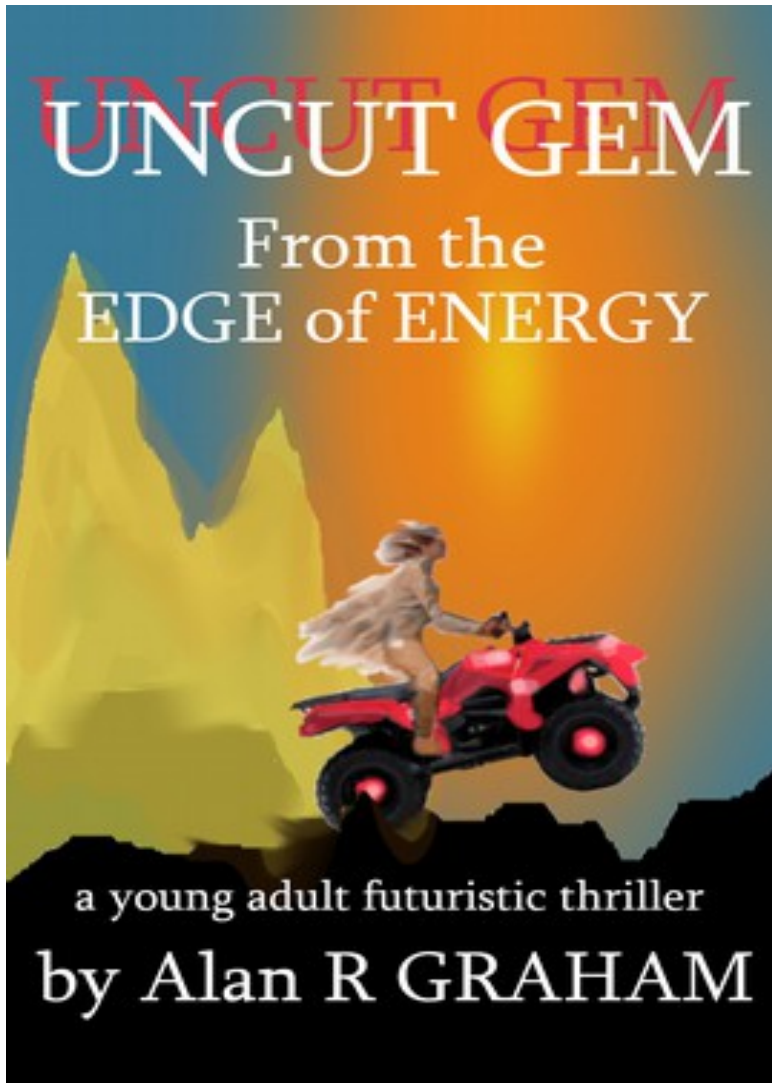


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Uncut Gem

from the Edge of Energy

By: Alan R. Graham

Romantic, Futuristic Thriller

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CHAPTER ONE: The Assassin

A man in a dull, black and blue, armored suit rode a pulse elevator to the forty fifth floor high above the city skyline. It was 1900 hours or thereabouts, the remnants of sunset hardly capable of suggesting a horizon. He stood to one side as the elevator slowed and the door dissolved. A glance to either side and he emerged, cautiously. He was tall, dark, a short ponytail protruding from beneath his head strap the only distinguishing feature visible in that dimly lit corridor. He turned left. Rounding the corner towards a row of doors, he noticed two helmeted guards, then a third behind him flickering in his 'eyes-up' display.

With fly-like precision he sprang off the floor, flipped, and clung to the ceiling with gloved hands and shimmering soles, while directing a flash of energy from his chest plate at the aggressor behind him. The guard was flung lifelessly back from where he had come. The other two guards had little time to react. A stream of tiny fireballs came whistling down the corridor towards him, just as one guard was ducking into a doorway.

The armored man barely had time to drop back behind the corner of the corridor as the firestorm slammed into the ceiling where he had been suspended. He stood for a second, smiled; now knowing in which room his target was embedded. He stepped back, over the incapacitated guard, and then ran casually towards a

window at the other end of the corridor, peering into the elevator as he passed. He rose up through the window as if it were pane-less, the glass appearing to dissolve on his command, and clung to the outside of the building, his gloves glowing dimly at the fingertips.

Within a few seconds he had maneuvered himself around the outside of the building and was poised outside one of a row of windows. He quietly reached in, his ocular display receiving an image from his wrist weapon: a guard by the door. Seconds later a burst of white light tore into the guard, cauterizing the hole in his chest, suffocating his desire to scream. He was held suspended for a few seconds before being lowered slowly and silently to the floor.

The armored man entered, dropped to the floor, walked over to a large bed, and confronted a portly businessman—clench fist, sitting, shivering, upright, and rigid.

“Agent of the Capital Guard,” the businessman said. “So, I suppose you have come here to kill me.”

The agent barely shook his head. Raised a finger to his lips and said, “Shh...no! To save you.”

“Pah! From who, from what?”

“...Your competitors.”

The businessman was bemused. “What do you mean?”

“Come with me,” the agent whispered, pointing at the window. “The Capital doesn't like monopolies, bad for business. Let's go.”

As they approached the window a vehicle rose up to meet them, a ramp extending and a hatchway dissolving. The businessman was ushered in. He sat down.

“You coming, Merk?” said a woman's voice from within.

“No, Fiori. Got something to attend to. But I'll be at The Diner around nine this evening, if you want to catch up.”

“Sure. I'd like that.”

The hatch resolved and the vehicle sped off.

Agent Mercury turned to the door of the apartment. The

ring in her voice brought it all back. He had been doing this kind of work for too many years. He was 33, time to think about retirement, at least from the rigors of killing. In his job, having a woman, a mate, was just not going to happen—could not happen. But later, in a different setting, that was a thought he had long entertained. So he wondered: what he might do instead of killing; whether he could change focus and alienate his past; whether he could find someone capable of discovering the real person within him. These were questions he could not answer, but they plagued him, every day a little more.

He picked a vase off the table beside him and let it fall. It shattered on hitting the floor. A few seconds later the door burst open. Mercury sent a blinding stab of light from his chest plate at the third guard in the doorway and he was instantly incapacitated.

Nine o'clock at The Diner and Fiori walked in. She was late 20s, a tall woman with dark, olive skin. Unusual. Most physical characteristics in humans were quite similar: Complexion, fair, with straight, black hair, and brown eyes. Ethnic group features had long since been diluted over the millennia by interracial breeding, though just occasionally, as in Fiori's case, a particular gene set would surface. She only ever came to this dingy eating establishment if invited, could not tolerate the staring eyes and whispering voices on her own. Paired up, it was not so bad.

She didn't have to look far to find Merk. He was sitting squeezed, as always, up against the bar, whiskey in hand. She came over, a black bodysuit from neck to toe hiding curves most would have wanted in plain sight. Only her arms were bare.

“You OK, Merk? Everything went down as planned?” she asked, sitting next to him.

“Yup. And you?”

“Oh, yes. Filing and formalities mostly. I just don't get why we have to save an idiot, when there are far better things we could be doing out there.”

Merk turned to her. “You're not supposed to question orders.”

She laughed. “And that's what makes you so damn good at your job. No emotion.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Guess, half of it, yes,” Fiori quipped.

“You don't think I have emotions...? Feelings?”

“Hey!” she said, “Don't take it to heart. Of course you do. Don't you?”

Merk pointed to Fiori as the barman passed by, then tapped the bar with a finger. Emotions, yes. He knew he did, but what they were and what he was supposed to do with them was a mystery. Most of them, anyway. Cravings were physical by nature, easily figured. Emotions like fear and anger he could handle. But those he did not understand he could not control and they bothered him: Solitude for one. Or, was that sadness? Were they the same thing? Could he be alone and happy? Fact is, he wasn't sure if happiness was an emotion; he only thought about it because he heard others talk of it. What exactly was it?

The barman returned with a tall blue, fluorescent drink. He slid it in front of Fiori.

She took a sip. Nodded in satisfaction. Saw Merk was not going to answer her, so she changed tactics. “You got another assignment, I see. To take down that notorious outlaw of The Steppe.”

“Yup.”

“Nervous?” she asked, “Being out there without tracking?”

“I'm always nervous, going in to heat. It's what keeps me thinking—keeps me alive.”

“Is this one going to be your last?” Fiori asked. They had talked before and she knew something of his frustrations. She liked Merk because he always spoke the truth and she felt comfortable around him. Not that he spoke much but when he did she imagined she was getting a little piece of him, an offering: Trust, perhaps?

“Dunno. Maybe.”

“...What will you do when you finally pack it in?”

Merk cocked his head, took a long drink, then without looking up, asked, “What is love?”

The question took Fiori by surprise; she paused for a moment before responding. “Hey, Merk, I don't really know. I've read stuff, heard talk, and it sounds as if love is simply a bigger kind of like. You know...like, liking someone a lot.”

“Hmm.” He nodded. “I can like apples but not oranges. I don't have to do anything, it just happens...But love? I don't walk into a bar, see a woman and say, I love her or I don't.”

“Ah, but, Merk,” she grinned, “Maybe you have to bite her, first—you know, like an apple.”

“Fiori,” he was shaking his head, “There's more to it than that. A bite, a kiss, what's the difference? Nothing happens.”

Fiori smiled. She wanted to reassure him; he seemed so tangled up inside. “Look,” she began, trying to make sense of something which she, herself, was unsure, “Love takes time to happen; it isn't a physical thing, like pain or pleasure that you feel immediately. It grows like a tree, inside you. That's what I read, anyway.” A shrug. She went on. “You hardly notice it at first, that little stick poking out of the grass, but as it rises, it begins to branch out, high and wide, overshadowing everything around it, until eventually, you know...That's it...You're hooked.”

Merk took another sip. His glass was empty. He slid it down the bar and it came to rest in front of the barman.

He said, “So I have to wait for it, I can't start it myself?”

“That's what I've been told,” Fiori replied, “But I guess you can help it grow, just like you can help a tree grow. You know: Add soil, water. That kind of thing.”

“...How long does it take?”

“Merk, I don't really know. Depends. Could take years. Could happen tomorrow. Who knows?” Fiori was intrigued, was wondering. Hoping. Why was he being so unusually open, especially on an intimate subject like this? And with her.

The barman dropped another whiskey between Merk's

hands. A gentle grasp and he raised it to his lips. “Well, that explains it.” He took a gulp, winced, swallowed, and then breathed out slow and steady. Turned to her, saw sadness in her expression....

She said, “Guess you've never loved?”

“Not that I know of. Maybe I did, but didn't know it. And you, Fiori?”

“Same,” she shrugged, “Are we in The Guard that cold and heartless? Are soldiers not supposed to fall in love?”

Merk turned to her again. “That's what I want when I retire. Love. Don't ask me why, I just know it is supposed to make people happy and content with what they have. I'm a long way from that, right now.”

“Working as an assassin, huh?”

“Yup. And that's it. Somehow I have to forget the past. Maybe love is the emotion that does that—wipes our memories, helps us start again. Like having a body shower and washing off all that old dirt. Stepping out, fresh and new.”

Fiori plucked up courage. She warmed to what he was saying and felt, just maybe, he was insinuating something between them. Said, “I'd like to love someone, too.”

His smile was an effort to convey affection for her, though he didn't look directly at her. Then he said quietly, “You know more about it than I do. You stand a better chance.”

CHAPTER TWO: The Edge of Energy

On the outskirts of The Capital lay a few small towns, communities sometimes called The Edge of Energy. The Capital lay beneath a vast solar collector in geo-stationary orbit. The collector beamed down a shallow cone of energy that powered the entire city, its infrastructure, its vehicles and its wealth. Beyond the cone nothing happened—couldn't happen—no energy, devoid of life since the tiny planet had been harvested to exhaustion many hundreds of years ago. Hazy sunshine might have offered sustenance to plants and other lifeforms, had there been a supply of fresh water. But it didn't rain, not anymore. And what little water which could be found in low lying areas was often tainted; a legacy from the days when poisonous and corrosive chemicals were used in the process of mineral extraction.

Air quality was deteriorating in these badlands. Oxygen was produced by the cities, naturally from plant growth, and as a byproduct of certain industries, but it was not enough to support life or hold off the inevitable outside city limits. Anyone wishing to venture into such a place was well advised to keep physical effort to a minimum, to walk slowly, carry water, and get plenty of sleep. In another few centuries there would be no oxygen left, just a cocktail of nitrogen, carbon dioxide, traces of methane, and a few other nasty gasses still seeping from beneath the surface.

One or two settlements were reported to exist out there in the dry wilderness, The Steppe, as it was known. Other than that, human colonization was concentrated in The Capital. Three other cities were dotted about the planet, but they were uncivilized, little more than outposts. Each had their own energy cone, so they were self-sufficient, communication with The Capital and governing bodies rarely a necessity. Visited? Never...Not to Merk's knowledge, anyway.

He walked into a hotel bar around midday and sat at the end. He was not wearing his military attire; he wore a brown, knee-length jacket and loose pants over a white bodysuit. He was in anonymity, working under-cover—perhaps his last assignment, was the murmur reverberating around his head. He could hope. If he made it out of this one alive, he owed it to himself.

“I need a whiskey and a guide,” he said to the bartender.

A tired old man walked over. “A guide, you say. You mean...you want to find girls? There are plenty right here,” he said, pointing up at the balcony above the bar.

“...And the whiskey?”

“Oh, right here,” said the barman, fetching a bottle from the back counter. He returned, flipped up a glass in front of his customer and filled it.

Merk looked at him. “...A guide, who can take me to Jacksonville.”

The old bartender took a step back. Laughed. “You mad? Why do you want to go out there? Dreadful hovel.”

“I've heard it's a nice place,” Merk replied.

The bartender stared at him for a while, then with a shake of the head, said, “You look like a man of money. There's no business to be had in Jacksonville. It's a commune, a worthless place full of mindless beggars, layabouts, and dreamers.”

“...A guide?”

“Oh, alright. Sure,” said the old barman. He looked around. “Over there. Those three, sitting at the table. I think they know

The Steppe well. They're dressed like it, for sure. But they'll want money, and lots of it to take you out there.”

Merk nodded. Tossed back his shot. Stood up and approached a table in the corner. He was wondering why three men were sitting at a table without a drink to be seen. So he offered. Said he was looking for a guide. Their response was immediate: They lunged at him, taking him completely by surprise. He managed to take one down with a bare fist, but the weight of the other two toppled him back off his feet. They were surprisingly heavy. Then a stinging sensation in his neck and he began to lose the will to fight.

He was being lifted to his feet when a flash of light slammed into one of his assailants. Merk couldn't actually be sure what it was. He looked drowsily up to see the blur of a body flying past him with a flutter, as if of wind. He was losing consciousness, but could still make out a roughly clothed youngster, child-like yet of enormous speed and agility. He passed out.

Merk came to on a mattress. He opened his eyes to see what appeared to be a young girl staring at him from the foot of the bed. He sat up abruptly, then put a hand to a throbbing head and decided it best he lay back. He looked down, unsure if he was still dressed. He was in his bodysuit, though his boots and pants had been removed. He looked up at her, standing at the foot of the bed. Was going to ask how he had come to be lying there half-naked. *Did she undress me?*

“Hi,” she said. “Hurts, doesn't it?”

He nodded.

“So, who are you?” she inquired, sweetly.

He looked at her. “Who are you?”

She laughed, and though the high-pitched crack rang painfully through his head, a background melody was somehow soothing. She said, “Oh, come on; let's not play that silly game. Alright. My name is Justin.... Now it's your turn. And you are?”

“Merk. How long have I been out?”

“Four hours and a bit,” she chuckled. “They would have taken you out into the desert and left you to shrivel up like everything else. You would not have survived the midday sun.”

“Yes, but...” He was looking confused. “How did you get me up here?”

“I carried you.”

“You..!”

“Yes, Merk. Then I went downstairs and dragged your muggers into the basement. Told Randy, the barman, to keep his mouth shut—that I'd be back to collect them later.”

“How can you, like.... I mean, what do you do?”

She walked around the bed and sat down next to him. “You are looking for a guide to take you to Jacksonville.”

He squinted. “Er.... Maybe. What makes you think —”

“I was up on the balcony,” she smiled. “I overheard.”

Merk sat up slowly. He asked, “Who were those men?”

“Not men,” she remarked. “Bots!”

“How do you know?”

She laughed again. “That's my little secret. What's yours?”

Merk avoided her question. He was confused. Intrigued, even. Could she have been the one he remembered flying off the balcony like a fireball? Could she really have carried him up here all by herself? *She is such a tiny thing*, he was thinking, *ragged and skinny*. That she was: small, mousy looking with short, fluffy, fair hair, dressed in baggy clothing. Not a muscle on her that he could see.

He asked, “Was it you that took out those bots?”

“Yes,” she replied. “And now you're going to ask me how.... Right?”

Merk tilted his head and raised an eyebrow, questioningly.

She responded, “Well, first you tell me why you want to go to Jacksonville and who you really are.” Justin was looking right

into his eyes. She thought she saw kindness, somewhere deep inside, but she was probably lying to herself, mostly she just saw pain. His dark eyebrows were arched and gave her reassurance. Why, she knew not, only that round things were usually nicer than straight, pointy things. Pointy things were often dangerous. He was a handsome man, strong, and was a fighter; she could see that in the scars on his arms and under his chin. He was not a mercenary; they were always ugly and rude. He intrigued her. Could he be the one?

“I need to meet Jackson.”

“Ha...He won't meet with you. He won't meet anyone from The Capital.”

“I have a message for him.”

“Are you a...an Agent?” she asked, with fascination. She had never met one before.

“Yes...And thank you,” he said lowering his head, shyly.

“You are welcome.”

He looked sideways. “So, those bots. How did you do it?”

She turned away and smiled to herself. “Now,” she said, “If I tell you all my secrets you won't hire me.”

“Hey,” Merk pulled at her shoulder, “We had a deal. And what's this about me hiring you?”

She retrieved her arm. “You need a guide.”

“...You?”

“Yeah, me. What? You think I can't handle myself out there? You think I'm just a stupid girl? huh?”

Merk shook his head. She sure had guts; he had to give her that. He said, “And what's to say you're not another bot?”

She leaned over and blew in his face. “Pooh. Is that the only line you have, to get a girl to take off her clothes?”

“I didn't mean it like that.” He lowered his head again. He was not used to conversation with people he did not know, it made him uncomfortable, and it was never simple. He liked to say what

had to be said and then do what came next. His feelings, if he had any, were his alone. His friends respected that. Not this girl. She was being invasive, and she hardly knew him.

Justin, on the other hand, was beginning to enjoy their little chat. He was very interesting, perhaps a little too interesting. He was shy, that was cute, and she could tell he was full of sensitivity just bursting to come out. But he was holding back. *Perhaps*, she mused, *he'll open up in time*. Yes, she could like this man, but for now she was going to have to handle her feelings. There were important things up ahead and she would make sure of them before letting emotions get in her way.

“There are bots all around the Edge of Energy,” she pointed out. “They are here precisely to stop people like you from getting too close to Jackson. Your big mistake at the bar was to order a whiskey. People who want to join the commune don't usually drink alcohol, or dress like you.” She stood up and continued. “I am not a bot but I do have certain advantages over the average human. It's all about concentration and minimal effort. So you need me.”

“How much?”

“Not much. A hand shake will do just fine.”

That evening, Justin left their drab and dirty hotel room, said she would go find something to eat for them. Merk offered her money, but she declined, said there was no need to pay. She was owed a favor. Upon her return she found him sitting on the side of the bed, dressed, head still throbbing. He had tried walking about, reached a window, couldn't see out of it, didn't know what floor they were on. A cracked mirror above the sink had given him comfort on discovering he still had all his teeth and that no permanent scarring was likely to his face.

She slid two large containers onto a plastic table by the window. They then pulled up the only two chairs in the room and sat down.

“Here, take this powder and put it into your drink,” Justin urged, shoving a little pouch in his direction. “It'll get rid of that headache in a flash, you'll see.”

He thanked her. Opened his container and popped the lid off a jar.

“I hope you like noodles. These are my favorite: duck and orange, they call it. I don't know what a duck is but I'd grow a duck tree any day, if I could,” she said, stifling a chuckle with a fork full of noodles.

For someone as bright and intelligent as she sounded, it was a surprise to him that she didn't know what a duck was. She was so young, perhaps that was it. Or maybe she was just joking; she did laugh a lot. He was wondering whether she was from around these parts, when she spoke up:

“I grew up in Jacksonville, but left as soon as I could become independent. I live halfway between here and there, doing the trip twice, maybe three times, a month. Which is why I am your best choice for guide, in these parts.”

From there the conversation flowed easily between them, though Merk was not one to express himself in more than a few words at a time. Nevertheless, Justin, without really paying much attention, was beginning to grow fond of him. She could relax with him—a man no less—and that was odd for her. She perceived no threat, quite the reverse, she felt easy with him. She wasn't one to smile much, but with him she couldn't help it. At the time she hadn't noticed, did not ask herself why, but later she would have time to reflect.

He slept in the bed that night on her insistence, she on the floor, looking up at him, wondering about him, about herself and about how quickly she had dropped her guard—until she finally fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE: Into the Badlands

The next day and down a dusty track leading away from town Justin stopped. They had walked about a mile, into some rocky outcrops. She seemed improbably dressed for an excursion into hostile territory: Floppy, over-sized linen jacket, a dirty, tan shirt beneath, baggy pants, and bare feet. *But, hey..!* A smile. He had accepted her as his guide, so here she was. How old she really might be, he had no idea, but he was beginning to get an impression. He had been wondering whether she really had incapacitated those three bots in the bar, or whether it had all been conjured by the effects of that drug he had been given. Was she just an opportunist, playing along? No. He had denied that as a possibility. Instead he had decided to trust her. Why, he didn't know, it was another of those mysterious emotions he had yet to comprehend.

Justin dropped a duffle bag on the ground and beckoned Merk over to a rusty metal ring lying in the dirt. She grabbed it and heaved it up, lifting with it a massive door, possibly ten feet in length and five feet wide that had been hidden in the dust. For such a small person he was amazed at her strength. Looking in, he at once saw two relics from the past, four wheel ATVs, he seemed to remember them being called. He had never seen a real one before, only images, thought they had all become extinct after the development of hover technology.

She jumped into the pit and unplugged them from a large, underground cable. *Electric*, he thought, *she's wired them up from outside the cone. Not just gutsy, smart, too.* Justin mounted the red one and with a faint whir drove it up the steep incline onto the surface. She poked her face at the other, it was blue, explaining that all he had to do was sit on it and it would start up. He did as he was told. Held the handles as she had done. It whirred but went nowhere.

Justin laughed. “Now twist your right hand and it will move forwards.”

He did.... It flew from the pit in an instant, bounced several times on landing, almost unseating its hapless rider, then raced off out of control down the track.

“Stop twisting!” she shouted behind him. Watched as he began to slow. A smile quickly became a giggle. He was oddly clumsy for an agent, she was thinking, kind of vulnerable and attractive all at the same time. She saw him gingerly begin a turn, come around, avoiding a large boulder, then back towards her. She was laughing again, hadn't laughed like that for so long, it almost hurt.

“Silly. That thing on the floor by your foot,” she pointed, “It's called a break. It will stop the ATV quickly, but don't press it too hard or you'll go flying over the bars.”

He felt foolish, had to say something, anything to hide his embarrassment. “I need a weapon,” he said.

She pointed at a switch on his ATV, while dismounting to close the trap door. Merk turned the switch and a compartment between his legs flipped up. Inside there were an array of gadgets, one in particular he liked very much: A Morton Blinder, his favorite weapon. He strapped it to his wrist. It logged in. He could see its read out on his ocular display. However, he could see he had lost communication with central command. No surprise really, he knew it was going to happen, and that they would no longer be able to track him. Here he was, on his own. It didn't bother him that much, he always worked alone.

“The ATVs radiate an energy field. So long as you are

within a hundred yards of them your weapon will operate,” she explained, while strapping the duffle bag to her rear rack. “My little babies will run for just over a week without needing a recharge, but there's nowhere out there in The Steppe to plug in. So ... That's three days out and three back. We can't risk taking them to the limit, in case of an emergency.”

“And Jacksonville?” he asked.

“Five days ride, or fifteen days walk.”

Merk thought for a moment. He was looking into the compartment between his legs. He was frowning. Said, “No gloves?”

“Gloves don't stick to rocks, silly. Only smooth surfaces, metals and such.”

Merk shrugged. “Where did you get all this stuff?”

She answered, “You're not the only one I've taken out there, you know. But they never come back. So, I've acquired a few toys over the years.”

“These people you take out there,” he asked. Then hesitated. He had never acted like this before. He wasn't a talker. It seemed he was asking far too many questions. His curiosity was leading him, though towards her rather than his assignment, a distraction he should have been well aware of but had missed altogether. He finished his sentence.”...what are they looking for? What do they want?”

“Well.... Some come for love, some for peace or salvation. Others to kill, to murder their lost loved ones. Or worse, to rape... lots of reasons.”

Merk looked up. “How long have you been doing this?”

“Oh, about five years, I guess.”

And the questions just kept coming; he was powerless to stop them. “Why? You don't ask for payment. What could you possibly gain from doing this?”

She glanced at him. “Capitalism isn't everything.”

“Well, I work for a living and money sure helps me,” he

replied.

“In there, yes,” Justin pointed towards The Capital. “But not out there.” She flicked a thumb over her shoulder.

“So, why, then?” he asked again.

She looked directly at him and said, “I’m waiting for a man.”

“Who is he? What’s his name?”

“I’m hoping his name is Merk.”

He frowned. “You found me. Now what?”

“Let’s get going,” she smiled, while a lovely fuzziness was erupting in her tummy, “It’s a long ride and there will be plenty of time to talk along the way.”

A day’s ride through a wasteland of rocks and dust and sand. Not a thing growing, not a bush nor a smudge of lichen. And it was hot. Justin was out in front. For some reason he trusted her, he still wasn’t sure why, only that she seemed honest, answered without hesitation or reserve. She made sense, even in the middle of all this weirdness, though at times what she came up with was beyond his comprehension. He was out of his depth, this place so antiquated and alien to him.

He had nothing much else to think about but her. There she was up ahead, he driving slightly to one side of her tracks, to avoid the dust trail. Somewhere behind her disheveled appearance, her shaggy hair, and dirty clothes there had to be a woman. He imagined her to be attractive, or at least probably...like an uncut gem. He could only see hints of her true self buried beneath the layers of dust and wrinkled cloth, but it was enough to give him fanciful notions. A hidden gem, scratched from the ground, caked and dull, yet sparkling somewhere within. A graceful woman she had to be, not a child, and the only way he could tell that was by her poise: The way she moved; how she stood so lightly on one foot to disengage the other; the gentle displacement of weight as she paused to cock a hip; how she managed to turn without appearing to do so; her subtle flexibility extraordinarily controlled.

All these oddities made him like her for who she was—not a

girl, not the brat she portrayed to the outside world—a real woman, plain and simple. A fantasy? Perhaps. One he hoped to meet, someday.

Justin took a side track around mid-afternoon. It ran between two small hills. She slowed, and turned to Merk.

“Keep your eyes open,” she gestured as she spoke. “There could be a few scavengers around looking for oil and wood, we're not that far yet from the Edge of Energy. They usually leave at dusk because you can't scavenge in the dark.”

“What is this place?” he asked.

“An old mine with a quarry full of junk. I drop in from time to time. Stay in the shafts overnight if need be.”

She drove on. He followed as the track opened out into a vast cut, several hundred feet high. All around lay broken and rusted vehicles from the harvest days. She was right, nothing but junk. They parked up by the entrance to an old mining shaft. He looked around. Nothing was moving. The silence was somehow disturbing, but he was getting used to it. His eyes reached up to an old conveyor that seemed to drag on forever until eventually it ended at the top of a tower on a ledge above his head. Justin dismounted and wandered off towards a machine the size of a house. It had enormous wheels and a giant shovel. He didn't know what it was called, but he had seen the archives, knew that such vehicles had been used back in the days.

A loud explosion snapped him into focus. Saw Justin spring back from behind the machine and press her back up against one of the wheels. She was trying to get his attention, pointing at the tower above his head. He looked up; saw three figures dancing between the joists. Another explosion, and this time he saw a flash of light coming from one of them. Then a ping that sparked a few feet from Justin's head. A weapon, he thought, they are firing at her.

She was out in the open. She needed cover. So he gave them something else to shoot at, took their fire, and ran for the end of the ramp. Rolling over in the dirt, he turned up on one knee and sent a burst of light from his wrist to the tower. It shuddered, began to sway, crumpled inward, bits disintegrating—but not before a

sharp pain jabbed him in the back.

He looked around; saw Justin springing now, across a pile of rubble, from one boulder to another with the ease of wind. She was flying directly towards a group of individuals, about a dozen or so, all of whom were firing projectiles at her. He watched in wonder at her agility. Her flowing body seemed to change shape to avoid being hit, while she would twist and roll in midair and find footing from nothing. The blur became a distraction. No arms, no legs, nothing to distinguish her as human, she floated and swirled as if made of pure cloth—staying aloft, it seemed, for an impossible length of time.

Merk woke up. She was going up against an army and he was just watching. He ran for her, knowing he would never get there in time. She was almost upon them. He stumbled up rocks and got into position. Raised an arm, but nothing happened. *Shit*, he thought, *too far from the ATVs. Best do it the old-fashioned way.* As his arm dropped he saw the scavengers spreading out. Then a tornado of cloth took out three in one immense eruption, each blown sideways by an impact that appeared to be little more than a gust. He stumbled again. Saw as seven of those still standing were converging on Justin.

A cartwheel of flaying cloth cut through the middle of them, to crumple into a heap just as the legs of two more scavengers vanished beneath them. She was now rising up, not a jump but as if by levitation, hovering high above their heads, was spinning.... Dropped between them. Then stumbled. *Shit..!* She was tiring, becoming overwhelmed. Just a few more yards, that was all he needed. But there was more than yardage to this battle.... They now had her pinned. Merk stopped abruptly. A knife was at her throat. He looked behind to see where the remaining two scavengers were. They were heading for the ATVs. *No time...must act now.*

“Here,” he said, taking off the Morton Blinder, “Give her to me and you can have this,” all the while, looking at her, watching her eyes flicker in the direction of the man to her left. He threw it at his feet, gave him just enough time to bend down, and sprang forwards. As he did so he saw Justin's loose and dangling sleeve

somehow rise of its own accord and entangle the blade at her neck, flipping her knifed assailant like an old piece of rope and slamming him into another. Merk pounded at his two until they were unconscious, then looked for the fifth.... Already down, she had taken him out, too.

“The ATVs,” he shouted, “We've got to get to them.”

His tiny avenger raised an arm. “It's OK,” she said, “They are rigged.”

He looked over and saw two scavengers lying on the ground beside the ATVs, shuddering, clawing at gravel, trying to crawl away as best they could. He looked back at Justin, astonished by her actions, a tingle of pride seeping through him, as if they had done it together, they were a team. But, in reality, he knew who to thank for their survival, and it wasn't him. He felt clumsy out here, out of the city. Where he came from things made sense, they worked, and he could do his job effectively. He felt he needed to apologize for his inabilities. He figured he should try. But how?

They walked back down the pile of rubble and onto the flat, towards the mine shaft. The scavengers had scarpered.

Justin paused. “Thanks, Merk. You saved my life..... Twice,” she said, reaching up on tiptoes and kissing his cheek.

He half turned away, unwilling to take the honor. “I...I did nothing,” he said, the moist impression of her lips still lingering, her breath all around him. “I was your sidekick. You did it.... But how is it poss—”

“Oh, shit, Merk,” she exclaimed on seeing his back. “You've been hit!”

She raised a gentle hand and rubbed the sore and bloody spot.

He winced. “Ouch! Yes. Wondered what that was.”

“It's an arrow. Broken off, but there's a bit still in you.”

“What's an arrow?”

“It's a stick, silly. Has a pointy bit on the end. It's supposed to kill you, but with skin as thick as yours, looks like you'll

survive.”

Merk looked back over his shoulder and said, “Do you know how many times you have called me silly today?”

“Oh, Merk...Please. It's just my way of saying I like you. Come on, let's get the ATVs in the shaft and then we can take care of your wound.”

He was wondering about things, as she worked to remove the arrowhead and clean him up. *Silly!* he was thinking, *how does that mean she likes me? Talking makes no sense. And why does she laugh so much, I mean, nothing out here is funny—or am I missing something?*

“Tell me,” he said, “You said you would. How can you move the way you do, like that, in combat? I can do things like that with armored gear in The Capital, but you do it out here without any tactical equipment.”

She patted him lightly on the back, then dropped down off the bench and squatted in front of him, arms on his knees. She gazed up into his eyes. Now she knew how she felt about him. She was positive. If she could at least tell him half the truth, then the rest would soon follow. She trusted him. He did not flinch in battle, he did not leave her side, and he stayed to protect her. Truly, no one had ever given her so much comfort.

Nobody she had ever met was simply nice. There was always some ulterior motive, some gain to be had. Here was a man that asked for nothing more than kinship. He was a killer, yes...but it seemed he was able to separate his job from his personality. It was merely a thing he could switch on when needed. Unlike mercenaries who lived brutality, craved killing, and had nothing inside but seething disrespect for the world, Mercury was different. What he did was not who he really was. He was good and decent inside.

“It's all in the mind,” she began. “I used to come out here to this quarry and practice with some junky old bots I programmed to exercise with me. My Mom was an engineer at the bot factory back in The Capital—that was before I was born. She taught me stuff. They are simple devices, really, with weaknesses just like humans

have. You just have to know their weak spots.”

Her last remark made him uncomfortable. Was she telling him she had found his weak spot? That's how it felt. It was a spot he didn't know he had, but he was imagining it anyway, an unnerving place. And she was looking right at it.

She continued. “I diffuse myself with loose clothing, I pretend to go this way but go that. I never follow standards; I never do what is expected. I lie to your senses: Mimicry and subterfuge. These are methods that have been used for eons by creatures to survive, feed, and fight.” She paused. Then, “Your strength comes from here,” she said, squeezing his thigh, “Mine comes from here,” she pointed at her head. “You could break my arm in a second, if you could find it. I could break yours with just a finger. When you slap water with your hand it's hard, like slapping a rock. But a finger will break the surface unimpeded, and at much greater speed. Rather than letting the body decide where energy and force should be applied, I take control, and channel all of it, as need be, into one simple task.”

“But how can you possibly fly through the air like that?”

“I don't fly; I make you think I am flying. I make your mind want to believe, and it does. I use things you are not looking for to keep myself aloft. While you are looking at me, I am finding a surface to use. I focus on senses: eyes, echoes, smells. I use the power of tension as needed, rather than let it pointlessly build and get in the way. That's all.”

“OK, but I saw you levitate, that can't have been a trick.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What? Oh, you mean, that.... Not a trick, just a bit of good fortune. I grabbed an old pipe that was lying beside me, flipped it upright with a toe and did a kind of handstand on its end. Then, as my foot was passing the top of it, I turned upright.” She laughed. “Did it look like levitation?”

“It was absolute magic to watch.”

“Nothing magical about it, Merk. You make me.” She smiled...caught herself drifting from her promise. She knew it, but could not help herself.

That night they spent lying together, not touching, though each could feel the other. She asked him many questions, about his past, his youth, and why he had taken up his job as an agent. His words were few but sincere. She knew he found it difficult to talk. He had been a man of solitude for so many years. How was he to find what it took to be expressive, in just a few, short days? He told her he had never had a relationship with a woman, but did not wander beyond the thought. She wanted to ask if he was open to the idea, but felt the question inappropriate. So she dreamed that night of what he might have said, instead.

The following morning it was back on the trail. They stopped a couple of times to stretch their legs, grab a bite, and chat. They were now far enough away from the Edge of Energy that there was no concern for bandits and scavengers. They had the entire Steppe to themselves. Merk watched her bound effortlessly up outcrops, across ravines, and down gullies, wondered if he could ever be like that, have the control and inner strength to adapt his body in such a way. He thought not, figured it was pointless asking her to teach him. So, he simply enjoyed the show. There was no question in his mind, now: He had chosen the perfect guide. Then he quickly rephrased his thought: *No..! She chose me.*

From atop a huge pile of giant rocks halfway up a hill, Justin, sitting cross-legged, was looking far below to her two ATVs and a man she felt sure was the one. He had lost sight of her, ragged clothes of beige and browns, blended perfectly with her surroundings. She was finding it difficult to control her emotions towards him, they were such powerful urges, nothing she had experienced before. She was a strong woman, inwardly, had learned to be self-reliant and in control. But these feelings for this man were beyond her means to manage. All she had heard and what she could remember of her mother's words were pointing at only one explanation: They had to be the seeds of love. *What a glorious sensation*, she dreamed with a little quiver. It was a far greater thing than she could ever have imagined. Overpowering. Flooding her body and mind with desire until there was nothing but him inside her.

Justin looked up. “*Damn you.* Such wonderful things always come with a price,” she muttered sadly at the hazy sky.

If she was falling in love, then he was the one. She would have to tell him, even though it would be selfish of her. But what else could she do? She needed to be sure, and only in sharing her thoughts and feelings with him could a bond be sealed between them and her ultimate wish be resolved.

She would talk to him tonight, Justin declared. She stood up, opened her arms, and flirted with the wind a while. Then let joy carry her effortlessly in free-fall into the precipice below.

CHAPTER FOUR: A Sister's Secret

It was evening, the sun was about to set, shadows grew long and the yellow landscape they had traversed all day was turning orange with each passing minute. Justin pulled up by the side of a large cliff, and then drove slowly between a small crack he had not noticed. It opened wider as they entered until he found himself under an overhang and facing a clear, blue pool of water.

“I want you to meet someone,” Justin said. “She's my half-sister, her name is Pearl.”

Before he could respond, the water some ten yards in front of him began to ripple and through its surface appeared a face. It floated slowly towards them, and as the edge of the pool shallowed, up rose the body of an extraordinary woman. Long, dark hair clung to the sides of a smooth, tanned face, over her shoulders, and down beside her breasts. She was wearing a thin, white dress cut just above the knee, soaking and practically transparent. Merk was staring, mouth agape, and chest about to crack for lack of air. He had never seen anything like her. Everyone in the Capital was always fully clothed—and dry!

“Hi, Justin,” smiled Pearl. “Brought another convert, have you? Has he denounced capitalism or is that why you have entrusted him to me?”

“His name is Merk,” Justin said, “And no, I did not bring him here so you could convert him. Just be nice and leave him alone. I've brought you some supplies. We'll be here for the night, and then we'll be off.” She turned to Merk, saw his frown. “Oh,” she said, “Pearl has a bag of air down there. She can stay submerged for hours.”

Pearl walked right up to them. Looked at both.

“Merk, that's an interesting name,” Pearl asked him. “What does it mean?”

He was surprised at his response; it came out easily. He was expecting to stumble over his words. “It's...short for Mercury,” he said with a twitch.

“Wow! Beautiful. And you sure are, too. What a handsome thing.”

Justin frowned. “Pearl, I told you. Behave yourself.”

“Deary me, sister. Do I detect a hint of jealousy?” Pearl smirked. “How could that be? Justin, you are married...”

The silence stung. Justin dropped her head, eyes tight shut. She was trembling.... Then gave Merk a timid sideways glance, only to see his astonished face staring down at her. A million thoughts were swirling around his mind, not one of them could he grasp. Could not concentrate. It was as if he had been disarmed; had nothing to fight with; vacant, useless, and helpless all at once.

Justin ran. She ran back out through the crack in the cliff and was gone. Merk wanted to run after her, but could not. Knew he should not.

“Oh, she'll get over it,” Pearl said casually. “So, now I guess you'd like an explanation?”

He nodded. Was still in shock. Why had she not told him? He had told her.

“Come,” Pearl said, “Sit with me a while. Sounds like you know each other quite well, so let me be perfectly honest.”

They sat at the entrance to a cave behind the pool, and Pearl began: Justin's mother had died when she was barely sixteen. Her

father had many wives, which was the way at the commune of Jacksonville; and she, Pearl, was the legitimate child of another. Both sisters were of the same age, 26 years old. Justin had married to escape solitude, to try and find herself Pearl believed, and regain her place in the commune; but instead, in a strange way, found loneliness more comforting. Her husband, who had other wives, tolerated her continued absence from the commune, though she had been back and forth for many years, often bringing soul-searchers and converts, perhaps as a way of repentance. Pearl didn't really know.

Pearl had been ostracized from the commune a few years back for an extra-marital affair. The commune was very strict about such things. Rules were rules. She had willingly seduced a married man: That was the opinion of the Chief Counsel; while redemption was metered to the man. Her side of the story was the reverse, but they would not accept such nonsense. Strong men did not lie, untruth laid waiting as evil in the weaker, opposite sex. Peace and harmony was the goal, by virtue of giving not taking. She had taken what was not hers. No one owned anything; they were farmers and foragers, free from the shackles of capitalism and corruption. The bit Pearl didn't get was why men could have many women, but women were not allowed to have many men. Though there was much about the commune and their way of life she had cherished, the whole thing about ownership, or lack thereof, seemed contradictory to her.

So, here she was, Pearl, unable to enter The Capital having no idea what it was or how to live there, nor able to return to the commune. She was stuck halfway, abandoned, an outcast with the only good fortune of having a guardian angel, little Justin, to watch over her.

Merk spoke up, "You must be very lonely."

"Yes," she replied, nodding, "Which is why I sometimes act foolishly, especially around handsome men."

"You are a beautiful woman. You should have a mate to make you happy. You are not going to find anyone out here in the middle of nowhere. But there are many men who would be happy to have you as their friend."

Pearl tossed her head to one side. “I am always hoping that, one day, Justin will bring someone here who wishes to stay with me. It is a stupid little dream, I know, but it keeps me going,” she replied.

“No, it's not stupid. Everyone dreams of one day meeting someone, and maybe falling in love.”

“Have you ever loved?” Pearl asked.

“No. But I...” He paused, was thinking of Justin, and then realized how futile it had all become.

“Why don't you stay a while?” she asked, coyly.

Merk turned to her. He had been staring at the glimmering moon in the pool. He said, “I'm on a mission.”

“Do you want to join the commune?” she asked.

“No, just a visit. So when I return in a few days' time I will be sure to drop by and see you again.”

“I would like that very much,” she said, with a deep, long stare into his eyes. Then, “I have a lovely soft bed here, inside the cave, with incense, liquor, and soft light. Would you like to join me for a while?”

He shook his head. Yes, of course he would, but knew he should not. His issues with Justin would have to come first.

“I will sleep by the ATVs. I will wait for Justin's return.”

“You are a strong man, Mercury. It was a pleasure meeting you.” She stood up, turned, and walked into her cave—a quick glance behind her as she disappeared from view.

The following morning Justin was eager to get going. The sun had barely risen. Where she had slept he did not know, only that she was there, sitting on her whirring ATV. No words passed between them, although he wished he could find some way of starting a conversation. She, too, but her heart was so completely shattered, she knew that anything she might say would simply make things worse between them. She had a mission to accomplish. That was, now, all that mattered.

They drove and drove. Found shade at midday for a break and some lunch.

“Listen, Justin.”

“No, Merk. Don't!”

On they drove, passing between outcrops, and then blasting out across sweeping dunes. It was a relentless journey, made worse by the horrible feelings each carried with them. Contradictions that made no sense; eyes that had said one thing but now another; moments together that now tore them apart. Was it her fault? Yes, of course it was. She knew that. But had she told him he may not have come with her. He, on the other hand, felt betrayed, but wanted to forgive her, even more so, having heard Pearl's story. He didn't mind losing her, he'd never really had her; it was simply a fleeting suggestion. But if it had to be, then it should be a parting under good terms.

That evening they pulled up at a shack. A secluded spot with a well away to one side. They sat and chewed on dried meat. The well water was musty but with a splash of purple powder it wasn't half bad. It was getting dark. Justin had lit a small fire with some wood she had torn off the cabin.

“Look, Justin, hear me out.”

“Why? What's there to talk about? I'm married. I should have told you.”

Merk smiled. “Hey, I'm not saying I didn't have a little thing going there—for you—”

“Stop right there,” she shouted. She did not want to hear. She did not want to burst into tears again, as she had half the night before. She fought to hide her feelings, even though they were screaming at her to be heard.

“Listen,” he said, “We can still be friends.”

Justin stood up, the only way she could be sure he would not see the tears welling in her eyes. She looked away and said, “Isn't Pearl a lovely woman?”

“Yes.”

“Is this your last job, Agent Mercury?”

“Maybe.”

“So do yourself a favor. Make her happy. That would make me happy, too. She deserves someone like you. You're not the greatest talker I've ever met but you are honest, I'll give you that.”

“How do you know?” he asked with unusual curiosity.

She didn't turn to look at him. She couldn't. She said quietly, so that her quivering lips would not give her feelings away, “We made deals, and you kept to your side of those bargains. No one does that, not even in the commune.”

He stood up and took her by an arm, wanted her to look at him. She pulled away. “I respect you, and rather dislike myself at this moment,” she pleaded. “So, please, leave me alone.”

As she turned it was as if the wind took her from him. He thought perhaps she was venting some anger by leaping away so vigorously. But, as he watched her flight through the air he saw the subject of her wrath: Someone in the shadows, and a second figure just behind. Merk did not have time to react before Justin had somersaulted over the first. The person toppled sideways. How and what she had done Merk never saw, she was already landing on the second one's shoulders. Incredibly, the head came off in her hands, seemingly without effort on her part, and it all happened in less than a second. Both they and he were equally surprised, though gladly he was still in one piece.

Merk looked around, was beginning to realize what had just happened: They were bots; were there anymore? Saw none and turned as Justin was dropping to the ground. She landed neatly on the foot of her decapitated opponent, and then busied herself shutting down the other. He walked over, noticed that she had peeled away most of the skin from its torso to reveal a luminous interior, now she was opening up various parts of the bot and extracting odd pieces, like a skilled surgeon. He asked what she was doing. She replied:

“There's lots of useful stuff in them. Best of all is their power pack. Has to be removed carefully.... Dangerous material inside, but each will recharge our ATVs and give us at least another

day's ride. We won't have to walk.”

Merk was curious. He could see she was comfortable talking about the bots, so took advantage. “How did you know they were bots? It's so dark!”

“Didn't you hear the humming?” she replied. “They all make that noise.”

He shook his head. “You said they have weak spots. Show me.”

She looked up from the mangled corpse, raised one of its arms and pointed. “See this bundle of wires? It's like their circulation and nervous system. This bundle passes directly beneath their metal shoulder joint and is just under the skin. Hit it just right and they lose that arm, for a few minutes. But careful not to break your own hand against the joint in doing so. It takes practice.”

“How did you knock this first one over?”

“Oh, that's easy if you are above them.” She half-smiled, wondering where her thoughts were taking her, why she was talking to him. She was thankful for his company; perhaps that was it? She continued, “Just under their shoulder blades are switching circuits. They don't have a spinal cord within their vertebrates as we do, it was deemed too costly. So, instead, two live bundles run either side of their spine and are well protected. But they have to pass over the top of these circuits, a weakness, as they are very close to the surface and in proximity to some powerful stuff,” she said, pointing through the chest cavity at some colored cables. “All you need is a nimble thumb to shove the bundle in at the tip of the shoulder blade and you have a toasted bot.”

Merk was nodding. It all sounded so easy, like being a chiropractor, or something. “Yes, but the head?” he inquired. “We are trained to incapacitate a human by a sharp twist of the neck. You, on the other hand, completely removed it.”

She tossed him a metal object and told him to take the wires off the end. Then replied, “Well, that's a trick only the engineers know about. It works like a door locking mechanism. If you know the combination and degrees of each turn you can have one off in

no time.”

He laughed. “We don't have aggressive bots in The Capital, they are task oriented. But now, if one ever goes on the rampage, I'll know what to do.”

“Not so,” Justin warned. “You have to practice every one of these actions hundreds of times before trying them out in battle. One mistake, one miss, and they will be tearing you apart, instead.”

“Sure,” he nodded, “I was just kidding.”

Unusually tender, she thought, he really is human beneath all those years of pain and brutality. She beckoned him to sit down beside her, started pointing out various parts of a bot's anatomy. The boots, she explained were part of their bodies, they didn't come off, but inside near the bridge and ankle joint was one of several communications generators. All that was required to take it out of service and disrupt their system was a well-placed heel. Bots didn't have brains in their heads, like humans, no central nervous system; it was all spread out around the body, because there was a lot more of it than would fit inside a skull. In essence they had tiny, hidden vulnerabilities just about everywhere on their bodies.

Eventually they had retrieved the power packs, Placidium Isotopes, or some such thing, she told him, and with great skill and ingenuity she had wired them up to the ATVs. Clearly, she had done this before, many times. It was getting late. They entered the shack and took a bench each to get some sleep. They were hard wooden things, neither sleeping, but it was doubtful they would have slept, even in a comfortable bed, both restless with racing thoughts and painful desires.

As the first light began to cast shadows in the shack, a noise outside had Justin on her feet and at the door. Merk, too, though out of curiosity. It was a familiar sound.

Through the open door they saw two Capital Guard war-craft landing. Justin took off, heading for cover, she disappeared in seconds. Merk stepped out onto the deck, watched as a unit disembarked and fanned out to take up defensive positions. A small contingent walked towards him. Fiori was out front, bare arms that clung to a fire lance glistening in the sun, wearing as she always did

the minimal tactical vest. She reached him at the foot of the steps and asked:

“Hi Merk, everything good?”

“Yup”

“Came to see if you needed backup. We are using a new military development, still in trial phase, a directional energy beam that can be deflected from the central orifice of The Capital Cone, to focus outside.”

“Why don't you just use it to go down to Jacksonville and eliminate him?”

Fiori said flatly, “Because it is still in trial phase. Besides, they would probably detect it long before we arrived and we would have no surprise element. It doesn't just track our war-birds, it lights up anything in the surrounding area, as you can see in your ocular display and your activated Morton Blinder. Just imagine the civilian casualties if we invade without knowledge of the layout or what he looks like. And their reprogrammed bots would become much more lethal.”

Merk nodded. “Thanks, anyway.”

Fiori knew what he was thinking. “I know, you like to work alone, but I wasn't going to let an opportunity like this go to someone else. I wanted to command this outfit myself, see how you were doing. I care about you.”

“I know you do. But working on my own means no one gets killed but me if I fail. I like it like that.”

Fiori looked to her side, pointed to a pile of rocks some distance away. “So, what is that thing over there?”

“Oh, Justin..? She's my guide.”

“She's a kid, for Christ's sake, a rag-doll, what are you talking about? Oh, I get it. She's your sex object?”

“Fiori,” Merk replied, sternly.

She looked at him.

“Justin could take you and all of your unit out in about ten

seconds flat, and without a single weapon. Don't be fooled. That is what she plays on. She is brutal and out here in The Steppe, indispensable. You see those bots on the ground over there? She took them out with her bare hands.”

“You have got to be kidding!”

As Fiori looked again, Justin sprang from thirty yards away. With astonishing speed, a ghostly twirl and a back-flip, she became airborne, landing on the roof above Merk before anyone had moved a muscle. Fiori raised her weapon, unsure if what she was seeing was really human, but the mirage was gone. Then, from behind Merk, a dirty young girl casually appeared through the open door.

She stepped up, dwarfed by Merk's huge frame. “Are you his lover?” Justin asked Fiori.

“No,” Fiori replied, “A concerned colleague.”

“Then stop being so rude about me. How would you like it if I called you a whore?”

“Merk..?” Fiori asked, questioningly, unsure how to respond to a child.

He half laughed. “Justin is an illusionist, and she played you like a sucker. You are not the only one...I was fooled, too, at first. She is not what you think she is. She is a phenomenal woman who has trained every part of her body to within an inch of fighting perfection. She is deadly. You should be thanking her. She has saved my life more than once in the last week.”

Fiori bowed her head in respect. “I'm sorry, Justin. And thank you for keeping Mercury alive.” She then looked at Merk. “Guess, if she can take out bots, you won't be needing our help. Just a courtesy call, Merk.”

He nodded. “Thanks, Fiori. Nice to have you on standby.”

“Shall I leave you to it?”

“Yup. This energy beam could light us up, and I would prefer to remain invisible.”

Fiori and her unit departed. Justin was very upset. She was later pacing the shack interior, wanting to talk but unsure of the

muddle in her mind and how to put it into words. Eventually she asked, meekly, “Why didn't they send a guy?”

Merk replied, calmly, “Because Fiori is top in her rating, in my same department, and we have worked together many times before.”

“Do you like Fiori?”

“Yes,” Merk replied, “But she is a colleague, and the rules say we are not allowed to have any kind of relationship with others in The Guard.”

“You are a man of rules, and a man of your word, aren't you?” Justin frowned.

“Yup.”

“She has strange, dark skin, shiny, smooth. You like that?”

“Never thought about it.”

“She is a beautiful, tall woman.”

“So?”

“Don't you wonder what she would be like? You know, to... to touch?”

Merk shook his head. “No, Justin. Neither she nor I know how to take our friendship any further. I consider her a sister and that is all.”

Justin looked over and said, “Thanks. You stood up for me. You're a good man.”

“Hardly difficult,” he replied. “So, why all the questions?”

“She was rude to me.”

“Justin, you have magical abilities. As you told me a few days ago: 'I make you who you are'. You should be proud that you confused her. Not angry.”

Justin stopped pacing. “That is not what I'm angry about.”

“What, then?”

“I can't...I can't explain.”

CHAPTER FIVE: Home Sweet Home

On the evening of day four, in the middle of flat nowhere, Justin's ATV ground to a halt, unexpectedly. Merk almost rear-ended her.

“What?” he inquired.

“Look,” she pointed up to a ridge a mile away.

“I don't see anything.”

“It's a bot. She won't come down here because she knows who I am. But she will pass her observations to the commune. They can communicate up to thirty miles from high ground.”

Merk had always been confused about the files he had read. “I thought the commune was all about peace and love, and that technology was a capitalist notion.”

“Weird—eh?” She smiled for the first time in days. “The commune will kill anyone who threatens to destroy their way of life. But they have no weapons, just arrows and sickles. Bots are their only real defense.”

“How does a bot recharge out here?”

“Placidium isotopes. They mine the raw material and then

process it themselves. Too dangerous for humans to attempt. They are programmed to defend the commune. They are controlled by Jackson, himself. As are all in the commune. He is their master, their savior, and their father.”

“Some guy...” he thought out loud.

Bastard, she wanted to say, but held off. Instead she said, “We park up tonight in a small hidden valley ahead. We will wait there for a group to arrive from the commune in a couple of days. You will have to talk with them. If they like you, they will take you to meet Jackson. But it doesn't always work out so well. You take one small step out of line or say the wrong word, they will kill you. And I can't get involved.”

“Damn. Best put on a good show,” he muttered, dismounting.

Justin faced him and he finally saw in her eyes what he had first seen, all those days ago: Warmth. He was happy for her. He knew she had been struggling, that she had been in pain, and that she had not wanted to lie to him. He figured there was something more she had to tell him. But what? There was still too much mystery about her for the little he knew of her.

“Agent,” she pressed, “What is the message that you will convey to Jackson?”

He thought for a bit. His training had always taught him to be as vague as possible before execution. He did trust her; he just didn't want to hurt her. At this point, though, lying was inconsequential. In fact, the truth was hard to come by, and in this very moment he knew that she deserved it from him after all they had been through.

“I'm here to kill him.”

Justin leaped at Merk. She threw her arms around him and let the tears she had been saving up for the last couple of days pour out over his shoulder. He was thrown back, could not quite understand the excitement he felt, or the emotion she was displaying, but was willing to hold onto her—did not want to let her go, wanted her anyway he could get her.

“Mercury,” she sobbed, “You are the man I have been waiting for all these years. You may not understand but...but many mercenaries sent by The Capital have tried and failed. All have been killed, before even reaching the commune. Please...Please be the one.”

“Justin, why do you want him to die?”

“You will find out in a couple of days...maybe. If you do not, I will tell you, one way or another.”

Merk reluctantly dropped her to the ground, saw her streaming tears, and was moved beyond his control. He was feeling things for her that he could not hold back.

“Pearl told me stuff about—”

“Pearl lies to suit her fantasies,” Justin struggled. “I mean her no ill-will; she has had a difficult life. She needs to be loved.”

Merk again: “She said your mother died, when you were young, that you married to escape solitude.”

“No,” Justin said, “I was forced to marry a man. That is how it works in the commune. I do not love him. I have never loved a man before now.” She dropped her head.... Held her breath, and then let it out. “I don't know how to say this, I understand if it disgusts you coming from a married woman, but I am falling in love for the first time, and it is with you.”

Hoping, she raised her head. Opened her eyes, slowly... Saw, with such relief, a wide smile. Tears again, agonizing apprehension. “Could you love me?” she whimpered.

“Justin, there is a tree inside me and it is growing. When this is all over, I will come for your love. And I will give you mine, whatever it is and however I am able.”

He lifted Justin up and kissed her trembling lips, gave her a big hug. For the first time he could see her, not with his eyes but with his hands. He could feel her tight muscles, every curve of her body beneath the rags, and a picture was emerging. She was no child; she was as full and firm as any female of The Guard. Her shoulders bulged, her back rippled, yet dipped long to a slender waist, her firm breasts pushing hard into his chest. He held on to

the thought for just a few seconds longer, wanting the image to engrave itself forever in his mind, then let her slip from his grasp. He turned away. Walked a few paces. He had to remain focused. He had a job to do. He returned to the vehicles, told Justin that he would sleep by himself until his return from the commune. She understood; he needed to prepare himself mentally. She was just glad it was all out and that he was her companion again.

They rode into the sunset, off track, into a sunken valley. It was a beautiful spot, with a trickle of water that dribbled from a crack in the rocky ground beneath a steep incline. There was a long, metal box in shade under an overhang, a container, she called it, and on unlocking it he was welcomed to her home. Inside was a mess, no surprise. Piles of junk and wires lay all about. But there was a cooking unit of sorts and two comfortable beds, chairs with cushions, and even a table with plates, knives, and forks. Justin lit up a few candles. She was smiling again.

“We'll have a hot meal tonight,” she said, “And coffee in the morning. Doesn't get much better than that.”

“Real coffee?”

“Well, no. Not exactly. But it's close enough. Made from a vine they grow at the commune.” She was staring at him as he walked around her home. A contentment she had once felt before was bubbling up inside her, again. Touching him and kissing him was the most intense feeling she had ever experienced. It was not sexual, she was sure; nothing physical, nor did her mind want it to be so. It was pure, a love from inside; the heart, some might have said, but it was not just from there, it was from everywhere. That was love. What else could it be that made her give herself so completely to a man? He made her forget her misery, the suffering she had endured, as if he had opened a door into a future that had no pain. She was happy just to be with him. It was what she had hoped would happen, even if it might only be for a short while.

Merk came over and sat beside her. He looked nervous as he began to speak. “Justin, I was always afraid that I'd never meet someone who could find me, the real me. I wasn't sure if there was one, until you showed me who I could be. I'm an assassin, a butcher, not exactly what women are looking for in their perfect

mate. But you dared and you persisted, and I realize now how similar we are. You slipped beneath all that. I don't know how. But thank you.”

Justin curled up her toes beneath a rug, trying to quell her anguish and the goose-bumps and the churning in her stomach. She was astonished that he was instigating a conversation. He never did that, only ever answering, never giving freely. She didn't mind being called a killer, in truth she was, if she had to be.

“You are right. We are similar,” she replied, “But not simply because we know how to end life. We have to manage our feelings, mostly the pain. I don't fight because I want to or like to, and neither do you. We share much more than that. I think that's what you are thanking me for: The joy of sharing.”

“Like what?” he asked.

“Isolation. Solitude. Longing to understand,” she began. “We don't live with people, we live around them. We long for something out of reach, with no way of knowing how far away it is and if we'll ever get there...Don't you talk to Fiori about these things?”

“Fiori is not a killer. She's a tactician.”

“So, you are not searching for the same thing?” Justin curled up her toes again.

“I'm no longer searching. You found me.”

“Neither am I. Thank you, Merk, for letting me in.” She blew him a kiss. That moment she had longed for—knew existed—had finally arrived.

They had the following day all to themselves, and Justin was going to make the most of it. To hell with cleaning up her home. She had awoken early and Merk found her down by the stream, cooling her bare feet in the puddles. She had put on a clean set of rags, he could tell, but had not washed her face. Or perhaps she had, only to cover herself in dust having done so. She always smelled female and fresh whenever he was close enough to tell. No sweet scents, just clean. Now she was caring for herself, that was

important, he felt it meant she was feeling good about things.

Had he arrived earlier he might have seen a naked body, radiant and supple, though of taut sinew and perfect tone; bulging muscles of immaculate proportion, with length and magnitude sublime; a phenomenal creation of femininity, quite divine. He could have seen her smiling to herself as she scrubbed down one of her thighs, lips full and flushed from love, pushing out deep dimples on either side that oozed temptation and willed desire. With high, round cheeks and a small, upright nose between, she was without question astonishingly beautiful. Merk had been right all along, yet missed his opportunity, did not get to glimpse *that* Justin, that fantasy of his in the flesh.... Truly she was an uncut gem.

She laughed when he approached, another sure sign she was back from depression, he thought.

“Merk, are you going to mope around all day or are you going to come and have some fun?” she prompted.

Not wanting to upset her, he said, “Sure, what do you have in mind?”

“I'm going to teach you how to fly.” A single bound was then followed by a spring off one foot, which landed both her feet on his shoulders. His immediate reaction was to retain balance, both his and hers. But remarkably he felt nothing, no wavering from her; she stood calmly above him, balancing them both. And she weighed hardly a thing.

“Now, start running,” she demanded.

“What, with you up there?”

“Yes...”

“Alright.” He took off, jumped over the stream and dashed between boulders. It was as if she wasn't there. A few minutes later he was coming back towards the stream when he saw her standing on a high boulder some ten feet above the ground. Somewhere en route she had jumped off and he hadn't even noticed.

She slid on her bottom down the side of the boulder and approached him. “First, we have to make you run with a spring in your step. You are a tough, inflexible guy, kind of like those bots,

so we need to turn you into an elastic band.”

“A what?”

“Oh, never mind, silly,” she said rising on tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

They stood for a moment staring into each other’s eyes. Then she was off. “You’ll never catch me unless you run on your toes. Come on.”

That was how they spent the morning, bouncing from boulder to boulder, he behind trying to emulate her moves, often unsuccessfully. It was those sideways jumps against vertical surfaces that lost him every time, and he would end up on the loose chippings bloody and bruised. She would laugh, pick him up, brush him down, give him a few pointers, and then it was time to try again.

They had lunch by the stream. She explained the importance of balance, and that until he could keep an upright stick on the end of his finger he would never be fully balanced himself. Big sticks were easy, she said, small ones required a thought process besides physical awareness: The ability to know which way it wanted to go before it had. He tried.

Justin caught the stick before it hit the ground. She threw it several feet in the air and let it fall precisely on her fingertip. “Feel my arm,” she said, “There is no tension; you and the stick must understand each other, become partners: share the moment.”

He took her arm and was surprised by its suppleness. There was no tightness. And even though she had the stick poised, his imposition did not let it fall.

“Now, try again. Relax, don’t waste your energy on desperation. Concentrate your mind, not your arm. Hoping is a worthless waste of power. Knowing is everything.” She tossed the stick up and took his arm. “Look at me, not the stick.”

It landed on his outstretched finger, and he followed her eyes. Saw minute detail in her observation as she moved his hand around. Yet the hand that moved him was soft as if his arm were enveloped in a ripple of warm water. She let go and he held the

stick aloft, imagining it to be a part of his finger and it did not fall. There was no stiffness in the stick anymore, it had become flexible, and now his arm, his hand and his finger were really just a thought. It was a numbing feeling to take effortless control, when all his life control had always required such considerable effort.

A while later she got up. "Let's walk to the top of that hill together, it's a beautiful view, well, if you like deserts, rocks, and sand?" she begged, passing him an outstretched hand. He took it. It was the first time they had walked hand in hand. She squeezed his and felt a rush of tingling heat flowing up her arm then out across her chest, before quickly invading every part of her body. It was a moment she did not ever want to forget. This was her day, she had believed in it; that it was possible, and now she knew. She had satisfied her craving and would make the most of it before the final days and the last act of her destiny. It was not the view from the hill that interested her one bit. It was for her to be standing on top of the world with the one man beside her who had given her the opportunity to love. True happiness did exist.

"Thank you," she whispered, as a yellow sun was lowering itself to the bleak horizon.

"Justin. You know, you are going to have to teach me everything."

A tear ran down her cheek. He smiled. Thought he understood. But only she knew of its true origin.

CHAPTER SIX: The Awful Truth

The following morning, there was nothing but silence. Just waiting. Merk had removed all gadgets and weapons; he was as clean as he could be. He watched Justin wiping down the ATVs. Wondered again what she was really like underneath all those dirty garments and forgotten dignity. He knew there was something very special about her but could not find it, not just by looking. He had found something in talking to her, a hidden quality, and a superlative nature he had never experienced in conversation with anyone else. She was pure inside. That, perhaps, was her precious value. And it did not matter by how much dirt purity was covered, it was, and always would be, pure—hidden like an uncut gem. His mind began to wander, back to that pool where they had met Pearl, and how he had wanted so much to lift Justin up and toss her into the water. He knew that if he had, she would have emerged more radiant, more beautiful, and more enticing than any woman he had ever laid eyes upon. But he would never have been able to do it without her consent.

His meandering mind was at once blackened, by the arrival of a group of people coming down the small valley towards them. It was time. He approached them. He could see perhaps five, and two larger individuals he imagined were bots. They stood around

him in a semi-circle, eyeing him up, before one eventually spoke.

“What is your name?” the man in front of him asked.

“Merk.”

“Why do you want to join our happy commune? Are you unhappy?”

“Yes. I am running from Capitalist justice.”

“What was your crime?”

“I stole...food. I wanted to feed my sister and her children, they were so hungry, but I could not afford to on my salary.”

“You think we gladly accept criminals into our fold?”

“I did not commit a crime by your standards. That is what I believe.”

“What was your job?”

“I worked in the foundry.”

“Do you denounce capitalism and its false promise?”

“I believe I do. But I wish to hear your words of wisdom, so that I can be truly enlightened.”

“What of your sister and her children?”

“I would like to bring them here, too. If you would only give me the chance to speak to your elders and understand your ways. I have no interest in money, it only brings me grief. I fight for a penny and get nothing in return. But I have been told that here at your commune such things are irrelevant. Please. Allow me passage to salvation. Teach me the true value of relevance.”

Heads turned. A nod or two.

“You have an ocular display circuitry,” said a bot.

Merk could not hear the humming, just figured it was.

“Yes,” he replied. “It was fitted by my employers to spot faults and cracks beneath the surface of steel beams. Doesn't work out here. In fact, in the city it becomes rather annoying when The Capital wishes to promote their campaign material, and folks like us

have to watch and listen to their propaganda. You can't turn these things off. At least, I've never heard of a way to do it."

The man in the front spoke again. "We can disable it. Come with us. It's a day and a half's walk to the commune. We will allow you a visit so you may speak to our chief counsel."

Merk lowered his head in respect. "Thank you," he said, "Thank you so much." He never looked back at Justin, but he was thinking about her, could see her in his mind, and was worried for her safety.

He was given a room at the commune to stay the following night. The next morning, Merk was summoned to the Grand Hall. He was stood on a small pedestal dressed in a drab robe, in front of a throng of perhaps two hundred blank faces. Each one seemed devoid of sensibility, no eyes like Justin's, no tenderness or love. Behind them on a large stage appeared seven men, of some age and distinction. All but one sat. He walked forwards.

"My children..." Faces turned from Merk and stared up at the man on stage.

He continued. "Today we are here to witness the arrival of a new follower wishing to enter our fold."

His words were met with frantic screams and applause.

"After many hours of deliberation we had concluded that he was of strong blood, good stock, healthy and would be a fitting addition..."

More applause.

"But, it has just recently come to our attention that he is not the man we thought he was. In fact, he is on a mission, no doubt another pathetic attempt by The Capital to kill me!"

Gasps.... Then stunned silence. Ugly faces turned to look at Merk.

"He will be hanged at dusk."

Jackson turned, walked to one side of the stage and instantly Merk was raised off his feet by a pair of huge figures. He was

carried outside, found himself close behind Jackson, who entered a building through two large swinging doors. Merk was plopped onto a stool, his hands bound. Jackson stood before him, grinning.

“Thing is,” Jackson rambled, “The Capital doesn't like competition. They want to monopolize this planet. They think I am stealing their workforce. I know. They are afraid that one day our commune will be bigger than their crumbling ruin. Yes, they force you to idolize money; they tell you that wealth is power, that money buys happiness. What utter rubbish.”

“And this! You call this any better?” Merk muttered, “Is anyone really happy, here?”

A dry laugh from Jackson. A sweep of an arm, as if to display the harmony all around. His creation, his obsession. He then looked at his captor. “Once again they try and get to me by filling your heads with their lies,” Jackson shook his. “And once again they fail.”

“I haven't failed yet,” was Merk's cold response.

“True. Man of courage. You certainly are as I was informed.”

“By who?” Merk queried.

Jackson walked around behind Merk and when he returned to face him he said, “It is always wise to tell the truth at the Pearly Gates, lest you be damned and sent to Hell.”

Merk was thinking. He did not like what he was hearing. Became inwardly awkward, but outwardly showed no sign.

Jackson again: “So, you met two of my daughters. Which one do you like best?”

Merk's training willed him to remain calm.

“I'll bet that it's Justin! Why? Because you wouldn't sleep with Pearl,” Jackson sneered. “How you could be attracted to a little wretch like that I do not know. But, ah, yes! Before she became a tramp she was a thing of beauty. ‘Tis true.”

Merk stared Jackson in the face. And with a cruel smile, said, “I don't like either of your filthy daughters; I simply used them

to get to you.”

“Clever, but not good enough,” Jackson spat back. “We’ll see who’s telling the truth, today. I will be hanging you out to dry in the sun as bait, all day long, expecting a visitor.... At some stage.”

Merk frowned. Nothing was making any sense....

“No, of course you wouldn’t understand,” Jackson scoffed, “How could you?”

A wave of the hand and two guards walked in and carried Merk off. He was tied to a post, some distance away, near a pile of rocks. From where he was positioned he could see neat rows of green and spinning wheels high on towers, strange, four-legged animals and flocks of colorful birds. He wondered what his fate would be. He imagined death to be just around the corner. *But why the mention of bait?* He dropped his head in wonder: Neither Justin nor Pearl would set foot in the commune. But then again, that was from Pearl, and she was nothing but a spy. Justin had said she lied. Jackson, her supposed father, had said his information had come from her. Could he really believe anything she said? Could he believe anything Jackson said? He was left with only one thought; that he had to believe in Justin.

Then suddenly there was Pearl, standing right before him. For a second he thought he was hallucinating, but then realized it was not even midday and he was still very much alert.

“Mercury, yes, I lied,” she acknowledged. “My father has been using me in exchange for my life. I’m his gatekeeper. But Justin has finally opened his eyes. All I’ve ever known is sex and seduction; I’m worthless like everyone else under his control. There is no love here in this hell-hole of a commune. No caring, no compassion. Merk, that stupid little dream? It was not about finding someone special, I knew it could never happen to me. I just wanted someone to make-believe, like a fairy tale. Then Justin told me that love really does exist. And so here I am confessing. To you! Hoping it’s not too late.”

Merk looked away. “How can I trust you?”

“You won’t need to in a little while. You will see soon

enough, if I haven't screwed everything up,” Pearl sniffed tearfully, swept back her long dark hair in apparent defiance. Then stared straight at Merk and said, “What you don't know is this: Our father, Jackson, killed Justin's mother because she would not allow him to marry his own daughter. He then did. He is now waiting for Justin, his child-wife by force. He wants her back.”

She stepped over and carefully dropped a small gadget in his pocket. “Bots are like ATVs, if you are within their energy range that device will activate. If you get the chance then do what you came here to do.” She took a step back and slapped him hard in the face. “Just for effect, Mercury. Don't take offense. I have to go, now. My father wishes to thank me. And I can well imagine what he has in mind.”

She left.

He hardly felt the impact to his face. His mind was hurting so much, his body was numb. The things Pearl had said were so preposterous, so utterly appalling, he had no way of knowing where truth ended and lies began. *Is there such a line in a place like this? Is everyone mad?*

A couple of hours went by and then off in the distance at the entrance to the commune central square, he saw a pair of shaggy pants and a flapping beige jacket ambling in. It was Justin. She was walking in a straight line, directly towards him. Two bots flanked her at some distance. They knew she was too quick for them and that she could turn them off in a second, so they simply hung back. Jackson was at the door to his building as she passed. He let her go. She walked by the fountain in the middle of the square and kept coming. She was staring right at Merk; never for a moment did she look away.

She stepped up to him. “I guess you know why I'm here.”

His response was slow in coming. “Not really. Not exactly. What am I to believe?”

Justin looked troubled. “This is a terrible place,” she replied, “And something terrible has to happen in order to finish it. It could have been paradise, but sadly, power is too compelling for some, no matter which side you are on.”

From over her shoulder Merk saw Jackson approaching.

“Ah,” Jackson chuckled, “The love birds. How sweet,” putting an arm around Justin's waist. “Are you willing to stay with me now, wife? If I let him live...Caged, of course.”

Justin struggled out of Jackson's firm grip, stepped forwards, and looked up into Merk's eyes. “I love you,” she mouthed, while a slight of hand slipped gently inside his pocket.

She did not turn, she did not falter for a second. She kept staring up at Merk as a thin blast of white light seared through her body and plunged into Jackson. She sank before him; and then Jackson, screaming in agony, did the same. He died seconds later. One by one the bots began to droop, devoid of orders, their master gone, direction null. Merk looked down at a ragged, smouldering heap of cloth on the ground before him, and a tear followed his thoughts. It was as if he had lost his own life. She had spent her years fighting demons, practicing her art, perfecting her skills, waiting for someone like him. Why did it have to be him? He had failed her. He had never failed before. He was good at his job. *Why this one?*

Quietly, a few in the commune came over with sheets and wrapped Justin up before carrying her away to the fountain. He watched her leaving him; it would be the last time. She was now gone, forever. He shook his head in disbelief.

Behind him he felt a tugging at his restraints, and then release. He looked around to see Pearl, hand to her mouth, an awful expression of agony in her eyes.

“It was not my idea...” she stammered, “It was hers...She... She wanted to die.”

Eyes burning, Pearl continued. “She had been tortured for years...by a terrible father. Raped and bullied from childhood. She...She told me to do it, to inform Jackson that she loved you. Justin knew he would use you as bait.” Pearl was biting her lip. Carried on, uneasily. “She felt so repulsed by the life she had been forced to live that even if she did eventually fall in love she knew she would never be able to give herself—physically—fully to a man. She was ashamed of her body. Her womanhood was taken

from her. The truth was too awful to bear.

“But you made love possible,” Pearl managed. “It was what she wanted, just to feel what true love was like—once, before she died. And...And she asked me to thank you. She knew it was selfish of her, but she also knew that true love always forgives.... Her mother had told her that.”

Merk took Pearl's hand. He was thinking back to a conversation he'd had with Justin a few days ago, outside a rustic old shack. Yes, in some strange and fantastic way, it was all beginning to make sense. Justin had given him to her sister. She had sacrificed her own life willingly for those she loved, hoping that they would achieve what she could not. All those years she had been hiding her body, disgusted with it, could not find a way to cleanse her spirit except through the discovery of love, itself—as he had once imagined of love. He forgave her, instantly. How could he not.

“Pearl. What you did was difficult, but for an intimate friend, your sister. You should be very proud.”

“I messed up, Mercury,” she said, wiping her cheeks. “I should never have told you she was married. She wanted to spend the last remaining days of her life falling in love, and I ruined that for her. I'm so sorry,” she cried, tears pouring again. “She wanted to die in love; instead she had to die in vain. I didn't know you were the one. Please...Honestly. It wasn't until she came to my cave in the early hours of that morning and told me how special you were, that I realized what a fool I'd been.”

“She understood, didn't she?” Merk said.

Pearl, chin quivering, squeezed her lips together. Nodded. Could not speak. She was out of words, just desperate for some kind of reassurance. Inside and out she was crying for help, hoping that her stupidity would not lose both of the two most precious things she had ever encountered, in one awful stroke of fate.

Merk squeezed her hand. He would tell her one day. They walked to the edge of the fountain where Justin's body lay. He looked at Pearl. She knew; she accepted his need to say goodbye. He lowered cupped hands into the well, raised them up and gently

poured water over Justin's face and shaggy, fair hair. He wiped her face with care, passed his fingers across her cheeks, around her lips, and over her sun-burnt nose. There she was. He didn't have to do it. He already knew she was the most beautiful woman he had never seen: His uncut gem.

The END.

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