

## Winter Crossroads – Preview

### Prologue

In Eden, there is a lot for people to hate about winter. With the temperatures dipping to increasingly oppressive numbers and the weather itself in a spiral of unpredictability, the land of Eden shifts its way into a total shutdown. Businesses close up, travel becomes highly discouraged, and families across the landscape retreat into their homes to keep safe and healthy from the bitter snap of the stark, frigid season.

Some people, however, see winter as a great opportunity. They get to spend more time with their families, work on new projects, catch up on studies, conjure some new recipes or even craft items and clothing to sell when business resumes in the spring. Overall, winter is a different-colored grab-bag of a different kind of lifestyle; as if for three months, Eden is a completely new world altogether.

I, for one, have never been the biggest fan of winter. The only thing I could really enjoy was spending time with my sister, Casey, while she altered clothing to combat the cold. I, however, always wanted to be keeping busy. Unfortunately, being fresh off of the “Producer” high and left with no forces to lead, my hands felt empty and unproductive as I waited for my sister to be done with her tailoring.

What was *I* waiting for, you ask? I’ll get to that in a bit. Or I should at least set the stage for you.

The end of the Revolution was a disturbing amalgamation of circumstances. While the Causes convinced themselves, with my help, that what they were doing was right, it turned out to be just the opposite. What we had failed to realize was that a lack of faith in the Fifteen and the governmental system they had striven to maintain was synonymous with a lack of faith in the land of Eden itself as well as its God-ordained structure.

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When the 13,000 Causes walked out and shirked their roles in Eden's grand design, the defensive barrier around Eden (Its outer wall combined with the holy ground of the Zica Sector) began to weaken. The Causes had no idea this was happening until a demon attack occurred during the Festival of Protection.

After the attack, my close colleagues and I sat with the Fifteen one last time. There, the Fifteen informed us of the critical state of Eden's defenses and the true reasons behind why the Revolution had to end. We had to restore our faith in Eden and its structure or it would be doomed to be overrun by the demons.

Now don't get me wrong: we didn't lose. Not by a long shot.

As part of the deliberations to end our protests, the Fifteen agreed to make a better effort to appease the citizens, answer their questions, and slowly, carefully make changes to mold a new era for our land. It needed to be a gradual, meticulous process due to the fragile state of Eden's defenses. And although skeptical as to whether or not the Fifteen would truly deliver on their promises, the fresh fear of the demon attack twisted any uncertainty into a two-dimensional faith in Eden's leaders: solid on the surface without too much depth to it.

All we could really do was wait for the spring to see if this new era would really play out as we envisioned it would.

In the meanwhile, I had business of my own to tend to...

## Episode 16 – Footprints in a New Direction

10/5 - Day 0

I

Negative three degrees...negative four degrees...negative five degrees, the thermometer in my hand just continued to read lower and lower. For a chuckle, I rubbed my gloved finger over the bulb on the bottom, trying to fool myself into thinking it was just a little less cold outside. Guaranteed, the tiles on my roof were even colder, with the only warm spot being the one I had been laying on for the past two hours.

For the fourth night in a row, I was testing the limits of the clothing that my sister, Casey, had altered for me. And it was the fourth night in a row I was growing increasingly pleased with the results. It was getting to a point where I was getting bored before getting cold. All I needed to do was keep my face warm by breathing close into my gloves from time to time. The only downside to that was replacing the mystically addictive scent of chill and smoke with an odor set to remind me that I really needed to brush my teeth.

When my face wasn't covered, I would be staring at the formless cloud that was consistently spewing from our chimney. Sometimes, the faint flicker of a wayward ember would interrupt

the clear night sky as if trying to disguise itself as a star before fading into ash. Sublimely entranced by the overall display, I found myself almost nodding off to sleep.

That was when I heard a faint knock against the gutter on the opposite side of the roof. “Casey?” I called out.

Her voice was quiet. I could barely hear her soft reply. “Yeah, big bro. It’s me!”

I rolled over onto my stomach and began to crawl over to the ladder, now noticing how much colder the rest of the roof was. The top of the ladder was jostling a little bit and I could hear Casey’s light huffing as she made her way up. “What brings you up here?”

“I just wanna talk to ‘ya.”

I reached down the ladder, taking her mitten-sheathed hand into mine. “Is there something on your mind? I hope you’re not having second thoughts.”

Casey sullenly muttered as she set foot onto the roof. “Well...” She turned around to free the tail-end of her gray robe from being caught on the top of the ladder.

“You really shouldn’t wear something that loose if you’re going to be on a roof,” I advised her.

She wrapped herself up tighter in the robe, adding another shield of warmth to the thick sweatshirt and overalls she had on underneath it. “It’s not that I’m having second thoughts or anything. It’s just that I’m a little bit nervous.”

I brought my face down toward my endearing sister. But being almost sixty centimeters taller than her, leaning down to meet her face to face was more of an exercise than a playful gesture. “Only a little bit?”

She began to carefully pace across the roof toward where I had been laying. “It’s just that I’ve never really gone too far from home before. I know I wanted to help you in the Revolution and stuff. I guess I’m just nervous about traveling, that’s all.”

I kept it real with her. “As well you should be. It’s like I said before: it’s going to be dangerous traveling in the winter. But that’s why I need you to be with me. If anything happens to me, I’ll need you to contact the Winter Emergency Board. I can’t go alone—that would be suicide...no matter how bundled up I am.”

Her sweet brown eyes met mine, filling with a twitch of excitement. “That’s why your other friends are coming, too, right?”

I smiled back to her, knowing she was excited to meet the people I had traveled with during the Revolution. “Well, Dice has his own reasons for coming with us. But it’s not in my right to tell you his problems. I’m sure he’ll tell you when you meet him.”

“And Mika...?” she pressed.

Laughing, I knew I had told her way too much about what went on during my travels. “Mika, Kay, Brigg...all of them. You’ll get a chance to meet them.” I slowly lowered myself back into the spot I was laying in before as I continued telling her what she wanted to hear. “Once you do, they can tell you all sorts of embarrassing stories about me that will keep you jabbing at me for years down the line.”

Casey laughed with me. “I won’t make fun of you *too* much.”

“Well, chances are that once we’re together again, we may not have time to think about joking around. From what I’ve been told from the others, there’s a lot more unresolved business than just trying to figure out what happened to dad. Once we leave here tomorrow, our lives will be at risk...and I’m not just talking about the weather.”

Casey had distinct fear in her response. “What do you mean?”

I inhaled deeply, feeling my lungs practically freezing inside of my chest. “Give me a few minutes to answer that, okay?”

“Is it that bad?”

I let the question linger as I reached to the inside of my red fleece robe. I began to finger something in the left-inside pocket: a coin. I didn’t know what kind of metal it was made of, why it was so shiny, or how it was even created. The only things I knew were where I got it from and why I had it...

## II

...It was the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> month—a little over a month before that time.

It was a windy and overcast day as I was supervising a group of former Causes during a reconstruction project. I had told the Fifteen that I would help repair some of the damage I had helped

cause even though it was the Zealots whom had done the most physical damage to Eden. It was my roundabout way of apologizing without really *saying* it; especially since I didn't feel I needed to in the first place. Much more simply, I was holding up my end of the deal for calling off the Revolution.

The six of us were taking a break and telling traveling stories when a well-finished and elaborately crafted horse-coach pulled up to our work site. From it, Syre—the head of Eden's economy—emerged and began to walk towards our group. The lower part of his long, tan trench coat flapped in the breeze while the rest seemed held in place as well as it could be by the hands in his pockets.

I was in an exceptionally good mood that day. So despite the residual malice toward the Fifteen, I stood and greeted him warmly. “What brings *you* here, old man?”

Syre stroked his silver handlebar moustache with his left hand while reaching to me with his right. Although, we shared a casual handshake, Syre appeared to be rushed. “There is a matter that we would like you to attend to. Please have someone else supervise this site then come with us.”

My tone stepped more toward his professionally urgent level. “Serious business, huh?”

He gave me a nod with a reluctant frown, as if he were disappointed having to appear so critical. “We can't talk here. This is a private matter.”

The rest of my crew assured me that they would have everything under control and that I could take my leave of them. I took the tools out of my pockets and followed Syre back to the coach. Despite how put off I was by Syre's words and approach, I had a feeling that any business the Fifteen had with me would have to do with our negotiations at the end of the Revolution. I quickly convinced myself that there was nothing to really worry about.

That was, of course, until I actually stepped into the coach. For sitting on the other side of the cabin was the one man I had honestly not expected to see: Biktor—the member of the Fifteen I felt was responsible for the death of my father.

I felt myself freeze in place on sight of him. As I stared at him in surprise, the Eldest Leader mustered a welcoming grin. “Bogen,

it's nice to see you again. I'm glad I was able to recover from my injuries."

Carefully ducking through the doorway of the cabin, I slid onto the back seat, next to Syre. I spoke softly, choosing my words so as not to come off too hostile. "I'm glad you're recovering, too. Personally, when I heard you may have been cursed by the demons, I thought you were done for."

"Not yet," he softly muttered.

It was then that I managed to look him over more thoroughly. His wrinkled face was pale in comparison to when I had seen him at the festival. His eyes flickered with a lack of energy and his mouth moved very little. Simply put, he looked very sickly. Not even his magnificent, all-encompassing white cloak could hide just how decrepit the old man was. Just as the carriage started moving, I couldn't help but ask, "You *were* cursed... weren't you?"

Syre explained the situation to me, leaving Biktör to save his energy. "Sandra and Cenia managed to lift the curse from him. But the effects on his health remained and are slowly causing his body to fail him. He's still undergoing treatments. But there is a good chance he may not survive. He's got about two more years, maximum."

Regardless of how I felt about Biktör, it was still a shame to hear of anyone dying by the result of a demon's curse. For a brief second, I felt responsible, which was a bittersweet sensation. Though an insensitive question, I felt to ask, "Will he continue to suffer like that?"

Looking toward his fellow leader, Syre shook his head at my question. "He's not really 'suffering'; he's just lethargic. Biktör's not in any pain... at least none that he's letting on."

"I'm fine," Biktör rasped. "But once I heard the news, I knew what I had to do. That is why I'm here to speak with you, Bogen." He struggled to sit up straight as best as he could, trying to look professional despite his condition. I could almost feel myself being sympathetic.

"Well," I sternly replied, preparing to finally voice my issues to him, "there's a lot I need to talk to you about, too."

"Which is another reason I came to you: I remembered how urgent it was for you to speak with me." He exerted a nice push of

energy and finally caught me eye to eye. “Please, tell me what is on your mind.”

Considering the circumstances, I felt no need to dance around the subject. I spoke to Biktor outright. “Eight or nine years ago, my father, Philo died. He had a clocksmith business in the Binda side of the Delta Business District. Now, I don’t remember a lot about what else went on around that time. But I know for a fact that you and he got into arguments over his ISG and your requests to have him move.” I turned toward Syre. “You and Sandra were there, too.”

“I *do* remember him,” responded Biktor, with a slow nod. “I remember him well.” He shifted in his seat a little and cleared his throat before continuing his thought. “He refused to comply with our requests.”

I stopped him there and went for the throat, reclining back and indignantly folding my arms. “...Which is why I think you killed him!”

Everything stopped to where we could only hear the horse galloping outside the carriage. Syre cleared his throat; Biktor tapped his foot a couple of times; and I just sat there, stock-still and staring into Biktor’s wrinkled features. Getting that off my chest and into his ears re-awakened just how serious I was about getting to the bottom of my father’s murder.

A few minutes passed, still and quiet.

“I...” Biktor methodically augmented, “...have an explanation.”

Not budging, I demandingly pressed, “Well, I’d sure like to hear it.”

“There...is a problem, though.”

That being far from what I wanted to hear I snapped shy of a shout. “What?”

“You will not believe me when I tell you...no matter how much you would want to.”

I was about to speak up, but Syre placed a hand on my shoulder and quickly told me, “Please hear him out. I know what he wants to say to you.”

Breathing deep and suppressing my inclination to punch either of the old geezers in the face, I waited to fully calm before giving the floor back to Biktor. “Explain.”



Scooting down his seat to slightly lean against the wall, he began to share his thoughts with me. “My reason for coming to you today ties into answering your concerns about your father. But in order for me to explain everything to you, there is something you need to know first.”

“What’s that?”

“As we’ve told you, I’m not going to be of this world much longer. Unfortunately, little Morie is still far too young to take my place. You, Bogen, through your Revolution, have proven to me and the rest of the Fifteen that you truly want what is best for Eden. Am I not mistaken?”

I nodded widely. “That’s...right. I do.”

“As you have seen, knowing and doing what is best for Eden is just an everyday thing for me. But if I am gone, I am going to need a young, capable person to replace me. In short: I want you, Bogen, to be that person—the one who wants what’s best for Eden and the one who takes my place.”

My hands went up. “Whoa-whoa-whoa! Are you sure that’s not the curse talking!?”

Biktor softly chuckled. “I’m sure.”

Syre assisted Biktor’s proposal. “We know we may be asking a lot of you because assimilating into the Fifteen is not something that can be done overnight. It requires a depth of understanding like no other and a willingness to sacrifice yourself to keep Eden in balance.”

It was a facet of the Fifteen I had never heard of before. And it made me morbidly curious as to why he chose those words. “Sacrifice...myself?”

“You see, sonny,” Syre drearily emphasized, “we may be the ones acknowledged as the head of Eden. But the price we pay...we pay every waking moment. We must eat, sleep and breathe Eden...every minute of every day. Every single thing we do must be for the betterment of the citizenry as a whole. We don’t play favorites—”

“Bullshit!” I sharply interrupted. “You played favorites! That’s why Sydney took your side during the Revolution!”

Remaining calm through my outburst, Biktor responded. “Sydney over-glorified himself after I gave him the same offer I have just given you. Yes, I admit to instructing him to break down

the Revolution in exchange for my position upon my death. The young man took the offer a little too seriously. His early death is only proof that he would not have been cut out for the job. He only wanted the power.

But Bogen, please understand: all of us Fifteen were prepared to lose our lives to the Revolution. We had to be prepared as part of our caring for Eden. If we were to die with no replacement, Eden would surely fall apart and soon meet its doom—as we all saw by the demon attack. I know you met a couple of the medics that Sandra appointed to tend to injured Causes...”

“Yes, I remember them. What about them?”

“Sandra was preparing a replacement for herself. If she had been killed, she would have had Zoe or Chloe take her place. Do you now see why we had to do it?”

I recalled the violence that the Zealots had wrought upon Eden and could comprehend the Fifteen’s mentality. “So...” I ever-so-slowly replied, “...you all just go out and find a replacement when you know you’re going to die?”

“Not very often,” Biktor spoke again. “The Revolution just so happened to put it in the front of our minds. Now, I’m going to share something with you that a lot of people don’t know...”

The feeling of being exclusive to a Fifteen secret put the first grin on my face since entering the carriage. “What’s that, old man?”

He sat forward with a slight smile. “In many cases—perhaps ninety-five percent of the time—we give birth to our own successors. For example: Morie is actually my daughter, and Vade is her mother.”

My jaw felt like it could have dropped past my sternum. “Are you freaking serious!?”

Syre let out a deep, mighty laugh at my reaction. “That was much more entertaining than Sydney’s response.”

“Indeed,” agreed Biktor, chortling as well. He then resumed his thought. “That other five percent, however, is when we bring in replacements from among the citizens from time to time to avoid any distant inbreeding. We also don’t do it often due to the difficult assimilation process.”

There was that word again. “I get it and all. But you make the whole thing sound really sinister when you say ‘assimilate.’”

“Anyone we’ve ever had to bring in from the outside has been off by it; nothing new. ‘Assimilation’ is just an easier way of saying ‘incorporating you into the Fifteen.’”

“So then, let’s get to the point here: What exactly *is* the ‘assimilation’ process.”

Biktor’s grin shifted back into a stoic and serious countenance. “You see, Bogen, this is why I said before that you would not believe my explanation. There are things you need to know. But I can’t tell you them unless I know you can commit to my offer to become one of us and take my place when I die. There are things you will need to know about Eden and about my job before I can explain to you what happened to your father. You will not understand otherwise.”

“So you *will* tell me...”

“Yes, I will. I just need one thing from you before I we can start.”

Cautiously, I wondered, “What’s that?”

“I need proof: something that will prove to you beyond a shadow of a doubt that what I will tell you is the absolute truth.”

I couldn’t help but let out a confused chuckle. “Come on, man. You’re freakin’ Biktor! What kind of proof could I possibly have that you couldn’t provide for yourself?”

After a long, dreadful pause, Biktor answered, “The girl...Mika....and her father—”

I swept my hands wide in front of me. “No deal, old man! Forget it!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Syre reach for a briefcase that was to his side. “We knew you would refuse. After all, the girl is your friend. However, knowing what we know, we have a question for you: Did Mika tell you everything about herself and her father?”

The first thing to come to mind was the time I met Mika’s father. I could recall the tightness in my gut upon seeing the masked figure. Every moment of that encounter felt like I was looking at a living, breathing pile of lies, making it all the more painful to have seen her go away with him.

During my silence that responded to their question, Syre casually continued. “The reason we ask you this is because the girl *claimed* to be from Central 12, Archa. Am I correct?”

My eyes shifted back and forth between Syre and Biktor. “Y-y-y-yes. She said that. What of it?”

Producing a long scroll from his briefcase, Syre cleared his throat again. “I want you to take a look at this. It is a comprehensive, alphabetical list of everyone born in Central 12, Archa, as well as the mother and father of the child, within two years of 643.”

“643? That’s...” I paused flicking through the quick math. “...eleven years ago.”

“Right,” said Syre with a smirk. “So if Mika is only twelve, she should most certainly be on this list, correct?”

I knew what he was getting at, but I kept him going just to make sure. “It would make sense.”

He placed the scroll into my hand. “See for yourself.”

I unraveled the scroll and immediately scanned for names starting with ‘M’: Mary, Melanie, Mercedes, Mercer, Mia, Miana, Mido...Milton. I closed my eyes, shook my head and looked at it again. There was still Mido and Milton, with nothing in between. Mika’s name was not where it should have been.

I began to search the entire ‘M’ section, and soon enough, the entire list. I even went up and down the list of fathers, looking for Devon’s name. But that, too, was nowhere to be found.

“This has to be the wrong list!” I surely objected.

“That, I can assure you, it isn’t,” scoffed Biktor. “Once we found out Mika’s real name, age and the name of her father, we had a team search through the birth records. Then, once we got wind that she claimed she was from Central 12, Archa, we managed to put all the information together to expose a pretty elaborate hoax. So we’ll ask you again: Did the girl *really*...tell you *everything*...about herself?”

Glancing up from the scroll, I looked into Biktor’s eyes again. “So you knew; you knew that Devon was Mika’s father!”

He waved his hand dismissively. “It was information that didn’t come to us very easily. Your friend, Kay, helped with the investigation once she found out a few of the details didn’t fit together. She seemed really distraught by the whole thing.”

My mind slipped back to the moment Mika admitted to us that her father was Devon—the author of the book that inspired the Revolution. There was something about her that day that

struck a really bad chord with me, having me view her as one with a secretive nature. But having taken her age into account, I never thought that her secrets went any further than the identity of her father.

This list of names, however, once again opened my eyes to the possibility that there was more to Mika than she had led us to believe. What Biktor and Syre were saying to me was, in essence, that there was no formal record of Mika or Devon even existing. And with the way the Fifteen had kept records of the population over the centuries, there was little to no chance that the scroll was mistaken.

I almost dreaded to speak, but I compelled Biktor and Syre to continue. “So...let’s put it in black and white: What is it you want from me?”

Biktor gently raised his volume, just to be heard loud and clear. “Bring me the girl and her father. When you do, I will tell you everything you need to know. Your father, your friends, Eden, my job...you’ll know it all. Once you hear what I have to say to you, though, your life will change forever. You will stay in Exta and be assimilated into the Fifteen. You will live out the rest of your days in a position of utmost power and prestige; you will take my place when I die. All you need to do is bring me the girl and the author.

I know you want what is best for Eden. So I want you to know that if we have no record of those two, they could be a threat to the citizens, to us, and to our land. We need them in our custody before we can move forward with our proposed changes to Eden. And I know for a fact that I will need them in order to prove what I will say to you is true.”

The long breath I had been holding eased out as I spoke. “Look, old man...” I muttered, darting my eyes about, “This is a pretty dry piece of steak you’re trying to get me to swallow. But I can say that I had a pretty poor impression of Devon when I met him. What you say about him being dangerous makes sense, knowing what I know.” I gritted my teeth, praying I wouldn’t regret the next word out of my mouth. “I’ll do it. But I have a question.”

“What is it?”

“What will happen to my mother and sister?”

“They will move to Exta with you and live comfortably within the upper housing of the Labor Fields. There, they may choose to do whatever they want; unbound to any obligations. They will be well taken care of and you can see them any time you want.”

It was a satisfactory answer to me. “Now, I’m just going to ask you to promise me something.”

With a wide smile, Biktor welcomed my words. “I had a feeling. What would you like me to do?”

“It’s more like ‘not do,’” I clarified. “You have to promise me that Mika will not be harmed. Devon, I’m not too sure about. He *could* be dangerous. But we need to make sure that Mika’s not just being led on by her father’s instructions. She could be completely innocent, only obeying her parent and not knowing any better.”

“Interesting,” he hummed. “We didn’t consider that possibility.” There was a beat before his answer. “Consider it done: the girl will not be harmed.”

I took a couple more deep breaths. “So how are we going to do this?”

Syre opened the briefcase again and unzipped a small pocket on the inside of the lid. From inside it, he produced a small coin with a shiny yellowish luster to it. “This is an Exta Coin. It will get you through Exta Sector security regardless of the presence of a member of the Fifteen. You, and anyone traveling with you, will be allowed in. Once you find Mika and Devon, bring them to Exta.”

“Won’t that be suspicious to them?”

It took Biktor a moment to alter the plan. “Find a way to contact us once you have them. We will set something up that will give you a good reason to go into Exta. If we wait until the winter to go into doing this, Joseph and I can fully focus on helping you with the mission we’re giving you.”

“Travel in the winter!?” I exclaimed. “Are you nuts, old man?”

“If safety is a concern, take your sister and a laptop with you. The Winter Emergency Board will take care of you if anything happens early in your travels. I’m sure once you have Mika and Devon with you, there will be less worry about being left helpless.”

Now I felt myself being suspicious about the whole operation. “You’ve really thought this through haven’t you?”

“Well,” Syre spoke up, “it’s a one-of-a-kind situation dealing with people who don’t exist in our records. We can’t have any loose ends in our plan to rectify the situation. Admittedly, the plan is a little shabby because it banks on how much Mika and Devon trust you as a person.”

“I don’t think we have to worry about Mika’s trust in me,” I assured them. “The kid professed to have strong feelings for me!”

Syre loudly snickered. “So we’re covered there. I think this will go well.”

Biktor corrected him. “It isn’t going anywhere unless he agrees to it, of course.”

“Right,” murmured Syre, holding the shiny coin out to me.

Biktor then addressed me. “So what will it be, Bogen? Everything you want and need, as well as your hand in Eden’s future, rests on you accepting this mission. Bring us Mika and Devon, and you will be well on your way to changing your life. You may take that Exta Coin and accept, or you may decline and we’ll find another way to resolve the issue. What will it be?”

### III

Having recalled that day, I was able to answer Casey’s question. “I’m just not sure if we’ll be able to turn back once we get into Exta, that’s all. I guess you could say I’m nervous, too. That’s why I feel like gathering up as much as I can of the crew before going in.”

Casey rested her head on my shoulder. “That’s why we’re going to leave for Dice’s house tomorrow, right?”

I leaned in to rest my head atop hers. “Absolutely. Another good thing about it is that he needed to get into Exta anyway to search for his mother. Cenia told Dice that she would help him. But from the INMails he’s been sending me lately, I can see that she hasn’t delivered on it yet. So since we already have a ticket into Exta, I can’t think of any reason he wouldn’t want to come with us.”

“That’s good. At least we know what we can expect.”

An unwelcome gust of wind frostily caressed us, prompting me to breathe into my hands again. With my mouth covered, I asked my sister, “So what about you? Do you still want to see what the Fifteen can do for you? Are you still curious about the sky?”

“Definitely!” she excitedly answered, laying down flat on the roof. “If they know how to get into the sky...that would be the greatest!”

Laughing through my nose at her flighty fervor, I laid down next to her, back in the same spot I was in when I was alone. “I *still* say it’s a little far out there. I know you’re not the only person who was wondering that, though. Any time someone mentioned the sky, I thought about you.”

“Glad I’m not alone,” she sighed. “I wouldn’t want *everyone* to think I’m crazy.”

I sat right back up and turned toward her. “Oh, don’t be silly. The Revolution proved that the Fifteen are capable of so much more than they let on. We can’t put anything past them; we have to assume they can do anything our imagination can conjure up...whether or not it makes sense.”

“I guess that’s another reason you’re nervous? You just don’t know what they’ll do next?”

“Right,” I agreed. “Biktor and Vade already have us set up with a pretty good reason to travel into Exta in the first place. With mom volunteering in the Labor Fields for the winter, all it takes is for us to make up a reason to go see her. I’m just glad she accepted the invitation—it’s made things a lot easier.”

Casey spoke up to veer the conversation. “Oh yeah; I almost forgot!”

“What is it?”

She slowly began to stand. “You wanted me to remind you that we have to get rid of all the food that will spoil while we’re gone!”

“Crap, you’re right. There are still a few things to do before we leave tomorrow morning.” I began to piece together the itinerary for the night. “We’ll cook dinner using as many of the perishables as we can. Then we’ll give the rest to neighbors next door. We also need to make sure we get a good night’s rest tonight. It’s quite a ways to Dice’s house.”



“Don’t forget to check your INMail, too, just in case.”

“Right, we don’t want any last minute details slipping past us...”

Casey and I helped each other off the roof. The both of us agreed that we were pleased with the results of testing our altered outfits against the cold. If we were warm enough in them while lying still, then surely we’d be plenty warm while moving around during our travels.

As Casey took to the kitchen to prepare our dinner, I took my laptop and sat in the living room within a couple of meters from the solar-heater. I flipped it open, accessed my INMail box and was immediately surprised. Dice had sent me a message with a rather interesting subject line: *Read this and let me know what you want to do about it.*

“What is this?” I thought aloud, double-tapping the touchpad to open the message.

Casey beamed from the kitchen, sounding triumphant to have guessed right. “Dice send you something?”

“That he did!” I answered as I began to read:

*Hey Bogen,*

*I’ve got good news, hilarious news, bad news, uncertain news and awesome news. And since I have to write it all down I might as well start from the top.*

*First the good news: As you know, I’ve gotten in contact with just about everyone else by this point bar Brigg and Mika. But there’re now two new additions to the list. You’re not going to believe this, but I managed to get in contact with Albion and Jalako. Since they turned themselves in after the Revolution, and helped with the reconstruction projects, the Fifteen eased up on their sentence and placed them in G8, Terra. Sure, they’re there for life, but it’s still good to know that they’re doing okay.*

*Now the hilarious news: Since the two of them are going to be in Terra for the rest of their lives, the both of them decided to get married. Cenia did the ceremony and everything. Is that a scream or what?*

*Okay, now for the bad news. When I got in touch with Kay, I found out that that Nealix guy still hasn’t been caught. So now, both Vade and Cenia haven’t boned up to what they promised us. Granted, Nealix didn’t sound like a person to be easily caught, so it’s sort of understandable. But still, I*

*want you guys to be careful. I'm concerned because you said you were bringing your sister with you. Be as careful as I'm being redundant. Careful!*

*Now for the uncertain news: Getting back to Albion and Jalako, the two of them want us to pay a visit. They didn't give us much of a reason to do it because I'm sure their INMails are all screened by Eliza before they are sent out. They are Labor Field prisoners now, after all. The reason this is uncertain news is because we don't know whether or not this will benefit us and they are asking us to go into Terra during the winter. I'm not sure what to make of it, so I'd like your opinion on what we should do about it.*

*And lastly, the awesome news: Although I said that I haven't done so, Kay has made contact with Brigg. Turns out, he did a great job of hiding his face when he was parading around as Morie's attendant at the Festival of Protection. He was there to see us turn over Mika to her dad! He didn't speak up at the time because he didn't want us to think he defected from the Revolution or betray or abandon us. I don't know how you feel about it, but I say that was the right move. It's very...him...for the over-analytic pain-in-the-ass that he is.*

*I know this is a lot to absorb so close to the start of your mission. But let me know if any of this warrants a detour from our original plans. Whatever you decide on is fine with me. It's more your mission than it is mine, after all.*

*Good luck and travel safe. See you soon.*

*-Dice*

The entire INMail stunned me. At that point I realized just how concerned with my own agenda I had been. But I couldn't help but think that Dice chose to head the proactive approach to bringing the team back together because he *knew* how busy I was with reconstruction projects and preparations for the mission. Dice may not have been the best at dealing with people on a personal level, but he sure knew how to be a team player.

As for Brigg, I wasn't sure if I wanted to shake his hand or slap him upside the head. Throughout the final month of the Revolution, our entire party was worried about him. The least he could have done was say hello. However, as Dice pointed out, his reasons for staying hidden *did* make a lot of sense. With everything that had been going on at the time, even I wasn't sure how our group would have reacted to seeing him in a Furnace Attendant's cloak.

Either way, this indeed was as awesome a bit of news as Dice had advertised. It was always in the back of my mind that the longer Brigg was held captive by the Fifteen, the more he would be able to learn about them and how they operate. Also, with him working with Morie, that meant he was living in Exta.

Something dawned on me on that thought. If Kay was in contact with Brigg, then there was a good chance that she was also in Exta, working alongside the Fifteen. If my memory served me correctly, which I was pretty sure it was, she may have been closer to Vade and her police operations rather than the Spirit Furnace and Morie's division. It felt much better to know that we had more outlets to find out what was going on in Exta before even setting foot into it.

After about ten minutes of dwelling on what I had read, I typed up and sent a simple reply to Dice:

*Yo Dice,*

*Thanks a lot for all that news. Knowing all that has put my mind at ease.*

*As for what we'll do about it, let's stick to the original plan. I want to come get you first because the sooner we increase our party size, the safer we'll all be walking in the winter. As tempting as it is to go speak to Al & Jal right away, I know they can't travel with us. Plus, I'd want you to be there in case they give us any vital information. Bring some extra parchment, just in case.*

*We'll talk more when we meet up. See you in a few days!*

*Thanks again!*

*-Bogen*

After sending it, I called to Casey in the kitchen. "It looks like we've got a little more travel ahead of us than we thought!"

There was the familiar clang of a spoon tapping against a plate as she was portioning out our meal. "Where else are we going?"

Still focused on my laptop screen, rereading the INMail Dice sent, I answered her. "Well, we're still going to Dice's house first. But after that, unless there's a change of plans between then and now, we're going to head into Terra."

“Terra!?” she disconcertedly exclaimed, “...*in the winter!*?”

I minimized the danger to try and ease her. “We’ll be fine. Dice will be with us by that time.”

Still in protest, Casey replied as she brought our plates out to the living room. “What do we need to go there for?”

Before I could answer her question, I had to compliment what she had prepared for dinner. “Wow, you managed to knock out the last of the perishables!”

“Not all of them. We’ll have to drink the rest of the milk and take what’s left in the fruit basket with us. But the rest of the steak and eggs are either cooked up right here or ready to be eaten for breakfast tomorrow.”

“Fantastic!” I praised with a grin, setting my laptop aside and taking my plate. I then went back to addressing her first concern. “Anyway, about Terra: Remember the Zealots I told you about; the people who attacked Eden to draw out the Fifteen?”

“Yeah. You guys became friends afterwards.”

The term “friend” wasn’t quite how I felt about them. “Ehhhhh...” I groaned with a shrug, “*I* didn’t really consider them ‘friends’, per se. They were more like people I knew I had to coexist with for a little bit to proceed through the Revolution. The others treated them more like friends than I did.”

“Okay,” she accepted, “so what about them?”

“Well, from what Dice tells me, Albion and Jalako—the two who led the Zealots—are living in Terra now and they want us to pay them a visit. They may have alluded to having information that could be important to us. If the two of them can help us in any way before we go into Exta, it’s important that we go over to Terra to see them.”

Casey was silent for a moment as she began cutting into her piece of steak. Just as she brought her fork up to eat, she looked into my eyes and said. “I trust you, big bro. It’s just scary, that’s all.”

“Thanks. That means a lot to me.” I assured her. “I learned a lot about how to travel smart and travel organized. I’m really confident in my ability to keep us safe. You will have nothing to worry about.”

I could feel that Casey’s lack of experience with travel was giving a sturdy foundation to her concerns. While I couldn’t make

her fear magically and instantly disappear, I knew I would have to be sensitive toward her in the decisions I would be making throughout the journey. The only problem would be holding to that sensitivity once there would be more people to provide input to the mission.

Personally, I was preparing myself for the change of scenery. Travel during the Revolution was busy, loud and frenetic in the more urban areas of Eden. The staggering contrast between Eden's daily bustle and the stark, desolate stillness of winter wasn't something I could easily prepare for. It was going to be like walking through a lifeless mirror image of the land I grew to know.

The idea of the crew getting back together was a great motivation to move forward, though. I knew that my friends shared the same suspicions about the Fifteen that I did. Each one of us either needed to get into Exta or were already there. And I was hoping that once we collected Devon and Mika, I could convince them to go into the secretive sector with us.

But even through all this, there was one thing I knew I was going to be struggling with in the days and weeks ahead. No matter what angle you could look at it from; no matter what reasoning or evidence was there; and no matter how important it was for me to find out about my father's death; I had accepted a difficult mission. It was a mission that would test my body's limits, a mission that, mentally, put me both with and against the Fifteen; and a mission that could reveal to me more than I was thinking I could handle. And the worst thing about it all was...

...that it was a mission to betray Mika.