

Chapter 3 – *End of the Trail*

Damian was on his way back to the barracks. What he needed was a hot shower and something to eat. He tried to recall what it felt like to have steaming hot water cascading down his skin. Heated water was nonexistent. His grueling training has taken its toll on his strained form. He was up before the others once again and had trained in an obscure location without interruption. The warrior smirked. Though he moved at a steady pace and was careful to remain unseen, it would be a miracle if he made it to the barracks unnoticed. He smelled and his stomach rumbled with hunger.

Constantly, the warrior surveyed his surroundings to detect any sign of the others. He stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes. Holding his breath, Damian went to cover his ears, then snorted at his weakness. It wouldn't do to block his ordinary senses as his coerced teacher had suggested—especially when opposition lurked about. No, he had to learn to master this extra-sensory gift without sacrifice. Slowly his determination paid off, but his luck had run out. They were much closer than he had anticipated. He detected one, two, three, and four, no- five life forces! The last one was unfamiliar. 'A newcomer,' he thought, and focused on the new entity, mentally recording its unique characteristics. Something stirred in the pit of his stomach and he spat. This one had an uncanny energy potential. Damian monitored their movements. Titus was taking the newcomer to the barracks. First impressions set the record. He preferred to meet the last recruit refreshed rather than worn, tired and hungry. The proclaimed tyrant of this group made it a habit to quickly establish his supremacy with newcomers. This one shall be no different.

Damian pinpointed the one that was alone and furthest to his left. It was Mayon. A low growl escaped from the otherwise reticent man. When he first encountered the weasel, he cursed

the day he had looked into his strange eyes. His pupils were odd in color, and masked something darker than the man's skin. Damian guessed what the rogue was up to. He could sense the boys were not far from Mayon. Their ability to communicate to each other without speech was what he was after—a worthless talent to one without allies.

Using his ability of stealth, Damian quickly made his way down wind. He stopped briefly to observe the scoundrel first hand. Mayon was lurking in the shadows, bracing his arm against the tree that he stood behind. He was spying on the boys who appeared to be playing a form of tag among the scattered rocks and tall grass. As usual, they were responding to each other without speaking. Damian smirked to himself. It would be a cold day in hell before that scum of the earth would ever master such a feat—unless... His expression changed to a frown. Despite his close proximity, he reaffirmed under his breath, “You will lose.” At once, he was on the move again.

Mayon, stiffened and jerked his head around. He thought he'd heard something. He surveyed the brush and trees behind him. Nothing. He locked his jaw to suppress his frustration and returned his attention to the boys. Both had disappeared. His nostrils flared. He was close to verbalizing obscenities when one of them reappeared. With his back to Mayon, he slowly rose up above the tall grass. The spying man held his breath in astonishment. Had the boy learned to fly? He relaxed when he spotted the other twin's head between his brother's feet. The boy was standing on his shoulders. Mayon thought he heard talking coming from the direction the twin's were facing, and then it went quiet. The boys didn't move for sometime. Suddenly, the one on top half squatted, and they both lowered into the brush again. Mayon heard Titus laugh. He was talking to someone. There was a commotion in the tall grass and the next thing he heard was Titus crying out.

Mayon complained through his teeth as talking to himself kept his thoughts in line. “Blast those brats. I don’t know why I just don’t beat it out of them.” He turned to leave, stopped, and a look of sadistic joy washed over his face. “Actually, hurting just one of them could prove to be more effective.” Walking again, he began to stroke his goatee, “The question is which one would be more likely to crack first?” After coming to the realization that it didn’t matter which (he was going to enjoy this regardless), he picked up the pace. Mayon made a wide circle around the group to avoid them.

Afraid to leave the path, Megan shouted at the thick vegetation that had swallowed up her escort. “JOHN!” All of a sudden, a mass of wrestling bodies flew at her and she jumped aside. Titus slammed the boys down on the pathway, and pinning them, one under each hand. Megan was astonished that the boys weren’t hurt. They devilishly grinned at the giant who looked like he could easily crush them by his weight alone.

“Well, well. Who are we today?” growled Titus in a serious way.

They glanced at each other, then back to Titus. “Ah, you’re the Evil Dark King, Coll and I’m Jaz and he’s-”

“Hey, I’m Jaz! You’re Dasher!”

“Come on, T! It’s still my turn!”

Timmy glared at his brother, but didn’t speak a word. Yet, Jimmy eyes rolled as if he had.

“Uh, John? You’re bleeding again.”

All three looked at Megan. Then Titus looked at his arm while the two boys gasped and started to struggle. Timmy yelled. “Yikes, it’s Madame Maja, Jaz! Let’s get the heck out of

here!” The two boys nodded to each other and clasped hands. Simultaneously, they brought their inner legs up and placed their feet on the giant’s midsection. Before Titus could react, he was airborne from the joint force of the boys’ kick.

T & J hopped up and both snickered at each other, “The bigger they are...hehehe.” Then they turned their attention on Megan. “Want to play with us?”

They were identical twins, in their early teens. Their streaked blonde hair was chin length. The boys’ brilliant blue eyes studied Megan through unruly strands of hair. Again the clothing was similar, off-white with a white sash tied at the waist. Their shirts were also sleeveless, but tailored differently. The fronts were crossed over and neatly tucked in loose pants. They were wearing rugged sandals. Each had a thin black band tied high on opposite arms.

THUD! All three on the pathway cringed from the sound. “AUGH! YOU BETTER BE GONE BY THE TIME I GET THERE!”

The boys ignored the thundering giant and Timmy asked, “Well, how about it? It’ll be good training.”

Jimmy added, “And a lot of fun too.”

“Geez Jimmy, You’ve got to stop talking, you’re Jaz and he doesn’t talk, remember?”

“Yeah he does.”

“No he doesn’t.”

Megan knew of the video game characters they spoke of, “He does in Jaz II.”

Amazed, they both stared at Megan. She was the first to actually know about the video game. Timmy mumbled, “We-we haven’t gotten that far yet.”

Jimmy piped up, “Hey, what other games do you-” he jerked his head around then grabbed his brother’s hand. They both jumped back when Titus landed where they stood.

Timmy pointed at the giant's arm, "Hey you're hurt!"

"Grrrr...get lost, before I get REALLY MAD!"

The boys took turns speaking: "Ah, man. Do we have to?"

"We want to stay."

They smiled warmly at Megan, "This newcomer is cool!"

"Yeah, she knows our game."

"And she's pretty." Timmy tugged on Jimmy's hand. He glared at him and something seemed to exchange between them. Their unspoken conversation was interrupted.

"Last warning, you two," growled Titus.

Both frowned. They dropped their chins and turned to go.

Titus regretted his stern words and called to them, "We'll take this up later...Jaz and Dexter."

Megan quietly corrected him, "It's Dasher." She heard the twins giggle and then they ran down the path shoving one another as they did so.

Titus watched them until they were lost from sight. He sighed, "I'm surprised they still listen to me." Megan came up beside him and grasped his arm with both hands to examine his wound. Defiantly, he tried to pull away, but misjudged her strength. His eyebrows shot up. She was strong.

"It stopped bleeding again. It needs cleaned and bandaged. Are you sure you will be all right?" She relaxed her hold.

Titus gently brushed her away. "I'll be fine, really. By tomorrow it will be good as new."

Shaking her head, Megan's whole body seem to slump. She quietly said, "This is just all so crazy. I'm not a bad person. I'm not aggressive or even completive. Training? For what? To

beat up people? Or is it to keep from being bullied or worse?” When she looked up again, there were tears in her eyes, “All I wanted to do was get a book for my daughter.”

Titus didn’t know what to say. The others didn’t quite affect him like this newcomer did. The majority of them were mostly confused at first until they started to imagine the ramifications—all except for Damian. He had remained silent and isolated. In fact, that one hadn’t changed much at all. Again, he thought of something that would cheer her up. Placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder, he smiled. “Hold to together, Megan. It’s not all that bad. I promise it will get better. You must put your faith in something. I’ve put mine in the greater purpose.”

Megan’s pleading eyes continued to trouble Titus, “What could that possibly be?”

The giant had to look away, “I don’t know.” He dropped his arm and they began to walk again, more slowly to clarify his thoughts. “I have to believe this is more than an experiment or some sick amusement. I can do amazing things, Megan. Things I wouldn’t even dream of before I came here. We all can. We have all gone beyond what a normal human could possibly do. And I am beginning to believe our achievements are never-ending.” He was able to return her gaze again, “There has to be a reason why all of us are becoming super human. Imagine what we could do with such powers.”

Megan hugged herself and watched the ground. “I’m no hero.”

“You could be.”

The woman looked up at Titus again. “You make it sound like this is easy.”

Titus smiled, “Sure it is. Like I said anything is possible.” Stopping, he held up his finger. “Hey, have you ever flipped a bottle cap before?”

Megan eyed the giant, “Yeesss.”

Titus began to look around until he spotted something on the ground. He bent over and picked up a flat shaped stone and tossed it to her. He smirked at her already honed reflexes. Finding another of similar size, he returned to Megan's side. "Ok, you remember how to hold it?" He showed her the technique and she nodded. "Now watch this." He positioned his arm with the rock and pointed down the path where a cluster of bamboo grew. Aiming, he flicked the stone.

Megan didn't see the rock, but when it hit the thick stem of bamboo, it snapped in two. Her mouth dropped open and she stared at the giant.

Satisfied, Titus turned back to Megan. "Uh, huh. Now you try."

Megan nodded, and then tried to mimic Titus's shot. She took aim and attempted to give it as much power as she could. She shot the stone, but it veered to the right, missing the bamboo.

Titus no sooner frowned when there came a CRACK and a cloud of dust appeared some distance away. Titus's brows shot up and he stuck out his bottom lip, "Hmm. Not bad."

Megan blinked unbelievably at her hand. She flexed it a couple of times, wondering if it was hers.

Grinning again, Titus knew this small feat would occupy Megan's mind for awhile. He nudged her to move and they began walking again. "It's not much farther now...just over the hill there." Megan didn't look, and just followed, her eyes examining both hands. "I don't want to spoil any aspirations you may work towards, but I got to tell you, you sure are strong for a newcomer. You may want to focus on other talents first. Don't get me wrong. Strength is an important asset but it becomes a given after awhile." He chuckled then added, "Ha, I know, why don't you work on that aim of yours?"

Megan absently nodded, but continued staring at her opening and shutting fists. Titus continued to talk over his shoulder as they walked single file. Here and there she caught what he was saying, giving her pointers on what “talents” have been proven among the others. Many he could only guess. He believed some kept traits to themselves, reluctant to share. Soon Megan’s head was swimming with feats of comic book and animated heroes that she and Jessah enjoyed together. Jessah would love this. Of all the incredible stunts, she loved the flying part the most. Jess wants to fly. She wrote to the tooth fairy once, asking for flying pixie dust. That’s why she wanted the ‘Singing the Breeze’ book. It was about a little girl that learned to fly. Dropping her hands and looking to the sky, she questioned her god, “Is it possible to fly?”

“Eh?” Titus glanced over his shoulder but kept walking. “Hoho, you are shooting high...So far none of us have, at least I don’t think so. But it’s not like we haven’t tried.” He was quiet for a while then spoke up again. “Hey, if you figure it out, you let me know, ok...Megan?”

Finally pulled from her thoughts, Megan answered, “Huh? Oh. Sure.” Then she noticed they were walking uphill. When Titus reached the top, he stepped to the side to watch her face as he swept his hand out over the valley, encouraging her to take a look below.

When she was on level ground, she stepped onto a cobbled pathway. Most likely the one they’d left to follow the dirt trail. It followed the ridge of the hill and then wove its way down through brilliant red flowered groundcover to a panoramic venue that took her breath away.

Damian made a quick survey of the compound, and then headed for the bathhouse on the left. He hated this communal rubbish. There wasn’t one day that he didn’t have to encounter the pathetic losers. To him, they were all incidental...as long as he remained on top.

Stopping at the water's edge, the warrior stared at the blue oblong tarn as he removed his gloves. He let them fall aimlessly to the ground while he examined his reflection in the still water. His familiar scowling face had become his one and only welcomed companion. Reaching up, he lightly touched the faint scar that crossed his right temple. Was it fading? Or was it his memory of them?

Damian pulled his sweat soaked shirt over his head. It was best that he focus on the task at hand. His muscles reminded him of their fatigue, forcing him to slow his actions. Perfectly balanced, he pulled off each boot and then untied the twisted sash around his waist. The warrior gave his pants a slight tug and they slid to the ground; piling around his feet. He stepped out of them and dove into the pool, feeling the cool rush of water enveloping his body. Damian slowly sank to the bottom and accepted the brief serenity. No, he would never forget. The memories of his wife and children would visit his dreams tonight.

His hand touched the floor and tiny bubbles found their way past his fingers. Soon the porous rock bottom erupted with billions of them. The fizzled water forced the naked warrior to the surface. He rolled as the small bubbles continued to find every crevice of his chiseled form—a body that was continually pushed beyond its limits. Damian didn't care to understand it. All he cared was to be the best. His body was simply a component edged against the others, particularly that freak show, Titus.

Sensing his back breaking the surface, Damian pushed his head out of the water and gasped for air. He closed his eyes and floated on his back while the bath completed its work. The warrior was careful to stay afloat near the bathhouse. The far edge of the tarn dropped off into the abyss that bordered the compound. He tried to sense for the others. Nothing. This ability to

feel life force was reasonably new and therefore limited to him—Damian would get nothing until they reached the ridge.

The others would not be long now. Damian sighed, rolled over, and swam to the marbled steps that went semi-circled around the edge of the miniature lake. As he climbed them, he combed his fingers through his hair. He walked over to his things and gathered them up. There were two entrances to the bathhouse. One was back behind the third and fourth column and the other between the eighth and ninth. He went inside the first to get a towel and fresh clothes. Nine individual cubicles were carved in the wall to the right. The ninth cubby was now full and untouched. The warrior smirked. If Mayon knew how things worked in this place, he'd be down here rummaging through the newcomer's stuff, looking for clues of the new opponent. In the center of the room sat a large polished stone cauldron—the rim reaching Damian's chest. Passing by, he tossed in his grubby belongings.

Over to the opposite side of the room, Damian grabbed a towel from the marble shelf that lined the wall, and wiped off. He discarded the towel the same as he did his old clothes. At his cubby he redressed in an outfit identical to the last. He reached for his comb—one of the few civil luxuries afforded the occupants. There was another luxury in the room and he turned to face it. It was a free standing eight foot tall looking glass framed by a floral, sculpted gold arch. The warrior could think of many worldly items that he would prefer to have...given a choice. Nevertheless, it was convenient.

Damian recalled the first time he had looked into the mirror. The utter surprise on his face was the most response he had shown since the car accident, but it was short lived. Soon he was able to see who he really was again. His eyes could not deny what his heart felt. Damian threw the comb into his cubby, grabbed the last items to his outfit, and headed back outside.

Hungrier than ever, he headed for the great table. Instead of walking around the tarn, he made a dash for the narrowest part (a good eighteen feet), and jumped to the other side. The warrior landed crouched, his back knee almost touching the ground. His fatigued muscles trembled from the effort. Slowly, he stood and looked up the hill to his right. Two figures stood at its crest. Consistently, Titus took the newcomers to the bath house first. It was usually a lengthy ordeal for the newcomer. The end of his lips curled up slightly. He still had time to eat.

Megan held her breath as she took in the magnificent sight. Her eyes followed the path down to the foot of the hill where the cobbled road reached bottom. It weaved its way around knolls of lush green grass dotted with various colors of white, pink, yellow, and lavender. It entered into a courtyard next to a large tent like structure. Several natural pools of water filled scattered depressions throughout the plateau. To the left, the largest and deepest of the pools was edged half way around with polished stone that reached out to meet the threshold of a long stone building. Round unadorned columns lined its front. The hill they were on curved around behind it and ended at a ravine.

Megan's gaze went above and beyond this enclave of serenity. She caught sight of a strip of surreal blue sky that was open to the chasm that bordered the land as far as the eye could see. She had no concept of how deep this ravine was. A lower blanket of mist masked its depths. Across the immense gap were far distant cliffs. Shear and menacing, they were of various hues of gray that seemed to reach for the heavens, the tops shrouded in the resuming cloud cover.

Titus clasped Megan's hand and began the decent to the camp's floor. She was grateful for the lead. That way she could continue to take in her surroundings. Towards the center of this grand hollow, the paved stones spread out into a wide circle, reaching four stone monoliths that

pointed to the sky. Their coloring mirrored that of the cliffs across the abyss. They stood equally apart and held up a huge white tent. In the middle of the top, set a flagged turret. Next to it and close to the edge, was a long table where someone was sitting at one end facing away from them.

And there were trees. Some appeared to be fruited. The evergreens that grew on the very edge of the abyss resembled gigantic bonsai and looked wind-worn. With no wind to speak of, they appeared out of place. Their trunks and limbs leaned inwards, and their massive roots clawed at the ground for solid footing. Between each tree, another pool would meet its end, spilling into the ravine.

They stopped where the pathway ended and the paved circle began. Titus began to point at things explaining their purpose. “Our sleeping quarters are inside the tent. Over there is the bathhouse. There you’ll find fresh clothes.” He enthusiastically grinned and gave Megan a little tug, “Come on, I’ll show you.” His pace was quick around the perimeter of the bathing tarn. The smooth, well-traveled stone was warm to her step.

Turning back to Megan, Titus stopped after passing through the columns. “Hey, do you need to go? If so, you go through in there.” He pointed to the right, down the porch-like corridor, to another doorway. Megan shook her head. “Good, nothing really to see anyway.” The giant continued and ducked into the first doorway.

It didn’t take much to adjust to the light in the room. A large round piece of what looked like a thin layer of polished quartz, stretched across the ceiling, letting the outside light in. In the center was a wide glazed caldron almost as tall as her. Titus faced Megan and smiled as he laid his hands on her shoulders. “Megan. I want you to go see yourself in that mirror over there.” He nodded to the standing mirror. “Now, don’t expect to see what you usually see. Ok?”

“What? Did I grow horns?”

Titus chuckled and said, “No, just keep an open mind.” He turned Megan around and led her to the looking glass.

Megan walked up to the mirror with confusion written on her face. She scanned her image for something that stood out aside from her borrowed attire. Then the newcomer looked at Titus standing behind her, his hands still on her shoulders. She shrugged, “What?”

“Huh? Ah, look again. Look closely.” Titus pushed her one step closer then dropped his arms.

Megan leaned in and scrutinized her reflection. Titus’s brow furrowed waiting for the newcomer’s reaction. There it was. Megan’s eyes opened wide, then narrowed causing the giant to grin at her mirror image.

Something was different. Megan looked younger, years younger. The lines on her face had disappeared. She tilted her head to find her gray roots were gone. Then she noticed her figure. It looked smoother and firmer. She whispered, “Oh my God.”

“Well, what do you think? You didn’t recognize yourself, did you? Isn’t it fantastic to be the best you could possibly be?”

Megan reached up and touched her face. “Why? Because I look younger?” Then she flexed her arm. “Because I’m stronger?”

Almost incredulous, Titus glared at Megan’s reflection. “That’s it? No other drastic changes?”

Another once over and Megan gave her answer, “Aside from the makeover, it’s still me.” She saw the disappointment in his eyes and added, “But this is great! I can’t remember when I looked this good!”

Titus beamed. “You should’ve seen me before I came here! Don’t get me wrong, I never complained, but I’m liking this body a whole lot better these days! Hey, let’s get you something decent to wear. You need to accentuate your new assets.” He winked and walked over to her cubby. “We don’t have much of a choice...” He held up some of her things. “...none, actually.”

Megan walked over and Titus handed her the clothes he had found. Then reaching up, he patted the edge of her cubical. “Now this one is yours. You will always find a fresh set of clothes in it.” He stepped back, reached into his own cubby for a shirt and pulled it over his head and continued, pointing to the cauldron, “Throw all your dirty things in there. You can go ahead and throw my shirt in.” He waited and then realized he should leave first. Smacking his hands together he awkwardly suggested, “Oh-kay. I will meet you out front,” and walked out.

Megan went back to the mirror and dropped the garments on the floor. Self-consciously, she looked around before removing Titus’s shirt and then took another good look at herself. Megan was no glamour queen, but her appearance had definitely improved. The woman tried to pinch her waist and found not much to grab on to. Turning around, she glanced over her shoulder and murmured, “Hmm. Not bad. Not bad at all.” Then she walked over to the big pot. Raising the shirt, she tiptoed to look in before dropping it. It was a big black hole. Megan dropped the shirt and listened for a sound. Not hearing anything, she turned back to her clothes and put them on.

The pants were easy and she was not surprised they fit. Megan found the top to be a simple short sleeve resembling a tee-shirt, but it was of a sturdier material which hugged her form. She didn’t care for the white sash, but wrapped it around her waist and tucked in the ends. Going back, the newcomer checked her cubby for footwear and found a simple pair of canvas laced shoes, but no socks. “Bummer.” Looking around for a place to sit and finding none, she

sat down on the warm floor to put them on. She always wanted a heated floor in their bathrooms. It was something her husband agreed to include in their house renovations. Would he still? Megan shouldn't think that way. There just had to be a way to go back. Somebody had to know something. Standing again, she looked to see what else was in her cubby and found a comb and a cone shaped object. While reaching for it, she heard Titus calling through the doorway.

“Megan, are you alright in there?”

“I'm coming, John.” Abandoning the object, Megan rushed out to join Titus.

She stood next to Titus who was observing the individual at the table across the water. He leaned towards her and spoke out of the corner of his mouth, “Call me Titus from now on. It's better that way.”

Megan saw who he was looking at, but didn't question him. “Uh, alright... Titus.”

“Good.” He looked down at her and smiled. “You look like one of the gang now. Comfortable?” She nodded. He clasped his hands affirmatively. “Excellent! Care for something to eat?”

“I guess.” Megan answer lacked the enthusiasm the giant was hoping for.

Titus noticed that Megan was eyeing the individual at the table and sighed, “He's the one that Pierce mentioned--a real jerk. But there is no use putting this off. He knows you're here and he'll make a point to confront you no matter where you go. This guy is bad news, Megan. You would be best to remain submissive for now. Any hint of a challenge and he will take you on with a vengeance.” Titus started to walk around the pool and she followed.

“Is he stronger than you?” Megan asked.

“It's hard to say. The man is a smart fighter...an excellent tactician. With him, the fight is over before it begins.” Titus went silent as he recalled his last fight with Damian. (The bastard

had grounded him with the help of a ton of rock crashing down on him. With the wind knock out of him, the giant panicked. Damian dug Titus out...just enough to laugh in his face and then left the giant to get himself out of the pile of rubble.)

From behind, Megan watched the giant ball his fists. “What’s his name?”

“He calls himself Damian.” Titus hissed over his shoulder, “And right now he’s number one.”

“That’s right, circus freak!” Damian had left the table. Megan ventured a look-see. He was walking towards them; tugging on his gloves and flexing his fingers. His eyes locked onto Megan.