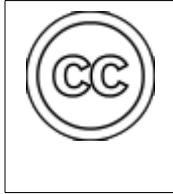


Backward



This is a story of intrigue. A story of questions about the past and about the future. You may think that this is a real story, but it's not. Though it comes very close.



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Preface

The dirt walls seemed to press in on him and it was almost impossible to move. Ritem struggled to remain calm, but staring around at bare dirt on all sides made him feel like he was inside a fresh grave. He wasn't exactly claustrophobic, but being down here and not being able to move his arms more than 15 straums in any direction was pushing him towards panic.

A familiar voice drifted down from the surface. "Come on Ritem, that hole needs to be at least 20 straums deeper before we can put the foundation blocks in. If you want to have your own playhouse, you're gonna have to put some sweat equity into it."

He'd heard as much half a dozen times from his father. It was real exciting to have his own playhouse, and it would be a huge relief to get away from his sister Kaya, but they weren't rich enough to hire any help. So he was stuck digging the channel himself until it was big enough for the big gralnit blocks to fit. He did his best to focus on the big picture and how great it would be to have some privacy once and for all.

After 20 more minutes of digging, he made a space almost big enough for the next block. He attacked the dirt wall with renewed gusto until suddenly he almost lost the spade. Something strange happened when he attacked the ground in one particular spot. The spade

went only a little way through the dirt before it felt like he'd hit empty space. Putting the tool aside, he started brushing it with his hands. Little by little he saw more of it. There was a strange material that looked much like the smooth clay on any house. But instead of being dark brown it was more of a whitish color, like the soot plants once they started dying back. He stared enraptured as he brushed soil away from something that was clearly a barrier of sorts. It was eerie in that he could clearly see it as if it were solid, but he felt nothing at all when he tried to touch it. There seemed to be no surface whatsoever. When he pushed against it, there was nothing but emptiness as far as he could reach.

Now overcome with curiosity, he spent time cleaning as much of the strange material as he could and eventually revealed a space a bit wider than his shoulders. But now he was stuck with another conundrum. What should he do about this strange thing? His dad wouldn't fit down here, even if he could be convinced to try. But the more he thought about it, the more he burned with curiosity over what lay on the other side. Slowly and with great trepidation, he worked up enough courage to push his head through.

Chapter One

His first glance was utterly disappointing. It was just an empty room. There were stacks of drawers covering the entire wall as far as he could see (which wasn't much). The ceiling was low, less than 6 feet high and the lighting was dimmer than even the hole he'd been digging. He stuck his head out a little farther to see more and was amazed at how he didn't need any muscles to support his head and shoulders. They seemed to just float like they did in the water. It was the strangest thing he'd ever experienced. He put his hands out in front of him to try and figure out what was holding him up. Something went wrong and he didn't know what happened, but he lost his footing and fell all the way into the room. Of course 'fell' wasn't exactly the right term since there didn't seem to be any 'down' to fall towards. He looked back in panic and saw just another row of drawers.

He was trapped! He smacked the nearest drawer and felt only solid material, so too with the one above and below. He smacked all the ones in reach and got the same result. In desperation he banged on every one that he could until his plight was interrupted by the sound of a door opening.

“What's going on here?”

“Who in the world are you?”

What are you doing in here?”

The woman was short, barely five feet tall and very gaunt. Her cheeks were sunken and her hair was short and pale. She had some kind of one-piece covering that looked dirty and heavily worn. She floated through the door as if she were swimming and as she got closer, he saw the black circles around her eyes widen along with the eyes themselves.

At first he was so surprised, he couldn't think of what to say. “Um....I don't know. I was just digging and somehow I found this...this...passageway I guess you'd call it.”

The woman gave him a strange unrecognizable look. “What do you mean you were digging. Are you looking for parts? Cause most of that stuff doesn't work anymore. And how come I've never seen you before? And how come you're so *tall*.” She said the last with the reverence he might use in a temple. He shrugged his shoulders. “I...I don't know. I've never seen this place before. What is all this?”

“Oh it's just a scrap parts room. Not many people ever use it now. We'll probably be shutting off the O2 in here.”

“Shutting off the O2? What do you mean?”

Now the woman drifted closer and came within a handbreath. “My! You look so healthy and well fed.” Suddenly her brows lowered into a frown. “Have you

been stealing extra food? Did your parents get past the safeguards?"

He was starting to get the barest hint of a picture. Something must have happened to these people. "No no, I've never touched your food. My..my family grows food in the yard. We've got almost a hectare out back."

Now her face looked almost cartoonish. "A hectare?! Come on, that's really cruel. How could you make fun like that. Geezkrishna, what kind of a monster would say such a thing!"

This he hadn't expected. "But honest. It's true. I just spent all day yesterday helping my dad plant Trux." Instead of looking at him, she put her nose close and took a sniff. It was pretty strange and he was taken aback. "Hmm. You don't smell....quite right. I think you better come with me. We'll talk to Jessa and see if we can figure this thing out."

She 'swam' toward the door and it immediately opened by sliding to the side. He barely had time to register this before she motioned for him to follow. Once past the door they drifted into a circular tube that stretched several meters in either direction. Like the room he'd left, this space was horribly cramped, though obviously not so much for these people. There were slender handrails on either side and the woman guided herself along these. The feeling of moving around in open air the way he would in a lake was

unlike anything he could imagine. Following behind her, he noticed that her suit billowed out except in spots where her body touched it. She seemed to have no muscle at all. It was almost as if she were a living skeleton. As they moved down the corridor, he felt a strange vibration along the hand rails. It was kind of like when a horse was trotting close by and the ground shook a little. But this didn't get faster or slower, it remained constant. Not really understanding any of this, he just let it be. He followed the frail woman 'down' past two more doors until she pushed a button and drifted through the door, motioning him in as well.

He found himself in another room not much brighter than the first. It was shaped like a pie wedge and with the same low ceiling as the last room. There was no visible light source that he could see, but rather the whole ceiling glowed faintly. There were large counters running along the edge of the half-circle room with lights going randomly on and off. Facing these surfaces were a series of chairs with three frail people in them. A fourth woman was floating in the middle and looking inquisitively at them.

“Jessa, this boy was in the empty parts room, I've never seen him before but he's said some pretty strange things. I thought you might know something about him.”

The woman Jessa was only slightly taller than the first one, her hair was black and similarly short-cropped. Her gaunt frame and sunken cheeks confirmed to him that this group of people wasn't getting a lot of food. They looked worse than Danic up the road who was always spending whatever money he earned on a bottle instead of on a meal.

“Young man, you should know that there aren't enough people on this ship for a person to live here unnoticed. So I'm going to ask you one simple question...”

He didn't even register the woman's full statement. His attention was quickly consumed by the word 'ship.'

“We're on a ship?! How is that possible?? I was digging in the ground just a few minutes ago! How could I be instantly transported to the ocean like that?”

Before the captain could answer, the other woman looked at her with shrugging shoulders. “See what I mean captain? I think he's nuts or something.”

The captain now drifted closer to him as well and looked at him carefully. “You're right Nisu, he is mighty strange. And the fattest huemean I've ever seen. Boy, what section are you from. Who are your parents?” Come to think of it, I don't think we've even had any births for the past....um....oh hell who remembers.”

Ritem felt like he was having some kind of crazy

dream. Nothing here made sense. Starving people, the feeling of floating in a room with no water, the strange ceiling that glowed but with no obvious daylight. He just put his hands up in the peace-gesture and calmly told the adults what he could. “Ladies, I really don't know how to explain it. One minute I was digging a foundation channel in the yard, then I came across this weird material and went through into that room.”

“Captain, what does he mean by digging? I thought he meant he was digging for parts. But I don't know what a 'foundation' is. I doubt there's one in the parts room....”

He couldn't imagine what would convince them that he wasn't crazy. “Look, I was digging in the ground, in dirt. See my hands...”

They were interrupted by one a man who turned from the counter to face them. “Captain, we've spotted another planet on the long range scope. It might be close enough to the host star to support life. Should I launch the probe?”

The woman looked over her shoulder at the person who had spoken. Her voice seemed to have no hope as she answered. “OhI don't know. It's our last shot....maybe we should get closer before we take the ris.....”

But before she finished, it finally struck him.

Ship...planet.... “Oh my god! You mean this...this ship

is outside of the planet?! We're in outer space?!" Suddenly all eyes in the room were fixated on him. He could feel every eye fixated on him like he was a circus clown. The captain once again drifted close and focused him with the full intensity of her stare. "Okay, how in the world can you be on board the *Faint Hope* and not know that we're in the Maurit nebulae? Just where exactly did you *come from*?"

Feeling confused he looked around at the rows of cynical faces. He took a gulp of air before he could answer. "Well, I'm from Ulak. It's...it's not a very large town, but it's on the outskirts of Medria." He looked around again and got blank stares for his trouble.

"Um..you've never heard of Medria? It's the capital of Philadrog." Looking again he saw no recognition. Every face stared at him blankly, as if they weren't just starving, but mute as well.

"What? Have you people never even heard of Nedune at all?!"

Now finally, a series of gasps exploded throughout the room. He heard the name repeated over and over.

"Nedune." "Nedune."

"He's from Nedune?!"

The words were whispered reverently just like the girl had spoken when she first saw him.

It took a long moment for the captain to recover from that. But finally she again fixed him with her hawk-like stare. "Nedune? *Nedune*?! How in the world can

you be from there? We left Nedune 150 years ago! Everyone on that planet must be long dead by now.” This struck him almost like a physical blow. “Dead?! Over a century ago? But that's impossible? I was standing on the soil of Nedune only an hour ago?” “Captain, I think the hunger has sent him into delusions of fantasy.”

Look folks, I don't know how to convince you. Look at my hands, there's dirt on them, my clothes are dirty...” “Hold on, one moment Geela.” The captain swung around again. “What is your name son?”

It took him a few seconds before his brain could switch gears. “Um..well, my name is Ritem.”

“Okay Ritem. Do you know your parents names? Are they still alive?”

“What? Of course they're still alive. My mom's name is Shriya and my dad is Kritar. They're farmers on the east end of Philadrog.”

The woman looked thoughtful for several minutes. “I don't remember anyone named Shriya or Kritar on the list of surviving. But then....well it's hard to remember much of anything these days.” She 'swam' back over to one of the counters and pushed several buttons.

“Well, I don't understand it, there's no record of those two people and no one in the ship looks as pudgy as you. I can't imagine how someone like you could be here.”

“But look. This stuff under my nails. It's dirt. I

swear!”

The other woman took his hand and examined it.

“Well there does seem to be some kind of dark brown stuff on his hands. It's not like anything *I've* seen before.”

“Captain, we can't afford to support anyone else on this ship.”

The woman turned from him and responded with a complete lack of emotion. “Oh Virab what difference does it make. If we survive a month or six months or even another dozen. There hasn't been a habitable planet in seven years and we're down to our last probe. There's really no use in keeping up our charade any longer is there?”

The scene was so depressing and empty of hope that he could almost predict the answer to his next question....almost. “Um, what charade do you mean?”

The woman now spun around in shock. “What charade? Oh come now, surely you know. It's the same story we've been repeating for decades now. *Some* day we'll find a planet. *Some* day we'll be able to grow enough food to keep away the hunger. *Some* day we'll have hope of escaping extinction.”

If there had been a downward force, he would certainly have fallen to the floor. His legs felt hollow and his eyes grew as wide as a hourdz's. “You mean....the entire race is down to just the people on this ship in space?! But how is that possible?”

How...how many are left?”

The captain was again looking at him closely.

“You...you, really don't know do you? No, I can see it on your face. This whole situation is completely unknown to you. Geezkrishna, I hate to be the one to tell you this. You seem like a nice enough kid. Ritem, there are only about...um...let's see Shrinar died last week...so...about 85 people left.”

Ritem felt the blood drain completely out of his face as his jaw hit the floor. “What in the world happened to all of you? The whole species is down to just eighty-five souls?”

The captain looked at him pittingly. Young man, generations ago, Nedune was a dying planet. Our species had destroyed it in our hubris. The lust for dinars and the processing of kowl had rendered the whole planet unlivable and there was barely enough food to keep a few hundred souls alive. There was constant fighting just to get a bit of algae each day...for those that saw any worth in staying alive. Nisu's forebears along with all of our ancestors took a last desperate gamble and launched the *Faint Hope*. We've been heading for...for...Geela where are we heading again?”

“Captain we're heading into the Lindra cluster.”

“Right...lord I haven't had algae in...um...I guess at least two days.”

“Captain, your our leader. You have to keep your

strength.” Someone else exclaimed.

“Oh Dissur, I’m alive, what more do you want of me?”

“My God, captain....do you think that this is the end of all Huemean's everywhere? It's so...so hard to believe.”

The woman looked exasperated. As if she was furious, but didn't have the strength left to put power behind her words. “Oh Ritem, look around you. Most of us are lucky to get one carefully measured serving of algae a day. Nobody even has hope enough to get pregnant, what do you think will happen when the last woman grows too old to give birth? Even if we found a planet...pretty soon it wont help.”

Geezkrishna! This is horrible. Isn't there any way to stop this?”

“Didn't you hear the captain doof! Even if we found a planet, there aren't even enough of us anymore. It's the end of all Huemean's....every damn one of us. Go tell that to y...”

The captain interceded on the man's speech. “Now now Geela, I know your hungry, and we all get moody when we're hungry. If you need a sedative, you're welcome to take one. The more we sleep, the less energy we'll burn and the less algae we'll need.”

Slowly, she turned back to him. “Ritem, you're welcome to explore the ship here. Most of us have nothing else to do and there might be someone who'd enjoy hearing about where you came from. But

there's no food here. Not much water either.

Now the other woman looked at him with a strange new expression. Her eyes were pleading as she stared directly into his, then she turned to Jessa. "Captain, do...do you think it would be possible to follow this kid back to where he came from? I mean...if they have an acre of trux we could eat, we could have hope...my god to have real food!"

Ritem thought about what she said. Eighty-five new people. Sure they had food, but would it be enough for all of them? Then again, he couldn't refuse and let them starve to death. He was in the middle of pondering what his parents would say at the sight of dozens of starving refugees when his thoughts were interrupted by the woman that had first spotted him. "Captain I would like to volunteer as a scout and see if it would be possible to escape back to where this boy came from." Ritem saw the pleading in her eyes.

"Please, Jessa?"

Ritem fought a war within himself. He wanted to help these people and give them at least some small hope of a future. But even if there was enough room and food, he didn't even know how he could get back. He'd tested every drawer and panel that he could find without figuring out where the passage was. But the woman's pleading eyes finally won him over and he decided to keep his peace until he could discretely look further in their storage room.

Ritem looked back at the captain and saw her deep in thought while the whole room seemed to watch her with baited breath.

“Nisu, I realize how strong the temptation is to jump at the first chance of salvation, no matter how slim. But we know nothing about this boy...or his world. We know nothing of Nedune save for the stories from our ancestors that escaped...”

Ritem saw the woman move over to the captain and grab her by the shoulders. It seemed that while these people lacked any physical strength, they managed to put a surprising amount of energy into their words and expressions.

“By all that is Holy Jessa! Think about it, in seven generations we haven't seen *a single planet* that could keep us alive. I don't know where this kid came from either, but wherever it is...this has to be the best chance we have of holding onto more than just a bare starving existence!”

Ritem felt his eyes getting wet from the emotion in the woman's voice and it was clear that her pleading had made an impact on the captain as well. The woman, Jessa, put her own arms onto Nisu's and spoke in a low and very calm voice. “Alright. I'll tell you what.” She turned to one of the people at the strange counter.

“Virab, how far do you estimate that planet is?”

“Captain, sensors indicate that it's twenty million clicks.”

“Thank you.” She turned back to the woman in front of her and her expression softened further. “Nisu, let's give it half a day. We should be close enough to get a more accurate reading by then. If this planet looks like it could support us, then we're going to need everyone's help to get things set up on the surface. If not...well, nothing will matter anyway.

Chapter Two

Though he'd never met a single person here before, the whole crew of this strange ship in the heavens treated him like an honoured guest. People asked over and over for stories of what it was like to harvest food and their hungry mouths hung slack at the stories of whole fields of trux or punkrins. He told them about the weekly trips to the market where his father traded their harvest for clothing, or tools, or sometimes a few dinars.

There were thousands of questions, and lots of things he didn't understand, like how the food ran out and why only the rich people had clean water. Nobody on the ship had even heard of wood, or even a tree for that matter.

Through it all the thought kept nagging him in the back of his mind that if he didn't manage to find the passageway back, then these memories would be the only thing left of his home.

The idea that he might be forced to live a short and starving existence among these people never left his mind for an instant.

His thoughts were interrupted by a disembodied voice that seemed to come from somewhere up on the walls. "All senior staff. Report to the bridge."

It sounded like the captain, and with the same dejected tone that he sensed in all the people in this place. He looked around, but, he could not figure how the woman's voice could be coming straight out of the walls. He was still pondering this, when Nisu walked over to him, her skull-like face wearing a concerned look.

"Ritem, you might as well come along with me. If this planet is finally the one then you can go back to Nedune knowing that all of us will survive. And if not..." Her voice trailed off for several minutes as they traveled the corridor. "Then we'll have no option but to try this corridor of yours."

Back on the bridge he saw the captain turn from the strange counter to face them. Her own face was a tortured mask of pain as she motioned Nisu towards her. The long embrace between them told Ritem that the news couldn't be very good.

"Oh lord no!" It was less a statement than a scream, but one with so little strength behind it that he found the situation hard to read.

He looked from one to the other of them, desperately wanting to know what was happening between them all. But it was clear that this was a deeply personal time for them and so he stood aside and let them have their space. It took a long while until the hugging and tears finally subsided before the captain addressed Nisu and threw a glance at Ritem as well. “It seems that you've gotten your wish Nisu. We have no choice now but to trust our future to this boy. Both of you go and check back as quickly as you can. I don't know how long I can keep the bad news quiet.

She turned then back to Ritem. “Young man, I'm sorry that you have to witness this. If you value eating or having a life at all, I suggest you find a way to get back home. There...there's no hope left here.” She paused and like the other girl, looked at him with desperate eyes. “And if you *do* get back....” she hung her head and her voice fell to a whisper “eat a serving of Trux for me.”

“And for me.”

“And me.”

As he gazed at the collection of wide-eyed mournful stares, the weight of the sorrow felt stronger even then the downward force back on Nedune. If this was the future, he certainly didn't want to live a short and starving life here.

So Ritem followed the woman back through the

corridor, holding the handrails as he drifted along behind. None of what happened made sense of him and as they moved through the ship he tried to get an answer from the woman.

“Nisu, what happened back there?”

She paused in her progress to stare back at him. “You mean you don't know?!”

He shook his head slightly before she continued. “It didn't work! Dammit! The planet is too young!

There's so much lava all over and the air is full of carbon. We won't have anything to breathe down there.” The woman put her face in her hands and mumbled something that he had to ask her to repeat.

“There's nothing else *for us* Ritem! Following you back is the only option we have to stay alive. It's...it's that or we die.

Once again, his legs felt dead as he stared into this desperate woman's eyes. Clearly there was nothing for it. If dad became angry, then so be it. He couldn't let these people all die a slow and starving death out here in...some nebula or whatever.

They floated through a doorway and Ritem found himself back in the room with all the drawers. He wasted no time in once again checking all the faces of the drawers from floor to ceiling and from right to left.

He said a silent prayer as he then made for the opposite wall. Feeling the drawers, he touched over a

dozen of them. Each time he struck solid metal his hopes fell one more notch. By the time he reached the 16th drawer, he wondered if he might indeed suffer the same fate as the rest of the skeletons on this ship in the heavens. He banged on the floor, on the ceiling, all to no avail.

Looking back at the girl he saw her head fall to the floor. “Oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god oh god...” “Jeezkrishna. I'm too young to die!” He started beating on the drawers with all his strength. Soon he was leaving dents in many of them, which seemed to have no effect whatsoever on the woman. She seemed to have fallen into a catatonic state. He almost did fall on his face finally, when his fist punched straight through into empty air.

“I found it! Nisu, I found it. I found it!”

She pushed towards him, put her arms around his neck and squeezed with what must have been all of her strength.

“Oh Ritem! We're saved. We're saved! Jeezkrishna, to actually see food, and plants, and this....dirt you talk about.”

Without wasting any time, he gently guided the woman into the passageway and told her to squeeze his hand twice if she needed help.

Barely a second passed after her head disappeared before she was frantically squeezing his hand and he

pulled her back. Her face was covered with dirt and her eyes were wide with terror.

“I don't believe it. After all these years, decades even of hoping and praying...we never knew.”

With her seeming incoherence and her eyes glazed over, Ritem took a moment to wipe Nisu's face and saw her eyes again bubble with tears.

“What is it Nisu? What is it you never knew?”

It took several moments before she managed to look up at him. “Gravity Ritem. Fluppin gravity!

Geezkrishna we've spent our whole lives in zero-G and it never even occurred to us that we needed muscle in order to withstand the gravity. But...but there's just never been enough algae.

She wrapped her skeletal arms around his neck one more time and her body shook with the tragic grief while he did his best to comfort her. He could think of nothing to say, and so he just continued to hold her until her crying was spent.

When finally she gazed at him again, the pleading was gone and she absentmindedly brushed the bubbles of water beneath her eyes away. “Ritem, you'd better go. There's nothing more you can do to help us, but...I appreciate that you at least tried.

“I'm sorry Nisu. I don't understand. What does gravity have to do with you coming back to Nedune?” Now the dejection on her face finally turned to anger.

“Look at me dammit! All of us here are nothing but

skin and bones! Geezkrishna don't you get it? I couldn't even keep my head off the ground in there. I have no damn muscle to support my weight against gravity! Even if Jessa could find a planet for us tomorrow. We'd all be too weak to stand up on the surface!” She looked at him again and her expression softened back into the dejection he'd seen earlier. “I'm sorry Ritem. I don't want you to remember us this way. But...it's best that you go back to your home, and say a prayer of gratitude every night that you can at least have a future.”

Now his own eyes were brimming with tears which bubbled around his eyes making it impossible to see. He gave the skeletal woman one last hug and she kissed his cheek briefly before he slowly pushed himself into the passage.

The last sound that he heard was a door opening and a sound like air rushing at high speed.

He was covered with dirt, but it didn't matter. He was home! Solid ground, his family, and *food!*

“Ritem, are you finished with that spot? Good lord boy, we can't spend the whole week on this. I have to get back to the fields.”

Ritem felt like he was coming out of a bad dream. For several minutes he struggled to reacquant himself with his normal life.

When he did, his first instinct was about to rush out of

the hole and clutch his father in joy and relief. But then he thought about how it would sound. Secret passageways, ships in the heavens, starving huemeans, dad would think he was crazy.

“Ritem! Answer me. Are you alright down there? I thought I heard a scuffle.”

“Sorry dad. I was working on this one spot and found a big rock. I must've hit my head or something.”

“Ritem are you okay?”

“Oh I'm fine. But I think we'll have to shift the building over two fretz. This big rock is too heavy to move.”

Sounding disappointed, the voice came back down.

“Alright. Well why don't you come on up and we'll have your mom check you out. No project is worth getting banged up over.

Chapter Three

Though both his parents asked what was going on, he couldn't think of a way to answer them. For a week afterwards, every time they had a meal he looked at the food and thought of Nisu and the captain, and all the other skeletal people on that ship. He couldn't stop wondering what had happened to them.

He tried bringing it up with his friend Shrik a few times, but every time he tried, the words just got tumbled up.

Little by little though, as the weeks went by he spent less and less time dwelling on the strange ship and focused instead on finishing the playhouse and keeping the fields growing.

Chapter Four

Mom and Dad were arguing. It was happening more often these days and money was always tight. The rains hadn't been falling and the harvest was slim. They had enough, but there was nothing extra left over to pay for repairs. It was times like this that he found solace in the old playhouse.

He was so grateful to have a place to get away when there was too much tension in the air. Ritem thought back again to the strange block he'd found when they

were building the foundation. The ship had been so depressing, and scary too. But he realized that if they were eating some kinda algae soup then a half pound of soats would be a great thing to give them. It was a tough decision, and he didn't know if he could find the courage to do it, but the memory of those gaunt faces never quite left his memory.

Finally, his mind made up, he grabbed a little that would've gone to the animals and started digging next to the wall.

It was harder to find now that he was consciously looking for it. He had to dig down in several places searching for the one spot that he remembered. He kept making small holes out from the trench until he finally located the thing. By the time he finished, he was covered in dirt and completely exhausted. He pushed against the strange surface and once again his trowel pushed through with no resistance. He brushed the dirt aside and peaked in but there was nothing to see this time. It was so dark that he couldn't even tell how large the space was or if anyone was there. Finally with a shrug, he heaved through and this time fell ungainly to the ground. He fell on something soft that smelled horribly bad.

Immediately the air was filled with the smell and he spat out several times from whatever it was. He picked himself up and felt along the walls to try and get a sense of where he was.

“Hello?” The echo told him that he was in a room not much bigger than the playhouse. Nobody answered so he decided to feel his way around for a door. He couldn't figure out why he didn't float like last time. He also noticed that it was quieter, last time there had been a strange humming sound. As he felt around, everything seemed to be broken. There were sharp edges and irregular lines all over. The air smelled odd and he coughed a little. It took an eternity to find another door without killing himself in the process and he almost tripped a dozen times. When finally he did find an opening, it was so small that he barely fit through and he bumped his head on the door frame. The next room had a dirt floor and once again he had to move carefully to keep from tripping over the random debris scattered haphazardly about. Eventually he made it across to another door and reached the outside. There was a tiny flickering fire off in the distance, but everywhere else was flat black. He couldn't see the moon or stars of any kind. He tried to make it across to the flickering light, but he almost fell sprawling over something just outside the building. The air was thicker here and his chest hurt. So he decided to wait in the doorway until it was light enough to see. His eyes drooped and he must have dozed off because when he looked up again, it felt like dawn. There was

a faint light streaming through the doorway but it was just barely enough to see. He looked out and saw, not the edge of dawn, but mid-morning. The sky was thick with dark black clouds and the sun was dim enough that he could look directly at it without any discomfort. The scene resembled what one might see just before a huge storm. He saw the edges of a few buildings to break the monotony, but mostly there was just rubble. His chest was hurting more and more now. He wondered if he shouldn't just get back to the passage...but then he saw a man lying against a pile of rubble. At first he couldn't tell if the man was alive or dead. He just seemed to lay there unmoving. He was covered in rags and even the rags were caked in a black dirt that smelled of urine. His face was black and the only part of him that had any color were his half-closed eyes.

“Excuse me.”

“Oh bugger off. Leave me die in peace.”

The man was lying on a pile of moldy cushions that he couldn't imagine using for an animal. Just like the people on the ship he was barely skin and bones, with big circles around his eyes.

The whole scene was so overwhelmingly sorrowful that he at first considered just leaving the man be. But finally his curiosity pushed him forward. “What's so bad though?”

The man laughed and a tooth flew off into the street.

“What's so bad?! What's so bad?” The man's cackling went on for a long while, like some kind of lunatic.

“What's so bad he says. Amazing.” The man now looked at him directly. “Have you been living under a damn rock all these years? I didn't make the cut...I didn't get ta go on the ship.”

Now the man looked at him even closer and he began to squirm a bit. “My my...you look positively FAT.”

“The ship? What ship?”

“What ship?” The man gave another maniacal laugh.

“What ship. What ship he says.” He acted like he was talking to some other invisible person. “Like Huemeanty sends up so many spaceships that they have to have a damn serial number on them.” The man looked back at him again. “Boy, how could you not have heard of the *Faint Hope*? And the lottery, and the rioting?”

“Um..well honest this is the first time I've ever been here. What happened to make this place so..sooo..”

“Shitty? Really, how the hell can you be standing there and not know about Megacorp? The greedy bastards made billions of dinars and got control of the whole army, but in the end it didn't do them a lick 'o good did it.” The man swung his arm around and laughed a long bitter laugh. Nope, didn't do them but *one lick 'o good*. I hope they rot in hell for all the shit they did.” He stared at the man and the depressing scene around them. “But why would anyone want to do this to the

land? I mean, don't they eat too?

For a second, the man looked pensive. “Well, I don't really know. The last few years some people have thought that they might just be some kinda robots. No feelings at all. Given what they've been doing it'd make sense.”

A few of them tried to bribe their way onto the ship, so at least *they* would have to be huemean. But eventually the folks stocking the ship wised up and killed the last coupla greedy bastards.

“But what about this ship? How can a simple ship be so important if there's no way to grow trux, or soats, or...”

Once again the man peered at him in a real uncomfortable way. “Boy, what's this you spouting about some extinct plants for. Aint nobody seen a gram o' that stuff since before I was born.”

This sounded just like the situation on the ship where he remembered the captain talking about having algae.

“Oh my god! The ship I was on...they called it the *Faint Hope* too. So you people also have no food?”

“My lord boy. With you lookin so fat and not knowing anything....are you from another *planet* or sumethin?”

“Well, it sure feels like it. The last time I traveled through this strange material and found myself on a ship...but not an ocean ship. A ship in space. There was no...no force pulling me to the floor. People swam

through the ship the way we would swim in a lake. The people were all skinny and they were looking for some...uh planet. They were talking about not having much algae.”

“Boy why don't you go spout your crazy somewhere else.”

He didn't know why, but suddenly it seemed important for him to make this person understand.

At first he couldn't think of anything that he *could* say though. It didn't even make sense to *him*. But then he remembered the handful of soats. He showed it to the man and the man's eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets.

“Oh my dear dear lord! Are those really plants?? It can't be. Nobody's seen real plants here for decades.” It was so hard to believe all of this. He couldn't imagine what could've happened to create such a desolate scene. “Wow, you mean you folks don't have any soats at all here?”

Now, impossibly, the man's eyes actually managed to grow even wider. “Soats?! You've actually got *soats*? Geezkrishna I wish I could eat that. How absolutely shitty, to finally see real food again and have no teeth left to eat with. Curse it all!”

Now the man looked up with a wholly different expression...almost of reverence. “Just where in this universe are you from, dear boy?”

Ritem had to think for a minute. “Well...I'm from Ulak, which is near Medria. Where I live the air is clear and we grow fields of trux, soats, and punkrims. We're poor, but at least we have food to eat.”

“The man continued to stare wide-eyed. “My god, punkrims?! I've only heard about those in stories. Are they sorta...roundish with seeds in em or somethin?”

“Well, yeah. They're orange and have kind of a hard outside with flesh inside and seeds at the center. They grow to be about this big.” He held his hands 40 straums apart.

“Geezkrishna! A punkrim that big could feed a man for two days.” He paused and looked back. “Listen, you don't want to be spouting this stuff too loud. There's some folks here still have the strength to walk. They'd sneak behind you and kill you for a chance to get to that land. Me... well I barely have the strength left to stay awake. Not that it makes much difference anymore.”

“You poor soul, I'm so sorry to hear all of this. I wish there was something I could do.”

The man looked thoughtful for a second. “Well, it's been mighty lonesome. Would you mind telling me some stories about where you lived?”

So just as he had with the people on the ship, he sat with this man for an hour or so talking about the farm, and harvesting the trux. He talked about Kaya and how she always complained about having him as a

babysitter. He talked about finding the strange stone-thing and finding himself on the ship.

“Yeah, and this funny ship, were there people on it, like yourself?”

“Sure, but they were all real hungry, they were skinny like you are. They couldn't believe me when I said I was from Nedune.”

“Oh well sure. That makes sense. *No one in the world* would believe someone as well fed as you could be from *this* planet.”

“So *this* is Nedune?!”

“Well of course. Where do you think you are. Man do you got some kinda brain disease or sumethin?”

“No of course not. But the Nedune I left just a few hours ago had big fields of punkrins and trux.

“Good lord, so why would you come here then? Stay where you are and say yer thanks to the powers above every night that yer not starving to death in this place.”

Now he felt more uncomfortable. Well, I just wanted to get away from my parents. They've been fighting over money late....”

He was interrupted by a bellowing laughter from the man followed by his hacking cough. A tiny rivulet of blood meandered down his chin as he looked up again. “Boy, if it's money you want, just wander around. All the folks still alive are the ones with the money to buy the last of the food. Now they're stuck,

cuz guess what?” He laughed again for a long while. “Ya caint *eat* pierlz and rubyz. So now they just litter the ground.”

Now it was Ritem's turn to be shocked. “You mean you've got pierlz and jemz just littering the ground?”

“Boy, didn't you hear what I just told you? All the idiots that sold their food for money found that they couldn't eat their profit an they died.”

“So are you people eating algae like the people on the ship?”

“You kiddin? We put all the algae tanks onto the *Faint Hope*, every one of us sacrificed our future on the small chance that ship'd find another place for huemeans to live.” Now he looked more intently. “But you said the people on the ship were skinny like me. So did they all die too?”

Now Ritem wondered to himself. Should he tell the man about what the captain had said? No, he decided to let the fellow die with some spark of hope in his soul. “Well, when I got there, the folks were low on food, but one of the people reported a habitable planet on some kind of scanner. They were about to launch something called a probe. Maybe that's where Huemeans will make a new start.”

“Goddamn lucky stiffs.” he muttered. Soon the man's head lolled and he started snoring. Ritem's heart ached for the man, but it didn't look like there was anything more he could do.

Remembering what the man had said and hoping that he could find *something* sanguine in the endless sea of desolation, he started wandering around looking for some of the jemz or pierlz. As he walked, there were an overwhelming number of skeletons laying near the broken buildings and lots of four-wheeled metal carts that were all burned beyond recognition.

He found one building that wasn't completely caved in and peaked inside. There were a couple of skeletons, some broken furniture and a few scraps of metal. In one corner was the remains of a fire pit with scraps of paper laying around. He picked one of them up and his legs almost gave way. It was a 1000 dinar note...and there were *dozens* of them. He quickly stuffed what he could into his pocket. Geezkrishna, even a single bill like that would pay for all the repairs they would need. The man had been right, there were riches here beyond his wildest dreams. He moved on and saw another building with a door hanging by one hinge. Peaking in this place he saw pieces of roof beams lying in a pile. But underneath them in a corner he saw a pile of precious jemz, rubbys, and a few more bills laying scattered on the floor. He took what he could and stuffed it into his pockets.

But it didn't take long before the feeling of emptiness looming ever more oppressively over the land began to chip away at his resolve.

He glanced up at the sun and decided it wouldn't be

safe to be in a place like this after dark. So he took a last look around and prepared to hurry back the way he came.

“Hey! Who are you?” He heard a voice coming from a box next to the building he'd just left. Looking carefully around the corner he saw a man stand up slowly and with obvious difficulty. The man looked even older than his father did but shorter, and he wore a suit that looked like it had once been expensive. The man pulled himself up to his full height, but had to shift some of his weight to a short metal pole. His eyes were hollow and his cheeks were drawn just like the last man, but this man still had just a hint of fire in his eyes as he stared intently.

“I'm talkin to you boy! You stole my stuff. I saw you do it! Don't you dare lie to me!”

At first he didn't know what to make of this character. If what the last person said was true, then money was useless here. Still, his father had taught him morals and he wasn't going to lie to the fellow.

“I'm sorry mister. I didn't think there was anyone who owned this....”

But the man cut through his words like he was wielding a sword. “What's that you got there. What's that in yer hand boy!”

He looked down and realized that he still had the soat stalks. That gave him an idea of how to get out of the situation. “Oh, I found these in a safe. I think it's food.

You can have it in exchange.”

The man peered at the stalks in his hand and like the other fellow his eyes bulged out of their sunken pits.

“Boy, you may be holding the last piece of edible food on the whole damn planet!” His eyes then narrowed as the man looked back at him. “Waaaiittt a minute. Why would you be offering your last food to me just fer a bunch of those worthless rocks in there?” The man paused in thought for a second. “You must have more of this somewhere. Good lord, you must be the wealthiest kid on the whole planet!”

Now the man, again with obvious effort, pointed the metal stick at him. “And your gonna show me where yer hidding it, right.... now!”

Ritem knew the guy was too frail to be much of a threat, but his voice was commanding and pretty intimidating nonetheless.

“Boy, I aint gettin any younger. I said NOW!” The man raised his other hand slowly and Ritem saw a sizeable rock that the man held with obvious difficulty.

A half second flew by and then he saw the man's arm swing through the air. At first he panicked, but there hadn't been enough strength behind it for the rock to hit him with any serious force. He was knocked down, but not critically hurt. As he saw the man coming towards him, he quickly got up and pulled back away. That was when he saw the metal stick fly too. He clearly didn't want to risk another second on the man

and hurried back along the road towards the place he thought the passaway was in. As he ran, he barely caught the man's last words.

“Wait. Wait! I was playing. Really! Just one more handful of food. I'll give you three times as many pierlz...no no four times! Four times as many. Pleeeeeaaassee!”

The man's voice faded into the background and with his heart dragging along behind him along the lifeless ground, he made his way through the dimming light to the delapidated structure. Everything felt different now with even the meager light, and he did his best to get his bearings. He felt around among the broken table legs, the pieces of bent metal, and finally found the one intact doorway that he'd bumped his head on. But where was the passageway? There was nothing in the room but broken furniture, and a pile of moldy fabric. He felt along all the walls, the floor, even next to the doorway. There was nothing but solid surfaces. In panic he began banging on every spot he could, fearing once again that this little adventure could leave him facing a slow and horrible death.

Finally in desperation he even started banging on the ceiling. A faint and cracking voice told him to keep it down and let a woman die in peace. But then near the corner, his hand punched through. The hole was in the ceiling! He let out a holler of joy which brought more complaint from the voice upstairs. He looked

quickly around for a way to boost himself up and found one chair that looked sturdy enough. After shoving the moldy fabric out of the way, he got the chair underneath and managed to reach it. Then he was pushing out into the hole.

Chapter Five

It was really confusing to have his sense of up and down thrown about like that. But the thrill of seeing healthy soil again quickly drowned out any upset. He laughed with joy at taking a breath of fresh air. But with the second breath he started coughing and felt a fire in his throat. He coughed for several minutes until something dark colored and gross finally flew out. He sprang up to the surface and gazed joyously at the clear night sky and the thousands of stars. Now with his throat clear, he long deep breaths of the clean air and ran gratefully over to the well for a drink.

If ever he felt that farm life was boring, tedious, or frustrating, all he had to do was go through the passage and remind himself of how blessed he was to have enough food and water.

But now he had a new connundrum. He'd made it back alive with the jemz, it had to be enough to pay off the farm and maybe rebuild the barn on top of that.

But how could he make dad believe that he'd come across thousands of dinars worth of wealth? Dad would think he'd stolen it.

He spent hours in the playhouse mulling it over, but each idea would just get him in trouble. He couldn't give them to someone else to give to his parents without risk of the person stealing it. He wasn't old enough to have his own account in a banq. It took most of the night before a solution finally came to him. With just a hint of blue kissing the horizon, he carefully made his way out to the field. He started digging at the edge of the field, but worked his way down at an angle until he was just touching the lowest roots of the trux. He burried the pierlz and jemz among the roots and hoped that his dad wouldn't destroy them with the plow.

A few weeks later, the whooping and hollering drifting over on the wind told him that his plan had worked perfectly. Dad raced straight for the house and before he could even walk out and pretend confusion his parents were hugging and speaking in hushed voices. So instead he closed the door and pretended not to notice. He dug down and pulled the metal box from under the bed. Inside were the partly burnt remains of 1,000 dinar bills. It was the one thing he had left to prove that he hadn't dreamed the whole thing up. Looking now at the money in the daylight, it was clear that they were useless. There was a picture of

someone he didn't recognize, a bunch of strange writing, and a date 720 A.R. He didn't know what 'AR' meant and he could only assume that nobody would take the money seriously.

As he stared at the old bills, the thought of all those desperate people kept nagging at his consciousness. He felt like he'd taken advantage of them by stealing their wealth in exchange for a handful of animal feed. He wished that there was some way he could help those people. But their plight seemed so gargantuan. He couldn't even imagine it, the whole of Nedune a barely habitable wasteland. How could it have happened? How could a few huemeans cause destruction on a planet-wide scale? What were these greedy people and their kowl all about? It was so confusing. How could he have been in a ship, and then later find himself somewhere on a destroyed part of Nedune.

Chapter Six

Finally the next fall he decided to try and help at least one or two people. He'd do it in secret so a crowd didn't muscle him out or attack him. He made a stew of the few punkrims that wouldn't sell at the market and brought a carving knife for protection. This time he also took a small plank of wood and tied some rope to it so he wouldn't lose the passageway. He packed the food in a clay pot tied tightly closed and crawled back into the hole. After a few minutes of searching, he found the strange material and brushed away the dirt. This time instead of exiting out of a wall, he ended up crawling up out of the ground. Once again, his sense of 'up' and 'down' were confused for a few minutes.

He took a few seconds to get his bearings, and was again depressed by the uninterrupted wasteland. At first he didn't see anything but a bare and empty horizon. It was the same type of devastation that he'd seen before except with no ruined buildings. Here his gaze revealed not a single plant or tree anywhere. The whole scene was of endless desolation marching up to a row of barren hills in the distance. He crawled out and started looking all around before a voice drifted over to him.

“Hey! Where did you come from?”

“Is that guy with the cops?”

“Naw, can't be, he's got no uniform.”

He carefully took a breath, but thankfully the air wasn't quite as smoky. The clouds were thick and dark, but it was no worse than a normal cloudy day back home. There were a few giant machines on wheels crouching in the dirt and the group which was looking at him were huddled against one such machine. They were the largest things he'd ever seen in his life. It was a gargantuan web of metal as large as his parents' whole farm crouched on enormous oval-shaped wheels. At one end was a giant arm that reached off into the distance.

“What are you people all doing here?”

“What are we doing??! How could you be out here without knowing about the protest?” The girl was slender but not as gaunt as the people last time. Her sand-colored hair almost perfectly blended in with the lifeless ground on which all of them sat. She wore a t-shirt with the word 'Megacorp' and a big red 'X' over it. She looked at him with the same analyzing stare as the dying man in the last place, but this woman's expression showed resolute determination in sharp contrast to the hopelessness of the people last time.

“Say, you don't work for megacorp...do you?” She peered intently at him. “Nah, you'd be wearing nicer clothes and you wouldn't be caught dead out here.”

“Wait..I've heard of Megacorp. People were saying that they destroyed the whole of Nedune.”

Now another middle-aged man spoke up. “Well they haven't managed to destroy the *whole* planet yet, but they sure seem to be doing their best. What do you think we're *here* for?”

“Honestly, I don't know. I've just arrived.”

“Now another person peered at him closely, a pattern he was realizing he'd have to get used to. “You just got here from...where?”

“Well, I'm from Ulak...that's near Medria.”

Someone gave a bitter laugh. “Oh well goody for you, you're from the same town as Roquelfeliay.”

This was something new. “Who's that?”

Suddenly, an explosion of laughter, erupted into the sky from the whole group. “You don't know Roquelfeliay?! Man are you one lucky damn SOV.”

Their conversation wasn't making any sense.

“But...why?!”

“Why? Ha! He was the devil personified. The guy started all this.” The woman swept her arm around.

“Not a living thing around for a kilometer in every direction. All so megacorp can earn more dinars.

Why do you think we're locked up to the machines?

Someone's got to do something to keep at least *a little* of the planet left alive.”

“But what do these giant machines do?” He stared in awe at the monstrous structures.

“These things are the giant diggers that Megacorp uses to tear apart the land so they can get to the kowl.

Nothing stands in their way, and nothing is left alive when they're finished.”

“Well, it's not as bad as the last place I found myself in.” He told them about the land where the air was hard to breathe and all the people he saw were dying of hunger.

“Sounds like what some people have predicted will happen here if Megacorp isn't stopped.”

“Well if there's any way that I could help, I'd really like to. I brought some food with me since the people I saw before seemed to all be starving. It's punkrin stew.”

“What?” The sound rippled through the group. “Did he say punkrin?”

“Punkrin? Really??”

“Um...yeah. You're welcome to have some. This is from a couple that didn't look good enough for the market.”

Now the middle-aged man fixed him with his intense stare, “Boy, you'd have to be rich enough to work for megacorp to have punkrins. It's the most expensive food you can buy.”

“Really? Well in the last place I was in, the man said he'd only heard about them from stories.”

“That's not surprising. No one but the Megacorp goons could afford to actually buy one in real life.”

So one by one, he gave each of the protesters a taste of the food. After trying it, they gazed at him reverently.

“You *sure* you don't work for megacorp?” The woman eyed him again.

He began thinking furiously. He didn't want one of them to attack him like last time. “Well, if I did work for them, wouldn't I try to stop you or something?” He'd heard about protests from some of the old farmers when wages were low. It usually involved the army coming in with guns blazing.

“Hey! I see a truck coming. It must be the cops!” The woman now looked at him again. “Listen. Wherever you come from, you'd better get back there quick. If those goons find out you got punkrin with you, they'll just assume you stole it and that shit's super expensive so you'd be lookin at one *long-ads* jail sentence.”

He didn't relish the idea of being stuck in this time any more then the earlier ones. But he was curious what the cops looked like. He began looking around for the passageway which he gratefully found with less panic thanks to the rope. He stood next to it until he saw a large wheeled vehicle heading directly towards them. It had no cows or hoardz pulling it and traveled amazingly fast. As it closed in, a loud and commanding voice flew at high volume towards them. “You are trespassing on private property. This is your last warning to disperse or face arrest!”

With that, he pulled into the hole and back home. Instead of springing up to the yard, he sat thinking over what he'd seen the last three times. First there

was the ship in space with only a few souls left. Then there was the polluted and murky ghost town filled with dying people, and jems littering the ground. Then finally the protesters fighting against this 'Megacorp' destroying the land. He thought it over for a long while, but couldn't make heads or tails of it. On a whim, he poked his head back through the material and looked carefully around. This time he saw the same hills in the distance, but there were large machines tearing up fields of soats and leaving bare dirt beneath. A large machine like the ones he'd seen before was sitting off in the distance at the edge of the work area. He pulled his head back in and wondered if he was looking at the place being transformed from a farm to an empty field where they dig for that kowl stuff. Finally as he sat there in that hole next to his old playroom, it struck him. Each time he went through, it was an earlier time. The first place he went was the far distant future and the end of his race. Then each successive trip took him a little earlier. He was watching the future of Nedune in reverse order! Now his legs finally *did* give out and he collapsed onto his keester. What in the world was this material? How could he travel to all these places seemingly in an instant?

More importantly though, what could he *do* about what he saw? Wasn't there any way of saving his world from such a horrible future? But no matter how

many times he turned the problem over in his mind, nothing came of it. The problem felt way too big for him. An entire planet with nothing to eat. A giant organization with huge machines bigger than a farm. What could he do? He needed Shrik. That kid was a genius and if anyone could think of something, it'd be him.

Chapter Seven

He was sitting with Shrik under the old Mugilla tree at the edge of his dad's farm. Like before, he felt the words tumble about like leaves in a storm. It took a lot of repetition and explaining of details and still Shrik didn't believe him. It wasn't until he showed the kid one of the 1000 dinar bills that his friend was finally convinced it wasn't a big joke.

“Ritem, man that's the craziest story I've ever heard. You be sure not to tell any of the adults...they'll think you're loony or sumethin.”

“Yeah, well that's what the first people I met were thinking. They couldn't believe that I actually grew up on Nedune.”

“So you really were out on a ship in....space? Did you see God then? Or monsters or somethin?”

“Nah...just a bunch of starving people. They smelled weird and had these big dark circles around their eyes. They seemed so...so hopeless, I swear it was the

most awful and heartbreaking thing I've encountered in my whole life.”

“And you think that each time you go through, it's an earlier time?”

“I...I guess. Cuz there were the protesters where the big machines were at first. But then I came back here for to escape the cops. And then when I poked my head through again a few minutes later the place was just startin to get destroyed.”

“Wow. Hey is it okay if I tell my brother Jateem? He got a scholarship to go to college, so he can read up on some of this stuff yer talkin about.”

Ritem thought about it. It all sounded so crazy that he couldn't imagine anybody taking the story seriously.

“Well sure, if you don't tell him it was me, then that's fine. I don't want nobody sending me to the loony bin. Dad's gonna need my help with the soat harvest pretty soon.”

Chapter Eight

It was only a week later that Shrik came running down the path towards their field. “Ritem, Ritem!” He looked around quick. “I need to talk to you!”

Ritem hurried away from where he was checking the plants to see if they were ready for harvest. He followed Shrik until they were back near the Mugilla

tree. The boy's eyes were bright with joy and he was taking air in huge gulps.

“Ritem, you're never going to believe it!”

“Shrik, comeon man. Tell me what's going on already!”

The boy took a deep breath and finally spilled it. “I talked to Jateem and asked if he could check with anyone in the astronomy department. I told him just some of the stuff you said that I thought might be verifiable. He told me that what that woman said about O2 checks out. O2 is the periodic name for Oxygen, that's what we breathe. Without 'O2' we'd all die.”

Ritem dug down into his memory. “Um...well the woman said they might 'turn off the O2' in the section I appeared in. I guess that meant they didn't plan to use it anymore, like when we put towels against the door to Aunt Shira's old room to keep from heating an unused space. That makes sense.”

“But Ritem, it gets better. He told me that what you described about people floating around on that ship is unproven. Nobody's ever *been* up in space, so they don't know what happens. He said that there was this one scientist who theorized that once a person gets far enough from Nedune, the pull from the planet will get weaker and weaker until it's gone completely. He said that everyone was awed that a person could imagine such a thing. I told them...that I didn't know the name

of the person, you know like you asked, but they insisted that you'd have to have several years schooling in science to even understand this stuff.” Feeling exasperated, he grabbed his friend by the shoulders. “But Shrik, I *don't* understand it! All I'm telling you is what I *saw*. *None of it makes any sense to me at all*. People starving to death, protests against this megacorp thing, it's like some kinda weird nightmare. Every time I go there, I feel like I'm gonna wake up in my bed with the pillow soaking wet.” Shrik didn't flinch at that. He just stared back intently. “Well listen. Could I go with you next time? Ya know, check it out too? It'd make this story of yours a lot easier to believe.”

At first he was thrilled at the idea. It'd be so much easier to figure this out with his friend along for the ride. But then the image of that man with the rock surfaced in his mind and he pulled back. “Oh Shrik. I'd love to be able to prove it to you. But you can't imagine how dangerous it is. Several times I wasn't sure that I'd find the way back. One guy tried to kill me in that ghost town with all the starving people. I was lucky that he was too far gone to be a much of a threat or I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you.” His friend's expression became more sober then. “Well, are you gonna try going through again?” He had to think about that one awhile. “Um...I don't know. It is super scary... but I'm also curious of

course. I'm really worried that there won't be a way to stop whatever it is that's supposed to happen.”

“Well I hate to be the one to tell you this my friend, but there doesn't seem to be any way to help either, until you can learn more about what's going on.”

Ritem's hands trembled at the thought of returning to that hellish place of starving men. He felt like he was trapped between a nightmare and a horror tale.

“I'm afraid you may be right” he whispered.

Chapter Nine

Ritem sat in the hole for an eternity staring at the strange material. He checked his pocket again for the knife, and made sure to have the sack of trux with him. But he still wasn't sure he could go through with it. The thought of walking skeletons trying to attack him felt all too real sitting there surrounded by dirt. He thought over all the things he'd seen, all the destruction, and all the people. It felt like when he was younger and he would play on the zeeshaw. Should he risk getting killed or being trapped in one of the nightmare lands? And if not, could he live with himself for abandoning them? He could see no easy way out of it. So finally he took a few deep breaths to build up his courage before pushing through the strange passage.

He looked around in all directions and saw a perfectly

clean room, with very nice straight walls. There was a sink on one wall in front of him and a tall metal structure that he couldn't identify. He walked out the door into a hallway lit by strange bulbs with no flame in them. How such a thing could work was beyond him, but that was secondary at the moment. He pulled open the nearest door and found himself in a large room with half a dozen people. A woman sitting behind a glass panel motioned him over and handed him a thin wood board with several sheets of paper held by a clamp. She barely glanced at him as he took it. "Fill these out and we'll call your name."

Not quite having an alternative idea, he took the board with the papers and the pen that she handed him and sat in a chair.

A young man was sitting one seat over and glanced at him with a sly expression. "Man, you're applying to Megacorp wearing that? Ha. They wont even give you a first call back. You need to dress the part, boy."

Ritem looked down at the form and saw the words 'MegaCorp' with a fancy logo drawn on the top of the sheet. "MegaCorp? My god, these are the devils everyone was saying is killing Nedune!"

Now the man sneered at him. "What? You one of them damn hippies? If you believe that crap, then why are you applying here anyway?"

"Me? I'm not applying here..."

"Look kid, I just saw you sit down with an application,

I aint just some stupid country boy you know.”

“No really, I just walked in and the woman handed me this. I would never work for them. I've already seen them destroy good farmland.”

The guy threw his comment aside. “Oh blah blah blah. Well some of us have to keep a roof over our head. Why don't you go work for one of those eco-fascists then. See if you can earn a living sticking plants in the ground.”

He was so frustrated by the guy, that he did in fact walk out. With clenched fists, he stormed right down the hall and followed some strange signs saying 'exit' which led to a beautiful landing. For a moment he was so impressed by the light streaming in the giant windows and the gorgeous brickwork that he almost forgot about Megacorp....but not quite. At the bottom of the steps there was a big open space with large potted trees, magazine racks, and a huge sculpture. Near the doors was a man behind a desk who watched him leave, and then he was out in the open air. There was a wide stone walkway and a whole cacophony of vehicles in the street. A few carts pulled by animals, other carts that traveled with no animal power like the ones used by the 'cops' earlier, and a larger vehicle with a metal contraption on top that pushed against some overhead wires. It was all terribly confusing. He felt overwhelmed, and a little scared too. It seemed like the best course was to repeat what he did last

time. Go back home and wait a few minutes before trying this place again. But then it struck him, he needed to get back to that room in order to reach the passageway. Could he find it again? He hurried back inside and was about to start backtracking his steps when the man behind the desk put an arm out to block his path.

The man towered over him as he spoke firmly. "Sorry son, they don't need any more applicants upstairs." "But I'm not applying for anything. I just arrived here and need to get back...to." Barely had the words flown from his mouth before he realized that there would be no way for him to explain the situation in a way that this man would understand. He looked around in desperation and saw the man fold his arms in front of him and furrow his eyebrows.

"Look buddy, the secretary already told me that they've gotten all the applicants they need up there. So I'm going to have to ask you to leave peacefully. We don't want to give you trouble young man."

He tried to protest, but he quickly saw that the situation was hopeless. The only way home was in the control of this Megacorp and there was nothing he could do now to reach it.

He was stranded. Not only in a foreign town or city, but in a time that he knew nothing about. There seemed to be no way out this time. He shuffled dejectedly back through the expensive looking glass

door again. There was nothing the least bit familiar outside except the few horse-drawn carts. He hung his head dejectedly and stared at the pavement. It seemed that his luck had finally run out. He was stuck here now....forever.

“Hey buddy, can you spare a 1/2 dinar?”

Looking over, he saw an older man in dirty and torn clothes sitting almost out of sight next to the building. With nothing else to do, he walked over to talk with the man.

“I'm sorry mister. But I don't have anything on me. I'm a complete stranger to this place.”

The man looked at him a little more. “Hmm. Yeah. Come to think of it, you do look different from the rest of these people. More....uh farm-like.”

“What is this place called?”

Now the man's eyes widened further. “Man, you really don't know where you are at all? This is Medria, the biggest city in Philadrog. How could you be standing here and not know that?”

He felt almost physically knocked over. Medria? The bustling town of a few hundred people? “But...but this looks like a huge city! I was only in Medria once, but the town that I remember was filled with two or three story houses, dirt roads, and none of these strange wires over all the streets.”

The man gave a bitter 'harrumph' and looked even more closely at him. “You say you remember that?”

Boy Medria hasn't looked like that in over a century. And you sure don't look like you're over a 100 years old.”

So he told the older man the story of his travels and what he'd seen. How the travels seemed to take him backwards in time and closer to his own era with each trip.

The man whistled quietly and stared even more intently. “Holy cow, boy that's one heckova story. So does that mean you're stuck here?”

“Well, it sure seems like it. Even if I could get back to Ulak, who knows whether my family still owns the farm there or not.”

The man seemed to think for a minute. “Well, you could try one of the history professors at the University Medria. They wont be too symathetic to any anti-Megacorp ideas, but if you skip that part I bet someone might listen to you.”

“Really? But why would people support a company like this?” He pointed an accusing finger at the giant building. “If they're causing so much destruction, can't people stop them?”

“You kiddin me? Those bastards *own* this town boy. Most every job in Medria is for Megacorp. They donated big dinars to the university, and I bet half the cops'r on their payroll too.”

“Good god!”

“Not good 'nuff I'm afraid. Listen, I gotta make some

dinars if I wanna eat tonight. If you head down that street and turn left at the third intersection it'll lead you straight to the university. Prob'ly yer best chance.”

“Thanks a lot, you've been a huge help.”

“Well, good to know. Oh an keep an eye on them motor carriages. They'll knock ya down fore' you can say watchout.”

“Thank you again.”

He walked down the sidewalk and followed the man's directions. He found the road leading to the university and soon the roads became less busy and the buildings became less intimidating then the monstrous ones downtown. There were older kids milling about or staring into books as he walked across a huge field of short-cropped trux. Aside from the pleasant looking buildings and the sporadic Mugilla trees, it was as alien to him as the center of town was.

Chapter Ten

He saw a particularly strange looking woman sitting on a stone wall near the path. Her hair was close-cropped like the women on the ship, except that there was a strip of bald scalp running straight up and over the middle of her head. The remaining hair was an exceptionally dark black, like his room after the candle goes out. As he got closer, he saw her shirt had

the same logo of megacorp with an 'x' over it like the one that the protestor girl had worn.

The girl looked up briefly from her book and stared him in the eye. "I aint yer type little boy...beat it." Her tone caught him off guard, this city felt like it sucked all the huemean qualities straight out of people leaving a cold shell in it's wake. He thought back to his walk and how nobody even raised a hand in greeting when they passed.

But then he remembered what the man on the street had said about how Megacorp had so much control over everyone. He decided to try one more tactic with the girl, seeing as she was the only person to say two words to him since he'd left downtown.

"Miss. I wasn't tryin to be mean to you. I wanted to say that I like your shirt."

Now the girl looked at him a little closer. Her lip pulled to the side in a kind of strange sneer. She seemed to be analyzing every struam of his body at once. "Yer too dirty to be a secret cop, but then again, ya don't look like you got the guts to stand up to Megacrop."

He decided to try a little white lie. "Well, I joined a protest against one of their destructive fields. A bunch of people were attached to machines to slow down the cops."

"Yeah?" She seemed to look at him a little less coldly.

"What was Megacorp doin there?"

That one was easy. “Well it was pretty horrible. What used to be a huge field of soats got torn up and destroyed so they could get at the kowl underneath.”

He was adlibbing, but it made sense based on what he'd seen of the landscape before and afterwards.

“Well duh. That's what those monsters do. They exploit the people, steal their land, and dig it up for the kowl. Most all the farms around here are gone, with nothing to show for it but lifeless dirt and poisoned water.”

“But isn't there anything that can be done?!”

“Well sure. We been protesting and...” she paused and he inferred paragraphs more in that pause. “Other stuff. But them Huems got control of ever-thing.

Anyone does something to their property sits in jail for a *long* time.” Now she looked at him really carefully.

“Hey, if you've been to a protest, how come I never seen you.”

She quickly gathered her things. “Hold it, I bet you *do* work for them. Maybe you *are* some kinda secret cop or something.”

“*Please!* Miss, I swear that I'd never work for them. I'm....new in town. Just got here this afternoon.”

The woman's eyes furrowed into a frown. “Boy, if you're tryin to be undercover, you doin a crappy job at it. How the hell could you be in a protest when there aint been any protests outside of this town?”

“Oh, there will be.”

“What?! What'r you, some kinda future-reader?”

“Um...well you could say that. Have you got a few minutes?”

She stared at him for several seconds. At first he expected her to just blow him off given her attitude. But she ended up surprising him. She look at a strange timepiece on her wrist before favoring him with a cool stare. “Well.... sure, okay. But if your hand comes anywhere near me I'll knock into next Shrudesday.”

“I swear that I wont.” So he told her the same story about how he'd gotten to see visions of Huemeanty's future to the very distant end. How the searching for this kowl stuff had killed off everyone's food supply. “Wow, I always thought they were evil, but who coulda thought they'd destroy the whole damn planet.”

He sucked in his breath. “So you believe me?!”

“Well, it's pretty easy, you stick out around here like a sore thumb. Ya aint too scared to talk truth about Megacorp, and ya look like some country bumpkin just off the wagon.”

“But that's just it. My family came out to Medria when I was younger, but the streets were dusty, the buildings were only two stories tall, and they didn't have any kind of university like this...”

But he let his dialogue fade away when he saw her looking off into the distance. “Hey Grejayne! Come on over here.”

Turning around he saw another adult about the girl's age but taller. The kid wore a black jacket, his hair was cut really short and there was a strange pattern shaved into it. He looked at the girl briefly and then Ritem felt his cool stare.

“Who's the droob?”

The woman motioned for the new guy to sit down.

“Grejayne this is..uh..hey what was yer name?”

“My name's Ritem, what's yours?”

“Hey, enough with the 12-step crap, what'r you all about?” The kids expression was as distrustful as the man with the rock had been. He hoped there wouldn't be a fight, because this guy actually looked dangerous.

“Hold on Grejayne. Look I don't know if this guy is fer real or just some psycho. But one thing's fer sure, he tells a hellova story.” She looked back at him. “Yo, give us an instant replay.”

So he told the story once more for this new kid hoping that he wasn't going to end up having bigger problems.

“Wow, yer right Frisha, dude tells one hellova story.”

The guy looked closer once again. “Doesn't seem too credible though. An you say you were part of a protest against Megacorp?”

“Yeah. I gave them some punkrin stew and they acted like it was the most incredible thing in the world.”

Now the kid looked more thoughtful and less combative. “Well, my dad's been complaining cuz the stuff went up two dinars a pound last year. So it's easy

'nough to guess that they could be super expensive if these adswholes keep killing the farms.”

Now the question that had been nagging him for months took over. “But how can we *stop them?*! Isn't there any way to make them see what they're doing?”

Now the other boy sounded bitter again. “Sure. Just go on up to Roquelfeliay's office and tell him you've seen the future.” He gave a bitter laugh. “I'm sure he'd be just *thrilled* to hear you out.”

He thought back to what the other man in the interview room had said, but it didn't make sense yet.

“Is Roquelfeliay the one who runs Megacorp?”

“Holy crap! Frisha I think this droob is telling the truth!”

“Wow, this is totes outa this world.”

He didn't know how, but it seemed that both of them were really convinced now. “Well, can you tell me who this Roquelfeliay character is?”

The guy blew out a breath of air and snorted. “Can't believe it. Aint a huemeanbeen alive that doesn't know Roquelfeliay.” The guy looked around once and then started the tale that changed Ritem's life. “Look, it was...uh something like 120 years ago that we first started hearing about Roquelfeliay and Megacorp. It started out as just a small operation digging up kowl on this little farm. But pretty soon, they were grabbing up land right and left to get at the stuff. With Roquelfeliay's money, they were able to find all kinds

of uses for it. Made electricity, turned it into fuel for the autocars, used it for cooking, you name it. The company started making thousands of dinars, then millions. Now they're the most powerful company in all of Philadrog. Even Prime Minister Yotak can't touch them. Nobody can even get into the company cuz Roquelfeliay always passes control to his oldest son...ya know like those kings from the old country.”

“GeezKrishna! Then that means I finally *am* stuck here.” With his head hung low, he didn't see their confused expression until the girl asked him what he meant. So he told them how he'd gotten through and how he'd accidentally found himself in a room of people looking to work for Megacorp.

The big guy started laughing and he started to get mad at the man. “Hey, this may be all a big joke to you two... but we're talkin about the future of the whole planet. Seriously!”

Finally the big guy's laughing calmed down. “No no, droob. I aint laughin at that crap. It's just pretty hilarious that you popped into this world through the shitroom, but you didn't even know it.”

“Yeah, well ha ha ha.”

The other girl fixed him with a scornful look. “Come on Grejayne. The kid's been through enough already.” Now the big guy turned his seemingly uninterrupted scorn to the girl. “So now you're all goodygoody with this country boy?” He made little kissy noises and the

girl punched him hard in the shoulder.

“Screw you Grejayne.”

But he seemed to not hear it. Suddenly the man seemed to be a thousand kilometres away.

“Hey! I got it.” The guy paused for emphasis. “Look, we're always talkin about how we'd love to stick it to Megacorp right?”

The girl nodded her head and the guy Grejayne looked encouraged. “So if this kid knows about a secret way outa their building, we could put a bomb in there, and then just escape!”

Ritem had never considered doing anything like planting a bomb before. He didn't even know how to make something like that. The most he'd ever done was put a capfull of lamp oil under a soat-pan to watch it fly up to the trees.

But unlike the other two, he'd already witnessed what Megacorp would be responsible for. He'd already seen the planet as nothing but a lifeless hell. It *did* feel like something drastic needed to be done to stop them.

“Well I bet a plan like that would work, and now that you know what's coming, it'll be easier to convince people to help.”

The big guy swung his sneering face over to within 10 straums of Ritem's. He stared right in Ritem's eyes menacingly. “Listen droob. We aint tellin no-stinkin-body. Megacorp's got ears in every damn hallway, so you just keep yer damn ignorant mouth shut alright?”

“Wait a minute Grejayne.” The girl looked back over to Ritem. “Ritem, if we do this, where are we gonna end up? Are you like, livin in the prehistoric times or something?”

He immediately saw where she was headed and felt his barely awakened hopes crumble. He stared at the ground as he answered. “We actually live in the ninth century, but it wouldn't make much dif...

“The what?” Krisha's eyes bulged wide. “How could you live in the ninth century when we're still in the second century here?” The woman folded her arms in front of her like the security guard had done.

“Hey Krish. I bet this kid doesn't know the new dating system. The ninth century in the old dating system would put him....oh a few years B.R.”

He looked back at the big adult. “What does that mean, B.R.?”

The guy laughed, but without any real humor in his voice. By his expression it looked like he was about to make another snyde comment, but Krisha interrupted him.

“Ritem, we recently changed over to a new dating system. This here's the year 135 A.R. which stands for 'after Roquelfeliay' and the time before is called B.R.”

In an almost trancelike voice he mumbled, “Before Roquelfeliay.”

“Exactamento.”

Just then it hit him and his legs gave out.

Chapter Eleven

He looked up and Krisha was staring down at him with what looked like a mixture of worry and doubt. But when he opened his eyes, the worry seemed to fade away and the tough-girl persona returned.

“The hell happened to you?”

Staring up at the strange girl, he began to wonder again if he wasn't actually dreaming this up while laying in a crazy-house.

“You'd never believe me.”

Now both of them were laughing. “You kidding droob? You already spoutin some crap about seeing the end of the world and I aint got bored enough yet. Caint get much weirder.” Then the big guy's face entered his field of view. “Can it?”

He gulped a little before sitting up and facing them.

“Well, after I got home from the second trip, I pulled out the box full of the money that I'd grabbed and looked closer at it. There was a picture of this guy I'd never seen and at the bottom it said 720 A.R. I didn't know what A.R. meant, but it was clear that nobody would believe that money could be real.”

“Holy crap. That's *hundreds* of years in the future.”

“Man this droob just keeps soundin crazier and crazier each minute.”

“Okay, but that still means that if we go back through

this....hole thing, we'll be stuck in some prehistoric dead-end wont we?"

"Well it's not exactly 'prehistoric' but there wouldn't be any of these fancy buildings. You'd be as alien in my home as I am here. Once you go through that 'passageway' or whatever, there's no return...forever. Even when I peaked back through to where the protest had been only a few minutes after being home, it seemed to be several years earlier."

That obviously caught the big guy off guard. He tried to look tough, but it was clear that he was thinking furiously. Ritem watched as he seemed to vasculate between his cool disdain and something like actual fear. It took several moments, but it seemed that the former eventually won out.

"Yah know what? It aint worth that. Look, aint like I don' believe you...but goin back to the stone age?? Man, screw that."

Then the girl cut in, but she didn't seem very sure either. "Well, 's like you said Grejayne. There aint no future for us if Megacorp stays in control. But, yeah I know. The only way to stop them is through that crazy passage of his. It just seems so...sooo..."

Ritem was becoming more scared by the minute as he watched what looked like his only way out slip into nothing. His mind churned at top speed trying to think of how he could shift the conversation.

Seeing that these adults were always talking tough and

cursing, he tried following their lead. “Well look, maybe we can go through and if we get back to my own time, we can catch this adshole before he gets too big to touch.”

“Well yeah. That'd be great, but.. I don't know. Leaving Junar, and Twans, and....you droobs don't got electricity there do you?”

He couldn't look her in the eye this time despite his earlier tough act. “Sorry, but I don't know what that is.”

“Well crap. That sure sounds like the stone age to me.” It was starting to feel hopeless and he wondered if he'd end up having to find a living here in this crazy future, when the big guy seemed to change his tune.

“Yeah, but you wanna grow up workin for Megacorp some day? From what this kid says, they're gonna get big enough to control the whole planet.”

That bit of encouragement gave him the push he needed to nail the board home. “Just think about it...uh..”

The girl looked only slightly annoyed. “It's Frisha, droob.”

“Just think about it Frisha. You two could end up being the greatest heroes on the whole of Nedune. I mean...has any huemean ever saved an entire planet before?”

The girl kicked a stone off into the walkway. “Well frack. Doesn't seem like we have a choice, do we?”

Finally it looked like he had their support. But knowing how tough they were, he didn't allow himself to act too confident. "Well...it's up to you of course. But that thing's a one-way trip."

"I guess it's better'n jail, which is where I'm sure we'd end up otherwise." The boy's jaw tightened and he started talking about what they could use to make a big enough attack. It seemed that the stuff people used to run the autocars was the easiest way to create a really big explosion."

"We don't know what kinda security they got in there. But chances are there's at least one security guard and plenty of alarms."

"What about weapons?" The girl looked pensive.

"Oh there's a guy I know who could get me somethin like that. Thing is we aint got a lot of dinars." Now the boy looked back coolly. "You got anything we could use to finance this littleprotest of ours?"

Ritem fished around in his pockets. There wasn't much on the farm of value. All he had was the little carving knife which he showed to the two radicals.

"Holy crap. That thing is ooowwwald. I never seen an antique like it." The girl turned to her friend.

"Grejayne, how much you think we could get fer this?"

Now he was seeing red. They were just going to steel his dad's knife and sell it. "Hey, that thing belongs to my dad! I aint gonna just let you have it."

But the boy fixed him with a winning grin. "Would

you rather be stuck in this time forever? Cuz that's your only other choice droob.”

He wanted to stay angry. He even wanted to punch the boy. But in the end, he realized the guy was right. There was no way that he could get back into the megacorp building without help. He stared down at his hands in defeat. “Yeah. I guess yer right.”

The guy's cool confidence took over again. “Course I'm right.”

Looking even more sure of himself, the guy started working out a plan that involved driving one of those strange autocars into the door and running for the upstairs while leaving a fuse on a big store of the autocar fuel.

“Just think, if we go back with this kid and find out where grandpa Roquelfeliay lived, then nothing we do to Megacorp in this time will ever happen.” Then the kid looked doubtful. “Least I think...I don' know. Frisha you know anyone takin advanced science classes?”

Now the girl looked outright shocked. “Me?! The hell makes you think I'd hang out with those brainiacs. I bet even Hawking wouldn't know enough about this weird stuff to be useful.”

“Alright. Well worth a try I guess. Most o' them types'r prob'ly on Megacorp's leash anyway.”

“So how long you think it'll take to put the shit together?”

He listened to the two of them talk about equipment that he'd never even heard of and waited to see if there was anything he could do. Finally the guy paused and looked at them both. "I'd guess about a week or so."

Ritem was horrified. "A week?! I gotta spend a week here?" But when he looked at the two, there wasn't the faintest spark of sympathy in their eyes.

"So which one of us is gonna babysit the droob in the meantime?"

This last pushed him over the edge. "Hey, I know you two don't think I can pull my weight around here. But I was digging crops and mending fences from the time I was three freetz tall!

"Yeah? You ever drive an autocar? Or put together a mozoltov-coktayl?" The boy seemed to sneer in response to everything.

Since he didn't understand those things, he could think of nothing to say.

"Yeah, thought so."

"Well listen. Just cuz I don't know all the newest gadgets don't mean I'm a damn baby. I know the roads well enough. I'll wander over towards Ulak and see what the place looks like."

Now the other guy give him his typical intense stare.

"Yeah? Well before I let you outa my sight in this little fiction, you tell us exactly where this 'magic portal' of yours was. I aint stickin my neck out on this only ta

get stuck up in those adswholes' jail.

“Alright. Well it was up..um two flights of stairs and there was a long hallway. The door was plain white where they had the job forms or whatever. Let's see. I'd gone into the first door, after getting to the hallway, so it'd have to be right next to that. I think there was a sign on it...”

“Well duh. Of course there's gonna be a sign telling people where the toilet is droob.”

The cauldron bubbling in his soul finally spilled over and he spat fire at the guy. “Hey! Enough o' that shit! You call me Ritem. I aint some dipshit honky...you...you...”

“Yeah?” The guy's conceited eyes laughed at him.

“Well you just remember that you need us more then we need you. We're not the ones trapped in some foreign time.”

“Oh you think?” He was just one more snide comment away from launching himself at the stupid adult. “An do you know how far that last future I saw really is? Cuz I sure don't. Maybe in 50 years you yourself'll be one o' those guys chained to a giant digging machine....or maybe Frisha gets thrown in jail by those cops I saw!”

All he got for his speech though was laughter from the guy. It was the last straw and he threw his fist right into the guy's laughing face. Unfortunately the adswwhole was faster.

“Well well, finally we get to see some fire in you.” Grejayne was still holding his clenched fist in his own vice-like grip. He leaned in real close before speaking again. “Thing is, guys that don't have enough fire in them....they up an' surrender to the cops when things get tight. They tell the cops whatever those shits want just so they can save their own keester. An you can bet yer prehistoric ads that I wont be lettin myself get thrown in Megacorp's jail cuza you. If I stick my neck out ta do this thing and find there aint no 'passageway' or whatever outa Megacorp...” they guy leaned in closer, “I'll just kill you myself....” He paused for emphasis. “Nice'n slow” He threw the fist aside, got up and stalked off down the road.

Ritem watched him go and wondered if his only chance of getting home had, in the end, vanished.

“I think you finally impressed him.”

He almost fell down as he spun to look at her. “You screwing with me?! Didn't you see how that ads just up and walked away?”

“Ah, don' worry bout that. I's just his way. He likes to talk big. I think we can pull this thing off...*IF* we can count on you.”

“Well you heard what he said. I don't seem ta have a choice, now do I?”

The girl was silent for a long minute as she looked at her hands. “So...we're really gonna do this, aren't we?”

Now he could finally see a crack in her tough girl persona. So he wisely chose more peaceful words. “I guess we have to do what's right, no matter what happens.”

“Yeah...I guess so. Man how the hell do I say goodbye to people and tell 'em I'm gonna go disappear into some prehistoric backwater?”

He tried to think about his talk with Shrik, but couldn't think of anything helpful. He put his hand lightly on the girl's shoulder. “I'm sure you'll think of the right thing to say.”

“Man, this is such a downer.” She reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a short cylinder. She tapped it a couple of times and shifted something that caused smoke to come out. Her pained eyes started to relax and her muscles drooped a bit.

It smelled familiar...a little, but not enough that he could place it. “What's that stuff?”

She grinned peacefully at him. “It's Metha...” Her voice cut off and she leaned into him very close. “...wuonia. I'd offer ya some but...a....” She playfully tossed a cinder over onto the path. “Yer underage little boy. 'Sides, the shit's mighty expensive.”

“Really? Mewon...expensive? Heck we make paper and clothing out of it back home. It's one of the most useful crops there is. Is it so hard to grow here that makes it expensive? I mean, what do you make clothes out of otherwise?”

She looked back contentedly, “Don' know. 's all made by Megacorp an they aint likely ta tell you their secret.....ingredient.” By now she was purring like a tigress. It was clear that she was too far gone to offer anything more useful.

Chapter Twelve

At first he didn't know what to do with his time. It seemed that he was stuck in this strange land for a week or so with no clue of how he could make himself useful in this fragile new alliance they'd created. So with nothing else to focus on, he hoofed it through the sparse woods in the direction of Ulak. He hoped that a long walk and some time to think would spur some inspiration.

The streets were nicely paved out this way and the houses looked so stately. It was worlds different from the humble farm town that dad sometimes took him to when he brought crops to trade.

Near the end of one road, he found a deep grove of trees to wander through. Compared to the few patches of forest back home, these trees were enormous. The place was incredibly peaceful and he often got lost in thought wandering the nicely maintained footpaths. He walked for half the day before spotting a bench. It was made entirely of one huge tree trunk and was beautifully carved with

dozens of ornate nature scenes set into the backrest. He sat there and closed his eyes just relishing in the peaceful surroundings.

“Hey you! This is private property! What do you think you're doing here?”

He looked up and saw a man wearing a smart blue uniform and riding on hourdzback. As soon as the man saw him, he held out his hands in peace.

“I...I'm sorry young sir. I didn't know it was you. Please accept my most fervent apologies. I would never accuse you of anything sir.”

It took a moment for him to register it all. The man on hourdzback must be a security person of some sort. But why was he apologizing? Ritem couldn't make sense of it. Still, he couldn't stand to see the man trembling the way he was. “Don't worry about it. You're just doing your job.”

The man exhaled forcefully. “Thank you young sir.” Then he rode off quickly without a backward glance. He meditated on the event for a long while. How could anyone in this strange land think they recognized him? The only people he knew at all were a couple of radical adults studying at the university. But thinking back to all the sorrow and death he'd seen in these future worlds, he decided to stay very very careful. He moved off the path and stayed to underbrush once he saw the man ride out of sight.

He came to the edge of the woods and found a huge expanse of the same short-cropped soats. There was a beautiful house at the far edge and a perfectly flat carriageway leading around the field. The place was easily as large as any of the buildings at the university and covered all over with beveled glass windows. Not one surface held a trace of mold or debris as far as he could see. It was all so well maintained and elegant that for a long while he just stared awestruck. Every corner was softened with beautiful moldings and ornate carved animals. He burned with curiosity to see who lived in such an incredible house and he even started taking a step towards it. But then a thought struck, what if he got put in jail for being on their land? Despite the reaction of the man on hourdzback, these people looked rich enough to be the owners of Megacorp. If he wanted to hold any shred of a chance to get home, he couldn't risk going anywhere near that house. He continued staring at the mansion for a long while, trying to imagine who could afford such opulence. Where did they come from? How were they so rich? He wasn't sure exactly where he was, as there didn't seem to be many landmarks now, but he felt like he was somewhere near the farm where Shrik's family lived. Keeping an eye out for anyone outside, he skirted the edge of the woods to the back of the house and saw similarly impecable grounds. There was a clean looking stable which looked as

polished as the main house and he could hear the sound of a hourdz winnying inside. Next to that was another small building with the sound of someone hammering on metal. As his gaze swung closer to the house, he saw a large pool of water that looked cleaner then even the pond at the edge of town. It was surrounded by a perimeter of the smoothest stones he'd ever seen.

Once, he saw an older woman wearing an ornate turquoise dress and carrying a parasol. But she quickly vanished behind a corner of the building, leaving him no closer to solving the mystery then he'd been before.

He sat watching for an hour more hoping for some telltale event, but there was nothing noteworthy to see in the vast manicured expanse. Finally out of boredom he turned back into the woods and looked for a way back to Medria. Despite being so close to his old home, everything here was different. The trees, the pathways, even the smells were different. For awhile, he became hopelessly lost and for awhile he worried if he'd end up running into the owners after all.

Chapter Thirteen

It was another hour before he came to a smaller break in the woods. At first he ran forward hoping it might lead to a road of some kind. Instead though, he stumbled on a small shack. This structure stood out not for it's elegance, but for it's converse. Where everything else in the area was clean and well-maintained, this little shack was on the verge of collapse. Judging by the construction, he guessed that it could even have been built in his own time. It was made of old warping boards and maypul shakes. Where the boards weren't peeling away from the structure, tendrils of ivy and moss did the job of holding the wood together. If not for them he suspected, it would have collapsed long ago. It looked like the sort of place a pauper would live in while gleaning leftovers from the fields.

He walked around several times trying to figure what it might be, but with no outward clues, he was left to try the door. Set nicely in the middle of the door was a tiny window. He peered through it and was taken aback to see someone's eye staring right back at him. At first he was too shocked to go near the door again. But with no sound coming from inside, he finally peaked again through the window. Now as he gazed, he noticed that the eye stared straight ahead without moving. Feeling even more puzzled, he tried pulling

the door.

Miraculously, the doorframe was in reasonable shape still and the handle turned without much resistance, but it took a couple of sharp shoves before he was finally able to open it enough to gain entry. Once he got inside, his eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. The place was dimly lit with light streaming in through the thousands of cracks in the walls. Each corner was filled with webs and there was a half stream of dust all over. The weak light that he'd seen was soon even further clouded by the dust plumes that he kicked up.

But smack dab in the middle of the room was a beautifully ornate picture frame. Set within, and staring straight back at him was the relaxed and smiling face of his friend Shrik. Unlike the boy he knew, this version was an adult and wore a beautiful suit. Even with the difference of age, there was no questioning the sly confidence behind the eyes of his friend. Ritem stood there awestruck. Shrik, the kid who had to work all day in the field so his brother could go to school? The kid who seemed too smart for his own good? Why would his likeness be preserved here in this broken down shack?

In front of the picture were two delicate vases, each holding the dried remains of some type of flower. Between the vases was a large and beautiful bowl with burn marks around the edge.

He turned to try and figure out the rest of the place. On either side of the 'alter' were several dimly lit rows of little drawers. He peered closer and pulled open one of them. The drawer was filled to overflowing with letters. Some looked only yellowed with age, but most were decayed beyond recognition. He saw one with a blue heart on it and reached for it, but barely had he touched it that the envelop crumbled to pieces. He carefully reached for another that looked to be in better shape. He took his time now slowly opening the fragile paper. When he finally saw the careful handwriting inside, his eyes bulged out of his face.

“Dearest Kaya

The weeks here without you are torturing my soul. Your glistening eyes like the twin moons shine down through the treetops and I imagine that it's really you smiling on me from above. Your last letter brought trembling throughout my heart as I smelled your perfume. Alas it will be another moon yet or more before I can wrap you in an embrace. In it's stead, I gaze upon your speckled cheeks in my memory as I drift to sleep and join you in the land of dreams.

Eternally yours,
Shrik

There was another one that looked a little newer, but still quite yellow.

Shrikypoo;

My heart yearns for you in the sky. I see you in the moons, in the stars, even the pattern of light on the trees. This one small refuge can't contain the endless expanse of my longing. The others say it's wrong, but I often seek for this lonesome existance to end so that I can join you up there in endless peace. The next time I try, it will be quiet. Nobody to know but you and me. I feel certain without question that we will share a future together once again. This and only this is the focus of my every waking thought.

Yours forever;

Kaya

There were several more goopy letters that were written the same way. He couldn't believe it. His best friend Shrik fawning over Kaya who wasn't big enough even to ride a hourdz yet. And little Kaya as

well, talking like a crazy person over him. As gross as it was to read the romantic junk, he kept hoping he'd find something that might give him a clue of how to understand what had been happening since his own time. The next letter crumbled where he first grabbed it, but there was at least enough left to add another clue.

“My dearest;
They told me what happened to you.
It carved open the deepest
chasm.....soul.
The thought of never gazing upon....
I don't know how a girl could go on.
I know it was R..... He denies it of
course. But he must have known
about.... He must have found.... I'm
so sorry my love, but I simply can't
conceal the singing in my.....over
y....
There must be.....has to be.....where
we can

The longing for you.....
Yours eternally
Ka....

In all the drawers it was the same. They must have sent thousands of letters to each other over the

months or years since. There was another one that looked less goopy, so took a chance on reading that one. The envelope fell to pieces on the floor and he had to hold the old paper with utmost care for fear of losing the words forever.

“My dearest;
I fear that these notes are being seen, so this must remain obscure. I pray that you will catch my meaning and understand that I only do what must be done with the heaviest conscience. The one we know has become frighteningly dangerous. I know you may not believe me, but I feel certain that our friend was killed because he found out too much. Many people are clearly afraid even at the mention of his name these days. I can see it in their eyes. You can be sure that I do not embark on this voluntarilly. But I worry that if I fail, we may all suffer a worse fate then he did. Please know that my devotion to you will continue to the end of time, and please don't judge me too harshly.

Your beloved

The words were too obscure to be of much help. But it seemed important, maybe Shrik would know what it was about (assuming he could ever get back home). He stared at the ancient paper and thought deeply about it. The sheet was so brittle it was already beginning to crumble. He decided to see if he could copy it. There wasn't anything around to write with and all the paper was on the verge of crumbling to dust. He looked through more drawers hoping for something...anything useful.

Finally, in a lower drawer though, he felt something poking his waist. He felt around in his pocket and remembered the pen from megacorp. That was half the battle, but what could he write *on*? There seemed to be nothing in the room that was less than a century old.

He was about to leave in failure when the last drawer proved to be different. There weren't letters this time, but some kind of powder. He opened one of the sacks carefully and smelled it. The stuff smelled faintly like mewon, but it was a lot different than the stuff they grew in the back plot. He grabbed several bags and put them in his pocket to see if Frisha recognized it. Then in the back of the drawer he found a beautifully ornate cloth a little bigger than a handkerchief. The edge was stained with something red, but otherwise it

was in good condition. He felt a little guilty writing all over such exquisite handiwork, but desperate times called for desperate measures. Besides, this place was on the verge of collapse anyway. He copied the faded letter word for word and then respectfully placed the crumbling paper back with the others.

He browsed about some more, but there didn't seem to be anything to find except candles and old goopy letters. So he stuffed the cloth into his breast pocket and reverently pulled the door closed. His thoughts now were tumbling like Ruisik Creek in the spring.

What did Shrik get involved with towards the end?

Who was it that he feared so much that he was willing to risk his own life? And did his sister actually commit suicide out of love for him? He couldn't wait to get back and see if Frisha had any ideas about all.

That thought brought him back to the present. He still had to find his way *out* of these woods, and the daylight was fading quickly. It seemed impossible that he'd be able to make his way out once it got dark. He tried scouting in all directions around the shack, but to no avail. He was afraid of going too far on the chance that he might run into a security man again. So with sad resignation, he returned to the shack and curled himself into a ball for the night.

Chapter Fourteen

It must have been late morning when he woke up, the meager sunbeams looked far too strong for it to be dawn. His stomach grumbled and his mouth felt like it was filled with some of those musty letters. He hoped that it wouldn't take long now for him to find his way back to Medria.

He looked carefully around in all directions and saw a small hill off to the side. At least that would give him a vantage point. It was an easy slope and it took less than an hour or so hiking to the top. Once he reached the edge, he could finally see bits of houses interspersed between the trees and some tall buildings in the distance. Now finally, he knew what direction to go and he joyfully ran in the direction of the houses. When finally he broke through the trees, he saw a road with two rows of metal rails along the center. He couldn't figure out what such a thing would be used for, but the road looked like it had been created recently. There were dozens of houses clustered along the street here and a few of the autocars sprinkled along the road's edge. The streets were clean and the houses looked to be nicer than anything back home. The houses all had yards of the same close-cropped soats that he'd seen at the university, and they were rimmed with neat wooden fences.

It seemed so impossible, walking down this pleasant

lane, for him to imagine the whole expanse one day turning into a starving hell full of rubble, skeletons, and thick black clouds. He tried to ponder in his mind what Megacorp and their kowl had to do with it all. It was still impossible for him to imagine how the two places could be found on the same planet.

Still lost in thought, Ritem found his legs meandering back the way he'd come. So with no idea of what else to do, he shrugged his shoulders and strolled back to the university.

Chapter Fifteen

He wandered across the field of short-cropped soats towards the central building. Now that he was noticing it more, he found himself deeply impressed by the quality of the place. Giant stones ran a straight line along the base of each building to support a lighter colored stone wall marching up at least three stories with the whole capped by carefully set stone shakes. There were carvings and motifs set into the corners beneath the roof, giving the buildings an almost religious feel.

With seemingly endless hours to spend, he could think of little else to do in such a foreign place, and so wandered into a classroom to explore what people

studied at this university.

The first room was nicely lit with windows even taller than he was and there was an enormous slateboard mounted in a solid wooden frame at the far wall. He silently closed the door and walked to the back of a large cluster of chairs. Finding a sturdy Maypul chair near the back he sat down as quietly as he could. Unfortunately though, the teacher was not blind to his entrance.

“Young man, when I start class, each of you are expected to be present and punctual. Do I make myself clear?” The man was old and stared at the room with eyes as sharp as an axblade from beneath his neat felt hat.

Not wanting to attract attention and hoping to learn more about what was on the board, he just played the part. “Yes sir. Sorry sir.”

The man didn't favor him with any further attention. He quickly turned back around and continued speaking about the order of magnets placed around an iron cylinder which was attached to a large wheel. He then spoke about how the heat from the kowl would drive the wheel and how the magnets turned the kowl's energy into power which could be used for lighting. It was all pretty confusing, but it explained how the person who controlled kowl would have a great deal of power...like Roquelfeliay did.

By the time class was over, the shadows were long and

the overhead lamps struggled with little success to maintain a dim luminescence. He waited in the dimly lit corridor covered in dark wood paneling hoping to find one of the two adults. It was doubtful that they would know much about the mystery, but he didn't have anyone else to turn to in this strange land.

It wasn't until the final bell rang that he finally spotted Krisha meandering out of class by herself and called her over to the corner he was waiting in.

“Oh come on. You don't scare me with that sinister dark corner crap. I could knock your block off before you blinked.”

“No...hold on.” At first he wanted to get angry about her comment. But decided to let it go for the minute.

“Listen Krisha. Do you know what this is?” He carefully pulled one of the cloth bags out and held it for her to see.

She reached for it dubiously. Her dirty fingers touched the bag like she thought there might be a mouse in it. But as she put it closer to her face her eyes opened full and then even wider.

“Holy frac..” She dropped her satchel and quickly put her other hand over her mouth. She carefully held the bag and squeezed close to him. Her breath smelled like old wine as her blazing eyes fixed his.

“How in the goddamn did you get yer virgin hands on this stuff?” Her voice was a whisper, but what she lacked in volume, she made up for in ferocity.

“Geezkrishna, there must be 500 dinars worth of methawuonia in this bag.”

So he told her about the strange shack in the woods with his sisters' letters and the giant portrait. “And there were vases that must have held flowers and half a dozen bags of this. Maybe she burned it like an incense to him.”

Her eyes continued to spout fire as she looked at him. “You kiddin little boy? She'd have to be the richest person on the planet to just burn this much mewon.” He was getting tired of being talked down to just because he was younger and so he spouted some fire of his own. “Hey though droob. You forget that this stuff just grows all over the place back where I'm from. It woulda been no different then burning rusmary if this shack is as old as it looked. So maybe you don't know all *that* much.”

She held him in a hostile stare for a moment before finally conceding. “Alright, I'll give you that. Maybe this kid Shrik got into Megacorp and owns that huge mansion.”

The thought horrified him. “Shrik? Geezkrishna no! He may be smart, but he's my friend. He aint anywhere *near* cruel enough to do all this.” He pointed in the direction of the Megacorp building.

“Yeah? Okay well whatever. It looks like you just paid off this little operation in one afternoon. As crazy as it sounds. I'll go hook up with Grejayne and see how this

takes care of things.” She carefully put the bag down on the floor and packed it in among her books. She wrote a quick note on a blank sheet and handed it to him. “This is my address. You can sleep in the barn for now and we’ll see how much this mewon goes for.” “Excuse me?!” He still kept to a whisper, but just barely. “The hell is this. I just hand you hundreds of dinars and you tell me to sleep with the hourdzes?” She gave him her usual smug look as she replied. “Clearly, you don’t know what good explosives cost these days.” She looked at him closer and must have read his anger because her condescending persona melted a little. “Look, you aint my friend and we aint goin steady or nuthing...but...I guess you’ve earned some respect Ritem.”

With that she walked away towards the door clutching the bags with all his earnings. He really felt like some country bumpkin now as he was left standing in the shadows. He was in some strange future town, he’d just given away hundreds of dinars worth of mewon, and now he had nothing but a piece of paper to guide him in this world. Feeling empty and dejected, he made his way among the last of the students towards one of the strange electric lamps so he could read the paper more easily. The woman had drawn a detailed map of the university buildings, the roads, and a thick circle where her place ostensibly was. Above it was a big smiley face which stood out in stark contrast to the

stony mask she normally displayed when they talked in person. The woman was such a crazy enigma, and he still didn't know if he could completely trust either of them.

He spent awhile meandering along the streets and getting a picture of the town so he wouldn't get lost again, before at last making his way to over to Frisha's place. The streets were quiet and only a few houses showed lights burning which made him think that in Krisha's neighborhood they must be too poor to have a lot of candles. If the alpha moon hadn't been three-quarters full, he'd have probably spent the whole night looking for the place.

“Hey boy!”

The tone of the voice set him instantly on his guard and he jumped back at the sight of a guy swinging a sharp piece of metal towards him. The blade barely missed him by more than one struam, but he quickly saw things go from bad to worse as he bumped into another man behind him.

“Whadya think Bratchun? Kid looks like easy pickins.”

“Hold onta him, let's see what's he got on him.”

Ritem struggled and fought, but the adults were too big for him.

“Kid aint got nuthin on him but a scrap 'o paper.”

Ritem tried to grab at it, but the other man was holding him too tight.

“Oooh, the little boy's got a girlfriend.” The guy sang

tauntingly as he looked. “Wait, hey. This is..”

The guy never finished what he was saying. Ritem felt a rush of air and the guy fell straight to the ground.

An instant later the man who'd been holding his arms pinned backed off several step.

“Hey man. We wuz just playin. Serious, look. Kid aint hurt or nuthin.

Grejayne stepped over the fallen guy's body and tapped the board menacingly into his other palm as smiled. “Yeah? An how'm I supposed to know that?”

“Yo Grejo. What's it to you? We're just mesin with some droob.”

“T'aint nun 'o yer business. Take a trip, yo.”

Feeling too shaken up to turn around, he listened to the sound of the other adult's footsteps fade away. He slowly looked at the adult, trying to discern what was going on behind the cold expression.

“Man, you gotta be the luckiest droob I ever met in my life. Caint fer the life of me imagine what the chances are of those guys jumpin you half a block from Frisha's place.” He paused and thought for a second. “Course the chick shulda been with-it 'nuf to warn you 'bout this street. Guess she was too distracted by all that mewan you had on ya.”

Finally he found his voice enough to speak. “Well, thanks Grejayne. You really saved my life.”

An explosion of laughter leapt from the guy's mouth then. “Yer life?! Ha. Those kids wouldn'a done more'n

rough you up and take anything they could sell. Man, good thing Krisha grabbed the mewon off you, er they'd probly 'ave taken it and ran."

"Um..well. Still, thanks for helpin me out."

The guy focused on him more closely now. "Yeah, well you can thank me by helpin take out MegaCorp. Nuthin else worth worryin about at this point. Now git yer antique keester over to Frishas. I aint yer damn bodyguard."

Feeling confused and incredibly relieved, he grabbed the paper off the ground and headed back the way he'd been going.

The house that the map led to was low and in a poor state of repair. Several pieces of siding were pulled away from the walls and the yard gate squeeked horribly when he went through. A candle soon appeared in front of the house and he heard a deep voice call out. "Who's there. Show your face now!"

Not being able to see who he was dealing with, he held up his hands. "My name's Ritem and Frisha said that I could stay here for a bit. Is this the right place?"

The person came closer and looked at him over the candle. The light gave him a haunted look like the starving people in the future land. But his tone quickly became relaxed. "Oh yeah. She said to expect you. Told me you paid for room and board right up front." The guy squinted at him again over the flame. "Mighty trustin of you boy." He kept looking at Ritem

for a few seconds more though. “Wow, you're young. You don't even look old enough to be in college.” The guy shrugged and stuck out a hand. “By the way, my name's Cermisd.” They shook hands and he followed the older boy up to the house. “There's still some porridge on the stove that yer welcome to. Frisha said none of us should have to worry about food for awhile thanks to your donation, so don't feel shy.” The smell of the porridge renewed his hunger and he attacked it as ravenously as the protesters had soaked up the punkrins.

Chapter Sixteen

There was little to do while he waited for the two adults to get the equipment. He went to classes during the day, making sure to keep his head down and go to different departments so that he wasn't noticed. Though the subjects were hard to understand, nearly all of them focused on various uses for kowl. Whether for heating, making the strange electric power, or driving great ocean ships the uses seemed limitless. It was clear that whoever controlled the kowl also controlled the people. But it was also clear to him that the entire focus of this school was to instill a dependence on it. A detail that he was sure Roquelfelie knew all too well. On the third day, he found one class that seemed to be

about designing buildings. The professor was standing at the board drawing a large box with a diagram next to it that wasn't familiar.

“Alright. We'll go over yesterday's midterm problem. You were asked to find the temperature that a five hundred square feet building could be heated to given 200 kilowatts of power and a building that's constructed of Douglas fir wood. First we calculate the heat differential created by the power and subtract the loss from the waste gases. We then take into account the temperature difference times the window area and we get...”

The man looked back at the class and pointed to a woman two rows in front of him. “Shantia, what did you get?”

After a brief silence, the woman's voice floated above the room. “Sir, I got 285 Kelvin.”

The professor offered an approving smile. “And that wouldn't be very warm, would it?”

Now there was no hesitation in the girl's voice. “No sir, it would be quite chilly.”

The professor continued. “So what would be the recommended solution to this problem...” He looked around and pointed in Ritem's direction. “You in the back.”

Ritem looked around him in panic. But he'd chosen a seat by himself, so there was no chance that the professor had called on someone else.

“Yes, you. What would you recommend?”

Ritem thought furiously. His own house was usually no warmer than that in the winter so he didn't think there was a reason to change this hypothetical problem.

“Come on young man.”

“Well sir. Our house usually is at 285 in the winter. It hasn't been a problem for us.”

The room soon filled with quiet chuckling which the professor quickly put an end to. “Young man, your name is?”

“Um...Ritem sir.”

“Okay Ritem. Now I'm sure we all enjoy a good chuckle now and then. But the classroom is not the place for it.”

He turned to another part of the room. “Moyard, what would *you* suggest?”

The boy who was called upon answered quickly. “Sir, if the amount of kowl available for heating was increased to 220 kill-graums then the building could be heated to a comfortable 295 Kelvin.”

“Much better.” The professor turned back to Ritem who's stomach sank again. “Young man, I expect you to have a more appropriate answer next time.”

The rest of the day he pondered over what had happened in the classroom. It wasn't just that these people were using the kowl for things like making electric lights work, they were becoming so dependant

on it that they actually laughed at the idea of enduring a little discomfort. The whole concept was crazy to him, especially after all that he'd seen.

Chapter Seventeen

They sat in the backyard on the last day and poured over a sheet of paper. Everyone was wearing black and Ritem had on a black jumpsuit that Krishna had given him. Grejayne labeled the last street and addressed them both proudly. “So I been watchin their guard situation. They don't seem too paranoid. Which is easy to guess since they own the whole police force. There's one guy who sits half asleep at his desk till an hour or so before sunrise when he wanders out and locks the door.

The building's damn huge, so I figure we want to know *exactly* where we're going beforehand.” He looked intently at Ritem once more. “You better be *completely* sure where yer goin for all the risk we be takin.”

Ritem was starting to see that the tough-guy attitude was how this clan worked. “Yo doof. Don't you get that I'll be stuck, just like you if this doesn't work?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” The guy then continued on and he felt like he'd finally learned to speak their lingo. “So what does the inside of that place look like?”

Ritem thought back to his first day here. His mind had

been on a thousand other things, so the memory was confused. “Well, there's this big oppulant lobby with a statue and magaz...”

“Yo, we don't need every detail, just rooms...kay?”

Ritem sighed and continued. “There's a big decorative stairway leading up to a landing. At each end of the landing there's a smaller stairway that probably goes all the way to the top floor. The hallway that I first saw was on the second level up...I think.”

“Yeah, well it sure as hell better be. Okay. So we'll take the truck, it's got a big wood beam strapped on the front, and ram through the door here.” He pointed to where the road made a 'T' in front of the building. It's gonna make a lot'a noise so there's no doubt we'll have cops racing in right quick. Now I'd bet my last mewan puff that he's got all the critical shit up on the top floor. Now thanks to your little 'contribution' I was able to get my hands on these.” He held up a glass bottle that wasn't filled with liquid but with some opaque powder.

“It may not look like much compared to what megacorps goons probably have, but we got a *whole bunch* of this fire powder. We'll spend the day filling every glass jar we can and putting a wick at the end. Then we just throw it at something and it explodes. Nice'n simple.”

Now the girl looked at him real serious. “Grejayne, are you *sure* about this? Did you test this stuff?”

He looked back at her with a mixture of surprise and anger. “What?! Of course I did. Took a tiny bit out to the woods with a fuse and set a metal pail on top. The thing launched as high as the lecture hall roof. Serious Frisha, the stuff's perfect.”

“So we just ram through the door, throw these mini-bombs around and jump through the portal?”

The guy seemed to be letting his ego do the talking.

“Well not exactly. Krisha is gonna guard the stairs while I bust apart the top floor, *then* we jump through this secret passage that *you're* gonna locate.” He pointed his finger square at Ritem's chest.

The girl put her hands on her waist and looked at Grejayne. “An how come you get ta see the big guy's office? *I'm* the one..found this droob.”

He fixed her with his usual cocky stare. “Cuz *I'm* the one that got the explosive...*and* the autocar, *and* put the plan together.” He looked as contented as a cat with a fresh mouse. “So let's start filling bottles. If we get done in time then we go tonight, if not then...we go tomorrow.”

They had some food and spent the afternoon filling all the bottles they could. Each one was sealed with wax and set carefully in crates. By the time they were done, at least six dozen bottles were packed in crates behind the house.

Chapter Eighteen

They moved the autocar slowly to within 40 meters of the building and watched carefully for the guard to leave. The minutes and hours stretched out interminably as they sat hidden against the side of a nearby building. Their breath was blowing in puffs of vapour by the time the electric lights went off and they saw a man pause by the door and walk away down the street. It took another ten minutes before Grejayne was willing to start up the autocar. The engine slowly sputtered to life and they roared down the street and right through the door. Glass shattered and expensive maypul flew like splinters as the cab pushed into the enormous lobby.

Grejayne was already looking around and spouting orders. “Quick! Get all the crates up on that landing. I'm guessing the stairwell we need leads up from that side of it. Ritem, once we got the crates moved, you run like hell for the bathroom and make sure we know how ta get outa here. Frisha, you keep an eye on the door and if any cops get past, then start chuckin bombs.”

Everyone moved like clockwork. In no time the crates were hauled up to the landing and the sounds of sirens could be heard far off in the distance. Ritem went as fast as he could up the stairs alongside Grejayne, only turning off two floors up. He found one door labeled

'men' and bounded through. It looked familiar enough, the big metal structure was there, and a slick white thing in the wall that went from stomach height down to the floor. He remembered the sink and felt around in the wall opposite. With increasing panic he felt all over the wall, the floor, he even grabbed a mop handle and poked at the ceiling. But every surface was stubbornly solid. With increasing terror he banged on every surface, but to no avail.

Now he began to wonder who would kill him first, Frisha, Grejayne, or the cops. With terror in his soul and head hanging low, he dragged 10 kilo feet out of the room only to face another doorway on the other side of the hall.

Of course! The women's room! He ran excitedly in and searched again, only to find his hopes dashed against the rocks once again. The room was as much of a dead-end as the last one. In mad desperation, he went down another flight and tried the bathrooms there. The men's room was another dead end. He wandered trance-like into the other women's room and almost fell down when his hand finally punched right through the wall. He found it!

He ran down to the landing to see Frisha laubing the bottles with a lit fuse on the end towards a group of men standing around their truck. The minute the bottle hit it's target a huge fire erupted. She barely favored him with a glance before shouting above the

explosion, “You find the way out?!”

“Yeah. It's just one floor above us. As soon as Grejayne finishes, we'll ditch!”

“So what the hell is taking that ads so long? These guys aint gonna just stand around waiting fer us!”

“I don't know.”

“Well, we're only gonna have enough of these little bombs for a few more minutes, so that droob better get his ads down here!”

A small explosion blew out a chunk of wall just above them as if to drive the point home.

It was several more minutes before they finally saw him. Ritem favored a glance and saw a stunned look on the man's face as he descended the stairs. All the confidence of the previous day were gone and the hulking man walked like a zombie towards them.

Before he quite reached the landing he spoke as if in a trance.

He looked not quite *at* Ritem, but kinda *through* him.

“Can't believe it....just can't..... In a million years...who coulda guessed that it's...” His words though soon were cut short by a lucky shot from one of the cops. Frisha saw it first and screamed in horror before the big man even fell to the floor.

“Oh my god no!!” She ran to the fallen man horrified.

“Ritem, you keep those goddamn fracks away!”

So Ritem concentrated on lobbing the bombs wherever he could see a cop, all the while praying that

this future nightmare of killing really *could* get written out of history. He reached down and fumbled for another bomb only to see the box down to four bottles. He threw one at the biggest group and shouted the situation Krisha.

“We've got to get outa here! There's only three bombs left!”

“No Ritem! We can't! We can't leave Grejayne. We just can't!!”

“Look, we're both gonna join him if we don't move it, and I mean NOW!” He wasn't sure if he could drag her along if she resisted. But the next shot just 15 straims above her head was enough. Ritem threw another bomb blindly towards the cops and they raced up the stairs. He lobbed another bomb back down the stairwell when they reached the top.

“This way!” He half dragged Frisha down the hallway and shoved open the door. She was still in shock, but it was starting to wear off.

Staring at the wall she turned to give him a sober look.

“So this is where it ends, huh?”

He didn't favor her with a response, just guided her into the spot where his hand had passed through the wall. They hurried through and found themselves crowded into the dirty hole.

“Hey, get your damn virgin hand offa me ya perf!”

They both hurried out of the hole and relished in the quiet and safety of the farm.

“My god, I can't believe he's dead.” With the panic subsiding, her eyes began brimming with tears. Not knowing what else to do, he hugged her and let the grief have its way for the time being.

She cried for a long time. Sometimes it seemed that she was pulling out and tried to speak, but then she would choke up again. He guessed that she was mourning not just Grejayne, but the loss of everything she knew. *That* at least was something he could empathize with.

Eventually though, her head rose and she was able to face him again. “What am I gonna do Ritem? He was the only guy in the whole town that could be trusted.” She looked around with scorn in her eyes. And now we're stuck here in the stone age.”

He tried to stay sympathetic, but the toughness had worn off on him. “Look, it may not be a world of autocars and electric lamps but at least we don't have Megacorp to deal with.”

“I don't know kid. I'm beginning to wonder if this might be worse.”

Chapter Nineteen

Since there was no reason to force her into the present right away, Ritem invited her to relax in the old playroom and he moved his things into the loft above the hourdz pens. She sat by herself in there for

several hours before he heard her call his name. By the look on her face, it looked like she was finally able to talk seriously again. Ritem guessed that she and Grejayne must've been dating or something.

“So what are you going to tell them about me?” They sat on a couple of short logs out next to the barn as the sun moved slowly towards the western hills.

Ritem sat thinking for several minutes before he answered. His voice was pensive and quiet. “Honestly I'm not sure. My dad's very smart, so we'd have to come up with something convincing.” He thought a little more and then looked straight at the woman.

“What were you studying at the university?”

Still looking sullen and with none of the fire that she'd had a week ago, she spoke slowly. “Well, I was studying medicine. So many people around the town were getting sick from all the crap in the water. I wanted to help the people who were being screwed over the most by Megacorp.”

“But what made you think that people were getting sick because of them?”

Instantly the tough-girl was back. “Oh come on droob. You think people get sick in all the places that Megacorp was tearing apart the ground and there isn't a connection? Maybe the professors can say it's all just coincidence, but I'm one-hundred-percent sure that it's cause of those adswholes.”

“Okay look. I didn't know that there was a pattern.

I'm sorry okay?" He softened his voice hoping to help her drop her shield again. "Look, if you've been studying this stuff, then you know a lot more than me. Plus you're older too. But think about it this way. Megacorp doesn't exist here. We don't have any kowl, and the water isn't poisoned."

She did soften her voice, but only a little. "Well...sure. But that doesn't mean it won't still happen in your...in our future. Geezkrishna this is confusing."

"I understand Krisha."

Barely a glance from her hardened eyes told him to change course.

"Okay check that. I *don't* understand. I've never gone back in time....given up all my friends." He purposely relaxed his face and risked putting a hand on her knee. "What I'm trying to say is....I'm here for you. I'm willing to be your friend, andhelp you find a place here."

"Alright droob. Well it doesn't look like I got much choice. Grejayne's dead, all the other people I know haven't even been born yet, hell I don't even know if this hair dye's even been invented yet. I guess....you're all I got."

She pulled away a little and once again stared with furrowed brows. "But I'll still knock yer block off if you try to touch me."

"Honest Krisha. I wouldn't try anything." He kept his hands up defensively, but then he saw her smile.

“Just kidding droob.” She punched him lightly in the shoulder and he left her to sleep for the night.

Chapter Twenty

“Ritem! Ritem where are you!” Shrik's voice floated down to where he was weeding the punkrins. His friend sounded panicked and he hurried off to see where the guy was. He found Shrik running over to him at top speed. But he wasn't coming from the south, he was coming from the direction of their own place.

“Shrik, what's wrong. Barely had he said the words when his friend came in sight. And what a sight he made. Shrik's shirt was torn and he had a giant bruise around his eye.

“Shrik, are you alright? Did you get kicked by one of the hourdz's?” He grabbed the boy by the shoulders and got him gently to the ground.

But in his excitement, Shrik was talking a mile a minute and it took a few seconds for things to clear up.

“The girl...woman...I swear I didn't see anything. Well, not much. But man, she hits just as hard as a hourdz would. Who...where on Nedune did she come from?!

Is she your girlfriend? But she couldn't be. Some..”

Ritem spoke very slowly and eventually got Shrik to look into his eyes. “Shrik my friend. Just tell me this. Are you alright? Are you hurt?”

“Well I...I don't think so. I...ow geezkrishna!” He rolled over onto his side a bit and Ritem looked him over as well as he could. “I think she got me in the keester, but I ran real fast.” He kept staring wide-eyed though. “Ritem, just who is that?”

“The name's Krisha ya little droob. And if I catch you peeping at me again, you'll get a lot more than just a kick in the ads. I'll give you something more permanent to remember me by.”

“Krisha! Come over here now!” He was seeing red and he didn't care right then what she thought of him. She sauntered over like a cat going after an injured mouse. “Well well, aren't we the forceful one today.”

“Krisha I want you to say you're sorry!”

“Wow, you really have lost yer marbles. You think I'm gonna....”

“Krish. He didn't know you were here and besides, he didn't deserve this!” He pointed a finger accusingly at Shrik's eye.

“All right, all right. Sorry for messing up yer little droob friend.”

He was still furious. He wanted to get her to say something nicer. But he guessed that was the most she'd give. So he switched gears and tried some diplomacy.

“I'm sorry we didn't tell you. Shrik, this is my friend Krisha. Krisha, this is my friend Shrik.”

“Hmmp. Can't exactly say it's a pleasure.”

“No more for me.”

“Ritem, where in the world did you find this....woman?”

“Ha. Where not in the world ya mean.”

Shrik's eyes grew big as saucers despite the bruise and his mouth opened and closed for a second. “Is....she one of those people on that....ship you talked about?”

“Nah way droob. I aint from that far forward.

Probably 120 years ahead of you. I was born in Kvichara. If ya don't know geography, that's about two day's ride from here by hourdz.

It took over an hour to go through the whole story with Shrik and convince him that Krisha really was from the future. But Ritem knew that he was the easy one. None of them yet had an idea of what to say to his parents. How could he explain a woman staying with him who was wearing perfectly fitting clothes, a belt made of a metal nobody'd ever seen before, and with that weird colored hair. The three of them went round and round throwing ideas like pollen into the air. Krisha and Shrik almost came to blows again, but she managed to keep from killing him....barely. The squabbling finally came to an end with a compromise that Krisha accepted with her usual grudging anger. Ritem prayed to all the gods that she could manage to be a better actress then a diplomat.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Good day young lady. How can I help you?” The tall man looked at the girl with just a hint of suspicion, but mainly with puzzlement.

“Good day to you. Is your name Kritar?”

Ritem watched carefully from a hidden spot in the bushes. He'd schooled Krish as much as he could, but now the woman was on her own. They'd cut off her hair (not without enormous protest) and given her some simple clothes that would help her blend in.

“My name is Krisha and I'm the apprentice to the medicine woman over in Kvichara. This is my time of wandering and I was told by a young boy named Shrik that the people here in this town might be in need of a woman with healing skills.”

“Well, it's certainly nice to meet you Krisha. It sounds like you were fortunate to run into Shrik. He's good friends with my own son and quite a smart young lad. We do have a healing woman who lives just down the road. But she's becoming old enough to have trouble reaching everyone. I imagine she could use the help of a strong young lady like yourself.”

“That sounds most agreeable.”

“Alright. Well I'm afraid that I still have to get our wagon repaired, but I'll see if my son can show you the

way to her farm. Give me a few minutes.”

Ritem had to quietly jog over near the barn to keep from giving away his hiding spot, but he managed to get far enough away by the time his father came around to the backyard.

Both of them feigned ignorance when his father introduced them and soon Krisha was following him down the road to Niposuhn who was the closest thing their village had to a doctor. The woman was older than his father even, and she always seemed nice. Ritem wasn't sure if the two of them would get along, but he did his best to smooth things over beforehand. “Krisha, I'm sure it's going to be pretty strange at first. No doubt the medicine of your time is a lot more advanced than it is here. But *please* don't lose your temper with her. You could teach us a lot about science and healing, but only if you don't arouse any suspicion.”

“Well, like you said droob. It doesn't seem like I have much choice. And hey, I probably know more than any professor here would, so I don't need to take any more o' them stupid college classes.”

They both laughed a little, but Ritem still worried about her.

Chapter Twenty-Two

He checked in with Krisha several times over the summer. The walk was a nice way to relax after the heat of the day was passed.

Whenever he visited, he brought a little bit from the fields, knowing that Niposuhn wasn't healthy enough to earn much food. Krisha was always grateful for his gift, but the stony mask always hovered just under the surface. She constantly reminded him of how much pain he would be in if he touched her, as if he needed reminding of that.

This day he found her out in the fields behind Niposuhn's place gathering plants. He waved hello when she looked up and she watched him approach with her usual cool disdain.

“What's up droob?”

As much as that frustrated him, the title wasn't one that he'd been able to get her to ditch, so he'd had to grudgingly accept it. “I brought you some trux.”

“Well well. Aren't we the little gentleman today.” But when she took the sack she put a hand on his shoulder. “Thanks.”

“How're you holding up here in the stone age?”

The woman fixed her eyes on the healer's cottage in the distance. “Well, it aint no party tha's fer sure.

Niposuhn seems to think these funny plants here have the same thing that we got in asprun back home. She

wants me to make a tea out of it and bring it to Ptolgren up the road who's got a sore back.” She took a second to sit down in the grass. “I tell ya, I don't know if the medicine here is merely primitive or if it's actually doing more harm than good. I'd just about kill right now for a microscope to get an idea of what's in some of these funky plants.”

“Well Krish. For as long as I've known her, Niposuhn hasn't lost a patient yet. And for 'the stone age' that's really saying something.”

“Sure, I guess. But I still miss Grejayne. I sure hope that one of us manages to find out how to stop Roquelfeliay back here. At least then his death won't be for nuthin.”

“Krisha, I'm behind you 100% on that one.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

The leaves were falling and he was hanging out with Shrik by the old mugila tree taking a break. The harvest wasn't quite done, but they were both exhausted from hauling punkrins all day.

“Hey, isn't that yer mate over there?”

Ritem's stomach sank half a dozen straums. Shrik was always referring to Krisha as his mate, even though she was at least 7 years older. He couldn't imagine what would bring her here during harvest season, but

he gathered that it wasn't good news.

“Ritem Ronningfield I can't believe you talked me into going back to this damn stone age!”

“I'll give you two lovebirds time to be alone.” The boy whispered as he got hurriedly to his feet.

“Coward!” He hissed in a loud whisper.

Shrik made no reply but threw a kissing gesture as he hurried off to his own parents' farm.

Meanwhile Ritem sighed and resigned himself to dealing with Krishna. He'd learned to keep his voice very calm and slow when she got into one of her tempers, which was nearly all the time.

“Alright Krish. What's the problem. I'm always here for you.”

Her mask fractured for a split second. “Yeah, I know.” Then she was holding her arms folded in front of her and staring at him fiercely. “That....that woman is nothing more then a witch-doctor!”

He very carefully and gently coaxed her to a sitting position so she could hopefully calm down (though he'd learned from experience that this was hit or miss).

“You know what that woman did this morning?! She gave moonshine to a man with a raging fever! I mean the stuff's not too bad for a buzz. But anyone with half a brain knows that you don't dehydrate a man when they have a fever! And two days ago, she tried to fix a woman's broken leg with two sticks! I mean they don't

even know about surgery out here! Geezkrishna, they use leaves and booze more often than they use actual medicine!”

“Alright Krish. Please calm down. You can't expect to bring medical science a century into the future right away. People have to be led into it slowly.”

Instantly she was on her feet again pacing. “But Ritem. These people could die! We're not talking about hourdz-drawn wagons or the ridiculousness of using candles. We're talking about actual lives!”

He thought furiously for a minute, hoping to come up with something helpful. Finally, he put his hands slowly on her shoulders. “Krish. Try to think about it this way. In your own time these people have been dead for a century. Whether you save a life or not, your talking about people who would've died *anyway*. Even the tiniest thing you do will be of enormous help to them.”

He wasn't sure what to expect. He figured she'd probably get mad, or maybe just stomp off. But her reaction was, unquestionably the most unexpected thing he could ever have imagined.

With tears running down her cheeks, she collapsed on his shoulder and wept for a long while. At first he didn't know what to do. The iron maiden who barely even let him touch her knee and still called him a droob, was crying on his shoulder like his sister used to do sometimes. But then she shocked him even

more, if such a thing were possible.

Pulling back, she stared intently into his eyes and looked serious again. “You know Ritem I don't think anyone here, even Shrik, has the level of genius that you do. I've met brainiacs before, and lotsa the professors were smart of course. But you...you've got people skills. You know how to calm down someone's frustration, even mine, better then anybody. I actually do feel a little better. Not great of course. But....well I think I can deal.” Then she gave him a very long hug that made his stomach turn over.

Chapter Twenty-Four

During the next year, they had similar conversations half a dozen more times. Ritem was sure that this was the most difficult thing that she'd ever been through. Even worse then watching those cops murder Grejayne. This was up close and personal for her on a daily basis. And try as he might, Ritem could never quite understand it. For him, this was normal. People lived, they got sick, they died. He'd never heard of surgery before, or antiseptic practices, or other things that Krisha talked about. But one thing he did know, she was smart *and* she was skilled. This both impressed him and also scared him. The latter because she was not much older then him but with a

century of knowledge to draw from. He wasn't at all confident that she'd be able to hold back enough to keep from being seen as some kind of magician.

His question was finally answered one spring day when Krisha stomped up to his spot under the tree in her usual tough girl manner. But this time he could see that she was different. Krisha wasn't wearing her healing robe and she didn't have anything with her. She looked deeply at him and he could see the war going on behind her eyes. Like clouds passing in front of the sun she would look furious for a second, then sad, and then furious again. Her hands were working with almost as much emotion as her eyes. They gestured, then stopped, and finally they were trembling.

“Ritem, I....I'm sorry but I'm leaving.”

The anvil fell on his head and knocked him cold.

“Look. You did your best, I'll give you that.”

She wasn't the tough girl anymore now. She was just a sad and scared adult and he was just a scared boy.

This time he could see clearly that there was no talking her out of it, but he hoped against hope to come up with something.

“But where else could you go? All the towns here have the same technology. It wouldn't get better if you went to Medria or Kolinsker.”

She shook her head and her auburn hair flew out in a

storm around her. “I don't mean to go to any of those places.” She looked serious again. More serious even then when they'd been planning the attack on Megacorp. “I'm going through that hole.”

The other shoe finally dropped. “But...you can't!”

“I can, and I will. Nothing you say is gonna stop me.”

She was back to being the tough girl and Ritem ran circles in his mind trying to figure a way out of this. It wasn't until she finally said it that the reality sank in.

“But you can't because...”

Now her brows furrowed and she looked at him with furry. “Don't! Don't you bloody dare say it.”

“Because I love you.”

“Geezkrishna Ritem! I told you not to.”

“You told me not to because you feel the same way.”

“No way! You're just some droob helped me deal with some outa this world crazy shit. Don't be an ads.”

He could see that it would be too much to get her to admit it, so he let her win. “Alright, alright. If you say so.” Still, he thought furiously to come up with a plan to keep from losing her.

“I'm sorry Ritem. There's nothing you can say this time.”

“But Krish. If that thing goes to an earlier time on each trip, you might just get sent a couple years into the future. It might not make the slightest difference...”

“And it might make a whole hell of a big difference.

Look, I just don't know unless I try.”

“Unless, we try.”

Her eyes opened wide and she pushed him away, hard.

“Oh no Ritem. No... you ...don't. Don't you dare start gettin into this we belong together crap!”

Now he saw where her fears were coming from. “Oh, I didn't mean that Krish. I'm not talking about that 'follow you to the end of time' junk. But think about it. I spent a week in your time, and it was only a few hours back here. We could explore wherever that thing leads to and I'd still get back here in time to help finish the harvest.”

Finally, he saw her face relax. It wasn't as good as having her stay in Ulak, but he was willing to risk a trip through once more if it meant that they could stay together awhile longer. Not that he wasn't scared to heaven and back of course.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Geezkrishna, maybe it'll be me that invents the electric bulb or somethin.” With that, she disappeared into the strange block and against his better judgement, Ritem followed her.

The room was very dim, just like the ghost town and he felt lost for a second until he heard Frisha's voice.

“Hold it, I think this is a light switch.”

Ritem saw something flash before his eyes and Frisha crumpled to the ground next to him. The next instant he threw himself at the attacker without really understanding what was going on. It took a minute or so of struggle before he registered the man's face.

“Shrik!” There was no mistaking it. Older yes, and with several days stubble but it was definitely Shrik. He'd been holding a thick board which he dropped in the struggle.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?!”

“Listen, sorry about this boy, but I just can't let this continue any longer.”

In panic he saw the man's hands reach for his throat. It felt like a horrible dream that he couldn't get out of. Everything seemed to slow down in a weird way as this older version of Shrik slowly wrapped his hands around his neck.

“Shrik wait! Don't you see who I am?! It's Ritem! Don't you know your own best friend? It's Ritem, from Ulak.”

In an instant, the man's arms lost all their force and he was able to get his own hands free and back away.

“Holy...mother of god! It really is you. But...how?”

“Nevermind that, Krisha's hurt!” He hurried over to her and felt his stomach do sommersaults as he gazed at her still body. He couldn't tell what was wrong, and the only person who had any medical training was the

woman who was knocked out. He remember she'd talked about blood movement and some other weird stuff. He held a finger near her neck and then felt around her heart. He praised the sun and the stars when he finally detected a faint rhythm.

“She's alright. Help me get her to the bed.”

“Geezkrishna Ritem, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt anyone else. Man, I never woulda guessed. I...I'm sorry.”

“What do you mean, 'anyone else?' Who were you attacking?”

Shrik looked at the floor a long time before he answered. “I was going after Roquelfeliay III.”

Suddenly he remembered. “Oh my gosh. The letter! The one you wrote to Kaya.”

“Ritem, how on Nedune could you know about that? I took every possible precauti..”

“Shrik. I found it in the future. In your...um her future.” He quickly summarized his trip to the 'shrine' which he'd kept secret up till now.

“Oh, so you knew about Kaya and I...” He saw a whirlwind spinning along Shrik's face. “Well it doesn't matter anymore. I'll never gaze into her gorgeous eyes again...”

Now it hit him like the kick of a hourtz. “So this was a suicide trip. You never actually *expected* to survive at all. Geezkrishna Shrik. I never really believed it could be true.”

Shrik's head fell and his eyes drilled holes in the floor.

“No Ritem. You must understand, there are some things that are bigger than she and I...”

“Are you kidding?! Of course I understand!”

“Ritem...I...”

“Shrik, remember *I'm* the one that saw the whole of Nedune turned into a wasteland. *I'm* the one that saw the starving men in the street!”

His thoughts were interrupted by Shrik grabbing his shoulders and shaking him. “Ritem, will you just shut the heck up for a second! This is important, and we're not going to have much time. Listen. You're also the one...”

A high-pitched scream shattered the silence. They both looked over to see someone staring at them from the open doorway.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Oh my god! There's a murderer!”

The woman was older, about his parent's age, wearing an ornate dress and expensive earrings that flew out from her head as she spun around to address someone out of sight. He couldn't see who the woman spoke to. But her tone of voice said that things were becoming very dangerous. With the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps, Ritem felt Shrik's hand shove

him towards the doorframe where the two of them had first appeared. Instantly grasping his meaning, he frantically felt around for the opening just as two hardened men appeared in the doorway.

Ritem's hand pushed through the opening a split second after an explosion ripped into Shrik. He stared horrified as the man's chest sort of caved in and his mouth opened in shock. The last sight he saw was a spray of blood fly towards the wall and land on a beautiful white cloth.

Without even a conscious thought, he dove into the opening and was back in the hole. But barely had he made it through, before a hand reached through behind him and got hold of his ankle. The sudden silence was eerie as he couldn't hear anything from the other side, but the pain of the vice-like grip on his leg was more than enough to convey the killer's meaning. With one foot planted against the dirt, he frantically looked around for anything to keep from being this horrible man's next victim. With his leg painfully slipping back towards the strange wall, he finally grabbed a stone and slammed it against the massive hand over and over until finally the grip from the bloody hand faded. He scrambled back to the surface just as the man's vicious face pushed through. In a panic now, he threw handfuls of dirt into the hole with all his strength. Over and over he threw the soil into the hole until there was nothing left to be seen of

the face or the strange pale material. Without stopping, he jumped up and down on the spot with all the force he could muster. Nothing could penetrate his mind but the lone thought of burrying that horror for the rest of eternity.

When the hand fell on his shoulder, he swung around and threw his fist blindly with last shred of strength he had.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Hey, hey! What's gotten into you?! It's me remember? Shrik...your friend....at least I think I am.” For a second he just stared blankly at the boy who he'd just seen murdered. Then with his strength evaporated, he collapsed into Shrik's arms. He couldn't think straight and his body shook with sobs and his mind flip-flopped as he struggled to rejoin the present.

“Well....uh....it's good to see you too. I guess.”

Several minutes passed before he could manage to stand on his feet and stare back at the boy.

“Ritem, what on Nedune has happened to you?! You look like you've been fighting in a war or something.” His expression became serious then. “Did you go back to one of those starving future places?”

Finally, very slowly, Ritem regained control of himself

and was able to sink down to the ground, motioning Shrik to sit next to him. He looked very seriously at his friend before he could finally form the words in his mouth. “Shrik. I...I just saw you get murdered.” Now it was his friend's turn to lose control. “You what?!! Whadya mean? How the hell could you see me get killed when I'm sitting here next to you?” “It was that other place. That....future place. You were an adult.”

Now the boy looked at him more seriously. “You know Ritem, this whole thing sounds like some kinda two-bit paperback. But the way you're reacting, man I aint never seen someone look as scared as you did just now.”

Ritem wished that he'd thought to bring something back with him. Something that would prove to Shrik that it wasn't just some made-up story. But as it was, he'd barely escaped with his life. Another second and he might never have come back at all.

“Shrik, I realize you don't believe me. That...that's what the older you said also.” He waved his friend aside when Shrik looked ready to interrupt.

“Look, it doesn't matter. As terrifying as that future is, I've got to do something. You, um the older you, told me that you were planning to kill Roquelfeliay III before he could become too powerful to be stopped. But that failed. And it failed because I got in the way. There's no denying it anymore. I'm the only one who

can stop this before it's too late.”

“But you...do you mean to say you're going to....*kill* him?! Kill an adult?” Shrik had grasped his shoulders and was shaking him. You CAN'T Ritem! That's murder!”

Until the words had actually been spoken, he hadn't quite appreciated the gravity of it all.

“Murder.” He whispered the words, almost reverently. Could he do it? Could he actually take another huemean's life? He thought back to the horrors he'd seen, the devastated landscapes and the starving half-dead people. Finally he realized that he didn't have a choice. He'd never be able to live with himself if he allowed it all happen.

Now, finally, he understood what had driven the older Shrik to try and murder Roquelfeliay's son. The monsters had to be stopped....at any cost. With an almost serene disconnect, he pushed Shrik's hands down. “Shrik, you don't understand. That man is going to put events in motion which will destroy the lives of every huemeanbeen on the planet. What is one man's life...his or mine, compared to that?”

Shrik looked dumbstruck, the boy's cool confidence was gone, as was his innocence. “You're....really serious. This isn't a prank.”

“Krishnamuerta I wish it was man. And there's a good chance that I wont come back this time. But...” He took a deep breath as the thought of that sank in.

“There's too much at stake here for me to shy away from this.”

They just looked at each other for several minutes, both of them unable to think of an appropriate response. Finally Shrik managed to find his voice. “So...um...how would you do it? What would you use?”

Shrik's acceptance went a long way towards cementing his own resolve and Ritem began listing off and then rejecting each option in his mind. “Well this Roquelfeliay is powerful right? He's also an adult. So it wouldn't be possible for someone my age to overpower him physically. I'd have to find some kind of weapon.”

“Ritem, we're not living in war-torn Cerbenika. This is Ulak. We don't keep stockpiles of weapons laying around”

“Well, I'll have to look. And if we can't find one here, then I'll have to figure out a way to steal one.” He looked intently at his friend. “We're talking about the future of our whole planet Shrik. Millions of huemeans lives are riding on this.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

With a final wave of the hand, his mom closed the door and he breathed a sigh of relief. She'd tried in vain to get him to join her in her weekly hike over to Norma's farm, but he'd managed to convince her that he had a headache and would need to stay in bed. At first she'd accused him of just being lazy and trying to get out of chores, but he managed to be convincing enough. Now he listened carefully to the sounds of their gate creaking shut.

With his father running some kind of errand in town, he figured it was safe to do some thorough searching for a weapon of some kind. He started in his parents room, then the cellar, and finally he climbed up into the attic. The last was filled with old machines and parts. A broken spinning wheel that his dad was planning to fix, a spare harness for the hourdz, a suit packed carefully into a cedar chest.

He was covered in dust and exhausted when he finally spotted something small and rectangular under a hat box. He pulled out the box and gazed at the faded grain of the oiled wood. The anticipation took hold and finally he unlatched the lid and opened it.

His eyes practically jumped out of his head as he stared at an old, but functional revolver. It's barrel gleamed with a thin sheen of oil and there was a small

pack of cartridges packed in next to it. But his next glance finally sent his heart leaping into his throat. Engraved into the wood were the letters 'K. Roquelfeliay.' His arms lost all their strength and the box fell clattering to the attic floor. There it was...the name which had struck terror and dread into the hearts of millions. But who was he? And how did his pistol end up in their attic? The thing was horribly confusing. Now finally, he'd found the solution he was looking for, but it only made the puzzle more complex. With a shake of his head, he finally made up his mind. The only thing that mattered was stopping Roquelfeliay. Everything else, even the origin of the weapon, was secondary.

With shaking hands, he put the cartridges back in the box and carefully closed the latch. He climbed down and was just putting the ladder away when he heard the door close. Panic gripped him as he raced towards his room. But the hallway was too exposed and from the corner of his eye he saw the outline of his father. "Stop!"

Chapter Twenty-Nine

He was sure it was too late, but he knew that everything was riding on this. And of course his father wouldn't understand...couldn't understand. Despite his better judgement, he bounded towards his bedroom door.

“Ritem Morris Ronningfield you stay right where you are!”

His brain ran at a mile a minute. What would his father say if he saw the gun? How could he explain that the future of everyone they knew was hanging on his shoulders? He had to do something, anything! But despite all his strategizing, his mind was as paralyzed as his body. He felt like those animals they would trap at the edge of the woods.

Footstep by footstep his father's frame moved towards him. And with each step, Ritem's hopes fell further and further.

It wasn't until the man was within arms length that he looked straight at Ritem and said only two words.

“Show me.”

Still he hesitated. If his father saw, there would be no going back. And he knew it.

Now the man's face flushed. “Ritem, I will not ask you again.”

With shaking hands, he fumbled and finally the precious box crashed to the floor. The silence was

shattered as completely as his own future was. They stared at each other for an aeon. Ritem in fear, and his father in shock. Ritem couldn't stop trembling now, not just in fear of his father's anger, but in the hopelessness of knowing that his last chance to stop Roquelfeliay was rolling around uselessly on the floor. "Into the den. Now." The words carried no emotion. His father's expression was now a blank wooden board. With hunched shoulders and his stomach dragging between his knees, he trudged the kilometer-long hallway to their den.

"Sit."

They both sat in chairs facing each other. It was a mental showdown between them. An eternity went by with neither of them moving body or tongue. Finally his father's mouth parted. "Ritem, I'm only going to ask you once. What were you doing with that box." He scanned an encyclopedia in his mind, searching for any words that would do.

"I...I can't say. I..."

"Ritem. Seeing you with that...it scares me, terrifies me right to the core. This is more serious then you can possibly imagine."

"Oh, I'm sure I can." he barely whispered it. But the words carried far in the stillness of the day.

"What on Nedune does that mean? Ritem, I insist that you explain yourself."

But try as he might, Ritem was paralyzed. His mouth

opened and closed with an almost mechanical quality. He gave a blank stare as he struggled to regain control of his own body. Then, in abject desperation, he played the only card that he had. “Who is Roquelfeliay?”

“Ritem, this is you that we're talking about. Don't try and change the subject.”

Finally, like the click of a trigger, his tongue managed to obey his mind again. “Dad I can't answer until you tell me about Roquelfeliay. It's more imp...more important than anything else on the face of Nedune, please....you've got to believe me.”

The man's eyes bored into him for another eternity. But his father's apparent uncertainty managed to strengthen Ritem's own resolve. “Believe me dad, I'd never contemplate taking something like that if it weren't such a gargantuan crisis.

And with a long slow exhale, he knew that he'd won. “Alright son. I guess you're old enough to hear the truth. I was going to have to tell you soon enough anyway.”

Ritem scooted to the edge of the chair as his father continued.

“Son, I've done the best that I could to provide for you and your sister, but it didn't come easy. Before I met your mother, I was a....a rogue...a thief....a criminal. I swindled people out of thousands of dinars. I'd never learned any real skill and this was something that I

managed to pull off damn well. It even earned me enough to put some money down for this farm. But when your mother and I decided to get married....well. I just couldn't face the possibility of raising a family with such a shameful past. So I changed my name from Roquelfeliay to Ronningfield, a nice plain name. I had hoped that it would spare you and your sister from having to live down the reputation that came with my sordid past. But now...seeing you clutching that box, and clearly hoping to deceive me. Well, I'm sure you can understand how scared I am at the thought of you following in.....”

It took a long moment for him to grasp what his father was saying. Once again his mouth worked open and closed, his whole body trembled and he almost collapsed from the weight of it.

“Good lord! You...we....I. *I* am a Roquelfeliay?!!” He shot up and paced the room. There *had* to be another explanation. Maybe it was a joke. Maybe Shrick had gotten to his father hoping to keep him from doing something rash. He paced the floor in circles mumbling and muttering. His mind worked furiously. It couldn't be...it simply couldn't! Could dad have found out somehow? Was he doing this to protect him somehow? No, that was impossible. But nothing made any sense.

Finally his father had to come over and physically

grab him by the shoulders. The big man got down on one knee and stared straight into his eyes. His face was devoid of all color and the fear that he saw only served to exacerbate Ritem's own terror.

“Son. There's more to it then that....isn't there.” His eyes once again stared deep into Ritem's soul. “Son, what is it that you're not telling me. I....I wont get angry with you...whatever it is, I swear.”

This was the moment of truth. His father had already spilled his own secret. Now it was Ritem's turn. But this story made his father's look like a sand pebble by comparison. He looked back carefully at his father and saw the older man's face soften. He led Ritem back to the chair and took his hand. “Whatever it is son....I'm sure that we can get through this together.” Finally, praying that his father wouldn't think that he'd lost his senses. He spilled the whole thing. The ship in space, the starving men and women, the stolen jems, the university where they taught about kowl, the fields ripped apart by the machines, and finally the sight of Shrik being murdered. Recounting the last part sapped his little remaining strength and, like before, he fell sobbing into his father's arms. He didn't know what would happen now, didn't know if he'd ever be considered sane again.

For a long while his father just held him and stroked his back, like he'd done years ago. But it wasn't until his father pushed him away at arms length and stared

again into his tear-streaked eyes that he finally saw the compassion show in his father's eyes.

“Ritem. I must say, you tell one heckova story.” He opened his mouth to protest, but his father put a finger over it.

“Let me continue. If you hadn't mentioned burrying those jems at the edge of the field, geezkrishna I never would've believed you. It was always a mystery how that one stash of precious stones could've been in the field without anyone else having come upon them.”

The man let go of him and reached into his pocket.

“Ritem, I used the money from those stones to pay off my sordid past and to put the final payment on this farm. But...there's something else that I was going to tell you. I was saving this for your ascension ceremony. In digging around that spot and looking for any more jems, I came upon this strange rock. It was blacker then any rock I had ever seen and when an ash from my pipe accidentally fell on it, the whole thing lit up and began to burn. Well let me tell you, as somebody who'd never seen a stone burn, I was mighty intrigued. I took a piece of it to the university out north and asked one of the chemists to look at it. The man I spoke to said that it resembled something in one of his books. The man dug around for awhile and found this volume that mentioned a people called the Haya who used to smelt iron. Their legends spoke of a material that burned like charcoal, but was not made

of wood. He told me that a fuel source such as I had found would have enormous value.

Ritem, I swear to you that I was thinking only of your future and well-being. I spent the last of the money from the stones founding a company called MegaCorp and financing the equipment which would help extract this kowl from the field more efficiently.” The man pulled out the envelope that he'd been holding and handed it over.

Ritem slowly and with trembling hands, opened the envelope before pulling out the official-looking papers. At first he couldn't read it his hands were shaking so hard. It wasn't until he let the paper sit in his lap and wiped his eyes for the hundredth time that he could make out the words.

“On this date 17th of Tishre 962, Ritem Roquelfeliay is in full ownership of MegaCorp and all equipment listed below. In addition, Megacorp and Mr. Roquelfeliay alone are in possession of the patent for extraction and distribution of the kowl located at 19145 Mabel lane. Any resources on or beneath the surface of said property are the exclusive possession of Megacorp and the Roquelfeliay family.”

As he finished, Ritem saw that now it was his father's hands which were trembling. The shock of it all left him completely speechless.

“I'm sorry son. There's no way I could've known what

all this would lead to.”

Conclusion

Ritem and his father sat in the cold yard staring at the endless expanse of stars. With his father giving him silent encouragement, he took over the task. He set a small pile of sticks inside an old tin pail. Once he'd gotten a steady flame started, he tossed in the legal papers and watched as dozens of tiny burning embers rose into the sky to join their comrades above. He was about to throw in the pen from the megacorp building as well. But then he saw it just disappear in his hand. He stared at his empty hand for several minutes. As they watched the flickering light turn the paper into black wisps his father put an arm around his shoulders and finally he knew without a doubt that, at long last, everything would work out okay.

The end