

2123: Dawn's Early Light

Chapter 1: The Olympians

-O say can you see, by the dawn's early light-

Henry Marshall rushed into the prison cell and pressed the barrel of his pistol against Jack Kennedy's forehead. "Finally, you're going to die, and everything will be good again." His smile turned to an evil grimace as he continued to push the barrel into Jack's head. "Goodbye, Jack."

One of Jack's wounded cellmates slashed Henry's shin with his blade. Henry glanced down and moved his pistol to kill the other man. Another cellmate stabbed Henry in the right thigh. Jack pulled the knife from behind his back and stabbed Henry Marshall in the abdomen and chest. His cellmates pulled Henry to the floor and stabbed him over and over until they were certain he was dead.

Joe Kennedy rushed into the prison cell and saw Jack kneeling by his cellmates near the body of Henry Marshall. Jack had cut strips of Marshall's clothes to bind their wounds and was comforting them. Joe pulled Jack into his arms and said, "Thank God you're okay!"

Adnan was sitting up and smiled, "You see, Jack. Our beloved caliph was correct. You have redeemed us."

When Joe released his son, Jack Kennedy pulled himself up to the window and shouted, "We need a medic up here!" Jack jumped back down onto the floor. Mehmud had wrapped a piece of cloth around Yusup's leg and was using it as a tourniquet to stop the bleeding. "Is he okay?"

"No, he is not. He is unconscious and a major blood vessel had been damaged. He needs to be taken to a hospital very soon. How are you, Adnan?"

"I have pain, but I think I am not hurt seriously."

Abe Gregory ran into the cell and knelt by the bleeding man. He opened a first aid kit and replaced the rag with a more effective tourniquet. Moments later, two caliphate soldiers and two medics joined them. Abe, Jack and Joe moved to get out of their way. Abe said, "Let's get out of here so they can work." As they headed toward the stairs, they could see more soldiers entering the prison block, opening the cells, and releasing the captives.

When they finally stepped out into the early morning sun, several crawlers had arrived and the troops were gathering the Orenites near the entrance to the unfinished cell block. Jack and the others began to walk toward the open gates of the prison complex. The door of a crawler opened in front of them and Caliph Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz exited. Ahmed hurried over and hugged Jack. "I'm am relieved to see you are safe, Redeemer." He kissed Jack on the cheek and then shook hands with the other men. "God bless you all for saving these people."

"Caliph," Jack interrupted, "my three friends inside are wounded. They need to get to a hospital quickly."

"Yes, I have already spoken with Ibrahim, who is also slightly wounded. My personal physician is with us and will accompany the casualties in my flyer back to Las Vegas."

"Thank you."

Across the compound and in the midst of the cannibals, a lone female voice shouted, "Bastard! You killed my father!"

"You're wrong! Shut up!" another voice shouted.

Jack and the rest turned to face the prisoners and were surprised to see three children at the front being restrained by caliphate soldiers. Jack started to move toward them. "That is not a good idea, Jack," his father noted, but he did not stop and so the others joined him.

They stopped ten feet from the line of soldiers who guarded the Orenite captives. Just on the other side of them stood two teenage girls and one younger boy. "I remember you from Ottumwa. It's Mary, Kate and Brian, right?" One of the girls smiled slightly, but her siblings had venomous hatred etched on their faces. "I didn't kill anyone. He tried to kill me and my friends."

"Liar!" one of the girls shouted, causing the men to take a step back.

"These animals are not worth your consideration, Jack," the caliph said. "Once my men have released the rest of the prisoners, these beasts will take their place in the cells. Let us go." They turned to head back to the crawlers.

"Wait!" one of the girls shouted. Jack stopped and turned around to see tears on her face as her siblings glowered at her. She put her hands to her face and began to sob heavily.

"You're Mary, aren't you?"

Her hands dropped to her sides and her eyes bugged out. She nodded and smiled very slightly. Her siblings began to argue with her and the caliph pulled Jack away. As they approached the crawlers, the caliphate helicopter took to the air and headed southeast. The men entered two crawlers and drove out of the compound.

Within a few weeks following the rescue of Jack Kennedy and the other prisoners in Merced, satellite images began to show the mass exodus from Los Muertos to the northwest. Shortly thereafter, the peace treaties among the United States, the Orenite cannibals, Mexico, the Tucson Ranch, Calnevona, and the Republic of South Texas went into effect.

After another five months, the Orenite group that headed north from Merced reached the Puget Sound. A few miles to the west, Damien Bennett sat by the mountain stream fishing. The others always begged him to take an S series with him for protection, but every few months Damien yearned to be free of the robots he helped to create. Yes, there were bears and mountain lions here in the Olympic Mountains of western Washington, but he had his rifle and pistol, just in case. As well, being surrounded by the others had strained his nerves. He was not a man who enjoyed the constant attention of others, human or cyborg. Fishing, hiking, and spending a few nights in his sleeping bag were all he needed to relax and think. Soon, he would be ready to return to the dome.

Suddenly, a twig snapped in the distance. He set down his fishing rod, stood, drew his pistol, and moved to put his back against the nearest tree to avoid a blind attack by a wild beast. He pushed the pistol into its holster and held his rifle in position. A pistol would not stop a hungry grizzly. Now, he thought he heard muffled voices from downstream. "Bill, is that you?" he shouted. Then, there were more voices, but their words were still indistinct. Damien was perplexed. If the voices had been from his friends, they would have responded. Rather than wait to learn the intentions of these voices, he started to move in the opposite direction. The voices behind him had almost faded away when he hurried toward a large rock outcropping. Just as he was about to pass it, a huge man stepped from behind it, blocking his path. The man wore only boots and short pants. The entire exposed body was covered with odd tattoos. "What do you want?" Damien asked.

"Howdy, stranger, my name is Claw," the tattooed man replied. "Who the fuck are you?"

Still holding his rifle on the man, he stepped back. "I'm Damien Bennett. Now what do you want?" The other man only smiled.

Within a couple minutes, twenty other practically naked and tattooed men and women were all around him. A beautiful young woman wearing what looked like silk pajamas soon joined the

others. She was quite tall, with lustrous blond hair, alabaster skin, and no tattoos. “Damien, I am Drone Princess Cassiopeia. Where are you from and why are you here?”

“I live in Seattle. I was just on a fishing trip. What do you want with me?” Damien was so drawn to her looks that he did not notice that Claw had moved slowly toward him, grabbed his rifle, and now slugged him in the face, knocking him to the ground. Claw then put his foot on the man’s holster so he could not draw his pistol.

Cassiopeia walked over and smiled down on her captive. “You should have stayed home Damien Bennett,” she said and walked away.

One of the assailants tied his hands behind his back while another tied his legs together with a long rope. They threw the rest of the rope over a bough of the nearest tree and then hoisted their prisoner into the air. As Damien looked on in horror, another man set a bucket on the ground under him. Then Claw returned wearing a bloody apron and wielding a long knife. “Dinner’s on,” he said with a grin.

A few days later, the Orenite army reached the outskirts of what had been the city of Seattle, Washington. They were astounded to see a glasslike dome over a small city near the downtown area of the old metropolis. The Orenite leader, Trish Marshall, was standing with her generals, Gargoyle and Granite, at the top of a small rise overlooking the scene. They dispatched a platoon of troops to inspect the area and try to make contact with the residents. As they stood looking through their binoculars, Trish asked, “Do you think they’re Russians?”

“Probably,” Granite replied. “This place has been a freezer for decades, so I’m surprised anyone is still alive here.”

“Majesty, I think we should move south. We don’t know what we’re up against and shouldn’t take any chances, especially with you,”

“I think we have to see how this plays out, Gargoyle.”

The advance platoon of one hundred Orenite soldiers were two blocks from the apparent entrance to the domed city. Captain Stain led his troops as they advanced slowly through the rubble of Seattle. Just then, a robot of some kind turned a corner and began to head toward them. It looked like a mechanical man, but it was fifteen feet tall, and its arms ended in machineguns and cannon. As it approached, they could feel the ground tremble under the weight of the thing. At twenty feet away, it stopped. The robot’s head was filled with sensors and cameras. A screen came to life in the center of the chest, showing the face of a man.

“Who are you and what do you want?” the man asked.

Stain motioned for his troops to lower their weapons, and he began to walk slowly toward the automaton. “My name is Captain Stain. We serve Patricia Marshall, Queen of our Orenite Clan. We have come from Los Muertos to establish a new hive here. If I may ask, who are you?” As he spoke, two more automatons approached from their flanks. Stain took a step backward. “We don’t want any trouble.” He could now see a woman’s face on the screen of one of the new robots and a man’s on the other.

“My name is Jupiter, and we are the Olympians,” the robot in front of them said. “And these are my friends, Apollo and Venus. I’m afraid we do not want anyone else in our area. I suggest you go back where you came from.”

“Well, that’s a bit of a problem, Mr. Jupiter. You see, we were exiled from our city and forced north. Our treaties with the United States and Mexico grant us the land that used to be Oregon and Washington states. So, in a way, you are the ones trespassing.”

Venus interrupted. “The United States still exists?” Stain turned to the other robot and nodded. “We had no idea. No one has come here in decades, not since the Russians evacuated.”

“Actually, we thought you were Russians.”

“No, we were Americans too, until the US abandoned us and left us to the Russians.”

“Jupiter,” the other male robot interjected, “I’m picking up some unusual readings from their stores.”

“I noticed that too, Apollo. It has to be a malfunction in our systems.”

“Excuse me, but what are you all talking about?”

“Please hold on a second, Captain Stain,” Jupiter requested. The screen on the robot’s chest went dark, and then the robot fell to its knees. A panel on the side of the machine opened and a man walked out. He was about five-feet, ten-inches tall and wearing a silver jumpsuit. His face was lined, and his hair was pulled back into a long, white ponytail. He leaned back against the robot and looked about the group of half-naked soldiers.

“That’s one hell of a weapons system, Mr. Jupiter.”

Jupiter smiled. “Thanks, but it’s a lot more than that! As you noted, this place was a frozen wasteland for a very long time. I guess you would say that suit and the dome were our way of surviving during bad times.”

“How much would it cost for us to buy some of those robotic suits?”

Jupiter laughed. “I’m afraid they are not for sale. We don’t know anything about you or your queen.”

“Don’t forget the anomaly, Jupiter!” the robot Apollo shouted.

Jupiter waved off the other robot. “I was getting to that! You make it sound like I’m losing my memory.”

“Well, you are one-hundred and sixty-eight after all.”

“What?” Stain exclaimed. “You can’t be that old!”

“It’s all good diet and exercise, Stain. It is Stain, isn’t it? That’s an odd name.”

“Your name is Jupiter, and you say my name is odd?”

“Point taken, sonny. Now, regarding our little computer glitch. Our systems are showing human meat in your backpacks. Of course, we all know that’s not possible.”

Stain smiled broadly. “Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of Oren Marshall?”

“Do you mean the editor of the LA Times?”

“Huh? No! Oren is the messiah of the Orenite nation. By the grace of Oren and our queen, we are cannibals and damned proud of it!”

“This isn’t good,” Venus noted.

Instantly, all the Orenites had their weapons at the ready, with most aimed at Jupiter, who said to Stain, “I’m going to say this just once. You will leave now and take the rest of your parasitic vermin away from here. For now, you can stay in Oregon. If you do not do this, you will all die. Got it!”

“We don’t give a shit what you want, old man!” Stain shouted, and then the Orenites fired. Instantly, the robot grabbed Jupiter and pulled him inside. Apollo and Venus opened fire. Jupiter’s robot jumped to its feet and opened fire as well. Within seconds, almost the entire platoon was dead. The few survivors at the far edges were running south as fast as their feet could carry them.

Moments later, ten fighter jets left the dome and headed toward the bulk of the Orenite group, which frantically attempted to form defensive lines. Recognizing the overwhelming power of the enemy, Marshall left the defensive lines meant to slow them down and headed south. Less than half of her group survived and was now headed toward Oregon, hopefully to safety. When they had moved another ten miles, Marshall sent one of their flyers south to advise Queen Candace of their situation.

When the exodus from Los Muertos was complete six months later, thousands of Americans began to move across the Mexican border to retake the land that was free of US and Orenite hegemony. As the new residents were taking more and more land in the San Diego area, most of the farms of the former residents of Co-op M-125 were converted to commercial and residential use while the farmers moved to the Central Valley of California to cultivate land that had lain fallow for almost a century.

The easing of the Ice Age began to decimate the farmland in Central Arizona, so those farmers moved west, with many retaking the Imperial Valley just east of San Diego.

With peace at last, John Winston and Dennis O'Shea established their central government in the city of Tucson, located in the center of the Tucson Ranch. The population in that area was much higher, and the city had better infrastructure.

The Kennedy and Johnson families settled at the southern end of the Central Valley, where they were given two large tracts of land. Most of the M-125 residents chose to live in the same area to be close to those who had survived their trip from the Midwest. Mayor Tony Wright and others moved into what had been the town of Delano, California, in order to provide security and administration for their neighbors. After having lived next door to each other their whole lives, Jack and Alexis were now separated by a mile of road that passed along the southern borders of their farms and led to Delano about three miles away. Even though the danger levels had fallen, most of the former co-op residents remained armed at all times and surrounded their homes with security fences topped by razor wire.

To the east of the Republic of South Texas, life in the United States had only become worse. Frank Dawson was still the president, but he had become a figurehead, with Darren Connor having the real reins of power. Frank stood looking out the window in the Oval Office. Outside the fence, he could see a large group of soldiers marching along the roadway. They all turned their faces toward the White House and made a Nazi-like salute. He heard a door open and turned to see his Chief of Staff, Avery Jones, enter the room and walk toward him. Frank smiled at his best friend. "Morning, Avery."

"Good morning, Mr. President."

"Christ, Avery, please call me Frank. I'm not sure president fits me anymore."

Avery sighed heavily. "We have no choice right now, Frank. Dog is calling the shots, and if we want to keep breathing, we have to do what he says. He keeps you locked up here, and one of his goons drives me back and forth to work while others watch my house and family."

Frank walked over to one of the couches and sat with a grunt. "Do you have my speech for the State of the Union tomorrow?"

Avery walked over, opened a folder, handed the document to the president, and then sat on the opposite couch. "Dog just finished proofing it late last night."

"You know he doesn't approve of that name anymore?"

Avery smirked. "Okay, Darren just approved it last night."

"It will be on the teleprompter, right?" Jones nodded. Dawson tossed the papers onto the coffee table and groaned, "Then I'll read this shit later."

Dawn had barely broken in the city of Portland, Oregon. Oren Marshall was sitting in the conference room overlooking the Columbia River with his sister and their children. Trish had an arm in a sling and looked desperately tired. "How many of your team made it back here, honey?"

“Dad, we’ve been through this before. Why didn’t we know there were others living in Seattle? I thought the Russians left there long ago. It’s been a freaking icebox up there for decades!”

Acton Marshall interjected, “They weren’t Russian, Cousin. We heard some of their radio chatter, and they call themselves the Olympians, and they spoke English.” They were all shocked when the telephone rang. Acton picked up the receiver and said, “Hello?” He listened for almost a minute and set the receiver down. “I think we will all know more soon. Apparently, a representative of the Olympians wants to negotiate a peace treaty with us.”

“What?” Candace Marshall asked.

“Mom, apparently, one of their leaders will arrive on the other side of the river in one hour. They would like one of us to meet with them about a mutual nonaggression treaty. I’ll go.”

“No! OJ, you go. My son is too important for this.” All could see the look of resentment on OJ’s face, but he nodded and walked out of the room with his father right behind him.

Oren closed the door and said, “Son, please don’t take her wrong.”

OJ sighed and looked down. “Dad, I know he is her only child, but I don’t think I’m expendable either.”

Oren hugged his son. “You’re not. I’m going.”

“Dad, it’s too dangerous.”

“Son, please just listen. I’m not a young man anymore. I know my sister wants me to sire more children in her hive, but I could never do that to your mother’s memory.”

At six-thirty in the morning, Jack Kennedy woke to thunder. He climbed out of bed, walked over to the window, and pulled the curtains aside. Rain was pouring down, and periodic flashes of lightning illuminated the hills just to the west of their land. He pushed his feet into his slippers and walked out of the bedroom, down the hall, and into the kitchen where he found his mother sitting with a fresh cup of coffee. “Why are you up, Mom?”

Rose smiled at him. “Probably the same reason as you, Jack. The thunder, right?”

Jack poured some coffee into a mug, added milk and sugar, and then sat with his mother. “The rainy season is so depressing. I want to get out in the fields and start growing stuff.”

“Your dad said the same thing last night, but it could be a month or more before the land is ready to be worked. Now is the time for you to study hard in school and have fun with your friends. Once the planting starts, you’re going to be putting in a lot of very long days.”

He sipped his drink. “I know, but I miss not having Alex next door.”

Rose giggled. “She is next door, Jack. It’s just that next door is a mile away.” Jack was about to answer when a buzzer sounded on a speaker mounted to the wall. Rose walked over to it and pressed the button. “Hello.”

“Hi, Rose, this is Tom Wainwright. I’m outside the gate with Steve Caster. Can we come through?”

“It’s awful early, Tom, but sure thing.” She pressed the green button to open the gate. “What do you think is going on, Jack?” He only shrugged.

Minutes later, Tom and Steve joined the Kennedy family at the dinette table in the kitchen. Joe Kennedy still wore pajamas as he prepared a second pot of coffee. “What’s going on, guys, and why are you here so early?”

They explained that Diana Appleton, who had been Drone Princess Dawn in the pyramid in Los Muertos, had gone north to visit her former queen, Candace Marshall. With her satellite phone, she told them that the Orenites had stopped in Portland in what had been the state of Oregon.

Apparently, the force Jack had seen leaving Merced with Trish Marshall had been attacked when they approached the Seattle area. Eventually, that group had been forced to retreat and was back in Portland now. Some of her former friends told her that they had picked up radio signals from a group calling themselves the Olympians. That group had engaged a large army attempting to capture Seattle. Eventually, the attackers had fled back southward.

“So, who exactly are these Olympians?” Joe wondered.

“We have no idea,” Steve sighed. “Most likely, they are another gang or more cannibals. The upper Northwest has been freezing for almost a hundred years. I don’t know how anyone could have survived.”

“Not only that,” Tom interjected, “the Orenites have now lost the land that was ceded to them. Perhaps they’ll settle for Oregon. If not, they might just come back here.”

“If it’s another group of cannibals, they might join forces,” Jack suggested.

“We’d all better hope not.”

“So, how have you been, Tom? I haven’t seen you in months!”

“I’m sorry about that, Jack, but it couldn’t be helped. I’ve been traveling with Steve and some others former AFIRS guys checking on Los Muertos. I know the Orenite queen said they were leaving, but we’re not about to take her word. So many more are crossing the border that we need to start rebuilding that city too.”

Rose smiled. “Perhaps you two could come for dinner tonight. Jack has to get ready for school pretty soon.”

“Sure, it will be good to catch up.”

Oren Marshall stood on a heavily weathered pier on the northern bank of the Columbia River. The three guards who accompanied him remained in the boat. The area was deserted, with only the rubble and debris of the city that had been here surrounding him. He glanced at his pocket-watch and noticed it was a few minutes past seven o’clock. He sighed heavily and began to head down the dock toward the boat. Suddenly, an odd whining sound arose far in the distance and became louder by the second. He turned around again but could see nothing different. A few seconds later, he spotted what appeared to be a tiny dot in the sky.

As it approached, the dot resolved itself into a man flying with an odd device strapped to his back. Within a minute, the man was twenty feet away and slowly descending. Then he landed, turned off the device, unstrapped it from his back, and set on the ground. He raised the visor on his helmet and smiled. Then he removed the helmet and set it down as well. He was wearing a silver jumpsuit and black boots, and had a long gray braided ponytail down his back. He looked about fifty years old. He extended his hand and walked slowly forward. When he was three feet away, Oren extended his hand and shook the other’s. “I’m Oren Marshall.”

“They call me Apollo, but my name is Ty Crane. How do you do?”

“I’m fine, but I must say you make one heck of an entrance. What is that thing?”

Apollo smiled. “Well, it’s a bit of a long story, but we call it a jump pack. When the Russians forced us out of our homes and into the mountains, we had to improvise. Fortunately, we have a lot of scientists and engineers in our number, so our improvisation turned out nicely.” He noticed a young woman approaching from further down the pier and said, “Is that your wife?”

Oren turned his head to see Diana Appleton approaching. “Dawn, you have to stay on the boat!”

Apollo grinned mischievously at her. “Dawn, that’s a pretty name for a pretty girl. My name is Ty, Ty Crane.”

She blushed slightly as she shook his hand. "Actually, my real name is Diana Appleton, but that's a long story too."

"I hear you guys want to negotiate for peace with us," Oren interrupted.

Apollo kept his eyes on Diana as he replied. "In a manner of speaking, I suppose that's true. How would you like to go for a ride with me in the jump pack, Diana?" She smiled, looked down, and blushed again.

"Excuse me, this is a negotiation, right? You can ask her out on a date later, okay?"

Apollo turned his icy glare to Oren. "That's fair enough, but this isn't a negotiation. I am going to tell you, and you can relate that to someone important. First, we know you're all fucking cannibals. Our deal is that you will stay south of the Columbia River. Any of you who try to come north will be killed. If you want, send your whole army our way, and you can all die and be forgotten together. That's the deal; take it or leave it." Oren was staring back at him, his face red with anger. Apollo grinned and turned his attention back to Diana. "Let's go, honey. I'll make sure you get home in a few minutes."

Oren turned on his heel and headed back down the pier toward the boat where the remaining guards were looking on in astonishment. Apollo and Diana had walked over to the jump pack, and he was helping her don a harness that would attach to his own. Oren turned and shouted, "Keep that bitch if you want! She's not one of ours and is not welcome back here!" He turned again and climbed into the boat, which immediately headed back across the river.

"So, you're not a cannibal then?" She shook her head. "Then what are you doing with them?"

"Well, it's a long and complicated story, Mr. Crane. We could be here all day discussing it."

He grinned like an idiot. "We'll talk later then. Let's get us strapped in and out of this place." As the boat neared the southern bank of the river, Oren turned northward and saw the two lift off, fly over the trees, and disappear from sight.

Hours later, President Frank Dawson was having lunch with his Chief of Staff and Vice-President Monica Stewart in the residence on the second floor of the White House. The chef entered and placed a plate with a cheeseburger and fries on it in front of each of them. Dawson smiled at her, and she left. He pulled a key-fob from his pocket and pressed it against the meat. It glowed red. He looked up and noticed the others were staring at him. Frank smiled. "You can't be too sure around here anymore." He took a bite of his burger.

"Frank, you know Darren has this room wired. You might be more careful with what you say and using that key fob."

The president took a sip of his beer. "Don't worry, Monica. Avery and I check this room several times a day to make sure it's clear."

"In fact, I just checked before we sat down for lunch," Avery said. "I'd say we're ninety percent certain we're safe here."

"Ninety?"

"Well, there's a five percent chance I missed something, and perhaps the same chance that you're a mole for Darren Connor."

There was a knock at the door, and then Connor walked in. "Good afternoon, Mr. President. I'm sorry to break in on your lunch."

The others looked up at the new arrival, wondering if he had heard their conversation. The president asked, "How can we help you, Darren?"

Smiling, Connor sat down at the table casually took a few fries from Monica's plate, and ate them. "It would seem our mutual friend, Candace Marshall, has a problem."

“You mean besides being a cannibal?”

Connor laughed. “Yeah, besides that. Have any of you ever heard of the Olympians or a man named Ty Crane?”

“Who?” Dawson asked. Monica shook her head.

Avery Jones looked shocked, but replied, “I read about some guy with that name once, but that was a story from a hundred years ago or more.”

“Well, this guy could be a descendant, I guess. Tell me about him.”

Jones looked down for a full minute and then raised his head. “Well, my memory of high school is fuzzy, but I remember reading about a company named Crane Defense Technologies. They were the leading defense contractor headquartered in Seattle, Washington. Then after the Crunch of 2038, the federal government had no money, so the defense industry collapsed. Then came the Ice Age, and all records of the company disappeared. The CEO of the company was named Tyler Crane. That’s about it.”

“That sort of fits what I heard. A man going by that name met with Oren on the north bank of the Columbia River. Apparently, he threatened to kill any Orenites trying to cross into Washington.”

“But the Orenites have an army.”

“And it would seem the Olympians have one as well.”

“What do we do now?” Dawson asked.

Connor stood. “There’s nothing for us to do. Seattle was to be the new hive for the Orenites. I guess they’ll have to settle for Portland.”

“Does that impact our other plans, Darren?”

Connor shook his head slowly. “Not unless the Olympians are all over the west. If they’re just in Seattle, we’ll ignore them for now.” He winked at Stewart and then walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“Mr. President, if these Olympians have an army that can rout the Orenites, we may have yet another problem.”

“Or another opportunity, Avery,”

Jack Kennedy was sitting in the school library with Alexis Johnson for study hall. Johnson’s younger sisters, Claire and Abby, sat across from them. Claire was thirteen, and Abby was eleven, and both looked very much like their older sister. Through a nearby window, Jack could see that the rain had moved east, and now the sun was shining brightly.

While he feigned studying English literature, he thought about the last eighteen months since he and Tom Wainwright had ventured into the Ottumwa Free City. He faced almost certain death that night from the cannibals and too many more times since then. It had only been a year since that awful day in Merced, when Henry Marshall had pressed the barrel of his pistol into his forehead. Subconsciously, he put his finger to the spot and felt the scar. If not for his cellmates, Mehmet, Yusup, and Adnan, he would have died there, having lived through the terrible journey from the co-op to Calnevena to be murdered in yet another human slaughterhouse.

Now, it was all supposed to be over, but Jack could not believe it. He had been their number one enemy for a long time, and most likely that was still the case. In his gut, he knew there could never be peace while cannibals roamed free. His only consolations were knowing that Henry Marshall was dead, and the remaining Orenites were hundreds of miles away.

The bell signaling the end of the school day sounded, and they headed out to his car for the ride home. As they walked toward the student parking area, Mary Foster, one of the teachers, hurried toward them. "Jack, Alexis, please wait up!"

"Miss Foster, what's wrong?" Alexis asked as Foster arrived.

"Nothing's wrong. I just wanted to let you know that my dad's bakery is open now. It's just a few blocks from here. I know my parents would love you both to come by."

"That is so cool! Let's go!" Jack exclaimed. He remembered George and Irene Foster very clearly. They had been part of the group of Old Ones who had arrived in the co-op with Jack's friend, Abe Gregory. George had wanted to open a bakery at the co-op, but the forced exile stopped their plans.

"Okay, just follow my car," Mary said.

Minutes later, they pulled up in front of Foster's Bakery and went inside. After greeting George Foster, they sat at one of the small tables at the front of the store where customers could have a coffee and pastry. "This place is great, Mr. Foster," Jack said. "And these pastries are fantastic! Thanks."

"Do you run this place all by yourself?"

"Well, I'm still working on that, Alexis."

"Dad, I'm not sure I'm willing to quit teaching. That's what I love doing."

George laughed. "I know. I was just kidding. Right now, Irene helps in the afternoons. I have to be here before five in the morning to get the fresh bread in the oven, so by one or two, I'm beat. I'm hoping to get one or two students to help during the summer. Jack and Alexis, I know you both work in the fields all day, but maybe you know some friends who would want to work?"

"Abby and I can help!" Claire exclaimed.

Alexis frowned. "You two are a bit young, I think. Plus, you might eat all the profits."

"My mom might help some, Mr. Foster. I'll ask her when I get home."

"That would be nice, Jack. I do have two full time workers starting soon. Obviously, you remember Abe and Sarah Gregory?"

"But they moved to South Texas?"

George smiled. "It would seem that Houston is a bigger problem than most thought. Their daughter Rachel and her family are coming here with them where it's safer. The mayor has promised them two houses next to mine. In the meantime, Rachel's family will stay at my house and Abe and Sarah will stay in the small apartment upstairs."

Jack wiped the moisture from his eyes. "That is so awesome. I really missed them."

After arriving inside the dome in Seattle, Ty Crane had taken Diana Appleton to his house, which sat on the shore of a large lake. She had been given a room and time to freshen up after the flight. It had been quite cold in the air for the long flight, so the hot shower was just what she needed. She put on a long robe and walked into the main room where Crane was sitting on a couch by a large fire, crackling in a fireplace large enough to stand in. She sat at the other end of the couch and smiled back at him. "This is a nice place, Ty."

"Thank you. Would you like a drink?" She nodded, and he walked over to a large bar. He turned back to her and said, "Since the Ice Age, it's almost impossible to get wine, but I have local beer and whisky."

"I'll have whisky on the rocks, please."

He smiled. "That's my girl. So, tell me all about Diana Appleton."

She crossed her legs. "Well, I was born in Dallas. We lived outside the dome, so you can imagine what that was like."

"I'm not sure I can, actually. We built this dome due to the cold. Is it the same there?" She shook her head slowly. "How is Dallas these days? I haven't been there in a really long time."

"It's gone. President Dawson dropped a hydrogen bomb on the city more than a year ago."

"What?" Ty exclaimed. "Why would he do that?"

"The rioting was the excuse, but it was a real shithole. Exactly how long ago were you there? Dallas has been horrible my whole life."

He walked over, handed her a glass, and then sat down next to her. He touched his glass to hers in a toast and they sipped their drinks. "How old do you think I am, Diana?" he asked while casually putting his hand on her knee.

She gently moved his hand away. "I'd guess in your early sixties?"

He took a large drink. "Try adding a hundred to that." Her eyes bugged out. "I am one hundred and sixty-one years old, my dear"