

AUS COM

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CHAPTER 1

“They’re coming!” The whispers echoed through the darkness. “They’re coming!” Voices changed with accents and tones while the words travelled down the line. Dust sprinkled from the railway tunnel ceiling; several muffled coughs drowned out the obscure commotion from above. The teams patiently waited; a routine carried out numerous times before.

“Definitely a Clan bash,” a veteran of the section uttered.

The remark conjured up images amongst those new to the section, nervously waiting for the moment when the order would be given to move up. Some experienced veterans rested against cold, concrete walls; this was nothing more than a standard surface sweep. They read inexperience in the trainee’s expressions. Little conversation was exchanged, as no amount of words could prepare them for what they would soon see.

Dawn prompted the silent silhouettes to appear from the hideaway beneath the earth. In a disorderly fashion, some moved on, having seen it all before. Through the eyes of the novice, the barren earth was creeping over the scars of what was once referred to as the suburbs. The eerie remnants of such a time littered the landscape.

Surface dwellers had picked clean anything remotely salvageable. Both simplistic and great architecture were lost, leaving only concrete and twisted, rusted metals that not even the imagination could perceive their original structures. Dividing the suburbs and city, a contaminated river retained debris from bridges to monorail lines, wrenched from embankments.

To those new to the section, the ghostly vision of the city, surrounded by devastation, stole their concentration. Having been protected from the initial blasts, the buildings stood like tombstones in a concrete cemetery. This colossal unmarked grave retained the bones of the dead, no longer remembered as individuals, but victims of a voice from the past. The insanity of power had almost succeeded in eradicating life from the planet.

An electronic security wall surrounded the main city blocks, having not seen life in them for over twenty years. One towering building stood out above the rest. Over one hundred floors of glass and steel were visible above the impregnable eight-metre-high shimmering barricade. By day, the reflection of the sun’s rays made the building gleam, yet at night, every floor was lit up by internal lighting. Surface dwellers named it the Light Tower.

Riders began the era of terrorism and dictatorship. The name Rider originated from earlier survivors. These men on horseback used fear to enslave and expand their Clans. On foot, scavenging surface dwellers did their master’s bidding. Though Clans fought each other for territorial

supremacy, they all united on one issue, the loathing of an imaginary enemy.

Clan teachings drove fear of those allegedly keeping them from the city. Derived from a scientific era, these indescribable hideous life forms worshipped advanced technology and weaponry. No surface dweller could prove what was thought, fact. Fabricated stories of escape, death and injury fed the machine of terror. Clansmen regularly gathered at night on common ground, combining their efforts in vain attempts to bring down the barrier. These intervals of alliance saw more dead to skirmishes than working towards a common goal.

A ridge of baked earth concealed the manhole, one of many to the underground tunnels. Veterans of the section were privileged to wear full military uniform, were others a mixture of the old armed forces. The sun's heat penetrated Roxanne's thick, navy, woollen coat, making it heavy and uncomfortable. The military emblems on her shoulders were neither representation of rank, nor decoration; trimmings came with the standard issue of clothing. Looking out over the flat lands, Roxanne's tall, masculine appearance reflected her personality. In her late twenties, her fitness was that of one many years her junior, which she flaunted at the opposite sex. Protective glasses sat on top of her short, dark hair in readiness for the morning glare. With no respect for the dead, Roxanne made comments that should have seen her reprimanded by her superior, standing beside her.

Important was the woman's friendship to Roxanne. Around the same age as she, Alex was thought feminine, very pretty and petite in Air force blues. With her superior remaining silent, Roxanne lowered her tone and continued.

"No one survived this one; let's just start the burning."

"You know the routine," Alex replied, continuing to search the area through binoculars, which electronically zoomed in on objects that drew her attention.

Shovelled dirt extinguished flames on the makeshift Clan transports, a combination of wood, metal and the inventive imagination of the nineteenth century. Teams used steel hooks to drag corpses to the mounds, their blood already drying in the early morning heat.

"Like lambs to the slaughter." Alex sighed disappointed.

"Lambs my arse," Roxanne scoffed, "more like fucking butchers." The winds, stirring the dry earth in the distance, prompted a change of subject. "It's starting early this morning and I'm not getting showered in the shit. Already I've got so much crap in my boots I reckon I could grow a Rider in them."

Ignoring the woman's candidness, Alex zoomed in on two males from their section. Immediately she recognised Shaun in full Army greens, the other knelt over something she couldn't quite make out. Shaun waved, indicating a survivor.

“We have one!” Pleased, Alex’s face lit up.

“That’s all we need.” Roxanne kicked at the dirt. Taking her hands out of her coat pockets, she aired disgruntled views. “It’s bad enough disposing of the fuckers, now we’re up for a bloody nightmare. Filthy Riders; I’ll have the smell in my nostrils for weeks.” With her friend not reprimanding her, Roxanne continued. “They’d eat us alive if they had the chance, but we welcome them with open arms. Come in, join the family, we’ll feed yah and...” Roxanne went silent, wondering why Alex hadn’t pulled her up, especially as the woman didn’t tolerate such negative talk.

Knowing the reason behind Roxanne’s resentment, Alex didn’t intend to reprimand a friend, though would have if others had been present. Understanding and a compassionate expression usually saw Roxanne at ease. The woman’s deceased brother was sadly missed, and Alex conveyed a familiar response.

“AJ’s death was hard on us all, but more so for you.” Alex’s blue eyes focused on the woman’s agitated profile. “This is what it is all about Roxanne; preserving life, the survival of mankind. You know how long it has been since we found a live one.” Alex paused, reading the frustration in the woman’s expression. “You don’t have to do this; no one would see you as weak if you went to another section for a time.”

“No!” Roxanne’s sights shot to her friend. “No, I’ll be okay. I want to do this for AJ; it was his mission in life.” She drew a deep breath, pulling up inner barriers to conceal the hurt.

Although Alex had gone easy on her, Roxanne knew her friend wouldn’t hesitate to send her to another section if she thought it for the best. She now hoped her attitude wouldn’t be brought up in the debriefing. Awkwardly glancing, Roxanne was not ignorant to her friend analysing her.

“I am going to let it go this time,” Alex said. “Nothing needs to be said to the others.” Having relieved Roxanne’s anxiety, she patted the woman on the arm. “It all takes time, even your brother used to say that.” She again turned her attention to team members on the job.

“Yeah, I know.” Roxanne rubbed tired eyes. “You know me, just hate those first few days.” She sneaked a sideward glance, not anticipating that Alex would shift her sights to acknowledge her.

“AJ had a zeal for life. He would have saved them all if he could have.”

Since the man’s death, Alex had conveyed this many times; however, the wedge between Roxanne and Riders remained firmly established. Reminding Roxanne of her brother’s work, Alex added to consider how many ex-Riders where now their dearest friends due to AJ.

Roxanne battled within. Relinquishing her hatred would mean forgiveness and this she couldn’t do. Sighing troubled, she couldn’t look her in the eyes.

“I’ll get a bed ready.” Roxanne didn’t wait for a response. Hastily, she disappeared down beneath the earth.

Skimming the surface, Alex zoomed in on the mound of collected dead, having been doused in fuel. With the torch lighting the accumulation, she lowered the binoculars. The moment called for an emotion, yet this she could not express. Common sense told her that it needed to be done.

The underworld burnt the bodies to eliminate disease and out of respect for the dead. This differed from the practices of the Clans whereby the dead were stripped of belongings and left where they fell. In addition, Clans displayed the bodies of their enemies on boundaries, a flaunting of strengths and a warning to others.

“What a waste,” Alex murmured. A shadow cast over her small frame before she felt the hand on her shoulder. The remnants of a Russian accent gave him away with his utterance.

“One is better than none.”

“I know why you’re here Stephen.” Alex’s eyes remained fixed on the burning mound. In his usual composed tone, he let her know that she was well overdue for a rest break.

The man’s strong features, clean-shaven and neatly trimmed white hair gave Stephen a sophisticated appearance. As an authoritative figure, his arrogance and demand for respect caused resentment amongst some who worked closely with the mature aged man. Stephen saw himself as more than just the head of the Medtech section and personal physician to Alex. The relationship between the two went deeper. At no time had Stephen openly divulged his personal reasons or feelings for Alex, leaving everyone, including the woman, ignorant to his secrets.

The inability to control Alex in the manner Stephen desired caused him constant frustration. Considered a workaholic, she had no respect for her own wellbeing. As head of the Medtech section, Stephen could stand the officer down until he decided otherwise. He was now on the verge of doing so to teach her a lesson.

Alex’s promise to comply shortly was a common response. Experience taught Stephen not to trust her in this area; running herself into the ground was nothing new. Rarely did Alex adhere to his warnings. Frequently, she lured him into a false sense of security before sneaking off to continue her duties. In a calm yet firm composure, Stephen gave Alex the choice to either come quietly or be restrained.

“And you know I will do it,” Stephen added.

“I will be in soon, I promise.” Alex’s eyes directed him to the men out in the field.

“This is neither mine nor your concern.” Animosity rose towards those Stephen perceived she mothered. “They are not children Alex. Shaun is head of security; he knows his job, so let him do it.” He continued with

Alex just staring unmoved. “Repeatedly we have gone over this. You place more emphasis on friendship than leadership. All must do their fair share, friend or not. Do I make myself clear?” Stephen raised a brow and turned his hand towards the manhole.

The surface was not a place Stephen cared for. He felt the pressure lift from his shoulders with Alex silently descending the steel ladder into the dimly lit tunnel. Her obedience stirred the authoritative figure within him. Thoughts of seeing her out of action for twelve hours had him smug with victory whilst following closely behind.

CHAPTER 2

The railway tunnel constructed of slabs of concrete was cold with overhead lighting distanced apart. Dust and cobwebs hid in the silent shadows and the odd alcoves housing old line technology. Sweat dampened Shaun's fair brow. His appearance of a gangly thirty-year-old in army greens was most misleading. Pleasant features revealed anger for section blunders and a Scottish heritage aired with him cussing aloud. Relief came to his aching back after dropping the unconscious weight on the gravel beside the first set of tracks. Panting, he flicked his fiery red fringe away from green eyes.

"If I had my way you bastard, I'd leave yah here to rot!"

Once Shaun's eyes adjusted to the dim light, he again swore aloud. The absence of the regular team was another oversight, which would later see reprimands. With no handcart to haul the body, he ploughed the gravel with his boot.

"Alex will go off her face!" Shaun turned his foot towards the Rider, stopping short of kicking the body. He took a moment to consider his options.

The tracks mounted on dusty sleepers hindered Shaun while struggling with the hefty body draping his shoulders like a coat. A metal spur on the back of the Rider's boot caught the wood, sending the security officer face down onto the track. Pinned down, Shaun heard the cumbersome weight groaning. Taking no chances, he shoved the man off and stumbled to his feet. Uneasy, he watched while the Rider stirred to consciousness.

Not only was Shaun a security officer, but he headed the department. He understood the routine better than most, having plenty of experience with Riders; nonetheless, he felt let down by his team who should be there, backing him up. The full-length woollen coat, collared with rat skins and bulging pockets, gave the six-foot, bearded Rider a threatening appearance. Knowing a fight was imminent the moment the Rider set eyes on him, a decision had to be made quickly, while the man was still dazed. He could either hit the Rider, rendering him again unconscious, or run for his life and get help.

Blue eyes, partially covered by dirty long, brown hair fixed firmly on the lanky stranger in a green uniform. Staggering backwards, the Rider came to rest against the cold, concrete wall. Feeling the pain of his injuries, he buckled a little while clutching his ribs.

Shaun now knew his opponent's weakness. Although confident of taking the man down, he was already exhausted from long hours awake and having hauled the Rider to the tunnel. Tension mounted, as the Rider became more aware of his surroundings and slowly reached under his coat. Shaun

read it in his expression and silently scoffed at the man's ignorance.

Personally, Shaun had carried out regulations, having searched and disarmed the Rider out in the field. No matter how primitive the weapons, security confiscated any threat to the underworld. Experience had taught him that communication at this point was a waste of breath. He knew this man had but one thing on his mind, to get back to his Clan. Without support, the chances of both reaching their destination unscathed was slim.

The security officer ducked the fist, thrusting a good hard blow to the Rider's stomach with his foot. About to follow through with another kick, Shaun felt the man block his action. The grimy fist struck his jaw; surprisingly, this Rider had swift reflexes. With above average fighting skills, the Rider sent Shaun to the gravel. Both rolled about on the railings exchanging blow for blow.

Shaun managed to get the upper hand due to elaborate techniques unknown on the surface. This gave him a few seconds to use his gymnastic abilities and back flip out of reach. Returning in full force, he surprised the Rider with his legwork, sending the man to the ground with a thud. With little energy left, Shaun prayed his opponent would stay down, but this was not to be. The man had unique moves of his own; Shaun found himself a victim of his own cleverness.

Heaving the stranger to his feet, the Rider slammed the threat against the wall. Pinning the man by the throat, his grip was so tight, it was clear the red-head could barely breathe.

"You're a Genetic, aren't you?" The man snarled through his panting. Shaun forced the word out of his bleeding lips.

"No!"

"Defect." The man understood the difference yet retained his hold.

Genetic engineering had once perfected the human body. Compulsory intervention on Mother Nature was a way of life for the elitist society. Any group or individual who challenged the system was labelled Defects. Since the early twentieth century they went under various names. In addition, those considered aggressors, naturalists, intellectually handicapped, spiritualists, amongst many others, found themselves victims of such classification. The governing system discreetly sought to eliminate the problem, forcing Defects to fight for survival by any means possible.

The man didn't care either way, though he himself was born of genetic engineering. His thoughts centred on escape, assuming others might be lurking.

"How do I get out of here?" The man snarled. "Tell me or I'll break your fucking neck!" Desperation and the stranger's silence only aggravated the situation. His grip tightened.

With no fight left in him, Shaun could taste his own blood from the split lip. Unable to breathe, panic set in, fearing death was only moments

away.

“Let him go!” Alex’s voice gave Shaun additional fight for life. His wide eyes caught a glimpse of the silhouette moving into the light.

Having abruptly drawn his attention, the Rider stared at the slender woman in a blue uniform. Unable to recall the last time he saw such long, dark, clean hair and a clear ivory complexion stole his concentration. Her natural beauty and large blue eyes had him loosening his grip, yet only enough for his captive to draw a breath. Again, the woman demanded the man’s release. With her moving closer, the outsider felt an element of amusement, though remained steadfast. Perceiving the woman no threat, he now saw her as his ticket back to the surface.

The man contemplated the reward he could get from a Master for such a gift. Though tempting, he belonged to no Clan, he was a Nomad, a desert scavenger. Having chosen this path for most of his life, a horrifying childhood memory was a constant reminder that he was not a barbarian. His conscience would not let him hand her over for a master’s entertainment. Thoughts of Clan life and Masters in particular, stirred loathing. Assuming this was going to be easy, he silently told himself that she was merely a ticket back to the surface.

“This is the last time I ask you,” Alex said, moving even closer.

“Or what?” The Nomad stared the woman in the eyes.

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Alex retained a calm composure.

“And I want out of here.” The Nomad thought that one more step would place her in hands reach. To entice her, he tightened his grip. Their eyes fixed on one another with her coming forward.

Shaking his head, the Nomad was unable to comprehend how he ended up flat on his back with reluctant eyes looking down at him. With the woman taking a few steps back, he rolled onto his side; glancing her companion sitting on the ground, regaining his breath. Though having underestimated the woman, he noticed something new in her expression and composure.

As a Nomad, there had been only one other, apart from himself, he’d ever trusted, and that person was dead. He could not afford to let his guard down, telling himself he was being lured into a false sense of security. Evidently, this woman was not as fragile as first thought. If blood had to be spilt to take control of the situation then she would suffer for his freedom.

Holding his ribs, the Nomad began to get up. Surprisingly, she reached out her hand to offer him assistance. One good blow should do it, he thought, and accepted her help. His fist not only collided with the palm of her hand, but her skilled actions caused immense pain that forced him to his knees.

Having wrenched the man’s fingers back, Alex used her other hand to jab at a couple of pressure points to immobilise and leave him defenceless.

Sweat beaded on his dirty brow; the more he fought against her, the more intense the pain. Though disliking this part of the job, Alex remained calm on addressing the surface dweller.

“Please stop resisting. I can assure you it gives me no pleasure enforcing such restraint. I give you my word; no harm will come to you. There is no cause to fear us.”

Aware that time was short; Alex wished to defuse the situation as quickly as possible. Already, she felt the strain on her body. Her diminishing energy would soon affect her limbs and cloud her judgment.

“I’m going to let you go. Behave, or I will restrain you.” Alex began to release her grip. Her fingers reversed her initial actions, leaving him free of pain. Amazed, the Nomad silently glared at the woman, having never experienced anything like it or her for that matter.

Keeping an eye on the surface dweller, Alex crouched beside her friend to assess the cuts and bruising to Shaun’s face and neck.

“Can you walk?” Alex whispered. A glance saw the Nomad nursing his ribs while rising to his feet. Shaun nodded. Aided to stand, he breathed easier and her presence gave him peace of mind.

Alex expressed no fear with the Nomad towering her. Politely, she asked him to open his coat. His reluctance to comply came from fear of her intentions, which she read in his eyes. Aware trust had to be established, she would not force him, though the situation called for it.

“You are clutching your ribs. I need to know the extent of your injuries. We won’t continue on foot if it’s detrimental to your health.” Alex’s eyes expressed sincerity.

“For god sakes man,” Shaun blurted out, “she’s only trying to help you. But if you’d rather wait for the medical team.” His remark made the man nervous. Shaun shifted his sights back to Alex. “Just knock him out and be done with it. I’m gagging for a drink and a sandwich.” His friend addressed the surface dweller.

“We are a collective of both Genetic and Defects. We are also a civilised people with no intention of hurting you or any other on the surface. I understand you’re scared...” Shaun interrupted her.

“We know all about what the Clan teaches you. Make it easy on yourself. Come and see what we have to offer; believe me, it will change yah mind.” Shaun sighed, wanting to get back.

Such kindness was unheard of on the surface. Triggered was an inner voice from the Nomad’s past, a voice he trusted as much as his own instincts. Slowly opening his coat, he watched delicate hands lift his worn, dark-green jumper. Drawn to her silken hair, he barely felt the warmth of her hand touch his skin and gently skim over the injured area.

“You have two fractured ribs.” Alex pulled the jumper back into place. Raising a hand towards his forehead, he reacted with apprehension.

Again, she felt compelled to make her actions clear to him. “You have blood in your hair. I suspect a cut requiring stitching.” Letting her continue, she gently brushed aside the hair dangling over his forehead. “It is not serious.” Alex slightly turned in Shaun’s direction. “You go on ahead; the others will already be on their way.”

“If I’m capable of walking, he’s capable of walking. I’m not leaving without yah Alex.” Shaun stepped closer, determined to see this through. He stiffened with Alex sternly addressing the surface dweller.

“Don’t try it, I will restrain you.”

“She’s quick, isn’t she?” Shaun grinned. “It’s her diet you know.”

Tense, the Nomad stared, wondered how she knew of his intentions to give it one last shot at nabbing her. He now suspected that the two were from an elite force, who having done this before, took nothing for granted. Alex addressed him.

“Excuse Shaun’s sense of humour, genetics never did consume human flesh, as taught in the Clans. Our diet consists of what we grow, such as fruit and vegetables.” Alex gestured with her hand for the man to move on, which he reluctantly complied.

Nudging Alex, Shaun grinned; he could always rely on her to win a heart. His expression changed with his friend slowly closing her eyes. Not ignorant to what this meant made him tense. Within seconds, she opened her eyes to a flicker. Shit, he thought. Having exhausted herself to assure his safety, he knew if Alex hit the deck, the Rider would again get the upper hand. With his fear written all over his features, Alex slightly raised her hand for him to be silent.

Hearing no movement behind him, the Nomad came to a standstill. On the surface, his fight for survival had fine-tuned his senses. Listening intently, he concluded something was wrong. It dawned on him that he may have dealt Shaun a worse injury than first thought, in which case, the man was vulnerable to another attack. Killing Shaun was not an issue, but the woman made him nervous. Her skills and speed undoubtedly had him at a disadvantage. Uncertainty drove common sense to wait it out and hope of finding a weakness.

Having indicated some understanding of Clan teachings, the Nomad could well believe he wasn’t the first outsider to enter their realm. He suspected he might just be the first intellectual with knowledge on both Clan and Genetic traits and history.

As a boy, his parents trusted him with secrets regarding atrocities. His father called it the unwritten history, buried truths that would one day surface and humanity would know their shame. He was once sympathetic to the plight of the Defects until they rose from the ashes and became the Riders who outlawed the genetic system. Many years he’d spent denying his own heritage, as to acknowledge it would see him dead in any Clan.

“Keep moving.” Shaun’s voice broke the silence.

The Nomad could now hear movement and continued, as did his thoughts. The woman had said no harm would come to him; this didn’t relieve his anxiousness to get back to the familiarity of the surface. He told himself if they wanted him dead, they would have left him to die in the sun.

Reflecting on what had taken place, the woman’s attitude left him questioning. She expressed no fear of him whatsoever; in addition, instead of reprisals for his actions, she had extended a hand of kindness to lessen the tensions. None of this made much sense. Both were unarmed, dispelling Clan teachings of a superior race and their use of advanced technology. As they wanted him to trust them, two could play at this game. He felt it time to lure them into a false sense of security to safeguard himself.

CHAPTER 3

Roxanne leant against a bench in the familiar room. Alex's accommodation ensured complete privacy yet felt like a concrete box. This arrangement differed from her sleeping compartment on an upper level. The train carriage had minimal furnishings and canvas dividers separated her from other single women.

The large room appeared small due to stacked metal cabinets, technical equipment and cluttered bench space. Jokingly, Roxanne referred to the bed as the dental chair, having seen something similar in a medical book. A bright light above shone down on the tan vinyl and small table attachment that was untidy with electronic devices.

Bored, Roxanne picked up a photo in a makeshift frame, standing out amongst the manuals and books on the bench. She had looked at it more times than she cared to admit, having placed the man on a pedestal. Each time she thought how intelligent and sophisticated the elderly gentleman looked in his white coat and dark tie. Though having never met the man, his smile had the gentleness of a loving father. Her admiration stemmed from him being responsible for creating the world they lived in. Like a routine, another came to mind. The way Stephen dressed and conducted himself made her think he was out to mimic the deceased mentor. She thought he didn't have a hope in hell of being as great as Nelson, the man in the picture.

Sighing impatiently, Roxanne knew she could not stand down until Shaun returned and they had been debriefed. Stephen's pacing ground on her nerves; everything about the man annoyed her. She deliberately provoked tension between them to see him angered, an emotion he didn't like to openly exhibit. To his face, she would insult his intellect, which saw her frequently reprimanded by Alex and others in the section. Roxanne believed she spoke what others thought but didn't have the guts to say aloud.

"Oh for fuck sake, will you cut it out!" Roxanne turned back to the photo. She almost grinned, aware of how much he detested vulgar language. If he was going to annoy her with his pacing, she was going to annoy him also.

With his thoughts elsewhere, Stephen didn't respond. Alex had eluded him yet again. Fed up, he was determined to see her excluded from certain tasks. The distraction of Roxanne's presence assured him she wished an audience before further insulting him.

Stephen disliked Roxanne as much as she disliked him. If he had his way, she would not be in the section. In his opinion, the woman was crude and unladylike, comparing her behaviour to that of a Rider. Voicing this only met with Alex's disapproval. Her request for grace and leniency was due to

Roxanne's nature, derived from femininity issues and growing up in the tunnels.

While Defect labourers had slaved on the construction of the complex, children were born and raised in the obsolete railway tunnels. Many lost one or both parents in so-called accidents of the time. Youngsters in hiding, like Roxanne, her brother and sister, took on parenting roles until they were of an age to work. Genetic sympathisers aided Defect workers by supplying additional food, bedding and clothing for children. Some years back, Roxanne had elected fulltime security when diagnosed as infertile. She chose to associate and work with men; her way of dealing with the issue.

In his mid-twenties, the oriental man stuck his head round the door, his panting evident of his haste. Stephen's expression answered his question, but Atlas asked anyway.

"Is she back yet?"

"No, she is not." Stephen's tone prompted Atlas to come into the room. Disillusioned, Atlas glanced at Roxanne, who grinned sarcastically, now having an audience.

Roxanne thought Atlas cute in a boyish way. Being a good friend and the two being around the same height, she rested her elbow comfortably on his shoulder. As one of the boys, Atlas felt more at ease around her where usually he was insecure and shy with women.

"Don't breathe too heavily," Roxanne scoffed, "he's in one of his moods." She eyed Stephen. "I keep telling him, you need to be fit in this job. He isn't as fast as he used to be."

Amongst others of the section, both Roxanne and Atlas were fit and worked out daily. Their bulk, she thought flattering, perceiving they made Stephen feel old and incompetent, lacking their physical endurance and strengths. Atlas took no notice of her, keeping his sights on Stephen.

"I was told you went out and brought her back." Atlas expressed concern.

"He did," Roxanne responded. "Alex did a runner the moment he turned his back. You'd think he'd know better by now, she does it all the time."

"Enough," Stephen growled. "You have no idea the seriousness of the situation." He knew Atlas would understand what he meant, appreciating the respect the young man always showed him. Atlas eyed Roxanne, expressing disapproval. Shrugging her arm off his shoulder, he questioned Stephen.

"How long?"

"Over an hour." Stephen heaved a sigh.

"I'll send another team. Least she's only an hour into a code yellow." Atlas glanced up at the antique digital clock on the wall, calculating the time left before running a code red.

“We are already running a code red.” Stephen’s words saw Atlas’s eyes bulge with disbelief.

“Grab your kit Roxy, we’re going up!” Atlas raced out the door. Roxanne followed; her response to him was overheard by Stephen.

“He didn’t tell me she was that far gone! I’ll blow his fucking brains out if anything happens to her.”

Having followed the tracks for over thirty minutes, the pace had slowed so dramatically that the Nomad again asked if he could assist. Shaun wanted it to appear that Alex was holding him up, when in fact it was the other way around. How long she could keep going, he didn’t know. In thought, he cursed those who should have been there by now.

The Nomad’s suspicions proved to be correct. Having heard one fall, he abruptly turned to see Shaun trying to lift Alex off the rails. The woman remained silent, appearing disorientated and unable to help herself. Though a mere glance, he saw fear in the man’s eyes.

With the outsider stepping forward, Shaun grasped Alex around the waist and hauled her back a few paces. On edge, he assumed her loss of mobility would encourage the man to attack. He was now prepared to kill in order to protect Alex from him.

Curiosity had the Nomad treading carefully, not wanting to intimidate her companion into a fight. For all he knew, it might only be a momentary lapse. The thought of her rousing during a fight and painfully restraining him kept him calm, yet alert.

“You wanted me to trust you, now it’s your turn to trust me.” The Nomad’s eyes fixed on Shaun’s. “Tell me what’s wrong with her; I might be able to help.” He cautiously moved closer, only glancing at the limp body in the man’s arms. Shaun searched his thoughts for explanation, anything to bide him more time.

“She’s exhausted. She was up all-night waiting for you people to stop killing each other and praying for survivors. She only wants to give yah a better chance at life.” He stiffened with the Rider slowly raising his hand.

“You can either trust me or fight me, it’s your call.” The Nomad’s eyes cautioned to trust him. Under scrutiny, he felt her wrist for a pulse. He noted Shaun tightening his arms around the woman, implying the man feared an attempt to take her from him. “Her pulse is erratic; you’re not helping her by lying to me.” His tone conveyed a conscience, rarely seen in Riders.

“I’m not lying to yah.” Shaun nervously stared him in the eyes. “Alex barley eats or sleeps. She’s bloody committed to saving lives. We have to force her to rest and every so often she goes down like this. I’m telling yah, she won’t be out for long. She’s conditioned herself to run on air.”

“This woman means a lot to you, doesn’t she?” The Nomad prodded for information.

“That’s an understatement.” Shaun sighed, his thoughts searching for

words to buy them more time.

“Your woman?”

“She’s no man’s woman!” Shaun’s defences rose.

The Nomad had dealt with enough grotesque injuries and death to know the woman was near dead. Although this was a chance for freedom, his curiosity for both the woman and the mentioned complex compelled him to stay put.

“You can feed me shit all you like, but I suggest you do something immediately or you’ll be holding a corpse sooner than you think.” Their eyes fixed on one another with equal determination.

“I need to get her back to the complex, but yah standing in my way.”

“I’ll make a deal with you, trust for trust. Let me carry her to your complex. If I don’t need to fear for my life, then you don’t need to fear for hers.”

Shaun felt he had no choice but to trust the man. Time was short and he knew Alex would have made the same decision. Scooping her up in his arms, he took the step forward.

“She’s wearing body armour; she’s heavier than she looks.” Shaun reluctantly handed Alex over. The man was right, the woman was much heavier than expected, but nothing he couldn’t handle.

“Lead the way,” the Nomad said. With haste in their stride, the two men headed down the tunnel.

Only a few minutes on, the surface dweller heard footsteps running towards them. The unknown sparked further uneasiness. Shaun reminded him of what Alex had said earlier. They wished him no harm and it was in his interest to cooperate. This was of little comfort to a man who had seen the trappings of trust. Thinking he’d made the wrong decision to stay, he tensed, having not expected the small group to be armed. Masking his fears in facade of calm, he glanced over the four weapons now pointing at him.

Such an abrupt demand to hand Alex over to another prompted the Nomad to think that what he held in his arms was important. He suspected a figure of authority, which he wouldn’t relinquish until certain of his own safety.

Stepping in closer, Roxanne was itching to pull the trigger. Seeing her friend in the arms of a Rider made her furious, blaming section blunders for their situation. Repeating her demand, she sought to scare him into submission.

“I’ll blow you all over these fucking walls if you don’t hand her over now!”

The Nomad felt movement in his arms. Looking down, it unnerved him to see Alex’s eyes slowly opening. Shaun pushed in front of the weapons. Gliding his hand down Alex’s hair, relief softened his features, assuming there was a little more time than first thought.

“Everything is under control Alex. It won’t be long now.” Shaun eyed the surface dweller. “Yah still right to carry her?” With the man’s nod, he again looked down at Alex, who tried to lift her head. Shaun assumed correct, his friend wanted to say something to him and slowly forced the words out.

“Get them out of his face.” Alex went limp in the man’s arms. The Nomad’s fears heightened; he could foresee them taking it out on him if she didn’t make it.

On the exception of one, those surrounding the outsider lowered their handheld weapons of a barrel and trigger mechanism, cabled into a backpack. Atlas forced Roxanne’s arm down, allowing the man to move on with Shaun at his side. Radioing ahead, Atlas informed they had found them, but the situation was compromised. Over the receiver, the familiar voice of his friend, Brendan, asked if they required back up.

“I don’t think so,” Atlas replied, “but I can tell you this much, Shaun’s not doing it by the book. We just have to trust him on this one.” He signed off and quickly ran to catch up with the group.

Atlas assumed he’d not only drawn Brendan’s attention to the situation, but his friend would also relay the message to Stephen. There’ll be reprimands over this incident, Atlas thought, disappointedly. Never had an operation gone down this badly. Communications were so screwed up that support teams had been sent to the wrong tunnels. Coming up alongside Roxanne, the animosity in her expression implied they would have to watch her carefully. This was the first Rider brought in since her brother’s death, her loathing of them could see her detrimental to the man’s integration.

“I don’t like this.” Roxanne jabbed Shaun from behind. “I’ll drop him like a fucking fly if he hurts her.”

“Shut up,” Shaun grunted and kept going.

CHAPTER 4

Beyond the heavy metal doors, the wide concrete walkway encircled the top service level. Steel girders and white tiled wall panels continued through to other areas, branching off the walkway. Flood lights embedded in the massive, curved ceiling gave a sense of daylight. Coming from the cold tunnel, the warmth and fresh smell suggested air-conditioning. Unable to see below the railing made the Nomad curious to how many resided here and to the additional levels within the massive complex. Cleanliness implied a proud and organised people.

Briefly taken in by his surroundings, the Nomad became reluctant to hand Alex over to those waiting. Although the men wore a mixture of military uniforms, the red arm bands implied a medical team. Also unsettling, were the armed security guards staring at him.

Shaun wanted to relinquish the man's fears and build on the trust he assumed they had somewhat established. Ordering the men to stand down, the group reluctantly dispersed. He gestured to the surface dweller to lower Alex onto the stretcher. With the man complying, the Medtech team wheeled her away with Atlas right by her side.

Roxanne began reciting rules and regulations. Shaun abruptly informed her that a security officer was present.

"I'm still on duty." Shaun wanted to gag his friend. The last thing he wanted was for the surface dweller to feel threatened. Returning his sights to the man, Shaun forced a smile, before gesturing he walk with him to the steel railing.

From this position, it enabled them to look down to the next level and those beyond that. Shaun could see it in the surface dweller's eyes that he was captivated by the sights. If he had gone by the book, their guest would have been hauled off to a holding cell. Something was nagging at him regarding the new arrival, something that set this man apart from previous surface dwellers.

"This my friend, is your new home." Shaun forced a smile.

The Nomad could barely grasp the magnitude of the area. He could still draw on images from his childhood of Genetic living conditions. This reminded him of what was once classed as socially unacceptable and hidden from public view. Nonetheless, twenty years of inhumane conditions created an illusion that he was in paradise.

The man had come from a well-engineered family. Although only eleven when the gasses and fires took the majority; his intelligence rating gained him advancements in the education system. Reading and writing was against Clan law, ignorance enabled a Master and his thugs more control of

those they barbarically ruled. The Nomad had never stopped educating himself, having scavenged reading materials throughout his journeys. Literature was his treasure; his private library was hidden in a cave and far from any known Clan. Once a year, he made a trek to the area, spending many weeks revising or studying new finds.

For those living in the complex, their environment was nothing more than cold concrete and artificial lighting. The lifestyle was simple, yet all worked as a unit to meet everyone's needs. One would not call it pretty, though clean and functional. Their code of practice, rules and regulations they all abided by.

The complex had no governing head as such; judges elected by the entire community oversaw their allotted jurisdictions. Regular meetings of elected members discussed problems and sought solutions in the best interest of all. The education system taught reading and writing, but above all, survival skills. At sixteen years of age, one was eligible to participate in the rotating work system. Trained in a section for six months, a worker moved onto the next until they were skilled in all areas of the complex. Thereafter, one would decide to what section most suited them. Hard work and dedication could see advancement to a position of supervisor. The idea of this method was to prevent boredom and social stigma, promoting skills and equality. All sections were deemed important to the workings of the complex.

The Nomad watched healthy people go about their business. A man and woman walked hand in hand, both were pleasantly smiling. Such touch and emotion the Nomad had long forgotten. A child hugged his mother, who pecked him on the cheek; parental affection not seen on the surface. A man struggled with loaded arms; another came to his aid; kinship instead of skirmish.

Overwhelmed by it all, the man sank to his knees and stared at the people on the level below. Shaun squatted beside him and remained silent. The Nomad couldn't remember just sitting and watching people for who they were and finding joy in their individuality. On the surface, he studied people, looked for the threat, their weaknesses and used it to survive. He noticed little things that those below took for granted, such as how women wore their hair. Long, short, in buns, braided, ponytails; the use of ribbons and scarfs. It suddenly dawned on him that they all wore much the same clothing and in a childlike daze, asked Shaun why this was so.

When the governments disbanded all military services, the stockpiles of uniforms, bedding and equipment were used for Defect labour. The three services, Army, Navy and Air Force uniforms were issued according to size, one could be given anything from overalls to a mixture of combat greens to parade blue attire. Smaller sizes were used for children. Salvaged materials from uniforms to sheets made up clothing for infants, which were returned to the stores when outgrown. They wasted nothing in the underworld.

Shaun nudged the surface dweller to move further along the walkway. News travelled fast and although the man received the odd glance from below, he was another human being, not a captive exhibit to be stared at. Shaun informed the newcomer that he would soon have the same rights and privileges as all in the complex. Until integrated into the system, he would be in the hands of an experienced team. Being an expert on Rider integration, Shaun had already categorised the man as a standard system entry, a relief considering the last few.

"This is one of eight levels." Shaun guided the surface dweller further around the railing, knowing a certain site would captivate the man.

"Is that what I think it is?" The Nomad stared, concealing he was awestruck.

"It's a fountain, and the water is fresh and unlike anything you've tasted."

What Shaun took for granted, the Nomad saw as liquid gold. With his tongue, the surface dweller moistened his dry split lips. His blue eyes remained fixed on the tiered sculpted fountain as he questioned Shaun.

"Can we go down there?"

"No way," Roxanne blurted, moving closer to the two men. "We can't have the likes of you roaming around down there. Blind me, the smell alone..." Her friend reached around the surface dweller and grasped her by the arm. Shaun was not going to tolerate her behaviour.

"You're off duty Roxanne. Hand over your weapon." Shaun snatched it from her. Roxanne reluctantly unbuckled the straps to the backpack of ammunition. With her resentment evident, Shaun buckled up in front of her. He knew the rules and wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of reminding him.

Roxanne badly wanted to stay; however, her attitude had cost her. She stormed off, cussing under her breath for not acting according to section standards. She wished she had kept her trap shut. Once Alex hears of this, she would be ousted out of the section. Too much had gone wrong that morning, stupid mistakes, which shouldn't have been made. If they'd listened to her instead of Isaac of team three, they would have been there sooner and perhaps Shaun wouldn't be so chummy with the dirt bag. She wasn't going to get her butt kicked for any part of the morning's events. If Shaun told Alex of her attitude, she would kick his arse.

Armed guards remained outside the small dimly lit room containing a couple of chairs and a table. Atlas thought the same as Shaun; something was very different about this Rider. The man co-operated, but not out of fear or force. His intelligence lead Atlas to believe he'd once had some form of education; however; the man denied being able to read and write. He understood what was said, they didn't have to resort to simplistic vocabulary and his diction was no different than their own. Eventually, the surface

dweller corrected them; he was not a Rider but a Nomad. This made a difference in their perspective of him.

Atlas disliked calling the Nomad by his surface name; Junkman sounded so degrading. Integration into their society took time and when the Nomad was ready, he would choose a new name for himself or perhaps recall a birth name. Although the surface dweller was aware of his real title, he was not about to divulge it.

Having had the probation period explained to him, the Nomad felt more comfortable being escorted by an armed security officer and Atlas to the washroom. Atlas's caring disposition prompted the man to question his own thoughts and feelings. He began to realise how emotionally dead he was, having forgotten the warmth of friendship, the joy in a smile or even gratitude. The words 'thank you' could pass through his lips yet would have no life in them. Twenty years of living on nerves and one's wits, a conditioning that wouldn't be easily broken, so he thought.

What the surface dweller had seen so far captivated him and stirred his conscience; his barbaric existence churned in his stomach. These people wanted to help him to be a man again; nonetheless, his reflection in the mirror made him think different. He saw not a man, but a beast, dirty, beaten down and unrecognisable. The nothingness in his eyes and a void expression concealed his hatred. They had thought him a Rider, which was understandable, as this is what he saw looking back at him.

The large washroom was once a public utility within the underground railway station; showers and a bath were added later. Just inside the door, the stocky security guard nodded gratitude to the teenager, who smiled before leaving. Atlas drew the Nomad's attention to the bath of steaming water in the corner; he anticipated the man's response.

"It is all yours." Atlas smiled. "Towel to dry yourself is on the stool, and this is soap, you don't eat it." He held the white bar out to the man.

"I know what soap is," the Nomad replied, not offended as Atlas was obviously aware of surface conditions.

Again, this assured Atlas and the guard of the man's intelligence. They wanted to give him some privacy, but rules were rules. Never had Atlas felt so awkward, there was still something nagging him about the surface dweller that he couldn't put his finger on. He seemed too civilised, too calm even for a Nomad. There'd been no attempts to overpower them nor had he offered Clan secrets out of fear. Atlas suspected that the man's glances took in more information regarding them and their surroundings than he himself knew.

Being seen in his nakedness was not an issue for the Nomad; however, all he owned covered his body and lined his pockets. Following procedure, Atlas handed him the smaller of two cloth bags, explaining all the items from his pockets would remain his property. Emptying his belongings

into the bag, he couldn't bring himself to give over his one prize possession. The dainty gold digital watch, he clutched tightly in his hand.

Atlas offered to hold onto it, just until he got out of the bath; begrudgingly, the timepiece was handed to him. He forced a smile, eyeing over the relic from the past. No one wore watches in the complex; the old station and platform electronic clocks were synchronised and displayed the time for all to see. If his memory served him correctly, the watch ran on a small disk battery and he knew where he could get one. He perceived the man would be thrilled to see it working again.

With the Nomad's possessions sorted out, Atlas handed him the larger bag. He informed that his clothes would be cut down for rags; they were little more than this as they were.

"You'll put them on." Atlas pointed to the hanger on a hook, protruding from the wall beside the bath. "I think you won a heart in the clothing section." His attempt at humour met with ignorance.

The surface dweller glanced at the uniform, a light-blue shirt, dark-blue pants and matching jacket with white stripes on the arms. This being no different from Atlas's attire, he presumed the uniform was merely on loan. He thought Atlas held a position of authority like Alex, where Shaun and Roxanne were merely soldiers; a misconception on his behalf.

Compassion rose with Atlas eyeing the man's body baring the scars of a life of hell. He apologised for staring. The Nomad shrugged it off as no big deal and turned his attention to the bath. During his examination in the medical section, he'd had a fill of the liquid gold, yet it still felt unrealistic to bath in something so precious. The information regarding their supply left him curious; water piped in from the sea to treatment plants and stored in massive tanks on each level was something he wanted to see for himself.

Easing into the warmth, the surface dweller lost himself in distant memories. Throughout his life, he'd held onto images, though the feelings had eluded him. He smelt the soap with a flowery fragrance. Touched by the past, he recalled his mother smiling at him whilst flicking bath water in fun. He blew bubbles off his hands at her, making the dainty woman laugh. Beyond her, his older sister placed fingers to her lips, gesturing for him to be silent whilst sneaking forward. In pink pyjamas and a towel covering damp lengthy hair, she wrapped loving arms around their mother's neck. The discreet uttering between the guard and Atlas drew him back to reality and he began scrubbing himself.

Roxanne leant up against the steel pylon, her focus was on nothing in particular. The many platforms had been converted to accommodate the men's facilities and sleeping compartments. Railway tracks were hidden beneath large metal containers, once used for cargo on ships. Those stacked three high were closest to the tiled walls, becoming single file into the several tunnels. The majority were in a rustic brown where those painted in different

colours represented section leaders. Lights hung from chains, orderly distanced apart, though many were switched off with those on day shift at work.

Meditating on the conversation and the promise made to Shaun, Roxanne knew this to be her last chance, or she'd be out of the section. Alex, Shaun, Atlas and Brendan were her mates; she not only loved working with them, but also felt she could be herself around them. Although hating what the surface dweller represented, it was her duty as a security and integration officer to be civil, understanding and be an example of their society. AJ would have wanted her to continue and act according to regulations; nonetheless, she couldn't pretend his death never happened nor could she apologise to the Nomad for her prior conduct.

Startled, Roxanne unfolded her arms and stood straight with the security guard and Atlas exiting the men's facility. As the third party presented himself, she blatantly stared. His brown wavy hair hung damp, having been cut to shoulder length. Without a beard and grime, he was surprisingly handsome. First appearances had been most deceiving, as he was not much older than herself. The full uniform suited him and like Atlas, she assumed that a certain woman had given the outsider the right royal treatment. Considering the lack of surface nutrition, he appeared to have a good physique.

On seeing Roxanne, the Nomad's mood soured, perceiving she would make his transition difficult. On the surface, he'd come across women just like her. They didn't last long, abruptly put in their place, beaten, raped and even executed in front of an audience as an example of male superiority. Already he'd gathered that such behaviour was frowned upon here and decided it was in his best interest to remain silent until he further understood the culture.

"Feel better after a scrub?" Roxanne forced a smile, attempting to be civil.

"You two haven't formally met." Atlas sensed the Nomad's discomfort.

"I'm Roxanne, but you might as well call me Roxy, everyone else does." She wasn't deterred by the man's silence. The assumption he feared her made Roxanne feel superior. He was nothing more than a barbaric Rider, a killer, untrustworthy. Until he was what she referred to as house trained, her opinion of the man would not change. She reminded herself to act like a trained professional.

"I thought you were off duty," Atlas said.

"I volunteered as a tour guide. Shaun wanted to check on Alex." Roxanne's sights shifted to the surface dweller. The mere mention of the woman's name sparked the Nomad to enquire of her condition.

"She's alright then?"

“She’s fine.” Roxanne brushed it off as though the woman had nothing more than a common cold. “Give it another couple of hours and she’ll be running around like a blue ass fly again.”

The Nomad had held Alex in his arms, seen the woman almost lifeless. Though convinced they were hiding something, he wasn’t about to reveal his thoughts in his expression or tone. He wished to dig a little deeper, directing his question at Roxanne.

“So what’s her problem?”

“Exhaustion, she does it all the time.” Roxanne made it sound plausible as she and select others were accustomed to her friend’s work-related condition.

“Alex is one of a kind.” Atlas encouraged all to continue down the platform. “She’s a workaholic. We have to watch out for her, she has this tendency to run herself into the ground, as you saw earlier.” He glanced uneasy at Roxanne with the man asking questions.

“What is her role in this system of things?” The Nomad was drawn to Roxanne, who chuckled.

“She’s the head poo bah.” Disrespect was not intended. “Well, that’s how we see her.”

“A Master.” The Nomad detested the thought.

“No,” Atlas replied, “not at all. There are no master’s here. Alex is one of the overseers, put in place by the people.”

Although the word overseer was familiar to the Nomad, it was not a title used on the surface. His childhood held the connection; however, Roxanne interrupted his thoughts, asking questions of the master’s he’d served. Replying a few, he never stayed long in a Clan preferring to wander in solitude. Listing off names of known Masters, he then gave over the one who in his opinion was the most feared in this region. Roxanne asked why he was with such a Clan.

“I’m not. I told you, I’m a Nomad.”

“But we found you...”

“I know where you found me.” The Nomad didn’t want to speak of it. Roxanne was too curious to let it go and pressed him.

It was near on dark, not the best time to travel but the Nomad wanted to head back up north, follow up the coast this time. He’d come across several women scouting for food. They were bitches when in a group, worse without male supervision. He spotted a woman amongst them; he hadn’t seen her in a while. Frail and weaker than the rest, it surprised him that she was still alive. While watching her, he contemplated snatching the woman away and taking her with him, as she’d been good to him in the past. They didn’t need a reason to attack her, they just did. The group beat her with sticks and pelted her with rocks; like dogs, they pick her clean and left her there to rot.

The story shook Roxanne. In her eyes, the coward had done nothing

to save the woman. Her own imagination of the event gripped her with loathing. She wanted to beat him senseless yet kept her clenched fists at her sides while voicing her thoughts.

“And you didn’t intervene!”

“No, it’s women’s business, their pecking order.” Although at the time the Nomad had pitied the woman, now in front of an audience, he shrugged it off as no big deal.

Bitting down hard on her tongue, Roxanne reminded herself that this was common practice in the Clans and her opinion could see her removed from the section. Shrouding her feelings on the matter saw her features more relaxed; nonetheless, this still didn’t explain where the man had been found and she questioned him.

The Nomad again mentioned it was not good to travel at night with so many of the bastards out and about. He hadn’t seen the four men doing a bitch in the scrub. Before he knew it, he found himself surrounded and dragged into a Clan meet. They knew who he was, and as a Nomad, he was good for pickings.

“You wander around enough, you find things. They won’t kill you without a good reason; just beat the shit out of you; let you go and hope they catch you again with full pockets.”

Roxanne wished they’d pulverised the coward. Her expression fought not to reveal what she felt towards the man. Seeing the tension in his friend’s features, Atlas changed the subject. He took the opportunity to explain the old railway systems; much of his knowledge came from books.

Monorail made electric trains obsolete. Defect labour transformed the old system into what they were today. The names Genetic and Defect were terms not used in the complex as all were thought equal and strived for the same goal. They hoped to one day return to the surface; their New World Order would be unlike anything seen in human history. Although simplistic, the complex had fully equipped medical stations, work and storage areas, schools, libraries, recreation posts and much more. All these areas were off limits to the Nomad during the probation period. He would have to learn the ways of civilisation before he could walk freely throughout the levels.

Atlas conveyed other information. The complex itself housed around two thousand people and they were always expanding. Genetic engineering was outlawed, and they were determined never to allow it to be an issue again to divide the human race. Though this was interesting to the Nomad, Alex continued to play on him. He could not admit to himself that he was already infatuated with her.