

“Escape”

A door slammed and locked somewhere else in the vessel. A young man attempted to sleep on a top bunk in an insignificant quarter. The bunk was one of thousands just like it crammed into tiny accommodations throughout the vessel. He could have sworn the door was in the next cabin over, but because of the vessel's unique design, sounds traveled farther than one might think. Pierce Donnelly turned over and squinted to see the alarm clock that sat on the desk a few feet across the cramped residence. The red digits read, “5:34 PM.” As he shifted in the bunk the springs squeaked and he worried he would wake his sister sleeping on the bunk below him. Nora Donnelly was several years younger than Pierce, but the world they lived in had made them both much older than they should have been. Pierce had turned twenty a few months earlier and Nora's sixteenth birthday was in four months. Their shift at the plant would come soon and, so he needed to stay quiet. She needed all the sleep she could get.

Seven in the evening came much too quickly for the Donnelly siblings. They reluctantly got themselves out of bed and dressed for the night's work. They trekked their way through the complex labyrinth of the vessel's narrow corridors without much thought. They had made this walk from their quarters to the site where the bus picked them up everyday for the past three years. It took them nearly an entire hour to work their way from their quarters to the vessel's south exit. They both had straight unclean brown hair and could not remember the last time they were allowed to bath. Clean clothes were an ever-rarer occurrence. They wore tattered and dirty overalls along with thin yellow t-shirts.

As they walked through the passages, Pierce noticed his sister looked more pale than usual and her cheeks more sunken in. She needed a good nights rest and a decent meal soon or she would not make it to her birthday. He told himself today he would speak to the section chief and demand his sister have these things. This might mean a torching for him, but perhaps they would not want to loose a good worker like Nora and they would give her extra rations.

Just outside the south exit was a small dirt gathering area, where a gravel road went off in both directions away from the area. In the darkness of the night, they could not see more than a few feet in front of them. Although some light from the exit filled the space, it was purely black in all other directions. The Donnellys emerged from the damp cool atmosphere of the vessel into the humid night air. Almost immediately, they began to feel themselves perspire. This was going to make tonight's shift that much more grueling. Twenty other people of varying ages, sexes and races exited the vessel and bunched around each other. Each of them wore similar attire and each looked severely malnourished. From down the gravel road headlights from the bus appeared and soon after the rumble of the diesel engine filled the clammy air. Most did not turn their defeated gazes up from the ground toward the approaching bus.

Nora did, as always. She held the idea tightly in her heart that one day the driver of the bus was not going to take them to the plant, but take them away from all of this horror. He would take them back to the days before the war, before the devastation and enslavement. Back to the days her grandmother use to tell her about. Of course, this was not the case. The doors of the bus swung open defiantly at her dream and the same small framed man from the past three years of hellish nights sat in the driver's seat. He did not

turn his eyes from the road ahead. In the seven years he had drove this route he had not made eye contact with any of the workers. On his first day, he had made the mistake of looking into the eyes of a young boy as he boarded the bus. The utter defeat he saw in the boys eyes stopped his heart from beating and his body from drawing breath for an eternity in a moment. He had never seen such pain and anguish in the eyes of a person so young. The driver broke down and began to sob. After several minutes of uncontrolled weeping, he managed to right himself and continued with the route. Once at the plant the workers were punished for arriving late. The driver decided on that day he would go mad if he saw eyes like that again, so he has not looked at one since.

After the last of the workers boarded the bus, the driver shut the door and drove down the road away from the vessel. The drive from the vessel to the plant was no longer than half an hour. The barren land of what was formerly knows as Mexico stretched out into the darkness on both sides of the bus. The Hesh called this area Neg Parltur, but the humans simply called it the wasteland. It was nearly 8:30 in the evening when they arrived at the large warehouse where they would labor away for the next twelve hours. As they filed out of the bus another shift stood in a huddled cluster of defeat and sorrow. Most of them looked ready to drop dead from exhaustion and famish. They would be crammed back on the bus and taken back to the vessel for a four-hour rest and ration, then they would return to be put back on the line.

The Donnellys and the other arrivals move quickly across the short path toward the massive building. It stood almost seven stories above them and stretched out a hundred yards in either direction. The constant and deafening roar of the machines housed inside could easily be heard outside. As they passed through the large doors to

the operating floor, the machine rumble doubled in intensity and the temperature rose an easy twenty degrees. On a cool day in winter, the shop floor was a concentrated ninety degrees Fahrenheit. On a night like that, the temperature was easily at one hundred and twenty degrees or more. Individuals peeled off from the group quickly toward their positions on the line. The assembly lines ran all day and all night, the section where the Donnelley's worked only halted twice a day and only for exactly thirty seconds. This was so one shift had time to move out of the way to be quickly replaced. If the exchange was not made within that moment the line would become compromised and then would have to be reset. An action like that was worthy of a harsh torching or even death, depending on the amount of time loss.

Pierce's spot on the line was only a few steps from the entrance. He had always felt lucky because there was occasionally a breeze from the large doors kept open all year round. Nora's spot was not so lucky. It was three rows deep into the belly of the work floor and down that row several dozen more feet. There the workers were incased in the heat, stagnant air and vociferous noise of the interior of the plant. As marked by the massive speakers installed high up in the rafters of the plant, a familiar female voice commanded, "Time to assembly halt: ten seconds."

Pierce stood patently behind the woman who worked his position on the opposite shift. She was an older woman probably in her late sixties, although it was hard to gage age anymore. A woman two generations ago could possibly be looking forward to approaching retirement. Now all she had to look forward to was a quick and painless death. The voice above echoed, "Halt". The seventeen assembly lines stopped suddenly upon the voice's word. Although the halting of those lines subtracted from the noise of

the plant, it did not send a wave of silence throughout the floor. There were still other machines running and the constant roar of the turbine engine that powered the massive plant was always a constant. It did however make it possible to hear the person next to you talking without them having to yell. The voice from above continued to speak and began a countdown, "Thirty seconds to restart. Thirty, twenty-nine.

Across the floor Nora went up to the man she had replaced everyday for the past three years. He turned with tears in his eyes, not an uncommon sight but not usually one seen at the end of a shift. She had never spoken to the man she replaced each day and did not even know his name. If perhaps she had known anything about the man, anything at all, she might have been able to say something to quell his fears. Though she knew in her heart there were no words to do that, not for anyone. Over the speakers, the count down continued: twenty-seven, twenty-six, twenty-five. Nora attempted to move past the man to get to the line, but he would not move. She motioned for him to get out of the way, but he remained firmly planted. He glanced up toward the offices about three stories up. Nora could not be sure, but it was almost as if he had a small smile on his frayed face. The descending numbers continued: twenty, nineteen, eighteen, seventeen. Panic began to fill Nora's mind and she spoke, "What are you doing? You have to move, please!"

Nora moved closer to the man, placed her hand on his shoulder and attempted to move him from his lodged position. She pushed with all she had, trying to coax out strength she had not had for months. The man did not move at all and then turned his smeared face toward her and spoke softly, "I am sorry." She stopped attempting to push him and backed away slowly as the man revealed a small revolver from his overalls. The barrel pointed at Nora and she instinctively put her hands up to show she meant no harm.

The voice above was ending her count: eight, seven, six, five. The man turned the barrel of the gun from Nora to himself. The tip of the barrel sat firmly against his forehead. Nora stood frozen, not knowing what to do. Fear had paralyzed every inch of her body. The voice above said, “two” and then, “Assembly start.” The ring of the revolver as it ignited the bullet and charged down the barrel to impact the man’s head was immediately followed by the bellow of the lines coming back online.

Pierce had quickly traded places with the woman whose spot on the line he shared. She had moved slowly but efficiently away and had left the plant through the large doors just behind them. Pierce’s task on the line was to place a small silver cylindrical ring over a protruding pole that was attached to a small cube. The cube housed a complex interior of gears and other mechanical mechanisms. As the cubes went on past him they would get more parts and eventually be transformed from dozens of separate pieces into the main drive shaft for Hesh vehicles. Pierce had placed four of the cylinders when a siren went off somewhere in the center of the plant. Then another siren went off until the air was filled with competing sirens when the voice from above said, “Emergency Assembly Halt.”

The lines stopped quickly after the echoed voice commanded them to. Everyone looked around in confusion and concern. No one dared move so that they would be in place when the lines came back online. Almost two entire minutes passed. It was the longest Pierce had ever seen the line down at one time. Down the line Pierce noticed that everyone’s attention had turned over their left shoulders. He took a step back from the line to get a better look; coming toward the main door area was a group of four Hesh soldiers.

The soldiers were large for Hesh, a little over 5 feet tall. Their pale skin sat in stark contrast to the brown Lorst Ret uniforms they wore. Pierce could not make out who, but they seemed to be leading a worker toward the doors. He thought that someone must have not gotten to his or her place in line in time and that is why the line had to be shut down. If that was the case, the person they were leading toward the main doors was going to be punished for all to witness. As the soldiers grew closer to the doors, Pierce could see that the worker was a woman, but still could not see her face.

A few moments later the worker was in plain sight. Pierce's mouth fell open, and his heart sank. The worker being led by the soldiers was Nora. Pierce's mind raced; how could this be? Nora was an obedient worker; she would never have missed the switch window on purpose. This has to be a mistake and he had to do something about it, but what? If he tried to stop them they would just torch the both of them. Probably more harshly than the torching Nora was about to receive. The four soldiers stopped a few feet from Pierce and put Nora on her knees.

The soldier facing the door turned toward Nora, he had a look of hate in his wide black eyes. It was a rare occurrence to see a Hesh without sunglasses on, but in the darkness of the plant at night they did not need them. From a holster strapped to his thigh, he pulled out a torch. The torch was what the humans called the long cylindrical device the Hesh used to beat a race into submission. It fit perfectly into the palm of the wielding Hesh. The muted black metallic casing was two feet long, two inches in diameter and ended in a spiral of small rings. With a flick of his wrist, the soldier ignited the device. Heating the rings with a special heat the tip was consumed in a bright blue light.

The Hesh called the torch device a Greb, it was developed two million years ago to keep the first slaves of the Hesh in line. While the Hesh were in self-imposed exile they had little use for the device, but since they had reclaimed the Earth, they had much opportunity to use the awful tool. The intense heat emitted from the tip of the torch was compared to that of the heat produced by the liquefying of steel. That degree of heat applied directly to human flesh would leave nothing but charred remnants if not controlled such as it was by the torch. The torch had the astonishing and malevolent ability to subject a victim to the feeling of unimaginable temperatures and excruciating pain, but amazingly did not harm the skin or the internal organs. Although no real wound was produced by the process, the pain and mental strain were devastating. The torch was the perfect device to subjugate a person and break their spirit but not lose the person as a valuable slave or informant.

The torch cast a blue glow across Nora's face. She had closed her eyes as tight as she could, and never wanted to open them. The tip moved closer to the exposed skin of her arm and Pierce decided he had to do something. He yelled and charged forward toward the soldiers. Two of the soldiers moved quickly from surrounding Nora and easily restrained Pierce. The Hesh soldiers were strong in spite of their small stature; they had been bred that way for generations. Pierce fought against them and yelled that they could torch him instead that there must be some kind of a mistake.

The soldier with the torch turned his gaze to Pierce and demanded he be silent. Pierce was quiet and he stopped fighting the soldier's restraint. The soldier with the torch took a step toward Pierce and spoke, "Do not worry, if you wish to feel the anguish of the Greb I will not deprive you of that humility. However, you must patiently wait your

turn.” With a vice grin, the Hesh turned back to Nora and regained his slow movement toward her skin. Nora could start to feel the heat from the torch on her arm. The real intensity of the torch was reserved for the very tip of the device, but even with it a few inches from her the pain was already starting.

Nora felt the heat intensify as the tip was within a half an inch from her skin when all of a sudden the heat fell away. Nora opened her eyes in shock and she saw the soldier lying on the ground next to her. A bullet had struck the soldier in the head and he now lay on the concrete bleeding from the wound. Three more shots came from seemingly nowhere and struck the other three soldiers. Pierce rushed over to Nora and embraced her with tears in his eyes. Through the large doors, an old Jeep Wrangler drove out of the darkness and into the dim light. A man wearing a black military uniform exited the Jeep quickly.

All the workers in the plant had left their stations and now pushed and shoved to see what was going on. The man from the Jeep was in his early thirties and wore a thick black beard. His curly black hair was cropped short and his green eyes scanned the area in an efficient manor. They fell onto Nora and Pierce in the center of the crowd. He crossed the distance between them and spoke quickly to Nora, “Is he dead?” Nora looked up at the man and asked who he was talking about.

“My brother,” the man said.

Nora suddenly realized whom he was speaking about. The man who she was to switch with on the line was this man’s brother. Nora shook her head yes and the man nodded and continued, “My name is Sergeant Nathaniel Forster. I’m from the HRA and you need to come with me.”

Nora did not understand what was going on and she protested, “Why did he kill himself?”

“It’s complicated, but it was necessary so the line would be down for more than the standard thirty seconds. That way the turbines were exposed.” Forster explained.

Pierce spoke up, “What does that mean?”

Forster did not look at him he just answered, “You’ll find out soon enough. We need to go.” He grabbed Nora’s hand and pulled her to her feet, but she resisted.

“Can my brother come?”

Forster looked over Pierce quickly and said that was fine. The three of them made their way quickly to the Jeep. The crowd had started to move closer on them as Forster put the Jeep in reverse and pulled out of the plant. He spun the wheel, turned away from the plant, pressed the gas pedal and said, “Poor bastards.”

This time Nora asked why, but she did not get an answer. Soon they were speeding away from the plant across the barren desert. Nora and Pierce watched through the rear of the Jeep as the lights of the plant grew small receding into the distance. All of the sudden, the dark sky was lit up in a white flash like someone had taken a picture. The shock wave of the explosion deep in the turbine shook the air around the plant tearing through the assembly lines, steel walls and the hundreds of workers. The blast’s force had depleted greatly by the time it reached the Jeep but they could still feel the force on their faces. Nora turned around in the passenger seat and faced forward looking out toward the horizon, “How many people just lost their lives?” Forster drove on without a word.

The Jeep cut across the desert heading south for another few hours. Forster had refused to answer any more questions. He seemed a bit untrusting, the only thing he did explain was that his brother had begged him to spare Nora's life before the bomb went off. Pierce was not part of the plan and he was not happy about the addition of civilians under his wing. Pierce made the mistake of asking what the difference was between him and them since no official government recognized the HRA. Forster snapped at him with the rhetoric of the HRA that even without a government those who fight for what is right, draw their power from justice and humanity itself.

It was nearly midnight when they reached the south coast of Parltur. The Jeep's headlights cut across the darkness of a small beach until they fell on a small rowboat that sat flipped upside down on the sand. Forster parked the Jeep and motioned for them to all get out. Outside of the Jeep Nora let the ocean breeze tug at her clothes and caress her face. It was an amazing feeling mixed with the soothing sounds of the waves coming and going from the beach only a few feet away. She had never seen the ocean before, but she remembered what her grandmother had told her about it. Her grandmother's words did not do the experience justice. Her hiatus into the peaceful world of salt breezes and playful waves was shattered as Pierce yelled her name.

Across the beach by the rowboat, Pierce and Forster had flipped over the boat. They slowly moved it through the sand toward the waves. The sound of the waves grew fast as the boat's bow kissed the awaiting water. Pierce felt his boot sink into the moist sand as if it was being massaged by the continuous waves. His boot had many holes and the warm water easily seeped in soaking his tired feet. He tried to imagine coming to a spot like this for recreation, but it was a hard sell to even his imagination. His world was

one that did not afford vacations or even sleeping a full night with the promise of breakfast.

Forster and Pierce held the boat as Nora climbed in. She was a little unsteady, but eventually she made her way to a seat and sat down gripping the sides for stability. Forster told Pierce to hold the boat so he could go turn off the Jeep and get some supplies. Pierce closed his eyes and just listened to all the wonderful sounds that surrounded him. Compared to the horrible sounds of the plant he felt alive and free for the first time in his life. The beach was thrust into darkness as Forster turned the Jeep's lights off. A few moments later Forster was back with a duffle bag and a sub-machine gun. He tossed them both onto the floor of the boat and told Pierce to get in. As Pierce jumped into the boat Forster shoved the stern and leapt into the boat in one motion and the ocean accepted them with open arms. The boat's oars hit the water at nearly the same moment as Forster began to row them out of the wasteland and into the unknown.

Forster continually rowed for about forty-five minutes until they quickly began to overtake a large dark mass in the water. As they grew closer to the mass, they realized it was a huge boat. There were no lights on the ship that they could see, and the side of the ship towered above them. Forster steered the rowboat up to the side with a steady skill. An awaiting railed platform was sitting just a foot or so above the ocean. They climbed out of the boat and onto the platform. A young soldier dressed similarly to Forster, about the same age as Nora, greeted them with a smile and Forster with a rigid salute. The soldier secured the rowboat to a near by ring on the side of the ship. He then turned to a switch and the platform began to rise slowly leaving the rowboat and the ocean below.

Once they reached the deck of the ship, they realized it was even larger than it had looked from the water. The ship's deck was dimly lit by small lights, but they could make out other soldiers moving about, even driving vehicles across the massive deck. The group started out across the middle of the ship toward a large tower that jutted out from the deck. Forster looked at the amazed looks in the Donnelly's eyes, "If you can believe it, they use to deploy and land aircraft off the deck of this ship."

They entered the tower and found themselves in long corridors much like the vessel they had woken up in a mere six hours ago. Only this one was well lit and did not have the stench the vessel's corridors permeated. A young woman about the same age as Pierce met them as they rounded a corner. Forster gave the woman a bit of a look, and quickly excused himself and left the Donnelly's in her charge. The woman introduced herself as Hanna Lambert. She did not look like the other people they had passed on the ship. She spoke with a French accent and did not wear a military uniform. Her blonde hair was long and in a loose ponytail. She smiled and spoke, "So, I have a very important question I need answered." The Donnellys didn't know what to think and glanced at each other unsure. Hanna went on, "Do you want to take a shower first or eat first?"

She pushed open the two large swinging doors to the ship's mess hall. On the right side of the big room were dozens of tables, mostly empty because it was two o'clock in the morning. Along the opposite side, was a bar filled with a variety of foods and behind those chiefs moved swiftly around a large kitchen getting prepared for breakfast. They stood in a state of awe and joy for a moment until Pierce spoke, "Where did all of this come from?"

Hanna led them closer to the food, "The HRA has its ways."

“What are those?” Nora asked while eyeing some fruit on the bar ahead of them.

“Necessary ones,” Hanna said while handing them each a tray.

After a hearty meal, the Donnellys were escorted to quarters that were not much bigger than their previous ones on the vessel. Hanna told them they could wash up and get together with her in the meeting room down the hall. They thanked her a few more times and quickly made their way to a washroom where they furiously washed away three years of dirt and sadness from their bodies. Pierce was finished before Nora and he made his way to the meeting room where he found Hanna writing in a notebook.

She asked him how the shower was and he said it was all that he had dreamed of and more. He wore a clean pair of blue pants and a grey shirt. The shirt had a faded emblem on it along with the letters, "NAVY." He sat at the small conference table in the center of the room across from Hanna. Quietly they sat for a moment and then Pierce asked, "What is it that you do? You don't look like typical military."

Hanna closed her notebook and tucked her pen behind her ear with a smile, "I'll take that as a compliment. I'm a reporter."

"And who do you report to?"

"Anyone that will listen," she answered with a quick grin. She went on, "I think that it is important that we document what is going on; for us and for our children, and their children."

Pierce shook his head, "And what *is* going on?"

"A fight for freedom. The revolution of humanity."

"At what cost is that freedom?"

Hanna reclined in her chair, having heard Pierce's argument before, "The Hesh have given us little choice. Do you not agree?"

“I agree the Hesh are a supremely vicious culture, and something must be done. That is true, but just a few hours ago at least three hundred innocent human beings were killed. How many Hesh do you think perished? Ten or twelve at the most?”

Hanna leaned back over the table and looked Pierce in the eyes, “I sympathize with you Mr. Donnelly, but this is not a world for sympathy.”

The door opened and they both turned to see Nora enter the room. She had a bright smile on her face and wore the same outfit as her brother. Nora crossed the room and sat down next to Pierce and he smiled at her. She looked back and forth between the two of them, “Now what?”

“Now we talk about your assignments,” Hanna picked up a folder from table and opened it.

Pierce went on the offensive, “Assignments?”

“Every human is charged by the HRA to aid in the rebellion. Now we would never force anyone into a combat situation who did not wish to be there, so I have here a list of non-combat related assignments.”

Nora sat up straight in her chair and spoke with confidence, “Then you can put those away.” Pierce smiled at his sister’s actions even after so much time being kept down by the Hesh. The HRA’s ways of war were immoral and got innocents killed and there was no way a Donnelly was going to aid in that. Suddenly Pierce’s heart went from pride to disgust as Nora went on. Nora smile widened and she declared, “You can keep those non-combat jobs for someone else. I’m ready to be on the front lines. I’m ready to give my life for the cause of humanity.”

Hanna was pleasantly surprised by Nora's reaction, she went on to describe the satisfaction, and sense of accomplishment felt in the hearts and minds of the HRA warriors. She finished her speech with a nod toward Pierce, "I'm delighted to hear you are so eager to help the cause, but I'm not so sure your brother shares your resolve."

Nora dared not to look at Pierce she just answered, "That may be, but my brother does not make my choices." She paused for a moment, let her voice drop and turned to Pierce, "And I don't make his."

Hanna smiled, proud at herself for finding a new recruit, "Then on behalf of the HRA I would like to extend our great appreciation for ..."

Pierce interrupted Hanna, "Could have a moment with my sister?" He looked at Hanna with anger in his eyes, "Alone?" Hanna said yes, gathered her notebook up, and left the room.

Nora stood up to beat Pierce to the punch, "I know what you are going to say. You've made your case plenty of times. And I respect that; however we can not just sit by and do nothing."

Pierce shook his head, "I'm not saying we do nothing. Yes, we need to do something. The HRA is not the answer. They have tossed ideology into the garbage and replaced it with fear and anger. That is not the way to win this war."

"The war has been over for eighty years, we lost. This isn't about the war and this is not the time for ideology."

Pierce could not believe his was having this debate with his own sister, "There is always a time for ideology. The HRA talk about fighting for what is right, but they have

discarded basic morals to make that argument. Without our ideals we are no better than the Hesh.”

“We are not the Hesh,” Nora quickly answered.

“Perhaps not, but how many times in *human* history have the policies of the government with the most power tried to change the world in their image? Regardless of whom they punish or kill in the process.”

“This is not a revolution to bring back the United States or any country of the old world.”

“Don’t be so sure.”

“I’m sorry Pierce, I have to do this,” Nora glanced away from her brother’s defeated look and left the conference room.

The next four days went by at top speed. The infantry unit she was assigned to quickly embraced Nora. The basic training of soldiers that use to take months was crammed into one week of drills and rhetoric. The gun given to her by her new allegiance had become her trusted companion and she had become quite accurate with it. In an impromptu sharp shooting completion on the third day, she came in second behind a seasoned officer named Cormac. A rousing victory party followed and Nora was quickly becoming a rising star among the HRA soldiers.

Those days had gone much differently for Pierce. Having had little choice in his assignment aboard the ship and his request to leave denied several times he tried to settle in with a kitchen job. It was an incredibly boring time of peeling potatoes and other repetitive preparation tasks. He did have to admit it was to a large extent better than working in the plant and living on the vessel. He had befriended another cook named

Joel Ibsen. Joel was a large man, much taller and broader than Pierce. The HRA had taken him in after the refugee camp he lived in was disbanded by the Hesh government as a breeding ground for terrorists. Before that, his father had been a leading HRA activist and four years ago had devised an ambush to take out a large number of Hesh soldiers. The plan did not succeed and the Hesh destroyed his family's home while his mother, father and two young brothers were inside.

Joel and Pierce often talked about life before the ship and their families. While living in the camp Joel had worked in a similar plant like the one Pierce and Nora worked. Pierce pointed out that their status as effective prisoners on the ship was only different from the Hesh enslavement in principal. Joel shook his head seeing his point but went on to say, "You might be right there, but at least they feed us and don't torch us."

Pierce stood and slid a bowl of peeled potatoes into a pot of boiling water, "Just because they don't use a greb doesn't make it right."

Joel looked over at Pierce confused, "A greb?"

"Yes, a greb. It's what the Hesh call the torch."

Joel stopped peeling and looked at Pierce with hope in his eyes, "You speak Heshing?"

"Sure, a little."

"Can you read it?"

"I can usually get the idea."

Joel stood more excited, "Would you read something for me?"

The cooks had a small area in the rear of the kitchen where they bunked. They arrived at a bunk in the back of the room and Joel removed a folded piece of paper from a satchel and timidly handed it to Pierce. Pierce took the paper and unfolded it. The paper was filled with dozens of hand drawn small characters in a faded blue ink. Joel spoke slowly, "This was in the Hesh newspaper the day after the Hesh destroyed my home and killed my family. I made sure I copied down the words exactly how they were. I was always curious what they had to say about it. I can't read Heshing, hell I can barely read English," Joel smiled.

"And people said the public school system was bad before the war," Pierce said sarcastically laughing a bit. Joes did not seem to get the joke and just waited intently. Pierce quickly changed gears and began reading from right to left, "This first part is a heading, and it says, Terrorist Plot Thwarted, then it goes on to describe the leader of the group."

"My father," Joel chimed in.

"I suppose so, it doesn't say a name."

"What else does it say?"

Pierce reads on, "The Lorst Alliance cannot and will not be threatened by terrorist. Then it goes on to explain the role of the Alliance in the world, their dedication to eradicate extremism and terrorism, and then the last line is, the leader of the group refused to leave his home and he and his wife were killed when the structure accidentally caught fire. The two young sons of the leader were rescued by a Hesh unit and taken to a local Human hospital for care."

Joel's face contorted in confusion as he collapsed onto his bunk, "They aren't dead?"

Pierce went back over the article, "No, at least not according to this."

After a moment or so of silence Joel stood and grabbed Pierce's arm firmly, "They are out there somewhere. Alone and no doubt scared. I have to find them," tears welled in Joel's eyes, "Will you help me?"

Forster walked down the main hall that connected to the mess. He looked like his was out for blood and no one was going to stand in his way. Behind him were three HRA soldiers in combat gear, with their guns locked and loaded. Nora was one of them. She had been returning from morning drills when Forster stopped her and told her to suit up; he had an assignment he needed her assistance on.

Just outside the mess doors four cooks, two men and two females, stood with their arms locked. Forster and the soldiers rounded a corner and stopped just a few feet from the cooks. Nora was surprised to see Pierce among them and she gave Forster an uneasy look. Forster barked at the cooks to step aside. Pierce replied firmly, "We aren't here to undermine this ship or its mission. We only request that we be allowed to leave."

"I am sorry, but the safety and security of this ship comes before anything," Forster explained.

"This is not about security, this is about personal freedoms."

Forster took a step toward Pierce, "Do not lecture me about personal freedoms."

Pierce smiled, "Someone should."

"I've had about enough of you!"

"Then let us go!"

Forster got more riled up, “That is not my call to make.”

“Then why don’t we talk to that person?”

“Not a chance. The generals of HRA have better things to fill their time with than the likes of some disgruntled chefs. This conversation ends with me.”

Pierce glanced over at the other cooks, “Your threats are not going to make us move.”

“If that is case, then the threats are over.” Forster put his gun up and pulled the trigger. The human chain broke when a bullet hit his shoulder and twisted Pierce out of it. Pierce stared up at the ceiling holding his arm as the pain coursed through his body. Forster pointed his gun at the terrified other cooks and they backed away.

Nora rushed over to her brother and looked at him with sorrow in her eyes. She asked him if he was okay and he said he would live. Nora said she was sorry and stood up. Pierce closed his eyes and thought that even after all of that she was still against him. All of a sudden, he heard a cracking noise and a sound of a body falling. Forster lay flat out on the floor opposite of Pierce. Nora still held the butt of her gun in the position that surely broke Forster’s nose. The other two solders had stood down and Nora took their weapons and handed them to the other cooks. Before exiting the hallway, Nora fished around Forster’s pockets and took a set of keys.

Nora led the way across the deck to the opposite side of the ship. Directly behind her were Pierce and Joel along with the other cooks. The soldier they had met when they boarded the ship barely a week earlier was on duty when they reached the platform. He looked nervous not knowing what was going on. Nora looked over the side of the ship

and in the dim morning light, she could make out the rowboat tethered below. She told the soldier to move, but he stood his post.

Nora pulled a handgun from her belt and placed it next to the young soldier's head, "Move." The soldier quickly stepped aside and Pierce grabbed his gun. The ride down the side of the ship seemed to take forever, but they eventually reached the rowboat. Joel had taken a few wide strokes with the oars and quickly put some ocean between them and the ship. One of the other cooks asked if they might shoot at them. With her gun trained on the ship Nora said, "Yes."

The rising sun cut long shadows across the barren Parltur landscape as the Jeep bounced its way across a rock outcropping. Nora turned the steering wheel sharply to avoid another rock in the path and the passengers held on tightly. In the passenger seat, Kathy Stephenson gripped the roll cage of the Jeep and stared out into the horizon. She hoped she had made the right decision in coming with them. The rear seat of the Jeep was full; in the center Pierce sat with his head staring up into sky attempting to ignore the pain in his shoulder. Next to Pierce was Joel, he was already planning how he was going to get through the border and back to the camp, or what was left of it. Julie Moliere occupied the last open seat in the Jeep. She glanced around at the other passengers and silently wished them all luck on their respective journeys. She smiled a little thinking of the price she would receive from the Hesh government for the HRA secrets she planned on selling.