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The Handlings: The Promise

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## CHAPTER 1

Gerald is an accountant.

He is far too busy with numbers to ever look closely at his fingertips

There's a magnifying glass right on his desk, for reading those really small numbers at the bottom of reports. But Gerald has not once picked it up, turned it towards his hand and examined one of his digits. Because if he had picked up that magnifying glass, pointed it towards the tip of his right index finger at this precise moment, Gerald might have seen something truly amazing.

A murder.

## CHAPTER 2

"This will teach you to come over and spy on us, traitor!"

Krandall Rightling screamed the words at the top of his lungs as he raised a large sword above the head of the handling boy lying on the ground at his feet. The bright morning light glinted off the black blade as it began to arc downward towards the frightened boy.

"Dad, no!"

Krandall stopped the sword in mid-swing and turned to see his teenage son, Julius, standing behind him. Julius, tall and gangly, had just graduated from Handling High. Krandall, Commander of Rightland's Spy Brigade, had been trying to convince his son to make the feared group of spy hunters his career choice. It had more than two months since Julius' graduation and he had still not decided what to do next.

Krandall immediately saw this execution as a good opportunity to force his son into a decision.

"Good, I'm glad you're here," said Krandall. "This will give you first hand training on how we deal with Space Jumpers."

Space Jumpers is the term handlings use to describe making

the dangerous leap from the fingers of the left hand to those on the right. For as long as anyone could remember, the handlings that lived on Gerald's right hand, the Rightlanders, had been in a vicious war with the inhabitants of the left hand, called Leftlanders. No one knows how the bitter feud had started or even why the two groups were fighting. Rightlanders just knew they hated the Left and assumed that the feeling was mutual.

Krandall slowly lowered his weapon and Julius thought for a moment that his father was going to release the boy cowering at his feet. But then, to Julius' horror, his father turned the sword around and placed it in Julius' hand.

"Here, son. You do it," said Krandall. "It will be your first kill."

Julius looked at the deadly weapon gleaming in the bright light. It had been carved from the leg bone of a bull dust mite and had been polished to a high luster. The blade sparkled like black glass in the midday sun. The handle was wrapped with the pebbled hide of a red ant that one of Julius' forgotten ancestors had killed many years ago. The large sword, just like his father, was well-known among the citizens of the First City, the bustling town that thrived on Gerald's index finger. It was known as the 'Justice Blade' and contributed mightily to the Krandall's legend as a ruthless killer. Whenever he ventured into public, the famous blade was always worn in a custom sheath strapped to his back with only the bright red handle protruding from behind his head. On the rare occasions when Julius' father had drawn the sword in public, it elicited screams of fear from all those surrounding him.

And now, the famous instrument of death had been placed in Julius's hands.

Julius studied the awesome weapon. This was only the second time he had ever actually held the Justice Blade. The first time occurred when he was a small boy of only four. His father had just returned from a bitter skirmish in the Palm Zone with a group of rebel handlings who had been crossing into Rightland to steal food. There were rumors that they were actually terrorists sent from Leftland to incite a civil war. The rebels had released whole herds of mites from the Pasture Lands that had trampled the precious crops that

were grown on the Veldt.

Rumors of the uprising had terrified the citizens of Rightland for weeks. Many had taken their children out of school and hidden in their homes. Finally, after much debate among the Council of Elders, the Army of the Right and the Spy Brigade had been sent to quell the insurrection.

The Justice Blade had seen plenty of action on that day.

Krandall had staggered into their home so weakened that he just dropped the sword on the floor and went straight to his room. While Julius's mother and older brother, Alex, followed Krandall into the bedroom to hear news of the skirmish, Julius stayed behind and examined the sword. It was his father's most prized possession and was always stored on two large hooks hanging from the wall in the family's small living room. Julius had never seen the sword up close and was fascinated.

After his mother closed the door to their bedroom, Julius slowly crept over to the sheathed blade lying haphazardly on the floor. There was some type of dark burgundy liquid pooled around it and when Julius timidly reached out and touched it, his fingers came away sticky.

It was handling blood! Maybe even the blood of Leftlanders, which made the sticky goo even more vile.

Julius had choked back the bile in his throat and grabbed the red handle of the sword. He slowly pulled it from the protective sheath, creating a sucking sound that he was sure his father would be able to hear in the next room. Julius quickly pushed the blade back into the sheath and froze. He stared at his parent's door, expecting his father to burst through it at any moment. He could hear the sounds of his mother comforting his father, and his older brother's excited questions, but nothing else.

No one was coming to stop him. This was his chance to see the famous blade that had taken the lives of so many handlings.

Again, Julius pulled the blade from its blood soaked covering and using both hands, lifted it to eye level. The black surface was not as shiny as he expected. Instead, it was covered with thickening goo and small bits of what looked like skin. Julius immediately knew what the blade had been doing that awful night in the hand of his famous

father. It had been cutting off the snoots of Leftlanders. He was sure of it.

Now, Julius stood before his father, holding the legendary blade once again. Fourteen years had passed since the first time he had held the weapon in his hand. And it still felt just as heavy.

The blade had been cleaned of handling blood many times since that night on their living room floor and now shown with a light that seemed to almost radiate from inside the ancient bone. For a brief moment, Julius felt that the sword was actually a living thing. He gasped at the thought and almost dropped the terrible thing to the ground. He wanted nothing more than to be rid of the hideous oracle of death, but he knew he could not waiver. Not with his father and nearly the entire city staring at him.

Julius regained his footing and slowly twisted the blade in his hand, admiring the way it seemed to reflect the midday light and at the same time, to suck it in from the surrounding air. He saw his reflection in the black surface and, with a little twist of his wrist, that of his father standing just a few feet away. Although his father's face was distorted and elongated by the curve of the blade, Julius could see that this was one of Krandall's proudest moments. His son was finally going to join the legions of ancestors before him who had defended the homeland and vanquished all those that would invade it, by land and air.

Julius twisted the blade again and caught a reflection of the shivering boy lying on the ground. Another small twist caused the reflection to shift between his own frightened face and that of the boy's. Julius looked almost as terrified as his victim. He turned the blade again and saw his father. Twist. His face. Twist. The terrified boy.

The collage of images, colors and shapes was beautiful. How could Julius be expected to mar the exquisite surface of the magnificent blade with the blood of another handling? The black surface twinkled in the light. Maybe the thing was indeed alive and just wanted to enjoy the warmth of the sun and reflect the beauty around it.

Julius was snapped from his imaginings by the touch of his father's hand on his shoulder.

"You can do it, son," Krandall said in a soft, assuring

tone that only the two of them could hear. He pushed Julius towards the alleged Space Jumper who was still huddled on the ground, shivering with fright. Krandall pointed one of his long fingers at the boy.

"Now, what you want to do is make a clean cut through the snoot in one quick motion," said Krandall, using his finger like a surgeon to point along the line of an imaginary incision.

The snoot is a handling's most prized possession. The fleshy extension growing from the top of a handling's head resembles one of those iconic inverted smokestacks one might see at power plants. It had a wide base and top that's tapered slightly in the middle. The length of a handling's snoot is associated with manhood and many a young handling has tried to stretch his by various painful methods. Each handling can blow a distinct note from his or her snoot by holding their nose and blowing through the snoot like a horn. And the higher the note, the more attractive a handling is to a potential mate. Because of this, young handlings spent many hours practicing their "snooting" and trying to achieve the highest, shrillest note possible.

But the most important function of the snoot is to allow handlings to breath while under water. A host's hands encounter many environments during the course of the average day, including being submersed in water, whether in a sink, tub or swimming pool. The snoot acts like the gills of a fish and allows handlings to breathe and continue their daily activities even while submerged. Without a snoot, a handling would drown the first time the Benevolent Host washed his hands. Cutting off a handling's snoot is the ultimate form of physical and psychological torment as the victim knows that he or she will die, they just don't know when.

Krandall swung his flat hand neatly along the imaginary line in the air.

"Okay, son, keep a steady hand and cut right through the snoot at its base."

By this time, the large crowd was pressing in on Julius and the alleged spy. This was a rare opportunity for them to see the elite Spy Brigade execute a traitor in public. Most executions were secretive and rarely seen by ordinary

handlings. There was an electricity in the air as word quickly spread that the great Krandall Rightling had captured a 'jumper" and was actually going to allow his son to conduct the public execution.

Julius looked around at the growing crowd and swallowed hard. He had just been coming to the Whorl to tell his father that his lunch was ready when he stumbled upon the scene. Julius wasn't looking for the opportunity to be a hero. He just wanted to go home and have lunch.

Julius used the sleeve of his shirt to wipe the cold sweat from his forehead and then looked down into the eyes of the young boy. Certainly the lad couldn't be more than nine or ten years old. He was as skinny as a mite's tail and covered from foot to snoot in grime. When was the last time the poor thing had eaten? And how was it possible that this ragged little scruff of a boy could have possibly made the dangerous jump between the two hands?

It was not possible.

Julius knew that a handling this small could never perform the daring maneuver and live to tell about it.

Yes, Julius knew alright. He knew because it was the same kind of jump that had killed his best friend.

### CHAPTER 3

That terrible day had started out wonderfully.

Julius was dreaming about a girl from school named Charletta. She had the biggest green eyes he had ever seen and when he looked into them, Julius felt lightheaded and dizzy. In his dream, he and Charletta were walking through a field, holding hands and laughing. Apparently, they were going on a picnic since Charletta's other hand held a large basket. Julius hoped that inside that basket was a loaf of skeen, the bread-like substance that handlings made by kneading dead skin and sweat together and then baking in small ovens. Other than the miniature vegetables grown in the Veldt, skeen was the staple of most handling's diets and Julius loved it, especially when the loaf was hot from the oven.

Or when it was being served to him by a laughing, green-

eyed girl.

Charletta suddenly stopped and dropped the basket.

"This is the place," she laughed.

In his dream, Julius reached down to open the basket. But Charletta grabbed his hand before he could flip back the lid and suddenly pulled him closer to her.

"No, no," she said. "First, you must have your dessert."

Charletta closed her big, green eyes and started to lean towards Julius with a peculiar expression on her face. She wanted to kiss him!

Julius had never been kissed by anyone except his mother. And he had certainly never been kissed by anyone as pretty as Charletta. He closed his eyes, pursed his lips and prepared for the sweetest experience of his young life.

"Get up, snoot licker!"

*Why was Charletta yelling at him?*

"We're going to miss it!"

Miss what? The kiss? The lunch of freshly baked skeen? For a brief moment, Julius thought maybe Charletta was yelling at him because he wasn't doing it right. He had never kissed a girl before. How was he supposed to know how to do it?

"Come on!"

Julius opened one eye and realized that he wasn't dreaming. The voice didn't belong to Charletta. It was coming from his best friend, Felix. And he was no longer just yelling at Julius. Now Felix was jabbing Julius with one of his long, bony fingers.

"Stop it," Julius managed to mumble and pulled himself up and out of the way, trying to slip back into the dream before he was fully awake.

"We've got to go or we'll miss it," said Felix.

"Just a few more minutes. Oh, Charletta," mumbled Julius.

There was another sharp jab to Julius' ribs. Felix voice was high and whiny and was very hard to ignore.

"I'm not going to miss it, just because you'd rather hang there and dream about some girl who doesn't even know you exist," said Felix.

Julius opened his eyes. The dream was over. He would have to wait to be kissed. Releasing his grip on the dirty indentions in Felix's ceiling, Julius dropped reluctantly to

the floor of his friend's room.

"You really think she doesn't know I exist?" asked Julius.

"No, Jules, I don't. Charletta Rightner couldn't pick you out of a crowd if you held a sign above your head with your name on it. So stop dreaming about her and let's go."

Julius rubbed the last tendrils of the dream from his eyes and looked up to see Felix standing over him. Felix was the tallest and skinniest guy in school and had been Julius' best friend since preschool. He was dressed in a pair of black pants and a long sleeve shirt with alternating black and white stripes. That was the shirt that Felix always wore when he wanted to go on one of his 'adventures.' Julius immediately knew that he was in for a crazy day.

"If we hurry, we can be there before it happens," said Felix. "Get dressed; we can eat on the way."

Julius rubbed his back.

"Felix, you've got to do something about your ceiling. I can barely hold on up there," grumbled Julius.

"Sorry. My dad said he's going to try to get that curve out of it, but he's been real busy down at the pop plant," replied Felix. Felix's father worked for the company that manufactured Sweet Sweat, the syrupy drink that was made from the Benevolent Host's perspiration. Felix was the only person that Julius knew who called it 'pop' and it always made him chuckle a little.

One of the many quirky things about handlings is that they sleep hanging from the ceiling. Each of a handling's hands and feet are covered with tiny hairs that resemble those on the feet of a common housefly. These tiny hairs help handlings keep a good grip on their Host. Without them, a handling could be flung into space when the Benevolent Host waves or throws a baseball. Each night, handlings grab the small indentations carved into the ceiling of their bedrooms, pull up their feet and fall asleep. It looked weird, but certainly gave you more space in your bedroom.

"I told my Mom we were going over to Vinny's house for the day," said Felix.

"But that's not where we're going, is it?" asked Julius.

"Nope."

Julius rubbed his sore back and watched his childhood friend pack a bag with a couple of loafs of skeen and two

mite skin flasks with Sweet Sweat. Because his dad worked at the plant, Felix got all of the sweet drink that he wanted for free.

Felix was very excited and talked continuously as he packed.

"You should have seen yourself up there. Trying to kiss the ceiling," said Felix.

"I wasn't kissing the ceiling."

"Yeah, you were."

Felix dug through the bag, pulling a small square object from the bottom.

"I wish I had my Mom's tracer. Can you imagine a drawing of me and the deer tick on that thing?"

Handlings do not have the technology common to humans. But they do have a device similar to cameras called a Tracer. The device uses a thin, almost transparent roll of paper that is created from pounding wet scrapings into long, flat sheets and then rolling them onto a large frame. When a handling wants to preserve a moment, he just rolls a fresh sheet into his tracer, holds it in front of the image he wishes to capture and uses the special charcoal pencil that is attached by a cord to quickly and accurately draw the view onto the thin paper. With a little practice, the drawing only takes seconds. But most tracers were expensive and were mainly owned by adult handlings. The one Felix now held in his hand was nicked and scarred for years of use by Felix's mother, who was a professional tracer artist. And it was constantly breaking and ruining the drawings of his most daring stunts. And there were plenty of daring stunts for Felix to record.

Not only was he Julius' best friend, but Felix was the biggest daredevil in their school. There weren't many things that he wouldn't do in his famous striped shirt.

In just the past year, Julius had stood witness as Felix bungee jumped into a sweat mine, put on a cape and tried to fly from the roof of the school's cafeteria and wrestled a large deer tick, which it turned out was already dead by the time Felix and Julius had found it. All of Felix's 'adventures' had been forever catalogued in a notebook that he kept in his room. The thick notebook was his most prized possession and Felix often carried it to school to brag

about his daring exploits with his classmates, especially the girls who would gasp at Felix's bravery. Felix loved the shocked looks on his friend's faces and it was this reaction that spurred him on to find more and more dangerous stunts to chronicle in his notebook.

Julius stretched his sore back and watched Felix hang the leather strap of his used red tracer around his neck.

"Oh, no. I'm not going to spend my day drawing you doing something stupid again," said Julius.

"Jules, this is going to be the best one yet," Felix replied excitedly. "Come on."

Felix slung the bag over his shoulder and headed for the door.

Julius pulled on a pair of rumped pants that he found lying on the floor next to Felix's desk. He then picked up a shirt and smelled it. The odor didn't make him gag, so it was still clean enough.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" asked Julius.

"We've got to get up to there by nine or we'll miss it."

"Miss what?"

"The Meet!" exclaimed Felix as he rushed out the bedroom door.

#### CHAPTER 4

A Meet is what handlings call the moment when the two hands of the Host came together. Sometimes a Meet is just a brief brushing of the fingers. Other times, it is a sustained, and awkward, consolidation of Rightland and Leftland.

Because Gerald used his right hand for punching in numbers on his old manual adding machine and his left for tilting back his glasses to read the fine print on reports, his hands rarely came together.

Except for one time each day. And that was when Gerald prayed.

He started each day standing bare-chested in front of his bathroom mirror, placing his hands together and praying that he make no mistakes. Moving a decimal point just one place or adding two figures incorrectly could have huge consequences for his clients- and for Gerald's career. So, each day was started with a brief appeal to the Almighty for

clarity and accuracy. And it was at this moment that Felix planned to jump from one of Gerald's hands to the other.

Julius quickly pulled the shirt over his snoot and rushed after his friend.

"How do you know it's coming this morning?" asked Julius.

"Because I've been timing it and the Meet has come at almost the same time every day for the last two months," replied Felix. Julius had wondered where his friend was spending his mornings since graduation. He had just thought maybe Felix was out looking for a job.

"At exactly nine on the dot, give or take a minute, there's a Full Meet up on the Curl."

The Curl was the point at which the finger started to fall away towards the fingernail. Very few handlings lived near the Curl or had ever ventured to the smooth skin on the other side of the finger. Without the grooves of the fingertips, the area was no good for building their homes and very difficult to hold on to, especially if one's Host did something that created a lot of movement like playing ping pong or conducting an orchestra.

Sometimes there was full contact in a Meet and sometimes it was just a brush. Most handlings got used to the event happening at random times throughout the week, but very few were able to predict when they would occur. The Righlander Army had an entire division that was commissioned to study and forecast Meets so that they could conduct quick skirmishes into Leftland.

Felix was fascinated with the danger of Space Jumping and had studied every book and article that he could find on the subject. He had been sitting up near the Curl every morning for weeks with a pencil and notepad, making a record of what times of the day Meets most often occurred. After several days, a definite pattern began to emerge and he was anxious to show his friend.

"We don't make full contact every single time and some days it doesn't happen at all. But I've been studying the pattern and there will be a Meet at nine this morning. I guarantee it," Felix said as he headed out the door and into the bright morning light.

Handlings build their dwellings and businesses by burrowing into the sides of the fingertip's ridges and sworls. It was

a very delicate process that sometimes took months to complete and each cave home was entirely unique. Felix's grandfather had dug their cave and it opened up right onto the Fourth Ring. Each successive ridge of the fingerprints was given a number starting with the one just outside of the center swirl where the Hall of Elders was located, all the way out to the edge of the finger. The lower a handling's Ring number, the more prestigious the address. Living on the Fourth Ring meant that Felix's family was quite well-off.

You couldn't tell that from his clothes, however.

Julius noticed the rips that were in both knees of Felix's pants. Every time his friend took a step, his bony knees would poke through like a small animal coming out for a quick breath of fresh air. But Felix insisted on wearing these ragged black pants every time the two of them went on one of their 'adventures.' He considered them his good luck charm (like the striped shirt) and didn't allow his mother to wash the pants. They were covered with signs of past trips- mud, dried Sweet Sweat and even blood. None of the blood belonged to Felix, but the various creatures that he had tried to wrestle like the already dead deer tick. Felix had saved money all summer from his after school job at the pop factory and bought the pants at a shop called Larney's Laird over on West 34th Street, out near the Curl. Larney was an ancient handling who refused to cut his hair or wear shirts. Felix said Larney called the pants 'knarly' (which he was pretty sure meant lucky), so he wore them constantly. And from the looks of those knees, Julius thought, this may be the last trip they ever go on.

Before Julius could ask Felix what exactly they were planning to do up on the Curl, Felix turned left and plunged into the early morning crowd of commuters. Most handlings were early risers and the street was packed with folks heading to work, shopping or play. Julius almost lost sight of Felix as he bounded up the road. But he could hear the familiar flopping cadence of his friend's dirty feet and used that to help guide him back to Felix's side.

"Let me guess," said Julius, "we're about to do something really stupid, aren't we?"

"The craziest ever, Jules," replied Felix.

Every since the two met in Handling Preschool, Julius and Felix had been inseparable. Their mothers had been old friends from high school and on the first day of school, had sat the two young boys on the floor side by side as they went off to have a hot mug of Sweet Sweat with the other young mothers. Julius looked Felix over and then started building a huge tower out of blocks. When he had finished, Julius looked over at Felix, smiled and said, "Look what I can do."

Felix had looked at the huge tower, then back at Julius and with a mischievous grin on his face replied, "Well, look what I can do."

He then climbed all the way to the top of the tower, stood up on the very top block, held out both arms and jumped snoot-first into midair. Felix came crashing down on the floor and the tower fell right on top of him. After a few minutes of frantic digging by his teachers and his frightened mother, they freed Felix from the debris. But instead of running and sobbing in his mother's arm, Felix ran over to Julius and said, "Build it again. Only this time, make it higher!"

Ever since that day, Julius had been the timid one and Felix had been the daredevil.

And Julius could tell by the determined look on Felix's face as they strode along that today his friend was planning something much bigger than the Great Preschool Tower Leap.

## CHAPTER 5

Felix broke into a run as they approached the Curl.

"Come on, it's almost time," he yelled back at Julius as he raced towards the horizon.

Julius had only been to this part of the Curl a few times without one of his parents. It was a popular destination for weekend picnics. And like all children, he had been told horror stories about handlings that got too close to the edge and slipped off into space. When Julius was younger, his older brother Alex had once taken him out to the Curl, just the two of them. The two brothers had held hands and advanced all the way to the Edge. Julius clung to his big

brother's leg when he felt the ground slipping out from under his feet.

Alex had looked down at his younger brother and said, "One day, I'm going over the Edge. You'll read about it in the papers. I'll be famous."

His brother had become famous alright. But it wasn't for going over the edge of the Curl.

"Hurry up or we won't make it," cried Felix as he raced for the Edge.

"Make what?" called Julius as he rushed to catch up with his friend. Julius could see that Felix's snoot had turned a bright red, a sign that he was very excited. Felix came to a sudden halt and Julius ran up beside him and searched his friend's eyes for a clue about why they were here. In Felix's eyes he saw not only excitement, but fear.

What are we about to do?

Felix reached down to the battered tracer around his neck and checked to make sure a fresh sheet of the transparent paper had been rolled into place. Satisfied, he extended his long legs and flexed his hairy toes. One of Felix's nicknames at school had been 'Flex" because of the way he could use those long digits. He was one of the few handlings who was able to climb walls using only his feet. In fact, Felix was so prodigious with those hairy feet that he could write his name, brush his teeth and even eat using just his toes.

Felix looked down and tapped his wristwatch. Although handlings do not have automobiles or television sets or the other gadgets prized by their Hosts, they did have many of the same rudimentary machines like watches. This one was an old spring wound relic that had been given to him by his father. He had dunked it so many times in the soda tanks or while diving into the sweat mines that it rarely kept accurate time. Felix shook his wrist and then held the watch to his ear to make sure the sticky thing was still running. Satisfied, he pointed to the face of the watch, which was gummed up with the syrupy soft drink and smiled.

"Five minutes. Are you ready?" he asked.

"Ready for what?" replied Julius, beginning to get a little alarmed.

Felix laughed and then blew a high note through his snoot

as if trying to get everyone's attention. This puzzled Julius because there was no one else around. He and Felix were the only handlings anywhere near the Curl.

But the lack of an audience didn't bother Felix. He looked around and shouted loudly out to the deserted Curl.

"Today, my friend Julius and I will make history. Today, we become Space Jumpers."

## CHAPTER 6

Julius's head snapped around in alarm.

"We become what?"

Felix put his long arm around his friend and pulled him close.

"You always said you wanted to do something really crazy when you graduated," said Felix.

Julius pulled away and stumbled back, almost falling.

"I meant like shave our heads or gets a snoot piercing. Not a Space Jump! Are you insane?" exclaimed Julius.

Felix stepped over to Julius and extended the wrist with the watch.

"I've been timing this Meet every morning for weeks."

"With a watch that doesn't work most of the time," said Julius pointing down at the grimy dial.

"I'm telling you, Julius, it's a sure thing. All we have to do is jump from one ridge to another and then back again. Nothing to it!"

Felix punctuated his claim by slapping Julius on the back hard enough to knock him off his feet.

Julius lay on the ground for a moment and thought about all the crazy things Felix had tried to get him to do over the years. He had once suggested that they crawl down in the city sewer and ride a homemade raft all the way down to the Veldt. And once, during the boredom of their holiday break from school, Felix had tried to talk Julius into roping a wild deer tick and riding it, uninvited, in the village's annual Host Days, the national holidays when handlings celebrate the generosity of the Benevolent Host who gives them life.

As he lay there, Julius thought about all the stupid things

Felix had tried to talk him into. And he got angry!

He jumped off the ground and screamed at Felix.

"Are you insane? No one has ever made a Space Jump and lived to tell about it. We don't even know if it's possible!"

"Sure it is," Felix chuckled. "What's the big deal? I sat right here in this very spot yesterday morning and at nine on the dot," he paused to tap his sticky watch, "there was a Meet so close I could have thumped a Leftlander right on the snoot if I wanted to."

Felix raised his hands over his head and pretended to 'thump' one of their dreaded enemies who lived on the other hand. Julius doubted if Felix had ever even seen a Leftlander close enough to tell his snoot from his foot.

"Imagine what kind of heroes we'd be if we actually made a Jump and could prove it. Just think what your Dad would say," said Felix.

Julius drew in a sharp breath and was about to unleash a stream of reasons why attempting a Space Jump was a very bad idea when Felix's words caused him to clamp his mouth shut. It was no secret that Julius' father had doubts about his son's manhood. Julius had never excelled in sports at school and didn't show any interest in joining the Junior War Brigade as a child. Even after pulling strings to get Julius considered for placement in the elite Spy Brigade, even though he had no previous military experience, Krandall Rightling was beginning to wonder what was wrong with his son. Maybe doing a Jump would show his father that Julius was brave and manly.

"How do you think you'd prove it?" Julius waved his arm around the Curl. "We're the only ones up here. Who'd see it?"

"Nobody has to see it when we have drawings of Leftland," Felix replied with a satisfied grin.

Felix reached down and held up the cracked tracer. Its bright red paint, which had once sparkled in the light, was chipped and dented, but the drawing tool was still very functional, if not beautiful. Julius doubted that anyone would believe they had been to Leftland just because they had a drawing of the place on a tracer. With the proper skill, anything could be forged on the drawing device.

Felix's mother had proved that fact. While his father worked at the pop plant, Felix's mother supplemented their family's income as a tracer artist. She had 'drawn' many famous portraits of the Elders and other famous people in Rightland, many of which hung framed in the Hall of Elders located in the center of the Whorl. She was renowned for her ability to alter the drawings to make her subjects look more handsome, thinner or even younger than they really were. Her tracer was large and new and worth more than most handlings earned in a year. She might be able to forge a drawing of the two of them jumping over to Leftland, but Julius doubted that Felix had inherited that skill.

"You're not your mom," said Julius as he reached out and touched the scarred surface of the tracer. Because handlings had to build all of their tools and machinery from pieces of metal shavings and scrap found lodged in their Host's skin, anything made of metal was quite valuable, even if it wasn't very attractive.

"Don't have to be. I can draw well enough on this thing to make us famous," said Felix. He rubbed the tracer lightly as if the thing were about to perform some miracle on its own. If they were able to document the world's only verifiable Space Jump, the old battered tracer would be a priceless artifact. Felix wouldn't be surprised if it was given a prominent place in the collection of artwork on display in the Hall of Elders.

Felix dropped the tracer and it bounced off his chest as if the thing was eager to go to work. Then he walked a little closer to the edge of the Curl. As Julius watched, he realized that his anger had now turned to cold fear. Felix wasn't kidding. He really expected them to jump.

Felix glanced at his watch nervously and then up at the opaque sky as if expecting the left hand to appear at any second. He waved for Julius to come stand beside him.

"Here's how we're going to do it. The Meet comes pretty quickly. When Leftland gets close enough, you just jump up and grab on to the edge of a ridge," explained Felix. He was using his arms and hands to demonstrate the jumping and grabbing motion to Julius, who noticed that his friend's snout had turned bright red again. Julius was sure his own snout had turned scarlet as well, from fear more than

excitement.

"But whatever you do, don't jump too early or too late," said Felix with a little quiver in his voice. Julius smiled a little realizing that his friend was just as scared as he was.

"Why? What will happen?"

"If you jump too early, you could be crushed if the ridges from both hands line up just right. And if you wait too long to jump... well..."

Felix pointed to the empty horizon over the edge of the Curl and whistled. Julius knew what that meant. If you waited to jump too late, the hand could pull away and you'd have nothing to grasp. And that meant you'd fall off the Curl, off the hand and off the Host. Into the Darkness. Nothing was more terrifying to a handling than somehow getting separated from the Benevolent Host. If the drop didn't kill you, then whatever lived in the strange world beyond the Host's body certainly would.

Felix saw Julius looking squeamishly over the Edge and slapped him on the back. Julius scrambled back away from the abyss and Felix laughed.

"Don't worry. I've practiced this hundreds of times. It'll be easy," said Felix. As he said the word 'easy', Felix reached up and unconsciously scratched at his snoot furiously. It was a habit that Julius had noticed his friend always seemed to do right before embarking on some crazy stunt.

There was a moment of silence as the boys looked at each other. They both knew that this little stunt was much more dangerous than anything they had ever done before, including the time they bungeed into the sweat mine. There was a good chance that things could go bad real fast. But if they did somehow pull it off, they would be the most famous handlings in all of Rightland.

Felix touched the tracer around his neck.

"I'll jump first and then capture the moment as you jump," he said, patting the tracer. "Remember, wait until the hands start to pull away and then jump. Hard."

Felix turned away from Julius and planted his feet far apart, ready to spring upward. The prospects for fame and glory were beginning to give way to reality and Julius

wasn't so sure if he wanted to go through with this after all. He turned to tell his friend he couldn't do it when the air around them suddenly began to darken. Julius could feel the hair on the back of neck tingle.

"Here it comes," yelled Felix.

Felix was right. It's was nine o'clock.

The Meet was right on time.

## CHAPTER 7

"Ready?" yelled Felix.

"Always," Julius lied. He smiled weakly and suddenly felt sick to his stomach.

The approaching hand made a loud swooshing noise at it barreled towards him. The wind swirled around the two boys and a piece of litter blew into Julius' eye. He pulled the debris from his face and looked over at Felix who was crouched down in anticipation of making the jump from the right to the left hand. Suddenly a thought occurred to Julius.

How were they going to get back?

If they did make the Jump successfully, how long would they have to wait to come back? Felix had said the Meet happened almost every day. Almost. What if they had to spend an entire day or even weeks in Leftland hiding from creatures who would like nothing more than to cut off their snoots and use it to make soup? This was another one of those stories that had been passed down from generation to generation. Leftlanders loved the taste of Rightland flesh. Julius had no idea if this was true but he did not want to find out.

Julius opened his mouth to ask his friend about the trip back but the words were torn away by a sudden gust of wind.

Felix's snoot was now a bright crimson red and seemed to pulsate with excitement. He was actually enjoying this. The wind. The noise. The danger. It's what Felix lived for and Julius realized with absolute clarity that this was the stunt that would kill them. Julius reached out to grab Felix's arm and hold him back when the hairs on his head and neck rose like magic.

Julius had heard of this phenomenon but had never actually experienced it until now. The static electricity caused by the two hands coming together made his whole body tingle and the sensation felt so good that he stopped for just a moment to savor it. Over the next several weeks, Julius would play the moment over and over in his head and wonder if that brief instant of selfishness is what had cost Felix his life.

Because at that precise moment, Felix squatted low to the ground and yelled, "Here we go!"

The two opposing fingers never actually touched, but before they snapped away from each other, Julius glanced up and clearly saw what looked like another handling boy crouching at the base of a ridge trembling. Was this one of the loathsome Leftlanders who raided their villages, stole their skeen, burned their fields and killed their cattle? It couldn't be. The boy looked just like him. He didn't have claws or fangs. His eyes didn't burn red with hatred. It was just a little kid crouching at the bottom of the ridge eating what looked like a jelly sandwich.

Julius was snapped out of his fascination with the young boy by movement from the corner of his eye. He looked over and watched in horror as Felix began to leap upward. Felix was very tall for a teenaged handling, nearly as tall as Julius' famous father. He stretched out his skinny arms and pumped his long legs upward. What happened next seemed to occur in slow motion like one of those old-fashioned flip movies the two had sometimes watched as kids.

Felix's hands grasped the descending ridge. Julius felt a wave of relief. Maybe his premonition was wrong.

But then, the left hand made a little twitch and pulled back quickly from the Curl. Felix held on tightly to the ridge, but the sudden movement was too much for his skinny arms. They were snapped away and for a moment, Felix seemed to hang in the air between the two hands. The little boy who had climbed so nimbly up a tower of rickety blocks during the Great Preschool Tower Leap all those years ago had finally met his match. There was nothing here to grab. Felix began to fall.

At first, Felix didn't seem to realize what was about to happen. He smiled a crooked grin as he floated in the

growing space between the two hands. But his smile quickly faded as gravity took over and he started to tip backwards into the darkness. Julius watched in horror as Felix mouthed the word "Help!" and then began to tumble over the horizon. Julius put away all his fear of the Edge and raced forward. He reached out and attempted to grab Felix but only managed to wrap his fingers around the cord holding the battered red tracer. It snapped with a loud crack and Felix was gone.

Julius looked into the void and then down at the small red object in his hands.

Through the haze of his tears, the delicate instrument looked like blood.

## CHAPTER 8

Now Julius' eyes began to fill tears once again as he looked down at the starved young boy lying on the ground before him.

Julius had been to the Edge. He had watched his friend attempt a Space Jump. He knew that it was impossible. This scrawny kid barely had enough energy to stand on his own, much less leap across the space between the two hands as they pulled away and gravity sucked at his thin body.

Julius was suddenly aware of the tears in his eyes and reached up with his right hand to wipe them away before his father saw. He had forgotten that this was the hand which held the Justice Blade and he promptly hit himself in the forehead with the ant skin haft. Several handlings in the crowd laughed at his clumsiness. Krandall pivoted around, the leather jacket with the Spy Brigade insignia on the back crinkling loudly, and shot a rebuking glance at those in the crowd who were taking this matter lightly. They quieted immediately. Krandall then turned back to his son, now impatient and irritated at Julius's hesitation.

"Julius, teach this traitor a lesson," Krandall bellowed in a voice meant to be heard by every ear in the gathered crowd.

There were shouts of encouragement from the onlookers. One obese woman in front spat a green wad of chunky mucus that

just missed the boy's dirty face. The crowd could see the skinny young boy lying on the ground and most instinctively knew Julius' doubts about the lad were true. But this was the Commander of the Spy Brigade. Not some flunky who wore the insignia on his back for a paycheck. The Commander. And if Krandall said the boy was a spy, certainly he was a spy.

Julius turned away from the boy's dirty face and looked up at his father. What he saw unsaid in Krandall's dark eyes was, *"you're embarrassing me."*

Julius had come from untold generations of Rightlings who had been military men. His grandfather, Xavier Rightling, had fought in the Great Palm War of '73 and had lost his left hand to a Leftlander's sharp sword. But that hadn't kept Xavier from leading the charge as the Army of the Right chased the invaders all the way to the Bow (that's what handling's called the deep valley on the inside of Gerald's elbows) and slaughtering every single one of them in that deep, dark place. When Julius was a small boy, his grandfather used to sit him on his lap and tell stories of the great battle and even allowed Julius to touch the thick scar at the end of his stump where his hand had once been.

Xavier's father was a soldier as was his father before him. The Rightling men had always gone to war and now that Julius had finished his schooling, he was expected to take up the sword and join the 'family business' as his father called it.

That's what this was all about: forcing Julius to decide what he was going to do and decide now. Krandall did not want to wait on his indecisive son another day. Today, Julius would choose. And when he did, there would be no turning back.

Julius wouldn't be surprised if his father had picked this kid out of the crowd just for the purpose of forcing him to abandon his innocence and swing the sword for the first time. Was Krandall so desperate for his son to step into that long stream of blood that had pooled around the feet of the Rightling men that he was willing to sacrifice an innocent child?

One look into the dark eyes of his father and Julius knew the answer. Yes.

Whether this boy was really a jumper or had just been

caught stealing a loaf of skeep from a vendor's cart in the city's marketplace, it didn't matter. He had a role to play in this sick play just like Julius. The child was to be sacrificed for the glory of Rightland. His father knew Julius would be coming to the Whorl to fetch him for lunch and he had been waiting, probably in a dark alley somewhere, waiting for the exact moment to fling the small boy into the street and accuse him of high crimes against Rightland.

Julius looked back down at the poor boy lying in the street. The wretched child had begun to cry and the tears were flowing like a weak river through the grime and dirt on his cheeks. The boy was nothing more than a beggar, one of the many young orphans who were abandoned on the streets of Rightland when their parents could no longer afford to feed them. Julius knew that these young, emaciated boys were prime targets for the Spy Brigade. Nobody cared what happened to the lost boys. No one would come to claim the body. Slaughtering a few each month helped to build fear among the people of Rightland and keep men like his father in power.

Looking at the boy weeping at his feet, something suddenly clicked inside Julius's mind and he knew his family's legacy would end here. The river of blood that had followed the Rightling men through the ages had finally found soft ground and would soak into the ground around his feet, never to flow again.

Julius looked up at the famous sword in his hands and sighed. And then he slowly began to lower the blade to the ground. When the tip of the sword touched the space between his feet, Julius looked at his father and said, "I can't do it."

## CHAPTER 9

There was a gasp from the crowd. Then the handlings all began to talk at once. Someone in the back yelled, "Are you sure that's Krandall's son?"

"Yes, this is my son," bellowed Krandall Rightling and the crowd quieted, but not as quickly as before.

He took a step towards Julius and spoke so that the mob could hear his words. This was the voice of the warrior they

feared. The warrior they loved.

"This is my son and this is the day that he becomes a man!"

The crowd broke into a cheer. Innocent or not, they wanted to see blood.

An old man who had been watching the scene from deep in the crowd pushed his way forward. There was a short row of medals pinned to the lapel of his threadbare coat. The old soldier didn't say a word. Instead, he saluted Julius with a bony hand and stepped back into the sea of faces. For a brief moment, Julius felt a strong urge to run after the old man and ask him exactly why he hated Leftlanders so much. He doubted the toothless old soldier could have answered.

Julius had asked his grandfather, the hero of the Great Palm War, that same question while rubbing the stump of the missing limb.

Xavier Rightling had thought about it for a moment and then replied, "We just do. Always have."

Julius wondered if the old soldier had been planted in the crowd by his father. Maybe the kid was the old man's grandson and he was actually saluting the young boy's bravery in the sacrifice of his life. But for what purpose? Just to continue to perpetuate a lie? Julius didn't have time to pursue this twisted path of thinking for very long because his father grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him close. Krandall whispered in his ear with a voice that was raw with anger.

"Pick it up."

The sword had fallen silently to the ground when the crowd had been cheering and Julius hadn't even realized that he had lost his grip.

"Pick it up now!"

His father's voice sounded like a box of broken glass being dropped to the ground. Every syllable cut a hole through Julius' head.

"No," Julius answered in a voice so soft, he barely heard it himself.

"What did you say?" Krandall asked and for a moment Julius had a vision that if he said no again that his father would reach down, pick up the blade and kill both him and the pitiful child. That would drive the crowd crazy. Two killings for the price of one!

Julius looked into the crowd for the old man. Certainly the old soldier would understand that all the years of slaughtering people who looked exactly like they did was senseless. Certainly the old man would see the desperation in Julius' eyes, step forward and tell Krandall that killing people just because they happened to be born on the left hand was insane. But the old soldier had disappeared. He had wandered away, probably to go home and polish his war medals.

Julius knew that if he refused to carry out his father's demand, he would be banished from the family. Maybe not told to physically leave their home, but banished nonetheless. He would be like a ghost in his own home, ignored and forgotten.

The next words from Julius' mouth would determine the course of the rest of his life.

He turned towards his father, opened his mouth and was about to speak the word that would forever cleave him from the Rightling family tree. But before this horrible syllable could escape his lips, a sudden shadow began to creep across the crowd. The same kind of shadow he had seen on the day Felix had died.

It was a Meet!

## CHAPTER 10

"Find cover," screamed Krandall Rightling.

There was a terrible wail as the crowd scattered. Even though handlings were used to several chance meetings of the hands each day, the event still sent them into a frantic scramble to find a hiding place when they occurred. Because of this, most Rightlanders had never seen a Leftlander face to face. Their view of the people that inhabited the opposite hand was shaped entirely from the propaganda posted on virtually every public building and wall in Rightland. Leftlanders were monsters, or at least that was how they were portrayed by the hundreds, if not thousands, of posters, billboards and flyers that were plastered everywhere. Every young handling could recite the Three Laws of Right.

- #1 *Rightlanders are good.*
- #2 *Leftlanders are evil.*
- #3 *All Leftlanders must die.*

As Julius watched the crowd disperse, he remembered how he had been taught to recite the Three Laws of Right as a child in preschool. He and Felix had just finished a contest to see which one could eat the most glue (Felix won after Julius threw up) when their teacher, Miss Rightning stepped to the front of the class and clapped her shapely young hands together to get everyone's attention. Julius was secretly in love with Miss Rightning so as soon as she began to speak, he wiped the vomit from his chin, ignored Felix and gave his full attention to her.

Miss Rightning was not married and Julius had spent many hours daydreaming in class about running away secretly with her and settling in some remote village down on the Palm where their odd paring wouldn't be questioned. Now, she opened her pretty mouth and sweetly told the class that it was time to learn a new song.

"It's called the Three Laws of Right and it's what has kept our people alive through generations of unprovoked attacks from our enemies," said the pretty Miss Rightning.

Julius had looked over at Felix and asked, "What's an enemy?"

Felix licked the paste from his lips and said, "I don't know, but I bet I can eat more of them than you!"

Miss Rightning had made the class stand up and clap their hands while singing the simple tune that turned the Three Laws of Right into a catchy song. From that day on, the children had started and ended each day of preschool by singing the song. It was the mantra that every handling, young and old, lived by.

As Julius watched the gathering shadow darken the Whorl, the childhood song played over and over in his head. Only, it wasn't his voice he heard. It was his dead friend, Felix. The Three Laws of Right hadn't saved him from anything. Right or wrong, good or evil, Felix was still dead.

Krandall Rightling suddenly reached down and grabbed the Justice Blade from beneath Julius' feet. He waved it wildly

over his head as he continued to yell at the crowd to flee. In the mayhem that followed, Krandall seemed to forget all about Julius and his young hostage. After screaming a few more commands at the fleeing crowd Krandall turned and raced up the street towards the police headquarters. The few people who were left in the Whorl saw his approach and ran from the street screaming. Julius wondered if they weren't more afraid of his father than the horrible hordes of Leftlanders that were about to descend on their heads.

As Julius watched his father cut a wide swath through the crowd waving the terrible blade in the air, he felt a faint tug at the cuff of this left pants leg. He looked down and saw the terrified face of the young boy looking up at him.

"Are you going to kill me now?" squeaked the frightened youngster.

His voice was high pitched and wheezy like it was a struggle for him to gather enough air in his lungs to speak. Julius felt pity for the boy and knelt down in front of him. The boy recoiled in terror.

"Don't be afraid. I'm not going to hurt you," said Julius.

The young boy relaxed only slightly and began to cry again. This time he sobbed with relief.

"What's your name?" asked Julius.

"Ollie." wheezed the boy as he reached up and wiped his filthy nose with the back of an equally filthy hand.

"Where are you from, Ollie?" asked Julius.

"Nowheres."

The word hung there between them and Julius thought that it was the saddest sound he had ever heard. Julius lacked for nothing. He had parents that took care of him, even if they wanted him to grow up to be a killer. There was plenty of food and clothing, a warm place to sleep at night. This pitiful boy had nothing.

"Used ta' live with 'dis other boy in a place out on da' Out'r Rings. Didn't like it much. So I run away. I'm not no Lefty. I promise!"

"So why did my father arrest you?" asked Julius.

"Don't know. Saw a piece of skeen just lyin' on the sidewalk. Was covered with dirt and stuff and I thought who dropped it surely wouldn't want it back, so'd be 'kay for me to jus' pick it up and eat it. I'm real hungry. It wan't

really stealing," said Ollie.

Julius had been right. The young boy was a beggar. He wasn't a spy or a secret agent of the Left. He was hungry, dirty and illiterate. And Julius had almost killed him.

"I tell you what, Ollie. How about if I give you some money and you go and get some real food?" asked Julius, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a couple of the small wooden coins that handlings used for money. The wood that handlings dug from the skin of the Benevolent Host was a very valuable commodity. Any discoveries were claimed as communal property by the Council who either sold the wood back to their citizens at great profit or carved it into money.

Ollie eyed the coins and Julius could see the hunger in the boy's eyes. Not just for food but for a life where people treated him like more than just an animal. That look almost made Julius start crying again so he reached into his pocket and pulled out several more coins, all the money he had. The coins made a small pile in the young boy's hands.

"This is mine?" wheezed Ollie, unbelieving.

"Yes."

"You not gonna' have me 'rested when I get up and walk away?" said Ollie, looking around to see if that mean man with the black sword was watching from a distance.

"No, Ollie. I'm not going to have you arrested," replied Julius. "Just take it and go."

The young boy got clumsily to his feet and almost left his soiled trousers behind as they slid down his slender hips. He clutched the money with one bony hand and used the other to pull up his trousers as he scurried away. Curiously, he stopped when he was out of Julius' reach, looked up at the darkening sky and then at Julius.

"Ain't ya' scared?"

Julius looked up at the descending finger that was now coming into view and said, "No, Ollie. Not anymore."

## CHAPTER 11

Time as humans know it is very different for handlings. Just as large objects are more greatly affected by gravity;

small objects like handlings perceive time completely different than their human hosts. A human year equates to roughly seven years to a handling. During the life of their Host, many generations of handlings can call a body home before migrating to another human.

Some handlings have crude watches which are constructed from springs and discs they make with the metal found embedded in the Host's skin. But to most handlings, time is fluid and doesn't tick off in seconds but is measured more by events in their lives. That's why although this particular Meet was only a few seconds long in Gerald's world, to Julius, it felt like a lifetime.

There are two different types of Meets that are experienced by handlings. The most common is what is called an Outer Meet. This occurs when the ridges of the fingers rest atop each other. In this type of Meet, one can look up and see the surface of the other hand far above their head. In order to pass over to the other hand, one must jump this space, hence the term Space Jump. The practice had been officially outlawed by the Council of Elders, but many handlings had claimed that they had successfully jumped from one hand to the other. Julius imagined that most of them were lying.

The other type is called an Inner Meet. This is a rare and dangerous event for handlings. During an "Innie" as handlings call them, the ridges of the fingerprints interlock with each other. The ridge of the fingerprint on one hand slips into the valley of the fingerprint on the other making it possible for a handling from one hand to simply step over to the other hand, although Julius had never heard of someone actually doing it. Fear of the enemy far outweighed the convenience. Experiencing an Innie is one of the moments that define a handling's life because for just a brief and terrifying few moments, it's as if the two warring territories are united into one.

In all of his seventeen years, Julius had never witnessed an Inner Meet. But as he looked up at the approaching left hand, he realized that this Meet would be extraordinary. The two worlds that hated each other so fiercely were about to become one.

As Julius watched in amazement, the air around him seemed

to grow thick as the two atmospheres were compressed by the interlocking fingers. All movement and wind suddenly stopped and Julius realized that he was the only person in the street. There must have been hundreds of handlings in the street just a few moments before the Meet. But now, Julius was alone.

Although the fingerprints were interlocked tightly, the ridge protruding down into the street from the other hand didn't seem to cause much damage. Julius noticed a couple of vendor carts, the ones that sold hot loaves of skeen or the syrupy Sweet Sweat to the busy commuters, were knocked over on their sides. But other than that minor damage, the only effect the Innie seemed to have on the Whorl was to place an artificial ceiling above the street.

Julius was amazed at how calm he felt. Maybe he was in shock at almost being forced to kill an innocent child. Maybe seeing the alien world hovering above him had sent his mind to a place that was beyond fear. Whatever the reason, Julius felt a strange peace as he stood on the street, alone.

Julius walked over so he could take a closer look at the ridge from Leftland that was now hanging upside down in his village. He had expected it to show some sign of the corruption that he was being constantly feed about the enemy's homeland. But instead, it looked exactly like the walls of Rightland. Julius, like all young handlings, had been taught since childhood that Leftland was nothing but a wasteland. He had been shown pictures of the awful cities on the left hand. In the drawings, which had reportedly been created by spies who had infiltrated the enemy territory, the streets of Leftland were piled with rotting garbage. The flesh, which was so pink and tender underneath the feet of Rightlanders, was green in Leftland, swollen and oozing with putrid pus. Leftland was a vile place filled with horrible beings who all shared one common goal: the death of all Rightlanders.

But as Julius examined the bare wall of the ridge, he saw none of these things. No sores or oozing wounds. No garbage or green, rotting flesh. It looked exactly like the walls of his city. He leaned cautiously forward and sniffed the wall for signs of decay. But just as he was about to

inhale the aroma of the surface, Julius caught a movement out of the corner of his eye.

Handlings have very small eyes and terrible eyesight. Because of the small world in which they live, having the ability to see distant objects clearly is not very important to handlings. Being able to focus on the world that their Benevolent Host inhabits would be more than handling brains could fathom. So, when Julius looked away from the wall and squinted, he saw a shadowy figure walking towards him down the center of the abandoned street. Julius' first thought was that it was his father returning to force Julius to kill the vagabond boy. But the figure was too small and walked in a way that showed no terror at being exposed during the meeting of the two hands. Julius knew that this could mean only one thing. The approaching handling was a Leftlander.

Since birth Julius had been taught that Leftlanders were to be killed on sight. Even beautiful Miss Rightner had said so, even though the command always seemed strange coming from her beautiful mouth. Julius had pledged to do so if he ever met a Leftlander face to face. But now, standing in the deserted street and watching what he knew must be a visitor from the other hand approaching him, Julius knew he could not kill this stranger any more than he could have killed Ollie. So, instead of searching for a weapon in which to kill his enemy or hiding like all of the other cowards, Julius raised his right hand, waved a quick hello and started walking to meet the approaching figure.

As the gap between the two narrowed, Julius could see that it was a girl. In fact, the closer he got to her, Julius realized it was a very pretty girl.

She appeared to be about Julius' age with long, slender legs and a delicate, pink snoot protruding from a mass of blond curls covering the crown of her head. The girl was dressed in a green shirt with a design on the front Julius had never seen before. It looked like a flower or maybe a tree branch above some blurry writing. As Julius got even closer, he realized that it wasn't a flower on her shirt, but rather a fist. A fist raised in anger with large white letters underneath that read "Fight for Peace!" Julius was so taken aback by the message on the girl's shirt that he abruptly stopped and reconsidered whether it would be wise

to get any closer. Was this shirt indicative of the type of propaganda that was distributed in Leftland? Was it a call to peace or war? At least seeing it confirmed what Julius' already knew. This girl was a Leftlander. No one would dare wear such a slogan in Rightland.

This strange girl had apparently stepped over from the other hand during the Innie and was now approaching him with what was certainly a dark purpose. Maybe she had a bomb hidden in her snoot, or a weapon behind her back, Julius thought. Maybe she was just waiting to get close enough to Julius to pull out a long sword like the Justice Blade and slice off Julius' snoot. Leftlanders were constantly sending terrorists to his country and this could be one of them.

Julius's mind whirled at all the malicious possibilities and he began to back-peddle away from the girl. Then he realized that making such suppositions about the girl were exactly what men like his father and the Elders wanted. Distrust was a cancer that he didn't want to catch, so Julius stopped his retreat and held his ground, ready to bolt at the first sign that all those propaganda posters were correct after all.

The girl smiled at him and lifted a delicate hand to wave. Was that a knife in her left hand? In his haste and the sudden certainty that he was about to be assassinated, Julius stumbled and fell on his back. The girl was approaching quickly and there was no way that Julius would be able to regain his feet and escape in time.

This is it, thought Julius. I'm going to be killed on the street by a Leftlandic terrorist. My only consolation is that there is no one here to see that it was done by a girl.

Julius covered his face with hands and prepared for the death blow. The sharp clap of the girl's feet got louder and then stopped. Julius waited to hear the sound of the blade slashing the air above his head. But there was only silence. He had expected the girl to scream out in victory at having captured and dispatched a Rightlander so easily. But there was nothing. The silence stretched on for what seemed to be an eternity. Julius slowly opened his fingers and peered at the girl through the gaps. Finally, the deafening stillness was broken.

The girl opened her pretty mouth and spoke.

"Hi, my name is Amatheia."

## CHAPTER 12

Julius was mesmerized by her voice. It sounded nothing like the kind of shrill, horrible noises that young handlings were taught came from the mouths of their mortal enemies.

Once, while in the second grade, a large, angry man had spoken to Julius' class about how to detect Leftlander spies living among them. Aside from the putrid smell that came from the sores covering their bodies, the ragged, blood-soaked clothes that they wore or the fangs protruding from their mouths (as if that wasn't enough to scare young handlings), the man described the monstrous voices that came from Leftlander's mouths. He then proceeded to reach up, pinch off his snoot and let out the most horrible sound that Julius had ever heard. Several of his classmates started to cry. One young boy name Sid actually crawled under his desk and began sucking his thumb after hearing the horrible wail.

Felix, on the other hand, thought it was 'cool' and spent the rest of the day closing off his own snoot and trying to imitate the vile trumpeting. After he refused to stop, their teacher sent Felix to the office where his parents were called and he was promptly dragged from the school, still attempting to replicate the sound while his mother beat him repeatedly with her purse.

How could this sweet voice belong to that of a Leftlander? It was so musical and lithe that Julius wanted to squeeze his eyes shut again and just listen to her talk forever. Or maybe sing. Yes, that would be heaven, Julius thought. Lying on the ground for all eternity and listening to this beautiful girl sing his name over and over again.

"I said my name is Amatheia," warbled the girl. "What's yours?"

Julius moved his hands away and looked up at the lovely creature standing over him, smiling. Not only did the girl have that alluring voice but the largest, most beautiful blue eyes he had ever seen. Certainly, she could not be a Leftlander. None of those vile creatures could possibly have

eyes like that.

Amathea bent down close to Julius' face. She smelled of some sweet perfume. Lilac maybe.

"I said, what's your name? Are you deaf?"

Julius blinked his eyes a couple of times to make sure he wasn't dreaming all of this, and then slowly got to his feet.

"Julius," he said. "My name's Julius."

Amathea struck her hand forward and presented it, palm up to Julius. He noticed the delicate hairs on the palm of her slender hand, white and wispy. He reached forward to take that lovely hand in his and then withdrew it quickly. One of the things that the angry man in second grade had said was that Leftlanders excrete a horrible acid from their hands that can melt away your fingers in seconds. Maybe those small white hairs were really microscopic hypodermic needles that would inject the acid or poison into him, causing a slow and painful death.

"Don't worry, I won't bite," said Amathea, thrusting her hand even closer to Julius.

Julius studied the deadly weapon once again and then slowly extended his own hand. Half expecting to feel the fire of acid burn into his flesh upon contact, he was visibly relieved when his hand was enveloped in her soft, warm skin.

Julius had been wrong. Heaven was not hearing this creature sing for all eternity. Heaven was being touched by her.

"Are you from.... from..." stuttered Julius.

"From Leftland?" answered Amathea. "Yes, I am."

"You don't look like..." stammered Julius.

"Like what? A monster?" Amathea giggled at the idea and Julius' heart leapt at the sound.

"No. I mean, you look just like me," said Julius.

Amathea released Julius' hand and took a step back so that she could look him over, mockingly. Julius let out an audible sigh of disappointment at the release of his hand.

"You mean you're a girl?" teased Amathea.

Julius, suddenly embarrassed, stammered again. "No! What I meant was, you look just like a... a regular handling."

"I am a 'regular' handling, although my father says I'm special," replied Amathea with a twinkle in her eye. "He

says that the day I was born, the sky opened up and an angel dropped from the heavens."

She pointed at herself and said, "That's me, the angel."

Amathea laughed loudly at her own joke and Julius felt his knees buckle with joy at the sound. How could such a beautiful creature come from such a vile place as Leftland?

"Would an angel wear that kind of shirt?" Julius asked, pointing to her tee-shirt. He regretted the words the moment they escaped from his mouth.

"Like it? I made it for my school art contest," said Amathea as she pulled the shirt away from her chest and looked down on it. "The theme for the contest was 'Protest Art' and I won first place. My teacher said that it showed a very mature use of paradoxical satire. What do you think that means?"

Julius didn't know, but hearing her use such long words made Julius realize this girl wasn't just pretty. She was smart.

"What does 'Fight for Peace' mean?" asked Julius. He wasn't really interested in the answer. He just wanted the girl to continue bathing him with her sweet voice.

"Well, there are still handlings in Leftland who don't want peace, even though we stopped fighting years ago before I was even born. They're mainly old-timers who wish we hadn't disbanded the Army. They have this twisted idea that war is somehow good for us. Isn't that silly?"

"Peace?" said Julius confused. Leftland was at peace with Rightland? They had no army? That was not true.

"Yes," Amathea answered. "You think our two countries are still at war?"

Julius did not know how to answer. There were rumors of battles with Leftland all the time, but no one he knew had ever even seen the enemy. If they did exist, they stayed far away from Rightland and only sent their covert spies. Julius remembered the gaunt face of the poor boy that would have been killed if not for the Meet. That was the enemy now. The innocent. But if Leftland was no longer interested in war, had any of the so-called spies who his father and the other members of the Spy Brigade slaughtered in the last few years truly been criminals? Or were they all just killed to keep the people afraid?

What the girl was saying did make sense.

When Julius didn't answer, Amatheia continued.

"My shirt means that peace is worth fighting for. Not with swords. With words."

As Amatheia spoke, Julius saw a fire of conviction in her eyes that he had rarely seen among his classmates. They swallowed all the propaganda that was fed to them, never questioning those who served it.

"So, you're saying that you don't believe I'm your mortal enemy?" Julius asked, not expecting such intellectual talk after just meeting this girl.

"My mortal enemy?" Amatheia repeated, then smiled. After a pause, she added, "Well, are you?"

"No," said Julius. Maybe there were vile Leftlanders on the other side of the Meet. Ones that would enjoy gutting him and watching him bleed to death in the street. But, Amatheia was not one of them.

"We were put here to love, not hate," said Amatheia. "I think that is true of both Leftlanders and Rightlanders. All we need is to get to know each other better. So, that's why I'm here."

And with that, Amatheia turned around and announced to the empty street, "I'm here. A real Leftlander! I don't hate you. Come out and see!"

Julius' first impulse was to tackle the girl to the ground. The idea of full body contact with this beautiful creature sent chills up and down his spine. Instead, he leaned toward Amatheia and said in loud whisper, "What are you doing?"

Amatheia turned back to him, smiled and pointed to the message on her shirt.

"I'm fighting," she said with a grin, her ice blue eyes ablaze.

Looking into those eyes, Julius realized that Amatheia was the bravest person he had ever met, braver than his feared father and even his revered grandfather with the stump for an arm.

And it was at this moment that Julius realized he loved her.

## CHAPTER 13

Amathea spread her arms wide, turned back to the center of the Whorl and yelled again, "Come and get me. I'm a Leftlander and I've crossed over to destroy your city. Won't anyone come out and stop me?"

Maybe a taunt would bring the people of this land from hiding.

Julius looked around the Whorl. He saw several pairs of eyes watching the scene from the dark interiors of the homes and businesses that lined the street. But none advanced into the light. Were they afraid of this dangerously beautiful girl or was she right? Maybe the whole thing was a hoax. Maybe the stories of blood thirsty, murderous Leftlanders were no more real than the tales of the boogeyman told to handlings as children.

When no one answered, Amathea turned back to Julius, her face softening.

"You're the only one brave enough to face me. Are you the last warrior in Rightland?" said Amathea, mockingly.

Julius laughed and after a few seconds, Amathea joined him.

"Do I look like a warrior?" Julius said when he got his laughter under control.

"No, but you are very handsome. What is your name?" replied Amathea with a devilish grin.

Julius felt his snoot turn a bright red as he blushed from the compliment.

He said his name softly, wishing that it was more masculine. How had he fallen for this girl so completely and so quickly he asked himself? He had only known her a few moments, but knew that if she asked him, he would follow her anywhere.

"Well, Julius..." The sound of his name coming from her lips made Julius understand why her father had called Amathea an angel.

".. back in Leftland, the boys are afraid of me. They say I am too 'outspoken' and being seen with me would get them in trouble with my father. You're not afraid of me, are you, Julius?"

"No," replied Julius, meekly. He was a little afraid of her touching him again. He thought that if she did, he

might lose his mind.

"Then come back with me," said Amatheia, the words tumbling from her mouth quickly. "Together, we could convince my people, and yours, that there is nothing to be afraid of. All handlings are one. And brothers don't kill brothers."

At the word 'brother', Julius cringed a little. He loved his own brother, but now the thought of Alex, standing proudly in his uniform and swearing to kill as many Lefties as possible made him feel a little ill.

Amatheia saw the brief darkness roll across his face.

"I'm sorry. Did I say something I shouldn't have?"

"No, just old wounds, that's all," said Julius.

"There is no war, Julius," she said, sweeping her arm towards the eyes peering at them from the dark houses.

"They're lying to you. Together, we can create a new world where all handlings live in peace."

Amatheia took a step towards Julius and placed her arms around his neck. Julius felt his body temperature spike at the mere touch of her fingers. Amatheia pulled him closer and whispered, "This is what you've been waiting your whole life for. Can't you feel it? Meeting you in the street today was no coincidence, Julius. We were meant to be together."

And with those words, Amatheia bent slowly towards Julius and kissed him.

It happened so quickly, Julius didn't have time to even kiss her back. But after feeling her soft lips on his, he knew that he would do whatever it took to touch those lips just one more time before he died.

Even if it meant following her back to Leftland.

## CHAPTER 14

Amatheia pulled away and smiled at Julius. Then she turned and walked back down the street. Julius just stood there, shell-shocked. He had never kissed a girl in his life. Oh, he had wanted to. But all of the girls Julius knew thought he was nerdy. He had spent many hours dreaming about what it would be like to feel a girl's lips on his. Namely the lips of the lovely Charletta. But despite all of his attempts to get the raven-haired beauty to go out with him, Charletta

had always said no. She never really gave him a reason. She would just coo 'no' and then huddle with her girlfriends and giggle until Julius walked away, snoot drooping in shame.

But now, Julius was glad he had never kissed Charletta. He was glad that he had saved his first kiss for the only girl he would ever want to kiss again. Amatheia.

Julius watched Amatheia slowly walk down the deserted street, her soft hands dangling behind her. She glanced over at her shoulder and called back to Julius, "You coming?"

Julius realized that she was testing him. He looked down at his feet and knew without a doubt that if he took just one step in her direction, he would be powerless to stop. If he lifted just one of his toes off the hard packed street to follow Amatheia, he would be her slave forever. She knew this. Julius knew this. And he didn't care. In the few seconds that their lips touched, he was hers completely.

Julius lifted his right foot slowly. It hung in the air for a moment as if questioning its master if this was what he really wanted. Satisfied that the answer was yes, the foot took the first step that would lead Julius on a path that would change his destiny. He followed after Amatheia.

When he caught up with her, she reached over with her left hand and grasped his right. At her touch, a deliciously warm sensation radiated up Julius' arm and raced across his body. This was how love felt. Now he understood what all the fuss was about.

Amatheia began telling him about her home in Leftland. She couldn't wait for him to see the beautiful courtyard garden behind her home or taste her country's national dish: skeen rolls dipped in real honey and then baked until the honey turned into a candy coating. She told him about the First City of Leftland, the wide plazas, the parks and how the whole city turned out on Saturday nights and had a big pot-luck supper in the large open area at the center of the Whorl. The more she talked, the more Julius realized that Leftlanders were nothing like he imagined. Their lives were very similar to his. They went to school, enjoyed sports, raised families, lived and died just like Rightlanders. Amatheia's home wasn't a wasteland of bloated corpses and rotting garbage. It sounded even happier than Rightland

where there were never any pot-luck suppers. Such things would be prime targets for Leftland spies who would surely poison the food.

"I can't wait to see the look on my father's face when we walk through the door together," said Amatheia. "He doesn't hate Rightlanders but says that you are a suspicious, nervous people who would never dare visit our homeland."

He's right, thought Julius.

"But when he meets you, he'll see... everyone will see that there is no reason to be afraid of the Right."

Amatheia suddenly stopped and faced Julius. When he looked into her beautiful blue eyes, he realized that he hadn't said a word since she had kissed him. No wonder all the girls thought he was a nerd. He started to open his mouth and agree with her when Amatheia put her arms around him and hugged him tightly. The warm feeling that radiated from their hand holding now burst from his body like a crashing wave. Instead of talking, he just closed his eyes and savored the sensation.

"I knew the instant I saw you standing here all alone that you were the one I've been dreaming about," said Amatheia.

She's been dreaming about me, thought Julius. In the same way I dreamed about Charletta?

Julius blushed and whispered in Amatheia's ear. "You've been dreaming about me?"

"Yes, Julius."

Amatheia reached up and cupped his face in her soft, warm hands. He instantly forgot how to talk.

"Even since I was a little girl, I've had the same dream over and over again. Now I know that the dream was about you, Julius"

Amatheia hurriedly told him how the dream was always the same. She would be walking all alone down a strange, deserted street. It was dark and she was scared that everyone she had ever known was dead. They had to be dead, because someone would have surely run from a house or business to warn her to stop. But no one did. She was the last handling alive. Sometimes the dream ended and she would wake up at this point in the dream. Other times, she walked down the deserted street all night. But several times each year, the dream would be much different. Amatheia would

dream that as she walked down the empty street, she would see a figure in the distance. A young man. Though she couldn't see who it was, Amatheia knew that he was The One. Not just the partner that she would spend her life with, but the one that would bring the two clans together and introduce an age of lasting peace. At this point in the dream, she would start to run down the street towards the man. But no matter how fast she ran, Amatheia could never reach him. She would wake up crying, wondering if she would ever reach her true love.

"And now, I have," said Amatheia.

A small, crystalline tear escaped the corner of her eye and slowly snaked down her cheek. Julius wanted to reach out and grasp the tear and try to save it somehow. He knew that single tear had the power to heal all that was wrong with their worlds, but he was too late. The tear grew smaller and smaller as it travelled down her smooth cheek until it evaporated to nothing.

"Don't you see, Julius? You're him. The one who will change everything," said Amatheia.

"Me?" squeaked Julius. He didn't feel like much of a hero. All he could feel was the warm band of gooseflesh where her arms had surrounded him.

"Yes, you. The dream was about you, Julius," she said, a bittersweet smile forming on her lips. "This time, I didn't wake up."

With that, Amatheia leaned forward and kissed Julius again. And this time, Julius kissed her back.

## CHAPTER 15

Julius forgot about everything during that kiss: his family, his friends, choosing a career.

Everything.

All that mattered to him now was following Amatheia back to Leftland. He didn't care if she was lying and her homeland was a wasteland crawling with monsters. He didn't care if he was The One (whatever that meant) or not. He knew that her repetitive dream probably wasn't about him. But that didn't matter. He would gladly follow Amatheia, even if it meant

living in a house of rotting flesh. Or as an imposter.

Amathea had suddenly become his whole world. Julius had not shared her premonitions in his dreams but knew, just knew that they had been destined for each other.

"We have to hurry," said Amathea as she broke their embrace and sprinted up the deserted street.

Julius had no trouble getting his feet to obey him this time and ran after her past the homes and businesses that he had known all of his life. And was now willing to leave behind forever.

They passed the painted house of the Rightovers. Mr. Rightover was an artist and spent every Sunday afternoon repainting the front door and walls of their dwelling. Some weeks it would be red with big yellow flowers and the next it would be several shades of blue with stars or sunbursts. Today it was painted green with what looked like drawings of small bugs. Julius hardly noticed the new scene on Mr. Rightovers' home. His eyes and mind were focused on just one purpose- following Amathea.

Amathea found the spot she was looking for and stopped abruptly. Julius bumped into her and nearly fell over at the sudden halt.

"This is it," said Amathea, looking over at the wall just a few feet in front of them. The protruding ridge looked just like those of Julius' village. Only upside down.

"Now, all we have to do is climb over," said Amathea. "It's easy because of the Innie."

Amathea deftly leapt across the short distance separating the two hands. Now that she was back in her homeland, she was upside down. She quickly turned herself around so that her head was dangling down towards Julius and then reached out to Julius with her right hand, wiggling her fingers.

"Just grab on. There's nothing to it."

Julius suddenly remembered that Felix had said the exact same thing right before his deadly Space Jump. He had been crouching next to Julius in his ratty pants and striped shirt, waiting for the perfect moment to leap to the other side. But Felix's jump hadn't been nearly as deft as Amathea's. He had fallen. And now, Felix was dead. Julius could still see him mouthing the word "help" as he fell away and felt the fresh wound break open again. He hesitated for

a moment, glued to the ground by the still raw memory. As Julius stood there, trying to get up enough courage to follow Amatheia, he felt that same tingle of static electricity and swirling wind that he had experienced with Felix up on The Curl.

The Meet was about to end and he hadn't crossed over.

Julius saw Amatheia's blue eyes fly wide with fear. She knew that if he didn't jump now, they would be separated. She called out to him in desperation.

"Julius! Come to me!"

Julius heard the promise in her voice: the promise of pleasures and happiness much greater than just a fleeting kiss or touch of her hand. And it was this promise that finally loosened the grip that his toes had on the ground.

This was it. Julius would never feel this way about another girl. Not even Charletta. He had only known Amatheia for a few minutes, but Julius was as certain of this reality as he was of his next breath. Looking into Amatheia's pleading eyes, he knew that if he missed this jump, he would miss everything: marrying Amatheia, building a home together, maybe one day having children of their own. His whole future would vanish.

"Do it now!" Amatheia screamed through the howling wind. She leaned out and wiggled her fingers wildly, encouraging Julius to grab on.

Julius took one more look into her glowing eyes. He needed to be sure.

He was.

Coiling his body into a crouch, Julius rocketed off the ground. He felt his body leave Rightland and sail towards Amatheia. Towards happiness.

Then Julius stopped in mid-air.

He looked down and saw five slender fingers attached to a long and muscular arm. The hand had a firm grasp on his ankle holding him suspended in the air. In his state of terror, it took a second for Julius' eyes to focus on the face at the end of that arm.

It belonged to his father!

"You're not going anywhere!" bellowed Krandall Rightling. Julius looked back up and saw Amatheia's outstretched hand. It was only inches from his finger tips. Surely, he could pull his foot free of his father's grasp and reach Amatheia's searching hand. He stretched his body as far as it would go and felt his fingertips brush Amatheia's outstretched hand. The warmth that had shot through his body at all their previous contacts was gone. In the brief moment that their fingertips slide past each other, he felt icy cold. It was the feeling of fear!

Julius' fathered bellowed again from below.

"You can't have him!"

Julius thought that maybe he should kick his father in the face. That would be a horrible thing to do, but worth it if it meant getting the man to release his grip. Julius quickly weighed the consequences of such defiance.

The indecision doomed him.

Krandall's hand tightened even harder on Julius's ankle. And he pulled. Hard.

Julius' head snapped forward from the sudden change in direction as his father pulled him out of the air. Krandall fell to the ground and Julius landed right on top of him. Julius heard a rattle on the street and saw that his father's prized sword, the Justice Blade, skittering across the ground.

In the bright surface of the terrible weapon, he clearly saw Amatheia's reflection. Her beautiful blue eyes were now filled with tears. As the teardrops spilled from her eyes and rolled down her face, Julius watched her mouth form the words, "Come to me. Promise."

Julius turned and called out, "I promise."

Then Amatheia was gone.

Just like Felix.

## CHAPTER 17

Julius sat at the kitchen table facing his parents. Krandall and Mirabella sat shoulder to shoulder on the other side of the table, looking sternly at their son. The

table had been in his family for generations, having been made from a wooden splinter that some long dead relative found protruding from Gerald's palm. His mother's grandfather or maybe even great-grandfather. Julius wasn't sure. It took the old man two days of digging to pry out the huge splinter and haul it home where he spent a year carving and sanding the piece of wood into the long, low table that now sat in the Rightling's kitchen. Julius didn't know what the man looked like or even what his name was, but he had spent plenty of time at his table.

Now Julius was sitting at the relic, rubbing a large knot hole with his thumb. He was so furious with his father that he didn't dare talk. Krandall did not tolerate disrespect from his men and definitely not from his children. But how was Julius to respond to being separated from Amatheia?

After the left hand had pulled away, Krandall was the first to speak.

"Was she trying to kidnap you?"

Julius had disentangled himself from his father's grip and struggled to his feet. He ran towards the receding hand, but it was too late. Amatheia was gone. Julius knew he would never see her again.

A fiery anger built up in Julius as he looked up into the sky. He balled his fists, pivoted towards his father and screamed in agony. Krandall misinterpreted the noise as a cry of pain and jumped to his feet.

"Did she hurt you?" He grasped Julius by the shoulders and turned his son around several times, inspecting his body from top to body.

"I don't see any wounds. Are you sure you're injured?" asked Krandall.

Julius could not speak. The deep rage he felt for his father combined with the sadness at losing his one chance at true love left him completely immobilized.

"Come on, son. It's over. Let's go home," said Krandall, wrapping his muscular arm around Julius' shoulders and pulling him down the street. As they passed the Justice Blade, still lying in the center of the street, Krandall bent and picked it up. He slipped the weapon back into its sheath with one deft motion and continued down the street. For a brief moment, Julius thought of taking the horrid

blade from his father and using it to cut off Krandall's snoot.

*He has ended my life, he thought. Maybe I should end his.*

Julius went so far as to actually extend his hand towards the haft of the blade when suddenly the handlings hiding from the Meet rushed into the street and surrounded him and his father. Several of them patted Julius on the back or tried to shake his hand.

"I saw the whole thing."

"Did that horrible girl hurt you?"

"She was a Leftie. Did you see that? A real live Leftie!"

Krandall pushed through the crowd and led Julius to their home, which was located several streets from the Whorl. The village center was beginning to come back to life as the handlings returned to their businesses and regular activities. Soon, the Meet, and Julius' brief encounter with the girl from the Left would be forgotten and life would continue unabated in Rightland. It was just another chance meeting of the two worlds.

But not for Julius. The Meet was the dividing point of his life. Even if he never saw Amatheia again, from this point onward his life would never be the same.

But how was he supposed to tell that to his mother and father? They sat glaring at him from across the ancient table. His mother was the first to speak.

"What were you doing with that girl? Why didn't you hide like everyone else?"

As Mirabella spoke, she absently played with the frayed ends of the long, multicolored sash that hung around her neck.

Mirabella Rightling was a petite woman who looked like a teenager herself. She had met Krandall Rightling when he was a young cadet serving in the Army of the Right. Mirabella's father was a General in the Rightland Army and commander of the post to which Krandall was assigned. Mirabella was barely in high school when she saw him for the first time. She was walking home from school with some of her friends when she caught a glimpse of the young Krandall lifting weights outside the door to his barracks. The young girls had just discovered boys and made it a habit to take the route past the soldier's quarters on the way home from

school every afternoon, hoping to see the strapping young army recruits. On this particular day, there were two soldiers in front of the barracks: Krandall and his roommate, Lars. Both men had their shirts off and were covered with sweat as they struggled with the heavy weights.

The young girls slowed when they saw the two soldiers, hoping to draw their attention. Most of the young men who congregated in front of the barracks in the afternoon were showoffs. They were always straining to lift huge weights while purposely ignoring their admirers.

But not Krandall. When Mirabella and her friends walked past him on that hot afternoon, Krandall put down his dumbbells and met Mirabella's gaze. Mirabella was enraptured by his dark eyes and how he seemed to look at her without blinking, not even once. Lars whooped and hollered, yelling the same old tired catcalls the school girls heard every afternoon. But not Krandall. He held Mirabella's gaze as she walked by and never uttered a sound. Right before she passed out of sight, he smiled a crooked little grin and winked at her.

After that day, Mirabella made it a point to pass by the barracks at the same time every afternoon just to see the handsome young soldier. On most days, Krandall would be out front straining with the heavy weights and bathed in sweat. And every afternoon, he would smile and wink at her. After weeks of inching closer and closer to the barracks, she finally built up the courage to stop and talk to the handsome young soldier. A week later, they went on their first 'secret' date and two months after that, Krandall asked her to marry him.

"Absolutely not," the General had said to his daughter. "You barely know him, Mira. And besides, he's not even an officer. He's just a private. My daughter is going to marry someone special."

"Oh, he is special, Daddy. Just look into his eyes and you tell me he's not," replied Mirabella.

The young school girl and soldier were married a week later in the General's living room. The old man had cried as he wrapped the Unity Sash around Mirabella and his new son-in-law's wrists, partly because he thought his daughter was marrying too young and partly because his wife was not here

to perform the ceremony. Marriage is highly valued by handling society, both Right and Left, and the ceremony was always performed by the mother of the bride. Mirabella's mother had died when she was just a child, so the General was forced to conduct the ceremony which included speaking a blessing over the couple and wrapping the multi-colored strip of cloth called a Unity Sash around their outstretched wrists. Each successive bride to possess the sash would spend the first part of her marriage carefully sewing a new strip of colored fabric to each end of the sash. Each thread had to be stitched by hand and the task took months if not years to complete. The tedious job was designed to remind the new bride of the bond that she held with all the generations of brides before her and how important the institution of marriage was to the fabric of handling society. The longer and more colorful a woman's Unity Sash, the greater her prestige was among the other women of Rightland.

The sash was a woman's most highly prized possession. It was the sign of not only the bride's deep bond with her husband, but also the responsibility she had with her ancestors to keep her mind and body pure for the next generation. Divorce was unheard of in handling society. Once married, a woman would be bound to her husband forever. She would continue to wear the sash around her neck every day for the rest of her life, only taking it off to wrap it around her own daughter's wrist on the girl's wedding day. Or, if she were childless, wrapping it around her husband's dead body upon his death.

Mirabella's father knew how important the Unity Sash was to his daughter. So he had removed it from his dead wife's neck before her body was taken to the Curl. Handlings cannot bury their dead so their custom was to throw the body over the Edge in an elaborate ceremony that followed a week of mourning.

The colorful sash had been folded neatly, wrapped in paper and stored in the bottom of the General's foot locker. And there it stayed until the day when he knotted it around Mirabella and Krandall's outstretched wrists on their wedding day. He had only wished that it was with someone that he felt would give her a better future than Krandall

Rightling.

But, after more than twenty years, Krandall had proven to be a wonderful, caring husband and Mirabella still felt lightheaded when she looked into his intensively dark eyes.

And at this moment, those dark eyes were narrowed with suspicion as they bore into their son.

"You were going with her, weren't you?" asked Krandall.

Julius looked from his father to his mother. He had always been amazed at how these two people who were so different could have stayed together for so long.

"Were you trying to follow her to Leftland?" demanded Krandall, leaning over the table to within inches of his son's face. "Answer me!"

Julius didn't answer. Instead, he looked at his mother and pleaded with his eyes for her to rescue him.

"Your father may have misunderstood. Just tell us. What were you really doing with that girl?" said Mirabella, giving her son an opportunity to escape his father's fury.

Julius thought of all the times that his mother had taken his side and protected him from his father's nuclear temper. Once, when he was twelve years old, he and Felix had broken one of his mother's vases while playing ball in the house. Well, actually, they weren't just playing ball. Felix was bouncing the ball off the low ceiling and trying to hit Julius in the head with the rebound.

"I've just invented a new game. I call it Headball," Felix had laughed as he continued to try to get the perfect bounce which would send the ball crashing down onto Julius head. He came pretty close a couple of times, and then the ball took a wicked spin and knocked a glass vase off the living table. When his mother heard the glass break, she came running from the back of the house, thinking that someone had been hurt. Instead, she found the two boys standing in the living room, trying to hide the ball behind their backs. She held out her hand and Julius reluctantly handed the ball to her. Instead of yelling, Mirabella had calmly walked to the open window and tossed the ball into the backyard.

"Let's not tell your father what really happened, okay?" she said, much to the boys' relief. "I never really liked that old vase anyway."

After that day, Julius could always come to her when he