

## **"Legionnaire, Part I: The Sisters"**

By Kenya Gaede

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### Other published works by this author:

*Legionnaire, Part Two: Conflict Resolution*

*Great Sacrifice*

*The Hunter Mysteries, Vol 1, Story 1: A Case of Simple Murder*

*Parallel, Book One, Part One: Genesis*

*Parallel, Book One, Part Two: Traverse*

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*Omicron, Part One: Cerberus Rising*

*Omicron, Part Two: Epic Victories, Bitter Defeats, & Selfless Acts*

*Omicron, Part Three: End of Time*

## Table of Contents

"Legionnaire, Part I: The Sisters" .....	1
By Kenya Gaede .....	1
Copyright 2013, 2022 .....	1
Author's Note .....	7
Prologue.....	12
Chapter 1.....	14
Assassination .....	14
Chapter 2 .....	18
The Sisters.....	18
Chapter 3.....	25
Practice .....	25
Chapter 4 .....	29
Investigation .....	29
Chapter 5 .....	38
Seditionist.....	38
Chapter 6 .....	41
Nightmares .....	41
Chapter 7 .....	45
Deserted.....	45
Chapter 8 .....	47
Aware .....	47
Chapter 9 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Shadows .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 10 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
General of Darkness .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 11.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
No Little Skill.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 12 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Veils of Deception & Contention.....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Chapter 13 .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

Drastic Changes.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 14.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Unfriendliness of Dark Lords .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 15 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Sword & Shield .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 16.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Desperate Connections .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 17.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Warriors of Darkness .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 18.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Panicked.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 19.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Show.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 20 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Consequences .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 21 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Murder .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 22.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Shortcomings.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 23.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Reluctance .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 24 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Special Forces .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 25.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Dangerous Power .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 26 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
The Whole Truth.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 27.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
First Movements.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 28 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Awakening .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 29 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Youthful Brilliance.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 30 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Temper, Temper .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 31 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Progress Overshadowed.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 32.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
No More Delay.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 33.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Because You're Young & Unfortunate Humans .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 34.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
A Bit of Sport .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 35.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Flight Training.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 36 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Opportunity .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 37.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Mind Games.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 38 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Hand-to-Hand .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 39 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Flirting with Darkness.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 40 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Elimination .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 41.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Teamwork.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 42 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
A Disguise Revealed, Flashbacks, & Heroic Resolve .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 43.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Misperception.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 44 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Ammon & Bayne.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 45 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Unleashed .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 46 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Changes.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 47 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Takeover .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 48 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Too Late? .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 49 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Moving Pieces.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 50 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Dreams.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 51 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Brave Souls & Data Streaming .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 52.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Critical Discovery .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 53.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Recruitment.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 54 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Subtle Ideas.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 55.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
New Nemesis .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 56 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Assignments.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 57.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Imminent Threat .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 58 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
First Engagements .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 59 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Little Confrontation .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 60 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Mighty Warrior.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 61.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

Side by Side in Battle.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 62 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Deceiver .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 63 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Unhinged & The Newest Favorite.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 64 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Valuable Witness.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 65 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Tested.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 66 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Power of Suggestion .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 67 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Understanding & From Imagination to Reality .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 68 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Slipping.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 69 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
War Games .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 70 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Vanishing Act .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 71 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Darkness .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 72.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Legionnaires .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 73.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Traitors & Leaders .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 74 .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Loss .....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Chapter 75.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.
Fallen.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.

## **Author's Note**

*April 2024*

First and foremost, the two chief characters in this story are not representative of my (dearly departed) sister and me in any way.

Secondly, simply because a character says or does something does not mean I condone it. Story characters must make mistakes or poor decisions so they are relatable.

Thirdly, some of the scenes involve battles in space. I include descriptions of some sounds that are heard during these conflicts. Although I understand that there is no sound in space, that is terribly boring for writing purposes. Also, this is a fantasy novel. Therefore, I can write what I want.

On a similar note, I use directional references (e.g. north, south) to describe how the mentioned planets and systems are positioned in relation to one another. Direction in space is relative, but some kind of orientation is needed for the sake of the story. Also, the planets' positions pertain to how they are situated in their current revolution around their system, which constantly changes.

Fourth, the powers that the Legionnaires possess are merely gifts. They are not the result of incantations or rituals. They are created with these abilities that are no different than any other human ones. That being said, they can still use their gifts for wicked and selfish purposes, and Darkness can use Legionnaires to terrible ends.

In a way, the same can be said for Evil's operators, called Seditionists in this book. They, too, are born with talents and gifts but have chosen to pursue the desires of their innate natures. They have selected to use their gifts against their Creator and to seek power and status through horrible means.

"Part I: The Sisters" is primarily focused on our two main characters and developing them as "people" and their skills as warriors. The plot of the antagonists exists on an undercurrent, but you'll see how their forces move into position.

"Part II: Conflict Resolution" is focused on the war between light and dark.

Despite the books being rather long, I strive to write in a way that builds the suspense to the final climax, which unfolds in a truly epic battle that meets your expectations. Fewer events are more disappointing than when you anticipate a glorious fight between the protagonist and antagonist...and it is either non-existent or too short.

All my books are built on the belief in the existence of Good and Evil, which is clearly established on the never-changing truth of Scripture. I cannot reasonably and logically observe the world we live in and conclude that evil neither exists in mankind's nature nor in any external forces. However, though there is great darkness, there is also a Light Who cannot be extinguished. Life is unfair, sometimes exceedingly so. Yet, after

many years of knowing Christ, I must conclude this to be the unfairest truth of all: that in my saved though still imperfect and fallen condition, I cannot be as faithful, true, and good as He deserves—and yet He remains faithful and true to me, and His genuine love never ceases. This kind of relationship dynamic is truly unfair. As someone who loves balanced scales and justice, I find this almost intolerable to think about sometimes. Yet, His grace still far exceeds our constant failures and is far greater than our shortcomings will ever be.

In closing, I hope always to write in a way that inspires others and builds them up. I try to create worlds and adventures that offer readers a brief escape from the hardships and struggles of their lives. I wish my life to be a little gleam of light to others and that these stories will accomplish that.

And now, I hope you enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it. Buckle up and prepare for an epic war between Good and Evil.



"Blessed be the Lord, my Rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle; He is my steadfast love and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield and He in whom I take refuge, who subdues peoples under me."

-Psalm 144: 1-2

"And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight."

-Hebrews 11: 32-34

"An unjust person is an abomination to the righteous, and the one who lives an upright life is an abomination to the wicked."

- Proverbs 29:27

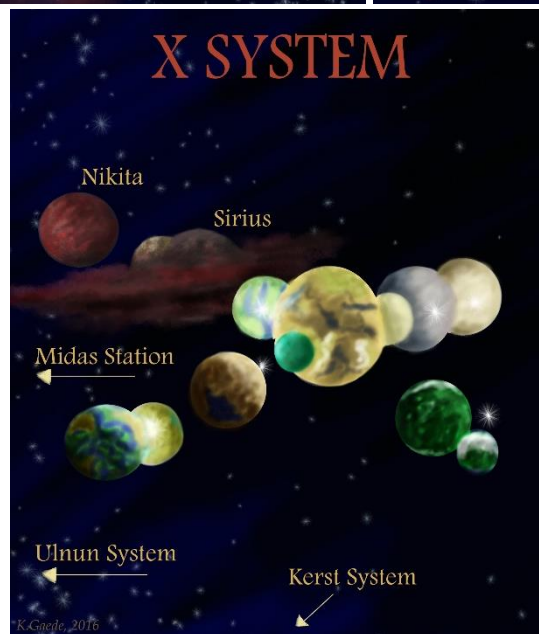
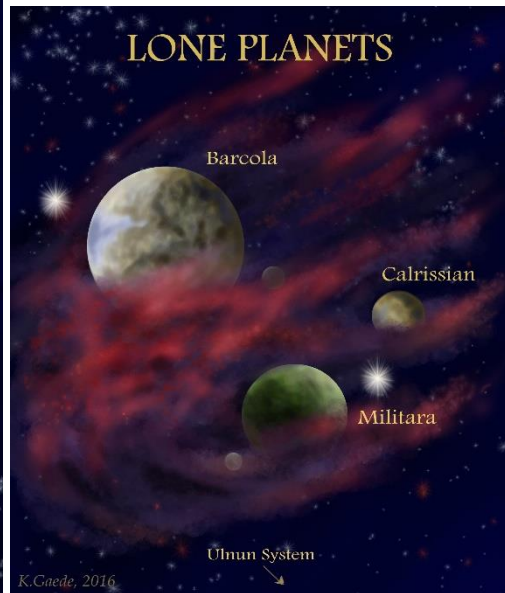
"For everything there is an appointed time, and an appropriate time for every activity on earth:

A time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to uproot what was planted;  
A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance.  
A time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
A time to search, and a time to give something up as lost;  
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
A time to rip, and a time to sew;  
A time to keep silent, and a time to speak.  
A time to love, and a time to hate;  
A time for war, and a time for peace."

-Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

All images and maps created and illustrated by Kenya Gaede





## Prologue

Old log entry by General Ciaran, one of the original Legionnaire traitors (Seditionist)

*Archived in the Legionnaire Council's library on Elywn*

*I cannot honestly say whether I regret my decision. All things seem pointless here, at the end of my long life. I feel neither conviction about my act of betrayal nor elation at the memories of all the innocent blood I have shed. Although I remain physically alive for a little longer, a large part of my soul died a long time ago. I have felt nothing for years. My spirit burned out and never rekindled. A consequence, perhaps, of the second biggest decision I ever made.*

*They titled us Seditionists, and we couldn't argue. It's what we are. Why deny what's true? "Traitors" would have been easier but it's too common a word. "Traitor" can refer to a minor offense or be used in jest. No. Our faithful, holy brothers-in-arms wanted a title that none would take lightly or want to use in everyday speech.*

*Some think that Evil can never tell the truth, but the truth is that It can. It told us what we would gain if we allied with Darkness. Evil kept Its word, and gain we did, incredible power, dark wisdom beyond Time, authority over beings of supernatural realms, and knowledge of the Laws between Good and Evil.*

*And we, the original Legionnaire traitors, knew exactly what we were doing. Moral Law is written on every human soul, and we were aware of Evil's many sly tactics. And, yes, Evil lured us. But in that pivotal moment, everyone willingly made their choice. We became Seditionists, traitors of Legionnaires and of the Almighty. There was no coercion. We stepped from the light onto another path. Or we returned to the path we were born onto before knowing the High One of Heaven. We were born His enemies and then made friends in salvation before remolding ourselves into His adversaries a second time.*

*But what did Evil need us for, anyway? First, fleshly bodies that could operate in mankind's dimension and who were aligned with Its goals.*

*Secondly, It wanted what we call "near knowledge." Evil understands spiritual realms and workings. To a fine point, this even includes the workings of the Almighty One. However, It isn't omnipresent or omniscient. Evil and Its operators can know about the vices of a specific human but not understand how he fits into the larger human social network.*

*For example, Evil might know the name of the Legionnaire general overseeing fleet movements in the Jutland System. However, It doesn't know this general is planning to send the commander he cannot tolerate on a month's leave. The officer taking his place is a stickler for the rules, which means he'll inspect every vessel entering the system. As a result,*

*we'll have to use longer, alternative routes to move our weapons so we aren't detected. See? Near knowledge and the complexities of human relationships.*

*Oh, and we can't forget that humans have an easier time recruiting other humans into Evil's empire. That task was simple, really. It's interesting what humans will do when you offer them purpose and power.*

*By the time the first of the original Seditionist Council died, we had brought tens of thousands into Evil's wicked fold. The overwhelming majority of trainees did not personally know the Almighty. As such, we did not have the Spirit to contend with.*

*I dare say that Evil finds these willing but lost souls more useful than us. It could not possess or control us, and our power is unique in its darkness because a sliver of light remains in us.*

*We taught our recruits everything we knew from our time in the Light and in the Legionnaire forces. We shared our knowledge about combat, spiritual and physical. We trained them how to use their dark spiritual gifts, from foresight to deception. We taught them Legionnaire procedures and how to earn their enemy's trust. We gave them everything. Between our knowledge of the Light and Evil's ability to fully control them, we created a kind of hybrid fighting force that has done the bidding of Darkness for generations.*

*Now, all but two of the original Seditionists have died. It's just me and one other. The title "Seditionist" is still used for those who came after us. It's convenient, though its meaning has changed and become broader. It includes any soul who chooses to ally with Evil instead of referring only to a Legionnaire who betrayed his calling.*

*These later generations may be a hybrid, but they are losing this latest war. Losing, though they have inflicted heavy losses on the Legionnaires. I feel neither sorrow nor joy about this fact.*

*There is a cunning dark general I have noticed in recent months. He wields the gift of prophecy. He has already looked forward to the next war (because of human nature, there will always be another war until Time meets its end). He has mentioned seeing a major shift in the seen and unseen realms, one that gives Evil a significant advantage. The most he presently sees are two humans. He says that their appearance will mark the beginning stages of this shift. But he cannot see their identities because He is concealing them. For now.*

*But such cares are irrelevant to me now. They will come after my time. I know it won't be long before I stand before the One I accepted and then betrayed. It seems strange to think that, despite my treachery, I will still spend eternity with Him. I wonder what that will be like, but...I guess I won't have to reckon much longer.*

## Chapter 1

### Assassination

*System: Ulnun*

*Planet: Verga*

*Location: Verda Hills*

A lone set of hoofbeats drummed quietly along the narrow trail cutting through the ancient forest. The night was eerily dark, and the moon and stars hid behind a thick veil of clouds.

Armor jingling softly, the horse snorted lightly with each stride as the path steepened.

The rider cursed the darkness, cursed this mountain, and the fact the ambassador had decided to visit his little-known vacation home in the heart of the mountains.

One could have hailed the ambassador from the city—if there hadn't been unknown interference blocking the signal. A speeder or cruiser would naturally have been quicker—if the house hadn't been in the middle of a dense wilderness of monstrous trees.

Normally, Neville, the rider, would have been in the depths of self-pity about this middle-of-the-night assignment. But tonight, something was different, something riding on the humid air as it drifted through the trees. It was something that forced him to stay alert. Or perhaps it was the unfathomably dark night.

His mount reached the narrow path that wound around the mountain, and he pulled his sweaty charge to a halt and listened. He thought he'd heard something above the sound of the wind.

The animal beneath him shifted anxiously to the side, ears twitching at every sound and muscles wound tight and ready to spring at any moment.

Neville listened a few seconds longer but only heard the sound of the horse's breathing and clanking metal as it chomped on the bit. Realizing that promptly continuing on his way was safest, he turned his horse down the path.

When he nudged his charge, it jumped into a swift canter and swept around the mountain.

## Ω

Ambassador Angra trudged tiredly into the living room of his small yet spacious vacation home. The lights inside burned brightly, making the house a tiny glowing point in the vast forest.

It had been a trying week, and all he wanted was relax a little, unwind.

After pouring himself a glass of brown liquor, he moved toward the couch in front of the hearth. The lights flickered once, then again.

Angra paused to look around the room.

The electricity went out, leaving only the candles to cast their soft glow. A shadow then fell over the room, choking out the candles' light and throwing the house into near-total darkness.

A noise from the kitchen behind Angra made him spin. His body stiffened, and his grip on the glass tightened.

The house creaked against a gale, and *he* stepped out of the blackness beyond the doorway and into the living room.

Angra's eyebrows rose in surprise as he drew a sharp breath and stepped back.

"You, well, I, you see, uh..." he stammered, setting his glass on an end table and taking a few more steps in retreat.

"You failed," said the visitor, slowly approaching as a suffocating presence settled over the living room. He wasn't hooded or cloaked, but darkness surrounded him and made him appear as a shadow.

"It was a simple task I asked you to perform. Not only did you fail, but now government officials are poking their noses into your business."

"I just need a little more time," blurted Angra, backed nearly to the stone hearth. "I told you before, our city is broke..."

"I don't care about your financial situation," replied the menace sharply as he drew still nearer. "The task I asked of you was a part of something so much bigger than your city or your planet."

He sighed, sounding mildly exasperated. "You disappoint me, ambassador."

Chills shot down Angra's spine. His skin was crawling, and he trembled with a rising terror that grabbed his very soul in an ever-tightening grip.

The man in his presence wasn't an ordinary human. He was something more. An air of terrible power and incredible intelligence surrounded him. He was a menace, a being of a sinister and dark nature. To put it bluntly: he was evil.

The man stopped inches from Angra and towered over him. The cold hand of Death surrounded him as a fierce pounding came to life in Angra's head, and his heart began hammering madly in his chest.

"I'll get it done! I promise. By whatever means necessary," pleaded Angra. "I won't fail again."

With the silence of a shadow, the visitor turned and walked back across the living room. Stopping at the end of the couch, he reached down with long, bony fingers and picked up Angra's glass.

He took a sip from it, then said, "I know you won't, ambassador."

Something didn't feel right. A few long seconds passed before Angra, now growing lightheaded, realized his heart rate was slowing and blood pressure dropping. Breathing



growing labored and sweat breaking out across his forehead, he shot a look at the visitor with his back to him.

Weakening, Angra fell to his hands and knees. His heart continued to slow. His vision began to blur before someone or something punched the oxygen out of his lungs.

With great effort, Angra craned his head up. The man still stood on the far end of the living room, enjoying his drink.

The ambassador finally went fully to the floor. An immense weight pushed steadily down on his chest until, at last, his heart finally stopped.

The visitor finished the last of the drink, considered the glass in his hand, and then crushed it like it was made of paper. When he opened his hand, fine sand remained. With a flick of his wrist, he dumped it onto the floor.

He didn't bother checking on the ambassador and walked from the living room into the kitchen. As he moved from one room to another or walked down a hall, the lights blinked on again after his passing.

The visitor reached the back door as a messenger rode up to the front of the house.

Neville swung down from the saddle and jogged up the steps leading to the large front door. He was about to knock but stopped when he saw the door was already open a few inches.

"Ambassador?" he called before tapping on the door a few times.

No answer.

Neville called out again with the same result.

A gust of warm wind moved through the trees and pushed the door open wider. His horse whickered anxiously and jittered sideways, tossing its head.

With an uneasy feeling growing inside him, Neville peered into the house.

A broad hallway stretched in front of him with a few rooms situated off either side of it. Most of the light, though, came from the last doorway on the left.

Neville glanced at his horse.

The animal pawed the ground and shook its mane. It tossed its head and whinnied at him, as if telling him to hurry up.

With quiet caution, Neville made his way through the house. He saw no one in the kitchen and continued into the living room where he jerked to a stop.

The ambassador lay on the floor in front of the fireplace and not in a manner that suggested he was sleeping.

Neville ran to him and knelt down. He checked for a pulse and found none.

"Oh man," he whispered, pulling out his comm, sticking it in his ear, and calling base. He was relieved, and a little suspicious, that communications were back online.

"*It's about time,*" growled his sergeant.

"Sarge! Ambassador Angra is dead!"



A breath of silence before, *“Someone has been busy tonight.”*

“Huh?”

*“Ambassador Domnall, Angra’s associate, was found dead five minutes ago.”*

Neville glanced down at Angra.

Yes, someone had had a very busy night.

## Chapter 2

### The Sisters

They moved stealthily through the forest, the breeze gusting off the lake and masking any noise they might make. With weapons raised, the leader signaled to the squad. They fanned out, and their eyes studied the trees creaking in protest against the strong gales.

The hunter to the left raised his hand. Everyone froze. Then he pointed.

There! They spotted one of their targets thirty feet ahead.

They started forward again, swifter now, and spread out to flank their quarry's position.

*Crack! Crack! Crack!*

Shots from the left dropped the hunter at the end of the line. His companion fell two shots later.

He was still falling when the hunter on the far right received two rounds to the chest.

The leader spotted another flash of movement through the trees and gave chase. Two of his teammates followed him while the remaining three ran after the second assailant.

The target pursued by the group leader glanced behind him. He briefly spotted his followers and squeezed off a round that grazed the leader across the shoulder.

The target ducked behind cover, but that didn't stop the team leader from firing off a few rounds in frustration.

The target pulled to a stop behind a large pine. Closing his eyes, he took several deep breaths to steady his heartrate and sense his pursuers. He smelled the pine trees and the scent of moist earth. He heard the forest sounds, and then sensed the three hunters. They had spread out again.

*Fine with me*, he thought.

He secured his rifle in its scabbard strapped across his back and then drew his sword, also secured to his back.

This was a fight over territory, the right for one group to operate in this sector and none other. Smaller skirmishes had finally led to this point: an all-out challenge, a test of skill and superiority.

Another gust bent the trees, making them groan. Clouds drifted in front of the sun and fell a cool shadow upon the wood.

The target continued to listen until *snap!* A twig broke beneath a nearby boot. He was already bringing the sword down when he stepped from behind the tree.

The hunter brought up his rifle to block the blade in a movement of pure instinct.

The target dodged a melee, swatted the rifle aside, and gave the hunter a kick in the stomach.

The hunter found his weapon ripped from his grasp before he received two shots to the chest. He was still falling when the target delivered a second, mighty kick to his core. The force of the impact sent him flying back into his two companions.

The leader and his comrade shoved the body out of the way while simultaneously firing at the target.

The target easily dodged the rounds while he backed up.

Growling in frustration, the two hunters advanced aggressively.

The target didn't turn and run, not that there was any place to go. They had reached a small clearing, and the edge of the lake cut off any escape.

Lowering the rifle and sheathing the sword, the target then pulled off his helmet. It wasn't a "he" at all, but a "she," the younger of the two sisters the group was hunting.

A gust of wind roared off the lake, blowing loose strands of braided blonde hair from Cadence Shahan's face and out of her keen blue eyes.

"No escaping, Cadence," sneered the boy, voice muffled through his helmet. "We're ending this today!"

A mischievous light danced in her eyes, and a coy little smile tugged at her lips. "Yes, we are."

Both the group and Cadence reacted simultaneously and opened fire on each other.

The rounds meant for Cadence evaporated into thin air when they came within feet of her.

As for the boys, they didn't have time to blink before red and yellow paint splattered across their armor and the facemasks of their helmets.

"Ah, come on!" whined the leader, blinded by the paint.

Cadence allowed herself a good laugh—until the sound of another fight drifted on the breeze. Her jovial mood vanished and was replaced by fierce determination.

She pulled her helmet back on and spun and sprinted through the trees.

While Cadence was en route, her older sister, Kiera, was in the middle of an intense battle with the three remaining hunters. And she was rather enjoying herself.

Charging forward, she ducked under several shots before leaping atop a large rock and flipping off it. She twisted over one of the challengers and put two rounds into his back as she landed.

Turning into a crouch, she raised her left hand, latched onto a wrist holding the weapon, and then socked the attacker in the diaphragm.

He stumbled back.

As she straightened, Kiera put two rounds into his chest. All the while, she was distinctly aware of every round fired by the third hunter behind her.

Reaching down with her free hand, she grabbed the armor of the challenger she had just eliminated. With a sharp jerk, she yanked him to his feet and pulled him in front of her as the final opponent rained down rounds upon her. The shots that didn't go wide struck the hunter's companion in the chest.

Instantaneously, Kiera brought her weapon around her human shield and put three rounds squarely in the chest of the final rival.

Thus ended the challenge. The three other boys who had been eliminated at the beginning joined them as everyone removed their helmets.

Kiera pulled hers off and revealed her fiery red hair, which would have fallen onto her shoulders had it not been for the braid. She gave a few sharp jerks of her head and popped the kinks out of her neck.

"I challenge the results of this fight," said one of the boys immediately.

Kiera, never one to back down from a challenge, drilled him with her green eyes.

"It was fought perfectly fair and square," she countered sharply. "You're just saying that because your ego is bruised."

Jaw muscles flexing in anger, he started towards her.

Glad to take him to task, Kiera dropped her helmet to free both hands.

He never had a chance to raise his fists. As soon as he was in range, Kiera threw a powerful right cross that made direct contact with his nose. His head snapped to the side, and he dropped to the ground.

That created an immediate commotion amongst the five others. However, before anyone could try anything else, Cadence jumped beside her sister.

"Easy," she said before removing her helmet again and letting it fall to the ground. She eyed the group around them. "No need to get all excited."

It was now effectively nine against two. Well, technically eight against two because the boy Kiera had punched was still on the ground and looked to be out for the count.

The leader opened his mouth to protest, but Cadence cut him off with a sharp remark. "The challenge *you* set forth was won fairly by Kiera and me, even though we were outnumbered and outgunned."

"We can go again if you want," added Kiera feistily, fire in her eyes as she drew her sword.

"Remember what dad said," muttered Cadence as she turned so she stood back-to-back with her big sister. "We have to try to give others a chance."

"Oh," frowned Kiera. "Right."

"So, what'll it be?" asked Cadence to the group of boys.

She secured her rifle, drew her sword, and then loosened the straps on her armor with her free hand. "But if you want to question fair justice, then we'll go round two without armor. No protection. You want to try to cheat and get your way at any cost, then we'll play by your own rules."

*Ooo, now you're talking, sis,* thought Kiera to Cadence, as she gave her sword a twirl.

Of the two, Cadence usually preferred to use reasoning, wit, and words to settle a dispute. Kiera was the more impulsive one and favored to settle arguments with swift, and usually violent, action.

Silence fell over the group.

They were just a bunch of kids in their mid-teens. Kiera was sixteen, Cadence fourteen, and they had been doing stuff like this for years.

Though they came from a long line of Legionnaires, the sisters had been forbidden to officially train at the military academy. Clearly, though, this didn't prevent them from watching friends who attended the training center or secretly learning what they could about being a warrior.

They had Legionnaire bloodlines and a strong sense of justice and yearning to train for battle. So, what did people expect them to do, anyway? Sit around and knit?

But the rivalry here wasn't a battle between the sexes; it was Legionnaire against regular security. It was hunters of evil that spanned across the known systems versus planetary law enforcement concerned with local matters.

Upon studying the four boys before her, Cadence gathered that only one actually wanted to fight. The others would much rather leave.

Her gaze returned to the lone holdout who hadn't stopped glaring at her. The moment she saw his muscles begin to contract as he prepared to reach for his weapon, she acted.

An unseen hand or force tore the boy's rifle from his grasp. The weapon hovered beside Cadence and leveled its muzzle on him. He also found the tip of a sword leveled under his chin.

*Next time, I'd carefully consider the consequences of my actions before I commit to them,* thought Cadence to him.

His eyes widened when he heard her voice in his mind.

A tense moment settled over the scene before Cadence lowered the sword, and the rifle dropped to the ground.

That was enough for the boy and everyone else. He snatched up his paintball rifle and sprinted away through the forest.

"Freaks!" called one of them.

"Only 'cause you're jealous!" Cadence shouted back.

Kiera joined her side with helmet in hand. She looked at it thoughtfully for a second before lobbing it at him. It popped him smartly between the shoulder blades and with enough force to send him flying forward a foot before tumbling to the ground.

Cadence grimaced a little at the aggressive action of her sister, though she was used to it. Besides, it had been pretty funny.

The sisters burst out laughing as the boy scrambled to his feet and ran from sight.

"Ah, the Shahan sisters" said a voice behind them. "Out causing trouble, as usual."

The girls froze with eyes wide. Slowly, they looked up to see Ronain, average height with sand-colored hair and soft blue eyes, looking down at them.

"Technically, uh, commander, sir, they started it," stated Cadence.

They shared a long look before Ronain broke into a smile, and the girls relaxed.

They held fellow Legionnaires in high regard, and their approval meant everything to them, especially Ronain's. For as long as they could remember, he was the only high-ranking warrior to give them unofficial training sessions.

"Another territorial dispute, eh?" he asked, eyes twinkling.

Kiera nodded and rolled her eyes. "Yeah. Boys."

"So, when are you going to be promoted to general?" asked Cadence excitedly.

That made Ronain chuckle. "A warrior proves himself in battle, and fortunately, we've had a long stretch of peace. So, there hasn't been much of a chance to show valor or skill."

"Well, *I* think it's long past due," said Cadence, folding her arms.

"I appreciate your vote of confidence," replied the commander.

Kiera whapped Cadence on the arm. "We should head home. Dinner's probably about ready."

"Right."

The sisters picked up their helmets, turned, and jogged toward the main road.

"See you later, commander!" called Cadence with a wave.

They arrived home just as their mother finished setting the table. After they all sat down, their father said, "I understand you girls had an eventful afternoon."

*Word travels fast*, thought Kiera.

The sisters glanced at each other before taking their seats. Kiera sat opposite their mother, Rebecca, and Cadence across from their dad, Matthew.

"I thought we've been telling you to play nice," continued Matthew, plopping some mashed potatoes onto his plate before passing them to Kiera.

"We tried to," replied Cadence in a very formal tone. "But they wouldn't leave us alone."

"Yeah," piped Kiera. "They kept saying we were in *their* spot, like there aren't other parts of the woods that are just as good."

"But really, dad," continued Cadence. "We tried to negotiate, but they insisted on a challenge."

Matthew looked from one daughter to the other. "Who did the bloody nose?"

Cadence glanced at Kiera and then at her plate.

With a sigh, Kiera confessed, "I did."

Matthew leveled his gaze on his oldest. His intense blue eyes never ceased burning with love and admiration towards his daughters. It was for this reason they found it difficult to meet his glance when they had misbehaved. They hated disappointing their parents.

"I thought we've been telling you to work on developing your other skills," he said, winking across the table at Cadence.

"I know," mumbled Kiera, dragging her fork through her potatoes. "But isn't skill in hand-to-hand combat a gift? Besides, Cadence is so much better at using supernatural gifts and stuff than I am."

"I've told you before," said Cadence. "I just practice more. I'm not as skilled with the sword as you."

Kiera looked at her little sister and sighed. *Always the peacemaker.*

The pitcher of juice in front of Rebecca, youthful and beautiful, lifted from the table and poured into Kiera's glass.

She looked over at her mom.

Rebecca's hazel-green eyes snapped mischievously at her daughter.

"The point of the matter," continued Matthew, reaching for the pepper shaker, "is you've both been getting into a lot more fights lately."

The shaker drifted to the left and away from his hand.

"Well, if you guys would let us train with the other Legionnaires," commented Kiera.

When Matthew reached for the pepper again, it shifted back to the right.

He glanced over at Cadence, who blinked at him innocently. As Matthew finally grabbed the shaker, he raised an eyebrow to let her know he wasn't fooled.

"We've been over that with you before," replied Rebecca. "We won't enroll you at the academy. Now...no more of this talk at dinner."

Cadence reached for the salad bowl, but it slid away from her hand. Lifting her eyes across the table to Matthew, she saw the smile tugging at the edges of his mouth and the mirth in his eyes.

She reached for it again, and it slid away. With a laugh, she grabbed at it with both hands. The bowl tipped forward suddenly, and Cadence dove out of her chair to avoid being showered with lettuce.

Now sitting on the floor, she glanced up at her mom who gazed down at her with raised eyebrows.

Cadence looked back at the table and saw a mass of lettuce and other various salad ingredients frozen in mid-air. As she watched, these reversed their course and resettled in the bowl.

"I'm sorry," said Matthew, smiling now as Cadence stood. "I thought you might like your salad tossed first."

Rebecca snorted, and Kiera dropped her face into a hand.

"Daaaad," said Cadence, rolling her eyes and sitting down again with a grin.

The giggling started with her and spread to the others.



## Chapter 3

### Practice

“The ambassadors of Verga were murdered?” asked Commander Ronain, puzzled.

“Yes,” answered Legionnaire General Nathan Chad, fingertips resting against the side of his head, where a dull ache had settled yesterday.

Tall with broad shoulders, his brown hair had begun to gray around his temples. His blue eyes were graying, too, but he was mentally as sharp as ever.

And agile.

Ronain only knew of one other person who could outwit or out-duel the general in combat.

Such as it was with Legionnaires. They matured at a young age, reached their physical and mental peak, and remained that way their entire lives. Their bodies aged to a degree and bore scars from battles, but they never lost their strength or sharpness of mind. There was something about the drive they were created with, the indescribable fire to confront and counter evil men, which preserved them.

They lived for battle and died in it—and they would not have it any other way.

Those who felt they had fulfilled their duties and retired showed aging perhaps a touch more as they lived out the remainder of their lives like any other human. They lost none of their sharp discernment or deep insight, though. To their last breath, they could gallantly defend and protect those around them.

Ronain was grateful beyond words to have General Chad as a friend and mentor.

“I assume the planet’s government requested that we investigate,” he guessed, studying his former instructor.

Chad’s eyes flicked to him. “That’s correct. They said there were unusual circumstances surrounding their deaths that would interest us.”

Ronain caught on. “The Legionnaire Council suspects Seditonists are involved. But what would they want with either of the ambassadors?”

“That’s what you and I are going to find out,” replied Chad, leaning back in his chair. “Though I was wondering when they’d resurface. Our enemy has been quiet for a long time.”

“Yes,” mused Ronain, glancing out the large windows to the left. “I agree...at least, that’s what my headaches are telling me.”

“Telling all of us,” agreed Chad with a nod. “Every one of the Council generals felt the restlessness last night. Anyway, we will leave this afternoon, after your combat training.”



"Afternoon, Commander!" exhaled Cadence, wiping the sweat from her forehead. She and Kiera had been sparring in a small stone courtyard not far from the training center. They had escaped punishment by their parents as a result of yesterday's challenge with the boys.

"*This time, anyway,*" their parents had stated firmly.

"Afternoon," nodded Ronain, stopping beside them.

"How did training go?" asked Cadence.

"As well as can be expected when fighting against half a dozen other commanders led by General Necro," he replied with a smile.

"Whoa," said Cadence, jaw-dropping.

Everyone had at least heard of the eight Legionnaire generals that made up the Legionnaire Council on Elywn. General Necro was known to be particularly cunning in battle.

"That about sums it up," agreed Ronain, rubbing a sore area over his sternum.

Kiera waved him off. "I'm sure you kicked butt."

"Do you have time to show us something new?" asked Cadence hopefully. She noted he was armed and wearing light armor, and thus surmised he was about to leave on assignment.

When Ronain hesitated, she gave him a cheesy grin. "Please?"

He laughed. "Okay. One quick pointer. Hand me your weapon."

She did.

He took it but paused when he realized it was an actual sword. Studying the two-foot blade and the gleam of the edge, he asked, "How long have you been dueling with real swords?"

Kiera and Cadence exchanged a glance of uncertainty.

"Uh, about...a year," replied Kiera hesitantly.

Ronain raised his eyebrows as he twirled the weapon and noted its perfect balance. When he looked up and saw their uneasy expressions, he responded quickly, "No, I'm impressed that you...haven't hacked any limbs off or anything."

They instantly brightened and felt relieved they weren't in trouble again so soon.

Ronain gave them a few more tips in regards to combat, explaining as he sparred with Kiera. However, five minutes hadn't yet passed when the three felt the arrival of a powerful presence.

Stopping, they gazed across the yard to see General Chad. Cadence couldn't help but stare.

He was one of the Legionnaire generals, a wise and seasoned warrior. But most importantly, he was a righteous man, attuned to the will of the Almighty, the source of a warrior's strength.

Chad's eyes fell first on Cadence, her expression one of a starry-eyed child. When his gaze shifted to Kiera, she met his eyes briefly before looking at the ground.

"Will we see you when you get back?" asked Cadence, taking her sword from Ronain.

"Of course."

Cadence beamed and saluted him. "Until then, commander."

Ronain smiled, returned the gesture, and strode across the courtyard to join the general.

"They're fond of you," said Chad as they walked along a broad, well-groomed trail winding through the woods.

"That's because I'm the only one who takes time to teach them anything," replied Ronain. "It's a pity they can't join the academy."

"Yes. However, you know as well as I that Council decided after they were born it would be too dangerous," answered Chad as they broke through the trees and saw their ship in the clearing. "We must also yield to the wishes of their parents. But...I would encourage you to continue teaching them. Just keep a close eye on them. They're both very strong already."

"Mmm, but...I don't think Cadence is fond of just me," commented Ronain, smiling a little.

The corner of the general's mouth tugged upwards before he nodded toward their ship. "Let's get a move on. It will take us several hours to reach Verga."

## Ω

"It would be so cool to be trained by General Chad!" exclaimed Cadence, looking across the courtyard and spying the roof of the massive Legionnaire military training academy.

"I guess," muttered Kiera.

Cadence snapped her head around to her sister. "You guess!?"

"He just makes me uneasy is all," she replied.

Cadence raised her sword with a mischievous smile on her face. "Well, then, I challenge you to a duel."

A grin pulled at Kiera's lips as she raised her weapon. Not wasting any time with a stare down, they lunged at each other.

The sisters battled quick and hard, almost dancing at times, across the courtyard. Neither was able to land a physical blow. Moving lightly on their feet, they dodged just so to avoid a strike or flipped out of the way of a swing.

It wasn't long before their swords locked.

They pushed against one other, muscles flexing and occasionally trembling. They slowly leaned closer and closer until their arms finally touched.

A flash lit the square, and the sisters went flying in opposite directions. They rolled and tumbled when they hit the hard ground twenty feet from each other. When they finally stopped and sat up, both were laughing.

"That's so cool!" exclaimed Cadence. "I love doing that!"

The scrapes on her arms and legs were minor, and she grabbed her sword and jumped to her feet. She ran to Kiera who was dusting herself off. "See, I think you're as strongly gifted as I am. It just takes practice and focus, like physical training. You don't add to the number of push-ups you can do by sitting around."

"I've never felt it that strong before," said Kiera, removing a pebble embedded in her arm.

Cadence grabbed her sister's wrist, and Kiera noted the heat that spread from her palm and up into her arm. It wasn't just her hand that was warm. Heat from the fight was radiating from her little sister, and her eyes were bright with light and life.

"I've been praying the Almighty would sharpen your gifts," she whispered excitedly.

Kiera blinked at her. "You've...been praying...for me? Why?"

Cadence blew through her lips and threw her a look of feigned incredulity. "Because you're my sister. Duh!"

A cry cut through the woods surrounding the courtyard, the sort of cry that comes when a smaller kid was being bullied.

"The peanut gallery again, I bet," muttered Kiera, rolling her eyes.

"No bet," replied Cadence, suddenly alert with her determined gaze fixed on the trees. "Come on, big sis. Let's go save the day."

Kiera broke into a grin and wondered how someone so young could possess such a strong sense of justice.

She glanced at her weapon on the ground, and it shot to her hand where it felt right at home.

"Alright," nodded Kiera. "Let's go get 'em."

## Chapter 4

### Investigation

*System: Ulnun*

*Planet: Verga*

Chad and Ronain landed at one of the primary military installations on the planet Verga.

The expansive base consisted of many large hangars dug into sheer cliff walls that dropped into a wide, deep blue river. The personnel assigned to this particular post served as customs and immigration. They closely monitored the inventory coming from and going to the nearby provinces.

A soldier drove the Legionnaire general and the commander to Ambassador Angra's vacation home in a military cruiser.

The Legionnaires were relieved to finally reach the house. They had spent hours on a ship followed by hours of sitting during the slow journey through the dense forest.

As Chad and Ronain finally climbed out of the cruiser, they were greeted by a pleasant summer breeze, heavy with the scent of pine needles and warm earth.

An official-looking man broke off from a small group of military men and approached the new arrivals. One serviceman flanked him.

Ronain exchanged a quick look with Chad.

Vergans were known to be a stubborn, stiff-necked people who didn't often appreciate outsiders and didn't listen to their advice.

A person's societal class was distinguished by their clothing.

Working-class men who labored in agriculture usually kept their heads shaved because they spent many hours under the sun. The military men usually came from a laboring family, not intimidated by hard work, danger, and long hours.

The upper class, or those who didn't want to toil beneath the sun, resided in the City of Spiden. Here, they spent their days in business, banking, and politics.

Regardless of their social class, all the women on Verga seemed to have an unfair share of noble beauty.

Overall, they were a united people. Every so often, a rift between country and city folk rippled across the planet before dissipating.

"I appreciate you coming so quickly," spoke the official briskly, extending his hand. "I'm Representative Dahr."

They exchanged customary greetings before Chad said, "We came as soon as we received your message."

“Yes, this is a very serious matter,” replied Dahr, wearing a scowl. “We believed the Legionnaire Council would be interested in these assassinations.”

His frown deepened. “This is serious because the peace between our planets is now at risk more than ever. Relations were tense already, with failing economies, unbalanced trade regulations, and taxes. Angra and Domnall were putting forth all their efforts to get things working again. After several years of hard work, they were finally succeeding.”

He cast a look up at Chad. “I don’t need to remind you that we don’t look well on outsiders. But I was assured by General Rufus that his men would cooperate with you. Your quarters have been prepared back at the Spiden Base, where you first arrived.”

Dahr nodded to the man beside him. “Sergeant Michaels here will aid you further in your investigation.”

With that, Dahr turned and walked to a speeder.

Sergeant Michaels was Ronain's height with a broad chest. Round-faced and strong-jawed, his hazel-brown eyes had gone cold after seeing previous wars.

“I take it you’ll want to look around the house,” he said gruffly.

“Hmm? Oh yes, definitely,” nodded Chad, breaking from his thoughts.

Michaels jerked his head towards the structure. “Have at it. You’re investigator types. I take it I won’t have to hold your hands the entire time.”

His eyes went to a pair of soldiers at the entrance.

“Hey!” he barked, jerking his thumb at the two Legionnaires. “These guys have total access. So don’t harass ‘em.”

The soldiers nodded in acknowledgement as Chad and Ronain walked to the front door. Before even entering the house, they felt their stomachs tighten and the hair on the back of their necks rise.

They made their way to the living room and turned on the small surveillance computer. These were used at crime scenes, placed on location the moment first responders arrived and removed only after the conclusion of a case.

The device blinked on and remotely connected to the holographic devices positioned around the room. An image of the ambassador’s body as it had been found projected onto the floor in front of the fireplace.

While Ronain studied the body and the layout of the room, Chad accessed the medical report on the computer’s touch screen. The data appeared over Ambassador Angra’s body where both men reviewed it.

“Look at the medical examiner’s notes,” gestured Ronain. “He would have ruled the death as ‘natural causes’ if the ambassador’s lungs hadn’t been crushed.”

“And yet there were no outward physical signs of trauma,” added Chad. “No bruising as one would expect if someone had knelt on his chest. This is very similar to the

other ambassador's death: no outward signs even though his trachea had completely collapsed on itself."

Ronain looked at his comrade. "I have a very bad feeling about this."

Chad held his gaze. "Me too."

*Seditionists*, thought Ronain to him, *they've been silent for decades.*

*Exactly*, replied Chad, turning to leave and clicking off the computer on the way out. *The enemy stays hidden for as long as possible while it regathers strength. Its movements, too, remain unseen until their plans progress to a point where it is simply impossible to keep them hidden. It was only a matter of time before they reappeared. I just hope this was a mistake of some kind made early in Evil's plans and not evidence of a campaign already in its late stages.*

"But right now, it's merely speculation," stated Ronain, not quite as eager to agree to such grand conclusions as his friend. "We don't know if these two murders were committed by a Seditionist mercenary on a single job or if they were part of bigger plan. We'll need confirmation to convince the other generals these deaths were backed by a dark army."

"Then we'll get confirmation," answered Chad, walking swiftly down the hall and to the front door.

"Excuse me, sergeant!" he called as he jogged down the porch steps.

Michaels spun and marched towards them.

"We need to contact the ambassador's assistant and secure a cruiser to the city," informed Chad.

"One step ahead of you," replied Michaels. "The man you want to talk with goes by the name of Coleman, and he's expecting you."

He tilted his head to one of the cruisers. "You can take that one. Just don't break it. I hear you warrior types can be particularly hard on vehicles. We'll expect you back at the Spiden Base when you're finished in the city."

Ronain and Chad nodded in acknowledgement and walked to the vehicle.

Since they mostly dealt with military types, they were accustomed to brash, even harsh treatment. The additional fact that most local law enforcement didn't appreciate outside help from the likes of Legionnaires, whom they believed saw themselves as elitists, made for some rather chilly receptions.

But warm, fuzzy relationships weren't a Legionnaire's purpose. Warring with the very forces of evil was. Chad was already certain Angra's death had been at the hand of an operator of darkness. Ronain sensed this too, though, remained reluctant to admit it. For now.

Presently, they needed to learn about how large of a scheme they had stumbled onto.

## Ω

*Planet: Verga*

*City: City of Spiden*

*Location: Hall of Council*

The City of Spiden sat wedged between two steep rock ridges and ran three miles wide and five long. Groups of buildings and towers clumped together and were divided by wide streets lined with great sprawling trees.

A few control towers dotted the city's perimeter and looked like bare skeleton trees rising out of a forest. The naked "branches" marked the countless landing platforms attached to the main tower.

Despite being one of the most technologically advanced cities on the planet, the original architects strove to blend it with its surroundings. Their goal had been accomplished. The materials, colors, and textures of every building matched those of the nearby rocks and forests. Although the city blended in visually, it still emitted a unique atmosphere that made it stand out. All in all, the City of Spiden was a grand place to visit.

The Hall of Council, a dome-shaped building in the city's center, glowed bronze in the afternoon sun.

Chad landed the cruiser on the shadowed side of the Hall and beside a line of vehicles.

Crowds of people came and went. A few passersby glanced at Chad and Ronain before continuing briskly on their way. There was something about Legionnaires that made them stand out, but Ronain had yet to figure out exactly what it was. Perhaps their clothing was a tip-off, but it wasn't as if they always walked about in heavy armor or robes.

Their garb was usually cargo pants and a plain shirt in a neutral color. They kept their weapons in plain sight and secured depending on the preferences of the individual. Perhaps a sidearm at the hip and lance secured on the thigh where it was quickest to access, with a third backup weapon on the other hip or side of a boot.

If they were entering potential hostile territory, they wore light armor to protect their chest, core, and back, and carried an extra weapon like a scoped rifle.

Chad and Ronain were just exiting their vehicle when a young man quickly approached.

"Welcome to Spiden," he said energetically and extended his hand.

Chad and Ronain tried not to act surprised by this open and kind greeting. Ronain focused on him as the man shook Chad's hand.



One of the many traits Legionnaires were known for was their strong gift of discernment, the ability to determine someone's intentions, feelings, and truthfulness.

As far as Ronain could tell, this young man's kind greeting wasn't a farce.

"I am Coleman, assistant representative to Ambassadors Domnall and Angra," he continued as he shook Ronain's hand.

"Assistant for two representatives?" commented Ronain. "That must have kept you busy."

Coleman smiled, hazel eyes dancing. "I do a fair amount of running around. Do please follow me."

As they started across the shaded courtyard, Ronain ventured, "If you'll pardon my saying so, I wasn't expecting such a friendly greeting."

"Ah," replied Coleman, a smile on his face. "I'm only half Vergan. Despite the fact that Representative Dahr and company are rather, how shall we say? Stubborn? You will find that our younger generation has learned to be a little more flexible and pleasant towards outsiders."

Chad casually scanned their surroundings for any signs of danger. Although he neither saw nor sensed an immediate threat, he had a lingering feeling that something wasn't quite right.

"So, what exactly could ambassadors Domnall and Angra have been working on that would result in their deaths?" asked Chad when they started up the large, flat steps of the Hall.

Coleman wagged his head a little from side to side. "They were working on a number of issues, proposals. As you know, things between us and our neighbor Iklil are quite chilly."

"Problems over trade regulations?" asked Ronain.

"That's correct," answered Coleman as they crested the top of the stairs and entered the Hall of Council through a massive archway.

"The ambassador of Iklil is claiming our trade tax agreement is completely unfair, seeing as how we tax their imports at a higher rate than they ours. For that to change, either the government's senate has to agree or we void that agreement and establish a new one...and the latter isn't going to happen."

"I see why they would be frustrated," replied Chad.

Coleman merely shrugged and glanced out of the wall of archways that overlooked a beautiful garden on the right.

"You don't think so?" asked Ronain.

"Our economy is not nearly as strong as our neighbor's," answered Coleman, nodding at a passing delegate. "While the cities on this planet may appear grand, it masks the fact that we're in trouble. We don't have enough trading networks with other systems

and drought has killed off a lot of our agricultural facets. But, of course, I doubt you believe import taxes would be the reason for the murders."

They turned left into a hall that led deeper into the building.

"There were also ongoing talks about a weapons trade between the planets Noriker, Poitevin, and Zerge," replied Coleman.

"What was the status on that?" asked Chad as they rounded another corner and headed for one of many small circular pads in the floor.

"Deadlocked," said Coleman. "Things might not be if Zerge wasn't in the mix."

"From what I know about Zerge, I don't doubt that," answered Chad.

The three men stopped on one of the pads. After a couple of seconds, it whirred and levitated, rising to the second level.

Coleman chuckled at Chad's comment. "Me either. If it wasn't for the controversy over their dealings and tradings with rebels and mercenaries..."

"What were the ambassadors' take on it?" asked Chad.

"We were pushing for it to go through."

"Really?"

Coleman smiled as the pad came to a hover at the second floor. "Well, desperate times call for desperate measures and all that. Shady business dealings aside, Zerge also has a vast trading network. We were hoping if we were on good terms with them, they'd send a little business our way. And we were willing to take the risk of having to deal with any...troublemakers that came with that sort of relationship."

At the second set of double doors, Coleman stopped and entered a code on the keypad.

"I'm sure it'll fall through now," he sighed, "with their deaths. Noriker and Poitevin were uncertain whether to stay in the talks, anyway."

Coleman pushed the doors open, revealing a spacious office with a nice view of the north side of the city. The door closed and latched behind them.

"Were there ever any direct threats or pressure from other planets?" asked Chad.

Coleman sat behind his horseshoe-shaped desk with his back to the window. He gestured that Chad and Ronain take a seat.

"Plenty of pressure from other planets," he replied. "But nothing unusual. You know how it is. Everyone has their own idea about how other planets and cities should run their governments. As to threats, we have a very high security and surveillance detail. Even the most subtle threat is investigated, and if there was anything serious, we would have known about it."

Coleman rubbed his face. "The only other current issue we were dealing with was a local matter. We presented an offer to build another small cruiser facility near the city's defense base in hopes of creating more jobs."

He paused a moment before he finished, "But the people voted against it."

Ronain's eyebrows rose, and Coleman shrugged at his expression. "If I knew what ran through the mind of the general public, I could tell you why. The only reason I could think of is that they didn't want to be disappointed again."

He looked directly at Chad and then Ronain. "In the past six months, every attempt this government has made to try to aid the economy has only ended in failure. Actually, it made things worse."

Coleman paused and glanced at his desk.

Ronain and Chad sensed and saw his hesitancy about sharing what was in his mind.

When Coleman looked back at the two Legionnaires, he felt their gazes probing him, maybe even reading his thoughts. Well, he had heard about these warriors being able to do amazing things, but mind-reading was probably pushing it.

"Is there something else?" asked Chad.

Coleman rubbed the back of his neck.

"About to the manufacturing facility," he began but stopped, and glanced about the room as if someone might be listening.

"I'm not saying it's anything," started Coleman again, leaning forward and lowering his voice. "But both Angra and Domnell were really pushing for this facility to be built. I mean, obsessed. It was all they were focused on over the past few weeks. It was like...they were afraid. When the vote came back that the people didn't want it, they became frantic."

Coleman shifted in his chair. "One day, about a week ago, I went into Angra's office to gather some data reports, and there was a small memory chip on his desk. It wasn't any of the standard ones used by our officials. We use specific devices that are encoded."

The young man took a breath and wrung his hands a little. "I uploaded the chip, and it was an encrypted message from someone called Cyrus from the Kerst System."

"Do you know which planet?"

Coleman hit a few keys on a virtual keyboard near one end of his desk, and the information projected itself holographically above it. He scanned the page before he found the answer, "Xor."

Chad rubbed his chin a moment then jumped to another point. "Were schematics for the cruiser facility already drawn up?"

"Uh, yes. Just a moment."

After Coleman typed away for a minute, the blueprints displayed over the desk.

Chad and Ronain leaned forward and studied the drawings intently.

“What’s this icon here?” asked Ronain, pointing to an unusual-looking symbol on the bottom left of the building plans.

When Coleman selected it, a dialogue box appeared and asked for a password.

His face scrunched in his vexation. “Strange. It’s a protected file with...only one layer of encryption, though. Give me a second, and I’ll have it open.”

A sharp pain pinged through Chad’s head. He looked at Ronain, who gave a slight nod. He’d felt it too.

*Darkness is moving*, concluded Ronain to himself, returning his gaze to the schematics.

Sensitivity to happenings in the unseen realms, the supernatural, was another trait all Legionnaires possessed. Generally, the stronger the headache, the larger the move the enemy was making. Or the stronger the ache, the closer the enemy became. Exceptions came into play when dealing with a high-ranking enemy who could conceal his or her darkness and motives.

“There we go,” chimed Coleman, pleased with his success.

Another set of schematics appeared. They looked identical to the previous ones, except for one small detail.

“What’s this here?” Ronain pointed at the rear of the building. “This indicates some kind of entrance.”

“And beyond that appears to be a very large room, with tunnels branching from it and running deeper into the hills,” finished Chad.

*Perfect for hiding a fleet of fighters and soldiers*, thought Ronain.

*My thoughts exactly*, replied Chad. *Verga is a strategic location for Seditonists to establish a base because of its proximity to the other planets in the Ulnun System.*

“Could we have a copy of all those plans, please? Oh, and of that message from Cyrus?” asked Chad, getting to his feet.

“Of course.”

Chad studied Coleman while he made the copies and handed him a spare memory chip. The man had seemed genuinely surprised about the hidden rooms and tunnels. It was doubtful he was involved in anything sinister.

“Thank you for your help,” said Chad, pocketing the chip. “And just a word of caution: I’d be careful. There’s no reason why whoever went after the ambassadors wouldn’t go after you.”

*Especially if they find out you viewed that message to Angra*, he finished in a thought.

Coleman’s eyes widened when he heard Chad’s voice. Clearing his throat, he nodded at that disturbing possibility. “Uh, yes...thank you.”

They said their goodbyes and made for their cruiser.

“I don’t like this,” said Ronain, rubbing at the ache that had settled across his forehead. Although initially reluctant to admit that Seditonists might be resurfacing, he now agreed with Chad. Ronain had once tracked rogue Seditonist squads and fought commanders. He knew their cunning and ruthlessness.

He also trusted Chad and his instincts. The general was very rarely wrong when it came to understanding the enemy and predicting their behavior.

“Whatever it is,” continued Ronain. “We need to get ahead of it.”

Chad nodded, jogging down the steps to the courtyard outside the Hall. “First thing will be to find out what we can about Cyrus. I suggest we get back to base and contact the others, let them know what we’ve found.”

A warm breeze blew lazily across the square when they reached the cruiser. The sun set on the western side of the perfectly clear sky, and the people continued with their business.

The whole scene seemed serene, but the two Legionaries sensed that something sinister quietly hid beneath the quiet. A storm that had nothing to do with the weather was brewing.

## Chapter 5

### Seditionist

Dusk was falling when Chad and Ronain returned to the military base at the Strait of Spiden. A lieutenant showed them to their quarters then went on his way.

The pair returned topside.

As they searched for a vacant observation post, Ronain peeked over the rail of the grate walkway. He whistled softly. It was quite a drop to the water, now black in the darkness.

Atop the post, they felt a warm evening wind blowing across the vast Strait of Spiden, a flat plain of golden brown spotted with clumps of sage. A mile ahead, the Strait ran into a wilderness of trees that stood up abruptly. In the darkening night sky, stars began blinking on, eager to burn brightly in all their glory.

Once they found a deserted spot, Chad removed a small, round device from his pocket. When he turned his hand upward and opened his palm, the device lifted into the air and sat itself on the flat railing in front of them.

Chad and Ronain had to wait while the comm found a signal and pinged a receiver back on Elywn. A minute later, a holographic screen displayed itself over the device, and they saw the Council members sitting in a semicircle around the round table.

There were other Legionnaire bases and training centers across the various systems, of course. However, the prominent size of the military academy, and the number of infamous, seasoned generals who lived on the planet, designated Elywn as the main Legionnaire headquarters.

*“Evening, General, Commander,”* said General Hezron. *“Have you found out anything about the murders?”*

*“Both ambassadors were murdered in the same manner,”* answered Chad, glancing up as a gust of wind buffeted them. *“There was no physical evidence left by the killer, no hand or weapon marks. But one had his lungs crushed, the other his trachea. Something was very wrong about the whole thing.”*

Ronain took over from there. *“Their assistant told us about a proposal to build a cruiser manufacturing facility in the city, but when the people voted against it, both ambassadors became frantic. The schematics for this facility showed a large, secret chamber behind it with an intricate system of tunnels running deeper into the hills. There was also an encrypted message from someone called Cyrus from Planet Xor about a week ago. I’ve already uploaded all the data and sent it to you for review.”*

*“You don’t think it was just a mercenary who committed these murders,”* commented Eliezer. Though he appeared as a mere boy, he was an individual of unknown origin and unquestionably the wisest of them all.

Chad shook his head. "We don't. Coupled with the ambassadors' behavior, the blueprints, and the threatening message, I think we're dealing with a Seditonist."

Another gust pushed past them.

"From the moment we got here, we felt uneasy," he continued. "It feels like the enemy is moving again."

"We've all felt it, too," nodded General Hezron. *"If our dreams over the past few days are any indication, the plots of our elusive enemy have reached a stage where they can either no longer hide their movements or they don't care if they're discovered."*

"Either possibility is dangerous," agreed Ronain.

"General Ipos is close to Xor," informed Eliezer. *"I suggest we task him with investigating the location the message originated from. I also believe he's familiar with Cyrus."*

They all concurred on the decision, and Eliezer looked back at Chad and Ronain. *"If there aren't any more leads you wish to follow, we look forward to having you home at your earliest leisure."*

Chad allowed himself a smile. "We'll be home tonight."



He walked down the main road of the town with complete ease. The only light came from nearby structures that were on fire. The black armor he wore reflected only the faintest glimmer of light from the flames. He was a dark commander, and the presence of evil rested heavily around him.

Like his fellow commanders and generals, he had quickly learned that the more he gave himself to Evil, the more wicked power and authority he was granted. Any memories about mercy and pity had long been erased from his memory and had been replaced with malice and contempt for human life.

He wasn't one of the original Seditonist traitors, a Legionnaire who had betrayed his brothers. No, he had been recruited after that rebellion. He had never personally known the One the Legionnaires did. He had never been exposed to His Light and Truth. In a way, perhaps, this made his depravity and availability to be used by Evil deeper than the first traitors. Their souls still held a sliver of Light that could never be driven out. The darkness of this particular commander, however, was complete.

One of the last squads of local soldiers opened fire from behind a building, ahead and to the commander's right.

He remained unalarmed as he continued walking, almost sauntering forward. The lance in his hand cracked to life, and the blade appeared with a sharp edge gleaming crimson, the color of spilled blood.

He deflected the first rounds with effortless skill and then extended his other arm towards the building.

A hollow crack like thunder shook the air as a dark shockwave struck the structure. Every window exploded and large chunks of glass and brick rained down on the soldiers.

The survivors had their weapons ripped from their hands before being killed by them.

The commander walked on down the road as the fires spread to more structures and explosions rocked the town. At the end of the street squatted the small government building where the governor had barricaded himself.

The front doors tore from the hinges and were tossed aside. A hot gust of wind followed him through the vacant lobby. The few lights still operating on emergency power flickered as he passed into the hall leading to the conference room.

The double doors swung open by themselves. Those inside the room watched with wide-eyed terror as a shadow stopped in the doorway. Fire and smoke from the burning town backlit him and made his features too dark to see.

The governor and his officials cowered at the far end of the room.

*Pathetic*, thought the commander.

"I believe you'll find the forces you've relied on to defend you no longer exist," he said aloud.

No one could find words in their fear. They could only stare at the black shadow. His only visible feature was his eyes, dark except for the deep golden crescent at the bottom of his irises. This was *the* signature mark of a Seditionist, a traitor.

Half turning, the commander removed a device from his pocket and held it in his palm. It blinked on, and a holographic image of the head and torso of a gruff-looking military man appeared.

"The town is ready."

Without another word, he turned off the device and slid it back into a pocket.

"What...what are you going to do?" asked the governor, finally finding his voice.

As the low hum of ships and fighters grew louder, he faced the governor again. "Show you how to become a part of something so much bigger than yourself."



## Chapter 6

### Nightmares

*The heavens were a deep orange sheet stretched across the upper atmosphere, an eerie contrast to the forest of silhouetted trees reaching high for the expanse. Ground fog slithered amongst the trunks as a breeze brushed past her. A chill that had nothing to do with the cool night trailed a claw down her spine, making her shiver.*

*That's when, riding on the air, whispers reached her ears.*

*She couldn't tell what they were saying, but the voices came from everywhere. She glanced around but saw no one.*

*A headache brushed past her forehead before the whispers grew louder, more excited.*

*She had been doing her best not to be afraid by telling herself it was just a dream. It worked until everything around her fell into total darkness. Fear pounced on her then and sank its terrifying claws into her soul.*

*She felt someone draw near, felt a suffocating presence close around her. This wasn't dark as in night. This was dark as in Evil, a heavy weight pushed down on her and made it difficult to breathe.*

*A barrage of weapons fire punched through the darkness. It was surprisingly loud and jolted her.*

*A series of nearby explosions erupted and made the soft ground under her feet tremble. Above it all came the noise of droning fighter craft engines intertwined with air raid sirens.*

*The sounds of battle rose around her in the dark, and she had the sense that she was no longer in the woods.*

*She turned in a circle but only saw only quick, blurry flashes of movement. A soldier firing at an enemy here, a fleeing civilian there. They were visible for a second before vanishing back into darkness.*

*A rocket struck a nearby building, shaking the ground.*

*She turned her face away from the blast of hot air and felt fine grains of dirt and debris hit her.*

*She saw the building now, mostly a large pile of burning debris. Heavy black smoke rose into the now dark sky, the smoke and clouds reflecting the oranges and reds of the fire.*

*Black fighters screamed by overhead. She only saw the briefest glimpse of flames reflecting off their smooth fuselages before they quickly disappeared into the night.*

*That's when she heard the first moans of the wounded. Then someone grabbed her ankle, and Kiera jumped. Looking down, she saw a woman, wounded and bleeding badly, lying at her feet.*

*"Please," she gasped, desperation etched in deep lines on her face as she looked up at the girl. "Help us!"*

*A crack from a high-powered rifle echoed over the street, and the woman was struck by a single, fatal round.*

*Kiera lurched back at the goriness of the deadly shot. She turned her attention up the road where the round had been fired. That's when she saw him approaching.*

*No, correction: saw them approaching, a squad of soldiers in black armor. They moved with unsettling stealth down the road with weapons in hand and dark eyes scanning the area.*

*They drew closer but didn't seem to notice Kiera. The nearer they came, the fiercer the ache that pounded against her forehead.*

*A shout off her right shoulder drew their attention.*

*A pair of soldiers emerged from the blackness on the far side of the street, dragging two more wounded civilians. They threw them harshly to the road where they trembled before the invaders.*

*"What do you think, commander?" asked the squad leader and gesturing at the two people with his rifle.*

*Kiera realized he was talking to someone on her other side.*

*She glanced left and felt adrenaline surge through her. A line of ten more soldiers stood in menacing silence at the end of the street.*

*They did not seem to notice her, either. Still, it felt like they were looking right at her with those dark, malicious gazes.*

*Her stomach tightened into a knot. She shuddered as a sharp pain stabbed through her temples and joining her already throbbing forehead.*

*The commander, a man who emanated evil, stood with his back to her.*

*"No survivors," was his response to the question.*

*His voice piqued Kiera's interest. It sounded so familiar, but there was no time to place it as she spun to the survivors.*

*They huddled against each other as two soldiers raised their rifles.*

*"No!" she shouted and started toward them.*

*Lightning flickered in the black clouds and was answered immediately by a growl of thunder. A gust of hot wind tore down the road.*

*Some kind of shift had occurred, and the soldiers finally noticed Kiera. When they realized they could see one another, disdain and spite filled their expressions.*

*"Hey!" shouted the squad leader, taking a few steps towards her. "What's the likes of you doing here, you little scourge? Spying?"*

*He held something in his left hand, and Kiera learned what it was a second later. The lance engaged with a snarling crack, and the sharp edge of the blade burned crimson.*

*Kiera's eyes went wide, and she backed up a few steps as realization crashed into her mind. Oh, these weren't soldiers. They were dark warriors.*

*Dark soldiers were like any other average soldier except they allied themselves with the dark army. Their reasons for doing so varied, and they shared general contempt for their enemies and every other human life.*

*However, what they lacked was the power and authority that came with aligning oneself with Evil and demonic forces. Dark soldiers were the underlings of the dark warriors, but that was acceptable to them as long as they got paid.*

*Looking at them again, Kiera now clearly saw the deep gold crescent in their eyes. And there were more than five with the group leader.*

*She could not clearly see their forms in the darkness further up the road, but she saw their eyes. There were dozens and dozens of the enemy, and they all looked at her.*

*"Deal with the survivors first," growled the commander, back still turned.*

*When she shot a look in his direction, her gaze widened with fear. There weren't a mere ten warriors lined in front of him, not even dozens.*

*Under another flash of lightning, Kiera saw there had to be hundreds up the road, in the alleys, and in the forest bordering the city. There were too many to count—and they all glared at her.*

*Meanwhile, two dark warriors put one round each into the two survivors.*

*Kiera felt like she had taken the shots herself, and fiery pain surged through her chest and stomach. Hitching a sharp breath, she would have dropped to her knees had it not been for the cold and sinister presence that appeared beside her.*

*"Enjoying the show, Kiera?" asked the commander.*

*She jerked around.*

*No, this can't be, she thought as she took a step back. This had to be some sort of a trick. She clearly saw his face in the light of the burning building. Kiera knew this person very well, so how could he possibly be a Seditionist commander?*

*Strong hands clamped tightly onto her arms and shoulders. Someone grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked her head back.*

*"What do you want us to do with her?" asked the squad leader, who held her by the hair.*

*The commander's eyes looked at her as a wicked smile contorted his face. "Torture her to see what she knows..."*

*Kiera flailed awake. For an instant, she didn't know where she was or what had a hold of her.*

*"It's okay, Kiera," said a voice beside her as she tried to jerk away.*

*"You're alright," continued the gentle voice as the lamp on her nightstand clicked on. "You're safe. It was just a dream."*

She was trembling from head to toe as she finally recognized her father on the edge of her bed. Kiera closed her eyes and shook her head against the remnants of the dream clinging to her mind.

The identity of the dark commander weighed heavy on her, threatening to break her heart. It had just been a dream, but it had seemed so real.

Turning, Kiera threw her arms around her dad and buried her face against his chest.

"It's okay," assured Matthew quietly as he stroked her hair. "It was just a dream..."

This was the third nightmare in a week, but he didn't dare voice any concern about it to her.

*I just want them to stop*, she thought to him, her face still turned away so he wouldn't see her tears.

*I know, dear one*, he replied as she clung to him. He rested his chin on Kiera's head as she continued to cry softly. His throat tightened, and he fought back his own tears.

The fact that Matthew was a seasoned warrior and had seen many wars meant nothing. He had been wounded physically in battle and had suffered deep grief while watching his dearest friends die before his eyes. Yet, nothing cut him deeper faster than seeing his child suffering.

*God of my soul*, he half-thought, half-prayed.

He and Rebecca had known before their daughters were born that they were made for a very select purpose. They had received continuous confirmations through vivid dreams and from the Legionnaire generals themselves.

Of course, it might not be entirely accurate to say the daughters were made for a select purpose in terms of becoming great warriors or leaders. First and foremost, they were symbolic markers, signals of a monumental and terrible shift in mankind's history.

Husband and wife knew such a purpose might mean an existence of deep suffering for one or both of their children. Understanding that possibility didn't prevent them from trying to bury it. Through wishful thinking, they had convinced themselves that Kiera and Cadence would fulfill their purpose but within the safe confines of living normal lives.

But when Kiera's nightmares had begun, Matthew realized the depth at which he and Rebecca had deceived themselves about their children. They had feared that unpleasantness or Evil itself might reach them. Now, those fears were quickly becoming reality.

Taking a breath, he closed his eyes and prayed. *May God Almighty have mercy on my daughter.*

## Chapter 7

### Deserted

*System: Kerst*

*Planet: Xor*

*Town: Erid*

Legionnaire intelligence had tracked the origin of Cyrus's message to a small town on Xor. The planet was an odd mix of forest and desert, and the seasons changed drastically from one month to another. It also didn't matter from what direction the wind blew. The air currents were always cold because of the planet's far-reaching ice caps.

The gales that day were as temperamental as the Seditonist warlord who had been there.

Ipos, a Legionnaire general, walked down the wide, lifeless street. Driven by the biting wind, little wisps of sand slithered across the road like snakes.

Judging by the state of Erid, most of the inhabitants had left some time ago. Buildings were empty, and patterns of flaking paint etched the exterior walls.

He hadn't genuinely expected to find Cyrus, whom he knew personally. Any half-witted idiot would know not to stick around after sending a threatening message to a government official.

Pulling his coat tighter around himself to keep out the cruel wind, he made for a squatty structure on the left. By the light showing through the grimy window, he knew at least one person was still here.

Ipos pushed the front door open and stepped inside before the wind pulled it shut behind him. He couldn't tell if this was a restaurant or a bar. Judging by the smell, it was both.

A short, brawny man bustled about, packing by the looks of it. When he shot a look across the room at Ipos, his eyes widened a little. He knew what the stranger was.

"I don't want any trouble," said the man, turning to continue his packing.

"Neither do I," replied Ipos, taking a few steps closer. "I'm only looking for a little information."

He eyed Ipos again. "What'dya wanna know?"

"When did things go sideways around here?" asked Ipos, nodding out one of the windows. "When did people start leaving?"

The man snorted. "The first business closed not six weeks ago. From there, everything went downhill quick. Started when that short-tempered guy arrived."

That wasn't uncommon. Wherever a powerful dark enemy visited or resided, Evil followed. In a matter of weeks, the economy would tank, people would be at one another's throats, and many packed up and relocated.

The general almost smiled at the storeowner's description of the dark warrior. The Council knew Cyrus had sent the threatening message and that the message came from Xor. However, it was best to ensure all the details aligned.

"Describe this 'short-tempered guy,'" said Ipos.

The man stopped and sighed as he reflected. "Not quite as tall as you, short black hair, and his eyes were an odd color, like, uh...turquoise. And he was, like I said, short-tempered. There was something very dark about 'em."

*That's Cyrus, thought Ipos. Irritating little gnat.*

The man half-turned to the boxes on the table behind him but stopped. "He's one of those warriors, isn't he? One of those who went bad...Seditionist?"

"He is. He's actually a general."

That seemed to unsettle the man, and his gruff demeanor wavered.

Ipos almost felt tangible waves of anxiety rolling off him now. He wasn't solely afraid because Cyrus had been there. He was now afraid of Ipos, a Legionnaire, which was completely normal. Ipos was also fully aware that his appearance and demeanor didn't put people at ease.

A native of Carlel, an outer rim planet, he had an almost dark air about him. Like his group of people, he kept his head shaved smooth. A straight nose was set well on his face, complemented by a square jaw and strong chin. And he could stare down anyone with his steel-colored eyes and see through the thickest defenses to the heart of a person.

While everyone had a story, the one of Ipos was unknown and shrouded in mystery. He was a powerfully gifted warrior who operated more like a rogue.

These facts, in addition to the detail that he was armed and armored like a Legionnaire expecting trouble, explained the man's nervousness.

His gaze lifted back to Ipos. He found those unsettling eyes studying him, and he flinched.

"Did you overhear where the warlord was going next?" asked Ipos, watching the man keenly.

"No, I didn't," stammered the owner as sweat broke out on his forehead. "Really. I didn't overhear anything about his business."

He fidgeted a little. "Look, if there's nothing else you need..."

Ipos continued staring at him a moment longer, assessing him and sifting through his thoughts. When he was satisfied the man wasn't hiding any further information, he turned for the door. "Thanks for your time."

## Chapter 8

### Aware

Darkness surrounded him like a heavy veil, and the evil filling the chamber was so thick you could feel it sliding across your skin.

He had been deep in meditation for the past twenty-four hours, contemplating and inquiring. Now, he finally opened his eyes, black save for the crescent beneath his irises.

The human ruler of darkness stood and exited the chamber, which he kept pitch-black. The door slid open, and he entered a large living room, also dark.

Floor-to-ceiling windows lined the walls to the left and straight ahead. It was morning, but the planet he called home was constantly shrouded in thick clouds and mist, choking the daylight.

He couldn't stand the light. It hurt his eyes.

He faced a large monitor mounted on the wall beside the door. It blinked on, and one of his top generals, Ammon, appeared on the screen.

*"It was just as you predicted,"* said Ammon. *"The Legionnaire Council on Elywn sent one of their generals to Xor to investigate."*

*"And he found nothing,"* concluded the dark one.

Ammon nodded. *"Correct. So...have you been able to pinpoint the cause of the headaches and restlessness we've all been feeling recently?"*

*"I have,"* he replied with a little glint in his eyes. *"Two beacons."*

Ammon continued to stare and wait for information that warranted a response.

*"Two beacons...signals in human form."*

Now Ammon blinked. *"You...you mean the two you foresaw at the end of the last war? The signals we've been waiting for all these years?"*

*"Their protection has been lifted and their identities made known to me,"* answered the ruler of darkness. *"They are two sisters."*

At this, Ammon smirked and huffed through his nose.

The ruler sent him a look and spoke with a sharp tone. *"Don't forget, general, that we never underestimate our enemies, no matter how irrelevant or harmless they seem."*

Ammon quickly straightened. *"Of course, sir."*

*"Anyway, they come from a strong Legionnaire bloodline and have been growing in strength and skill. But their combat skills may be mostly irrelevant. Human beacons such as them, who mark the beginning of a supernatural shift across physical and supernatural realms, are given special power and authority."*

A faint smile pulled at one corner of his mouth, and the gleam in his eyes brightened. “And it is that unique power we’ll use to pull our enemy’s feet right out from under them.”

Ammon slowly nodded as his mind aligned with his leader’s. *“The greater that special power, the more devastating it is when it is turned against its own forces. Are they in training?”*

The dark one’s faint smile broadened into a truly wicked grin. “No, not officially. They have received only basic instruction. They don’t even know the truth about their existence or why they aren’t in training. And now that *He* has removed their supernatural concealment and left them on their own, the door of opportunity is wide open to us.”

*“At long last,”* sighed Ammon, like a man long in agony who is finally given relief. *“Our years of patience have paid off. I know you already have a plan. When will we move against these sisters?”*

“Soon. I have someone keeping an eye on them. Timing is everything, and the plan must be executed perfectly if we are to manipulate our two little pawns. If we do it just right, the Legionnaires will be able to do absolutely nothing.”

*“And what of my forces?”*

“Continue as planned,” replied the overlord. “General Bayne’s legions are amassing as we speak and will be ready to rendezvous on time.”

*“It will be as you say.”*