

The Exodus Project

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Part One

Tyler walked slowly down the road, kicking small rocks that he saw. It was coming close to the end of summer and he still hadn't done anything, except work at the Riley's farm so he could earn a little bit of money. Some of the guys had invited him to a party for the Fourth of July, but he wasn't one for parties, so he didn't go. He did this often. Just walking. Nothing else. He could do it for hours, not caring where he went. He always made it home of course, his memory made sure of that. His doctors and teachers treated him like the eighth wonder of the world. According to them, he had an IQ higher than Einstein and a memory that couldn't be matched anywhere in the world. He remembered even the smallest details. He knew where everything in his house was. Two days ago, when his sister lost her iPod, she asked him where it was. He remembered exactly where it was. It was under the couch; dead center. He had seen it a few times there. He also remembered her headphones were exactly four inches to the left of the iPod, and the charging cable was plugged into their mom's computer. People told him it was a gift; sometimes it was a curse though. Always remembering everything. Everything that he saw, heard, felt, or smelled. He can walk through his entire house with his eyes closed without stepping on or bumping into anything. When his teachers would misplace a pencil, they would call him up to the front of the classroom and ask him where it is. He would instantly point it out. Then they would praise him and send him back to his seat. It was the most embarrassing thing in the world. He was in high school but they acted like he was in the first grade. Of course, this made him a target for the local gang of bullies. They tried to stuff him into a locker on the last day of school, but they quickly realized he was too big.

The only people who didn't treat him like he was different were his few friends and the hockey team. Yeah, he was on the hockey team. People thought that he was just a dorky kid with no friends, but he was actually the

captain of the school hockey team. Not many people knew. Just his friends and the guys. The bullies didn't know that he could beat the living tar out of them if he wanted to or, with one word, he could have the whole team on them. But he chose not to. He didn't want people thinking he's cool just because he was the captain of the school hockey team. So he kept it a secret. No one recognized him when he was in full gear, so he didn't have a problem with people coming to the games. No one knew that his last name was Johnson either. So they didn't even know it was him when they saw the back of his jersey. People cheered him on every time he played, but they never really knew who they were cheering on. People put his jersey number on their lockers, books, even on their own hoodies, not knowing who the owner of that number really was. Girls had pictures of him while he was playing taped to their lockers, but if they knew it was him they would tear the pictures down, so he never told anyone. He let them have their idol; Johnson, captain of the hockey team, number forty-five. He played left defense, and he was one of the best players in the team. Girls asked the rest of the team for his number on a daily basis.

Nobody knew who he really was. The kid that the teachers loved. Top of every class. The kid with only a few friends. The geek. The nerd. The kid who the bullies targeted and the one who everyone stayed far away from out of fear of being bullied themselves. He lived two lives, and no one knew. Only the hockey team, his friends, and his family. He kept it that way. He liked it that way.

When he got to the end of the road, he turned left onto a path through the woods. He walked for another twenty minutes until he emerged on the other side in his backyard. He did that every day. Leave his house, walk around, cut through the woods and always wind up right back at his house but this time, instead of going inside, he turned around and walked back through the woods. He didn't know why, he just did it.

It was getting late into the afternoon, but he didn't care. He just kept walking. When he came to the stop sign that he usually turned right at, he turned left. He was walking through a small neighborhood. The street wasn't very busy, but it was a Saturday in the middle of summer and he didn't expect it to be busy. He soon began to recognize the neighborhood; most of the guys from the hockey team lived there. He liked the neighborhood. Small children played in their front yards, sprinklers watered lawns, and the sun shined down like everything was perfect. Then he saw the guys.

They were running from yard to yard shooting at each other with airsoft guns, taking cover behind trees, mailboxes and anything else they could find besides cars. They learned not to hide behind those the hard way. Tyler played airsoft with them every once in awhile, but didn't really feel like it then, so he kept walking. He only got to the next street when he finally needed to sit down and rest. It was the middle of summer and was almost ninety-five degrees outside. He rested on a cool rock and pulled his black baseball cap over his eyes. The warm sun beat down on his chest, which was covered only by a thin purple tee-shirt. He laid there with his legs stretched out on the grass and his head on the rock and drifted into a calm, quiet sleep.

He woke to the sound of a loud truck. Much to his surprise, he looked to his left and saw a girl sitting a few feet off. She looked about his age, she wore blue jeans and a white tee-shirt. Her long blonde hair was pulled into a ponytail. She had a soccer ball under her left arm, a water bottle in her right. She just sat there next to him, occasionally taking a drink from her water bottle. He looked to his right and saw a moving truck pulling out of a driveway. He looked back to his left and the girl was still there. He bit his

tongue, which hurt, so he wasn't dreaming. There was actually a girl sitting next to him that he'd never seen before. She didn't go to his school last year, he would know. She must've moved here recently, which would make sense considering he'd just seen a moving truck pull out of her driveway. As he realized this, he also realized he must be in her yard. It must be weird walking outside and finding a random teenage guy sleeping in your yard. He sat up and ran a hand through his short, blonde hair which was dampened with sweat. He leaned over to pick up his hat which had fallen off when he sat up.

"Finally, you're awake." Said the girl.

"Yeah, um. Sorry about falling asleep in your yard." He replied as he put his hat back onto his head. "You new here?"

"Yeah, we just finished unloading the truck when I saw you sleeping on in our yard." She explained.

"So, where are you from?" Tyler asked.

"Nashville, my dad got a job here so we moved. Mom wasn't too happy about it." She replied.

He didn't understand. She didn't know him, and had never seen him before. Why was she being so open towards him? When most people sawn people sleeping in their yard, they thought it was creepy. She seemed perfectly okay with it.

"My name's Tyler. I live just outside the neighborhood." He said, deciding not to worry about it for now. She offered her hand so he shook it.

"I'm Katie. Katie Peterson. Does 'Tyler' have a last name too?" She asked jokingly. Tyler hesitated. He never told people his last name.

"Mitchells" he lied. Mitchells was actually his friend Carter's last name, but he knew Carter didn't care.

"Why exactly were you sleeping in my yard?" She asked with a smile.

"Oh, no reason. I was walking and sat down to rest. Then I fell asleep." He explained

"Fair enough." She said and handed him a water bottle.

"Thanks." He said, and had just raised it to his lips to take a drink when he heard three quiet pops and a sharp pain in his arm. "Crap! I didn't think they'd make it this far!" He said as he jumped to his feet. "Quick! Follow me!" He yelled as he pulled Katie to her feet. Shouts rang out across the street. The team had brought their airsoft game down the street. He got hit a few more times before he and Katie made it to cover behind a small brick wall.

"What the heck is going on?" Katie asked rubbing her leg where she got hit.

"Don't worry about it, they're not trying to hit us. It's the school hockey team. They do this every once in awhile." Tyler explained

"What? Shoot at random people?" She asked breathing heavily.

"They're not shooting at us." He reassured her again.

"Then what are they shooting at?" She asked. As soon as she said that five guys burst out of the woods, firing like mad.

"Here comes the cavalry!" Tyler shouted. "Carter!" He'd gotten their attention. Carter turned and saw them. He yelled something to the rest of his guys and they bolted for the brick wall. Carter jumped the wall with ease. The other four followed shortly afterwards.

"Anyone hit?" Carter asked.

"I am." One of the guys admitted.

"Where?" Carter asked as he rolled his eyes.

"Left leg." The boy said.

"Give your gun to Tyler. You can't run anymore Andrew." He ordered. Andrew slipped his mask off and handed Tyler the gun. Tyler did a quick weapons check as Andrew pulled clips out of his vest pockets.

"Keep your pistol." Tyler commanded. "If they find you, take out as many of them as possible."

Andrew grinned and said, "Yes sir."

"I'm technically hit, but I just joined the game so I don't think it counts." Tyler said.

"Whatever." Carter replied.

Tyler looked at Carter. "Carter, give your pistol to her." He said as he gestured towards Katie. "Katie, don't shoot unless you have to." Tyler told her.

"Who's she?" Carter asked.

"Dunno," Tyler told him, "She's new to town."

"Why exactly is she coming with us?" Carter asked.

"Because I'm not leaving her behind to get shot up. And don't question my orders." Tyler replied with a smile.

"Woah, hold on. You're taking her and leaving me?" Andrew complained.

"Sorry man, you'd slow us down. You can't walk on your hit leg." Tyler told him. "Cameron, stay with Andrew."

"That brings us down to four guys." Carter informed him.

"And one girl." Tyler joked, "Now let's go." Tyler jumped over the wall and started shooting. There were only five people on his team right now. Carter said he counted fifteen enemies. So basically the entire rest of the hockey team. They always wanted the joy of beating Carter and him at airsoft. It was an old tradition. Tyler and Carter chose a team of five, then faced the rest of the team. They had yet to lose. Two enemies popped their heads over a trash can and Tyler took them out in two shots. Tyler and his team ran from cover to cover. Eventually, they got pinned down. There were just too many enemies for them to keep moving forward. Suddenly, Tyler had an idea.

Carter was right next to him hiding behind a trash can, while he hid behind a bush. Plastic pellets pounded the trash can, but no one could get a good shot. He waved one hand in the air to get Carter's attention. Carter looked at him, and he pointed at the trash can. Carter understood immediately. They'd done this before. If the enemy is directly ahead, the key is to move forward. So Carter climbed inside.

"Ben! Cover me!" Tyler called. Carter pushed the lid up on the trash can and used it as extra cover. Tyler slung his gun over his shoulder and started to push the trash can. Carter stuck his gun out the side and started shooting. Directly to the left, an enemy stood to shoot Tyler. Ben shot him as soon as he moved. They made it halfway down the street, and Carter ran out of ammo.

"Tyler!" He yelled, "Gun!"

Tyler swung his gun up into Carter's waiting hands. They were almost there when Carter yelled that he was hit. He dropped the gun down to Tyler along with his two grenades. Those were one of Tyler's favorite parts about this game. The grenades were just black water balloons filled with red paint but it took forever to get the paint off once it dried.

"Sniper! In the trees on the left!" Carter informed him. Tyler picked up one of the balloons and threw it at the tree. He heard a yell and the firing stopped from that direction.

"Carter, how many left." Tyler asked.

"Three enemies, it's just you and the girl now." He replied. Tyler swore under his breath. That basically meant that he was probably the only person left on his team who actually had experience.

"Where is she?" He asked.

"Maybe five yards to the left, sitting behind a tree." Carter told him. Carter was his eyes and ears right now.

"Tell me when to go." He commanded.

"Three, two, one, now!" Carter yelled. Tyler stood and sprinted to the tree Katie was behind.

"How you holding up?" He said breathing heavily.

"Fine," she told him,

"I got myself a better gun." She said as she waved a rifle in his face.

"Where'd you get that?" He asked rather confused.

"I shot someone." She said like it should be obvious. Tyler glanced around the tree and saw the three enemies moving to take cover behind a bush. All three of them in one condensed spot. Tyler grinned like it was his birthday. He reached into the vest he took from Andrew. He still had one more grenade.

"Katie, when I say go, jump out from behind the tree and shoot at that bush. Keep their heads down. I've got one more balloon left and pretty good aim. Got it?" He asked.

"Got it." She replied. He started counting down,

"Three,two, one!"

Katie jumped out from behind the tree and started shooting. Her aim was not as bad as he thought it would be. She hit one of the guys, and Tyler threw the balloon straight into the bush. The bush was painted and the two guys stood admitting they were hit.

"Good job." Tyler said to her. As he was standing to declare the game over, the enemy's team captain jumped out from a tree behind them with his gun raised. Tyler jumped in front of Katie and was shot several times in the chest. His shirt was so thin it felt like each shot had gone straight through his chest. He cried out in pain and felt a jerking on his belt. He dropped to the ground and Katie shot the guy right in his mask. The guy dropped his gun and the game was over. He pulled off his mask and noticed the long crack running from top to bottom. He dropped his mask and walked over to the spot where Tyler sat.

"Nice shot Adam." Tyler said still clutching his chest in pain.

"Thanks." Adam replied. He helped Tyler to his feet. Adam looked over at Katie. "Who's she?" He asked.

"New girl, not a bad shot though. I should pick her next time." Tyler said with a smile.

Adam looked over at Katie,

"Nice shot by the way, I'm Adam."

"Katie." She told him as she shook his hand.

"Why do you even try to win Adam?" Carter asked as he joined the growing group.

"Because I know we'll beat you eventually. We got really close this time." Adam replied.

They all stood there talking about the game, getting weapons back, and introducing themselves to Katie. People came up to Tyler and patted him on the back, and congratulated him.

"You seem pretty important to this game." She told Tyler.

"Important? He's the best shot here. He's captain of the winning team. Of course he's important." Carter said as he started taking his gear off. Tyler blushed at the praise of his best friend.

"Ah, come on Carter. You know I can't do it without you." Carter leaned in closer and whispered,

"Come on Tyler. We both know that. I'm just trying to make you look good in front of the girl." Tyler laughed and pushed Carter over.

"You know, you might want to warn Travis to leave her alone." Tyler told him.

"And why is that?" Travis asked, obviously attracted to Katie. He couldn't keep his eyes off her.

Tyler picked up Adam's broken mask, "Because she's holding the gun that did this."

"Well," Travis said obviously not going to back off, "I like a girl who's not afraid to shoot a man between the eyes."

Katie smiled. It was a dangerous smile. Tyler looked over at Carter and they both grinned. They could see what was about to happen. In a flash, Katie shot Travis in the thigh. When he bent over to grab his leg, she kneed him hard in the face. He fell backward clutching his face, blood pouring from his nose. Carter and Tyler were rolling on the ground laughing like maniacs.

"Wow, she's got some fire." Travis remarked, as Katie started to walk away. Suddenly she turned and shot him in the nuts. This made Carter and Tyler laugh so hard tears started streaming down their faces. Katie nodded, satisfied with Travis's groans. When she was finally out of earshot Travis muttered, "She's all your's Tyler. Trust me, she's a keeper."

When Tyler and Carter finally got control of themselves they started to walk towards the rest of the group.

"Alright guys," Tyler said, "Carter and I win. Again." Some of the guys groaned in frustration. "Yeah, suck it up. We've got a game in... What time is it... three hours. Go home, get cleaned up, drink some water, and get over to the rink. I expect to see you all there, yes, including you Travis. I don't care where she shot you." Some of the guys chuckled and Katie smiled.

The crowd started to disperse and they grabbed their gear. Carter and Tyler walked over to where Katie stood, but stopped as one of the other guys approached her.

"Can't wait to see how this one goes." Tyler said, Carter laughed. The boy swaggered up to her and flipped his long brown hair. That's as far as he got before Katie kicked him hard in the knees and he buckled. She then kicked him in the chest and he toppled onto his back. She crouched next to his head and said,

"No." She then stood and shot him three times in the stomach. He rolled around on the grass in pain. Carter looked at Tyler, and they burst into laughter again. Katie dropped the gun on his chest and walked to her door.

Tyler walked up the stairs to his room. Carter said he was trying to make Tyler look good in front of Katie. He didn't know what the heck that was supposed to mean. He wasn't really attracted to Katie, was he? He knew Travis was, but Travis was attracted to all girls. Had he acted like he was attracted to her? He'd only just met her. How could he be? He didn't know anything about her. She was definitely pretty though. He remembered when he woke up in her yard she acted like she didn't even know he was there, yet she seemed tense. As if she was wondering if he was even going to talk to her when he woke up. When she talked, it was in a very bored, uninterested tone, but her eyes were full of curiosity. Her eyes. He hadn't really noticed at first, but he remembered their color now. Blue; definitely blue. They were a shocking blue. Like seeing nothing but blackness, then all of a sudden there's a light, and it's a wonderful, satisfying light. A happy, hopeful light, that says there's more than blackness. Tyler shook his head. Why did he care? It wasn't like the color of someone's eyes had any influence over someone's feelings. He put the thought aside. He needed to get ready for the game. He took a quick shower knowing he'd need one when he got back anyways. Then he went downstairs, ate a sandwich, filled his water bottle, put his bag in the car and headed for the rink.

He walked into the locker room, and everyone stopped what they were doing. It was rather quiet to begin with, but now you could hear a pin drop. He checked his watch.

"Game starts in fifteen minutes," he said, "Finish getting dressed." It was still quiet. No one spoke other than the occasional whisper. The loudest

sound in the room was the rattling and shuffling of the gear. Tyler dragged his bag over next to Carter and sat down. "Nervous?" He asked.

"Who isn't?" Carter replied.

"I think you'd be an idiot not to be." Tyler told him. "This game is going to decide whether or not we make it to the championships, and we're playing against Matthew County High School. But don't let them get to your head. We're better than them and we've proven it a large number of times. It'll be tough, but we can do it."

"Sometimes I wish I had your confidence." Carter admitted.

"Someone's gotta have it." Said Tyler with a smile.

"Well, are we getting a speech or not?" asked Adam.

"Fine," replied Tyler, "but it'll have to be short." Everyone stopped putting their gear on and listened. "I know everyone is nervous, but you shouldn't be. How many times have we played Matthew County and lost? Almost none, but this doesn't give us the right to get cocky about it either. They're a good hockey team. We wouldn't be playing them if they weren't. Yeah, we're pretty good too, but now isn't the time to compare us to them. Now is the time to prove that we can beat them without even breaking a sweat. I want you to go out there, and play your best, whether they play fair or not. If they start playing dirty, show them how to play right. I want to see you guys talking to each other. Play your position, and don't be afraid to hit someone. Andrew, yes I'm talking to you." The team chuckled at the old joke. Andrew wasn't very confident when it came to checking. "Win or lose," Tyler continued, "Be the bigger man. Take the hit when it's given. Then give some back. Now, let's get out there and win a hockey game!" Everyone cheered and strapped their helmets on; coach patted him on the shoulder.

They all finished getting dressed as quickly as possible. Then they marched to the door, grabbing their sticks as they left the locker room

The first two periods were rather uneventful. Tyler's team scored a couple goals, and the other team scored a couple goals. The score was tied going into the third period. Four to four. At the bench Carter and Tyler were exhausted, but eager to get back on the ice. At the sound of the whistle, they jumped over the boards and replaced the other defensive line. They skated to the face of point and waited for the referee to drop the puck. The ref blew the whistle and the puck slapped onto the ice. The forwards wrestled to get the puck out of the neutral zone but they were struggling to keep it to themselves. The puck popped out of the mess of forwards and glided towards Carter. Carter caught the puck on his stick and looked up for a pass. He saw Andrew wide open but before he could pass it, one of the other team's forwards hit him hard in the chest. Carter fell and the guy with the puck skated into their zone.

"Well, that's not gonna work for me," Tyler thought to himself, and he bolted towards the enemy player. The player had his stick raised, ready to take the shot, when Tyler brought his shoulder up into his side. The guy flew back into the boards and Tyler passed the puck to Andrew. By then Carter was back on his feet and had skated into position. Tyler's team had taken the puck into the other team's zone and were sending shot after shot at the net. But they couldn't seem to get one in. There was forty seconds left on the clock and they desperately needed a goal. Andrew got the puck and sent it up the boards to Tyler. Tyler brought his stick back to take the shot. There was fifteen seconds left on the clock. If he couldn't put it in, he needed someone in position to take the rebound, but no one was. So he had to make it. He took the shot and heard a yell behind him. He twisted around to see Carter lying on the ice while the guy Tyler had hit earlier stood over him with a broken stick in his hand. Carter's visor was shattered and his helmet had a

long crack from front to back. The guy had tried to cross check him, but Carter took the blow instead. Carter's face was covered in blood. What else could Tyler do but punch the kid so hard his helmet fell off? The guy dropped like a rag doll and Tyler jumped onto his chest and continued to punch him. He heard several cracks as he broke the guy's nose. It took four guys to pull him off. By then, the whole team seemed to be fighting someone. Tyler's opponent never got up. Satisfied, he kneeled next to Carter.

"Come on buddy, you'll be alright." He said, "Carter?" But Carter didn't respond. He just laid there, his face bloody from the hit. Several shards of plastic from his mask were stuck in his face. Tyler shook him, trying to get some sort of response. "Carter!" Tyler shouted.

By then he realized that Carter wouldn't respond. He was still breathing, but Tyler knew he had to get help.

"Andrew! Get over here!" Tyler yelled.

Andrew shoved the kid he was fighting away and skated over to Tyler.

"Oh God." He said. "We need to get him out of here."
Tears streamed down Tyler's face. Carter had taken the hit instead of letting him take it.

'Why did he have to do that? Why couldn't he just have let me take it? Then he wouldn't be lying here on the ice with blood pouring from his face.'
Tyler thought.

But he took the hit instead, and Tyler was grateful for having such a loyal friend.

"Help me get him up." Andrew said, but Tyler didn't move. He couldn't even if he wanted to. "Trevor!" Andrew called as he realized that Tyler couldn't help, "help me get Carter back to the locker room."

Andrew and Trevor managed to drag Carter's limp body to the bench where the coach and a few parents stepped in to help. The fighting had stopped. Everyone just sat and watched as they carried Carter away. The only sound came from Tyler as he sobbed for his friend. Tyler's helmet had fallen off, but he didn't care.

'Let them see.' He thought to himself. *'Let them see who their hero really is.'*

The team started to crowd around him, checking to see if he was okay, but he wasn't. His best friend had just been carried off the ice, bloody and unconscious. How could that be okay? He didn't want the comfort of his team, he wanted his friend, but he wasn't there.

"You alright?" Asked Wesley, one of the other defencemen. They were never that close of friends, but he was here anyways. Wesley could see that Tyler wanted to be alone, and he respected that. "Give him some space guys." Wesley told the rest of the team.

They started to leave. The game was over anyways. They headed for the locker room, one by one, except Tyler. He stayed on the ice. He knelt next to the spot where Carter had laid, the ice stained red with blood. There were no more tears left for Tyler to cry, the only thing left was anger. Anger and sadness. He was angry at the person who had hurt his friend, he was angry at his friend for taking the blow that was meant for him and he was angry at the other team for pulling him off the person who had to pay. His gloves had fallen off a while ago and his clenched hands were bare to the bitter cold of

the ice, but he didn't care. He welcomed the cold. He was shaking, but not of the cold. He sat there for what felt like hours, even though he knew it was only a few minutes, waiting for someone to come and kick him off the ice, but no one did. Suddenly, he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was a kind hand, a gentle hand. He didn't know who it was, and honestly, he didn't care. He didn't move and neither did the hand. For several minutes, Tyler, and whoever was with him, just sat there. Then the hand left his shoulder, but he grabbed it. He couldn't stand the thought of being alone right now. He didn't want the person to go. The person moved around until they were facing each other. Tyler looked up at the person's face and was surprised to see it was Katie. She had come to their game. She wrapped her arms around him, and they continued to sit there. Neither of them said a word. After about five minutes she stood and helped him up.

"Go get changed." She told him. And he obeyed. When he got to the locker room, everyone was already gone so he checked his watch. Of course they were gone, it was eleven thirty at night. He quickly changed out of his gear and put it away in his bag. His phone read that he had fifteen missed calls from his mom. She was probably worrying to death about him. He usually didn't stay out this late. He grabbed his bag and stick, and left the locker room to see Katie waiting outside the door. The building was dark except for a few lights left on in offices. No one was there except them. Katie walked Tyler to his car, and helped him put his gear in the trunk. He went to open his car door, but stopped. All he could think about was Carter and his bloody, broken face. He let go of the handle, and sat down leaning against the front wheel of his car. Katie knelt down and hugged him again, but this time he hugged her back. He started sobbing again. He couldn't stop himself. "Come on, I'll drive you home." Katie whispered in his ear when he finally stopped crying.

They walked to her car and got in. Neither one said anything on the way back. She only had to ask him for directions a few times. He only said a few words when she asked. Neither one said anything else. When they got to his house, she dropped him off and drove away without a word, but he was okay with that. He didn't want to talk anyways. The front door of his house was locked so he tried the back door. No luck. He always kept his window unlocked though, so he clambered up onto the roof and went in through his window. He was too tired to change, so he just plopped down onto his bed and fell asleep. He didn't even close the window.

He woke the next morning to the sound of a truck in his driveway. He got out of bed and headed for the stairs. His parents weren't awake yet, and he didn't want them to wake. There was a knock on the door and he rushed to answer it. To his surprise, Andrew was standing there.

"Come on, the whole team is going to the hospital to see Carter." He said.

Tyler grabbed his jacket and went with him.

"So where are the others?" Tyler asked.

"At Trevor's house. We're all going to meet up there." Andrew replied.

"Can we stop and pick up Katie?" Tyler asked.

"Who's... Oh, isn't she the girl who played airsoft with us?" Andrew said.

"Yeah." Tyler answered.

"Alright show me the way." Andrew told him.

They pulled up to her house and Tyler knocked on her door. She was already dressed, or maybe she didn't change last night. Tyler explained what was going on.

"Will you come with us?" He asked.

"Of course." She told him. She walked with him to the truck. When they were both in, Andrew turned to them and said,

"Alright, she can come, but under one condition. No making out in the back seat."

Tyler glared at him.

"Sorry man." Andrew apologized, "just trying for a bit of humor."

Without even knowing, Tyler held out his hand. Katie took it.

"Don't worry." She told him. "I'm sure Carter will be fine." Tyler didn't respond. He just stared out the window.

When they got to Trevor's house, they found a large group of cars. It definitely looked like the whole team was there, but there were more cars than there were team members.

'Who else could be here?' Thought Tyler. Andrew got out of the car. Tyler didn't move.

"You two coming?" He asked.

"Give us a sec." Katie told him. Andrew shook his head. He hated seeing Tyler like this.

"Alright, I'll see you guys inside."

"Tyler?" Katie said, "you alright?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine." He told her. "Who else could be here?"

"No idea. Let's go find out." She suggested. Tyler nodded, but didn't seem to want to move. "Tyler, you're going to have to let go of my hand so we can get out." She told him.

He didn't know why, but he didn't want to let go. Why was he holding her hand in the first place, he couldn't say, so he let go. Katie left the car and walked around to his side of the car. She leaned through the open window and kissed him on the cheek.

"Tyler, get out of the car." She told him, and she opened the door.

He stepped down out of the truck and took her hand again. She'd just kissed him. He barely knew her, and she'd just kissed him. He pushed the thought aside. He didn't care right now. They walked up to the house and knocked. Trevor opened the door.

"Come on in. You won't believe who else came." He told them.

The house was packed, and only half of the people there were on the team. He recognized several kids from school, a few teachers, and the Carroll County hockey team.

'Why are they here?' Thought Tyler.

Trevor walked up next to them.

"Someone sent word out that Carter had gotten hurt. They also said that we were going to visit him at the hospital. So they all came." He said as though he could read Tyler's mind.

Countless people came up and introduced themselves to Tyler and shook his hand. One of the Mathew County players who came up to him had bandages all over his face.

"My name's Jack." The boy said wincing at very word.

"I'm really sorry about your friend." So this guy was responsible for hurting Carter. Katie gripped his hand. She could tell he was getting tense, but he surprised even himself by letting go of Katie's hand and shaking Jack's.

"Tyler." He said as he shook Jack's hand. "I'm sorry about your face."

"Forget about it. I deserved it." Jack reassured him.

"How bad is it?" Tyler asked.

"Nose is shattered, cheekbone fractured, chipped a couple of teeth, but other than that, I'm fine. How's your hand?" Jack said.

Tyler had never thought about his hand. He looked down and saw that his hand was covered in dry blood, bruises and cuts.

"Wow. I'm surprised it's not broken." Jack said in amazement. "You should go get that cleaned up." Tyler took Katie's hand again, and they walked over to Trevor.

"Hey, where's your bathroom?" Tyler asked.

"Down the hall to the left. Holy crap. What happened to your hand? Is that from last night?" He remarked.

"You should see the other guy." Tyler replied with a smirk.

"Oh I've seen him. You busted him up pretty good. I'm surprised you didn't punch him again." Andrew said.

"So am I." Tyler replied. He left Katie who was talking with Trevor and headed towards the bathroom. Why wasn't he mad at Jack? Last night he had been ready to break the guy's neck, but he wasn't anymore. He even shook his hand and apologized to him. He quickly washed the blood off his hand and went back to the living room. He looked around for Katie, but with all the people there, it was hard to find her. He finally spotted her sitting next to Andrew on the couch in the living room and quickly walked over to sit down with them, but Andrew got up in a hurry, said he was going to go get drinks, and walked away.

"Well he seems jumpy." Tyler said.

"He's worried about you." Katie told him.

"He's worried about me? Why?" He asked.

"Your best friend is in the hospital! You just met the guy who was responsible for it and apologized for punching him! We all thought you were going to explode, but you didn't. That's not really normal. Normal people would be holding a grudge." She replied. "Why aren't you?"

"I don't know. I'm not a normal person, and he seemed like a nice guy. I guess I didn't blame him for... what happened to Carter." He told her.

"Then who do you blame?" She asked quietly as if she didn't want to know.

"Myself." He said. He'd just realized this. That was why he wasn't mad at Jack anymore. He should've taken the hit. People looked up to him too much. So much that they're willing to risk their own safety to make sure he could take a single stupid shot on net, and he wasn't even the best shot on the team. Carter was.

"Come on Tyler. That's ridiculous. It can't be your fault. How could it be?" She said.

Just then, Andrew came back holding three cans of Coke.

"It sounds like people want to hear what happened." He told them.

No. Tyler couldn't do that. He didn't want to think about what happened. He had to get out of there before they started talking about it.

So he went straight for the front door. He heard Katie call his name, but he didn't stop. He had to get out. He flung the door open and ran outside. As soon as he crossed the front porch, images started flashing through his head. Andrew passing him the puck, him taking the shot, turning around. He yelled something but didn't even know what he said. He didn't want to see this part. He relived the night before, in his dreams, and he could barely stand it.

Then he saw Carter, lying on the ice, bloody, broken, helpless, almost dead, and there was nothing he could do about it. Maybe that's why he blamed himself. He couldn't do anything to help his friend. When Andrew needed help carrying him off the ice, he just sat there. Not able to pull the strength together to carry his best friend off the ice, and he hated himself for

it. Then he was on top of Jack. Punching him with no mercy. He looked up to shake the two guys off his shoulder. Then he looked back down at Jack and punched again, but when he pulled back to punch again, he realized he wasn't punching Jack anymore. He was sitting on Carter's chest instead, punching his best friend. That's what he dreamed last night. Why was he seeing that instead of what actually happened? The face changed back. Jack was unconscious, blood streaming from his nose. He got up and skated over to Carter.

Suddenly, Andrew was next to him, shaking him and calling his name. He didn't remember this in his dream, or in the real event. It must be something that's happening now. He tried to pull out of the dream, but he couldn't. That's how it was last night. He'd tried desperately to wake himself up, but with no luck. He had to finish. Andrew was yelling for Trevor to help him get Carter. They carried Carter away, and Tyler sat there on the ice. Katie had her hand on his shoulder. She tried to walk away, and Tyler grabbed her arm. She knelt down and hugged him. Then she whispered in his ear,

"Tyler, come back to me." He didn't remember that either. That had to be a current event. Then it ended. He was back in Trevor's front yard where he was lying in the grass curled into a ball. Katie had her arms wrapped around him again. Andrew was holding his phone with his thumb hovering over the call button. He was ready to call the paramedics, but Tyler didn't need that. He was fine now.

"You alright?" Andrew asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Tyler said, still shaking.

"What happened? Trevor asked as he ran outside.

"Nothing." Tyler lied. He didn't even know what had happened.

"That's not nothing Tyler. You were fine two seconds ago, and then we come out to see you lying on the grass curled up into a ball." Andrew exclaimed

"I'll be fine Andrew." Tyler told him, "just gimme a second."

Reluctantly, Andrew headed back to the house. Trevor quickly followed. The only person that didn't leave was Katie.

"What's going on?" she asked him. "And don't say 'nothing', because I know it's not. What happened?"

"I don't know." he replied, "I just didn't want to listen to people ask me how it happened. So I ran. Then started seeing flashbacks of... the night Carter got hurt. Last night. I saw everything, like it was happening all over again."

He stopped there. He didn't want to explain what he had seen, or why he was angry with himself. He just wanted to go see his friend in the hospital. To make sure he was okay.

"Carter is fine Tyler." Katie told him, "we're going to see him in an hour. What happened wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could do. let's go back inside now."

That's exactly what they did. They walked right back in like nothing had happened. Andrew and Travis didn't say anything either, and he was glad that they didn't. Tyler and Katie returned to the couch and drank their Cokes in silence. After about fifteen minutes, Trevor announced that they

were now going to leave for the hospital. Tyler, Katie, and Andrew headed to the truck while everyone else got in their own cars.

It was sunny, warm, and the birds sang their happiest songs. The wind battered Tyler's face from the open window. The Beatles "Let it Be" started playing on the radio. It seemed like a perfect day. It was only supposed to be a twenty minute drive, so nobody worried about sticking together. They must've looked strange to everyone else, a large group of more than fifteen cars, all driving to the same location. They were six blocks from the hospital, five, four. They could see the hospital looming over the rest of the small town now. Three blocks, two blocks, but that's when the car appeared. They were driving through a green light when a green Honda CR-V slammed on the gas and rammed the truck on Tyler's side. It was a deafening sound. The crunching of metal, the shattering of the glass, the screeching of the cars as they slid through the street. Then the airbag deployed and hit Tyler hard in the face, the back of his head slammed back into the seat and everything went blurry.

Tyler could barely see. Everything he saw swam in and out of focus. He tried to recall what had happened. He was in a truck, apparently with some other people. The truck was upside down. Out what was left of the window, he could see a green SUV. Then it all came back to him. The hospital, the light, the crash, then black. The only thing keeping him in his seat was the belt, but he couldn't seem to get it undone.

"Andrew!" He said as he shook his friend's shoulder. But Andrew didn't respond, neither did Katie. He would have to get them out himself. He looked around for some way to cut the belt. There was a switchblade in Andrew's pocket, but Tyler couldn't reach it. He spotted a piece of glass on the ground and stretched to reach it. He was just an inch shy. He reached again and this time he was able to grab it. He grunted as the glass cut into his hand, but his

hand was not important right now. Reaching to his waist, he ran the glass along the belt and cut himself free. As he dropped to the ground, there was a bang on the door. Then another, then the door was ripped off its hinges. A rough hand grabbed Tyler by the arm and yanked him out. There was a loud pop that came from his shoulder and Tyler screamed in pain. He was dragged about ten feet from the wreck and then he was handed off to two other people, but these people were much more gentle.

"You're going to be okay." someone told him, but then he realized that his friends wouldn't. The car that had hit them was on fire, and the gasoline was leaking out of the truck in a steady stream, heading straight for the fiery mass. Two men were trying to yank the door to the truck open on Katie's side but with no luck. The gasoline was getting closer and closer to the fire. His friends only had a few more seconds, and the two men had noticed the gasoline and started to back away from the car.

"NO!" Tyler screamed. He shook the two people off and bolted for the truck. The door wouldn't open, so he threw his shoulder as hard as he could into it. Nothing happened, but Tyler couldn't stop trying. He slammed into the door, again, and again, and again, pain shooting through his whole body with each blow. Then Tyler heard a loud bang as the door gave way. He ripped the door open and scrambled inside. He quickly grabbed the knife from Andrew's pocket and cut both his friends free. Andrew had started to wake and climbed out on his own, but Tyler had to drag Katie from the seat. Pain shot up into his shoulder as he tried to pull Katie out of the truck. Someone ran up beside him and helped him pull Katie out. When they finally got Katie out, the person went to go help Andrew who had fallen over. Tyler looked at the stream of gas. He wouldn't be able to make it. He had maybe four seconds at the most to get a far enough distance, but there was no way he could get him and Katie away from the wreck in time. They were only six feet from the

wreck, but Tyler stopped pulling Katie. Instead, he dropped her arms and jumped on top of her and used himself as a shield to protect her.

The stream of gas sizzled as it caught fire, then there was a sound louder than anything he had heard in his life as the gas tank exploded. Tongues of flame licked up his legs and across his back. It was the worst pain he had ever felt in his life. Even worse than the time he broke his arm from a stray hockey puck. The heat was almost unbearable, but he didn't move. After a few seconds, he felt hands try to pull him off, but he didn't move then either. So the person flattened himself on top of Tyler, instantly extinguishing the flames. Then Tyler heard sirens. He counted five sets of them. Firefighters ran over to where Tyler was lying and pulled him, Katie and the third person over to an ambulance. They lifted him onto a stretcher and into the ambulance where he drifted into a deep and peaceful sleep.

When he woke, he was in a hospital bed. He was lying on his side, back and legs still screaming with pain. He couldn't believe the irony of what had happened. They were on their way to the hospital to see Carter, and got in a car accident that hospitalized them. It felt like some sick joke.

'Hey, sorry. You can't see your friend in the hospital because you just got seriously injured in a car accident while you were on your way to the hospital.' Sounded about right. He rubbed his eyes and sat up. There were a few machines to his left, a window behind the bed, and a door at the foot of the bed. His back still throbbed with pain. He had bandages running from his waist to neck, even some of his face was bandaged. He was wearing a pair of cotton pants, but no shirt because of the bandages. Everything hurt, even breathing was painful.

Suddenly, the door at the foot of his bed opened, and a woman, probably a nurse, walked in.

"Oh, glad to see you're awake. I'll let the doctor know." She told him and hurried out of the room. A couple of minutes later, the doctor came in.

"Hello Tyler." He said as he walked in, "I'm Doctor Bradley. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty sore, my back still hurts, but I'm fine other than that." Tyler replied.

"That is to be expected. That was a pretty bad accident. The truck was destroyed, and the driver of the other car was killed on impact. It's a miracle you survived. Not only did you survive, but you were able to go back and get your friends. And that little stunt you pulled, saved that girl's life. If you hadn't done that, she wouldn't be alive right now." Dr. Bradley told him.

"Katie? How is she? Is she ok?" Tyler asked, jumping at the fact that she might be ok.

"She's fine. A few minor injuries, but what you did saved her from burning alive. Matter of fact, the only thing that saved you was that other boy. When he layed on top of you, it put out the flames, and he took some of the force of the fire. You should be thankful for such loyal friends." Dr. Bradley told him.

"I am." Tyler said. "Am I allowed to see them?"

"The girl, yes. She's already waiting outside. But the boy needs to rest." He replied. "I'll send her in."

Dr. Bradley then got up and opened the door. Katie calmly walked in. She had a few bandages, but she looked virtually unharmed other than that.

"Hey Tyler." She said. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." He told her, "you?"

"I'll be ok, and you look far from fine." She laughed. "They told me what you did."

"Oh, uh. You know. Don't worry about it." He stammered.

"Shut up." She said shaking her head, "you saved my life, and Andrew's. I can't thank you enough. You almost died, twice. Once after they put you on the ambulance, and again while you were in the operating room. Your heart stopped Tyler."

By then tears were forming in her eyes. His heart had stopped? Weird, he felt fine.

"How long have I been here?" He asked trying to change the subject.

"A week." She told him.

"Really? It doesn't feel like that long." He said frowning.

"Well, you've been asleep the whole time. Be glad you were. From what I heard, it was pretty bad. They almost couldn't save you the second time your heart stopped. Andrew woke up the second day, but he didn't have it that bad. His burns weren't as bad as your's, but he got some on his front when he tried to protect you. The fire department got there a few seconds after that and pulled us out. You and Andrew were taken to the hospital immediately. Andrew wanted to come and see you, but they wouldn't let him leave his room." She informed him.

Tyler nodded, "Have you seen Carter yet?" But just as he said that, the door opened and Carter walked in. "Well, speak of the devil. Hey Carter." Tyler said.

He was dressed in jeans and a blue tee shirt. His short brown hair was a mess like always, but his face was scarred and bandaged.

"You look like you've been to hell and back my friend." Carter said grinning from ear to ear.

"Have you looked in a mirror lately?" Tyler asked as his friend hugged him tight. "Ow, ow, ow, watch the ribs."

"Sorry about that." Carter apologized. "What a summer huh? You've been in the papers twice in two months. You're going to be practically famous when we get back to school."

"I was in the papers?" He asked, he thought he would have known about it if he was in the papers.

"Yeah, you made the front page for that 'act of heroism.' Everyone in the hospital has been talking about it. Even the staff." Carter told him. "You had a hundred different news stations wanting to interview you, but the doc wouldn't let them. He said you needed rest."

"Well, school's gonna be fun." Tyler said sarcastically.

"I say you're going to be handing out autographs for the first month. Dibs on the first one." Carter said winking at Tyler.

Then a nurse came in and ushered them out. She told them Tyler needed rest. Carter groaned.

"I'm tired of that excuse." He said as he walked out. The nurse shut the door behind her and left Tyler to his thoughts. School started next week. There was no hiding who he was anymore. The bullies are going to grovel at his feet and apologize for the way they treated him, but he wouldn't believe them. Girls already thought he was good looking, now they would swoon just to hear his name. His life was going to be a nightmare. The one thing he was avoiding was attention. Now he was going to have his fill of it. He wouldn't be able to escape it. He was glad that it would be his last year of high school though. His birthday was next month.

He would be turning eighteen. He didn't even know what he wanted to do when he got out of school. He had earned enough money over the past few summers at the Riley's farm to get by for a couple months, but he would need a job eventually. To get a good job, he probably needed to go to college, but that wouldn't be difficult. He already had a couple scholarships for hockey, and just about any college would take him because of his grades. Maybe people wouldn't care who he was once he was in college. Who was he now anyways? Tyler Johnson, number forty-five, left defense for the high school hockey team, good looking to some people, "eighth wonder of the world". Who was relied heavily on his high school hockey team. When he left for college, who would he be? Nobody. Just another face in the crowd. The thought reassured him. He wouldn't be good looking genius number forty-five anymore. Just Tyler Johnson. And he was okay with that. He wanted that. He wanted to just be Tyler Johnson. A normal person. With that thought, he shut his eyes and slept.

Andrew was released from the hospital on Saturday. Tyler was released Sunday. The next day, all of them went to school. Katie and Tyler ended up

with all but one class together. Just as they all suspected, the bullies backed off, everyone wanted to take a picture with him, get his number, be able to call him their friend. He had earned their respect, but they hadn't earned his. Most of the time he was nice to people. He was a hero to the little kids in middle school, and to the freshmen. And just as Carter guessed, a few people asked for his autograph. He ignored the kids who had bullied them. Now all of a sudden, he was a popular kid. He had power, and to them, he looked stronger. All because they knew who he was. People stared at the scars on his neck and arms.

When he went to the locker room to change for P.E., the guys around him stared at the scars on his back. He played hockey almost everyday, and when the guys wanted to play airsoft, he played with them. They had yet to beat him, Carter, Katie, and Andrew.

Part Two

Tyler tapped his pencil lightly against his desk, starting at the paper in front of him. He glanced up at the clock. Two minutes left till he could start the test. It was a history test, and history was his best class. So Carter and Katie challenged him to a race. Whoever finished first with the highest score won. Andrew decided to join and suggested that everyone get a five minute head start of Tyler, so he sat there staring at the back of the test. He glanced up at the clock again and the minute hand slid to the sixty second mark. Five minutes was up. He flipped the test over and answered the first question with ease. It was a fifty question test, but those were easy. His pencil moved like lightning as he answered one question after the other. He would start to read the next question before he even finished writing so he didn't have to stop writing. Question forty-nine went by at six minutes since he started. He quickly read question fifty.

What were the codenames of the five beaches the Allied forces invaded during the invasion of Normandy during World War Two?

Was that even a question? He quickly jotted down his answer.

Juno, Gold, Sword, Omaha, and Utah.

He dropped his pencil and stood pushing his chair back. Calmly walking over to the teacher's desk, he set the test on her desk. He noticed no other tests were turned in yet.

"Thank you Tyler." She told him without even looking up to see who it was.

He walked back to his seat and started to read the textbook. About two minutes later Katie and Carter turned in their tests at almost exactly the

same time. Then Andrew turned his in. Then the rest of the class started to turn theirs in. Some people started texting their friends underneath their desks. Others were working on homework for other classes. Still others were reading various books. Tyler had already finished today's homework yesterday. It was Friday and he never felt like working on Fridays, so he did all the work on Thursday. Not only was it Friday, but Monday was final exams and then everyone was done with the school year. The end of the school year meant the guys were going to hold a massive airsoft war. They've been stockpiling for months now, buying gear, balloons, paint, ammo, better guns, attachments, and various survival supplies.

It was going to be Tyler's 'commando' team, plus a few of teams from the local airsoft league. Tyler had gotten his supplies early and locked them in the shed in his backyard. They were all going to go into a large forest and fight there. The game would not end until all but one team surrendered or were eliminated. So it could last for weeks, and probably would. Tyler had two bags, one full of war supplies, and one full of survival supplies.

Tyler closed the book as the bell rang. He quickly grabbed his textbooks and left the classroom. He waited by the door for his friends.

"I think I win." Tyler said as Carter passed him.

"Shut up." Carter replied with a smile.

"Admit it. I want to hear you say it. Say it. Come on." Tyler urged.

"I'm not admitting to anything until those tests are graded." Carter said.

Katie and Andrew walked out and they all headed for the halls. Each of them had to go their own way to get to his or her locker. Tyler quickly spun the correct combo on his lock and pulled the door open. He shoved the books

and folders into his bag and pulled on his hoodie. He slung the backpack over his locker and shut the locker. To some people he may have seemed to be in a hurry, and he was.

There was a new kid in the school who liked to push people around. So Tyler was going to have a nice chat with the kid. Well, not necessarily nice. Some of the people this kid had beat up were his friends, and he didn't even have the courage to do it himself. He had his gang of thugs do it. He, Andrew and Carter planned to find the kid. Of course, not all of them would participate if a fight started. That was just cowardly. He looked around the halls for Carter and Andrew, but the new kid found him first. Trailing by his pack of four dogs, he came swaggering up to Tyler. He was a big kid. Maybe three inches taller than Tyler, and definitely over fifty pounds heavier. His gang were about the same build, but five inches shorter.

"So this is the famous Tyler Johnson. You know I've heard a lot about you." He told Tyler.

"I'm flattered." Tyler said, he needed to stall. These guys weren't going to fight fair. Of course they'd use their numbers as an advantage. Suddenly, two of the guys grabbed Tyler's arms. He didn't like where this was going.

"Look, why don't you call off your dogs and we can meet for tea, huh?" Tyler joked.

One of the guys twisted his arm behind his back and began to slowly push up. Apparently he didn't like being called a dog.

"Ooo, I wouldn't make them angry. He will break your arm." The bully said.

Suddenly, Carter appeared behind him and twisted his arm until the boy was bent over trying to stop the pain.

“And I’ll break yours Jim. Now stop crying and get your boys off mine. And please hurry, I haven't got all day.” Carter whispered in his ear.

“Break it!” The bully yelled, but he was soon screaming as his arm cracked. The boy holding Tyler’s arm tried to follow his leader’s orders, but Tyler kicked him hard in the knee. The second boy went to punch him, but Tyler moved and the boy punched a locker. He doubled over clutching his hand and Tyler kneed him in the face with a satisfying crunch and spurt of blood. Carter made quick work of the two other boys who had run to their master’s aid. Tyler looked over to see one lying on the floor clutching his head and the other clutching his parts.

“Aww, come on! You could have at least left me one!” Andrew yelled as he reached the top of the stairs. “Should we wait around for teachers to arrive?”

“Heck no.” Carter said, “We could get expelled for this”

“Well, you could,” said a voice that all of them recognized as belonging to Mr. Smith, the school principal, “but I didn’t see anything. It looks as though these boys fought each other and there was no clear winner.” Oddly enough, he was smiling as he said this.

Tyler didn't understand. It was obvious they had done this to the children on the ground, and the principal knew that. Shouldn't they be getting yelled at right now?

“I suggest you children go home before someone blames you for this unfortunate incident.”

They had no reason to argue, so they ran down the stairs and out the door to the parking lot where Katie was waiting by her car.

"What kept you guys? I've been waiting here for twenty minutes." She asked obviously irritated by their late arrival.

"Tell you on the road!" Carter said as he threw his bag in the trunk.

"Let's go!"

"Well someone's in a hurry." She replied opening the car door and climbing in.

So they told her the whole story, how they had planned to find this kid and have a 'chat' with him, how they planned to meet by Tyler's locker, and how the guy with his gang they were going to look for got to Tyler first, how Carter and Tyler beat the living tar out of them. Oddly enough Katie just shook her head and kept driving.

"Why did you break his arm exactly?" Tyler asked.

"He said, 'break it', but he wasn't very specific." Carter replied, and everyone laughed.

"You should've seen their faces when Carter just appeared behind them. *God* it was great, by the way, how did you do that Carter?" Tyler said.

"It was easy. I just used the lockers as a hiding spot." Carter told him.

"You guys could have gotten in serious trouble." Katie remarked

"Be glad the principal saw what happened and let you off."

"Yeah, yeah, we know." Andrew said. "That guy needs to be in a mental hospital."

"Andrew, you didn't do crap." Carter laughed.

Andrew smiled, "Yeah, but I was at the scene of the crime when the principal got there."

"My hero." Tyler said sarcastically.

"So, Tyler, have you chosen your team yet?" Andrew asked, quickly changing the subject.

"Yeah." Tyler replied.

"Are you going to tell us?" Carter asked hesitantly. Tyler laughed, "No. I'll tell you guys at the game tomorrow."

"Aww, Tyler! We're hanging on the edge of our seats here!" Andrew exclaimed.

"All the more reason not to tell you." Tyler told him, and Carter and Katie laughed.

They pulled into Andrew's driveway and he hopped out.

"So, are you going to tell us now that Andrew's not here?" Katie asked.

"Nope." Tyler said smiling.

Next they pulled up to Tyler's house. He hopped out of the car, grabbed his backpack, and waved goodbye.

"You guys had better be at the game tomorrow." he told them.

"I have to be there. So you don't have to worry about me." Carter said. Tyler raised his eyebrows at Katie,

"I'll be there too." She reassured him, "I always am."

With that Tyler started to walk back to his house. He opened the door and walked inside.

"Mom? Dad?" he called. It was only four so he didn't expect his dad to be home, but his mom should be here. There was a note on the table.

Odd, his mom didn't usually go out on Friday nights. No surprise that his dad wouldn't get home till late. He was an engineer. He was always home late. It wasn't like his mom to leave a note telling him where she'd gone. He wasn't hungry right now so he just went upstairs to his room. He didn't need to study for the exams. He never studied for tests. He dropped his backpack on his bed and sat down at his desk. He had decided who would be on his team, but he still needed to put on paper. He grabbed a piece of paper and a pen.

Carter

That was always the first name on the list. He couldn't imagine playing without him on his team.

Katie

Andrew

Ben

Travis

Now he had exceeded his max amount of chosen people. He needed to get rid of one. So he scribbled out Ben's name. He reread over the list he made.

He liked this list. So he folded it up and slipped it in his pocket. For large team events, the captains were allowed to choose five people, then a group was appointed to them. Whichever captain had their list read first would get the group they chose. This was determined by a coin toss, but Tyler always won coin tosses. They were supposed to call it in the air, so Tyler watched it and calculated what side it would fall on and called that. He was never wrong.

He decided he was going to go to the rink to get some practice in before the game tomorrow. So he walked down to the garage and put his hockey bag in the trunk of his red '65 Ford Mustang. He rarely drove his car if he didn't have to. He didn't want to break it. He turned the key, and the car rumbled to life. He slowly backed the car out of the garage and drove along to the rink.

When Tyler got there, Carter was already on the ice. So he quickly got dressed and grabbed his stick. Carter had a number of pucks all lined up, and he was shooting one after another at the net. He never missed.

"Blue line shots?" Tyler asked, "What kind of a challenge is that?"

By then Tyler was at the red line. Carter turned and gave him a hard pass. Tyler one-timered it dead center of the net. He remembered the last time he had shot a one-timer. It was the day Carter got hurt. When he had gotten that pass he didn't even try to catch the pass. He just shot. People

told him he had made it. He had scored the winning goal, but Andrew told him it was the worst shot he had ever made. He had actually hit the goalies blocker, but the puck slid off into the net. So ever since then he had practiced his accuracy. Mostly wrist shots and slap shots, but he hadn't tried a one-timer since that day.

"Nice shot." Carter said, breathing hard from the rapid shots on the net.

"It seemed too slow." Tyler said with a smile.

"Race you goal-line to goal-line." Carter challenged.

"Really? You always lose." But Tyler was already on the goal-line, ready to start.

"Ready? Set, go!" Carter yelled, and they rocketed off the goal-line. They were already at the blue line, red line, blue line, but then Tyler's skate slid out from underneath him and he slid all the way to the goal-line, inches behind Carter. He stood breathing heavily.

"Well," he said, "I think I need to sharpen my skates."

"Yeah, right." Carter said laughing.

They practiced for about an hour, Andrew and Travis showed up while they were doing skating drills. They ended practicing by doing a two-on-two scrimmage. Tyler and Travis won two to one. So they headed back to the locker rooms. They all changed quickly so they could get home for some sleep.

Tyler slung his bag over his shoulder and walked back to his car. He dropped his bag and stick in the trunk and was about to close it when he heard a car skidding through the parking lot. He turned in time to see a gun pointed at him. The man holding the gun was wearing a black mask. He tried to drop to the ground as he heard three shots, but he felt jolt in his shoulder and extreme pain. He heard the man turn and run. Tyler laid there, staring at the asphalt. His shoulder throbbed with pain. He reached up and his hand was instantly soaked in blood.

"Tyler! Oh god no! Tyler! Talk to me buddy!" Carter yelled as he ran over.

"They shot my car." Tyler said just before everything went dark.

He woke to the sound of two people shouting at each other. He listened closely trying to hear what they were saying.

"I leave you alone with him for less than two hours and he gets shot!"

"You have no room to talk here Katie! When he was with you, he almost died twice!"

He heard a loud smack and assumed that Katie had just slapped whoever was talking to her.

"You know I had no way to stop that accident!" She yelled.

"Hey, at least I stayed awake long enough to get him help!" The other person yelled back.

"You know what Carter, maybe you should never have been assigned to Tyler! Maybe Andrew would have done a better job!" She told Carter.

Wait, what were they talking about? Carter was 'assigned' to Tyler? What was that supposed to mean?

"Guys! Shut up! He's awake." Said a third voice. Tyler looked up in time to see Katie storm out of the room.

"Look Tyler, I'm sorry about all this. Katie's right. It's my fault. I should have been with you." Carter apologized.

"Carter, what the heck is going on? You were 'assigned' to me? And how could this be your fault? What was Katie talking about?" Tyler asked hurriedly.

"Tyler, I know this is confusing. It took me a while to take it in too." Said Andrew who must have been the third person.

"What do you mean?" Tyler asked.

"Someone wants you dead Tyler." Carter told him rather bluntly.

"What?" Tyler said.

"Shut up Carter. It's not your job to tell him." Andrew told Carter.

"Oh, and I guess it's your job then?" Carter asked.

"No, it's his dad's." Andrew said.

With that, the door to the small room he was in opened and Tyler's dad walked in.

"Give us a minute." He said.

Carter and Andrew walked out of the room whispering rather loudly. His dad came over and sat down on the bed.

"Dad? What's going on?" Tyler asked hesitantly.

"Tyler, you know how I always said that I was an engineer?" His dad replied.

"Yeah." Tyler said.

"Well, I'm not the kind of engineer you think I am." His dad told him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Tyler asked.

"For the past few years I've been working on a project that could change the world. We called it project . We planned to use a device on Mars. The device would change the environment to make it habitable by humans. This would take about four months. While this change was happening, we would start to load cargo and volunteers into a massive spaceship that would take them there. As soon as the crew said it was safe, we would start sending more people, but there are some people out there who would use the device to gain power. I wouldn't let them have control of the device so they threatened to hurt you. I told everyone that I wouldn't continue with the project unless you were safe. So they sent Katie, and recruited Carter and Andrew." His dad said.

"What do you mean recruited?" Tyler asked.

"I'm getting there." His dad continued.

"The group responsible for the protection of the project is called Cronus. I can't tell you much about them other than the name. It's above your security level, but under the circumstances, they let me explain what I could. You've been moved to their top-secret facility for recovery and protection. It took a lot of effort to persuade them to bring you here. Carter, and Andrew joined Cronus last year, but Katie has been an agent since she was fifteen. They've been working hard to protect you, but it hasn't been easy for them. We have reason to believe that the car accident and shooting were the work of a terrorist group called the New Russian Empire. I know, it's kind of a stupid name, but you should see the people that work for them."

"So you're telling me that the past year of my life has been a lie?" Tyler asked, he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

His dad hesitated. He couldn't even admit it. His dad wasn't the only one lying to him. Carter, Andrew, Katie, they were guilty too. His best friends.

"I'll leave you to finish talking to your friends now." His dad said as he got up to leave.

Andrew, Katie, and Carter walked in after his dad left. None of them said a word.

"How much of it was a lie?" Tyler asked.

"What... What do you mean?" Katie stammered.

"Last year, my life, my friends, everything. How much was a lie?" Tyler asked again determined to get some sort of answer.

"Look Tyler, none of us wanted to lie to you, but we didn't really have a choice." Andrew said hesitantly.

"Didn't have a choice? *Didn't have a choice?* How do you keep something like this a secret? I thought you all were my friends! Katie, you've been lying to me since the day I met you. Andrew? Carter? How long have you guys been hiding things from me?" Tyler asked not believing what he heard.

"Tyler we *had* to lie to you!" Katie said, "I couldn't tell you if I wanted to! I have family working on project too! If I had told you, they would have been fired, and I would have been arrested by. If Carter or Andrew had told you they would have been arrested too."

"Look guys, Tyler needs to rest. We've got briefing in five minutes." Andrew reminded them.

"I don't need to rest! Why does everyone think I need to rest!" Tyler said. He tried to get up but instantly felt his shoulder burning with pain. His shirt became red with blood.

Katie sighed, "You pulled your stitches out. Carter, go get a nurse. I'll try to stop the bleeding."

Carter left the room, and Katie grabbed a white cloth and pressed it against the wound.

"Hold that there." She told him. "Andrew, see if you can find another towel. A clean one preferably."

So Andrew left too.

"How much was real?" Tyler calmly asked.

"Tyler, I had a job to do. Outside of that, it was my life to live." She told him.

"Was it? Then how much of it was actually your's and not a made up story? The night Carter got hurt, was that a lie? When I couldn't take the pressure and you held my hand, was that a lie, or was it just you 'protecting' me? The day you kissed me, was that a lie too? When you held me as I sobbed after the flashback..."

He never finished that sentence. Instead, Katie leaned in and kissed him again. Her hand placed on the side of his head was warm against his cold skin. Her hair smelled like roses. Her warm lips were soft on his. Her tears dripped slowly onto his cheeks. She held the kiss for what felt like forever. Instantly, all anger he had felt was gone.

She pulled away, "I told you, outside of my job, my life is mine to live."

Tyler nodded and Katie ran out of the room. Carter came back with the nurse and almost ran into her.

"What's up with her?" Carter asked.

"Not entirely sure." Tyler told him. A single tear rolled down his cheek, but it wasn't a tear of pain, or sadness.

Tyler was allowed to leave the infirmary a few days later, but his arm was kept in a sling. The HUB, as they called it, was a massive facility. The fact that no one outside knew of it's existence was beyond belief. You could easily fit five high schools inside. You could do almost anything here. There

were personal quarters for everyone, there was a hanger for planes and helicopters and a launch pad for spaceships. The technology here was far beyond any of them had ever seen.

They had a room for holograms, where you could train, or relax on a beach, or even go camping. There were school rooms for the children. There were some rooms that he wasn't allowed to know what they were because he wasn't a level one. When Tyler was released from the infirmary, they placed a metal gauntlet on his left arm. The gauntlet reached from his wrist to his elbow. There was a screen on the inside of his arm that could connect to any of the computers if he had the access code. He could play games on it, watch movies, look at a 3D map of the facility, and if he wanted to contact someone who had the gauntlet as well, it could display a hologram image of them, or just show their face on the screen.

After the second day at the HUB, an officer approached him and told him that one of the commanding officers wanted to see him. The man lead him through a series of halls and security checkpoints.

"He's in there." The man told him pointing at a door directly ahead.

Tyler walked slowly towards the door. It looked just like a regular door. There was no security pad, no com system, not even a gauntlet uplink station. He guessed he supposed to just open the door so he did. He walked into a large circular room with no windows or computer stations, just a lone desk in the center of the room. Behind the desk sat an older looking man with deep wrinkles on his forehead; black hair turning white. His hand shook as he turned the pages of various documents.

"Sit down." The man said gesturing to the chair in front of the desk.

Tyler walked over and sat. The man had a deep voice. You could probably put a mask on him and call him 'Darth Vader' if you wanted to. He kept turning the pages and didn't even bother to look up.

"You asked to see me sir?" Tyler asked after a long silence.

"I did." The man said.

They continued to sit in complete silence. Tyler was beginning to wonder if he should just leave when the man spoke again.

"You have very loyal friends Tyler."

"Why do you say that?" Tyler replied.

"They jumped at the idea of protecting you, but they downright refused to lie to you. In spite of this, they were under my command and I threatened to court martial them for disobeying a direct order. Don't hold a grudge against them, or Kathrine. Kathrine didn't know you when she took the assignment. It was just another job, but then later on we could tell that it had become more than just another job. You two had become very close. She asked for requested that another person do the job instead of her and she almost quit but she stayed to protect you. Carter's a fine agent. He never questioned his orders as long as he knew that he was helping protect you. Andrew was the same way. They all knew what a powerful asset you could be to this organization, but that's not why they did it. They did it because they're your friends. They never once let their jobs get in the way of their friendship and love for you. Never forget what they are to you and what you are to them." The man told him.

"What do you mean by 'powerful asset'?" Tyler asked.

"Don't you know?" The man asked like it should be obvious.

"Know what?" Tyler replied.

"Maybe I should let your father explain, but for now I'd like to offer you a place in our organization.

Cronus is an international private company, to accept would be to swear allegiance to us, but you would still hold your American citizenship. Don't ask me how that works, I don't even really know myself. You would immediately be granted level three access. You would be able to pick a team of young people your age to be your special operations team. Though they will have to go through special preparations before they can be on your team." The man told him.

"Wait, so you're saying that if I take this job, I would immediately get command of my own team? No training? No special qualifications? No years of experience?" Tyler was shocked. Who would be insane enough to offer something like that?

"Well, you will go through training while you have time." The man explained, "It pays well. I should know."

Tyler thought for a moment. They had to be trying to use him some how. Who gives an eighteen year old kid command of a special operations team? There had to be some other factor at play.

"Give me time to think about it." Tyler said.

"You'll have all the time you need." The man replied.

They stood and shook hands.

"I do hope you accept this offer. It's a once in a lifetime opportunity."
The man told him.

With that Tyler left the room. He had no trouble finding his way out of the maze of hallways. He needed to find his friends and tell him what had happened. He still couldn't believe he was just offered to enter this organization as an officer, but what about him being a 'powerful asset'? The man said his dad would explain so he started looking for his dad instead. He asked around, but no one had seen him. Then Tyler remembered the gauntlets. He touched his left arm and the screen came to life.

"Where is Nathan Johnson?" He asked.

Classified

Why was his dad's location classified.

"Call Nathan Johnson." He tried.

Unable to call Nathan Johnson.

Explain." Tyler commanded.

Classified.

"I'm his son!" Tyler said.

He was arguing with a computer. There was no way to reason with it.

"When is Nathan Johnson released from duty?" Tyler asked

Two hours.

Well, it looked like he would have to wait.

"What are the current locations of Andrew Tesser, and Carter Mitchells, and Katherine Peterson?" He asked it.

The requested persons are in the Holoroom.

"Stand by." He said.

The screen went dark. He was going to have to talk to his friends first. The Holo Rooms were on level four. The entire facility was underground so the farther you went down, the higher the numbers got. He stepped into the elevator and hit the '4' button. The ride was so smooth he didn't even know it had started moving until the doors opened on the fourth floor. There was a long hallway with doors along each wall. Each door was marked with a number. He quickly found Holo Room number six and linked his gauntlet to the terminal.

Would you like to continue to briefing?

"Skip briefing." Tyler commanded.

Please equip your visor.

Visor? He looked around and on the wall there was a rack with what he guessed were the visors. He picked one up to examine it. It looked like a gas mask except without the filters on. He slipped it on. He had a perfect view.

"Tyler Johnson, current program." He said.

The door to the Holo Room slid open to reveal a room with racks of weapons and armor.

"Program details." Tyler commanded.

Hold the city until extraction.

Urban areas, lot's of buildings, good for sharpshooters. He only had one arm so he wouldn't be able to do much. So he strapped a Colt M1911 to his waist. Slipping several extra magazines into his belt, he gave the 'ready' command.

Instantly three small camera feeds of his friend's faces appeared in the top right corner of his visor. The sound of gunfire and explosions almost drowned out his friend's yelling at each other. He could hear Carter yelling commands at all the others.

"Tyler? What are you doing here?" Katie asked.

"Taking command." Tyler said assessing the situation.

It didn't look good. The visor showed an outline of his team members. They were all in different buildings. Enemy forces were converging heavily on each building.

"Katie, Andrew, do you see the apartment building across from the gas station?" He asked. "Meet me there, Carter you've got a sniper rifle right?"

"Yeah." He told Tyler.

"Bolt-action or semi-automatic?" Tyler continued.

"Bolt-action. What else?" Carter asked.

"Well that doesn't help me. But it'll have to work. Lay down covering fire for us." Tyler ordered.

"You got it." With that Carter began to shoot at anything that moved.

Tyler began to run towards the apartment building. An enemy soldier jumped out to shoot him, but Carter shot him before he could even blink. When he reached the apartment building he saw Andrew was holding the door open for him. As soon as he got through the door, Andrew shut it.

"What now?" Andrew asked.

"Get to higher ground." Tyler ordered.

So they bolted through the halls and found the stairs. They started running up the countless flights of stairs. Their legs were burning with pain from the effort once they got to the top. Each of them was gasping for air. Sweat was fogging his mask. Tyler slowly pushed the door to the roof open and it was instantly blown off it's hinges. How did they not notice the chopper? They should have heard it. How did none of them hear it? Bullets sprayed the wall.

"Back inside!" Tyler yelled.

"I'm hit!" Andrew yelled back.

Katie stopped to help him.

"No!" He commanded, "Leave him!"

She turned to follow him and bullets sprayed her back.

"Carter! Shoot the rotors!" Tyler told him.

Instantly there was a pop, then shortly afterwards another pop. The helicopter dropped out of the sky. Carter had completely severed it from the blades. Tyler kicked a wall. He had just gotten two of his team members killed. How was he supposed to be a leader if he couldn't even keep his team alive.

"Tyler, they're converging. On your position. They're already in my..." Carter's com went dead. He could hear the large group of enemies coming up the stairs. He didn't have any cover on the roof, or anywhere to run. There was no way out of this. So he turned and jumped. But he wasn't falling; the program had ended.

"Sorry guys." He said.

Carter patted him on the shoulder, "You kept us alive a few minutes longer than we would have been if I was still in command."

They dropped their stuff off in the armory and disconnected their visors. They decided to go to the rec room to relax. The rec room was a large room with a couple ping pong tables, some pool tables, an actual pool, a bar, large sofas, and really big TVs. Carter grabbed them a couple sodas while Tyler set up a game of hockey on the game system.

"So guys," he said, "I've been offered a job working for Cronus."

"Nice, what did they offer? Janitor duty?" Andrew asked laughing.

"No, I got offered a job as an officer commanding my own team." Tyler told them.

Suddenly, Andrew wasn't laughing anymore.

"An officer? That never happens, and your own team? Tyler, Cronus doesn't just up and give an untrained person command of his own team. Tell us exactly what the person said."

"Well, I was told that I was wanted by some other officer. I went into his office, and he offered to let me enter the organization as a level three. He said I would get the command of a special operations team, and would get to choose who was on it. But the people I chose would have to go through 'special preparations'. Tyler explained

"Level three? Your own hand picked team? Tyler say yes." Carter said.

"You saw how good of a commander I was in the Holo Room. I got you all killed, what if it were real?" Tyler asked.

"That's what training is for. It's not like they're immediately going to give you an assignment." Andrew told him.

"Take the job, Tyler." Katie said.

Tyler nodded, he still needed to talk to his dad before he decided. He glanced at his watch, four thirty. His dad should be back at his quarters by now.

"I've gotta go do something, meet you guys later?" He asked.

"Yeah, see ya." Carter told him.

"What is the current location of Nathan Johnson?" Tyler asked the gauntlet.

Tyler knew his way around here pretty well by now so he had no problem finding his dad's quarters. He pushed the intercom button.

"Hey dad, it's Tyler." He said.

Come on in. His dad replied.

The door slid open and Tyler walked in.

"What brings you here?" His dad asked.

"I just talked to someone who offered me a job here." Tyler explained.

Tyler's dad froze.

"Ah, Agent Phillips." He said, "he told me he was going to do this. No matter how many times I warned him against it, he insisted on recruiting you."

"Why would you warn him against recruiting me?" Tyler asked.

"Tyler, perhaps you'd better sit down."

Tyler sat in the armchair across from his dad. He was barely sitting in the chair. His dad took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes.

"Tyler, when you were born, you were just a regular child. But when you turned four, a man showed up at the door of our house. He was from a company that was researching genetic enhancements. The man told us that

you had been selected to receive the first round of testing. They told us that it would make you faster, stronger, smarter, he told us you would never struggle in school or sports. He said that they were on the verge of creating the world's first super humans, but you were the only one that they were able to do the testing on due to lack of funds. So we brought you home and raised you like a normal child and you exceeded far beyond what anyone had dreamed. By the time you were ten, you were solving equations your math teacher didn't even understand. You ran your first mile in four minutes. You could push the truck all by yourself when you were seven. Your mother wanted to hide your abilities, so we did. We kept it as secret as we could. It's one reason we never encouraged you to do your best. We just wanted to have a normal life. You have to understand, when we let them run their tests, we did it because we loved you. Then we realized that it was a mistake." His dad explained.

"You... let them.... run tests on me?" Tyler stammered,

"Like I was some kind of animal?"

"No Tyler..."

Tyler stood, throwing the chair back

"That's exactly what you did! You decided that I needed to be perfect so you turned me into some freak thing! But now I'm still not good enough to make you happy!"

"Tyler, what we did, was a mistake, but we still love you." Tyler's dad tried to tell him.

"How do you love me?" Tyler asked,

"You didn't love me enough when I was born so you let them experiment on me! Now you're so ashamed of me you tried to keep this a secret. Dad, I'm barely human! Why would you hide that from me?"

With that Tyler stormed out. He heard his dad call his name, but he didn't stop. He was a monster, barely human, and that man was the one who made him this way. Tears streamed down Tyler's face. He kept walking till he got to the hanger. He crawled up into the landing gear compartment of a C-17. It wasn't too uncomfortable in there. When the gears were down, there was plenty of space. Tyler activated his gauntlet. He just wanted listen to some music right now. Scrolling through the list of artists, he found favorite playlist. He hit shuffle and leaned back as the music played quietly from a speaker on the gauntlet. The people he called his parents were no more than criminals to him now. How could they do that? They thought that their child was so imperfect that they were willing to genetically enhance his abilities. But he was still imperfect, and they were now ashamed of the person he had become. Why couldn't his parents love him for who he was? Was he worth loving?

"Tyler?" He heard Carter call.

"Tyler? Your dad sent me, but I didn't think you'd want to talk to me. So I brought someone else."

"Tyler?" Katie called.

He didn't want to talk to anyone right now.

"Tyler, your dad told us." Katie told him.

"So you know what I am?" Tyler asked.

Katie suddenly appeared beneath the plane. She crawled up into the landing gear compartment.

"Yes, you're our friend. We don't care what they did to you. You're still the same Tyler we've always known." She told him.

His started favorite song started playing. Katie jumped down and smiled.

"I love this song." She told him. "Come down here and dance with me."

Tyler shook his head and jumped down. Sometimes he wondered why he listened to her. She grabbed his wrist and turned the volume up on the gauntlet. So they danced. Tyler had never really danced before. He decided he liked dancing. She rested her head gently against his shoulder, and they swayed back and forth to the music. They danced for what seemed like twenty minutes. Even after the song had ended. Tyler leaned in and kissed her. He held the kiss for a long time.

When he finally pulled away, Katie said, "Now go get that command."

Tyler nodded and headed for the commander's office.

Two weeks later, Tyler officially got his rank pinned onto his uniform. The next year Tyler and his team got their first mission. The mission was a success and they then began to get more and more missions. Project Exodus was coming very close to completion. Launch was expected within the next two years. Tyler eventually was promoted to a level four.

Part Three

Tyler stood to attention behind the commander at the podium. The commander called this meeting to update everyone on the launch.

"This group of fine men and women that stands behind me deserves the honor and respect of every member of. They have proven this on

countless occasions. This team has the three youngest level fours has ever seen. Agent Katie Peterson, Agent Carter Mitchells, and Agent Tyler Johnson. Agent Johnson's team has performed a number of reconnaissance, sabotage, and undercover operations. All of them a major success. I couldn't have asked more of these people. All of you know that Project Exodus will be ready for launch within the month. The ship will be commanded by Captain Hart." The commander gestured to a man to his right.

The man was tall. His military style haircut showed off the long crescent shaped scar running from his forehead to his chin. He looked like the kind of guy you wanted to stay away from.

"Captain Hart has been training for this mission for two years. You will not find a man more capable of commanding the starship anywhere on Earth. He deserves the best security detail has to offer. This is where the men and women standing behind me come into play. They, along with another security team, will be tasked with the protection of the Exodus and its crew. The crew's mission will be to explore Mars once the device has been launched. They will find a suitable place to start colonization. Once they have a colony set up, we will send more people. They leave for their seven month journey in one week."

Everyone began to clap as he stepped down from the podium. Seven months? Tyler glanced down the row to find that Katie was already gone. Her only fear was tight spaces, and now they're telling her that she'd have to spend seven months on a starship. He looked over at Carter. He had noticed that she was gone too.

He nodded to Tyler and Tyler stepped through the door behind him. He tapped the screen of his gauntlet.

"Where is Agent Katie Peterson?"

Agent Katie Peterson is located in Holeroom Three.

He stepped into the elevator and hit the down button. The Holo Rooms were six floors below him. The elevator doors slid open when he got to his destination, and he ran through the long hallway until he arrived at Holo Room three. He linked his gauntlet up to the terminal and the doors opened.

Stepping inside, he was hit with a blast of cool air. He was standing on a beach, the sun was slowly setting, and a cool breeze blew. He looked to the right and saw Katie sitting in the sand a several yards away. The hat that accompanied her dress uniform was lying at his feet. Her hair was loose, and blew freely in the wind. Tyler dropped his hat and slid the heavy coat off his shoulders. He walked over to the place where Katie sat and draped it around her shoulders. It was getting colder by the minute, and all he had on now was his black camouflaged uniform pants and a white tee shirt, but he sat down in the sand next to Katie anyways.

"Seven months." She said after a long silence. "Seven months on a spaceship. Do we even have a choice?"

But they both knew the answer to that. Orders were orders, to question them would be treason.

"Why do we work for them?" She asked.

"I'm working for them because you guys are." Tyler told her. "But why do you work for them?"

"I don't know. My mom came to work on this project and they offered me a job, so I took it." Katie said.

"How long do you think we'll be up there?" Tyler asked as he looked up at the vast expanse that would soon be filled with the tiny bright dots that were the stars.

"Five years, I checked." She replied sounding bitter about it. She picked up a shell and threw it into the sea. "And we don't even have any say in it."

"We've got a week before we leave. We should probably start packing and saying our goodbyes soon." Tyler said.

She only nodded. She reached for his hand and he gave it to her. Katie gripped it tight, and Tyler remembered when that used to be him. She used to be the one to comfort him. Now, it was his turn. He spotted some drift wood nearby and gathered it together. It would be hard to start a fire without the proper tools, but he could do it. Soon there was a spark. Then another. Then a few of the smaller sticks caught fire.

Eventually the whole thing caught and Tyler and Katie sat quietly next to it. The fire kept them warm even though the sun had set and the breeze that came off the ocean was cold enough to set someone's teeth chattering. Tyler glanced down at his arm to find the gauntlet was gone. In its place was a small watch. It read two thirty in the morning. They should probably head back to their quarters now. Tyler looked over at Katie, but she was already asleep. He gave the system a command and two sleeping bags appeared. He rolled them out and pulled out some pillows. Then he walked over and shook Katie's shoulder. He gestured to one of the sleeping bags, and Katie nodded and climbed inside. Tyler walked over to his, but didn't want to sleep yet so he just sat on top of it. Katie was already asleep. The sound of her quiet

steady breath mixed easily with the sounds of the night. Tyler added more wood to the fire as it began to die down. He stared up at the stars and found Mars.

That's where they were headed. In six days, they would be on a starship in cryotubes. They would wake up two days before they arrived at Mars, and when they landed, they would begin to set up a colony. There would be so much to explore. The device would add water, breathable air, plants, mountains, rain, snow. Everything that Earth had, they would have. The device had already been launched, and has gone far beyond what the scientists expected. But as stared up at the stars, he couldn't help but wonder what would become of them. He shook his head, only time would tell. He looked over at Katie. The fire cast a soft glow on her face, illuminating every feature. For the first time, he just stared at her and thought about how beautiful she was. He thought about how much she meant to him now.

Before, Tyler had never thought of her as more than a friend, but everything changed. Now what was she to him? He didn't know. He didn't really know anything anymore. He didn't know why he was working for Cronus, or what he had to do on the mission. He didn't know if he would live through it, and he'd been lied to too many times to know who he could trust anymore.

He remembered the commander announcing to all of that his team was going to be the lead security team on the Exodus.

They all knew it was going to happen. They were the youngest and most successful ops team Cronus had ever seen. None of them wanted to spend five years on Mars, but they didn't have a choice. Tyler had specifically requested that the commander would send another team, but apparently the commander didn't care. They were going anyways. They would all have to go

through zero-g training tomorrow and the day after. Tyler knew he should try to get some sleep, but there was no way he was going to be able to if he tried. So he didn't try, and he drifted off while staring at the stars.

The next morning arrived along with Carter kicking Tyler awake. He sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Rise and shine sleepy head." Carter said, "Zero-gravity training in five minutes."

"Five minutes?" Tyler asked surprised, "I'm still in my uniform! Why didn't you wake me earlier?"

"You looked so peaceful when you slept, I didn't want to wake you." Carter said laughing, "No time to change, you're going to have to go in that. I'll let you wake Katie."

With that Carter left the Holo Room. The beach was much warmer now. He found his coat and hat and slipped them on. Then he knelt next to Katie placing a hand on her shoulder. Gently, he shook her awake.

"Hey, wake up." He said.

She sat up and yawned. "Why'd you wake me up?"

"We've got zero-grav training in five." He told her.

"What? Five minutes? You've gotta be kidding! I'm still in uniform!" She exclaimed.

"You can blame Carter." Tyler said as handed her her coat and hat.

"I swear, one day, I'm going to kill him." She said shaking her head.

Tyler tapped the screen of the watch and his gauntlet reappeared. He gave the exit command and the door appeared ahead of them. They bolted through and found Andrew waiting outside.

"Come on! We're already three minutes late!" He told them.

They ran to the elevator and hit the down button. Zero-gravity training grounds were at the very bottom. The ride took six minutes.

"Geez," Andrew said, "I have never ridden an elevator that took that long to get to its destination."

The doors opened to a long hallway with two doors at the very end. They ran toward the doors.

"Wait," Andrew said. "Which door is it?"

"Well, may as well try one." Katie said and she hit the button to open one of them. She expected there to be a floor on the other side. There wasn't, but there wasn't any gravity either. Her momentum sent her flying to the other side of the vast room where she hit the wall with a loud crack. She cried out in pain and clutched her shoulder.

"Katie!" Tyler yelled.

"Someone's gotta get her." Andrew told Tyler.

So Tyler dove through the door. The room was huge. It was even bigger than the hanger. It looked like the inside of a big white sphere. Except for the fact that it was filled with more spheres. They were all different sizes. He flew

in towards one of the larger spheres and hit it feet first. He clambered around it and spotted another one a few meters away, so he jumped for that one. He jumped from sphere to sphere until he got to the other side. He stopped against the wall and stood like was walking on it, but there was no up or down in zero-gravity. To him it looked like he was standing upright and the door was above him. He grabbed Katie and picked her up like she was as light as a balloon. The zero-gravity helped. He could use just one hand to pull her through the air. She tried to help but every time she tried to move her arm she cried out in pain.

"Don't move it." He commanded.

"I think it's dislocated." She told him through gritted teeth.

Tyler hopped from sphere to sphere again dragging Katie behind him. There was a loud thud as something hit the sphere they were behind.

"What was that?" Katie asked.

"Don't move." Tyler told her as he saw small rubber object floating through the air. It was a rubber bullet.

"Training starts now!" They heard a man yell. Soon the room was filled with bangs as rubber bullets flew everywhere. Carter and Andrew came up beside them, each of them carrying guns.

"How bad is it?" Andrew asked as he checked her shoulder.

"I think it's dislocated." She told him.

"We need to get her to the infirmary." Andrew said. "Medic!"

Two men with bright red armbands floated over and took Katie to safety. Carter tossed Tyler a pistol, and the three started to return fire. They seemed to be making progress. Most of the enemies were gone except for two remaining people. These two people were proving hard to beat. Tyler, Carter, and Andrew couldn't seem to get a clear shot, or they would poke their heads up to shoot only to have to duck back down again as bullets flew over their heads. These two remaining people were different from the others. They were incredibly fast for one. They had impeccable aim, and Tyler and his friends just couldn't hit them.

"Who are these guys?" Andrew asked the question they'd all been thinking.

"Dunno," Carter said shaking his head, "But they're good."

Tyler looked at the side of his pistol. The high-tech weapon read five shots left. Had he used that many bullets already? These things could hold twenty bullets while still being able to fit in your inside coat pocket. It had a perfect grip and was more accurate than the average assault rifles.

"Guys, I'm out." Andrew told them. He always was a little trigger happy. He let his rifle float and drew his pistol to keep firing, but the two enemies were gone.

"Did you guys get 'em already?" He asked.

"No." Tyler said. "Where'd they go?"

Suddenly, the two people appeared behind them and Tyler took a rifle butt to the face. He grabbed it and pulled as hard as he could. He and the helmeted enemy flew away from the others. The person went to kick Tyler,

but he grabbed the person's leg and pushed it up. The person started to spin and Tyler stuck his foot out. It connected hard with the person's helmet. The force of it sent a jolt up his leg and he heard the helmet crack. Tyler floated backward and the enemy floated in the opposite direction. The rifle floated just a few feet from Tyler. He stretched to grab it but was a couple inches shy of it. He kept floating back until he hit the wall. Then he used the wall to launch in the direction of the rifle. When the other person noticed what Tyler was trying to do, he launched himself after the rifle as well, but Tyler got there first. He grabbed the rifle and fired three shots into the other person's chest. He heard a grunt and slammed into the person. The person's helmet flew off and he noticed it was a girl. Her eyes were closed and her head hung to the side. They were coming up to the wall fast. She had lost her helmet. If she hit first she could get a serious head injury. Tyler spun around and wrapped his arms around her so he was going to hit first. He barely had time to brace himself before he hit the wall.

The back of his head slammed into the wall and they came to a dead stop. He pushed the girl off and slowly floated away from the wall. He clutched the back of his head. He felt blood soak his hand. His vision blurred. He saw the girl, and both of his friends floating through the room, dead still. The only other person floated over to the girl and took off his helmet. He checked to make sure she was ok. Then he noticed Tyler and all the blood. He yelled something, but Tyler couldn't tell what it was. The man floated over.

"You're gonna be alright." He told Tyler, "just hang in there buddy."

Tyler wanted to reply but he felt himself slipping away. He knew it wasn't death. This feeling was too familiar. He closed his eyes and let the darkness come.

He woke up and looked around. He was lying on the floor. His friends, along with the two new people, were standing in a circle around him. He could see a man sitting in a metal chair a few feet away.

"He's awake." The new woman said.

"So, have you learned your lesson about not going into the field without proper gear?" The man in the chair asked.

"It was an emergency." Tyler replied rubbing the back of his head still wet with blood. "How long was I out?"

"Five minutes max." Carter told him.

"Five minutes? Feels like twenty. Why didn't you guys take me to the infirmary?" Tyler replied.

"Didn't think you needed it." Andrew said.

Tyler sat up. His head throbbed.

"You guys sure he's alright?" The guy they fought against said, "he hit the wall pretty hard, and his head's pretty bloody."

"He's had worse." Andrew told them.

"I know. I read his file." Said the woman.

"Why did you read his file?" The man asked.

She shrugged her shoulders, "Curiosity? He is the youngest level three agent since the commander."

"Yeah, and now he gets to be the youngest Commander in the space fleet." The man said rolling his eyes.

"Wait, 'Commander?' When did this happen?" Tyler asked, very confused. He was an agent, not an officer in the space fleet.

The woman checked her watch, About three minutes ago. Welcome to the Cronus Space Fleet Commander Johnson."

"Can they do that?" Andrew asked.

"Apparently they can." Carter said.

"I don't think we've been properly introduced yet." The woman said, "I'm Lieutenant Commander Jenna Less. This is Lieutenant Dylan Park."

Tyler shook her hand, but Dylan kept to himself. Tyler had never actually looked at their physical appearances. Jenna was tall with red hair. She didn't smile much, but instead had a very professional look. Her uniform was clean and wrinkle free. You could tell she'd been a part of Cronus for a long time, but not part of the Fleet. Dylan was scowling and glared at anything that moved. His uniform wasn't worn according to regulation, and his medium length black hair stuck out in a mess from under his hat. His arms were folded firmly across his chest. They both looked to be in their mid twenties.

"Tyler." He said, "This is Andrew and Carter."

"We know who you guys are. Who doesn't? You guys were the best agents the Intelligence and Special Operations Department has seen in a long time." Jenna told them.

"Don't let it get to your head." The man in the chair said. "Less and Parks are the best I've ever trained. Top scores on all their tests. You guys only have three days to learn what they learned in two years."

"Yes sir, we'll try as best we can." Tyler said.

"No you won't. You'll *do* as best you can. But it still won't be enough." The man said. "Less and Parks will have to help with your training."

"Great, when do we start?" Andrew asked.

"An hour ago." The man told him. "Less, take Andrew for target practice. Parks, take Carter for maneuvers. Tyler, you're staying with me."

They all dispersed to go to their directed activities. Tyler and the man stayed behind.

"What about the rest of my team?" Tyler asked.

"Katie's in the infirmary getting her shoulder fixed, and the rest of your team is on assignment." The man said.

"But I'm their commander. Why am I not with them?" Tyler replied.

"Johnson, the rest of your team was not transferred to the Fleet. Just the four of you." The man explained.

Tyler nodded. He didn't like it, but there wasn't anything he could do about it right now.

"What will we be doing?" Tyler asked.

"I'm going to tell you what you're up against." The old man touched his gauntlet and a large screen was projected onto the wall. Tyler almost fell over when he saw the image.

On the screen was the picture of one of the most terrifying creatures Tyler had ever seen. It looked fairly humanoid, but had claws on its hands instead of fingers. It had long, razor sharp teeth in its mouth. Instead of a nose, there was a layer of what looked like armor plating. Its three eyes were at the very top of its forehead, forming a triangle, and two of them glowed red, except for the third one. The one on top had a sickening green color. It had the longest legs Tyler had ever seen. On its feet it had two claws on the front and one on the heel. It had sharp spikes running down its spine and tail. The tip of the tail looked like a three headed spear.

"What... What is that?" Tyler stammered.

"That, my boy, is a Titan. They were created when we launched the device at Mars. The device could not make Mars exactly like Earth, but they are very similar. Unfortunately, it also created the Titans." The man touched the gauntlet again.

This time there was a slideshow of Titan groups living in jungles, rivers, mountains, deserts, even underwater.

"They're everywhere." Tyler said quietly.

The pictures moved faster and faster, showing more and more groups of Titans living in more and more places.

"One quick question," Tyler said once the pictures ended, "Why are we continuing this mission?"

"Because we were ordered to." The man replied.

"Do you know any weaknesses yet?" He continued.

"We know that they live in tribes, and that the tribes are constantly battling each other. It's the only reason the Titans haven't completely overwhelmed the planet. Their brain seems to be located behind that armor below the eyes, but that's no good. You'll probably never make it past that. But the stomach is a very vulnerable spot. It will only take a couple shots to bring it down, but you will rarely get the chance. They move with incredible speed." The man explained.

"Well, that definitely makes me feel better. How do we kill it?" Tyler said.

"Very carefully." The man replied. "We're working on a new weapon that can pierce its armor but it's doubtful we'll have it done by launch time."

The man checked his watch, "That'll be all for today. You're dismissed."

Tyler walked back to his quarters and dropped onto his bed. He couldn't get the image of the Titans out of his mind. How could they survive? They just would. Somehow, they had to. He drifted off to sleep, and his nightmares were filled with the creatures from hell hunting him, and he ran. Always ran. Never stopping. Until he died.

The next couple days consisted of hard training, countless meetings, packing, and a goodbye party. They acted like the group would never come back. Tyler knew they were probably right. Their chances of surviving the Titans were slim to none. The weapon was still not ready, and there was only twelve hours till the launch of the *Exodus*. Tyler stood outside his dad's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in." He heard the deep voice of his dad say.

He opened the door and was instantly embraced.

"I want you to know that I'm proud of you Tyler. And I trust you to be a leader to the men and women aboard that ship." He told him.

"Thanks dad. But I'm not the captain." Tyler explained.

"But you will be the second highest ranking officer aboard. If Captain Hart is unfit for duty, you become captain. Do well Tyler." His dad said.

"Yes sir. I won't let you down." Tyler assured him.

"I know you won't." His dad said quietly.

With that, he let go of Tyler, and Tyler left the office shutting the door softly behind him.

Tyler checked his gauntlet. Seven hours until launch.

"Where is Katie Peterson?" Tyler asked.

Agent Katie Peterson is in her quarters.

Tyler head for her quarters. They were only a few down from his so they were easy to find. He knocked.

"Come on in Tyler." She said.

"How'd you know it was me?" Tyler asked as he walked in.

"Who else would it be?" She replied.

"Fair enough." He sat down in an armchair and looked around the room. There was the bed, a couch, a couple chairs, television, and a door to the bathroom. It looked like everyone else's quarters, except there were pictures everywhere. There were pictures of Tyler, Carter, and Andrew, some of a man and woman that resembled her, and some of people Tyler didn't recognize. On the coffee table in front of him laid several files, probably mission reports.

"So," she said sitting down across from him, "Why are you here?"

"There are seven hours till launch. I just thought I'd stop by and see how you were doing." He replied.

"Well, no better than anyone else. I keep thinking about how we're going to survive the Titans." She told him.

"Hey, that's my job. I'll get you guys home alive." Tyler said.

"I hope so." She said with a smile. "Do you think everything will still be here when we got back?" She paused. "If we get back."

"What?" Tyler was confused.

"Do you think anything will change?" She tried.

"Katie, I think everything is going to change." He told her.

"That's what I thought. I don't want it to change." She said almost to herself.

"Why is that?" Tyler asked.

"Well, we've got it pretty good here. We get paid well. We're with friends and family. I like this job. We can basically do what we want if we're not on assignment. Cronus provides for all our needs. What will we do if we come back and everything is gone?" She explained.

"Honestly? I don't know. I don't even know what we're going to do once we get to Mars, other than not die of course." He said thinking hard about it.

Katie checked her gauntlet, "We should probably load our stuff onto the and get settled into our bunks."

"Agreed." Tyler said standing up. "Here, let me carry your bags. Mine are already on board."

Tyler picked her bags up and they headed towards the *Exodus*.

It was a massive ship. They had to tear down the walls of four hangers to fit it. The ship was bigger than three aircraft carriers combined. It was manned by a crew of eight hundred men and women, not including military and security. Crew quarters were the size of cupboards, unless of course you were an officer. Tyler's quarters were the size of a large bedroom, bathroom and walk in closet included. Tyler stood in the doorway and looked around his

quarters. There was a bed, couch, arm chairs, a TV, and a large window. He even had his own coffee maker.

"Nice being an officer huh?" Said a woman behind him.

He turned around and there was a woman with dark purple hair that only came down to her neck. She was about a foot shorter than him.

"Um, who are you?" Tyler asked.

"Lieutenant Commander Raven Sharp. Head of engineering." She said with a salute.

"The captain sent me to tell you that briefing is in an twenty minutes." She said.

"Thanks." Tyler replied.

She turned and hurried away as if she were afraid of him. Why would she be in such a hurry? She probably had her reasons.

Tyler threw his bag on his bed and started to unpack. This would be his home for the next month, and possibly the next five years. Might as well make it feel like home. He checked the closet to find a new uniform. It was a black jumpsuit with a red stripe running from his shoulder to his wrist, and his rank was pinned to the collar. There was a patch on his upper arm with the *Cronus* symbol. It was a scythe with a sheaf of wheat leaning against the handle. Below the scythe was the top of the earth. There was a star on either side of the scythe, and one inside the curve of the blade.

The pants were black with the same red stripe running down the side of both legs. Along with the pants and jacket, there was a pair of black boots.

Obviously these were not intended to be used in ground combat. They were thin with a smooth bottom. They wouldn't be able to protect against water, thick brush, or anything that might try to sting or bite him. The smooth bottom meant he would have no grip when he tried to walk on rough terrain. They were built for comfort mostly, which was understandable considering how long the user could be wearing them all day.

He checked his watch and decided he should probably get up to the briefing room. He stepped outside and tried to input a command into his gauntlet, but his gauntlet didn't even turn on. He'd never had a problem with his gauntlet. Why now? He looked around and spotted a computer terminal. He tapped the screen.

"Where is the briefing room?" He asked.

Deck one.

Deck one was the command deck. Why didn't he think to go there in the first place? He stepped into the elevator and hit the "1" button, but just before the doors could close, some one stepped in with him. It was Lieutenant Commander Less.

"Oh, Commander Johnson. Um, hi." She said.

"Is something wrong Lieutenant?" He asked.

"Oh no, nothing's wrong." She told him, never looking him in the eye.

She looked nervous. Her hand shook as she pressed the "12" button. Her eyes darted around the elevator, looking at everything but Tyler. They stopped at deck twelve and Less left the elevator. The doors shut and the

elevator started moving again. Deck twelve. Deck twelve was the engine room, but Less was a security officer. Why would she be going to the engine room?

Tyler got to deck one and found everyone was dead silent. Launch was in less than an hour. Everyone was either excited or nervous. He walked into the briefing room five minutes early, but it seemed everyone was already there. Even Carter and Katie were there. The captain had already started talking to some of the other officers. Hart gestured to a seat at the long table.

"Have a seat Johnson." He said.

Tyler sat down across from Katie.

"Now we can start." Hart said. "Originally this was supposed to be a mission briefing, but we just got some bad news and I'm pretty sure you all know the mission by now. We have a spy on board this ship."

The room burst into a cacophony of voices all speaking at once.

"Quiet!" The captain screamed. Instantly, all noise stopped.

"We are going to leave for Mars on schedule and arrive there safely. If this spy peeks his head out, we'll deal with it then. Get to your posts. Launch is in ten minutes. Tyler, meet me in my office."

Everyone stood quietly and exited the room one at a time. Tyler left last and headed straight to the captain's office. Upon arriving, he hit the button that notified the captain of his arrival.

"Enter." He heard the captain command.

"You wanted to see me captain?" Tyler asked.

"Yes, sit down."

Tyler sat in the chair directly opposite the captain. It felt like hours before the captain finally spoke.

"Johnson, I believe this is your first time serving aboard a starship, isn't it?"

"Yes sir." Tyler replied.

"Well then, this starship is one of the biggest in the fleet. That means that this spy could be hiding anywhere. And when I say anywhere, I mean anywhere. We'll have a constant sensor sweep looking for personnel where they're not supposed to be. Everything else will be up to you and your team. You've dealt with spies in the field correct?" Hart asked.

Tyler responded with a nod of his head.

"Good, I want you to be on the lookout for anything unusual. If you find something, call it in. I'm trusting you on this one."

"Yes sir." Tyler said.

"Dismissed." The captain replied.

Tyler stood to leave. Suddenly, he remembered his encounter with Less.

"Captain?" He said turning around quickly.

"Yes Johnson?"

Tyler quickly explained what happened in the elevator while the captain sat in silence.

"I wouldn't expect Lieutenant Commander Less to be the spying type and a suspicion isn't enough to accuse, but that definitely seems worth looking into. Keep an eye on her tell me if anything else happens." The captain said when Tyler had finished.

Tyler left the room and stepped out onto the command deck and bumped into a girl who had her eyes glued to a folder full of papers. She shouted and dropped the folder in surprise.

"Oh, commander. I'm so sorry, I didn't see you." She apologized as she scrambled to pick up her papers.

"Here, let me." Tyler said and bent down to pick up the folder. The words 'official report' were stamped on the front. He handed her the folder.

"Thank you." She said pushing a strand of her brown hair behind her ear. She looked to be about sixteen.

"Yeah, no problem. I don't think we've met yet, have we?" He asked.

"No, of course not. I mean, I would know if Tyler Johnson said hello to me." She gave him an awkward smile as she remembered she was talking to him. "I'm Destiny. Destiny Wylde."

He shook her hand.

"Well, Ensign Wylde now that I've joined the fleet." She said.

"I didn't know they recruited so young." Tyler commented.

"They usually don't, but they decided to make an exception in my case considering I'm the captain's daughter." She explained.

"I see." Tyler replied. This conversation was going longer than he expected.

"So you're Tyler Johnson." She said almost to herself.

"I suppose I am."

"You know, I've heard a lot about you. My father speaks highly of you. So does about every officer on the ship. You know, if you're free for dinner..." She prompted.

"Unfortunately, I'm booked today. Sorry, maybe next time." He said. He wanted this conversation to end.

"Maybe." She said, then she just at stared at him for what felt like ten minutes.

"Don't you have to..." He said pointing at the folder.

"Oh! Yes, I completely forgot! I'll see you later then." She said and hurried off.

Thank God that was over. That was the weirdest conversation he'd had, and he'd had some pretty weird conversations.

Tyler dropped onto his bed. They had no new leads about the spy. At this rate, they were never going to catch him. Or maybe it was a her. He didn't know, not yet anyways. Suddenly, the deck below him began to shake. First it was a light shake, just enough that you barely noticed it. Then the shaking worsened and he heard the steady hum of the engines coming to life. They were launching the ship. Soon the thrusters blasted awake for the first time. Slowly, very slowly, the ship began to rise. He looked out his window to see the mountain in which Cronus's main headquarters was hidden getting smaller and smaller. Soon he couldn't see it anymore. They left Earth's atmosphere and the shaking stopped. They were in space. The ship's artificial gravity kicked in to keep them from floating away through the ship. His gauntlet beeped.

He stepped out into the corridor, and found Katie waiting outside his door.

"Hey, what's up?" He asked.

"Just wanted to see how you were doing." She replied. "You going somewhere?"

"Yeah. The bridge actually."

"I'll come with you then."

They walked down the corridor to the lift. Suddenly, the engines began to whine.

"What the..." Tyler was cut off by an alarm screaming to life. The lights dimmed.

"Come on!"

Tyler and Katie stepped into the lift and hit the button to get them to the bridge. The doors opened at the bridge to the captain barking orders and people chiming in to give various reports.

"Decks eleven through thirteen have begun to evacuate!"

"Radiation levels reaching critical!"

There was a massive explosion somewhere else in the ship.

"We just lost engine two!"

"Casualties flooding in from all decks!"

"Johnson!" The captain had just realized that he was on the bridge.
"Help get as many people on the escape pods as possible."

Tyler and Katie jumped back onto the elevator. So, the engines were exploding. Tyler had a feeling that the spy had something to do with this.

"Andrew! Carter!" Tyler yelled into his gauntlet. "Get as many people as you can to the nearest escape pod!"

"Aye commander!" Carter yelled back.

There was a large explosion above them, and the top of the elevator was ripped open. They were staring up into space. An emergency force field

had activated to keep them from being sucked out. Debris floated everywhere.

"The command deck..." Katie stammered. "It's... It's..."

"Gone." Tyler said for her.

Everything above deck four had been blasted to pieces.

"But... the captain... the commanding officers..." She continued.

"They're dead Katie." He couldn't believe what he'd just said. How? The engine were exploding. How would that cause the command deck to explode?

"How?" Katie asked him.

Then it dawned on him.

"That was a long ranged missile." He told her. "The only reason we're still alive is because the elevator's failsafe activated."

"What exactly does that mean?" Katie questioned.

"A force field activated to keep the air in, and the elevator magnetized itself to keep from moving." Tyler explained as he reached for the panel to try and get them moving.

Carter shouted into the gauntlet.

What in God's name was that?! The Command Deck isn't responding. What's going on up there?

"Long ranged missile." Tyler replied. "The command deck is gone."

Carter muttered a curse. *What are we supposed to do now?*

"My previous orders stand: get everyone off this ship."

There was another explosion.

"Carter?"

Carter didn't respond.

Tyler tapped his gauntlet.

"Engineering, what just happened?"

The ship is being ripped to pieces! I can't hold it together much longer where's the captain?

The captain's dead. I'm acting captain." Tyler told her.

He got nothing but silence from engineering. It was understandable. It was hard to believe what was going on. The captain was gone, the ship was coming apart at the seams, and they'd already lost so many people.

"Get every one to the escape pods. Women and junior officers first."

The elevator started moving again as Tyler deactivated the magnets.

"What're we going to do?" Katie asked.

"You're getting to an escape pod. I'm going to the secondary command deck." He replied. He refused to look her in the eyes.

"Tyler, no... You can't." She knew him too well to not know what he was going to do. "Most of the senior officers are dead. No one will be there to help you. You'll die!"

"But you won't! I can't let you guys die! What kind of a captain would I be if I sat back and watched as every single escape pod was blown out of the sky?" Tyler told her.

"You don't even know what we're up against!" She said. "I'm coming with you."

"Katie, I order you to get off this ship."

"And I'm refusing."

Tyler knew it was no use. She was with him until the end. Tears streamed down her face. Tyler kissed her. He didn't care about protocol anymore. They were going to die. Rules were of no use to a dead man. They embraced and didn't let go until the elevator stopped.

"Let's go to the command deck then."

Neither of them said a word until they reached the secondary command deck, walking hand in hand. Loose wires sparked dangerously close to their faces. Tyler hoped none of them were very important. The secondary command crew were scattered everywhere, all of them dead.

"Get to the helm." Tyler commanded.

Katie nodded and crossed the room to a terminal. Tyler dragged the previous security officer's body off the tactical terminal. That was ensign Jones. A very zealous young man. Not even older than Tyler himself. Tyler tried hard to not think about his dead comrades. He had a job to do.

Tyler began scanning for the enemy ship. There it was. Hiding right behind a large asteroid. A regular sensor sweep would have never picked it up. Tyler targeted the ship.

"Firing." Tyler said and sent the first missile after the ship. It ripped through the enemy's hull like a knife through butter. If they didn't have their shields up then, they did now. Tyler sent missile after missile at the ship, but they recovered quickly. They stopped firing at the escape pods.

"They've locked on to us." Katie told him.

"Good." Tyler replied.

We've almost got everyone off sir. The chief engineer said.

"They're loading missiles." Katie said.

Commander, we have an escape pod waiting for you.

"No." Tyler said. "We'll draw fire from the enemy ship. Get everyone out of here."

You can't hold them off for long sir.

"I can try."

Suddenly Katie turned and looked him in the directly in the eyes.

"I'm sorry." She said.

"Katie! No!" Tyler yelled

She tapped her terminal and Tyler was encased in a swirling orange light. The ship was gone. He was now inside one of the shuttles. Katie had locked onto the signal coming from the shuttle the chief engineer was on and transported him there.

"Sir?"

"Commander Pierce, you have to get me back aboard that ship right now!" Tyler yelled.

"I'm trying sir, but there's too much radiation. It's interfering with the signal." She replied.

"Then get her off!"

"Sir, there's too much interference. There's nothing I can do."

Tyler tapped the com terminal.

"Katie, listen. Lock onto this signal and transport yourself onto this shuttle." Tyler said.

"I can't, Tyler. I wish I could but I can't." She replied.

"Wh..why?" He asked trying to choke back the tears that were filling his eyes. "You did it to me... Why can't you do it again?"

He watched as the ship began to slowly move towards the other ship.

"No... Katie... Don't. Don't do this. You don't have to." Tyler said.

"Yes, I do. You know I do."

"Sir, thirty seconds till the *Exodus* hits the enemy ship." Pierce chimed in.

It seemed as though the other ship just realized what Katie was trying to do. They started hailing missiles at the *Exodus*. Tyler watched in horror as the ship was ripped to pieces, one deck at a time.

"Katie..." Tyler started, but never got to speak. Tyler watched as the ship exploded. Tyler went numb to everything around him. The people, the shuttle, the enemy ship. None of them mattered right now. He felt as though a hole had been ripped through his chest. He couldn't think. His head throbbed. She was gone. Carter was gone. The captain was gone. He had failed his mission. Now everyone looked to him for orders. How was he supposed to do that? The ship was gone, transmissions were being jammed, and the shuttles were being destroyed one by one. What was he supposed to do? He had to keep these people alive. But how?

He stood. He knew what to do.

"Get me aboard that ship." He said quietly.

"Sir?"

"Get me aboard the enemy ship."

"But..."

"Is there a problem commander?"

"No sir."

"Then follow your orders, and don't question them." Tyler said as he pulled one of the new pulse rifles out of the weapon's cabinet.

"Yes sir."

Pierce punched a few commands into the terminal.

"I'm putting you in the shuttle bay. There shouldn't be a soul in sight." She told him. "Whenever you're ready captain."

"Go ahead."

He was encased in the orange light again, and the shuttle disappeared. Now he was in the other ship. Pierce was right about sending him to the shuttle bay, but it was crowded with people. It only took them a couple seconds before they started shouting.

Tyler bolted for the elevator that he assumed would take him to the command deck. Shots rang out behind him, but he didn't stop to return fire. Not until he was in the elevator did he turn and face the shooters, but when he did, he was staring down the barrel of an enemy rifle.

"Drop the gun." the soldier ordered.

Tyler slowly leaned over and set the gun down. As he bent over, he noticed the knife strapped to the soldier's boot. Tyler dove into his legs sending the soldier toppling over. He yanked the knife free and drove it hard

into the man's leg. The man screamed as blood ran down his leg. Tyler dragged the man to his feet and held the knife to his throat.

"Nobody move!" He screamed, and everyone froze. "Put your guns on the floor!" They all complied.

"Now everyone get against the wall!" One by one they walked over to a wall and put their hands against it. Tyler slowly backed into the elevator. He noticed a grenade hanging from the soldier's belt. In a flash, Tyler drove the knife into the man's ribs. He grabbed the grenade as the man fell, and threw it as the doors were closing. He was already a deck above them when it exploded. Too late he realized he had left his pulse rifle in the shuttle bay. He grabbed the dead soldier's gun. It was an AK-47. It was old, but it would have to do. He grabbed the last grenade from the man's belt. He would have to make it count. The doors slowly opened. Tyler pressed himself against the wall as bullets flew dangerously close to his face. It was several seconds before they stopped firing. He rolled the grenade onto the deck and started firing. Those who he didn't hit were killed by the grenade. All except the captain. The captain's left leg was blown off by the grenade, but he was surprisingly still alive. Tyler grabbed the knife from the soldier.

"You killed my crew, my captain, my friends. You destroyed my ship, and to do so killed *hundreds* of men and women. Some of them not even older than seventeen. Now, you're going to tell me who you work for, and where their base of operations is." Tyler said.

"Long live the Czar!" The captain replied.

"So that's how it's going to be, ey?" Tyler asked. "Now we know who you work for."

Tyler slowly began to press the knife against the captain's one remaining leg until he drew blood.

"I'm going to ask you again, *who are you working for and where is their base of operations?*" Tyler asked, driving the knife deeper with each word.

The captain didn't make a noise, but Tyler could see the pain in his eyes. After a good fifteen seconds, Tyler slammed the butt of the knife into the side of the Russian's head. Blood ran down his cheek into his mouth. Suddenly, the captain spat the blood back into Tyler's face. Tyler shook his head.

"Russians." He scoffed. Tyler drove the knife into the captain's chest. He stood, cleaned the blade, and sheathed it. He walked over to a terminal and plugged his gauntlet into the main computer. Everything was in Russian, but the translators back at HQ could solve that problem. All Tyler needed to do was download everything. Tyler set the ship to self destruct while his gauntlet was hooked up to the main computer. It was tricky, but nearly the same as the system on the *Exodus*. Once the download completed, he sent a signal back to the shuttle.

Suddenly, a shot rang out throughout the command deck. Lieutenant Park was pointing a revolver at him. Tyler looked at his chest. There was a single bullet hole. Blood began to pour out of the wound. The Park fired again. Another hole appeared in his chest. The gun clattered to the floor. Tyler had never known what it felt like to be drowning. He supposed this is what it felt like. He was choking on his own blood as it filled his lungs and throat. He started to fall. He couldn't stop himself. His head slammed hard into the floor. The orange light swirled around him, and the ship disappeared.

He was back on the shuttle.

"Commander? Commander! I need a doctor over here!" Pierce yelled. A man in a white uniform rushed over.

"Get him in the cryotube." The doctor ordered.

Tyler's vision blurred. The cryotube's lid shut. Within seconds, Tyler's breathing slowed. He could feel the blood freezing to his chest. Then he couldn't move. He tried to speak, but not even his lips could move. Slowly, very slowly, the world turned black around him.

Author's Note

I don't really expect anyone to read this, but if you are, I thank you. I started out writing the Exodus Project in December of 2014. I was fourteen years old as of September 1st of that year. I was on Christmas break and was so bored that I sat down with my iPad and began writing. I had no idea where I was going with the story. As a matter of fact, I never did. It started out with the title, *The Bittersweet Tale*. I'm not sure why though. Later on I found that the title no longer fit, so I changed it to *The Exodus Project*. What I loved the most about writing this was two things: firstly the fact that I never knew what would happen next until I had written it, secondly the support and love from the first readers. I originally released *The Exodus Project* to my readers in the three separate parts. I would finish a part and instantly share it with my readers. They asked me to write a part two after I had shared part one, so I set to work on part two. Once I released part two, I then had to do a part three to finish it off. Of course, I never could have done it without the support of my readers, and more importantly my editor, Maggie Clugston. Maggie was my very first reader. She and I had been going to school together and become friends after a few weeks of me sitting around awkwardly by myself. I was new to the school. She soon became my friend, along with many other wonderful people. I shared *The Exodus Project* with her when I had only written the first few paragraphs. She continued to read as I would write, then, one day, she asked to be my editor. I

couldn't turn her down. It was hard enough to write the entire thing on an iPad. I was sure I had made a few mistakes and would make dozens more. People, including Maggie, wonder why I end up killing most of the main characters in the end. I've wondered this myself, and as I've thought to myself, I've come to a conclusion. By killing off main characters, I've created a world of opportunities in which I can expand, or even create a second novel.

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