

*THE CRESECREN
CHRONICLES*

BOOK ONE

NOVUS

by

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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*To my husband for repeatedly asking,
“Is that book ready yet? I’d really like to read it.”*

NOVUS

PROLOGUE: LIFE

--Their fate was to be no one's son or daughter, no one's brother or sister, no one's father or mother, no one's kin.--

NATURAL DISASTERS. Disease. Climate change. War. In the last three centuries, the world's population has been on a drastic decline. In an attempt to combat these issues and preserve themselves, Humans created those they call Cresecrens. The name stems from the Latin word *crescere*, which means to grow something, to cultivate. Although not Human, they were created in the likeness of Humans. However, they do not share the same privileges. They are prohibited from choosing a life of their own but instead are assigned a set path to serve Humans.

Cresecrens were originally developed for the military to decrease the number of Human casualties, for scientific studies conducted to prolong Human life, and for high-risk jobs such as hazardous material disposal and underground construction to decrease the number of Human deaths. In more recent years, privileged Humans who were motivated by greed or an increased sense of entitlement began using Cresecrens as domestic servants.

Cresecrens were designed to be distinguishable from Humans. Their eyes were genetically engineered to be a striking deep violet, unlike those of any Human. In later years, they were also given plainly visible permanent markings on their jawlines so there is no mistaking or confusing who they are. These markings are codes the color of coal that show their birthdate down to the exact second.

Humans implemented a lethal plan to discourage Cresecrens from removing their markings. If that should happen, either accidentally or intentionally, the Cresecren would suffer an untimely and agonizing death. Additionally, this plan insured that Cresecrens would never forget who they were.

All Cresecrens follow the same twelve-year developmental process. They spend the first five years of their lives in a life-sustaining cocoon. This coma-like state is referred to as "Limbo." While in Limbo, they develop physically in the same way as any Human. Feeding tubes provide sufficient nutrients, and electrodes attached to the brain feed them knowledge of their own existence. In addition to basic life needs, they develop motor skills and speech during these important Limbo years.

At the end of the fifth year, Cresecrens are released from Limbo to a secure facility and allowed to interact with Human researchers and scientists. This is when they first eat solid food and learn to balance themselves. These years are also vitally important because they learn all that is necessary to prepare them to be released into the real world to their assigned placement. In their eleventh year, Cresecrens learn the identity of the Human

organization or family they will serve. The next twelve months are dedicated to studying all there is to know about being a valuable Cresecren to this particular organization or family.

Then they receive their birthday markings and become a permanent part of the organization or family. By this time, they should be fully aware of their sole purpose for existence: to spend their lives serving Humans by doing what Humans could not or would not do.

Cresecrens who did not fulfill their purpose—by becoming too old or maimed to continue to be of service or too stubborn to mind who they were meant to serve—are cast out into Crescencren camps where they will remain until they die. These camps are self-governing and are periodically monitored externally by Humans via surveillance cameras. In the remnants of the Northwest region of North America, those camps are Gavaron and Solitare.

ANTICIPATION

IT WAS my birthday—the anniversary of the day I was made, of the day I was given life, of the very moment I was created to serve—and Alecander was late. Alecander is twice my age and we share the same dark hair. We bonded, although bonding is not normal Cresecren behavior. He took me under his wing the moment I stepped on the beach of Gavaron over two years ago. Alecander was the closest thing I had to a father.

I eagerly awaited my visit to the Conservatory but I had promised Alecander I would wait for him before I entered the ship. Going to the Conservatory is a birthday tradition in Gavaron. When we lived among Humans, our birthdays were never celebrated. In Gavaron, the elders decided we should have something to look forward to and celebrate. Every year on our birthday, we trade one of our items for a new one at the Conservatory. The object is to find something more useful than the one claimed the year before.

I thought about the Rawnetts, the Human family I had served and how I endured yearly ridicule from the twins. They teased me relentlessly about how I spent the beginning years of

my life. I was particularly relieved at that moment, knowing I did not have to hear their taunts again.

I caressed the weathered hard cover of the book I had read over and over in the last three hundred and sixty-five days. I recited the first passages by heart while I waited. Some might have thought it a foolish choice. However, it had proved itself useful in many ways: entertainment, survival, and research. I would miss it.

I grew antsy and began to study my home by the sea. There was not much to admire. It was once a land full of foliage and rich in resources. At first glance, someone who looked at the main entrance to the underground quarters of Gavaron might have mistaken it for an ancient shipwreck, but in reality it was once a pirate-themed restaurant. I stood on the deck, my preferred entrance to our underground housing. I thought about when the first Cresecrens were banished here and had to make do with what was already present on the land. I imagined the mostly elderly Cresecrens who were no longer able to work trying to build a suitable place to live. Because of an overseas tsunami, they reaped some fortune out of others' misfortunes by using items washed up on shore. Eventually, the federal government did lend a hand in making Gavaron more habitable. We had since encountered aftereffects from other tsunamis and continued to collect useful items that claim our beach.

I saw how seventy-eight years of over-utilization and a growing population of my people had taken their toll on my surroundings. I recalled hearing about the disasters such as the

Great Fire which destroyed seventy percent of our orchards and the Great Flood of '99 that almost obliterated our homes. I wondered where I would have ended up if it had destroyed everything. There were close to three hundred of us in Gavaron and we were only allowed to inhabit certain areas.

My mind wandered for a while until it returned to thoughts of Dahsie and the Conservatory. Dahsie was one of the many Appointed in charge of different sections of Gavaron. She was the Conservatory Appointed and took her position very seriously. I do not believe she ever left the undergrounds of Gavaron since the death of the previous Appointed just before my arrival. No doubt she would be disappointed I was tardy. Courtesy of Alecander, I would probably have to listen to a scolding before she let me enter.

I peered down into the hull, but the weathered crimson couch was empty. *Where are you, Alecander?* As I took a step back to leap down onto it, I heard my name from behind. I recognized the voice instantly. Alecander's.

"You're late," I said.

He smiled. "You waited."

"Of course. I said I would. Now get on with your speech about what you think I should and should not do today. Dahsie awaits," I said, knowing full well I would have entered the ship had Alecander been one more second late.

"Yes, we mustn't keep her waiting." Alecander reached into his russet satchel and handed me a brown paper bag.

"A present?"

“Yes.”

“No one has ever given me a present,” I said, as if he did not know.

“Open it.”

Whatever was inside was light. I unfolded the bag gently, trying not to crumple it.

“You won’t break it,” Alecander said with a sly smile.

It was a Supply Appointed Assistant’s neck flag, deep purple and soft. I immediately recognized it as a symbol of freedom. Well, as far as freedom could extend its hand to me. The deep purple represented the color of Cresecren eyes. The neck flag was a pass to the outside world for Cresecrens from the camps. Alecander and I were to wear them like necklaces while we traveled to gather supplies. Before we were allowed to enter the Supply Depot, we were to hang them on the end of a flagpole. This informed others of our presence.

I loosened my grasp to allow it to slide down my fingers, draping into a rectangle.

“Where did you get this? Is this why you were late?”

“You are welcome, and yes.” Alecander’s smile engulfed his face.

I asked what I already knew. “You were chosen to be the Supply Appointed?”

“Yes, last night. I was summoned to the Supply Depot. I received my own neck flag and one for the assistant of my choosing.”

“You chose me,” I said, more as a statement rather than a

question, suddenly comprehending that the flag would allow me to enter forbidden terrain, the land outside these invisible walls, the land of the Humans!

“There is no better person.”

“Thank you.” I gasped the words I had used before but rarely meant. This time I truly felt their meaning.

“You’re welcome. Blynn and Phillip, the old Supply Appointed and her assistant, have been transferred. I didn’t get all the information but I gathered that yet another Crescren ground is being built down south. We leave tomorrow at 4AM for the Supply Depot. It would be wise if you go to bed early tonight.”

Go to bed early? I did not think I would sleep a wink as I eagerly awaited the morning to come. The excitement almost kept me away from my thoughts of the Conservatory. I gently placed the neck flag in my satchel. I did not see Alecander’s flag but I trusted it was safely in his own satchel.

“Alecander, give me your speech. I wish to enter the ship,” I reminded him. Each year, he told me about how much I had grown both physically and mentally. He also felt the need to remind me about what he thought was a good birthday choice.

FREEDOM

*C*HOOSE WISELY. Use your head not your eyes. Alecander's words echoed in my mind as I jumped down into the ship onto the tattered couch. I have long since perfected this art. I do not get bruises nor roll off the couch onto the floorboards any more. I peered down and saw that the ladders were empty. However, Famous was working his way up the rope pull. Famous is not his real name. He used to serve the rich and famous Quinso Vardo, giving him a never-ending supply of outlandish stories of lavish parties and the endless flow of seductive women. There was outrage in the common knowledge that Quinso wanted to put his mark on anything the world had to offer regardless of the consequences. He was willing to dabble in any business, including pharmaceuticals, despite having no formal experience in the field. Quinso began receiving death threats when one of the drugs he developed had irreversible adverse effects. Unfortunately, Famous was the Cresecren selected to open all packages, check all vehicles. Anything and everything passed through him first. That is how Famous ended up in Gavaron without lower legs and an incredible story about how he

lost them.

“How’s it going, Cayden?” Famous called up.

“I’m late for the Conservatory,” I answered quickly before Famous began another of his tales.

“Excellent! Is it that time already?” he said, reaching my eye level and reading the codes on my jawline. “You’re late. Dabsie has probably already rubbed the fur off of her mangy cat’s head.”

“Probably,” I said, grinning to myself as I realized Alecander would receive payback for making me late. *He* would have to listen to one of Famous’ outlandish tales. “Alecander is outside. If you hurry you can catch him,” I said.

“Don’t choose anything I would choose,” he said to me, winking.

I leapt down the last few steps to the gritty ground. Sprinting to the Conservatory stairs, I recalled my first birthday selection after arriving in Gavaron. I had searched for over two hours for the perfect present. I nearly drove Dabsie mad with the cast-iron rod I lugged around, poking and prodding the precious commodities. There were many things to choose from, like cloth material, baskets, and tools. Afterwards, I left with that very rod, thinking I could choose no better. It was not the best choice I could have made but I still used the rod on a regular basis. For example, I entertained myself by either swatting rocks into the sea or at targets in the forest. I also tied a line to it and used it to fish.

The Conservatory was the most illuminated area of

Gavaron. It was located above the walkways of our living quarters, lighting most of its surroundings. The walls, doors, and floors of the Conservatory consisted of heavy-duty shatterproof glass. I entered the doors and was greeted by Dahsie's shaming eyes, partly hidden beneath her wild gray locks. I could see her assistant Kayella shaking her head and giving me a playful but timid grin. Kayella is a half-year younger than me but she looks older. Working beside Dahsie will do that.

Lucky for me, my scolding was short-lived. Dahsie had an appointment to get to. She scooped up her cat Elza and left.

"You shouldn't have been late," Kayella shyly giggled, shaking her auburn hair over her violet eyes and then sweeping it back into place.

"I have Alecander to thank for that," I answered.

"You should be thankful Dahsie's scolding wasn't long-winded," Kayella said.

"Yes, I am SO thankful that Elza had an appointment," I said. Dahsie took her to the veterinarian who was not really a veterinarian. He had worked with many animals on the farm of the Humans he served. It eased Dahsie's mind to refer to him that way.

I handed Kayella my book and she looked at it expectantly. "You chose a book last time?" She checked her records to confirm.

"Well, I can read," I stated as though she did not know that all Cresecrens could read as part of our training for service.

Although books were rare, they still existed. Among the Humans, some are immensely valuable.

Kayella pointed to a shelf where a couple of books were lying and asked, “Will you choose another?”

“Maybe. It is as good a place as any to start,” I said as I scanned the vast Conservatory and clutched my book for the last time. I thought about Alecander’s practicality in choosing a flashlight on his last birthday. He spent many nights wandering the beach and sleeping above ground. I doubted that my choice would be as practical.

On my way out, nearly three hours later, I felt I made a foolish choice. In fact, I was sure of it. I glanced down at my satchel and sighed. *Alecander will surely speak his mind.* My thoughts were interrupted as I passed Dahsie holding her prized kitten and someone I did not recognize, a newcomer I felt sure. My eyes caught sight of his jaw markings. His creation date did not match the current day. Curious, I paused and looked back over my shoulder as I exited the Conservatory. He reached Dahsie’s counter and pulled something out of his satchel. Dahsie examined it closely. She nodded and gestured toward the array of objects. Whatever he offered Dahsie, she wanted. I had heard of this kind of trading but had never attempted it myself. I did not think I had anything Dahsie would want and could not think of anything to give up.

I braced myself for Alecander’s didactic words as I received my meal of oatmeal with apples and a glass of watered-down milk in the Cafeteria. There were several schedules for eating.

Each of us was allowed two meals every day. Alecander and I ate mid-morning and mid-evening. If we had any success hunting, our stomachs rejoiced. Chances were we would be eating at the Cafeteria most of the time since the food supply in the vicinity was scarce. We hunted more for entertainment and fresh air rather than the game. There was also fishing but the areas where we were permitted to fish had a low supply of edible sea creatures. We were not starving but from time to time we would find ourselves hungry.

I was thankful the food shortage happened the year before my arrival. For two months, President Zantham, a Human, decided to make an example out of my people for the growing number of rejected Cresecrens entering the camps. He feared Cresecrens were purposely acting out to escape from their duties. He wanted to ensure that we did not evade the purpose for which we were created. An independent group of peace activists who call themselves The Truce fought for our rights to receive food. The supply was regenerated but not without subtle reminders that the government was in control.

I found Alecander at our usual table with Bentum and Aurora. Bentum and Aurora are an older couple, one of the few mates in Gavaron. Aurora cannot see and Bentum cannot hear, so naturally they found each other. As I sat down, the table wobbled and I realized this time I would not be leveling it with my book. I immediately put my glass of milk to my lips to avoid talking. The last thing I wanted was the inevitable conversation with Alecander. I did not want to be made to feel like

a child in front of the others.

Alecander lowered his eyebrows and looked at me, but Aurora spoke first. “What did you choose?” I was always impressed by how she knew I was there, no matter how quietly I approached.

I cleared my throat and tried to think how I would explain my decision. I still could not think of a convincing answer. “A map.”

“A map?” Alecander asked.

“Of Gavaron? What would you need one of those for? You know this place like a baby knows his mother,” Aurora said.

Alecander’s eyes told me he knew the map was not of Gavaron. I shifted in my seat uncomfortably.

“He has a map of the Den,” Alecander told Aurora.

The Den is the world we can no longer enter without being an Appointed or summoned. It became its name by definition and reality: the lair of a wild, usually predatory animal.

Aurora’s hand was as white as our reconstituted milk as she took Bentum’s ebony hand. She wanted to be sure he caught everything. He had almost perfected the art of lipreading. Bentum had lost his hearing a little over a year ago after being exposed to toxins while working with developers of a new kind of fuel. He was no longer fit for his duties working for a researcher or able enough to be put back into the Cresecren training pool. Thus, he was placed in Gavaron. Once Aurora had Bentum’s attention, she began signing. Through watching them, I have learned to recognize many signs. When she signed “map,” I

looked at Alecander.

“Why would you want a map of the Den? Becoming my assistant does not suddenly give you free rein of the outside world. You know we are to follow the strict route. Foolishness!” Alecander said scornfully.

I answered truthfully. “I wanted it. I felt compelled to take it, or perhaps it fascinates me. I do not know exactly why I chose it.”

“You *guess* it fascinates you? Did you miss your mark and hit your head this morning when you leapt into the hull of the ship?” Alecander asked, irritated. “Anything else in the Conservatory would have been more useful!”

I could see Aurora’s hands moving quickly to relay the conversation to Bentum, who expressed amusement. Despite her faulty vision, there was a twinkle in Aurora’s eyes. It seemed as if she could see right into my brain and dissect my thoughts.

Aurora is quite stunning with her fiery, wavy red hair. She wears it long past her shoulders even though it would be easier to care for it if it were short. Bentum keeps her well-manicured and as clean as one could be, living in those quarters. Their relationship is the closest thing I had ever seen to love in Gavaron. Aurora arrived here mere months before Bentum. She had worked for one of the many scientists who tried to find the fountain of youth in the form of a pill. Aurora was a test subject. She is grateful she was only blinded as a result of the testing and did not meet the same end as the scientist. Most of the world believes he died after taking the drug voluntarily.

However, he actually died by the hands of The Truce, the small group of Humans who advocated for Cresecren rights. They helped the scientist to “test out” the drugs on himself. Aurora was questioned but she answered truthfully when she said she saw nothing.

After all that Aurora has been through, her greatest fear in life is that she would live forever.

“There has been talk of our being able to go wherever we wish in the future,” I said, my voice unsteady.

“This talk you speak of has been going on for decades. Look at my lips as I say this. It is *never* going to happen! Besides, even if there were a chance, you know very well that those maps are not complete,” Alecander replied.

“Oh, let him have his fun!” Aurora laughed. Bentum’s broad shoulders rode up and down as he chuckled along with her.

“I will eat the rest of my breakfast with the sane!” Alecander growled as he got up and stalked away. I watched the table wobble as he exited the Cafeteria.

DEATH

THAT NIGHT in my chamber, I lay in my rest pod, impatient about the next day. I scanned the room for something to entertain my mind, using only the dim light shining under my chamber door. The Conservatory stayed lit all through the night in case someone was created during those hours. I climbed out of my pod and pulled it down into a sitting position in front of my desk. My chamber was very small, and I never got used to the confined area. I wished then that I had a mate so I would have had a larger area to pace. Or, if nothing else, someone with whom to share my thoughts. There were rare occasions when a Cresecren took a mate but it was based on survival, not love. Bentum and Aurora were lucky to have one of the few mate chambers. Mine was simple: a crate in the corner for visitors or more likely for Alecander to sit when we played chess. Those games filled many of our nights. We used the hefty storage trunk as a table. I would pull my pod next to it and we took turns sitting on the crate and pod. The trunk stored my meager clothing, some hunting tools, and Human remains—in the sense they were the remnants of Human

civilization on Gavaron soil. I could get a drink of water or clean up in the sink nestled into the stone wall. Above the sink was a shelf and a small mirror above that. A hook for my satchel hung above the crate and completed the eclectic design. *Ah, home sweet home.*

I fumbled with the map on the desk. I was surprised that such a seemingly insignificant item had caused such a stir. I pushed it aside, pulled the chessboard off the shelf and set up the pieces. I remember the week Alecander and I spent making the game. We carved the pieces and board from an old fallen pine. I cringed, remembering the splinters I had gotten. Before I could place the pawns on the board, I heard banging on my door which caused me to knock over my king. *Of course! Alecander is not even playing and he wins!* He almost always did. On those few times he lost, I thought he was just letting me win. I assumed he must be at my door because he wanted to play a game. He must not have been able to sleep either.

I slid the door open to find Kayella standing wide-eyed. She looked shaken, beads of sweat covering her forehead. Her arms were crossed in a protective position, and one finger twisted a lock of her auburn hair.

“Kayella? What happened? Are you hurt?” I asked as I pulled her inside and glanced both ways down the seemingly deserted corridors. I slid the door shut.

“What is it, Kayella? Did Dahsie do something to you?”

“No!”

I waited patiently and offered her my rest pod. She

remained standing, staring ahead.

She swallowed. “You have no reason to believe me. None at all. Ever since I can remember, my dreams have reflected reality. They are jumbled and I never remember the entire dream but something always stands out and I see it come true.”

“Why has this brought you here?”

“You can’t go into the Den to the Supply Depot. At least, I feel you shouldn’t go.” Kayella rubbed her forehead with the sleeve of her blouse.

“Let me get you a drink.” I pulled down a metal can and filled it with water.

Before I turned around, Kayella’s hand was on my arm. Her footsteps were so silent that she startled me. I pivoted to look at her as she spoke a single word hauntingly. “Death.” Kayella looked so serious that I did not speak my initial thought of “nonsense.” Instead, I handed her the can and asked her to tell me about her dream.

“It won’t make any sense to you. How can I explain something I don’t understand? They are bits and pieces of a puzzle.” Kayella became flustered, her hand began to tremble, and water sloshed to the floor. “I came because I felt I needed to warn you not to go tomorrow.” She grabbed my arm tightly. “Have someone go in your place. I have to go and warn Alecander.” She dropped the can into the sink, splashing water along the wall. Before I could stop her, she ran out the door and down the corridor. I stood there, taken aback. The Kayella I knew was timid and sweet. I knew nothing of this Kayella.

Death. Such an ominous word. Is it that I might die? Or Alecander? What exactly had Kayella seen? Did it even matter? It was probably a nightmare and she was feeling the aftereffects, perhaps even sleepwalking and talking. I had no idea how Kayella came to be in Gavaron. Perhaps the reason was disturbing the Humans she served in the middle of the night. I decided to let Alecander deal with Kayella when she shared her dream with him. I was not going to give him an excuse to keep me from going into the Den. I returned to my pod and I lay awake another hour before falling asleep.

Outside the Vehicle Grotto where the cargo vehicle was kept and which also contained the only other entrance to the underground living quarters, I again arrived before Alecander. It made two days in a row that I had beaten him. *I had better not make a habit of it or he will expect it.* I felt surprisingly refreshed, despite having only slept a few hours. I grew antsy as I waited. It was nearly 4AM and the early-morning heat was beginning to replace the night chill. The day before was nearly ninety-five degrees and I wondered if it would top one-hundred on this day. Spring had finally ended. I never looked forward to the scorching summer months. This was one of the reasons we Cresecrens decided to build underground, mimicking the Human movement. The sun also aided us in our transportation for without it we would have had to figure out another way to receive our food rations. Our cargo vehicle is mainly powered by the sun. The night before, the vehicle was loaded with items to trade at the Underground Market. It was a place where anyone

could buy, trade, or sell items to or from vendors. Trades were made with handmade items or found possessions for items some of us needed desperately or desired greatly. For some Cresecrens, it was all they thought about. Famous traded hand-crafted wooden bullets for cheap bottles of wine. He said the wine reminded him of the good old days. He may have forgotten that he used to drink fine wine from Quinso Vardo's private reserve, not the cheap wine he gets from the Underground Market.

Supply Appointeds are only allowed in the Underground Market one day a month, after they gather food rations, basic toiletries, and medical provisions at the Supply Depot. Anything from the Underground Market would have to be traded for since Cresecrens had no money. Before we left, Alecander would have made a list of those things desired from the Market. I have never made anything to trade or traded anything I owned because I have never needed anything more than what I already had. I thought about making another chess set but I could not think of anything I really wanted. However, this day I rummaged through my storage trunk and took out a shark's tooth, which I found on the shore over a year ago. I always meant to do something with it but never made the effort before. My stomach quivered with excitement, as I had not left Gavaron for so long. I had not seen a Human in a long time. I needed to keep myself in line as my freedom one day a month was at stake.

“Early, are we?” Alecander said.

“I will not make a habit of it!” I cracked a smile, noticing that he had a bulky handwoven backpack in addition to his satchel. I had heard that the Supply Appointed were fed well on their travels. I was certain that food was inside the backpack. I made a mental note that Alecander did not mention the map of the Den and patted my satchel as I entered the cargo vehicle.

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

OUR SOLAR POWERED vehicle could go just twenty-five MPH. It almost felt as if jogging would be faster. Apart from eating and staring out the window at the mostly barren land, I slept most of the way. Our conversation about Kayella had been brief. Alecander never saw her the night before because he had chosen to sleep under the stars. When Alecander inquired what Kayella had wanted, I did not tell him the whole story. He passed it off as a vivid nightmare. Remembering her wild eyes made me briefly question my decision to enter the Den.

Five hours after setting out, we finally neared the Depot. Alecander began poking me to make sure I was awake. About a mile from the gates, we exited our vehicle and were met with a blast of heat. There were three flagpoles: one for Gavaron, one for Solitare, and one for the new site being built down south. From the middle pole, two neck flags already dangled with little wind to cause any movement. The Appointeds from Solitare, up north, were already there. After hoisting our flags, we got back in our vehicle and drove to the gates.

The flags signaled the Supply Depot we were there for our

monthly visit. They had extra precautions to make sure we were in fact expected guests. The Supply Depot had issues in the past with riots from the hungry. Guards at two towers stood steady with their guns fixed on us. Devices came down on either side of the vehicle, scanning our violet eyes and our bar-coded faces.

“The government takes food supply very seriously,” I said.

“Hush boy, stay still. If they can’t confirm who you are, they’ll shoot you and then ask who you were,” Alecander replied.

I remained silent, afraid to breathe until they confirmed our identities. We parked in our designated spot. We were approached by two armed guards whose weapons were not drawn. They escorted us into the building, which was essentially an enormous warehouse. Its white walls were so different from the dusty walls of Gavaron and reminded me just how far away from home I was.

“Thank you, gentlemen. I’ve got it from here,” Alecander said when he reached the desk of a shaggy-haired man.

The guards walked off without as much as a shrug.

“Gavaronians?” The man did not look up from his chair.

“Yes,” Alecander answered.

“Let me just sign you in and you can start collecting your handouts.” The man’s tone was insulting as he looked up at us with a sneer.

My nails dug into the underside of the desktop and I bit my lower lip. I grew warm despite the air-conditioned room. *Do NOT screw this up! Remember this is freedom.*

“We are grateful for what we are given,” Alecander replied graciously. If he was aggravated, he gave no indication of it.

“Seems to me like we give YOU people enough. A portion of my pay goes to taxes that fund the likes of you. I can’t even afford to pay for one of you to work for me part-time yet I still have to pay to keep you alive.” A vein pulsed between his eyes.

I bit down harder on my lip. Alecander remained composed. “May we go on now?”

“Sure, sure. Can’t stand to look at you any longer anyway!” the man said, turning his back to us.

I imagined myself hurtling over the desk and ensuring that he could not look at the likes of my kind again.

We found most of our supplies ready to load. Someone said that our medicine was behind schedule because some items needed to be cleared. Probably Famous’ potent painkillers, I thought. The Cresecrens from Solitare had almost finished loading their vehicle. They were a lanky older woman and a young man with curly red hair, probably no older than me.

They seemed all business and did not look in our direction until they were finished. The young man walked over to us while the woman watched. He said condescendingly, “We’ll have first pick again at the Underground Market. Gavaron should at least try to give us a run. Only the best for Solitare!” He scurried back to the woman and shared a chuckle with her. They jumped into their cargo vehicle and headed for the Underground Market.

“I did not know it was a race,” I grumbled.

“It’s not. However, they are right. They will have first pick,” Alecander replied.

I will see about that next month!

One of the Humans caught my eye because she was so much younger than the others. She was much more enthusiastic and energetic about her duties. She demanded attention like a lone wildflower in spring among a field of lifeless grass. Even her attire was out of place. Everyone else wore matching ill-fitting black and brown uniforms. She wore lemon-colored shorts and a pale blue tank top which flattered her crystal blue eyes. Her golden tresses were pulled back loosely into a ponytail.

I must have been watching her closely for the better part of an hour. Finally, she walked up to me with the container of medical supplies and said, “If you are going to stare at me, we should at least be on a first-name basis. My name is Linnayah.” She smiled.

My face and neck grew hot. “My name is Cayden. I apologize if I am making you uncomfortable. I am just curious. You do not seem to mesh with your current surroundings.”

“Oh, you mean those drab uniforms?”

“And the fact that you are less than half the age of everyone else working here. And there are other noticeable differences.”

Alecander called over to me and said he would be back in a few minutes. I nodded and watched Linnayah watch Alecander exit. Not surprisingly, Alecander would draw this response from a female. He was created to have the appearance of an Adonis. I

surprised myself when I wished at that moment Alecander would trip.

“I don’t work here. I am volunteering,” Linnayah said.

“Volunteering?” I repeated.

“Yes, some of us still attend school regardless of the majority of the world’s view, and we have reports to do. My report is titled ‘Supply Day.’ I know, it’s not very creative. Anyway, I want to be educated. It still has meaning to me, unlike some of my generation who choose to work or those who take things that aren’t theirs to survive.”

“Are you referring to Pillagers?” I asked. She shifted her weight on her feet but did not reply.

Pillagers are the lowest form of Humans. They prey on others even though their victims are in no better position than themselves. They take as much as possible as fast as possible, wrecking anything or anyone standing in their way. They manage to elude the law, very careful to cover up their tracks.

“Thanks for the help,” I said, trying to be polite.

“No problem.” As she leaned in a little closer, my toes dug into my soles. Her whisper caressed my ear. “I slipped in a couple extra bags of oats and a jug of milk.” She winked. “Don’t tell.”

I was not used to a Human being that close or that generous before. I just stood there, staring back at her.

“There you go again, staring! If I wasn’t a confident person you would give me a complex.” Linnayah bent down, lifted up a box and handed it to me. I took it and loaded the last of the

boxes into our cargo vehicle.

For the remainder of our time in the Supply Depot, I tried hard not to look for Linnayah but failed miserably. I could not help it, she fascinated me. *Why would she give us anything extra to eat? Why risk getting in trouble? Where does she live? What is her family like? Where does she go to school? I would like to read her school report sometime. Would she get high marks for it? Will I see her again?*

Alecander went to see the shaggy-haired man to sign us out of the Supply Depot. He left me behind to spare my fingernails and the man's well-being. I did not see Linnayah anywhere, as I had lost track of her. *Where did she go? Will I see her once more before I leave? What is the matter with me? What am I doing? Caring about what a HUMAN is doing. Maybe Alecander is right in calling me ridiculous yesterday.* I climbed into the cargo vehicle and did not permit myself to look back.


~~~~~ End of Book Excerpt ~~~~~



Award-winning author **Crystal Marcos** lives on the Kitsap Peninsula in Washington State with her husband and their daughter Kaylee. *Novus*, her third book and first Young Adult novel, is book one of The Cresecen Chronicles.

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