pair of alien feet standing just outside his cell. He laid on the floor limp, still too tired to move. He could feel that his body was still injured, but that he was recovering. At least he could breath without feeling pain.

“Look at him,” said a female sounding voice. “This is the one who cost us so many people? This one person? Impossible. He’s only human.”

“It’s him,” a male voice responded. “His psychic ability is more powerful than anything I’ve seen, even among our people. Or, should I say, it was. I doubt that he’ll be able to do some of the things he did outside for a long time. Too much brain damage.”

Paris tried to use his mind to feel for Ori, but the pain was unbearable. He let out a painful grunt.

“Is he up?” the female Grell asked. She knelt down next to him.

Paris looked up. He recognized the alien face: it was Toria, Ori’s daughter.

“So it’s YOU,” she said in English. “You went back to my father’s side after all.” She turned to the male. Paris saw that the male she was talking with was the same large Grell-droid that nearly killed Mauria. “Jarka, this is the one that was up in Philadelphia, the one who killed my two yogin. He would have killed me too if I hadn’t convinced him otherwise. He’s a tough one. He may even be tougher than you are. He even killed ten humans at once.”

Jarka laughed. “High Daughter,” he said in Grell, “I mean no disrespect, but you have no understanding of what it is to be a warrior. Humans are weak creatures. Even when they acquire some powers, I still beat them. Many of their powers are not practical in combat. This one would have probably killed a lot more of us if he had focussed on his sword instead of using his energy. That’s why I say that it’s good to train chi, but science and technology are stronger than energy training.”

“I agree,” Toria answered. “It’s my father who insists on training the humans to use their spiritual power instead of letting us graft their genes like we do with you. It’s so much more effective.”

Paris sat up. He looked up at the massive Jarka. “You know,” he said in their language, “if I weren’t so beat down right now—”

“Hah!” Jarka scoffed. “You foolish yogin, walking around in your silly robes, armed with medieval weapons. What you need are more guns and less garments. Where was your training when you were outnumbered? Huh? I bet the Second didn’t teach you about military tactics, did he? If he had, you never would have been foolish enough to try to attack the fortress.”

Paris looked over at Ori. He was sleeping. "Ori's sources sold him out," he defended.

"They didn't have to," Toria interjected. "My father was relying on outdated information. Besides, everyone knew that he was going to try sooner or later to destroy the suppression machine. If he had bothered to talk to any of us instead of being so obsessed with his humans, he would have known that the First One doubled the number of Grell-droids who were assigned here months ago. Father is a dreamer, Paris. His dreams may have brought you to a high level of power, but reality is harder to change than he would like to admit. If you really wanted to free your race, the best thing you could do for yourself is to stop listening to him. Find your own way to help your people, Paris, if that's what you really want."

Jarka pointed his arm at Paris's head. Paris saw that he had a canon where his hand should have been. "I don't care how many humans and reptiles you may have killed with your archaic fighting arts; if you want to know the truth about real battle, you need to look in here." Jarka's "here" referred to the mouth of the canon.

Paris sat back on the floor. That time, instead of shooting him in the head, Jarka had injured him in a deeper place; his pride. He realized that even though his yogin training had made him stronger than any single being on the planet, even he was no match for an entire army. Humiliated, he leaned against a wall and stared down at the floor. He wondered if at that point, he'd learn more from staring at the cracks on the floor than he would learning how to focus supernatural energy on an entire squadron.

His strength was returning. Ori was getting worse. When he wasn't dreaming about seeing Leah, Paris tried to come up different plans of escape. He saw no way of getting out of that fortress alive and unarmed. Many times Ori would lapse into a bloody, flemmy coughing spasm between bouts of babbling in Grell and several dead human languages that Paris didn't recognize.

"I'm sorry I brought you in here," Ori would mutter deliriously.

"Don't worry about it," Paris would answer. "Be sorry that your people came to Earth. So help me, I'm going to find a way to get rid of them."

"Good," Ori would reply. "Good." Then, he would drift back into delirium and a coma.

He swallowed his pride and asked the Grell-droid guards for help. They laughed at him and told him that Ori would be fine, that no matter how badly he'd been injured, a long-living Grell like Ori had the ability to heal himself.

Paris had been held in the dark cell for two weeks before his body completely healed. His energy ability, however, was still minimal. At that point, Ori had begun to develop a fever. Paris had never known of a Grell to be afflicted

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with any type of ailment; he assumed that they were immune to disease. At that point, the guards decided to remove Ori from the cell.

Later that day, they told Paris that Ori died.

Paris' reaction was a mixture of joy and pain. On the one hand, he was glad that Ori had perished because he blamed the Grells for the destruction of his home. But another part of him remembered the part of the creature that took him as his charge when he was a boy and turned him into a yogin. Ori had shown him things that other human beings could only dream about. Paris knew that even when humanity was not openly oppressed by the Grells. No human, not even the other yogin, had ever reached his level of power. For that, at least, he was grateful.

However, his eyes shed no tears. His anger at his oppressor-teacher proved to be the stronger emotion. His feelings resolved into a morbid smile.

How long had Ori lived, thousands of years? If he truly was the spearhead of the alien movement to free humanity, Paris wondered if the movement would die with him. His parents told him the story of a black human like himself called Martin Luther King Jr., who used non-violence as a means of conquering prejudice within humanity. His parents had said that even though King had been killed, his message still lived on. But would the Grells see Ori as a martyr, or would they view him instead as a rebellious son who had gotten what he deserved.

Toria came to Paris' cell. She ordered the Grell-droids to leave then sat down outside of the bars with her back to him. Paris was surprised that she or any other Grell besides her father was willing to make any gesture that gave the impression of coming down to his level.

"You know my father is dead?" Toria asked in Grellic.

"Speak English," Paris replied in his own dialect. "If you really want to talk to me, that is."

Toria switched to English. "Okay. Fine. If that's the way you want to be."

"IF! Thanks to you people, I don't know how I want to be. Stop acting like you're down with us when you know damn well you ain't!"

"Is this the way you used to talk to my father?" she asked. She frowned her face into something resembling disgust.

"Yes, after I was free of him," Paris answered.

Toria turned around. Paris had a hard time finding any femininity in her gray face even though he knew she was a female.

"I've never been free of him," she sighed, looking at him with large, insect-like eyes. "Even when I turned away from him and served The First One, a part of me always felt bad for turning my back on his ideals." She reached out a gray hand and touched Paris' leg. "You know, he really wanted what was best for you people."

Paris pulled away from her, disgusted. He contained his revulsion as best he could, surprised that some part of him cared about hurting the feelings of one of them at a time like this. “What was best for my people was for you all to have never come to Earth in the first place. Thanks to your influence, all humanity has done is fought and killed each other. Perhaps if we were united, we would have never fallen victim to your influence.”

Toria became defensive. “We would have destroyed your planet. You all were nothing before the Grells came here.”

“You may have destroyed us, but at least you would have never controlled us.” Paris sat up on his knees and heels. “You know, I was hoping that I would die in here. At least that way I’d be free of Ori and free of the rest of you. I guess that I have no way of finding that freedom now unless you all plan to kill me.” He looked her in her monstrous eyes. “Do you?”

“No,” Toria said in a low voice. “I’m taking you with me. Since you enlisted yourself back in my father’s service, you’re now my property.”

“No I’m not,” Paris protested.

“Yes, you are,” Toria said. “My father logged you agreement into his private database. I guess he thought it would make some kind of great historical souvenir in the future. Anyway, that makes you mine. It’s in writing.”

“So why should I go off with you?” Paris asked. “My mind is weak now. Couldn’t you make me come along against my will?” He smirked in anticipation of her answer. He knew that she was powerless to control him, especially if she were as weak as she seemed to be.

“I can’t,” she admitted. “You’re still too strong. I can feel that you’re a lot weaker than you were, but your mind still can’t be contained by me or by any of us. I guess it must be something you were born with, which was why you were able to break away from my father and challenge him for your freedom.”

Paris crossed his arms. “Good. Then I can do the same with you. I’m sure you’re nowhere near the fighter he was.”

“I’m not a fighter at all,” she said.

“Then staying with you would really be like being a protector, wouldn’t it? I wouldn’t be a pawn. You’d actually need me to stay alive, right? Assuming you Grells were ever in danger of anything.” Paris cracked his knuckles. “You know, my speed is returning. I ought to just reach through the doors and break your gray little neck, bitch. Or at least choke you until they open the doors.”

Paris felt a push at his mind. It was Toria. She was trying to talk to him telepathically. He tried to let her in, but his head hurt. His brain was still damaged, possibly to the point that telepathy was impossible. That would be good from a standpoint of resisting mind control, but bad when it came to talking silently as she wanted to do now.

Please, Paris, let me in, she thought.

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He heard her! Somehow he heard her. He decided to relax and let her have her say.

Go. Talk, he mentally replied. It was about all he could manage at that point.

Please, don't kill me. I know you can. Despite what you human warriors think, most of my people are not as powerful as my father was. We need devices in order to control you humans. The mind control machines we used to use before are not working as well as they did before. In fact, that's why I'm here. Now that Father is dead, the First One needs a new enemy. He needs someone new to take the blame among my people when things go wrong. Since I'm my father's only living child, I am now the new Second. That makes me a threat to the First One.

So...what! Paris thought feebly. Why should I help you? I know you were one of the grays that were responsible for the problems in the Philly pyramid. You're just as bad as those white humans that used to terrorize my ancestors. In fact, you're worse.

Please, Paris, let's not talk politics, okay? I'm scared, Paris. I'm scared! My life is in danger. I need you for protection. It's the only way. Many of my father's sympathizers are coming to me. They expect me to take over the movement. I've been refusing them. The thing is that those who side with the First One are finding out his protectors. It is against our custom to harm one another, but many of the Grell-droids have been sent to kill people who were loyal to my father. It's getting to be a dangerous time to be a human-loving Grell. Please Paris, come with me. Perhaps if you were among us, you might find a way to help your people. If not, then things will continue the way they are now. Besides, if you return to your old level of power without being under the authority of one of us, they'll hunt you down and destroy you and the ones you love. Now that they know about you, Paris, you will be watched.

Leah, he thought to himself. John. The settlement. "Okay, fine," he said. "I'll work for you, then. But on one condition."

"What is it?" Toria asked aloud.

"Protection," he said aloud. For Mauria's settlement. For Leah and for John.

Done. The First One is not concerned with it yet. I'll see if I can influence people into thinking that it's not important. At least that way the humans there will have some peace.

"You really are your father's daughter," Paris laughed. "You still think that you can control people even though your own life's in danger. Besides, I thought you felt like your Grell-droid technology was more effective than my inferior human training, right?"

"Jarka is the only Grell-droid I can trust," she replied. "Besides, I asked him already. He hasn't given me a firm answer. I think even he is worried that I share

my father's views. Jarka is like most of my people; totally enthralled to the will of the First One."

Paris laughed. He laughed at the situation, finding it ironic that besides inheriting her father's estate, Toria had inherited his burden with humanity as well. He leaned against the wall behind him with a straight back and crossed his legs in the lotus position. He breathed deeply, closed his eyes, and concentrated on gathering more energy so that he would be ready to escape when the time came.

Paris never got to see Ori's body.

Chapter 15

He had been taken out of the cell three days later. He had been passing the time in meditation, using his mind to heal his body. Contrary to what Ori had taught him, he learned first hand that physical damage could be so traumatic that it did affect the mind and the spirit. And, the damage did not have to come from another yogin in order to be that deep.

Toria came to him early on the morning of his release. She had him brought into her quarters. She allowed him to bathe and arranged for new clothes for him. Somehow, Toria had even gotten him a new laser pistol, dagger and his old sword, Yolnir. Paris tried to make contact with the sword's spirit secretly, but with no success. He still had a lot of work to do before he built up enough life force to expend it on astral projection. For now, his training and intuition would have to be enough.

He took his place at her rear after he had completely dressed himself. But instead of the traditional yogin doo-rag that he wore with Ori, Toria had found a small, form-fitting black one that was popular with humans around the turn of the 21st century. Paris laughed; he hadn't seen one of those outside of the historical documents that Ori had said were fashion magazines. Ori had preserved some of them in his library. Toria must have seen some of Paris' ancestors wearing one of them and decided to have one replicated.

Toria had a mirror brought in for him. There were still some small, faint scars on his face, but other than that, no one would have known that he had lost a fight against a horde of Grell-droids.

"I know what you're thinking," Toria said.

"What?" he asked.

"That you look good considering how you were beaten by the Grell-droids."

"Yeah. So?"

"You killed A LOT of them, you know. At least forty or fifty of them. Or more."

"So?" he asked again. "I still ended up being confined. Why didn't they just kill me?"

"I think they were going to study you," Toria commented. "You and Mauria. None of the rest of Father's yogins would have even gotten as far as you did. Mauria's got some of our blood in her, you know, or at least some of Father's. That explains her ability. I wonder what's behind yours?" She touched his face curiously.

He drew back. "Perhaps there is nothing behind my ability, other than I believed."

"You mean BELIEVE," she corrected.

“I mean BELIEVED,” he shot back. “It’s going to take me a while to regain my belief.”

There was a knock on the outside door. That was strange, Paris thought to himself. Since when do Grells knock? Don’t they know when another one of them is around?

“I’ll get it,” Toria answered as Paris checked himself in the mirror.

She’s picked up some human habits, just like her father did, Paris thought to himself.

A feeling of danger overwhelmed him. For a split second, he didn’t trust it, but then he realized that however injured his psyche was, he still had an instinct for survival.

He drew his sword. “Toria, don’t open the door!” he warned.

Toria had already pressed the button. As soon as the door open, Paris leaped in front of her. He pushed her back and narrowly avoided an energy blast. Without thinking, he hacked off the hand of the creature that was wielding it. It wasn’t until the hand and pistol hit the floor that Paris saw that it was human.

Two yogin and a Grell-droid were trying to force their way into the room. The hand he had cut off belonged to one of the yogins—an Asian female. She screamed in agony and fell to one knee, holding her wrist as the blood gushed out like a fountain of red water.

The other yogin, a black male, and the Grell-droid froze.

“You’re not suppose be strong, least no not yet,” the Grell-droid said in broken English.

“Stop underestimating a brother,” Paris laughed.

The other two went for their gun weapons. Paris pulled out his pistol and was on them before they could draw. He had his arms crossed. His sword was held by his right hand, and rested on the throat of the yogin, while his pistol was rested at the temple of the Grell-droid.

Toria walked up beside him. “Who sent you?”

Neither one of them answered. The bleeding woman kneeling on the floor went ignored until Toria probed her mind. Then, she issued a mental command to make the woman pass out. “It’s too bad you all aren’t as weak minded as she is,” Toria commented.

“Did she tell you anything?” Paris asked. “Who sent them? Do you know?”

“No, because she doesn’t know.” Toria sounded annoyed. “All she knows is that a Grell promised her some diamonds. You humans are still greedy, even after we did away with money in most of the pyramids.”

“Can you scan these two?” Paris suggested.

Toria tried, but without the success she wanted. “Only the human. The Grell-droid has a chip in his mind that I can’t work around. I think he knows, though. We’ll need another way of getting it out of him.”

Cecil Washington

Paris smirked sadistically.

He yanked his sword across the throat of the yogin and shot the Grell-droid in the face at the same time. Both of them fell to the floor hard. The human began convulsing while the Grell-droid screamed and held its face in agony. Paris then began kicking the Grell-droid several times in the stomach. It tried to cover up, but Paris was too much for it. He beat hit with his fists, legs, and the blunt side of the sword. The Grell-droid ended up with a bruised arm, bloody lip and bloody nose. Its eyes were also swelling up.

“O-chak! O-chak! Eeki-doech,” it begged, which translated as “Enough! Enough! I’ll talk!”

“Speak English, damnit!” Paris demanded as he held his sword at its neck.

“You know,” Toria observed, “I think the empathy centers of your brain must have been damaged in the battle.”

“Actually, I was always like this,” Paris said.

“We—we—we—were sent by Jarka,” it stuttered in English. “He sees you as threat to fortress. Even though you Second now, he still not recognize authority. He think you High Daughter of First One. But, he say you out of favor with him, like your father, and that you want to complete his mission. You better go, Toria. The word is if we no stop you, then others come finish job. If no others, Jarka himself come.”

“Kneel to the Buddha, B.I.” Paris ordered.

The Grell-droid knelt down. Paris hacked off its head with one cut.

“What was that for?” Toria asked.

“Look your grayness, we need to get the hell on out this joant. Now. You hear me?”

“I don’t have my saucer,” Toria answered. “Jarka had sent for me after my father was captured. I hope the driver will let us on.”

“Can you fly one by yourself?” he asked.

“I can program it to take us back to Grellicus.”

“What?” Paris wondered. “Another planet?”

“No, a city, deep below the surface of this one.”

They heard footsteps.

“Come on!” Paris grabbed her by her rough, leathery arm and pulled her in the other direction.

“Which way?” he asked.

“I—don’t know—” she stammered. “It’s—well, let me guide you with my mind.”

“No!” Paris asked as they turned another corner. No one had found them. Yet.

“Paris, you have to trust me. It’s easier that way. You let me lead and I’ll let you fight. It’s either that, or we both die in here!”

Cecil Washington

“No time, High Daughter,” the sympathizer replied. “Go, human. I’ll protect her and get her out of her. I understand what you want to do.”

Toria tried to interrupt. “But—” The sympathizer picked her up and carried her down the corridor.

Without looking, Paris fired off another shot before he retreated down the hall towards the machine. It killed the Grell-droid who was standing in front of Jarka.

Jarka called the squad to a halt in Grellic. “Let the High Daughter and the traitor go. The human is headed for the suppression machine. It looks like his powers may be returning. If that’s the case, we’d better eliminate him or else we’re ALL in danger.

Chapter 16

Paris ran down the corridor. His speed had returned. He fell upon the guards at the vault entrance with blinding speed and hacked them down with his sword. His link with Toria had also given him the access code for the vault. “At least my letting Toria inside my mind got me in this motherfucker,” he said as the large metal door closed behind him.

A second later, he was grazed on the shoulder by laser fire. Paris tumbled to the floor and threw his dagger, killing another Grell-droid. Soon, there were two of them in the area, facing him with weapons drawn. Paris stood still, again waiting for the cue to attack.

Then it occurred to him. He remembered what Jarka had said about why he was defeated. *This one would have probably killed a lot more of us if he had focussed on his sword instead of using his body energy.*

So he focussed on his sword, Yolnir.

The world seemed to slow down around him. The Grell-droids fired. He avoided both lines of fire and hit each one of them with a blow across their throats and stomachs. Before they hit the ground, Paris leaped at three more Grell-droids who were charging him. He killed them one by one.

Paris put away the sword and grabbed two pistol weapons from the dead Grell-droids. “Time to get back to technology,” he said to himself. He continued on.

He found the corridor that housed the control room. Robotic guns that came out of the walls and fired on him. At one point, the room filled up with nerve gas. Paris held his breath and ran as fast as he could. He was able to leave the contaminated area before the full effects of the chemicals could set in.

He felt weakened a little from the gas. But, he still arrived in the room with the suppression machine a minute later. Having the element of surprise, he let off a large volley of shots at the Grell-droids, dropping four or five of them before one of them could fire a shot that destroyed one of the weapons. Paris accelerated himself again enough to speed up to the Grell-droid and fire off a round through the neck, killing the creature instantly.

One Grell-droid remained. He threw up his hands in surrender.

“Structoor nen-ga-ha, too-too,” Paris said. (“Give me the destruct sequence.”) “Ih dorminallirook.” (“Or I’ll kill you.”)

The Grell-droid did not move. It looked at the panel.

Paris fired off a shot that struck it in the leg. It screamed in agony, but continued to resist him. “I don’t care what you do to me!” it yelled in English.

Paris kicked the Grell-droid in the stomach. He threw it against the wall and stuck his laser pistol in it’s groin. “Still don’t care what I do to you?”

Cecil Washington

He let Paris walk him over to the main console. With a gun still pointed at his crotch, the Grell-droid entered the auto-destruct sequence. Paris shot the console, causing it to burst into flames. The verbal audio warning began the station wide countdown in Grellic. There were only 30 minutes remaining.

A shot was fired from outside the room. It hit the Grell-droid's skull, killing it instantly. "Traitor!" yelled a Grell voice he recognized.

Paris turned around with his gun drawn.

"Let me go, Jarka," Paris demanded. "This place is finished!"

"You're the one who's finished," Jarka said. "We can rebuild this eventually. I don't know what you think you've done, but the world is still ours!"

"You can talk all the shit you want," Paris said as he casually drew his sword. He felt his body energy building inside. He thought that maybe his powers were returning.

"But I'm either going by you or through you, your choice!"

Jarka fired. The blast caught Paris center mast and knocked him back against the wall. Paris was burned, but still alive. He winced as he pulled himself back to his feet.

"Still think you stand a chance?" Jarka teased.

Paris charged him. Before he could blink, Jarka was screaming in pain. Paris had severed his hand-cannon. The weapon was on the floor, fizzling and firing mechanically into the wall where Paris had been standing.

"I'm focussing on my blade, Jarka," Paris said.

Luck came to Jarka. He reached out and grabbed Paris's neck and threw him into the hallway like a rag doll. Paris' body flew against the wall. Before he could recover from the impact, Jarka had kicked his pistol from his hand and was choking him. Paris tried to cut him with Yolnir, but Jarka was too close for the attack to be effective. He dropped his sword and resorted to empty hand techniques. A well placed grab to the groin and a palm strike to the chest was enough to get Jarka off of him.

Jarka kicked at Paris. Paris dodged the kick and swept Jarka's standing leg. Jarka rolled out of the attack and landed on his feet. As he backed up, Paris called Yolnir to his hands. The sword obeyed. It flew into his hand.

"If you had any honor, you'd fight me unarmed," Jarka accused.

Paris noticed that Jarka had produced another laser weapon in his good hand. "Obviously," he said looking at the weapon, "you don't, do you?"

Jarka fired. This time, Paris avoided the attack and severed Jarka's other hand in one motion. Jarka fell to his knees. With a final swing of the sword, Paris killed him.

Paris grabbed his pistol from the floor, returned his sword to its resting-place and fled. There were only 28 minutes left until the auto-destruct ignited.

Five minutes later, he arrived at the launch bay. He expected to see the Grell-droids either fleeing for their lives or united in their efforts to destroy Toria or him. What he saw instead was that the Grell-droids were firing at each other. To his left, guarding Toria's craft, were hundreds of Grell-droids who had their heads tied in rags like human yogin. On the other side were others who were wearing nothing unusual for their kind. Instead, they were screaming out battle cries of loyalty to the First One.

"Kill the traitors!" yelled the loyal Grells.

"The Second shall be the First!" screamed the rebels.

The laser fire inside of the bay was intense. The Grell-droids were destroying the structure around them. Fragments and fragments of metal were falling from the ceiling—some of which were killing more beings than the direct attacks. A few more selfish Grell-droids on both sides tried to fly their crafts away from the commotion. Only one managed to leave before the squadron door was shut. Everyone was trapped.

"If the explosion doesn't kill us all, these damned fools sure will," Paris said to himself.

Then it hit him. His legs went out from under him. He hit the floor hard. The inside of his mouth tasted strange.

"Th-th-th-the—gas," he stammered to himself. The nerve gas was taking effect. Even with his superior constitution he wasn't immune.

Concentrate, he told himself. You can make it. Just a little farther is all. Come on! Focus your chi.

He did and it worked. He managed to stave off the effects of the gas and pull himself up before he had to dive on the ground again in order to avoid a stray laser bullet. He could feel the effects of the gas lingering inside of him like an undercurrent. He realized that if he didn't get help soon, the gas would take over his body completely and he may die.

Paris. Is that you? someone said in his mind.

He staggered to the wall of the entrance and leaned. *Yes, it's me*, he said, struggling to maintain focus and fight off the gas at the same time. *Who is this?*

It's me, Paris. Toria. We haven't got much time. We've got to leave or these fools are going to bring the place down on us. I sense that something is wrong. Can you pull yourself together enough to make it to the saucer?

"Yes," he said out loud. It was no use. His mental powers had to be reserved for dealing with the toxin in his body while he fought off the dangers that were outside of it.

His instincts screamed danger. Paris ducked. An energy blast went off over his head. He glanced backwards to see a team of five loyal Grell-droids behind him. The feelings of paralysis left him as he fired at them, killing two of them

right away and wounding a third. Suddenly, his vision was blurry. The remaining two able-bodied Grells fired a volley of blasts that he avoided by luck.

“Traitor!” one of them screamed.

It pulled out a large knife that appeared as a long, thin pole to Paris’ effected eyes. Still, he killed it before the other Grell-droid fired a shot that grazed him across his shoulder.

Paris returned fire. His shot destroyed its weapon.

The firefight boiled intensely, as if the commotion were evolving into one large being. But to Paris, everything looked too blurry for him to even begin to cross without hope of being hit. So, he waited.

The auto-destruct sequence went to five minutes and counting as his vision returned to him. Then, Paris fell into a fit of coughing and wheezing. His lungs were failing him because of the nerve gas. “At least I can see”, he gasped to himself.

There was only one way out that he could see; through the middle of the battle itself. But he needed some cover. How was he going to manage that? As far as he knew, Toria’s saucer was not a battle craft. Also, most Grell saucers needed to be airborne in order for them to be able to transport a life form aboard. He’d have to risk his life running through a hurtle of laser bullets or die from the explosion or die from the effects of the nerve gas. Neither option looked too appealing.

The ceiling exploded. He looked up and saw that it was Ori’s saucer. That meant that John and Leah had managed to penetrate the fortress’ defenses. Perhaps there was a way after all!

A few seconds later he was on board the saucer. He guessed that there were about four minutes left before the explosion.

Leah and John were inside the saucer. Leah was piloting while John was running the transport controls. They were both dressed in the black body armor that Ori had given them during their training. They too had come to find a new level of respect and admiration for the Grell in spite of his role as oppressor. How could he tell them that their new friend was dead?

“Look,” Paris spit out as his speech returned to him. He looked down at his left hand. It was starting to go numb. The nerve gas was shutting down his body at random. A second later, his left arm was useless. It dangled on his side as if it were a necklaces that was attached to his body at the shoulder. “John, Leah, we can’t leave yet. We at least have to get Toria and a few of the—”

“No time for that Paris,” John interrupted. “We’ve got to destroy this place and get the hell out. Besides, you look sick. I need to run the weapons and tend to you and we also have to find Ori. Who’s going to—”

“Shut up, John!” Paris barked. His anger seemed to fight of the gas somewhat. He shook his arm, relieved that at least for a minute, his body was

functional. “Ori’s dead, okay? He’s dead! The only one who could help us right now is his daughter?”

Leah turned was paying full attention back to the saucer. “I’m scanning for his bio-chip print, Paris, but I ain’t finding it. I love you, by the way baby.” She smiled at him. “Anyway, I can’t get a read. So either he must be dead, or—”

“I said he’s dead you idiots!” Paris shook his head, realizing that now the nerve gas had started on his mind. “I’m sorry, it’s the gas. Nerve gas. I’m—I’m trippin’ and I’m probably going to die unless I get an antidote. I don’t think any of you can help me, can you? No, you can’t. You need to get his daughter. She might be able to come up with a counter agent.”

John and Leah felt sad but they did not have time to mourn. They continued on with the mission.

“How can I find her?” John asked. He help Paris sit down then returned to the console.

“Just—two—one—minute, must be one minny...” Paris was becoming delirious.

“One what?” John asked.

“Shit! This place must be getting ready to go up. Paris—Paris!” Leah yelled.

Paris was paralyzed. His complexion was beginning to pale to a dark yellowish-brown. He stared into space. His mind had returned to normal but his body was completely unresponsive other than his breathing and his voice. But, even his breathing was starting to sound labored. “Thank God I can still talk!” he gasped. “John, Leah, do this: scan for a female. She’s probably the only female down there. Scan for a Grell female in the craft down there. Hurry up!”

John scrambled his fingers across the alien console. The ship rocked from an impact. They were all shaken, but fine. “I’ve got something. Grey female all right. I’ll beam her aboard and we can get the hell on out of here!”

John manipulated the controls. A few seconds later, Toria appeared. Dazed, she looked around, afraid. She panicked until she saw Paris.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she said, relieved. “You humans must be my father’s chattel, too. I am Toria, Ori’s daughter. Quick, there’s no time to wait. Let’s go! Hurry! Hurry! That’s an order!” She ran over to Paris. “This one’s been hit by a biological agent. I’ll administer an antidote when we’re clear. Father must have kept one around here somewhere for his humans.”

Leah rolled her eyes at Toria. “We don’t work for your father, okay? We’re his friends. Now hold on until we get out of here.” Leah maneuvered the controls and shot the craft up and away from the fire fight.

As soon as the ship was clear, the fortress exploded. It was a boom that sounded as if it rang around the world. Tons of snow, ice and debris sprang up from the source of the blast. Their ship barely made it from Antarctica in time.

Cecil Washington

Leah turned on the autopilot. After it was set, she ran over to Toria's side. Somehow, she could see the resemblance between Toria and Ori that went beyond the two of them being Grells. Under Toria's supervision, John found a hidden medical kit that Ori had left. Inside of it was a drug that acted as a panacea to humans by boosting the immune system.

"Your immune systems are so simple," Toria said, "that this weak drug ought to be enough to encourage him to fight off the agent." She injected the drug into Paris using a needle from the kit. Paris' body relaxed. He still was not moving, but his breathing and complexion were returning to normal.

Leah stared at Toria. She knew that she had seen her before somewhere. Most humans obeyed a Grell whenever they saw one out of cultural conditioning and usually had trouble telling one from the other unless they had been with the alien for a long period of time. But Toria, somehow, seemed familiar. "Ori never told me he had a daughter. Tell me girl, what's your name again?"

"Toria." Toria tried to probe Leah's mind in order to get her name. She was unsuccessful. "You're a null aren't you? You're immune to telepathic communication and attack? I can't get in unless you let me. Well, you'll have to tell me your name then."

"Leah." She looked down at Paris. "He'll be okay soon, right?" She stroked his forehead lovingly, but still kept a suspicious eye on Toria.

"Yes, my yogin will be fine," Toria answered.

"Good. Thanks for taking care of MY man," Leah said with forced tolerance. "You know, for some reason, I just—well, no, it's crazy, but—I feel like I should not like you for some reason."

Toria was quite. She remembered Leah from Philadelphia. She hoped that Leah would forget about the Aryan Carnivore Worship cult and Toria's role in it. If Leah were not a null, a simple mental suggestion would have made her forget about the incident or not be angry about it.

Paris sat up. His upper body was moving again, but his legs were still stiff. However, he was looking and feeling better. "Hey, thanks Toria. I'll be all right now." He turned to Leah and kissed her. "It's so good to see you again, baby," he swooned.

Leah hugged him, returned his kiss and stood up. "How much longer are you going to be incapacitated, baby?" She started glaring at Toria.

"Oh, just for a little bit longer," Paris replied. "I can use my chi to help along the antidote. Most people would probably need at least a day or more. I won't be at my absolute best, but I'll be walking in a few minutes."

Toria backed away from Leah. Leah moved towards her. Toria dropped the needle out of nervousness instead of clenching it in her hands. Leah moved forward faster.

"What—what's going on?" Paris asked, feebly trying to stand up.

Leah smirked. “This bitch is the same fucking Grell that was behind that Aryan-Carnivore bullshit in Philly. I knew it! She’s got some hell to pay. If it wasn’t for her ass we’d never had been in this situation now!” She turned her attention back on Toria. “I may not be with pyramid security anymore, but I’m going to show you what security really means!”

John looked over his shoulder at them and laughed. Paris thought that maybe John had some hostile feelings for Toria as well, considering she was responsible for the Black and Brown Diaspora in the Philadelphia pyramid. Either that or he had gotten hit enough by Leah and Mauria the year before to learn when to mind his own business.

The ship was large for a flying saucer. Even though the room was spacious enough to be a cockpit, emergency medial area and transport pod in one, it was not so large that Toria could run from an enraged security officer. She ran on her chubby little alien feet as fast as she could, but Leah moved with the determination of a tiger that was fixated on its prey. She grabbed Toria by her large alien head, put her in a headlock, and then slammed her down on the floor. There, she mounted Toria. She let loose with her rain of chokes, slaps and other blows. Eventually she went down the list of which each pummel was “for”. “This one’s for my mother! That’s for my sister! That’s for my cousin Tracey and I don’t even like her ass! This one’s for my father! That’s for my baby brother...!”

Paris wobbled to his feet and slowly dragged himself over to the melee. He saw that Toria had not lied about not being a fighter. She tried her best to fight off Leah’s attacks but it was no good—especially since Ori had shown her a few more martial tactics before he died. Leah beat, stomped, slapped and cursed Toria for a full two minutes before Paris was strong enough to pull the two apart. Toria was a bruised gray mess with a swollen face after the tussle, while Leah was neither winded nor had a hair out of place.

Paris tended to Toria’s wounds with other supplies in the medical kit. Leah stood over the two of them. She was still angry. “I guess you’re just a slave for these grays, aren’t you?”

“You studied under her father, remember?” Paris reminded her.

“Yeah, but I never handed him my soul like you did. He was nice, though, for a gray. He’ll be missed,” Leah said nonchalantly.

“Paris,” Toria gasped as Paris wiped her alien blood away from her small mouth and dabbed her puffed-up gray eyes. “You’re supposed to protect me from danger. If any of you cared anything about my father, you would have never let your mate or any other human attack me. I thought you were a warrior, a yogin. Don’t you have any loyalty?”

“I guess the fact that he saved your life when you were down there meant nothing to you did it, gray woman?” John interjected.

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Paris ignored John. “You were in no real danger,” Paris replied. “Leah wouldn’t kill you. Besides, you don’t know how many times I wanted to kick your father’s ass myself. If you ask me, considering all of the problems you caused for black folk back in Philly pyramid, and, what you all did around my way, you got what was coming to you.”

Toria pouted, John and Leah laughed, and the four of them returned to Mauria’s settlement a few minutes later. Fortunately for Toria, Mauria had shut off her mother’s device as soon as she saw the ship off in the distance. After the destruction of the fortress and the life-suppression machine that it contained, the device that protected New Vermont from the Grells was no longer necessary.

Chapter 17

Paris stood outside of the saucer with his arms folded. He guarded the entrance patiently. Toria was inside, resting. She still felt a little sore from Leah's beating. Paris was under orders from her to keep all unauthorized humans out of her craft, which meant that only he, Mauria, John and the doctor were allowed access to the craft's interior.

Mauria approached the craft. She was swinging her sword in an intricate pattern. She smiled at Paris then put the sword in its sheath.

Paris looked to make sure it was Mauria, then stared off into space. He leaned back against the saucer. He avoided meeting her gaze.

"You still don't want to look at me, do you?" Mauria flirted. "I guess I look too old for you now, huh Paris?"

Paris looked at her again. She had been so badly injured in the fight with the Grell-droids that she had to allow herself to age so that her chi could be focussed on healing. "I am over a hundred years old, you know." She looked like a youthful woman of fifty.

He was unresponsive.

Mauria walked up and hugged him. Paris was still and did not return her embrace.

She grew annoyed. "Why are you acting so hurt? I'm the one who should be hurt! I'm the one who lost."

Paris looked at her and said nothing.

Mauria continued. "Fine, Paris. Fine. I know what it is; you're still mad at me because of Leah. You think of me as some sort of drama queen, right? Well, I guess I can see why you would say that. I have caused nothing but problems for you and her." She held him again. He was as stoic as a tree. "Fine, Daphne. Fine, I'll be Apollo."

"Who?" Paris asked. "You're nuts!"

"I guess you didn't spend enough time in my library," Mauria sniped. "Or am I too old for you?"

Paris gently pushed her away and broke his coldness. "No, you are not too old, you are too crazy. Plus, you're my cousin. Besides, you nearly beat Leah to death so you could have me. You were supposed to be my teacher, not my molester." He put his hand on her face gently. "Mauria, you are a very beautiful woman, old or young. I admit, part of the pull you had on me before was sexual. You were like a black goddess calling me from beyond. But then, I met Leah. Leah may not be as powerful as we are, but she is a good person. She's smart, she's funny, she's crazy too at times, but I love her. Don't you understand that? I

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love her. I'm sorry, but I do." He kissed her on the forehead. "I hope we can be friends, Mauria. At the least, we should be able to be warriors-in-arms."

His words hurt her worse than any battle wounds could. Tears welled up in her eyes, but somehow she maintained her composure. She wiped her eyes and changed the subject. "Does my gray aunt in there have any control over your mind?"

"No," Paris answered, relieved that Mauria was avoiding the issue of the two of them. "She's claiming me as her protector because of the deal that I had with her father."

"I see," Mauria answered. "She doesn't have to control your mind. She can manipulate you into doing whatever she wants. You're HER knight in shining armor now, not just Leah's. Do you have feelings for her? For Toria?"

"What?" Paris protested in falsetto. "Not for no gray bitch. Never. This is strictly warrior-code."

"Oh yeah, I forgot, you let your wife beat up on her. My mistake. Some warrior-code," she said. "Does your new mommy in there know about the part of the deal that you made with her dad that includes you destroying the First One?"

Paris laughed. "You know, you're awfully nonchalant about the grey side of your family. Girl, you shouldn't be 'shamed of your heritage. Don't you even care that Ori died?"

Mauria became angry. "As far as I am concerned, I am black. I don't care that my grandmamma may have gotten it on with some little gray bastard from outer space. I don't look like no alien, I don't feel like no alien, and to me, I am a human being. I am a black woman born on planet Earth. The only thing gray about me is the blade of my sword." She made the teeth-sucking sound. "And as far as miss gray-thing up in that saucer, that is one thing I can agree with your girlfriend about." She grinned at Paris. "Leah and I have two things in common; one, we both think you're fine, and two, we both want to beat down Toria until she stops breathing."

Paris laughed again. "Thanks for the compliment, but what good will beating her do? She won't change. She's just as arrogant as Ori was."

"You got that right," Mauria chuckled. "Besides, this ain't the first time she got stomped by a human. Ask her about she found out that she could no longer control me telepathically."

Paris shook his head. "No, never mind. I can only imagine. Anyway, what brings you here? Are you going in?"

"She summoned me. I decided to respond. Besides, I pretty much have an idea of what she wants. She wants more protection when she returns to Grellicus City. I guess she doesn't think that you'll be enough."

"And you couldn't tell her no from a distance?"

“Why should I? It’s much more fun to break the bad news to Aunt Toria in person,” Mauria said sarcastically. “Let’s go inside. She’s waiting for us anyway.”

Paris was quiet for a second and realized that Mauria was right: Toria was beckoning to the two of them. They went inside and waited. Toria sat up, still sore from the wounds, and told them John and Leah were also on their way.

An hour later, the five of them sat down inside of the spacecraft. The humans were either sitting on the floor or on a platform while Toria stood.

“Now that I’m better, we will have to continue with the mission,” Toria began.

“What mission?” John asked. “You mean your father’s mission? I thought that you weren’t interested in that sort of thing.”

“Well,” Toria answered, “that sort of thing cannot be avoided any longer. I’ve monitored communications recently. A civil war is about to erupt among my people. The life suppression device is causing a large spontaneous growth of vegetation on this planet. There are trees growing rapidly in places that were desert a few weeks before. All of this vegetation is going to cool the earth, change the air and make life hostile to us. We may still be able to survive, but the gases and other thing that the vegetation gives off will weaken us over the centuries. Most of these old earth plants are toxic to carnivores. They are dying in astronomical numbers. Some of them have tried to seek refuge underground. Those few that make it far enough to the city are still too many; they are being killed by Grell-droids and by our sentry-bots. And the humans! They are either shattering their pyramids or leaving them entirely. The machines that magnify our mind control have all been failing one right after the other. It’s time for us Grells to either leave this planet or die. We only have a few decades left at most at the rate things are going.”

“So, why don’t you all just leave?” Leah asked. She reached over and held Paris’ hand out of habit. Paris responded by rubbing his fingers on the back of her soft knuckles and skin.

“Let me guess,” Paris speculated. “Sympathizers, right?”

Toria sighed. “Yes. Sympathizers. Many of the Grells and Grell-droids who were loyal to my father are protesting our leaving the planet with you all still being as dependent on us as you are. The peaceful Grells think that we should educate you all on how to use your own culture and technology before we go. You humans are not illiterate as a whole, but you are certainly capable of far more than we have allowed you to be. We rebels want to rebuild your cities and restore your libraries and computer networks. We want the planet to be yours again before we go.

“But the problem is with the First One. He still does not want to leave Earth. He thinks that the pyramids can be restored, the suppression device rebuilt and

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humanity will come crawling back to us. He is mad. And now, he is summoning me to appear before him. I don't think it will be a trial, but he does seem urgent in wanting to see me. And, several other rebels and sympathizers have found me through communication and telepathy. They say that the First One wants to test my loyalty. If I pass the test, I live. Others say that there are patriots who want to see me dead. Since First One is the only Grell who can take the life of another, they want to use their yogin to do their dirty work for them."

"Wait," John asked, "you mean, you all can't kill each other directly, but it's okay for you to use your servants to kill someone? That's insane."

"It's our way," Toria answered. "That's why we use other species as our protectors."

Paris interrupted. "What do you want us to do?"

"You know what I want, Paris," Toria answered. "I want you all to accompany me back to the city. I want John and Leah to drop me off and return here. Mauria and you are to be my protectors inside of the city."

"Out of the question," Mauria said forcefully. "My people need me here. I risked my life to destroy the fortress. As far as I'm concerned, it's only a matter of time before humanity is rid of you people anyway. I don't care if I'm related to you all or not, I want to see you go from this world."

Toria cut Mauria a look of anger that was too human for a Grey face.

Paris spoke up first "You sure you don't have any black in YOU Toria?" he teased.

"SHUT UP!" Toria screamed at him.

Paris had never seen another Grey get so volatile. Then he remembered part of her memories from her mind-blend with him and realized that was a sore spot with her due to Ori's cheating on her mother with black human women.

"Paris said. "Done. Leah and John can drop us off at the Grellic city and I'll protect Toria until after she resolves things with the first one. We'll leave out in three days."

The humans got up and started walking out of the saucer.

Toria was confused. "Three days? Why three days? Why not tomorrow?"

"Because," Paris called out as he put his arm around Leah, "I need to spend some time with my lady!"

Chapter 18

Three days later, Paris had a nightmare about the destruction of the Pomonkey Pyramid.

He stood with the aliens and other yogin. As the yogin hearded the people towards the center of the pyramid, Paris saw the looks of anger and betrayal that burned from the eyes of his mother, father and sister. "I'm sorry, Momma and Daddy. I'm sorry Karen," he whispered. The worst part about it was that Paris knew that by that point, he was strong enough to resist the Grells' mind control.

Most of the people were pulled by the power of a blue orb. The orb was a Grey device that allowed Grells to control human behavior for hours at a time. Few humans had a natural immunity to the machine. The rest were herded by yogin humans to the center of the pyramid. There, Ori and a large group of other Greys stood on a large platform and yelled out the long list of violations that the pyramid dwellers had committed in their pursuit of unauthorized human religions.

Ori stepped forward on the platform with Paris at his side. "The sentence for this crime is death," he called out to the humans. "I am willing to lessen the severity of the punishment if there is any among you who can convince me otherwise."

Brain dead and/or horrified, the other humans remained silent.

A new feeling overwhelmed Paris: it was anger, at himself and at his masters.

"I speak up!" He yelled. He drew his sword and held it at his side. He began issuing a challenge in Grellic. *I challenge you for my freedom, Master. I challenge you for my freedom and the freedom of my people. If I win, you must grant us leniency and spare our lives. If you still must take a life, then take mine instead.*

Ori responded in English. "That is unacceptable, Paris. You cannot challenge me for their freedom, you can only win your own. I may even decide to spare one or all of your family members. You cannot free all of the humans here unless you kill every Grey on this stage. And you and I both know that is impossible. We control you."

"It's not impossible, Ori," Paris hissed. "Because you don't control me any longer."

Ori motioned to another yogin. The yogin handed him his sword. "We'll make this easy. I won't resort to mind control. We'll settle this in combat."

"You're a fool if you think you can beat me physically, Ori."

The Greys and yogin moved back, giving the two of them room to fight.

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Ori struck first, but not with his weapon. He projected an energy blast from his hands that Paris easily avoided. The blast, however, hit a Grey that was watching and sent it flying on its back.

Ori complained in Grellic. “You made me hurt one of my own! Now you know you’re going to have to pay, don’t you?”

Paris countered in English. “Shut up and fight, Teacher. I’ll show you just how much I learned under you.”

Paris leaped into the air. His sword came down hard on Ori’s. Ori fell to one knee. Paris kicked Ori in his diaphragm. He brought the sword down towards his neck. Ori avoided the blow and aimed a hard thrust at Paris’ stomach. Paris sidestepped the thrust and swung his blade at Ori’s neck. He stopped it just short of making contact.

Paris used the sword to guide Ori to his feet. “Ori, you ain’t shit! You really have spent too much time teaching. There was a time when you’d have knocked my weapon out of my hand. I guess you can’t do that now that I’m beyond your mind control, can you?”

The rest of the Grells babbled and panicked. Some of them rambled about the end of their order, while others recalled how Mauria had done the same thing to Ori before. Still others felt that Grells like Ori got what he deserved since they were training humans to tap into their spiritual power instead of only showing them hand-to-hand techniques.

“Two out of three,” Ori demanded.

“Come on man, give it up. You lost. Stop acting like a punk.”

“Two out of THREE!!!”

Paris pulled back and went to the guard position. He noticed that his minor victory had done something to the hold that the device had on the humans. A few of them seemed to have shaken off it’s influence after seeing a member of their species get the upper hand with the oppressor. Two of the newly liberated humans began praying.

This time, Ori struck first. A blow from his sword grazed Paris ear. Paris countered the blow by tripping Ori with the broad side of his own weapon. Ori pulled himself to his feet and made another lunge. Paris avoided this lunge the way he did the first. This time, he countered by hitting Ori in the head with the hilt of his sword. After Ori was dazed, Paris sent him flying into the Greys and yogins with a palm strike to the chest that was powered by a loud yell.

Ori stood up, rubbing his chest. He pointed at Paris and attempted a psionic attack. Paris’ mind put up a reflexive shield. Paris walked slowly towards him. “That’s two out of three, Ori. You know you don’t stand a chance. Now release me and my people or I’ll have to shank you in front of everyone!” ‘Shank’ meant ‘stab’ in Paris’ dialect.

The other Greys closed their eyes and used their own power they had over the other fighters that were present.. The rest of the yogin drew their swords and guns and circled Paris, pushing Ori out of the way as they made their way to him. Paris felt no fear, despite the impossible odds. He drew his laser gun in his left hand and stood, ready to take on the mob and die if necessary.

“Come on!” Paris screamed. “Come on! Bring it!”

More and more humans broke free of the machine’s influence. A murmur went up from the town. A few of them started walking towards the platform, yelling and shaking their fists in anger. Their actions began having an effect on the yogin as well. Half of them shook off the Grey’s mental influence. They stood with Paris, turning their weapons on the rest who were still being controlled by the aliens and the machine.

“Enough!” Ori ordered. Everyone—the crowd, the Grells, the yogin and Paris—stopped and looked at him. “Paris has won his freedom. We can’t control him or many of you any longer. Please, everyone, lower your weapons and remain calm.”

“No!” rang sporadic cries from the yogin and the human civilians. “No! You want to kill us!” “Never!” “We can’t trust you!”

“Kill the Greys!” an old black woman yelled from the crowd. Her request mutated into a chant on every human save a few.

All of the yogin broke free of the alien influence. However, a few of the yogin and human civilians still sided with the Grells out of loyalty. But the yogin, being mentally free for the first time in their adult lives, were confused.

Ori calmed the commotion. “Please! Settle down. It’s clear that the people of Pomonkey have no use for our law and in fact, we have no way to enforce it right now. Therefore, we’ll leave. You’ve won. This pyramid is yours.” Ori turned around to the rest of the Grells and the other yogin. “We will leave and discuss this with the First One. For now, all control is to revert to the humans. A few of us will have to remain in order to show the humans how to control the pyramid’s environment. Any yogin who wishes may come or go out of his own free will.”

Paris was shocked that all the other yoggin left with the Grells. The Greys and their supporters slowly marched off the platform. The rest of Pomonkey cheered.

Ori walked up to Paris. He placed a proud hand on his shoulder. “Your people are safe for now, but I don’t know for how long. You have stayed their execution with me, but I don’t know what First One will order me to do.”

“First One?” Paris asked. “I thought you were in command.”

“He is in command of my people.” Ori sighed. “But, I will keep my promise I made to you. Since you won your freedom from me in both mind and body, I will keep my word. If anything happens, I will do my best to make sure that one or all of your family is spared.”

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“I don’t understand you Greys. Why do you need humans? Why do you even need the yogin?”

Ori removed his hand from Paris’ shoulder. “You were right about my inability to fight you, Paris. Before, I only beat you because I could control you. Now that I can’t, your fighting abilities have surpassed even mine.”

Ori shook his head and turned his back from Paris as the crowd dispersed itself. Soon, there was only he, Ori and his family in the square. His family soon joined them on the platform.

Ori turned to Paris’ father Fred. “I never intended for him or any other human to become this strong-to become strong enough for you to liberate yourselves from us. On the one hand, I had always hoped that would happen. I guess I didn’t think it would happen this soon.”

Fred was proud. “One thing you couldn’t possibly know about the human spirit, and the spirit of black people in particular: we have the power to overcome anything. You think that life’s been that much easier for black people since you all put us in pyramids? We still have to deal with prejudice, even though we are all in this thing together.”

Paris’ mother Elizabeth continued. “That’s why we need our religion, Ori. I know you all don’t want us to follow it, but it has brought us together. It has helped the people here see past our differences and realize that it is God who will deliver humanity back to its rightful place. And, he can deliver us with love. We don’t have to hate you Greys in order to reclaim our world. We can all live here and be brothers and sisters in the eyes of Christ.”

Ori fell silent. Karen saw through Ori’s quiet response. “Momma, Daddy, that’s why they don’t want us to have our religion. They know that God can see us through. They know that if we turn to God and not them, that we’ll become stronger than they are. That’s why they made it illegal and destroyed all of the buildings and tried to hide all of the books after the pyramids were made.” She walked up and looked Ori in the face. “That’s true, isn’t it? ISN’T IT?”

Ori looked away. For the first time in his life, Paris saw his master intimidated by the one thing that would free humanity: the truth.

“So,” Paris smiled, “my sister is right, isn’t she? You always talked to me about how one-day human beings would be free again, but you never really meant it, did you? You taught me and showed me things that you never meant for me to use for myself. As strong as you wanted me to become, you never meant for me to be a warrior for my own people, did you Ori? That’s why you took me away from home while I was young, so that you could use me.” He shook his head. “So now what’s going to happen? We can’t be the only people in the world who have seen through the game.”

Ori faced all of them. “That’s where you’re wrong. You are the first humans to rebel against us. The problem is that you definitely will not be the last. And

that is something that the First One is not going to like at all. He may still order your execution. If he does, I don't think I'll be able to stop him. The best I may be able to do is protect you four, individually."

"We're not worried about that," Fred said. "We're going to put that in God's hands. For now, you all will know this: God's love has returned to his human children. Even if these are our last days, at least we will no longer have to live them out in bondage."

Ori left for Grellicus city.

The people of Pomonkey prayed and asked God to watch over their home and protect them from the vengeance of the Greys. Eventually, everyone had all but forgotten about the grim prediction that Ori had revealed to Paris' and his family. But three years later to the date of the uprising, the Greys returned and destroyed the pyramid.

A small fleet of saucers flew over a ground army of carnivores. Paris didn't know that carnivores were intelligent enough to be trained to fight as a unit, but there they were, armed and ready. The humans inside of the pyramid did not stand a chance. Waves of shattered glass and debris filled the air as people either ran for cover or fought back the best they could. Paris killed scores of the carnivores before a blast from one of the alien ships knocked him unconscious.

He awoke to a world of death. The Grells had not only betrayed the humans who used to serve them, they decided they no longer need their reptilian troops. Half of the carnivores laid dead and dieing, victims of what he now knew in hindsight was some sort of biological agent. The others looked as if they'd been shot to death by the saucers. As far as the eye could see there were dead men, women, children and carnivores. The air was filled with the stench of burning debris and charred flesh.

To his horror, he found his parents. His father died with his hands around the neck of a carnivore, while his mother's charred body had been ripped open by either claws or reptile teeth, he could not tell which. He thought one of the explosions had finished her off. At least, he thought, she did not feel what the carnie did to her. A hideously burned black girl of about twelve or thirteen laid beside them. She had braid that were burned into her flesh. Her face was charred beyond recognition. But, he took that girl for Karen. This time, however, something not quite right.

The dream made him realize that he was wrong. His memory of the events leading up to the destruction melted away. In fact, the whole world melted away and left him at the bottom of a well of darkness.

But at the top of that well was a light of hope. And smiling back at him from that light was a young woman who smiled at him with a familiar face.

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Paris realized that Karen was still alive. She had been trying to reach him for a year through the dreams. As his parents had told him in the dream he had months before, he really was not alone in the world.

Chapter 19

“You know, don’t you?” Toria asked, worried. “My father kept it from you, but you know. You sister finally broke through to you with her mind. Now I’m not going to have your full focus while we’re in the city, am it?”

Paris turned to Toria. He looked over at Leah and John, who were busy working the controls of the saucer. He turned and looked at Mauria, still surprised that she had changed her mind about going. “She’d always told me she had some psychic ability, but I never believed her.” He shook his head in frustration. “Look, Toria, I’m not the one you need to worry about, Toria. Your niece over there probably hates you more than I do.”

“I doubt that,” John chimed in. “I know I’d be pretty pissed off if someone kept that from me.”

Paris folded his arms, hoping that he could push his anger down inside himself. “Well, it’s not going to do me any good getting mad at Ori right now, is it? He’s dead anyway. Besides, I still have a deal with this one I plan to honor.” He pointed at Toria. “Even though there is obvious no word in Grellic for the term.”

“What term?” Toria asked naively.

“Honor!” all three humans said at once.

The saucer made it’s way through the air with the speed of a jet. John and Leah had to be careful not to take the craft into hyper-speed since they were only going around the planet. The ship made its way off of the east coast of the former United States and headed straight for the ocean. It flew to the bottom of the sea and through an opening in the ocean floor.

The water was sealed out from the large flight tunnel by an invisible barrier. Toria’s ship then sailed through the air for an hour before it reached an enormous hollowed area. Inside the monstrous opening was a large floating city that looked as if it must have run through the center of the earth itself. It was Grellicus, the grey capital city that was hidden deep beneath the earth.

Toria made them land the craft near the tunnel opening. She turned to a comm panel and sent out a message. “You all will wait here,” she said to her companions. “If I’m not back in two weeks, return to the settlement without me.”

“Famous last words,” Leah joked.

Mauria cut Leah a glance. “That was low, even for you.” Then, she chuckled. “But, it was funny.”

Toria found no humor in it. She ignored them. “Mauria, Paris, you two come outside of the saucer with me, okay?”

“Is that such a good idea?” Mauria said. “I mean, aren’t I known as a human rebel? Paris at least still spoke to your father after he got his freedom. Me, I’ve

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never talked to any of you people. Maybe I should stay here and protect these two.”

“It’s up to you,” Toria answered. “Right now, I don’t think it will be much of an issue. If you come to the city with me, most Grells will assume that I must have promised you both something to win your loyalty. Either that, or they’ll think that you still have SOME feeling of loyalty to Father’s investment in you.”

Paris motioned to them both. “Come on, let’s go, if we’re going.” He paused. “How are we going?”

“I sent a message out to one of the Grells who was loyal to my father. He’s on his way to pick me up. I’m leaving the ship here. I don’t want anyone loyal to the First One to have easy access to my father’s records. If I’d left Father’s things back at the settlement, then New Vermont may be in danger,” Toria said.

“Aw,” Paris said sarcastically, “thanks for thinking about us humans for once. Bitch.”

“You know something, Paris? I bet your own females won’t allow you to use that word with them, so I’d appreciate it if you didn’t use that word with me,” Toria demanded.

“It’s all good for you to assert your femininity, Miss Toria,” he said with more sarcasm, “but the last time I checked one of my females had her hands at your throat.”

“You still can show me some respect, Paris,” Toria huffed.

“I show you the same respect I ought to show who’s been lying to me about my sister.”

Toria said nothing.

“Mad huh? Damn, you are just like your father.” Paris pulled out Yolnir and twirled it around. “I think you’re really mad because you can control me like I control my sword.”

A tiny, boat-like craft arrived a few minutes later. The driver of the craft was a Grell female that had the breasts, hips and curves of a voluptuous human woman. Paris smiled as he secretly studied her body. He thought that she’d be rather attractive if it weren’t for the fact that she was a Grell. He greeted the Grell woman with a handshake and could swear that he detected a hint of jealousy in Toria.

He was right. “Why did your father send YOU out here, Karna?” Toria complained as Paris and she took their seats.

“Why did your father send you out here with a body like that?” Paris chimed in from the rear of the craft.

Karna smiled. She input the lift-off sequence into the craft’s control panel. The air-boat began flying towards Grellicus. Then, she turned her head slightly towards Paris and began speaking to him in English. “My great-grandmother was a human female. She was black, like you. I guess I inherited some of her genes.”

She rubbed her buttocks and breasts. Toria rolled her eyes. “Most women in our race are not quite as plain as your new mistress. I bet that an outsider couldn’t tell her from some of the males, could they?”

“You will show me some respect as The Second, Karna!” Toria ordered.

Karna laughed and ignored the order. “Look, we are doing this for Ori, do you understand? Ori, not you. You know that up until a few weeks ago you considered The First One to be more of a father to you than your own blood. We rebels are merely hoping that there is a slim chance that Ori’s death has opened your eyes to the truth.”

“And what truth is that?” Toria asked.

Karna shook her head impatiently. “That the First One will kill us all in his thirst for power and immortality. We should be making a harmonious relationship with the humans instead of trying to change their planet to suit our needs. Look at what we did to our own society? All he cares about is playing God so that he can have some meaning in his endless existence.”

“Where are you taking us?” Paris asked.

“Toria is to report to the First One as soon as she arrives back in the city. I don’t know if it’s going to be a private meeting or if it’s going to end up being a trial of some sort. Either way, she’s got to get back,” Karna explained. “Fortunately for me, I’m a null, so the First One has no way of knowing that I’m a rebel. In fact, most of us who are rebelling are nulls. Ori was one of the few powerful mentalists who ever decided to challenge tradition.”

Toria became concerned. “Do you think that I’ll be able to block out the First One’s mind probes? I mean, will he know that my feelings have changed. He couldn’t read me before, but, well, you know, things may have changed since I’ve been gone.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Paris assured her. “He’s probably more concerned with what you say than what you think at this point. Besides, I’m sure he knew how Ori felt and yet he let him run around freely didn’t he?”

“I’m not my father,” Toria countered. “I’m long living, but no where near an immortal like them.”

“Stop doubting yourself,” Paris said. “And remember, you have me for protection right now, right?”

“Yes, I guess so,” Toria answered. “And for that, I’m grateful.”

They looked down at the marvel that was Grellicus. As they came closer, the thousands of other flying crafts, building of various shapes, sizes, hues and textures, the rainbow of lights and shadows, and the assortment of Grell residents blended into a detailed visual symphony. Karna turned the craft a quarter of the way around the city and headed towards an area that Paris assumed was a docking port.

“That is a public docking area, right Karry?” Paris asked.

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“Karna,” she corrected. “Yes it is.”

“I don’t know, something—something doesn’t seem right.”

Toria interjected. “What is it Paris? What’s wrong? Do you sense something?”

Karna calmly landed the craft among the busy bustle of other flying machines and grey pedestrians. Paris tried to probe her mind and found nothing—no hint of a shield or of an open mental presence. She was a null, like Leah. That made her dangerous.

Paris looked around. His attention focussed on a Grell who was walking towards them. The Grell appeared to be some sort of attendant who was responsible for checking in crafts. He wore same silver-gray uniform that made Ori and Toria look naked to the untrained eye. Paris looked down at the grey’s legs and noticed that the one on the right was made of metal.

He whipped out his pistol. “Toria, get down! It’s a trap!”

The Grell was really a Grell-droid. Paris’s shot landed between the creature’s eyes. It’s right hand changed into a cannon and fired a round before its body collapsed. The shot ended up grazing Karna by her ear. She went down screaming, holding the left side of her head. Paris dove on top of Toria and forced her into the rear of the craft.

“Drive!” Paris ordered.

“I can’t! I’m hurt!”

“Shit!”

Three more Grell-droids came out, opening fire on the craft. The vehicle absorbed most of the blows, before one managed to put a dent in it. Paris grabbed Toria over his shoulder and before he knew it, he was running rapidly out of the range of fire. He realized then that his speed had returned.

Paris ran through the docking area. He made an effort not to knock any of the civilian Grells over. They all covered up and crouched out of the way of the fight. The three Grell-droids pursued, but they were not as fast as he was.

“Put me down!” Toria ordered. “I’m the Second now, Paris. I’m sure there is some sort of misunderstanding. Please, let me talk to them!”

“Shut up! Come on, they just tried to kill you!”

Paris turned a corner and continued sprinting. He did his best to avoid knocking down any of the aliens. Much to his dismay, he managed to crash into a vending stand and stumble. Toria and he were unharmed. He gave her a grin, embarrassed.

The three Grell-droids fired on them. Paris returned fire, causing havoc to mushroom around them. Eventually, he found a sparsely populated few blocks where he could launch a good offensive.

He fired another round that caught one of his pursuers in the left eye. That one fell down, shrieking in pain. As he turned a corner to his right and narrowly

avoided hitting an elderly Grell male. “I guess the First One wants to kill us!” he yelled.

“I don’t know, he might! You killed a lot of our people in that attack with Father. Now put me down this instant! I’m nauseous.”

Paris turned the block two more times to the right before he put her down, despite the fact that the idea of a Grell throwing up on his back disgusted him to no end.

“You stay here,” he told her as he pushed her flat against the building.

He put away his gun, ran harder and pulled Yolnir. Within a minute, he had caught up with the pursuing Grell-droids. Before they could stop and fire, Paris decapitated one and ran Yolnir through the neck of another. The last staggered back, choking and gasping in exhaustion. It raised its weapon, but he killed it before it could fire. The dark-brown life-water that was Grell blood made the perfect harmony for the melody of death that was laying at his feet. He smiled as he wiped his blade on their backs. Then, he gently jogged back to where he had hidden Toria.

Toria leaned against the wall, shaking a bit and crying. Her eyes were closed and she was muttering something to herself that Paris didn’t quite recognize. He only knew it as archaic Grell.

“I didn’t know that greys could cry,” he teased. He put Yolnir back in its sheath.

“You think that only humans shed tears and pray to what they hold dear, don’t you? Father has taught me many of the human ways of worship. In fact, it was us who gave humanity religion in the first place.”

Paris placed what appeared to be a caring arm around her shoulders. “First Daughter, Second to the First One, do me a favor and get over yourself.”

“Fine, Paris,” she said with contempt. She threw his arm aside and started walking. “We need to hurry to the First One’s council chamber. There, we will be safe. I hope.”

They made their way back to a more populated area of the city and eventually found the Palace of the First One. It was a large, castle like structure that looked like a strange fusion of medieval and futuristic architecture. The walls were made of a smooth, dark metal unlike anything Paris had ever seen.

The Grell-droids who stood guard let them in with no problem and little notice. Paris was suprised that he was not even challenged about his weapon, but Toria assured him that being a member of her family had certain privileges, which, however, could be revoked depending on how the First One interpreted her motives.

Two Grell-droids approached them and led them across the courtyard to an elevator. They rode to the top level. After exiting, the Grell-droid escorts took them down a long corridor that emptied into a throne room.

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The room was decorated with all manner of gold, silver and other medieval signs of wealth that Paris thought only humans used to care about. He saw various artworks and paintings from different cultures, some human, some alien. He did not know that the First One had a hobby of collecting different artworks from all of the human and alien cultures that he had preyed upon and influenced over the millenia. Adorned in a few fine jewels—like some of the kings that Paris had seen in stolen history books that both Ori and his parents had secretly given him—the leader of the Grells looked like some sort of thin, hideous toad. His monstrous majesty had a few more Grell-droids standing near his throne, and each one of them looked to be as strong as Jarka was. If a fight erupted in there, Paris wondered if he would have made it out alive, even at his former level of power.

Toria walked up to the throne with Paris standing behind her. Paris was suprised that the conversation was spoken in Grellic instead of being a telepathic inquiry between the two of them.

“Don’t you know your place?” the First One bellowed with hostility. “Bow to me.”

“First One, I thought that was unnecessary. You know that you’re like my father now that you—” she began.

“Quiet! You know that the only man you ever really considered your father was Ori. Even when I took you from him in order to save you from his evil views, you still clung to him in your heart. His death has made you the new second. Tell me, Toria, what is in your heart now? Are you still loyal to me?”

Toria looked down at the ground. “Yes, First One. I am loyal.”

The First One peered at her. “You lie. I don’t even have to use my powers to know that you are lieing.” He turned his attention to Paris. “You there, human! Kneel in my presence! I see the Ori family has not taught you proper manners.”

“Yes, my lord,” Paris replied in Grellic. He sat down on his heals.

The First One switched to English. “You black, filthy cur! Don’t you ever insult me by using my language again. You speak to me in your own tongue.” He laughed. “Oh, I forgot. We taught the white humans to take that from you. It seems like they did a good job of it too. And they played right into our hands. Now, instead of only one group of humans being niggers, you are all our niggers now!”

Paris was outraged. But, he contained his fury.

His restraint was noticed. “I see that Ori did train you well after all. I know who you are, Paris. You’re the most powerful human yogin on this planet. In fact, I doubt that even one of my people can match your skill level. Your ability has exceeded even that of Ori. But, you know you are no match for me, don’t you?”

Paris didn’t answer.

The First One laughed. “Don’t be so cocky, boy. I have some of my strongest servants in this building. Even with your strength, there is no way you can beat them all. So that means that you and your mistress are still at my mercy, understand? Answer me when I am talking to you?”

“I hear you,” Paris said.

The First One tried a probe at Paris’ mind. Paris was surprised that he had to struggle to keep him out. He felt exhausted after the attempt at mind reading ended. Still, he managed to kneel and keep his bearing.

“Very strong mentally. I can’t break your shield. Almost, but not quite. So, I see that I have to come up with a different way to control you.” The First One called to his guards. One of them left the room. A minute later, they dragged in a young black teenager. She was fourteen years old. She was a beautiful, long haired, cocoa-skinned young lady dressed in a tight fitting, synthetic black material. Paris knew that he would have found her attractive were it not for the fact that he knew her already. It was his sister Karen.

Karen’s eyes welled up with tears of joy and sadness when she saw Paris. She started to speak, but the First One put up his hand to quiet her.

He smiled evilly. “Paris, this is your sister. Karen. Ori made me promise I would keep her here, safe, as my servant. He said he made some sort of vow to you before we destroyed your home, about keeping a member of your family alive. So, as a test of his loyalty, I made him hand the girl over to me and never reveal to you the fact that she was alive. I told him that some day you’d learn that your sister was still alive. I guess there is no time like the present for a, what is the term? Oh yes, a family reunion. Say hello to your brother, Karen.”

Karen looked at Paris with despair. “Paris!” She tried to run towards him, but one of the Grell-droids raised his cannon. She stopped and hung her head. She stared down at the floor.

Paris held his emotions in check. He took a deep breath and blinked back his tears. “Hi, Karen. I’ve missed you. I felt that you were here, but I didn’t know when I’d get to see you.”

The First One interrupted. “That’s enough conversation between you two.”

One of the Grell-droids pointed a weapon at Karen’s head. Paris stood up with his hand on Yolnir. The rest of the Grell-droids pointed their weapons at him. “Leave her alone!” Paris shouted.

“I am in command here, not you!” the First One reminded him cruelly. “You understand this, Paris: if you betray my people in any way, the little bitch dies, understand? Your little rebellions have been tolerated up to this point, but they will be no longer. Your freedom is gone. Once you went back into service with Toria, you came back in service unto me. Understand? You will help protect us as we re-establish control on the surface. You will be an aid to the Grell people. Your ties to humanity are gone? You belong to me now. Now take your place!”

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Paris glared at the First One. But then he thought about his sister. It had been different when he didn't really know that she was alive. After having seen her, after knowing that even if he saved her from the clutches of the first Grell-droid, he still may not be able to save her from the First One. Reluctantly, he returned to Toria's side and knelt. "Yes, my—lord." he forced himself to say finally.

"Is this really necessary, Orna!" Toria shouted.

The First One—Orna—scowled at her. "So now we are on a first name basis?"

"We are when I'm in your bedroom!" Toria yelled. "And you said you wanted me to be your daughter! All you ever wanted was a woman from our race that you could abuse! You never loved me and you never cared about my father, our people, or the people on this planet. All you have ever thought about for the past eon is yourself! I'd rather lay down with a human than let you touch me again!"

"Some father figure," Paris muttered.

One of the Grell-droids pointed his weapon at Toria. "How dare you speak to the First One that way!" he screamed.

"Enough!" Orna put up his hands. His fingers looked almost like snake, looking as if they were slithering away from his palms rather than existing as a part of his body. "Toria, you will do whatever I tell you to do, understand? If not, you'll die. Plain and simple. And these humans that you and your father seem to love so much will be a close second. We don't need to keep them in the pyramids anymore. At this point, we can clone what few humans we do need."

"They're just chattel to you, aren't they? Property with no feelings. You disgust me," Toria protested.

Karen looked at Paris. Paris, please stay calm. Please! she said mentally. I'll be fine as long as you don't provoke him. He's insane. He's been alive too long. It's starting to get to him, I know it.

Don't worry about me, Karen, he thought in response. I can take care of myself. And I'm going to get you out of here as soon as possible.

Orna looked down at his daughter-lover. "Why should I respect a race that enslaves and conquers its own kind because of superficial differences? Do you know that this is the only planet we have been to where the natives willingly accepted our plans for their own species? All we had to do was convince a few of them that they were better than the rest because they had bred with us, when really, our breeding did not have a significant impact on their genetic code whatsoever. You can't even tell the difference between hybrid descendants and other humans at the genetic level. And yet, for centuries we had humans waiting around for our return, in hopes that we'd give them dominion over the rest of humanity."

Orna directed a hostile gaze towards Karen that was loaded with a psionic attack. The impact on her mind caused her to scream in pain before she fell unconscious. Paris became enraged and leaped at Orna. But before he could bring his weapon upon the alien, Orna knocked him out of the air with a wave of energy that emanated from his hands. Paris pulled himself to his feet and glared at the imperial grey. The Grell-droids dropped Karen and swarmed in front of Orna's throne. They pointed their weapons at Paris and Toria.

"Your sister was having unauthorized thoughts in my presence," Orna said smugly. "I don't tolerate that from any of my human servants—including you."

Paris rubbed his chest. It burned as if he'd been shot by one of the energy pistols. He was amazed at the First One's power. This guy's going to be tougher than the Grell-droids at Antarctica, he thought to himself.

"Like I said, human, you belong to me now. And so does your mistress." Orna switched to Grell and ordered the Grell-droids to remove Karen from the hall. He told the rest of them to follow. Within a minute, he was alone with Paris and Toria.

Orna the First One changed his demeanor to false kindness. "I know why you two came here. I know you are trying to destroy me. You're doing your best to honor your loyalties to a dead man. That is commendable, even for a nigger like you, Paris, and a bitch like your mistress here."

"Must you go out of your way to offend me?" Paris said angrily. "Or is it because you feel bad because you know you remind me of an overgrown tadpole."

Toria stood there, hanging her head and staring at the floor throughout all of it. Paris could tell that she had given up.

"If humans had listened to their instincts when we first found them in what you call Africa, we would have never been able to get a foothold on your planet. But the thing with humans, as with my people, is the overwhelming lust for power. It's that greed within all sentient beings that allowed you to be divided and conquered. It's easy."

Orna stepped down from his throne and walked towards Toria. She looked up at him. Paris could see tears forming in her eyes. Orna stood in front of her. Ignoring Paris, he waved his hand across the front of her chest. A thin, skin covering fell from her body that Paris had not noticed before. He realized that she and the rest of the greys had been wearing some sort of skin-toned, grayish material for their clothing that acted like an additional layer of flesh. Once the covering fell to the floor, Paris could see her full alien femininity: firm, round womanly breasts, a soft stomach, and an alien vagina that would have even appealed to him had he been more liberal about inter-planetary liaisons. Paris could feel the humiliation radiate off of Toria as Orna fondled her nipples in front of him. As her nipples became erect, her shame became more magnified. Her

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body seemed to betray her soul at the touch of the powerful Orna. Paris felt sorry for her. Somehow he knew that whatever feelings she had incestuously develop for this paternal figure were not worth handing over her body to him and betraying her sense of pride.

Orna looked at Paris. "Aren't you going to protect her from me? Or do you know better than to risk your life for a grey piece of pussy." He chuckled. "Besides, if she's anything like her father, I'm surprised you have not fucked her yourself, human. You know that the Ori family tends to like dark meat, don't you?"

Paris pulled his sword. Toria stopped him. "No, Paris. No. Don't. It's okay. I'll do what he says."

Paris was confused. "But—but Toria, you don't have to—"

Her voice waivered. "Yes, Paris, I do have to, as long as I am Second. Remember when I told you that no member of my race may kill another by their own hand? Well, he and the Grell-droids are the only exceptions, since they are not civilians like the rest of us."

"She'll be fine, human," Orna said in a strange mixture of sadism and comfort. "Now go. Leave. I want you to keep everyone out until I'm done with her. You are to stand outside and allow no one in but my guards. You may only go if THEY chose to relieve you. Understand? Understand!"

Toria turned to him and gave him the same desperate, pleading, human female expression that his sister had. He wondered if she too had been violated at the hands of this sadistic grey monster. Do it, Paris. Do it. I'll be fine. I'll survive.

Paris put away his sword. "Yes, my lord," he said. He gave a warrior's bow, turned and slowly walked out of the throne room. He heard Toria's sobs and Orna's sadistic giggling as he closed the door behind him and stood guard outside.

He tried to block out the sounds coming from the room but he couldn't. Toria's cries moved through an eerie symphony of sexual and tortuous cries that were accompanied and countered by Orna's sadistic melodies. There was no doubt that he used his grotesque hands and mental powers to subject her to all manner of sado-sexual cruelty and pleasure. Paris would hear her moaning in ecstasy one minute—like Leah would when he was with her—only to hear her screech in pain the next, like a soldier dieing on the battlefield. Eventually, he sat down and leaned against the door of the throne room in exhaustion from trying to control the protective feelings he never knew he could feel for Toria or any other grey besides Ori. Was he really beginning to see the Grells as something other than a master or an enemy? Or was it that he was beginning to see Toria as a woman—a sister that needed him now more than ever? He was not sure which,

but whatever it was, it was draining him more than any other test that his mind had been through. He closed his eyes and shook and held his head in confusion.

“Get up!” called a Grell voice from above him. Paris opened his eyes and found two Grell-droids standing above him. He recognized them as two of the guards that were in the room earlier.

The noises coming from the throne room became a surreal background for his conversation with the Grell-droids.

“This is obviously too much for you. I’m surprised you’ve managed to stay sane for this long. Most human protectors who have to hear Orna rape their masters would have been dead by now, by his hand or their own,” one of the Grell-droids chuckled. “You know, human, Orna has even raped males from time to time. Sometimes, he likes to have sex with some of the yellow and white humans that live in the pyramids on the surface. I guess being immortal gives you an appetite for the unusual. He’s probably been alive so long that he’s tried damn near every sexual game in the universe.”

“He must be testing you,” said the other. “Don’t worry, you’ve passed. If you’re strong enough to stand here and listen to him torture the First Daughter, you’re loyal enough to serve our race.”

“Hmnn,” said the first Grell-droid. “Perhaps he is afraid?” he teased. “Or are you aroused, human?”

The other Grell-droid studied Paris’ face as if he recognized him. “Wait—I know him! If this is the human that attacked the polar base with Ori, then there’s not much on this planet that scares him. Not even Orna.” He turned back to Paris. “Now go. Ask one of the other guards to show you to Toria’s quarters. Even though you serve him now, he’ll still want you to guard her from any other Grell.”

Paris stood up. “Fuck you,” he hissed.

“No, human,” the other Grell-droid replied. “Your mistress is the one who’s being fucked right now. Just like her father was!”

Paris kicked the Grell-droid in the stomach. He doubled over in pain. The first Grell-droid laughed at the both of them. Paris walked off, too angry and horrified to finish them off for good.

Chapter 20

Paris had found out where Toria's quarters were. Instead of going there, he made his way through the building to the level where the human servants were housed. The human's quarters had the look and feel of a place that was somewhere between that of a dormitory and a hospital. The hallways had the occasional grey and Grell-droid who half-watched over the drabbly dressed humans as they dragged themselves about their business. Eventually, Paris found the room where Karen was staying.

Karen was fortunate enough to have her own quarters. He found them to be a step above the others. She had her own furniture and some pictures and drawings that looked like they had been restored from the ruins of the Pomonkey pyramid. She was laying on a bed, fully clothed and half sleeping, her back turned to the open door when he entered.

The door slid closed automatically behind him. "Karen, it's—"

"I know it's you, Paris," she said in a sad monotone. "No one else is crazy enough to come in here and violate the sanctity of the First One's harem."

"HAREM! No! You can't be!"

"I am, Paris, I am." She sat up and looked at him. "Although I haven't had to do it more than once or twice with Orna. His human tastes tend to run towards white and Asian women. Ori was the only other grey who wanted to do me. But he checked himself, out of respect for you."

Paris sat down on the bed and hugged his sister. Their joy was dampened by the seriousness of their situation. Paris had never seen the cruelty of the Grell influence enforced so blatantly. After a moment of silent tears from the both of them his elder brother instincts took over. "You haven't had to do anything for any other alien in here have you?"

"No, not unwillingly. A couple of Grell-droids tried something once. I managed to get away in time to avoid anything happening. A couple of days later I heard they were executed. Orna must have found out. Then, there was this one normal grey—Horrin. He was sweet. I think I could have gotten past the whole grey—black thing with him, but Orna got jealous. Even though he doesn't want me, no other grey male is supposed to have me. He even killed a human male from Pakistan because he overheard the man's thoughts about me. Orna's known for killing anyone who intrudes on anything he perceives as his. That's why most males, Grell or otherwise, are afraid to even come near me or another harem girl unless they have to."

Paris kissed his little sister on the forehead and wiped her tears. He hugged her again. He even managed a smile before he had to get serious again. "I don't

understand this place—these people. I mean, most of the aliens seem so asexual, except for Ori and Toria.”

“What do you mean except for Toria?” Karen asked with a curious look.

“Nothing that I responded to,” Paris said. “Anyway, I can’t imagine them doing it, you know? Not until I heard him raping Toria inside the throne room.”

“Paris, it’s just like human beings used to be before. Remember the books in the library that we found? There were many human societies that allowed their leaders to do whatever they wanted while the citizens were held to the highest standard of conduct. Orna The First One is really Orna The Tyrant. He’s been ruling their race for ages because no one else is strong enough to defeat him.” Karen wiped her nose on her sleeve and laid her head on his shoulder. “Maybe my big brother is.”

Paris rubbed his chest where Orna had blasted him. It was starting to heal already. Perhaps his powers were returning. Perhaps he WAS strong enough.

But, he needed help. “We have some friends—human friends—waiting for us outside of the city. I can contact them astrally or telepathically later tonight and have them sneak inside here somehow,” Paris suggested.

“No,” Karen advised. “That’s not a good idea. Orna has spies around here, even on the mental and astral planes. He spied on the dreams I sent to you. At first I thought he wanted me to be a distraction. Now, I think he wanted to lure you here so he could see how strong you are. Even he was talking about what you did at the South Pole. He thinks that if he can get you on his side that he can manipulate you into being a weapon against his enemies.”

“But why use me? Isn’t he allowed to kill anybody he wants?” Paris asked.

“Of course he is, Paris, but think about it: if you were in charge, wouldn’t you rather have someone else do your dirty work—someone you could put all the blame on? He could say that you are working for another one of the Grells and save face. That way he won’t look like such a demon to the rest of them.”

“I see where Ori learned how to lie,” Paris commented. Then he remembered the guard’s remark about Orna raping men. “Karen, did Orna ever—I mean did he and Ori—did he ever make Ori—”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?” Karen answered.

“I can’t. He’s dead.”

Karen responded with silence but Paris didn’t catch the hint.

Just then a faint buzz was heard at the door. Paris jumped up walked to the entrance.

“Push the red button,” Karen instructed.

Paris fumbled around the console until the doors slid open. There was a small, elderly grey female outside. Paris was surprised that he was finally able to tell them apart.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” he asked in Grellic.

Cecil Washington

She responded in English. “Don’t worry, I speak all of your languages. You’re Paris? You’re the black one who serves under Toria, right?”

Karen laughed. “Yes, he’s the black one!”

“Still have not lost your sense of humor at my expense,” Paris said, annoyed.

The Grell woman continued. “My name is Korana. I’m a rebel. We’ve discovered the saucer that First Daughter left outside the city. Please let me in, it’s not safe for me to be seen out here and I’m not rich enough to be able to afford bodyguards.”

“Rich?” Paris asked himself as he let the elderly alien inside the room. “I thought that money was obsolete.”

“That’s only among you humans,” Korana replied. “Haven’t you seen how the First One adorns himself? My people care a lot about money and material things. That’s one reason why we let First One trick you into living inside of the pyramids. With you humans catted off, there is more on the planet for us.”

Korana sat beside Karen. Karen looked at her for a second then gave her a hug. “Oh my God! I remember you! You’re Horrins’s grandmother! Listen, I’m sorry about what happened to your grandson. It was all my fault. I should have warned him about Orna.”

Korana gave Karen a maternal stroke on her hair. “Don’t fret about the First One’s evil, child. My grandson knew the risks. He was well over two hundred years old, you know. He looked and acted like a youngster.” She looked over at Paris. “Come join us on the bed so that we won’t be overheard.”

Paris knelt down beside the bed. “I’m listening. What’s going on.”

“A few rebels found the ship. We had to get the humans off and destroy it before any loyal greys or Grell-droids reported it to the First One. The humans are fine. We have them hidden inside the city.” Korana smiled at Paris. “Leah sends her love to you—and so does the jealous one, Mauria.”

Karen smirked at her brother. “They’re still fighting over the virgin huh? Assuming you’re still one.”

Paris laughed. “So are you planning some sort of attack?”

“Yes—and no. The city is divided down the middle. Half the humans, greys and Grell-droids are upset about Ori’s passing, while the other half are glad that The Great Traitor as they call him is dead. The only thing is that the more powerful beings in this place tend to side with the First One. And, to make matters worse, there are those among our ranks who are reluctant to attack because they don’t want anything to happen to Toria. They also feel that Ori may be still alive. Rumor has it that he’s being held here.”

Paris looked up at Karen. “Is he still alive?”

“I can’t answer that and live, Paris. If Orna decides to read my mind and find out I’ve told you anything he’ll kill me on the spot. Either that or he’ll have his henchmen rape me, then kill me while he watches.” She thought for a second.

“But what I can tell you is this: there is a rumor going around that he’s still alive. There’s also a rumor that Orna is getting weaker since the two of you destroyed the machine. If that’s true, then this is the best time for us to attack!” She wrung her hands, excited.

Paris thought for a moment. “Orna’s stronger than I am, but he’s still not strong enough to read my mind. I can do some snooping around here and find out if what she’s saying about Ori is true. If it is, Korana, how can I get word to you so that you can make a plan of attack?”

Korana put her hand on Paris’ arm. “Let Toria know, Paris. I’ll be in contact with her in a few days. I was a good friend of her father’s. No one will suspect anything if I pay her a visit.”

“No,” Paris answered. “I don’t know if she can be trusted. Especially after what he’s done to her today. I’m sure she’s terrified of him. She’ll probably betray us out of fear.”

“What do you mean, what he’s done to her?” Korana asked naively.

“The same thing many Grell males do to human females. Only Orna has the power to do it to his own,” Karen said angrily.

Korana was speechless. Then, her shock turned to anger. She began rambling off some curse words in Grell that had do with having sex with one’s mother. “That filthy bastard! What a monster!” She managed somehow to glair at Paris. “Why didn’t you stop him!”

Paris stood up. “Calm down, Korana. Calm down. Toria ordered me to let him have his way. Besides, I’m supposed to be loyal to him now, remember? But don’t worry. You know where my heart is when the revolution comes.”

Korana stood up. “If Ori is still alive, that will put him back at the head of the movement. We were hoping that his daughter would take over, but if she’s telling you to let that demon take her, she’s probably can’t be counted on to lead. And even if Ori still is alive, he’s probably too near death to be able to tell us what to do.” She shook her grey head. “May the Universe help us all.” Korana hugged Karen, then Paris. She showed herself out of the room.

“What now, Paris?”

“Nothing as far as you’re concerned. He can read your mind, remember? You just concentrate on how glad you are to see me so that he won’t know any details. He already knows why I came here, but for now he doesn’t see me as much of a threat.” He gave her a hug goodbye.

“Where are you going?” Karen asked.

Paris sighed. “No where but to Toria’s quarters. That’s where I’m supposed to be when I’m not outside his door. I think that Orna—I mean First One, gotta get it right—will allow me to see you, too. That’s it. If he asks—or probes—all you need to know is that I’m going to go meditate. Meditation is not unusual for a yogin, now is it?”

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Karen smiled. "No. But none of them have ever managed to do what you've done, except for some woman. What's her name? Mauria? Hey, isn't she our cousin?"

"Yes, she is." Kissing cousin, he thought to himself.

Karen slapped his arm playfully as she changed the subject. "Who is Leah? Is she my future sister-in-law?"

"If we ever get out of this mess she will be," Paris said. "Maybe you could be her maid of honor."

"That's good," Karen said. "Just make sure you don't have your sword with you when you get married."

"Why not?"

"Come on, Paris. Don't you think that would be tacky? What do you want to do, kill anybody who may object?" She laughed. "And you better not be wearing a doo-rag either, Negro."

Paris laughed and shook his head. "Nagging me. Telling me what to do and I'm the one who's older. Yeah, I guess you are back in my life now, aren't you?"

Chapter 21

Paris found Toria's quarters guarded by two smaller Grell-droids. They also recognized him as The Black One Under Ori. One of the Grell-droids took a sample of DNA from his fingertips using a small beaming device then download the information into the console by her door. "You are going to be the only human granted access," he instructed as he made the modifications.

Afterwards, Paris sat in the corner of the living room. He looked around at the beauty of the place. It looked like one of the old bedrooms that he'd seen in some of the magazines that humans had made before the pyramid days. Ori had told him that a dwelling like this one was called a penthouse or a luxury suite. It was a very desired living arrangement among rich humans before everyone moved into the pyramids. Paris often wondered why Ori had on the one hand insisted on his obedience while on the other he told him things that no wise master would ever tell a servant.

"I guess these greys were slaves themselves," he said to himself. "Slaves to their own greed. That's why they divided us instead of working with us. I guess they really don't think that both races can prosper."

He placed his sword on the floor in front of him and began meditating. Or at least he meant to meditate. He was so blind to his own fatigue that he fell asleep sitting up.

He was awakened a few ours later by the sobs of Toria's tears.

She staggered into the room, dressed in a very human female outfit: a long, blue silk dress. It was stained with Orna's gray semen. Toria walked by Paris. He slowly pulled himself up and followed her into the bedroom. She was collapsed on her bed, staring at the walls. Paris could now see that her body was covered with discolorations that he now knew as bruises and blood on grey flesh.

He sat down beside her. Toria gave no response other than jagged, weeping breathing. He began stroking her head in order to comfort her. That seemed enough to sooth her to silent crying, but not nearly enough to erase her sadness.

"Vernnerott," she said to him, which was the Grell word for "Hold me."

Paris obeyed. He scooped her limp body up into his arms. She gave no reciprocal response other than saying "Thank you," in English. Feeling that she must be uncomfortable, Paris placed her on the bed. She was still listless in body, but her eyes managed to snatch themselves away from the void. She looked at Paris with an expression that said that she feared she had let him down.

He ignored her self-pity. "Toria, I think you need a bath. I'll run some water for you. Don't worry, I'll place you in the tub." His mind went back to the hotel room where he'd told the white girl April in Philadelphia to was herself off after he'd killed her buddies. Only this time, he was not going to be the cruel

inquisitor in order to get information. Instead, he was going to do his best to heal the deep spiritual wounds that can be burned on a woman's soul.

He ran the water in the bathtub, then returned to the room. Toria was curled up in the fetal position. Paris undressed her and was careful to suppress any sexual desire he may have had from handling a naked female, human or otherwise. Even though Toria's mental abilities were weak, he was afraid that even her normal intuition could be sensitive at a time like that. He picked her up gently and took her into the bathroom.

Paris placed her in the tub then began looking around for anything that might resemble soap or a wash rag. Ironically, he found that the greys used the same toiletry items as humans. He contained his surprise and walked over to the tub with a cloth and a bottle of liquid. He poured the liquid into the water, which was starting to turn green from Toria's Grell blood. He wiped her head silently as she stared at the walls.

"Don't worry, Toria," he said in a soothing tone. "Don't worry. He's going to pay for what he's done. I'll see to it."

Toria deliriously babbled in Grell. She called out to her mother and father in vain. She wondered whether the Universe would save her from the evil that was Orna. Paris bathed her limp arms and legs and deliberately avoided any sexual parts of her body. He made sure that his touch was medical instead of sensual, in order to avoid upsetting her.

But his efforts were not enough. She let out an inhuman scream of agony. Paris thought that the guards outside the unit would burst in to her rescue. But to his surprise, he was the only one in the world who heard her wailings. There was something in her cries—a deep pain, that bothered even his hardened heart. It reminded him of the pain that he buried deep within himself whenever he thought about how almost he'd loved had been destroyed at Pomonkey. He understood the agony that she now felt, the agony of losing everything. Their emotions brought tears to his eyes and for a brief second, he had a silent catharsis.

But his agony put some distance between them as he realized that she had probably been instrumental in the destruction of the Pomonkey pyramid. In fact, this was the same female grey that was trying to get the white people of Philadelphia to destroy people of color through human sacrifice and racism. And here he was, like a fool, comforting her. He was about to cry for and with someone who only months ago would have watched him die with as much sympathy as the average American felt for slaves during the early 1800's.

He stood up. His tears dried and his ears tuned her wailings into the background. She again looked alien to him instead of something that was near human. Not even the erotic lure of her vulnerable form could reach his own sado-masochistic tendencies. In other words, his pity flew from him once he realized that he was giving aid to the enemy.

He remembered his mission—a mission that he took upon himself to save his world, not their's. He gave Ori his word. Even though he did not know how he felt about Ori all the time, he knew how he felt about a promise that he had made. He looked down at the sobbing Toria with no love whatever. “I guess payback is a bitch, huh? Now you know how I felt when you people had the carnivores wipe out my home. I lost my momma and daddy and damn near lost my sister because of you people.”

Toria stopped sobbing and looked up at him. “Don’t you even care about what he did to me?” she said in a quivering voice.

Paris shook his head no. “I tried to stop him, but you said no, remember? You ordered me to let him do it without a fight.” He sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “For real, Toria, I really don’t give a damn about your grey ass right now. I came down here to save my sister and my world, remember? But don’t worry, Toria, I’ll go see if I can find your father for you. I’m not like you and Ori, I’m not going to have you walking around for over a year thinking that all of your family is dead and shit.”

“Father can’t be alive,” she said. She stared down at the water.

Paris stood up and did his best to wipe some of the moisture from his legs. He was soaked. “Your father is alive, Toria. Now keep your mind and your mouth shut about it so that Orna won’t find out that I know.” He started out of the bathroom.

“KAH-JORO!”—“DON’T LEAVE ME!” she screamed, terrified. She stood up in the water, shaking.

“I’ll be back, Toria, as soon as I can,” he replied coldly, with his back to her. “I have to come back to avert suspicion. Get some rest. Now that you let him take you, I don’t think he’s going to expect you to do something against him anytime soon.”

She stood there, frozen, while Paris gathered his weapons and left her quarters. The Grell-droid guards acted as if they didn’t see him leave. Either they were rebels, he thought to himself, or they just did not care.

Chapter 22

He began thinking about Leah and Karen as he started sneaking about the building. They were his only reason for living. He missed Leah's soft touch and was thankful for the comfort his sister gave him by being alive. She was something from home, something from the past that the greys had not taken from him. His lover and his sister were two things in the world that were worth fighting for.

After about an hour of finding nothing anywhere, he grew tired, hungry and thirsty. He made his way down a few levels to the galley. He stole some food that was being prepared for the Orna's dinner. He devoured one of the meal plates in a hidden part of the kitchen. Paris didn't know quite what it was, but it was hairy, had lots of tentacles and did not sit still until he killed it. But whatever it was, it certainly satisfied his appetite and did not seem like it disagreed with his stomach.

A human male cook walked into the kitchen. He was an older black man that reminded Paris of one of his uncles. "I could have sworn that I put that Grell shit beast platter in here somewhere," the cook said to himself. "I'd better fix up another one or that grey fool's gonna have my hide."

Paris remembered that the Grell shit beasts were a delicacy among the aliens. The only problem was that the aliens raised them by feeding them human feces. But despite the disgust he felt once he realized what he'd eaten, he did admit that the shit beast tasted pretty good. Why you couldn't even taste the shit inside the thing, he thought to himself.

It was as he was stealing some water that he got the information he needed.

"I see you over there, scurrying about like some God damn rat," the cook called out.

Paris was busted. He stood up from beside one of the sinks. "Look, man, if you care anything about—"

"Don't worry about me, Paris. Yeah, I know who you are. Ori used to show me what you looked like with his mind when he first started training you. I could feel you because I'm psychic, only these fools in here don't know it. I used to work for Ori as a spy. Seems like these rich grey fools like for black folks to do their cooking for them. Just like white folks did when they thought they was on top of the world." The cook gave Paris a nod.

"Do you know where Ori is? You've heard he's still alive, right?"

The cook wiped his brow. "Yeah, I know where he is. But you can't reach him. He's in a room that's off limits to all humans, including you. They've got some type of genetic screening at the door on the bottom level. That's why you

probably haven't found it if you're on the elevator. The panel won't show that floor exists if there's a human on the elevator."

"How do you know that?" Paris asked.

"Like I said," the cook answered, "I have my powers too, they just aren't like yours. I was born with mine. I can see into the minds of humans and aliens alike if they let me—even the First One's. I can't make them do anything, but when they let their guard down, I can see pictures. It's hard for me to understand what the pictures mean though. I also can't make anybody else see what I see. I used to just tell Ori what I saw whenever he'd come by here. That seemed to be enough for him."

"Well, mister—what's your name?"

"Sam. Sam Cook. Same name as an ancient singer of the blues. Funny isn't it? I got that name, and I cook, but I can't sing a lick. My parents had a few discs hidden with all that type of stuff on it, but you know how those greys are. They took it when they found it. We didn't get punished though. You know they don't want us trying to learn anything on our own. They're afraid that people are going to take the world back. All they want us to know is how to do our jobs and that's it."

Paris laughed. "You're right about that Mr. Cook. That's why all I know how to do is fight."

"Please, call me Sam." Sam laughed. "You'd better get out there and start fighting. The world needs you to shake things up right now."

Paris started to leave, then he turned around, about to ask a question.

"He's fine, for now," Sam said, anticipating his response. "His mind is too weak for you to feel him. It would be hard for you to do that anyway. You have to deal with the excitement you have of seeing your sister again."

Paris was shocked.

"Yes," Sam said. "I know about that too. I hear about all kinds of things working in here. You know, you might want to get over that for a minute too—your sister and all—so that you don't lose focus. I ain't no fighter, but I do know that if you're going to get us out of this mess, your mind needs to be on what you're doing."

Paris nodded. "You're right, Sam. Thanks."

Paris focussed waved. He put the plate he was eating on a table and walked out of the galley. He had left before Sam collapsed on the floor. Sam did not know that Orna had forged a secret telepathic link with him. Orna was using him to be another set of eyes and ears without his knowledge. Orna used his power to kill Sam the moment Paris disappeared from his sight. Blood poured from Sam's mouth. His body twitched in a horrible, agonizing dance of death.

Cecil Washington

Paris was still hiding in the shadows, totally undetected by the Grell-droid that stood guard at the entrance. He wondered how he was going to get the elevator to go down to where Ori was held. If John or Leah were here, he thought, one of them could re-wire the control panel so that he could have access. But he was alone in this one.

There was only one way. He did not like the idea. The last time he'd tried it, he almost died. And besides, going down a level, through the floor no less, was a lot different than trying to walk through a tree. "I'm going to have to try to phase shift. If not, I'm fucked."

Paris stepped out from the wall. He fired three shots at the Grell-droid. Each blast hit the alien dead between the eyes. It slid down the wall like a limp noodle. Paris blasted the security camera that was beside the elevator before he stepped in front of it. He secretly hoped that if Orna knew what he was doing, he'd be more obsessed with stopping him with brute force instead of using Karen as leverage.

Paris closed his eyes and breathed deeply. His breath became an ocean wave. His mind and body felt as if he were floating. He opened his eyes and stared at the corridor and waited for what seemed like an eternity, but really was more like a second. The room glowed with a white light. Then, everything looked surreal. At that moment, he knew it was time.

He forgot about the past, the present and the future. Time meant nothing. All that mattered was walking through the elevator entrance. He started towards the door.

His hand went thorough—but suddenly, he felt excruciating pain. He pulled it back in time before he materialized. When he became solid again, he realized that his skin was scraped. The pain in his fingers was nearly unbearable. He gasped in pain.

"Concentrate," he told himself. "Don't—don't lose it."

His body responded before his mind could. He looked around at the wispy world and realized that he was again out of phase. He slammed himself through the door in a split second and landed inside the elevator. He felt shaken but not wounded.

His body was beginning to feel tired. He was losing the phased state. Paris started to panic. He was only half-way to his destination and his powers were fleeting him.

"No," he whispered to himself. "Hold it—just a little longer—go down—down."

Miraculously, his body obeyed. He saw the world disappear above him as he fell slowly down through the ground. Slowly, steadily Paris steadied his breathing as he sank down through the floor of the elevator and into the bottom of the elevator shaft. Once he saw the door to the bottom level, he walked calmly

towards it, having nothing under his feet but air. His last bit of phasing energy was spent walking through the doors that were the entrance to the bottom level.

He materialized without a problem. But the irony of the situation was that he materialized in front of a squad of twenty well-armed grey droids. Apparently, Orna had gotten wind of his activities and anticipated that he'd make it as far as he had.

Dizzy and drained from his psychic efforts, Paris tottered back and forth and threw up his hands in surrender.

The squad leader laughed. He was another one of Orna's private guards. "Since you love the traitor so much, the First One has ordered that you join him in confinement. Your little mind tricks won't work inside there. The cell is sealed off with a multi-dimensional force field. You won't get through those walls unless you're made out of oxygen."

They grabbed Paris, stripped him of his weapons and dragged him to the cell where Ori was waiting.

Paris sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall, the same way he did when they were held in the Antarctic. At least the two of them weren't beaten nearly to death, he thought, trying to cheer himself up. However, Ori did look like he was delirious. His whole entire body had taken on a green coloring.

Paris waited a few hours before he decided to talk to Ori. "Ori!" Paris shook him. "Ori, wake up! It's me, Paris! I'm here. Listen, you've got to snap out of it. I came here to get you out! Toria's in the city with me and the rest of your followers are ready to revolt. They need you man! They need you!"

Ori opened one eye. "Paris? Oh hell, they caught you too. Listen, I'm too weak to be of much good to anybody. I know you're glad I'm here, but I really did die you know."

"No you didn't," Paris replied. "How could you have died? You're here, right in front of me."

"I did die, Paris. I was dead, medically. But Orna used his power to bring me back. It took a lot out of him, but he did it. He healed my body just enough for my soul to return to it. But he didn't give me enough life energy to live for very long. If he had, he'd probably be on the brink of death himself."

Paris rubbed his chest where Orna had blasted him. "He's still got enough energy alive to knock me out the air, that's for sure."

"If he hit you, and you're still here, that means he's still weak. He's still not at his full strength. If he was, Paris, you'd be dead. If that death machine were still functioning he would have recovered all ready. But thank God that's not still happening. I can feel that the life is returning to this planet. Humans all over the world are leaving their pyramids. That is weakening him too." Ori coughed.

Paris gazed at Ori. He didn't have any way to ask, other than to come out and say it. "Did he rape you, Ori? Did he really—"

Cecil Washington

“Yes. Many times. I could not stop him. He was too powerful,” Ori admitted. “It was his way of trying to break my spirit because he knew he needed me. I have always had a way with humans that he never did.”

“You could not fight him off? Not even with everything you taught me to do?” Paris asked.

“Not even. He knows all of that and more.” Ori looked back at Paris. “Has he hurt my daughter too? I know she went to him freely in the past, but, this time, that may not be enough for him. He loves to hurt anything that will scream.”

Paris sighed. “He raped her. And she ordered me not to do anything to save her. I had to stand outside the door and listen to it for an hour before one of his guards came to relieve me. That was when I’d heard about what he did to you.”

Ori trembled with rage. “Kkriahiai!!!!” He calmed himself. “I’ll kill him. I don’t care if I don’t have any life left in me. I’ll pick up a brick and beat him with it. Who cares about our law anymore? He never did. Ever!”

Paris got frustrated with Ori. “What do you know about law? What do you even know about decency? For weeks I wandered the badlands, thinking that I was alone, with you popping up around me like a fungus or a bad rash. You knew that my sister was still alive. And yet, you never told me! What’s up with that? Huh?”

Ori sighed. “I’m sorry, Paris, but I didn’t want to tell you about her until you were ready. I was afraid that if you knew—If you had even thought about attacking Orna before today he would have stopped you dead in your tracks. You were weaker back then and he was ten times more powerful. But now—now you may be the one to beat him. I knew that once we got rid of the device he’d lose power. Now, he’s vulnerable.”

“So,” Paris asked, “why didn’t you tap into the same power that he did? Wouldn’t that had given you the same strength as him?”

“It would have literally been the same strength Paris. I would be fighting destruction with more destruction, instead of with creation. Fighting evil with evil only makes evil stronger. That’s why I put my energy into creating human beings who could protect their own world. I can’t get my life from death, Paris.”

Ori coughed again and again. Paris could feel that Ori’s life force was waning. Paris looked at him like he was concerned. He put his hand on Ori’s shoulder and shook him. “You okay?”

The grey laughed. “Don’t worry. Don’t even shed a tear for me, Paris. I’ve lived long enough already. I was ready to expire from my battle wounds. The next time I am faced with death, I will embrace it again. I don’t want to live any longer, Paris.”

Ori looked down at the floor. “Despite all of my knowledge and long life, all I have been is a traitor. A traitor to my people and to yours. A traitor to this planet,

to the Universe, to God himself. And most of all, I've been a traitor to myself. I've lived like a coward under Orna. I won't do it any longer."

"No, Ori," Paris began, "I hate to say it, but I think that you felt that you WERE God. That was before you realized that you've spent your life working for the devil. But don't worry about it. It's all good now. I'm going to take care of business."

"Shut up in there!" ordered one of the Grell-droids from outside. "I don't need to hear that crap!"

"You shut up!" Paris shouted back. "You better act like you know!"

"Paris, no!" Ori said fearfully. "That's what they want! They'll come in here and King us." By King, Ori meant Rodney King. The Legend of Rodney King had survived into the time of the pyramids. In fact, Ori was there when it first happened, in the form of an innocent bystander.

Paris smirked. "That's what I want them to do."

Paris stood up. He stumbled a bit, still dizzy from the walls. "You guys are nothing but punks. You talk big shit from outside this cell, but I bet you won't walk up in here and say that!"

"We're not stupid," one of the guards said. "You're up to something, aren't you?"

"I ain't up to nothing but going upside your head!" Paris yelled.

The Grell-droids laughed and powered up their cannons. "Lower the shield," the other guard said, "and open the cell doors. We can take care of this from a distance."

Paris was still a little dizzy, but his speed did not fail him this time.

Everything moved in slow motion. As soon as the field dropped and the bars opened to the cell, Paris dove for the opening. The Grell-droids fired, hitting nothing but air. Paris had a feeling of total calm as he moved his body between their lines of fire. He broke the arm of the first Grell-droid and aimed the broken limb at the second. Within a few seconds, both robotic Grells were dead.

Ori dragged himself to his feet. "We'd better go, Paris. Quickly! There will be reinforcements."

Paris looked around the holding area and found his weapons. "Fools!" he said in delight as he armed himself. Ori was moving around a little better now, as if the mere act of freedom was giving him strength. "Am I going to have to carry you out of here right now?" Paris asked.

"No, I'll be fine. You're going to have to protect me though, Paris. And don't expect me to do any fighting. I'm too weak." Ori looked worried.

"Well, I need you to get me up the elevator. I don't know anything about the console. All you showed me how to do is fight," Paris admitted.

Cecil Washington

“Don’t worry about that. You could figure it out if you want. The most important power I gave all of the humans I’ve trained is the ability to think. I’m sure you could figure it out if you had to.”

Paris and Ori ran towards the elevator. They expected to find an armed squad of Grell-droids on the attack. Instead they found nothing. After a few minutes of waiting, Paris used his sword to slice open the front of the console. Ori gave Paris a quick verbal lesson in hacking and security as he hastily rewired the circuits. They jumped on the elevator. The doors closed and sped them hurriedly to the top.

“Something must be wrong. Shouldn’t they have attacked by now?” Ori asked Paris.

Paris closed his eyes. He could feel chaotic energy coming from each floor that they passed. He knew what was happening. “Ori, I think that the resisters got tired of waiting around to see if you were really alive.”

Chapter 23

Ori stopped the elevator. As the doors opened, their mouths fell open in awe at the chaos.

Scores of Grells, Grell-droids, humans and a few yogin were battling with each other. The normal humans were trying to choke each other to death while the yogin battled each other with wildly thrown karate and kungfu techniques. Paris even noticed that here were a few carnivores that were joining in the skirmishes. "How'd those carnies get in here?" he asked Ori, straining to be heard over the ocean of battle noise.

"We have to pay a tax to Orna in order to have bodyguards. Carnivores are cheaper than humans because Orna believes they're not as intelligent fighters as you are," Ori yelled back.

"Well he's right!" Paris shouted. A stray laser bullet sounded over their heads. "Now let's get the hell out of here! We've got to find Toria and Karen!"

"Paris!" called out a voice from out of the crowd. He turned and saw that it was Leah and Mauria running towards him. They were both wearing helmets and battle vests. Paris hugged them both when they arrived at the elevator, but he kissed Leah on the lips. Mauria took a deep breath in order to check her reaction at the sight of them kissing. Eventually, then moved over and inspected Ori.

"He's hurt bad, Paris," Maura shouted. "We'd better get grandpa outta here, quick!"

"Where's John?" Paris asked. "And where'd you get this armor? I like it!"

"He's looking for Toria on the upper deck," Leah answered. "He and a couple of Grell-droid rebels went up a while ago. I hope they're okay." She smiled at him. "Apparently Ori and his supporters have been preparing for this day for a long time now. Korana had gear made for some of us. It's too bad there wasn't more to go around." They all ducked as a round went off over their heads. Leah shot the offending shooter without even looking. She smiled at her lover. "I was so worried about you, Paris. I missed you, baby."

"I missed you too," he cooed back. Then, he changed his tone. "Come on. We've got to get Ori, Toria and Karen out of here, quickly."

"Karen?" Leah asked with suspicion.

"His sister," Mauria answered.

Paris looked at her, annoyed. "I bet you knew too, didn't you? You did! Why didn't you tell me?"

Mauria rolled her neck and returned his hostile glance. "For the same reasons that Ori didn't. I didn't want you to try to do anything before you could at least hold your own against me. Now, you stand a chance."

"WE stand a chance." Ori chimed. "I'm not leaving until this thing is over."

Cecil Washington

They all got into the elevator. The intensity of the battle outside was growing.

Ori closed the elevator and continued their ascent. "I am in command here, remember?"

Paris is still under my service for this mission, right?"

"Forget your mission!" Leah protested. "Come on, we need to leave now!"

Paris resigned. "No, he's right. We need order if we're going to get out of this thing alive."

"What do you want us to do?" Mauria asked.

Ori took command. "Leah, I want you to find my daughter and his sister after we get to the top level. Everyone who is part of Orna's chamber will be up there with him. It will be heavily guarded, but with these two and your shooting, we should be able to get by. See if you can find a stairwell or a teleportation device. Whatever you do, get them out of here! The three of us will take care of Orna."

"Okay," the rest of them said in unison.

They arrived at the top level—the level of Orna's throne room.

The doors opened to an explosion. Leah, Mauria and Paris managed to move out of the way, but part of the blast caught Ori, flinging him back against the wall. "Go!" he yelled before anyone could check him. Leah rolled out of the elevator and shot the civilian grell that threw the explosive. Paris and Mauria opened fire on two Grell-droids that were with the Grell civilian.

Paris recognized the dead Grell. "That was Korana. I thought she was on our side?" he said as he grabbed the rest of the explosive spheres she held in her dead fingers.

"God damn bitch must have set you up!" Mauria yelled. She opened fire on another Grell-droid.

Ori joined the three of them, holding his chest. He still seemed to be getting stronger somehow, despite his injuries. The four of them fought their way through heavy fire before they approached the door to the throne room. It was locked. All around them, humans, Grells and Grell-droids were fighting for their lives. "The Universe must be with me," he laughed in Grell. "Perhaps the Creator is giving me strength for my final battle."

Paris motioned for the rest of the party to move back from the door. He drew back to through the explosive.

"Wait! Wait! Paris, don't!" called a human male voice from behind them. They turned around and saw that it was John. He was wearing the same gear as Leah and Mauria. Running behind him were Toria and Karen. There were two strong looking Grell-droids that were bringing up the rear.

"Paris," John began, "we've found Toria. And this girl says she's your sister. We've got everyone we came here for. Come on, let's go."

“No,” Ori demanded. “I’m not leaving yet. Leah, you and John go and get them to safety. And by safety I mean outside of this city. No matter who wins in this chaos they still may not be safe. John, take them to the surface. I’m sure you can find an abandoned craft someplace, right?”

John was confused. “This whole entire city is in a riot! You’ve got to go while the getting’s good!”

Paris drew his sword. “I’ll cut you head off if you don’t leave, old man.”

John saw through the bluff. “That’s bullshit, Paris. You have too much honor to kill me. I know you’re my friend.”

Paris put away his blade. “Please, John, I’m begging you. Get my sister and Leah out of here. Okay? Don’t worry. The three of us will be fine. We’ll survive.”

Toria looked at her father with longing. “Father, I can’t bear to lose you again. Please be careful.”

Ori and Toria exchanged a warm embrace. “I’ll be fine, Toria. No matter what happens, I am in the vibration of the Universe. I only hope I can earn the Creator’s favor before I die. Now go.” He put his lips to her forehead.

“What is that, Father?” Toria asked meekly.

“It’s a gesture of affection I’ve learned from my time on Earth. It’s called a kiss.”

The door blasted open in front of them. Everyone managed to cover themselves in time.

The debris was harmless, but the air was thick and clouded.

“Go! Quick! Now!” ordered Paris.

John and Leah ran with Toria and Karen. They made their way around the chaos of the battle.

Mauria and Paris drew their swords and pistols when the smoke cleared. Ori stood not in front or behind, but beside them.

Behind the door were two dozen Grell-droids, including Orna’s personal guard. They were all armed and ready. But as Paris and Mauria moved towards them, away from the battle outside, the Grell-droids fell back. Orna sat upon his throne. He did not seem the least bit worried that the Grell city was in complete chaos.

“Cowards!” he screamed at his troops. “You had better be more afraid of me than of them! I can kill you with a single thought!”

“Shut up, Orna!” Paris yelled. “They know what’s up! Maybe they’re tired of you sucking the life out of everything on the planet.”

One of the Grell-droids stopped. He turned around and fired a shot at one of the others, killing him at point blank range. “The true second lives!” he cried. “May the Second become the First!”

Cecil Washington

The floodgates of battle erupted. The Grell-droids killed the traitor in their ranks. Then, Paris and Mauria charged as they opened fire on their enemies, dropping four of them to their knees. They used their swords to battle the rest.

Orna walked down from his throne, seemingly immune to the chaos. Ori stood, unwavering, with a new found strength. Paris glanced back at him and found that by some great miracle, Ori looked like his former self.

“So where is your power coming from, Ori?” Orna taunted.

Ori smirked. “Perhaps this Earth is giving me another chance. Someone have tried to atone for what we’ve led our race to do.”

Mauria hacked the head off of another Grell-droid and dodged an energy blast aimed at her head. This time, she was only grazed by the blow instead of falling unconscious. Paris stood at her back. There were twelve of the twenty-four attackers left. They all powered up their weapons.

“Get ready to jump!” Paris whispered over his shoulder. Mauria nodded in agreement.

The moment that the Grell-droids opened fire, Paris and Mauria leaped into the air. They looked down and saw the cyborg aliens fire on each other. One by one they all dropped to the floor, dead by each other’s hand. Only one was left standing when Mauria and Paris landed. Paris killed the Grell-droid quickly by throwing a dagger into its throat.

The yogin slowly walked up behind Orna with their guns and swords drawn. Orna was surrounded, his troops were dead and his empire was crumbling around him.

“Am I supposed to be afraid?” Orna scoughed.

“You should be,” Paris answered. “Unless you’re too stupid to be afraid.”

“You don’t know what fear is until you’ve faced me in battle,” Orna hissed.

Orna muttered a strange command. The yogin’s swords and guns turned red hot. Paris and Mauria dropped their weapons. Suddenly, the swords and guns were floating in the air and pointed at their owners.

“Attack them!” Orna yelled.

Obediently, the swords went after the yogin with a mind of their own. Paris and Mauria were dodging these attacks made by Orna’s mental ghosts. The sword blows and laser fire were poorly aimed, but still came fast enough to put them on the defensive.

“Enough!” Ori yelled, pointing a finger at Orna. His screaming was laced with a psionic attack.

The ghost weapons dropped. Orna managed to put up a mental barrier in time to block the full force of Ori’s mind blast. But the power of the attack was enough to draw his full attention at the moment. Following his lead, Paris and Mauria closed their eyes and sent mind attacks of their own. Mauria detonated a psionic bomb while Paris fired psionic bullets at Orna’s mental fortress. The

combined force of the attack managed to jolt him physically, but Orna still held his own against their blows.

He returned the battle to the physical by firing an energy blast at Ori's chest.

The blast knocked Ori back a few meters. Orna fired two more rapid blasts at Paris and Mauria. They avoided the attacks. Ori staggered, gasping for his breath. Mauria reached by her side and drew her dagger. She hurtled it at Orna with incredible speed. But Orna stopped the projectile an inch from his head with his mental powers. He used his power to turn the blade around. It flew at her before she had a chance to move. Instead of killing her, it made a large gash in her side.

Paris was intimidated by Orna's power. Then, he remembered what Ori said about how fear fed his opponent. He breathed in deeply and let go of the fear.

Mauria held her side in agony. She was bleeding. Heavily. The blood was running down her hip like a river. Paris looked over at her. He was enraged.

Orna wrinkled his face into a grimace. "What's wrong? Is she your mate, Paris? Are you two—what's the term?—fucking!"

"You're going to be fucked by the time I'm through with you!" Paris yelled.

Paris charged Orna in the blink of an eye. He landed two punches across his face and one strong kick to his stomach, knocking Orna off-balance. Ori fired an energy blast from his hands into Orna's back that sent him sprawling to his side. Mauria sent off another psionic explosion that. It put a crack in Orna's mental shield. Weakened, but not finished, Orna still stood his ground.

Orna staggered, then looked up at the ceiling and pointed. He closed his eyes and concentrated. A large part of the roof fell in on his opponents. Paris—and Mauria, despite her wound, managed to avoid the rubble. But Ori was not as fast as the two of them. He ended up being struck in the head by a large chunk of material. He was knocked out cold. As dark alien blood oozed from Ori's mouth, Orna stood in the center of the room, unharmed, laughing as the electrical wires dangled from the damaged ceiling about.

"One down, one hurt, and only one left," he cackled as he turned towards the humans.

Paris suppressed his concern for Ori. He closed his eyes and meditated. Mauria followed his lead and began summoning energy for an energy blast.

"Tell me," Orna asked them. "Aren't the two of you used to serving my people? Aren't I a far more powerful master than he ever was? Mauria, don't you feel some kinship with me? Our blood is in your veins. Please, join me! Join me in dominion over your world. It would be such a waste for me to kill the two of you when you clearly have so much potential."

Mauria's body was beginning to glow. Paris steadied himself. For some reason his mind was focussed on nothing in particular. His inner voice told him to be empty and for once, he obeyed. He knew that the answer would come to him if he could only hold out and wait.

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Orna turned to Mauria. “What are YOU trying to do? Are you mad? Don’t you know that this type of attack takes entirely too long for you to pull off in a battle like this?” He pointed at Ori. “That’s his training, isn’t it? He thinks that fighting is purely spiritual. Well, it’s not!”

“You’re dead, Orna!” Mauria grunted as she pulled in more energy.

“Hah!” he answered. “If that were the case, then you’d have killed me fifty years ago, bitch. But you didn’t because you were too busy sucking my dick to care about what happened to your world, weren’t you?”

Muria let his reminder of their brief tryst ruin her concentration. Orna had convinced her that he’d make her his human queen, but instead she only ended up being used and abandon like a human member of his harem. Some small part of her still carried around that pain. She’d never cared for another male again—Grell or otherwise—until she met Paris. And she knew she could not have him because he belonged to Leah.

Her anger and hurt caused her to let off the energy prematurely. The blast erupted from her with more than enough power to drain her in her wounded state, but not enough to slow down Orna. He countered her attack with an energy blast of his own. She collapsed on the ground, drained from both the blood loss and from the power she used in her attack.

Paris wasn’t worried. In fact, he was concerned with nothing but the answer he needed to defeat Orna. He felt that the answer was coming. He opened his eyes but did not see anything in front of him.

Orna walked slowly towards him. “Give up, Paris. It’s over. I still have a link to your sister and to your master’s daughter. I can kill them with a single thought.”

Paris did not respond. In fact, he did not even understand what Orna was saying. But the answer was revealing itself to him.

Jarka appeared to him, as if out of a dream. The dead Grell-droid’s image super-imposed itself over Orna and his words. Even though it was Orna talking, all Paris heard were the words of his dead enemy.

“...Even when they acquire some powers, I still manage to defeat them. Many of their powers are not practical in combat. This one would have probably killed a lot more of us if he had focussed on his sword instead of using his energy...”

Paris focused on his sword. “Yolnir,” he whispered to the fallen sword. “Yolnir—attack!”

The sword floated from the sword and sped towards Orna’s back.

But it wasn’t over. Orna stopped the sword in mid-air and call it to his own hand. He then hurled the blade at Paris. Paris stepped to his left, easily avoiding the counter made with his own sword and miraculously caught the blade by it’s hilt.

“Impressive,” Orna said with admiration. “Still not enough to keep you alive, but impressive none the less.”

Paris smiled. He spoke even though his mind was still on his sword. He issued the challenge in Grellic. *I challenge you for my freedom, Master. I challenge you for my freedom and the freedom of my people. If I win, you must grant us leniency and spare our lives. If you still must take a life, then take mine instead.*

“You cannot be serious!” Orna laughed. He used his power to call Mauria’s sword to his hands. “Human, you’re dead!”

Paris struck the first blow as soon as Orna gripped the weapon. He knocked the sword out of Orna’s hand and quickly held the blade at his throat. “No, you’re dead Orna. Give it up. Now.”

Orna used his telepathic powers to push Paris across the room. Paris managed to summon up enough chi to soften his impact against the wall behind to the point where he was shaken instead of killed.

“Orna!” It was Ori. He’d pulled himself out of the rubble. Blood poured from him head and mouth. “The battle’s not over yet!”

Orna turned towards Ori. But in doing so, he’d underestimated Paris. Before he could counter the attack, Paris attacked. Paris put it his mind, body and soul into Yornir. In one swooping motion, he severed Orna’s head.

However, Orna fired one last energy blast that caught Ori in the chest. After that, Paris sliced Orna’s body in half. Then, the corpse hit the ground.

Paris stood in the middle of the throne room dizzy, exhausted and sore from fatigue and injury. His body was covered in sweat and his mind was filled with fog. But at last, at long last, the evil that had plagued the earth had been defeated. The First One, the tyrant of the grey alien Grells was destroyed.

Paris walked slowly over to Mauria. He checked her pulse. She was still alive but unconscious. She needed help immediately and there was not a healer that he knew of who could help him at the moment.

“Paris,” Ori rasped. “Paris, bring her to me.”

Paris walked her over to the Ori. “Come on, Ori, she’s dying and so are you. What are you going to do for her?”

“I still have a little life force left, Paris. And I know now why it was given to me. It was given to me so that I could help you and her succeed. We did it, Paris. We killed him. Now my people and your people are free.” Ori pulled himself up. “Put her head in my lap. She’s already healing herself, but I can give her some help. That way, she’ll be awake at least.”

Paris looked on but said nothing more than, “Go ahead.”

Ori closed his eyes and focussed on Mauria. The normal grey coloring of his skin slowly returned to the sickly green that it was when Paris saw him inside his

cell. Mauria's wound, however, closed up quickly. Soon she opened her eyes and sat up. As soon as she turned towards him, Ori finally collapsed.

Mauria's eyes teared. Paris knew that deep down inside, despite her hatred for the greys, she did have some love for her alien ancestor after all. He knelt down and held her as she cried silently. Paris mourned quietly in his own way. While he did not shed any tears for his former master, he did manage to let go of the anger he was carrying around towards Ori for most of his adult life. They held each other, comforting each other for the first time as friends.

Paris helped Mauria up. She was still weak from her injury. They picked up their weapons and left the thrown room. They found that the din of the battle had subsided somewhat. Judging from the wreckage that was around them and the wounded and the dead, it looked as though neither side had attained victory.

A weathered, elderly grey male came up to them. "Stop humans! Stop! Tell me, who one the battle? Is Orna still alive?"

Paris was weary. He and Mauria kept walking on. "Nobody one. The first is dead, the second is dead and I don't know who's third, all I know is I ain't it!"

The mob of Grells, Grell-droids and humans was quiet. Then someone broke the silence. "We have no leadership," a grey female chimed out.

"Yes we do," called out another. "The First Daughter is still alive. Isn't she?"

Paris stopped. Mauria stood on her own. "Look, Toria is not here, understand? She's not here. She's gone to the surface and I hope to God that's she's never coming back. It's over! Your king is dead! The pyramids have been destroyed on the surface. We're on to your little games now, so if any of you greys and sellout humans try to take what's ours again, we'll be ready for you!"

The mob became unruly. Paris thought that he'd have to fight his way out. He put his hand on his sword and drew his pistol. "Is it on? Is it on? Bring it!"

One of the Grell-droids spoke the voice of reason. "Let them go. He's right. Killing them won't solve anything. The First One's dead and his power machine is destroyed. We've killed most of our warriors. The humans know about us now. They know we're not the gods they once thought we were. The plant and animal life will thrive on this world soon. Everything will be green again in a few years and we know it. We won't be able to survive on this planet for very long. Our time on Earth has ended and we know it. It's their world now, not ours."

The other greys and Grell-droids dropped their hostility. The humans trickled over with Paris and Mauria.

"Please," asked another Grell. "Tell the First Daughter that we need her. The revolution has come and neither side is the victor. All that has come to us is death. She's the only one by birthright who can lead us know. She should know that we need to find a new world."

"I can do that," Paris answered. "I promise I'll send her back to you as soon as we get home."

A third Grell-droid stepped forward. “No, this is nonsense. What, do we expect the humans to walk to the surface? We brought them here to work for us. Now, we can take them home.”

A few hours later, as the flames inside Grellicus died down, scores of saucers and other flying crafts had assembled. Little by little they shuttled the humans back to their homes. Eventually Paris and Mauria were escorted back to the edge of New Vermont where they found Toria’s saucer waiting for them.

They went inside, accompanied by the Grells and Grell-droid that brought them to their location. Toria wept and cursed Grellic as the news of her father’s death was broken to her by the Grell-droid. The Grells and Grell-droid held her as she wept. Eventually, they began telling her that she was needed below the Earth’s surface, that the people of Grellicus were lost without her. Toria’s loyalty and pride in her race got her to pull herself together enough to realize that she had to leave the human settlement immediately. Sensitive to Toria’s pain, Paris, Leah and Karen hid their joy in seeing each other until after the Grells had taken their new queen back to Grellicus.

Toria allowed Paris to keep her craft as payment for the mission. A few weeks later, she made contact with the craft one day when John was at the console. She requested that they come to the city immediately. After a little debate, they all decided to comply Toria’s request. When they arrived, Toria informed them of her plans for humanity, which they happily accepted. She promised them a way for the world to come together, with the hope that humanity would never be divided again.

The greys spent their years of their time on Earth helping the humans reclaim the full aspects of Earth technology. All across the planet, Grells and Grell-droids acted as advisors as humanity rebuilt its scattered nations and repair its weathered landscape. While the world was being above ground, the Grells spent their time rebuilding the ages-old space crafts that could carry them across the stars. They departed the Earth not as conquerers or enemies, but as newly found friends who had atoned for their sins against humanity. The plan was for the people of the Earth to live as one, in a large, global collective.

During that time, Paris and Leah married. They took the time to make love every chance they had, vowing to never allow themselves to be separated from each other again. As a result of their intense passion, Leah gave birth to twin boys, named Erik and Jacob.

Mauria allowed herself to age a bit, so that she would not make her new husband feel insecure about his age. It seemed that she had decided to take a liking to John. She made John the proud, older father of two boys and two girls before he died at the generously old age of a hundred and twenty-five years old.

Karen took a liking to Gaurang, the young yogin acolyte that challenged Paris when he came to the settlement. She married him as soon as she turned

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eighteen. She made a point of it not to allow her husband to train them too deeply in the arts of the yogin.

As world changed around them, Paris often wondered if this time around, humanity would rise above its greed and desires that had caused them to be tricked into living inside of the pyramids in the first place. At first, he felt secure in the progress of the human race, and devoted most of his aging years to passing on the Way of the Yogin to the younger generation. Besides being hailed the world over as one of the two Liberators of The World, his proudest title was the one that the yogin acolytes addressed him by: Grandmaster. The yogins even built a kwoon in his honor that became a place for him to train young men and women who wanted to learn about the spiritual martial arts of Yogin.

Paris lived a long, rich life. He outlived his devoted wife, loyal sister and dear friends. He and his sons and grandchildren were visiting the graves of his friends on the day his fear for humanity had returned. The Grells had reintroduced one last concept of civilization to humanity before they left.

“Granddaddy,” cried one of his twelve year old grandsons. “What’s this?” He walked over to Paris and handed him a long, thin paper-like object. “Someone at school said he’d give me more if I showed him how to fight.”

“That,” Paris answered, “is what people used to call money.”

About the Author

Cecil Washington writes Sci-Fi, Fantasy, Erotica, Horror and vampire stories. He is a big fan of slayers, vampires, space and African-American culture. The Science Fiction and Fantasy World web site, www.sffworld.com, is carrying three of his stories online. His story *Aging* has been selected for the Sci-fi Noir gallery at www.scifinoir.com/gallery.html. His personal web site of science fiction stories can be viewed at: <http://creativebrother.freehosting.net/scificindex.html>. You can e-mail him at creativebrother@yahoo.com.

Cecil's interests are varied, ranging from the martial arts, music and of course, writing. He graduated cum laude from Bowie State University with a major in Business Administration. He minored in Marketing, Economics, Communications and Music. He lives with his wife, children and mother-in-law in small home. This is his first novel.

Cecil dedicates this book to the memory of his late mother Gloria Washington and to all of his family and friends who have been there for him over the years.

