

**“Omicron, Part I: Cerberus Rising”
Chapters 1 - 15**

By: Kenya Gaede

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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’s owned by a friend in the South and is responsible for converting me more into a “dog person.” Until him, I’d never seen such expression in an animal’s face or eyes. He also has a calm and regal way about him, instead of a hyperactive “in your face” disposition.

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

Author’s Disclaimer

First and foremost: please remember that is a work of fiction. There are a lot of scenes involving angels and demons. This is especially true in Part II because the spiritual and physical realms begin to merge 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 on spiritual beings is based on what is written in Scripture, which is completely true. 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, are very adamant about it, 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 or offers little information about 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 their existence, then we make Christ out to be a liar.

I reiterate: this is a work of fiction. 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, may only have a vague idea about It, or may 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 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 and 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.

One final note: not all situations in this story have happy endings. Not all resolutions, whether in a conflict or relationship, will result in “warm, fuzzy feelings.” This isn’t reality, and although this work is fiction, it still needs to be somewhat relatable.

Everyone passes through seasons that are 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.

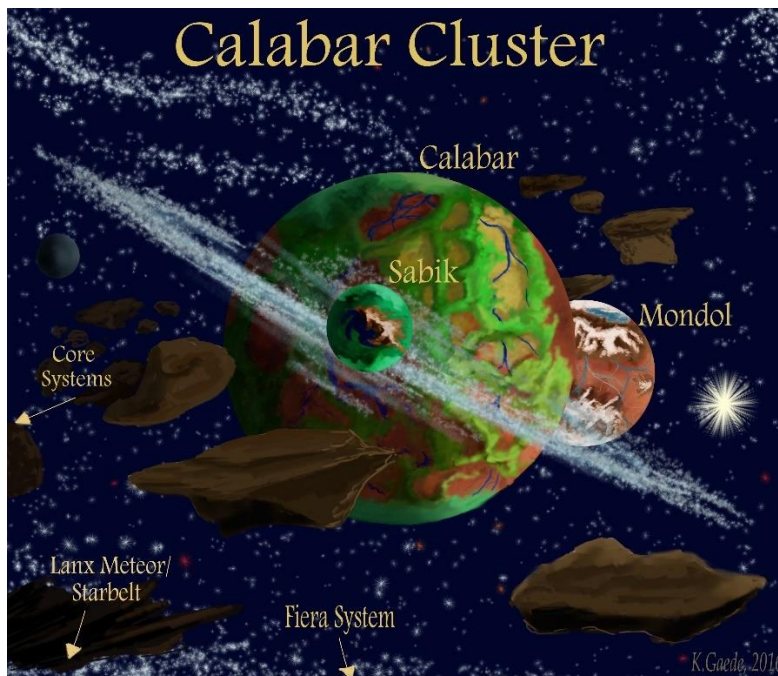
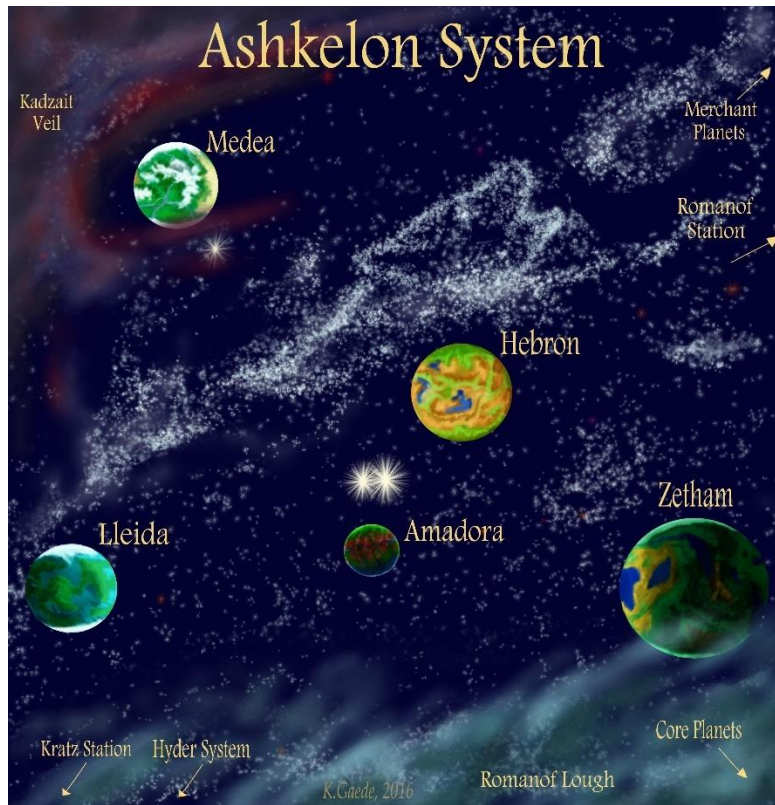
We have three basic options when we’re going through hardships (self-inflicted or not): we continue to have faith and keep crawling forward, we become stagnant, or we become embittered and turn our backs on God. I’ve learned from personal experience that if you choose the first option, you’ll come out 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.

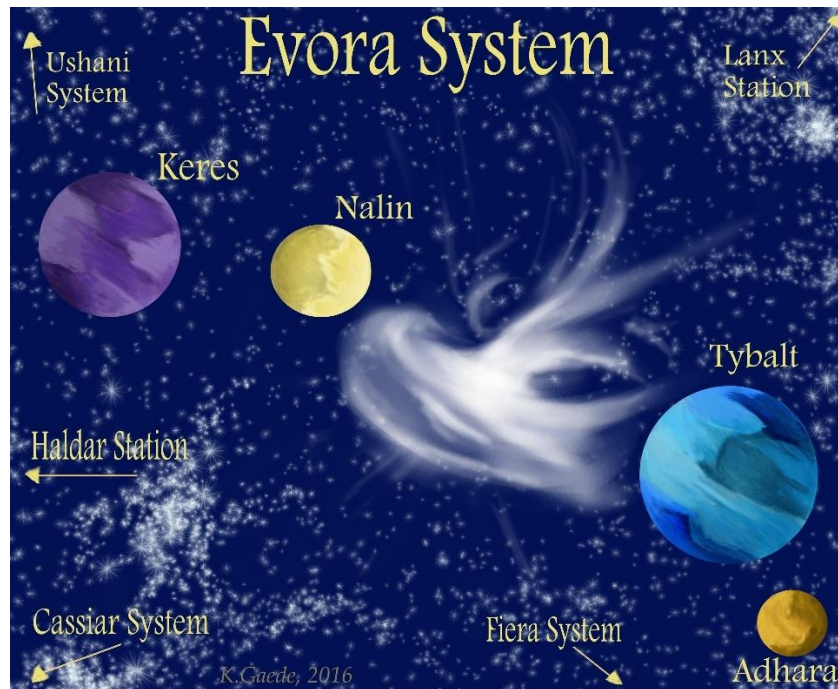
This is why I’d rather not have one less God-allowed trial, why I’d rather not have simple days of comfort and ease. This is why I no longer fear the Refiner’s fire or storms of life.

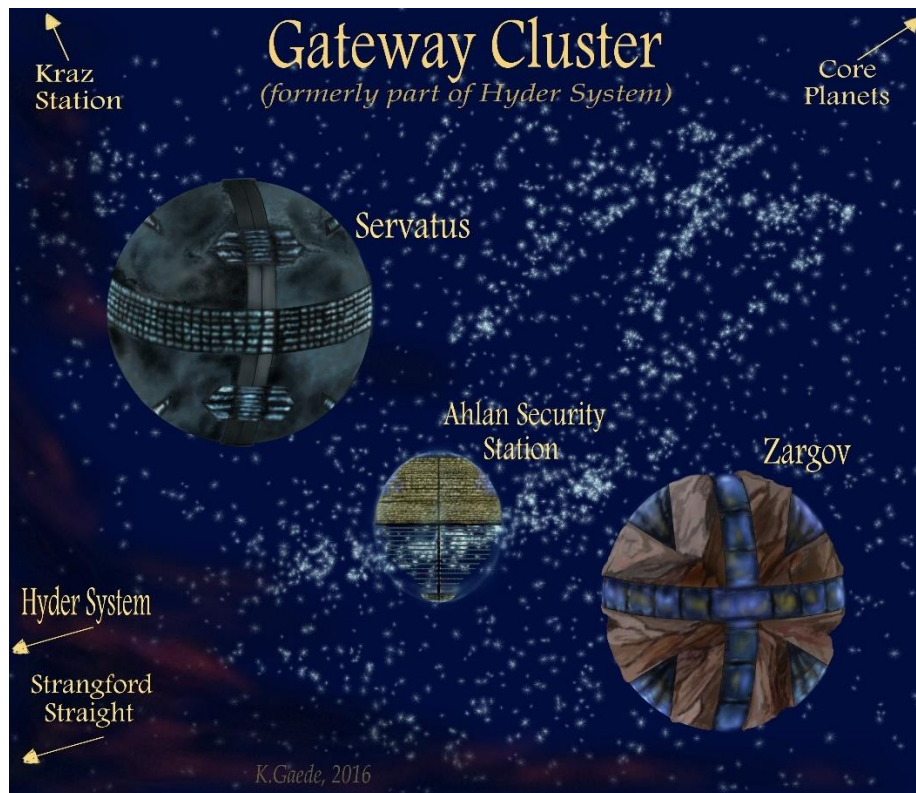
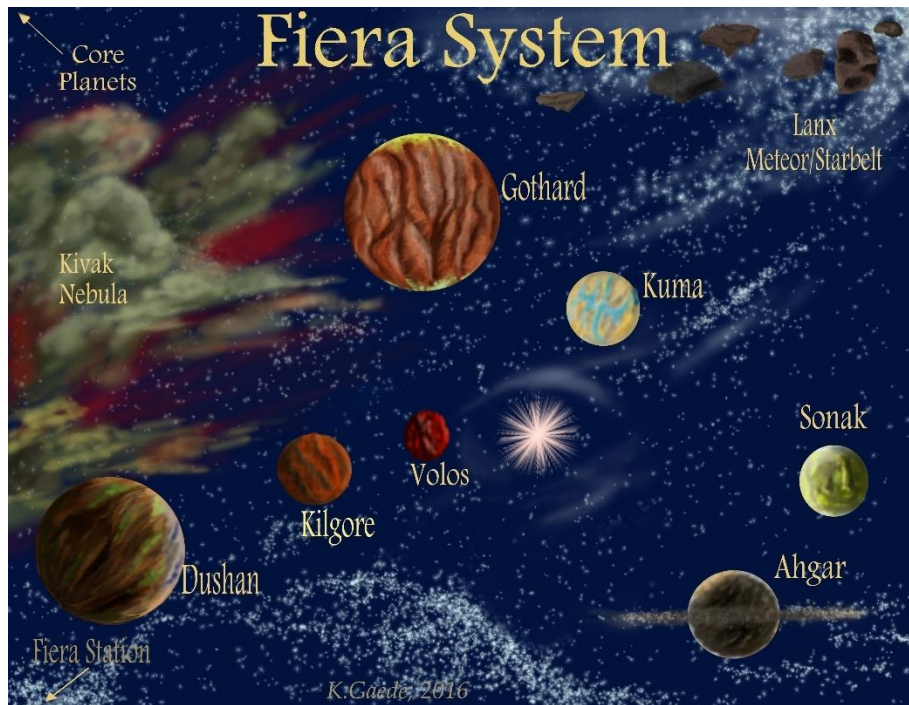
That’s all that needs to be said, except: as always, I hope that you enjoy reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

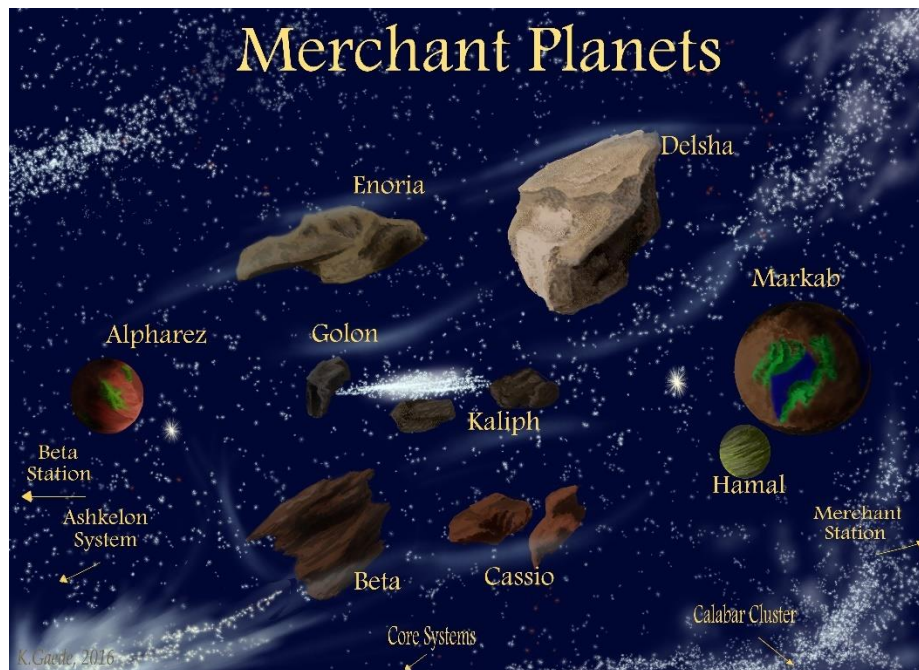
System Maps













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. It was a place where 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 both 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 could include guarding a new human, running messages or being sent to scout the enemy’s borders.

As the seven stood before their commanding officer, they appeared expectant and ready, sure they could handle whatever job was put before them. Some were shining 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 all his associates, of course, but it wasn’t bursting from him. Nor did he exude confidence and boldness like the others. He was silent and even seemed to be a little detached from the situation.

For himself, he expected more administrative duties, like the ones he’d been performing in recent “months,” or so they were called in human terms. For the past six months, he’d been executing “in house” tasks and seeing to heavenly affairs.

That was perfectly fine with him because he was still recovering from the assignment that had come seven months prior. Or, more accurately, the assignment that *ended* seven months ago.

The commanding officer was a more serious being than 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, which meant “brightness.” The form he usually chose to take was that of a winged being of average height (by human standards) and lean 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’d 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 Zayev.

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’ve easily mistaken him to be 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. But the task he’d 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’d 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’d wrestled with, and had managed to quiet, came roaring back to life.

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.”

And then 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 go 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 had free will. They could choose to disobey orders and lead rebellions—but at a great cost. Once cast down, they could not be redeemed. In their lofty positions of power and authority, and as those who saw His face: the greater their position, the greater the responsibility... and thus, the more severe the punishment for willful misconduct.

This was what added to Zayev’s internal struggle. He wanted to question his orders and to ask for understanding, which he doubted would result in him being cast from heaven. But in that questioning, he’d be showing a lack of his own “faith,” so to speak, in the very One who’d 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 depth and gravity of the battle? It was a contest between standing by when their earthly charges were in pain or trouble, and not disobeying their orders *not* to render aid –or by repeatedly and blatantly questioning His orders, which could result in any measure of chastisement.

“My friend,” said Thebez gently, barely able to stand watching his companion be in torment. 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, which is typical...and he stole her life, pulled it right out from under her. It wasn’t your fault.”

There were fiery and glistening tears of grey light 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 even the 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 even if we consider and prepare for all outcomes, we may still meet defeat. Our enemy does get one up on us sometimes –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 even have 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 one another 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, 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, a 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 been burning 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. 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, 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 they were 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 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 leap 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 full well 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 right 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 rage before bearing its large, gleaming teeth at the person who’d 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.

Having already regripped the arrow she’d drawn so her hand was nearer the head, she was in the process of thrusting it 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,” whined 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,” said 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 the 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 chin 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’d seen one up close as a child. She’d thought it a brute and that hadn’t changed after fifteen years.

It was like a cross between a wolf and a lioness. The head resembled a wolf, but the body was broad and muscled like a lion. Coats, however, were a thick and coarse double-coat, and 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 wielded 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'd seed and send white fuzz into the air, mimicking the appearance of snow. A lingering chill remained in the air 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, was waddling 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 to them. 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 way 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 any given person to wander for months in the wilderness exploring. Although not 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 had the distinct honor of being a true “outer rim” planet. In all the known systems, it was the only “fourth rimmer.” All others across the systems 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 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, there was a notable coldness in their expressions and an unnerving, vicious light 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 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 the wind was bringing. 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.

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

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 could be seen 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 the one leading into the office was their point-of-entry. It was large enough to jump through, and the pair did so in complete 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. Jolting, she dropped the red pepper and knife she’d been holding. 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 behind the dining table...with a container of blueberries that had been beside the peppers.

“You two take years off my life every time you sneak up on me,” chided Alana, before sending Lee a look. “And if you’d 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 tiskted 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 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, now 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 go 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 Elam did 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 it was good hunting 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 was on top of the rise, giving 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. But it was also equally important to have a high vantage point and decent view at all times, period.

Once on the 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 even still alive. But Elyse had figured that if dear old mom and dad had any interest in their children, they would've 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'd worked through the troubles and burdens that often came with adopted children.

Elam had initially been quiet and brooding. He 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 times in the Koa household. But as time passed, 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'd appreciate it one day, having their own identities, their true identities. 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 a military man,” 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 snorted. “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?”

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

“I'm sure you heard the rumors a few weeks ago about the Merchant Planets,” began Elam quietly, “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 at the plants showed that there were catastrophic malfunctions just before the explosions.”

Elam sighed. “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 gave a shake of 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 to sound 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’ve 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 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 she'd 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—or they were topics that they simply blew off. It wasn't that they didn't believe such things existed, because they did believe in them. 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, by the size, shields, and weapons. Since my team and I were recon, our ship only had cloaking capabilities. But we couldn't engage the ship, either way. We had...less than superior firepower if things turned violent.”

He shook his head. “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 time...”

Elam paused to regather his thoughts and then continued, “Like I said, I can’t explain it. But my gut is screaming at me, telling 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 across 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 just jump on board?”

Elyse’s heart pounded harder with every word her brother spoke. Because of her fiery 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 and 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.

Elyse chewed on her brother’s words for a few minutes.

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. Besides, 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 projections that said 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 took, 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'd 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'd 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 was from the very first time she'd 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'd catch up to my class easily. Few upper-level commanders who 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.”

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

“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?”

Zayev 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. But 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’d nearly gotten lost or 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, 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’d 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’d 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 and then 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 mossy 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 had become quite difficult for him to traverse after another mile, and he was lagging 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 just 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 of some kind. None were in sight, so he turned right and jogged along the water.

Around a bend, he 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 thundered 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.

Instantly, he dropped to his stomach. The water below roared 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 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 and steeled himself. 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. Then together they'd 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 loudly 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 could hear his foe snarling behind him and almost feel 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 for the small, black puppy.

The pup lunged sideways, but his foe practically landed 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 incensed, 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 were thrown off balance, lost their grip on the rocks and then plummeted into the river.

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

At first, the razorback attempted a few swipes at the puppy but soon decided 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, however, continued to be carried 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 and calmed and straightened a short distance.

The puppy whined when it saw the enormous rapids at the head of the next corner. It might've 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, as if the river and rocks were alive.

An image, unbidden, came to the puppy, a vision of a large monster lying in wait ahead, awaiting 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'd 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, getting 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’d been out 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’d agreed to run with them, mostly because Elam was still home, and he was going with the group. As if she’d 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’d 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’d 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 heard over the wind, but still it made 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 and the call was clear. The sound of it 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. But 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 or not I rescue it.*

The wind brought yet another wrenching cry to her ears, before a gust slammed through the trees, ripped off a cluster of leaves and threw them right into her face.

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

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

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

“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 be racing beside the river, sometimes pushing her. 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 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'd 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 just by her appearance, and by her garb and the various weapons she had secured to herself. Her pale blue eyes were keen. In them was a fire, as if reflected her spirit.

And she'd 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'd 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 how much she wasn't a dog person, and yet the animal that she'd 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 then 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 just 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. However, 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 was wagging as he took a few prancing steps back and tossed his head from side to side.

Elyse just 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’d 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’ve 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 the color slowly reached higher into the sky. Something was coming, but she couldn’t tell yet if it was fire or some strange menace.

As it drew closer, the smell of smoke became thicker, and the wind fiercer and hotter. Finally, sparks began to dance 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.

Flames, at last, 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 was standing on as the scorching wind tugged at her.

‘Is this what’s coming?’ she thought as she looked out 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 greatly troubled her, along with the description of the enemy ship. Her brother was already certain that there was, in fact, a lethal enemy traveling about the systems. He also knew that they, whoever they were, wanted total domination. The fact that they’d destroyed two planets meant they were confident in their ability to achieve that goal. Elam had only seen a glimpse of them, but of all these things he was positive.

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 could be seen on his finely featured face.

Blinking out of her gawking 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 then 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 or dismay that frequently happens when a human met angel in real life.

At any rate, his charge also needed a little more of a push to encourage her towards a decision that she needed to make very soon.

Besides...the guardian was just plain curious about what she’d be 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 what a single individual does or doesn’t do. Many times, the fate of millions has rested on one.”

He stopped when he was 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 ever so subtly, 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, he became even more so. Determination was one of the traits that her very being was founded upon, determination and fearlessness. The more difficult the situation, the harder she’d strive and fight, to the death, if necessary.

Of course, the hazard of this type of human was the potential that they’d fight 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'd 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 knew of the great things they'd do together, of the feats they'd accomplish that all others said were impossible.

As she met and held his gaze, she watched as a light burned in his eyes. By his expression, he seemed to have to 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 could feel 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 laughter in his eyes.

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'd 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 further. "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 took on a somewhat challenging posture.

"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 burned brighter. "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 Zion, 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.”

Laughter danced in his eyes 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’d slept in. She could smell breakfast.

For a moment, she remained laying there and thinking about the dream. Already some of it was fading from memory, but bits and pieces about the stranger and what he’d 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 piled on his plate.

“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, then to the heap of eggs on his fork, before back to her and shoving it 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 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’d 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 were still laughing. When Elyse snuck a look at Issachar, she spied the corners of his mouth trying to pull upwards. But she still didn’t glance 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’d been successful in winding 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, and when she glanced out the glass door leading to the porch, she 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’d 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 again, who was 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 warm 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 back end.

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 one another 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 reached a habitable planet.

The tension on the bridge 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 to slowly pace. While 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 had to be able 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 were fed by darkness. They were driven by an evil whose vileness and wrath was 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 had 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 both 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 glared 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’ve 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, 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 gaze out the window. “Perhaps I should be questioning the competence of Skoll’s scouts.”

That 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 one of the Overseers. His name was derived from ancient mythology, specifically a story about the wolf that relentlessly chased after and pursued 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 he was always shrouded in shadow. 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’d 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 in 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 pick them up.”

“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’d be fun to toy with his prey first, such as by giving them false hope before catching and killing it.

“Aye, sir.”

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

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

A minute went by and the crew had just started to breathe 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 ship 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 with their hands. But they could not drown out the voice. It was as if it was coming 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 out of nowhere and looked at them with gleaming 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.*

Chapter 6

Guarded Incentive

System: Ashkelon

Planet: Medea

The two battling units raced down the side of the ridge, becoming steeper the farther down they ran. There was so much movement it was difficult to keep track of fellow teammates while simultaneously fighting the nearest rival.

Blue Squad had thought they’d gotten the jump on the less experience Red Team at the start of the skirmish. But they’d only lulled themselves into false security. The Reds had lured them to an ambush point before attacking.

Now instead of an organized offensive, it was a free-for-all as the two squads battled. Neither side showed any hint of yielding and went at each other relentlessly.

So, there they were, running, or more so sliding, down a moss-covered ridge. Rounds from assault rifles zipped through the air and passed between various squad members.

A Red soldier, whose opponent was on the far end of the battling teams, sprinted towards the end of a ledge. He was about to jump from it but took a misstep and stumbled. It saved him from taking a round to the side, but not the chest as he staggered forward. As he fell, he squeezed off a round and it found his opponent’s stomach. Both dropped the ground at the same time.

The terrain was becoming more difficult to traverse and trees harder to avoid as the fight raged on. Within seconds, two Blue members fell, followed by three more Red soldiers.

“Get ‘em, Vesper!” shouted one of the Red soldiers as he and the other eliminated players slid to a stop on the ridge.

“Yeah, show ‘em, Notus!” called another.

There were two Reds, Vesper and Notus, and two Blues remaining in the skirmish. All four approached a section of the ridge that became a sheer cliff.

Notus ducked one shot from his opponent and then dodged behind a tree to avoid another. When he emerged around the other side, he was already returning fire. The rounds were still in route to their target when Vesper, exchanging rapid-fire with her rival, slid underneath his shots to draw a better line on her opponent.

The rounds from Notus brushed by the Blue soldier, grazing her neck, shoulder, and both legs. She’d been simultaneously shooting at him and her rounds reached Notus the same time his reached her. She just missed him, shots brushing by his arm and side.

Because his rifle was completely dispensed of ammo, and his sidearm was overheated, Notus made his final charge. He knew he didn’t stand a chance against two Blue Squad members, but his teammate might. However, if this was his last stand, it would be a valiant one and an attempt to level the playing field for his squad member.

He drew his knife and sprinted straight for his rival, which was difficult to do over the steep ground.

As for Notus’ opponent, she knew she only had three good shots left before her rifle overheated. Calming her breathing, she turned and stalked forward.

Despite the difficult terrain, Notus proved to be sure-footed. He ought to be because he’d grown up in these woods and knew them like the back of his hand. He ducked behind a thick stand of hemlocks, jumped atop a fallen spruce on the other side, and sprinted along it.

The Blue Squad rival disregarded the urge to panic and rush her shots as Notus swiftly closed the distance. She squeezed off the first round as he reached the end of the tree.

He pivoted sideways and avoided the shot. The motion threw his momentum somewhat sideways, but it proved to be a plus. At the end of the tree was a large boulder and he flipped off the edge of it. The sideways motion twisted him as he passed through the air and kept him from catching the second round from his rival. When he landed, Notus was within a dozen feet from his opponent.

The two eliminating shots occurred simultaneously. Notus threw his knife, which struck his rival square in the chest. She fired her last round, which found its mark in his neck.

They both fell.

While all of that was transpiring, Vesper and the other Blue Squad member had been cautiously testing one another’s resolve and closing the distance between each other.

Bursts of weapons fire echoed off the ridge. Clods of dirt and chunks of bark were thrown into the air as the rounds missed their target. The two rivals were running full speed, not by choice but because of the angle of the ground. The end of the ridge was approaching, where it dropped at a near ninety-degree angle.

Vesper and her opponent managed to redirect their momentum, so they cut sideways along the steep hillside. Crossing the final span between them, they emptied the last rounds from their sidearms.

Vesper’s shots would’ve hit her target if he hadn’t passed behind a hemlock and then a large birch. The third shot brushed his arm, the fourth his shoulder, and fifth the side of his helmet.

The closest shot made by Vesper’s opponent zipped passed her ear, while the others passed at a safe distance.

They were now upon each other and had no time to draw any of their other weapons. The Blue rival dropped his sidearm and threw the first swing, a quick and decisive right hook.

Vesper ducked underneath it, deflected the second swipe, and then bashed her opponent atop his helmet with the butt of her firearm. It dazed him slightly and sent him back a step, but he was still able to deflect her left hook. She managed to dodge most of his counterstrike, but his fist caught her in the shoulder and shoved her off-kilter.

Going with the momentum, she spun and mule-kicked him in the stomach.

The force of the impact sent him staggering back, but not before he snatched a handful of her shirt and pulled her over the edge with him.

They entered freefall for twenty feet. Or Vesper did. The Blue rival landed awkwardly ten feet down on a large spruce growing straight out of the ridge. Vesper fell an additional ten feet before slamming back-first onto another spruce. Pivoting her hips sideways, she popped herself over the edge of the tree and grabbed hold of it.

Rifle rounds from her enemy pitted into the tree where she'd been not a breath earlier. Speaking of breath, Vesper was still trying to get air back into her lungs.

Her enemy fired three more shots and one came dangerously close to her hand.

Letting go of the tree, Vesper let herself fall to an ancient aspen a dozen feet below her. As she dropped, she drew her rifle. By the time she landed, she was answering her enemy's shots.

Her opponent was firing, too, and their rounds passed each other as they sped for their targets. Vesper's shots forced him to throw himself off his current ledge and flip backwards to a safer location.

Vesper, in return, had to jump and twist awkwardly through the air to avoid being eliminated by the Blue opponent's shots, passing too close for comfort.

They both regained better footing and took a moment to locate one another before commencing the fight.

It was a mad thirty seconds as the two rivals battled it out, using the trees as makeshift ledges while they tried to get a clear line-of-sight on one another. The Blue

Squad member expended all his ammunition, and Vesper’s weapon overheated, so both dropped their rifles and took up their last weapons: steel bows and arrows.

Medea was known throughout the systems for its steel bows and arrows, made from the scales of bora. Armor was also made from it. Obviously, it wasn’t real steel. The material was lighter, stronger, and more durable. “Steel” was just the name given to it.

Another thirty seconds of rapid arrow fire ensued as Vesper’s rival closed the distance again. As she dodged out of the way and returned fire, she quickly assessed that she was losing good ground. Below her, the “ledges” weren’t more than some sick and flimsy spruce and aspen trees.

Vesper dropped into a crouch when she landed on the last good ledge but didn’t have time to draw a line on her target. An incoming arrow forced her to flip back. She was still going over when she felt the shaft brush her boot.

Another arrow grazed her side as she came out of the flip and landed on a sickly, springy spruce tree. When she glanced up to check on the location of her rival, she set her jaw and glared. He was already in mid-air and coming straight for her with a drawn knife.

He’d spent his last arrow.

But she hadn’t.

Thinking fast, Vesper used the spring from the tree to give her some added height before leaping straight off. Twisting in the air so that she was facing up, she pulled back the arrow she’d already set on the string.

The instant her rival landed on the tree she’d just jumped from she released the arrow. It flew with such speed that not even she saw it until it found its target. The arrow snapped the tree, passed clean through it and struck the opponent squarely in the chest. It evaporated upon impact, though it left a bright red splotch across his armor.

As for Vesper, she struck one small tree, which broke, and then hit another ten feet later. It slowed her momentum, almost held her...and then cracked and snapped, dropping her fifteen feet to the ground.

A loud horn blared over the forest, signaling the end of the match. Vesper remained lying on her back until Notus joined her at the bottom of the ridge.

As Izhar, codenamed “Notus,” gave her a hand and hauled her to her feet, he grinned. “Nice work, Vesper. You took the phrase ‘take ‘em down’ to a new level.”

Elyse, aka Vesper, wheezed a little laugh. Carefully. The body armor had absorbed only some the force of her landing. She was going to be especially stiff in forty-eight hours.

“I’m just glad you were able to make the final duel one-on-one,” she replied, “and not two-on-one.”

A short time later, everyone from both teams convened beneath the large makeshift pavilion that served as headquarters for the “recruiting games,” as they were called. A few times a year, the local military recruiters held war games, which served a dual purpose.

First, it allowed anyone possibly interested in enlisting or applying for the officer program a chance to test combat waters. Essentially, play around with non-lethal versions of military weapons.

Second, the games served recruiters and scouts. It allowed them to spot any civilians with raw skills.

Of course, the wild game hunters tended to join in the fun, though not because they were interested in service. It was solely for play, but that was fine with the recruiters.

Elyse and her team reported back to the commander who oversaw several other squads. The unit she was in “just so happened” to consist almost entirely of the members from her hunting crew. That was likely why they’d managed to stand a chance against the enemy team, which was mostly comprised of military personnel. It went without saying that the loss to a non-military unit put the Blue Squad in a rather foul mood. They stood thirty feet away and spoke with someone who appeared to be a commanding officer.

“That was some nice shooting,” piped Thyra, a beautiful omicron with dark auburn hair and rich mahogany eyes. “Won the match.”

Elyse blew through her lips and gave her teammate a look. “The victory belongs to the unit. It was because of everyone’s efforts that we won. You pegged the first kill, and

when you picked off that one guy during your little dance on the rocks...it was inspirational.”

“No kidding,” agreed Riley, the intense and ever serious hunter with brown hair and bright hazel eyes. “And when Titus went hand-to-hand with that one rival...it was pretty awesome.”

“Speaking of rivals, Elyse,” muttered Titus with a subtle glance over his shoulder, “that last guy you shot is eyeing you like you’re lunch.”

Elyse threw a quick look at the members of the Blue Squad. Sure enough, the young man she’d shot was gazing at her darkly.

“Give him one of those infamous Klein looks,” said Thyra with a grin.

It was known amongst their friends that both Elyse and Elam could send out a glare that’d freeze a desert lake in the middle of summer.

Elyse wasn’t the least bit afraid of anyone. Whenever someone did try to intimidate her, it only made her mad.

Half-turning, she locked gazes with the young man and narrowed her eyes a little. *You have something to say, come over and say it. I’ll give you a piece of my mind, along with a taste of my fist.*

The young man drew himself up in response to her cool, challenging glare. But two of his teammates slapped him on the shoulder and pushed him in another direction.

“So, the Klein skill in combat clearly runs in the family,” said a voice behind Elyse and her friends. “You take after your brother.”

Elyse rolled her eyes as she turned to see who was speaking. *And I’m already in my brother’s shadow. Ha, but not for much longer...*

But when she saw who had spoken, she froze and couldn’t help gawking. He was tall but evenly built; not excessively lean, yet not thick like a tank. His dark brown hair was kept short, and it was his eyes that gave Elyse pause: impossibly bright blue with honey-colored flecks flaring away from the pupil. It wasn’t only the color that took her back. It was the curiosity in that clear gaze, the keen interest of one who notices the

smallest detail and takes in everything he sees. He was neither a young pup nor was he old. He was mature.

However, Elyse couldn't definitively peg him as an omicron. His eyes and the depth of the gaze was unnerving, but he didn't have the essence of one...

“Seems you know my brother,” replied Elyse, blinking out of her stare, “but I don't know you.”

“Oh, sorry,” said the stranger, extending his hand. “I'm—”

“Careful!” exclaimed a familiar voice as a hand slapped onto the stranger's shoulder. “She bites.”

Elyse rolled her eyes at her brother and then returned her attention to this interesting, yet-to-be-named individual. “At least I'm up-to-date on my vaccinations.”

The corners of the stranger's mouth tugged upwards and his eyes twinkled with laughter. “I'm Luca.”

Hmm, thought Elyse, gripping his hand firmly, seems like a normal enough name. It doesn't scream “omicron,” but there's just something...

“After seeing you all in action,” said Luca to Elyse and then the others. “I hope you'll enlist or saddle up with the officer program. We'll need every fighter for what's coming.”

“You'd thrive in the training,” agreed Elam to the unit, before sending a teasing look to his sister. “I'm not sure about Elyse, though.”

Clearing his throat, he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin a little. “I doubt she could handle always being second best.”

Elyse snorted and planted her hands firmly on her hips. “I'd surpass you in no time at all.”

A genuine smile crossed Luca's lips as he slowly turned to go on his way. “I look forward to seeing you in training,” he said before his gaze lingered on Elyse. “All of you.”

After he walked away, the group “ooo'd” and whistled at Elyse, at which she glowered and replied with a sharp, “You're all wee scunners, you are!”

Crossing her arms tightly across her chest, she continued to mutter to herself, “Buncha irritating nuisances...”

She was about to go on her way when military personnel, including Elam, ran to the pavilion from scattered directions. Everyone fell into respective lines and stood at attention seconds before they appeared: armored and lightly armed soldiers.

Elyse immediately pegged them as elite and seasoned fighters. It wasn’t just by the scars she saw. It was the way they carried themselves, and the expression in their eyes.

“They must be the Special Forces unit,” whispered Thyra. “It was rumored they’d come aid in local soldier training.”

One or two gave a nod in acknowledgment at her words.

Elyse, completely drawn by these arrivals, tuned out everyone and everything for a moment. It wasn’t the soldiers, exactly, though they had her immediate respect. For some reason, what held her truly spellbound were those flanking the Special Forces soldiers.

They weren’t regular soldiers or seemed to be of a military affiliation. They did, however, move with the confidence and silence of an elite trained fighting man. They also weren’t omicrons.

Are they even human, wondered Elyse, expression intensifying as she took a step forward.

There was something familiar about those accompanying the fighting men. While they had the physical appearance of humans, she sensed they were something greater. They were something mightier, stronger...and much older and wiser. Beings of light, terrible power, and splendor.

Like the being in my dream, she thought.

As she continued to observe them, she noticed how they were positioned around the humans and constantly scanning the area, as if they were on guard.

The Special Forces squad stopped and spoke with the various military commanders. It was then that Elyse noticed something more about these guardian warriors. One stood behind Commander Bardou, one of the instructors and recruiters, and spoke with the other guardians. All the while, however, their gazes were up as they

watched for trouble. Then the guardian beside the Special Forces commander looked straight at Elyse.

The deep and timeless expression in that gaze took her breath away as chills shot through her. His expression was of one who'd been through many ages of man, who'd seen new generations born and pass away. He was one who held counsel with and presented himself before the One who'd created him and his companions. He'd seen His face, and in previous lives of man, he'd crossed the universe. His eyes were bright and keen, flickering with a fire of great and unquenchable zeal for justice.

As Elyse beheld this great guardian, an image played before her eyes. It was as if she saw him, and those with him, as they truly were. The armor they wore faded, drowned out by near-blinding light that came from their very beings. They were not clothed in body armor made by human hands, but with light and power. Adding to their revealing magnificence were their wings, which unfurled and were spread out about themselves.

Indeed, as the light diminished and the image faded, Elyse knew without question that they definitely weren't humans. They were both guardians of the humans and fellow warriors beside them in life and battle.

Wow, she thought in awe, they're angels.

Elyse finally blinked out of her stare and glanced about herself and her friends. What about their guardian angels? Weren't they supposed to have some? If they did, then why weren't they visible like those around the Special Forces?

Then again, thought Elyse, those are in disguise as human warriors. They've obviously been given permission to be seen by people.

Naturally, this line of thinking and questioning brought several more thoughts to the front of her mind: if there were angels, and they were on guard, what were they guarding against? They hadn't been created with all those battle wounds, and those shining swords weren't for show. If there were great beings of light, then there had to be...

Demons. The word struck a deep chord in Elyse. It wasn't that she didn't believe in them. Of course, they existed. How could anyone have been alive for the previous wars of

darkness and not believe in evil? Put aside war and mass bloodshed, what about the atrocities that humans did to one another for no practical or justifiable reason? How could there not be something deeper inside the human soul that stirred up selfish and dark desires?

Evil was real, Elyse believed it. Angels and demons were both real, though the latter wasn't something she chose to think about frequently. It was also something Issachar and Alana didn't discuss much.

Like sex and drugs, the topic of angels, demons, and spiritual warfare were taboo. Or whenever they were mentioned, they were brushed over lightly and quickly.

Of course, Elyse knew many people, especially soldiers, who spoke often about the spiritual realm and the battle therein. “You can't separate the two,” they'd say, “the seen and the unseen, the spiritual and the flesh, because they're interwoven.”

Elyse honestly hadn't decided exactly what she believed on the matter, and she wasn't interested in sorting it out in the near future either. Angels were fine. She could go with that, but the darker stuff crept her out.

Some years ago, Alana had told her, “You belong to Elohim, you accepted His Son and you pledged your allegiance to Him always. Because of this, you don't need to be afraid of darkness and death.”

Those were the only things said. Elyse didn't know why specifically she didn't have to be afraid of evil, demons, and darkness. She thought perhaps it was because He looked after His people and sent help to them when they needed it.

Then again, it might help if Elyse had made it a habit of reading the sacred writings, which were entirely inspired and breathed by the Creator.

She read them sometimes. When she felt like it.

Maybe you ought to make it a habit, suggested a thought to Elyse as she held the great guardian's gaze.

Yeah, she thought in response, *maybe I should. We'll see.*

The military squads dispersed, and people began milling about the pavilion again. But many civilian bystanders still watched the Special Forces soldiers while they continued conversing with the local military personnel.

Elyse searched for Elam in the crowd, now consisting of a fine mix of civilians, soldiers, and guardians. That’s when her eyes flitted past a face. She froze, blinked, and did a double-take. There! She caught a glimpse of him for a second, but it was long enough for her to recognize him: it was the angel from her dream! He hadn’t been shining in full glory, but she’d never forget his face.

A group of passersby broke her line of sight. When it was again clear, he’d vanished.

For a reason unknown to her, Elyse’s heart had begun pounding when she’d seen him. She didn’t know how or why, but she knew they would be working alongside one another. It was also just plain weird that someone in a dream had appeared in real life.

Elyse turned in a circle, looking for him and hoping to find him again.

But Zayev had concealed himself. For the time being, his interaction with her was to remain limited. Until she made the decision to join the military and passed basic training, he was to keep himself hidden from her sight. Those were his orders. He’d stay close beside her, but any face-to-face meetings were to remain at a minimum until she advanced in training.

Besides, this arrangement allowed him to better identify anyone who was a veiled threat to her. So far, the only human of interest was that Luca character. Though there was light in him, black scars marred his soul. Hidden deep in his eyes was a trace of darkness, reflecting a time when he’d either been immersed in it or horrifically assaulted by it.

Luca also had a lone angel beside him, and he too was different. When Zayev’s companions chose to take on an actual form, they glowed white or gold. This particular guardian, however, did not. He was pale gold-grayish in appearance, as were his garments. His armor was gray and covered with mars and dents too many to count. The sword at his hip was almost black. The visible scars maybe had once been also, but they’d

faded to gray. Zayev perceived that this angel was old, very old, though he obviously didn't look it.

When their eyes met, he felt himself stiffen. The eyes of the ancient warrior were slate in color, save for flecks of icy blue. And the expression in them was cold and fierce. Add to this the angel's size...and Zayev suddenly realized just what his menacing companion was.

Archangel, thought Zayev, wide-eyed, *and one from ancient times, before the first planet was drawn in His mind.*

Drawing a steady breath, Zayev tore his gaze away and returned his attention to Elyse.

“Who you looking for, Squirt?” asked Elam, walking up.

“Luca?” teased Thyra.

Elyse sent her a curt look. “You're so funny. No, I thought I saw someone I recognized, is all.”

It was at that moment, when her heart was sinking with disappointment, that a familiar bark lifted her spirit. The mingling crowd parted as a black puppy darted through legs and made a direct line for Elyse.

“How does he do that?” asked Elam, as the puppy crossed the remaining distance in five giant leaps, jumped, and landed in a sitting position at his human's feet.

“You're a wee scunner, too,” said Elyse to Alastar, but with a smile. “How do you always manage to escape?”

Alastar snorted and tilted his head.

Holly, who'd just joined the group, laughed. “He's so cute! I love his expressions.”

At this, Alastar laid on the charm, wagging his tail and gazing up at her with endearment as his tongue hung out the side of his mouth.

Elam and Thyra abandoned themselves to laughter, and Elyse merely shook her head. The instant she straightened, Alastar's attention snapped back to her as he waited for her next command.

Elyse raised a finger, telling him to wait a few seconds...before patting her shoulders and saying, “tej,” or “up” in the ancient dialect.

Alastar didn’t bother to stand first. Instead, he launched himself from his sitting position and up into Elyse’s arms.

“Oh, heavens!” declared Elyse as she caught him. “I need to change your diet, little one.”

In the three weeks Elyse had taken on Alastar as hers, he seemed to have gained a significant amount of weight and at least doubled in size.

That’s not possible, thought Elyse. But the evidence was clear, and he was about to enter the awkward stage of his development.

I’m going to need to teenage dog-proof the house, she reminded herself as she and the others began to mosey down the hillside.

“So, are you finally going to apply?” asked Elam, giving Alastar a loving scruffle. “Commander Bardou said the office would be open tomorrow at seven.”

Sighing with resignation, Elyse nodded. “Yes, I’ll go in first thing.”

“So, battle was the incentive needed to give you that last push,” laughed Izhar, eyes sparkling.

Elyse huffed through her nose. “It would seem so.”

The group then proceeded to engage in their usual banter as they continued down the broad path towards town. But Elyse didn’t immediately join in. At her answer to Izhar’s question, Alastar had begun looking at her in his thoughtful way. When she finally glanced down at him, their eyes locked. Both human and dog understood what military life would mean: time apart for training and assignments, and coming and going at unknown times and days.

The time has come at last, thought Elyse, the call to arms has sounded and I can’t ignore it any longer, or deny the rising need to answer the call of duty.

Yet somehow, she had the sense that she and her dog wouldn’t be spending too much time apart. She figured it would all make sense in the days ahead.

Wherever she goes, I go, thought Alastar as he snuggled against her, *and nothing will ever keep me from being with my human.*

Chapter 7

Awkward Stage

Summer was getting on, and though the morning was still young, all knew it would be another hot day. The wind blew warm from the south, carrying heat all the way from the great sands. It jostled trees and shifted shadows as the hunter stalked silently through the edge of the woods.

She'd been on the trail of a prize catch since the break of dawn and finally had eyes on him: a young stag, antlers already in velvet. About an hour ago, she'd been afraid he'd caught wind of her because of the way he'd quickened his pace. But he'd slowed again and was now taking his time.

Elyse glanced up at the aspen leaves, quaking in the breeze. The air moved awkwardly in the woods and was manipulated in clearings. The wind direction, however, had been changing frequently all morning, shifting from south to east and then back to south. She and her quarry were headed in a north-northwesterly direction, so when the wind turned from the east, there was a greater risk of her target catching her scent.

I wish the wind would just make up its mind, thought Elyse, pausing behind a pair of ancient birch trees.

For a few minutes, she watched the stag playfully pull at clumps of long grass and strip off willow leaves as he walked by them.

Walk down the rise, she thought to him, *down the rise...*

Somewhat lazily, the stag turned and started up the gentle slope.

No! Doh!

But the animal was only interested in nibbling at some wild berries halfway up the hill. They weren't to his liking and he sauntered down the rise.

Perfect.

Elyse drew an arrow and held it on the string with one hand before signaling to her partner with the other. She couldn't see him, but she knew he was there.

Taking a few steady breaths, Elyse pulled back the arrow and slowly stepped out from behind the birch trees.

The stag was walking away from her, and all she had to do now was wait for her hunting partner to—

A brief, but loud rustling ahead gave both Elyse and the stag pause. The animal, standing still as stone, stared intently.

Dang it, turn just a little, thought Elyse. Presently, she was still looking at a stag butt.

That was when two things happened. The stag snorted and bolted, and something resumed thrashing in the underbrush.

The initial plan had already gone to pot the moment the stag made a break for it, and Elyse sprinted up the rise to try to get one decent shot. Leaping atop a fallen spruce, she drew a line on the stag and released the arrow. It missed by less than an inch, brushing over the base of his neck.

Sighing, Elyse glanced at the bottom of the rise to see her hunting partner, Alastar, looking after the stag. He then turned his attention to her and gave his tail a little wag before trotting towards her. He was nearly to her when he tripped over his paws and face-planted in front of the tree she was standing on. Snorting moss and dirt out of his nose, Alastar righted himself, shook his head, and again looked up at his human with an apologetic expression in his eyes.

Elyse managed not to laugh, which she knew would offend him in his current state. Her cute, fluffy puppy had reached the inevitable awkward stage. For the time being, he was all legs and floppy paws.

Since she'd gone forward, applied, and been accepted into the officer program, she spent her remaining time training and working with Alastar. He learned with exceptional speed and retained nearly everything after a single lesson. He obeyed either voice or hand commands and had developed an innate sense of where his human wanted him to

maneuver when stalking wild game. He was of strong build, and in being accustomed to spending all day exploring the woods with his human, he had great stamina.

Alastar very much wanted to be a great hunting companion for his human. However, his body wasn't currently complying with his wishes.

“Come on,” said Elyse, leaping lightly from the tree and jogging northward. “The day's still young. Let's see what else we can find.”

They spent the remainder of the afternoon like they had many other days in the past month: exploring and learning how to work together to herd game and stalk prey. The master hunter and the apprentice would ultimately have to accept defeat in that they wouldn't be taking home any meat for dinner for day.

The team did have a few near-victories, though. They almost bagged a whitetail deer, except Alastar tripped over a tree branch on the final approach to the target and spooked the animal.

Following that incident, they came across a young Inar. Success had been in their grasp until Alastar jumped the gun. Elyse had sent him around to a flanking position, and he'd made it there without alerting their prey. She then signaled him to hold before sneaking away out of sight.

In reality, only thirty seconds had passed after she'd disappeared, but it felt like an hour to Alastar. *It's taking too long*, he thought as he eyed the magnificent creature graze unworried not forty feet in front of him. *Maybe she can't find the right spot. What if she changed her mind and wants me to take it down, but can't signal me without spooking it? Wait. What if it's a test and she's seeing how long I'll hold? No, it's getting late and she might want to get back home before dinner so she can eat. Or what if she wants to try hunting at night again? But we've stayed out the past three nights, so wouldn't she want to be able to sleep in her own bed?*

This was followed by more disturbing thoughts as Alastar watched the Inar begin to move off through the trees. *What if she's injured or unconscious? What if she was hurt and I wasn't there to help? What if...a razorback snuck up and attacked her?*

Alastar's hackles rose at the last thought and a low growl sounded in his throat.

As expected, the Inar heard it and sprang into flight...not a split-second before Elyse released her arrow. It zipped just under and behind the animal's right foreleg and sank into a tree.

When Elyse emerged from the thicket she'd been climbing her way through, she shot a look at Alastar. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to, and Alastar hung his head.

But she didn't accept total failure at that point either. Off they went again and nearly took down an elk. Elyse set them up so Alastar could chase the prey down, and he nearly had the animal. He would've, too...if he'd paid attention to the narrow, but deep stream running through the meadow. The elk faked a sharp right and then doubled back to the left.

Reacting to the first turn to the right, Alastar leaped sideways to cut off the animal and ended up in the water. He wasted precious seconds clawing his way up the steep banks. Elyse had forgone loosing any arrows because it had been Alastar's task to make the kill. If they'd been in desperate need of food she would've, but this was simply another training exercise.

Alastar made one final attempt to vindicate himself and gave a valiant chase after a large wolverine. To the pup's credit, he did an excellent job keeping up as the animal cut and weaved up a steep, rocky hillside. It was when it seemed that the wolverine was finished that Alastar made his mistake: letting himself get tunnel vision.

The wolverine dodged left and then ducked right, darting for a burrow. Alastar stayed right on his tail and mirrored his target perfectly. Too perfectly. When the animal went right, Alastar did so also at nearly the same moment...and ran smack into a tree, dazing himself.

Elyse, already atop the hillside, secured her bow. She then called to him as she turned and headed farther up the ridge.

Feeling like an utter failure, Alastar followed a short distance behind her.

They trekked a short distance to a clearing atop the ridge, which overlooked the forest and hills to the south and east. Here Elyse sat atop a downed hemlock. Alastar sat in front of it and just to her right.

He looked completely dejected: slumped, head down, and the expression in his brown eyes was one of deep disappointment. He didn't know what had happened to himself. When he was smaller, he could sneak up on all kinds of creatures. He could run swift and sure, without tripping over himself. Now he was clumsy and couldn't sneak up on a deaf elephant if he tried or run across flat ground without stumbling.

He was supposed to be the best hunter and tracker that ever was. The best companion for the best ranger. But he'd failed. He doubted he would ever again be able to successfully hunt anything. Alastar bet Elyse was regretting ever taking him into her house or even saving him from the river.

All the while, Elyse was watching her growing pup and could easily read what was on his mind. As expected, the more time they'd spent together, the easier such a thing had become. There were instances when she swore they could literally read one another's minds or send each other thoughts.

She wasn't disappointed in him in the slightest, and she didn't think it was a big deal. She knew he'd outgrow the awkward stage, and all would be right. He'd be the best, fiercest tracker and defender a ranger could ask for. Never again would there be one like him.

But she did feel bad for him because she could tell how disappointed he was in himself. Again, it wasn't a big deal to her, yet after trying so hard, putting forth so much effort only to fail...she could understand how difficult it was for her partner not to feel useless and hopeless.

In the midst of disappointment, everything seems like a big deal, she thought. As soon as the thought occurred to her, she had the sense that that was something applicable not just in this specific case.

I have a feeling it'll be something that I should keep in mind while I'm away training, she thought.

After they sat in silence for a time and listened to the late afternoon breeze play through the trees, Elyse spoke to her companion. “Alastar...”

His ear twitched at the sound of her voice but made no other movement.

“Alastar...”

He groaned and still wouldn’t look at her.

Elyse removed her quiver and backpack and set them on the ground before taking a seat beside her dog. He was big enough now that when she sat next to him, his head was even with her shoulder.

“Don’t beat yourself up about today,” she said, stroking his silky head and neck. “It’ll be fine. You’ll grow out of this phase, you’ll see.”

Alastar turned his head enough so he could look at her out the corner of his eye.

“And then you’ll be the best tracker that ever was,” continued Elyse, “and ever will be.”

Whining a little, he finally looked at her, placed his chin on her shoulder and gazed at her with those expressive eyes. *How can you know for certain*, he wanted to ask, *how do you know I won’t be a blubbering klutz the rest of my life?*

Elyse smiled as if she heard the thought, and his heart melted. “I know because of what I saw the day I took you as mine. I remember what I saw in you and what I saw you become.”

Her smile grew into a grin and laughter sparkled to life in her eyes.

“Besides,” she continued as she gently grabbed his cheek, “how could such a handsome boy not become something great?”

Alastar groaned loudly and leaned away as he placed a paw on her arm.

Then Elyse laughed. It was heavenly music to Alastar’s ears, and the sound of it lifted the weight of his disappointment, as it always did.

Throwing her arms around her black puppy, she gave him a hug and a scruffle. Alastar then shoved his head under her arm and snuggled against her side.

They would snooze there, in the shade of overhanging hemlock branches until dusk fell. It would be a full moon in a clear sky that evening. The lesser light and her

starry companions would light the way for ranger and tracker as they patrolled the mountains into the deepest watches of the night.

Chapter 8

Gone Missing

It was like any other weekly run from Calabar to the Ushani System. However, it had taken the pilot longer than usual to safely escape through the large meteors drifting around the Calabar Cluster. An hour before liftoff, his plotted course had been clear. By the time he got his vessel airborne, numerous pieces of rock had filled the planet’s orbit. He hadn’t planned for that specific delay.

Typical, the pilot had thought as he’d carefully navigated the debris. He could’ve opted to wait until it cleared, but that only meant a longer delay. He worked hard to maintain his reputation for being punctual. That wasn’t possible if he decided not to fly whenever conditions weren’t optimal.

Now he was only about an hour from his first destination, Nessur, on the outer rim of the Ushani System.

I won’t be too terribly late, thought the pilot before he pinged one of the towers near his destination for a weather update.

“Yeah, we’re havin’ some fierce wind, Frank. You should be able to get here before the rain starts. But I hope you didn’t have any other stops lined up for the next twelve hours...”

Frank, the pilot, frowned. *Bugger it all*. “Well, all of the urgent materials are going to Abana, anyway, so...guess it works out.”

“Guess it does. Ping us again when you’re in orbit and we’ll give you the play-by-play for your approach.”

“Roger.”

Frank sighed again after ending the transmission and then informed his small crew to begin arrival protocols.

He was mentally considering all the ways his landing could go wrong in strong winds when the small bridge went dark. Looking up from the console, his expression

furrowed as he glanced out of the windows. He couldn't see anything, but it was like they'd just passed into the shadow of...

Frank's eyes went suddenly wide as the source of the shadow suddenly came into view. It was a large, sleek, black vessel, nearly impossible to distinguish from space's dark expanse. His cargo ship was already so close that this eerie beast filled his vision, and they were drawing right alongside it.

Frank leapt back into his chair and shouted over the intercom for his crew to prepare for evasive maneuvers. He flipped a few switches, grabbed the controls, and began directing his vessel away from the black ship. He hadn't even turned ninety degrees when something struck with a violent blow.

Two more savage explosions immediately followed, making the entire ship groan. Alarms sounded, the lights went out, and emergency power came online as a faint smell of smoke filled the wounded vessel.

When Frank glanced up again, he saw that the big, black ship was closer than it had been a minute ago. Next, he tried frantically to reach someone at the Calabar Station or someone on Nessur, but only static answered. Someone was jamming all the frequencies.

A chill of panic was trickling down Frank's spine when his ship lurched and then began moving. The movement wasn't because they suddenly had power. The black vessel was pulling them towards itself.

Another thirty seconds later, Frank, his crew, and his cargo ship were unwillingly pulled into one of the interior docking bays in the unidentified cruiser. None of them would ever come out.

A short time later, when the control tower on Nessur pinged Frank's ship, they were answered with static. Puzzled by this development, they messaged the Lanx Station, which confirmed the cargo ship had been on its radar for a time before vanishing. Due to Nessur's unfavorable weather, the station took it upon itself to send a ship to investigate and rescue if necessary.

However, when they reached the last known coordinates, there was nothing. Their scanners didn't even pick up any traces of debris. The cargo ship had simply vanished.

The odd disappearance of the ship on that normal day would be written off as a mystery. It was possible perhaps that there had been a catastrophic system failure and an explosion, amplified by flammable cargo, resulted in the total obliteration of the vessel. Because there was no trace of evidence, the thought never crossed anyone's mind that the vanishing had been at the hands of a sinister and silent foe.

Chapter 9

Failed Misperception

Basic Training, Week 2: Vehicle and Aircraft Training

“By Jove, Rechab! You tryin' to kill everyone?” shouted one of the drill sergeants as a recruit in a cruiser passed unnervingly close to him and another instructor.

They shook their heads as the cruiser wove about unsteadily, rounded the far end of the practice field...and then bashed into a tree. Unfortunately, that hadn't been the first time that week a cruiser had been crashed. “Cruiser and Craft Week,” as it was called by the overseers, was always the most nerve-wracking week in all of basic training.

For both safety and learning purposes, the two-seater cruisers had been modified so they couldn't go beyond a certain speed. Not that that modification prevented them from still occasionally being totaled.

Because of the limited number of vehicles, the recruits and candidates were split into two groups. One would begin on the ground cruisers, and the other would start on flight training. Halfway through the week, they'd switch.

Elyse and Titus were in the group starting with ground cruisers. They'd had little experience with any type of craft, ground or air. They were hunters after all, and because the terrain they crossed was typically heavily forested or mountainous, they used their own two legs to get around. Besides, spotting game from the air was cheating in their book, and a touch unsportsmanlike.

Regardless, they took to vehicle operation quickly. By the end of the first day, they were floating and gliding over the practice fields with the best of them. The technology was basic and practical, which allowed someone unfamiliar with it to speedily learn how to operate a vehicle.

Not that that earned them any praise or recognition by the drill sergeants. In fact, they were berated almost constantly: Titus because he was an omicron, and Elyse because she'd been selected for personal rebukes by all overseers.

But the two just rolled their eyes and usually ignored it. They knew the overseers were just trying to get into their heads and under their skins for the sake of doing it.

It was only day two of three for cruiser training and already those who'd mastered driving were bored. They took it upon themselves to remedy this. Elyse, Titus, and three others challenged each other to a race from the eastern end of the field to the western side.

As already mentioned, the cruisers were only able to reach a certain speed. However, Elyse had figured out how to bypass the safety mechanism to allow for a little more acceleration.

The five formed a line and then, before any of the overseers could see what they were doing, gunned the throttles. They all pulled away evenly and made for the western end of the field.

It turned out that Elyse hadn't been the only one who'd figured out how to bypass the speed safety on the cruisers. The other racers had, too.

Two of them leveled off their speeds as they neared the rest of the students weaving around the center of the field. Elyse, Titus, and one other, on the other hand, increased their speed and the engines droned deeply across the clearing. The trio was on a direct path towards the mass of other cruisers.

The recruit to Elyse's left cut away to skirt the congestion.

Elyse and Titus stayed on course and as they drew nearer the others, they finally saw the drill sergeants notice them. The two friends figured they were already going to get in trouble, so they might as well as finish what they'd started.

Elyse and Titus swapped a daring look and then punched the accelerator. Elyse got the jump on Titus and took the lead. Ahead, she noted a cruiser in front of her drifting right and another farther ahead sliding left.

After quickly calculating their speeds, Elyse eased off the throttle and sent her cruiser drifting sideways. She performed a beautiful slide, passing just in front of the cruiser heading right, and then passing behind the second craft as it glided to the left.

That’s when she saw a third cruiser making straight for her. She swung her craft around at the last second, threw it in reverse, and sent it roaring backwards.

Meanwhile, Titus performed a similar maneuver to Elyse’s left, avoiding several collisions and keeping himself in the race.

They wound up beside each other again, Titus facing forward and Elyse in reverse. The third challenger cut in behind them and closed the distance as they neared the far end of the field.

With a little jerk, Elyse swerved towards Titus, who swerved away and was forced to ease off the speed to keep from overcorrecting. This allowed her time to swing the front of her cruiser around, so she was facing forward again.

Then all three opened up their crafts full throttle, the old vehicles sounding like ancient bombers coming in low and slow to drop their payloads.

At the last possible second, they cut left or right to avoid smashing into the trees at the end of the clearing. They drifted and circled each other as they decelerated and finally came to a stop in a line facing eastward.

By then, one of the overseers was marching towards them with a hard-set face.

The three exchanged a subtle knowing glance as they cut power to their cruisers.

“I’ve had enough of dealing with you!” shouted the drill sergeant. “Klein, Gen-N, get over to the hangars. Now. I’m going to let the flight instructors deal with you early.”

As for the third recruit, the sergeant jerked his thumb back towards the others in the middle of the field. “Get back out there.”

The flight instructors had been pre-warned of the arrival of Elyse and Titus. While it had appeared they’d been sent early as punishment, everyone was aware it was because

the two candidates had mastered cruiser driving –and that if they stayed, they’d wind up causing the others to crash more frequently. Thus, the decision was for everyone’s benefit.

As for recruit and candidate treatment during flight training, they were addressed as actual students due to the serious nature of flying. While technology had advanced greatly over the past centuries, and an aircraft could fly to and from planets on autopilot, flight was still serious business. Also, flying in space was on an entirely different plane, so to speak, then navigating terrain on a planet’s surface.

Therefore, there were no mind games here by the instructors or typical verbal abuse of basic training. It was vital every student thoroughly understand the concept of flight, the general controls of an aircraft and, most importantly, landing. Takeoff was simple. Even hovering was now straightforward. But landing on a floating platform in the middle of a planet’s tumultuous ocean during a hurricane required the utmost skill at calculating the rise and fall of swells, the movement of the platform, and adjustments required in unpredictable wind gusts.

Elyse and Titus joined the other students in simulators. To catch up for lost time, they asked the others about any tricks the instructors had already told them, and for common mistakes to watch out for. Their new companions were helpful and gladly answered whatever questions they could.

Any answers the other students didn’t know, they inquired of the instructors.

They were all being trained on basic operations of a single-man fighters and for a bomber craft. The Old Alliance ships were based on very similar circuitry and controls, so learning one or two platforms meant they should be able to operate any vessel in the fleet.

Theoretically.

Elyse and Titus found actual flight simple enough for both the fighter and the bomber. It only took a few experimental failed takeoffs to get the throttle, flaps, and thrusters correct.

Landing was a different matter. Neither outright crashed, but their first dozen landings were a bit hard. However, when they'd only six successful landings, the instructors changed the parameters on the simulators to make things more difficult.

Needless to say, during that entire afternoon the learning curve for Elyse and Titus was a nearly vertical line.

At dinner time, all the students except Elyse and Titus were dismissed for the day. The new pair would get to stay for another couple hours to play catch up. Tomorrow would be real flight tests. It was a long evening for Elyse and Titus, and for the instructor who had to supervise them.

The following morning was bright, but low clouds stretched out snowy fingers towards the ridges to the north and west. The sky above the airfield itself was clear and blue, but it was encircled by gray.

Everyone would get to pilot a fighter, which was a two-seater for the sake of these lessons, and a bomber. There were three of each spaced well apart from one another along a vast field. Instructors would do the initial takeoffs, perform some maneuvers, and then land. It would then be the student's turn.

As many knew, it was one thing to read about a skill and to do simulations. But it was a completely different thing to perform that skill in a real situation.

No students crashed, but there were a few close calls, usually upon takeoff, and there were a few “earth-shattering” landings. Titus and Elyse were almost the last ones to go, which allowed them to observe the other flights. This gave them a chance to make mental corrections for wobbly takeoffs and heavy landings.

Titus and Elyse went up at the same time. They made a wager that whoever left a crater upon landing would owe the other a quiver of steel arrows.

After the instructors did their bits, it was time for Titus and Elyse to take over the controls. Their takeoffs were slow and controlled as their crafts gently lifted off the pads and drifted forward and upward. They increased altitude and speed, and soon they were tearing in and out of the clouds that now covered the airfield.

At eight thousand feet was a break in the cloud layers, with a higher layer one thousand feet above them.

Elyse’s instructor had her drift around between the layer for a few minutes and perform basic maneuvers. He’d been warned that, like a few of the other students who took to tasks naturally, she became bored quickly. When Elyse began doing some unrequested maneuvers, such as going up and down a few times before pitching hard to the left or right like a rollercoaster, he knew she was bored.

He quickly decided to provide her with new tasks. He gave her new coordinates, which marked the location of a labyrinth of steep and narrow ridges, currently hidden by the clouds. When they neared them, he relayed her next orders.

With a decisive movement of the controls, Elyse sent the fighter in a vertical climb. They quickly shot into the next cloud layer and were surrounded by “static.” That’s what Elyse called the snow in the clouds, because that’s exactly what it looked like.

She cut the power and was informed by the computer seconds after that they were preparing to stall. The instructor had told her that good pilots could fly “by the seat of their pants.” They didn’t rely too heavily on their instruments, because those could malfunction or fail altogether.

The “pants” reference was mostly related to stalling, and as they neared a stall, Elyse understood what the instructor had meant. She could literally feel a change in her seat.

An alarm sounded as they officially stalled, which was the first situation all students learned how to recover from. A craft with its wings and tail still attached will automatically begin to self-correct.

Instead of adding power, Elyse first let the fighter slide and swing its nose around. When they began to drop downward, Elyse opened up the throttle. She put it into a nosedive back through the clouds and then sent the craft into a gentle spiral. When she glanced at her radar, she spotted another craft ascending their direction.

After making a slight course adjustment, Elyse increased their speed again. When the approaching craft was nearly to them, she barrel-rolled left and over the fighter being piloted by Titus.

When she glanced at the radar again, she saw that they’d circled and were now in pursuit.

The pair of fighters played hide-and-seek with one another as they ducked in and out of the clouds and looped about to chase each other.

Finally, under orders of her instructor, Elyse dropped their fighter steeply through the lower layer of clouds.

Titus followed.

When they broke again out of the clouds, they saw they were over the maze of ridges and canyons.

Elyse’s computer warned her that another craft was closing in quickly from behind. She opened up the throttle even more and sent the fighter sliding sideways into a narrow canyon.

A frantic pursuit followed amongst the hazardous terrain. Elyse and Titus had seen several other students get to participate in dogfight games, and they were elated that they’d been chosen to play also.

Staying dangerously close to the ridges and canyon walls, Elyse darted all over the place. When the canyon she was currently in narrowed, she eased off the speed and let Titus close the distance again.

At the last possible second, Elyse punched the thrusters and whipped the fighter around in a twisting loop, which put her right on his tail. She was impressed at the amount of G-forces she felt. The instructor was too, though he’d never admit it.

Titus followed Elyse’s technique of zipping closely about the ridges.

Elyse, however, maintained altitude, quickly finding this made it easier to keep a visual on him.

Ahead, she saw that the canyon he was in looped around and doubled back on the other side of a ridge. When he did this, Elyse sent her craft into a barrel roll over the crest of the ridge. She nearly landed right on top of Titus as he passed beneath her.

Jerking the controls, the fighter went vertical and slid back a moment before completing the half-loop. Engaging thrusters again, Elyse caught up to Titus and leveled off beside him.

After some private discussion between the two instructors, Titus and Elyse were given their final orders and a new maneuver.

After telling his student what he wanted her to do, he finished with, “just go slow and controlled.”

“Yes, sir,” replied Elyse with the utmost concentration.

She initiated the maneuver and sent the craft into a gentle barrel roll. When she reached the peak of it, Titus copied her. Once they were settled into a rhythm, they were spiraling around each other.

A number of other students had finished up their runs with unique maneuvers, each one of them different. The spiral was the one Elyse and Titus were chosen to perform.

They spiraled over the airfield and, once reaching the other side, broke off and shot in opposite directions. They then whipped around and roared towards their respective landing pads.

At the last possible second, Elyse cut power, gracefully drifted to her pad, and gently landed with the lightness of a snowflake touching the ground. Titus’s landing was equally as graceful, and both were ranked near the top of their class for landing technique and ability.

Next, were the bombers. Because of their size, they felt a bit more cumbersome in their maneuvers, but they sounded awesome with the deep droning on their engines. The outcome of Elyse and Titus’s outings with the bombers was identical to that of light fighters.

As it was, that specific group of flight students was marked as one of the most successful in the history of that training facility. The instructors and upper management were impressed...and relieved. They'd look forward to seeing these recruits and candidates in the field one day soon.

Once everyone was back in the hangers, the students were told “well done.”

It was one of the only times they'd hear those words for the rest of basic.

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Basic Training, Week 3: Obstacle Courses

They slogged as quickly as possible through the mud that had once been a trail through the dense patch of trees. Sliding around another bend in the path, the unit saw their next obstacle in a small clearing.

When they reached it, they threw themselves into the mud and standing water and began crawling under the strands of barbed wire and electrical strands. It was especially exciting to touch the electrical lines when one was drenched in water. Exciting for the grunts, and rather amusing for the driller sergeants who relentlessly hounded and insulted their charges.

As the leaders of the unit reached the far end of the wire, they scrambled back to their feet. As always, though, they couldn't move fast enough for their overseers.

“Get the lead out, you maggots!” shouted one of the drill sergeants to their right.

“Move, you sorry excuses for worms!” thundered another rather imposing man on the left.

The unit stumbled faster down the path leading out the eastern side of the large stand of trees. As they neared the edge of it, the trees bent in one of the gusts of wind that had been hammering the training facility since late last night. The moment they broke onto the vast, flat field, they were buffeted by the gale, which threw sheets of rain at them.

As Elyse Klein jogged along behind one of her teammates, she cast a glance up at the bleak sky. *I'm just glad we're training at the end of summer and not in a few months*

from now, she thought as she was shoved by a muggy gust of air, otherwise, we'd be pelted with sleet. Now that would suck.

The unit lined up in two rows beside the long stand of monkey bars. In pairs, they began swinging across them. Between the rain, and the fact everyone was soaked from the barbed-wire crawl, most members lost their grip and fell into the trench below. It was only about three feet deep, but the water was kept at just below freezing. It made a cold punishment for those who failed to make it across the bars.

It was Elyse's turn in short order. As was typical for when she challenged the bars, she took a short running start and then threw herself forward. With the momentum she generated, she could usually traverse three or four bars in a single swing. Whenever it was wet, she shortened her reach so she could ensure a slightly better grip. On days like today, she more or less slipped from one bar to the next.

When it was wet, the key was not to rely too heavily on the desire to maintain a solid grip, because she knew that she wouldn't have one. The real challenge came when the mud on her hands from the previous obstacle had been wiped off on the early bars and it was skin on slick metal.

The person on the bars to her right was a good twenty feet ahead. She watched as he lost his grip, fought to keep it, and then splashed into the icy trench.

Elyse, who'd settled into a somewhat frantic, slippery rhythm, had just told herself she wasn't going to fall when it happened. In the brief lapse of concentration during her teammate's fall, she tried to reach over too great of a span. When she reached with her left hand, her right lost its grip.

Fortunately, her momentum carried her enough for her to grab hold of the next bar with her left hand. Her fingers were already slipping as soon as they wrapped around the bar. Thinking fast, she directed her momentum up, swinging at the hips. She hooked her legs over the next bar, so she was hanging upside down.

I'm not falling, she growled in determination.

Reaching behind herself, she rubbed her hands over her boots so she could regain some traction with mud and grit.

As much as Elyse would've loved to run along the top of the bars, that wouldn't fly with the drill sergeants. She knew because she'd tried that the very first time the unit was introduced to the monkey bars.

Heaven forbid we learn to improvise or perform a task in a more efficient manner, she'd thought after having her head bitten off by three overseers at once.

Elyse took a firm grasp of the bar behind her, carefully unhooked and dropped her legs, and then got moving again. She'd reached the place where her teammate had fallen when she began losing her grip again.

What'd they do, she thought angrily as her left hand slipped and she swung sideways by her right arm, *put vegetable oil on these things last night?*

She wouldn't have put it past the overseers. A few drill sergeants had been specifically assigned with the sole task of making the lives of recruits and officer candidates a living heck. That was to be expected for obvious reasons, but it seemed to her that one or two had genuine sadistic tendencies.

There were a few moments of awkward flailing and swinging as Elyse tried to regain a grip and keep going. This resulted in some weird twisting and her hanging from the sidebar on the outside of the bars.

I'm not falling, she growled again to herself, *come on. You're almost there.*

She set out again even as she heard two more splashes behind her.

The final twenty feet were nothing more than odd contorted movements by Elyse as she fought to maintain her grip to the last bar. Finally, she dropped to the ground on the other side and sprinted towards the next obstacle.

Smoke it, she thought to the monkey bars. She didn't much care how she'd looked because she hadn't fallen into the trench. Traversing them had been a success, regardless of appearances.

The rate at which she sprinted by the two drill sergeants stationed between the monkey bars and the climbing ropes left them unable to jeer at her.

You can smoke it, too!

Elyse had never appreciated it whenever people yelled at her, not because it was belittling or intimidating. No, it ticked her off and awoke the deep desire to punch the obnoxious person.

She didn't check her pace when she reached one of the five large climbing ropes. When she was close enough, she threw herself at the rope and quickly climbed. Although she couldn't compete strength-wise with those larger than her, having a lean body type had its advantages. She could climb cliffs or run up mountains with less effort than the bigger, muscular types.

The trickiest part about the rope obstacle was climbing over the beam from which the ropes were suspended. In the beginning, more than a few recruits had fallen the thirty feet to the ground. Now, for their own survival, everyone had the “climb over” well mastered.

Elyse climbed over and then let herself hang as her boots locked the rope in place. In a quick, adrenaline-filled second, she then let go of the beam and snatched the rope with a hand. After that, it was a piece of cake and only a matter of sliding down the rope just slow enough so as not to tear the first three layers of skin off her hands.

The instant her boots returned to the ground she was back in motion. The end of the six-mile obstacle course was ahead and with only one more challenge in the way.

One would think that leaping over and ducking under large logs would be simple enough. But it was a task made slightly more difficult after crossing miles of other obstacles that sucked the life from the body. That didn't factor in the extra energy spent when weather conditions were unfavorable, such as when the trail between these obstacles was nothing more than ankle to knee-deep mud.

Of course, some of the recruits and candidates, such as the hunters did have an advantage. They were accustomed to being out in all kinds of weather conditions and spending all day laboring or trekking. They'd grown up being tested mentally and physically daily by their work and hobbies.

Granted, those on Medea lived and breathed outdoor activities, and tracking various wild animals. But some in basic were just starting out as trackers and hadn't fully

been “wilderness tested” yet. Others, while they enjoyed outdoor activities, were inclined to the more passive hobbies. They hiked when the weather was fair, but other than that, their primary attention was to more diplomatic or community issues. Thus, before basic, they hadn’t fully understood how taxing being out in the full force of elements could be.

Naturally, others had yet been exposed to the kind of harshness unleashed by the drill sergeants. Everyone reacted differently to stress, pressure, and having someone in your face yelling at you nearly twenty-four seven. Some coped, others retaliated in kind which wound them in trouble, and others just shrugged it off in knowing that it was all a game. Some people, however, were more fragile in mind and spirit and were reduced to tears on a regular basis.

There were also select recruits who were just plain clumsy and tripped over their own feet at times.

This turned out to be exactly the case as Elyse reached the first log and launched herself over it. There was something she’d always liked about this obstacle, though she wasn’t quite sure why. She guessed it had something to do with the fact that, if she leapt just so and generated enough torque, for a second she felt weightless as she sailed over it.

In basic training, it really was the little things.

Elyse caught up to one of her teammates, Logan, and together they synced up and continued along the course.

Logan came from a line of hunters known for being large and broad. Not overweight, but just big. However, from an early age, Logan had proven to be a bit of a klutz. Both he and his family were still waiting for him to grow out of it.

“Elyse,” huffed Logan as they passed over another log.

“Logan,” replied Elyse as they ducked under the next one.

They were almost near the end of the course, and Elyse was just thinking how impressed she was at her large counterpart’s grace when it happened.

They sailed over the next log...and then Logan landed, tripped, and fell smack on his face in the mud. To his credit, the ground under the log obstacle was like all the others: muddy and rutted. The deeper holes and dips were also currently filled with

water, so no one could gauge just how deep they were until they stepped in one. Plus, this obstacle was on a gentle downslope, so it was easy to become off-balance.

It was mostly because of this that Elyse didn't stop and help her companion. She couldn't. She cleared the final five jumps and then fell in line with the others in her squad.

From how they were positioned, she was able to watch Logan stumble to his feet, clear the next two obstacles...and then trip and fall on his face again. He had enough momentum that time to simply slide under the remaining logs and across the unofficial finish line of the course. He happened to come to a stop at the feet of two drill sergeants, who stood towering above him with their arms crossed and unimpressed expressions on their faces.

To Elyse, and everyone else's, surprise, they didn't subject Logan to a merciless verbal assault. Instead, they merely watched as he staggered to his feet and lumbered over to the unit.

Elyse was considering this when a few additional overseers jogged in as several more officers finished the course.

“What the heck was that, Klein?” barked one of them as they marched towards her squad. “You looked like a drunken monkey clearing those bars.”

One of her teammates, none other than Thyra, snorted at the comparison.

The overseer was on her in an instant.

“Somethin' funny, Gen-N?” he snapped. “Drop and give me fifty!”

“Yes, sir!” she answered sharply.

As Thyra carried out her punishment, one of the other drill sergeants picked up where his friend had left off with Elyse.

“That was the most pathetic display I've ever seen, Klein,” he quipped. “Your brother never looked as sad as you do when running the course. He was always calm and in control. He'd have been embarrassed if he'd seen you flailing around like that.”

“Or if he'd seen how long you took to get through the barbed wire,” added another. “Unlike Fenrir, here. He blazed through that obstacle.”

It took every ounce of Elyse’s control not to raise an eyebrow at that last statement. Fenrir was Logan’s last name. He’d fallen on his face twice on the last obstacle alone, which they’d seen but hadn’t made a single remark about.

There were now five overseers around her, and they prattled on about every obstacle she’d completed and done terrible at. But they always did. By the end of week one, it was evident that Elyse was one of those people they’d selected to attempt to belittle and tear down at every possible opportunity.

But none of what they said bothered Elyse. She knew it was mind games, to test recruits and candidates, maybe try to get a rise out of them, and to see how they handled pressure.

Although whenever they brought up Elam, she did sigh inwardly and think, *yeah, always in his shadow. Thanks a lot, brother, for setting the bar so high.*

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Week 4: Gun Range

The drill instructor let fly an explicative and then expounded with, “What was that, Klein? That last round was two inches above the rest of the group! You’ll never graduate with shooting like that. The Old Alliance help us all if the entire service shot like you.”

This time when the instructor turned and continued down the line, Elyse did roll her eyes. Because she’d worked on a hunting squad with an unsurpassed success rate, she was more than capable of handling a sidearm, a rifle, and a bow and arrow. Everyone knew it. Plus, today’s shooting drills were designated as “sidearms only” and at distances no closer than ten yards.

Elyse had just eliminated her target with extreme prejudice at twenty-seven yards with a sidearm equipped with crummy stock iron sights. The first fourteen rounds had created a hole the size of a silver dollar. The fifteenth was two inches above it.

“Reset firearms and targets!” shouted the instructor. “This is the last drill of the day, so make it count. Fire ten shots, and it’s your choice of chest or head.”

There was a slight delay in him giving the order to shoot when he stomped over to Elyse’s station, punched in a command on the keypad, and moved her target out one more yard.

Oh, you, she thought, feeling her face growing warm in her rising anger.

“Ready!”

Front sight, she reminded herself, focus on the front sight, and squeeze with the pad of your finger.

“Up!”

The sound of twenty shooters firing at once wasn’t nearly as thunderous as it had been centuries before courtesy of advanced technology. It was rather anticlimactic, honestly. But the lack of theatrics was worth not having to carry hearing protection everywhere and mess with applying and removing them. It was also worth everyone not rupturing their eardrums if they had to use their firearm without hearing protection.

Elyse focused her irritation on the task at hand, something she did whenever she’d been handed pointed insults from the overseers. Being angry wasn’t worth it if she couldn’t put it towards doing something productive with it.

At the command to shoot, Elyse raised her weapon and fired off ten rounds in rapid succession. In seconds it was all over. After she secured her weapon and assessed her target, she lifted her chin a little in satisfaction.

All ten rounds made a nice little oval between the eyes of her target.

She knew ultimately that was the reason behind the overseers picking on her constantly: to help her improve. They’d known from the start that pressing her only resulted in her focusing more on drills and pushing herself harder.

Elyse slid her gaze over to the “upper management” officers who’d been observing and assessing everyone. She locked eyes with one of them and narrowed her gaze slightly, as if to say, “I know what you’re doing.”

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Week 6: Hand-to-Hand Combat

Because Elyse had been relentlessly harassed at the obstacle course, the shooting range, or over every other drill since basic began, she wasn't surprised when that kind of treatment continued with hand-to-hand combat.

She became bored by the end of day one. Like many experienced hunters in her squad, she found some of the new maneuvers helpful. They also knew from that experience that certain ones were lifesaving.

However, the repetitive drills were wearisome. Elyse and her fellow hunters exchanged many knowing glances throughout the first day. In real life, fights didn't transpire in controlled conditions and a safe atmosphere. They were chaotic and didn't follow any set of rules or maneuvers. It was fight and win, or fight and die.

Because the seasoned recruits and candidates had battled beasts that outweighed them on significant levels, fighting another human wasn't as intimidating it was for those who had yet to wrestle with a razorback.

During the controlled drills on days two and three, Elyse was always placed with partners who were significantly bigger and stronger than she was. She rolled her eyes. She'd never been a fan of physical contact, except when wrestling with her brother or hunting squad members. So, during that week she contained her anger and energy that resulted from unwanted contact and saved it for the assessment duels on the last day of the week.

Finally, she thought as the one-on-one duels commenced.

Elyse and her opponent were one of the final pairs to go. By that time, there had been quite a few good shows put on by their predecessors, and those whom she'd hunted with had achieved victory over their rivals.

There were also several others in her basic training squad who'd proven exceptional in a fight. She hoped if she was ever in a heavy combat situation, she'd be on their team.

As Elyse and Aden, her opponent stepped forward, the onlookers were already whooping and cheering. Fighters wore basic protective gear, which consisted of helmets,

lightly padded gloves, and very basic and thin vests to shield their cores. A powerful strike would still hurt, but it wouldn't be crippling.

Hopefully.

Any half-wit fighter had studied the others in their squad during the week. They noted basic fighting style, favorite maneuvers, and weaknesses. Elyse and Aden both knew that their rival had studied the other and gotten a good read.

So, thought Elyse as they slowly circled, *this is going to be good.*

While Elyse had been partnered with larger opponents all week, for this duel she was placed with a rival closer to her size and body type. But if the overseers thought she'd allow herself to view Aden as she had her larger rivals, they were mistaken. The bigger opponents were usually a touch slower. But she already had in mind that Aden was quick and had a fierce right cross and left upper hook.

As neither appeared eager to start swinging, Elyse flinched forward towards Aden.

He delivered a lightning-fast punch, and she blocked it. As they continued to circle, she teased him a few more times, for which he always retaliated quickly.

The moment that Aden threw his left cross, Elyse initiated the fight for real and in force. Never once all week had she started the duel with her rival. She'd always taunted them or simply allowed them to start it.

But she knew the value of being unpredictable in fights and had never let herself become content with the moves she was naturally comfortable with or good at. She identified her weak areas and had used all that week to turn them into strengths. This resulted in her being pummeled a few times, but the payout was worth it.

That said, Elyse had also consciously made the effort of showing some intentional, predictable habits, such as always letting the other person go first. She'd hoped it would be a benefit on “duel day,” in that she could throw her opponent off-balance.

It seemed to work.

She drove down upon Aden with relentless jabs and strikes and had him backing up. In focusing on his face initially, this encouraged him to keep his fists up, elbows in...and this then permitted her to deliver a solid punch to his diaphragm.

She deflected his jab and then socked him in the side of the head. She jerked herself sideways to miss most of his counterstrike, and then they both kicked each other in the stomach.

Elyse quickly stopped her backward momentum, pushed herself forward and advanced again.

This time Aden kept himself moving sideways, so Elyse’s speed remained somewhat curbed. She landed a few more solid strikes, but so did her opponent.

She jabbed him in the head, and he socked her in the side. She throttled him in the face, and he pummeled her in the stomach in return.

Both became fed up with one another simultaneously and stopped moving their feet altogether. Neither yielded before the other. For several long seconds, there was only a flurry of strikes and counterstrikes.

The crowd was cheering when the inevitable happened and the two fighters became somewhat interlocked. Thinking fast, Aden and Elyse both kned one another in the stomach, before he followed it up perfectly with a kick to her leg.

She dropped to one knee and then, with a surge of adrenaline and rising irritation, wrapped her arms around Aden and threw them both sideways to the ground. She bashed the side of her fist into his face, twisted to her feet and then jumped on him and pinned him.

Elyse punched him in the face once and twice. She was in the process of doing this a third time when Aden gave a powerful twist of his hips, rolling her off his chest.

Aden was already to her when she tucked her knees and delivered a two-booted kick directly to his chest. He was stumbling backwards as Elyse jumped to her feet and charged. His swing glanced off her shoulder and she tackled him again to the ground.

This was when her rival became incensed. Before she could get settled, he punched her in the side of the head. Elyse deflected the follow-up jab, but he still got a boot up and kicked her.

In a turn of events, Elyse was still moving somewhat backward when Aden jumped to his feet and sprinted towards her. Just before impact, she pivoted to the side and

tripped him. Keeping an eye over her shoulder, she watched him pivot back to his feet and face her...right before she mule-kicked him in the chest.

It nearly put him back to the ground, and this time Elyse didn't charge him. She kept her back somewhat to him, letting him get to his feet and make a move for her.

At the last instant, she pivoted and elbowed him in the face. As Aden staggered back, it was at this point that she again became aware of the others around them.

“Come on, Aden!” called one of the overseers over the noise of the crowd. “You've got her beat in every way! Don't let this girl get the better of you!”

She allowed Aden to recover and then continue advancing. This time she crouched and bent forward a second before he reached her. It caught him completely off-guard and as he passed over her back, she straightened suddenly and twisted.

The movement tossed him over her back and sent him tumbling across the ground.

“Come on, Aden! You got this!” shouted another overseer. “You've got ten times the skill as her brother the sleaze does, so this should be a piece of cake for you!”

“Yeah! Quit playing around and just end it!”

Elyse now slowly walked towards Aden with the air of a lion approaching a wounded and downed wildebeest.

“Get up, you bum! She's all show and no go, just like her sorry excuse of a brother!”

While Elyse told herself to remain focused on her rival, she heard every jab about Elam. There were a few and select matters that were off-limits to jeers, and one of them was her family, especially her brother. He might've set the bar impossibly high for her, and she might've felt like she was always in his shadow, but only she could make quips about him. Everyone else had better keep their mouths shut before she introduced them to her fist.

She told herself to focus and she did, but fire was steadily simmering in her veins. She'd had about enough of all these stupid mind games by the drill sergeants. She decided then that after this day forward, if anyone made snide remarks about her brother, there would be swift consequences, no matter who made them.

When Elyse was close enough again, Aden jabbed and swung. He made contact, but his moves had weakened somewhat.

Elyse also didn't try to block or deflect every strike. Sometimes she willingly took a direct hit and then retaliated with a stunning blow of her own.

Aden landed more punches, but Elyse's were more powerful and each one sent him staggering.

Finally, Aden threw all his weight forward and attempted to tackle Elyse. But she simply backed up until she got herself better positioned with better traction and stopped the movement altogether.

She then threw her elbow straight down into Aden's back once, and then again. When he was about to try to pull them sideways to the ground, Elyse elbowed him in the side of the neck.

It dropped him.

“Get up! She's a coward at heart. Soon as you start putting her in her place, she'll cave, like her weakling of a bro! Come on!”

That does it, she thought as she watched Aden get to his feet. Fire burned through her body...and she then proceeded to project the rage she felt towards the overseers upon her rival.

Striding forward, Elyse swatted aside Aden's feeble swing, elbowed him in the face and followed it with a fist to the side of the head. She sealed the deal by pivoting and delivering a devastating right hook.

Helmet and padded gloves or no, Aden dropped like a sack of deer quarters.

Shoulders rising and falling in her anger, Elyse stood over him a moment, waiting to see if her rival wanted to get up and have another go. When it was evident that he didn't, she backed up a few steps, removed her helmet, and leveled a venomous glare on the overseers.

Elyse had understood before arriving at basic that she'd have to curb her typical “speak your mind” attitude she knew that she strongly possessed. She'd also learned after arriving at the training facility that a wrong facial expression could result in chastisement.

But certain lines couldn't be crossed. If they were, then those who crossed them would be sorry.

Elyse's hunting companions gathered around her and whooped and hollered over her victory. But she kept her wrathful gaze fixed on the drill sergeants even as they stood around Aden and helped him to his feet.

As for those in “upper management,” typically commanders scouting for potential recruits and officers to add to their units, they watched the proceedings from an enclosed watchtower at the edge of the field.

Present was Commander Bardou, who'd convinced Elyse to join up with the military. Commander Arzak was there also, along with a few captains, and one or two from the Special Forces team.

The comm in the watchtower beeped, signaling an incoming call. Commander Arzak tapped the small, oval button in the center of the communications unit on top of the front window ledge.

“Overall, I'd say we have a pretty impressive group with this officer unit,” commented the chief overseer of the duel assessments. *“Although I think it's time to change tactics with Klein.”*

Commander Arzak huffed a snort. “Yes, I'd say that our present tactic has passed beyond the point of being productive. Let's leave her be next week to cool off and then start with the alternative method the week after.”

“Yes, commander. I'll drop off the recorded footage of this afternoon's proceedings to your office sometime before dinner. I'll also bring our assessments so far, along with some recommendations for a few of them.”

“I'll see you then, sergeant.”

“I take it you were going for the classic ‘pick on and tear down the candidate in an attempt to either break them or get them to work harder’ tactic,” smiled one of the Special Forces soldiers.

Commander Arzak's eyes twinkled a little. “We were. But Elyse and those like her are perceptive and knew from the start we were playing mind games.”

“Well, you know what they say,” said the other big soldier with a deep voice as he folded his beefy arms, “if at first one tactic doesn’t break ‘em...try a different one.”

Chapter 10

Gen-N’s

The following day was the start of the weekend, and Elyse’s body was thankful for an extra hour of sleep. Aden had landed some good punches, especially to her side and stomach. Both areas were happy to inform her of their discomfort as she returned from the blissful land of unconsciousness.

Everyone’s internal clocks had synced up by the second week of basic. Now even on weekends, they rose at about the same time.

Within ten minutes of waking, all fifteen young women in Elyse’s barracks headed to the mess hall en mass.

While men and women trained together and shared common areas around the mess hall and other central buildings in the facility, their barracks were on opposite ends of the grounds. They were gated with guards at entrances. At night, sentinels kept watch. Even during the day, people of the opposite sex weren’t allowed to wander freely onto the grounds of the other.

Of course, Medea was a hunter and “soldier planet.” Men and women both were known to be stubborn, skilled, and generally intolerant of certain kinds of rude advances. As such, it was understood that male and female alike had an equal chance of putting down an assailant.

That said, it was still good policy to openly discourage misconduct of the sexual nature. Such policies aligned with that of the local community and planet as a whole. While the peoples of Medea were fiercely independent and free-spirited, it was severely frowned upon if one wouldn’t master their thoughts and feelings or control themselves.

The training facility was for training soldiers, not for drama and harvesting romantic relationships at any rate. It was about defending one’s home planet, not encouraging “mushy gushiness.”

Anyone guilty of sexual misconduct was physically punished, banished from military service, and then thrown out of the training facility. This was a blanket response at every training site on the entire planet. Such a thing was a very serious offense and would never be taken lightly.

Elyse and the others were one of the first groups to arrive at the mess hall. There were already several overseers eating, as well as a few active-duty personnel.

As Elyse went through the line and grabbed chow, she already couldn't wait for the jeering that was likely to ensue the moment she sat down to eat.

But strangely enough, the overseers left her alone and didn't as much as look at her. From the time she sat down at a table to when she stood ten minutes later, she'd never caught any of them glance her way.

Odd, she thought as she and a few others walked out of the mess and down the hall. *I'm already suspicious. What are they up to now?*

“Hey! Wait up!”

Elyse and the others paused and looked back to see Abigail jogging to catch up with them. She was probably at the “youngest allowed to contract with the military” age. With her round face, expressive baby blue eyes, and blonde hair, she didn't look a day over twelve.

She was housed in the fourth barracks, at the opposite end of Elyse's. By the end of the first week, she'd become Elyse's shadow. Well, not exactly a shadow. Shadows didn't speak much, and Abigail was full of questions and intense curiosity about rangers like Elyse and Thyra.

Abigail hailed from Almaak, a secluded and moderately sized town in the center of some particularly wild forest lands. It was completely walled in and secured because of the dangers posed by the wildlife. It was a completely self-sustaining town and all life happened inside its walls.

As such, children grew up sheltered to a certain age, unless they were raised in a mining or hunting family that worked in another, less dangerous town. The latter grew up much like Elyse and others unprotected by walls.

The former, however, didn’t get their real first taste of the outside until they landed an internship with someone who worked in a different town or city. Then off they went to learn about the world beyond their home borders.

“Morning, Abigail,” said Elyse as she and the others continued down the hall.

“What are you going to do today? Practice some hand combat? Hit the range? Maybe just go for a run in the hills? I heard that some of the omicrons are going to—”

“Ohie! Klein!” barked a stern voice.

Great, here it comes, thought Elyse. She turned to see a sergeant marching towards her.

“Call for you,” he said, stopping in front of her and shoving a small comm device towards her.

“Oh, thank you, sergeant,” she replied, taking it from him.

He said nothing more, turned sharply on his heels, and strode back the way he’d come.

Elyse looked back at her friends. “I’ll catch up to you in a minute.”

They waved at her and continued down the corridor towards the exit.

As Elyse stuck the comm in her ear, she wondered what she’d done this time. Or perhaps Alastar had escaped again and Issachar and Alana couldn’t find him.

“Klein.”

“Hey, Squirt.”

Hearing Elam’s voice put an instant grin on Elyse’s face. “Hi! What’re you doing calling? I figured you’d call mum and dad when you had a minute to waste.”

“I did, but no one picked up.”

Elyse rolled her eyes and continued walking down the hall. “More like they recognized the number and chose not to answer.”

“Smart aleck. No, I wanted to call and ask how basic is going. I got your last message. You sure whine a lot. What’s wrong with training alongside recruits instead of just officers? It’s only for the first ten weeks.”

Elyse belted a laugh. “I remember when you went through basic. You bellyached every day for those ten weeks. In my case, I’m only...stating minor...irritations.”

She pushed one of the exit doors open and was greeted by a burst of fresh, albeit mild, air.

“*I did not,*” countered Elam with feigned indignation. “*Just be grateful that Commander Bardou talked you into the officer route instead of enlisted. Besides...since when did Elyse Klein ever not want to boss people around?*”

She paused under two massive oaks and studied the various people sitting on the grass or milling around the common grounds. “I forgot how funny you were, oh brother o’ mine. No, it’s just...boring is all. I know they have to make sure we’re all on the same page knowledge and skill-wise, but...still! It’s boring!”

“*Have the overseers been picking on you much?*”

Elyse snorted. “Only every day, but I knew from the start it’s just a game.”

She heard Elam chuckle before saying, “*Well, if they ever leave you alone, that’s when you really need to worry.*”

“So, when will you be home next? Do you know? How’s the assignment?”

“*I don’t know for sure yet,*” answered Elam, and there was a different tone in his voice that recaptured Elyse’s attention.

“What’s wrong?” she asked quietly. “What’s happened?”

“*It’s nothing. I mean nothing for sure...and you know I can’t talk about it anyway. But, it’s just...*”

Elam cut off his sentence, and they remained in silence for another few seconds before he came back and said, “*Just focus on your training, Elyse. We need everyone to focus and put forth their best effort...we’re going to need as many skilled soldiers as possible.*”

Sudden panic reared up and seized Elyse. It was stirred by mad fear that her brother was in a dangerous situation that might result in him not coming home again. What if he was killed and she wouldn’t have him with her for the rest of this life? He was all she had. Yes, there was her adoptive family, but there was a special bond between

blood-family members who were friends. Just the thought of going through life without her brother made her feel sick.

Elyse hadn't been aware of how strong that fear had become until that moment. Sure, she'd always known the risk of him being killed because he was, after all, in the military and out on missions now. But perhaps it all had something to do with her own training. It was driving home the real possibility of war, and Elam's words and tone only confirmed the fact that the systems were drifting towards it.

“You there?”

“Uh, yes, sorry,” answered Elyse, focusing on movement in the trees across the clearing. “Just lost in thought.”

“Well, look at it this way: once you complete your ten weeks, you're onto more advanced stuff. When that happens, we'll probably train together for certain drills...then I can embarrass you when I outdo you in everything.”

“Not in your dreams,” retorted Elyse. “You're the one who'll be in tears in front of your friends.”

“Game on, then. Hey, I have to run, Squirt. See you in a few. Oh, and...try not to give anyone any more concussions.”

Elyse's jaw dropped, but before she could reply, the call ended. She wondered how he could've known about Aden already, but thoughts on that issue were short-lived. Her attention returned to the far trees when she saw a flash of light come from it...before someone tumbled out of the trees and over the grass.

She tossed the disposable comm into a nearby trash bin and then strode towards the trees.

As she watched the person who'd gone for a roll across the ground, he sat up laughing. He then sprang lightly to his feet and jogged down a rise and out of view.

Perplexed over the whole ordeal, Elyse crossed the clearing. At the edge of the far trees, she found Abigail, Thyra, Riley, and a few others. They stood at the top of a gentle rise and were observing something in the clearing below. By their expressions, they'd witnessed the event that had resulted in the young man tumbling through the trees.

“You just missed it, Elyse!” whispered Abigail, gawking wide-eyed at the three people in the clearing. “It was amazing!”

The trio had borrowed combat weapons from one of the supply sheds. Because this was a military training facility, practicing combat and various drills during off-time was encouraged. Therefore, sheds on the grounds had been outfitted with various weapons, in their nonlethal forms, naturally.

The three each wielded the equivalent of a nightstick. They stood in a rough triangle, gazing at one another with faint smiles already on their faces as they waited to see who would move first.

None of them could take it any longer and advanced at the same time. As the three proceeded to engage in a sort of dance, striking, counterstriking, twisting, flipping, and aerialing away from one another, Elyse recognized that these three were omicrons.

Aside from their stunning eyes, it was the unsurpassed grace with which they moved that gave them away. Their ability also to successfully flip and perform various “airs above the ground” attested to their kind. It seemed that gravity had a lesser grip on omicrons, which left them able to do the kinds of tricks that they did.

Elyse felt the ache of her inferiority come to life as she watched these three amazing and beautiful people duel. She knew she’d never be able to move as gracefully or match them in any skill. She was a normal human doomed to mediocrity. While omicrons seemed to always be growing and excelling in every area, her capacity to advance would eventually be capped by her humanness.

The fight seemed to have naturally shifted to “girls against the boys,” and the young man found himself at a slight disadvantage. But he didn’t seem to care. Laughter flickered in his stunning hazel-green eyes as he pivoted back and forth to block and deflect the strikes of his opponents.

He sensed the large tree close behind him. With one powerful swing, he glanced both his rivals’ weapons away, and then spun and sprinted for the oak. Reaching it, he ran up it several steps before flipping backward.

He sailed high in the air, and as he twisted around, he swiped at the first of his opponents. He landed in front of the second young woman and immediately threw himself forward, flipping over her.

She simultaneously aeriaded after him, and when he landed, he did so almost right on top of her. As they commenced some awkward close-quarter combat, the second young woman rushed to join them.

She'd never get the chance. A second young man, who turned out to be Titus, charged onto the scene. The speed he had helped him gain great height when he aeriaded over her and took a swipe at her in passing.

As the two dances continued, the number of spectators grew. They whooped and cheered on the four and smiled at the spectacle and skills they were witnessing.

Elyse shot a sidelong glance at Thyra. The expression on her face and in her rich mahogany eyes was one of intense longing as she watched with keen interest. Though she deeply desired to, she made no move to join the fun with her fellow omicron companions.

Elyse wasn't vehemently against omicrons, and she had completely accepted Thyra and Titus. Still, Thyra was aware of her hunting partner's edginess in dealing with Gen-Ns. Also, because Elyse had been the unofficial alpha female in the hunting squad, Thyra thought it important to conform more to what she thought her leader desired: to be normal and not exhibit any “unnatural” abilities or gifts.

Elyse sensed all of this and it made her feel a bit guilty. Her friend shouldn't determine her actions because of Elyse's thoughts or opinions.

The guilt now compounded the rising inferiority she felt, and she grimaced a little.

Finally, the dueling pairs drifted closer to one another and the chaotic, high-speed end of the fight followed. All four were in constant movement as they struck and parried. Soon, the four locked weapons over their heads with their respective rivals, which forced everyone to stop for a breath. Then, looking at one another, they kicked at each other in unison.

The air itself shook and a shockwave seemed to punch outward from the group in all directions. A burst of air pushed against the onlookers and threw up swirls of leaves into their faces.

As for the four, they were thrown away from each other and went sailing through the air thirty feet before tumbling across the ground. When they sat up, all four were laughing.

The observers clapped and cheered, as Abigail, beside Elyse, quietly asked, “Hey, are you okay?”

Elyse’s internal turmoil had begun to show itself on her face. To Abigail, it appeared that she was in pain or distress.

Thyra glanced Elyse’s way just as she shook herself from her thoughts and tried to brush off Abigail’s concern. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Standing close to them was a group of five who had not been impressed with the display. The ringleader, by his mutterings and the expression on his face, was obviously not a fan of omicrons.

As for the other four, it was difficult to say whether they truly agreed with their leader’s prejudice. It simply seemed that they’d align with whatever ideas he had for any given day.

“Well, that was lovely,” the ringleader declared rather loudly, “showing the rest of us normal folk up, then?”

The noise of the bystanders fell to silence and all eyes turned to the young man, who’d felt his own prowess threatened by the innocent duel.

“I’d thought you’d get tired of it by now,” he continued as he pushed his way past the few people in front of him so he could scoff down at the four. “After all, it’s not like we’re a threat. You don’t have to keep making a display of the skills that didn’t come to you naturally.”

“Get off it, Brogan,” said one of the crowd.

“Yeah, just shut it,” added another.

Brogan ignored them and continued to sneer at the four. “How do you cope with knowing you were just the result of a science experiment? That you’re not human, or...anything really.”

Cold laughter glinted in his dark brown eyes. “How do you identify yourselves, anyway, if you’re not human? As aliens, half-breeds, or freaks? You don’t belong here or in any of the systems. Why don’t you all just go find your own planet in some dark corner of space and leave the rest of us mediocre humans to ourselves?”

As Brogan the brute had continued his insults, a number of the crowd had subtly moved closer to the four in their defense.

As for the omicrons themselves, Elyse was surprised by what she saw in their expressions. Because the first experience in meeting such a person had not gone well, it had tainted her mind and perception of all other omicrons. Therefore, she’d expected these four to glare death at Brogan at the least and unleash whatever kind of powers they had at the most.

Instead, Titus and the other three merely stood calmly and regarded Brogan with stoicism. Not a trace of anger or hate was to be seen on their faces.

Thyra, in the meantime, had fixed her steady gaze on Brogan. He must have felt it because he turned and looked right at her.

“Oh, great,” he said with a roll of his eyes and emphatic shrug of his shoulders, “another one. It’s like an invasion.”

Then he directed a sudden, and rather vengeful, gaze on her. “I ought to mess your face up just for lookin’ at me!”

“Ohie!” barked Elyse sharply as she planted herself between Thyra and her potential assailant.

Doubtless, Thyra could defend herself against a brat like Brogan, as skilled in combat as he was. But Thyra was part of the old hunting team, and just because they were in basic training now didn’t mean anything. Therefore, it was Elyse’s duty to defend her teammate.

“You sure have a way of haverin’ on,” continued Elyse, raising her eyebrows as she looked Brogan up and down. “But what do you expect from a wee nyaff from the Cadmus Loch?”

Brogan blinked at Elyse for a few seconds before asking, “Wait...how’d you know I’m from the Loch? Who told you that?”

“I know by your accent, eejit,” she replied with a roll of her eyes and as her mild accent became heavier. “Maybe if you’d spent more time focusing your energy towards somethin’ productive, like learnin’ about your own planet and the people in it, instead of mindlessly listenin’ to unfounded lies and hate that divides instead of binds...then I might not be insultin’ you right no’.”

Brogan’s eyes narrowed as he studied Elyse, taking in her battle stance, the keen light in her eyes, and the overall confident air that hung about her. “You’re one those hunters, aren’t you? You come from a trackin’ village?”

“Aye,” answered Elyse, “and what’s it to you? You have a problem with my kind? You going to learn to hate rangers, too?”

An expression then settled on her face like when a wolf decides to give one of the lower members in the pack a good thrashing.

“It’s a good thing our Gen-N friends have such patience,” she continued as a dangerous light flickered in her eyes. “If that had been me you’d mouthed off to...overseers would be findin’ pieces of you from here all the way to the front gate.”

That earned a chorus of “ooo’s” from the crowd.

But both Brogan and Thyra weren’t so sure those words had just been an empty threat. The last time Thyra had seen that expression on Elyse’s face and in her eyes was when a big boar razorback had nearly killed one of the members of the hunting squad. There had been no fear as Elyse had jumped in its path and challenged it.

That had been the first time Thyra had witnessed the surfacing of the terrible violence that could explode from her teammate. It hadn’t been violence brought upon by the desire to shed blood; it had been the urgency to defend her wounded teammate and also from a dominance standpoint. Even though the razorback was four times the size of

Elyse and outweighed her ten-to-one, she’d gazed at it as if to ask, “who do you think you are, ambushing my friend? We have dominion over you, not the other way around, you runt.”

Meanwhile, just a touch of uneasiness caused Brogan’s haughty and certain expression to waver. Finally, he cleared his throat and shrugged. “Whatever,” he said, slowly backing away. “I’ll catch up to you later.”

Elyse knew it had been an empty, veiled threat and she narrowed her gaze at him in response.

The crowd was chattering rather excitedly and glancing at Elyse. But she ignored them.

Once Brogan was out of sight, she relaxed and looked at the four Gen-N’s in the clearing. They were studying her with interest with those piercing eyes. But other than mild curiosity, she couldn’t tell what else was running through their minds.

Don’t look at me like that, she thought to them, turning and weaving her way through the crowd. I’m not your spokesperson or representative. I was just defending my teammate...and I still have personal issues to work out with the likes of you.

Elyse knew she had a lot of thinking to do. In a matter of minutes, her indirect interaction with four omicrons, in addition to seeing Thyra’s choice not to join in the duel with her Gen-N companions, had muddled everything she’d thought or known about them.

For some time, something had been whispering in the back of Elyse’s mind. A nagging sense had been telling her that she needed to sort out what she thought about omicrons, and how she was going to interact and work with them.

As Elyse strode off towards a ridge peppered with trees, she blew through her lips and thought with no little exasperation, *och! Omicrons!*

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While the students broke into more pairs and joined their omicron counterparts in good-natured duels, a group of guardians stood in the shade of the trees.

They always enjoyed watching their young human companions test their skills and try new ones. There was something about getting to observe young creations have good fun and sport. And their laughter, their laughter could bring joy and a smile to even the most dismal guardian.

Neither human nor angel would ever guess at the wonder of how emotions such as pure joy could pass through the veil and affect those in the unseen. Truly, the two realms were intertwined in many ways.

The group shared a chuckle when Titus and Devorah, another omicron, outdid themselves in their duel. The climax wasn't a flurry of movement, but more like a staredown. To an unwitting observer, it might've appeared that Titus and Devorah simply began glaring at one another with arms raised and hands at the ready.

But in reality, the duel had reached its height. It had turned fully into a battle of unseen wills and power. A wild light glinted in Titus's dark green eyes as he glared at his rival, and Devorah, with her unnerving aqua-green eyes, matched his expression. Within seconds of the stare down beginning, the air about them started to hum. A few moments later, white light began to flicker in the space between them, and then all about them.

Thirty seconds into it, the pair began to subtly lean towards each other, although it would be more accurate to say “pushing against” one another.

The humming became louder until those near the pair could feel it in their chests. Flickers of light appeared in greater number, and were soon joined by short arcs of electricity snapping in the air. At last, the air between them grew brighter until there came a loud crack like thunder and a flash of blinding light.

Titus and Devorah were thrown away from one another as a shockwave punched outwards in all directions. It kicked up a powerful gale, which bent the trees and sent up a wave of leaves.

Their shockwave incidentally set off a chain reaction. Any battling pairs or groups relatively close to Titus and Devorah, and who were in an omicron “pushing match,” were taken by surprise when shockwaves exploded between themselves. Of course, the force of

the shockwaves tossed not only the omicrons away from one another, but also anyone else close to them.

Three or four more shockwaves answered Titus and Devorah’s within seconds of each other, and the trees were assailed with several gusts of air. When everything quieted, about twenty students were on the ground. Everyone looked wide-eyed at each other as the leaves lazily trailed back to earth. Then everyone started laughing and leaped to their feet. Being young people, the most common comments were, “that was so cool!” and “let’s do it again!”

The angels chuckled as the students paired up to have another go. As they began chatting amongst themselves, they scanned the immediate area and spotted Thyra standing beside a massive pine. Standing and observing, but not participating in the fun. It was plain by her expression that she wanted to join in, yet was still restraining herself.

“Your charge isn’t dispirited by Brogan’s comments, is she?” asked an angel to Thyra’s guardian. The question was mostly a joke, because the young woman had a quiet but firm spirit.

Her guardian, Aquilo, smiled. “More like she’s concerned with young Miss Klein’s stance about omicrons.”

At this, Zayev folded his arms and teased good-naturedly. “Oh, so it’s all my charge’s fault then?”

A moment later, Riley, the seriously determined hunting mate of Thyra, appeared beside her companion. She then took up her typical “on guard” stance: arms crossed and legs braced while wearing a stern expression that read something like, “if you’re looking for trouble, I’ll pummel you into oblivion.”

Though short, Riley was evenly built and possessed impressive strength in her body. She was also fiercely loyal to her hunting team and unlike Elyse, the alpha of the squad, she couldn’t care less if a team member was purple with green spots. A member of the team was a member of the team and thus warranted protection and loyalty.

Zayev’s glance returned to Elyse, whom he could spot passing in and out of the trees on the ridge.

Seeing his companion’s thoughtful expression, Aquilo guessed, “You’re interested to see just how deep her internal struggle with omicrons is?”

Zayev looked at his friend, who’d always been a master at reading the thoughts and expressions of others. “Mmm. It’s deeper than I’d first suspected...and adding to it are the questions about herself that keep resurfacing in her mind.”

“Do you think she’ll ultimately accept the truth?”

Zayev shook his head. “It’s too early to tell. All I can do is wait and prompt her as tactfully as I can...hopefully, she won’t resist too strongly.”

“If they all knew the truth from the beginning,” added Evander, Titus’s tall and strong guardian, “it would make things easier.”

“Yes,” agreed Zayev quietly. “If only they knew the truth.”

Chapter 11

Mysterious Sightings

Location: Haldar Station, positioned in the center of the Core Systems

“I’m telling you: you have to use the blaster and sticky grenades if you’re going to defeat the boss on Level 4.”

“I tried that, but I always run out of ammo right when I beat him. Then the only things I have are knives. Those don’t work against the sentinels that rush the cave when you kill the boss.”

“Wait. You don’t have the scattershot yet?”

“Scattershot? What—”

The conversation ended when one of the monitors beeped.

“Is that Johnson finally showing up two days late?” asked one of the officers as they turned to the consoles. “He’s the reason the boss was especially ticked this morning...”

“The boss is always ticked,” muttered the second officer as he double-checked the radar and pinged the vessel that had just appeared on it.

No response.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” he said. The medium cruiser sliding across the monitor’s screen had no identification numbers or markings. Sensors were also unable to get a read on any schematics of the ship, not even its exact size.

“Whoa,” said the first officer as he slowly stood from his station. The handful of other officers in the room also got to their feet and gaped out of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“Mike,” said the first officer to his companion as the monitor beeped again.

Mike’s expression furrowed. Six more unidentifiable ships appeared on radar and flanked the lead vessel.

“Mike,” repeated the officer more firmly and whapped his friend on the arm.

“What?” snapped Mike. His glance flitted up to the windows once and then again before he slowly stood like the others.

Passing by the Haldar Station at no more than two hundred meters away was a squad of black ships. The lead was the largest, the size of a small warship, and those accompanying it were medium cruisers. They were all sleek and made for stealth.

The room suddenly felt colder as fear and a wave of panic speared everyone. This cluster of ships could easily be an attack squad. As that very thought ran through all their minds, their fear grew.

It had been many years since this area of space had seen conflict, and longer still since the station itself had been attacked. While at one time it had been outfitted with a substantial defense system, it had been somewhat decommissioned after the last war. Now, it was primarily a rest area, communications, and maintenance station. It no longer boasted heavy weaponry.

These facts crossed the minds of the observers in a matter of seconds. They’d just begun a short debate over whether to sound the alarm when the ships shimmered and vanished from sight.

When Mike looked down at the radar, he saw no sign of them.

“Not possible,” he whispered.

In this age, cloaking wasn't too uncommon or unheard of. However, although a cloaked ship would still be invisible to another, monitoring stations such as the Haldar were constantly being upgraded with the latest technology. Thus, they could see cloaked ships even if another vessel couldn't.

Until today. Every now and then a single ship could elude radar entirely, but not a small fleet.

“That's not possible,” said Mike again.

With the tap of a few keys, he reversed the recorded footage of the ships. But when he reached the marker that designated when they'd first appeared, the image was smudged and greatly distorted. At the point where the ships disappeared, the footage turned to snow. After that, when Mike tried to rewind a second time, there was only a black screen.

Leaning back in his chair, Mike wiped the sweat from his forehead and then shot a look at his friend. *What is this? Who was that?*

He then decided that after he filed an incident report, he was going to have a stiff drink.

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Location: near the Imnek Station, just “west” of the Ushani System

“90% is too bitter.”

“No, it's not. Just put it in ice cream.”

“I don't want it in ice cream. I want to eat it straight out of the wrapper. That's why 80% is perfect. Besides, it's probably better for you.”

“Pfff, whatever. It's all dark.”

After giving one another a look, the pilot and co-pilot turned to their female counterpart, seated at a console behind them. “What do you think?”

She looked at them, raised an eyebrow, and shrugged. “Chocolate is chocolate.”

The helm in front of the copilot beeped at him and he glanced at it. “Vessel approaching...one mile out.”

“Our sensors are effective for up to one-hundred thousand, right?” asked the pilot, before raising an eyebrow of his own at his female associate.

“Correct.”

“Then why are we just now seeing this ship?”

Never one to take blame that wasn't hers, the engineer firmly placed a hand at the top of the console and looked pointedly at the pilot. “Maintenance and I are only responsible for upkeep of the vessel. We're not the ones who are supposed to buy upgrades for equipment that went out-of-date twenty years ago.”

A teasing light twinkled in the pilot's eye as he returned his attention forward.

“Whooa, okay...I just lost the ship,” said the copilot. “It just disappeared.”

Before the pilot could ask, the engineer piped up with, “Our sensors are working perfectly, sir.”

“So, it's not us, it's them,” replied the pilot, feeling rising tension tightening his body. “Let's warm up weapons and alter course. Make for the Imnek Station...”

An alarm from the helm jarred them all a moment before the unknown ship reappeared almost directly in front of them.

The pilot slammed thrusters in reverse. After restoring some space, the trio stared at the vessel as it slowly slid past. A full-size warship, it was both beautiful and terrifying in appearance, a large predator that was brutish yet stunning. But who did it belong to and where did it come from? There hadn't been any rumors about a charted system creating a fleet of black ships, nor had there been any whispers of another civil war. So, what was a big ship doing out here between systems?

No one on the small vessel wanted to find out presently. So, the pilot continued to slowly drift away from their significantly larger counterpart.

“Okay,” said the pilot once they had some more room. “Let's get the—”

“They're gone!” exclaimed the co-pilot. “I glanced down for a second, and when I looked back up...”

“No readings on sensors, either,” added the engineer.

“Like I said,” answered the pilot with a look at his companion, “let’s get outta here.”

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Location: somewhere near the decommissioned Kraz Station

“Thanks for the spare part. The entire fleet might be outfitted with warp drives, but those little solenoids are still difficult to come by.”

“And some of our maintenance branches are still a little...lax in keeping up to the Army’s needs in a timely fashion.”

“The General will probably be giving them a visit sometime soon.”

That earned devious chuckles from the two commanders, before the one aboard the medium cruiser said, “Although I do wonder when we’ll be assigned to an attack squad. I mean, patrolling and scaring enemy ships is fun for only so long.”

“Indeed,” replied the other commander, on a lighter scouting vessel. *“Although I heard from Commander Zosma, over in the far eastern quadrant, and he said the ships in that entire sector have been ordered to clear the area and rendezvous. Guess upper management is beginning to shift to a new phase.”*

The first commander was silent for a moment as he considered this news and then answered, “I wouldn’t be surprised then if we receive the same orders. If I had to guess, the purpose of spooking enemy ships and stations was to test how reactive they’d be to a suspicious threat, and, well...just to terrorize them psychologically.”

“Ha! And if all the mysterious black ships disappear suddenly...pha! They’ll likely, hopefully, fall back into a sense of security. We took two planets in the Merchant System and there was only one investigation into it...and nothing happened after that. That just tells us that although they might’ve been nervous, what was more overpowering was the anxiety and reluctance to investigate something that might hint at another conflict.”

“Reluctance and complacency. The Systems don’t want another galactic war,” sneered the first commander, “but that doesn’t mean they aren’t getting one, anyway. I

hope not all the planets will remain asleep and that at least a few will offer some resistance. It would make the war more entertaining than just mowing over them all.”

“Agreed...but seeing how they didn’t react to the Merchant Planets...resistance might be too much to hope for!”

Chapter 12

Leading Tactics

Excerpt from Log Entry by Klein, Elyse:

I knew something was up. Last week all the overseers and drill sergeants left me alone. That hasn’t happened since basic began. Elam had been right that the time to be concerned was when they started ignoring you.

This week they’ve been complimenting me on nearly everything. I liked it better when they were verbally abusing me, but they knew I knew what they were doing back then. Plus, all the other recruits and candidates feel sorry for those being targeted.

However, when they single you out and show off your work or skills to all your other squadmates...then the general population begins to resent you pretty quick. Of course, I would’ve figured that they’d catch on that it’s just another ploy by the overseers, just another trick.

Unfortunately, they haven’t figured it out, except Thyra. But all my other teammates already hate my guts.

It doesn’t help that I keep being put in lead positions. The overseers intentionally pick a member who they know will quite likely fail leading the unit in, say, taking enemy headquarters. Then when they do fail, I get picked on to try again...typically with success. Yeah, that helps improve group dynamics even more.

But I’ll figure out how to flip this on its head. I have to. I only have two weeks of regular basic left and I’m not leaving with everyone thinking I’m perfect or a hotshot with a big head.

I don’t think so, Commander Bardou. Yes, I’m onto you. I know you’re the one pulling strings, and that you and your friend decide which of us gets picked on and how.

You're not going to win this one. I'll show you.

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“Is she onto us?”

“Ha, of course, she is. She and most of the others we’ve been...judiciously targeting all session long, are always suspicious. But she was the real tipster, to begin with, the troublemaker. She was the one who initially reminded everyone this was basic training, and the drill sergeants would be mentally and psychologically beating them up. Anyway...how are things for the battle simulations?”

“We’re nearly prepped for the games next week.”

“Excellent. Although, there’s something I want to add for the team that Klein will be assigned to...let’s add a few extra elements of surprise...”

Listening in on the conversation was Zayev and a few other guardians. They’d been informed by the commanders’ angels that the human leaders may or may not be planning something less than fair for the upcoming war games. If Zayev and company wanted to get a better idea of what those plans might be, they were free to listen in.

That’s what they were doing now, and the more the guardians heard, the less pleased they became.

“Commander Arzak is a real piece of human flesh, isn’t he?” muttered Dhaka to Zayev. Dhaka was Riley’s guardian.

Zayev’s only response was to cross his arms tightly across his chest and scowl. Elyse thought that Commander Bardou was behind the orders to verbally harass her and the others. But it was actually Commander Arzak, the cold and less than empathetic human.

However, while his management of young soldiers seemed to be lacking, he was a superior warrior on the battlefield. He was what some called a human-omicron cross, meaning he had the appearance of an average person, but he wielded the power of an omicron. It also explained his age, for he’d seen many previous wars and yet still looked like a middle-aged man.

In battle, he was cruel. His ferocity in mercilessly destroying his enemies earned him respect in both human and angelic ranks. For reasons that escaped most, Arzak was given insight into enemy plans, and inspiration for strategic plans and tactical maneuvers.

Also, while his character earned him mild fear and distaste by his fellow warriors, he was utterly hated by all beings dark and evil. He was fearless in confronting them and he had been given great victories over them in the past. Thus, there was a price on his head, but no dark being was brave enough to get near him—even though he hadn’t had a guardian in over a decade. Then again, he didn’t seem to need one because he could sense the smallest or subtlest threat, which was another reason no one tried to attack him. He could see them coming from the other side of the galaxy.

But on that particular evening, it wasn’t operatives of evil making plans to pummel the commander. It was the guardians of young future soldiers whom he was going to knowingly put in legitimate danger.

That said, it was unfortunate for the heavenly guardians that they had orders *not* to interfere with the commander’s plan-making or during the war games themselves. However, if any future soldiers under the protection of the angels present, were injured – conditions might become significantly more unfortunate for Commander Arzak.

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Week 8, Day 4

They sprinted through the forest, grateful for the blustery fall wind. Most in the squad had innate or learned stealth, but not everyone. Hopefully, the gusts would cover any noise they inadvertently made.

And right now, speed and silence were paramount for the successful completion of the assignment. The fact that they had yet to achieve victory over a single mission that week added further stress to the squad.

“Bravo, prep to climb,” whispered the group leader as they approached a broad and sheer rock face.

Bravo consisted of three members who’d shimmy up the cliff, a shortcut to an enemy post. They’d scout ahead while the rest of the squad took another route to check

out a few suspicious buildings. The last thing anyone wanted was for an enemy troop to come from behind and ambush them.

The three removed a small handgun from a spare pocket in their pants or vests. The device housed a small grappling hook and line that could more than carry their weights.

Unfortunately, the feat of removing said device was too difficult a task for one of the three supposed to traverse the cliff. Though he’d proved exceptionally stealthy, he oddly enough seemed to have butterfingers. He fumbled and juggled nearly everything he touched like a hot potato before finally dropping it. Hence the nickname he’d been given the first week of training: Tat, which was shorter and more masculine than “tattie.”

He was generally an easy-going fellow. However, he’d sworn with conviction that if anyone called him “tater,” they’d find themselves breathing through their ears. No one had yet uttered that particular nickname.

Living up to his nickname, Tat fumbled with the device and dropped it in the moss. He, of course, stopped dead in his tracks and was nearly barreled over by the squad leader.

Squad leader grabbed hold of him by the back of the vest and pulled him after the others. He was about to protest, but Elyse the leader said, “You’ll run with us, Tat. Gex will take your place on Bravo squad.”

At this, the teammate known as Gex, nicknamed after the gecko because she could climb up basically any surface, shot a wide-eyed look at Elyse. “What? Wait, but...”

“You’ll do fine,” assured Elyse.

While Gex, whose real name was Amber, had exceptional skills, her confidence in front of others still lacked.

The feat of Bravo team running up the cliff while Alpha continued south was supposed to be completed without communication and without slowing. But Tat, whose real name was ironically Tate, was stumbling along and not doing a good job keeping up. Gex was still attempting to engage in a stuttered argument. This explains how the squad came to a complete halt at the base of the cliff.

Thyra and two others tried to play along with the assignment and work with their leader. The trio took up covering positions behind some nearby trees.

“Look, Gex, just scuttle up the cliff with the rest of Bravo,” said Elyse firmly, while at the same time trying to sound encouraging. “You’ve been doing stuff like this for weeks. It’s fine. Just get prepped to go.”

Not waiting for a response, she turned to Tat. “Ready?”

Tat flinched a little as he admitted, “I...might’ve forgotten my secondary weapon...”

Elyse managed to keep a straight face and take a measured breath. “Make do with what you have. I’ll put you in a lookout spot.”

“Why don’t we all just stick together and go Alpha’s route?” asked a young man nicknamed Brewer.

He was quite sharp mentally and seemed to master every new skill he took up. But because of it, and the fact he was like the stereotypical “young pup,” he thought he knew everything and was “all that.” If the plan was different from what he wanted to do, he typically failed to listen and did what he wanted. This ended up with the squad leader biting his head off and telling him to get his butt in line.

He could also easily dish out criticism and banter, but when he was wrong, he pretended he wasn’t. If he was teased in turn, he quickly became defensive. In short, he couldn’t take his own medicine and had yet to choose to have enough self-control or maturity to either keep from criticizing and teasing, or to “man up,” laugh with the others, and shrug it off.

“Stick to the plan,” answered Elyse evenly.

She was still speaking when two enemy combatants appeared. Thyra and company picked them off as movement in Elyse’s peripheral drew her attention right.

Pivoting, she had her sidearm in hand, raised and aimed in under a second, and she squeezed the trigger not a breath later.

The pair of the enemy that had emerged from the south trail collapsed.

“And now they’ll be on high alert when those scouts don’t report back in,” she sighed with utter exasperation. “Mission failed...again.”

As she spoke those last three words, a buzzer echoed over the forest, signaling the end of the simulation. The four enemy bodies were holographs and they disappeared.

“Great, another job botched,” said Brewser with typical attitude.

“And whose fault is that, exactly?” muttered Thyra as she and her two companions rejoined the unit.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Brewser, instantly on the defensive.

“You know what it means,” snapped Arune, a hunter from an isolated town situated at the feet of the mountains.

For being a young man, he was already tall and lean. Hair and eyes dark, his expression was of one who’d already seen the unpleasant things of life. It had matured him faster than his peers and it showed in the way he carried himself. It was also obvious to everyone that he’d been raised properly because he respected his elders, women, and authority. He was decently loyal to whoever was appointed squad leader and put forth honest effort in executing orders. As such, he had little tolerance for someone like Brewser.

“If we did less arguing and puttin’ more effort into followin’ orders,” he continued, with fire in his eyes, “then maybe we might complete a mission, period.”

“Overall success or failure of the mission ultimately lands squarely on the shoulders of the leader,” replied Brewser, sending a snooty sidelong look at Elyse.

She’d found it helpful as a leader to watch the members of the group interact without her involvement. They tended to forget she was on the sidelines and wound up speaking more freely. This allowed her to better “see” what was on everyone’s mind and understand individual attitudes. She could understand the core of her fellow teammates and catch glimpses of how they were at heart and what motivated them.

For a second, Arune looked like he was fixing to pummel Brewser, an action no one else would protest.

As the bickering continued, and one or two more people joined in, Elyse stepped forward and loudly declared, “Everyone, shut it!”

Silence answered.

“In the mission that we just failed,” she began sternly, “failure belongs to everyone. We are not unified. We’re not actively working together, and we’re not putting one-hundred percent effort into executin’ the phases of the plan.”

Elyse took a breath, mostly to keep her own anger in check. “That said: constant bickerin’ and fightin’ amongst ourselves isn’t helping, either. Not everyone is going to get along. That’s life. There will always be least one person who rubs us the wrong way. There’s no escaping it. Either you learn to cope and to work together with your teammates because in the military it’s not about what the individual wants, but the success of the mission that counts or...”

She looked purposefully at Breswer and drilled him with the infamous Klein glare. “You work against your team by disobeying orders, bein’ smart when it’s time to focus, and castin’ doubt around the group by constantly questioning the lead.”

Breswer took a breath, either to swallow the lump in his throat or to respond.

Elyse spoke first, “If you have something helpful and productive to say, then say it. If not, then keep your trap shut. I’m surprised that no one has yet to give you a good skelping for being such a smart Alec.”

She let her glare linger for a second longer before drawing another deep breath and setting her hands on her hips. Then, to everyone’s surprise, she huffed a laugh and a smile pulled at her mouth.

“But the real matter here,” she continued, “is that this week has all just been another round of mind games. Just like the overseers picked on some of us mercilessly the first six weeks, now they’ve selected some to praise and turn into points of jealousy. They want us all at each other’s throats. That way we’ll be too distracted to focus on assignments, which is what actually matters. This is the military, not a soap opera.”

She looked about at each of her teammates and began subconsciously to speak using her hands to add emphases to her words. “I’m no better than any of you, but the overseers have been wantin’ you to think otherwise. We all have strengths and weaknesses, and it is the strengths of others that complement one another’s weaknesses. We’re only as fast as the slowest man, and we’re only as strong as our greatest weakness.”

Elyse’s smile returned as she glanced from Thyra to Arune. “It’s just like on a hunting squad, yes?”

They both returned her smile and nodded.

“Now,” said Elyse with a scheming light in her eyes. “I say we throw the overseers scheme right back in their faces. Instead of snippin’ at each other, let’s focus on what’s important: truly working together as a unit so we can successfully finish missions...so we can graduate and move on. When we’re doing exercises and drills, I want to hear suggestions on how we can tighten up and do them better and faster. I want new drills to perform, so we can broaden our skill base. I want our unit to be lethal, and I want us to stand out. I want us to work hard so that at the end of the day, we can be proud of what we’ve accomplished. And when we’re planning for an assignment...”

She shot another look at Breswer, “that’s when I want to hear lots of ideas for execution.”

She glanced back at the others with a teasing smile, “I shouldn’t be the one doing all the work and coming up with brilliant ideas all the time.”

They received some chuckles and nods.

“So,” said Elyse, straightening more to attention, “we’ve got two more tries to get this mission done right. Whose game for showing up some overseers?”

That earned a “heck, yes” from Tat and Arune, a fist pump from Thyra, a giggle from Gex, and an actual smile from the final squad member nicknamed Cobalt, the silent omicron. Brewser was skulking and licking his wounds.

As they all turned back the way they’d come, Elyse slapped Brewser on the shoulder. “Come on, I need that sharpshooter mind focused for sniping the guards around headquarters.”

Brewser looked at her with mild surprise.

Elyse just chuckled. “While I don’t condone insubordination, I do believe in acknowledging exceptional skills and issuing praise when it’s due...as well as giving a smack up the back of the head when required.”

Needless to say, the team completed a “redo” of the mission and was met with success. They passed the six additional assignments later that day and the next with flying colors.

Chapter 13

Know Thy Teammates

“Are we ready?”

“Still waiting for Charlie Company to get their ducks in a row...”

Elyse and the team took a quiet breath and tried to survey the terrain. It was difficult to see in the odd predawn light, made darker by the thick clouds. Still, the sky above the large, long ridge was lazily lightening while the rest of the steep hillside was somewhere between light enough to see, but not quite in shadow.

From the moment they reached the edge of the tree grove, Elyse decided that she didn’t like the “cover” situation. Or lack thereof. Beyond their stand of trees was nothing but scrubby brush. It bordered an expansive lake at the southern foot of the ridge and blanketed the entire hillside.

In short, they wouldn’t have any cover once they stepped outside of the trees. They’d be easy pickings for snipers that were undoubtedly hiding all along the ridge.

Everyone playing the “assailants” in this week’s war game had the task of dominating that ridge. Why? Because it was where enemy headquarters was situated. The location hadn’t simply been handed to them, either. The air team had had to search for it. It’d taken them nearly twenty-four hours of nonstop recon over the entire span of the wilderness designated for the training facility’s war game.

Now that the “ground crew” had a visual on the ridge, they could barely believe that’s where enemy HQ was located. But they also understood why the air force couldn’t just carpet bomb the entire ridge and surrounding valleys: headquarters was *inside* the ridge, likely buried deep. Air recon had only taken notice of this place because they’d picked up some odd heat readings. Watching several enemy soldiers enter and exit the facility had helped, too.

Even from where ground assault teams were, the gray stone headers that marked the doors could be easily missed if one didn't know to look for them.

Elyse and the others were certain that if this had been a real-life scenario, the military had more than sufficient weaponry to leave a mile-deep crater where that ridge was. But for all-intensive training purposes, they had to pretend like they didn't have that capability.

“All companies, this is base,” said a voice in their helmets. *“All units are reporting a green light. Prepare to execute and standby for air support...”*

Arune, who'd been appointed the commander of Delta Squad, glanced at his unit and signaled them. Elyse and the others raised their rifles and peered through their scopes. Since it was still dark-ish, Elyse turned on her infrared optics.

She was perfectly happy not being the big leader. She preferred to be given an assignment and left to herself to get it done how she saw fit. She wasn't someone who enjoyed overseeing large numbers of people.

Eww, she thought, leave that to the commanders and generals. I'll stick to solo work, and small group recon and strike teams, thank you.

Elyse was, however, placed as lead over two others who'd be responsible for infiltrating enemy headquarters. While recruits had been given command opportunities throughout basic training, only officers were designated as leaders in this scenario. It was good practice for everyone all around.

“How many snipers you think they have covering that ridge?” whispered Tate. “I'll bet a steak dinner on ten.”

“I'll bet eight,” wagered Titus.

“I've forgotten what real food is,” said Brogan. “Steak. Is that some kind of fruit?”

“I've spotted two bogies on the east end,” breathed Riley, with an eye on her target.

“I've got three center and just west,” added Elyse.

“As usual, the women are doing the work while the men are chatting,” muttered Arune. He said it lightly, but there was just enough of an edge in his tone that told them now was time to cut pointless talk and focus on the assignment.

Ten seconds later, the first wave of small fighters swept past overhead and unleashed a burst of weapons’ fire along the ridge. They were out of sight before their thunderous noise caught up to them.

Two slightly larger bombers droned in, passing east to west as they dropped their payloads.

Because this was only a “war game,” and all weapons and ammunition were nonlethal, the “bombs” were only small orbs filled with red powder. Just before hitting the ground, they burst and covered everything nearby with red.

As hoped, several of the enemy snipers were in the blast radiuses and eliminated for the rest of the game. A few of their companions remained unharmed.

“Bogie sniper, two hundred yards out, three hundred up,” reported Riley. After making quick adjustments, she squeezed the trigger, and a red splotched splattered across the face shield of the enemy sniper on the ridge.

“Let’s move,” said Arune.

In unison, the squad broke cover and made for the ridge.

Three enemy fighter jets roared onto the scene but were immediately intercepted by four friendlies. The dog fights commenced over the long lake, to the squad’s left.

Various other ground units to the right were also breaking from cover and advancing towards the ridge. If everyone was moving as they should, then half a dozen squads at the opposite end of the ridgeline were also making a push.

Arune’s squad was nearing the base of the ridge when they all heard something whiz through the air amongst them. Another unidentified object zipped past Elyse.

They all dove into some brushy sage bushes. They would only serve as brief concealment because any enemy snipers could still see and shoot them.

“Where’s that sniper?” barked Arune.

“Three-fifty up!” shouted Elyse as a pair of fighters swept past overhead.

Another round passed dangerously close to Amber’s position before Elyse returned fire.

The first shot brushed by the side of the sniper’s helmet, the second his shoulder, and the third splattered against the rock just under his chin. In an evident moment of panic, he stood, spun, and began sprinting along the steep ridge side.

I’d have just stayed down, thought Elyse as she led him just a little, *let me help.*

She gave a smooth, steady pull of the trigger. Almost instantly, a red splotch appeared over the left side of his back.

The squad immediately continued moving. They’d just begun ascending the ridge when a rapid burst of sniper fire rained down upon them. This time they landed in a clump of willow bushes, which provided even less concealment.

But this wasn’t a complete disadvantage. Elyse and Titus both spotted the sniper, above them and twenty feet to their left. He was using a large boulder both for cover and a perch.

Riley saw him a breath after her two teammates did and sent a round up to him to say hello. It struck the base of the boulder and smeared red upwards across its face.

Just as the sniper ducked out of sight, Elyse exclaimed, “It’s Brewser! That sticker above the visor confirms it. Dang it! He’s an ace marksman!”

Arune glanced around and spotted the team member he wanted.

“Fuzzy!” he shouted to Brogan. “Get to that rock and then use one of your little friends to flush that sniper out! Everyone else, cover fire!”

Brogan, aka Fuzzy, bolted for the rock Arune had mentioned and the rest of the team opened fire on Brewser’s position. He was just peeking over the boulder when he spotted the hail of weapons fire headed his way. But he also saw Fuzzy.

Brewser ducked out of view. A second later a small, round object came from his location and arched through the air towards Fuzzy’s rock.

“Grenade!” yelled Arune.

The warning had only been sounded when the grenade burst into a million pieces harmlessly over the ridge.

“Nice shot, Gex!” hollered Elyse.

Amber had suddenly begun to flourish the previous week and had grown further over the weekend. Elyse had patiently worked with her to firmly instill confidence in her young teammate. Once she was able to work past the mental roadblock of “insecurity in front of peers,” three new and key skills quickly showed themselves.

The first was that she had an innate ability of spotting threats from afar. She could also instantly put herself in their position, think like them and thus react to their countermove before they made it.

Second, she was beyond exceptional with a sidearm, as she’d just proven by shooting the grenade.

Thirdly, Amber, aka Gex, could improvise on the fly.

“Anytime now, Fuzz!” shouted Titus to Brogan.

Back against the rock, Brogan had pulled a small circular object from one of his pants pockets. Now he was messing with a flat handheld device.

“While we’re still young, Mr. Fuzzy!” called Elyse to her teammate as Brewser reappeared suddenly and returned rapid-fire on their location.

The team flattened themselves as much as possible amongst the willows. It was a miracle that no one was hit.

“Half a moment!” hollered Brogan.

Finally, the orb came to life and lifted into the air. “I’m online!”

Using the pad that fit in his palm, he sent the little recon droid zipping up the ridge. It found Brewser, who yelped in surprise when it popped over the boulder. He swatted at it, but it darted sideways. He was bringing his rifle around to melee it, yet as he did so, a tiny turret dropped from the base of the droid and splattered tiny red dots all over his visor.

Arune and squad broke cover and continued up the ridge as the droid returned to Brogan.

Halfway up and behind a line of flat, mossy rocks they rendezvoused with another squad. Because this was the best cover they were going to have, the main companies would hold position here while the strike teams entered the facility.

“*Delta*,” acknowledged the commander from the other unit.

“*India*,” replied Arune. He glanced at Elyse, Riley, and Titus to issue orders, but as he did, rapid weapons fire fell upon their position.

Several enemy soldiers were on top of the ridge and had taken an interest in the two units.

They returned fire, but even as they did, one of the enemy fighters lobbed a grenade at *India* Company.

“*Grenade!*”

Another sailed towards Arune’s group. *India*’s unit was just scattering when the second one landed at the rock right in front of Arune.

India’s grenade exploded and blew red paint everywhere.

Amber grabbed hold of Arune and threw him backwards before diving after him. Everyone else pushed themselves in reverse down the ridge.

The second grenade covered everything in red, and then both *India* and *Delta* laid down heavy weapons fire as they returned to their initial holding positions behind the rocks.

The three enemy combatants didn’t reappear, but no one doubted they were simply lying in wait for someone to crest the ridge.

“Alright, *Strike Team Two*, you’re up!” said Arune to Elyse and her two teammates. “Remember: it’s up to you to find the power generators and set explosives. Afterwards, you’ll meet up with two other strike teams in the control center and then get out of there. Got it?”

“Loud and clear, sir,” answered Elyse. “See you in a few!”

Elyse, Riley, and Titus broke cover and quickly made their way towards a door fifty meters away. That was when one of the combatants reappeared with a burst of weapons fire.

But Riley had already been aiming up the ridge when the enemy showed itself, and she covered his armor and helmet with red paint.

While that was on-going, another grenade popped over the ridge and dropped towards Elyse. If the ground had been smoother, she wouldn't have worried much about it, because the grenade would've just rolled on down the ridge. But the sage and willows offered plenty of places for it to become stuck.

Titus launched himself forward and rolled across the ridge.

Without thinking, Elyse threw herself back in a flip. The grenade exploded and threw red powder everywhere as Elyse landed. She was sliding back when she snapped up her rifle.

The combatant that had thrown the grenade was surprised to receive weapons fire through the powder that hung in the air.

Elyse drove hard, picking up to a run as she went straight up the ridge. She passed through the lingering powder with a burst of shots.

The combatant didn't retreat but aerieled out of the immediate line of fire. When he landed and returned fire, Elyse noticed something familiar in how this enemy moved. It was graceful yet forceful at the same time. The grace screamed “omicron,” but that forceful manner...

Elyse's brain was still working on that second factor when the enemy skittered sideways. Again, he sent a couple of shots at Riley to keep her pinned where she was, then swept around to Elyse and advanced.

Thyra, thought Elyse. This type of assault and confrontation had her hunting mate's name written all over it.

A shot brushed past Elyse's shoulder. She didn't flinch and instead continued to advance.

Thyra had an irritating way of dodging out of way of the rounds. But her attention was momentarily drawn to Titus, now nearly even ground with her.

Thyra wouldn't be easily outdone, despite the fact it was three-to-one. After trading shots with Titus, she tossed a grenade towards him and flipped backwards to

avoid fire from Elyse and Riley. Halfway over, she twisted and shot at Elyse. She landed facing the other direction than when she'd started and used her momentum to flip forward and twist again, this time to shoot at Riley.

Ugh, thought Elyse as she slid to a knee in the brush, *omicrons!*

Thyra was in the process of landing when she opened fire on Elyse again. But she had made herself a smaller target by crouching in the brush. The shots meant for her came precariously close to finding their marks.

Elyse was already returning fire and two landed squarely in Thyra's chest, a third her on the visor of her helmet.

“Finally!” shouted Titus, now beside the door.

Elyse and Riley sprinted up the ridge to him and then cautiously entered the enemy's headquarters.

Chapter 14

Elements of Surprise

The trio stalked silently down the hall. They hadn't gone halfway down it when the sound of running boots reached their ears. It came from a corridor ahead that intersected theirs. They froze and held their breaths.

A unit of a dozen enemy soldiers ran by their hallway and disappeared.

Elyse and company continued forward. At the end of their hall, they had the choice of going left, right, or straight. They obviously didn't have the schematics for this facility, because that would've been too easy.

But signs in the corridors helped, as did a map on a wall in the hall straight ahead. Elyse tapped on the electrical room and shot a glance at her teammates for input.

Titus nodded and then put his finger on the mechanical room.

It was Elyse's turn to nod. Before they turned to go down the stairs, which was a random and particularly narrow case just to their right, she noted where the control center was.

Titus checked to make sure the stairs were clear and then Elyse led the way down. She immediately didn't like the stairwell because it was poorly lit, and the air seemed stale and dank. She wasn't claustrophobic by any means, but this was a kill box.

She also hoped they really were going down to the second level and not where the enemy kept guard dogs, dragons, or something of that nature.

Near the bottom, Elyse swapped out her rifle for her second secondary sidearm, which had a suppressor on it. Modern weapons weren't loud by any means. However, they could still alert people they didn't want to alert if they had to take out security guards.

Elyse kept in mind that there were two other strike teams hopefully inside already. If she and her crew were spotted and the alarm was sounded, a very quick and efficient search would begin. That, in turn, would make it more difficult for the other two teams to complete their tasks.

So, for now, Elyse could assume neither of the other units had been spotted, and thus she and her team would do their best to maintain invisibility and silence.

Titus and Riley followed her lead with the weapons. By the time they reached the bottom of the stairs, all three had suppressed weapons in hand.

The staircase was near the corner of the structure, and the team had a choice of going straight or turning right.

Pausing, Elyse peered right. Clear.

She signaled to her team and then entered the hall. They passed a door on the left, then a second one twenty feet later. As they went by the different passages, Elyse could feel her muscles growing tighter. Every room behind them meant a higher chance of being ambushed at the least and trapped at the most.

They were feet from the third door when it opened and out stepped a pair of...people. They weren't carrying any obvious weapons, though for safety purposes they did have helmets.

They gave a violent start when they saw the three enemy soldiers. But before they could make a sound, both were pistol-whipped. They carefully collapsed to the floor as Elyse stepped over them and popped inside the room.

There was only one person there sitting at a desk in the far corner. He was too far away to do unto him as Elyse and Riley had done to his two friends, so she put two rounds into his chest.

“Clear,” whispered Elyse. “Bring the other two in.”

While Riley and Titus dragged the two people into the office, Elyse helped the pretend dead man to the floor. Once he was situated behind the desk, she pushed in the chair.

The other two fake corpses were set in a corner beside some tall CPU-like units. Hopefully, if anyone stuck their head into this room, it would look like no one was there and they’d leave.

The three hastily continued their trek to the electrical room. At the end of the hall, they went the only direction they could: left.

They’d just passed the first hallway that intersected theirs when raised voices came from somewhere. Elyse didn’t even stop to try to pinpoint the location of the voices and strode to a narrow door on the right.

She’d learned early that stopping in one place long enough to discover the cause of a mysterious noise ended badly. It was better to make a decision and move, and have it turn out to be a bad one, than to just stand around and wait to be slaughtered.

Upon reaching the door and opening it, she discovered it was a utility closet.

She signaled to Riley and Titus, and they cautiously opened a door on the opposite side of the hall and found it was a currently dark and unoccupied room. They disappeared inside and quietly closed the door.

Elyse wanted them to be split up in case someone came and entered either room. This way, not all the eggs would be in one basket and thus be unavailable for total annihilation. If one of them was stumbled upon, then the other would be there to render weapons support, as well as have the element of surprise.

The voices were louder now. Seconds later, the sound of boots tromped towards the trio’s hideout locations.

Elyse, mostly hidden in the far corner between two metal racks, raised her firearm.

The boots came closer and closer until they passed in front of the door...and continued down the hall. Once the sound faded, Elyse carefully opened the door just a little and peeked through the crack. She saw the last pair of enemy soldiers disappearing down a hall to the right.

The door across the hall slowly opened and Titus poked his head out.

Elyse signaled him and the three continued in the direction the enemy troop had gone. They’d been moving at a brisk walk until that point, and now Elyse picked up into an easy jog. They needed to get moving, find the power generators, and then meet up with the other two teams. At the rate they’d been going, their teammates would be waiting for them until the end of the year.

They only had to backtrack and duck into random hallways two more times to avoid detection. After that, they reached the electrical room. Elyse cautiously peeked inside and saw a handful of personnel tending pretend duties, all of whom had their backs to the door.

I find their lack of security consciousness disturbing, thought Elyse.

The room was a small one and it was plain that the generators weren’t housed there.

Rats, she thought, now we have to move double-time to reach the mechanical room.

That was when two things happened. First, as she leaned out of the room, she saw movement out the corner of her eye. It was an enemy soldier. For a split-second, Elyse was afraid he’d have time to call out a warning.

The second event happened was Riley putting two rounds in his facemask.

He crumpled to the floor and they sprinted to him. After looking around themselves a moment, they decided to shove him in the corner of a storage room. Elyse snagged his headset, clipped her helmet to the back of the small pack she was carrying and put on the headset.

Due to the possibility that a soldier could become separated from his helmet, which had a built-in communication system, backup comm units were provided. They came in the form of small, clear, wireless earpieces. Elyse wondered why they didn't just settle with them to begin with and forgo helmet comms altogether.

With the earpiece in one ear and headset on the other, she could hear updates from her commander, as well as enemy conversations. The latter was particularly amusing.

As they backtracked to the stairs, Elyse was caught up on everyone's plans once this training session was over. She nearly laughed when one enemy shared his plot to execute the demise of his wife's cat while she was off-planet for a month.

As she and her team reached the staircase, someone listening in on the conversation snapped, *“Everyone focus. We're under attack, remember? Has anyone heard from Security Team Two?”*

A round of negatives answered, and Elyse felt her stomach tighten.

“Or how about Team Four?”

More “negatives” replied, before someone suggested, *“They could be down on the lower levels. Reception's dodgy once you hit level three.”*

“If no one hears from any of them in thirty, put some additional security details on it.”

“10-4, boss.”

Team Four, thought Elyse. She wondered if their disappearance had anything to do with the chance the other strikes teams were inside, too.

As they descended another dark and eerie staircase, Elyse began to hear a lot of static on the enemy headset. *They weren't joking about the reception*, she thought as she pocketed the device and donned her helmet again.

According to the wall map they'd looked at upon entering the bunker, the mechanical room was below the electrical one.

One of the differences they immediately noticed was that it was darker on this level. A few of the lights in the ceiling flickered occasionally, and the moment they stepped out of the staircase, the entire structure and ridge itself, shuddered.

Elyse shot a look at her teammates. Why did the place tremor? Did someone in the air force armory miss the memo that they *weren't* using live rounds for these war games?

With no further time to think about it, they jogged down the hallway. An additional item they noticed shortly into their trek was that there were a lot more enemy soldiers here.

And they appeared to be mobilizing.

From one of their hiding places, Elyse, Titus, and Riley watched as two rows of a soldiers filed swiftly down the hall. They then proceeded to halt where the hall intersected another corridor, twenty feet to the left.

“There’s heavy enemy presence at the north end of the ridge,” said the commander. “You and three other troops are to head there pronto and push them back. We’re holding this ridge and these headquarters.”

“Any word on enemy infiltration into the base, sir?” asked one of the soldiers.

“Nothing yet,” replied the commander. “But it’s only a matter of time. Reinforcements are being sent to all other entry points and hangers. Our enemy will be hard-pressed to step foot in here. Besides, we have sentinels patrolling the hallways.”

One more order was given, and the units moved out promptly. As soon as they were out of sight, Elyse, Titus, and Riley continued toward their destination. All three wondered what the commander had meant by “sentinels patrolling the hallways.” This made them highly suspicious, and they guessed it was likely these sentinels were omicrons innately skilled in stealth.

Halfway to their target location, the ridge shuddered again, and dust and bits of grit floated down from the ceiling.

“That’s a bit unsettling,” whispered Titus.

Elyse nodded. “All the more incentive to complete our job and get out of this tomb.”

That was the first moment in which doubt entered their minds. They wondered if upper management, those overseeing these games, had let some things slide. Or they’d accidentally overlooked some issues, like ensuring everyone and everything was equipped with non-lethal rounds.

It wasn’t comforting either way, and the team added a little more speed to their steps. They only paused one more time to check the hall that led to the mechanical room.

Upon seeing it clear, they made for it. That was when the hair on the back of their necks stood on end.

They reacted simultaneously, snapping their weapons up as they each faced a different direction. Precious seconds ticked past. Nothing happened.

Riley and Titus shared a glance before Riley looked at Elyse. When their leader gave the subtlest upward nod, they knew she was aware that they were being followed.

Sentinel, thought Elyse. She had a mental image of her dark-eyed and haired, and rather sneaky, friend Izhar stalking through the near-dark. He wasn’t an omicron, but he might as well have been because his stealth was beyond uncanny.

Elyse spun and ran to the mechanical room. Her teammates followed close behind, keeping their hall behind them covered.

Elyse slid to a stop at the door, quietly opened it, took out the two personnel inside, and then darted inside the room. Riley followed, and Titus, their personal omicron scout, kept watch at the door.

Against the back wall and housed inside a bullet-resistant glass room stood the three giant power generators. A biometric hand scanner kept the unit secure, so Elyse dragged one of the employees over and slapped his hand on top of it.

That was all that was needed. The lock disengaged and Elyse and Riley helped themselves into the unit. Riley dug out the necessary equipment from Elyse’s pack and set the remotely detonated charges on the wall just behind the generators. For obvious reasons, it was best to keep them out of sight in case enemy soldiers did a sweep of the room. Fortunately, the charges were small, the size of a matchbox.

The task was completed in seconds, and then Riley and Elyse exited the unit and closed the door behind them. They then pulled the person they’d used for the hand scanner back to his little workstation. They didn’t want to leave any hint that the generators had been tampered with.

All the trio had to do now was make for the control center, one level down. They’d have to wait until after the rendezvous with the other strike teams to detonate, in the event some downloading of enemy files had to be completed. That wouldn’t be possible once the charges were set off.

Elyse had inquired about auxiliary or backup power that might need to be dealt with, in addition to the main power supply. But those who’d designed the simulation hadn’t desired to go into *that* much detail. So, the instructions were simply: find the main power supply and set charges.

After all, this was only a simulation. Or it was supposed to be. When the ridge heaved again, her doubts deepened.

Elyse looked at Riley, who nodded that she was ready to go. She then glanced at Titus, still at the door, and froze. On his face was the infamous intense stare he had when he was locked onto prey.

“I just saw him,” he said, whispering so quietly he was barely heard.

Elyse shifted an inch so she could see more of the hallway. It was darker than it had been when they’d first entered the mechanical room.

“He killed the lights,” breathed Titus, loosening the knife at his thigh before raising his sidearm.

“If we move at speed, can you take him?” asked Elyse, checking the knife at her left thigh and the other strapped to her vest.

“Yes,” answered Titus in almost a growl.

He and Izhar had had a friendly competition about everything since they were kids. They were always trying to outdo each other, whether it was school projects early on, or out-hunting, “stealthing,” and dueling one another in later days. Whenever there

arose an opportunity that could be turned into a playful competition, those two jumped at the chance.

Still, while it was honest and fun, that didn’t mean that they didn’t take challenges with utmost seriousness.

“We’ll follow the exterior wall around to the stairs,” said Elyse, “fewer ambush points that way. We’ll run straight to the end of the hall, and then take that right to the staircase.”

“Got it,” nodded Riley, her expression just as intense as Titus’s.

Elyse turned off the lights in the mechanical room and then reminded her teammates, “and let’s all mind our heads.”

If it was Izhar out there, he’d shown on the gun range that he always preferred headshots over body hits. Why not? Helmets couldn’t protect against high powered rounds.

Just prior to giving the signal to Titus to open the door, Elyse again had the image of Izhar lying in wait in the dark.

Steeling her nerves, Elyse signaled Titus. He opened the door wider, and Elyse and Riley bolted through it and down the hall. He followed, caught up and kept himself to their right, so they were between him and the outside wall.

They sprinted by two doorways. As they approached the first hallway, their muscles tightened in anticipation of an attack.

They sprinted by the corridor and nothing happened. That made them even more suspicious.

Come on, Izhar, thought Elyse, where are you hiding?

That thought had just run through her head when the team reacted simultaneously. Riley and Titus stopped and spun to face opposite directions as bursts of weapon’s fire lit the dark hall.

Elyse threw herself against the wall as rounds nearly smacked into her helmet. Ahead twenty feet, she could just see the outline of a person standing at the corner of the next hall.

“Notus,” she snarled as she returned fire. Her rounds zipped by his head while she dodged right to avoid the next couple shots from Izhar. She was in an awkward position, and she lurched to a stop when he tried to lead her with a burst of shots from his weapon. Pivoting sideways, she made herself a smaller target and, wielding her sidearm with her right hand only, answered his shots.

Meanwhile, Titus and Riley quickly discovered that the weapons fire behind them was from a little drone, like the one Brogan had used to take out Brewer.

Riley had the better angle on the target and disposed of it the same time Elyse unleashed another burst of rounds at the real threat.

Her shots were well-aimed, especially for being in the dark and without having the aid of any night-sights on her firearm. They splattered against the corner Izhar was positioned behind. The moment he ducked back, Titus sprinted towards his position.

It could be argued that it was a bad idea to fight the same opponent frequently. They learned your style and favorite moves. But on that same thread, that could be part of the enjoyment: trying to better outsmart your rival and using new moves just to see how they reacted to them.

This was perhaps why Izhar didn’t sound the alarm to his fellow enemy soldiers. He was capable of handling himself, and he wanted the pleasure and bragging rights of getting one-up on his rival by defeating him all by his lonesome. He’d done it before, and he’d do it again right here.

Titus crouched as he slid around the corner with his weapon at the ready.

Izhar had anticipated something of that nature and as Titus slid into view, he was already flipping over him and into the hall that Elyse and Riley were in. They’d taken up positions in two different doorways on both sides of the corridor. When Izhar came fully into view, and with Titus safely out of the line of fire, they squeezed off a few rounds at their enemy sentinel.

They brushed by him, but none made a direct hit. By then, Titus was to him with his knife at the ready, since firearms weren’t typically the best weapon for close combat.

The fight was short-lived but fast-paced. They punched and counterpunched, kicked and stabbed at blinding speed. It was an agonizing thirty seconds before they finally began landing strikes. During that time, Riley waited for an opportunity to shoot at Izhar, while Elyse kept watch behind them.

Izhar kicked Titus in the knee. But as his leg gave, Titus used the momentum and torque to sock Izhar in the helmet as he went down. Once on a knee, he twisted sideways and bent forward to avoid his rival’s counter swing. He missed the punch, but not the kick to the chest.

The force of it sent Titus sliding back over the concrete floor. He was still coming to a stop when Izhar flipped and twisted over him, so Titus would be between him, Elyse, and Riley.

Izhar’s boots were just touching the floor when Titus pivoted at the hips, rolled back and slammed his boots into his rival’s stomach. Izhar went airborne again, though not on purpose this time.

He tumbled to the end of the hall while Titus leaped to his feet and sprinted for him. Izhar was picking himself up when a knife came his way. He had just enough time to dodge it, and by then Titus was to him and not interested in letting this duel go on any longer.

Both were wielding knives as the second, fast-paced round of close-quarter fighting commenced. Neither was able to land a solid stab or punch, and either deflected a strike or simply dodged it all together.

At last the end came. To set himself up for a solid strike, Izhar willingly took a body shot to the side, which left him able to throttle Titus squarely in his helmet visor. This he followed up instantly with a knife to the chest.

Or tried to. Although Titus was a bit fuzzy from the helmet punch, he knew what would come next and had his wits about him to latch onto the wrist of the knife-hand. The angle Izhar had been attempting to stab him at left Titus able to contort his rival’s arm to his bidding.

This forced Izhar around, so he was facing the wall. But before Titus could lock his arm in place, he ran up the wall and flipped over Titus...who pivoted and kicked Izhar smartly in the diaphragm.

Armor or no, the force was incredible. It sent Izhar flying back. Because they had been angled somewhat, he went crashing through the wall of the room to Titus’s left.

That’s so not fair, thought Elyse as she and Riley broke cover and ran to Titus’s side.

That move would’ve incapacitated at the least and killed at the most –if Titus had put everything he’d had into the move. But there was no need to get too carried away.

A grunt came from the debris in the room and a second later Izhar’s head and shoulders appeared. He signaled he was out, obviously. Yet even as he stumbled out of the immediate pile of rubble, he vowed, “I’ll get you next time. Don’t be too smug.”

Elyse threw the “peace” sign at her hunting companion as she jogged by with Riley at her heels.

“Catch you later, brother,” chuckled Titus before following the others.

They dropped down one more level and followed signs for the control center. As they did, they became very much aware that they were nearing the heart of the beast’s lair. It was even darker down here than on level three.

Oddly enough, they didn’t see any enemy soldiers or personnel as they wove their way towards the control center. Upon reaching it, they discovered the reason. From around the corner they paused behind, they could see into the glass-walled control center. It was a large room with enormous screens on the front wall and lines of consoles on two levels. And the place had both soldiers and personnel inside, close to thirty.

Well, this is grand, thought Elyse as she scanned the room again and attempted to figure out what they were going to do.

Movement at the opposite end of the hall caught her attention. Someone else was peeking around the corner. Whoever it was locked onto Elyse and they stared at one another for a breath. When neither started shooting or sounded the alarm, they guessed they were likely on the same side.

Elyse signaled to the unknown person, who signaled back and confirmed they were a friendly.

She, Riley, and Titus then backtracked to another hallway that wasn't in direct line of sight of the control center. They rendezvoused with the two other strike teams there and then stepped into an empty room.

Elyse asked what frequency they were on for the comms, and then she and everyone else synced up.

“Glad to see we weren't too late to the party,” whispered Elyse.

A chuckle from the larger and beefier of the two commanders rumbled in his chest. Even though he was a young man, Elyse wondered how a human could already be so large.

“No worries,” he answered. “Czar here showed up the same time you did. I'm Borz.”

He extended a very large hand and Elyse slapped her gloved hand into his. “A.C.”

He chuckled again, and Czar gave a nod. “Oh, so you're Alpha Commander.”

“You're actually as tall as I'd thought you'd be,” grinned Borz.

Elyse snorted and then asked, “So, what's the status of things? My team and I have done our part, save getting out of here.”

“Copy and dido on that,” answered Borz. “After seeing how many bodies we have to deal with in the control center, I can understand why we were all ordered to rendezvous...”

He looked at Czar. “Our friend could use a little completing his assignment without getting his backside shot off.”

“What's your op?” asked Elyse to Czar.

“Basically, download all of the enemy's digital activity at this base.”

“That's...a lot of bytes.”

“I can send a fair amount of it straight to base quickly, but large data logs and schematics will have to be downloaded.”

They ran through the most obvious options, such as just storming the control center weapons blazing and hope none of the enemy managed to sound the alarm. They could split up and have a small group draw out the soldiers and lead them on a chase around headquarters while the rest guarded Czar.

If they had building schematics, they could find the ventilation shaft that led directly into the control room and fake a dangerous gas leak or something rather to empty the place. But they didn't have the base layout and didn't have time to search for shafts.

That was when a member on Borz's unit suggested, “Why not just jack a radio and call in suspicious activity somewhere else on this level? That might draw out some of the soldiers in the center since most others have already been deployed elsewhere. That should leave fewer for all of us to handle.”

The three unit commanders instantly liked that option and agreed to it. Before anyone asked where they might quickly get their hands on an enemy comm unit, Elyse removed the one she'd stashed in her pocket.

“Perfect,” grinned Borz.

Since he had the roughest voice, he got to man the comm. After playing with the frequency for a minute, they found the right one, which was designated for short-range communication due to the poor reception at lower levels.

They knew it was correct because, first, they heard a voice instead of static. Second, the voice was that of an enemy commander whining to an associate that the unit that was supposed to deploy to the hanger went to the wrong location. Not only did they get mowed down, but now the attackers had breached the hangers themselves.

Cheers to us, thought Elyse.

That was when Borz made his play. “So, who's pulling security on Level Four?”

“Patrol Squads Ten and Twelve. Why?”

“I just saw some shady people 'round the southwest area. Didn't think they were flat out bad guys, but I don't know, man.”

“Why don't you check it out?”

“We’re about to reinforce the hangers, that’s why.”

“You’re in Harrison’s squad? Why isn’t he calling in?”

“He’s biting someone’s head off for questionin’ orders.”

“Figures. Okay, copy on the southwest quadrant. We’ll take care of it.”

Borz turned down the volume on the comm unit, handed it back to Elyse, shared a look with everyone and shrugged. A few of them chuckled.

All they had to do was wait a few minutes and then return to the control center to reassess the situation. When they reached it, they saw only six soldiers to deal with and ten technicians.

Four of the six soldiers were standing along the rear glass wall and facing outwards into the hall. As anticipated, they were on alert. The last two were standing at the base of the short flight of steps that led to the lower workstations.

Now was the time to move and work quickly, before the soldiers sent to check the southwest corner returned.

After designating which soldiers and personnel they’d each take, all thirteen of the fighters from the three squads executed swiftly. It turned out that the glass wasn’t round resistant and even the nonlethal rounds of their weapons punched through the windows and found their targets.

The ambush was over in seconds. The soldiers were the first ones removed, and most of the techs fell under fire. Those still alive for the second sweep could only stand in genuine wide-eyed surprise before they, too, were eliminated from the game.

As Czar set to work with his unit around him, Elyse and her team quickly double-checked the pretend corpses to ensure no one had survived to set off the alarm.

Borz and his unit concealed themselves and kept watch on the two entry points and the hall.

The next two minutes were agonizing. Borz was about to ask what was taking so long when Czar said, “Just a few more seconds and I’m done.”

Sure enough, a few seconds later the task was complete. A beep sounded in their comms, letting them know someone was patching in.

"This is base. We just received the data you sent, Czar. Good work, all of you. Now it's time to run like your lives depend on it. You could make a break for the hangers since it's closest and our forces are making steady headway. But there's still a heavy enemy concentration all over that base. They have the other exits covered but that'll change once the devices are detonated. I assume the charges are ready, Strike Two?"

"Affirmative, base," replied Elyse.

"Once you detonate, the enemy will be flying totally blind, and our forces will slip in en masse from every direction to mop them up. So, at your leisure, Strike Two, send the enemy into darkness."

"Yes, sir."

"See you back at base. Out."

"I'm all for the hanger exit," said Elyse, checking her weapon, "and ambushing the enemy from behind."

The vote was unanimous, and everyone made for the exits. They'd just stepped into the hall when the ridge began to shake violently, nearly knocking them off their feet. A loud popping noise filled the hall and they glanced around before falling dust drew their attention to the ceiling.

Everyone split and ran towards the opposite ends of the hall. Massive rocks and chunks of concrete rained down after them, chasing the teams down the corridor.

Elyse and company reached their end of the hall as the ridge gave one last mighty heave. Titus, right behind her, grabbed the commander by the back of the armor and threw her around the corner before jumping after her.

There came one more loud crash and they felt the floor shudder as heavy debris smashed into the floor.

Silence.

Elyse was generally one who didn't swear, but as she jumped to her feet, she let loose a few choice words and then continued with, "What the heck!? Is everyone alright? Edessa? Dumah?"

“Yeah,” coughed Riley, aka Edessa, as she got to her feet and helped Titus, aka Dumah, to his.

She checked in with the other two strike teams, who were significantly less composed than her. Everyone was fine, but the cave-in was extensive.

“Just head out,” said Elyse, coughing against the heavy dust. “If we find a clear hall, we’ll come up behind you. Otherwise, we’ll find our own way.”

“10-4,” said Borj. *“We’ll find you after this is over. Then we can find out who was responsible for that stunt and...have a stern discussion with them.”*

“Copy that,” answered Elyse as a fiery light gleamed in her eyes. “Wouldn’t want to miss out on a chance to...voice my concerns. See you gents top side.”

She and the others then returned their comms to their original frequency.

“Alright,” said Elyse, “let’s get the heck out of here.”

“Aye, AC,” answered Riley and Titus firmly.

They quickly backtracked to the stairs and wound their way up to Level Three. They were about to continue straight to Level Two, but hurrying boots forced them to duck into a room.

Elyse wanted to be in proximity to an exit before she detonated the charges. She knew their forces would swarm the place immediately after. However, because she and her team were inside, they’d probably be seeing a lot of unfriendly faces before friendly ones. The enemy would go berserk the moment they lost power.

It turned out her hand would be forced. Through the door of the room they were hiding in, they heard the soldiers reach the bottom of the stairs and turn right. When they reached the corner, they stopped. There were muffled voices before all three heard the question, “What’s with the hole in the wall? Is that a sentinel down?”

Elyse rolled her eyes. She took the detonator from a pocket, flipped open the protective cover, and pressed the red button.

The sound of a muted explosion came from somewhere in the building. Seconds later, the lights went out.

Elyse and her teammates, with night vision in their visors turned on, darted out of the room and sprinted up the stairs. Up to the second level they raced, and it was there they finally met some enemy troops. There was a squad in the hall in front of them and they were in complete disarray.

Elyse and crew would've continued up the stairs, if not for another troop coming down it.

As for enemy unit in the hall, most had had the sense to engage the night vision option in their visors. The throng was still clamoring, but one soldier blinked a few times when he saw Elyse, Riley, and Titus. He took a breath to say something, but paint splattered across his visor and he was forced to fall to the floor.

It took a few seconds for the others to realize what had happened, and by then Elyse and her companions were gone. Everyone was becoming excited again when the second troop appeared at the bottom of the stairs and was nearly shot by their own forces.

With an assignment now at hand, the commanders shouted and sent everyone searching through the second floor.

The trio in the meantime was sprinting through random halls while trying to figure out how to double back to the stairs. No idea had come to mind when they slid to a stop at a hallway intersection. There were running boot steps echoing from every direction.

Elyse turned to a door on the right and entered the room. Thankfully, no one was there. But a random staircase was.

That's tricky, she thought as she led the way up it.

At the top, she cautiously poked her head through the floor and scanned the black room. Two people stood beside their desks and spoke in muttered voices about what to do.

Elyse shot them both in the chest and then stepped up and into the room. The bodies were removed from plain sight of the stairs.

They then continued up to the top floor. The bursts of weapons fire outside the room attested to the excitement on that level. There was also a lot of radio chatter.

The last of the static cleared as the trio heard Arune saying, “...and keep an eye out for AC and company!”

It was a breath of fresh air to hear a friendly voice. The entire op hadn’t taken forty-five minutes but being down in the dark lair of the enemy had made it seem like days.

“Strike Team Two to Delta Boss, can you hear me?” asked Elyse quietly, and as the ridge shuddered again.

“AC! Thank the Almighty! The other two strike teams made it out and there’s been talk about a cave-in...”

“We’ll explain later. My team and I are in the center of the top level but are flying blind. What’s the latest on our troop movements?”

“We’ve nearly achieved control over the skies, but there are a few dogfights still on-going. We now hold the hangers below and are sweeping upwards. But the real task is breaching the top entrances. The rest of Delta is pushing for the entrance you used. Some teams have already gained entry, so it’s mixed company. It’s just a mess right now.”

“Copy. As of thirty seconds ago, there was a large concentration of enemy on the second level,” answered Elyse, swapping out her sidearm for her rifle.

“Copy. I’ll relay that. Oh! Keep an eye out for two enemy generals. We had one sighting near the hangers, but that’s it. They haven’t come out, obviously, and we haven’t found any signs of hidden tunnels.”

“10-4, boss. See you soon. AC out.”

She looked at her two teammates. “You copy about the generals?”

“Aye,” nodded Riley.

“How can we be certain if we see them?” asked Titus.

The dark and slightly unnerving expression returned to Elyse’s gaze. “Because they’ll be the ones running away.”

After taking a breath, she nodded to Riley, who grabbed the door handle.

“It’s mixed company out there,” reminded Elyse, “so we need to make sure we id each target before firing. Let’s try to push for the door we entered, see if we can’t help out our fellow teammates.”

“Copy that.”

“Right,” said Elyse, raising her rifle, “let’s go.”

Riley swung the door open, and Elyse checked the hallway. She watched the tail end of an enemy squad pass by the end of the hall, followed shortly by a friendly unit.

She was about to hang a right, but when her eyes fell on the door straight across the hall, an idea formed.

Duh, she thought, why didn’t I think of that sooner. Don’t work harder, or more dangerously...work smarter.

Granted, there could easily be fighting in some of the rooms. But passing through them would be a faster and shorter route than trying to fight through the hallways themselves. She knew they’d be met mostly with success by this tactic, because most of the rooms they’d gone through had two points of entry—or exit, however one looked at it.

Elyse glanced back at her teammates and signaled at the door.

By their expressions, they seemed to catch onto her idea.

After checking the hall once more, Elyse crossed to the door and kicked it open. The room was clear, and she charged to the far door. The next corridor was momentarily clear, and she crossed. She was halfway to the next door when an enemy soldier passing the end of the hall to the right spotted her.

The shots passed behind her as she entered the room and then pivoted to one side of the doorway to return fire. Riley took advantage of the cover and darted across the hall.

Another squad appeared at the opposite end of the hall, identified Elyse and company as friendlies, and then proceeded to send a barrage of fire at the enemy squad.

In no mood to become deadlocked, Titus caught Elyse’s attention. When he pointed to the ceiling tiles, she knew what he was thinking. She nodded and Titus disappeared from sight.

Both sides exchanged bursts of fire for another ten seconds. On the eleventh second, there came a mighty crash as several large ceiling tiles smashed to the floor right in front of the enemy squad. They were briefly taken aback and couldn't tell what was going on in all the dust.

It was moot seconds later. A grenade on their right flank detonated and covered half of the squad in vapor. Those to the left were just looking at their now deceased companions when a grenade dropped behind them. It was game over seconds later.

Titus then reappeared in the room with Elyse and Riley. She signaled to the friendly squad and then they continued charging through random rooms.

The next two hallways and rooms were clear, though the trio caught glimpses of both enemy and friendly squads. As they neared another room, they heard heavy weapons fire. Elyse's memory reminded her then that they were getting close to the entryway.

That explained the heavy fighting.

They quietly entered the next room and tip-toed to the far door, which was standing halfway open. With a careful glance, Riley confirmed they were enemy soldiers outside. She held up four fingers to indicate the number that she could see.

Elyse crouched behind the door while Titus took a position behind a desk. Riley was beside him and ready to leap to the opposite side of the door once Elyse opened it.

Without further delay, Elyse swung the door wide, locked onto the nearest target and fired. Titus fell the two in his direct line of sight. Riley picked off three more that were to the left of the doorway.

Once all the threats were neutralized, Elyse carefully poked her head into the hallway. The enemy squad hadn't been fighting anyone. It seemed that they'd simply been waiting for someone to stop by and say “hello.” Elyse was glad that her team could oblige.

She was about to continue into the next room but paused to listen. It suddenly seemed very quiet, and not in a way that suggested the good guys had suddenly and overwhelmingly won.

No. Her gut told her that there were some bad guys nearby.

She signaled to Riley and Titus to go to the end of the hall and then hang a right. She wanted to know where the enemy was and how many they were.

While they moved out, Elyse went in the opposite direction and stalked to the opposite end of the hall. Once there, she turned left.

Her earlier hunch had been correct. They were very close to an entry point. Ahead, the hall could only turn left. From there it would enter a narrower corridor with one entry point on the right and the other farther down on the left.

But Elyse never reached the next turn. She was nearing it when she saw a glimpse of an enemy’s back.

She instantly reversed. It wasn’t worth ruining the element of surprise by being seen or heard if she went for a closer look.

Riley and Titus were also returning, and they met at the door they were originally going to enter. Only once they entered the room and shut the door did any of them speak.

“Do you know how many there are?” asked Elyse, barely loud enough to be heard.

Riley shook her head. “Could be six. Could be twenty. Depends on how tightly they’re packed at the corners of the corridor entrance.”

“AC to Delta Boss. What’s your twenty?” asked Elyse.

“Just coming up on the door. We just finished removing all exterior enemy resistance.”

“Hold your position! There’s a squad waiting to ambush you. We can come at them from behind, but we’ll need three minutes to get into position.”

“You’ve got two.”

Elyse rolled her eyes. *So dramatic.*

If they’d been permitted to use real explosives, they could just attach some shape charges to the rear walls of the three center rooms. Then as Arune and company entered headquarters, the enemy squad could be rained upon with various kinds of debris from behind.

But they didn't have shape charges, and any nonlethal alternatives wouldn't be powerful enough. Fortunately, the ceiling tiles ran all the way to the corridor entrance. So, Elyse and crew could still sneak above their enemies.

When she pointed to the ceiling, Titus and Riley knew precisely what she was thinking.

Hastily, they all crawled above the ceiling and set out the various items they wanted, chiefly frag and smoke grenades. Elyse had an extra pair of shape charges and set them on two tiles near the center of where the enemy squad should be.

Then she looked at Riley, on her left, and Titus, her right. They'd already quietly slid the tiles open just wide enough to drop grenades through.

Elyse gave them the signal and then the fun began.

The smoke grenades went down first, landing in the middle of the ambush squad, situated to the left and right of the corridor. As smoke filled the air, and they tried to figure out where the grenades could've come from, the frag grenades were dropped unseen onto the floor.

Someone gave a shout of warning, but by then it was too late. The grenades went off, splattering crimson paint everywhere and sending red powder into the air.

This was also the exact moment that Arune and company entered. They swept into the corridor weapons hot...just as two explosions shattered the tiles above the enemy squad and rained debris on top of them.

Meanwhile, Elyse, Riley, and Titus were back in the opposite hallway as weapon's fire popped in the corridor. They were taking up their rifles again and sharing a little smile when Elyse watched Titus's expression change to one of near horror.

“Down!” he screamed, grabbing Elyse and Riley and throwing them to the floor.

They'd never know if it was a grenade or rocket, but whatever it was wasn't a nonlethal weapon. It whistled over their heads and struck the wall behind them. It resulted in a deafening explosion, wave of searing heat, and a shower of rocks.

Elyse’s ears were ringing as she forced herself up to her knees. Glancing down the hall, she saw a tall man in military garb. His hair was grey, eyes blue and cold. In his hands he held a beefy looking rifle.

One of the general’s, she thought as she blinked away some stars twinkling in her vision.

Beside him was another man who also appeared to be of important status by the way he carried himself. He was the one who proceeded to lob a grenade.

Alarms sounded in Elyse’s head as she watched the gray object arch through the air towards them. Wild, defensive fury to save her teammates surged through her.

“Move!” she shouted to Riley and Titus as the grenade bounced along the floor and rolled towards them.

Riley was already scrambling to her feet as Elyse, backing up, grabbed her arm. She then snatched the back of Titus’s armor and pulled him across the floor. She threw them around the corner and lunged after them just as the grenade exploded.

Shrapnel flew everywhere, driven by a powerful burst of hot air.

It had barely gone off when Elyse staggered to her feet. “Is everyone okay?”

Her teammates were covered with dirt and dust, and she didn’t see any visible damage. To them, at any rate. Their body armor was riddled with tiny rocks and random metal granules. The right side of Riley’s helmet now bore a large scar. Something of decent size with considerable heat had glanced off it. Riley herself couldn’t recall being hit by anything, but there was the evidence. Plus, her head was aching a little.

Upon closer inspection, Titus had a sizeable gash on his arm, compliments of the searing debris from the rocket. It had gone clean through the armor.

“Your helmet!” exclaimed Riley when she finally took a good look at Elyse.

She’d been wondering why she couldn’t see clearly, but then realized it was because over half of the visor was missing. That was when she also became aware of the prickly pain on the left side of her face. It felt like a million bee stings. She’d see later the gash along her cheekbone and the tiny bits of shrapnel around it.

But now there was blood in the water. Elyse’s teammates had been wounded by the enemy, who’d blatantly broken the rules and genuinely put them in harm’s way.

Unjust and underhanded, two of the many things that set Elyse’s blood afire.

She tore off her helmet because she couldn’t see with it on and peeked down the hall. There was no sign of either general. Elyse wrinkled her nose in disgust. *Cowards!*

That was about the time an explicative came from Arune regarding the smoldering hole in the side of the ridge. The rocket had blown a hole clean through it.

“There were two generals,” replied Elyse as she attached her helmet to her pack. “They had live rounds...one had some kind of grenade or rocket launcher. The other tossed a live grenade.”

She slung her pack back on and continued down the hallway she’d thrown her companions into, to prevent them from being shredded. “We’re fine and mobile. Will catch up with you later.”

Elyse glanced over her shoulder at Riley and Titus. “You can rendezvous with the boss if you want.”

Riley practically glared at her. “We’re on the hunt with you.”

“Let’s show ‘em what three rangers from Kadesh can do,” added Titus with a gleam in his eye.

Elyse nodded and picked up into a run.

Because their headquarters was now quickly being overrun, Elyse guessed that the generals wouldn’t head back to the lower levels. Instead, they’d look for another way out. The fact that the entire ridge was surrounded was beside the point.

Therefore, the trio sprinted to the opposite end of the ridge. They slowed only to ask friendly units if they’d seen anyone run by recently. In the span of sixty seconds, they crossed five squads, none of which had seen anyone suspicious.

They caught a break another twenty seconds later, when they drew near to the end of the ridge. Another unit was at the end of a hall to the right and they confirmed seeing someone sprint by not a minute ago.

Elyse thanked them and took off again. For some reason unknown to her, her ribs were starting to hurt. Her head was pounding, too, and she wondered what Riley’s was doing.

They skittered into the entrance corridor with weapons ready just as an exterior door swung shut. While their weapons were non-lethal, a paintball to the face, or anywhere else without armor still hurt. It would also make the unfortunate opponent unable to see.

The three redoubled their pace and slid to a stop when they reached the door. Riley and Titus went through the one that had just been used, and Elyse exited through the door opposite it.

A blustery wind greeted her outside, as well as two pairs of fighters battling it out over the lake.

Noting the abundance of friendly forces everywhere, she jogged to the top of the ridge. She and her teammates reached the top at the same time and immediately spotted their targets.

The first was only twenty feet from them and seemed to be half-heartedly lying in wait. He held a firearm in his hand, and considering their past meetings, the three assumed it had live rounds.

Titus never gave the general a chance to fire. He sent two paintball rounds smack into his face. The man, oddly not expecting the headshots, snarled in pain. He nearly dropped the weapon as he backed up a few steps.

He could, however, still see enough to notice Titus sprint towards him. To remove the risk of having his firearm taken, the general threw it off the ridge.

Now convinced that her teammates wouldn’t literally be killed, Elyse dropped her pack and rifle and then sprinted after the other general. She had her sidearm and two real knives that she always kept on herself.

With youth and rage on her side, Elyse quickly made up ground. The general’s progress was also eventually hampered by shots fired from farther down the ridge. It

wasn't particularly broad stretch of terrain, and it narrowed at the ends. The shots forced him to duck and move closer to the center.

Shouts that a general had been spotted came below Elyse's line of sight. She couldn't easily see them, but they could see her...and they watched as she tackled him to the ground. From there on out, they could only catch glimpses of the fight as they progressed along the ridge.

“Where's your armor, general?” growled Elyse as she throttled him in the face. “Didn't think you'd need it since you had a live RPG?”

With a powerful twist, he threw her off. But before he could grab her again, Elyse kicked him in the chest and shoulder and then jumped to her feet.

“You don't...understand,” coughed the general, pushing himself to his feet.

Elyse wasn't fooled by his feigned weakness. Instead, she drilled him with a harsh glare and watched his every move like a hawk.

“You're right,” she answered sharply. “I don't.”

Stepping forward, she faked a jab to see if she could entice him to truly initiate the duel.

The general had the reflexes of a cat and counter-struck with the speed of a serpent.

Elyse dodged it and then turned sideways to avoid the kick. At his next jab, she swatted his arm aside with her left hand while simultaneously stepping forward, pivoting and smacking her elbow into his face. She quickly reset and elbowed him right in the nose.

She deflected the punch to her ribs and saw the swing for her face while it was on approach. Jerking her head, she missed the brunt of the punch. Going with the momentum, she flipped back and away from the general. He stayed with her, and even as she was landing, she deflected his next jab.

At this time, external reserve forces began cresting the ridge. If it hadn't been for news of live ammunition used in the simulation that had nearly killed at least three

candidates, and the wariness and suspicion that resulted, the onlookers would've likely been enjoying the duel. A candidate versus an enemy general.

But that was not the case. Something ominous and dark had happened that day and everyone was unsettled. They also saw the blood on the face of their fellow soldier and recognized that the venomous glint in her eyes went far beyond merely being caught up in a game.

Being loyal soldier types, the onlookers wanted to help their teammate. But they were wary of the general and they didn't want to wind up making the situation worse by trying to render aid.

Elyse and the general were moving so quickly that their movements were a blur. The general would push Elyse back a few feet before she stopped his progress and drove him backwards in return.

They both landed a few strikes and seemed to balance out one another. Elyse would land a solid strike to his ribs, and he'd instantly counter with a punch to the side of the head. He'd kick her in the leg, and she'd respond by getting close and personal and elbowing him in the throat.

Just as the general wrapped his arm around her neck, she latched onto it, pivoted forward at the hips, and threw him over her back. She maintained a grip on his wrist until he kicked her. Fortunately, it missed its mark and his boot only slammed into her shoulder and not her stomach. It broke her grasp and sent her back a few steps.

But Elyse had had enough, not in that she was tired, not in the slightest. She was ready for this stupid war game to be finished so they could get to the bottom of what had happened, and why she and her two companions had nearly been killed. She was ready for all of it to come out into the open.

“You going to just go ahead and explain why you nearly killed my unit and me?” she asked, expression full of fire. “I hear confession is good for you. Makes you feel better.”

The general, with blood running from his face, straightened and replied with genuine indignation, “You don't have the authority to question me!”

The wild light never left Elyse’s eyes as she noted how heavily he was breathing and the subtle ways he favored certain areas, like his ribs and right hip.

At his answer, a surge of something beyond rage supercharged her.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no,’ then,” she growled.

As hoped, the general advanced first, but only after drawing a knife that had been discreetly secured to his thigh.

That earned shouts from the onlookers and a fair number began to close in the rest of the distance.

She dodged his first swing, but the second brushed past the side of her face. Pivoting to go with his momentum, he kneed her in the hip. This caused her to bend forward somewhat, but thinking fast, she used it to her advantage...and head-butted the general in his already broken nose.

It only seemed to incense him further.

As if he has any room to be ticked off, thought Elyse.

She ducked the blade as it passed over her back, then smacked the knife arm away before he brought it back down. However, it left her open to receive a fist to the chest.

It was in that moment she discovered that this general was an omicron. Armor or not, the impact punched through her like a shockwave. It forced all the oxygen from her lungs and made her entire upper body ache after the initial wave passed through.

Yet to her, and everyone else’s, surprise she wasn’t hurtled through the air, which was typical of a forceful blow from an omicron. Instead, time seemed to slow for a moment as she took a few slow steps back.

She wasn’t sure what was happening or why, but she became aware that all the anger left her, and a cool, steady mind returned to her. Nothing like this had ever happened. At the time, she guessed it had to do with receiving such a powerful strike from an omicron. But she’d think about it later. Right now, there were more pressing matters.

Elyse refocused on the general with a steely resolve. He noticed a change in his young opponent but advanced anyway. He lunged forward with the knife, and she effortlessly smacked it aside before turning and arialing away from him.

She may have been filled with cool determination, but her lungs still needed to get their air back. Moving away from him for just an extra two seconds helped.

Already he was nearly to her and oblivious to just how close a squad of commanders were getting to him.

Elyse read the rest of his moves before he executed them. With ease, she deflected the first stab with the knife and then blocked the feral left. The next time he punched with the blade, she grabbed his arm, locked it, pivoted sideways and then broke it against her leg.

When he swung with his other fist, she grabbed it with such a forceful grip that it broke bones. Having gained control of that arm, she maneuvered just so and gave one more firm yank to dislocate the shoulder. Then as the general stumbled back a step, and with a sudden burst of power, she kicked him in the chest.

He flew through the air a good twenty feet and then tumbled to a stop at the feet of the commanders.

Elyse hadn't been aware of what she'd done while she was doing it. It had all come as naturally as breathing oxygen. Only after a few seconds, as the general's wrists were secured with no consideration to his broken bones, did Elyse finally become aware of her surroundings. And that her head was aching, along with her ribs, chest, and face.

The bystanders had moved closer to her, but not too close yet. When she glanced at them, they saw they were looking at her strangely. Some were wide-eyed, others surprised, while a few more with uncertainty and...a trace of fear.

“Dang, what was that, Klein?” asked one of the soldiers.

Elyse ignored him and turned towards the north end of the ridge, where she'd last left Riley and Titus. She wound up nearly running into a commander, who looked down at her grimly.

“There’s a transport en route,” he said. “You’ve got a ticket to board so we can get you checked out at the infirmary.”

Elyse tried to wave him off. “I’m fine, commander, sir.”

She stepped around him and had just started to weave through the soldiers when she saw them: Riley, Titus, and several commanders with the other general in custody. He appeared to be rather roughed up.

She’d learn the story of that battle later. It was epic...and rather short. The general didn’t stand a chance with Titus and Riley together. While he was still dealing with the paint in his face, Riley had distracted him so Titus could get around behind him. With two rivals on either side, the general had his task cut out for him. As his opponents circled him, he was forced to pivot back and forth to counterstrike and deflect their swings.

They themselves received a few more scrapes for their troubles, but they also landed a fair number of blows, which only infuriated the general.

At length, Riley became fed up at how slow he was fading, took up her rifle, ducked a punch, and then swing her rifle like a bat and bashed the general in the knee. Needless to say, that gave him pause, during which time Titus punched him in the back of the head. Riley then proceeded to melee him and put him on the edge of unconsciousness.

Then Titus, with his unfair omicron strength, grabbed hold of the general and threw him down the ridge...where he landed at the feet of a friendly squad.

Now, when Elyse saw them both alive and walking, she heaved a careful sigh of relief. When they spotted her, they offered weak smiles and made their way towards her.

“The doc is waiting for all three of you,” continued the commander, who’d again stepped beside Elyse. “We need to make sure there’s no internal bleeding...or that that punch didn’t bruise your heart. You’re fortunate it wasn’t pulverized.”

The seriousness in his voice caused her to glance up at him again. He was still grim, and now there was trace concern in his eyes. He looked her over and then shook his head. “That armor is just for paintball. It’s not combat grade.”

With the departure of the last of the adrenaline, and fury, Elyse felt very tired. With a yawn, she waved him off again as Riley and Titus reached them. “It’ll take more than a pulverized heart to stop us, commander.”

Chapter 15

Overseer of Shadow

Location: Kivak Nebula, on the outer rim of the Fiera System

While his sister was nearly being killed in a simulated war game, Elam and the other active-duty military personnel were on assignment. They were warily passing through the various systems with the likeness of a party host tiptoeing through their own house to see where their unwelcome guests were located.

For the recruits and candidates at training academies and facilities across the known planets, their entire world had become those very academies. As is common in intensive training on enclosed grounds with limited contact to the outside world, they’d momentarily forgotten about the very real threats cruising through their home systems.

But for everyone else, the reality was an atmosphere of rising tension and apprehension about where this dark menace would appear next. Based on the findings of the investigative team sent to the Merchant Planets, it was now a common suspicion that an unknown force had wiped out Alpharez and Markab. But aside from a few unnerving sightings of a black fleet near the charted systems, this elusive enemy was still invisible against the inky and dark expanse of space.

Thus, in order for the Old Alliance forces to track them and then decimate this veiled enemy, if required, their vessels had to be found first.

This was the task of countless recon squads, like the one into which Elam had been assigned. There had been word a month ago that debris from a missing merchant vessel had been discovered.

The ship had been following a common shipping lane between the Cassiar and Ushani Systems but never reached its destination. According to the logs at the Haldar

Station, the vessel had been an hour southeast from the station when it disappeared. The captain had contacted the station for a “traffic” report on the shipping lane, and then there was nothing but silence.

All that was left of the ship now were tiny metal fragments floating about a small asteroid field, which had slowly traveled a few miles east over the past month and a half. There could only be speculation about the true cause of the merchant ship’s demise. However, due to the extent of destruction, it was clear it had been attacked without mercy and with extremely powerful weapons. Whispers rippled through the ranks, rumors that this had to be work of the black enemy, still hidden for now.

In addition to other mysterious disappearances, these events explained why everyone had reached a new level of edginess. It was worse knowing there was a lethal threat out there somewhere, but being unable to see it, than facing a completely visible foe, regardless of size and shape.

How large was this enemy fleet and how many soldiers were in it? How could every vessel have cloaking capability? That was the first obvious reason why none in the Old Alliance had been able to locate a mysterious war vessel. The technology to cloak a ship was widely known, but acquiring devices, especially for large warships, was another matter.

The origin of this menace was also in question. There had been absolutely no chatter amongst terrorist, militant, and mercenary units within the known systems about a “global” plot to take control. Thus, this raised the question of: did they traverse from an uncharted system? They would’ve had to have traveled a considerable distance to reach the systems they were lurking amongst now. But arrivals from an unknown system made sense, especially when considering their fleet’s firepower and cloaking abilities.

All in all, the more pieces they learned about this threat, the more unnerved the soldiers of the Old Alliance became.

So, when Elam and his small squad picked up an unusual reading on radar, everyone tensed. It was coming from the surface of the planet Gothard, the lone outer rim planet of Fiera System, the other “Guardian System.” It was opposite of the Ashkelon

System, situated on the other side of the Core Systems. Fiera was on the edges of both a meteor and star belt, and also the Kivak Nebula.

That day, the nebula was rather energized and its outer edges were reaching into the western rim of Fiera. The recon team’s pilot stopped the ship a few miles west of outer rim and took advantage of this light cover. They then deployed a recon droid and sent it rocketing towards Gothard.

Unfortunately, the droid, like all others on the scouting vessel, were ancient and outdated models...and could no longer withstand the violent abuse of entering a planet’s atmosphere. It burned up in seconds.

Elam pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“You know,” said Ravi, Elam’s right-hand man, “you’d think because of the importance of our assignments that we’d be given top-of-the-line equipment. Not relics from the first space program.”

“Alright,” said the team commander to the pilot, “we’ll have to land and scout on foot.”

The pilot pulled up a holographic topographical map of the planet near the anomaly and studied it a moment. “There’s a mountain range here that runs east to west, but the eastern end splits and cuts both north and south. If we come in low and slow it should mask the sound of our engines. The anomaly is on the east side of the range, and it looks like I can set us down on the western side of that ridge. It’s near the end of the mountains, so the going on foot shouldn’t be too difficult.”

“Let’s just hope that if it is a ship down there that no one’s paying attention to radar,” muttered Elam as he took a seat and harnessed himself in. “What I wouldn’t give for cloaking. Or how about just regular stealth capabilities, visual, sound, everything.”

“Let’s not forget droids that don’t burn up on entry,” added Ravi, “or run into trees...or mountains...or other ships.”

“How about a ship that can actually go beyond warp 3,” said Namroq, the fifth and final member of the scout crew.

He hailed from Planet Kilgore of the Fiera System. It was apparent by the name alone that those from Fiera were a harsh and rough type of folk, very sturdy and forceful in their ways. Due to Ashkelon’s own independent nature, inhabitants of the two Guardian Systems either got along splendidly or they were in all-out battle against each other. If their systems had been beside one another, the latter would likely be a constant.

Those who knew and worked with Namroq simply called him “Rok.” Anyone unfamiliar with other languages and peoples found it difficult to differentiate or pronounce the Fiera “q,” compared to the normal “k.” This Fiera letter came at the very back of the throat, a sound that some didn’t know how to produce.

It was also fitting that his nickname sounded like “rock,” because he was immovable like one. He embodied the classic Fiera physique: on the shorter side and built like a tank. He was all muscle, a powerhouse who could wrestle an opponent three times his size with little issue.

Unlike those more rogue-ish Ashkelons who didn’t mind slightly longer hair, male Fierans kept their hair cropped exceptionally short, which only added to their brutish appearances. In regard to their female counterparts, however, the longer the hair, the merrier. It was a joke amongst some that hair length was the only way to differentiate male Fierans from their female counterparts.

Hair came in dark colors only: blacks, browns, and dark auburn. Eye color was typically brown, hazel, or green.

In this regard also Namroq rounded off the fine representation of the people of his system. His head was crowned with short black hair, and his eyes were a deep hazel-green.

Ravi, from Zetham in Ashkelon, dropped into the seat beside Namroq. He was the complete opposite of his Fiera teammate in the arena of physical makeup. Ravi had the appearance of a tall and lanky aspen sapling whenever he was beside Namroq, a short, well-rooted and rounded blue spruce.

He laughed at Namroq’s comment. “Right, if our thrusters and power grid were up to code, we could make it back to base in one day instead of five.”

Silence fell over the vessel as it began its rapid descent towards Gothard. They entered the atmosphere on the side of the planet opposite the anomaly and then rocketed eastward, passing from the night side and into the daylight.

Once they spotted the desired mountain range, the pilot descended until they seemed to be flying just above the treetops and canyon ridges. When they entered the mountains, the pilot cut back power. Everyone hoped it would be enough to silence the droning of the old thrusters, so they wouldn't alert whatever they were sneaking up to.

The vessel set down in a small clearing on the eastern side of the descending mountain range.

“It's a four-mile jog to that anomaly,” said the pilot, pointing at the holographic map over the main helm. “Whatever it is, is east by northeast from our position.”

“You stay with the ship and keep tabs on us,” replied the commander, as Elam and the others began grabbing gear and weapons. “If you lose track of us, we're killed, or I order you to leave, then you kick on those afterburners and get out of here. Contact base to let them know what happened and get to a safe port or planet, wherever.”

“Yes, sir.”

The pilot could follow their movements using their comms. But because strong interference could render them useless, the commander also grabbed a small tracker and put it in his pocket. The device would have to be destroyed, or a heavy particle field would have to enter the atmosphere to render it useless.

The four were geared out and had weapons in hand as Ravi popped open the side hatch and jumped out. Namroq followed after.

The commander was about to exit but paused and looked at the pilot.

“Oh, and remember: don't open the door for strangers,” he said, in a rare display of humor.

The pilot rolled his eyes. Elam smiled and shook his head as he followed the commander before shutting the hatch.

The commander, first name Ian, was a legitimate seasoned fighter. He'd been many planetary civil wars and a few confrontations between the systems. He'd also

tracked militants and mercenaries who'd attempted to start galactic wars. Although he'd joined the service in the wake of the last major war between the allied systems and a murderous and evil enemy, he'd seen the aftermath. He saw the fresh scars it had left on soldiers, their families, and their planets.

This partly explained his overall no-nonsense and stoic nature. The other half was simply due to his personality, which was calm, somber, and unhurried, unless he was being shot at. He possessed a brilliant intellect and had a gift for battle strategy, which he regularly showed in skirmishes.

He also did have a mind for humor. At random times, he'd flash his capability to successfully partake in wordplay and puns, which resulted in everyone rolling on the floor with laughter. After that, though, it was back to stoicism.

His very nature reflected itself plainly in his pale blue eyes as he scanned the terrain around them. Elam watched and could almost see his commander's sharp mind sorting and analyzing everything he saw, from the forest and mountains to the smells brought to them by the warm southwesterly wind.

Elam had yet to learn where the commander was born and raised. For some reason, it wasn't common knowledge and he'd never volunteered that information. In addition to all his skills, he recurrently showed that he was very keen in reading the signs and sounds of the wilderness, regardless if he'd been to that particular planet beforehand.

Being a former hunter from Medea, Elam himself possessed these things. Yet the commander was keener all-around than he. And he wasn't even an omicron.

Two guardians were going with the ground team. Because of the likely enemy threat, it was agreed upon that the fewer who went with the humans, the better. Two angels were at a lower risk of being spotted by any scouts than five.

Thebez was one of those accompanying the team. The other was Rohim, Commander Ian's protector. He'd been assigned Ian in the middle of one of the bloodiest system civil wars. Although Ian bore many mars on his body from the countless conflicts he'd been in, Rohim had more. Half of his scars had come while protecting his current charge, and they were a testament to his unwavering loyalty.

Rohim was also like his human associate in that he was a silent leader type. His exact origins were also unknown. Although he was a high commander within heavenly ranks, he'd been stationed far away, near the edges of the universe and the borders that marked other mysterious realms. The expression in his light brown eyes was of one who'd seen many strange things on those borders that many of his heavenly companions hadn't even imagined existed.

“Right,” said the commander quietly, eyes still on the mountains to their north, “let's get moving.”

The commander lifted into a light jog and cut eastward into the forested hillside. After everyone had had about a mile to warm up, he increased the pace.

As for Thebez and Rohim, they were in disguise as humans, but still invisible to the men. In situations like these, they preferred to have the element of surprise if things became dicey.

The going wasn't too rough. The ridge was more like numerous smaller and shallower hills that rose and fell gently to crease the broad and far-reaching southern mountain arm. While the regions above tree line were mostly rock, dirt, and straggly grass, farther down in the forest the floor comprised mostly of moss. The mature trees had long blocked out adequate sunlight to allow saplings and undergrowth to prosper.

As for Thebez and Rohim, they were on high alert and constantly scanning the landscape. While Gothard was a comparably tamer planet to the others in the Fiera System, it still possessed wild and dangerous beasts. Some were strictly wild.

Others were evil. Not in the sense they were aligned with darkness but were evil in and of themselves. Fortunately, most of the menacing beasties came out at night, which left the two guardians primarily on the lookout for their demonic foes.

For the first three miles, the pair took turns running ahead to scout the area. But as they entered the final mile to the anomaly, Thebez returned from scouting and confirmed that some very powerful enemies were indeed nearby. He hadn't seen the group itself and didn't know who or how many they were dealing with. Still, he'd had no desire to get closer.

The ridge came to an abrupt end at a dark, hazy veil. It seeped lazily through the treetops and a distance above the ridge. Black fog slithered amongst the trunks. The area immediately around the veiled perimeter was chill and all things, the air, plants, trees, and birds were completely quiet in their great fear.

Thebez hadn't seen any scouts actively patrolling the area, but he and Rohim knew that didn't mean the demons wouldn't sense their approach.

From then on, the two angels remained close to the human team.

Almost an hour after leaving the ship, the team were drawing near to the anomaly. They slowed their speed and dropped back down into thicker tree cover. Up ahead was the edge of the ridge. As they stalked towards it, their human senses were finally telling them that something wasn't quite right.

For Thebez and Rohim, that sense was magnified. The evil that surrounded this particular foe was unusually strong and heavy. Great fear and terror were with this menace, more than either angel thought possible with a human puppet. Unless...

The demon band isn't amassed around a human, thought Thebez to Rohim, they're with a high-ranking officer, a general at least. And yet they showed up on the radar of the humans' ship...

I believe we're about to see the identity of one of the masterminds we're up against, replied Rohim as he looked at his companion with that steady gaze. *Only extremely potent demons have shown up on human sensors in all their history.*

Rohim then stepped beside Ian, gently placed a hand on the man's shoulder, and whispered, “Be very careful, my friend.”

The words of caution ran through Ian's mind like it was one of his own thoughts, and he made a conscious effort to quiet all his movements as much as possible.

When the team was almost on flat ground again, he stopped. Ian wanted to stay on just enough of an incline, so they'd be better concealed from whatever was around the corner.

But instead of continuing, the commander remained still, observing and considering their surroundings again.

The others were glad. They’d all become aware of an ache settling against their foreheads. Their entire bodies felt off and uncomfortable. It was almost like they could feel the onset of the flu. A wave of weakness washed over them and their muscles began to occasionally tremor. But it wasn’t due to chills. They weren’t consciously aware of fear, yet their bodies were reacting like they were indeed afraid.

And the headache droned on.

They all exchanged a look before Ravi held out his hands and they watched as a tremor ran through them. He glanced at his companions and gave a little shrug.

Thebez, now close to Elam, shared a look with Rohim. While the angels were more sensitive to the proximity of evil things, they typically weren’t affected by it physically. Humans, on the other hand, were generally unaware of evil, unless it was extremely toxic. Yet, they could be immobilized or worse by what they couldn’t see.

When the team turned back to the commander, they saw he was staring up and ahead at something. They followed his gaze and took notice of the great trees swaying as in mighty gusts.

At first, no one thought that odd until they realized...there was no wind. Also, not all the trees were moving. Those farther up the ridge, and to the south and east were completely still.

The three gaped at the spectacle in front of them. The living trees were actually writhing in their fashion, writhing as if they were being torn by a terrible tempest. Some of them began to have their branches snapped off and tossed to the ground, while others had their leaves stripped from their limbs.

To the eyes of Eohim and Thebez, they saw the trees as they appeared to human eyes and also in their very essence as living things. Unlike their counterparts on darker planets, these trees were good. They grew, leafed, and praised their Creator each in his or her own fashion. In the spring, they burst forth joyously with new growth and leaves under the sun and warmth. In summer, they loved the long days, and their leaves were their voices of gladness as their limbs reached towards the heavens. Come fall, they put on the most brilliant display of color, for they knew they were direct proof of their

Creator’s existence to the realm of man. Finally, in winter, they fell into peaceful rest, for which they were thankful after the excitement of the previous three seasons.

But now these trees were reacting to the powerful evil that was amongst them. The two angels could plainly see the dark veil. They could feel the chill of evil as it pummeled the trees or wrapped cold claws about them, making them writhe. In other instances, evil gathered itself to create large, shadowy monsters that latched onto the trees and began breaking branches or stripping off the leaves with harsh pulls.

The dark game lasted only another thirty seconds before the shadowy creatures vanished as evil’s attention was redirected. The trees then quickly stilled and stood in complete silence.

Rohim and Thebez let out a quiet breath.

The humans remembered to breathe. That was also when their headaches returned and commenced pounding against their foreheads.

Ian gave a shake of his head at this irritant and then signaled to the others. They followed after him and did as he did: making an extra mental effort to pay attention, minding tree roots and branches, and treading as quietly as possible.

In the final six feet to the “corner,” humans and angels dropped to their stomachs and crawled the remaining distance. With the utmost caution, they peered around the crest to see what was in the shadow of the mountain’s arms.

The instant that their eyes beheld the ship and the small crew, the chills of terror rolled over the humans. Ice washed over the back of their skulls and ran down their spines. Pain grabbed their heads in a relentless grip and oppressive weight pushed down on their shoulders. The air suddenly felt thick and heavy, making it difficult to breathe.

Elam glanced at the commander. He didn’t seem overly bothered by whatever was assailing them, and his gaze was distant, like what they were feeling and beholding had stirred a memory.

It had. It brought back the stories he’d heard from soldiers in the last conflict with powerful evil. He’d read the reports of so many warriors, both survivors and those who’d fallen but had recorded their interactions with the enemy before meeting their demises.

He'd also seen the footage of many battles. Even though they had only been playing on a monitor, whenever he saw the high commanders and generals of darkness, he could still feel the bitter grip of evil.

The commander blinked from his thoughts and knew that this was what they were seeing: a very powerful and dangerous foe steeped in darkness, death, and evil.

The recon team was looking at a medium-sized black ship that itself had the appearance like some evil bird of prey. The coat wasn't glossy, but in a matte finish to reduce light reflection.

Half a dozen soldiers were loading crates from a room or tunnel in the ridge and onto the ship. As to be expected, they dressed in dark clothing and armor. While all military men moved with a certain level of preciseness, these soldiers were even more so. Everything was to the point, yet graceful, which in turn resulted in silence.

In the quiet that now filled the forest, the commander and his men heard no sound from the soldiers in black, even though they were only sixty feet away at the most. They spoke no words as they easily hauled the crates onto the vessel.

Several times, one or two would straighten and glance at one another, as if preparing to speak. But no words were exchanged. Seconds later, they might give a subtle nod or tilt of the head, as if coming to an agreement or something or other. Then they'd continue with their task.

Both Ian and Elam knew the only logical explanation was that the men were communicating telepathically.

The men were correct. Rohim and Thebez plainly heard the communication that seemed to be silent to the humans.

There were two kinds of telepathic communications: one was like a normal verbal exchange, such as when a group was completing a task. Thoughts were caught and understood as easily as words spoken aloud. Words between two members of a group could be “heard” by all of the others. That said, silence remained the advantage for any outsider to the group or nearby enemy.

The other kind of telepathic communication was the traditional, more secretive form, in which specific people only can “hear” what’s being said. Even in a crowd of one hundred, two beings speaking via thought would hear one another. The difference was the intent of the communication: public or private.

How is that even possible, thought Elam, as he and Ian shared a glance.

There was little time to further consider telepathy when *he* walked down the ship’s ramp and into view.

The four went stiff with fear again and heavy dread beyond describing took hold. Without a doubt, they were now looking at this black squad’s leader. He wasn’t just that squad’s lead, though, but was a general of legions. No, he was something above a general, beyond it..

It’s one of the Overseers, thought Rohim to Thebez with eyebrows raised in mild astonishment.

Thebez’s expression was tight and intense as he stared at the being ahead of them. All heavenly beings knew who’d rise and come to galactic power near the end of time. They knew about the three Overseers, but Thebez had never thought he’d actually see one, and not so early in the development of matters. In seeing how this particular Overseer moved and the darkness that surrounded him, both angels knew exactly what he oversaw.

Hunkered near Elam, Thebez whispered the word in his charge’s ear.

Overseer, thought Elam, *of what? Of the entire enemy force?*

Even that didn’t sit quite right with him as he gawked at the evil being. It was assumed he was clothed and armored all in black, like his underlings, but one couldn’t be certain. A shadow seemed to wrap itself around him, like an outer robe of his other garments.

He was an overseer, but if not of soldiers, then what? What else was there besides men and women warriors?

Almost as if to answer those questions, the four gave a sudden start. There were now more dark soldiers on the scene and standing around the Overseer.

Where did they come from, wondered Elam, greatly perplexed, they didn't walk off of the ship.

But as the new soldiers moved and shifted, and the longer Elam gazed at them, he saw that they too were in shadow. And they weren't completely human. One second they had the faces of man, but when they shifted just a little their human faces gave way to something much more grotesque. It was like seeing through a mirage or veil of disguise.

But that comparison was furthest from any of the four's minds. As the unknown beings shifted, not only did they reveal how they truly appeared, but the observers also saw glimpses of wings, just blurred edges and outlines.

Are those...how can...but, whether a question or a thought was trying to form in Elam's mind, he didn't know.

Sure, he'd entrusted himself to the living God while he was young, and he believed in angels, demons, and supernatural events. But by being raised in a house where these things weren't discussed beyond the fact that they existed and were real, those very truths had faded from his mind.

Now he was staring at beings that he hadn't thought about since he was a child. He'd never taken the time to consider angels or demons, their ways, and how their doings affected the realm of the seen. That was mostly because his adopted parents had made it seem like it was a forbidden topic. It was uncomfortable and even rude to discuss with others.

Now, however...

I know what I'll be thinking about on the flight back to base, thought Elam, who finally realized his mouth was hanging open.

Thebez, who'd been watching Elam's reaction closely, was relieved to see that his charge 1) didn't have a total meltdown at what he'd seen, and 2) accepted the demons for what they were and was committed to considering matters further when it was safe to do so.

While the dark soldiers continued working, the visitors spoke with the Overseer, though they heard none of the words being spoken.

The commander nudged Elam. When he looked at him, he made a “take a picture” motion with his hands.

Elam nodded and gently bumped Ravi, who had the high-tech photo gear. This “gear” amounted to a thin, narrow camera that just covered the palm of his hand. However, it did come with software, housed in the equivalent of a notebook laptop that could instantly upload different filters to the camera, as well as various zooming capabilities. Long gone were the days of lugging around a dozen camera lenses and swapping out half a dozen filters for just a few shots. There were also no shutter sounds to worry about when one was, for example, on a stealth assignment. All the worries and hassles of “traditional” photography were a thing of ancient history.

Ravi shook himself out of his daze and had everything ready in under a minute. With caution, he peered around the corner and started capturing photos. He stopped after taking about a hundred and then waited to see if the enemy did anything particularly interesting.

After a couple more minutes, the meeting of the shadows seemed to come to an end. Final words were spoken, and when the four blinked, the visitors were gone.

The Overseer abruptly turned their direction as if something had caught his attention. It had, but not a noise or any movement. It was a sudden sense that something that didn’t belong was very close. He didn’t sense an enemy per se, but something was off.

The three tensed again, and the commander whispered, “No one moves. Don’t move. He’s only looking...”

The Overseer’s eyes began sweeping the trees. When they reached the crest that the four were hiding behind, his gaze lingered in that area.

While they didn’t move, they’d all averted their gazes. Regardless of the fact all four of them were hunters, they believed the myth that both prey and predator could sense when eyes were on them.

Elam shifted his gaze back up to see what the Overseer was doing, and he did so at just the wrong time. It seemed that he looked right at Elam and locked onto him.

Even from that distance, he saw that those eyes were cold. Evil’s bitterly icy hand wrapped its fingers around his heart and soul. It immediately exposed the fears he kept buried deep within him and played them before his eyes. It intertwined them with visions of goriest scenes of war and the most gruesome torture. It painted streets, even entire cities, in crimson, and set entire planets ablaze with fire. It hunted down every one of his friends and family, and tortured and then murdered them.

Elyse was not spared, and as her death played out before him, Elam felt a pit settle in his stomach. Wretchedness wholly washed over him. There was no hope for the light to overcome this time and fighting the night would be in vain. None would be spared, for the enemy enjoyed bringing destruction, and loved spreading grief and agony.

After so many ages of man, the time for evil’s reign had come and there’d be no coming out of the darkness once it fell.

Steady, Elam, thought Thebez to him as he lightly placed a hand on his shoulder while keeping his gaze on the Overseer.

The being of darkness was, in fact, looking straight at the humans and two angels. He thought he’d seen the faintest shimmer out the corner of his eye, which had drawn his attention to begin with.

The Overseer’s gaze narrowed. He knew that some of his angelic foes had the power to conceal themselves and humans, even if they were standing out in the open. A shimmer was the one dead giveaway of the shield of concealment. But when he didn’t see it occur again within the next minute, his gaze moved elsewhere amongst the trees.

Then the terror and hopelessness that had held Elam immobile let him free. The instant the Overseer turned, Elam rolled onto his back out of view and slapped his hand over his mouth. The aftereffects of being under the gaze of such a powerful being of evil would linger for a while. Memories of such severe dread would ripple through him in the hours after they returned to their ship, and the thoughts and visions of his deepest fears would still flicker before his eyes.

While the angels knew the truth, no human would be certain whether this Overseer had truly seen Elam. Surely if he had, he would’ve ordered his soldiers to storm

their location and kill the team. Or perhaps they'd speculate later that he had seen Elam but assessed him as being an insignificant threat.

Then again, maybe the Overseer hadn't seen him after all.

Another vital item the four humans failed to realize at that time was just how monumental of an event they'd witnessed. Or, it would be more correct to say: they weren't aware of just who it was they'd seen with their own eyes.

They'd correctly assumed he was an extremely powerful overseer of legions. But he wasn't just any overseer. He was one of the Overseers, one of the three. Elam and his team were the very first humans ever to behold Skoll, Overseer of demonic forces of Cerberus, the Black Army, the hellhounds that were spawned by Evil Itself. They'd seen him in the beginning, before tensions and attacks escalated, and war broke upon the horizon. They'd been permitted to see him at the start. The reasons for this could not be known for sure, by both angel and human.

As for Elam himself, it seemed the hand of Him whom he'd pledged his life to had quite purposefully redirected his gaze to where the real battle was. At least, where the real fight began: in the unseen. It was time to wake up and decide what he truly believed.

With what he saw that day, he knew he no longer could avoid considering the realm of the spiritual, which was apparently very tangible at times. How could he continue to avoid thinking about the ways of good and evil, light and darkness, angels and demons?

It was like having a bucket of ice water dumped over his head before being slapped in the face.

To Elam, it seemed that reality was suddenly very different. His wake-up call would, in turn, affect Elyse, his sister who would maybe one day be a fellow soldier in battle.

As Rohim and Thebez watched and read the thoughts of Elam and the others, they too better understood one of the purposes for being permitted to see what they had. For the angels, seeing Skoll, one of the Overseers, it was a sign of the shift to the final chapter of mankind's history. To them, it was as loud and clear as a trumpet call.

As for mankind, it was hopefully an awakening, like it was for Elam. The effects of what the four had observed would affect others, as the ripples across the waters of the lake do, for they'd seen Skoll, Overseer of Shadow.