

“Omicron, Part I: Cerberus Rising”

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Dedication

This one is for my (likely very few) readers. Thank you for your patience during the long, arduous process of writing another story.

To my “Scottish family” down South: Chapter 3 is for you.

Acknowledgments

The idea behind a particular four-legged character was inspired by a real dog. He was owned by a friend in the South and is responsible for converting me more into a “dog person.” Until him, I had never seen such expression in an animal’s face or eyes. He also had a calm and regal way about him instead of a hyperactive, “in your face” disposition.

I must also give his owner kudos for the phrase “little one,” which I occasionally use in this story.

Author's Note

First and foremost: please remember that this is a work of fiction. There are a lot of scenes involving angels and demons. This is especially true in Part II and Part III because the spiritual and physical realms begin merging as Time draws to a close. Do not think that real warfare happens the way it does in this book. This is a sci-fi/fantasy novel written to inspire people, provide an escape from their troubles, and take them on a fantastic adventure. My knowledge and belief in spiritual beings are based on what is written in Scripture. However, while Scripture offers a few glimpses and words about angels and demons, it remains an unknown subject overall.

Some Christians and theologians get an idea or belief in their heads about these beings. They can become very adamant and try to spread it—even if there's no Scripture explicitly supporting their ideas. We have a way of focusing on topics that the Bible is silent about or offers little information on and expounding on them with truths of our own. This is unfortunate and potentially dangerous and destructive. If it's not plainly written in Scripture, don't present added ideas as truth. Ultimately, what matters is: there are angels and demons. Satan (formerly Lucifer) is real. We know this because Christ mentions them. If we don't believe in their existence, then we make Christ out to be a liar.

I reiterate: this is a fiction work. I do believe that we can't imagine how the seen and unseen affect each other. I also agree with what C.S. Lewis wrote, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." I believe what awaits in eternity is epic beyond reckoning, but we must be careful not to get pulled into something false.

Second disclaimer: I write that there are three Overseers, three to offset the Three in the Trinity. I realized that some people may have no idea what the Trinity is, only have a vague idea about It, or misunderstand It.

I need to make a clarifying point on this subject because the Trinity is crucial to Christian faith. It isn't identified explicitly in Scripture, but Its basic truths can be

reasonably understood. The Trinity is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but that doesn't mean there are three gods. There is still only one God. Yahweh is One. Paul Enns uses the term "Triunity" or "three-oneness" to express this uniqueness. He writes, "The Trinity is composed of three united Persons without separate existence—so completely united as to form one God. The divine nature subsists in three distinctions—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Enns, 2008, p. 203).

We could provide examples of this all day and never find one that perfectly reflects this mystery. The Trinity can be described as three different glasses of water poured into one bowl. Or one atom has protons, electrons, and neutrons. The Trinity is something that the human mind can't entirely fathom.

Third disclaimer: I'm aware that direction in space is relative. When I mention it in space scenes, I'm referring to how the planets are positioned to one another in their current revolutions. A standard of direction is required, otherwise, no one knows where anything is because it's constantly changing at different rates.

Also, I understand that space is almost a complete vacuum. As such, there isn't sound in space. However, for epic story purposes, that is dreadfully boring. Therefore, I describe sounds during skirmishes in this book. Besides, this is *my* sci-fi/fantasy story, and I wrote it how I wanted.

Final disclaimer: not all situations in this story have happy endings. Not all resolutions, whether in a conflict or a relationship, will result in "warm, fuzzy feelings." This isn't reality, and although this work is fiction, it still needs to be relatable.

Everyone passes through seasons filled with darkness and relentless trials. It's an experience that all humans share. Hardships may last months or even years. There are times when ceaseless prayers and crying out are answered with silence or "wait." It would be convenient if He always pulled us out of the fires of refinement or out of situations the instant that we became uncomfortable. But I believe that it wouldn't be for our benefit.

We have three basic options when we're going through hardships, self-inflicted or not: we continue to have faith and keep crawling forward, we become stagnant, or we become embittered and turn our backs on God. I've learned from personal experience

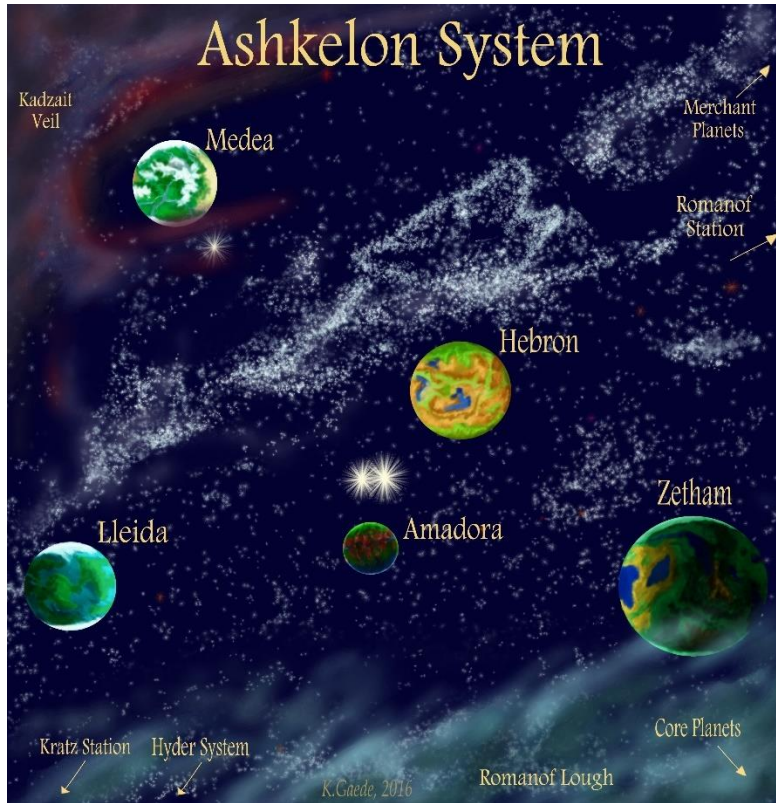
that if you choose the first option, you'll come out the other side stronger and wiser than before. Adversity is where you gain iron strength. The fire is where you gain wisdom. Even when you are dashed to pieces, if you choose to persevere and trust God, then when He does bring you out, you will be nearer to Him, you will know Him better, and you will be more prepared to carry out the plans He has for your life.

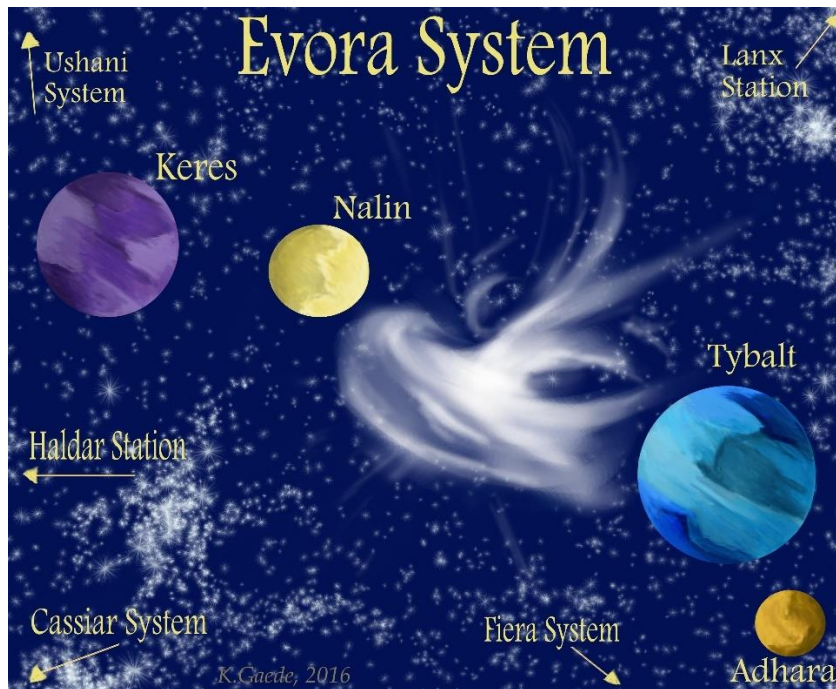
This is why I would rather not have one less God-allowed trial, why I'd rather not have simple days of comfort and ease. This is why I no longer fear the Refiner's fire or the storms of life.

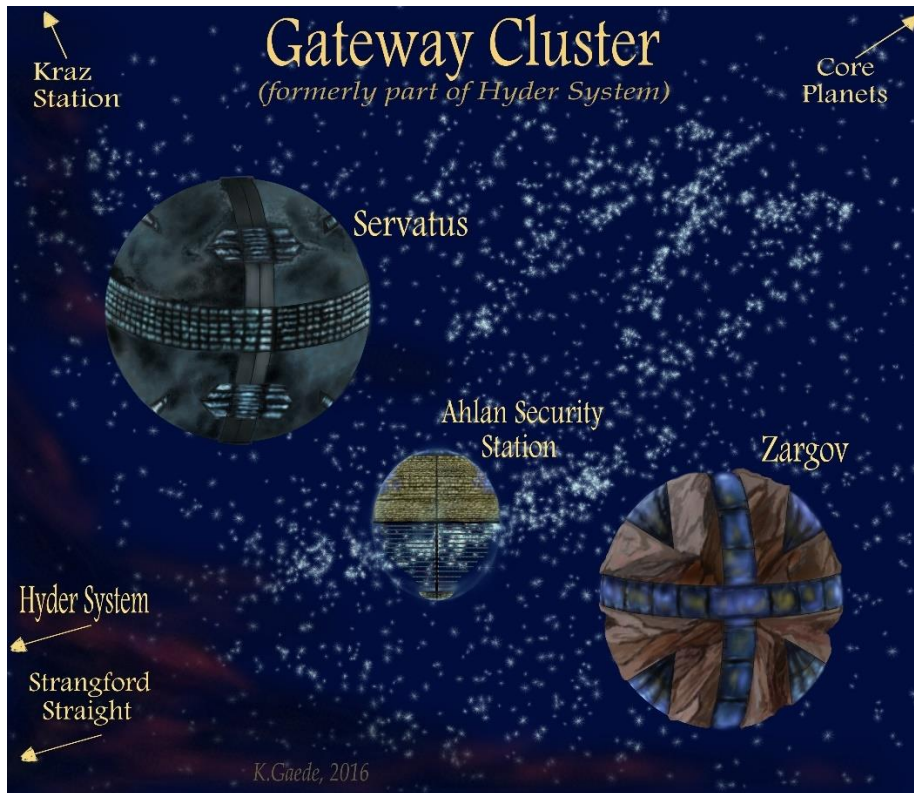
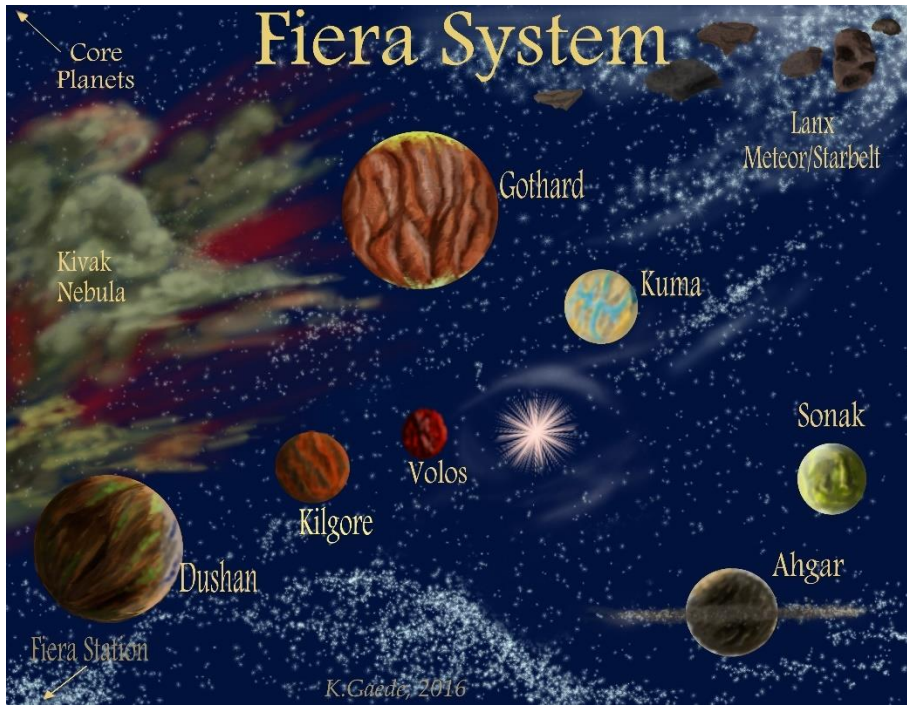
That's all that needs to be said, except: as always, I hope that you enjoy reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

System Maps













Prologue

The Plight of Angels

They assembled in the unseen heavens, in a realm not yet imagined by the minds of man. Though nowhere near the Throne, it was still a place of ceaseless light and where His presence was ever felt and sensed. Darkness could be seen, but it never drew close, for Evil and dark could not tolerate being remotely close to Him. This was where His holy name and His very sovereignty were guarded by magnificent creatures and beings glorious and terrible to behold.

It was here the small group of angels gathered to receive new assignments. Some already knew their next tasks, which included guarding a new human charge, running messages, or scouting the enemy's borders.

As the seven stood before their commanding officer, they appeared expectant and ready. They were certain that they could handle whatever job was put before them. Some shone particularly bright, full of life and zeal. One or two were the stoic sort, and their light and fire burned in their eyes instead.

One angel, however, stood a little apart. He was filled with light like his associates, but it wasn't bursting from him. Nor did he exude confidence and boldness like the others. He was silent and even seemed a little detached from the situation.

For himself, he expected more administrative duties like the ones he had performed in recent "months," or so they were called in human terms. For the past six months, he had executed in-house tasks and attended to heavenly affairs.

That was perfectly fine with him because he was still recovering from the assignment that had abruptly ended seven months ago.

The commanding officer before them was a more serious being compared to the previous one. He forewent engaging in any pleasantries, unrolled the large scroll in his hand, and began reading out assignments. As each new task was given, the officer handed a small scroll to the individual he was addressing.

Next to last was an angel by the name of Thebez, meaning "brightness." The form he usually chose to take was that of a winged being of average height (by human

standards) and strong build. Regardless of his form, he was always full of life. The light that came from him never completely faded, as if it was a symbol of hope springing eternal from his being. He was a close friend and associate to the lone angel, whom he had tried and failed to cheer up.

“And Zayev,” said the commanding officer as he reached the last name on his scroll.

More errand running, for another three months at least, thought the lone angel called Zayev.

“Your new charge,” finished the officer before handing a scroll to him.

Clearly taken back, Zayev hesitantly took the scroll extended to him. When he unrolled it and saw the image and identity of this new charge, he couldn’t keep the horror from showing on his face.

Thebez winced a little when he watched his friend’s expression become etched with grief and internal torment.

“Are you sure?” blurted Zayev in rising desperation and fear.

Everyone in the group held his breath and looked at the officer.

The officer, about to roll up his scroll, paused and glanced at Zayev with a severe look and raised eyebrow. “Is the Most High certain when He wants the suns to rise?”

Without taking his eyes off Zayev, he proceeded to roll up the scroll.

The two shared a long, tense look. They were probably of equal authority, not necessarily by “age” but by rank. Zayev was a young senior officer and had been promoted to a commander almost two years ago. However, by his slightly hunkered posture and anxious expression, an observer might have easily mistaken him as a subordinate.

Finally, Zayev spoke. “Perhaps there has been—”

“What?” asked the officer curtly as he straightened. “A mistake?”

“No,” replied Zayev with some distaste. Then he stuttered, fell silent, and lowered his head a moment.

Of course, his orders weren’t a mistake. *He* didn’t make mistakes or change His mind. However, the task he had just been given brought about several questions: was this

some kind of punishment for what had happened seven months ago? Was he being set up for failure so that he may learn something he had yet to realize in past months? If that was the case, then He would be perfectly justified in doing so. But why entrust the life of another human to Zayev? Every life He created was precious, so why risk it?

Yet it wasn't exactly in a heavenly being's protocol to regularly, and definitely not openly, question the Most High.

Front and center, however, was Zayev's lack of confidence in himself and fear of another terrible failure. All the self-doubt he had wrestled with, and had managed to quiet, came roaring back to him.

The fire in the officer's expression diminished, and his tone softened minutely. "Your charge is the sibling to Thebez's charge. You'll more or less be working together. Your orders came from high up the chain-of-command."

He hesitated and paused like he knew much more than he was permitted to tell. "I can't say anymore other than: be ready for a fight. A change in all realms is coming."

With those encouraging words, the officer went on his way.

For a long while, Zayev stared at nothing at the misty veil beneath his feet. Thebez remained quiet, for it was plain that his friend was lost in some deep pool of thought or memory.

Finally, Zayev opened the scroll and looked again at his charge. He could only stand to gaze at her for a second before the deep, unspeakable ache of sorrow and horrific failure seized him. This human he was now supposed to oversee was strikingly similar to his previous charge.

It's possible that most humans never considered the character and qualities of angels. Were they generally perceived only as powerful beings of light with large wings and bright shining swords? Did the depth of their characters only go so far as they were full of zeal for justice and the work appointed by the Most High?

Or did it go much deeper? Did they not care for the humans they were ordered to guard and protect? Were there times when they didn't understand orders *not* to interfere, no matter what was about to happen to their human? Did they ever disagree with their

tasks? How deep did their own pain and torment reach when they were forced to watch their charge be attacked by the enemy or be filled with agonizing cancer? Did they not feel some measure of sadness, disappointment, frustration, and failure?

As the Star cast down from heaven had shown, along with his fallen companions, heavenly beings and angels possessed free will. They could choose to disobey orders and lead rebellions—but at a great cost. Once cast down, they could not be redeemed. The greater their position, the greater the responsibility, and thus, the more severe the punishment for willful misconduct.

These realities added to Zayev’s internal struggle. He wanted to question his orders and to ask for understanding. He doubted making such requests would result in his being cast from heaven. Yet, in that questioning, he would show a lack of his own “faith,” so to speak, in the very One who formed him into light.

As a being of heaven, a desire that could not be comprehended by man burned deep and hot in him, a desire to continually show his trust and loyalty to Him. He wanted with all the light in him to do this, yet, he thought his doubt prevented him from doing it.

Perhaps it’s true that few humans truly considered the plight of angels. Who could understand the gravity of the battle? Who could understand the internal war of following orders to stand back and watch pain afflict a charge or of desiring to repeatedly question His commands?

“My friend,” said Thebez gently.

He found watching his companion’s torment nearly intolerable. Apart from the traits already described, Thebez was a kindly, empathetic angel which made him perfect for working with human charges.

“Everyone knows what happened with Elizabeth wasn’t your fault in the least,” continued Thebez. “She’d been sent into dangerous territory. Death made an underhanded move as it often does. He stole her life, pulled it right out from under her. It wasn’t your fault.”

Bright tears of grey light glistened in Zayev’s eyes when he looked up at his companion. “Not my fault? I was tasked with seeing her safely to the command post. That

duty included considering all the ways the enemy might try to attack her, and I...I failed. I failed my assignment, failed my charge. *He* knew what was going to happen, so why did He bother to send—”

Zayev cut off his question and shook his head. He felt guilty about the mere desire to question the Almighty about what had happened.

“Zayev,” answered Thebez, more resolutely now. “You know we can’t fully know or understand His plans, even being what we are. You know that sometimes if we consider and prepare for all outcomes, we may still meet defeat. Our enemy does get one up on us at times—or so it seems at that moment. But they will pay for everything at the end.”

He placed a firm hand on his friend’s shoulder. “My brother, in the ages I have known you, very few young commanders have seen such victory and success as you. You may not be as old as our highest-ranking generals, yet you’ve earned the respect of those above and beneath you. And the enemy fears you! I’ve heard it said that they don’t permit your real name to be spoken amongst their ranks.”

At that, Zayev huffed a laugh through his nose, and a faint smile threatened to appear on his face.

“Besides,” continued Thebez, gently again. “Elizabeth is with her Savior now. She isn’t upset with or disappointed in you.”

He then lowered his voice. “I heard that she told Him she was glad He’d sent you personally to her. She said you were her close friend, a brother-in-arms. She looks forward to visiting with you again.”

New tears burned Zayev’s eyes, and he looked away. He didn’t understand his orders. He may have wanted to question them, but he knew that refusing to follow them would be the greatest fault here.

“Well, then,” he said at length, after making up his mind. “We’re working together again.”

Thebez grinned. “Yes! It has been too long.”

Zayev looked up at the pale golden sky high above them and felt the old fire in him being rekindled. “Yes, much too long,” he agreed, and his voice grew stronger. “Let us see

to our charges, fulfill our orders, and aid our human counterparts in unleashing havoc on the enemy.”

He then looked wryly at his heavenly companion. “That’s a funny thing about humans: they have not seen His face, know not the wisdom of the universe, or can even grow wings, and yet...we still learn from them.”

Zayev gave Thebez a slap on the shoulder. “Maybe that’s one of the reasons why we’ve been assigned to these siblings.”

Thebez returned the slap and beamed, “Come, the enemy thinks that they’ve finally silenced Zayev, the cunning commander rising through the heavenly ranks. Let us prove them wrong, and swiftly!”

The two angels fully faced each other and then, extending their right hands, they clasped one another on the arm.

“Forward we go again,” said Zayev firmly. “Boldly into darkness and whatever may lay ahead.”

“May we fulfill our orders and look well after our charges, even to the gates of Hell if that be our end,” continued Thebez, shining gloriously now.

“May the Almighty go before us and grant us victory,” finished Zayev, young commander of hosts, as white fire and light wreathed around him. “Or, if He sees fit, that we carry our charges over the threshold of Death.”

“Into eternity, the ultimate victory,” grinned Thebez, who couldn’t have burned any brighter than he was at that moment.

“The ultimate victory,” agreed Zayev.

The two heavenly warriors then took to the air, and with a thrust of their mighty wings, shot through the veil and the heavens with the speed and brilliance of comets.

Chapter 1

The Norm

The morning sun was just bathing the snow-laden peaks with light when a deep, guttural growl broke the silence of the forest. As the commotion drew closer, birds perched along the direct line of the excitement delayed giving voice to their morning songs. The cause for their pause appeared seconds later when a massak ran pell-mell through the birch trees.

For the most part, all predator-type animals on the planet of Medea left one another alone. It required too much energy to stalk and fight each other, and there were easier food sources to be had.

Thus, there wasn't much for massak to worry about, especially the one currently fleeing. It was a large adult, standing at six and a half feet high. Although it had four legs, it moved about on its long and powerful hind ones. The forearms were shorter, though both hands were armed with three to four razor-sharp talons that shredded the toughest hide of any creature.

The massak was the closest this planet had to a dragon, which it could hardly be compared to because it was wingless. Its long, narrow head was reptilian in appearance, and its slender neck melded smoothly into a short, sturdy back. Although the creature couldn't kill with its long tail, any beast receiving a snap from it would quickly reconsider its life choices. The small, interwoven scales of the massak's tough hide and thick armor plates over the chest, stomach, sides, and haunches left only select areas of its body vulnerable. But any potential threat would have to first catch this creature, whose scopey body allowed for incredible speed.

Massak were always short-tempered and received an extra dose of orneriness upon emerging from hibernation in spring. All these attributes being noted because it was an unusual event to witness a massak fleeing from pursuit. On this occasion, however, it was understandable.

When the female robin, perched beside her chick, saw the massak's pursuers, she was filled with relief but a little annoyance. The irritation was directed at the small band

of camp robbers close by, watching from an ancient cottonwood. They were making a din while watching the chase. Being troublemakers themselves, they typically thought such things were an enjoyable sport to watch.

“I don’t know why they always have to make such a racket first thing in the morning,” she said to her chick, as prey and pursuers disappeared into a thicker area of the woods.

The massak was running as quickly as the terrain and trees would allow, but it was no use. Even if it had been on the plain, it could not outrun these kinds of hunters, for they were swift and tireless. Once in pursuit of a target, the thrill of the chase gave them added speed. They were also impossibly determined to catch their prey. In fact, the only way a creature or target could escape them was if it threw itself off a cliff or performed some other suicidal feat.

Snarling in rage and fear, the massak slid to a hard stop with surprising quickness. Swinging around, it snapped its tail at one hunter while simultaneously chomping at another. It then spotted the third stringing its bow and threw itself at him.

The bowman leapt off the rock right before the massak landed. As it slid over the smooth surface, the claws on its hind feet and talons on its front drew scars along the boulder.

With another hiss, the massak whipped around to confront the main group. It was struck then from the side with incredible force and knocked off the rock.

Thinking fast, it twisted onto its back, forcing all of the hunters to leap away to a safe distance. It was a wise move because, for a moment, all there was to face were claws, teeth, and a thrashing tail.

However, the massak’s ploy backfired and gave the hunting squad time to completely encircle it. Grunting, it rolled sideways and up to one haunch, preparing to jump back to its feet. This maneuver left its right side exposed for less than half a second, but it was long enough. An arrow sank into its flank.

The massak became incensed, knowing its end was almost certain now. Springing to its feet with a growl, it launched itself at the hunter directly in its path.

Two kill shots occurred instantaneously. The first arrow struck between the spines protecting the head and into the base of the skull.

The second arrow came from the warrior for which it had been leaping. That arrowhead plunged through the thick armor on its chest and into its heart.

The massak's legs gave way as it reached the archer and rammed into her. Both she and the creature tumbled down a short but rather steep rise.

Hunter and beast landed in a pile of last fall's foliage. A surprised grunt caused the hunter to jump to her feet and then take a giant leap back.

"Razorback!" she shouted to the rest of the group, who were nearly down the rise already.

The razorback, an alpha judging by the size, sounded a bellow of fury before baring its large, gleaming teeth at the person who had disturbed it. After sounding a displeased growl, it lunged for her.

The archer sprang lightly back, dodging a snap from the razorback's jaws before ducking a swipe from a clawed paw. Pivoting quickly, she avoided another strike from the other forepaw and then stepped forward so she was right in front of the creature.

She was in the process of thrusting the arrow towards the beast's jaw when a spear whistled through the air and found its mark in the base of the razorback's skull.

"Dang it, Izhar," chided the archer as the creature's body collapsed at her feet. "Why do you *always* have to do that? I had it covered."

"Just making sure it didn't eat you," replied the tall hunter as he jogged up. By the twinkle in his dark brown eyes and smile pulling at his mouth, the archer knew he was joking.

"Och." She shot him a displeased look. "Taking credit for what should've been my kill, more like."

"A massak and a razorback," remarked Titus as he and the rest of the unit joined them. "Quite the morning."

A teasing glint came to life in his unbelievably deep green eyes. "Although, I didn't think that razorback was on the hunting list for today, Elyse."

She slid the arrow into her quiver and then placed a hand on her hip. “You’re just jealous that I managed to sneak up and surprise one.”

Titus snorted and then rubbed his cheek with feigned thoughtfulness. “Yeah, I see now that I should’ve come up with the idea of rolling down a hill and landing on one sooner.”

Elyse gave a sharp nod. “Exactly.”

Her gaze drifted over the large razorback, recalling the very first time she had seen one up close as a child. She had thought it a brute and that hadn’t changed after fifteen years.

The creature was a cross between a wolf and a lioness. The head resembled a wolf, but the body was broad and muscled like a lion. Their double coats were thick and coarse. Colors included black, white, tans, and varying shades of grey. The hair on the tail, which was the length and shape of a feline’s, was thick but shorter than what was on its body. All four large paws were armed with large claws.

While massak were hunted for food and its tough hide, the razorback was more or less left unbothered until after its winter coat grew in. Their pelts provided phenomenal warmth.

“Well, I guess we should—”

Titus cut off his sentence as the first breeze of the day stirred. It brushed through the trees, making the new bright green aspen and birch leaves flicker and the arms of the spruce wave.

The six-member unit lifted their faces into the air current and sorted the earthy scents and listened to the sounds.

The moss thickly carpeting large swaths of the forest was giving off a heavy smell of dirt and moist earth. The aroma of the hemlock, aspen, and birch was faint, overpowered by the cottonwoods, which had been the first to leaf that spring. Soon, they would seed and send white fuzz into the air. A lingering chill remained as winter attempted to hang on to the bitter end.

As for sounds, birds near and far were singing happily in the dawn of another clear spring day. A creek here and there trickled along and, farther still, a river roared. Something small and low to the ground, likely a wolverine, waddled up the ridge in the distance.

The entire group smiled when they heard a deep rumble followed by a loud and clear whinny riding swiftly on the wind. Several fainter whinnies and snorts replied, telling the hunters that one of the wild horse bands was on the move in the crisp dawn.

When a stronger gust rolled its ways over the forest, a whisper rode on it this time. This time, all gazes snapped to Elyse.

Natives of Medea were natural hunters, trackers, and rangers. They were gifted in building and its various crafts, and it wasn't uncommon for someone to wander and explore the wilderness for months at a time. Although no larger than the average human, Medean men and women were exceptionally strong and could wrestle with any of the planet's beasts without tiring quickly. They had great speed in their legs, and a visitor from another planet had yet been able to keep up with their pace and stamina.

While all five planets in the Ashkelon System were known to be rogue and ranger planets, Medea held the distinct honor of being a true "outer rim" planet. It was the only "fourth rimmer" across the known systems. All others were placed within the first three rims.

Ashkelon, along with Fiera, its brother system on the opposite side of the Core Systems, were called the "Guardian Systems." They were named as such because of their strategically defensive locations on either side of the Core Systems. It also goes without saying that there were no finer, or deadlier, defense fighters than those from Ashkelon and Fiera.

Living on a "fourth rimmer" in a Guardian System resulted in Medeans having a particularly fierce streak not seen in their other Ashkelon neighbors. This ran especially true for the rangers and hunters. Whenever they were challenged or on the hunt, a notable coldness in their expressions and an unnerving, vicious light appeared in their eyes. They were the masters of the rugged land. They subdued it. They were the superior

and dominant ones, the alphas, and a challenge by any wild creature was quickly and violently put down.

All in all, they were an extremely independent and rough bunch. They laughed at fear and perils and never backed down from battle. Family lines varied in types of fighting that came naturally, such as close-quarter combat, stealth to sneak behind enemy lines, sniping, sabotage, to name only a few. These people were made to be outdoors and to be active, even in the heart of winter when the land was burdened with snow.

They loved the land, though they didn't worship it. They worshipped the One who made their home, the universe, and them. This land was made for them and they for it. As such, the One who made them gave them a deep understanding of the various landscapes and their moods. They could also understand animals and comprehend their moods, if not their actual thoughts.

To an extent, they knew what tales the wind brought. All had a general understanding of the different scents on it and knew what the weather would do because they were sensitive to atmospheric changes.

But only a select few could actually understand what the restless wind whispered. It did indeed have news of its own to tell, of what was going on in the far reaches of the planet, and what was happening in the land it passed over.

Elyse might not have been genetically enhanced like two of her teammates, but she could "read the wind" and understand the news it brought. Plus, her hearing and eyesight were a touch sharper than her counterparts.

When they looked at her, she was already staring southwest with great intensity.

"Lunch," she whispered, and the others heard her as clearly as if she'd shouted the word.

That was when they all saw a flicker of movement deeper in the valley. It was a lone Inar, a type of elusive deer whose meat was nutritious enough to sustain a family for a month.

Two team members stayed behind to begin quartering their two kills while the rest of the group took off through the trees with the silence of shadows.

Thus marked the start of another day on Medea, where hunting lethal predators and slaying dangerous beasts was all part of the norm.

Chapter 2

Kadesh

They paused in the deep shadows of the hemlocks to survey the house, built on and out of a little cliff. Only one occupant was inside and visible in the kitchen. The spring sun was still high in the sky, but the dinner hour was drawing close.

The moment the woman in the kitchen turned her back, the two ran noiselessly from the shadows and leapt over the deck railing.

Several windows were open to allow the warm breeze through the house, and they selected the one leading into the office as their point-of-entry. It was large enough to jump through, and the pair did so in total silence.

After taking up positions on either side of the doorway, they cautiously peeked into the kitchen on the far side of the large living room. They watched the woman emerge from the pantry with several vegetables in hand and return to the kitchen.

When her back was to them again, they quickly and quietly exited the office and crossed the living room. As they drew closer, they split up and crept up to both sides of the woman.

The one to the right hopped and sat down on the island that was behind and to the right of the woman. "What're you makin', mum?"

The woman nearly jumped out of her skin. With a jolt, she dropped a red pepper and a knife. Spinning to the right, she whapped her son lightly on the arm. "Gracious, Lee. Stop doing that!"

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it'll be delicious," piped another voice behind her.

The woman gasped and turned to see Elyse sitting on the counter beside the cutting board and munching on a piece of red pepper.

The woman, by name of Alana, snatched the dishrag from the sink to slap Elyse on the leg with it. But by the time the rag was in-hand, Elyse had jumped from the counter and was dodging away with a container of blueberries behind her back.

“You two take years off my life every time you sneak up on me,” chided Alana before sending Lee a look. “And if you would stop encouraging Elyse...she’s gotten worse and worse at joining in on your games.”

“No, mum, I wouldn’t say that,” replied Lee with a slow smile as he slid off the island. “I’d say she’s gotten better and better.”

Alana tisked and sent him another look, but there was laughter in her hazel eyes. That is, until she stepped back to the cutting board and saw that the blueberries were missing.

“Ohie!” she shouted, turning sharply and flicking the dishrag at Elyse.

Elyse was nearly out of the living room but couldn’t quite get out of the line of fire. The rag was wet, and it slapped her on the shoulder. As she slowly crumpled to the hardwood floor in a rather theatrical manner, she tossed the container to Lee.

But Alana was faster and snatched it out of the air before her son could catch it.

“I’m sorry, brother,” whispered Elyse hoarsely as she sprawled on the floor. “I failed.”

Alana chortled and shook her head as she stepped back to the cutting board. “Why don’t you two get cleaned up before—”

The sound of a door opened before someone called, “Are there any crazy people home?”

Elyse gasped and sprang to her feet. “Elam!”

She reached the top of the staircase the same time as Elam and threw her arms around him in a bear hug.

“Elyse,” said Elam, wheezing at the strength of her grasp. “You’re having one of your dramatic days. I take it that hunting was good this week.”

“You got that right, big brother,” replied Elyse, releasing Elam and then slugging him in the arm. “I didn’t know you were coming home! How’s the training going? Your

commander keeps bragging about you. How are you keeping up with the Gen-Ns? I bet it's totally not fair. Why are you home early? Were you given leave or are you only here because you're about to be shipped off on another assignment?"

Elam planted his hand on top of Elyse's head and moved her out of the way so he could pass to the kitchen.

"Why do you need to know everything in thirty seconds?" he asked with a laugh that made his pale green eyes dance.

When he reached the kitchen, he and Lee shared a handshake and slap on the back. He then turned and gave Alana a hug, nearly engulfing her.

Elam may have been tall and lean but, as was expected with a soldier, he was strong and quick on his feet.

"Glad to see you looking so well, Elam," she said, beaming up at him. "Issachar and I hear nothing but good things from your commander."

"Of course, you do," snorted Elam. "I told him what would happen if he gave a bad report to you and dad."

Alana laughed but not just because of the joke. Her joy was increased simply because Elam was home. Though he and Elyse weren't her biological children, she still loved them fiercely. She adored and admired them like she did Lee, her flesh-and-blood son.

"Why don't you and Elyse go down to the market and buy me some more elk so I have enough for dinner?" suggested Alana.

Lee was about to speak, but she cast an eye on him and spoke first. "Lee will help me finish preparing everything else. That's what he gets for giving me another fright."

Lee tilted his head back and sighed audibly. "Muuuum..."

Elam looked at his sister. "Let's go so we can get back and eat, Squirt. I'm starving."

Lee was still whining to Alana about staying behind when brother and sister stepped out of the door on the main level.

Like all houses in the town of Kadesh, theirs was built on and out of a short rock face. The main floor sat on top of the rise and provided a clear view of the landscape in

every direction. The second floor was built away from the rock so it wasn't overshadowed by the top floor. This allowed ample natural light inside and didn't compromise the view, which included the eastern, northern, and western horizons.

Homes that weren't built out of rocks were raised and constructed in the treetops. This was partially for security at night. However, having a high vantage point and decent view at all times was a standard requirement.

Once on ground level, Elam and Elyse made their way to one of the markets. While in route to their destination, Elyse again bombarded Elam with a million questions about the military and his training.

The brother and sister had been adopted at an early age by Issachar and Alana Koa. It had yet to be revealed where their true parents were or if they were still alive. But Elyse had figured that if dear old mom and dad had any interest in their children, they would have made contact early on. That hadn't happened, and Elyse had written them off as heartless and careless.

Issachar and Alana couldn't have been a better fit for two energetic, and rather mischievous, children. With much patience, they worked through the troubles and burdens that often came with adopted children.

Elam had initially been quiet and brooding. He also had once been extremely sensitive to rejection. Not in the way that he burst into tears but in that he kept it bottled up until he exploded with anger.

Elyse had been the hardcore rebel and hadn't seen why anyone had to take care of her. She could take care of herself. If her parents hadn't wanted her, then she didn't want anyone in return. While Elam had a quiet, seething spirit, Elyse had been and still was high spirited and quick to fierce action.

Needless to say, there had been turbulent days in the Koa household. Time passed, though, and Elam and Elyse found themselves and settled. They were still high energy and occasionally mischievous but not in the destructive way they had once been.

Although brother and sister hadn't wanted anything to do with their parents, Issachar and Alana raised them with their parents' surnames: Klein. Alana had said they

would appreciate having their own identities, their true identities, one day. But she didn't elaborate further and still hadn't.

"Thanks for settin' the bar so high," quipped Elyse to her brother as they walked down the broad dirt road. "Commander Bardou keeps pestering me about the officer program. He's been after me for a year! The man's relentless."

"He's military," answered Elam. "What else would you expect?"

He shot her a sidelong glance. "But I think it's time you seriously consider joining up."

Elyse belted out a mighty guffaw and followed it with, "Yeah, right!"

"I'm serious! Do you really want to be on a hunting squad your entire life? Wouldn't you rather get out and explore the systems more?"

Something in his voice made Elyse pause and look at him suspiciously. "You saw something on your last tour, or you know something or...something. What is it? Tell me or I'll wrestle it out of you."

They stopped in the shade cast by three ancient spruce trees and watched a squad of local mounted security ride past.

Elam rolled his eyes at her before saying quietly, "I'm sure you heard the rumors a few weeks ago about the Merchant Planets. You know, that no one's heard anything from Alpharez and Markeb?"

Elyse nodded. "Yeah, something about them going dark. But none of their neighbors said they were equipped to fully investigate."

That made the corner of Elam's mouth pull upwards. "They said that because they were afraid to do it themselves. According to the reports, a handful of merchant vessels entered the orbit of Markeb and skimmed Alpharez's atmosphere but didn't get any closer. Whatever they saw scared them enough so that they kept their distance. They wouldn't specify exactly what they'd seen. They only reported that something was wrong."

He paused a moment and took a breath. "Well, I was part of a recon squad on my last stint. We went to the Merchant Planets to investigate, and...there was no one there, Elyse. On Markab, cities and processing plants had been completely destroyed. The rest

of the uninhabited areas are dead, nothing more than wastelands. What records we salvaged mentioned that some kind of unknown plague suddenly appeared a month ago and was moving swiftly through the population. The reports also showed that there were catastrophic malfunctions just before the explosions.”

Elam shifted uneasily. “The only signs we saw that there had been life at one time were a few burned corpses. As for the colonies on the meteor Delsha, not a single colonist was left. It appeared that the meteor had been abandoned for some time. But the most suspicious thing was a gaping crack that ran halfway through the meteor, clean through, too.”

Elyse swallowed back the lump in her throat. “You mean, like...maybe the colonies had drilled too far or something?”

Elam shook his head. “Our sensor readings suggested a single point of impact resulted in that crack. We believe it was caused by a weapon and an extremely powerful one. No one has any idea who might have that kind of technology. And of course, with that suspicious finding, it makes us second-guess what we found on Markab. It might’ve been a plague that wiped out the population. It might’ve been malfunctions that destroyed the cities, but that seems unlikely now...which only makes us more nervous. The alternative is that Markab was attacked. But whether the plague was real and introduced by the attacker, or if it’s all a fake explanation to conceal the attack itself, we can’t be certain.”

With every word her brother spoke, Elyse’s stomach grew tighter, and an alarm began sounding in the back of her mind. Elam had seen Alpharez and Markab, the very two planets around which rumors had revolved for weeks. Elyse had hoped findings would have shown a simple problem with communication links between the planets and everything would go back to normal.

The truth was quite the opposite. This was a very big problem. It was as if the first big red flag had been raised.

And Elyse didn’t like it.

When she looked at Elam to ask a question, she paused when she saw her brother's expression. It had grown distant as he remembered what he'd seen.

"There was something else there," he said quietly. "Something that kept us on edge. I've never felt or sensed anything like it...but it seemed like a lingering evil remained on Alpharez and Markab."

He shook his head again as he tried to find the right words. "It was like, even though the attacking force was gone, the evil that is with them remained and had tainted the planet."

Elyse went cold. Never before had she thought that she would ever hear such words come out of her brother's mouth. Faith, angels, demons, unseen realms, and evil were things they hadn't seriously discussed. They were topics they quickly blew off. It wasn't that they didn't believe such things existed. They simply didn't have any desire to have heart-felt talks about it.

"And when we were leaving Markab's orbit," continued Elam in a low voice. "We believe we saw one of the ships that attacked the planet."

Elyse's eyes went wide.

Elam nodded. "It looked like a scouting vessel judging by the size, shields, and weapons. Since my team and I were recon, our ship only had cloaking capabilities. We couldn't engage the ship, either way."

He shifted his weight again and emphasized his next words with gestures of his right hand. "That scouting ship was made with advanced technology, cutting edge stuff. Just the shape and configuration of it made me uneasy, my team, too. It gave us all the impression of some swift predator that can strike at a moment's notice and do so with terrible violence."

His green eyes met his sister's blue ones. "I can't explain how I know this, but that was one of the enemy ships. I'm sure even if no one else is. And I can tell you already that they won't stop, Elyse, this enemy. There have been civil wars before and battles between planets. There have been organizations that wish only to conquer specific territories. But this..."

Elam paused to regather his thoughts before pressing onward. “Like I said, I can’t explain it. But my gut is screaming at me that these guys want complete domination. They’ve shown they’ll get it by any means necessary. There have also been reports of dark fleets at the Calabar Cluster and even in the Fiera System. Evil is with this enemy and for them. It’s driving them. We could all feel it coming from that single scout ship. I can only imagine what it’s like being face-to-face with a full-sized battleship.”

He drew a breath. “Like I said: they won’t stop, and they’re only going to spread. The planetary militaries are calling on their respective skilled fighters who haven’t yet joined. The Ashkelon System, naturally, is especially interested in lone, stealthy ranger types, like those from Medea.”

He searched his sister’s face. “Recruiters have already been speaking with hunting squads from other towns on the planet. They’ll press you again any day now, so why not jump on board now?”

Elyse’s heart pounded harder with every word her brother spoke. Because of her rebel spirit, just the thought of anyone threatening her freedom and her home planet set her blood afire.

But she always thought the military as being bossy and nothing but strict orders. No freedom in itself, no wandering and exploring. Just rules, regulations, and drills that turned every soldier into a mindless machine.

Yet, she thought, eyeing her brother. Elam doesn’t seem that way.

Elam seemed to sense her thoughts. “The Ashkelon Military recognizes the various types of warriors. They know that we from Medea, and our neighbor planets, thrive on being mobile and on operating in a particular way: rogue-ish, they call it, and with speed, stealth, and silence.”

“You forgot violence,” added Elyse with a sinister little twinkle in her pale eyes.

The corner of Elam’s mouth tugged upward. “Obviously, but ‘violence’ doesn’t start with ‘s’ and I had the whole ‘s’ thing going, so I left it out.”

“So, I see.”

Elam snorted.

Silence fell between them as Elyse chewed on her brother's words.

Another patrol rode by and the afternoon breeze played amongst the trees.

"I still don't see why we matter all that much," she said at last and with a touch of disdain. "Why doesn't the military just use all Gen-Ns? They're obviously superior in every way."

Elam gave her a look. "Don't be like that, and the military refers to them by their real titles: omicrons."

Elyse huffed and folded her arms. "Of course, they would."

Omicrons were genetically engineered humans. The most common and appropriate slang term used to refer to them was "Gen-Ns." It was generally accepted that omicrons were faster, smarter, and stronger than the average human.

For obvious reasons, there was heated debate about genetic engineering itself, particularly on humans. Some said it was modifying how the Creator intended each person was made. It was changing or making man-made improvements on creations designed and brought into existence by the living God.

Omicrons didn't seem to have an improved or better moral center than a "free-range bred and raised" individual. What was to stop the rising number of Gen-Ns from organizing and enslaving their "inferior" human beings?

Part of the issue was that once a person was genetically modified, whether in the womb or after birth, the changes were permanent. If that person married and had children of their own, the genetic enhancements passed to their offspring 95% of the time.

The term "omicron" meant "small," and originally it was deemed appropriate. Only a few humans had survived the initial enhancements and only a few had been selected to undergo such procedures.

Unfortunately, the original projections that stated enhancements wouldn't pass to the next generation, which allowed for control over the genetically engineered population, were incorrect. With the passing on of genetic changes from one generation

to the next, and the fact that 99% of the modifications made on people were accepted by their bodies, the number of omicrons running around was dramatically increasing.

Regardless, genetically engineering humans was seen as unfair and went against the laws of nature that He had set into motion.

Of course, other people didn't see what the big deal was. If omicrons truly were superior, then they would be that much better of a fighter which could only be a positive thing.

In reality, the true differences between an omicron and a "normal" person weren't necessarily in the terms of the physical. Anyone who had seen a Gen-N in action had a difficult time describing it, but it was like they had superpowers. The omicron was no more or less physically powerful than a non-modified individual. Yet, they did have power but over the unseen. Or so the stories said.

Naturally, this was deemed as obscene by the average person. It couldn't be possible. Only angels, demons, and the living God had power in the unseen realm. The unseen had influence in the unseen and the seen. The seen had influence in the seen world only. It wasn't especially fair, but that's how it was. Anyone who tried to explain it otherwise was written off as crazy.

Elyse didn't much care one way or another about the political or ethical debates. Her distaste stemmed from the first time she had met a Gen-N. In short, he'd been an elitist jerk and thus ruined every other interaction that came afterwards.

Two of her hunting teammates were omicrons, which she didn't hold against them. She was merely jealous. They had beautiful flawless skin and the most graceful way of moving.

But the most obvious sign someone was a Gen-N was their eyes. The dead giveaway was a crescent several shades lighter than the rest of the iris. The eye itself seemed to be so much clearer, as if they could see right into someone's soul.

It wasn't fair that they should have such beautiful eyes. Elyse's were just plain blue.

But I can still keep up with Titus and Thyra, she thought while considering her two Gen-N teammates. That counts for something, I guess.

“Just give it some serious thought,” said Elam at length, before continuing down the street. “I don’t doubt you would catch up to my class easily. Few upper-level commanders can shoot and track as well as you.”

When Elyse huffed again, Elam laughed and put her in a headlock. “Alright, enough of your bellyaching, Squirt. You’re joining up and that’s that.”

“Elam,” whined Elyse, though she was laughing now.

He released her, and she promptly punched him in the arm before lifting into a jog. “Hurry up! Dinner will be over by the time we get to the market and back.”

“You have the next two days off, right?” asked Elam as he fell in beside Elyse.

“Yeah, why?”

He grinned at her. “I hear Izhar has some puppies he’s giving away. You could take one off his hands and have it trained to track stags by Monday.”

Elyse belted out a laugh. “You know how much I am *not* a dog person. Besides, I heard that none in the last crop of pups had guts enough to take down squirrels. The big pansies turned tail and ran from a pair of weasels, for crying out loud! So much for being a great and fearless defender of man.”



They stood beside each other in the shade of the trees and watched the siblings pass by.

“Elam was one of the very first to see the enemy, and he and his team saw and perceived them precisely as they are. They also correctly guess the enemy’s intentions. To be able to discern and understand such a thing so early is a rare gift. Your charge sees very well, Thebez.”

The angel Thebez nodded as he looked after the brother and sister. “It’s a testament that, though his family isn’t immersed in the ancient writings or faith, He has still been doing much work in him. Elam immediately accepted the truth of what he saw. He didn’t try to rationalize it any other way or in a manner that was more comfortable, as so many are apt to do.”

Thebez glanced at his companion. “What do you think of Elyse, your charge?”

The young commander ventured a little smile. “There’s a fiery spirit in her, plainly, and I’m relieved to witness that she can take care of herself. He has put skill and strength in her hands, and a fearless spirit in her soul.”

“Do you think she’ll apply for the military?” asked Thebez as a sort of joke.

Zayev’s smile broadened. “Do you think she’ll go hunting tomorrow?”

Thebez chuckled and then drew a breath. “I confess I was a touch surprised when I saw how advanced our enemy’s plans have already progressed.”

“Mmm,” answered Zayev. “They’ve accurately sensed the time, their time. When their legions launch their campaign, they’ll break against our forces like a mighty wave onto an unsuspecting shore. Elam will have to bear the burden of knowing the truth about the enemy from the start, whereas many of his human counterparts will be reluctant to believe.”

The commander turned his gaze upward. He surveyed the treetops and sky like he could see the movements of both the seen and unseen realms.

“No wonder the commanding officer told us to prepare for a fight,” said Zayev as he closed his eyes. “A change in the realms is no longer coming. It’s here already...the beginning of the end of things as we have known them since the creation of man.”

Chapter 3 Defender of Man

The day was fair but blustery. A stiff northerly wind was blowing off the Ice Fields and bringing a bite to Kadesh.

With innate stealth, he trotted his way through the forest, filled with the noise of the wind in the aspen, cottonwoods, and spruce. He'd been on a specific scent since that morning, a smell that wasn't yet familiar to him.

Born from a line of hunters and protectors, he was fiercely territorial. From the moment his eyes opened, he went after anything that trespassed into his family's domain.

His mother had taken him and his littermates on daily perimeter-checks until they all knew the borders of their extensive territory.

Now, his other siblings were adventurous as well, to an extent. In between patrolling the border and tagging along with the human family they'd been born into, they preferred to play or lounge close to home. They were content to wait until a life-long human companion picked them and they left for new homes.

One particular pup, however, was especially keen on exploring. A time or two he had nearly become lost or gotten into a tangle with a wild animal. His mother had come to his aid in those instances.

Now that he was older, he recognized the scents of most of the wild animals and the songs of the birds, and knew what was riding on the wind.

This day, as he tracked an unusual scent, the black pup with a narrow white stripe down his chest wasn't especially worried. He'd killed dozens of squirrels, rabbits, and even a few birds that had crossed his way and couldn't escape fast enough. He was confident he could take on anything except for a bora, perhaps.

By noon, he was far from home and drawing near a rock and moss-covered mound. The scent he had initially been tracking had become masked by a stronger, familiar smell.

They appeared then on top of the mound: three wolf puppies, younger than the black pup but already larger than him.

The brown wolf puppy gave a bark of greeting as he and his two siblings wagged their tails. As these were of canine blood, and he'd crossed several wolf packs before, the black pup saw them as friends.

He barked in response, though it came out more like a squeak. He had yet to get his more mature and serious "adult voice," as his mother called it. He hoped it would come sooner rather than later. At six months old, it was important that he begin to be taken seriously by the other hunters. That wouldn't happen if he sounded like a squeaky toy.

The three wolf pups swarmed their dark companion, and a playful tussle began. They wrestled and raced about the rock mound until the adults returned. They also had previously met the black one and greeted him like one of their offspring.

After a chorus of "hellos," the pack began to move northeast through the forest, slow at first before gradually picking up speed.

The black pup kept up with his counterparts. They ran amongst the aspen and birch and passed through swaths of spruce that towered over the soft forest floor.

As the chill wind increased even more, the pack raced faster.

The windstorm the previous night had fallen many old spruce. With ease, the wolves, puppies and adults, cleared them and crossed the terrain, now becoming steeper and rockier.

The black puppy managed to keep up, though he was in the rear now.

Half a mile later, the way was steeper still as rock hills climbed up and into the mountains. In between the gales mimicking the sound of rushing water as it raged through the spruce, the black pup thought he heard a river somewhere nearby.

The terrain became quite difficult for him to traverse after another mile, and he lagged behind the tireless pack. At last, when he thought the hill he was struggling to climb would never end, he reached the crest.

It turned out to be a cliff of sorts. The other side dropped abruptly into a deep, swift river that thundered and foamed through a gorge.

The pup caught sight of the last wolf as it sprang over the span of the gorge, no less than thirty feet across.

Well, he fancied himself as a decent jumper, but he wasn't a kangaroo. Maybe when he was bigger, he could leap as the wolf had, but not yet.

Standing on the edge of the cliff, he looked up and down the river, searching for a bridge. None were in sight, so he turned right and jogged along the water.

He rounded a bend and spotted an ancient spruce lying across the gorge. He trotted happily to the makeshift bridge and studied it. It looked solid enough to walk across.

With caution, he stepped onto it and inched his way along. When he was fully over the water, the noise of it was nearly deafening and also unnerving. It seemed as if the dark, rushing current was attempting to daunt him as it rumbled in a deep and menacing voice.

He pressed onward.

When he was halfway across, the tree creaked, and he felt it shudder beneath his paws. At the same time, a terrible gust rushed along the gorge and buffeted him, knocking him off-balance and causing the tree to tremor.

He dropped to his stomach. The water below boomed while the wind tugged and pushed him in an unceasing gale. That was when he made the mistake of looking down.

The river was roiling and throwing up waves of mist in its anger. The dark torrent hurled itself against the rock walls that contained it before leaping up for the little black puppy frozen in fear on the old spruce bridge.

He whined quietly for a few moments before beginning to yelp and cry for help.

No answer came. No help arrived on swift wings to save him this time.

Finally, the black puppy gathered his remaining courage. After all, he came from a warrior bloodline, one of loyalty, bravery, and might. He would not be intimidated by a little stream, and he would go on to be chosen by some great ranger. Together they would hunt, track, and slay the most terrible beasts in the galaxy.

With a little growl, the black pup pushed himself to his paws and continued. He made it ten steps, then twenty.

The spruce groaned loudly and shifted.

He was steps from the end when the tree popped again. The pup bolted forward, leapt with all his might, and landed safely on the other side of the gorge.

The river roared on, and the gales raced through the forest.

Feeling understandably triumphant, the pup trotted through the trees with his head up and tail high. He sounded a few barky-howls, or that's what they were supposed to be. They too came out as squeaks, though not as high-pitched as his previous calls.

He crested the rise right before a massive form fell upon him. It was a razorback, which had not long ago been harassed by a passing wolf pack.

The black puppy snarled and jumped out of the way of a clawed swipe from his much larger foe. He continued barking and growling even as he scampered out of reach.

He darted behind a spruce as the razorback clawed at him again, missing and leaving large scars on the tree.

He raced back down the rise and along the river. He heard his foe snarling behind him and almost felt its breath on his back. With a yelp, he veered sharply right under a fallen birch and down along the cliff wall itself.

The razorback growled and bounded with a mighty leap. It landed in front of the pup, cutting off his trail.

He backpedaled as his snarls quickly turned into cries for help.

Agile and surefooted with its claws, the razorback skittered along the rocks so it was directly above the puppy and essentially cornering him.

With nothing else to do, the puppy, with hackles raised, lowered his head and unleashed the biggest and loudest roar he could.

In response, the razorback inhaled deeply and let loose a terrible call, the sound of it echoing for miles, even over the river's noise. Then, without further warning, it lunged at its small prey.

The pup jumped sideways, but his foe landed nearly on top of him. He latched onto the razorback's forearm and drew an irritated growl from the beast.

Still precariously balanced on the cliff, the razorback lurched awkwardly in an attempt to grab hold of its next meal.

But the pup was faster than the brute had thought. Shooting out from under the creature, he chomped on its flank before going for a hind leg.

Now thoroughly infuriated, the razorback swung and snatched at the puppy with lethal claws. Again, it didn't land a fatal blow, but it did make contact with the annoying little black urchin.

Both went off-balance, lost their grip on the rocks, and plummeted into the river.

The current was swift and violent, tossing them about as if they were twigs. As the water carried them over the next several miles, razorback and puppy were thrown around mercilessly when they weren't sucked under the surface.

At first, the razorback attempted a few swipes at the puppy. Soon, though, it decided that its own immediate survival was more important than a meal. What good was food if it was dead?

After some flailing, the razorback managed to grip the side of the cliff and haul itself out of the water. The rock wall was shorter there, and it crested the rise, shook itself, and 'humphed' at the puppy and all the nuisance it had been.

The black puppy continued downstream. In between coughing and sneezing water out of his nose, he made pitiful attempts to call for help, any help.

Another mile later, the river rounded a bend, calmed, and straightened for a short distance.

The puppy whined when it saw the enormous rapids at the head of the next corner. It might have been his imagination or from the shock and excitement of the past few minutes, but he thought he heard deep laughter coming from the canyon ahead. To him, the river and the rocks had come alive.

An image, unbidden, came to the puppy, a vision of a large monster lying in wait ahead, waiting with dark and morbid mirth to consume him.

Paddling madly, he headed for a flat lip of rock that stuck out into the river. It was the only thing he saw that offered hope of keeping himself from being swallowed by the white water. If he entered the rapids, he knew for certain he would drown.

A fresh surge of panic raced through him as the current almost carried him beyond the rock. With some frantic splashing, he managed to claw onto the little lip and get the upper half of his body out of the frigid water.

But he was soaked to the bone. Both the wind and air current generated by the water's movement chilled him.

He was also stuck again. He had no way to scale the cliff or even climb completely out of the water.

Terrified and feeling rather hopeless, the black puppy let loose a chorus of pathetic shuddering and squeaky cries for help.



They had been patrolling and exploring the feet of the mountains east of Kadesh. While Elyse often preferred to explore alone, especially on her days off, some friends had convinced her to join them. There wasn't any real plan other than to climb a few cliffs, do some tracking, and practice some archery.

She had agreed to run with them, mostly because Elam was still home and he was going with the group. As if she would pass on a chance to spend more time with her big brother.

The day was nice enough, except for the wind, which had been steadily increasing throughout the afternoon.

The group had finished the first round of archery. Practice involved shooting while in motion and picking off targets below and above them to hone in the skill of making altitude adjustments.

They had picked a place backed against a thirty-foot rock wall with numerous ledges and outcroppings. The last archer had just completed his run when they heard the recognizable bellow of an enraged razorback.

It was close and had come from somewhere west of their current location.

“Sounds like another beastie caught lunch,” Izhar had joked.

Now the unit was taking a break and discussing options for food when it came to them: a cry from some little creature. It was barely audible over the wind, but it brought everyone pause.

Elyse turned to the west and searched the woods. She saw nothing, and no other call came for several minutes.

She heard the group moving out when the cry came again, louder this time. It was brought directly to them by the wind. The sound wasn't just a call. It was a plea. Its owner was begging for anyone or anything to help. If it didn't come soon, death was imminent.

The emotion, the desperation in the cry stirred something in Elyse. Instead, she set her jaw and turned to follow the others.

Again, the cry came, and again it moved Elyse. She paused and closed her eyes a moment. *It's probably some fatally wounded animal that's going to die whether I rescue it or not.*

The wind brought yet another wrenching cry to her ears. A strong gust followed, slamming through the trees, ripping off a cluster of leaves, and throwing them into her face.

With a grimacing expression, she glanced at Elam, who was already looking at her with laughter in his eyes.

Grumbling something unintelligible, Elyse took off westward and toward the source of the cries.

“Why do I always have to be the one to save pathetic creatures?” she grouched.

“Yup!” laughed one of her friends behind her. “There she goes again! Elyse to the rescue!”

“Shut yer gob!” she shouted over her shoulder as another unmistakable cry came now to her ears.

Then the forest fell silent, save for the gales. The wind swirled about and seemed to push her as it raced beside the river. With every stride she took, and with every

moment of silence, her heart pounded harder. Elyse pushed her legs faster as she dropped down a rise and sprinted alongside a river.



The black puppy now whined softly to himself. He'd cried until his voice was hoarse from his efforts. Only the thundering and laughing river had answered him.

He was certain that no one would rescue him this time. No one would save him, let alone hear him. How could they? The water and the wind surely drowned out his small voice.

He glanced over his shoulder at the rapids like he had so many times in the past hour and saw his watery grave. Any remaining hope in him dwindled and finally faded.

With one more, barely audible whimper, he placed his head on the rock he was lying on and closed his eyes. He'd just begun slipping into a dream about playing with his littermates in one of the meadows near the farm when something grabbed him by the scruff.

He started awake and thrashed about as he was pulled from the river.

"Easy, little one. Steady."

Before the black puppy knew it, he was out of the water, out of the dark gorge, and looking into the face of the most beautiful human he had ever seen. She was frowning as she held him out and looked at him, but still, she was beautiful.

And she's a ranger, he thought with sudden excitement. He knew by her appearance, her garb, and the various weapons she had secured to herself. Her blue eyes were intense, and in them was a fire that reflected her spirit.

And she had rescued him.

It was love at first sight for the black puppy, though it didn't appear to be reciprocated on behalf of his human. That was okay. She had saved him, so how could she not love him?

Though he was exhausted from the day's events, he gave a wag of his tail and placed a paw on her arm.

Still, she didn't smile.

By then, the group caught up to Elyse and were joking and bantering about her new pet. It was especially funny because they knew she wasn't a dog person, and yet the animal that she had saved was a dog.

Elyse merely gave them displeased looks, and said, "He's not mine."

As she held the puppy against herself and began the trek to town, the pup snuggled against her and rested his head on her shoulder, thoroughly content.

Glowing, Elyse shot a glance to Elam, who was hardly able to hide his smirk.

"Och, wheesht," she chided, brushing past him.

The black puppy didn't remember the trip back to Kadesh because he slept the entire way. Only when the group of humans was halfway through town did he finally stir.

The people were talking about things the pup didn't fully comprehend, though he did understand the words they were speaking. That was the first time he heard his human laugh, and he thought it the sound of some heavenly being. Her voice, too, was strong and rich. He also saw how the other humans looked at her, regarding her with fondness and respect.

He looked up at her with endearment as the humans continued through town.

Elyse pretended not to notice the black poof ball in her arms and the impossibly human-like expression in his liquid brown eyes as he gazed up at her.

"He's likely one of Drake's," said Izhar. "I know one of his hunters had puppies just before Christmas. He mentioned one of them was a particularly adventurous tracker."

"Well," replied Elyse firmly. "That's settled then."

The group walked on through town another mile, during which time several passersby teased Elyse about the black bundle.

"He's not mine," she reiterated time and time again.

Finally, the black pup, understanding her tone, pushed himself away from her a little, resolutely placed a paw on her shoulder, and tossed his head back and barked.

But I've chosen you to be mine, he thought, cocking his head to the side.

Elam, unable to contain himself any longer, burst out laughing at the puppy and his expression.

“I don’t think he’ll have it,” he chuckled as if knowing the creature’s thought. “He has picked his human.”

Elyse stopped when they reached the entrance to Drake’s front yard. It was fenced and currently contained a big black furry dog and half a dozen puppies, roughly the same size as the one she was holding.

When she arrived, the big dog perked up and barked.

The puppy answered as a young man exited the house and crossed the yard. The big dog fell in stride beside him while the puppies rushed the fence to see their sibling.

“Afternoon, Elyse,” said Drake. “Looks like you found my wanderer.”

“He was stuck down by the river,” she answered, propping the puppy against her right hip.

He was now panting happily and wagging his tail.

Drake looked at the dogs around him, gave a snap of his fingers, and issued a firm word. Every dog, puppies included, sat.

Elyse set the puppy down on the ground as Drake opened the gate leading into the yard.

But the puppy sat down beside Elyse and blinked up at her.

“Off you go, then,” she said to him, gesturing through the gate.

Distaste crossed the puppy’s face before he looked away and growled.

Drake grinned, and Elam and the others chortled.

The glowering expression resettled on Elyse’s face. Bending down, she picked up the puppy to hand him to Drake. But the moment she held him again, the pup perked up and began wagging his tail.

Eyeing the furry creature, she set him back on the ground. His demeanor immediately soured. Yet, when she picked him up, he was happy and wagging.

“Are all your dogs bipolar?” Elyse asked Drake as she put him down again.

Drake laughed. “No. He’s just found his human, is all.”

At this, the puppy sat and placed a paw on Elyse’s boot.

“No,” she said, first to the puppy and then to Drake. “No. He’s not mine. I just rescued him. That’s all. I don’t like dogs!”

The puppy pushed himself to his paws and looked up at her. His entire rear end wagged as he took a few prancing steps back and tossed his head from side to side.

Elyse shook her head, picked him up, and then set him beside his big, black mother.

“Thanks, but no thanks, Drake,” she said as she started to leave, and Drake shut the gate. “I’ll see you.”

She’d taken three steps before the most pitiful and wrenching cry came from the puppy. He stood on his hind legs and braced against the fence as he looked after her.

But she didn’t turn back. It wasn’t practical to own a dog, not right now. She was undecided about joining the military alliance, and if she did, she would be gone for great lengths of time. It wouldn’t be fair to the creature or fair to those who had to care for it while she was away.

It’s just...not practical, she thought.

The cry came again.

Elyse hunched her shoulders and cringed. Her heart had already melted for the black puppy who had taken a liking to her. Never before had she seen such expression in an animal’s gaze or witnessed such character and personality.

And at each of his cries, her heart broke even more.

But Elyse steeled herself and walked on, forcing herself not to look back at the furry black puppy who had stolen her heart.

Chapter 4

Practicality

She ran beneath the stars and patrolled the mountains, her path well-lit by the full moon. The forest below was bathed in silver and contrasted sharply against the black shadows.

It would have been quite serene if not for the wind. It had not settled for the evening but blew warm from the south.

Stopping on an outcropping looking southeast, she gazed far into the distance as she sorted the smells on the air. Riding on it was the faint scent of smoke, both from wildfire and burning debris.

That's when the eastern horizon flared red and slowly reached higher into the sky. Something was coming, but she couldn't tell yet if it was a fire or some strange menace.

As it drew closer, the smell of smoke became thicker, and the wind fiercer and hotter. Finally, sparks began dancing past her.

That's when she turned her gaze to the sky and saw that the inky darkness was not black or blue; it was crimson. The stars were still visible, but they were backlit in dark red.

At last, flames appeared, devouring the forest below and consuming everything in its path. Small meteors also fell from the sky with trails of flame and smoke behind them. The fire raced along either side of the narrow ridge she stood on as the scorching wind tugged at her.

'Is this what's coming?' she thought as she looked at the fiery ruin. 'Is this our end? Will we be destroyed like the others? Is there no refuge in these darkening days?'

Elam's news about the fate of Alpharez and Markab had obviously troubled her greatly, as had the description of the enemy ship. Her brother was already certain a lethal enemy was traveling about the systems. He also knew that they, whoever they were, wanted total domination. The fact that they had destroyed two planets meant they were confident in their ability to achieve that goal. Elam was positive about these things despite only seeing a glimpse of them.

Maybe this partially explained the dream. But now it was her home planet that was burning. She recognized every mountain and hill being consumed in the inferno.

“This is what will come to pass if those who can fight refuse to do so.”

She started and half-turned to see him standing a dozen feet away, near the edge of the ridge. Tall he was, and strong with the most cutting light blue eyes she’d ever seen. He wasn’t an omicron; he was something far greater. Although he was in the likeness of a man, she sensed that he was a being of terrible power. Timeless he seemed, too, though no gray touched his black hair and only a subtle line or two marked his finely featured face.

Blinking out of her stare, she eyed him again. “I doubt the fate of an entire planet rests on whether one or two fighters refuse to engage in war. Besides, is this ruin and fire for certain? Last I checked, only One knew what was or wasn’t going to happen. And if I’m not mistaken, isn’t this how the systems will perish? With fire to destroy the old and prepare for the new?”

The stranger, none other than Zayev, chuckled deeply, and his eyes snapped at her. “Well done. What you say is true about the destruction and restoration of the universe.”

The time had not yet come for him to reveal himself to her in the physical realm. However, he wasn’t yet certain when that would be or what circumstances would surround that event. Thus, he figured a preemptive introduction through a dream was in order to hopefully lessen the shock that frequently happens when a human met an angel in the physical realm.

At any rate, his charge also required a little encouraging push towards a decision she needed to make very soon.

Besides, the guardian was curious about what she was like to interact with.

Zayev’s mirth faded as he casually approached her. “However, you’re wrong in thinking that the fate of an entire planet or people can’t rest on one person or on what a single individual does or doesn’t do. Many times, the fate of millions has rested on one.”

He stopped several feet from her. Though his physical form wasn’t the largest of his kind, he was still head and shoulders above Elyse. He watched the muscles in her jaw flex and body tense as she prepared for a possible altercation. It was normal enough for humans

to be intimidated by another of their own who was larger than themselves, but here this little human stood braced for a fight with a being of heaven.

Zayev couldn't help but be a little impressed. When he looked deep into her soul, that sentiment deepened. Determination was one of the traits that her very being was founded upon, determination and fearlessness. The more difficult the situation, the harder she fought, to the death, if necessary.

Of course, the hazard of this type of human was the potential of them fighting themselves to death; when they ran so far and so hard that their bodies gave out despite the determination of the spirit. Even in that, it was when they sensed the weakening of their bodies that they went into overdrive.

She also had a good temper in her and a wild spirit as untamable as the wind or sea. A cage would be the true bane of her existence, but she would rather force a captor to fight and kill her before she was ever locked up.

The image of a wild horse caught in a barbwire fence came to his mind. It hated the fence that entangled it and fought and struggled in its wrath. It knew that lying still would ease the pain, but that meant yielding to the snare. And if someone approached to cut the wild horse free, it would fight twice as hard, for who knew this stranger's schemes? Better having lived a free life and then died fighting, than to be freed from the fence only to be confined and forced to labor in allotted work.

In his time of working alongside humans, Zayev had only seen one other person who had the fight and fire equivalent to hers. He'd been a great commander of men in a past age of war, but he had been greater still in faith. The guardian had come to see this human as a true brother-in-arms, his friend.

And in that moment, when he saw that kind of spirit in her, he felt inspiration and camaraderie come to life in him. He sensed the great things they could do together.

As she met and held his gaze, she watched as a light flickered in his eyes. By his expression, he seemed to have come to some sort of conclusion, though she couldn't guess what that might be.

Straightening, he folded his arms and seemed to grow even taller. The air about him seemed also to grow lighter, and if she wasn't completely imagining, she felt heat rolling off him.

"Last I checked," said the guardian. "Your people were made to be protectors, excelling in stealth and cunning. When speed and silence were needed, it was your people that others looked to, to execute what all but you deemed impossible. I've never seen one of your people flee from a fight or even tremble before a foe, no matter how large or numerous."

She pulled in a sharp breath. "I'm not afraid of anything."

"Except one particular black puppy," he replied with mirth.

Her temper flared.

"I fear nothin'," she said sharply, her light accent becoming more pronounced as she drew the knife at her thigh. "But I can give you somethin' to run from pretty quick."

Tossing his head back, Zayev laughed heartily, and the depth and power of his voice thundered over the mountains. A cool wind came then, rushing off the Ice Fields and immediately extinguishing the raging flames.

"You definitely take after your father," he said once he had contained himself.

She blinked at him. Issachar was a balanced and level-headed man. She'd never heard him raise his voice.

"I mean your biological father," clarified the guardian. "Always a bit quick to a fight and opting to strike first with swift and fierce brute strength."

She looked at him with deepening suspicion and felt her defenses rise higher. "And what could you possibly know about my parents?"

He didn't answer her question but took one step closer. "Listen to your brother: the time for you to train and track on new hunting grounds has come. Time is of the essence and is ever against us."

The stranger unfolded his arms and straightened.

"I challenge you to give all the other officers at the academy a run for their money," he continued as the light in his eyes brightened. "I challenge you to best your commanding

officers and even top Elam. Better still...surpass your parents, who set a bar so high that only a select few have ever met it."

A loud crack came from the eastern horizon as a swift, pale dawn chased away the crimson heavens.

"The call to arms has been sounded for every soldier. Answer it, child of Ezar and Tara."

He leaned towards her a little with an expression of utmost intensity. "Respond to the call, daughter of heaven, and become fully what you were made to be."

A twinkle of sunlight flirted amongst the tops of the trees as he backed away.

"Oh, and keep in mind that friends and allies can come in the most unusual shapes and sizes."

His eyes twinkled again. "You two were brought together for a reason. He'll come in handy."

The sun peeked over the trees and hills, flooding the land with blinding light...

Elyse opened her eyes and found that it was morning. And that she had slept in. She smelled breakfast.

For a moment, she remained lying there and thinking about the dream. Already some of it was fading from memory, but bits and pieces about the stranger and what he had said stayed with her.

Finally, with a giant yawn, she forced herself out of bed. She could think more about it all later, but right now her stomach was reminding her that she had more pressing matters to tend.

On her way to the bathroom, she chanced a glance out a window and saw that it was another sunny day.

She was still half-asleep when she tripped upstairs to the kitchen and sat down at the table with the others.

"Morning, sunshine," said Elam, who was working on a mound of scrambled eggs and pancakes.

“If you don’t start eatin’ more, you’ll waste away to nothing,” quipped Elyse to him as she snatched a biscuit from the basket in the center of the table.

Elam glanced at her, the heap of eggs on his fork, back to her, then shoved into his mouth.

“You’re just mad you overslept, and we already ate all the chocolate chip pancakes,” he commented around a cheekful of food.

“You ate them, you mean,” replied Alana, walking to the table with a plate in hand. “But not the very last one.”

She flipped the pancake onto Elyse’s plate which Elam eyed. The moment his hand twitched, Elyse whacked it with her fork and then leveled a lethal glare on him. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Did you hear the latest report on that rogue bora?” asked Issachar, setting down a small digital tablet he’d been skimming news on.

Elyse shook her head. “Last I heard is that it was spotted outside Almaak. But that was on Wednesday.”

“It hit Lisburn late last night,” said Issachar, taking up his glass of orange juice. “Killed some livestock, two hounds guarding them, and wounded two horses belonging to a hunter.”

Elyse raised her eyebrows. “Well, that bora just signed its death warrant. Pickin’ off livestock is one thing but killing guard hounds is another. And wounding two horses, which belong to a hunter no less, is an offense beyond describing.”

Issachar passed the tablet to her. “Security caught some photos of it.”

Lee, sitting opposite Elyse, leaned over the table to see the images as she began scrolling through them.

“Wow, that’s a big one,” he commented. “Look at that wingspan.”

“Yes,” mused Elyse, studying the creature. “Largest one I’ve ever seen.”

She set down the tablet and took up her glass of water. “The party that takes it down will have some serious bragging rights.”

Elam huffed. “What do you mean ‘party’? Don’t you mean ‘the person’ who takes it down?”

Lee immediately picked up where Elam was heading with the conversation. “Aye. Never let it be said that Elyse Klein looked away from a challenge or prize as big as that brute.”

Alana was quick to jump on the matter and take control. “No, no Elyse is right in implying it would take a team to bring down a creature that large. It has been harassing towns for weeks which means it isn’t scared of humans. This latest attack shows that it is only going to grow bolder.”

She sent a rather pointed look from Lee to Elam and then finally to Elyse. “She’s right in showing caution.”

Lee burst out laughing at that. “Elyse? Cautious? You’re talking about the woman who, as a girl, traversed the entire width of the Ice Field during spring breakup without any gear.”

“Aye. And she prefers to patrol at night, under the cover of deepest darkness,” added Elam with that mischievous twinkle in his eye. “She hunts packs of massak for fun and plays tag with rabid wolves.”

“Shut up,” muttered Elyse under her breath.

“Oh yea, and that’s when she’s not wrestling with bachelor bands of razorbacks,” grinned Lee.

“And all before afternoon tea!” finished Elam, before he and Lee exploded into riotous laughter.

“Both of you shut it,” snapped Elyse, growing red in the face as she looked everywhere but at Alana.

While she knew her parents were aware of a few of her exciting adventures, Elyse preferred that her activities weren’t regularly divulged to Issachar and Alana. She was concerned they would worry for no reason, or worse, lock her in her room. Granted, she was an adult now, but that was beside the point.

Elam and Lee laughed on.

When Elyse snuck a look at Issachar, she spied the corners of his mouth trying to pull upwards. She still avoided glancing in Alana's direction.

With surprising quickness, Elyse jumped to her feet and smacked Elam up the backside of the head.

"I don't know why I hang out with you," she said with irritation. "Why do you have to be such a wee clipe, always tattle-taling?"

She looked at Lee sharply. "And I'll never take you with me on patrol ever again!"

Naturally, the brothers thought getting a rise out of their sister was rather enjoyable and funny. Thus, seeing that they had successfully wound her up only made them start laughing all over again.

The three of them were making quite a racket in between laughing on the boys' behalf and heated threats on Elyse's end. Alana was about to restore the peace when a noise gave them all pause.

Everyone looked at one another before the sound came again, this time louder. Movement out the corner of Elyse's right eye drew her attention. She glanced out of the glass door leading to the porch and started.

Standing there, panting happily with lolling tongue and a wagging tail, was the fluffy black puppy with a narrow white stripe down his chest. Today, he was sporting an orange collar with something pinned to it.

"Well, go on," said Elam to his sister with a nudge while trying his hardest not to laugh yet again.

Hesitantly, Elyse walked to the door and then paused a moment to watch as the puppy's entire back end began wagging. Finally, she opened the door and looked down at him.

Recalling what she had seen Drake do yesterday, she snapped her fingers. As hoped, the puppy sat down obediently. She then knelt and unpinned a note attached to his collar. After reading the short message, she looked at the puppy gazing up at her with endearment.

“Uh,” she said, looking over her shoulder at Alana. “Sooo...Drake is giving this guy to me. I guess all he does is sit at the fence and watch for, uh...someone to come back.”

Alana smiled, and her eyes twinkled. “I know. Elam told me all about the rescue and how attached that puppy is to you.”

Her soft gaze went to the little creature. “Well? Are you going to invite him into his new home?”

“Wait, what?” asked Elyse, confused. “I didn’t think you’d let any of us have a pet.”

“He’s not a pet,” replied Issachar. “He’s a laborer and is thus a member of this family. I know you’ll train him to earn his keep.”

A twinkle came to life in his gentle hazel eyes. “Besides, back when I was a hunter, I had a tracker who went everywhere with me. The best dog I’d ever worked with. Stayed by my side for two decades ‘til he was killed by a razorback—but not because he’d grown old and slow. The hunted just got the jump on the hunter is all.”

Elyse sighed. “But...it’s just...if, when I sign up for the military, who would...I mean, it’s not fair...it’s just not practical to have a dog or any pet right now.”

Issachar smiled. “I know Alana and I have raised you three to be careful of your emotions and not to let them run away with you. We’ve taught you to use your head and to think. But sometimes...the best choice isn’t always the strictly logical or practical one. There are times when the best, and right, option is impractical. Or so it seems at first before you see in the long run that it was the good call.”

“Besides,” said Alana offhandedly. “I’d like to have someone to keep me company when everyone’s at work or training.”

Elyse drew a breath of resignation, looked down at the black puppy, and slowly smiled.

At this, the puppy, still sitting, wiggled his entire body.

Will you run with me through the forest in the heart of night, she thought to him, and across the mountainside bathed in moonlight? Will you track with me and hunt the fiercest and darkest foes? Will you stay beside me and prove to me unceasing loyalty?

As if reading her thoughts, the pup reached up and rested a paw on her knee. *I will stay by your side and guard your steps to the end of my days, he wanted to say, or until the end of time comes.*

Elyse knew that a dog would be unfailingly loyal to its human and show ceaseless love until its death.

Funny, she thought as she looked into those eyes that held such expression. That a human can obtain such things from an animal but not from another human. It's almost like He gave us such creatures to show us what unceasing love and loyalty is like...

At length, Elyse stroked the puppy's head and gave him a good scruffle before picking him up.

"Alright then," she said, propping him against her hip. "But don't say I never gave you chances to stay away from this crazy family."

The puppy gave a squeaky howl in reply.

"What're you going to call him?" asked Lee as Elyse walked inside and shut the door.

Elyse held up the puppy a little and looked at him with a thoughtful expression. Human and dog gazed at each other for a long breath, as if they were seeing deep into each other's hearts and catching a glimpse of what they would become in the days ahead.

Gently, the puppy reached out and placed his paws on her shoulders.

The smile returned to Elyse's mouth as a name came to her. "Alastar...defender of man."

Chapter 5

The General & the Wolf

The stealth vessel glided swiftly through space like a predator on the trail of its prey.

He sat in the captain's chair on the bridge and mindlessly toyed with a knife. The light in the room danced off the keen blade and reflected in his dark eyes.

Every soldier on the bridge went about their tasks with quiet quickness. They felt the tension in the air and knew it came from their commander. They were in pursuit of a target that had been spotted by another friendly ship a few hours ago. It was paramount they intercept it before it reached a habitable planet.

This tension wasn't caused from fear of failing to catch the target vessel in time. It came from rising excitement and anticipation of what was going to happen to those on board once it was in their custody. The only thing more invigorating than the hunt was the destruction or domination of one's foe. That was when a person felt truly alive.

With a sigh, the general stood and began pacing slowly. Although he was chief, the head Overseer of the striking arm of the Black Army, and he had an insatiable taste for violence and cruelty, he was still a man of considerable patience. In order to be as successful as he was, he needed the ability to wait and keep in check his lust for carnage.

There had been many like him in the past ages of man, but none measured up to his level of hatred, malice, and brutality. Never had there been one like him and there never would be again. There would be no one "after" him because his arrival marked the beginning of the end of Time.

He was one of the three Overseers, those who could not be matched in all things evil, corrupt, perverse, and hateful. He was one of the three most evil beings that had ever been and ever would be.

After waiting for many lives of man, after biding its time, Evil itself had brought them forth and ushered them into their positions of power and authority. They had been immersed in darkness, brought up in darkness, and fed by darkness. They were driven by an evil whose vileness and wrath were beyond describing. Truly, they came from a line of

those who worshipped Evil and the Dark One who brought it into the universe. They came from a heritage that worshipped fiends of hell and all things perverted and twisted. Somewhere along the line, spawns of Evil were born from the daughters of man, which resulted in a dark and twisted race not entirely human.

As each generation gave birth to darker offspring, it was finally said that those born of the corrupted line were more demon than human. Yet, they had the appearance of humans and dealt in the realm of the seen, though they also worked amongst beings of the unseen.

The three Overseers came from this evil line and embodied everything that the faithful believers of the living Creator abhorred and stood against.

And there he paced, one of the three, Lorcan, the fierce and cruel Overseer of the Black Army's military movements. His mind was filled with strategies for war and torture. Because he had decent foresight, he could preemptively strike his enemy before they had a chance to initiate a countermove. Add to it that he possessed a vast intelligence network, both human and demonic, and his rivals stood little chance of achieving victory.

Because of his high rank and status among man and demon, he did not permit his name to be spoken by his underlings. Such as it was with his other two Overseer associates. His subordinates referred to him as the Overseer and, when specificity was required, the General.

Drawing a measured breath, Lorcan stopped before the large front window of the bridge and gazed with feigned boredom into the expanse of space.

"Are our sensors fully functional?" he asked evenly to the chief navigational officer.

"Yes, sir."

"Including our long-range scanners?"

"Yes, sir."

"And there's no reason why we wouldn't be able to pick up a cloaked ship?"

"No, sir."

Lorcan took another long breath. He felt the need to lash out at someone and to understand why they hadn't picked up a signal from one rickety refugee ship. But that

would prove pointless. If there was a problem with the sensors, obviously someone would have said something by now and would be working to remedy the issue.

Instead, he sent a look to the one standing off his right shoulder. “Well? Are your scouts actually out searching or are they waiting for us to do all the work?”

To the eyes of the human soldiers, they only saw a black shadow standing beside Lorcan. But to his darkened eyes, he plainly saw the demon general next to him.

The general, a large brute with an impressive wingspan, when he chose to have wings at all, returned Lorcan’s gaze with a cool glare. “My scouts are searching ahead of your ship. We may be able to travel faster than any vessel known to man, but the galaxy provides a lot of ground to cover.”

Lorcan returned his attention out the window. “Perhaps I should be questioning the competence of Skoll’s scouts.”

That remark made the demon smirk. “Perhaps. The Wolf himself is unsurpassed in all matters of the unseen, but he doesn’t have the brightest imps working for him. You, on the other hand, O prince, have the cream of the crop. Those under myself and my fellow generals are unrivaled in speed and stealth, and our intelligence network is unmatched, save perhaps, by the Alpha himself.”

A corner of Lorcan’s mouth twitched upwards.

Skoll was another of the Overseers. His name was derived from ancient mythology, specifically a story about the wolf that relentlessly chased after the sun. Hence his name spoken by underlings: the Wolf.

He was more demonic than his other two Overseer companions. This was fitting because he oversaw all the demonic forces across the expanse of the universe. His appearance was also less human than his associates, and shadow always shrouded him. Like his demonic counterparts, he could go hither and thither through the air or space with great speed. It was difficult to know when or where he would turn up, which made him especially lethal to the enemy. He wielded great terror, and to oppress and tear down was his specialty. No light of any believer had pierced his darkness or climbed out from under the suffocating blanket of his evil once it fell upon them.

Only a few had seen him approach from afar and had barely escaped with their lives. High-ranking demons flanked him, and the most seasoned generals answered his call whenever he issued it.

Or so it was said. Presently, Lorcan was questioning the latter rumor.

A weight pressed down on the room as a shadow dropped beside the General. “They’re only a few leagues out,” reported the scout. “They’re hiding amongst a small asteroid field, which might be why the sensors didn’t detect them.”

“I have the field,” commented the navigational officer. “And I’ve just picked up a weak signal.”

“Adjust course so it looks like we’re going to coast by them,” said Lorcan with a dark gleam in his eye. He was having one of those days where he thought it would be fun to toy with his prey first by giving them false hope before catching and killing it.

“Aye, sir.”

Minutes later, the asteroid field came into view on the left. They locked onto the refugee ship’s signal and knew their target was hiding behind a particularly large rock near the outer edge.

The refugee ship didn’t know this. Its occupants watched with great anxiety as the sleek scouting vessel slipped by their hiding spot. Everyone held their breath as it glided past and disappeared.

A minute went by. The crew had just started breathing easier when a deafening explosion rocked the ship with such force that it threw everyone off their feet. The vessel groaned as the primary power blinked out and emergency backup systems came online.

Another shudder ran through the hull before an unfamiliar voice spoke through the intercom.

“This is General Lorcan,” snarled an evil voice. *“Overseer of the military forces of the Black Army.”*

At the sound of that voice, and at the potent evil that was in it, the occupants of the wounded ship became completely dismayed. Overcome with fear and dread, some dropped to their knees, others to the floor, and all covered their ears. But they could not

drown out the voice. It was as if it came from inside their own minds. There was no escape, and there was no place to hide.

“I know this ship is the one that escaped from the Merchant Station,” continued the General, *“which my forces took control of. As such, you know that I cannot let you continue on your way.”*

The ship groaned again. People were jolted when black, winged shadows appeared from nowhere and looked at them with glinting eyes.

“You have two choices: you can surrender, in which case you will be escorted back to the station and be placed under our supervision. Or you refuse and I tear your ship apart. You have ten minutes to decide.”

Silence fell over the ship. The shadows, after grinning evilly at the cowering humans, vanished in the blink of an eye.

Back on the scouting vessel, Lorcan wheezed a laugh to himself and then turned to the weapons officer. “Give them nine minutes and then blow that ship apart section by section. Let’s allow them to grasp at a final strand of hope before ending their pointless existence.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lorcan smiled, feeling quite pleased with himself. *I just love being evil.*