

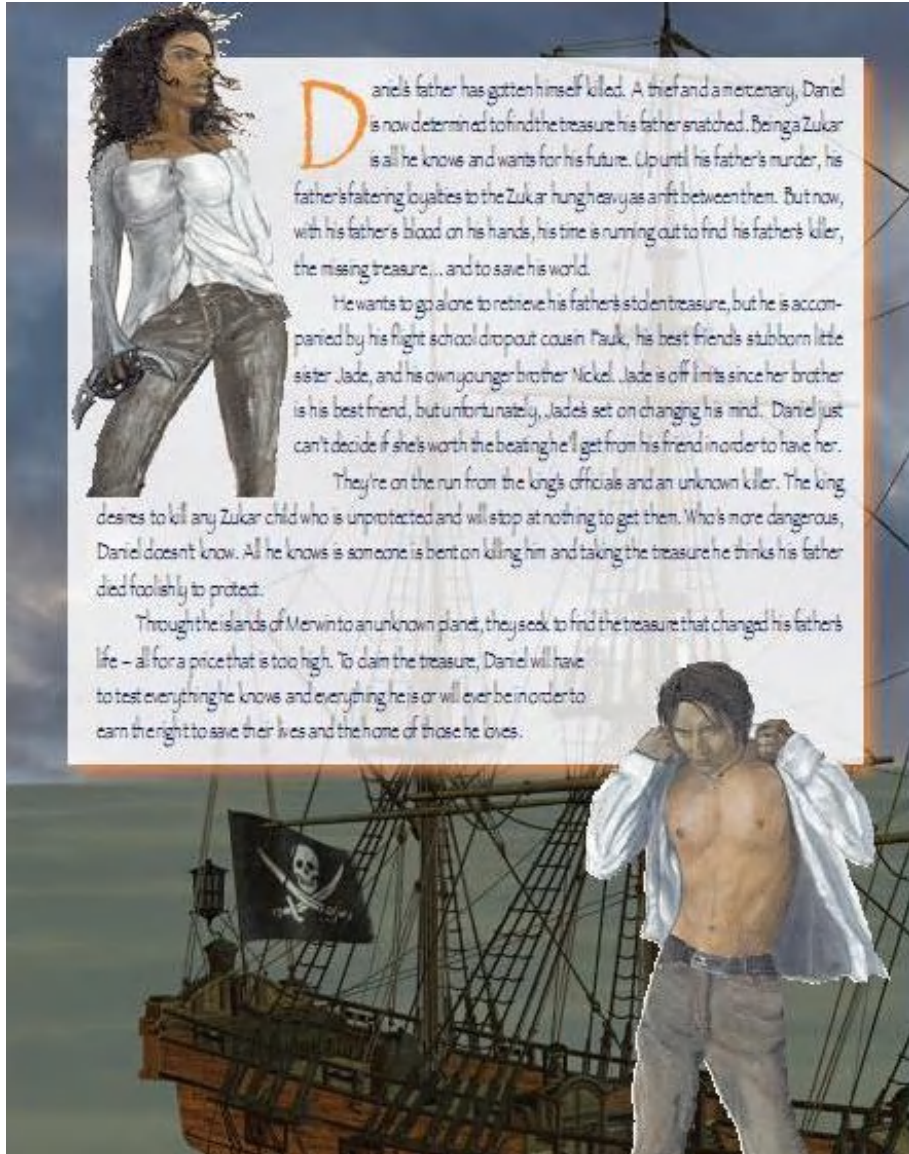


Daniel's father has gotten himself killed. A thief and a mercenary, Daniel is now determined to find the treasure his father snatched. Being a Zukar is all he knows and wants for his future. Up until his father's murder, his father's faltering loyalties to the Zukar hung heavy as a rift between them. But now, with his father's blood on his hands, his time is running out to find his father's killer, the missing treasure... and to save his world.

He wants to go alone to retrieve his father's stolen treasure, but he is accompanied by his flight school dropout cousin Paul, his best friend's stubborn little sister Jade, and his own younger brother Nickel. Jade is off limits since her brother is his best friend, but unfortunately, Jade's set on changing his mind. Daniel just can't decide if she's worth the beating he'll get from his friend in order to have her.

They're on the run from the king's officials and an unknown killer. The king desires to kill any Zukar child who is unprotected and will stop at nothing to get them. Who's more dangerous, Daniel doesn't know. All he knows is someone is bent on killing him and taking the treasure he thinks his father died foolishly to protect.

Through the islands of Merwin to an unknown planet, they seek to find the treasure that changed his father's life - all for a price that is too high. To claim the treasure, Daniel will have to test everything he knows and everything he is or will ever be in order to earn the right to save their lives and the home of those he loves.



BANDITS

LM PRESTON

BANDITS [EXCERPT]

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Chapter 1

Daniel rolled over and punched his pillow. "Ugh! I give up," he muttered.

Sleep always eluded him and tonight was no different. Groomed as a thief and mercenary, his mind was ready to act. Most nights it was hard to shut off. He definitely wouldn't get any sleep tonight with the distant murmur of voices that filled his head and grew louder each second.

"Gambling night," he spat out. Daniel snatched the pillow from under his head and covered his face. It didn't help, the angry voices filtered through anyway. He just didn't get it. Every week it was the same thing. Fights over cheating, his father's outright refusal to take on any snatch jobs, and then the old man getting chewed out. He was sick of his father's screw-ups.

Daniel shook his head at the thought of another late night caused by his dad's weekly game with his friends. He let out a deep breath, threw the pillow aside, and sat up on his bed. "Serves him right," he sneered. "Been picking up his jobs for three years now, and I'm ready for my own territory anyway. I'm finished picking up his slack - I'm done doing it...TONIGHT." He wiped his hand down his face then punched down on the rumpled bed.

Remorse crept up his back. He squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them. Maybe, he should've picked up the load his

father refused to get from Haden. His father's best friend and leader of the EBRA, was sick of his dad's refusal to do his job.

Daniel looked down at the snoring body of his cousin on the floor, and acknowledged that Faulk didn't have the same dirty blond hair, dimples, or gray eyes as he. No, Faulk was different. His mother's Asian features dominated Faulk's face instead. He shoved Faulk's leg out of his way so he could stand. With a *crack* of his neck, he stretched, and then scratched his bare chest.

"Faulk," he smirked, "your parents would kill you if they knew you were hiding out here. Hell, my father may kill *me* when I tell him I let you in." Daniel figured Faulk had the Pierce family's adventurous spirit. Proven fact, since Faulk dropped out of flight school two days before his graduation, only to land on Daniel's doorstep.

Faulk had showed up earlier that day with a sack of wrinkled clothes, his flight school uniform and a stupid grin. Daniel let him in, even though he hadn't seen Faulk in years. The first and last time he'd laid eyes on Faulk was four years ago, when Uncle Kiev came to demand that his father change his criminal ways and come home to Earth. *No way Uncle Kiev would get my old man to change. He'd never give up being a Zukar.* His father had been with the Zukar, a faction of thieves on Merwin ever since he was a kid. Celebrated for his undisputable snatch jobs, his father had become a legend.

The voices in the front room grew louder with angry shouts and the muted sounds of laser fire pierced the air. Daniel's head jerked toward the door, his brow wrinkling. The tingling down his back confirmed this wasn't the typical weekly banter. He pulled

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his gun from beneath his pillow. Gripping the handle of the gun, he crept to the door, and pushed it open. He leaned against the door and tilted the gun up, prepared to shoot. Ready to attack, he was stopped by a call from his ten-year-old brother.

"Psst," Nickel whispered from his bedroom doorway across the hall.

Daniel turned his angry gaze on his younger brother, whose short, light brown hair stood on end. Nickel's gray eyes filled with concern on his rounded face as he shook his head at his brother's stupidity. He gestured in their coded sign language. "No, too many."

Daniel's mouth thinned. He raised his free hand to motion for his brother to stay put, and crept slowly along the wall leading to the front room. Whispered arguments had elevated into shouting. More laser fire went off, and a smoke bomb followed, filling the long hallway with thick smoke before Daniel could make his way down. Daniel held his breath and fought his way through. His eyes burned, and his lungs fought to breathe. He narrowed his eyes and felt around in front of him. With his gun at the ready, he frantically searched for his father in the dull, smoke-filled room.

"Humph! The bastards ran."

Coughs sounded behind him. Daniel knew his brother and cousin were not far behind. The roar of an engine lit the night. He ran toward the front door to pursue the men who fled, but he tripped forward, stumbling over a firm body. He used his free hand to brace himself before falling face first on the floor. The smoke started to dissipate out of the opened door and Daniel didn't have to look at the body to see whose it was. The punch of

dread hit him dead in his chest when he pushed himself back off the slightly rounded stomach of his father's large form.

Daniel held back a sob and swallowed. "Keep Nickel back! Keep 'em back," he yelled. He sat back on his knees and forced his angry eyes to land on his father.

"No! Damn! Who-did-this?" His lips formed a scowl. Tears from the smoke and his grief fell slowly. Balling his fist, he punched down on his bent knees as grief and desolation caved in on him. Anger at his father - even dislike - didn't take away the fact that he loved the old man and wanted him there with them. "Arghhhhhh!" His fist tightened, "I never wanted this. I'll kill them. Why didn't you just yell for help? I would've saved you," his voice cracked. He raised his fists and pushed them against his eyes to stop his tears.

Daniel heard his brother cry behind him. "No, no... *Dad!* Please don't be dead. NO!" Nickel tried furiously to fight his way out of Faulk's firm grip.

Daniel's muscles tightened, and years of training as a thief reminded him to push those sappy feelings of regret down. "Don't let him go Faulk. Not yet." He quickly pulled himself together. His expression grave while he examined his father to see if he was breathing. *Nothing, he's gone. The old man's ...gone.*

With a grunt, he tilted his father's body for a better look, just to be sure. His eyes traveled over his dead father, up and down his back. The finality of his father's fate sat heavy in his gut. The laser left a hole clean through his father's leg, but it was the knife to his heart that ultimately caused his death. His father's body landed with an eerie, lifeless *thump* when Daniel released

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him. Daniel looked at his father's grayish--blond hair and the shocked expression of his death in his eyes, and screamed out. Anger at his father's killers - even at his father's carelessness choked up within him.

Nickel broke free of Faulk and ran into Daniel's back. He collapsed to his knees, laid his head on his father's stomach, and cried in loud, choking sobs.

Putting his sorrow aside, Daniel reached back to console his little brother.

"Daddy, no..no." Nickel cried and kneed the floor in anger. "Why, Daniel? WHY him? *Our Dad?*"

Faulk came and put his hand on Daniel's shoulder. "Daniel, I'm sorry man. I'm so sorry. Maybe...maybe I should call my parents."

Daniel stood up with a glare. "Don't," he forced out the words through gritted teeth. "Your parents don't know this place. They'd make things worse. Trust me -much worse." His mouth thinned as he watched his brother cry.

"You gotta be kidding me! Your father was murdered, right *here*," Faulk pointed to the floor. "Here, while we were in our beds, dude. Cold blooded with us in the house. Who's to say our asses aren't next?" Faulk yelled, and then pushed Daniel's chest.

Daniel grabbed Faulk's shirt, balled it up in his hand and slammed him against the wall. "You came here uninvited. You wanted to live here, but you don't...Look, you- don't- know- the- Zugar. Outsiders stay the hell out of our business. Don't try your Earth logic on this planet. I'll handle it." He jammed his index finger into Faulk's chest. "And by the way, the next time you push

me, you best be ready for a beat down. Now go to my room and pack up my weapons – all of ‘em. I’ll take care of Nickel,” Daniel forced out, trying to hold onto his anger at Faulk’s misplaced judgment. He pushed Faulk into the wall in disgust, and then let him go with a jerk, releasing his wrinkled shirt.

Daniel turned away from Faulk, and then bent down to touch his brother’s trembling shoulder. “He’s gone, Nick, but don’t worry. I’ll take care of you. You know I will.”

Nickel turned to Daniel and hugged him. He sniffled and wiped the tears from his eyes. “I know you will. I’ll take care of you too. Dad wanted me to.”

Nickel gathered his composure and forced a determined expression on his face. “Are we going to the trove? We gotta get to Dad’s stuff before they do. Someone wanted to know where his trove was, but he wouldn’t tell them.” Nickel pulled on Daniel’s arm and whispered. “He told me a secret. Said if anything happened to him, I had to get his journal.”

Daniel’s eyebrow arched up. “His journal? Dad kept a diary, like a girl?” He groaned. “I knew the old man was turning soft.”

Nickel frowned, working up a fierce appearance on his face. “No he wasn’t! Dad wasn’t soft. He was fierce and strong. He could still kick your butt, and you know it.” He glared at Daniel angrily, still upset by the loss of his father, but he didn’t hold the glare long. “Anyways, Dad never got a chance to tell me where he put the journal. Some bastard killed him tonight, before he could.”

“We gotta get out of here. You search for the journal if it’s so important, and I’ll get my gear.” Daniel grabbed Nickel by the

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arm to force him down the hallway so he couldn't go back over to where their father had fallen.

Nickel pulled away. "Okay. I'll look in the lower rooms. That's where he was when I last saw him. He might have had it there," Nickel said before running off.

"Faulk!" Daniel called while he ran down the hall to his room.

His cousin was fervently packing various weapons into their packs. "Yeah? This stuff is ready to go. Anything else?" Faulk took a quick glance around the room.

Daniel pointed to his closet. "Go into the safe in the floor of my closet. Put in 56-23-82-34 and take out all the money there. Hell if I know where we're going, but if things don't turn out well we may have to leave Merwin." He grabbed a green shirt off the floor and pulled it over his head.

Faulk angrily threw down the sack he'd filled. "Leave the planet? What the hell for? We didn't kill your dad. Why do we have to be the ones on the lam?"

"Look, let me make this quick for you goody do right types. Merwin is populated by Zukar from all different galaxies. Any cut-throat or snatcher that wants a safe haven from the law settles here if they can pass the Zukar's members test. It's a planet full of - well, criminals, hit men, and murderers - people who'll do anything for the right price, get my drift?"

Faulk rolled his eyes. "Uh, well I still don't get the danger here."

Daniel shrugged as he looked under strewn clothes for his vest. "Our new King wants us out, off his planet, and many of the

Zukar here won't go without a fight. If we don't find my father's killers before they find us, we'll all be dead or sent to a penal colony on the Planet Uukin. Damned if I know who killed 'im. I just know I don't want us to be next."

"So, we're running from the King and maybe a Zukar?" Faulk asked, raising an eyebrow as he stuffed a knife in his belt.

Daniel put on his vest over his shirt. "My father had a lot of people who hated him - first for his skills and later for his failures. It could've been a Zukar or the King's men. There are different people here every week to gamble. Far as I know, it wasn't even the usual crew, since most of them are out on snatch jobs this time of year. I just thought he was doing his usual weekly gamble bit."

"My parents could help us. They're ambassadors of the Galactic Peace Council."

Daniel pointed at Faulk. "Your parents' power as diplomats for Earth won't help when we get sent to Uukin. Cuz, you came here for an adventure, right? Well it's about time you man up and stop running to your daddy at the first sign of trouble." He grabbed his gun belt and quickly left the room.

He headed to the lower rooms, and climbed down the steep ladder leading downward from the secret door in the floor. "Nickel? Nickel? You find it?"

Nickel was looking under the couch. "No. Freak! I looked everywhere. We can't leave without it. We gotta find it. Dad made me promise."

Daniel started looking around the room and hastily turned over anything that stood in his way. "I remember walking in on

Dad when he was down here. He jumped when I came down, like he was hiding something. He was over there by the mirror.”

Daniel bumped into Nickel and then tripped over Nickel’s foot. He broke his fall by landing in the middle of the mirror. While he righted himself, he saw the mirror under his fingers glow with a strange blue light.

Nickel pointed. “Look! There, on the opposite wall...the picture moved.”

Daniel watched with quiet interest when the picture split in half to reveal a built in shelf. It held a small black book which pushed forward. He took the book out. It felt heavy and thick as the worn pages pushed the black cover up slightly. He flipped it back and forth in his hand for a second and then opened up the first page.

For Daniel and Nick.

Daniel shut the book and put it in his back pocket. He turned to see Nickel staring at him. “Let’s go. We’ve got to get out of here before it’s too late.” Nickel didn’t argue but ran past him to climb up the ladder.

Faulk was waiting at the top of the stairs, and gave Nickel a hand to get up.

Daniel followed Nickel up but purposely ignored his cousin’s outstretched arm. “Let’s go. Now! Get everything to the door,” he ordered, leaping up out of the hole.

Nickel stomped his foot. “We can’t leave Dad like that. We gotta do the Zukar ceremony of death. We have to do it or he won’t rest.”

"We don't have time, Nick. They'll be here soon. We stayed to long already," Daniel said sternly as he pushed Nickel toward the door.

Nickel resisted. He stumbled against Daniel's hard pushes on his back and head to force him forward down the hallway. "No! No, I'm not leaving unless we do it. It's our Dad!"

Faulk looked solemnly at Daniel. "Look, man. I'll pack the car. Give the kid something to remember -a chance for him to say goodbye." With that, he grabbed the bag and left the house.

Daniel gave in and walked with his brother to stand in front of his father's fallen body. "Okay Nickel, let's do it."

They chanted and prayed the Zukar death ritual over their father. Daniel snatched his knife out of his belt and cut off a lock of his hair. He turned to Nickel and did the same. Nickel gathered the pieces and plaited it into his father's long braids.

There was a moment of silence, and finally Nickel dropped down and hugged his father goodbye. He took a deep breath and swallowed hard, trying to be brave. "I'm ready."

Daniel put his hand on his brother's shoulder. He lifted him up and threw him over his shoulder. He tickled Nickel, hoping their old game of capture would take their minds off the grave road ahead of them.

"Put me down! Stop! I'll get you!" Nickel yelled and squirmed.

Daniel slapped him on the leg, a smile tickling his lips. "Keep fighting. You squirt. You'll never be big enough to beat me."

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“When I turn eleven, you’re going down – you just watch,” Nickel replied with a firm smack to Daniel’s head. He laughed out as Daniel seized him with another tickle attack.

“Is that so? Then maybe I need to get all my licks in now,” Daniel chuckled and slapped Nickel’s backside. He forced it out and pushed down the conflicting emotions raging in his chest: pain, anger, and regret filled him whenever he thought of his father. Now, however, all he felt was guilt -and lots of it.

Chapter 2

Faulk was waiting for them in the driver's seat of Daniel's black and gold sports car.

Daniel walked around and opened the curved shining door. Pointing to the passenger's seat, Daniel pushed Faulk's shoulder. "Over. Get in the passenger's seat. Now!" Daniel frowned, angry that his uninvited cousin was slowing him down.

Faulk looked at him stubbornly, refusing to move. "I can drive, dude. I'm a flight school graduate, you know. Besides, this reminds me of those old Lamborghini sports cars on Earth."

"This is better than any old Earth car. Now, move the hell over or I'll ditch your ass right here!" Daniel yelled.

Faulk shrugged and climbed over into the passenger's seat. "You win this time, but I'm not going to ride around and be your lackey. I can help you. I do have skills, you know."

Daniel climbed in and allowed the door to shut. "I'll let you know when I need your skills, cuz. Until then, do what I say so we can live."

Faulk worked the navigator. "You know this planet is so different from Earth and the planet where I went to flight school. It's old fashioned here, rugged."

"Merwin's got over a million islands. It's a Zukar's playground. There's no other place like it in the entire universe - at least not - that I've visited." Daniel pressed his foot on the accelerator.

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The slick, all-terrain car Daniel maneuvered was an older model, but it was the one possession he coveted, given to him by Haden. Ever since his father's snatching skills ran sour, Daniel had tried to pick up the discarded jobs as his father walked away from the reputation he'd built. He had to clean up the jobs and save both of their asses from getting killed for betrayal of the Zukar ways.

He loved his car. The day he got it, his father had almost caused the loss of one of the largest prizes the Zukar had targeted to steal in almost a decade: Corbitzin crystals, enough to power half the planet for fifty years. They were widely sought after for Zukar, and Galaxy Governmental Agents alike.

Daniel's father was the picture of health and strength. Unfortunately, he was the weakest Zukar Daniel knew. His father refused to go with the Blood Hounds, part of the Zukar sect known as EBRA. The first dispatched group of Zukar, whose sole purpose was to secure the target territory. The EBRA used any means necessary to immobilize the snatch site, even if it meant killing all that stood in their way - and that happened more often than not.

His father had argued with Haden and declared, "I won't kill innocent people. I won't do the damn job. Daniel, you're coming with me."

After that, Daniel told his father, "Go to hell," and took over his father's job with the Blood Hounds. His father was determined to throw his career away, and Daniel wouldn't let him drag him down with him. On that fateful day, he'd lost all respect

for his father. *Another mess I had to clean up because you didn't have the balls to finish the job.*

Daniel shook his head in disgust as he drove and reminisced on his final argument with his father. The fingers of guilt crawled from his chest and he swallowed it down. Pushing on the accelerator even harder, he thrust his thoughts of his father away along with the pain of loss that came with them.

The car moved in smooth symmetry through the weaving roads of palm trees and willows of his home Island of Bethan. The streetlights tucked high in the palm trees that flanked the roads lit up as he passed. Few cars passed him in the small populated area of the island.

He glanced at Faulk and thought back to when he'd seen him four years ago. Faulk's father, Uncle Kiev came to demand that his father change his criminal ways and come home to Earth. Daniel snorted then let out a small laugh at the audacity of such a demand. It had been useless for his uncle to insist that he could change his father's loyalty to the Zukar. His father had been with the Zukar, a bandit faction of thieves on Merwin, since he was a kid. Celebrated for his extraordinary talents on snatch jobs, his father had become a legend in his own right. It was too bad his father had thrown it all away.

Daniel picked up speed and maneuvered around a turn on the sandy road. "So why'd you skip out on graduation?" He took a quick peek at Faulk, who was absently looking out the window of the car.

Faulk put his foot on the dashboard and adjusted the seat back. "I just didn't want to stay on with the flight school gig. My

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parents had dreams of me going into politics like them, but that's just not me. I left to run my own life. I'll be eighteen in three months, and this being told-what-to-do bull is getting real old. I knew they would be on their way to the graduation, and the school only gave us the week before graduation off. So, I took my chance and ditched the place."

Daniel elbowed Faulk and laughed out. "I bet your dad's gonna kick your ass when he finds out what you did."

Faulk shrugged. "Seemed like a good time to get the hell out of there, if I ever wanted to run my own life. Otherwise, my parents would've put me in the diplomat program on Earth. I had nowhere else to go. I knew family wouldn't turn me away, right? So I caught a trade ship here and paid my way by working as a kiss-ass to the pilot while messing around with his daughter," Faulk bit the nail on his thumb in thought.

"Hah! You must've stunk as a kiss-ass," Daniel snickered.

"Yeah, a family failing I have is being too much like my Uncle Rayne - stubborn as hell. My dad figures that I'll never be any good, especially if I'm anything like your father," Faulk said while imitating his father's stern reprimand.

"Your dad was a stuck-up prick when I met him. What made him think he could change my father?" Daniel asked before making his turn.

Faulk looked out the window and adjusted his seat back. "I guess he thought your father wanted to change. But then again, he was wrong about that. Especially since he hadn't seen Uncle Rayne since he was a kid." He wiped a hand through his hair. "It was the first time my dad lost control, and let me tell you ... he

never, ever lost control. My mom was real shaken up after that. My dad left pissed and hurt."

"That's why I was shocked as hell to see you standing at my door like you belong here. I gotta hand it to you, Faulk, you definitely have the Pierce family balls, man." Daniel cupped his hand upward before pushing Faulk's shoulder. "Hold on to them, 'cause in the next couple of days, you're gonna need them if you want to stay alive."

Daniel pulled into the driveway of the lone one-story house, slightly hidden by large overhanging branches of surrounding palm trees. Huge, colorful flowers decorated the night, sticking out in various places amongst the plush grass. The house was illuminated by colorful lights tucked in the high trees and the walkway that led to the door.

Faulk leaned forward on the dashboard and asked, "Where are we?"

"My best friend Gabe's house," Daniel replied, staring at the driveway in front of him.

Faulk put his hand on Daniel's chest to stop him from getting out of the car. "Hey, what about his parents? Won't we have to fess up to why we're here so late?"

"No worries. Gabe's parents work nights. They own one of the bars and game dives in town. Gabe, Franz, or Michael are usually home - unless, they had a job to do tonight," Daniel said and sat back in his seat.

"Brothers?" Faulk asked.

"Yeah. They still live at home. Gabe is the youngest boy. Franz the oldest and Michael are living here in between jobs for

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the Zugar. They want to move, but digs for kids in training aren't this good," Daniel said. He looked back in the seat to see Nickel sleeping.

Faulk followed Daniel's gaze to Nickel. "What are we going to do with him?" he asked, motioning his thumb back at his younger cousin.

"Wake his butt up. Nowhere is safe, especially until I ditch this car and get to my father's trove. But to do that, I need keys to a water cruiser. The one we had was wrecked last week during a botched-up snatch job. Gabe's family has a couple, and I know Gabe will let me borrow one. C'mon. Get Nickel and meet me at the door," Daniel said before getting out of the car.

Chapter 3

The plush over hanging leaves that flanked Gabe's house gave it a hidden feeling of seclusion, as if concealed from civilization. It was similar to Daniel's own house in many ways. The rounded roof and inviting door were both things his mother had insisted on. He absently fingered the beaded necklace she'd made for him. She'd wanted their house to be 'one with the island' so her family would feel like they were the only ones on Merwin. Unfortunately, she hadn't lived past Nickel's childhood to see it finished.

Another one dead. Daniel remembered his mother's brown hair, soft green eyes and lilting songs that flowed over him. Her constant shows of affection, bantering with his father, and playful chases around their home brought a bittersweet smile to his face. Daniel's world had changed with her death, and again with his father's murder. Now, he was the only one left to take care of Nickel - thanks to his father.

Daniel walked through the tall, plush foliage surrounding the house. He bypassed the cobbled walkway that he'd helped Gabe build and arrived at the door. He hesitated there for a moment and took a deep breath as the chirping of the seabugs mating sounds filled the night. Usually this would be the perfect time to sit out with Gabe and dream of the worlds they would travel to when they became fully trained EBRA. Tonight, though, he wondered if that dream would become nothing more than a distant memory.

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Lifting his hand, he swallowed before he hit the door with a coded rap. The *bang* was rapid, then slow as its rhythmic beating matched the uneasy symphony of his saddened and angered heart. They'd made up the knock as kids -a joke that became a habit.

A few minutes passed and the door opened. Instead of Gabe, however, Daniel faced Gabe's youngest sibling, Jade. Her jet-black, wild, curly hair was pulled back in her typical ponytail. The curls slipped out and framed her face. Jade pushed a wayward curl away from her wide, cinnamon-colored eyes and looked up at him with her usual dimpled chin.

Jade returned his irritated stare with a smirk. "Come on in." Her gaze traveled behind him to Faulk. "Wait!" Her hand shot out and pressed against his stomach. "Who's that carrying Nickel?" she asked with a skeptical raised eyebrow.

Daniel brushed her hand away. "Uh, that's just my cousin Faulk. C'mon Jade. Hurry up and let us in. Gabe here?"

Jade reluctantly slid out of the way and allowed them inside. "I don't know if he's here, but I'll go check the game room. I need to go get more darts anyway." She gave Faulk a thorough once over before she left the room.

Faulk stared after her with a big grin on his face. "Wow. Who was that? Miss hot and sexy just the way I like 'em. Um-um-um!" He smacked his tongue on his teeth as his eyes drank her in.

"Back off. Her brother's my best friend, so Jade's off limits - like the little sister I never had. Besides, you perv, she's only *fifteen* years old. Her brothers are all built like their father, who's from the Planet Zanden. Those guys there are giants compared to most

Earthlings like you," Daniel added before gave Faulk a reality punch in the arm.

Faulk waved a hand, unimpressed. "Yeah, whatever. We had one of those at our school -all barbaric and muscle, but not a bit of sense in between the you-know-where." Faulk pointed at his head and cocked his thumb like a gun. With a jerk of his head he pretended to shoot, and let out a chuckle. "The sorry muscle head ended up getting kicked out of the program and sent home." He rubbed his hands together. "Anyway, you might see her like a little sister, but no sister of mine looks that good. On top of that, I like challenges -especially when they're that juicy." He sat in the chair facing the hallway in which Jade had left.

Jade returned shortly and smiled then winked at Faulk who sat in front of her. She turned to Daniel and placed a hand on her waist. "You've got a problem. Looks like Gabe sneaked out. He was supposed to help my dad out at the club. Of course, he bailed, claiming he was sick. He got stuck watching me. But he ditched the gig when I told him I wasn't going anywhere. The faker, obviously, he pulled the stunt so he could go to his girlfriend Malera's house." Jade leaned close to Daniel, her nose just under his chin. "You know her right? The one who's the younger cousin of your *much older* morsel of the week, Deana," she laughed out. Saucily, she turned to throw a metal dart at the dartboard right over Faulk's head.

"What the f..." Faulk blurted out with a hop at the *thump* of the dart landing at a bull's-eye above his head.

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Jade laughed and spun back to Daniel. "He's definitely not from Merwin, still a jumpy one. Without a doubt your cousin isn't ready for Gabe, or my other brothers."

Daniel glowered. Leaning forward and placing his elbows on his knees, he faced Jade. "Cut it out with the Deana jokes. I gotta get one of your water cruisers. We had a, uh...a situation, and I gotta get out of here fast and quiet like."

"Oh. Well, in that case, I'll take you to my dad's club to get the keys. He doesn't keep them here," Jade said, and then started to walk toward the closet to get her jacket.

Daniel grabbed her arm and stood. "No you won't." He released her and dragged a hand through his hair in frustration. "I don't have time for these flippin' games. Stop playing around, Jade. You never go with Gabe and me. You know that. So don't try to play me because Gabe's not here." He scowled down at her. "How can I get the keys to the water cruiser? I know your father keeps spares for Michael and Franz."

Jade appeared to grow in height as she challenged him. Fire blazed in her eyes, and her short stature came under the shoulder of his muscled arm. "I'm sick and tired of you butt holes treating me like I'm stupid kid. I'm turning sixteen in just two days, and that will make me just a year younger than you and Gabe. I can handle myself. Besides, there are no spare keys here." She shrugged. "There's no way for you to walk into my father's club without explaining to him why you want the water cruiser. He's used to me getting it for my brothers. So, you can either take my help, or go find your own water cruiser."

Faulk got up and stood behind Jade. "We don't have a choice, dude. Just let her come."

Jade pointed her finger at Daniel. "Listen to your jumpy cousin. At least he doesn't have some macho ego holding him back from accepting help from a girl." She walked away to get her gun and promptly put it on her hip.

Daniel growled and glared first at Jade and then at Faulk. He walked over to Nickel who was asleep on the floor. "Get up. We gotta go."

Nickel didn't budge.

In exasperation, Daniel picked up his sleeping brother. He snatched open the front door, and walked to his car. Without so much as a backwards glance, he knew Faulk and Jade were following behind.

END OF EXCERPT - COMING OUT JUNE, 2011 -
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SPECTRUM *Short Story* by F. Raushawn

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Hello. My name is Damon Fitzpatrick, and I'm a spectrum. In case you don't know what that is, to sum it up, it's a super human given powers by sunlight. See, I wasn't always like this. About year ago, my life was perfectly normal. I had tons of friends, a sexy girlfriend, and a great family. I guess maybe I should tell you what happened, but brace yourself... it ain't pretty.

It all started my sophomore year in high school. I remember it was Wednesday. My brother Tony and I caught the bus to school. I was wearing my American Eagle shirt and a pair of shorts. Although it was winter time, it had been strangely hot for the past couple of months - so hot some days that we couldn't even go to school.

Anyway, when we were getting on the bus, I noticed my brother wasn't feeling too well. So, when we got to school, I took him to the nurse.

While she was checking him out, the bell rang, and the nurse told me to go to class. "You go on now," the chubby, smiling nurse said. "It looks like your brother will have to stay here until your parents pick him up. I'll take good care of him 'til then."

I was a little protective of my brother. After all, he was sick, and he was only a freshman. "Can't I just hang out here with him?"

"That won't be necessary. You better get to class."

"I don't know when they'll be able to get him. It's hard to reach them at their jobs."

She gave me a stern look, and I shrugged.

Seeing that she wasn't going to let me have my way, I went on to Mrs. Livel's math class. It wasn't long before I got bored. I started talking to Nancy, this hot senior. "Hey, girl," I said. "What's up?"

"Hi, Damon," she said with a wink.

"I, uh—" All the sudden, her face grew blurry, and I had to brace myself on my desk to stop the room from spinning. I figured I must've caught whatever my brother had.

"You okay?" she asked.

"I don't know," my voice cracked. The bell rang, so I rushed out of class and headed to the nurse's office when suddenly a giant flash blinded me, the entire school, the whole world. After about ten minutes of blinding light and the burning, there was only pain – so intense I can still remember it. The flashes began to fade, and my eyes started to focus in the darkness. I almost wished they hadn't because the first thing I saw was that everybody around me was dead.

At this point, I was in complete shock, and I couldn't believe what had just happened. The smell of burning flesh was... man, it was sick. My stomach bubbled and gurgled like I was going to throw up, and then it dawned on me – that my brother may be dead as well.

I stumbled, and tears rolled down my cheeks as I choked back vomit. "Tony!" I called out. For some reason, my eyes

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couldn't adjust to the light. The colors had changed. What used to be bright, wonderful colors were now dark, vicious flashes. When I stumbled to the nurse's office, hoping to find my brother, I got the sense something was off, like someone was following me, *hunting* me.

At this point, I was sure I must've been going crazy or in serious danger, so I started to run. Before I could get a single stride in, I was attacked by someone - or more like something. The breathing, the harsh sound of something hungry and crazed burned in my mind. He looked human, sort of, but didn't act or even have the slight sense of being human. This thing jumped on top of me, and drool dripped on my cheek as it snarled. He looked at me like I was his morning snack. *A weapon! Where the heck is a weapon when you need one?* I looked around frantically while I pushed the creature back by the neck. There was nothing, not a stupid thing in sight that I could use to get him off of me.

The dead bodies all over the dang floor didn't help much either. I struggled to get him off me, but the thing took a huge chunk out of my arm. "Ooooh!" I screamed.

It hurt, but I got a surge of strength to kick the creature off of me and ran for my life. How the heck it ran so fast, I don't know. From nowhere, it jumped back on top of me from behind and knocked me forward onto the floor so hard that I literally bounced. This time, I got angry. Something happened then - something I can't explain. A fiery anger exploded from me, and I used all my strength to throw him off of me. And trust me, I had a lot. My body was on fire, or at least it felt like it.

Finally, I was able to get back up. At the time, I didn't realize I hadn't just pushed him off of me, but I had completely torched the thing. His body was on fire as he sat there rolling and screaming.

"Uhhhh, oooh, grrrr!" it wailed as it tried to crawl toward me on the floor. What was left of my clothing was burnt as well. *What the hell just happened?* Then the realization of what I was hit me, and a slight grin ran across my face. *I've always wanted super-powers, and now I have them!*

The feeling of euphoria ended, and my slight enjoyment went away as the fear that my brother and family may still be dead. I began to pick up speed and ran to the nurse's office, praying my brother was like me, praying he had somehow survived.

This time, more open to my surroundings, I was relieved I made it there without running into trouble. When I finally got there, I could already see the door was locked. I hoped that meant nobody had attacked him and he'd gotten away. Slowly, I made my way to the door. As soon as I got my hand on the door, *smack!* I saw light between my eyes and shook my head to recover as I fell back on the floor.

Tony had hit me straight in the face with the door. "Da-mon? Where you been? I'm so glad it's you!"

I recovered and stood up. "It's me. You okay, lil' bro?" If it were any other day, I probably would've punched him in the arm, but right then, I was just happy to see him alive and well.

"Hurry! Get in here. It's safe." Tony pulled me by the arm.

"I don't know what happened, but—"

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"I do. The news said they were videotaping the sun and some weird rays were flickering off and on it. They said the sun was poisoned by a meteor that hit it. After that, everything went bright."

"How did we... why did we survive?" I mumbled to myself.

"I don't know." He slumped down against the door.

I locked it and then took a chair to brace against it. Things were starting to make a little more sense, but I still wondered why the rays didn't kill everyone, why they left us alive. I guess I will never know. It was still unclear how my brother and I had survived the deadly attack, and why there were things - or people - trying to eat us.

"We gotta jack a car and check on Mom and Dad."

Tony looked up at me. "You think they're still alive?"

"If we are, there's a good chance they are too," I assured him.

"Um, you got blood on your arm."

I looked down and realized the bite mark had completely closed over, but dried blood remained. "Something bit me."

Tony looked at me, concern and fear on his face. I felt the same way his face looked. I didn't know what to do.

One year later.....

"All humans ever do is eat, sleep, and die. That's their role in life, but it is finally clear to me that my role is different. I have a true purpose - to extinguish the world of scum and bring the balance back," Tony said with conviction.

“Really? You don’t look much like an angel to me, at least not while we were running those things down to get home.” I turned away from him, lost in my thoughts. Of course it didn’t really make much sense at the time, but now, I truly saw what he was rambling about.

It’s been a whole year since the incident, and I’ve found out a lot about what happened that day, as well the extent of my powers. My brother’s powers complement mine, but there are those out here there that can outsmart us if we’re not on top of our game. Yes, there are others like us too – a whole group of spectrums just like us, only with different powers, are roaming around, looking for others to join forces with them.

Tony, for instance, can slow down time, making all of his movements crisp and precise. I, on the other hand, have a diverse power from anybody in my group. I can change powers based on the colors I see. Red is fire, blue is ice, yellow is super speed, green is super strength, and my last power is silver. I’m not quite sure what that one does yet, but I hope to use it eventually.

“Hey, you wanna get some feeders tonight?” Tony asked.

I smiled at the thought. Feeders are the ones who like to eat off living flesh. The flash caused them to go insane, somehow twisting their brains.

“Cool. I’ll call the others. You sure you ready for this? I could go in your place.”

“No way. I’ve done this before. Besides, you are good backup. Just drop me off up ahead, and I’ll get us some supplies. The gang will be here soon to back us up.”

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"I don't know. I got a bad feeling about this, bro, but I've got your back."

I watched him sneak into the abandoned train station, dialed backup, and sat. Too much time had passed since the others called me back, but finally a call came through from my best friend Enox.

"Damon, there was an ambush. We couldn't save them all. Only two of us can make it to you. The others are going to save Mike and Stacey."

A few minutes later, Enox and Leann pulled up next to me. "What's up?"

"He's been in there too long. His telecom is off. He texted me about ten minutes ago and said he hit a hive but was dealing with it." Although this was a dangerous mission, I was pretty sure Enox, Leann, and I can handle it. Enox is made of pure energy and is as big as a truck. Leann shoots deadly crystals from her hands and can make some massive force fields.

"Let's go." I grabbed a mini-bomb from the back seat of my car and led the others down into the deserted subway station.

We made it in without a hitch, and the moment we hit darkness, the bastards came at us. They'd grown huge over the several months, and the more they ate, the bigger they'd become. There were hundreds of them. *Where the heck are you, Tony?*

"Kill them all!" I yelled.

"Ain't nothin' but a word!" Enox called out and started blowing the crazed feeders up like popcorn.

Yellow light formed in front of me as I headed down the path of dead feeders Enox made for me. When I saw yellow, my

super speed kicked in, and I whizzed through the salivating drones to search out my brother. "Tony? Tony!"

He was trapped, surrounded by over fifty of them. He was fighting, but there were just too many of them for him to kill.

Enox came out behind me, while Leann cleaned up the remaining feeders that blocked our exit.

"Enox, make a hole through them, and when you do, be prepared that all hell is going to break loose."

"Got it! Just say when," he said.

"Leann, I need you to make a barrier around me so I can get to Tony."

"On it, but they're coming fast - from everywhere."

"NOW!" I called out.

Enox started firing them down, the smell of burning rotten flesh filling the room.

Tony yelled out, "Get off me!"

He'd been bitten. I grabbed the neck of the feeder that took the chunk out of Tony's arm and saw red. Fire came out of me and burned the feeder to ashes.

"Crap! Where the hell are they coming from?" I yelled as more seemed to come at us. Leann's force field was weakened.

"The hive's... too big," Tony forced out, weakened from the loss of blood.

"Full power, everyone! Get to the sun and don't look back!"

Leann made her way to us. "I'm giving it all I got!" She put her force field around us.

"Enox, blow the joint! We're safe!" I called out to him.

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Enox smiled. "Damn, I love my job! Brace yourselves! Here I go!"

I grabbed Leann's arm and threw Tony over my shoulder and willed yellow to show. *Yes!* Super speed was on, and I ran us out of there just as Enox incinerated the place.

We cleared the hive and made it to the car. I kept running as I watched for Enox to come out, and then the entire place collapsed.

"Oh God! He's not gonna make it!" Leann cried.

Tony rested his head on the window, and I held back a sob... and we waited.

Hours passed as we sat there and waited for him. Grudgingly, I pulled off.

In the end, Tony, Leann, and I made it out safe. Although Enox didn't make it, we knew we had made our first step to turning the world back to its normal state. Enox didn't die for nothing, and as spectrums, it is our job to clean up the mess the world had become.

About the Author of BANDITS

LM. Preston was born and raised in Washington, DC. An avid reader, she loved to create poetry and short-stories as a young girl. With a thirst for knowledge she attended college at Bowie State University, and worked in the IT field as a Techie and Educator for over sixteen years. She started writing science fiction under the encouragement of her husband who was a Sci-Fi buff and her four kids. Her first published novel, Explorer X - Alpha was the beginning of her obsessive desire to write and create stories of young people who overcome unbelievable odds. She loves to write while on the porch watching her kids play or when she is traveling, which is another passion that encouraged her writing.

You can find out what LM Preston's up to on her blog:
<http://lmpreston.blogspot.com> and new releases
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