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The Lightbringer: A Novel

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ABSTRACT

The Lightbringer is about a collision of two worlds: the world of a contemporary South Florida town and the magical world of Zariel, bringing with it the universal threat of the Terra. Childhood friends, Breck and Tom, are thrown into the middle of an ancient conflict between the Terra—a collection of alien races that have been transformed by darkness—and the forces of good. After an encounter with a magical pool of golden water, the boys must learn to use their new abilities to protect against the growing Terranox army. In the midst of their struggle, however, a mysterious companion—the Lightbringer, one of the few remaining Lightborne—arrives to help them survive the invasion and to guide them while they search for the one who can help them save the world. While facing the ever-increasing threat of the Terra, Breck comes to grips with his origins and his destiny as the Lightbringer who is said to overthrow the Terra once and for all.

The Lightbringer: A Novel

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Graduate School

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Brett Lee Butler

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To those lovers of fantasy who find themselves perpetually in search of new and interesting worlds.

And to those who long for an escape, a way to flee the pains and displeasures of our temporary human existence, even if only for a few moments.

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understand and verbalize the essential functions of fiction and fantasy in our society.

Finally, unspeakable thanks to our God and Creator, for whom I am a sub-creator and to whom I owe all that I am and all that I will become.

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INTRODUCTION

THE JOURNEY TO CREATE

The idea for *The Lightbringer* has been gestating in my mind for eight years, growing the worlds from which the Lightborne and the Terra originate. I first had the idea when a friend, who had a chapter of hand-written scribbles, asked me to read his manuscript. After exploring the document, which was simply an introduction to a dozen different characters, I thought, “If he can do it, I can do it.” The Lightbringer came first with his golden armor and a magical hammer called Tempest. His companion, Rellion, formed second—an Elven mage, the wise sage whose extensive knowledge of the universe and intuition is coveted by many. A year later, I climbed out of my dorm room bed, light casting shadow lines on the gray carpet, and sat at my laptop. Before I brushed my teeth or checked my phone for messages, I started a new Word document and wrote the line, “Breck’s eyes shot open. He reached as his cell phone vibrated off the bed stand.”

I have been a prolific gamer all my life, not prejudicing any system over another. I was accustomed to fiction and story-telling through the world of gaming. “How different can it be?” I thought. The further I progressed through the manuscript, the more I realized that I was in over my head, that I knew nothing about writing aside from the academic essay. To complicate matters further, I grew up in a Christian tradition that was averse to secular literature, especially fantasy! As a result, I had not touched much fiction beyond C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* (which was church-approved) and had not

learned how to read for pleasure. In this way, my entrance into creative writing was backwards, attempting to create something blindly with little literary experience to guide me.

Five years after I started the *The Lightbringer* manuscript, I stepped into my first graduate class at Abilene Christian University. I had been denied entrance into the Creative Writing track, but I knew that exposure to literature would set me on the right path and teach me the skills I needed. After the first semester, I determined that my passion still resided in the creative process and wanted to focus my efforts in that direction. So, I extracted the prologue of *The Lightbringer* and sent it along with an explanation of why I wanted to be reconsidered for my original path. After some persistence and a slightly more polished writing sample, I was finally accepted! Though the novel had been collecting digital dust for years, Breck's story was never far from my thoughts. Breck's first line had taken a dozen different forms before I deleted it on the first day of writing my thesis. After a long-held commitment to that original moment, I decided it was time to trust the story and let the characters drive themselves. I set aside the 200-page manuscript and started a blank document. Breck and Tom, his best friend, were there, and that was all I needed to begin. Everything after that was progress, the evolution of a story that had long been in the making.

The product of that evolution is something perhaps truer to the original idea, to the heart of the story, than what previously existed. The characters are more real, the alien race is more defined, and the stakes are higher. All this is attributable to reading of other works within the genre, reading about the craft, exploring the functions and goals of fantasy literature, and rewriting the novel under the direction of Dr. Shelly Sanders.

Through the writing process, however, there were many obstacles, moments where characters fell flat or the explanation of plot took priority over the experience of the protagonist. During these road blocks, I returned to the things I had learned from writers like Orson Scott Card, J. K. Rowling, Ursula Le Guin, and Philip Athans to reset, reconstruct, and re-establish the direction of *The Lightbringer*.

I was committed to accomplishing several goals at the outset of the novel. First, I wanted the novel to be cross-over fantasy, or intrusion fantasy, which is a collision of worlds. This, I believe, is one of the most potent forms of fantasy to the current generation. Second, the characters needed to encounter real-life conflict; though the presence of an alien race is other-worldly, Breck's conflict with his father, his loyal friendship with Tom, and his growing understanding of himself holds lessons that are true to life. In addition, these conflicts needed to speak to the primary audience—Young Adult. Third, I wanted my faith to be present in the novel—through its themes and questioning of origin stories—while avoiding overt allegories or heavy-handed allusions to Christian doctrine or biblical characters.

Ursula Le Guin, in *The Wave in the Mind*, says that “writing is how you be a writer” (262). I have learned the value of revision in this process. Mainly, at the outset, I labored over each sentence like I would in flash fiction. I wanted each word to be perfectly placed. I quickly learned that after a page or two, I was already displeased with some of the earlier writing regardless of how much time I spent painstakingly considering word choice. I had to push on, work through the draft, let the words find their own way to the page, and focus on the characters. In addition to the three primary goals—fantasy setting, characterization and real conflict that speaks to the audience, and the subtle

presence of faith—this introduction will also detail the struggles I encountered in the writing process and how I overcame them.

On the Merits of Fantasy

It seemed to me when I began graduate school that the literary atmosphere was hostile to fantasy, though many of the students in the program were avid readers of the genre. At the graduate level, there exists a prejudice for, or higher consideration of, literary fiction over speculative or imaginative fiction, as if to suggest that literature grounded in the “real” carries greater merit. Before I seek to show the merits of fantasy within the umbrella of fiction, I should add that restricting myself to literary fiction in workshops forced me to address areas of weakness in my writing technique. For example, I wrote a short story called “Korin’s Wish” about two brothers and a legend surrounding a mysterious island at the center of their lake. While the plot hints at magical realism, nothing in the story depends on magic, and that allowed me the opportunity to focus on characterization and believability within the known world before stepping out into the unknown, where it is even more difficult to convince a reader to suspend disbelief.

In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O’Connor says, “I know well enough that very few people who are supposedly interested in writing are interested in writing well. They are interested in publishing something, and if possible in making a ‘killing.’ They are interested in being a writer, not in writing. They are interested in seeing their names at the top of something printed, it matters not what” (64). I came to writing not to publish but to tell a story. At the time I started writing, I had intentions of graduating with a Biblical Studies degree and going on to become a worship minister; in fact, I submitted several applications and received recommendation letters to that effect. I wrote because I

believed it was the best way to invite others into Breck's world. I am self-conscious about my writing at times, in part because I am afraid that it is not any good and might not get published, but I also fear if it *will* be successful and that I will not be considered a serious writer because of my chosen genre. I am worried that "real" authors of "literary fiction" will read it and dismiss it, regardless of any merits it might contain because I am not committed to realism.

Le Guin says, "[T]o think that realistic fiction is by definition superior to imaginative fiction is to think imitation is superior to invention . . . our high valuation of story drawn directly from personal experience may be a logical extension of our high value for realism in fiction" (267). Before I knew the terminology for fantasy, I knew I wanted to write a story about the "meeting of worlds." I believed there was value in the imagination—how else would the greatest inventions in history have come to be if someone had not first imagined a life made simpler by things that did not yet exist. So, I questioned how literary fiction was inherently different in what it sought to accomplish than fantasy. Le Guin writes that "fiction is experience translated by, transformed by, transfigured by the imagination. Truth includes but is not coextensive with fact. Truth in art is not imitation, but reincarnation" (268). Le Guin's point is that all fiction, whether it is literary or speculative, seeks to accomplish the same goal; it transforms real life experience into allegorical form, and serves as a messenger of truth regardless of its factual verity. In that light, fantasy and literary fiction are only different in form, in *how* they seek to accomplish this goal, and one is not necessarily more effective in its strategy than the other. One is not more worthy of being classified as "literature" simply because it imitates the current reality rather than imagining a new one.

Le Guin, however, goes further and encompasses my view regarding the relationship of fiction and fantasy:

Fiction as we currently think of it, the novel and the short story as they have existed since the eighteenth century, offers one of the very best means of understanding people different from oneself, short of experience. Fiction is often really much more useful than lived experience; it takes much less time, costs nothing (from the library), and comes in a manageable, orderly, form. You can understand it. Experience just steamrollers over you and you begin to see what happened only years and years later, if ever. Fiction is much better than reality at providing useful factual, psychological, and moral understanding . . . so writers who want their story to be understood not only by their contemporary compatriots but also by people of other lands and times, may seek a way of telling it that is more universally comprehensible; and fantasy is such a way. (43)

Le Guin identifies the reason that fantasy, as a literary medium, appealed to me. Fiction serves as an arbiter for life experience, providing it to readers in digestible form. It allows distance while connecting the text through emotion and contact with the characters. Readers are presented opportunity to face struggles, interpret them, and respond to them from a safe place.

Fantasy offers the same experience, but its application is more universal; it is not limited to a time or place but is set in equally unfamiliar territory. In *The Christian Imagination*, Peter Leithart says that “works of fiction present a world to us. In some sorts of fiction, like fantasy or science fiction, the world of the novel is a world quite

completely different from the world of our experience” (210). J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is immersive in this way—all readers have to adapt to the Shire—while Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief* takes place in the familiar, wherein the fantasy world intrudes into the existing world. However, I experienced both types of worlds while reading Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*. The protagonist, Richard, spends much of his time on the London streets and in the canals below. To a London native, the fantasy feels familiar because of its setting, but to me the novel could not be more unfamiliar and might as well have been set on a distant planet, even with its likeness. Yet, reading it gave me the sense of a Londoner’s life—what it is like to walk the streets of London, what do people say, how do people act—and thus broadened my experience while, at the same time, exposing me to the fantasy of London Below.

Neverwhere is considered an Urban Fantasy, a subset of intrusion fantasy. Philip Athans, in *Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy*, likens Urban Fantasy to horror, since it is set in the real world, except that

...there is a difference in the basic approach. In horror, the goal of the protagonist tends to be a simple one: survival. He or she has to escape the monsters, get out of the haunted house, or simply live through the night. But urban fantasy borrows the more active hero or heroine from fantasy and lets contemporary characters do battle with vampires, werewolves, zombies, or whatever.” (“The State of the Genre,” 114)

He also notes that humor generally is not present in horror but tends to be central to Urban Fantasy (115). *The Lightbringer* is riddled with vicious monsters, and for much of the story the characters are primarily bent on survival, but they are ultimately striving

towards the long-term end of overthrowing the Terra, which places Breck as the hero of the story. I am not certain that the setting goes far enough to be considered urban fantasy however, since the presence of the Terra transforms the landscape, eventually making it feel unfamiliar and foreign.

Gaiman's novels—*Neverwhere* and *Ocean at the End of the Lane*—caused me to question the degree to which fantasy prevails in my novel. Ultimately, I wanted my readers to have the experience that “this could happen in *my* world,” the same tactic that Gaiman implements. I wanted the setting, the world to feel earthly and familiar. The benefit to the immersive fantasy, like *The Lord of the Rings*, is that all things are subject to non-reality—anything can happen. The whole world is unfamiliar and can be crafted to the imagining of the author. However, the author must still be keen to the relatability and plausibility of his or her characters even in an imagined world; the reader, while in unfamiliar territory, still needs attachment to the real decisions and changes of people, regardless of the shape or color of their face, whether or not they speak audibly or through telepathy, whether they be a wizard, a dragon, or anything else with conscious thought. Tolkien sought to create worlds so convincing in *TLoTR* that they would cause the reader to hesitate and consider, even for a moment, that the supernatural might exist in reality. He calls this hesitation “Secondary Belief”—the moment when a reader suspends disbelief to the degree that he or she is convinced that the world is, or could be, real (“On Fairy Stories,” 122). Catherine Butler, a professor at Cardiff University, labels this “imaginative absorption” in her essay “Tolkien and Worldbuilding.” Most importantly, Secondary Belief can only occur in Secondary Worlds, which requires a “subcreator,” a writer, a world builder (107).

The benefit, then, of intrusion fantasy over immersive fantasy is the added suspense or fear of a potential reality; in other words, this is a story of something that has yet to happen or has happened but the general population has no knowledge of it—London Below is hidden from the non-magical population similar to J. K. Rowling’s Hogwarts. The effect of this type of fantasy is that it allows the reader to ask, “What will I do when this happens to me?” The questions shift from an *if* statement to a *when* statement. Intrusion fantasy’s purpose is to cause the reader hesitation, to interrupt the primary or natural order and instigate alternative discourses for the problems encountered in the text. Since intrusion fantasy’s purpose is tied to, even dependent, on the real, it is one step of fantasy’s grander function as a “vehicle of truth.”

The decision to remain within the confines of intrusion fantasy was not without consequence. I was eager to tell the reader about the immersive world from which Belthar comes, and Belthar became the primary means by which I relayed these details. As a result, he lacked real presence and volition in the story other than to answer Breck’s questions, without hesitation, and provide lengthy exposition about his history. There are many unique and interesting things about the Zariel—Belthar’s planet—and I thought it was essential that the reader experience Belthar’s world in order to understand his character. However, while his world differs from our own, human experience is ultimately the same. Even among non-humans, conscious, bodily beings experience conflict, reward, joy, sadness, regret, defeat, and a laundry list of complicated emotions that arise when people act like people. There are exceptions to that in fantasy and science fiction, of course, in the case of cyborgs or androids or other beings that lack individualization or sentience. Or, like the witches in *Ocean at the End of the Lane*, the

characters may not be bound to a singular body or world; they might be other-worldly to the degree that their experience is nearly impossible to comprehend—which perhaps is why the young witch, Letty, takes a familiar form and speaks to the boy in ways which he can understand, requiring her to leave out the whole truth about her family. Phillip Pullman’s *The Golden Compass*, on the other hand, is full of characters who are sentient and relatable, even if one of them is a talking polar bear who experiences the full range of human emotion. In *The Lightbringer*, I felt that Breck’s story was the most important and needed to be foregrounded, which left me to sacrifice some of the story’s immersive qualities for a deeper focus in characterization.

Ursula Le Guin’s *The Wave in the Mind* got me thinking about influences, both literary and otherwise. Since I had started gaming long before reading, I questioned whether a novel was even the right medium for Breck’s story. Stories, after all, do not only come in literary forms. The gaming world is invested in story-telling much in the same way as the fiction writer. Developers strive to give the same kind of learned experience that a writer does in his or her fiction. The interactivity, however, is different. Literature requires the imagination of the reader to visualize the story while gaming allows one to play or inquire into the imagination of its creator. But the reader is still asking the same fundamental question in both scenarios: “What if?” For the gamer, the answer is tangible and often non-linear, allowing the exploration of good versus evil, or whatever it might be, to take literal effect. For the reader, the story is linear, taking a specific direction provided in advance by the author, a direction that cannot be changed once it has been published; this is of course also true of some linear adventure games, but

the gamer engages in volition, making the choices and reaping the consequence rather than just following along with the protagonist.

For the above reasons, I doubted if I was in the right field, if I had invested years into a graduate program that should have been spent studying game development. Le Guin says that “there is nothing in so-called interactive programs except what the programmer put in them; the so-called choices lead only to subprograms chosen by the programmer, no more a choice than a footnote is—do you read it or don’t you? The roles in role-playing games are fixed and conventional; there are no characters in games, only personae” (270). I think there is more to gaming than Le Guin’s simplification; however, I agreed with her about the lack of real characters, as opposed to personae that are embodied and controlled, in games. Le Guin writes that “all of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. If we don’t, our lives get made up for us by other people” (208). I am in graduate school because I imagined what my life would be like as a writer; I imagined what it would be like to invite people into the world I have created, seeing it expand and move beyond my original thought. Essentially, it does not matter that Breck and Tom are from middle-income families; when the Terra come, none of that matters anymore, and suddenly anyone can be Breck or Tom. I wanted the reader to experience Breck’s story, not just the conflict between the Terra and the Lightbringers. Most of all, I wanted the emphasis of my medium to be on the characters—their choices and experience—rather than allowing the reader to direct the story. My background in gaming, however, bled over into the manuscript, particularly in the ways that the

monsters behave and action sequences unfold. Here, I turned to Orson Scott Card to guide my journey through *writing* fantasy rather than simply experiencing it.

Card's influence on my thesis work is discussed more in the next section, but the most drastic effect of reading Card is in his suggestion about prologues. He says that many fantasy authors fear that their reader will not understand their world without the foregrounding of a prologue. Yet, these prologues end up being meaningless because they are often not entirely connected to the characters or provide information that the readers do not need to follow the story. So, he suggests "skip the prologue entirely and begin with the story..." (*How to Write* 83). I originally had a prologue that showed a scene of Breck as a five-old-boy, set from his mother's point-of-view. His mother reads him a story from her journal that details an adventure she had with Belthar and a hunting party—though she leaves out the specifics to make it sound like she is not the woman in the story. After considering Card's point, I agreed that the details in the prologue did not add anything to the main storyline except details about the *other* world, so I cut it altogether. Though, I think Breck may at some point have a vision of that night and remember the story his mother told, so I am glad that I wrote it.

Characterization and the Young Adult Reader

The Lightbringer is about a collision of two worlds: the world of a contemporary South Florida town and the magical world of Zariel, bringing with it the universal threat of the Terra. Childhood friends, Breck and Tom, are thrown into the middle of an ancient conflict between the Terra and the forces of good, finding themselves somehow wrapped up in the fate of the earth. In the midst of their struggle, however, a mysterious companion—the Lightbringer, one of the few remaining Lightborne—arrives to guide

them, to teach them how to combat the invasion, and to protect them while they search for the one who can help them save the world. *The Lightbringer* is also an origins story. Not only does Breck learn that he is from another world, but the forces that drive the conflict, as well as the source of the Lightbringer's power, suggest that his ideas about the origins of the universe are limiting. While facing the ever-increasing threat posed by the growing armies of Terra, Breck must also come to grips with his destiny as a Lightborne and his place among cosmos.

Writing fiction is like being an actor, except that instead of embodying one role, the author must take on *all* roles. The author must understand how each character will respond to a particular scenario or unexpected events. The author must speak with the voices of all characters while still maintaining enough distance to allow the characters their own volition; in other words, an author should not force characters to do something simply to progress the plot but must understand them well enough for their actions and dialogue to occur organically. Card says that "trusting your story" means to let the story guide itself, relinquishing full control. When deadlines are present, there is a natural sense of "push to the end" (224). The temptation is to follow the outline, hit the major events, and wrap it up. But when characters are alive they experience things, they have conversations, they make mistakes, and the author must allow the characters to change and respond authentically, which sometimes leads to a plot twist or requires the exclusion or redaction of an event or detail. Peter Leithart writes that "earlier critics took it for granted that literature, an imitation of life, presents models for imitation to the reader . . . a fiction can also function as a cautionary tale, presenting a bad model as a warning against certain kinds of conduct" (217). Characterization is essential to literature because

people read and absorb valuable lessons from characters whom they know well, primarily through re-reading, in the same way they would their parents or peers.

Flannery O'Connor says, "technique in the minds of many is something rigid, something like a formula that you impose on the material; but in the best stories it is something organic, something that grows out of the material, and this being the case, it is different for every story of any account that has ever been written" (67). I think this was a barrier in the earliest part of the novel. Coming off of writing a bout of short stories and creative non-fiction shortly before that, I made lengthy exposition, descriptive and colorful, even if the colors were dry and boring. I felt that the work would be insufficient or unimpressive if it lacked poetic qualities or literary resilience. However, Young Adults, especially teen, readers generally are not concerned with these writerly intentions, and for those that *are*, they are likely reading Austin, Dickens, or Tolkien (if they are not avoiding imaginative fiction altogether). This is not to say that fantasy cannot be poetic, since it most certainly exists in Tolkien's prose, but it is not a *primary* concern in YA fantasy over other essentials like characterization, pacing, and believability. I think poetic language in YA fantasy is most effective when it is subtle, not present in overt poetic structures but in the unusual arrangement of familiar language.

Most of the ideas for *The Lightbringer* came to me in the pre-writing process, asking "what if?" type questions. But through writing and overcoming roadblocks, new ideas generated to fix problems. This required deviations from the original outline, the plot, and my own plans for the characters. "You have to be willing to change *anything* during the creation phase; only that way can you make the story be true to yourself. There's nothing sacred about your original idea— it was just a starting point" (Card 65).

A direct example occurred in the writing of Breck's first respite at the church, shortly following a battle with a Devourer. Originally, Breck interacted with several citizens, engaging in conversations about their individual experience with the Terra. Card writes that "nothing is sillier than a story that has some great event in the world that provokes only *one* response from society at large. Never in the history of the world has any society been perfectly unanimous in its response to any event" (35). Considering that these refugees in the church have also encountered Belthar, they are not only afraid of the Terra but also suspicious of anything other-worldly. At this point, Breck and Tom have already been shaped by their experiences with both the Terra and Belthar and appear as outsiders. Breck, sensing this, hurries to escape the pressure of a hundred eyes, watching him with defensive anticipation. Garth, then, must separate the boys and their families from the general population, effectively protecting them from the upheaval that their presence would cause. This change forced me to move details about Ragnos, one of earth's *Logarians*, to later in the novel.

Card also talks about the importance of *rules*: "Because speculative fiction always differs from the knowable world, the reader is uncertain about what can and can't happen in the story *until* the writer has spelled out the rules. And you, as a writer, can't be certain of anything until *you* know the rules as well" (36). This idea has been a challenge, not because I do not know the rules, but because the rules are complex, and of course I wanted the reader to appreciate and understand the full spectrum of these rules' effects on the history of the Lightborne. But, at the same time, I needed to avoid burdening the story or detracting from the characterization in order to lay the groundwork for how Belthar's world works and the limits of the Terra. Belthar's character was originally very flat; he

spent all his time explaining answering the boys' direct questions and telling stories about Zariel beyond the scope of the question. The goal was not to simply provide history but through those explanations to demonstrate the limitations of magic and the Terranox power. However, I had to once again heed Card's advice be willing to deviate from Belthar's original character, or at least the way he had been constructed in my mind, in order for him to be an interesting and necessary rather than a walking encyclopedia on alien worlds.

I turned to Card for help with presenting alien language in the novel. Rather than going as far as Tolkien to invent an entirely new language, Card points out that there are other ways that this can be handled; for example, the protagonist could already understand the language and interpret it in his or her native language, or the author can choose to only introduce new words for concepts that do not already exist in English (54-55). For me, this was an interesting problem. Mainly, I wanted the world of Zariel to be believable, but the likelihood of English being the primary language on a distant planet was dubious. I solved this through Rellion's understanding of other worlds. English is learned and spoken along with many languages by the people on Zariel because they are a mixture of immigrants, though Harthrend is primarily made up of Lightborne. At the same time, Rellion is a master of Earthspeak, of which Belthar is familiar. Earthspeak is the language of nature, the first and original language, the language that makes magic possible. All language is derivative of Earthspeak, so those who know Earthspeak can easily adjust to new tongues.

Monsters are central characters in *The Lightbringer*; they drive the action, they keep the story pacing forward, and they create suspense. Early in the pre-writing phase, I

read this quote from Card: “Whenever you invent an alien creature, you should invest a great deal of effort in determining *why*, in evolutionary terms, its unusual features would have developed . . . why the alien’s unusual features would have survival value” (50). In *Writing Monsters*, Philip Athans talks about the various places that monsters originate (space, the ocean, underground) and the appeal to each option (35-36). He explains that readers of science-fiction tend to ask *why* a monster is the way that it is. While there’s more latitude for fantasy here because magic explains the distortions and abilities, I still found this relevant for the Terra. Mainly, the Terra are a conglomerate of species, collected by scouring planets across the universe; some are magical, but most are not. Athans’ model encouraged me to think through the origin of each of these creatures, what their home world was like, what the creature was like *before* it was transformed into one of the Terra, and how its particularities affect its action and appearance as one of the Terra. This is evidenced later in the novel as Rellion explains the origins of the Orin, a dominant but peaceful animalistic race that became the Leapers. Understanding the origins of these creatures, I think, makes them more unique and ultimately more terrifying. The metamorphosis into Terra amplified and distorted their already-existing traits. The result was a rediscovery of the way the Leaper acted in the story, in addition to a name change (they were originally called Crawlers—a name now ascribed to a different species in the novel).

Athans’ point about the hidden terror of monster origins also reiterated for me the need for the *Logarians* or Legendaries—ancient monsters that have been buried within the earth since its creation. Athans identifies key areas of the unknown that I have utilized for these monsters: darkness, underground, underwater—these are the non-native places

that are inherently scary because they limit the senses and reduce control (40-48). Joseph Andriano says that the appeal of monsters in fiction is that they “embody what we fear, what we dread . . . monstrous beasts were once a very real threat, it should come as no surprise that our fear of them may be a result of natural selection, hardwired in our brains . . . the fear of being eaten is so primordial” (273).

While I knew early in the process that I wanted to write for Young Adults, I questioned if the inherent horror of the beasts in *The Lightbringer* would be a problem for younger readers. Athans addresses this in *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction*, demonstrating that authors should not avoid difficult subject matter for younger readers—even gore—but should instead consider how the main character responds to what he or she sees (109). This strategy lingered in my thoughts as I wrote the most brutal scenes in *The Lightbringer*, especially in the moment when Breck crushes a Leaper’s spine in his hands. It was important to me that Breck’s point-of-view not dwell on the potential gore or grotesque nature of what he was doing, but rather that the reader sees his willingness to do what is necessary to save Belthar. I see Young Adult as a transition audience, passing from childhood fantasies and idealisms to the harsh realities of life, and beginning to decipher life’s irresolute problems—pain, power inequality, independence and responsibility, moral perspectives and consequences. Athans also mentions that “the secret behind the success of the bigger Young Adult (YA) properties seems to be the growing number of adults who gravitate toward the YA/Teen section. Everyone has seen a grown woman voraciously pouring through *Twilight* on a bus or airplane—and she’s not the only one” (109). Adults have not perfected their responses to the world’s problems, and American young adults are particularly comfortable with

extending their stay at home while they sift through priorities. The YA fantasy and science-fiction genres are currently booming because the same stories translate beyond an age limit, speaking to the needs of both novice and mature readers. Thus, I felt compelled to show violence and death in its true form while still avoiding gore for the sake of the younger readers.

Le Guin says that “when a story’s finished, it’s always less than your vision of it was before it was written. But it may also do more than you knew you were doing, say more than you realized you were saying” (229). After completing the rewrite of the manuscript, I already identify with Le Guin’s point to some degree. I have had so much time to think about this particular story, plotting the major events that would define Breck’s journey and bringing the world to ultimate resolution. I have filed in my memory all the ways in which I wanted that to happen and the various monsters that they would encounter along the way. In the end, some of those bits did not make it into the manuscript, not because I did not want them to but because they were not necessary. I had to sacrifice some world-building aspects of the story in order to give the reader what was really important—the characters.

Faith in Fantasy

Glover says that “imaginative writing fills two functions: it provides an outlet for the human’s desire to mimic his creator, using material ready at hand, and it assists in drawing home to readers the inner truths which have greater force when absorbed through an imaginative medium than when given in philosophical or historical form” (30). I received my Bachelor of Science degree in Biblical Studies and Philosophy. I did much of my undergraduate research in the realms of Apologetics and Metaphysics. After

engaging in philosophical discussions with both Christians and non-Christian about the origins of the universe, the existence of God, and the many theological barriers that keep atheists and agnostics from questioning their worldview, I felt more and more like those conversations were not effective. Debating these critical topics did not lead people to change their minds and were often unfruitful or circular. This prompted me to think through covert or subtler ways to opening dialogue, allowing people to realize these questions and consider the possibilities on their own.

As I contemplated literature as an option, I wondered how my Christian friends and family would interpret my writing. In *The Christian Imagination*, Leland Ryken writes that “the bigger obstacle to letting literature be literature among Christians has been a naive belief that literature is somehow a direct rendition of reality” (24). This was the ideology of my home church. This is why my pastor claimed from the pulpit that Harry Potter and Pokémon were not allowed. The fear that a child might misinterpret literature as reality was rampant. I think this fear among Christians spawns from faith in a book, a work of literature in and off itself, the canonized Scripture. Pastors and parents fear that their children, who are taught that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, will misdiagnose other literary works as sources of truth rather than maintaining a reliance purely on Scripture. This discounts the ability for literature to be a carrier of truth, even if that truth is not *fact*, which is self-defeating, considering that the Bible is in fact a literary work containing many genres and styles of writing.

Le Guin makes the same point from a slightly different angle: “Inexperienced readers think writers write only from experience. They believe that the characters believe what the writer believes. The idea of the unreliable narrator takes some getting used to”

(237). Le Guin here is warning against this mentality, which is why she suggests it is akin to new or naive readers. But it rings true for me and my early fears of writing. I felt as if each time one of my characters said a curse word, thought something inappropriate, or acted out in a particular way that my readers would assume there is a link between the events of the story, or the characters within it, and my personal experience. This feels increasingly risky with close friends and family who might sense similarities between the characters and myself, and I worry that they might begin to expect some sort of commentary about people I know or what I think about the world. But Le Guin combats this fear, saying that the author must be permitted to take these risks and that experienced readers understand this distancing—the separation of the writer from the written text.

Ryken furthers the discussion of the Christian view on literature, iterating that “literature is built on a grand paradox: It is a make-believe world that nonetheless reminds us of real life and clarifies it for us and . . . literary conventions are present in the Bible from start to finish, even in the most historically factual parts” (25). The Bible is full of the fantastic—magic, mythical creatures, miracles—and some Christians fear that children are incapable of distinguishing “true” miracles and magic—performed by God—from the imaginary of the fantastic—appearing in literature. This is not to say that age and maturity are not a factor. For example, I would not want my son to read *Fifty Shades of Grey* (assuming that he had desire to) until I believed he was capable of understanding and differentiating the fiction in that story from real world expectations. This type of censorship though is not afraid or limiting of literature but is a strategy inclined towards engagement, understanding the potential effects on the reader rather than pure restriction. Ryken emphasizes this also, saying that “Christian readers must be discerning and self-

conscious about their responses as they read. A Christian approach to literature involves a continuous testing of the spirits to see if they are from God..." (29).

The most important consideration for me concerning a philosophy of literature lies in the intersection of fiction and faith. I have already claimed in this introduction that readers imitate characters that they know well, implying that the author has a responsibility to his or her readers, to instruct and provide examples for a reader's imagination. Janine Langan reminds us that "we forget that none of our conscious intercourse with the world around us is free from the imagination's input" (64). Even the *real* is interpreted by stories. I see a leaf falling and think of the time my son first picked up a dried oak leaf, brown and crunchy. He scrambled up to it in giddy excitement, waving his arms and hooting. He whipped the leaf around in a circle until he suddenly dropped it and scampered off to the next thing. Now, when I see a leaf, I appreciate its presence, its being, its ability to give the experience of joy and discovery to a child. Now, I have a story that informs my reality. "One of the levels of truth in literature is truthfulness to human experience and external reality" (Ryken 28).

Leland Ryken states, "literature takes reality and human experience as its starting point, transforms it by means of the imagination, and sends readers back to life with renewed understanding of it and zest for it because of their excursions into a purely imaginary realm" (24). Fiction gives the reader a new appreciation for the world, and a Christian interprets this as renewed awe and wonder at God's creation. Ryken goes further to say, "How can a person read literature to the glory of God? By enjoying the beauty that human creativity has produced and recognizing God as the ultimate source of this beauty and creativity" (27). The Christian's use of literature goes far beyond allegory

or biblical allusion. All art is the practice of subcreation patterned after the imagination of the Creator. So, literature benefits the Christian reader in two ways: one, the reader gains new appreciated for real world experiences, and two, the reader sees the beauty in the author's creation as an extension of God's creativity.

Robert Siegel says that “the imagination is constructive of reality, and metaphor and symbol are the means to creating and discovering new knowledge in all literary forms, but especially in poetry and fantasy” (348). This is the purpose of my writing. To show real things through a new lens—the lens of metaphor. This is not unlike parables in Scripture; Jesus creates myths, which have lasted for thousands of years, that teach fundamental truths and principles about humanity. Siegel connects this principle to fantasy, saying that “when fantasy touches upon ultimate questions, matters of origin and destiny, of transformation between (and including) birth and death, it can create literary myth” (352). The Lightborne have specific beliefs about their origins, considering that they came into existence at the same time as the Terra. We only know that they were preceded by the Elves and the Orin. While *The Lightbringer* only gives us glimpses into this world, I imagine subsequent novels providing deeper dives into Zariel, the history of the Lightbringers, and the Lightborne's mythos surrounding creation.

Fantasy helps readers to transcend their world and experience life outside of their limited worldview: “Though fantasy has much else to offer, its strongest attraction for us may lie in its power to take us out of our skins—away from the small, limited, half-life that is our ordinary consciousness—and to give us an experience of a larger, more complete life, in which we hear the music of the turning spheres” (Siegel 356). Fantasy allows us to engage with difficult circumstances, decisions, or life events (like death) and

process them in a risk-free environment, preparing ourselves to deal with them in real life. Le Guin says that “Through story, every culture defines itself and teaches its children how to be people and members of their people...” (207). Further, she notes that “the intellectual usefulness of literature is not that it necessarily tells us the truth about an issue but rather that it serves as a catalyst to thinking about the great issues of life” (O’Connor 30). Whether Christian or not, what higher earthly honor is there than to contribute to one’s society in this way, to participate in the crafting and shaping of society through the creating of literature. I hope that someday my son, as a young adult, will read my work and find truth in its story—a story that does not simply fantasize reality but, rather, brings reality to life in new and unfamiliar ways.

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CHAPTER I

MELTING

“Seriously, Tom. Is there any game you can’t destroy me at?” Breck said, dropping the controller on the floor.

“No. I will always beat you at every game. It’s in our DNA,” Tom said.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Um, yes it does. You’ve got your football, your muscles, your brains, blah blah blah . . . and I’ve got *this*,” Tom said, pointing to the flat-panel television mounted on his bedroom wall. “It’s okay to be jealous. I would be . . . if I were you.”

Breck’s phone vibrated in his pocket. He slipped it out and the screen glowed, “12:48 p.m.” He plucked a stress ball off of Tom’s dresser and tossed it at his head.

“Dude!” Tom said, swatting the ball away but keeping his eyes fixed on the screen. “Why is it always violence with you?”

“Shut up. C’mon, we’re gonna be late for fifth period.”

“Hold up. I’m right at the end of this level.”

“Fine, but you’re taking the heat if we’re late,” Breck said, pacing across the hallway to the restroom.

“I always do!” Tom called after him.

Breck splashed cold water on his face and checked himself in the mirror. His copper-toned hair lay to one side, except for a cowlick at the front—which forced it straight up—and another on the left side of his head, mushrooming a section of wild

locks. He wet his hands and forced the hair flat, knowing it would spring to life again as soon as it had dried. A small scar at the bridge of his nose was still pink from a nasty break during football season. His orthopedist set the bone, but it had healed slightly crooked. Blue eyes were darkened by the gray of his t-shirt. Below pronounced cheek bones, stubble shadowed a square jaw. His neck, thickened by years of two-a-day lifts, pressed out towards angled shoulders. He pursed his lips and nodded at himself.

Something flashed in the mirror. Tom stood outside the doorway, holding up his phone. “Oh, man . . . this is perfect,” he said before turning and bounding down the stairs.

Breck bolted after him. “Seriously, Dude!”

Tom beat him out the door and vanished into the driveway. Breck stopped to scoop up his backpack and lock the door behind them, knowing that Tom had already sealed himself inside his mother’s convertible. A wave of intense heat staggered him for a moment as he reached the driveway. He had grown accustomed to the harsh Florida sun, but the pre-summer months were usually moderate. It was nearly April, and it seemed that the summer scorch had arrived early.

Breck leaned in and tapped on the passenger side window. “Alright. Open up,” he said.

“You have to promise not to kill me first.”

“For how long?”

“At least for today.”

“I might be able to manage that . . . are you going to delete that pic?” Breck said.

“We both know the answer to that.” Tom turned the key in the ignition and the engine purred. “But, you’ve got no car. So, I could just leave you here and let you face Mrs. Beringer’s wrath tomorrow morning.”

Breck sighed. “Just open the door already?” The black lock mechanism popped up, and Breck peeled the door back. He climbed into the seat and immediately clobbered Tom in the shoulder.

“Gah! Dude,” Tom shouted, clutching his arm. “You’re going to break me!”

“You’ll live,” Breck said.

Tom McKerrick was taller, lankier, and thinner than Breck. He was a second-string wide receiver, so being light on his toes worked in his favor until he had to take a hit from a padded brute at full sprint. Breck met Tom on his third birthday—the day he, his mother, and his father moved to Florida and into the house next door. As they pulled into the driveway for the first time, Breck pointed to Tom’s house, which was adorned with blue and green balloons, orange and yellow ribbons running along the outer rim of the yard, and an enormous “Happy Birthday” sign strung across the open garage. “Party?” Breck had said. Their parents met, and Tom immediately invited Breck inside and offered to share his cake.

Tom pressed a button on the console, and the sedan’s hard top retreated into a hidden trunk compartment. He shifted into drive and stepped on the gas, peeling out of the driveway.

Breck braced against the dashboard, holding his body firm against the seat until he could pull his seatbelt across and click it into place. “Dang it, Tom. You know I’m still on edge with that crap.”

“Now we’re even,” he said.

Breck closed his eyes and leaned his head back. The warm air rushed around him. He spread his arms out, and his hand brushed along a small toy train stashed in the center console. His fingers remembered its thin plastic wheels that teetered to adjust for changing surfaces, the edged top that shaped it into a caboose, and its ball bearing ends that contained magnets for attaching other train cars. Tom brought it everywhere. At one time, it belonged to Tom’s little brother, Ethan. Ethan was only five when he was diagnosed with a rare malformation in his brain. He passed in his hospital bed a few weeks later, Breck and Tom both at his side.

“Check this out,” Tom said, grabbing the phone, swiping across it with his thumb, and typing with one hand. On cue, Breck reached out, steadied the steering wheel, and watched the road until Tom held the phone out for him. “Check it.”

Across the top of the screen, scrolling words showed Thursday: 8:33 a.m. 104°.

“104?” Breck shouted. “That can’t be right. Not yet, even this close to summer.”

“Scroll down,” Tom said.

A days-old headline was linked at the bottom of the page: *Meteorological Anomaly: A Once-in-a-Lifetime Chance*. “Meteors?”

“Asteroids actually. Pretty big ones too. Expecting a few of them to brush the atmosphere as they pass. Should make for a good show, pieces breaking off into meteor showers and what not.”

“What’s that have to do with the weather?”

“‘Atmospheric friction’ or something like that. These things are so big that they’re heating up the atmosphere. It’s like temporary global warming,” Tom replied.

Breck rubbed his forehead. The clouds whizzed by in a blur of gray. “That sounds like a conspiracy theory. If it’s already happened, why can’t we see it yet?”

“Other side of the globe right now, Dude, and the rocks are traveling with the rotation of the earth. Tomorrow morning is prime time for the coastal states.”

Breck thought for a moment and cocked his head. “So . . . we won’t be going to school tomorrow, then?”

“My parents will be on the road to Boston before the sun comes up.”

“Right, they’re scoping things out before the marathon.”

“Does your dad know that we’ll be alone?” Tom said.

“Would it matter if he did?”

“Nope.”

“Thought so.”

“On a completely unrelated note, your hair is waving at me,” Tom said.

“Ugh.” Breck pressed his hands over the cowlicks, matting them down. “I swear, one of these days I’m just going to shave it off.”

“Then I’d have to look at your weird-shaped head.”

They turned into the school parking lot where only a few spots were still unoccupied at the outskirts. Tom found the nearest one and darted in, only braking at the last moment to squeal to a stop. He pressed the convertible button and waited for the top to return and lock into place. He plucked Ethan’s toy train from the center console and shoved it into his pocket before stepping out. The bell sounded, echoing like a broken fire alarm. Fifth period had already started. They grabbed their backpacks and sprinted for the door.

Tom was slightly faster, because Breck's backpack actually had books in it, and arrived first. He held the door for Breck, sticking his leg out as Breck hurdled through the opening. Breck slid belly-down along the tiled floor.

"Served!" Tom said, laughing as he leapt over Breck.

Breck scrambled to his feet and raced after him. He rounded the corner, passing rows of alternating red and black lockers, and heard Mrs. Beringer's voice echo through the hallway like a grandmother scolding a toddler. He hurried into the classroom, where Tom stood, immobilized, just a few steps in.

Tom stared at the ground, thumbs tucked beneath the straps of his backpack.

"Mrs. Ber—"

"I'm not finished," Mrs. Beringer said, muting Tom with a raised hand.

Mrs. Beringer's hair had grayed over the last few years. She claimed to have once been a professor of some prestige, but moved to Palm Bay to live near her only granddaughter. She wore a khaki skirt that brushed her ankles, a white blouse that ruffled at the collar, and flat black shoes that were boxed at the front—Tom called them "foot bricks."

"This is the third time you've been tardy since you promised me you wouldn't be late again," she continued. "You will go directly to the principal's office without another word."

"Should I pass 'Go?'" Tom said, shrugging.

Mrs. Beringer's face reddened and her jaw tightened, pressing out her lower lip.

"Wait, Mrs. Beringer," Breck said, stepping between them. "I made Tom late—"

"That's enough," she said, spitting the words. "Out. Now."

“No need to cover for me, Breck. It’s clear that the professor here has made up her mind,” Tom said, returning to the hallway.

“Mrs. Beringer, honestly, if you’re going to punish someone—”

“I’m in the middle of class, Breck. This is not the appropriate time. Please, take your seat,” she said, motioning to the back, where two empty chairs were squarely tucked under a wooden tabletop.

Breck looked around the classroom. Some faces were stretched, laughing to themselves, some stared down at phone screens, but many were tight with bitter resentment, watching to see if the football star would be obedient as expected. Even Marissa, the blonde ballerina with a self-proclaimed obsession over Breck’s biceps, suppressed a smile. She was beautiful, but his stomach churned whenever she would hover around him at the gym, palming his arms, finding convenient places to stretch within sight, and leaving inappropriate notes in his gym bag.

“No thanks,” Breck said to Mrs. Beringer, leaving the classroom.

A minute later, he caught up with Tom, who was already sitting in a molded plastic chair outside the principal’s office.

“What are you doing?” Tom asked. His arms were barred across his chest.

“She’s being unfair,” Breck replied, joining him in an adjacent chair. It was bright blue with a square cutout in the back. His body gradually slid down and forward from the greasy residue shed by sweaty kids after the occasional gym class brawl. He tried not to touch any part of the chair with his bare hands, leaning forward on his elbows.

“I’m the kid who gets in trouble, Breck, even when I haven’t done anything wrong. I mean, the principal knows me by name! That’s not you. Go back to class. I guarantee that old squeaker will thank you for returning.”

Breck sighed. “You always do this . . . act like the world’s out to get you.”

“You gonna deny it? They all treat me like this.”

“Except Mr. Bonks. He always calls on you in class and asks you about what you’re going to do with your life.”

“Yeah, but he’s eighty and nearly deaf. You know he’s only here for the football team. I don’t listen to a single thing he says in class, and I’m still passing.”

“Well, we’ll find you a college that prefers students who are strong in Astronomy,” Breck said, shrugging.

“I’m still not going.”

“We’ll see. I’ll fill out the applications for you if I have to.”

The door creaked open and a skinny, bald man stood in the doorway. It was Dr. Garothe—the Assistant Principal and Head Coach of the football team. His opal, button-up shirt contrasted his light brown skin. His shirt tails were tucked into black jeans, narrowing down to dirt-flaked boots. He had given up his job with NASA a decade ago, then moved to Palm Bay to be work at the school. Breck thought Garothe’s experience was a weird fit for the team, but he’d been a good coach and always seemed to look out for Tom and him.

“Boys,” Garothe said, nodding a greeting.

“Coach!” they said in unison.

“Phew,” Tom said. “I’m so glad it’s you.”

“Where’s the principal?” Breck asked.

“Mrs. Pencil Skirt?” Tom replied.

“Right. Her.”

Garothe cleared his throat. “Just because I’m your coach doesn’t mean you can speak poorly of Kate in front of me, nor should you ever.” He wagged his finger between the two boys then cross his arms. “So, Tom, what happened this time?”

“Just late.”

“How late?”

“Late enough.”

“I was just as late, Coach,” Breck interjected.

“I know,” Garothe interrupted. “I saw you arrive together.” He leaned out and looked up and down the hallway. “Both of you, come with me.”

The boys followed Garothe down a short hallway and into an office as big as the living room in Breck’s house. Breck had been here many times before during football season. He thought it was odd that the Vice Principal had the largest office of all the staff, even the Principal. Perhaps it was an advantage of being Head Coach, but Garothe’s office lacked any sport paraphernalia. Instead, book shelves lined the walls, holding an array of thick books about Astronomy, Geology, Metaphysics, and unconventional topics like Space Flight and Time Travel.

“Well, then. Let’s discuss this morning’s misdemeanor,” Garth said, rocking back in his chair.

Breck hated not having his own car, having to rely on someone else to get him around. But he remembered every millisecond of the accident. The jerking of the wheel

when the girl appeared in the middle of the highway. He was close enough to see her shoulder-length red hair. Her orange eyes glowed like the morning sun meeting a cloudless sky. The tires caught, collapsed, and vaulted the car into the steel guardrail. His nostrils burned, hot with the bending, crunching, and scraping of metal. The air bag exploded into a smog of dust and gravel. The swirling sun appeared as the roof split away. The steering console pinned his legs. He covered his head with his arms as his body whipped the ground. He hung sideways from the car when it finally stopped. He thought he was dead, that every bone in his body had shattered, and that, at the least, his insides were a mix of red and shredded organs. But his skin was dry, and he could move his arms. He pushed against the steering wheel and the entire column bent away. The police found him lying in the grass, breathing, bruised, scraped, but whole.

“You got that, Breck?” Garothe said. He leaned forward with hands propped on his knees. The oddity of both Garothe and Tom bending before him finally popped Breck back into the present.

“Oh. Um, sure.”

“Hmm,” Tom said

“Well, then. Take this with you to class,” Principal Garothe said, tearing a half-sheet from a clipboard on his desk. “It’ll excuse you for your tardiness.”

Tom took the note and stood, pulling at Breck’s sleeve.

Once they were in the hallway, a good distance from Garothe’s office, Tom said, “That was weird, right?”

“Huh?”

“What do you mean, ‘Huh?’ Weren’t you listening?”

“I zoned,” Breck said, shaking his head. He stepped over a green spot of something mashed into the tile. The calking had been blackened over time by thousands of dirty flip flops.

“Still bothering you?” Tom said, his green eyes, dark like swamp moss, staring.

“Just doesn’t make sense, ya know? Feels like I shouldn’t be here, or at least shouldn’t be walking. Can’t seem to shake it . . . whatever. So, what happened in there?”

“He’s giving us a pass on being late today. but he wants us to meet this guy tomorrow afternoon,” Tom said.

“What guy?”

“Didn’t want to say.” Tom tightened his shoulders up into a shrug. “After school, we’re supposed to wait outside for him.”

“For what?”

“To talk.”

“Like a counselor or something?” Breck said.

“Probably.”

“Ugh. I’ve seen enough of those. I’ll bet that’s why he didn’t say.”

The next doorway led into Mr. Bonks’s Astronomy class. Tom pushed the door open and handed over the note. “Hey, Bonkers.”

“Hello, Tom. Breck. You’re just in time for our discussion on red and yellow giants. I hope you’ve read the chapter.”

“Never do,” Tom said, finding a spot at an open desk.

“Of course you did! Have a seat. We’re on page 172 of our textbooks.”

Breck slipped into the seat beside Tom, dropping his backpack to the floor with a *thunk*. Tom stared at Breck for a second before asking. “You don’t have your book, do you?”

“There’s actually nothing in my backpack, except lunch of course.”

“You’re the worst,” Breck said, pulling the astronomy tome from his pack. Breck and Tom agreed that lockers were a waste of time, so Breck carried all of his books on his back. Tom only brought the essentials, especially during an open-book exam.

Mr. Bonks flipped off the lights so he could doodle on his computer screen, which was mirrored by a projection on the wall. The students immediately tuned out Mr. Bonks’ droning voice. Breck’s eyelids grew heavy, just catching Tom pumping his fist in self-congratulation at a high score on his phone.

As the class dragged on, Breck’s mind repeatedly wandered back to the conversation with Garothe, making mental passes between the redhead standing stiff on the pavement, the subsequent car accident, and the mystery man with whom he was expected to meet without any confirmation of intentions.

Breck was rubbing his eyes again when the dismissal bell rang.

“Hold on, Mr. Bonks. I think Breck’s hair has a question,” Tom said.

Breck shoved his book into his backpack, kicked Tom just above the ankle, and said, “Thanks, Mr. Bonks. See you tomorrow.”

The old man smiled and waved in the wrong direction.

“You gonna come over?” Tom asked when he’d caught up to Breck.

“My dad got in this morning. I haven’t seen him yet. I probably ought to do that and get started on some homework.”

“Nothing’s due til’ Monday. You’ve got the whole weekend for homework.”

“You mean ‘we,’ right? *We*’ve got the whole weekend for homework.”

Tom laughed. “Sure.”

As soon as they stepped outside, Breck felt the intense Florida sun coat his skin. Moisture rose immediately to the surface to protect his body, and his shirt pressed wet blotches on his back as the two ran to the car and yanked open the doors. After a minute of allowing the air conditioning to blow out the stored heat, they crawled in. The metal end of the seatbelt stung his hand as he pulled it across his chest.

Tom shouted along to the radio. The houses were evenly spaced for the most part, each on a quarter acre lot with freshly mown lawns. The older houses were obvious because of their stucco exterior, as if globs of brown muck had been slapped to the walls then carved into various forms of quadrilaterals like pieces of shattered shells on the beach. Popcorn-style concrete distinguished the newer houses, tiny bulbs of paint texturing the walls. Breck and Tom’s neighborhood was considered upscale for the Palm Bay area. Hurricane season usually deterred construction of two-story houses, but Breck’s mother wanted a big house after spending several years in a crowded New York apartment.

Breck fished the canal behind his house when the water level was high enough and Tom’s other neighbors weren’t around scaring all the fish away. The neighborhood drew young families with its community pool and public park with a playground, which always seemed crowded. Tom’s parents were a bit too germaphobic for the communal spaces when he was younger, but they had a private pool, access to the canal, and only a twenty-minute drive separated them from the beach, which gave the boys plenty to do.

Breck enjoyed the small-town feel—kids riding scooters up and down the street, basketball hoops at the end of driveways, and couples walking their dogs in the evening without carrying nightsticks or baseball bats to ward off predators. People stopped and talked to each other in his neighborhood, unlike the grocery store or mall where strangers only talk if they collide—sometimes not even then.

Breck's father had worked in the New York stock exchange, Wall Street, and all that, when he met Breck's mother. When Breck was born, they decided to buy a house in Florida to escape the cold and busyness of the crowded city. Breck's father travelled back and forth to upkeep the business he'd grown. His mother never had a job, that he knew of, but he'd often stay with the McKerricks for days or even a week at a time while she was travelling. He had assumed that she was spending that time in New York, but sometimes his father would come home first, and they always acted as if they hadn't seen each other in a while.

After Breck's mom passed away from a heart defect, his dad's trips to New York grew steadily longer until it was normal for him to be gone for weeks at a time, leaving Breck with the McKerricks, or alone to fend for himself when he got older. But he always had money. His dad sometimes split without saying "goodbye," but he never forgot to leave an envelope full of cash to last a few weeks; it was his way of taking care of Breck without having to be a father.

Through the passenger window, the greens of palms, browns of pines, and yellows of dried grass blended with the passing milky gray stripes of concrete driveways. The car rumbled gently over the graveled road. Breck closed his eyes, focusing on the vibration of the tires, once again determined to fight off sleep, as suddenly the memory of

the girl on the highway became clear in a way it had never been before. He saw that she was a teen, like him. Her features were sharp and fiery from the orange in her eyes to the curling, red tips of her hair. She had stared right back at him, tracking him with her eyes. Her lips moved, whispering something, but only the hissing of her breath was audible. As the car rolled, breaking apart, there was a moment when the spinning slowed and the street was empty. The girl had vanished, or had never been there to begin with.

CHAPTER II

WIND AND FIRE TRAILS

“Hey,” Tom said, prodding Breck with his index finger. “You gonna get out or do you need to stare a little longer?”

The hypnotic humming of the convertible had lulled Breck into a daydream. He popped up and swatted away Tom’s finger. “Keep that nasty poker to yourself!” Breck said.

“Whatever, I washed my hands at least once today,” Tom said, wiggling his fingers towards Breck’s face.

“Seriously, Dude, I will literally break each one.” Breck said, opening his door and retreating from the car.

Mr. McKerrick stood in the garage, face partially shaded by the darkness. He was shirtless above khaki flip-flops and black pants made of windbreaker material. Breck always suppressed a bit of jealousy at Mr. McKerrick’s build—tall and thin but ripped with protruding muscle definition; it was the frame of a triathlete.

“Hey, Guys.”

“Hey, Dad,” the boys said in unison.

“Should we expect you for dinner, Breck?”

“Nah,” Tom answered for him. “Breck’s hair has karate lessons tonight.”

Breck scowled at Tom. “Actually . . . my dad’s in town, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s already off to the next thing. So, probably...”

“Hm. Well, we’ll set a plate out for you . . . just in case.”

“Farewell, Breck. Farewell, Breck’s hair,” Tom said, bowing.

Breck shook his head and crossed the yard. His father’s sports car, its ebony coating flawless, sat parked in the driveway. He slid his fingers along the hood, making a sound like a dry squeegee on glass. The front door to the house swung open before Breck could reach the knob. His dad stood with keys and suitcase in hand, his black hair shined, lying flat on its own—which aggravated Breck. His skin was tan and toned, with the beginnings of wrinkles around his eyes. A navy blazer fit tightly around his torso. Freshly pressed black slacks pointed over threaded, black leather shoes. They stared at each other for a few moments.

“Hey,” his dad finally said.

“Hey.” Breck dropped his backpack, letting it hit the hardwood floor with a *thud*.

“Going somewhere?”

“An emergency meeting. I’m leaving for Los Angeles in a few hours.”

“You weren’t even going to say ‘hi?’”

“You know how these things are, Breck,” he replied, stepping around to the front door. “It’s a last-minute call. I’ll be back Monday morning.”

“Okay?”

“I spoke with Tom’s dad earlier. They’ll be expecting you tonight, then you two are on your own for the weekend.”

Breck watched as his dad paced away, wheeling a suitcase that could fit his entire wardrobe—too much for a weekend getaway. “You been saying we’d go car shopping for three weeks now. How am I supposed to get around?”

“Rent something. I’ll cover it.” He tapped a button on his key ring and waited for the trunk to open, jiggling the keys in his hands.

“I’m eighteen, Dad!” Breck shouted. His knuckles whitened, clutching the doorknob. His heart was pounding in his ears. He wanted to run out, grab the man by his coat flaps, and shake his head loose. After ten years of waiting, he wanted to scream, “Be my father or stay the hell in New York!”

“Right . . .” his dad said, hoisting his suitcase into the trunk of his two-door sports car. “I’ll talk to the McKerricks. We’ll figure something out.” He opened the driver’s side door and waved. “Love you, Son,” he called, disappearing before Breck could respond.

Breck slammed the door behind him and kicked his book-filled backpack, which throbbed immediate regret in his toes and ankle. He stomped up the stairs and flung himself face down onto his bed. In the middle of a pillow-muted string of curses, a low rumbling stopped him. The bed shook for a few seconds under him, or perhaps he’d just been light-headed, teetering back and forth until his head settled. He stood and the ground steadied. He was convinced that must have deprived himself of oxygen for too long. His phone buzzed in his pocket.

“Yeah?”

“Dude, did you feel that?” Tom said.

“You felt it too? I thought it was just me.”

“Nah. Mom’s freaking out. A bunch of her fancy vases and what-not shattered all over the place.”

“Was it an earthquake?”

“In Florida? I doubt it. I’m streaming a bunch of newsfeeds, waiting to hear something. Get your butt over here!”

Breck hung up and hurried down the staircase, stepping on clusters of dismantled picture frames, narrowly catching himself on the staircase railing. A photo with Breck and Tom’s families side-by-side lay against the door. The boys were six when the scene had been captured, wearing matching baseball uniforms. Breck and Tom knelt in the forefront, Breck’s hair—blonder then—swooping up and to one side. The Palm Bay Aquarians—a team name that they’d never been too fond of.

He made sure to lock the door, since natural disasters seemed to bring out the worst in bad people, even luring the good ones into things like looting.

Tom stood outside his front door, motioning for Breck to hurry. “Dude! C’mon, we’re missing it!”

“Hello, Breck,” Mrs. McKerrick called in a sing-song voice from the living room where she was busily vacuuming shards of glass. Mr. McKerrick, teetering on a step-stool, secured their glass cabinets with duct tape.

“Hey! Sorry about your vases,” Breck said, stopping for a moment before Tom gripped the front of his shirt and dragged him up the stairs. “Good to see you.”

In Tom’s room, two empty chip bags were crumpled at the foot of his bed, crumbs scattered on the bedspread and carpet.

“You’ve been home for like ten minutes.”

“I’m a nervous eater, okay? Look,” Tom said, pointing at a frozen image on a wall-mounted computer monitor. He’d paused the video on a zoomed shot of a fire

engulfed meteor, green flame trailing behind it. Clouds and blue skies surrounded it at the edges of the screen.

“What game is this?” Breck said.

“It’s not a game, Dude! This is real footage!” Tom said, hands gripping his hair.

“Seriously? Where is this?”

“Here, Dude, in Florida!”

Breck took a deep breath. “Are you sure this is real? Mr. Bonks said these would burn up in the atmosphere before they got this close.”

“It *just* happened, Breck. There’s no way someone had time to fake a whole video.”

Breck crossed his arms and pursed his lips. “Hmm . . . but you said the meteor shower wasn’t until tomorrow.”

“Right! That’s why I’m freaking out.” Tom tapped the left arrow on his keyboard until he found the section of video he wanted and resumed it.

One familiar news anchor was moving off-screen. His cheeks were wet and red. A lady in a gray blazer stayed on-screen. Her face was blank, eyes frantically searching the teleprompter tablet in front of her. She finally looked up. “My apologies, everyone. We’ve just had an influx of information on a developing story. The passing asteroid belt seems to be behaving erratically. Several rogue meteors have broken away from their course and turned sharply towards earth. There has not been confirmation that these can penetrate our atmosphere. Here’s a clip of some viewer-submitted footage.”

A white streak in the sky led to a pulsing red speck. The videographers voice was gruff and thick. “Said these’d be ‘ere tomorra, they did. Yet we got one right here

already. All on its own.” Suddenly, the red dot began to grow with increasing brightness, and the trailing white seemed to fade. “Hm. Summin’ seems to be ‘appenin here.” Then the picture blurred, shaking up and down rapidly. He managed a final “oh shit!” before the screen went blank and returned to the reporter.

She was arguing with someone off-screen until there was an ambient sound of throat clearing. “Um, sorry. We’re still trying to learn more details. Here’s another clip from a different angle.” Breck pressed his palm around his neck, feeling his heartbeat quicken. This was the video that Tom had originally paused. A camera with a powerful zoom showed a glowing rock engulfed in white fire, burning across the sky. Its jagged surface jutted out in all directions like fractured crystal. Green flame trailed behind it. The meteor seemed to slow, so that the jagged detail of the rock became clear, though it continued to burn. Then it surged downward, disappearing for a moment while the cameraperson zoomed out and found it again, barreling toward earth. The screen returned to the news anchor, whose mouth dangled open.

“Oh, shit,” Tom said.

“Oh, shit,” Breck said.

“Dude.”

“Seriously.”

The news anchor blinked hard and shook her head. “We’ve got to take a break . . . we’ll bring you more on the anomaly when we return.” She moved off-screen, but the commercials never started. Instead, the camera showed an empty desk. Indecipherable chatter echoed softly in the background. Several people were all talking at once. After half a minute of nothing, the screen shook. Settled. Shook again, and a smattering of

voices screamed. Settled. Then the screen scrambled for a few seconds, leaving the camera angle momentarily crooked before the video ended.

“That’s it?” Breck asked with hands resting on top of his head. Pushing locks of light hair between his fingers.

Tom tapped around on the screen. “Seems so. None of the other videos are working—like all the links have been locked.”

“Scroll up. Where’d this happen?”

Tom moved the screen around until he found the location of the news channel.

A note on the screen showed *Serving Miami-Dade County*. “That’s three hours from here, and we still felt the impact.”

“Do you think they’ll evacuate us?”

“To where?” Breck replied.

“We gotta show my parents. Mom! Dad! Can you come up here?” Tom yelled.

After a minute without a response, Breck peeled back the door and could hear the airy horning of the vacuum cleaner. “I’ll go.” Breck’s feet grazed the front edges of the stairs as he hurried down. Mr. and Mrs. McKerrick were still busily securing the fragile décor. “Mom. Dad.”

Mrs. McKerrick took no notice, humming to herself. Mr. McKerrick turned and tossed a plastic cylinder of empty Scotch tape at her, which missed and rolled under the couch. He slapped his forehead, then shouted, “Mary!”

Her head snapped up. “Almost finished.”

Mr. McKerrick pointed to Breck, who waited at the base of the staircase for their attention. Mrs. McKerrick clicked off the vacuum. “Everything alright?” she asked.

Breck shrugged. “You’ve just got to see it for yourself.”

They followed Breck up the stairs and into Tom’s room. Tom was typing frantically.

“What is it?” Mr. McKerrick said.

“You’re not going to believe this,” Tom said, leaning forward on his elbows.

“Just show them the video.”

“Can’t.”

“Why not?” Breck asked.

“It’s gone, Dude. Everything. First the videos stopped opening. Then the website went down. Within thirty seconds it was back up. But look,” Tom motioned to the headline on the same site where he and Breck had found the meteor video. *Minor Earthquake strikes Southern Florida. Aftershock felt as far north as Jacksonville.*

“Whaaaaaaaaat?” Breck said, sitting on the bed.

“Do you realize what just happened?” Tom asked, glancing at Breck.

“Huh?”

“We just witnessed a government cover-up.”

“I think we did...” Breck received a quick high-five from Tom.

“This might be the best day of my life.”

“Ahem,” Mr. McKerrick said. “Would someone like to include us in the conversation?”

Tom told them about the asteroid anomaly, of which they were already aware, then the videos he’d found of the confused newscaster, and ultimately the strange scene of the course-recalibrating meteor, which led up to the earthquake.

Mrs. McKerrick's hands bent beside her hips and her tongue moved back and forth in front of her lower teeth as if she were rolling a gumball around. Mr. McKerrick's head tilted and his arms were threaded in front of his stomach.

"You're telling me that you think a meteor caused that aftershock?" Mr. McKerrick asked.

"I know so," Tom replied. "I can't show you the video now, but it's bound to resurface. They can't keep it hidden forever."

"Besides you two, everyone else seems to be saying 'earthquake.' Maybe it's coincidence," Mrs. McKerrick said.

"You don't believe me."

"Hold on. We're not saying that. It's just a bit much to grasp," said Mr. McKerrick.

"I can't believe this. It's not just me. Breck saw it too. Why would we make this up?"

Breck suddenly felt out of place. He loved being at the McKerrick's, and overall their home was always welcoming. But on the rare occasion that there was a feud, he stepped out of the conversation. Breck didn't want his frustration with his father to bleed over to his relationship with the McKerricks. He had enough conflict at home already.

"Did you see the impact? Did the meteor strike ground?" Mr. McKerrick said, looking at Tom.

"Well, the footage cut out—"

"And did anyone from these videos say anything about a collision?"

"They were mostly just screaming and running."

Mr. McKerrick tilted his head forward as if he were peeking over the top of imaginary glasses. “That’s my point. We don’t have the facts except what’s right here in front of us now. Those people were scared. For all we know, the meteor burned up before it even got close. I’m not doubting you, Son, but what you saw doesn’t tell the whole story. It is certainly strange that those the footage vanished like you said, but I can’t see a reason right now that anyone would be invested in hiding it. If what you’re suggesting is true, I imagine there will be an officer at our door eventually, telling us to pack up and get out.”

Mr. McKerrick talked to the boys like this when they were in trouble—mainly, he engaged Tom, assuming that Tom was the instigator (though he usually was) and Breck was not equally at fault (which was only occasionally true). But Mr. McKerrick’s words restored calm. Tom’s breath steadied, the flush around his neck and cheeks faded to pale white, and his arms hung loosely, grazing the edges of his pockets.

“Okay.” Tom nodded. “I see your point.”

“Good. Well, we will continue to monitor things before we make a decision about our trip tomorrow. We’d lose the money we’ve invested, but we’ll stay home if needed. That okay with you guys?”

“Sure,” Tom said, nodding.

“Yes, sir. Thank you,” Breck said.

Mr. McKerrick guided his wife out with a hand on the small of her back and turned back to say, “Breck, if you call me ‘Sir’ again, I’m vandalizing your bedroom.”

One eyebrow raised, Breck looked over at Tom.

“He’s serious. I forgot to mow the lawn once and he broke my lava lamp.”

“That was more a public service than punishment. Those things are ugly . . . and fire hazards.”

“And a mess to clean up,” Tom added.

Breck fell back onto Tom’s bed, creating a *whoosh* of air and an explosion of crumbs. “So, you think your dad’s right, about the earthquake and all that?”

“Are you kidding?” Tom said, laughing. “He’s a facts guy. He’d never take my word for it. We’ll have to show him.”

“What do you mean?”

Tom reached into his dresser and retrieved a small camera connected to a series of straps. “With *this*!”

“I’m sure there’s somebody working on it, but last I checked no one’s invented time travel yet.”

“Tomorrow, Dude. If something’s going to happen around here again, I bet it will be then.”

“Hold on.” Breck cleared his throat and sat up. “So, let’s say, hypothetically, another meteor misbehaves and instead of burning up in the atmosphere or continuing past earth, the flaming rock plummets towards earth with enough force to cause a small earthquake. You’re suggesting that we, instead of finding a bomb shelter or fleeing the state, should stand outside and watch?”

“Boy, you really know how to suck the fun out of something . . . but, yes, I guess so.”

“Great. I’ll pack my helmet,” Breck said.

Tom pumped his fist and closed his door, ensuring that no one could overhear.

“There’s a huge clearing out at Palm Bay Regional Park where the soccer fields are. Not so many trees to block our view. I’m thinking that’s our best shot.”

“That’s almost thirty minutes from school.”

“Who said we were going to school?” Tom said, half-smiling and tapping his fingers together with a rolling motion.

“You’re a dork.”

“Cultural conditioning, my friend. You made me this way.”

Breck rolled his eyes and sighed, flopping back onto the bed. “What about Coach? We promised we’d meet that guy tomorrow.”

Tom stared at him with his lips scrunched up. “You know, sometimes I feel like it’s just lookin’ at me.”

“Huh?”

“Your hair . . . it’s like . . . everywhere.”

“Seriously, Dude?” Breck said, covering his head with his arms.

“Don’t worry, Coach will understand. What could be more important than world-ending meteors?” Tom said.

“At the end of the day tomorrow, you’re going to be sitting in detention, basking in disappointment. Or dead . . . we could be dead also.”

“Either way, we’ll be together,” Tom said, tossing himself on the bed beside Breck. “RIP, Breck, Tom, and Breck’s hair. Meteor Hunters.”

CHAPTER III

SHOOTING STARS

Breck lay awake in his empty house. Moon shadows crept along the blank ceiling, stretching through the framed window and casting a cross of intersecting blue light. Each time he began to doze, flashes of the girl with red hair stormed his dreams. She was standing in the middle of the road, then suddenly stretched out in a crater with mangled pieces of his car scattered around her. Breck bunched the sheets up around his throat. His mouth felt dry, and the spread of blankets couldn't seem to break the night's chill. He threw back the covers and made his way to the kitchen. In the soft glow of the refrigerator light, he drank a glass of orange juice, trying to coat the sticky pockets in his throat.

This had become routine since the accident: visions of the girl, her eyes blazing in a penetrating gaze; the bus-sized crater with sparks of flame along its rippled surface; and himself from above, his upshot hair parting the winds, watching the girl vanish, certain that she was dead either by the sheared parts of the car or the traffic immediately behind him. He had looked for her after the accident, once the paramedics arrived and helped him stand—his body was whole but his legs failed under the weight of the mental trauma, the thought that he might have killed her—but she was gone. They carted him away in the ambulance before the wreckage had been searched. No one would tell him if a body was ever found, but his father made him start seeing a psychiatrist the following week, who had prescribed him pebble-sized blue pills to help him sleep. A benzodiazepine—he

only tried it once and couldn't remember the following day; he preferred insomnia to a groggy haze.

Back in his bedroom, Breck turned the television on and left the volume low. Faint movements of light were still visible through the shade of his eyelids. A deep voice spoke in long, smooth strokes, stringing together phrases about the unique features of the autonomous vacuum it was selling. Breck scrunched up his face, held it, then relaxed it—a technique a therapist had shown him. He repeated the same process down his body with each muscle group, tensing and releasing. He focused on the bending of each joint and the coolness of pillow pressed under his neck. His mind went blank.

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Breck forced open his eyes, reaching to silence his phone alarm. 7:03 a.m. He lingered in the shower, breathing in the thick moisture and loosening the residual stiffness that comes with lack of sleep. Pungent green pellets, molded into the pillow-shaped soap, released an odor like bleach with the after-sting of freshly laid tar—a scent he endured in order to combat the surfacing acne on his chin and cheeks. He let the water run over his head, pouring in streams from his chin.

He wiped the fog from the mirror and lay his face in the sink basin for a long time, allowing the cold spray to numb his skin—the sting seemed to flatten the swollen darkness still hanging under his eyes. He sighed as his damp hair rose slowly. “Alright, this is just getting damn ridiculous now,” he said to himself. He retrieved a bottle of green hair glue from beneath the sink—something his father bought him, saying, “Maybe this can tame the wilds?” Breck squirted a glob onto each hand and molded the rebellious locks into spiked clumps. After a few moments, they naturally separated, rising up on the

side and bending away from each other on top. "Screw it," he said, returning to his room. His phone glowed, displayed a flood of messages from Tom:

It's happening!

We need to go soon or we might miss something.

Are you awake yet?

Seriously.

Dude, why do you even have a phone?

I'm coming in two minutes if you don't answer.

Breck quickly tapped a response,

Awake. Ready soon. Parents go or stay?

The TV was still on, and a high-pitched voice, exuberant like an announcer at a pro baseball game, said, "It's a scorcher today! High of 100 degrees. Feels like 105 with a UV index of 10. Don't forget your sunscreen today, folks!"

Breck sighed, dreading the coming hours of standing outside with Tom in the direct sunlight. He dug out an old pair of khaki cargo shorts from his dresser. Small tears on each pant leg exposed his copper skin, but the airflow and thin material would help prevent heat exhaustion. From the clean pile, or at least the pile he deemed clean yesterday, he pulled a pale yellow t-shirt. He knew his feet would sweat since Tom's shenanigan's frequently ended in a fleeing sprint or some kind of chase. So, he chose sneakers.

Breck found his backpack, still overturned from yesterday's brief altercation, and dumped out the contents, replacing it with a towel, water bottle, keys, and wallet. On the living room mantle, his gaze rested for a few moments on an opaque, ceramic jar.

Circular carvings lined the gray, lower half, while the upper half was brown and stamped with cuneiform-type scribbles—something his mother had given to Breck’s dad from her travels. Inside, her remains rested in a heap of soot. Breck thought it a morbid irony that his mother provided her own urn, but his father didn’t like to talk about, so Breck still didn’t know the whole story behind it.

His pocket vibrated.

Tom: Clear. Parents heading to Boston. Dad left his truck for me. I’m outside when you’re ready.

“Bye, Mom,” Breck said to the urn. He twisted the doorknob to let the heat wash over his face. Sweat beads immediately formed on his brow. “This is going to be an awful day,”

Tom propped himself up from the open truck door, his eyes trained on the sky. A serpentine dragon with spurts of flame erupting from its mouth rippled on his T-shirt. Chinese script above and below the image curved to form a circle around it.

“Hey,” Breck said. “Nice shirt.”

“Holy crap!” Tom said, looking at Breck’s hair with wide eyes. “Is it hedgehog mating season or something?”

Breck exhaled and shook his head, climbing into the truck. “Not today, Dude.”

“I’m just sayin’ . . . there’s a lot going on up there.”

“If we get caught, this one’s on you.”

“These things only happen once in a lifetime, right?” Tom said, returning to the driver’s seat.

“If you’re referring to the potential scenario wherein we die, then yes, this only happens once in a lifetime,” Breck said, buckling his seatbelt.

“So, my parents left at 6—”

“You were awake at 6?”

“No, Dude,” Tom said, scrunching up his face. “They left a note. They’ll be driving for another four or five hours before they get to Atlanta.”

“I thought they were flying?”

“They were. All Orlando and Miami flight are severely delayed or cancelled—unsafe ‘weather’ conditions—yet, it’s perfectly sunny outside,” Tom said, shrugging with his hands out. “They’re staying with our family up there tonight and leaving from the Atlanta airport in the morning.”

Breck laughed. “Sounds like they’re evacuating without us.”

“I thought the same thing!”

The little gas station, and surrounding four-way stop, indicated the halfway point on the road stretching out of town to Palm Bay Regional Park. As they got closer, the walls of gated communities were replaced with forestation on both sides. The two-way street was empty, only leading to the park, a man-made retention pond, and newly developed housing community named Parkside West.

They turned onto a concrete path. A wooden gate, supported by cross-beams, blocked the entrance. Breck slipped out to push the gate open, then hopped into the bed of the truck. If there was going to be a meteor shower, he wasn’t sure how they would be able to see it against the bright sun. The truck veered around the curved path into the gravel parking lot.

Tom sprung from his seat, grabbed the miniature video camera, and darted for the span of soccer fields. “Come on!”

Breck followed him, shading his eyes with one hand.

Breck peeled his shirt off as it began to soak, twisting it and shoving it partially into one cargo pocket. Tom was transfixed, but Breck cast frequent glances to the park entrance, nervous about the consequences of cutting class. He imagined a squad car with flashing lights, the embarrassing escort to school, and the weeks of detention that would follow.

“Quick. Look!”

The sky was clear except for the occasional marshmallow cloud. “I don’t see a thing.”

Tom moved beside him, adjusting Breck’s head position and pointing to a white speck. It inched across the sky.

“Dude, that’s a plane.”

“We’ll see . . . keep watching.”

The white dot continued slowly, or at least it seemed to. Then, as both of the boys strained their necks to watch, the blemish, in an otherwise perfect sky, flashed, glowing bright red and falling fast.

“There it goes,” Tom said. “I knew it!” He lifted the camera and pushed record.

Bursts of red and yellow pulsed from the burning rock as it plummeted down towards the earth. Though pieces seemed to break away and sputter out, the core gained speed until it disappeared behind the surrounding tree line. A moment later, Breck leaned forward, holding his balance as the ground shook. The treetops swayed.

Tom reached out and braced on Breck's shoulder. "Did you feel that?"

"Duh." He sucked in a deep breath and blew out in a narrow stream. His stomach gurgled, and his head ached. "Tom, I think we should go. I'm not feeling so hot—Tom?"

Tom stared up into the western sky, opposite the direction that the meteor had fallen. "Yeah. I think—I think we ought to go. Right now." Tom turned and hurried towards Breck, quickly gaining speed.

"What—" Breck began to say, but Tom grabbed him as he passed, pulling Breck along. A bright flash filled the sky like lightning. Breck looked back over his shoulder. A fireball, radiating green and yellow flames, barreled towards them. It was the size of a small car and seemed to expand as it grew closer. The air thickened and tightened around Breck's chest. Something held him, froze him to the ground.

"Breck!" Tom yelled.

His lips were dried shut, tongue scraping the roof of his mouth.

Suddenly, he was being pulled backwards; Tom's arms had hooked him under the shoulder. His legs loosened, then freed. He sprang to life. "Run!"

They aimed for the truck. A sonic sound rumbled the earth, like standing between two passing trains. A draft of scorching heat reached Breck's back. The air thinned, as if the oxygen had been sucked away. Tom turned around and shouted something at Breck, but the roar muted his voice.

Breck was a few strides from the truck when an explosion rang out, and the blast launched him into the air. He fell for a moment through a storm of dirt and ash and met the truck hard, his face striking the windshield. He immediately covered his head, curled into himself, and pressed his eyes shut. He heard Tom screaming and the hollow

hailstorm of earth and rock all around. He curled up and braced for collision with meteor bits, but they didn't come.

When the sound of raining debris lessened to a trickle, he opened his eyes. The still-falling dust blotted out the sun, but chunks of upturned sod and black rock littered the ground. Though the air settled, dark cloud hovered overhead, casting a shadow. Tom lay curled up into one corner of the truck bed, his face pressed up against the side. Blood trickled from a cut on his shin and a gash on his ankle. Breck inspected himself. No pain. No obvious signs of trauma. But the truck was trashed. The front bumper had been ripped down by a bulk of black rock that must have come from the meteorite. A pen-sized hole at the top of the windshield spread out into a net of thin cracks. And the passenger's side mirror had been blown off.

Breck slid down the front of the truck and moved around to the side. "Tom, you alright?"

"Am I dead? Are we in heaven?"

"Too hot for heaven. I'm going to go check things out."

"I think I still need a minute with this corner. You go ahead."

Breck walked towards the center of the field, picking around mounds of dirt and grass. Shards of black, sparkling rock stuck out of the earth like blades. He hurtled a particularly massive heap and, in the clearing, a dense collection of particles and soot fanned out from one spot. But there was no crater, and no meteorite.

Instead of a hollow, Breck stumbled onto stagnant pool of water. Its face was solid, motionless. It stretched thirty feet across and was as perfect a circle as Breck had ever seen. Its black center seemed infinitely deep, and a dark, green glow rose from its

shallow edges. The back of his neck suddenly tightened, and tiny hairs stood erect. Something unseen pulled him forward, tugging at each vertebrae. His feet scuffled towards the pool, kicking up dirt. The glow steadily intensified.

His heart raced as his body moved almost without his volition. His hand extended to the solid black surface. Then, he pressed his index finger down into it. It wasn't hot or cold, wet or dry, smooth or rough—it was simply flat. The darkness below swirled, and a sound like wind blowing through trees rose around him. He slowly tipped forward, his face targeting the hard shallow.

Just as he thought he might fall, Tom grabbed his arms. For a moment, it was almost as if his body was trapped in a game of tug-of-war between Tom and the pool, the rope running through the middle of his chest. Then suddenly, with a grunting sound, the tension released, and he fell backwards.

Breck sat up, having regained control of his body.

“Get off...” Tom moaned.

“Sorry,” Breck said, rolling to one side.

“Ugghhh . . . you’re like an elephant. You’ve gotta cut back on the protein shakes.”

“It’s not my—” Tom’s polka-dotted boxer shorts stood out against the brown soil.

“Dude, where are your pants?”

Tom propped himself up, avoiding eye contact. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Did they get blown off?”

“Shouldn’t there be a crater here?” he snapped. “What was that, anyways? I was yelling your name. But you kept creepin’ on like a zombie. Even your hair was going for the pool!”

Just then the earth pulsed beneath them, knocking them both onto their backs. Breck scrambled to his feet. A green orb gleamed with oscillating brightness from within the pool. Then, as if someone had dropped a stone into its middle, a ripple moved outward in a circle that stopped at the pool’s edge. The solid surface became vibrant, as if it had a life of its own. It perspired a black mist, masking the light of the submerged orb.

Breck took several steps back, while Tom looked deeper. He was at the edge of the pool, one leg extended forward, hovering over the surface. Breck lunged, yanking Tom away by the collar and dragging him from the water.

Tom’s eyes widened, and he grabbed at his chest with frantic hands. “What the hell was that?”

“You okay?”

“I could almost hear it . . . talking, like a voice underwater, telling me to enter. I felt it, in my throat.” Tom jumped up. “We’ve got to get far away from her. That thing . . . it’s evil.”

“Hold on. What do you mean, ‘her?’”

“I can’t explain it. It’s just a feeling. A bad feeling,” Tom said, already moving towards the truck.

“Tom—” A flicker of movement, like a shadow, passed through the cover of trees. Something, like a paw, peeked out, barely visible through the foliage. It clutched a low branch of a pine tree—several black blades dug into the layered bark. Two eyes

glowed from the tawny head of cat-like creature, obscured within the canopy of darkness. Breck back-peddled until he stumbled over a hunk of debris. The eyes and claws had vanished.

The sound of sirens echoed from the road. Flashes of blue and red blinked between the trees. Breck turned and ran in retreat. He had just reached the truck when a single police car pulled into the parking lot. The boys froze.

“What do we do, Breck?”

“I don’t know! Stand here?”

“Should we put our hands up? Your hair is already doing it.”

Breck narrowed his eyes at Tom and scowl, lifting his hands above his head.

The squad car skidded to a stop, and a female officer stepped out. She was young and pretty, though her face was powdered with dirt, like she had just been through a dust storm. Still shielded by her car door, she yelled to the boys, “Are you two okay?”

“Uh . . . yeah,” Breck called back.

She walked towards them, keeping a hand on her pistol. Her loaded belt clanged with each step. “What are you guys *doing* out here?” she asked. Her badge read, “O. Nealie.”

“We wanted to see the meteor shower and...” Tom replied.

“And?” the officer asked

“Well . . . we saw it.” Tom motioned toward the pool.

“Put your hands down. It’s getting weird,” she said. The boys obeyed. “Why aren’t you wearing pants?”

“Um...”

“Whatever, it doesn’t matter. You’ve got to get out of here before anyone else arrives, unless you want to spend the day in an interrogation room.”

Tom stared at her, as if he were waiting for an explanation.

“Go!” she yelled, grabbing Tom by the collar and leading him into the truck.

“Wait! Tell us what’s going on!” he protested.

“All I know is that it’s bad, and it’s big—a global event.”

“Why are you helping us?” Breck asked, pulling the seatbelt strap across his chest.

“Maybe it’s fate that I was nearby when the meteor struck, and I’m here now before the rest. I can’t do much, but I can’t at least spare you two the hell-storm coming your way. Now, go. You’ve only got minutes.”

“One more thing,” Breck said, stopping Tom’s hand on the shifter. “Don’t go over there. Stay away from it—whatever it is. Bad things happen when you get too close.”

“Seriously. He had normal hair this morning . . . but now . . . whoosh!” Tom said, flailing out his fingers.

Officer Nealie nodded. “Sure, Kid.” She slapped the hood of the truck twice, and backed away. Tom stepped on the accelerator, whipped the truck around, and sped toward the exit. As they neared the wooden gate, he slammed on the brake and pointed out toward the field. “Breck, look. That didn’t take long.”

Officer Nealie stood at the edge of the pool. She was immobile, staring at its core. Breck gripped the interior door handle. A hot wind blew through the open window. Then, Officer Nealie waded two steps into the pool and stopped. It was silent—no flapping of birdwings, no rumbling of engines, no swishing of tree branches. Breck began to doubt

the malevolence of the thing, questioning if the pool had really taken control of him or if he had been hypnotized by his own curiosity. But then, the same dark mist appeared, dusting over the pool's rim. Officer Nealie's head suddenly cranked back as a giant, liquid-like glob erupted from the pool's center, extending up and hovering over her. Her scream reverberated through the open air for a moment before the glob formed into a hand-like shape and collapsed over her. As quickly as it came, the black glob was gone, and so was Officer Nealie.

Tom stomped on the gas, peeling out onto the road.

CHAPTER IV

HIDE AND SEEK

“Tom, where are we going?”

“Home.”

Breck dialed his dad’s cell number and waited through a series of rings. “You’ve reached Steve Barkan, financial advisor and retirement planner. Leave your message, contact information, and reason for calling, and I’ll respond within twenty-four hours.” Breck sighed; his dad never answered the phone, but he’d hoped that his urgency might be reciprocated, assuming that the meteor event was not localized. Silence followed after a beep.

“Hey Dad,” Breck said. “I’m hoping that you’re okay, and maybe on your way home already. Things are getting a little crazy here. Tom and I are safe and heading to the McKerrick’s. Please call me when you get this.”

“Can you call my parents too?” Tom said. “My phone is in the truck bed with my pants.”

Breck wanted to ask again why Tom had to expose his pale legs. Now, in the confines of the small truck cabin, he smelled urine. He let it go, not wanting to embarrass his friend. “Sure.” But he had to leave a message for the McKerricks as well.

Tom had no intentions of slowing on the empty road. When they reached the residential part of the city, all the stop lights blinked red, suggesting power outages.

Neighbors convened in their front yards—arms flailing, shouting back and forth, and some even loading suitcases into cars.

“Do you think they know?” Tom asked.

“They must know that *something* is going on. But do they know that the ‘something’ is a people-eating blob creature? I doubt that.”

“It’s just weird that our parents haven’t called, right?”

“I’m worried too,” Breck said, and it was true. Other families were probably gathering together, encouraging each other, saying that “everything is going to be alright.” At the moment, however, Breck and Tom had only each other. Breck replayed the image of Officer Nealie vanishing into the black pool. Was it some kind of new technology? Were they under attack? Was that thing . . . alien? What happened to the officer? Did she survive?

He pulled his phone out again and opened the local news app. All the stories were a day old. He tapped the internet app and typed, “meteor sighting in Southern Florida.” A dozen blog posts appeared first.

“I found something. A meteorite destroyed this guy’s yard. It looks like the pictures and most of his posts have already been taken down . . . half the responses too. It’s just questions about the original post now: ‘what was in the pictures, what’s the story here, why do my posts keep getting deleted?’”

“What if this is our own government? I mean, somebody is going to extreme lengths to remove evidence. Who else has that kind of power?” Tom asked.

“Tom, why would our own government attack Florida?” Breck said. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“I don’t know. We’re ninety percent tourists and immigrants. Maybe they figured they could hit a little bit of everyone in one place? Be equal about it at least?”

“...it scares me when your crazy ideas sound somewhat reasonable.”

Tom glared at Breck. “Just keep looking.”

Breck returned to his online investigation. “Families Gather as Confusion Spreads.” “Sporadic Power Outages Across South and Central Florida.” “East Coast Meteor Shower: A War of Censorship”—Breck tapped through the headlines.

“Listen to this, Tom. A guy took screenshots of dozens of posts before they could be deleted. He says, ‘Out of all the posts I’ve captured, the following are the most unsettling: House Destroyed by Meteorite, Dog Disappears into Mysterious Pool, Families Vanish after Meteor Shower—’

“What?”

“The page has been blocked . . . this is useless,” Breck said, slipping the phone back into his pocket.

They passed the bus stop where Breck and Tom had stood each morning before Breck got his license. The nearness of home comforted him, but his gut sank again when they rounded the corner onto their street.

A black SUV was parked outside Breck’s house. It looked expensive—chrome rims and bumpers, windows tinted to opaqueness, and a micro-dish satellite receiver suctioned to the roof. Breck had seen a hundred vehicles like this on television, usually driven by FBI or some secret government agency. Officer’s Nealie’s warning echoed. The last thing he wanted was to sit in an interrogation room, circling around questions he couldn’t answer.

“Do you know whose truck that is?” Tom asked.

“No clue. Park a few houses down. We’ll wait at your place until they leave.”

They stopped at the Andersons’ house. The Andersons had seven children, many of whom were in high school or college. The driveway was usually crowded, so another truck on the road wouldn’t look suspicious. Breck’s hands began to sweat. His insides quivered with nervous excitement.

“Let’s go,” Tom said.

Breck glanced in each direction before stepping out. The door clicked shut behind him. He ran to the cover of the Andersons’ house. Tom followed at his heels.

“We’ll be exposed when we get around the pool,” Breck said.

“Stay low—belly crawl.”

“Too suspicious. Better if we just hurry. Go.”

Breck walked stiffly in long strides. Tom’s steps crunched out of sync behind him.

“Breck? Tom?” said a voice from beyond the screen.

“Gah!” Tom yelped, stumbling forward and tackling Breck to the ground.

Breck rolled and sprung back to his feet. “Oh, hi, Mr. Anderson. We’re just passing through,” he said, resuming his pace.

Mr. Anderson was in his late fifties, partially bald with an impressive beer belly.

“What are you two doing out here?”

“Umm,” Tom said as he recovered his footing. “Just forgot pants is all. Working on a resolution now.”

“Well, you should hurry on in. It’s not safe outside.”

“Trust me. We know,” Tom said.

The boys continued through the next yard to Tom’s house. Breck dug his keys out of his backpack and crept up to the rear door. The lock popped and the door swung open. Tom lurched inside and immediately ran to the kitchen faucet to gulp water.

Breck locked the door behind him and exhaled. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth. He stepped toward the fridge. A shadow moved in the hallway. A man stood in the dark, watching.

“Uh, Tom,” Breck said, stepping back towards the door.

“Wait, Breck,” the man boomed. “It’s me.”

“Huh?” Breck asked.

The man stepped out of the shadow.

“Coach?” the boys said.

“Sorry for the furtiveness. I didn’t mean to startle you,” Garothe said. His black T-shirt was tucked into navy pants.

“You look different,” Tom said.

“Yes, well, there are many things about me you don’t know. We have a lot to talk about. I need you both to come with me.”

“To where?”

“A safe place, until things settle down—”

“Why can’t we just talk here?” Breck said.

“Some things you just need to see for yourself,” Garothe said.

“That’s an understatement, you wouldn’t believe where we just were,” Tom said, shaking the water from his hair.

“Try me,” Garothe said, smirking. “I’ll wait for you in the truck.” He disappeared outside.

“I should probably put pants on for this,” Tom said.

“Wait, you want to go with him?”

“It’s Coach. He’s always looked out for us.”

Breck sighed. “This is turning out to be the weirdest day.”

“Yeah...”

“He’s probably not gonna wait out there forever, ya know.”

“Right . . . pants. Also, you should really take care of that,” Tom replied, pointing at Breck’s hair before bounding up the staircase toward his room.

Breck stepped into the restroom by the kitchen. Sweat lines formed through the dirt caked on his face. His hair had shaped into a crooked crown, spiking at the top and around one side while lying flat in-between. “The world is falling apart and I still have to deal with *this*.” He said to himself. He turned on the faucet and scrubbed the crusted hair glue out beneath the cool water, then splashed some on his face and neck, wiping away the grime and grit with the hand towel. Breck held his wet hair down as he walked out of the house. The grass crunched beneath his feet. He hopped the narrow drainage dip where the two yards connected. The truck’s ebony coating radiated. He climbed up through the open rear door and slid across the leather bench. Garothe offered a water bottle over his shoulder.

“Thanks. So, what’s the deal with the theatrics?” Breck said. He cracked the seal on the water bottle and sucked back the contents.

“Well, I had planned to send for you two this afternoon regardless, but after the events this morning—”

“Wait. You know what happened?”

“Of course—” Garothe stopped suddenly as a rumbling shook the windows. The truck swayed for a moment before the sound quieted. Breck braced on the seat in front of him. “Was that—”

“Another event. They’re coming much sooner than expected and with increasing frequency. Seems about a hundred miles or so between them.” Garothe glanced down at his watch.

Breck rolled down his window. A pair of familiar white streaks crossed the sky.

“Bam!” Tom shouted, springing from below.

“Dang it, Tom!” Breck said, reaching for him, but Tom had already stepped out of reach. He circled around and bounced into the truck, slamming the door shut behind him.

Breck pulled him into a headlock. A scent of fresh linen and musky deodorizer swept up from his hair. “Did you shower?” Breck asked.

“I needed to . . . trust me,” Tom replied.

Breck released his grip on Tom and fastened his seat belt when the truck began to move. “Wait a second,” Tom said. “This is a trick, isn’t it? You’re taking us back to school.”

“Just relax. It’s a short drive.”

Breck leaned his head back against the soft leather. He breathed in the warm air as it blew across his face, deciding not to care that the wind was drying his hair to its primitive uprightness. He wondered what his mother would say if she were still alive.

She had always been confident and strong, reasoning with him when he was afraid. How would she explain what had happened that morning? He wished she was there, conjuring her soft hands holding him, his head fitting perfectly into the curve of her neck, the gentle hum that lulled him to sleep.

~ ~ ~

A door clapped shut. Something invisible and dense pressed in on Breck's temples as if he'd been interrupted from a deep sleep. Tom and Garothe conversed outside the truck. He flung open the door and hurried to join them, not wanting to miss any part of the explanation. They were standing in the parking lot of a small brown and gray church. A pillar rose up from its center, cresting into a concrete steeple. Only a few other vehicles occupied the lot, and they mirrored Garothe's SUV.

"Hey. Was I out long?"

"Twenty minutes or so," Garothe answered. "Let's go." He turned and walked up to the front door. Two uniformed men opened the doors from inside, but boys hung back for a moment before entering.

"I've been here before," Breck said. "When I was little . . . with my mom."

"Yeah? Do you remember anything?"

"Not sure. It's been so long. Now that I think about it, we only came here when my dad was out of town."

"Maybe you should ask your hair. It seems excited to be here," Tom said.

Breck sighed. "I'm probably the only person in the world who will be happier when I go bald," he said, walking up brick steps to the entryway. Inside, the white-washed walls housed multi-colored reflections from stained windows. The lilac carpet

was freshly vacuumed. There were stacks of leather-bound books on a table near the entrance. To one side, a door opened to a shadowed sanctuary filled with empty pews.

Breck's and his mother always sat near the back in the same spot by the window. She would stare through the clear panes, her skin glowing in the sunbeams, combing her fingers through Breck's wild locks. She never asked Breck about the sermons, and she didn't mind if he colored through the entire service. She just sat quietly, watching through the window and occasionally scribbling notes in a journal.

Across from the sanctuary, Garothe waited in an elevator, holding open the door.

As they stepped through, the doors sealed, and Garothe slipped a key into the elevator console. He turned it until the only button illuminated. Breck's stomach jolted as the ground shook loose and the elevator began a slow descent.

"Uh, how is it that we're not underwater right now?" Breck asked.

"The land around the church was built up on a steady incline to make room below, though we're still slightly below sea level. It's barely noticeable."

"Is this where you take your prisoners?" Tom asked.

"Yes," Garothe answered, unflinching.

Tom's eyes widened. He sidestepped closer to Breck. The door opened after a few moments, and they stepped out into a frenzy of bodies busily moving from one place to the next. The space expanded as far and wide as the sanctuary above. A series of consoles projected maps of Florida and various other states, each with dozens of glowing green dots. Clusters of men and women in black uniforms circled tightly around the projections, debating loudly. Each shirt had a symbol pinned to the sleeve; it looked like a cross but

one solid bar ran diagonally through it from top-right to bottom-left, and it was fused into one solid piece.

“This way,” Garothe said. He led them along the perimeter of the room to a series of doors. They were labeled Interrogation 1, 2, and 3. He pressed open the first door and motioned for them to enter. “Wait here.”

The commotion outside the door was indecipherable. A mixture of boisterous shouting and meaningless code-words crowded the small room. “Black Horizon” stood out as it was repeated over and over. Breck fell into a pronged, metal chair while Tom paced the room. A mirror beside the door reflected a baseball-sized camera in one corner of the room; a tiny red light blinked into a starry glare.

“Alright, then,” Garothe said, shutting the door behind him. Narrow, framed reading glasses were perched on the end of his nose. “Let me start by correcting something. My legal name is Terryl Garth. You’ll hear others around here call me Garth or Dr. Garth. I prefer not to be called ‘Terryl,’ mind you.” Garth pulled back his shoulders and crossed his arms behind his back. “You’re standing, and sitting,” he said, gesturing to Breck, “in one of Black Horizon’s many classified facilities, most of which are underground as terrain allows. Eighteen years ago, I was commissioned by the federal government to begin the Black Horizon project and have grown it nationally over these many years. I took on the façade of Coach Garothe as a cover while I watched over you.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed. He tilted his head and asked, “You needed a fake name, so you change Garth to Garothe? You added two letters . . . that’s kind of lame.”

“I wasn’t hired for my predilection in espionage. I was, however, prepossessing of qualities related to exoteric entities, primarily those of the extraterrestrial variety.”

“Aliens? You mean aliens, right?” Breck said, standing.

“Perhaps not the kind we’ve imagined in movies or in fiction, yet the things of which we speak are certainly not from this world—I think we both know that,” Garth said, looking over the top of his glasses at Breck.

“You know what we saw?”

“Of course. Just like the FBI or CIA, we have access to the latest gadgets, not excluding satellite imaging around the globe. Had we known what would happen to the young officer, that the pools were immediately dangerous, I would have prevented you from going.” Garth’s eyes remained fixed on Breck, though Tom still paced the room. “But I presumed you needed to see it for yourself for. . . in order to believe.”

“Believe what?”

“I’ve spent many nights staring into the stelliferous sky, waiting for this day. We’ve poured resources and hours into preparing for it, even in spite of my own waning belief.” Garth stepped forward and gripped Breck’s shoulder. “This event, massive as it is, affects all of us, but has ultimately come for one person . . . for you.”

“I don’t understand,” Breck said, shaking him off and backing up against the wall.

“You touched the pool, did you not?” Garth spoke quickly and directly.

“Yeah. So what?” Tom said.

“And it animated? Came to life?”

“Yeah. Maybe.” He had felt the pool tugging him through his middle, the bottomless depths drawing him in. The crystalline surface had pulsed beneath his fingertips, moving like waves nearing the shore.

“Others have touched the pools, Breck. Nothing happened to them.”

“But Nealie!” Tom interjected. “We saw it attack her.”

“Yes, but only *after* Breck touched it.”

“Stop!” Breck shouted. He sat, leaning his elbows on the rectangular table at the center of the room. “What happened to her?”

Garth seemed to calm down, uncrossing his arms and joining Breck in an adjacent chair. He pulled an officer’s badge from his pocket and lay it on the table. “O. Nealie” was etched in blue along the top. Garth watched him intently, as if he were waiting for something to happen. Breck picked up the badge, and the ceiling above him began to crumble and fall all around him. The room was suddenly empty. Then, Breck shielded his head as the ceiling collapsed in one giant heap, revealing a gray sky.

The dark pool bubbled at his feet. The water swirled and a body floated to the surface. It was Nealie, but her eyes had blackened and jagged cracks canvassed her face. Dark mist rose from the crust-like fissures, and her jaw had contorted, lengthening and stretching the skin. Two police officers in navy uniforms stepped around Breck and grabbed her at the shoulders, dragging her to the shore. The pool stirred, waves crashing over her legs, sucking her back in like riptide.

Breck backpedaled and felt a hand on his chest, shaking him.

“Breck!” Tom said. “Hey!”

Breck woke up. The fluorescents burned his eyes, and he shivered uncontrollably. Nausea stirred in his stomach.

“Are you okay?” Tom said. “You’re drenched in sweat.”

“In here,” Garth said.

A nurse in blue scrubs draped a blanket over Breck and tucked a second one under his head. She pressed two fingers against his throat. “Rapid pulse.”

“I’m fine,” Breck said. “I just need a minute.” His stomach had settled, and his heart rate slowed with a few deep breaths. He wiped away the sweat that had pooled on his forehead.

“I’m sorry, Breck,” Garth said. “I thought you might have inherited some of your mother’s abilities. But this—”

“Wait. What are you talking about?” Breck said, scrunching up his brow.

Garth sucked in a breath and sat in the chair across from Breck. “She wanted to keep this part of her hidden from you as long as possible . . . but I think you need to know why I brought you here. What I want to show you. Your mother . . . she could see the history of things by touch—one of her many extraordinary gifts.”

“You’re not serious?” Breck said.

“Quite serious,” Garth said. “And I think your experience just now confirms it.”

“It doesn’t work on me,” Tom said, standing by the table and poking Nealie’s badge with his finger. “Maybe it’s only a one-time use kind of thing?”

“Garth, how could you have even known her? I mean, she’s been gone for almost ten years,” Breck said, propping himself up.

“She’s the one who started all of this,” Garth said, gesturing to the room around him with widespread arms. “She’s the reason that the Black Horizon was formed—”

The door suddenly opened and a man in a black uniform burst in. “We’ve found him!”

“Are you certain?” Garth said.

“It’s the first one like this. Just came down outside of Melbourne about ten miles away.”

Garth turned back to Breck. “I’m sorry, Breck. But we’re going to have to cut our conversation short.” He stood and pulled off his coat, revealing a matching Black Horizon uniform.

“Wait!” Breck shouted. “I still have questions!”

“So do I,” Garth said. “And I think we may finally be getting some answers. I’ll have someone see that you make it home safely.” He rushed from the room without a second glance, leaving Breck and Tom alone.

“So, I guess you’re like . . . a psychic or something?” Tom said, resting his hands on his hips.

“I’m not anything,” Breck said, throwing the blanket off. “Let’s get out of here.”

A man in a too-tight t-shirt cut them off at the door. A black beret hung limply from atop his head. “Come with me,” he said with a scratchy voice, as if he’d been either a chain smoker or a singer in a Screamo band.

“Is it safe?” Tom said. “What does your hair tell you?”

“Shut up,” Breck said, following after the soldier. They retraced their steps back through the church and out to the SUV. Lines of trucks and Humvees, laden with mounted machine guns and ammunition crates, swarmed from a ramp beneath the church’s gymnasium.

On the drive home, Breck stared through the tinted window at the passing cars. It was the early afternoon on a Friday, and the interstate swarmed with activity, as if

schools had let out early. He wondered if Garth was telling the truth—he couldn't think of a reason that Garth would make up a story, especially one about his mother.

Tom pestered the driver with questions the whole ride home, asking about the meteors, the dark pool, and the Black Horizon. The driver responded with "I can't say anything more than what Dr. Garth already told you" to most of the questions. "He basically told us nothing," Tom answered back, then unleashed a new round of questions.

Breck's head hurt, pulsing at the temples, from processing the possibilities, the surreality of the entire day. Since the accident, he'd woken up every night with the same dream of the red-haired girl, the same nausea, the same sweat-soaked pillow. Before his mother passed, he had nightmares so vivid that he could touch the cold earth, hear the wind of flapping wings, and feel the terror that overtook him as shadow monsters pursued him. His mother was always there when he woke up, holding him, telling him it wasn't real. But what if it was real? What if Garth was right?

The SUV jerked to a stop in Breck's driveway. The driver turned around and handed Breck a business card with the Black Horizon symbol—the cross with the diagonal strike-through—and phone number printed at the bottom. "Dr. Garth asked me to give this specifically to you, Breck. It would be better for you both to stay together tonight, at least in the same house. It will be easier for us to keep you safe. Dr. Garth will contact you in the morning, but if you need him before then, you have his number."

"Really?" Tom said. "He said give it 'specifically' to Breck? What, does he think I'm irresponsible or something?"

"Yes," the driver said, nodding.

"Welp . . . he certainly knows me," Tom said, stepping out of the vehicle.

Breck unbuckled his seatbelt and cracked the door. “This guy, the one Garth rushed off to find, who is he?”

“He’s the one we’ve been waiting for, preparing for. He’s ‘The Lightbringer.’”

CHAPTER V

IN AND OUT

The stale air hovered, particles of dust gleaming in static suspension. Breck stared at the familiar ceiling of his bedroom, reclining on pillows. Tom sat hunched at the foot of the bed, staring at the television. The newscaster's sports coat hung loosely as his hands swept around in wide gestures. Story after story about the mundane happenings of the day filled the evening news.

"Seriously. Nothing?" Tom said. "I don't understand why they're keeping things under wraps."

Brecks bounced his hands against his head, his hair acting as a spring. "Garth said the other pools haven't come to life like ours. If there's no threat, there's no need to cause panic."

"Meteors are still falling. People must be asking questions. I'd want to know if it were me."

"Yeah?" Breck said. "Well, you *do* know. What would you be doing right now if you didn't?"

Tom paused, drawing in a breath. "We'd be sittin' in my room, gaming probably."

"Without a care in the world, right?"

"Well, *I* wouldn't have a care in the world . . . you'd still have all *that* to deal with," Tom said, motioning to the wild mop on Breck's head.

“I think I’d rather be ignorant and happy than aware and just . . . waiting.” Tom scooted his back against the wall and lay his arms on his lap. “You worried?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Man, I’m terrified. What we saw . . . that ain’t from here. When I lost myself for those moments, before you pulled me back from the pool, I felt the worst kind of hatred—like the kind that just wants to stand in the fire while everything burns. It wasn’t even directed toward anyone or anything specific.” Tom leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “I’m more afraid of feeling that way again than anything—no control, hot coals in my gut, fire in my throat. If that’s what those pools do, turn us evil, then we *should* be worried.”

“It was different for me,” Breck said.

“What do you mean?” Tom propped himself up on an elbow.

“I lost control too—felt weak, hopeless, defeated—but . . . the hatred, I didn’t experience that.”

“Hmm,” Tom said, peering out the window into the night. “Maybe it affects people differently. So, who do you think this guy is—‘The Lightbringer?’”

“No clue. Could be anyone, or anything.”

Tom sighed and laid across the opposite end of the bed. “This reminds me of the night before the first time we went to Disney World.”

“In what way could this possibly be related to Disney?”

“Remember? We were eight—”

“Ten.”

“Semantics,” Tom said, flapping a hand at Breck. “We sat in my bed, looking at the park map, plotting out which rides we were going to go on. We promised we’d do all the scary ones first—the log shoot, the roller coasters, the haunted mansion—to show that we could. Once those were out of the way, we’d hit the fun, easy stuff—the live shows, the kiddie rides, fireworks— and, you know, experience the magic or whatever.”

“Your dad came in half-a-dozen times to tell us to go to bed,” Breck said.

“I wish he was here now,” Tom said, “to tell us to go to sleep.”

“He went with us on all those rides, holding onto that stupid white hat the whole time,” Breck said, laughing.

“Hey! It worked, though. Not a sliver of sunburn on his neck.”

“Still . . . your mom just stood there, shaking her head at him.”

“And Ethan was screaming because he wasn’t big enough for the roller coasters.”

“Why did we put ourselves through that anyway?” Breck asked.

“Are you kidding? Chris Thompson would have laughed us out of the fourth grade.”

“Dude, *that* kid...”

“Seriously.”

Breck rotated onto his side, flipped his pillows to their still-cool undersides, and pressed his face into the down. A mixture of lavender, peppermint, and boy-sweat lingered on the pillowcases—Breck knew it was time to wash his sheets when the latter scent drowned out the fresher ones. “I think you’re right, Tom.”

“Yeah?”

“The unknown is both terrifying and exciting. Since the moment the pool came to life, I’ve been suppressing this idea, this thought that we’ve just stumbled onto something so redefining that everything I know about the world is coming unhinged. Whatever the pool is—good, evil—I’m certain of one thing: there’s magic in it, and that changes everything.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of—*that* and whatever that thing is that lives on your head,” Tom said.

Breck kicked Tom’s legs from beneath the covers.

Tom jumped up. “But, like before, we’re in it together.”

“To face the terror.”

“And the excitement.”

“I can live with that,” Breck said. The tension in his chest released like the snapping of an overstretched elastic band. He tucked his hands beneath his pillow and let his eyelids blacken the room. “You gonna sleep in the guest room or bring the extra mattress in?”

“I’ll grab the extra.”

“Good.”

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“Breck, you have to wake up,” said the girl with red hair. She looked up at him, her cheeks pink and jaw sharp.

Breck was suspended in the air, still strapped into the seat. The car, pieces of plastic from the dashboard, and shards of glass hovered around him, moving together in slow motion. “Who are you?”

Long lashes flashed over the piercing gray of her eyes. “Soon,” she said, nodding. “But for now, you have to wake up.”

She was suddenly ripped away as the car pulled Breck into a full-speed spin, the earth approaching quickly, a meteor screaming across the sky.

He sprung awake, throwing the sheets back. The sun poured through the open window. Tom snored from a mass of blankets billowing over a blow-up mattress on the floor. Breck blinked and rubbed the granular collection of irritants from his eyes. He crept out of bed and winced as the door creaked open. He stopped at the restroom before making his way to the kitchen.

Boxes of cereal and chip bags, left empty from the boys’ late-night snacking, covered the marble counter top. Breck peeled a speckled banana and wasted little time chewing. A magnet held a single photograph to the refrigerator. A five-year old Breck smiled from his father’s shoulders, arms wrapped around the man’s chin. His mother squeezed around them. Her auburn hair had streaks of gold at the edges. Her frame was small—half the width of his father—but strong, the curve of her biceps showing through the translucent white of her shirt. They had been together and happy once—a time that sunk into the irretrievable depths of Breck’s memory.

Breck checked his phone; still no messages from his dad. He keyed in his dad’s number. It rang once, then the milk carton slipped from Breck’s grip as a distant screech echoed from outside. It sounded like the peeling of tire—howling as the rubber spread across the road—but lingered and grew in intensity like a siren. Breck cupped his hands over his ears, muffling the sound until it cut off. Tom thumped down the stairs a moment later.

“Did you hear that?” Tom shouted. The hair on one side of his head had formed to the pillow and waved a greeting as he moved.

“Hey!” Breck said. “Your doo is like mine.”

“I know! Maybe they can be friends.”

Breck rolled his eyes and returned the milk carton to the refrigerator, relieved that it hadn’t split open and caused a mess.

“What do you think made that sound?” Tom said.

“Maybe a jet flying low or something? I’ve never heard anything quite like that.”

“It sounded painful, right? Like someone was screaming.”

“There’s no way that sound came from a person. Where are you going?” Breck asked as Tom crossed to the front door.

“Just gonna peek out and make sure no one’s hurt.” Tom slipped outside, tiptoeing along the concrete squares leading to the driveway, and disappeared from view.

Breck had just reached the door when another high-pitched screech cut the air. It rung louder, originating closer, and travelled through the open door like a fog. Breck pressed his arms over his ears, his head beginning to pound. He steadied himself against the wall as Tom appeared, diving headlong into the house, kicking the door shut behind him. He immediately pointed and mouthed the word, “deadbolt.”

Breck secured the door and the screech pattered out. He blinked hard, regaining his bearings, and pulled Tom up by the shoulder. “What happened—”

“Shhh!” Tom said, pressing a forefinger to his lips. He held his palms out as if he were waiting for something to break through the door.

“What did you see?” Breck whispered.

“I can’t explain it,” Tom hissed back. “But . . . it looked right at me. And its mouth opened up, wide, like it unhinged its jaw or something. Then it made that sound—I almost blacked out. Barely made it back here.”

The dull ringing in Breck’s ears quieted and a dull cracking replaced it. Someone, something, was walking along the sidewalk leading up to the house. A scraping sound followed the splitting of concrete and crunching of rubble. Then, the door pulsed inward as if something had slammed into it. Cement dust swept through the cracks between the frame. Muted light entered through the translucent window shades around the entrance. Breck moved away as the stone-splitting steps grew louder. A shadow darkened the narrow windows until the light was completely blocked.

A wooden slab was all that separated the boys from the creature outside. *Crack*. The door shook. *Crack*. The hinges bent. Then it pounded on the door again and again, breaking the bolts loose. *Whack*. A chunk of the door soared past Tom’s head.

Breck grabbed Tom’s sleeve and shouted, “Upstairs!”

They bounded up the stairs and into Breck’s room. He shut the door behind him and pressed his ear against it. A final *crack* echoed into silence.

“Tom, toss me my phone. It’s on the nightstand.” Breck grabbed his jeans from the floor and dug Garth’s card out from the pocket. He flung open the closet door, shoved the rows of hanging shirts out of the way, and retrieved his wooden bat from the corner. “What do you see outside?”

Tom crept up to the window and opened the blinds. “The sidewalk is all messed up. A huge chunk is missing from the driveway. Here,” he said.

Breck caught his phone, punched in the numbers from Garth's card, and immediately dropped it as a shadow flashed by the window. Tom jerked backwards and caught himself on the opposing wall.

"Tom," Breck said. "Tom! Get over here."

Tom snapped to attention and belly-crawled across the room.

"Hold this." Breck handed him the bat and knelt to fish the phone out from under the bed. He had just pressed the phone to his ear when Tom squeezed his arm. "What?"

An oblong shadow stretched across the floor up to the bed. A giant creature hovered outside the window, staring directly at them. Its eyes burned, glowing red. It stood upright, balancing itself against the window frame like a giant mutt. Muscles bulged beneath thin, black skin covered in scars. Saliva dripped from yellow fangs as a growl reverberated from its long snout. It dropped on its front haunches, causing the walls to shake, then reared back out of sight. Light refilled the room.

"We need to go," Breck said, yanking Tom to his feet and throwing the door open. Just then, the creature burst through the window, collapsing a wide portion of the wall with it. They dashed out of the room, and Breck aimed for the master bedroom at the other end of the house. Shutting the door behind them, he glimpsed the creature on all fours, glaring. Tom was already dragging the wooden bed frame. Breck helped Tom barricade the door with the loveseat and recliner before retreating to the master bathroom.

Tom climbed into the tub, clutching the bat to his chest. Breck backed up to the tiled wall, sliding down to the floor. He wrestled the phone from his pocket and redialed Garth's number.

"Breck—"

“There’s something in the house with us.”

“I’m already on my way and bringing help. Hold tight,” Garth said, his voice firm and quick.

Breck tucked the phone back into his pocket.

“What’d he say?” Tom asked, his face stretched in anticipation.

“He’s coming.”

“What do we do?”

Breck took a slow breath. “You ready to use that bat?”

The skin on Tom’s knuckles tightened as he gripped the wooden club. He shook his head. “That thing broke through a concrete wall. What am I gonna do with *this*?”

Breck stood and grabbed hold of the towel bar. He placed his foot against the wall and pulled back. The tile glue began to flake away. He kicked and the bar broke free. Several cream-colored tiles fell along with it, shattering on the floor. He pressed and scraped the metal rod along the floor, filling the room with the familiar scent of heated metal, until one end formed to a dull point.

“I’m not going to just wait to die,” Breck said.

“I haven’t even had breakfast—”

“Shhh. Feel that?”

The floor vibrated in beats. *Kuh-thump. Kuh-thump. Kuh-thump.* The sound of splitting wood ran chills up Breck’s spine, causing the tiny hairs on his neck to stand on end. The creature had peeled back the door with ease, then a crash rang out as it toppled the makeshift barricade.

“It’s in the room,” Tom whispered.

The clicking of claws followed each step as the beast neared the bathroom door. The wood floor flexed under its weight. Breck put his face to the floor. Curved, black claws as long as fingers dug into the planks.

“You ready?” Breck said, crouching and holding the shank in front of him, ready to strike.

Tom climbed out of the tub and up onto the toilet. “Over-under?”

“Yup. You go down on the head, and I’ll go up into the throat.”

“Assuming that we last two sec—”

The door shook, and one long blade pierced through, cutting down through the middle. Breck’s skin tingled, and his stomach stiffened. His heart thumped in his head, adrenaline rushing to his aid.

“You trashed my room and busted my window! I won’t be so easy. Come in and try it!” Breck bellowed, inching nearer to the door.

Tom stood up a little straighter and cocked the bat back. “I’m gonna rip your limbs off and beat you with them!”

Breck nodded in approval.

The beast let out another piercing screech that flooded the bathroom. Instead of covering their ears, the boys yelled and howled as loud as they could, beating their chests and banging their weapons against the counter. In one pull, the door ripped away, revealing a bulging behemoth, snarling and flashing its fangs. It reared back and lunged, but stopped midair as if caught on something. Then, it vanished from the doorway.

Breck darted forward just as a beast with tawny fur—as big as a bear but longer and leaner—dug its claws into the black creature’s shoulder blades and heaved it through

the wall. It crashed onto the ground below, howling and twisting to its feet. The bear-beast looked over its shoulder at Breck, its bright, gray eyes shining. Then, it leapt from the house, crashing into the creature below before disappearing behind the house.

“What was that thing?” Tom asked.

“Which one?”

“It’s getting back up,” Tom said, backpedaling from the opening. Just then, a barrage of machine gun fire sprayed the black body. A row of armed Humvees came into view, speeding toward the house. Soldiers hung out of windows and open tops, rifles pinned to their shoulders. The creature struggled to stay on its feet, recoiling as the volley forced it back. It shrieked, clawing at the dirt.

One of the soldiers shouted, “RPG!” A trail of smoke streamed behind the missile. Breck lunged, tackling Tom to the ground. The tawny sky exploded into red, quaking the boards beneath him as they crumbled away.

Breck crawled to the broken bed-frame and pulled himself up. “Tom, come on! The floor is collapsing.” He helped Tom to his feet and hurdled over the crushed furniture. The front door had been ripped off its hinges and lay in two pieces against the entryway closet. A soldier in sand-brown camo stood just outside the doorway, peering down the sight of her rifle. She turned to Breck as his bare feet slapped the stairs.

“Quick,” she said, pointing out to a dust-covered Humvee in the street. “Garth’s waiting for you.”

“What about my house?” Breck said.

“We’ll take care of it. Go.”

As the boys approached the vehicle, Garth rolled down his window and said, “One of you, up front.” Breck beat Tom around the side and into the passenger’s seat. Tom tucked himself up to the legs of another uniformed soldier whose top half manned a mounted machine gun. The engine roared as soon as Tom shut his door.

“There’s a duffle behind you, Tom. It has clothes for both of you.”

“Did you know this was going to happen?” Tom said, unzipping the bag. “This is all our stuff.”

“We knew that it would happen . . . but not *when*.” The tires locked and squealed as they turned out of the neighborhood. “I grabbed that stuff two weeks ago when the asteroid trajectory was confirmed.”

“Breck, your sneakers are in here. The blue ones that disappeared from your locker,” Tom said, dropping articles of clothing one by one over Breck’s shoulder. “Ooo, and a hat. That’s obviously for you.”

“No. I look ridiculous in hats,” Breck said.

“You look ridiculous *without* a hat.”

Breck turned around, snatched the hat from Tom, and pressed it on. He felt it hitting dip in on his ears, pressing them out sideways. The hard bill squashed his forehead down against his eyebrows.

Tom reached up and slipped the hat off of Breck’s head. “Yeah . . . I’m just gonna leave that in the bag.”

“Garth,” Breck said, turning back, “Why are we going so fast? Couldn’t you kill that thing?”

“Those things . . . they keep coming back. We can only stun them—”

“*Things?* There’s more than one?” Tom said.

“I’ve seen three, including the one just now. Similar reports are coming in from all our sections across the state.”

“How many?” Breck asked.

Garth’s eyes were red and dry. Dilated pupils pressed out against brown edges. “About a dozen. They started coming out of the pools early this morning. Twelve dark pools were counted in the state—one from each.”

“The others you saw. What happened to them?” Breck pried, leaning in.

“A sniper took the first one right through the skull after it had already torn through a small battalion. The thing exploded into some kind of mist—a minute later, it was back at our throats. Looks like they all do that. We were fleeing when the other two showed up. Half the crew stayed behind to cripple their advance.”

Breck gripped the door handle and braced on the dashboard as the Humvee careened onto the highway. “Where are you taking us?”

“There’s one pool that’s different from the rest, and the Leapers seem to be converging toward it.”

“Leapers? Is that what just attacked us?” Tom said.

“Right. That’s what *he* calls them.”

“Who—”

“Wait,” Breck interrupted, “You’re telling me that all these unkillable things are heading to the same place—the same place we’re going?”

“You need to trust me. He says it’s the only place you’ll be safe from them.”

“*Who* says?” Tom shouted.

“The Lightbringer.”

“But who the heck is the Lightbringer?” Tom said, throwing his hands up.

“*Him*,” Garth said, bending forward and motioning out the front windshield. A thick forest of towering pines and full, blooming palm trees lined the highway. Above the treetops, beams of golden light flashed in all directions. A section of trees had been uprooted or broken off at the stump, creating a narrow trail. “Hold on,” Garth said and jerked the wheel.

CHAPTER VI

THE LIGHTBRINGER

Overhanging branches scraped the sides of the Humvee. A density of pines and palms edged the narrow passage. The side mirror on Breck's side snapped off from a close encounter with a passing tree.

Breck braced against the ceiling as the truck bounced and dipped over felled branches. A cluster of trees cracked behind them, and two Leapers barreled into view.

"Cover your ears!" Garth shouted. The soldier beside Tom swiveled around and opened fire on the Leapers.

Breck freed himself from the seat belt. The Leapers accelerated in bounding strides. Claws gripped the earth, leaving a cloud of dirt in their trail. The Leapers barked through razored jaws, snapping at the air. Then, a flurry of yellow streaked from the machine gun. Each shot rang through the crowded cabin. The Leapers took a series of direct hits, shrieking but pressing forward.

Garth stomped on the gas, and the Humvee began to pull away. Suddenly, another Leaper burst into the pathway ahead.

"Cover!" Garth bellowed, reaching back and tugging on the soldier's pant leg. A moment later, the creature reared to pounce, leapt over the Humvee, and tore the soldier from his mount. The moment they hit the ground, all three Leapers converged on the body, and in seconds it disappeared.

A hollowness formed in Breck's stomach. "Where'd he go?"

“Oh, crap,” Tom said, pressing himself against the back of Breck’s seat. “They straight gobbled that dude...”

“Garth, they’re moving again, and closing in fast.”

The three Leapers formed a V-shape with the bulkiest Leaper at the head. It lunged forward erratically, swiping across trees and low-hanging branches.

“We’re almost there,” Garth said. “We just need a few minutes. Tom, you’ll have to—”

“No way!” Tom said.

“We won’t make it. You’ve got to try.”

Tom glanced at Breck with wide eyes. “You’re better at shooters!”

“Damn it, Tom,” Breck said, crawling over the back seat. He pulled himself up through the manhole and squeezed the machine gun grips with both hands. The curved trigger rested under his finger. The leader had reached the back of the Humvee and leapt at Breck with teeth bared. Breck jerked back and pulled the trigger. A stream of bullets sprayed up the Leaper’s belly to its open jaw, and it fell to the ground in a cloud of dust. “Whoa...”

“Keep shooting!” Tom shouted.

Breck took aim this time, thinking it’d be easier if he were holding a game controller instead. The sight hovered around the Leaper. He squeezed the trigger, and the gun kicked back at him, spraying the trees. He flexed his shoulders and leaned into the recoil, forcing the muzzle down, then squeezed again. A series of rounds to the skull dropped the second Leaper. There was no blood, but black mist erupted from where the

wounds should have been. Breck swung the gun around and peppered the ground near the last Leaper, sweeping out its legs.

The Leapers only stayed down for a few moments before recovering and gaining ground again.

The metal gun grip was suddenly searing, so Breck released it and dropped through the manhole onto the bench seat.

Tom's jaw hung loosely. "Dude, you're a gun wizard." He bowed, hands still cupped over his ears. "Teach me, oh Gun Wizard, and together we shall own all the punk kids who game all day long."

"Garth, they keep getting up somehow," Breck said.

"I know," Garth said, motioning for Breck to return to the front. "You've done enough. The clearing is just ahead."

The dirt path smoothed. The air was quiet except for the dull galloping of heavy paws beating the ground. Breck stepped on Tom's hip and launched himself over the seat. A guttural "hmff" escaped Tom's lips. About a half-mile down the path, the trees opened up to a bright clearing the size of a small retention pond. From its center, a golden glow obscured everything inside.

"I need you two to listen closely. As soon as we break into the clearing, I'm going to turn and hit the brakes. You have to jump out immediately and make a run for the middle of clearing. There's a light pool there. If you don't see the Lightbringer, you need to jump straight in. Do you understand?"

"What about the Leapers?" Tom asked.

"You're going to make it in time."

“Aren’t you coming with us?” Breck asked.

“I’m afraid this is where we must part ways for now. Are you ready?”

“But, Garth—”

“Trust me.” Garth stomped on the brake and cranked the wheel, spraying loose soil and dried grass in an arc. “Go!”

Breck flung open the door and jumped out, rolling and springing to his feet. He caught Tom, falling face first into the dirt, and pulled him forward. The Humvee spun around, spitting up earth, and sped toward the Leapers. The air cleared, and the light portal appeared a block’s length away. It was similar in size to the dark pools except blue, like the sky, and it emanated a golden haze.

“What if it’s solid? Like the last one,” Tom said between breaths.

One of the Leapers shrieked. The Humvee had barely slowed them, and they careened after the boys in long, digging strides, flailing frantically. They snarled and barked louder as the boys neared the pool. The ground trembled with each step.

“They’re right on us. No turning back now,” Breck said. Only a few yards away, the pool pulsed and glowed brightly. Claw tips grazed his shoulder, splitting the skin. He stretched forward and dove into the pool.

An invisible force immediately pulled Breck downward into the pool. His lungs burned as the surface faded and the water darkened. Then, beams of luminescent blue and gold swirled around him. He shielded his eyes as the light cut through the water in a brilliant spectacle of rays. A golden beam pierced through his chest, and his lungs refilled.

The water around him stirred. It jolted his body back and forth. Then the waters calmed, and he was caught in a whirlpool of light, thrusting him upward. Light splashed over the surface of the pool like raindrops, and a surge of water heaved Breck into the air. Suspended in a golden cloud, he glided back towards the pool.

“Breck,” said a muffled voice. “Stand up.”

Breck lifted his head from the water, and his feet touched the pool bottom, finding that it was only waist deep.

Tom stood beside him, examining himself. His skin gleamed a fiery red. Drops of golden rain bounced off his face. “Dude, we’re glowing.”

Breck’s chest pounded in powerful beats, forcing the blood into streams. Heat pressed out from his middle, flowing out to each limb. He felt invincible, like a thousand meteors could crash down around him, and he’d be untouched. He waded towards the pool’s edge. The water moved around him in tiny whirlpools, spinning and dancing, appearing and disappearing. The world seemed suddenly small and perfect with its glimmering greeting, as if it were welcoming Breck into a new life.

The boys stepped out of the pool together, and the rainfall of light ceased, spilling a final wave over the pool and disappearing. The water glistened calmly again, as if nothing had happened.

Breck fingered the tear in his shirt and the smooth, healed skin beneath. “Tom, you’re shiny.”

“Okay, seriously, all that water and it did *nothing* for your hair?”

“Dude! What do you think this is?”

“Nothing from our world, that’s for sure,” Tom said. “Just so you know, while we were in the pool, I totally peed in there.”

“Of course you did...”

“You’re welcome.”

A throaty rumble echoed from behind them. At the edge of the clearing, a dark creature towered nearly ten feet tall, and black mist flowed all around its rippled body. Its eyes shone silver. It stood erect with bulky legs like those of a bull. Its upper half was humanoid except that two angled horns protruded from its skull and great black wings spanned from its back. Its feet and hands were similar to a reptile’s, clawed with rough, scaly skin. From one hand, a sword glowed black.

“Are you friggin’ kidding me? They’ve got swords now?” Tom mumbled.

“Is that the Lightbringer? He seems . . . *not* light.”

“It looks like it wants to harm me.”

The creature thrust down its wings and hovered for a moment before taking a thundering step towards them. The earth shook and cracked beneath Breck’s feet, forcing him to stumble into Tom. He grabbed Tom’s wrist, and the glow rushed from them in coils of red and gold, meeting where their skin touched before fizzling to nothing.

“I’ve seen some freaky stuff today . . . but that tops it all,” Tom said.

“Okay . . . seriously . . . where the hell is ‘The Guy?’”

“What?”

“You know, ‘The Guy.’ There’s always a guy who explains all this crap in movies—a wizard or whatever.”

“Yeah!” Tom nodded. “Where the hell’s ‘The Guy?’ Something’s literally been trying to kill us since we woke up, and I’m tired.”

Breck shrugged. “I actually feel pretty good after the pool thing. It was weird, but I feel good about it.”

“That’s true. I could go for a burger, though.”

Breck cleared his throat. “Excuse me, um, Sir demon . . . thing. We’re waiting for ‘The Guy.’ So, if you could just *not* kill us ‘til he gets here, that’d be cool.”

“We won’t kill you either, obviously,” Tom shouted. “Breck’s really strong, and I’m sometimes fast. You definitely don’t want to come over here.”

The creature opened its mouth, and a roar vibrated the air. Its wings sprawled out and beat down.

“You think it’s leaving?” Tom said.

“Not likely.”

“Should we split up?”

“Then you’d die.”

“...that’s not funny,” Tom said.

The sun obscured the black body hovering over the treetops until it appeared, suddenly soaring downward directly at the boys, pulling in its wings. The sword gleamed, sparking and glowing intensely as it neared.

“Here we go,” Breck said, dragging Tom by the sleeve. They circled around the pool before heading toward the tree line.

A moment later, Breck felt a gush of wind against his back and the clashing of metal filled the air. An explosion of brilliant white light blinded him, sending both boys

onto their bellies. Breck shielded his eyes until the brightness faded. He rolled onto his back, and a broad-shouldered man towered over him. The man's hair, and matching beard, was brown with flecks of white, and a cowlick at the front forced it into a wave. It was shaggy like Breck's and brushed the base of his neck. The sun reflected off his plated armor, glistening with golden scales. His hands gripped the opalescent shaft of a sledge-like hammer. Its golden head was as large as a mailbox and a shield symbol protruded on each side.

"Are we dead?" Tom said.

"I hope not. I've come all this way." The man's voice boomed, deep and commanding. His tongue skewed some of his words, like a Scottish accent but less harsh on the throat. From the way he pressed out his chest, dangling the hammer over his shoulder, Breck had expected him to sound knightly, or proper at least. A ray of light suddenly beamed out from the prismatic armor, moving down from his shoulders to his toes, revealing a tied shirt of leather-like material and earth-toned pants that stretched over boot tops.

"Who the heck are you?" Breck asked.

"I'm Belthar," he said, extending a hand.

Breck was suddenly pulled to his feet.

"Wow," Belthar said. "After all this time. Here you are." Belthar gripped Breck's shoulders, staring at him with eyes like sun-soaked grass. Then he clapped his hands against Breck's arms, "Not bad, Belreck. You could still use a bit more weight up top. And grow the hair out, that'll help."

Breck froze with arms pressed to his sides. Tom looked up from the ground with raised eyebrows and mouthed, “Belreck?” Breck shrugged in reply.

“And you, skinny one, must be Tom,” Belthar said, lifting Tom up with one arm. “What keeps you from floating off the planet?” Tom was just as tall as Belthar but less than half his width. Belthar’s skin had been darkened by the sun, exaggerated by Tom’s reflective paleness.

“Umm...” Tom said, eyes darting back and forth between Breck and Belthar.

The three of them stood in a small circle, watching each other for a moment. Belthar leaned the hammer against his hip and picked at his beard. A faint screech echoed from the woods.

“Krat,” Belthar said with a gurgle sound in his throat. “More Leapers. Dank-faced things never quit. Follow me.”

“Where?” Breck said.

“Somewhere we’re less likely to get eaten.”

“Wait a sec,” Tom said, resting his hands on his hip. “Aren’t we safer near the pool?”

Belthar sighed. “I don’t have time for this.” He twirled the hammer upside down and tapped it on the ground. A translucent sphere erupted from its head and extended a few feet beyond where the party stood.

“Woah . . . what is this?” Tom said. He reached out to touch the inside of the sphere.

“I wouldn’t—”

Tom's body locked up like he'd been electrified, and he fell to the ground unconscious

"Tom!" Breck said, shaking Tom's body. "What'd you do?"

"Eh. He'll be alright in a few minutes. Keep up." The shield moved with Belthar. Breck kept stride, being sure not to accidentally touch the inside of the sphere, while Tom's body rolled along like a gerbil inside of an exercise wheel. Belthar finally stopped in a thick patch of palms. "There. The Leapers won't be able to sniff us out in here. Should buy us a few minutes while they rally." Belthar prodded Tom with the flat end of his hammer, and Tom sprung awake, sitting upright. "You alright there, boy?"

"Fwoof," Tom said, rubbing his head. "Did I faint?"

"You're The Lightbringer, aren't you?" Breck said.

"I am *a* Lightbringer, yes. There are others also."

"That means you're 'The Guy.' You're going to tell us what's happening to us," Tom said.

"From what I overheard, I think Rellion's your 'guy.'" Belthar crossed his arms. His muscled forearms pressed out from his chest. "Tom, have you felt unusual since you came up out of the pool—body changes, chill in your throat, fire in your gut?"

"Now that you mention it, my insides felt like they were exploding in the pool—it wasn't painful, but it was hot, like I swallowed a handful of wasabi. Speaking of wasabi, I'm also hungry—"

"Ah!" Belthar hooted. "A Firemaster. You have that in common with Rellion. You will be useful. Breck, what about you?" Belthar inched closer, looking down at Breck with fixed eyes. "Anything different?"

Breck took a short step back and leaned away. “My hands feel tingly, and I’m a bit dizzy and tired. I’m sure that’s normal when you’re under the constant threat of imminent death for an entire day.”

“Well, all Lightbringers feel that emptiness when they first ascend. You’ll feel better once you’ve rested and your energy has restored.” Belthar eyed the skyline, glancing back and forth.

“Hold up a sec,” Tom said. “What was that bit about the Fire-thingy?”

“Right . . . here’s the short of it,” Belthar said, taking a deep breath. He fished a bug out of his beard and flicked it into the shield, eviscerating it with a spark. “Every Lightbringer has a Guardian. This is usually a close friend. When a Lightborne comes of age, he or she can enter the Circle of Light. It’s actually quite dangerous, considering that some never come out, but those who do return are Lightbringers. And the Circle both chooses and empowers the Guardian according to his or her predispositions and traits.”

Breck furrowed his brow and scratched at his elbow. “Empower? What do you mean?”

Belthar clapped Tom on the shoulder. Tom buckled under the weight of his arm. “Since Tom is a Firemaster, he can both manifest and manipulate fire.”

“Wait, so which one of us is the Guardian?” Tom said.

“You,” Belthar said, point a finger at Tom.

“Forget that. Breck can be the Guardian,” Tom said.

“You don’t get to choose.”

“What’s wrong with being the Guardian?” Breck said.

“‘Guardian’ sounds like a fancy word for ‘sidekick,’” Tom said.

“Rellion’s my Guardian, and he’s far more powerful than I,” Belthar said

“Oh. Well . . . I guess we’ll just see how it goes then.”

“Tom, you need to control your thoughts. Your power comes from language, so when you imagine fire, and think about the word, you’ll create it.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Tom said.

“Your hand is on fire,” Belthar said, pointing at Tom’s left hand. A crimson flame engulfed it from his wrist to his fingertips.

“Gah!” Tom beat the flaming hand against his pant leg, then tried burying it with dirt but the flame immediately returned. “How do I make it stop?” he shouted.

Belthar laughed, hands pressed against his belly. He didn’t move to help.

“Does it hurt?” Breck asked, hurrying to help Tom douse the hand with dirt.

“Well,” Tom said, unburying himself and inspecting the flame, clapping his hands together. “Now that you mention it. No. I can barely feel it.”

“You can’t burn yourself, but you’ll set the whole wood ablaze if you can’t control your mind.”

“Nothing good ever comes from putting Tom and fire together,” Breck said.

Tom turned the flame over in his hand until it faded.

“I’m confused,” Breck said. “So, this light circle thing gave Tom magic, what can I do?”

Belthar leaned back, propping himself up with the hammer. He looked down his nose at Breck. “Well, Belreck, if what they say about you is true, then you can do anything that I can do, and more.”

Breck *did* feel different, as if he'd been sick his whole life and just woke up finally feeling better. Tom's abilities already manifested by accident. He wondered why nothing was happening to him yet. Perhaps Tom will be the stronger one, but Belthar scared off the shadow monster without breaking a sweat. "Why do you keep calling me 'Belreck?'"

"Cause that's your name," Belthar said, matter-of-factly.

"No," Tom said, shaking his head. "It's Breck. Is that a weird Lightbringer thing?"

"No," Belthar said, his voice growing louder, "His mother changed it when she brought him here."

"To Florida?" Tom said.

The earth rattled. Pebbles danced at Breck's feet. The golden sphere trembled in rippling waves.

"Well, story time will have to wait," Belthar said. "The Leapers will return with numbers greater than I can manage, especially with you two dragging along." He tapped the hammer against the ground and the golden shield faded. "We need to find shelter. I need to time to locate Rellion," he said, strapping the weapon to his back. "Do either of you know where we are?"

Breck peered through the thick of trees. The entrance to the flattened path lay several yards away. "We can follow the path back to the interstate. I think Garth took us north to get here, so we must be near Rockledge. It will take us half the day to get home if we're walking."

“Your homes will be off-limits for now. They’re sure to be guarded while we’re so close. We’ve got to move north.”

“Tom, what about your Uncle Louis? We could walk there in about an hour or so, right?”

“I don’t have a key.”

“I don’t need a key,” Belthar said, strutting toward the path.

“Should we follow or make a run for it?” Tom asked. “I’m with you, whatever you think.”

Breck stopped and faced Tom. “There’s something familiar about him. I can’t quite place it—”

“He’s smug like you,” Tom said. “And the hair thing . . . that’s kind of weird.”

“I’m not smug,” Breck said, scrunching up his face.

“Dude, during football season . . . you can be such a tool.”

“Whatever, I’m not sure we’ve got another option here but to follow the dude with the magical hammer, especially with the screaming, flying whatever that keep popping up. And you, setting yourself on fire and what not.”

“Agreed.” Tom nodded.

“Are you coming or waiting there to get eaten?” Belthar called, already halfway down the path.

“He’s quick for a big dude,” Tom said, and the boys hurried after him.

The coach version of Garth made the boys run through the woods like this. It was like an obstacle course with the fallen trees and sharp palm branches sticking out into the pathway. On Wednesdays, he’d bus the team to his house on the Tillman Canal and

they'd run along the shore, watching for gators. He called it "motivation." Breck thought it ironic to be keeping stride with Tom in the same way, running from monsters. Though, gators always seemed to be afraid of them, retreating beneath the murky surface, while these monsters . . . well, they weren't afraid.

"So, Belthar," Tom said, "Do you have like a magical horse or something? We're in the off-season, you know? I can make the short sprints, but I'll die if we keep up this pace much longer."

"No. We'll travel on foot til' we meet with Rellion. I need contact with the earth."

Breck took several steps to keep pace with each of Belthar's strides. "Belthar, what was that thing at the pool—the demon-looking creature with the sword?"

"Solarius. He's a lieutenant in the Terranox army. I'm surprised he attacked so soon—still weak from the portal travel and all. I suspect it was a trap, to try and lead me away. I could have killed him, if you two hadn't been there."

Tom scratched his head. "Is there like an instruction manual that we could use to figure out what the heck you're talking about?"

"Yeah, like the little flip book that comes with video games?" Breck said.

"We never even look at those..."

"I'd look at *this* one," Breck said.

"I still wouldn't."

Belthar glanced back and forth between the two sides of the pathway. "Be quiet." He suddenly planted his feet and both boys marched into him. Breck rubbed his forehead and tried to control the forward flap of springing hair.

"What are you made out? Cement?" Tom said.

Belthar reached back and pinched Tom's mouth. "Listen." A faint hiss, like the release of air brakes, increased in intensity until a trail of green flame crossed overhead. "Keep up," he said, launching into a full-bodied sprint, swinging and pulling himself forward with his arms. The boys scrambled after him.

"Hey," Breck said between breaths, "shouldn't we be running away from the meteor?"

"The bigger ones are coming down now. If I can stop this one, we may last a little longer." Belthar reached back and unhooked his hammer, then leaned forward and raced ahead.

CHAPTER VII

THE TERRA

The path opened up to the empty interstate. The meteor screamed overhead, blazing green and yellow. Belthar crouched in the middle of the street.

“Belthar!” Breck shouted. “You’re right under it!”

“That’s the idea.” Belthar pointed his hammer at the meteor, then locked it back by his side. Its head glowed blue, and cylinders of fire snaked around it until it was engulfed. Then a growl from his lips rose into a battle shout, and he heaved the radiant hammer into the sky, releasing it directly at the meteor. It spun through the air, gleaming and cutting through the cloudless blue. Belthar tracked the hammer’s movements with an extended hand as if he were controlling its path.

A moment later, the hammer collided with the meteor, exploding into a nova of light. Chunks of rock and ash shattered out in all directions.

Breck rocked back on his heels. “Whoa...” His pulse pounded in his neck.

The hammer, perfectly intact, began falling toward the ground. Belthar took off in a sprint after it.

“Keep up! The Leapers will have seen that!” Belthar ordered.

Tom sighed and palmed his head. “I’m too tired for this...”

Breck shrugged and started after Belthar. “The dude just exploded a meteor, and you want to take a nap?” A familiar screech resonated from the cover of trees, growing louder until it stabbed at his ears drums.

“Don’t cover your ears!” Belthar shouted back without turning around, “It leaves you defenseless. You’ll get used to it.” He slowed, steering himself beneath the falling hammer.

Suddenly, a Leaper burst into view, tearing up the earth as it dug for traction. It was only a few yards from the Lightbringer.

“On your left!” Breck hollered.

“I know!”

The creature closed in on Belthar in an instant and pounced into the air. At the same moment, the hammer fell into Belthar’s hands. He spun completely around, slamming the hammer into the creature’s midsection. The Leaper padded the air, frantic for footing. Belthar jumped, swung the hammer over his head and brought it down on the creature’s back. The Leaper yelped and fell flatly to the ground.

Belthar landed on his feet beside the Leaper’s lifeless body. The red glow in its eyes began to fade. The boys hurried to Belthar and stood on each side of him for few moments, staring. The Leaper’s arms stretched out along the speckled gravel. Its back hollowed where the hammer had struck.

“You killed it!” Tom said, pumping his fists into the air. “The demon beast has been slain!”

“I thought these things couldn’t be killed—”

Tom’s stomach rumbled audibly. “Can we eat it?”

“Just wait,” Belthar said. He spoke softly, eyes locked on the dark body. He took several slow breaths. Then, the Leaper’s eyes extinguished to black and the beast

dematerialized instantly into a thick mist. The particles moved together in a black cloud, retreating to the cover of the woods.

Belthar extended a palm toward the fleeing mist. “Be gone.” A flash of golden light burst from his hand. The black cloud erupted into a spectacle of lights. Flickering like a swarm of fireflies, the mist formed together into a beam and disappeared into Bethar’s hand.

Breck walked around in a small circle where the creature had been. “What did you do to it?”

“I absorbed it. Stole its power.”

“So it can’t come back?” Breck asked.

“Leapers will rematerialize if given time. Lightbringers, however, have the ability to convert the dark mist, and once it has become light, can use it as energy. Though, that is quite advanced and could kill you if you get it wrong. It’s most important to stop the rematerialization, or they’ll overwhelm you—that is their primary strategy.”

Breck turned sharply as a howl blew across the road. A body of tawny fur snaked between the trees, padding soundlessly on four cat-like feet. It moved parallel to Breck and his companions, stalking something in the shadows. Then, a pair of red eyes appeared, and a growl rolled from the long snout of a spying Leaper. In a flurry of flying foliage, the tawny animal pounced. The altercation lasted only a few moments until a black cloud fled deeper into the woods and the tawny creature resumed its prowling.

“You have Kamgars here?” Belthar asked.

“What’s a Kamgar?” Tom said.

“Have you ever seen that animal before now?”

“Maybe,” Breck said. “Something like it showed up at my house this morning just as a Leaper was about to tear into us.”

Belthar sighed, “She’s going to complicate things.”

Breck looked at Tom, who shrugged and bent to tie his shoe. “You know that cat-thing?” Breck said.

“You’ll find out soon enough. The Leapers are forming together—more than I can handle without Rellion. Don’t fall behind,” Belthar said, starting down the interstate at a steady jog, the hammer bouncing against his back.

“Do you think he ever walks?” Tom said.

Breck’s legs burned at the thought of running the remaining miles to Uncle Louis’s house. He felt the heaviness of fatigue already setting in. The lining of his throat stuck together. “I might die of thirst before we make it to the exit.”

“Don’t tell anyone I said this, but I’m beginning to think I’d rather be at school, like any other boring day,” Tom said.

“If I had a seat to fall out of, I’d be falling out of it right now . . . do you think we should catch up to him before something jumps us?” Breck said.

“Will you carry me in your hair?”

“Nope,” Breck said, taking off after Belthar. Tom rolled his eyes and followed.

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As they neared the city, abandoned cars littered the road. Many were simply parked, but others had been crushed, lights still flashing, air bags hanging limply. A green, metal sign read, “Rockledge—1/4 Mile.” The party slowed, weaving between vehicles.

“I bet we could take one of these cars,” Breck said.

“This one still has the keys in it!” Tom said, leaning through the window of a copper-toned truck.

“No,” Belthar said, walking ahead.

“Why not?” Tom said. “It would be so much faster.”

“Your technology is unreliable and dangerous.”

“More dangerous than a band of Leapers gobbling us up?” Tom said.

Except for the vacant vehicles, the street showed no signs of harm—no bodies, no blood, no abandoned flip-flops waiting for their owner’s return.

“Belthar, where are all the people?” Breck said.

Smoke seeped from the hood of a red sedan, jammed between a furniture delivery truck and a tan SUV. The doors had been left open. Duffle bags filled the floor space beneath two empty infant seats. The ceiling fabric dangled from two slash marks penetrating the steel frame. Breck moved around to the front of the car and pressed his hand into a paw-shaped indentation on the hood. Air forced into his lungs until they burned, swelling against his ribs, threatening to burst.

The colored sky faded into gray as if the day had reversed to the early morning. Then, a young woman threw open the driver’s side door. She scrambled to the rear, unstrapping an infant from his chair. A man appeared on the other side, retrieving a little boy—a toddler with blonde hair—from another seat. A horde of Leapers swarmed across the interstate, slamming into cars and ripping bodies from vehicles.

A Leaper collapsed on the small family. It caught the woman in its jaws, pinning the others beneath its massive chest. She fell limp, limbs dangling. People flocked across

the street, fleeing into the woods. The Leapers pounced from victim to victim, catching as many as they could.

The Leaper holding the woman breathed in. Streams of sand-colored dust flowed from her body into the Leaper's mouth. The trapped man screamed as curved, black claws dug into his back. Then, the Leaper stretched its long snout to the sky, clamped its jaw shut, and the woman's body burst into dust. Rippled muscles tensed, pulsed, and seemed to grow, thickening, contorting. It refocused its attention to the blonde toddler, who stood watching with blank expression. His mouth hung loosely, and a dark stream ran down the front of his red pajama pants. The Leaper growled, inching toward the toddler, and Breck turned his face away.

"Breck! Are you okay?" Tom said, shaking him.

"Let him be, Tom. Belreck, did you see something?" Belthar said, pushing Tom aside.

The sun hung low over the empty road. Breck leaned against the car door. "There were hundreds of people here, stuck, trying to escape. The Leapers . . . they hunted them."

Belthar pressed his hand over Breck's head, lifting, then pressing down again, then lifting. Breck's hair sprung back each time.

"I know . . ." Breck said. "It's a thing."

"It's quite distracting," Belthar said.

"Ha," Tom said, laughing to himself. "The alien is making fun of you."

"Does this happen to you often? Visions like this?" Belthar said

"Why do you want to know?" Breck said, redirecting Belthar's hand away.

“Don’t tell me then,” Belthar said, turning away. “We need to keep moving.” He pushed the wrecked sedan aside with one arm as he walked past.

“Wait, Belthar.” Breck brushed himself off and pulled Tom along with him to Belthar’s side. “I used to get these nightmares a long time ago. They seemed so real. They went away for a long time until a few weeks ago. Now, I get them almost every night.”

Belthar sighed and turned to face Breck. “I’m sorry. You should not have had to deal with that alone. What you see is important, and Rellion will help you understand why this has happened to you.”

“I saw a Leaper crush a woman,” Breck said. “Then it absorbed her somehow . . . blood and all. Was that real?”

“That is what the Terra do,” Belthar said. “They sustain themselves by consuming life—from the plants, the trees, and all living, breathing things. Then, once they’ve devoured all life on the planet, they move on to the next.”

“And this happened to your home, before you came here?”

“Yes, and it is still happening. Yet, I’m here—” Belthar’s eyes locked onto something behind Breck.

“What is it?” Breck asked. In the minutes where he’d been lost in the vision, a wave of blackened clouds had peaked over the horizon. Though a sliver of sun still shone over the treetops, a sheet of darkness moved north in their direction.

“Krat. It’s the Black Horizon. Keep moving. How much further, Tom?” Belthar said, pulling the boys along.

“At least twenty minutes at this pace. What’s the big deal?” Tom said.

“Frost Weavers are already coming through the portals. They weave the storms that make the Black Horizon to create advantages: blotting out the sun, masking Terranox movements within, using the elements to distract their prey.”

“So . . . they’re threatening us with rain?” Tom said.

“Doesn’t sound all that bad,” Breck said.

“This is Florida. It rains every day. Now, if fire comes outta those clouds, we’ll be in trouble.”

“It would be inconvenient to catch a cold out here though, being on the road and all,” Breck said.

“Agreed. I bet my uncle has umbrellas—”

“Boys.” Belthar’s voice resonated through Breck’s body like volts passing up his spine. “On Zariel, my home world, when the Black Horizon swept through, blood pooled with the rain.”

Heat rose to the skin on Breck’s cheeks. Though he didn’t know what Zariel was like, Belthar’s pain connected with him. He thought of his mother, dancing with him in the rain one Saturday afternoon, leaping from puddle to puddle. After a heavy rainfall, they’d wade through the drainage ditch at the edge of their yard, searching for the brown, clawed crawdads that had wandered too far from the canals. They scooped up tadpoles, letting them squirm between their fingers. Then they’d sit on the porch, wrapped together in a cocoon of towels, watching the rain ripple along the flooded street.

“‘Black Horizon?’ Isn’t that the name of Garth’s thing?” Tom said.

Belthar nodded. “I suppose Garth found the name fitting for his cause also.”

A line of cars led to the Rockledge exit in a subtle curve. “This way,” Tom said, pointing down the road. “His neighborhood isn’t far from the highway.”

“I will watch the rear. Move quickly. The Black Horizon will quicken if we’re spotted.”

Breck kept pace with Tom while Belthar trailed behind, keeping track of the Black Horizon’s advance. His heels ached from trekking along the interstate. “I need different shoes. We’re close, right?”

“Yeah. It would be a lot faster if we had a car though. Maybe we can convince the Big Guy to let us drive to the next place.”

“He said he needs to go North to meet that other dude. ‘North’ could mean Canada for all we know.”

“There’s no way I’m walking to Canada. I’ll die,” Tom said.

“Quiet,” Belthar said, suddenly right behind them.

Tom jumped. “Dang it, Belthar. You can’t sneak up on a dude like that.”

“You’re being the opposite of quiet,” Belthar said.

“...I’m starting to like you,” Breck said.

Belthar stared blankly. “There’s something stalking us. Don’t draw attention to it. Just let it follow. I have a suspicion.”

“Put your hair down, Breck. It might spot you,” Tom said.

Breck punched him in the arm. “What do you think it is?”

Tom looked behind, scanning the surrounding area, popping his head around parked cars.

Belthar shook his head. “We may never find out.”

“Belthar, don’t you think it’s weird that we haven’t heard from our parents yet?”

Breck asked.

“Your parents?” Belthar laughed, shaking his head. “What do you care about that man?”

“Do you know my father? How?”

“Oh, I know him alright. Not much a father if you ask me—never came to see you, never around when you needed him.” Belthar spat and tugged on his beard, then pressed his lips together and strode ahead.

“Still no service,” Tom said, pulling his cell phone from his pocket.

“You think your uncle might be home?” Breck asked. “Maybe he can help us track them down.”

“He’ll have a landline at least. Maybe they have service wherever they are.”

They made their way down the exit road where a semi-trailer had been split through the middle, spilling plastic water bottles onto the road.

“Convenient,” Tom said, scooping up a bottle. Breck gulped one back and offered another to Belthar who sniffed the plastic and promptly tossed it aside. A crescent moon appeared as the last glow of sunlight slipped away. They turned onto a road that led into a gated neighborhood. White, block walls lined the edge of the community. The entrance was guarded by a bronze gate attached to center tower.

Tom stepped up to a curbside keypad and speaker and tapped his lips. “Hm . . . my parents kept the passcode on a pad in the top drawer of the kitchen. I just need to remember...”

“Hey, Tom,” Breck said. “I think he’s got it.”

The hinges screeched as Belthar pushed against the gate with one hand. The metal rods bent away so easily that Breck couldn't tell if the gate had opened on its own by magic or if Belthar was so strong that he didn't need it.

"Do you think we'll have to pay for that?" Tom said.

"I don't think he cares," Breck said. Belthar was already inspecting the first house, patting the concrete wall as if he were testing its durability.

"Welp . . . here we go." Tom led them through several yards, which were damp from their evening watering. Houses all along the street were dark except for a few flickering yard lamps.

No one knew what Uncle Louis did for a living. He would disappear without warning for weeks at a time. Then, he'd be home and cheering at their football games. The McKerrick's didn't talk much about him. Tom had said that Uncle Louis married during college. The girl was still in high school and just barely eighteen. He saw them once together after their daughter was born and thought she looked more like a sister than an aunt. A few years later, Uncle Louis moved to Florida without his family, and Tom has not seen his cousin since.

Tom approached the garage door and tapped his chin. "I bet I can jimmy this thing open." He squatted and inched his fingertips beneath the door. Breck crossed his arms and smiled as Tom arched back, pulling up on the lowest panel. The door didn't budge.

"Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to help me?" Tom said, still straining.

"Belthar's already inside."

“What?” he said, falling back on his hands.

“The front door was open.”

Tom stood and strolled past Breck, brushing the loose gravel from his hands.

“Your face is stupid.”

“Good one,” Breck said. He smiled and kicked the back of Tom’s ankles as they walked to the entrance.

Moonlight illuminated the living room where Tom’s uncle, the proud bachelor, had a set of leather couches facing a flat-screen television. Framed photographs of Tom’s family lined a console table in the foyer. Several more lay face-down on the tiled entryway, shards of glass surrounding them.

“Uncle Louis? Anyone here?” Tom shouted, patrolling the house.

Breck closed the door behind them and twisted the deadbolt. Belthar stood in the center of the kitchen, examining the dishwasher. He tapped his hammer against the wall then leaned it against the counter. The refrigerator light cast a glow over his face. He picked at his beard and knocked around the bottles on the shelf.

“This thing stores food?” Belthar said. He pulled out a pizza box and looked inside. “Why is it in triangles?”

“I wouldn’t eat that—”

But Belthar had already taken a bite. He immediately spat it out into the sink and threw the box onto the ground. “It’s oily like Sea Slug. What does this come from?”

“Um. Italy.”

“Well, there may yet be defenses against the Terra that even *they* did not predict. Let’s hope they run into some of these Italies.”

“...right, or mold . . . Hey, Tom. It looks like the power works,” Breck said. His shoe snagged on a t-shirt, and he found a trail of blood-soaked scraps leading down the hallway to the far bedroom. Various garments had been used to compact or wrap a wound, and had been cast aside when soaked. Breck stepped around the clothes and crept quietly to the bedroom. The exterior wall had been shredded through from floor to ceiling. A spray of pellet-sized holes surrounded the opening. Shards of glass scattered the floor, camouflaging into the cream-colored carpet. Sticking out from beside the torn bedframe was a pair of shoes, the feet still in them.

“Tom! In here!” Breck called. “Quick.”

Tom appeared a moment later. “Aw, man. Don’t let that be him.”

Breck and Tom moved together around the bedside. Uncle Louis’s pale body lay on one side in the fetal position, hugging a shotgun. A mat of bloodstained t-shirts was pressed against his chest. A tear on one pant leg exposed an open gash, drained by time. The shotgun pellets indicated that Uncle Louis had fired in self-defense, but it hadn’t been enough to prevent whatever did this to him from breaking through.

Tom fell to the ground and covered his face with one hand while the other rested on Uncle Louis’s foot. Breck squeezed his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Tom.”

Breck’s heart sank into his gut. This war against earth became suddenly real, now that someone he knew was gone forever. Their parents were missing, but there had been hope in the unknown—the chance that they were still alive. But now, the unknown became more sinister, more likely to be deadly, more permanent.

“Oh,” Belthar said, entering the room. He exhaled loudly.

“Belthar, can you do something?” Breck said.

“Not this. Only a Paladin can restore the dead, and there’s not been one of those in a century.” Belthar moved to the shredded wall. Battle-worn fingers caressed the claw marks. “The storm is near, and it will bring cold and rain. We should move to the next house and see if it’s more secure.”

“No,” Tom said. “I know this house. I want to stay here.”

“Fine, but we’ll need to patch the wall, and I’ll have to move the body out.”

“Why can’t we just go to the other part of the house?” Breck asked.

“It’s not healthy to have it here.”

“I know,” Tom said, lifting up his eyes and standing to his feet. “I just need a minute. I’m sure my uncle has plywood in the garage from hurricane season. We can use it to patch the wall.”

Belthar nodded and waited at the end of the bed. Tom wiped his face, took a deep breath, and dug his hand into his pocket. He pulled out his brother’s toy train and spun the wheels with his thumb. “Alright, Breck. Let’s go.”

The boys hurried down the hallway and into the garage. Breck pressed a button by the door frame and the garage light came on.

“Don’t you think we should keep them off?” Tom said. “We’re bound to draw attention if ours is the only house with lights on.”

Breck could tell that Tom suppressed the thought of his dead uncle. The corners of Tom’s mouth pressed forward, straining his face. “Right,” Breck said, switching the lights off.

“Here.” Tom turned and flicked his fingers out. A flame bounced from his palm to a candle on Uncle Louis’s tool bench. “I’ve been working on it, setting things on fire when no one’s looking.”

“You’re good at setting things on fire . . . why am I not surprised by that? Look, there,” Breck said, pointing to a dozen sheets of plywood leaning against the tool bench.

Uncle Louis’s yellow convertible gleamed in the candlelight—the “beach cruiser,” he called it. Each plywood sheet was as long as Tom was tall. He gripped one with both hands and dragged it inside, scraping a line onto the cement along the way.

Breck pinched a sheet between his palm and fingers and lifted it with ease. He stacked several more in each hand before moving to the hallway.

“Dude,” Tom said, appearing from the bedroom. “How are you carrying so many?”

“I don’t know . . . I just am.” Breck shrugged and squeezed past him. “I’ll get the rest. Find something to put them up with.”

“Super strength . . .”

“Whatever.”

Belthar had already relocated Uncle Louis’s body and covered the largest part of the tear with the plywood Tom had delivered.

“How is that staying up?” Breck asked. He released his grip and the plywood sheets landed with a dull *thud*.

“Do you want to want me to stand here and explain it to you or fix the wall?” Belthar said, taking another sheet.

“Um . . . both?” Breck said.

Belthar placed a second plywood sheet adjacent to the first and lined up the edges to cover the remaining exposure. His triceps rippled as he pressed it to the wall. He whispered a string of unfamiliar words, his tongue rolling and dropping. Belthar coughed and uttered the last word, “Enadoca.” The two sheets had become one. Something hit the ground with a *thud*, and Belthar’s hammer cast a dim glow through the room.

“It took a few tries to find the right words for the elements in the wall, but it will provide a more reliable hold.”

“...than nails?” Tom said, walking in with a hammer and a box of nails in his hands.

“I could put a couple nails in it, just to be sure,” Breck said. Tom nodded at him in agreement.

“Do what you want. It won’t come apart either way,” Belthar said, repeating the ritual on a third sheet.

Breck gripped the edges of the plywood sheet with his fingertips and pried without success.

“Hmph. Even with a Lightbringer’s strength, you can’t separate them. The bond is organic.”

“Would it work on Breck’s hair?” Tom said.

“Not sure anything could help with *that*.”

“Welp,” Tom said. “It looks like you’ve got things handled. So, I’m just gonna take care of something.” Tom tapped his fingers together until a small flame appeared.

“Hah!” Then he disappeared into the bathroom.

“He finds the most convenient times to slip away...” Breck said.

“Are you just going to stand there?” Belthar said.

“Oh. Uh...”

Belthar stepped forward and grabbed half a dozen sheets with one hand. His fingers compressed the edges beneath his grip. “You two need to rest. Find some bedding.”

Breck backpedaled as Belthar pushed past him. Frustration ached in his chest. He hated that Belthar made him feel useless, as if he expected them to know better how to help. Breck exhaled and decided not to think about it. He moved to the hall closet across from the bedroom and pulled blankets and extra pillows from the bottom shelf. He made himself a bed on the floor, laying aside a pile of extras for Tom.

Breck stared up at the ceiling, tucking his arms beneath the pillow. Images of Uncle Louis’s face pressed to the forefront—greased hair parted to one side, chest curls peeking from the neck of his golf polo, sagging chin. He hadn’t been a fan of Uncle Louis’s grimy appearance and insensitive jokes—it was no wonder that he was a bachelor—but his death was unsettling. That could have been Mr. McKerrick’s body or his father’s body.

The toilet flushed and Tom peeled back the door. “Ah. Victory.”

“Dude,” Breck said.

Tom rolled his eyes, then returned to wash his hands. “Happy?” He flopped down on the blanket pile, not bothering to spread it out. “Where’s the big guy?”

“Doing whatever it is that he does. Are you okay?”

“Yeah . . . just trying not to think about it,” Tom said.

Belthar appeared in the doorway. “Tom, these were in the cold box. Is it safe to eat?” he asked, holding a handful of peaches. Bits of peach pulp dangled from his beard.

“Most people ask that *before* they try something.”

“I meant for *you*. We Lightborne can digest tortoise shell. I’m not concerned about a little fruit.”

“Yeah, it’s safe.”

Belthar dropped the peaches between the boys and moved to the wall, peaking between the window edge and plywood.

Breck propped himself up on one elbow and bit into a cold peach. He didn’t bother wiping the juice from his chin as it ran down his neck, cooling his body. “Belthar, there’s something I don’t understand—”

“Like *everything*...” Tom said.

“Well, yeah. But I don’t get why you’re here. If this is happening to your home, why would you abandon it?”

“Earth reminds me of Zariel—once lush and green.” Belthar paused and closed his eyes. Then he turned to Breck, “I didn’t abandon it, nor am I trying to flee the Terra . . . it’s quite complicated, and I’m not sure you’re ready to hear it.”

“Well tell us *something* at least,” Breck said. “You’re dragging us around and we don’t know why.”

“To keep you alive. Is that not clear?” Belthar said.

“But *why*? Why me? Why Tom?”

“Fine,” Belthar said, his nostrils flaring. He grabbed his hammer and tossed it onto the floor. It landed with a *clunk* and glowed brightly. “Touch the Tempest.”

“What?”

“The hammer. Touch it.”

“You named your hammer?” Tom said.

“*I* didn’t name it,” Belthar said. “You can thank Rellion for that. He’s the one who enchanted it.”

“What’s going to happened to me?” Breck asked.

“You want answers. See for yourself. Grab hold of him, Tom.”

“Huh? Why?”

Belthar sighed. “Adolescence might be the end of me. If you want to see Breck’s power, just grab his flinkin’ hand!”

“C’mon, Tom,” Breck said. He placed one hand on Tom’s shoulder and reached for the Tempest.

CHAPTER VIII

LIGHT BEYOND

Breck stood ankle-deep in a stream. A fish with rear legs and webbed flippers swam between his legs. He startled backwards when the fish stopped and looked up at him with bulging eyes. Grass-like blades as thick as his forearm grew stretched up to his waist. A sun, several times larger than the earth's sun, blazed overhead, and a smaller sun crept over the horizon. A winged shadow traveled across the grass. Breck ducked as a dragon soared just feet from the ground, dragging its claws through the thick blades. Spikes protrudes from its jaw line, and a saddle sat atop its bright, silver skin.

Breck followed the stream around to a towering structure that was squared like a castle but had a tall peak like a church. An unfamiliar script along the outer wall glistened a golden aura that emanated translucent waves. A dirt path led through a gap in the wall to a center building with two massive gray doors. The same symbol was carved into the steel—a cross with a diagonal line through it, the same they'd seen on Garth's uniform.

Three men with gray hair and two women with faint wrinkles around their eyes stood in circle outside the door. Golden armor, like Belthar's, covered their bodies and gleamed in the sunlight. A young man in his late twenties emerged from the building. Long, copper locks brushed his leather armor pads. His head hung low, and his shoulders slumped forward. In his hands, the Tempest glowed a bright crimson.

"I'm sorry, Belthar," one of the elderly men said. "We were wrong about you. It's going to be someone else."

Belthar's head snapped up. His eyes blazed. "But my whole life . . . you said—"

"I know what we said," the man said, his voice booming. "You will wait now until we decide what's next."

"And what about my mother . . . what will become of her?"

"Helios has made his decision. There's nothing we can do about that."

Belthar pushed through the small circle and stomped down the steps. A tall, slender man with flowing orange hair waited for him. "Belthar, wait," He said. "Wait!"

The vision blurred, then cleared inside a dark room. Belthar held the Tempest across his shoulders, hanging his hands over the shaft. "I don't know what to do. We haven't told the Council yet."

The man with hair sat in a chair across from him with cross legs. An orange garb lined with red flowed from his shoulders to the ground. His narrow face extended to a pointed chin, and his ears angled up to a tip. "You have to tell them. They will want to protect the baby."

"By what—sending it away?"

"That is the wisest course of action. The Terra are at their strongest now, more powerful than we've ever seen. The legend says—"

"I know better than most what it says," Belthar spat. He swung the Tempest around and slammed it into the ground, splitting up the stone floor.

"Then you must know . . . if it's a boy, they will not let him stay here. The Council is old. They cannot protect him while they wait for him to mature. It's the only way."

"But you're a Mage now—"

“Only just.”

“We can do this.”

“Stop being stubborn, Belthar,” the man said, standing. “There is only one option.”

Breck’s head spun as the vision swirled. When it stopped. He stood at the edge of a pool of light. It was like the one he and Tom had jumped into, where they received their powers. Its glow was almost blinding.

“Go. Now, but you must leave the Tempest here,” an elderly voice said, wavering from tired lips. “Its power will draw the Terra, and the boy must not be found for as long as is possible.”

The young Belthar, stubble shading his face, stepped forward and unhooked the hammer from his back. He handed it to a man with a gray beard who was twice his size. A woman joined Belthar’s side. Her pale, hairless arms cradled an infant in her arms. A small curl on the infant’s tiny forehead swooped up like Breck’s. The auburn waves of the woman’s hair reflected the light from the pool. A red and gold tunic reached to her calves.

When they turned to step into the pool, Breck’s heart leapt and pounded in his ears with a surge of adrenaline. Her thin nose, her crescent-like lips, her bright gray eyes. He had no doubts—the woman was his mother.

The pool flashed and light flooded the room. Then, it faded as quickly as it had appeared, and Belthar stood alone, waist-deep in the water. His arms still hovered in the air as if they were wrapped around Breck’s mother. “No,” he said. “No! This can’t be.

Send me through!” He slashed at the water, which splashed against an invisible barrier at the pool’s edge. “You can’t do this to me! Not again!”

The man with the red hair jumped into the pool and clamped himself around Belthar’s chest, pulling him out of the water. Belthar continued to curse the pool in a flurry of tears. Belthar ripped himself from the man’s grip and stormed out of the room, scooping up the Tempest on his way. The man turned to face Breck, “I think you’ve seen enough.”

Breck sat up abruptly. The Tempest illuminated the room. Belthar stood with crossed arms, glaring at Breck.

“Ugh,” Tom said, rubbing his head. “That was mega trippy.”

“That boy was me, wasn’t it?” Breck said.

“So, now you know,” Belthar said.

“...you’re my fathe—” Breck felt the word “father” fall back into his mouth, and his head spun. His eyelids flickered and he collapsed back onto the pillow.

“Breck, what’s wrong?” Tom said.

“Move aside,” Belthar ordered. “He’s used too much energy. Overextended without rest.”

A warm hand pressed against Breck’s chest. His heart slowed, and something like hot liquid poured from the hand and spread along his ribs. The room steadied, and Breck blinked his eyes open. Belthar pulled Breck up and sat back against the bedframe.

“That was my fault. Too much, too soon,” Belthar said. “I knew it would be a lot to process at once.”

“What was that place, Belthar?” Tom asked.

“That was Harthrend—the region that birthed the Lightborne. At its center stands the Temple of Helios—built to protect the Circle of Light. It is the source of a Lightbringer’s power, and it’s what finally brought me here.”

Breck heard only muffled voices as Tom and Belthar talked about the vision. Could it be true that he spent his whole life believing a lie, that his lousy father was not his father after all? But, was Belthar any better? Both fathers were strangers to him. Why would his dad keep the truth from him?

“Belthar,” Breck said, interrupting the Lightbringer mid-sentence. “Why didn’t you come for me? If you really are . . . if I’m . . . why would you leave me here alone?”

Tom leaned back against his blanket pile and pursed his lips. “Alone, eh?”

Breck ignored him, locking eyes with Belthar.

“Don’t you think I tried? I went to the pool every day until the Council barred me from the Inner Sanctum.”

“But you’re here now, after all these years, and all you brought with you was death and deceit—”

“And an absurdly large magical hammer that causes epilepsy,” Tom added.

“And what’s the plan?” Breck said, throwing back the blankets and standing. “Do you expect me to just go with you, and leave behind everything I’ve ever known?”

“This isn’t the way anyone wanted it, Belreck! It just happened—”

“That’s not my damn name!” Breck swatted a plastic manatee trinket off the dresser. It ricocheted off Belthar’s forehead, leaving a mark. Belthar’s face grew bright red. He stood, pulling his shoulders back. Breck turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. The walls swayed, and heat rushed to his cheeks. He

dabbed his forehead with his t-shirt to soak the forming droplets. The kitchen counter caught him. He lifted the receiver from the landline and dialed his dad's number, pressing the phone to his ear. It didn't ring.

"Hi, you've reached Steve with Barkan's Consultation Services—" The rest of the message blurred together until the beep.

"Dad. This is Breck . . . why didn't you tell me?" He paused and took a deep breath. "Can you come get me? I really need you this time. We're at Tom's uncle's place in Rockledge, but I'll watch my phone for service in case we have to leave here. Please . . . just, call me back."

He placed the handset back onto its dock and slid down to the ground. In the shadows across the room, two amber eyes reflected in a thin beam of moonlight. The edges of the creature's tawny fur were barely visible. It slinked forward, its elongated torso weaving with each step. Its cat-like face widened at the jaw, almost flattening, as if it were made to cage smaller animals within its bared fangs.

Breck pinched his eyes shut and waited. Moist, hot breath coated his neck. Then, a grated, damp tongue stroked up the side of his face, pulling against the grain of his scruff.

"Oh, boy," said Belthar's voice. "This complicates things."

The creature curled around Breck, its purr rumbling against his chest. Its massive head pressed beneath his chin.

"What the hell is that?" Tom shouted, peeking out from behind Belthar.

"Is it going to eat me?"

“It’s a Kamgar, and you’d be dead already if it planned on eating you,” Belthar said. He leaned forward, balancing himself on the Tempest. “Hello, Aztheria.”

The Kamgar returned to the shadowed corner and collapsed in on itself. Fur retreated into skin. Its torso shortened, and paws formed into slender fingers and toes. Its striped tailed ran up along its back and fused into its spine. The wide face narrowed and retracted, revealing pink lips, a thin nose, and orange lashes. A streak of red fur around its mane moved up its neck and bloomed out from the head of a crouching, naked girl. A stream of cloth hung from her neck, and she quickly stepped into it, coiling it around her body.

“Snap diggity! Who are you?” Tom said.

“This is Aztheria, Rellion’s daughter,” Belthar answered.

“I can speak for myself, Belthar,” she said. Her voice was pointed and airy like a teen whose vocal chords had not finished developing. She stepped out of the shadow. Flat, red hair brushed the middle of her back. Her ears were longer than human ears, extending up to a tip. Her cheeks were pink above a chin that narrowed to a point. Beige fabric stretched across her breasts in a V then wrapped around her torso to her thighs. She was a few inches shorter than Breck. “Hello, Belreck.”

“Careful, he’s not a fan of that name,” Belthar said.

“I don’t mind it so much when she says it...”

Tom stepped up and extended his hand. “Hi, I’m Tom. I’d like to personally welcome you to earth. If there’s anything at all that you need—”

“Hello, Tom,” She said politely, bowing her head forward.

“Did you lick me?” Breck asked, pushing Tom’s hand down.

Belthar cleared his throat. “Aztheria, how long have you been following?”

“I piggy-backed on your portal and tracked down these two in the early hours.

Led several Leapers away during the night.”

“Well, that explains how Rellion and I got separated,” Belthar said, glaring at her, but Aztheria didn’t seem to care, resting her hands on her hips.

“That was you . . . in the house,” Tom said.

“Wait—” Breck said. Her eyes glowed a fiery orange. “You’re the girl from the street, the girl that keeps showing up in my dreams.”

“Hm. You’ve been dreaming about me?” Aztheria said.

“They’re more like nightmares . . . but, yes.”

“Belthar, do you think he’s a Harbringer?” Aztheria said.

“It is consistent with what the Lightbringer Council foretold. His mother was a Harbringer, so it makes sense that the power would pass to him.”

“Hey,” Breck said. “I’m literally standing right here.”

Aztheria looked across at Belthar, her hair whipping the air. “You haven’t told him?”

“Told me what?”

“Harbringers are extremely rare, almost as uncommon as Paladin,” Aztheria said, stepping closer to Breck. Tiny flecks of orange and red danced around her irises like licks of a flame. “If a Harbringer became a Paladin, that would mean—”

“I know,” Belthar said. “The first since Helios.”

“Wow, Belreck. The things they said about you might be true after all.”

“Okay, is someone going to include me in the conversation about me at some point?” Breck said, throwing his hands out.

Aztheria took his hand and held it between hers. Her silken fingers traced the crevices of his hand. “Your visions are of the future, but Harbringers can also see the past of magical things where traces remain. Few Lightbringers have this ability, Belreck, and nearly all of them are on the Council, or are historians like your mother.”

“Just, hold on a second,” Breck said, pulling his hand back. “Why do you think you know so much about me? You’ve only been here for a day!”

Aztheria’s expression suddenly changed, her lips tightened and she shifted her gaze to the boarded window. “Do you feel—”

“Yes,” Belthar said. “It’s moving more quickly than usual, and they’ve had almost no time to rest.” He paused and thought for a moment. “Do you have any Home Seed?”

“Where on earth would I store it?”

“Fine. I’ll use the last of mine,” Belthar said sharply then turned down the hallway.

“Um, I’m going to go lay down,” Tom said, running his fingers through his hair. “All this is giving me a headache.”

Breck turned to follow them, but Aztheria caught his arm.

“Breck, I’m sorry that this has been so difficult for you.”

Breck took a deep breath. Aztheria was a stranger, but he felt as comfortable with her as he did when his mother was around, like he knew intuitively that she already understood what he was going through. Maybe seeing her in the visions made her feel

more familiar, but their connection was deeper than that, somehow rooted in his core.

“It’s just a lot to take in, and almost nothing makes sense; nothing seems real even when it’s happening right in front of me. I spent my whole life believing that this was all there is, *this* life and nothing more. I just learned that I’ve had a father this whole time on another planet, doing whatever it is that he does, while I’ve been through almost everything on my own, without a parent to help me through anything. And now, I finally have one again, and he doesn’t know how to be a father any more than the one I already have.”

She reached up and toyed with his hair. “Do you draw your power from this?”

“More like it draws its power from me...”

“Have you noticed that Belthar has a similar—”

“I noticed,” he said, crossing his arms.

“Breck, you need to know that Belthar . . . well, things didn’t happen the way he thought they would. He was going to leave everything behind for you and your mother.”

“I know . . . I saw that—”

“So, you know that it wasn’t his decision to leave you, but you still distrust him?”

“I don’t know,” Breck said, leaning over the counter. “I just need some time, okay? He just . . . seems to hate that he has to be here. Like he’s here out of obligation, and it doesn’t matter who I am to him.”

Aztheria pressed her palm against Breck’s back and moved between him and the counter, inches away from his face. “I’m going to tell you something that will be difficult to hear, but I think it will help you understand why Belthar is this way. Promise me that you’ll listen until the end.”

Breck thought he'd stand there forever as long as she was that close to him.

"Alright."

"There's a legend that's been passed down through generations about a Lightbringer, a boy, who would be born when the Terra were at their peak, scavenging the universe. This Lightbringer would bear the Mark of Helios—a Harbringer, able to see the future—and would become the most powerful Peacemaker in centuries . . . and would ultimately ascend to the rank of Paladin, which has not been seen since the Terra were defeated, forced into hiding a thousand years ago.

"Your father started having visions as a young adult, and the Council told him that it would be him, that he was the one to finally defeat the Terra. But after many years of training, he went into the Circle of Light, and it rejected him. He did not truly bear the Mark of Helios, but his visions were instead caused by the mutual love between your mother and him. She was the true Harbringer and was invited to join the Council of Lightbringers as a historian."

"So, what? None of this makes up for—"

"I'm not done yet," Aztheria said, putting her hand to his lips. "When your mother gave birth to you, she had a vision. She saw you holding the Sword of Helios, a weapon that has been held in the Temple of Light. The Council immediately gathered and knew that you must be protected from the heart of the conflict in order to have a chance to mature and learn to fight the darkness. There was no safe place on Zariel, so the three of you entered the Circle. But Belthar was again rejected because his heart was not pure. He was bitter about his own destiny, and the Circle did not trust him to raise you."

“Look, Aztheria,” Breck said, stepping back. “I get that stuff has happened on your world, and I’m trying to understand it, but right now, the man in there is not someone I want to be my father, even if it’s not his fault. None of this makes up for eighteen years without a real dad, and what’s worse is that all I can think about through all of this is that if he’d been a better person, and was here for us, my mother might still be here.”

“That’s exactly it, Breck. That’s why he is this way. He’s overwhelmed by guilt over you, yes, but what your mother did, what she went through, he will carry that burden forever.”

“You know what happened to my mother?” Breck said, gripping her shoulders.

Aztheria spun out of his grip and stepped toward the hallway. “I’ve already told you more than Belthar would want me to. I can’t—” she turned sharply as Belthar appeared in the hallway.

“It’s ready,” he said. “We’ve already wasted too much time.”

Aztheria walked beside Breck, her arm grazing his hand. The silk of her pale skin caused his chest to tighten and his heart to quicken. Her feet padded lightly. Her neck was taut, and she watched him from the corner of her eye. He couldn’t unlock his gaze, something about her resurrected feelings of familiarity. He wanted to ask her about the day of the wreck: why did he see her, why did he feel like he knew her, and how the heck did she transform into the cat-thing, but Belthar watched them. Breck’s tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, and his lips refused to part.

“Here,” Belthar said, holding out a copper flask. “Drink this.”

“Flaum juice?” Aztheria said, hovering her nose over the open cap.

“It’s all we’ve got time for.”

She took the flask and sipped it. “Here, Breck. It’s safe.”

The metallic rim chilled his lip. The liquid smelled like raspberries and caramel, but a sour sting ran over his tongue, forcing puckered lips and a hard swallow.

“Yow! You’ll probably like this, Tom.”

“Oh. I already drank a bunch,” Tom said, cozying into his pile of blankets.

“He didn’t give me a moment to tell him he only needed a sip,” Belthar said. “It could be a problem.”

“Huh?” Tom said.

“Best to lie down. It works quickly,” Belthar said, lowering Breck onto the makeshift bed. Aztheria lay beside him, the amber rings in her eyes glowing. His eyelids grew heavy, and she vanished into darkness.

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Stars gleamed in the black night. Tom stared up into the sky, rock shards and giant black boulders surrounding him. A torrent of dark mist moved around him and ash fell from his eyes. His t-shirt was tattered and flaming pebbles scorched holes through his cargo shorts.

“What are you doing, Tom? What’s wrong with you?” Breck tried to say, but the words were inaudible.

Tom turned his head. The black of his eyes reached out like tar and crept along his body, pulling itself with finger-like webs.

A golden beam enveloped Breck. Tom reached out as the tar subsumed his arm, and his image faded. Breck screamed, then green grass to his knees surrounded him. The

sun was several times larger than normal, looming overhead, but its warmth comforted him. Beside him, the Kamgar sat upright, its tail whipping against his leg.

“Belreck!”

“Wake him up, Belthar! They’re right on us!”

Breck forced his eyes open as Belthar lifted him to his feet. His legs wobbled and knocked together. His head bobbed forward, calling him back into sleep.

“Belreck, watch me,” Belthar said.

Tom rolled around on the ground, pulling blankets over his face. Aztheria tried desperately to wrestle them away.

“Pay attention!” Belthar grabbed Breck’s hand and angled his palm so his finger pointed to the ceiling. “You’re going to have to fight this time. A Lightbringer’s power comes from deep inside.” Belthar pressed against Breck’s chest. “Feel it start here. Think about moving it out into your arm and imagine it leaving your body. Aim for the chest.”

“Shh,” Aztheria said. “Listen.”

Rain beat with soft pads against the roof. Then the wind stirred, whistling through the plywood cracks. Water trickled in through the narrow openings. Suddenly, a sound like a thousand golf balls pelting the roof filled the room.

Tom sat up, blankets still wrapped around his shoulders. “What is that?” He shouted.

“Get back!” Belthar said, scooping all three teens in his arms and pinning them against the wall just as something burst through the ceiling. A boulder of ice as big as Breck shattered on the floor. Icy air spilled through the opening.

Breck shielded himself as tiny pellets stung his face. With the wall gone, he could hear the muffled screams of people fleeing their houses, growing louder before cutting off. Above the house, great blue wings sprawled out from a gray belly, beating the air. Teeth like icicles snapped above a ridged jaw. The dragon's eyes glowed blue. Spikes protruded from the entire length of its tail. Saddled to its back, a black creature gripped the reins. Triangle-shaped ears topped its head. Its face was similar to the Leaper's—dog-like, extended with fangs—but plated with armor along the snout. Taut muscles covered its slender body, and a piercing blue light emanated from its eyes. The Frost Drake whipped its head back, and a fog formed around its mouth.

Belthar extended the Tempest, and a shield projected from its head. A moment later, a barrage of dagger-shaped hail exploded against the barrier. The party moved together out of the room while Belthar kept the shield directed toward the Frost Weaver.

The wind howled through the narrow hallway.

"Tom, you can drive a stick, right?" Breck shouted.

"The Beach Cruiser!"

Aztheria gripped Breck's arm as they moved together into the garage. She had taken down a host of Leapers on her own, so he thought her closeness must not have been motivated by fear.

"No," Belthar said, shaking his head at the car. "I need my feet on the ground. I can't fight from inside that thing."

"It's the fastest way out of here," Breck said. "Tom, where are the keys?"

"On it!" Tom shouted, darting back into the house.

"I hate earth transportation. It's dangerous," Belthar said.

“More dangerous than riding a dragon?”

“I’ve never crashed a dragon,” Belthar replied.

Breck paused. “Well played,” he said.

Suddenly, ice crystal crept in from beneath the garage door, spreading out along the concrete floor. Claws pierced through the lowest panel, bending it outwards. The side door, leading outside, shook violently.

“Can they turn door knobs?” Breck asked.

Belthar shook his head and smiled. “They don’t need to.”

Hinges squealed as the shaking intensified. Aztheria released Breck’s arm, and he stepped toward the door. He gripped the knob and held the door still.

Belthar reared the Tempest over his shoulder, inching towards the bent panel. He peeked through the window and immediately turned to Breck. “Guard yourself!”

The storm sucked the side door out, tearing it from its hinges. A dragon hovered over the breach. It eyed Breck, then thrashed its wings. A gust pushed him backwards, and its rider soared through the doorway, toppling into him and pinning him to the ground. Breck screamed as the Frost Weaver dug its claws into his shoulders. Warm blood streamed down his back.

The Frost Weaver split open its razored jaws and roared, splattering Breck’s face with icy saliva. He reached and found hold of the Frost Weaver’s neck, tightening as its claws pressed deeper. It finally released him and whipped its head back, freeing itself.

“Now, Tom!” Belthar shouted.

Breck shielded his face as a fireball struck the Frost Weaver directly in the chest, exploding and hurling it against the tool bench. A shelf of sockets and ratchets crumpled

into a shower of metallic *clinks*. The creature scrambled onto its scaly paws just as a second fireball struck its jaw, and it collapsed onto Breck.

“Do it, Breck! Finish it!”

Breck aimed his palm at the Frost Weaver like Belthar had instructed. A pulsing sensation formed at the center of his chest. It spread into his arms, racing through his veins. His fingers trembled, and he struggled to keep them straight. Then, a burst of light erupted from his hand, piercing through the Frost Weaver’s torso, and the creature shattered into black mist, escaping through the breach. Breck’s palm tingled and glowed beneath the skin.

“Breck!” Tom called. “Hey! Snap out of it! I can’t get a clear shot.”

Belthar’s feet dangled above the ground. A Frost Weaver had pinned his arms to his sides. A gray fog foamed from its mouth, covering Belthar’s face. The Tempest lay on the ground, out of his reach. His body convulsed, kicking at nothing.

“It’s suffocating him!” Tom shouted. A blazing sphere hovered between his hands. Threads of flame whipped around it.

“Where’s Aztheria?”

“I don’t know. You’ve got to do something. I can’t hold this much longer.”

Belthar’s limbs flailed, struggling against the Frost Weaver’s grip. Breck vaulted over the Beach Cruiser and wrapped his hands around the Frost Weaver’s neck from behind, tightening on its throat. The fog sputtered but continued to flow. He squeezed harder, feeling the knotted vertebrae tensing beneath his thumbs. The muscles in its neck began to split, and acid built up in Breck’s throat. He was about to crush the life from a living thing, but he had to save Belthar . . . he needed to show himself that he could do

this. He dug in with his fingers and pressed his hands together. The Frost Weaver finally released Belthar and clawed at Breck with flailing arms.

Breck closed his eyes and channeled the stabbing pain in from his shoulders into his grip. He cried out, spit showering from his open mouth, and squeezed until the Frost Weaver's spine shattered into dust in his hands.

"Move!" Tom said.

Breck ducked and an enormous fireball soared over his head. He helped Belthar to his feet through a fit of coughing and sucking breaths, and they hobbled to the Beach Cruiser. Breck lowered him onto the rear bench seat. Tom was already fiddling with the keys. Dragon paws appeared beneath the tattered garage door, claws cracking the concrete driveway.

"Hurry up!" Breck said.

"Belreck," Belthar said between coughs.

"Don't worry, we'll get you out of here."

Belthar reached forward and gripped Breck's shoulder. Heat spread through his back, converging at the open wounds. There was a sound of tearing paper, then the skin came together and the pain suddenly ceased. Breck sucked in a deep breath and stretched forward, fully healed.

Tom stared, pale and blank. "I should not have watched that. It was like watching a snake after it's swallowed a whole mouse, still moving around inside there, pushing out against—"

"Go, Tom," Belthar said, falling back into the seat.

The engine roared. Tom stepped on the gas and they tore through the shredded garage door. He jerked the wheel, careening onto the street, and they sped forward.

“Where are we going?” Tom said.

“We’ve got to get ahead of the storm,” Belthar said, forcing out the words.

Belthar had seemed invincible until now, batting away the Leapers without stopping to take a breath. How could a Frost Weaver single-handedly overpower him? Breck’s tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, and his neck tensed. Belthar’s presence had created an illusion of safety, as if he could tackle any of the dangers the Terra brought. But even *he* had weaknesses. Breck stared into a pocket of darkness, meshing with the dashboard.

Color returned to the world when Tom’s hand reached across and pounded Breck in the chest. “Hey. You alright?”

Breck blinked and took a deep breath.

“Look.” Rain fell in sheets at the outer rim of the Black Horizon. They passed through the wall of water, and the moon glistened in the clear night. Through the rear window, lightning filled the clouds in jagged lines. The shapes of distant dragons and their riders blurred. “I guess cars are faster than dragons.”

“They’re not pursuing,” Belthar said, pulling himself upright.

“How do you know?” Breck asked.

“The Black Horizon crept up on us in the night. I think it has something to do with the natural dark.”

“I don’t understand,” Tom said. “Natural night?”

“Zariel has no moons. We have the Ahnstar, our day sun, and a second, lesser sun, Aurastar. It’s always light. The night here is creating unforeseen advantages for the Terra.”

Breck shrugged. “Why are you telling us this?”

Belthar peered through the window, scanning the landscape. “They would not simply let us go. I suspect we are heading into a trap.”

They slowed, weaving between abandoned cars as Tom steered them onto the interstate. The on-ramp lights flickered, and the street became black without the usual ambience of passing traffic.

“Um. I’m not sure exactly what we’re looking for, but is that something we should be concerned about?” Tom said, pointing out his window.

A massive creature stood three stories tall. A chocolate-colored shell armored its body. Its flat head angled to a point at the chin and forehead and was nearly half the height of its body. Black eyes were evenly spaced on each side of the v-shaped head. Teeth as long and sharp as swords filled its mouth. It sat upright, propped on its front legs like a dog begging at the dinner table.

“Tell me that’s not real,” Breck said. “It’s bigger than my house.”

“And its head is shaped like Breck’s hair,” Tom said.

“Devourer. It’s in a stoic phase now. It could wake at any moment. I recommend we go much, much faster.”

The speedometer showed 60. “I can’t go much faster than this with cars just sitting in the middle of the road.”

“What will happen when that thing wakes up?” Breck said.

“They’re tunnelers. Slow above ground, but beneath it, a Devourer moves through earth like a fish in water.”

“What about Aztheria? Shouldn’t we wait for her? She disappeared right in the middle of the fight,” Breck said.

“I saw her circling overhead just beyond the Black Horizon.”

“Huh?” Breck said, scrunching up his brow. Belthar stared into the distance, his arms resting on his knees. “Is something wrong?”

“Tempest. She’s back in the house.”

“Oh crap, Belthar.” Breck covered his face, squeezing his lips together with his hands. “I’m such an idiot.”

“There’s nothing to be done now. It will be difficult to fight without it, but not impossible.”

“Can we go back for it?” Tom asked.

“Not now. Not while the Black Horizon is present. Rellion will know what to do.”

Breck sat back in his chair, guilt sinking in his stomach for abandoning the only magical weapon on the planet. The faint moon hung overhead. Daylight was still several hours away, and the night seemed to last an eternity. He wondered what he’d be doing right then if the Terra hadn’t come—would he be sleeping, or pacing the kitchen after another nightmare? Would he be at Tom’s, still up gaming, escaping from the bitter thoughts about his father? Now his real father rested in the seat behind him—Belthar wasn’t perfect, or even good, but he was still there, and he hadn’t left Breck’s side since the moment they were reunited.

“Belthar?” Breck said. “The Tempest showed me other Lightbringers. Are they coming to help us?”

“The war with the Terra has taken its toll. Lightbringers are few, and those who remain are old.”

“What if I can’t be what you want me to be? The Terra, they will destroy everything?”

Belthar sighed, gazing out the window. “It would mean the end of the Lightborne, yes. But *everything*, I don’t know what lurks in the unknown galaxies—perhaps something darker and even more terrible than the Terra.”

“If we fail, though, that means we’re dead?” Tom said.

“As long as we live, we are the greatest threat to the Terra.”

“Let’s do the thing where we don’t die then.” Tom tapped the brakes as the ground began to rumble. Breck braced against the dash as his seat vibrated.

“Another meteor?” Tom said.

Belthar jumped up. “This can’t be happening. Not already. We’ve got to get out of this thing!”

CHAPTER IX

SEEDS OF DARKNESS

Tom gripped the steering wheel and slammed on the brakes. A sound like a rockslide rose from beneath them, and something burst through the pavement, flipping the car onto its top.

Breck pressed his eyes shut as the familiar scent of heated metal flooded his nostrils. He imagined Aztheria standing in the road, watching him as he soared over her. His body jerked back and forth as if he were bouncing between each tree again. The seatbelt held him upside down until the car stopped sliding. He took a deep breath, inhaling a cloud of dust, coughed, and forced his eyes open. Tom was fastened to his seat beside Breck while Belthar lay on the ceiling, rubbing his head.

“We’re upside-down,” Tom said. “Don’t worry, Breck. Your hair didn’t move.” He released his seat belt and fell onto Belthar, who grunted as the air escaped his lungs. “Sorry.”

Breck unbuckled and lowered himself down. “I think I’m done with cars for a while.” He pulled the door handle and rammed his shoulder against the doorframe until he could peel it away. A few steps outside the car, rubble surrounded a gaping hole in the earth. The tunnel was wide enough to hold a house and deeper than Breck could see in the moonlight. A hand on his shoulder yanked him backwards, dragging him behind to the wrecked Beach Cruiser.

“Are you demented?” Belthar scolded.

“What?”

“That thing is right there,” Tom said, pointing around the car.

On the other side of the pit, the Devourer towered over them. A swampy mixture dripped from its shell. Bright, silver eyes pierced the sky, scanning for their prey. Several seconds passed while it moved one massive leg forward, thundering as it struck the ground.

“What do we do, Belthar?” Breck said.

Belthar said. “It has a paralyzing stare, so avoid its gaze. Its throat is unarmored. I’ll have to circle behind it, climb up and find the weak points between the plates. Tom, you’ll need a stronger spell to do any damage to a Devourer. Use *firan*.”

“Furran? What’s that?”

“It’s Earthspeak, but you have to say it correctly. Feer-ahn.”

Tom mumbled the word to himself until a burst of yellow exploded from his hands. “Holy s—”

“Belthar, what can I do?” Breck said, his heart pacing eagerly.

“Keep moving. Watch for Leapers. Make sure Tom is safe.”

“What? I’m just supposed to just run around? You saw me crush that Leaper . . . I thought Tom was *my* Guardian.”

Belthar ignored him and turned to Tom. “Wait until I’m close, then—”

Breck stumbled onto his side as the ground shook violently beneath him. The earth cracked, and wet soil rose to the surface. The quake climaxed, then weakened as if something passed under them.

“No...” Belthar said, watching behind them.

The earth erupted into a cloud of soot and mud. Chunks of debris showered down around the party as a second Devourer emerged from its hole like a breaching whale. It landed on its massive haunches and came down on its front trunks, emitting a shockwave upon impact. Its armor was gray, and its eyes gleamed a red like blood.

“There’s *two* of these things?” Tom said.

“Okay, seriously . . . how the heck did they even fit through the portals?” Breck said.

“Now what?” Tom said.

Belthar stood motionless, a hand pressed against his brow.

“Belthar?”

“This should never have happened. Rellion, where are you?” Belthar mumbled to himself.

“Belthar!” Breck said.

“Let me think,” he shouted back. “This might be it.”

“What? You’re not going to even try?” Breck said, stepping up to Belthar.

Belthar’s eyes flicked to Breck, and his face reddened. “To give us any chance, Breck, you’re going to have to keep one blinded while Tom and I take the other. Use the light blast I showed you earlier, but try to sustain it. The silver-eyed Devourer is smaller, more vulnerable armor, so we’ll take him first.”

“So,” Tom said, “You and me take this one, while Breck and his hair take the other.”

“Seriously, Tom? Still . . . in the midst of all this,” Breck said, throwing his hands up.

“I’m just saying. Maybe all the Lightbringer power is being stored up there . . . you’ve just gotta embrace it and let it be free.”

One of the Devourers roared. Breck stood to peer over the car. A red-scaled dragon swooped down at the Devourer’s head, blasting it with waves of liquid fire. No bigger than a small plane, the dragon sliced through the air, banking sharply and evading the slow-moving jaws.

Breck felt something drop in the pit of his stomach. It moved as the dragon moved. It stung as the dragon clawed at the Devourer’s eyes. “Aztheria...” Breck said.

“This is our window—”

“Let’s do this!” Tom shouted, running out into the open, a fireball already forming between his hands.

“Wait!” Belthar yelled after him. “Blasted adolescence . . . watch his back, Belreck, but keep the red eyes occupied. We’re dead if you don’t.” He stomped, and auric beams moved up his body, revealing golden armor. He lunged into bounding strides toward the Devourer as a blast of orange and red struck its throat.

Breck faced the red-eyed colossus. Black goop foamed from its mouth, dripping into steaming pools on the ground. Its tail whipped around to one side, brandishing a line of barbed spikes. “Clearly, I wasn’t given all the information here. Somebody hand me a controller,” he yelled to Tom.

“Are you kidding?” Tom called back. “This is *way* better!”

Breck recalled Belthar’s instructions and imagined a thread of heat coursing from his core to his arms. Stepping towards the Devourer, he put his hands together, the way

Tom had, and forced the energy out. A golden beam burst from his hands, sending him toppling backwards, stopping just short of the gaping hole.

“Ugh...”

“Nice one,” Tom said.

“Plant your feet!” Belthar’s voice echoed from a distance.

“...yeah . . . got it.” Once air returned to his lungs, Breck pulled his feet under him. He bent his knees this time and turned his body. The Devoured had already crept several steps closer and was almost on top of him. He focused, and light beamed again from each hand. Pulling the rays together, he trained the light on the hazy, red eyes. The Devourer roared and pounded the earth with its front hooves. Then, a dozen spider-like insects burst from the ground all around it. Each dog-sized creature stirred up dust, skittering along the road. They quickly closed the gap to Breck.

“Crawlers!” Belthar shouted. “Don’t move!”

Breck froze. With clenched teeth he waited for the assault, but the Crawlers moved around him toward the other Devourer. His eyes widened as one grazed the wild tips of his hair. Aztheria swooped down and ignited the Crawlers that didn’t fall to their death accidentally into the open tunnel.

The Devourer backpedaled and shook its head. With a rush of confidence, Breck pressed his hands forward and stepped into the blast, consuming the Devourer’s head in light. It roared and stepped back again. Breck thought he had figured it out—he could force the Devourer away without Belthar’s help. He pushed forward, focusing the beams on the eyes, and the creature turned away. “It worked!” Breck shouted back at Tom.

“No, Belreck! Watch out!”

The Devourer had spun almost completely around, and its massive tail, as thick as a semi-trailer, cut through the air. Breck threw himself down, and barbs as big as him grazed his back. The draft swept him several feet, rolling onto his knees. When the creature's eyes came back around, Breck blasted it with another wave of light, but his hands began to tingle and numbness set in. The golden beams sputtered and disappeared. Hollowness replaced the burning sensation in Breck's chest. The ground wobbled beneath him, and the air thinned.

Another round of crawlers burst into view. Breck fell forward and caught himself. Darkness crowded the corners of his eyes as the blood drained from his face. The earth trembled as the crawlers, closer this time, sped past him. Then, the Devourer's gaze shifted, and it chomped down with a porcelain *clink*. The red of its eyes intensified into a blinding glare.

Someone cried out from behind Breck. Tom had dropped to his hands and knees, digging his fingers into the dirt. Belthar mounted the silver-eyed Devourer, gripping its V-shaped head like reins. Aztheria spat fire into its mouth, but it only set the acid ablaze as it dripped to the ground.

Breck forced his feet forward and hurried to Tom's side. "Tom, what's wrong?"

"I can't . . . move . . . everything hurts."

"Belthar, help!" Breck yelled.

The Lightbringer threaded his fingers together and his hands began to glow. He thrust his fists down onto the top of the Devourer's head, causing an explosion of golden fireworks. The creature fell forward, biting the earth, and Belthar slid down its scalp. He hurried to the boys.

“Is it dead?”

“Tom, can you move?” Belthar said.

Tom shook his head. He grit his teeth, temples pulsing.

“Which one has him?” Belthar said to himself, glancing between the two creatures. “Red. We’ve got to take it down.”

Aztheria screeched and crashed beside them, wings whipping the ground. The silver-eyed Devourer had recovered, and its eyes shone like the other’s.

“Aztheria,” Breck cried out. “Belthar, do something!”

“This can’t be,” Belthar said. “Not already.”

“What, Belthar? What is it?”

“I’m sorry.” Belthar fell back on his haunches. “They were right about me. I can’t protect you.”

“Tom’s hurting here! You can’t give up. What do we do?”

The air vibrated, and the sky flashed red. An explosion rang in Breck’s ears. Tom collapsed, unconscious. Breck turned back just as something detonated on the red-eyed Devourer’s head. Then, a barrage of gunfire sprayed against its armor in a shower of bright flashes.

From the road, a tank accompanied a convoy of armored vehicles. It pumped shell after shell into the Devourer’s skull. The silver-eyed Devourer stormed forward and was met by a hellstorm of missiles. A line of three helicopters passed overhead, veered around and unleashed another wave of rockets.

The Devourer arched back and leapt into the air. Driving its head downward, its pointed forehead split the earth, and the mammoth vanished below. The red-eyed Devourer finally fell onto its side, and the red glow faded to black.

An armored carrier screeched to a halt beside the party, and a lift in the back swung open, banging as it struck the ground. Several armed soldiers lined the inside of the carrier, and a man stepped out from the passenger side.

“Garth!” Breck said, running up and wrapping his arms around him, knocking his head against his Kevlar vest. “You’re alive!”

“Been looking everywhere for you. Let’s get them in!” Garth ordered, motioning with one hand. He wore combat boots and brown cargo pants. He patted Breck on his shoulders. “You alright?”

“I think I’m alright, but Tom...” A knot formed in Breck’s throat. He swallowed hard and let the emotion pass.

“Don’t worry. We’ll tend to him right away. Hello again, Belthar,” Garth said, extending a hand and helping Belthar to his feet.

Belthar’s armor vanished, revealing the still-oozing wounds in his back where the Frost Weaver had held him. He bowed his head. “I’m indebted to you.”

“No need to be ashamed. I owed you one, anyhow. Now, follow me,” Garth said, leading Breck and Belthar into the rear of the carrier.

“Wait,” Breck said. “What about Aztheria?” He poked his head out of the vehicle. A group of soldiers lifted both Tom and Aztheria—who had returned to her human-like form—onto stretchers and carried them into a separate armored vehicle. “Where are they taking them?” Breck said.

“Don’t worry. We’re all going to the same place.”

Belthar leaned back against his seat. His broad shoulders pushed against a woman in camo gear sitting next to him. “Sorry.” The soldiers stared and didn’t respond.

“Garth, what happened to you?”

“Nothing. Belthar chased off the Leapers at the pool. I made my way to headquarters. Then, as soon as we’d tracked down your parents, they demanded we retrieve you. Can’t blame them.”

“They’re okay?” Breck nearly shouted. “Where are they? How did you find them?”

“Take it easy, Breck. There will be time for that. They’re all safe at our Black Horizon headquarters. We’re headed there now.”

Breck lay his head back, feeling fatigue set in as his adrenaline waned, and shut his eyes. The leather seat vibrated beneath him. Garth mumbled into a radio. Static distorted the voice on the other end.

“Belthar, can you tell me anything about Tom’s condition? The medical staff is confounded,” Garth said.

“That Devourer, with the red eyes, it’s a Plaguespreader.” Belthar’s voice trembled. He cleared his throat and there was a rustle of fingers through his coarse beard. “It paralyzes its victims and implants them with a Terranox seed. I won’t know if it’s taken root or not until Tom wakes or shows signs.”

“This ‘seed,’ is it serious? Could it be fatal?”

“I’ve never seen an infected human. I don’t know how his body will respond.”

“His parents will have questions. I can’t say how they’ll respond to you, but I expect they won’t be thrilled.”

The rumble of the interstate lulled Breck’s mind, and everything went blank.

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Breck woke to a rhythmic beeping. A down pillow cushioned his head. Light spilled in through a window beside him. The sun hung low in the sky. He took a deep breath. It was the first time he felt relief since the Leaper crashed through his bedroom window. A series of small white patches were adhered to his skin, connected by wires to a digital monitor by his bed. Every few seconds it flashed a number—78, 80, 82.

He rolled onto his side. Across from him, Tom lay on a hospital bed. His skin was stark white, and a black dusting surrounded his eyes, as if he were wearing eye shadow. A screen mounted to the wall between them showed 95 degrees outside. It flashed to another image: Tuesday, 10:13 a.m.

“Tuesday!” Breck said. “I slept for two days?”

The doorknob jiggled and turned. Breck quickly lay his head back down and closed his eyes, pretending to sleep.

“Look at Tom’s eyes,” said an unfamiliar voice. It spoke pointedly, like a doctor would when concerned. “His pupils are overly dilated and the lenses are slowly turning black. It’s almost like cataracts, but the grayish core is not present. It would also be highly unlikely that cataracts could develop in such a short span of time.”

“There’s nothing wrong with his eyes,” Belthar said. He seemed more like himself. “I’m certain now that he is infected. This is how it begins.”

“What does this infection do, Belthar? Will it spread?” Garth asked.

“The seed will grow, slowly transforming him into one of the Terra.” Belthar spoke slowly, pausing intermittently as his words trembled. Breck didn’t need to see Belthar’s face to hear the guilt laced in his voice. “It will not take long before Tom becomes . . . something else.”

“Can it be treated?” Garth said.

“I can slow the spread, but I will need the Tempest.”

“His parents are waiting for an explanation. How much time does he have?” said the unfamiliar voice.

“The seed affects different species in different ways,” Belthar said. “He should have already lost control. It means he’s fighting against the transformation.”

“What will he become, Belthar? Is it safe to keep him here?”

“I’ve never seen a human transformation, but I think the sooner we leave, the safer everyone will be.”

“Alright. We’ll do what we can to help,” Garth said. “You spoke with the McKerrick’s already?”

“Yes. They resisted the idea of separating from Tom again. The choice will have to be his.” The door creaked shut, and Breck was alone with Tom again.

He pushed back the bedding and pulled the white sensors off his skin. He moved to Tom’s bedside. Tom lay motionless, his chest stagnant. One would assume he was dead were it not for the medical equipment showing otherwise. Black gunk lined his fingernails. A residue like ash covered his neck and arms.

“Don’t worry, Tom.” Breck placed a hand on Tom’s shoulder. “Your parents are here. We’re safe now.”

Breck grabbed his clothes, which had been laundered, from a chair beside his bed and pulled them on. He stopped to check himself in a mirror mounted to the door. His face had been washed clean. The hair on the right side of his head stuck straight out from a pillow mold; now his head had wings. He scrambled his hair around furiously with his fingertips, then pushed through the door into a gigantic auditorium. The room, shaped like an oval, descended with rows of chairs down to a level platform at the center. A stage covered with packaged meals, piles of blankets, folded cots, and stacks of bottled water was raised slightly higher than the floor. Hundreds of people swarmed the pit-shaped room. Many sat in tight groups, keeping to themselves, while many others lay on cots with nurses hovering around them.

Breck followed a path along the outer ring of the auditorium that led to a door on the opposite end of the room. He stepped faster as people began to notice his presence. Some simply seemed curious, but a group of men scowled at him, murmuring to themselves.

“Who is that boy?” One child asked her parent. “He looks crazy.”

A woman, claw marks on one side of her face and bruises all along her arms, knelt beside the child and said, “It’s not nice to point, dear. Go play with your friends.” She guided the young girl with a gentle hand until she ran off. The girl joined a cluster of young children who were surrounded by a few adults, watching like overseers. The children were gathered together in a sort of play pen, and there seemed to be more children than adults to be their parents. Breck sucked in a breath when a blonde toddler, the boy from his vision in the street, peeked around the woman at him. The woman crossed her arms and glared. The whole crowd appeared to suddenly notice him as he

neared the other side of the auditorium. He ducked into the first hallway out of sight, leaned his back against the wall, and took a deep breath.

“Breck?” said a familiar voice. Mr. and Mrs. McKerrick stood in a doorway on the hall.

“Mom,” he said. He only made it a few steps before his limbs went weak, and he collapsed into her arms. Mr. McKerrick joined them, holding Breck’s weight. Tears poured from Breck’s eyes, and he sucked in breath between sobs. He hadn’t wept like this ever, even at his mother’s funeral. Though, he hadn’t believed at the time that she was truly gone. But the last few days with Tom had been too real, too uncomfortable, too overwhelming. He thought this moment would never come.

CHAPTER X

DEEPER IN

“It’s alright, Breck. We’ve got you,” Mr. McKerrick said.

Breck pulled away once he could breathe again. He used a sleeve to dry his face.

“What happened to you?”

“We never made it to Atlanta,” Mrs. McKerrick said. “We had just crossed the Florida-Georgia border when one of those things paraded across the interstate, chasing after something.”

“Panic ensued, as you can imagine. Traffic was a mess. We left a host of messages but couldn’t get through to either of you. It didn’t take long before Garth’s men tracked us down. Then, we were on our way back here.”

“So,” Breck said, “You don’t know what’s going on out there?”

“Well, we saw one of those creatures ourselves, and Garth showed us video of several more. I think we’ve got a pretty good idea,” Mr. McKerrick said. “That man you’ve been traveling with, Belthar, he didn’t say much, but he told us some interesting things about you and these . . . Triceratops.”

“Terranox.”

“Whatever. The point is that it’s clear that he’s incapable of protecting you. You don’t need to worry about him anymore. He can fight his own battles.”

Mrs. McKerrick cleared her throat and rubbed Breck's shoulders. "Let's not worry about that right now, alright? Your father, your *real* father, is anxious to see you, Breck."

"Belthar is my real father," Breck said.

"So *he* says. Steve has been pacing the hallways for the last day, just waiting for you to wake up."

"He was pretty concerned by a voicemail he got from you a few nights ago," Mrs. McKerrick said, stroking Breck's face. "He's in with Garth now. Down this hallway, last door on the left."

"Alright," Breck said, stepping away. "Um, what are you going to do from here?"

"We're going to stick together," Mr. McKerrick said. "The five of us. We'll wait this thing out as long as it takes. We're safe here. It won't be easy, but we'll make it as long as we're together."

Breck forced a smile and nodded, then turned down the hallway. Fluorescent light brightened the white walls. Breck stepped along the pale blue carpet, running his fingers along a wooden cross. Passages of Scripture lined the walls, painted in a cursive font. One verse spoke about a horned beast coming out of the earth. Another described a multi-headed beast emerging from the sea—an unearthly being with seven heads.

The sun cast a cross-shaped shadow onto the wall. His mother had brought him to churches like this on Sunday mornings. She would smile at the light as it shattered into a kaleidoscope of color through the stained glass. The choir led from hymnals. His mother didn't sing, but she'd hold him in her arms, rocking him back and forth with the music. The pastor, always in a suit and tie, pounded the pulpit to wake the back row. This church

felt familiar in a way, like a home he'd forgotten about. Those days seemed so impossible now, as if they'd been a lie from the start. He wondered what the preacher, spouting about the End of Days, would say now, now that the world might truly be seeing its end. Did his apocalypse include thousands of monsters with children in their jaws, ground-bursting colossi, dragon-riding creatures raining down boulders of ice onto innocent families? Breck lost those beliefs when he lost his mother. He abandoned the world-saving messiah rhetoric for something that made him feel more in control of his own life. But now, he wished that the stories he'd heard were true, that there would be a savior, someone else who would be responsible for the fate of the world, someone other than himself.

“How are you feeling?” Garth said, appearing in the hallway.

“I'm all right. A bit overwhelmed still.”

“No one can blame you for that. Please, don't let me get in your way. Go on in.”

Garth stepped aside and allowed Breck to pass into the room, shutting the door behind him.

The room was wide with built-in risers designed for a choir. A set of narrow stairs led up to a doorway. Breck's father sat amidst six green cots, his hands folded under his chin. He stood as soon as Breck stepped through the doorway.

“Breck! You're finally awake!” He said, crossing the room and pulling Breck into him.

Breck's father smelled like sweat and the musk of aftershave. The grit on his chin scraped along Breck's forehead like sandpaper. Mrs. McKerrick had been warm and soft,

smelling of her usual floral perfume. He'd thought this reunion would be comforting, but he just wanted to go back to the McKerricks.

"How's Tom? Is he okay?" he said.

"I don't know, Dad. I think he's pretty sick." Breck sat on the nearest cot, fighting the lump reforming in his throat.

"Well, don't worry, Son. You're safe now, and Garth brought some of the best doctors with him." His father walked between the cots, hands tucked into the pockets of his black dress pants.

"I met that girl, Aztheria. She seems to know an awful lot about you. You've had a few days to get acquainted?"

"No, only a few hours the other night," Breck said.

"Oh. That's interesting."

The calm Breck had felt from the McKerricks began to wear off. "So, when did *you* get here? I've been trying to reach you."

"Garth called me as soon as first contact had been confirmed—the meteor, I mean. I drove straight here. Got in last night just before they went looking for you."

"I don't understand. You mean, you knew what was happening from the start? Why didn't you call me back?" Breck said, massaging his scalp.

"Well, of course I knew. I assumed you wouldn't want to speak to me, until I got your voicemail. I tried calling you back but couldn't get anything on your phone and no answer at Louis's," his father said.

"Why wouldn't I want to speak to you?" Breck asked.

"You know, because Belthar's your true father—"

“And you’ve been lying to me all these years.”

His father traced the cracks in the linoleum floor with his eyes. “I’m sorry, Breck, I just—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You’ve got to believe me, I wanted to tell you. I almost did so many times. I just didn’t know how to say it—I didn’t think you’d believe me.”

“Is that why you were never around after Mom died because I wasn’t really yours?” Breck said, staring at his feet.

“No, no. Not at all. I just . . . your mother understood you—your visions.” He sat down beside Breck on the cot, wringing his hands. “This other world . . . I didn’t want any part of it. Your mother kept that part of you, of her, separate. Once she was gone . . . I just wanted to be normal. I wanted you to be normal. I couldn’t take it, but the McKerrick’s didn’t know. They didn’t have to. The McKerrick’s took better care of you than I ever could have. They got you the help you needed.”

Breck combed through his hair with his fingers, massaging the bulging nerves in his scalp. “So, I suppose you’re going to tell me I should go with him then—my *real* father? You couldn’t help me then; how can you help me now?”

Breck’s father moved to the cot across from him and gripped his shoulder.

“Breck, you’ll always be my son, and I’ll do anything for you. I know that hasn’t always been true, but I’m here now and I’m not going anywhere. I promise.” He paused and leaned back. “But . . . you’re in an impossible situation. I want you to stay, but I can’t tell you what you should do.”

“I wish you would,” Breck said. His face felt hot, and his heart pressed against his ribs. “I wish someone would just tell me what the hell I’m supposed to do for once! I can’t fight these monsters. I can’t save this messed up world, or the Hell world where these creatures are from. I don’t want to!”

“Okay, okay,” Breck’s father said, putting his hands on Breck’s shoulders. They looked at each other for a moment. His father’s head bobbed, nodding in the way that he does when he doesn’t understand. He just changes the subject, trying to avoid the uncomfortable. “You know, your mother and I got married in this church. Still, I’ve never met anyone as beautiful or graceful as her, and I’ve met a lot of women . . .” He cleared his throat and continued. “I proposed after a year together. She told me everything before the wedding, of course, even showed me some things.”

“How did my mother die, Dad? How did she *really* die?”

“A heart defect . . . you know that.”

“No. She was Lightborne. I don’t believe it.”

“Breck—”

“That’s not my name,” he said, just to hurt him. Breck pushed away and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him. He splashed water on his face from the hallway water fountain and soaked his head, smashing down the wild mane.

“Breck.” A woman in a white overcoat and matching pants bent around the corner. Blonde hair curled under her ears. “He’s awake and asking for you.” She strode away, and Breck hurried to catch up to her.

“Is he okay?” Breck said.

“He’s in high spirits, and that always aids recovery.”

“That’s just him. Can you cure him?”

“Whatever this disease is, it’s not something we’ve ever seen. It seems to affect him like mononucleosis—fatigue, fever, chills—so we can treat the symptoms for now until we have some answers.”

The McKerricks stood outside the door, talking to a broad-shouldered man in a camouflage jumpsuit. Two snakes coiled around a winged sword on his uniform patch. Mrs. McKerrick’s hands hovered over her mouth while Mr. McKerrick’s arms were firm across his body.

“You okay, Breck?” Mr. McKerrick asked as Breck neared.

“Everyone keeps asking me that. Can I just see Tom?”

“Sure, sure,” he responded, stepping aside and nudging Breck along with a hand on his back.

A collection of pillows propped Tom upright. A cup of red jello, a piece of buttered bread, and cup of juice sat untouched on a tray in his lap.

“Well, it’s about time,” Tom said, smirking. His ashen skin pulled tightly at his jawline when he spoke.

“Hey, Bud. How you feelin’?”

“Woke up pretty bad, but I think they’re pumping me full of feel-good stuff, cause I can’t feel a thing. My stomach is totally numb.”

“That’s good, Man. Your parents are here,” Breck said, spooning a scoop of Jell-O into his mouth.

“I know. My mom came in blubbering all over me, acting like I’m dying or something.”

“Tom, don’t you know what’s going on with you?”

“I’m drugged up pretty good, but I can sense it—here,” Tom said, tapping his fingers against his chest. “Something’s just not right in there.” He shook it off. “But I’m going to be fine, you’ll see.”

A minute of quiet passed. Tom swirled the juice around in its cup. The sun gleamed in the blue sky outside. Cloud puffs wandered by.

“Man, I’d kill for a few hours back in my room, escaping into some game that doesn’t require any brain power,” Tom said. “You know, just running around slashing things into oblivion—not worried about sickness, not worried about death.”

“Seriously!” Breck replied. “It feels so unreal, to see the sun shining like any normal day after everything that’s happened.”

“But it’s not a normal day . . . I had to tell my parents about Uncle Louis.”

“Aw, Man. What’d they say?”

“Nothing at first, then a lot of things. Mainly, they’re going to try to make us stay here with them. But we can’t walk away now.”

“Why not, Tom? Really, what’s in it for us? It’s safe here. There’s food and beds. We don’t have to keep fighting.”

“You don’t believe that, Breck. It might be sunny now, but the Terra could sweep through at any moment.”

“This place is swarming with soldiers . . . I mean, they have freakin’ tanks! This is our best shot,” Breck said.

“But you’re the Lightbringer—”

Breck scoffed. “Which means *what*, Tom? I’ve been pretty worthless so far. I couldn’t even protect *you* . . . how am I supposed to save the world?”

“Damn it, Breck. Look!” A flame hovered over Tom’s open palm. “This means something—who else can do this?” Tom closed his hand and lay back. His eyes grew darker around the edges. “Ugh. Maybe I shouldn’t have done that.”

“What’s wrong?” Breck said, moving to Tom’s bedside.

“I’m alright. Just feel a little strange.”

“Maybe the drugs are wearing off? Want me to find the doctor?”

“Nah. I think I’m okay. Just let me chill for a sec,” Tom said, shutting his eyes.

Breck sat on the edge of the bed and reached to pat Tom’s pale arm. The moment their skin met, the room went dark. Suddenly Breck was standing in the Temple of Helios—the place that the Tempest had shown him. He was holding a black figure in his arms. Black mist obscured its features, but the body was long and slender like Tom’s. Its limbs dangled limply, and its head draped back, exposing a swollen neck. Coarse skin like sandpaper tugged at his fingertips. Light radiated from a golden pool at Breck’s feet, swirling around the edges. A spiral of flame encircled them, spinning like a cyclone.

Breck stepped forward, wading into the pool. Cracks of light covered the body like webs of lightning, and an auric ray beamed from the center of Breck’s chest. An uncanny feeling of contentment washed over him—a moment of all-consuming joy, like standing on the beach while the sun warmed his face and a constant breeze cooled the air around him. He could stay in the pool forever and never feel pain again.

Tom’s face shone beneath the surface of the pool. His expression was serene, calm. The remaining ink on his skin bled out like an oil spill then burned up in the light.

“He’s alright,” said the doctor’s voice. “Move him to the bed, please.”

Breck opened his eyes. The back of his head ached against the cold tile. A circle of faces stared down at him. He wanted to return to the pool, to be ignorant of pain, to be caught in its quiet, even if it wasn’t real.

Tom leaned over the bed. “Is the hair okay? Oh . . . yeah, you’re good,” he said, smiling.

Two soldiers scooped Breck up from under his arms and carried him to the bed. “I’m fine,” Breck said, sitting up.

Garth appeared in the doorway. “What happened?”

“A fainting spell,” the doctor said. “Vitals are good.”

“Well, then. If you all wouldn’t mind excusing us, I’d like to speak with the boys for a few moments,” Garth said, stepping to the middle of the room. He wore a white lab coat, and a pair of reading glasses hung from a chain around his neck.

“Sure. We’ll be down the hall if you need us,” the doctor said, escorting the soldiers and nurses out.

“What’s up, Garth?” Tom said, resting a plastic spoon on the tip of his nose.

“Did you have another vision, Breck?”

“Um. Yeah. I don’t really understand—”

“It’s alright, you don’t have to tell me right now. I think it’s time we have a conversation about what’s next for you two. Belthar should return in the next fifteen minutes or so if everything goes smoothly.” Garth rested his back against the wall, folding his arm together. “He will want to resume his mission immediately, considering that he’s lost several days during your recovery.”

“Return? Where did he go?” Tom said.

“To retrieve the Tempest, of course.”

“He went without us?” Breck said.

“Well, there is some urgency with Tom’s condition. He said it couldn’t wait.”

Garth chuckled to himself and scratched at his ear. “It took some convincing before he agreed to board the helicopter, ultimately conceding to celerity and Aztheria’s urging. When he returns, Breck, he will undoubtedly pressure you to accompany him on the remainder of his quest,” Garth said. “You’ve got a decision to make.”

“Wait, what about Tom?” Breck said.

“Yeah, what about Tom?” Tom reiterated, furrowing his brow.

“Belthar will respect your parent’s wishes, Tom, and they intend to keep you here while you get well.”

“What if what’s happening can’t be cured by normal doctors, like Breck’s hair? Don’t they realize my best shot is with the one guy who knows what’s going on?” Tom said, pounding his fists against his mattress.

Breck grabbed the pillow from his bed and winged it at Tom.

“I suppose that’s between you and your parents. I’ll send for them when we’re through. Breck, your father has also requested that you stay, but Belthar doesn’t seem to think that’s in your best interest. In fact, he had some choice words to say about your father that I won’t repeat, mainly because I’m not sure what they mean—but they sounded barbarous,” Garth said, smirking.

Breck sighed and let his head fall back against the bed, wishing he hadn't thrown his pillow. "You're asking me to choose between a father who doesn't care and a father who wasn't there."

"Wow..." Tom said. "You've been working on that one."

"Shut up."

Garth perked up. "So, he's finally told you the truth then? You know that Belthar's your father?"

"Obviously..."

"Oh, good. It nearly killed me, keeping that secret for this long."

"You knew too?" Breck shouted. "Are you serious right now?"

"Of course I knew. I detected the anomaly that brought you here. I was on the shore when your mother waltzed out of the Hudson River, cradling you against her chest. I helped her create an identity and stay under the radar all those years while she was traveling and conducting research."

"Hold up," Breck said. "I literally have no clue what you're talking about. What research?"

"Oh," Garth said, frowning. "I suppose he *hasn't* told you everything after all."

"Apparently not."

"Can I get some popcorn or something?" Tom said. "It seems like this might take a while."

Breck glared at Tom through narrow slits.

"Here's what I can tell you, Breck," Garth said. He moved across the room and sat on the bed, turning his body to face Breck. One hand rested atop the other—a posture

typical of bedside manner. “Once you were a few years old, we moved your family next door to the McKerrick’s, knowing that they were a good match. As soon as she trusted Tom’s parents, your mother began venturing to places around the globe, searching for signs of something she called *Logarians*—the best translation we found was ‘Legendaries.’”

“You put Breck and me together on purpose? What if we hated each other?” Tom said.

“Well, we hoped—”

“What was she trying to do?” Breck interrupted.

“Your mother knew from the start that the Terra would eventually find you here. Whatever the *Logarians* are, they’re key to winning the conflict. We’ve continued her research to the best of our ability, but she knew things, saw things that no one else could.”

The door swung open, banging against the wall. “Garth!” a soldier said. His uniform had the same logo that they’d seen at the first Black Horizon outpost—the cross with the diagonal bar. The sounds of a hundred voices flooded into the room, echoing from the auditorium. A blur of bodies passed the by the open door. “They’re back, and we’ve got trouble.”

“I’m coming,” Garth said, he stood and followed after the soldier, stopping just short of the exit. “Tom, you need to think seriously about what’s best for you . . . and what’s best for your parents. I’ll support whatever you decide. That goes for you too, Breck. One last thing.” Garth reached into his coat and pulled out a leather-bound journal, tied with a red ribbon. “This was your mother’s.”

“I recognize it,” Breck said. “This is the journal she brought to church. Where did you find it?”

“She left it there, tucked under the pew by the window. I think she wanted to keep it from your father, so he wouldn’t know how dangerous her research was. She recorded memories, thoughts, and everything she learned about the *Logarians*. I’ve added some notes over the years, mostly near the end. I’ve been waiting for the right time to give it to you. I’m certain now that you need it more than I do, considering what’s still ahead.”

Garth reached out and dropped the journal on Breck’s bed. He reached out and squeezed Breck’s shoulder, then turned with a whoosh of his coat tails, clapped Tom’s leg on the way out, and closed the door behind him.

Breck picked up the journal. The gloss of the pages seemed to glow as he turned it over in his hands. He flipped through a few pages and stopped at one entry.

March 2nd. Year one.

This place reminds me of home: the community of belief, the way they talk about truth and the nature of good, the way they come together to this place, this building where their world intersects with the divine. Light sprinkles on this pew in shattered colors, but the golden beams are brightest, and I don’t mind their reflection on this alabaster page. Breck is three now. I bring him here to give him a taste, a glimpse of our home, like a portal to our world. It seems to me that there is Light here, though these people fear what they cannot see, condemn what they cannot control, and flee what they cannot understand. Still, in spite of all these doubts, the grace and kindness of these who have not seen magic gives me hope: there may be a power here that is not confined to a Temple, that might stand in the face of darkness whenever it comes for us.

Breck is beginning to See. He wakes at night and doesn't understand the message of his dreams. He remembers only the monsters, the falling stars, the never-ending night. I've sensed the Logarians in this world and have seen their footprints in history. There are days when I forget, when I think only of Breck and our life here, when I am content just to look in his eyes, but I cannot forget—The Terra are searching for us.

“What is it, Breck?” Tom said, resting his head on his hands.

Breck thought for a moment, turning to let the sun warm his face. “I keep thinking that I’m going to wake up, or that I’m going to look outside and see children on the playground. There’s a part of me that just can’t believe all of this—a part that doesn’t want to. Yet, things keep happening that make sense, that connect pieces of my life that I couldn’t understand. I mean, the guy even has friggin’ hair like me...” He met Tom’s gaze and hopped down from the bed.

“That’s not hair. *That’s* a living, breathing thing.”

Breck rolled his eyes. “...I have so many questions, and in order to get answers, I can’t stay here, holding on to an old life. I need to know where I’m from, whatever that means. But . . . I don’t want to do it alone.”

“Dude, there’s no way I’m letting you go back out there without me! Or Hair. Don’t worry, Hair. I won’t abandon you,” Tom said, patting Breck’s head.

“Even though it’s safe here. And your parents—”

“I got you into this whole mess. I was the one who wanted to chase meteors,” Tom said.

“You know, you’re right. This really is all your fault,” Breck said, nodding to himself.

“Well, it’s settled then. Now, I just have to figure out how I’m going to tell my parents.” Tom dropped his head back on his pillow, blowing at the ceiling.

A few minutes passed, and the commotion outside suddenly quieted. “Hm. What do you think’s going on out there?” Breck said, meandering to the window. A cloud split the sun across its middle. Cannon fire rang out like the finale of a fireworks show, and something bellowed a high-pitched roar that caused the window to rattle. Even his hair seemed to stand a little taller as the sound filled the room. It lingered for a minute before dying out and was replaced by gunfire and the shouts of panicked voices.

Belthar burst through the door. Soaked hair dripped onto his face, mixing with a trail of dried blood on his neck. One leather shoulder piece was dyed red. The Tempest glowed from his hands, its head radiating a pale blue. Aztheria ducked in behind Belthar. Her fiery hair sucked to her skin like wet fur.

“Aztheria!” Breck said. “You’re alright?”

“Quite! Thanks to your friends.”

“What happened out there?” Tom asked.

Belthar’s eyes fixed on Tom. His mouth moved, but he didn’t speak.

Aztheria stepped in. “Solarius knew we’d go back for the Tempest. There was an army waiting for us. I’ve never seen the Black Horizon come on so quickly. We escaped, but there were casualties.”

“Belthar, what is it?” Breck said.

Belthar finally shifted his eyes like he was waking from a daze. “The Terra . . . they’ve followed us here. We don’t have much time,” Belthar said, moving to Tom’s bedside. “Tom . . . I—”

“I feel fine. Don’t make a big deal about it,” Tom said.

“Here.” Belthar lay the Tempest on Tom, its massive head covering his chest.

“This thing’s heavier than it looks,” Tom said, pressing out the words.

“Don’t move.”

Aztheria stepped to Tom and cupped his hand between hers. Then Belthar mumbled something indecipherable, chanting a phrase in a language Breck didn’t recognize. A wisp of golden light flowed out from Belthar’s lips in a loose spiral. It tangled with the Tempest’s aura, turned white, then erupted into a blinding flash.

Breck shielded his eyes until the light waned. A thread-like shadow flowed from Tom’s mouth and followed the Tempest as Belthar lifted it away. The thread danced around the Tempest, twirling and reaching out. Belthar guided it to the floor, pinned it beneath the hammer, then tapped the shaft with his fist. The shadow wrapped itself around the Tempest, clawing desperately. Then Belthar tapped the hammer again and a white flame surged around it until the thread was gone.

“That was gross,” Breck said, covering his mouth.

Belthar squeezed Tom’s shoulder, and he jolted awake. “Take it easy. It’s done.”

“That’s it? I’m cured.”

“I’ve removed the root, but the seed remains. You need to be careful of your power, Tom. Rellion suspects that these seeds feed on magical energy. I think that if you use magic, the seed will grow faster.”

“I’m gonna be useless if I can’t use magic.”

“That’s why you need to stay here,” Belthar said.

“We’ll come back with my father,” Aztheria said. “He’ll know what to do.”

“No,” Breck said. “Tom and I already decided that he’s coming with us. I’ll watch out for him.”

“That’s not up to you, Belreck,” Belthar said still staring at Tom.

“That’s right,” Tom said, pushing back the sheets and standing up beside Belthar.

“It’s up to me, and I’m going wherever Breck goes. Though, I’d like to pee first.”

Belthar breathed in slowly, pushing out his chest, and pressed the air out through his nose. “Your parents won’t like this.”

“We have to lead the Terra away before they can make a direct attack. This place, it won’t last long,” Aztheria said to Breck, the fire in her eyes dancing.

“Where will we go?” Breck asked. “We can’t just keep running forever.”

“We located Rellion. He’s under assault, but he’s much closer now.”

“Well then, what are we waiting for?” Tom said. Aztheria stood behind him, smirking.

“Pants,” Breck said.

“Huh?”

“You’re still wearing the hospital gown.”

Tom pulled the gown together, his cheeks reddening “Right . . . if you’ll just excuse me,” he said, disappearing into the restroom.

“Aztheria, will you wait for Tom? He will want to say goodbye to his parents.”

“Of course,” she said, nodding her head.

“Belreck and I need to chat with his father.”

CHAPTER XI

BEYOND THE HORIZON

Breck pushed through the door. His dad knelt with his forehead pressed against the edge of his cot. His fingers were intertwined behind his head. The door clapped shut. His father jumped up and wiped away rolling tear drops from his eyes.

“Breck . . . sorry.” His father cleared his throat. “I was just . . . well, I don’t know what that was.”

Belthar leaned against the door, combing his beard with one hand while the other rested atop the Tempest. He glared at Breck’s father.

Breck hid his hands in his pockets. “You still do that, eh?”

“Oh . . . um. No, not really. It just felt like the right time to maybe start again . . . being in this place and all.”

Breck sat on the nearest cot, and motioned with a nod for his father to join him. “I remember when we used to do that before bed—you, mom, and me.”

“Yeah? It was one of those things that reminded her of home, I guess. You gave it up too?”

“It never worked for me.”

“Those were better days, huh? When your mother was still around.”

Breck thought about the years after his mother died. For a while, all he wanted was to get through the night. If he could just make it until morning, he’d feel better. His

mother would wake him by opening the window, allowing the warm sun in. He learned to cope. He learned to open the window himself. “Look . . . I’m just here because I want to say I’m sorry.”

His father sucked in a breath and sighed, letting the air seep through his lips.

“You’ve decided to go with him then.”

Belthar tapped on the Tempest, making a *tink* sound with his fingernail.

“It’s what Mom wanted,” Breck said, patting the leather top of the journal.

“Somehow I’m part of all this, and I can’t quit now . . . now that Tom . . . I have to find a way to cure him. But I didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.”

Breck’s father stood and paced a few steps away, biting his fingernails.

“Well,” Belthar said, his voice booming. “Are you going to tell him already, or shall I?”

“Tell me what?” Breck said, glancing back and forth between them.

His father turned back, running his fingers across trembling lips. “Breck . . . earlier, you asked me about your mother, about how she died.”

“Yeah?”

“Well . . . she didn’t necessarily die.”

“Excuse me?” Breck said, standing.

“You heard him right,” Belthar said, stepping closer.

“Dad, what’s going on?”

“Look, I didn’t tell you because—”

“Because it’s *his* bloody fault,” Belthar said. “And he’s too much of a flinkin’ coward to look you in the eye and tell you that.”

“I was trying to protect him from all of this, Belthar! You know that!”

Breck rubbed his temples and pressed his hair down. His eyes felt suddenly sticky and dry. He pictured the ceramic jar on the mantle, which he thought contained his mother’s ashes. Every day he’d said goodbye to her, imagining that she heard him, that they were somehow still connected through that little bit of her that still remained. Breck jumped between them. “What happened, Dad? What happened to her?”

Breck’s father dropped his head, eyeing the floor. “I’m sorry, Breck—”

“Just tell me!” Breck said, grabbing his father by the shoulders and shaking him.

“They came for you!” His father shouted, pulling himself free. “This . . . *thing*. It found us.”

“Tell it all!” Belthar stepped up beside Breck. “You let them take her.”

“It was *her* choice, Belthar. What was I supposed to do? It would have killed me first, then taken her anyways!”

“Enough!” Breck screamed. “Damn it! Someone just tell me what the hell happened. I don’t care who!”

Belthar crossed his arms and rested his shoulder back.

Breck’s father sighed, scratching at his forehead. “You were with the McKerricks that week. Your mother had been in the Amazon. She showed up at our New York condo instead of going straight home like usual. She found something there . . . something that had her shaking and weeping uncontrollably in my arms, which says something because your mother was a strong woman—”

“Stronger than all of us,” Belthar added.

“I think she knew what was coming, what she’d have to do.” He paused and squeezed his lips as if he wasn’t sure how to say what he needed to. “It followed her. She touched my face and showed me things, flashes of her travels, flashes of her world—I saw Belthar. I saw you . . . grown, and standing by yourself in the middle of a desert. Then she let go, and the next moment, the lights went out . . . and *it* was standing in the room with us. It was hard to see—a black haze blurred its body, but it stood on four legs. Its horns poked right through the ceiling. There was only fire where its eyes should have been. We could hear its voice when it growled. It asked, ‘Where is the boy? Where is the Lightbringer?’”

Breck was waiting for his father to say, “she’s still alive,” but his tone grew darker, sadder. If she didn’t die, but she wasn’t alive . . . what was she?

“They argued. Your mother said you were dead. But the creature seemed to know she was lying . . . then she was suddenly standing, moving towards it. They spoke in some language I didn’t understand, but I could tell she had agreed to something. She turned back to me and smiled, tears dripping from her chin. Then she reached out and touched the beast, and they were both gone.”

“And you just watched while she gave herself up,” Belthar mumbled.

Breck closed his eyes as his fathers launched into another argument. He didn’t want to be here—this cold place. He wanted to be home in his bed, even if the nightmares continued, even if his step-father kept being an ass-hat. He wanted to be able to shut his eyes again and just think about what trouble Tom was going to get them into the next day, or what new video games were coming out soon. He wondered what would happen

if he just stood there and didn't say anything, and didn't move, and just waited. But what if his mother was out there somewhere? What if this meant that he could have her back?

"Belthar!" Breck blurted out, holding his hands up to quiet the men. "Do you know what that thing was?"

"Yes. It was a *Logarian*—one that had aligned itself with the Terra."

"So what happened to her then?" Breck said.

"She's either dead . . . or worse than dead."

"What do you mean?"

"Lightborne cannot be seeded," Belthar said, his voice booming, "We're immune. We cannot become Terra unless we do so willingly. And if I had been there, I would have died with honor before I let her be taken."

Belthar started forward, but Breck shoved him, causing him to stumble backwards. "Why, Belthar? Why wouldn't she fight? What aren't you telling me?"

Belthar paced forward and ripped the journal from Breck's hands. "I'll show you." He flipped to a page near the end and scanned until he found what he was looking for. He pressed the book into Breck's chest. "See for yourself."

Logarians was written at the top. Belthar pointed to a paragraph in the middle of the page.

Saethiron

Rumors have surfaced about a mysterious creature in the Amazon. It has been described by many names, but "Saethiron" seems to be shared by those who claim to have heard it speak. From its description and the timing of its appearance, I suspect that it is an Earth Hound because its emergence seems to coincide with the early timeline of

my travels. Earth Hounds are anti-magic, showing up on worlds where magic has either been used improperly or its inhabitants were never meant to use it at all. My use of magic for survival must have awoken it, and it has begun its search. So, I dare not use magic near home or near Breck. I will eventually need to seek it out to see if it has chosen a side.

A crooked scribble beside the paragraph read, “No sign of creature since she vanished. Confirmed.”

“I still don’t understand. What does this mean?”

“Once an Earth Hound senses that magic is present, it does not go back to sleep until that magic has been destroyed. As soon as she was gone, you were safe again,” Belthar said. “If the story he tells is true...” Belthar pointed to Breck’s father, letting his finger hover near the man’s nose. “Then Saethiron didn’t devour her, but took her out of the world instead. There’s only one reason that it would do that: to turn her over to the Terra.”

The Tempest suddenly ripped itself out of Belthar’s grip and struck the floor as if pulled by magnets. It vibrated, glowing blue.

“Rellion...” Belthar said to himself.

Aztheria burst through the door, Garth at her heels. “Belthar. We’re out of time,” she said.

“A convoy just returned,” Garth said. “The said something is coming . . . something big.”

“Could it be one of them, already?” Aztheria asked. “Could they have already found a *Logarian*?”

Belthar bent and pulled the hammer from the floor. “Rellion is close. We’re converging, and we can’t do that here. We’re leaving *now*.” He paced out of the room, Aztheria and Garth following.

“Breck,” his father said, grabbing Breck’s arm. His eyes watered, glistening at the edges. It was the sincerest look Breck had ever seen on his own father. “Be careful, okay? I know that Belthar’s your real father, and so you think you need to go with him, but I have this feeling that there’s something else in it for him. I’m questioning what he’s here for . . . and I’m beginning to think that it may not be you.”

“You think he’s lying about something?” Breck said.

“Maybe not ‘lying,’ but certainly not telling the whole truth. When I got here . . . he might have killed me if Aztheria had not been present to restrain him. I think he is looking for signs of your mother, and this journey is the thing that lets him do that. Just . . . watch out for yourself . . . and Tom. Don’t let your guard down.”

Breck opened his arms and pulled his dad into a hug, resting his chin on a bony shoulder. He felt his father’s pulsing chest and warm tears running down his neck. “When this is all over, we’ll find each other again,” Breck said.

“Yeah...”

“Breck,” said Tom’s familiar, spirited voice. His complexion had returned to normal, though residual shadows still formed around his eyes. “Really, Dude. We’ve gotta go.”

“Bye, Dad,” Breck said, dropping his arms.

His father patted Breck’s shoulder as he turned away. “Good luck.”

The boys hurried from the room. The refugees were crowded into the center of the auditorium. Armed guards encircled them, facing outward, waiting for an attack. Garth stood among a group of soldiers near the entrance, directing the boys his way.

“How’d your parents take the news?” Breck said as they circled around the auditorium.

“How do you think?” Tom said, turning his face away.

“That bad?”

They passed the little medical room where the boys had been treated. The McKerricks watched from the doorway, arms wrapped around each other. Breck waved, and Mr. McKerrick raised a hand and nodded in reply.

“Take these,” Garth said, holding up two black backpacks as the boys reached him. “There’s water, packaged food, long-ranged walkies, extra clothes—everything we can fit in there.”

Tom was already digging through the contents of his pack. He pulled out a lighter and a flint and steel kit. “We won’t be needing these,” he said, dropping them in Garth’s hand and stuffing an extra MRE in the created space.

“Garth, will you all be safe here? Can you keep it defended?” Breck asked.

Garth nodded. “Belthar seems to think the worst of it will follow you. We can lead the little stuff away.”

“Thank you, for everything,” Breck said, shaking Garth’s hand.

“You act as though we won’t be seeing each other again. But I think we will.”

Garth released Breck’s hand and popped Tom in the shoulder. “Good luck to both of you. Take care of each other.”

A soldier opened the door, and the boys stepped out into the sunlight. On the other side of the empty street, a white pole with a triangle-shaped flag stuck up from a green mound. The sidewalks were wider than usual, and a dozen golf carts—modified with chrome rims and grills, hard tops, windshield wipers, headlights, and leather seats—had been abandoned along the street.

“Hey, Garth. Wait,” Breck called. The soldier caught the door just before it closed. “Where the heck are we?”

“The Villages,” Garth replied, poking his head out.

“The ritzy retirement area where old people drive their golf carts in the street?” Tom said.

“Yep. Breck’s mother seemed to think that the Terra would go for areas most densely populated with the young and healthy first. Well, and old people just don’t ask as many questions. They’ve got other things to do with their time.” The soldier pulled the door shut, and it locked with a clicking of bolts.

“K, bye,” Tom said, waving at the sealed door.

Breck rubbed his eyes and swatted away a mosquito that buzzed around his head. Nothing seemed to be moving in either direction. The moist air formed into droplets on his forehead, steaming from the blazing sun. He could feel his head-mop frizzing and rising from the humidity.

“You know,” Tom said, “I heard this place is a hotbed for sexually transmitted diseases.”

“That’s ridiculous. It’s a community full of retired people.”

“Exactly! What else do you do when you’ve got no job, a bunch of money, and a bunch of time?”

“I literally hate everything you’re saying to me right now,” Breck said.

“I’m just saying . . . it’s good to keep in mind, when you’re looking for a place to retire.”

“How do you even know this stuff?”

“School, obviously. You just gotta know when to listen for the important stuff,” Tom said.

“You’re ridiculous.” Breck scratched his chin and wiped the sweat from his brow, using it to wet his hair back off of his forehead. Tom buried his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels. A wall of dark clouds moved steadily in their direction. A cool breeze swept around them.

“So . . . where do you think they are?” Tom said.

“Who?”

“You know, Aztheria and Belthar.”

“Yeah. I was just wondering that myself,” Breck said.

“They just left us out here without adult supervision.”

The faint screeching of tires echoed from down the street. The boys leaned out. A few hundred feet away, a car rolled down into the drainage ditch running alongside the road. A blue flash forced a second car into a barrel roll.

“Is that Belthar?” Tom said. “That tiny man all the way over there?”

Breck sighed. “He really doesn’t understand this whole father thing.”

“How is it that he’s so fast, and you . . . not so much?”

“Are you challenging me to a race?” Breck said.

“It wouldn’t be fair . . . for you. Besides, I’m not supposed to exert myself.

Belthar said it’s dangerous.”

“I’m pretty sure he was talking about the shooting of fireballs and setting yourself of fire.”

“Either way, we can’t be too careful.”

Breck hopped off the steps and headed in Belthar’s direction. Tom kept stride beside him. Shops ran together like a giant outdoor mall—all painted shades of cream or beige. Golf carts filled the parking lots except for an occasional luxury sedan. A group of square-cut houses, only differentiated by paint variations, had been boarded, but light seeped from the plywood edges. People still bunkered in their homes, waiting, perhaps hoping that the threat would pass over them.

An icy drop caught on the tip of Breck’s nose, then a drizzle fell from the billowing gray above.

“Belthar!” Breck called when they were within earshot. “You didn’t wait for us.”

Belthar stopped and turned around. “Why would I wait?”

“Um. What if we got attacked?” Tom said.

“Did you?”

“No—”

“And now you’re here.” The Tempest radiated, shaking in Belthar’s hand.

“Rellion is close.” He resumed his pace, still bumping cars out of his way.

“What’s the deal with your hammer?” Tom asked.

“Rellion helped craft it. He can call to it when we’re near. It’s one way that we can find each other when we need to.”

“Where’s Aztheria?” Breck said.

“Scouting—” Belthar halted abruptly and turned his head to the side, listening over his shoulder. A distant screech sounded from beyond the golf course. The air vibrated as the roar intensified before cutting off. A plume of red flame shot into the sky, forming into a crimson cloud and raining down fireballs. “They’re on him,” Belthar said, lunging into a sprint.

The boys struggled to keep up as Belthar raced over the golf course’s rolling hills. The freshly cut grass provided traction, but Belthar’s muscled legs pushed him forward, increasing the distance between them.

A familiar Leaper’s scream rang in Breck’s ears. He imagined the first moment he’d heard it, standing in his kitchen, Tom running downstairs, the shadow moving across the window. A dozen Leapers had appeared behind them, closing in. A second pack trekked parallel to them, spewing chunks of grass in its wake.

“Belthar!” Breck shouted, feeling the pounding of claws beneath his feet.

“There’s too many! We have to get to Rellion!”

“They’re too close!” Tom yelled.

One Leaper growled and barked, jaws snapping at Breck’s ears. Another leapt, soaring over their heads. Before Breck could react, the Leaper burst into green flame. A wall of green and black fire formed behind them, consuming their pursuers.

Tom slowed and fumbled forward. Breck caught him before he collapsed, pulling him over his shoulder and pressing on.

“Tom! How did you do that?” Breck said sharply.

“I didn’t know I could.” Tom’s feet began kicking again a moment later, and he pushed himself off of Breck. They passed over the apex of the largest hill, and the battle came into view. A slender man, wearing an orange robe, stood at the center of a charred field. A beam of purple energy from his hands cut through the horde of Leapers moving in on him. Black mist retreated and reformed into more Leapers at the rear of the mob. A blue orb hovered behind him, tracking his movements and obliterating Leapers like a bug zapper.

Three Devourers burst from the ground, and waves of Terra flowed from the holes—Leapers, Crawlers, creatures with scythe-like arms, a group of beasts as large as a Devourer that moved like gorillas, and many more indistinguishable creatures fusing into the mob.

“Rellion!” Belthar shouted. The Tempest raged, shaking violently and glowing golden.

Suddenly, a spectacle of shining blue particles appeared around them, moving toward Rellion like shooting stars being sucked into a vacuum.

“Hurry, Boys!” Belthar said. “He’s going to nova.”

“He’s gonna what?”

“You’ll see.”

Rellion released a wave of fire before pulling his arms in and crouching to the ground. Just as a horde of crawlers pounced on him, Rellion sprang up and threw his hands out. A silver sphere, like a globe of water, erupted from his body and expanded

rapidly in every direction. As it passed through the dark creatures, they instantly exploded into dust.

Breck fell flat on his back when the nova hit him. Belthar had plowed through the wave and launched the golden hammer into the center of the nova. As soon as it reached Rellion, the Tempest detonated. A golden light burst from within the nova and instantly turned the blast from blue to gold just before the spell dissipated. Belthar pulled the glistening dust toward him and directed it into Rellion with a white flash.

Breck shielded his eyes. When the light faded, Belthar and Rellion stood together with interlocked arms, talking excitedly. The Terra had been eradicated.

“Do you hear that?” Tom said.

“Hear what?”

“That hissing sound . . . like a radio.”

A shiver ran up Breck’s spine. Tom’s eyes had blacked around the edges, fading in towards the pupils. His cheeks were ashen, and his neck appeared as if he’d walked through a sand storm. He dug into one ear with his pinky, attempting to find the source of the noise.

“Tom, are you okay?” Breck said.

“I am feeling a bit off actually. But I also knocked my head pretty hard.”

“Hello there,” Rellion said, standing over them with Belthar at his side. Bright, red hair whisked back and touched his shoulders. Fair skin covered a pointed chin and thin nose up to stretched ear tips. His eyes were a golden orange like Aztheria’s. His robe was made of layers of orange scale-like material with thread of ornate red running along the edges. He extended his hands and helped the boys up.

“You’re Rellion,” Breck said.

“Quite. And you’re Belreck—”

“Breck,” Tom said.

“Of course. And who is this?” Rellion asked, staring into Tom’s eyes.

“This is Tom,” Belthar said. “He’s a Firemaster.”

“I gathered that.” Rellion tipped his nose up, examining Tom’s blackened skin.

“Well, we ought to relocate before the dragon returns. Belthar, would you do the honors?” He said, stepping aside and pointing to a dark portal behind them, similar to the one Officer Nealie had fallen into.

“Dragon?” Breck said.

“The biggest I’ve seen in quite some time,” Rellion said. “Quite rare to find them at all outside of Terranox control. This one, I think, has been here for some time.”

“Come along, Breck. You need to know how this works,” Belthar said.

“How *what* works?”

Belthar sighed. “Do you see what I’ve been dealing with?” he said to Rellion.

“Welcome to fatherhood.”

“C’mon, Breck. I’m going to show you,” Belthar said, pulling Breck along. He picked up the Tempest and paced to the dark portal. “The pool can be banished just like the Terra, stopping anything coming through and shutting it down permanently. The process is the same, but you need something to break the surface.”

“But it’s water, isn’t it?”

Belthar laughed to himself. “Not quite.” He reared the Tempest back until it glowed gold and red, then he swung it down. It struck the surface with the sound of

shattering glass, and the black water splintered, cracked, then exploded a burst of white light. The pool had vanished, leaving a crater that was several feet deep. Evenly spaced ridges lined the crater floor from the edge to the surface. At its center, a black shard the size of a finger rested on the soil. “Go ahead.” Belthar said.

Breck lowered himself into the crater and picked up the shard, turning it over in his hand. “What is it?”

“A Spirit Shard, we call it,” Rellion said, stepping up next to Belthar.

“That little thing was in the meteor?” Tom said.

“That *was* the meteor, with a magic barrier of course. Now, if you don’t mind,” Rellion said, holding out his hand. Belthar helped Breck out of the crater, then Breck dropped the shard onto Rellion’s palm. “Everyone gather in.”

“Rellion, before we go, you should know something—”

“I know she’s here, Belthar,” Rellion said sharply. “She’s been avoiding me, as if I’m ignorant of her presence. She’ll come if she thinks we’re leaving. Closer, Tom.” They all pressed into a tight circle, and something swooped down from above, landing at Breck’s heels.

A set of wings retracted, revealing Aztheria’s form. “It’s coming.”

“A simple ‘hello’ would also do,” Rellion replied.

“There,” Tom said, pointing to a spot in the sky. A dragon beat the air with massive wings. It was as large as two Devourers. Matte, red scales covered its body. Black spikes protruded from the point of its tail to the tip of its snout. Liquid flame dripped from razored jaws.

“Time’s up.” Rellion grabbed Aztheria and pulled her in. The shard hovered over his palm then twisted and spun until it appeared as a black orb. “Breathe.” The orb suddenly expanded out, enveloping them. Then everything went dark.

CHAPTER XII

OUT WITH THE TIDE

Breck blinked his eyes open and rubbed at his throbbing temples. Moonlight bled through the cover of overhanging trees.

“Hello, Sleepy Head,” Aztheria said, leaning over him.

“What happened?”

“Teleportation. The first time is usually the worst. I think you knocked your head a bit on the way down, but don’t worry, you’ll be fine.”

Breck sat up and tried to brush his hair down. A translucent barrier hovered several feet in front of him. Beyond it, trees towered all around—oaks with thick bases. Behind him, Rellion and Belthar huddled around Tom. They sat on wooden benches beneath a canvas canopy. Tom was hunched over with his arms wrapped around his middle, his usual smirk absent. He eyed a spot on the ground, pushing dirt around in circles with the toe of one shoe. The protective barrier contained them in a hundred-foot bubble.

“What’s going on?” Breck asked.

“I think they’re trying to figure out if they can help him or not.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s sick, Breck. Really sick.”

Breck started to jump up, to join the conversation, but Aztheria grabbed his hand.

“Wait,” she said. “You’ll have your chance. Tom needs this.”

In the blackness, shadowed movements stirred the brush. Something lurked, waiting. A sliver of white showed through a patch of thick branches. Breck leaned forward, and a pair of hooked claws slipped out from the darkness. Digging into the bark, a creature held itself upright against a tree. Thin, crab-like limbs flashed between the brush. It clicked with its mouth, though its flat face was obscured by black mist. Red glowed from its eyes.

“Assassin,” Aztheria said. “It can’t see us, but it brushed against the barrier a while ago, so it knows something’s here.”

“Where exactly is ‘here?’” Breck said.

“Somewhere near the other light portal where my father came down. You can only teleport to places you’ve been, that you know at least well enough to visualize.”

“Great . . . so we have no idea where we are,” Breck said, laying his head back against the grass.

“We’re close. The Terra that guard the pools are vicious. We’ll have to be strategic if we’re going to all make it.” She paused, staring off at the swaying trees. “I think you’ll find that Belthar is a different person now that my father’s around.”

“Huh?”

“Just give him a chance, okay? He’s had a tough life, and he and my father . . . they’re just not the same when they’re apart.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Breck said, crossing his arms against his chest. “Aztheria . . . tell me something. If you were safe in that temple-thing—”

“Temple of Helios.”

“Whatever. If you were safe there, why did you come?”

She smiled, pushing hair behind her ears. “Do you know that we were born only days apart? My mother and your mother were childhood friends, like our fathers, and my mother was Lightborne too. I’m the only hybrid—Elf and Lightborne—in recorded in history.”

“You’re not answering my question.”

“Right . . . well—”

Warm pressure gripped Breck’s shoulder. Muscled, worn fingers pressed into his skin. “Breck,” Belthar said, his voice deep, vibrating in Breck’s chest.

“You said my name.”

“Yes . . . well.” Belthar cleared his throat. “Rellion’s waiting. He wants to speak with you alone,” he said, stretching out his hand.

Breck pulled himself up and held Belthar’s grip for a few moments. Tom’s head peeked around Belthar’s wide frame. “Tom!”

“Hey, Dude. Hey, Hair,” Tom said. His pupils had widened, furthering the shadow in his eyes. His teeth clenched behind ashen cheeks. Pain began to show on the surface.

“You okay?”

“Sure, Dude. Go on and talk to Rellion. He’ll explain.”

“We’ll be here,” Belthar said.

“Breck,” Aztheria said, popping up. “Hold on a sec.” Aztheria took his hand and led him around Belthar, who smiled as they passed. He heard Tom and Belthar chattering and laughing at him as soon as they were a few steps away. Half-way to the canopy, she stopped him. Her eyes glistened, the familiar fiery orange that he’d seen in his visions.

Her hair swayed with the wind, releasing a perfume like almond and cherry. “About your question . . . I came here because I’ve been waiting my whole life to meet you, to see if the things the Council said about us would come true. I couldn’t just sit by and wait any longer, not when I knew that I could help bring you home.”

“Aztheria . . . my home is here. Even if we make it to your world, I’m always going to want to come back.”

She looked down at the ground and smiled, nodding her head. “I know. It really can be quite beautiful there though. Maybe once you see it, you’ll find it harder to leave than you expect.” She stepped close to him, her nose hovering only inches from his chin. “I believe in you, Breck. That’s why I’m here.” She brushed her cheek against his, kissed him at his jawline, and twirled around him. She paced back to the group, bouncing on her toes.

Breck combed his fingers through his hair, pressing on his scalp. His head still throbbed, but elation seemed to numb the pain. Aztheria’s kiss still lingered on his skin. He crossed the empty space to the canopy where Rellion stood at a table, grinding something with a pestle and mortar.

“Have a seat, Breck.”

The wooden bench was soft, plushy almost, though it looked normal, woodgrain splitting its middle. He suddenly felt like he could lie down and sleep for a while on that bench.

“So, Belthar told me about the kiss.”

“Whoa,” Breck said, holding his hands up. “Look, I didn’t know she was going to do that. It just kinda happened, I swear.”

“Not just now, though I did see that,” Rellion said, eyeing Breck over his shoulder. “I mean a few days ago, with the Kamgar.”

“Uhhh...”

“Hm. I thought Belthar would have told you. You must have been quite confused,” Rellion said. He knocked the powder from the mortar into a vial filled with clear liquid. “Where we’re from, it’s customary for the women to choose the men. Now, it doesn’t always have to be that way, especially in more recent times when . . . well, there just aren’t as many of us left. Nevertheless, a girl, when she’d come of age, would signify her choice with a kiss.”

“So, when it . . . er, she, licked me, that was a kiss?”

“Afraid so,” Rellion said, turning to face Breck, swirling the vial between his fingertips.

“Let’s say, hypothetically, the man chosen doesn’t return the feelings. What happens then?”

“He does have a choice, but he’d be ostracized from the other women in the community. You see, our women don’t take the ritual lightly. In fact, they only choose once in their lives. Should the male not pursue, the female will wait until he does.”

“I see. You’re telling me this because Aztheria—”

“—is my only daughter,” Rellion interjected. “You need to take seriously the decision she’s made and know what that means for her, and you.”

Breck let his head fall back on the table. “Oh boy...”

“Here,” Rellion said, extending the vial to Breck.

The clear liquid turned a pale green in Breck’s hand. “What is it?”

“It’s a potion, made with ingredients from Harthrend.”

Breck raised an eyebrow.

“It’s safe, just limited. It will restore your energy, replacing the rest you desperately need.”

Breck lifted the vial to his lips and felt the drink travel over his tongue. It was flavorless, but he smelt flowers and rain—like his mother’s perfume, it was sweet, almost stinging. His legs bounced on the bench, and his head cleared, eliminating the dull throb.

“Better?” Rellion asked.

“Woah, Dude. I wish I had this stuff during football season. Do you have anything that can deal with *this*?” Breck said, pointing to the wild mess on his head.

“I’m afraid even magic can’t deal with *that*. Trust me, Belthar has tried it all.” Rellion smiled. His orange cloak brushed the dirt as he sat across from Breck. “I imagine you’ve got some questions about all that has happened these last few days. While we’re resting, I I’d like to answer what I can for you.”

Breck looked over at Tom. Belthar and Aztheria were arguing playfully about something. Tom sat cross-legged, picking at the grass but smirking at least. “Is he going to be okay?”

“Tom unknowingly used Earthspeak against the Leapers. It’s a sign of the transformation. The Terra know Earthspeak, and therefore Tom knows it as well. They’re beginning to communicate with him, though he’s still unaware of it.”

“You can cure him, right? Belthar said you’d know what to do.”

"I'm sorry, Breck. There's nothing I can do. Belthar removed the roots, which stopped its growth, but if Tom doesn't refrain from using magic, he'll continue to feed the seed, he'll continue to change."

"Can't you remove it—destroy it?"

"Not here . . . and not me. But there may be way—"

"The Circle of Light," Breck interjected.

Rellion cocked his head. "Yes. How is it that you know?"

"I had a vision. I was holding a black body, wading into the pool. I think it was Tom."

Rellion slowly nodded his head. "No one has ever come back from complete transformation, but the Council believes it is possible through the Circle of Light in the same way that it restores the dead to life. But we should hope it doesn't come to that. The process is complicated."

"What do you mean?"

"The portal requires your power, your life, in exchange for the one you seek to save."

"You mean, if I want Tom to live . . . I have to die?"

"You have to be *willing*. A Lightbringer, however, should he or she be found worthy—if intentions are pure and motivated by self-sacrificial love—will heal his loved one and emerge as something new, something far more powerful than Belthar or I."

Breck recalled his vision of Belthar's argument with the Council outside the Temple of Helios. "The Tempest showed me something like that . . . with Belthar and his mother."

“Yes, Breck. Your grandmother, a Council member, was fatally wounded during an excursion against the Terra. Belthar rushed her to the Circle, but he believed he was chosen to be the next Paladin. Not to say that he didn’t love his mother, but in that moment, he was motivated by his desire to become a Peacemaker, to set himself on the track to fulfill the prophecies. And so, he lost her.”

“But he still has his power?”

“That’s right. The Council was confounded until your mother became pregnant. They told him then that his power was preserved so that he could protect you.”

“But then he was left behind? I don’t understand. The Council was wrong again?”

Rellion chuckled to himself. “Well, let’s just say that the Council is quite good at seeing things, but interpreting those things . . . well, that’s a different story. Your mother was the greatest Harbringer to serve on the Council, during my time. Unfortunately, she had no interest in offering interpretations . . . not to us, at least. Helios was the true seer, the one who foretold all that has come to pass. The Council has tried to supplement the knowledge he left us by understanding new revelations, predicting when prophecies will be fulfilled. Yet, their guidance only led Belthar further into the deep beyond pain.”

Breck wondered what Belthar might be like if he’d never been misled. Would he have been allowed to come to earth with Breck and his mother? What would he be like without all the guilt he carried? Would he be a completely different person?

“Aztheria, she wants me to give him a chance,” Breck said. “...to let him be my father I guess.”

Rellion interlocked his fingers and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. “Belthar is a good man and as powerful as a Lightbringer can be. The man that

demolished my front door in a rush to tell me that his wife was pregnant—jumping up and down and knocking fragile things about with that clumsy hammer—he’s still in there.”

Breck took a deep breath. Tom had rolled down onto the grass. He laughed as Belthar and Aztheria wrestled. Her arms had transformed and split into multiple tentacle-like appendages, giving her an advantage—Breck thought she reminded him too much of something from a horror movie, but the rest of her was still beautiful. The change in Tom was evidenced on his face: the darkness in his eyes, his blank face that only smiled for a moment before flattening again, and the way he rested his chin on his hands as if his head was heavy with fever. Breck sensed that his friend was becoming less of himself.

A few days ago, they had been playing video games and chatting about football. They had talked about which girls they would take to prom. Tom had had a crush on a short blonde named Claire since the second grade, but he hadn’t said a single word to her in his life. Breck couldn’t get him to shut up unless she was around—he’d just stare until she left the room. Since Ethan’s funeral, a day had not gone by where Breck and Tom hadn’t seen each other; he even went with them on family vacations. He didn’t want to imagine what a day would be like without him.

Breck shook his head. “What if I don’t want any of this? I just want to help Tom, and get back to our normal life.”

Rellion stood and pulled the journal that belonged to Breck’s mother from a leather sack. “I borrowed this while you were asleep. I needed to see what your mother has learned about the *Logarians*. I hope you don’t mind.” He handed it to Breck. “She knew that your life on earth was only a temporary escape. She even gave herself over to

the Terra in order to preserve your solace here a little longer. Once she was gone, Saethiron inevitably returned to sleep. Though I expect he is stirring again now that we are here...

“I won’t attempt to persuade you, Breck. The journey ahead will be difficult, and I don’t blame you for wanting to distance yourself from it, but your mother, your father and I, and my daughter—perhaps most of all—believe that you’re meant for this. You *will* be the first Peacemaker in a generation, and the first Paladin in a thousand years.”

“And what then, Dude? What does it matter if I do any of that if the people I love are here, are dying, while I’m off on *your* world, fighting *your* war!”

Rellion sucked in a slow breath and sat down beside Breck. “Elvish lore tells of the first Terranox war. It is said that the Terra first appeared in the deep mines of Healion, the Elf home world, but were defeated and forced into retreat. The Elves kept the Terra entrapped for centuries, but we didn’t know then that the Terra came from another world, that the Terra had been created to destroy us.”

“You could actually kill them? Without a Lightbringer?” Breck interjected.

“I’m getting there—”

“Sorry.”

“The Terra searched for something to help them defeat the Elves, moving in stealth from world to world. They eventually found the Orin—a race that had survived eons of evolution. The Orin were noble, four-legged creatures that moved like light. Each Orin had a ribbon-like appendage flowing from the top of its head that floated down near the base of its stout neck. They used this to communicate, instantaneously, across the entire race. They led and followed, always acting as a whole, gallant, and peaceful. Their

most powerful trait, however, was their ability to shatter, becoming mist and regathering any place where other Orin were in need.”

“Mist—like what the Leapers do?”

“Precisely. However, the Orin were survivors, not warriors. The Terra overwhelmed them. The Orin’s bodies were transformed into the hulking monstrosities that mark the Terranox ground force—the Leaper.”

“That’s why they can’t be killed?”

Rellion nodded. With his staff, he carved a circle in the dirt with a second circle around it. He waved his hand over the picture and the dirt became mud. “When the Terra returned to Healion with legions of Leapers, my ancestors were unprepared and outmatched. They were forced to flee Healion, migrating to known worlds both young and old across the universe.”

“It just seems so impossible. You cut through hundreds of Leapers at once, but I can barely take on one by myself. I just don’t think I can do this...”

Rellion tapped his lips for a moment, then pointed to the creature, still stalking from the shadows, just beyond the barrier wall. “See that over there?”

“Yeah. Aztheria called it an Assassin.”

“The Caloranth. ‘Tree Guardians,’ they were once called. I cannot say for certain, but my research leads me to believe that sometimes the hosts live on inside their transformed bodies. I don’t know if they have control, if they can resist the commands of Terranox leadership or not. The hope is that, if the original species indeed live on inside those shells, perhaps they can someday be restored, someday when the Legends are proven true, when a Paladin destroys the source of the Terra for good. Perhaps there is a

Caloranth still alive within that Assassin, and he's looking for you, hoping, like the rest of us, that you are who we think you are."

Breck leaned back and closed his eyes. "How can I defeat an army that destroys worlds?"

"The Lightborne came into existence as an answer to the Terra, created to ultimately bring the world back into order. So, you should not be asking, 'Am I able?' but, instead, 'Am I willing?'" Rellion blew toward the ground. A swirl of dust rose from the image he'd etched into the earth, obscuring it momentarily before it vanished entirely.

A flash of lightning suddenly struck the barrier, illuminating the sky. Rellion jumped up. He stepped out from beneath the canopy and peered into the clear night with scrunched brow. "Belthar?"

"Wasn't me," Belthar called in response.

Another bolt shook the barrier, filling the sphere with an electric sound like charging power lines. A third bolt. A fourth. A fifth. The party gradually moved together, all eyeing the sky.

"Is this the Black Horizon?" Breck asked. "I don't see any clouds."

Rellion shook his head. "No, Breck. This is much worse. Something is trying to destroy Belthar's shield."

Then, a barrage of jagged bolts buffeted the barrier in rapid succession from all directions. Breck covered his ears and put his head to the ground.

"It's collapsing!" Belthar shouted.

"Aztheria! No!"

A sound like a screaming tornado rung in Breck's ears. A blast of wind rolled him into a tree. Metal bars clanked and bent with the tearing of the canopy. The light suddenly vanished, and the night returned. Breck felt around a stinging pain in his rib. A blade stuck out from his side, blood dripping from the hilt. The barrier held but large cracks had formed from the top to the base. Belthar pressed his hands to the sky, as if he were holding the barrier in place. The Tempest glowed in silver swirls on his back. Rellion mimicked Belthar, but golden wisps floated his lips, dancing along the inside of the barrier and finding their way into the cracks.

The forest had grown dark, like a black abyss. The trees, the bushes, the moonlight was all shadow, but then it moved, twisting, uncoiling, turning around the barrier. Black scales scraped along the shield, claws as big as cars appeared half-sunk into the ground. Finally, a spiked snout came into view, fogging the barrier with misty breath. Snake-like eyes peeled back, revealing crimson eyes—a deep red like the blood drying on Breck's hand. The dragon's head eclipsed the moon.

“Ragnos...” Rellion mumbled.

“How?” Belthar said, straining to keep his arms erect.

The dragon swung its massive head to one side, revealing a creature on its back. The rider was double the size of an ordinary man, though it looked like an infant compared to the colossal dragon. Clawed wings extended from the rider's back, and a flaming silver blade hung from one hand. It looked like Solarius, the man-like hybrid that Breck and Tom encountered when they first emerged from the golden pool. But this creature was broader, thicker, and its face seemed almost human. Yellow eyes stared at Breck, and the haze around its lips curled up, as if it were smiling at him.

“We can’t hold it, Belthar,” Rellion shouted. “Not against *him*.”

“Tom. Breck. Get ready to run,” Belthar called.

Tom fumbled onto the ground beside Breck, clutching his stomach and struggling to catch his breath. “Breck . . . what’s wrong?”

Breck twisted so that Tom could see the dagger. “I don’t know where it came from.”

“Shit!” Tom said, punching the ground. He pressed his forehead into the dirt and took several deep breaths. Then he shoved his hand into his pocket, reached across, and placed Ethan’s toy train in Breck’s hands, closing his grip around it. Tom’s eyes had completely clouded. He stared through the jet black at Breck. “When this is all over . . . come and find me.” He immediately jumped up and paced towards Rellion.

“Tom, what are you doing?” Breck shouted. “Tom!”

“Rellion, tell me,” Tom said.

“No, Tom!” He replied. “Stay back!”

“The barrier is collapsing. Tell me the word!” Tom screamed in his face.

Belthar dropped to his hands and knees. Chunks of the golden sphere broke away as another round of lightning bolts ripped into the barrier. Tom leaned in, and Rellion shouted something into his ear. Then he turned and glanced back at Breck before stepping to the edge of the barrier. The dragon lowered its head, black spines hovering only inches from Tom’s face.

Suddenly, the shield collapsed, and Breck felt jaws close in around his stomach, lifting him into the air. A Leaper had scooped him up and dashed away, stealing Breck

from his companions. The blade pressed deeper, and Breck's body shook violently with each bounding stride.

"Belthar!" He screamed. "Help!" He gripped the Leapers head and squeezed, holding his body still so he could see what was happening. Belthar and Rellion pursued Breck's captor. Tom stood with his arms at his sides. The dragon reared back, smoke swirling around its jaws. Then, it surged forward, and Tom erupted into a pillar of black fire, angling the flame into the dragon's mouth. A horde of Leapers swarmed him. Then the pillar exploded in beams of green and black, and Breck was thrown from the Leaper's mouth. His body whipped the ground and rolled across branches and roots before skipping to a stop. His head spun, and his skin burned. Something scooped him up again, his head snapped back, and the world went black.

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"Breck. You have to swallow," said a girl's voice.

A cold sensation flooded to the back of his throat, forcing him to cough. The cool liquid came again and he gulped. He peeked through swollen eyes. The sun gleamed above.

"Can you sit up?" Aztheria said.

Coarse fingers gripped Breck's hands and pulled him upright, propping him against a tree, then placed a block of something frozen onto his palm.

"Put that on your face," Belthar said. "Rellion will be back shortly with something better."

"What's going on?" Breck mumbled and squished the icy block across the bridge of his nose, covering the upper half of his face.

Aztheria cupped his free hand, caressing it with the silk of her fingers. “We’re safe. Tom . . . he got us out.”

“Where is he? Is he okay?”

“No, Breck,” Belthar said. “He’s gone.”

“What do you mean, ‘gone?’”

“Here,” said Rellion’s voice. He pulled the block away from Breck’s face and rubbed a thick lotion that smelled like manure onto his face. “That will relieve the swelling.”

Within a few seconds, the inflammation in Breck’s cheeks lessened, and his eyes opened up. He felt for the blade in his side, but it had been removed. “I thought . . . I thought I was dead. That Leaper, it had me.”

“Sorry about that,” Aztheria said. “I had to get you out of there.”

“What?”

“That’s one of her many tricks,” Rellion said. “Since she’s part Lightborne, she can take on their form without losing herself.”

“I didn’t know about the dagger.”

“It’s alright now,” Belthar said. “You’ll heal soon enough.”

“What the hell happened?” Breck said, glancing between the three sets of eyes staring at him.

“Nothing we could have predicted,” Rellion said. “The dragon, Ragnos, is a *Logarian* from Zariel. Somehow, they brought him here. We were winning the war in Harthrend until the Terra recruited him. It turned the tide in their favor.”

Belthar knelt beside Breck and pulled the blade from a satchel at his back. It extended the full length of his forearm—longer than it seemed when half of it sunk into Breck’s side. A series of indentations and jagged lines were etched into the steel. He handed the blade to Breck. “This belongs to Vultarion—the rider. He’s one of the highest ranking, most powerful Terra we’ve ever seen. This blade was covered in his blood before something pierced you with it—an Assassin likely.”

“Why?”

“It *is* curious,” Rellion said. “Perhaps he thought the sharing of blood might turn you to the Terra . . . or maybe it would poison you. Neither of those appear to be the case.”

“Why would he want to turn me? Why not just kill me?”

“Because,” Belthar said, standing. “He’s my brother.” He turned and paced away, disappearing into the glare of the rising sun.

“That thing was Lightborne?”

“There’s a story there, Breck,” Aztheria said. “It’s one of the many things Belthar feels responsible for. But yes, the worst of the Terra are those who were once Lightborne, like us, but surrendered, giving themselves over to become something dark and terrible.”

Breck paused and forced the hair down on the side of his head. “You said that the creatures living inside the Terra can come back . . . what happens when they’re banished?”

“Well, that is the dilemma,” Rellion said. “The Terra can only be destroyed permanently through banishing, but, this also eradicated anything that lives on inside.

This, of course, eliminates any possibility of restoration, which is the sole reason that both Vultarion and Solarius are still alive.”

“Belthar hopes that he can save them?”

“Belthar hopes that *you* can save them.”

Breck rubbed his forehead. “Why is everything in your world so dang complicated?”

Rellion smiled. “With time, you will learn. You will understand.”

Breck sighed. He turned the blade over in his hands. “So, what do we do now?”

“Well . . . your mother’s journal mentions a *Logarian* on earth called Leviath—a sea serpent that she believed would be receptive to our cause. If we can find him, awaken him, and convince him to hear our story, Leviath could be the equalizer we need to compete with Ragnos—”

“And then we save Tom,” Breck said.

“Tom will be with the heart of the Terranox army. It would be much easier for us to first return to Zariel.”

Breck had seen things he never imagined were possible. Even when the Leapers, the Frost Weavers, the Devourers were in front of him, he didn’t believe that they were real. But now Tom was gone. For the first time on this journey, Breck was truly alone. Who would dispel the impossible moments with laughter and somehow make them endurable, conquerable? Breck had left the family he knew behind, but the people here were somehow part of him too. And his mother was out there somewhere, maybe finding her way to the church, sitting by the sunlit window, reaching to tease his hair with her fingertips. He could have had a different life without the Terra—his mother, his father—

even if that was on another world. Maybe if he could defeat the Terra, he could still have that life. He could have his mother back. He could give life back to every creature under Terranox control. But he couldn't do it without his best friend. He couldn't do it without his Guardian.

"I'm not leaving without him, Rellion," Breck said, his face stiff.

Rellion sighed. "If you insist that we retrieve your Guardian first, we will have no choice but to rescue him."

Breck lay his head back against the tree. The sun peeked above the horizon, warming his face. He reached up to calm his rebellious hair, but grabbed the blade instead. He jammed it into the ground and hoisted himself up. "Well, then, let's go find this *Logarian*."