

## BITTERSEED by Ted Kosmatka

**Ted Kosmatka hails from the cornfields and steel mills of Indiana. He's been a field hand, a college tutor, a zoo-keeper, a chemical analyst, an eco-researcher, and a laborer in the red-black guts of a blast furnace. He now works for a research laboratory. Ted's knowledge of those cornfields comes in handy in his second story for Asimov's.**

The world was rivets.

Marc groaned as he lifted his face from the cold, steel deck and tried to focus his eyes. Pain thundered in his skull, driving away articulate thought. He knew he had to hurry but couldn't remember why. So much blood, red on gray—a wet smear across the smooth metallic surface.

He rolled onto his back and brought a hand to the side of his face where he found the familiar topography transformed into something loose and lumpy—something with two sharp angles where none had been before. He tried to move his mouth and the bones grated; his jaw was broken.

The field-skim thrummed beneath him, waking new pain along his left leg as the ship adjusted its flight course. He tried to sit but his ribs flared white-hot, and he collapsed, breathing hard up at the blue sky.

Movement caught his eye and he concentrated the blurry figure into focus. Eli's sun-creased face glared down over the railing of the sight deck twenty feet above. There was no mistaking his expression. Marc blinked and the face was gone.

He remembered then why he had to hurry. And he remembered why he'd jumped.

Ignoring the pain, he hauled himself to his knees and then to his feet. The deck heaved beneath him as the skim banked hard to port on its preprogrammed flight pattern across the crop glade. He clutched weakly at the railing for balance, trying not to faint while sparks played across his vision. The field-skim was one of the corporation's smaller ships—just under thirty meters—and was designed to fly close to the crop surface. Beyond the railing, the spindly green tops of maiza whisked by a few meters below.

On this planet, maiza was the equatorial crop, and from Marc's perspective, it spread in a swaying carpet from the eastern horizon to the low mountains sixty kilometers to the west. It wasn't just a sea of green; it was a vast, sweeping ocean. The individual plants were tall and thin, and the backwash of air from the skim made the stalks dance as they flashed by below.

Marc glanced around for a weapon, but the nose deck was empty. There was only the hard steel floor, the railing, wind, and a sea of green all around. Oh, and the ladder. Mustn't forget the ladder.

Eli descended toward him a rung at a time.

Marc felt the vibration when the man's boots slapped heavily to the ship's lowest deck. Though Eli stood three inches shorter than Marc, he outweighed him by fifty hard-won pounds of muscle. There were no guns on Tristan-3, but Man's indomitable spirit never lacked for improvisation: Eli still carried the iron tamping rod that had broken Marc's jaw.

Marc backed against the rail. Eli followed with his dark eyes but did not move. The wind lifted his short, black hair off his forehead in buffeting spikes.

"There's still time to take it back," Marc said.

"I don't want to take it back," Eli said.

"Are you sure?" That was as close to begging as Marc would go.

"Very."

Marc ducked the first swing and rolled across the deck. His head swam with the sudden movement, and colors blotted his vision again as he reached up for the railing. The swing had been just high enough to let him slip beneath. Eli was toying with him. Marc pulled himself to his feet, backing toward the far front of the skim.

Eli followed, changing his grip on the long iron cylinder and widening his stance. The second swing was calculated to be more damaging, and Marc sacrificed an arm to save his skull. The bar careened off his forearm with a crunch of bone, missing the top of his head by an inch.

Marc staggered back against the railing, clutching his arm. He turned and Eli was two steps away, poised, a smile on his face. Marc saw it in his eyes then. He saw it in the smile. This wouldn't be a beating. Eli was going to kill him.

Marc considered rushing him, but then what? He wouldn't have a chance. Instead Marc looked him in the eye. "Don't get caught for this," he said. "It would kill Mom to lose both of us."

"I've already thought of that."

Eli raised the iron rod. Marc slid backward over the handrail just ahead of his brother's final blow. His feet followed him into the spinning sky, and then the wind tore at his clothes and the stalks were crunching like bones breaking. Silence.

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Marc opened his eyes to darkness. Pain and the sweet smell of growing things told him he was not dead. For a long time he just breathed, and that was miracle enough. To ask for more seemed presumptuous. The fall should have killed him and he knew it.

Wind blew high up through the stalks, making rasping whispers of the shadows that moved there. It was a sound he'd grown familiar with in his four years on Tristan-3, and it brought him a strange species of comfort.

When he tried to sit, pain quaked through him, too diffuse and all encompassing to isolate in any single body part. Everywhere hurt. Slowly, by degrees, he managed to roll out of the crater he'd made in the soft black dirt. The fall had embedded him well into the moist soil, and he left a perfect imprint of himself behind. He rolled against the row of maiza and let himself feel the hard vertical shafts against his back and legs. He raised himself up on an elbow.

One of the moons was rising, and Marc caught glimpses of it through the swaying leaves. It looked like Bromb, the larger moon, but he couldn't be sure. He thought of his brother and knew he couldn't be sure of anything anymore.

His good arm climbed the stalk, and he pulled himself to his feet. He leaned against the plant, feeling the slow sway. Even with all that had happened, he couldn't help but feel a sense of pride at the touch. This year's maiza crop was the healthiest yet. As a geneticist for Pioneer Seed Co. he'd worked long and hard toward that goal. It was likely now to be his only legacy.

Down the row to his left, he saw the leaning, shattered shafts that had slowed his descent and saved his life. The plants lay skewed across the narrow gap between the rows, their leaves crumpled beneath the weight of the stalks. To the right, the row disappeared into the distance. What direction had the skim

been going when he jumped? East? North? He couldn't remember.

He put his shoulder against one of the plants and pushed with all his weight, but it was already too late in the season. He wasn't strong enough to bring one down. He counted the broken stalks: four. Would that be enough for them to find him? Four broken stalks among a continent of maiza? Perhaps, but Eli would direct the search parties away from any evidence. He would say that Marc fell near the river thirty kilometers to the East, or at the edge of the mountains. The satellites might be able to pick out four broken stalks in the vast sea of green, but Eli wouldn't have them looking for that.

Marc felt the energy drain out of his legs as he considered his situation. There would be no rescue. His knees folded, and he collapsed to the dirt, sending a fresh jolt of pain through his jaw. Mother would take this hard. By now Eli would have told her. A fresh rush of anger welled up in him. She was too old to deal with this; she'd lost so much already.

When he laid his face on the warm ground, the soil was as soft as any pillow. He breathed in the smells of life and slipped into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

He woke to roaring sunshine. An early morning wind drove the leaves into a kind of applause as he sat and wiped the crusted dirt from the side of his face. Something in his broken jaw shifted, and he screamed. His mouth was cotton dry, his tongue coated in grit.

As he sat, he considered his options. He could sit here and die, or he could walk and probably still die. He looked down at the little crater he'd made and decided it looked too much like a grave.

Marc stood. Looking up at the sun through the long, narrow leaves, he decided which way was north and set off down the row to the right, pushing aside the leaves as he walked.

Maiza was an amazing plant. The roots of its cultivation could be traced back a thousand years on Earth to aboriginal Central American populations. Later, in the twentieth century, it became a staple throughout the world for both animal feed and human consumption. But the leafy green field he walked through now hardly resembled what twentieth century farmers would call corn. Agricultural geneticists had stopped using that term more than a hundred years ago.

Maiza now clung to the equatorial continent of Tristan-3 in an ecological monoculture, dominating the landscape to the complete exclusion of endemic flora. The local plants simply couldn't compete with a thousand years of selective breeding. It was midseason now, and the plants were already fifteen feet tall. Upon harvesting, each would produce a variety of usable products for export to fringe colonies. The stalks were mulched into a biodegradable lubricating oil; the cobs provided food for people and livestock; and the leathery leaf fiber was used to make heavy, durable rope.

The enormous continental basin was divided into a corrugated pattern of male and female plants: two female rows for every male. The sexes were of different strains, designed to be of slightly differing heights so that the male reproductive tassels were close to the female cobs. This helped diminish the instances of self-fertilization, and subsequent inbreeding depression in seed product.

Marc trudged on, and when the sun was middle high, he stopped and turned. The world behind him was indistinguishable from the one before him. The air moved not at all, and the light lent a soft green cast to everything beneath the leafy canopy. He took his shirt off and continued walking.

In the early evening, the rain began. It fell as a gentle haze that clung to everything, soaking his clothes and turning the soil to glop. It rained most days on the central continent, but the rain was always like this: weak and misty. Marc tried to lick the droplets of moisture off the leaves and stalks, and although his

tongue got wet, there was little he could actually swallow. He continued walking and after another hour the rain stopped. The sun set behind a bank of clouds, and darkness fell quickly beneath the leaves.

He lost energy as the moons rose, and when he could walk no more, he slept where he fell.

In the morning the leaves were dry again, and his legs were stiff and sore as he climbed to his feet. During the night his thirst had grown into something burning in the middle of him. How long could a man live without water? Three days? Four?

He started walking again, and now he felt each leaf as pain on his exposed skin. Both arms were swollen and red from the microscopic nettles on the surface of the leaves. After all these years of working with the plant, he'd thought himself intimate with it, but this was something he'd never dealt with before. You don't feel the nettles if you're only in the fields for a few hours.

When the rains came again, Marc threw himself into the task of hydration. He licked the surface of the plants again, running his tongue up and down the leaves, trying to get enough moisture to swallow. He opened his mouth to the sky and kicked at the base of the stalks to shake droplets loose. He worked vigorously for more than an hour, losing his shoe to the muck. He went from plant to plant until his tongue swelled, and his lips split.

When the rain stopped, his thirst seemed stronger than before.

Because there was nothing else to do, he continued walking. When night fell, he slept.

\* \* \* \*

The field applauded him again. He looked up into the green-tinted light and licked his chapped lips. Golden patterns of sun played across the dark soil—such good soil, the geologists had said. Perfect for growing things. It had taken the company a long time to find a place like Tristan-3.

There were discrepancies, of course. There would always be discrepancies. After all, you couldn't just transplant life from one planet to another and expect it to thrive immediately. There were little problems that had to be dealt with first, little things that had to be fixed.

That first year, the crop had been stunted and pathetic. Too little nitrogen in the soil, too much sodium chloride. Even the sunlight was slightly wrong—bright enough, but skewed into a slightly higher spectrum than earthly chloroplasts were evolved for. They could photosynthesize, but at a diminished efficiency. That's why Pioneer needed Marc. It was always so much simpler to change the plant than to change the planet.

A year later, Marc pulled some strings and had his brother brought to the outpost colony as his assistant. Marc, Eli, and their mother—one big happy family again.

The second year's crop showed a 40 percent yield increase. Not great, but definitely a step in the right direction.

It was during the winter before the third growing season that Marc made the breakthrough. That third year, the company finally turned a profit on its investment.

\* \* \* \*

Marc pulled himself from the dirt. Hunger swept through him. Was Eli eating a big hearty breakfast? Was he taking a shower and letting all that precious, precious water cascade over his skin and down a drain? Was he looking into a mirror and thinking of what he'd done? Marc knew his brother well. He knew Eli told himself that his motives had been purely financial. Maybe Eli even believed it—there *was* a lot of

money in agra patents. But Marc knew better. Money had nothing to do with it.

Marc looked up at the husks just out of reach overhead. He grabbed a plant and shook it in frustration, but the husks were hugged tightly into their leafy blankets against the stalks, and he knew he'd never shake them down.

After a moment's thought, he un-cinched his belt and flipped it into a loop. He bent his knees, eyed the spot carefully, and jumped into the air, hooking the belt around the top of the husk. He pulled. It came down with a crackle and landed at his feet.

At first he almost couldn't believe it had worked so easily. Then he bent and snatched the leafy coverings aside and pulled away the yellow, straw-like filaments. The cob beneath was white and pebbly, and his stomach growled in anticipation as he ran a finger slowly across the hard kernels.

He raised it to his mouth and bit—and something unhinged in his jaw. Marc screamed in pain, and then the pain turned to rage, and he threw the cob as far as he could. Tears sprang to his eyes, and though he tried, he could not hold them back. He collapsed into the mud, holding a hand to the side of his broken face, and he wept bitterly up at the swaying plants that would feed millions.

\* \* \* \*

Though Marc and Eli were born four months apart, they were identical twins. At least in theory. Circumstance had stepped in and changed all that. The same accident that killed their father began the process that would so starkly divide them.

The Pagas mine colony was in shambles, and it took nearly an hour for help to burrow through. By that time, their mother's pre-term labor had progressed too far, and Eli was born unfinished onto a bloody miner's jacket amongst the rubble. The doctors managed to halt the labor, and Marc was saved from his brother's fate. The doctors didn't expect Eli to live, but after the pneumonias and the seizures, after the surgeries and the transfusions, he did.

Months later, when Marc, the second twin, was finally laid next to the first, he was twice the size of Eli. But the differences went deeper than that.

Although Eli had come first into the world, it was Marc who crawled first, Marc who said the first word, Marc who first learned to pee into the toilet standing up.

As the babies grew into children, Eli developed severe asthma and couldn't play rough with the other boys from the work zones. There was always a sense of difference about him—made only more starkly visible by the presence of a brother to whom he bore such a striking resemblance. To anyone with eyes, Eli was Marc, only less.

And Marc never let him forget it.

Perhaps it was guilt that drove the taunting. Marc looked at Eli as what he easily could have been had chance only positioned his body nearer to the mouth of his mother's womb. Eli was a constant reminder of the gift he'd been given, the debt he owed fate. Marc grew to resent his brother almost as much as Eli grew silently to hate him.

Once, when their mother caught Marc bullying, she jerked him into another room by his arm, leaving great red welts on his bicep.

"Do you know what you're doing?" she asked him. He only looked up at her mutely, shaken by her sudden, unexpected rage.

"Why do you do these things to him?" she asked.

"I don't know," Marc said.

"You reap what you sow," she said. "If you keep this up, it's going to be a bitter harvest."

He hadn't understood what that meant.

He understood now.

Marc stopped sobbing and picked himself up from the dirt. He picked his way between the shafts to where he'd thrown the cob. He picked it up and turned it slowly in his hand. He brushed off the clinging chunks of mud. Opening his mouth, he carefully placed the cob against his upper teeth and pressed. His incisors sank into the hard flesh, and when he turned the cob, a scatter of kernels popped free onto his tongue. He swallowed them down greedily without chewing. When the cob was bare, he used his belt to pull down another and repeated the process.

He didn't walk anymore that day, and when night fell, he lay in the mud and slept with a full belly.

\* \* \* \*

The cramps came around midday. When he looked down at his stool, his heart sank. He'd known something was wrong. Instead of getting stronger after yesterday's meal, his strength had continued to ebb.

The corn lay in a mushy pile where he'd squatted. For all the hours it had run through his digestive tract, it had hardly changed at all. The kernels were perfect.

It probably cost more energy to move through his gut than the meal had provided.

He sat and leaned back against a stalk, shutting his eyes. The wind made shuffling noises overhead, and this time, it wasn't applause he heard; it was laughter.

He was hot. He ran a hand across his forehead, and his brow was strangely dry. Even his tongue was dry. His lips were cracked. If he didn't get water today, he would die tomorrow.

He thought of standing and walking again but couldn't make himself do it. Instead, he took his clothes off and laid them flat across the ground. Then he looked up at the sky and willed it to rain.

An hour later it did.

His clothes dampened slowly in the drizzle, and when they were finally wet enough, he wrung the moisture into his mouth. It came slow but steady—a trickle really—but he let the water fill his mouth completely before swallowing. It burned like ice going down his ragged throat, but it was the best water he'd ever tasted. He swallowed again and again. By the time the rain had stopped, his stomach was cramping with moisture. He mopped the clothes up and down the maiza plants, gathering extra water. Then he carefully wadded up the shirt and pants and continued walking.

As night neared, he stopped, un-balled the wet fabric, and wrung out every ounce of liquid into his mouth. Afterward, he slept.

It rained on the next three days and Marc drank himself full. He gradually came to realize that he wouldn't die of thirst, but food was an altogether different problem. When the hunger became too much to bear, he would hook down a cob and fill his belly with the worthless kernels. It took the edge off his aching emptiness, but it did little to sustain him. The kernels left him in the same condition they entered.

Marc had never been fat, even as a child. But as he'd approached early middle age, a certain thickening had developed around his mid-section that he was never able to fully eliminate. He couldn't find the extra hours in the day to work out, and he lacked the motivation to push away second helpings at the dinner table. His mother had laughed when he'd complained about it one afternoon at the family meal. She patted him lovingly on the little gut that puffed above his belt line and said, "It's a sign of health."

"It's a sign of too many of your pasta dinners," he'd said.

That gut was gone now.

Eli had spent many hours in the gym turning that same soft thickening into something hard and strong. Eli didn't have his brother's length of bone, and it was as if he could make up for it in muscle. Marc had seen the hypodermic needles in the trash, but he'd never said a word.

Marc no longer felt the scrape of the leaves on his bare flesh as he walked. His nerves had either gone dead beneath the bands of red welts, or his skin was callused to the nettles. He couldn't bring himself to care which.

It was on the morning of his eighth day among the stalks that Marc found the grub. It revealed itself in a slight yellowing of leaves. Marc stopped and considered the miaza plant carefully. He blinked, looked again, and the plant was still a slightly different shade than its neighbors. The scientific part of his mind ran through the list of possibilities: mutation, disease, parasite. He noticed the hole then. It was small, slightly larger than his finger, and it descended into the soil at the base of the yellowing plant. A root parasite?

Marc fell to his knees and dug. The grub pulled free from the soil in a writhing mass of ciliated legs. It was pale and mushy, approximately the circumference of his wrist, and about half a foot long. Marc didn't hesitate, didn't pretend there was a choice to make. Despite the pain in his jaw, he bit into the thing where he thought the head might be and swallowed down an oily chunk of flesh. It tasted like vinegar, but he bit again. The thing never stopped moving as he ate. He wondered if it *still* moved in his stomach.

He meant to save some for later, but his hunger prevented it. When the last of the animal was down his throat, he ran his slimy hands through the dirt to clean them off. Then he stood and continued on, waiting to die of poisoning, or not.

By nightfall he felt a measure of his strength returning and knew his body had been able to break down at least some of the alien compounds. The native fauna had most of the same amino acids as terrestrial organisms, but those small differences had been known to be fatal on other worlds. The rule of thumb was this: don't eat anything native. Considering his options, Marc thought it was time to suspend the rules.

The days blurred into one another. He drank when it rained; he ate every few days when he came across a yellowing maiza plant. The grubs grew larger as the season progressed, and the canopy of leaves grew thicker and higher, eventually closing off the rest of the world until Marc could see only a half-dozen feet in any direction.

Some nights he dreamed of harvest and giant steel machines. Some nights he woke screaming.

\* \* \* \*

The labor camps weren't the kind of places you raised children if you had any other choice, and Marc's mother worked hard to keep her boys alive from month to month. Twelve-hour shifts, six days a week, kept them in the kind of poverty that was only just this side of starvation. The system was different then, less kind. A lot of people died inside their equipment rigs, and a father's absence wasn't such a rare thing among the throng of children that crowded the edge of industrial zones. The companies moved them from one outpost to the next, providing the living quarters and a small stipend--but the paychecks always went

back to the company for food.

Family was all-important to his mother. What else did they have? She never brought another man home in front of her children like many lonely women. She made her boys her world and her cause. Marc and Eli saw how hard their mother worked, and sometimes when they lay in bed together at night, they talked of how they would save her. They whispered of the life that they would give her, where she'd never want for anything, where she would have peace.

It wasn't until Sepselan-16 that Marc and Eli were introduced to formal education. Marc's natural aptitude earned him entry into the special program, and, afterward, his mother was transferred into housekeeping. They didn't pretend the two events weren't connected. Even Eli was given special educational dispensation—they began training him as a cook. Later, Pioneer Seed Co. picked Marc up as apprentice geneticist, and the family was transferred to an agricultural colony. Although Eli's scores didn't merit it, Marc was able to get him enrolled in a tech program.

When Marc was given his first assignment, he gave the tickets to his mother on her birthday and asked her to quit her job and follow him to Maldron for the five-month term. When she hugged him tightly, tears of pride brimming in her eyes, he'd caught a glimpse of his brother's face from over her shoulder, and a quiet kind of panic settled into the base of his spine.

Looking back, he'd known then. The bitter harvest was coming.

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Marc counted his footsteps as he trudged through the green. At the end of the day, he calculated the distance of each step and ascertained that in more than two months he'd walked a little less than a hundred kilometers. Not quite halfway back to the colony. He looked up at the ripe cobs and knew he wouldn't make it. The season was over. Harvest was upon him.

That night a sound woke him from his sleep. It was the sound from his nightmares, and for a while he lay in the dirt unsure whether he was really awake or not. But the metallic grinding grew louder and he knew the big machines had come. He jerked to his feet, heart pounding in his chest. *Which way was it coming from?* The closed space around him confused the sound, spreading it evenly through the stalks. He held his breath, concentrating, and then, suddenly, he knew. He sprinted blindly down the row away from the sound, tearing at the leaves as he ran. The combines had no lights; they didn't need them. The enormous machines were navigated by satellite guidance as they moved quickly over the flat terrain of the continental basin.

The sound was nearly deafening now. He stopped. Did he expect to outrun them?

He dropped to his knees and tore at the moist soil with his hands. He dug feverishly, scooping out chunks of dirt. Behind him the din continued louder, closer. He put his back into the work, using both hands together. The trench gradually widened, deepened. Now the noise was a roar banging against the stalks, and when he chanced a backward glance, the combine towered into view above him. He threw himself into the trench face-first, imbedding his hands deeply into the soil for purchase. The noise became something bigger than he was, and then a great wind tore at his bare flesh, threatening to lift him from the dirt while a thousand tiny nettles scoured his backside. He screamed into the blackness and the sound was torn away, lost in the tumult.

Silence.

He raised his head and stars blinked down across an open expanse of land. He could see the hulking, metallic shape moving into the distance, leaving a mile-wide swath of stubbled dirt behind it. The vastness around him was disorienting after his long mobile confinement within a visual space of a few meters.



He stood and felt likely to fall sideways into the sky. Only the dirt and six inches of stalk remained of the world he had spent every moment of the last two months in. His clothes were gone. He was naked and empty-handed.

A breath of wind caressed his flesh and he shivered. He walked and that felt familiar.

In the morning he learned of a new enemy. The sun climbed onto his back and stomped hard with both feet, pushing him into the hot dirt. His skin had gone pale beneath the leaves, and now it burned and blistered in the glare. When the rains came at midday, he lay on the ground and covered himself with mud, so that he was afforded some protection when sun renewed its assault in the afternoon. He walked on.

When night fell, he shivered in the wind and got a few hours' sleep. At dawn he continued.

They would never find his body, and that was pleasing to him. His mother would have no grave to fret over. And she would have Eli there to remind her of what he'd been like as a living being. Perhaps she would weather this—or, actually, had weathered it already. After all, she'd probably thought him dead for two months now.

When the rain came again, it washed some of the mud loose from his body, but he dared not stop to renew his supply. Something deep inside whispered that if he stopped walking, even for an instant, he would never start again. Night fell, and he walked on.

At some point, he became aware of lights. In the distance at first, but nearing slowly from his left. And then the lights were on him and he was blinking up into brilliance. He let himself sit then, and hung his head to his chest. The field-skim landed nearby, and in the next instant arms were lifting him to his feet.

"Marc, is that really you?" a man asked.

The face belonged to John Miller, a close friend in another lifetime.

Marc only nodded and let the arms drag him to the skim.

\* \* \* \*

"My mother?" His words were slow and canted; the jaw didn't want to move right.

"Not good," his old friend answered. "She still thinks you're alive. Well, you *are* alive, but she was the only one who ... Marc, what the hell happened?"

Marc lifted his head from the pilot's cot and took another sip of water. At this speed, skims tended to ride rough, and he had to be careful not to spill. "Why not good?"

"I try to stop by and visit her when I can, but it's hard to see her this way. Her health hasn't been good lately."

"And Eli?"

"He's in charge of the seed program now. Your mother won't let him out of sight, follows him around everywhere because she's so afraid of losing another son. Marc, there were a lot of people who never bought Eli's story about what happened. A company prosecutor was brought in to investigate."

"All the way out here?"

"A possible death-penalty case, Marc. Fratricide."

"What did he find?"

"Same as us, fishy as hell but no proof. What happened?"

Marc rolled over in the cot and put his face to the wall. He felt a hand on his shoulder for a moment, then the hand was gone. He slipped into unconsciousness.

Marc woke as the field-skim settled into dock. He rose to his feet and stepped into the bathroom. He didn't recognize the bearded, crook-jawed man staring back at him from the mirror. He urinated and washed his hands. John was waiting outside the door.

"I thought you--

Marc held up his hand. "Hurts to talk, so don't make me. Who knows about me?"

"Everybody. I radioed it in. The special investigator wants to talk to you."

"He's still here?" *Would Mother really be relieved to gain one son and lose the other?* "I need a minute to clear my head."

The latch opened from the outside.

"Doesn't look like you're going to get it, Marc."

A tall man in a company suit walked through the door. "Welcome back from the dead," he said, extending a hand. "I'm Special Investigator Tom Brennen. We've got a lot to talk about."

"Do we?" Mark asked.

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Twenty minutes later, Marc walked down the hall to his old office. He paused at the door. He pushed it open. He stepped inside.

Matching dark eyes moved to his.

"Brother," Marc said, and then he shut the door.

Eli didn't move. He sat stiffly behind the desk. His face looked different. Older. He'd lost weight. The last few months had taken a toll on him, too.

Eli opened the desk drawer and stuck his hand inside. "I've been waiting for you," he said. He pulled out a white envelope and tossed it on the desk.

"What is it?"

"Some days a confession. Others, a suicide note."

"Which is it today?" Marc picked the envelope off the desk.

"Today? I don't know, brother. The day isn't over yet."

Marc looked down at the envelope in his hands but didn't open it.

From out in the hall he heard a shout. A woman's shout of joy, his mother screaming his name. His mother was coming down the hall.

Marc looked at his brother, ripped the envelope in half, and tossed it in the trash.

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