

Final Solution 7

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Chapter One

“Kroboski. Kroboski!” The huge, crumbling arena erupted. with the National Hero’s name. The brainless hero’s name was Kroboski. I’m not saying he won some award for being brainless. I’m just saying the year 2202 was brainless enough with out having a National Hero named Kroboski. National Long Dart Champion. Ninety-nine percent of the hundred thousand fans who filled every seat in the giant, run-down Long Dart Stadium didn’t know his first name; they just called him “Kroboski”, but his name was Gregory Kroboski.

He was like a Neanderthal Polack who survived from some other century .He reminded most of us why we had to jump-start the human race for the seventh time—or so they said. But they said a lot of things that would someday prove to be untrue. Or so I thought. I wasn’t the guy to challenge them. I noticed too many disappearances of my peers who challenged the Matriarch and her teachings. But Kroboski was all the things the Matriarchal society, which I was unfortunate enough to be born into, pounded into our bowed heads. His kind was the reason society imploded the last time around. The history books were kind of fuzzy on what happened, how it happened, and why it happened, but history was very clear men caused the fall. They took all the money, ate all the food, raped all the women, beat all the children, and killed all the righteous men.

I, like everyone else was taught that all men were brutes. We only thought of ourselves. So men had no time to think of the welfare of society. Only women could rule. Only women could be mothers: to children, to society, and to their husbands. From the time I was fourteen, I knew I was bigger and stronger than any woman and most men. I knew I could slam anybody’s silly head against the Foundation’s Liberty Wall if I so desired. But the FOL were always around. The Followers Of the Leader kept all of we brutes inline.

The women taught and led and ruled. So why did they allow a violent game like Long Darts? And why allow a throwback like Kroboski, Gregory Kroboski, to be

champion for the past ten years? In Old-times, men beat each other to death in an octagon, but at least they didn't use four-inch steel spikes.

The arena crowd puked up his name again, "Kroboski." But my attention went quickly from my internal rant to the exquisite, dark-haired girl sitting next to me. She was tiny and delicious. There I was thinking like a brute. . . . again. If there were truly a God, he would let time stop and let me have her right there on the splintered stadium-seats. But there was no God. Just more hype from the women. The woman, beside me, was a real beauty. She turned to me as though she could read my nasty thoughts which included having her for lunch.

"Demitri will win," she said casually.

"You're nuts," I blurted out, "Kroboski hasn't lost a match in ten years." Then I used an illegal swear word. Only four letters but four letters that seemed to offend every woman even the Free Girls and the wild women from North City. By the look on her beautiful face, I could tell she didn't expect a mere male to contradict her in public. Or use an illegal swear word. But I liked that swear word. It was just designed to offend everyone.

The women thought that if they made certain words illegal it would make men less violent. As if not calling a guy a name as you were about to gut him with a double-edged knife would make you thrust less deeply. Technically, the word had always been illegal. Every society had outlawed it. At least for the last three hundred years. But it still rolled off the tongues of most men, all Free Girls, and some women from North City.

The roar of the crowd suffocated the pretty young thing's comment as Kroboski entered center ring. He knelt and tied his left leather sandal. Before tying his rights andal, he looked up and bowed his head toward the Matriarch. Almost as an afterthought.

Maybe I had misjudged him all these years. Maybe he was as frustrated with the leaders as I was. For all I knew; he was locked in a cell until they untethered him a minute before he entered the stadium. Kroboski stood and stretched. His huge stomach pushed the black breastplate upward, like some warped, elaborately engraved dinner platter. His arms and legs were massive bronze ropes. In the Old-times, his kind dominated. Historically, they turned the world to a dung heap. In the New-times, women dominated. The world was still a dung heap.

Kroboski stretched his arm back. A steel hook reflected the dwindling but scorching copper sun. Kroboski snapped the hook forward. Three Long Darts spun along the surface of the hook and catapulted one-after-another toward a wooden barricade. Two of the four-inch shafts drove into the wood up to their hilts. The third dart caught an innocent Dart Boy just to the left of his sun-blistered nose and then drove deep into his eye-socket. The roar of the bloodthirsty, capacity crowd replaced his piercing screams.

In the center of the court, glistening glass cubicles honeycombed, across the court, from edge to edge. The cubicles measured one foot by one foot by one foot with their openings unobstructed for each opponent. The cubicles were stacked four high. On the far side, of the cubicles, a princely, muscular, young man rotated his arms. He was warming up for the challenge of his life. He was hero to the few women present; he looked much like them. He was their sacrifice to the animalistic males who needed to vent their frustrations and their need for violence. But the Matriarch and her legions left a small circle of dampness, on the stadium seats, no matter who won. To show their loyalty to the Matriarch, the women, who sat on the Ruling Council, sacrificed their oldest sons

to the Long Dart arena. Their sons were all maimed or killed. My brother, Artemus, died eight years ago next Saturday. Artemus died when Kroboski drove the four inch steel shaft of a streaking Long Dart into his unprotected throat. I watched him scream a silent scream. For weeks before Artemus stepped into the arena, I tried to get him to attempt an escape from Metropolis⁷, but he insisted he would beat Kroboski. And he was winning. Kroboski had a Long Dart shaft protruding from each shoulder and his left hand—his dominant hand. He roared at the crowd and his big fist reached up and snapped the feathered tails from the darts. The crowd roared back. And on the sixteenth dart, Artemus misjudged the speed of the dart and it drove deep into his neck. Dark red blood sprayed from his throat as he tried to block it with his hands. The crowd roared. My brother's picture stood next to one hundred and sixty-three others at the entrance to the arena. Most thought they could beat Kroboski or his predecessor.

"Demitri will win!" She said.

A screeching ping tore through the stadium. The public address system clicked on "Let the games begin."

"Demitri will win!" the beautiful woman-child said again.

Kroboski stretched high. Sweat ran from his matted hair and washed down the open blisters on his face. Open sores on his calves and thighs glistened in the boiling, afternoon sun. At the Cultural Center, they taught what an enemy the daytime sun was to the many Citizens who had to labor in it with no or very little protection. It was apparent that the National Long Dart Champion was required to practice long hours in the punishing sun. I figured that the Matriarch and her cronies forced him to stay in the sun so eventually he would succumb to the blood poisoning that eliminated twenty-five percent of the Citizens each year. No one Champion could last long enough to amass a major following. But Kroboski had fooled the Matriarch and her cronies; he had stayed Champion, for ten years—open sores and all.

The giant whipped the hook forward and flung a Long Dart toward Demitri. The dart spun and then flew through the center of one of the open cubicles at mid-court. It swished, like hot steam being released from a boiler, as it grazed the top, right, inside corner of the center cubicle. Demitri danced, around the court, in bare feet. He easily snagged the whistling dart. The first Long Dart stuck from his splintered paddle. His graceful black body was in contrast to Kroboski's. But his tanned skin was beginning to blister. If the match lasted the usual two hours, his blisters would transform into open, running sores. Someday it would be nice if Metropolis⁷'s Champion looked less like some ravished ape and more like a human being. But Demitri couldn't win.

"Demitri will win," the girl said again.

I pulled my sun hat to one side. I leaned over to whisper into her ear. Her hair smelled fresh and appetizing, and her ear felt warm against my lips. "I've seen Kroboski drive a dart through his opponent's chest protector. That handsome boy, Demitri, is going to be turned into road-kill."

She turned and snarled a smile, "I could have you arrested for disputing me and using an illegal swear word. What's a nice guy, like you, doing rooting for Kroboski?"

"My name is Brian Owen. I'm rooting for Kroboski because he can't be beat."

She started to speak, but in center court, Kroboski hurled two more Long Darts. They chipped glass as they streaked through the cubicles. Demitri jumped straight up, and as though suspended in air, twisted, and then caught the first dart close to his green

breastplate. But he misjudged the second lethal dart. It knifed through the back of his hand and impaled it to his paddle. A piercing, animal scream sliced from his twisted lips and lodged in my anus. Demitri dropped to one knee. But the dart held. The crowd was in pandemonium: chanting started slowly but like a seventh wave, it crashed against my ears, "Kroboski!. . . "Kroboski! Kill him Kroboski! Slam one through his breastplate! Pin him to the wall!"

Kroboski reared back and then with all his brute force hammered a Long Dart toward Demitri. The four-inch missile sprayed glass as it sliced through the cubicles and collapsed the entire center section. It spun out of its path and then shot wildly across the court. Demitri jumped high, and then spread-eagled against the white, court-wall; he snagged the winning dart in his blood-drenched paddle, but drove the dart, already protruding, from the back of his hand, in deeper. His screams reverberated through the stadium. His back slammed into the white wall. He collapsed, and slid down, leaving a blood-red arrow pointing down at the new Champion. No one in Long Dart history had ever caught the first four darts. It was an automatic victory.

"Attention. all four Long Darts are still attached to the opponent's paddle. The new Long Dart Champion of Metropolis 7 is. . . ." The public address system clicked off.

The girl next to me was screaming, "We have to save him!" She grabbed my hand and pulled me through the crowd. I looked back at my father. He had that dear in the headlights look.

Chapter Two

Half-way to center court, the girl and I collided with Demitri's Teammates bearing the wounded Champion and fending off the crowd. A female Citizen, one who looked to be from North City, dug her polished, steel fingernails into Demitri's blistered upper thigh; blood streamed from the wounds and ran down the shoulders of the carrying teammates. I grabbed the woman, pushed her back, and then kicked her hard between her legs. She screamed and then grunted and tumbled backward into the mob. I reached for Demitri, slung him over my back, and kept running. The Teammates formed a wedge as they battered their way through the human gauntlet.

An explosion tore through the front of the arena. FOL, Followers Of the Leader, entered the arena on red-black stallions. As their helmeted riders shot with automatic pistols into the swarming mass, the snorting stallions trampled the crowd. The FOL had waist length helmets the same color as their stallions. Their black jump suits had bulky, black, waist belts with silver rockets attached across the back. The FOL unhooked the small rockets, slammed them into their Round Guns, and then blasted into the crowd. The small rockets immolated the Citizens in front of the Matriarch's booth. The hollow clank, of the returning bolt carriers, echoed across the stadium. Bullets, whipped up from oversized, black holsters, and fed the automatic pistols that rained death down on the defenseless spectators. A dozen FOL stepped into the matriarch's box and then riddled all the Citizens in the vicinity.

As we pushed closer toward the exit, thick sulfur clouds burned my lungs. That much sulfur meant the Round Guns were operating efficiently—I could give a good report to the little bitch of a supervisor at the Round Gun Company. The FOL twisted and turned, in their saddles, as they fired at random into the crowd. Their red-black helmets were laced across the back. The four-inch spike, of a Long Dart, whizzed through the air and buried itself deep into the unprotected back of one of the FOL. Another dart hit a second rider, and then a third. Two of the Teammates pulled the dead riders from their stallions.

I lifted Demitri over the rump of the first stallion, and then mounted the bucking stallion and took the sharp saddle-horn directly in my privates. I gasped for air as I pulled Demitri up tight to the back of the saddle. I would be able to sing two octaves higher on the ride out.

We all rode two-on-a-horse from the stadium. It would have been a great time for an automobile—any size, any shape—but they had been outlawed along with one hundred and seven words a hundred years before.

Curfew passed before we regrouped at the beach on the outskirts of Metropolis 7. We rode towards a large drainage pipe. The stallions beat a slow staccato on the rusty, corrugated steel as we rode into the darkness. Dank odors sucked the freshness from the ocean air and clogged my nostrils. “Brian, you better go to the mountains with Demitri,” the girl said. “The FOL are sure to know who you are. They’ll beat you to your bed-site.”

I slid down from the stallion and walked over to her. Her hand felt warm and tiny in mine. She grasped my hand and slid down from the muscular rump of a Teammate’s restless stallion. I looked at her perfect face, “I have to go back. I’ll take the chance they didn’t make me. What about you?”

“I’m trusted by the Matriarch and the Party. My mother runs the Hibernation Facility. But you’ll be subject to instant arrest.”

“I have to go back,” I said, “I have to get my father from harm’s way.” I mounted the stallion. “What’s your name?”

“Nova Lines, I’m Paired-up,” she said and looked away.

“Aren’t we all?” I rode toward the orange-red opening in the pipe and down into the dunes. All the beautiful women were Paired-up. The Matriarch’s junky computer made the decision when and where. I had been Paired-up for almost ten years. It was kind of fun the first year. Because the virgins were taught the ways of the Boards. It was great. But then Teea began demanding sex with no consideration of what I wanted. Just her pleasure was all she cared about. If I didn’t comply, I had Hell to pay handed out by the Council. The Free Girls were the only answer. My head was full of images of the Free Girls I had met and used. Then suddenly the image of the jagged skyline of Metropolis 7 was partially blocked by the raising cliffs. I had ridden miles while my mind was on Lacey and Nela and the other Free Girls. It was quiet on the dunes. Almost like none of the insanity was going on. In the Old-times, it was said, men ate up the Citizens like so much fodder. Now, the Matriarch and her FOL turned all men into slaves first and then slowly turned them to fodder.

None of the young men, who served with me at the Cultural Center, were to be found. Except the men who looked and acted like women. They survived. My friend Eric Cole was the latest to disappear. He was a good guy and almost my size—big and strong—but he was due to fight Kroboski. All he talked about was the two of us escaping. But I

said I couldn't go. The fact that my appointed Mother was a teacher, at the Center, was the only reason I had survived and by-passed what ever fate the others had been dealt.

And I was a valued Quality Control Assistant Supervisor at the State owned Round Gun factory.

I rode the spirited stallion up the path toward the top of the cliff. When I could see more of the cliff's upper surface, I made out the unmistakable shapes of the FOL patrols moving slowly toward the cliff's edge. I spurred the stallion back down the path, dismounted, and then smacked the stallion's rump sending it racing down the beach away from the corrugated pipe. The FOL rode down the steep path and took chase. Rumors were the FOL were robots manufactured at a secret site. But I was certain they were loyal, muscle-bound female followers, of the leader, who got a daily dose of steroids.

Hours later, in the shadows, I edged along the base of the cliff until the sharp edge of the corrugated pipe knifed into my back. But I panicked. It must have been the wrong pipe. It was waist deep with water. Down the beach, something jutted from the shear cliff. I started toward it. But a whispered voice stopped me. "Brian, wade toward me," a Teammate whispered.

I turned quickly and moved slowly back toward the pipe's entrance. I peeked in. "Wade toward me. Now!"

I cautiously waded toward the voice. The water soaked through my thread-bare jumpsuit. It was freezing! "Damn!" I stumbled against a platform and clambered onto it. I stood face to face with a Teammate. "Where are the others?"

The Teammate turned and then blew into a speaking tube, "Open!"

Chapter Three

A heavy, cumbersome wall, at the side of the platform, rolled open. The entrance was to the floor of a high, domed cavern as big as three Long Dart Stadiums. Dim lights hung in hundreds of tiny, makeshift cubicles stacked to the cavern's roof. Moving around in the cubicles, the people looked like an unorganized insect community waiting to be smashed by a giant foot. It would be the Matriarch's foot. If she knew about the cavern, she had kept it from the Citizens. If she didn't know, but was about to find out, the people in the cavern would have made their beds in Hell.

The guard at the entrance clasped hands with the Teammate, "I just came on shift," he said. And then he recognized me and pointed to a large hut at the midway point of the cavern. "Ah, The Hero, Brian. Demitri's in the hospital hut."

The walk, along the moist pathway toward the stilted hut, brought me past horse barns, a blacksmith's shop, a gunsmith's small store fronts, a supply shack, a giant water tank, rows of hydroponics greenhouses, a Long Dart practice range and Team Hoop court (with its tall post containing notched pegs.) A giant waterwheel, fed by an overhead flume, occupied the center of the cavern.

I climbed the stairs of the hospital hut and opened the heavy, wooden door. Inside, there was the heavy odor of old medicine, unattended bedpans, and rotting flesh. Nova,

two Teammates, and a white smocked older man hovered over Demitri. Nova looked up and frowned.

“Patrols,” I said, “I couldn’t get around them.”

“I’ll lead you out as soon as I know Demitri’s stabilized,” she said.

“This place is wild.”

“Permanent headquarters of Thomas Notes. Temporary stop for Season Jumpers on their way to the mountains.” Nova touched the Doctor’s shoulder and then tipped up on her toes to whisper something in his ear. She smiled and turned toward me and signaled to follow. We moved across the damp ground toward the waterwheel. She looked up. I looked up. High in the ceiling of the cavern was a small circle of light. It was fantastic: The waterwheel geared down into a winch that pulled a cable high up into the circle of light. Nova stepped onto a bar clamped across the cable. A burly attendant kicked the gear lever. Nova moved above my head then stopped. I stepped onto the next bar and gripped the bar that Nova was standing on. The attendant kicked the lever again. The opening in the distant ceiling came closer and closer.

At the opening, two guards helped Nova and me from the cable-bars. One of the guards spoke in a whisper to Nova, “Patrols are heavy. Started because of the stadium riot. Best go on foot.” The guard handed me a crossbow and arrows identical to the one strapped across Nova’s slender back. We were on our own: That tiny woman-child and an untrained Citizen; probably more dangerous to the pretty young thing and myself than to any FOL Patrol. We moved slowly through the brush and rocks and then down to the flat land.

Tall, yellow-green grass sheltered us from the searching eyes of an unusually large FOL Patrol. Nova reached up and lifted the bow gun from my back, “You know how to use this?” she whispered.

“Not really.”

“Bring it down on the target,” she leveled the bow gun in the direction of the Patrol. “Shoot the widest part of the back or below the helmet in front.”

“Miss Expert.”

A weasel darted from the bush, and then zigzagged into the short grass. Nova quickly loaded an arrow into the bow gun and then fired. The steel tip tore into the slim body of the weasel and sent it screeching toward the tall grass. The last member of the Patrol turned and looked back at the noise. The weasel scampered back out into the short grass. The last member rode back, and then, at a gallop, loaded and fired its Round Gun, blowing the weasel into minuscule pieces.

Women were definitely idiots. Just to prove she was a marksman, Nova nearly got us blown into minuscule pieces. I grabbed my bow gun from Nova and then raced, hunched over, through the tall grass. Due to the Patrol, we headed back, down the cliff, toward the beach. We reached the deserted buildings at the wharf near a dry bay. Some of the ancient wood and brick buildings contained artisan shops but most of the buildings were deserted. Nova darted ahead into the shadows. A single FOL galloped around the corner toward her. It rode, legs clamped to the stallion’s sides, not holding the reins; both hands held and loaded a Round Gun. It was an eternity from the rocket slamming into the gun and to my reaction. I raised the bow gun and fired. The arrow clattered impotently against the FOL’s helmet. I frantically reloaded. The FOL turned toward me, stood in the stirrups, and then started to fire. I released the arrow. The arrow dug deep into the

stallion's flank. The stallion whinnied, twisted, and then fell on its rider. The blast, from the rocket, blew out the wall behind me and threw me face down onto the cobbled street. Nova fired her arrow, at close range, into the pinned FOL's unprotected back. "You okay?" she asked me.

"Most of me."

"The blast will bring more FOL! Take the stallion and go!"

An hour later, I dismounted the wounded stallion, two blocks from the renovated brownstone I shared with my father, his assigned wife, Olivia, and my assigned wife, Teea. I edged around, the back of the brownstone, and then into the central living area. My father's voice came from the front of the bed-site, "We have attempted contact. We know it's illegal."

Damn! They already knew I was part of the stadium thing. I had spent all my life following the rules, and then some pretty, little thing gets me in a sling. Even the pretty ones screw up your life. No more. If the most beautiful woman in Metropolis 7 offered to do me in the center of the Long Dart stadium, I'd just look the other way. I'd be weeping but I'd look the other way.

The shorter FOL pushed past my father, and then with an electronically amplified voice, boomed, "We must enter!" It moved toward me; I was still in the shadows. I could smell the dank water that permeated my jumpsuit. My hand moved cautiously toward the small black spot where Demitri's blood had soaked into the bunched material at my waist. My body shifted from leg to leg in an attempt to stall the urgent need to add the smell of urine to the cornucopia of smells. Nova had said, "Instant Arrest."

The FOL moved past me and removed the control-cover from the wall sized Tele-screen. It extracted a small, black box, "If the sending module has been tampered with, you will be arrested." It walked, with its comrade, back out the front door.

I hugged my trembling father. "Are Olivia and Teea out?" I said.

"They went to an emergency Guides meeting. I'm sure it's over the stadium riot. They don't know for sure we attended."

"No body recognized us?"

"It all happened too fast. But Teea suspects."

"You have problems getting out?"

"No, just stepped over bodies."

"The people I left with are taking the Champion to the mountains. We should follow."

"He's not the Champion. The Matriarch declared him dead. She restored the Golden Hook to Kroboski. This place is crap. It wasn't always like this. When my grandfather was your age, men ruled. It wasn't perfect but it was a Hell of a lot better than this crazy broad and the hags before her. If I were you, I'd head for the mountains. Take my chances."

"I'll go if you come with me."

"I'm too old. I'd be a burden to you and the mountain folks."

"I'm going to take you with me. It'll take planning. We'll do one more season of hibernation, then scramo. Right?"

"Right! Scramo!" He signaled me to come closer. "Teea might want to question you and then turn you in. . . . she should. Her friend told her she thought it was you who rescued Demitri. There aren't too many guys your size in Metropolis 7. She'll be taking a

big risk not turning you in. If you're discovered, her life is finished. Use the boards tonight. Placate her. Entertain her."

At night, I went to our room. Teea was waiting for me. "I'm reporting you," she said.

I moved slowly toward her. She was one of the most beautiful women in Metropolis 7, but the Council had forced her on me. In a different time or a different place, I would have pursued her, but life sucked. So there we were. It was what it was. "Father convinced me to apologize," I whispered as I led her toward the boards.

For the first time I was going to take a chance. My stomach was queasy. Some of the younger men, from the Institute, had taken a chance. It was said; they went down to the beach and attempted to escape by boat to one of the outside communities. They were brought back and punished with a public castration. The Matriarch did the deed herself. I was working at the Round Gun factory so I missed the party.

The most dangerous part of the plan would be at the Round Gun factory. I had decided to sabotage all runs of Round Guns coming off my sixteen lines. The plan was simple but timing would be everything. For the months leading up to my hibernation, I made sure all the passive safety disconnectors, found on all the Round Guns, would malfunction. The safety disconnecter prevented the gun from firing unless the gun was properly closed. I then had all the new Round Guns stored behind the "good guns". I left a note for Coleman Harris (the Quality Control guy who took my position and my bedsite while I hibernated.) to continue to use first in first out inventory practices. I didn't tell Coleman, but I needed the "bad guns" to not be in service until I was out of the Hibernation Facility, or I was a dead man.

One more trip to the Hibernation Facility, then scramo. Me and Pops inched along in the New-season line. The Hibernation Facility was built like one of the Old-times prison facility. But I was certain there had never been a prison of that size. The many tiers were multicolored; each color denoted the alphabetical placement of the family assigned to a cell on that tier. The walls were plastered with posters of the Matriarch and statements of the benefits of hibernation. Every New-season Citizen was dressed in a white robe. My robe looked about the worst. But I'd be damned if I'd spend half my monthly Citizen's Allowance on a new robe. The season before, the robes were about a week's CA.

No way. I'd rather go naked—spend my CA on Free Girls. It was about time to see the white-haired girl. She always came from one of the top tiers. Each season, she smiled as she passed. Luckily my thoughts were interrupted by the public address system; thinking about the white-haired girl had given me problems the season before. "Citizens leaving the facility, please go directly to building three for reorientation." The live voice was replaced by the recorded, scratchy, condescending message from the Matriarch, "Citizens...Beloved Citizens. You are here because, you know, your sacrifice, your sharing, is what has saved Metropolis 7. Metropolis 7 is one of the few communities to have survived. The only community to have flourished. This blessed final solution seven—this Hibernation Facility—is your sacrifice to God and your fellow Citizens of Metropolis7. Thank you for sharing your homes, your jobs, and your production. I thank you. The Council of Guides thanks you. And the God who blesses Metropolis7 thanks you. Let us pray as we move in our appointed directions."

The identical organ music, which so depressed me at the Spiritual Center, started crushing the happy thoughts—about a naked, white-haired girl—into my throbbing skull. The damn, "blessed" final solution seven was killing me. Then the light from the massive

skylight highlighted her. Her hair was the color of her pure-white robe. Her eyes, beautifully blue, had two hearts, like tears, tattooed under each one. She was breathtaking—fantastic.

She moved closer. Our robes touched. I could smell the musk of the six month hibernation. My breathing became short and rapid. A chill shot down my spine. She spoke, "God and the Matriarch be with you . . . young Citizen."

Teea tugged at my sleeve, "Do you even know who that is? That is Meti from the Spiritual Center. You are ridiculous. Be unfaithful with the Free Girls. Meti would not give you the time of day. She would not risk her position at the Center to be with someone like you. Someone who can't even satisfy his assigned wife."

As usual, her voice sawed at my nerves. But my attention was riveted on the hibernation cell. It looked worse than I remembered. The capsules were ancient—in total disrepair: Wires hung from the EEG hookup and the pulse clock. Tubes, leading from the intravenous feed, were taped and patched. Half the gauges, on the exterior wall, probably didn't work. Butt here I was, moving so slowly toward the ridiculous glass coffin. It was ridiculous. I was ridiculous.

Nova and another attendant started hooking up Olivia and Teea. Nova finished rapidly and came toward me. I laid in the capsule and fantasized about reaching under her attendant's smock. She began hooking me to the respirator, "I've made arrangements for you," she whispered. "I will explain when you come out at the end of the season."

I fingered the tape on the intravenous-feed hose, "Can you guarantee I'll live through the season?"

Nova smiled and slowly closed the cover on the capsule.

Chapter Four

As the sleeping-gas filled the capsule, I dreamed of caressing breasts. First they were Nova's, but they rapidly switched to Meti's then Teea's, and as I drifted into conscious sleep, the breasts belonged to Olivia—my father's assigned wife—my birth mother. I hated the gas. From as far back as I could remember, the gas made me see images that made no sense. Fellow students at the Cultural Center saw the same images. We figured that the gas couldn't give us all the same images, so the Government must have been using some kind of subliminal recordings. The images were always the same. They started with the skyline of a community much larger than Metropolis 7. The community was in flames. Women and children were staggering from the flames with their clothing burning into their flesh. Close-ups of their smoldering privates brought the smells of cooking flesh. Sitting to the side, were obese men being pander to by Free Girls. The men were blatantly enjoying the favors of the Free Girls, and the spectacle before them. Then the Matriarch rode in on a red-black stallion. The Matriarch's long, white hair blew around her head like a halo.

As she galloped toward the debauched men, her robe flowed out behind the stallion. She pulled back on the reins and brought the stallion to its hind legs. A gold cross floated

from the pure-white clouds. It spun and glistened in the bright sun. But when it landed in the Matriarch's outstretched hand it became a flat-bladed sword that she raised and brought down on the first obese man. Before the images were finished, the Matriarch had rapidly sliced the heads from all the screaming men. Their blood was sucked into the earth and geysered straight up and showered blood-red rain over the community. The fire was smothered by a thick coating of blood. The women and children were miraculously resurrected. The women and children marched in white jumpsuits in front of the Matriarch. When they dropped their jumpsuits, around their bodies, they all revealed no breasts and no private parts. The images were all I remembered from the six months of hibernation. Six months became six minutes, and the automatic inducer brought me to consciousness, but didn't relieve my claustrophobic panic that always lasted until I was released from the glass coffin.

Nova began the disconnection procedure; one of the hoses burst and then sprayed dark green liquid on her jumpsuit. "Damn junk." She removed the respirator from my face.

"It's a miracle I'm still alive," I said.

"It's no miracle. You're still alive because the crew repaired this ancient junk heap three times during the season."

"I'm not coming back next season." I said.

"Neither am I. Meet me at Ortello's on the wharf next Friday after curfew."

I followed my family halfway down the stairway of the Hibernation Facility when a piercing scream came from the cell directly to the side of us. An old Hibernator was flipping and flopping on the floor of the smoke filled cell. He was still attached, to the smoldering capsule, by wires and tubes. Electricity was arcing from one bony wrist to another; his lower body was in flames. Two attendants pushed past with canisters; the purple liquid flashed dark green, as it hit the flames, turning the old man into a brown-blue glob. His family covered in each others arms.

"Not another season!" I whispered to my father. "Not another season!"

I met Nova at a small Artisan shop named "Ortello's" It was at the far end of the bombed-out wharf. "You look as beautiful as ever," I said.

"Same to you," she said, and then moved deep into the shop toward a rotund man talking to a young couple who had just been Paired-up. The assigned-husband looked giddy. Of course he did not know the future he was headed for with his beautiful wife.

Suddenly five fully armed FOL crashed through the door. They fired their cloth fed automatic pistols as soon as they came through the ruptured door. Showcases along the walls shattered. Ortello was hit. He collapsed through the glass case and swam through the blood splashed glass splinters. I grabbed Nova's hand, and then dragged her through the curtained back entrance. I burned my fingers, doing a quick twist, unscrewing the hanging light bulb.

Two FOL came through the curtain one-after-another. The first one through the curtain pointed a Round Gun point-blank at Nova's belly and then pulled the trigger. Click! Nothing happened. The Round Gun was labeled, "Made by The Round Gun Company." I yanked hard on a heavy pipe rack. My move tumbled the boxes from the top shelves but the boxes were too light and bounced right off the head and back of the FOL. But a heavy tool box tumbled onto the FOL's dodging head and the sharp corner of the

box cracked the helmet lens and tore into a bulging eye. The FOL's electronically amplified scream echoed through the small room.

The second FOL tripped over the first and blew its comrade's head off with a functioning Round Gun. I fumbled with a long-shaft screw driver, which had tumbled from the toolbox, and purchased enough handle to drive the rusted flat-head into the downed FOL's back. I pulled the Round Gun from its dying hand, twisted a rocket loose from its waistband, slammed the rocket into the Round Gun, and blasted toward the curtain just as two more FOL charged in. Then the room was silent. At least one more of the helmeted killers was unaccounted for. But here it came through the back door. Its blast took the door off its hinges. My blast took the legs of the FOL.

"Get the other Round Gun!" I said to Nova.

"The damn thing doesn't work."

"You sound Teed-off that it doesn't work," I said.

"It would just be nice if something worked around here."

"But you'd be dead."

She nodded and headed toward the splintered door-frame.

"Nova, get the Round Gun and a couple of rockets. Nobody knows it doesn't work. You can creep up and put it against someone's back. And besides, maybe the gun works but the rocket was faulty. Unless it's from the batch of 'bad guns.'"

"Bad guns?"

"I'll explain later."

We got to the volcano pipe that led to the rebel's cavern. Two FOL had replaced the Teammates. Nova gasped. The FOL turned in unison. They both reached for the Round Guns on their backs. I dove at the closest FOL and jammed a loaded gun against the side of its helmet before it could retrieve a rocket from the back of its belt. Nova pointed her faulty gun at the other FOL. It dropped its weapon. But in one quick move grabbed Nova's gun by the barrel and then pulled it away from her and pulled the trigger. I was out of the rocket's path as soon as it was fired, but the FOL's comrade was blown into the pipe and disappeared screaming in a shrill, feminine, electronically-amplified cry. My rocket took off the head of the surprised FOL.

The cable lift was running but appeared that no one was stopping and starting it so we had to leap at a passing bar. I jumped first. One hand caught and almost flipped me into the cavern. But I grabbed on with my flailing left hand and brought my dangling feet to purchase the bar below. Nova did a better job on her jump. Bullets whizzed past our heads. We both dove toward the protection of the gear house. The gear man had a hole in his chest as big as his giant fist. Nova began to scream and weep at the same time. Deadly bullets kept us pinned in the gear house until a silent arrow tumbled the shooter from midway up the cavern wall.

"Stay here!" I said to Nova and then darted toward the barn. A helmeted FOL tackled me and hammered me through the barn door. I fell back, defenseless, to the hard ground. The FOL charged through the doorway. I turned to my side and reached for a pitchfork leaning against a support post. I twisted back and braced myself just as the FOL stumbled belly-first against the fork's deadly prongs. The sharp points drove deep up under the base of the waist-length helmet. I twisted out from under the dead weight of the FOL.

I was way in over my head. Up to my neck in FOL. Nothing was worth getting your head shot off. Nothing! All the moving shadows in the dank barn scared the crap out of me. I twisted and turned and finally found my way to the back barn door. The entire cavern was in flames. Cubicles were burning and then tumbling from their moorings and igniting everything in their paths as they timbered from their precarious slots.

Nova moved up beside me. She was crying. "All are massacred! Slaughtered! They would have been in the boats—tonight. They would have met Thomas on the far side."

Demitri ran up. Blood was dripping from his bandaged hand. He pointed up into the burning cubicles, "We're targets if we go for the exit. The last of the FOL are watching from the eighth cube up."

We huddled, against the barn, twenty feet from the heavy, cavern door. The door was rolled closed and latched. One of the Teammates rushed to the door, and then lifted the latch. He started to roll the heavy door open; gunfire flashed from an upper cubicle.

Blood splattered across the Teammate's back and legs. Nova screamed. The Teammate continued to roll the door open. Bullets tore his flesh. He slid to the bottom of the blood-splashed open door. A high pitched scream, like a wounded gull, came from the upper cubicles. An FOL sat on the edge of a cubicle, high above the cavern floor. Arrows stuck from both arms and upper legs. It couldn't move its arms—they hung uselessly at its sides. Arrows flashed across the cavern and then knifed into its hanging calves—pain jerked it forward. The FOL toppled and spun to the cavern floor.

Demitri, the Teammates, Nova and I each mounted a stallion from the barn, then one Teammate cautiously rode through the open door into the dark pipe. I waited with the others. Why the Hell had I listened to Nova. I could have been at home on the boards with Teea. There was an explosion and a bright flash at the pipe's open door. We scrambled back toward the barn. And then I heard myself saying, "I'll flood the pipe." I moved cautiously toward the pipe entrance.

Nova came up beside me. "The valve's at the base of the platform—in front."

I edged through the door, and then flattened against the corrugated side of the pipe. I stumbled on something. When I looked down, the hazy outline of a bloody haunch of a stallion bobbed against the edge of the platform. I waded in the knee deep water around to the front of the platform. As I knelt down, I heard two sets of steel-toed boots, splashing through the water, and pounding against the corrugated floor of the pipe. The valve wheel wouldn't budge. If it didn't move soon, I was certain I would be blown to bits and then I would wet my pants; not necessarily in that order.

Two FOL came through the dim haze. I stood straight up and kicked the wheel. It jarred loose. I turned the valve full-blast; water burst into the pipe. Bullets ricocheted near my head. Water rushed, down the pipe, washing the screaming, sparking FOL down and out into the darkness of the pipe. I edged back up onto the platform, and slid back through the door.

After rolling the door closed and latching it, I ran to Demitri and Nova helping the Teammates to repair the winch on the waterwheel.

"Two of us will hand crank the rest of you up." Demitri said, "then we'll climb the cable."

Chapter Five

Toward the outskirts of Metropolis 7, the darkness shrouded most of our movements, but, as we moved into the tall grass bordering the fenced ditch, two FOL came riding hard, stretching a rope-net and dragging a Teammate down to the ground while a third FOL shot directly into the net with a Round Gun. The Teammate's screams rang, across the steppes, above the hammer-fast explosion. Nova and I rolled into the tall grass and crawled away.

Silence filled my ears and seeped down toward my toes. Two FOL came on foot. I pushed Nova into deeper grass. The first FOL tripped over my foot. I pounded a razor sharp cartwheel into its back. I grabbed its cloth-fed automatic. I rolled sideways and fired point-blank into the charging second FOL. Death danced up the automatic's umbilical cord and ripped through plastic and flesh.

Demitri moved up behind us, "It's all clear," he whispered.

We darted across a cleared area that ran along a towering chain link fence. A powerful search light swooped past us and then came back rapidly—blinding us. I ducked and I pulled Nova to the ground. Five FOL glided up. They hung, upside-down, like bats; their ankles were hooked to the guidance system that ran along the top and length of the entire fence. They strafed the tall grass as the guidance system whizzed them toward us. A search light flashed suddenly exposing me cowering over Nova, but before I could think of death, two Teammates moved forward and fired their confiscated Round Guns in unison; the blast took out a huge section of the chain link fence and scattered the clearing with scorched parts of FOL, the guidance system, and search lights. The guidance system was still sparking and sizzling as we approached the opening in the mutilated fence.

Demitri stepped around the swinging remains of the fence. He whistled low then said, "Thomas. Send it now!"

An explosion and a flash came from the far side of the ditch. A flare arched high into the air and crashed behind us. Two Teammates ran to the location and retrieved a grapnel at the end of a heavy cable; they dragged it back, to a stable post of the ruptured fence, and hooked it. They both whistled twice, and the cable was pulled tight from the other side of the ditch.

Demitri whistled, and then said, "Send the Hang!"

Another explosion and flash came from the other side and something crashed against the fence; it looked like two upside-down "Ts" welded together. It was hooked to the cable. A rope extended back into the darkness. "Nova, show Brian how to hold on. Get moving!" Demitri commanded.

I turned and looked at Demitri, "They'll send it back for you?"

"We're staying," he said. "We still have much to do."

Nova grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the hang. She stepped forward, grasped the handles of the hang with both hands, and swung out over the dark cesium. I grabbed the handles below her and swung out. A rope towed us into the darkness. Shots rang out behind us; over my aching shoulder, I could see search lights scanning the area. The lights hit us. Shots ricocheted off the iron hang. A hot burning bullet tore through the base of my ear lobe. I was going to fall and die in some unknown, bottomless pit. We

were almost at the far side of the ditch, but the hang was moving too slowly. I was going to die!

The cable snapped! My terrified body swung toward the sheer cliff-wall. Nova slammed into the wall of the ditch, and the iron hang flew down the cable. I slammed into Nova knocking the air from her tiny body. In a knee-jerk reaction, my legs locked around Nova's limp waist. Our weight was being held only by the tow rope. The rope drug us up the face of the cliff. Welcome hands reached down and pulled us up into the darkness.

"What happened?" Nova said, "The last thing I remember is hitting a wall." Her small jaw was badly bruised. Her body was still slack as I held her in the saddle while we rode behind Notes' men toward a fantastic range of mountains.

"What happened is . . . by some miracle, we're alive. Thanks to your friend Thomas."

Thomas Notes rode to us, stretched from his saddle, and kissed Nova on her cheek. "You look a little more beat-up than when we last met...Love." He easily lifted her from my horse and rode with her to the head of the procession.

I followed. I'll be damned! I always hated the damn pushy—take anything they wanted—FOL; now, the same thing was happening out in . . .

"Atavates!" Notes shouted.

We were stopped suddenly by a troop of ragged, toothless, overfed men, women and children. Their leader was a duplicate of Kroboski. "Damn does he look like Kroboski. Except for the wooden stump, they could be twins," I said.

"They are twins," Nova whispered.

Kroboski's twin had a rough wooden stump in place of his left leg. He rode an FOL stallion. He was naked, as were most of the others standing on the hillsides surrounding us.

"They'll want all of our possessions, especially the hemp," Nova whispered.

"Big Man want girl," Kroboski's twin said as he rode toward Nova.

Notes grabbed Big Man, by his huge wrist, as Big Man reached for Nova. "Big Man, you can have the hemp and the bags of earth, but the girl is mine. When I'm finished with this delicious young thing, I'll send her back here with one of my men."

Big Man pulled his giant arm back, and smiled a toothless grin. "I see her pass through here before. You send her back, soon?"

Thomas ran his hand up around Nova's breasts, "Soon," he said.

Thomas started to ride away but Big Man blocked his way. "We fight for girl!" Big Man said.

Notes nodded and Big Man rode off toward the village. Nova protested but Notes told her to keep her mouth shut for once in her life or it might mean all of their lives. We rode, two abreast, from the highway to the skeleton of a gas station. In front of the rusty station, we met Big Man's fat, naked wife being chauffeured in the fur wrapped frame of a tire-less automobile drawn by two flea-bitten mules. The steel hubs made a loud clanking sound as the coach circled us. I had never seen a fat woman before; by Metropolis 7 law all female Citizens had to be slim, and have no more than seven percent variance in weight as pronounced by the Council of Weights and Measures. Fat women were ugly; no wonder the law was on the books; if fat woman like Mrs. Big Man were allowed to become Citizens of Metropolis 7, there would be Hell to pay at the assignment desk at the Council of Mating.

We all followed Mrs. Big Man's carriage around the station to an arena of sorts. Acres of rusty, ancient automobiles filled the valley. Most of the rusty heaps were being used as living quarters: material and animal skins lined the rusty window frames; cook pots hung over fires in front of many of the rusty dwellings. In the center of the rusty automobile piles was a combat ring lined with crudely-stitched leather-bound auto seat frames.

Big Man and Thomas rode to the center of the arena and dismounted: the horses galloped, side-by-side from the ring, grateful not to be part of the sure-to-be-bloody battle. Big Man's people took up most of the leather seats; my option was to sit on the ground or stand at the circle's edge. Like an idiot, I sat next to a naked, toothless, old hag. She began to stroke my hair: she smelled like stallion droppings. I looked over at Nova; she smiled and shook her head as though to say what an idiot I was to pick such a spot to sit. She of course was sitting, like the queen she was, in Big Man's platformed chair at front-center ringside.

"Fight with machetes?" Big Man said. He threw his machete high into the air and then danced under it and let it stab point first into the wooden stump he used for a leg. He pried the machete loose and hurled it across the ring; it slammed up to its hilt into the belly of the naked, old hag foundling me.

I jumped a mile. "Damn" I said.

The old hag grabbed at the hilt of the machete and then rolled over dead. All the Atavates laughed. I tried to move away from the body but was shoved back down into a puddle of blood.

"Or maybe snakes," Big Man offered. He gestured toward one of his men. The man tossed a coiled whip to the Atavate leader. Big Man uncoiled the whip and cracked it above his head. "Burden, come here!" he shouted.

Big Man's fat, naked wife edged out into the ring. She cowered when Big Man cracked the whip again. Big Man stepped back from his wife. He stretched out the whip on the hard packed ground. Fire light shimmered from his wife's sweating body. He snapped the whip. An earring was torn from her ear leaving her bloody ear-lobe hanging. She stumbled from the ring.

"Big Man better than Champion brother at Long Darts so how we fight for girl?" Big Man said.

Thomas Notes held up his fist and smiled. He unstrapped his bow gun and pistol and unhitched the five-bladed cartwheels from his knee-high moccasins. Big Man moved toward him rapidly; he brought the knee of his stumped leg up into Thomas' chest. Thomas rolled flat on his back. Big Man placed the tip of his wooden leg on Thomas' exposed belly and then pressed down, but Thomas reached up and twisted Big Man's testicles. Big Man bellowed and then staggered back. Thomas jumped up and flipped sideways placing both of his feet against Big Man's chest.

Big Man stumbled backward and crashed to the ground. Each time Big Man tried to get up. Thomas kicked him along side his big head then swept his leg and knocked him back to the ground. Thomas' deadly feet ripped the leather straps from the wooden stump and sent the stump rolling into one of the ringside fires. Big Man floundered on the ground.

Thomas walked over to him and helped him up: he put his arm under Big Man's shoulders and then walked him to his chair. Thomas kicked Nova roughly to the side.

"When I'm finished with her, my men will bring her back as a tribute to a champion fighter and a great leader." Thomas said.

The Atavates all cheered.

"Don't bother . . . she too skinny," Big Man said.

Chapter Six

We followed a crumbling, six-lane highway that was moonlit. Late that night we unpacked our bedrolls and then laid them out around a good-sized fire.

"I was almost Big Man's supper," Nova said.

"Instead you'll be Thomas' desert," I said.

"I won't be anyone's desert. Up here, no one owns anyone. Not like in Metropolis 7 where women own men, or in the hills where women are the chattel of Atavate brutes."

"He acts like he. . . ." I stopped mid-sentence when I heard howling close by.

"Put out the fire!" Thomas shouted.

Three of us moved toward the fire; then I saw them; I had never seen them in the flesh; only pictures in the tattered books in the Cultural Center. Their silhouettes circled the camp and then the Timber Wolves attacked the stallions. With whinnies and piercing cries the horses stampeded the camp.

"Let them go!" Thomas said. "Don't panic. Shoot what comes at you. No crossfire. Don't shoot each other."

The wolves attacked in packs: large, gray bodies hurled through the air and landed in the center of us. We wrestled with the wolves, fending them off with knives and forearms braced in the wolves' open jaws. Thomas walked among us shooting wolves at close range with his rapid firing pistol; he held Nova next to him. I was wrestling a one hundred and sixty pound wolf when Thomas came and stood over me; he hesitated; I waited for Thomas to save me with a point blank shot, but he hesitated.

"Shoot!" I shouted.

Thomas shot directly into the wolf's temple; blood splattered across my forehead and into my eyes. Thomas had us stand in a circle with our backs to the injured men heaped in the center. "Fire straight ahead. Cover area without overlapping."

His four remaining men and Nova and I followed Thomas' lead and fired into the night. I heard howls and whimpers move off into the distance. We all sat down, facing out, waiting. We sat though the endless night, and, when morning came, we rounded up the horses. Shot the unmendable horses and then packed the healthy ones. We skinned the dead horses and wolves and packed the skin, and then we changed into heavier clothing: fur hats and coats. Our automatic pistols and Round Guns were belted on the outside of the coats, and our bow guns were hooked to our saddles. We started up a snow peaked mountain.

I was riding side-by-side with Nova. "Why are there no FOL.?" I said.

"F.O.L. won't come out past the Atavates. . . . when they raid our community, they come all the way around the back of the mountains. . . . a five day journey. . . . just to bypass the Atavates," Nova said.

"Why, they have more fire power than that naked bunch of morons," I said.

"Too many FOL have been raped and sent back to Metropolis 7."

"Rape an FOL? Are the Atavates smoking that hemp?"

"What'd you think they do with it?" Nova said.

We rode, through a treacherous blizzard, with our heads down and scarves wrapped around our faces. We had to stop and destroy some of the wolf-wounded horses. At midday, we approached a swinging bridge.

Thomas rode back next to me. "The bridge is mined at the start and finish. Ride where I ride. Don't get your pretty, young butt blown to Hell." Thomas rode to the front and started across the bridge.

"You think my butt is pretty?" I said to Nova.

"It's a handsome butt. Yes I'd say handsome," she said.

"Is our Thomas one of those guys who likes guys?"

"Not a chance."

We all rode Thomas' path with Nova just behind the riders taking care of the wounded. I was at the back of the pack and dropping back further because my horse was afraid of the wind and wasn't about to cross the bridge while the wind pulled and ripped at everything. I kicked my heels into the soft flesh of the horse's inner flanks. The stallion shook its head at the wind, and then rose up kicking at the wind; I was unable to control the twisting stallion. My fur hat tumbled toward the canyon floor; the stallion kicked higher and knocked me from the saddle; I caught the rope guard just as the thrashing stallion calmed down and galloped, rider less, across the bridge. I pulled myself up and walked slowly across the wildly swinging bridge.

At the horse barn, on the safe side of the bridge, Thomas and his men and Nova all dismounted and led their horses inside—I followed. I knew my fears about Nova and Thomas were valid when I entered the barn: Nova and Thomas were down on their knees hugging a young boy.

"Tom, this is Brian," Thomas said. "After you come down the hill with us and you signal our people in Metropolis 7, teach Brian how to handle a horse."

"It appears my father inadvertently gave you Black Wind. Not even father can handle him on the bridge during the wind." Tom said. He shook my hand and then mounted one of the mules the mule tender was grooming. "This one is for you," Tom said. "He's the most gentle." He smiled and pointed to the mule beside him.

Nova and Thomas mounted mules behind us; the mule tender took the lead on a mule that I was certain was on its last legs. We rode down the side of the mountain past strong evergreens that lined the canyon rim as far as the eye could see. Guard towers lined the ledges around the canyon; I watched mirror-signals flash across the canyon when we passed the smiling teen-agers in each tower. "Star, this is our new friend, Brian, he's a friend of mother. From Metropolis 7," Tom said to the attractive, young lady high in the tower. The young lady waved and shouted down to Nova, "Mother, will you be at the meeting tonight?"

Nova nodded yes.

The trail was steep right to the edge of a lush valley that held a large community of assorted dwellings with gardens, hydroponics units, fish ponds, and in the center, a gigantic, meeting hall. The community suggested intelligent builders, but builders who were restricted to salvaged goods.

"Where the Hell did you get all the material?" I said.

"Dead City," Tom said. "Hundreds of years ago, it was the most modern city in the world. It is not too far. Someday I will take you there."

The dwellings were a combination of glass and steel and plastic. Geodesic domes of red and clear plastic golf-balled among the sharp corners of steel and wood dwellings. A large waterwheel, identical to the flume-fed wheel in the Metropolis 7 cavern, sat against the base of an unusual looking mountain: it was bright red and shiny gray; nothing I had ever seen before. I was later told it was iron pyrite. Crops of all assortments filled the spaces between the hundreds of dwellings and fish ponds and greenhouses. We all dismounted in front of the meeting hall.

"You will stay with me," Nova said, looking directly at me.

"Ah. . . . but. . . . Thomas is your assigned husband," I whispered.

"No, there are no assigned husbands or wives just good friends," she whispered.

Thomas approached. "You with him, for now?" he said to Nova.

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Until I come back to you."

"Tom and Star and I will miss you."

"I'll visit."

Thomas turned to me and shook my hand. "I'll help you collect material for your house." He said. "Come by and get me." He pointed at the tri-level next to the meeting hall.

Chapter Seven

They let me pick between living in the village on a small lot or taking an acre against the mountains. I took the acre. Thomas walked with me to my new land. An hour there and an hour back. Next time I would take a horse and cart or one of the many mountain bikes. Or if they weren't in use, I could use one of the six bio fuel trucks owned by the community. I had seen three of them moving materials across the valley. They were all a hodge podge of different parts from ancient trucks, but they hummed along like master mechanics had done award winning work on their engines. A seventh truck, a heavy-duty mostly Mercedes was coming out of repair that afternoon and Thomas had signed up for it. Nova, Tom, Thomas, and I loaded the truck's flatbed with barrels of bio fuel and barrels of Pyrite and every sort of vegetable. With Thomas driving and Tom riding shotgun we headed East down a well traveled, canyon road. Towering mountains guarded each side of the blacktop. We were headed for Dead City to strip building material from

the all but abandoned community. Nova and I sat among the sacks of vegetables on the flatbed.

“I was thinking of you last night,” I said. “I almost went to your room.”

“You were more than welcome,” Nova said. “I didn’t invite you because I was battered and tired and figured you were the same.”

“I was, still am, but had some questions. Such as how did you hide your children from the Matriarch?”

“As far as the Matriarch and my assigned husband know, both Star and Tom were stillborn while I was hibernating.”

“I thought it had some thing to do with the Hibernation Facility.”

“Smarter than the average bear.”

“Where did you hear that phrase?”

“From Eric Cole,” Nova said.

“Did you know he’s missing? He was my best friend.”

“He’s not missing—he can still be your best friend.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Eric’s in Dead City with Prometheus.”

Dead City contained building after building after building. Most the buildings reached impossibly for the sky. They looked like the buildings from my hibernation dreams. Most were charred skeletons. Across our path, from mountain base to mountain base, was a giant scrap metal wall. The entrance looked to be a solid piece of metal ten feet wide and twenty feet in height. Attached to the top/center and bolted in place was a giant closed grab attached to a two-inch thick cable leading up to the jib lever of a level-luffing crane with a double-lever jib. I had seen one in action when my father was helping to build the Round Gun factory twenty years before.

Tom reached from the passenger’s side window of the idling truck. In his hand was a small mirror. He tilted it skyward, dipped it quickly three times toward the hot air balloon drifting on a hundred foot teacher overhead. A mirror flash came from the balloon’s basket and the heavy metal door began to lift and move horizontally at the same time. Thomas drove the mostly Mercedes forward causing the door to hang just inches over Nova’s head. I had already buried mine in the vegetable bags.

We were in a large metal box that could hold forty trucks the size of Thomas’ truck. A second piece of metal as impressive as the first rose up and side ways by Thomas’ driver side revealing a road lined by piles of sorted scrap metal, and wood and glass and plastic. There were rows and rows of pipes and fixtures and furniture of all assortments.

At the end of the road, a glass building rose one hundred stories. When we pulled up in front of the building we could see the side of the fantastic structure. It looked as if it had been gnawed on by some glass-eating giant. Young men, dressed in military uniforms, crowded the plaza in front of the building. No two of the young men’s uniforms matched. Eric Cole’s big body pushed through the crowd and ran toward me. I stepped from the truck bed and into Eric’s big bear-huge.

“You came after all,” he said

“It wasn’t exactly voluntary,” I said.

“I know. I heard.”

“What do you mean you heard?”

“Prometheus and these young geniuses used the old telephone posts and cables to hook up telegraph stations up and down the mountains and we just completed the lines to Metropolis 7. Red Mountain has been hooked up for a year. Nova telegraphed me today that you were coming.”

“Glad to see you alive—old friend.” I hugged him again.

“Me too, buddy”

“If you two stop playing kissy-face, I’d like to introduce myself.” Standing, in front of me, waiting for a hug, was a tall elegant man in riding pants and a T-Shirt. The T-Shirt read, “I Love D C ”

“I’m Brian Owen,” I said.

“I’m known as Prometheus,” he said. And we hugged.

Thomas came up and grabbed Prometheus by the hand, “Congratulations; you finished the ‘box’.” Thomas said.

“None too soon. Fifty FOL troops headed out on foot and horseback two days ago from M7. I’m ready to test the box.” Prometheus said.

“I need to use your telegraph,” Thomas said and ran toward the glass building.

“We best go back,” Nova said.

“It’s up to Thomas, but I’d like you to stay,” Prometheus said.

“Fifty FOL coming. There are at least a hundred young men.” Nova said. “But they will be no match for the FOL.”

“We should bring some men from your village, Nova,” I said.

“What, you think women can’t fight. You do know that the FOL are women,” Nova said.

“I guessed it,” I said. “But they are well-trained women on steroids.”

Thomas came back with a big smile on his face. “Oliver’s all set. If any get through, the box and up the valley, they’ll be met by a barrage.”

“We have the problem of fire power,” Prometheus said, “Those Round Guns are lethal.”

“Not the ones with the silver tipped barrels,” I blurted out.

“Silver tipped barrels?” Thomas and Prometheus and Nova said.

Then Nova gasped, “Bad Guns?”

“I was QA Inspector at the Round Gun Company. I supervised sixteen lines—twice as many as anyone else. Months before I went into hibernation, I fixed it so all guns, coming off my lines, would not fire. The FOL should be using some of those Round Guns now. Just tell your men to shoot at anything that does not have a silver tip.”

“Brilliant,” Eric said and patted me on the shoulder.

“What about the pistols?” Thomas said.

“Twenty-three percent of the pistols are bad,” I said. “No intentions, just bad manufacturing methods. And the belts are faulty in their feed. And the bullets misfire at a rate of one in five. The rockets misfire at a rate of one in seven.”

“Damn, Prometheus,” Thomas said. “If the box works, when it’s over, we should raid M7. We’ll have fifty or more FOL uniforms here and I’ve got some at Red Mountain and the Activates have some. Let’s do this.”

“Let’s see if the box works; then let’s talk,” Prometheus said.

Chapter Eight

Two hours before the FOL arrived; we were warned by the young man in the East Balloon basket. Then a normal patrol of FOL stallions—fifteen—and thirty-five foot shoulders came charging up on what looked like an abandoned city with a metal tunnel in front of it and an entrance to the city in the North-side center of the tunnel. As the FOL rushed into the box, ten young men hang glided from the forty-seventh floor of the the glass building. They landed on the road one hundred yards East of the box. They were there to mop-up any stragglers.

But there were no stragglers. The front door closed the side door closed and the back door closed and the sleeping gas was released. Wham bam thank you. . . . Man! There was a blast inside the box and screaming and the stallions were going crazy. Then it quickly settled down and there was silence.

Young men wearing gas masks entered through the opened side door. They collected weapons and handed them to a waiting line of Prometheus' men. The weapons were then brought to me for inspection. Most of the Round Guns were faulty but could be repaired. Most of the pistols were in relatively good shape. Next came the helmets. Eric would be able to repair any electronic failure. The unconscious FOL were carried and placed on and around Thomas' empty flatbed.

They were all muscular women. Most were beautiful. Eric let out a whistle.

"You realize they are all cold blooded killers," I said

"Maybe they can be rehabilitated," Eric said.

Nova laughed.

An assembly line was setup to tie the wrists in front of each of the unconscious women and then tie four of them together on a length of rope wrapped around all their waists, and then they were laid out on the ground.

There was one dead FOL and five injured. One of the Round Guns must have been purposely loaded and used in an attempt to breach the metal box. It probably injured everyone near the shooter and took the belly right out, of the shooter, with the ricochet.

"I'll take the injured," Prometheus said. "I've become quit the doctor with all the injuries sustained by the fellows running and jumping around all this metal and glass. We inherited a pretty well equipped clinic."

The dead FOL was loaded in a wheelbarrow and then pushed through the box and out the front to the hillside.

The trouble started when the FOL began to wake. A beautiful Amazon shook off the sleep and stood up pulling up the three FOL tethered to her. "Do you know who I am?" She said.

Thomas stepped forward. "You're a beautiful young woman who has taken way too many steroids."

"I am Shea Soldier of God Follower Of the Leader Warrior and your worst nightmare."

"That's a damn long name. Can I just call you Shea?" Eric said.

I laughed.

She turned and stared at me. “You two will be the first to die.” She charged, at Eric and I, pulling the three other FOL, roped to her, forward. Her beautiful nose hit my fist. Her nose split. Blood filled her twitching mouth and then she began to scream at the heavens. “A man has touched me! God! I command you to strike him down! Now!”

“You’re silly,” I said and walked toward the glass building. I turned back and shouted, “I don’t believe in God.”

Prometheus came through the front entrance. He was dressed in a doctor’s smock. Blood covered the front of his chest and his hands. His bloody hand grabbed my wrist. “Don’t ever blaspheme God while you are a guest in my city,” he said.

I shook his hand loose. “Don’t ever touch me again or I’ll snap your neck right here in your city.” I said. “Right here in front of all your fellows.”

Prometheus stormed toward Thomas. Eric came running after me. “I should have known you’d get into trouble. I should have warned you Prometheus is worse than the Matriarch when it comes to God.”

Thomas walked up. Let out a long sigh and said, “You have been excommunicated from Dead City.” He turned and looked back in the direction of Prometheus. “You take the truck and Tom and go back to Red Mountain. Report to Oliver but don’t give him your opinion about God.”

“Okay if this Atheist travels with Brian to Red Mountain?” Eric said.

Thomas nodded.

“Thanks for coming along,” I said.

“Thanks to you for coming along, finally,” he said. “When this is all over, let’s you and I build our own Big Guy Atheist City.”

I nodded. “That’ll be a mighty tinny town partner,” I said. “You may not have noticed but ninety-nine percent of the human race believes in that God crap.”

“Dash dash dot. Dash dash dash. Dash dot dot. Dash dot dash dot. Dot dash. Dash dot dash. Dot.” Eric rattled off.

What was that? Turrets?” I asked.

“Just practicing my Morse code. That was ‘God crap’”

“That was ‘God cake.’ Unless by ‘my Morse code’ you mean you have your own version of Morse code?”

“How do you know Morse code?”

“I have the highest IQ recorded by the Culture Center. And I’ve read what ‘How2’ books they have.” I rubbed my bruised knuckles on my shirt lapel.

“Then you must have read that in all societies it has been forbidden for a man to hit a woman. Though, I must admit, if you didn’t I would have.”

“Well, you’ll get a chance to do more than hit them when we raid M7.”

“Now you sound like Prometheus,” Eric said.

“We could have been friends.”

We drove directly to Oliver’s orchard on the outskirts of Red Mountain. The sounds of explosions and gun-fire echoed through the trees. We pulled up in front of a barrack.

Because there was no easy way to move a hundred fighters from Red Mountain and all most as many Activates across the ditch, the plan was to take boats along the coast. But there were not ten percent of the boats needed. I approached Oliver, “How did the FOL troops get across?”

“What?” He said.

“When the FOL attacked Red Mountain, the last time, how’d they get across?” I said.

“That’s a good question.”

“Well? What’s the answer?”

“It’s not important. Thomas said it’s too dangerous,” Oliver said.

“Thomas is not here. You’re in command. Why is it too dangerous?”

“It’s a draw bridge five miles from here. It’s heavily guarded. There’s no way, short of help from the other side, to get them to put the bridge down.”

“They’d put it down for thirty or forty prisoners,” I said.

Ten of us dressed as FOL herded ten naked Atavats down the road toward the bridge. They walked with their hands behind their backs. Each had a buck knife. Big Man walked alone in front. An electronically assisted voice boomed from a giant speaker on my side of the bridge. I rode the stallion toward the speaker and spoke in an electronically assisted voice, “Shea has taken control of Red Mountain. She commands that these prisoners be castrated at the Auditorium.”

All the Atavates turned and looked at me. The draw bridge lowered. It was an ancient single-span rail road bridge. The counter weights groaned in its weight room under the bridge. When the span hammered down on my side of the ditch, I could see that the train tracks had been replaced with a wide wooden-plank path. We herded the Atavates forward across the bridge toward the five well armed FOL guards. The guards didn’t get off a shot. The lead Atavates moved in a flurry of action that left no usable FOL or FOL uniforms. The rest of the Atavates and Red Mountain men came storming across the bridge. What were we about to unleash on Metropolis 7?

The FOL guards at two outposts on the march toward the Martriarch’s strong hold had less of a chance than the guards at the bridge. When we reached the edge of the city, the Atavates broke ranks and charged into the brown stones.

“Oliver, we have a problem,” I said.

“I know. We are way ahead of schedule. The bridge cut our time by almost a day.”

“We’re about to screw up everything. Get everyone killed,” I said.

“We could do the prisoner thing and be lead into the FOL barracks. Take over.”

“The FOL are going to be alerted by the Citizens under attack by the Atavates.” I started checking the switches on my helmet. “Some thing must activate contact with headquarters.” I pressed a button at the base of my right thumb.

“Speak,” an electronic voice said.

“Shea has taken over Red Mountain. We escorted almost two hundred prisoners across the draw bridge,” I said.

“At Outpost 12?”

“Yes. Outpost 12.”

“We have had no alerts from Outpost 12.”

“The guards were slaughtered by Atavates who escaped our restraints.”

“We are already responding to complaints of Atavates in the city. How many escaped?”

“Almost one hundred,” I said.

“Are they armed?”

“No!”

“We will send an escort for the remaining prisoners.” Then the speaker went silent.

“She didn’t ask where we were located,” I said to Oliver. “There must be a locating device in the helmets.”

“Let’s get out of these uniforms.” He said.

“The may have let us cross the bridge to trap us.” I unlaced my helmet. “The Matriarch wouldn’t care if we killed a few FOL. Get the others out of their uniforms. We need to put the locaters in some neat spot and set our own trap.”

“If she set a trap for us, there’ll be a trap for Thomas,” Oliver said.

“Let’s worry about us right now. A couple of miles from here there’s a double row of brown stones. They lead to a wall. It’s a dead-end. We’ll take over and man the brown stones. When the FOL follow the signal they’ll run into the wall and we’ll mow them down. A nice dead end for the FOL. Then we’ll find some way to help Thomas.”

We charged through the city. By the time we reached our brown stone, dead-end, we had only encountered twelve FOL. With a little luck, they hopefully died before they could sound an SOS to alert their headquarters. The brown stones were empty. Everyone was doing a ten hour day at some State owned factory or another.

We piled the uniforms against the wall and hoped we were correct about the locaters. Red Mountain men filled every window facing the street leading to the pile of uniforms. The Matriarch or one of her cronies had sent a full contingent: fifteen riders and thirty-five foot shouldered. The Red Mountain men were instructed to shoot fast and accurately so no FOL had a chance to make contact with their superiors. There was a blood bath at the dead-end.

Chapter Nine

A third of the Red Mountain men had stallions. “Oliver, contact or not, their superiors will send another contingent to see why there is no response,” I said. “I’ll take every one, who’s got a ride, with me. You stay here. Have your men hide the bodies and get back in position for the next slaughter. This trap might work a couple more times. Remember to get the FOL weapons. Test them. Now, I hope to Hell you know where Thomas and Prometheus are coming across.”

“Wilderness Road—by the old army barracks,” Oliver said. “About three hours from here.”

“Everybody, who’s got a ride, mount up and follow me,” I shouted.

We rode toward a group of Atavates who had FOL jailed in a cellar; the Atavates were taking the FOL out one-at-a-time and then molesting them in the street. They waved as we rode by. Treat, the youngest of the Red Mountain men raised his automatic pistol and pointed it at the Atavates. I grabbed his arm. “Save your ammunition for the ones who deserve saving,” I said. “Those FOL have tortured and killed thousands of Citizens.”

He holstered his pistol and then we rode with the other thirty mountain men toward Wilderness Road. Just ahead loomed the giant Hibernation Facility. Rockets exploded through the walls. Fires burned on the lower level and several of the tiers. Screaming white-robed citizens pressed toward the entrance. Some were shoved against the railings,

and tumbled screaming onto the people crowded on the lower level. The fires worsened, but FOL blocked escape. We opened fire with our automatic pistols blasting the FOL guards. The screaming crowd stampeded from the facility, crushing older, slower Citizens. They were on their own; we had no time to stay and help; Notes and Prometheus were headed for a trap.

My troops turned the corner at the far end of the Hibernation Facility. Behind the corner pillar of the facility a stallion snorted. A rider tried to still the sweat drenched stallion. The rider was holding an FOL helmet on her arm. I realized for the first time that most of the FOL were very beautiful women who blindly followed the commands of the Matriarch.

The rider had a dark black crew cut and the piercing black eyes of a wounded animal. Blood stained her jumpsuit. I rode toward her. My gun was drawn. She begged me not to shoot; she said that she was unarmed and wounded. I lowered my gun. She kept her stallion backing slowly away from me and sensuously unzipped the top of her jumpsuit; her breasts stood firm. I hesitated. The rider brought her stallion forward, and as the stallion began to claw at the brisk, morning air, I ducked and fell sideways off my bucking horse. The stallion was about to come down on me when there was an explosion and the rider and stallion were blown sideways against the building. Treat stood with a smoking Round Gun.

We fought our way to Wilderness Road, but we were too late. Hidden by the thick forest, we watched a contingent of FOL lead what was left of Prometheus' men. At the front of the pack, Thomas and Prometheus were tied together back to back the same way the FOL had been tied at Dead City. There was a rat in the pack. Prometheus and Thomas struggled to walk but stumbled over each others feet and fell to the ground. The FOL drug them long the blacktop. I flashed a quick mirror signal to Nova who was at the center of the pack. Blood was running from her gashed forehead.

Nova's whispered warning circulated through the troop of twenty or so bloodied and battered young men. We charged from the forest. Before the FOL could fire their loaded Round Guns, they were dragged from their stallions by Nova and the young men or blasted by the attacking Red Mountain men.

Nova untied Thomas and Prometheus and then ran to me. I dismounted my horse and then hugged her; she was drenched in blood. She collapsed in my arms. "They were waiting for us," she whispered and then she died in my arms.

Thomas stood silently watching me cry. "What did she say?" He asked.

"What we all know," I said. "It was a trap."

"It was the only way I could get close to the Matriarch," Prometheus said. "They gave their lives for the better good."

"For the 'better good' you let more than half your men die." I said. "And Nova. What about Nova?"

"That was God's will," Prometheus said.

"You stupid, ignorant, monomaniacal jerk, your silly obsession with God is going to get every one killed." I shouted and then charged toward him.

But Thomas stepped in, "Brian, Prometheus is going to be the new Patriarch of M7," he said. "Everyone from Red Mountain is going to fight to the death to install him. Then any of us who survive are going to pack up and go back to Red Mountain."

Prometheus patted Thomas on the back and then he spoke, “we are going to march on the so called Matriarch’s fortress. We will burn her at the stake for saying she speaks for God. Only I speak for God! We will also burn at the stake all women who sit on the Council. All FOL will be rounded up and shot. M7’s name will be changed to ‘The City of God.’ All will be welcomed here except Brian Owen and his Atheistic friends. Let’s go burn the witch”

He mounted a stallion, raised his hand and signaled to follow. Every one but I complied. Treat looked back and then saluted

Chapter Ten

I fought off Atavates and retreating FOL to get back to my bedside to rescue my father. My father, Sidney, was beating an Atavate over the head with a shovel. I used my pistol and fifteen rounds to end the fight. We rode off two-on-a-horse through the streets back toward the draw bridge. My father and I turned the corner into another alley. We saw, Olivia, Sidney's assigned wife crumpled in a corner; her jumpsuit was shredded. Sidney jumped from the back of my horse and then he ran to Olivia; further up the alley, Teea, my assigned wife, was spread-eagled on the cobbled pavement, a large Atavate had just finished raping her; a smaller Atavate was trying to pull him off so he could have a turn.

I hesitated, and then rode forward, kicked the small Atavate in the face and then rolled off the stallion onto the back of the huge Atavate. I used my knife to open the Atavate's throat from ear-to-ear.

I helped Sidney and Olivia onto my stallion; I retrieved the Atavate's horse, mounted, the spirited horse and then pulled Teea on behind me. I looked at Sidney, uttered a sigh of resignation, and then we rode out of the city toward the drawbridge. Teea had her arms gripped tightly around my waist; her head was lying on my back; her face toward the snow clad mountains.

The end

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