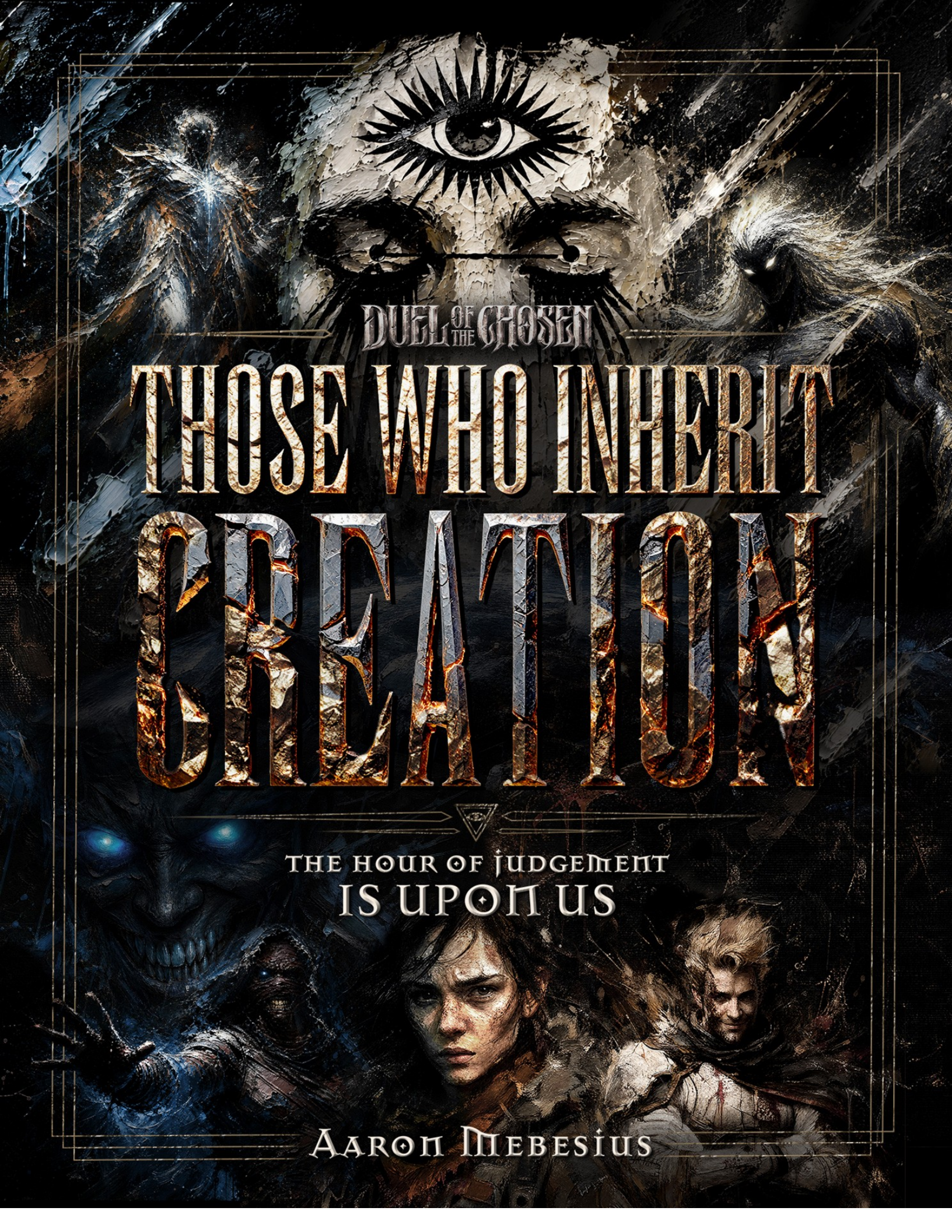
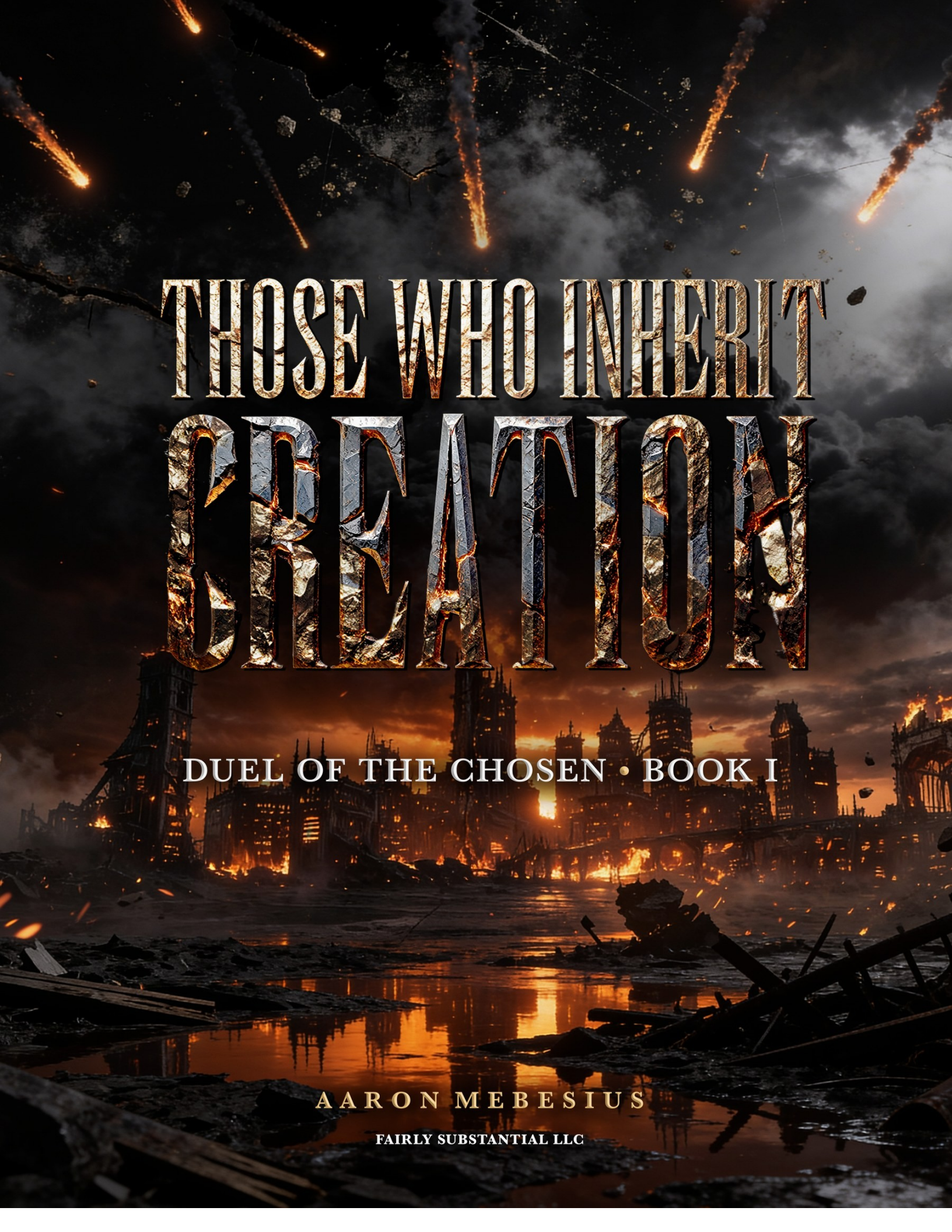

DUEL OF THE CHOSEN
THOSE WHO INHERIT
CREATION
THE HOUR OF JUDGEMENT
IS UPON US
AARON MEBESIUS


THOSE WHO INHERIT
CREATION
DUEL OF THE CHOSEN • BOOK I
AARON MEBESIUS
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CHAPTER ONE PREVIEW

Thank you for reading. What follows is the prologue and first chapter of Duel of the Chosen: Those Who Inherit Creation, Book I of the Duel of the Chosen series by Aaron Mebesius.

This excerpt is the final, edited text of the published book. It contains graphic violence and strong language and is intended for adult readers.

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The complete novel releases October 31, 2026, as a Kindle eBook. Pre-order on Amazon, and join the mailing list at duelofthechosen.com for release news and bonus material.

The End

As the gates of Paradise slammed shut, The Beast of the Pit was loosed upon the world. Its heart was malevolence, its breath despair, its voice as thunder. The moon was shattered and wept tears of fire and brimstone upon the earth; and all the living envied the dead as the Divine War came to Creation.

But The Hour of Judgement, the final battle, never came. Withheld and known only to Sheppard: Fate itself, and the voice of The Father eternal. And the righteous above, the long stewards of humanity, did wait and watch with patient indifference as the Beast remained free, the skies continued to fall, and the Divine veil was lifted.

Only when knowledge became ash and darkness everlasting did mortals arise bearing Divine gifts. And they would become the blades tempered to end the conflict: the first of Divinity, the last of Creation, chosen to determine the fate of all that was, all that is, and all that shall ever be.

CHAPTER 1

Scavengers of The Falling

The land was a mosaic of wounds. Impact craters stretched from one horizon to the other, ranging from small circles to vast scars large enough to hold entire cities. Their rims gleamed with the faint sheen of melted soil. Smoke rose from the freshest impacts and curled lazily upward. The remains of homes and buildings lay folded in on themselves like crushed shells, swallowed by black dust. Metal and ash bled into the wind's scent as it tore across the landscape, carrying the residue of incalculable death and destruction.

Fragments of the shattered moon slowly orbited the earth, sunlight flickering between them. Billions of pieces, some no larger than pebbles and others the size of mountains, loomed overhead, waiting to fall.

A vulture broke through the upper layer of the clouds, its body twisted by generations of Divine corruption, feathers along its spine mottled with scales, the tips hardened into Divine glass. Its eyes were red and unblinking, twin mirrors of the world below. It beat once, twice, then glided toward a thin column of steam on the horizon. Dozens of vultures circled, among them crows, ravens, and creatures born from the Divine ruin that still choked the earth. Their wings bent at wrong angles, their beaks split into twin blades, their plumage glinting like obsidian shards. They flew together in uneasy harmony, drawn by instincts older than reason.

The flock of scavengers swelled as it circled the earth's newest wound—a single crater and the object of their attention within. Their calls echoed in a broken chorus. Steam rose from the impact in heavy veils, and the ground at its center still burned. Heat bent the air into strange motion, ripples and distortions pulsing beneath the soil, giving the illusion that the land was alive.

Atop its ridge, human shapes emerged through the haze, drawn by the same instinct as the flock above. The wind pressed against the slope as Lynn reached the crater's summit.

The birds never lie, she thought.

Moments later Kyral was beside her. His steps were steady and unhurried, with the stoicism that made him fit for command as First Sentinel. His armor was black and brown fabric reinforced with scavenged composites, layered for movement and edged with the flared, sharp oranges of Citrus, one of the few settlements still clinging to a semblance of civilization. Even out here, far from its walls, his presence made discipline and survival feel possible.

The ridge crumbled beneath their boots as they stopped at the edge and looked down. At the center of the crater lay a massive elk, or what remained of it. The body was torn open, and parts of its flesh had fused into black glass. The smell of scorched fur and wet ash was layered with the sweetness of meat cooked by an open flame.

Yes. I knew it.

Kyral stood unmoving at the edge, his gaze fixed on the smoldering carcass below. Behind them, footsteps climbed through the wind, unmistakably human. Two more scavengers were dragging a meat sled, panting, eager to see what lay at the crater's center. Their gear was built from remnants of the old world. Stitched leather, patched canvas, and scraps of polymer mesh—colored in the subdued tones of black and brown that hid dust and blood alike. Through the ruin, the proud colors of Citrus still showed—bright-orange threads ran along seams and straps.

"Fresh—still steaming. Don't see this too often," Lynn said, her voice lifting. She stepped forward without waiting, boots grinding through the brittle crust, and leaned out over the edge. The crater's glow lit her goggles as she smiled, unguarded.

A gift pulled from the ruin, she thought, turning to Kyral, grin still bright.

This is a good one—everyone back home is going to be so relieved. We needed a find like this. The meat's fresh. The organs look mostly intact. It looks like the bones are in good shape too—can trade those instantly.

Her grin faded when she saw his attention had already moved past it, scanning the land for the dangers that always came.

Celebrate after.

While Kyral led their party, Lynn followed by duty. She had received the title of First Scavenger for her keen eyes and her ability to feel life from afar. Beyond her human senses, the Divine

had begun to find her. She had manifested the first of the Divine gifts—the sense. For her, it came as a pull toward life itself, a constant awareness of living things. In a world haunted by scavengers that shared her hunger, she had easily found this place.

I wonder how far ahead we are.

Her movements were quick, shaped by hunger and the rituals of survival. Goggles rested on her brow, lenses cracked from years of use; a pack hung against her spine, heavy with tools for scouting. A faded scarf, threaded with Citrus' oranges, was wrapped tight around her neck against the wind, its frayed edges snapping like sparks in the air.

The scavengers behind her were younger men, both roughly thirty years old. They carried poles tipped with clawed hooks, had cleavers strapped to their thighs, and empty sacks folded neatly at their belts. Their footing was less certain as they climbed, masks buzzing faintly through filters that had endured too many storms. Their attention moved constantly between Lynn and Kyral, measuring every gesture.

A prize as fresh as it was rare—Sheppard is generous today.

Lynn tilted her head back toward the sky where the circling birds still soared in gathering numbers, black wings wheeling slowly and patiently through the dim light. Through her gift, she sensed them as living things, fragile yet defiant, not so different from herself or any of the other scavengers hunting among the ruins of a dying world.

Sorry, friends. This one is ours.

The light was thinning faster than she liked. Below her, the two scavengers worked with urgency, hands slick with blood as they cut the largest pieces loose and hauled them onto a sled of scavenged plating and cable, boots sinking into the mud. Each movement stirred a faint hiss from the earth, and when they slammed another hunk of meat onto the sled, it echoed across the pit like a dull drum.

One of them straightened and looked up. The sky had filled with birds, their shapes overlapping in the dying light, an ominous tornado of black feathers. The man exhaled a low, nervous rasp and gripped the sled's rope again. The two of them began to drag it uphill toward the crest of the crater's edge.

At the rim, Lynn and Kyral watched the two men slip and curse below. The mud fought their every step. Kyral wasn't helping on purpose. He was watching for something else; his attention was fixed beyond the ridge. Lynn followed his line of sight toward the haze thickening into darkness.

Taking too long. Way too long. Doing their best, but we gotta move.

The scavengers slipped again, the sled threatening to slide back down to the crater's bottom until Lynn reached out and caught one of them by the shoulder, steadying him. She braced herself, hauled the man and the sled over the lip, and nodded once.

"Fucking slop—thanks, Lynn," the man panted.

She smiled, knelt beside the sled, and opened her hand. The meat shifted and settled as if pressed from above. Both men exchanged a look but said nothing. Lynn caught the unease in their eyes. She always did when her gifts surfaced.

One of them grabbed a canteen from the sled and drank greedily. He looked upward.

"When we got here, there were, what, a dozen circlers?" he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his glove. "There's more every time I look up."

Lynn only raised an eyebrow in response.

"So… it's hard to miss," he added, uneasy laughter dying in his throat.

"You're that afraid of the soulless?" Lynn asked, half taunting.

"Smart *men* are," the other scavenger replied.

Oh, that was nice.

She kicked the meat sled toward them, the movement sharp and impatient. "Then finish faster. The sooner you're done, the sooner we head back."

You think I'm not scared to be out here? Suck it up.

The scavenger gritted his teeth, dropping the canteen back onto the sled.

"If the two of you'd used your gifts, we'd already be gone. Instead, we're breakin' our backs while you both just stand there, doin' what exactly?"

"Watching your back," she said, looking off in the distance.

The scavengers followed her gaze.

Fuck. Too slow. Fuck.

Across the far side of the crater, a sea of silent, unmoving bodies had gathered. Barefoot and gaunt, they stood pressed together.

“Soulless,” one whispered in terror.

“Hundreds of ’em,” Lynn said softly, without surprise, taking in their skin, caked in dust and streaked with grime.

Kyral stepped past her, eyes narrowing. “More,” he corrected, walking toward the rim.

I guess he has no choice now. I’m so tired of this.

Her shoulders sank. She recognized the ritual about to happen—again.

“Do you have to?” she asked quietly, almost pleading.

Kyral stopped just long enough to look back at her.

“Don’t let them run. We’re not lettin’ this prize go.”

He stepped over the edge and began his descent. Lynn watched him go.

Behind her, the scavengers had already turned and edged toward the opposite ridge. When her eyes found them, they froze under her stare and exhaled together.

The bottom of the pit steamed. Heat shimmered over the black glass floor, and the illusion of movement warped everything. Kyral descended in silence, his boots cracking the thin crust, sending shards into the mud beneath. The sound was sharp enough that Lynn winced with each step. Across the pit, another figure emerged through the haze, the heat warping his outline until the light revealed his full size.

The figure moved with the weight and confidence of a predator, each step deliberate and heavy. He stood nearly three meters tall, his body carved from muscle and scar. His skin was the color and texture of stone left too long in the sun. Crudely stitched hides and pelts hung across his shoulders, fastened with cords of tendon and wire hardened by age and blood.

The skull of a slain exanimis was strapped to his chest. The bone darkened to crimson coal, its cracks sealed with resin and ash. Its empty sockets faced outward. It was both trophy and warning, proof that he had once stood before Divine corruption and conquered it.

That’s new. Bigger than the last one.

His beard was long and tangled, streaked with gray and clotted with dark blood and bits of dried meat. Half his head was

missing, the wound sealed only by scar tissue that had grown unevenly, the skin torn and puckered where bone had never returned. His forearms were wrapped in cloth, soaked again and again until it hardened like bark. Bone fragments and teeth were woven in, lesser trophies when compared to the might of an exanimis. His hands were enormous and thick, calloused from violence, the nails chipped and blackened.

As the two of them stopped, the air settled and the wind faltered. They stood at the center of the pit a meter apart, steam drifting around their legs, measuring each other in silence. Lynn understood the prize well enough. So did all of them. Neither man was going to yield, and she knew only one of them would leave the crater alive.

He struck his fist against his chest, the sound deep and hollow like a drum. “Ttt… Tun… Tun… Tundra,” he said, low and guttural, roughened by age and dust.

Easy does it. Come on. Be gentle. Just once. You know what’s going to happen.

Kyral studied him, his expression unreadable until he let out a slow sigh Lynn read as irritation.

“Kyral, First Sentinel of Citrus,” he answered, mirroring the gesture. “Been eating well, I see. A champion of the soul. Your kind… still eats first?”

Tundra let out a low growl, a sound caught between confusion and impatience.

Kyral nodded toward the crater and the blood-soaked spoils scattered around them.

“This is mine, Tundra,” he continued, firm and even. Tundra grimaced, eyes narrowing. “All of it. I’m sorry your kind got here second… but those are the terms. You know this.”

Tundra’s lips twitched, struggling to form a word. His throat worked once before the sound came, rough and broken.

“Ours,” he managed, followed by a dry, rasping cough.

We talked about this. Come on, Kyral. Firm but fair.

“No. No, Tundra. First. We—I got here first. First, you know?” Kyral said, his posture tightening.

Tundra tilted his head, listening, and his mouth stretched into a broken smile of understanding. “Ffff…irst?” he said.

“Yes,” Kyral replied. Relief flickered in his eyes, then vanished.

“Ours,” Tundra said again.

Kyral exhaled through his nose.

“Treaty?” he said with frustration. The word hung between them until Tundra blinked, recognition faint but real.

“Treaty,” Kyral repeated, his voice softening, almost pleading. “Please? Tundra—hm?”

Tundra looked toward his horde gathered on the far ridge of the crater, the soulless standing in their hundreds, unmoving and silent as stone. He turned back to Kyral. “Challenge,” he uttered with finality.

“Thank you for trying,” Lynn whispered to herself.

Kyral closed his eyes and dropped his shoulders.

“Accepted,” he whispered, the word more surrender than consent. Watching from above the crater’s ridge, Lynn let out a small sigh.

Tundra’s grin spread wide, showing teeth yellow and jagged, gums blackened with rot. He inhaled, and the steam bent toward him. A low vibration trembled through the earth and rose until it filled the world.

The skull on his chest began to glow, white light leaking from its sockets along veins in the cracked bone. The Divine corruption sealed within the skull merged with his flesh, amplifying the chaos that fueled his being until, together, they became something neither Divine nor human. The ground split beneath his feet, glass shattering into dust as ash rose in waves that spiraled around him like storm clouds. Light within his eyes pulsed violently, raw and uneven, radiating outward in jagged bursts that fractured the air around him.

From the rim, Lynn felt his power surge, a vibration that echoed into the back of her skull.

No doubt about it, he’s gotten much stronger. I hate this part.

His roar erupted—whatever was left of the man in him grinding against the Divine corruption that saturated his being. Its pitch oscillated wildly, climbing and falling across every tone the air could hold—a living resonance of the world’s suffering.

“Their way? So be it then,” Kyral said.

Tundra charged, his right arm cocked, and crossed the distance in a single stride. His fist swung forward, aimed squarely at Kyral’s head with the force of a punch that might have caved a

mountainside, until the moment collapsed into a sudden, unnatural silence.

He froze, fist an eyelash away from Kyral's face, and looked down in confusion. Kyral's hand was buried in Tundra's chest, the exanimis bone around the heart crushed inward. Lynn's mouth went dry at the sight of what Kyral had done without hesitation.

"Gifted," Kyral said coldly, "but not chosen."

Golden light flickered in his eyes as his other hand rose, palm open. A sphere of the same energy formed above it, humming low with controlled violence. He moved it closer until the sphere hovered inches from Tundra's face. Everything went still. The only sound was the deep, pulsing rhythm of Kyral's Divine energy.

"No, Haeviel—no. I've… I got it. I've had enough," he said to himself.

Oh shit.

The sphere detonated. The shockwave split the air, sending dust and heat cascading through the hollow as Tundra's head snapped back on impact. Bone fractured and teeth scattered while blood erupted in a fine spray that hung in the golden light. The force lifted his massive frame and hurled him backward. The ground trembled, and he crashed into the mud. Silence followed, broken only by hissing flesh and the crackle fading from Kyral's hand as the gold left his eyes, leaving them human brown.

Tundra lay on his back, gasping for air, his lungs rattling as blood bubbled from his mouth. The skull of the slain exanimis on his chest smoldered faintly, its hollow sockets glowing one last time before extinguishing into darkness.

Stop. There's no point. He's done.

Kyral stood over him, palm open, and Lynn felt a gentle vibration before it hit. A second blast rang out, telekinetic and invisible but real enough to drive Tundra half a meter into the earth with a single pulse. Its echo rolled outward, shaking the rim of the crater where Lynn and the two scavengers watched.

He just had to…

The soulless looked on with a thousand hollow faces as Kyral lifted his head and met their collective gaze. Lynn watched the horde begin to turn away, their shapes dissolving back into the haze of the broken countryside.

Lynn hopped over the crater's rim and descended the slope, her boots sliding against the loose earth as she passed Kyral and knelt beside the defeated soulless. Tundra heaved shallow breaths, the light already dimming in his eyes as she placed her hand over the wound.

"Don't," Kyral said behind her, his tone carrying no command, only fatigue. She looked back, puzzled. "It won't matter," he continued.

"It should," she replied.

Kyral did not attempt to stop her. Instead, he turned his attention to the ridge where the two men waited, watching uneasily. "Get after it! I want to be moving before nightfall—before another soulless horde lays claim or something bigger comes," he commanded.

The pair nodded before returning to their work in silence.

Tundra gasped suddenly, his body arching, his hands flying to his chest to search for a wound that was no longer there. He looked at Lynn, disbelief turning quickly to wonder.

"Mercy-giver," he whispered.

You're still in there… whatever's left of you—I see you.

She smiled faintly, laying a hand flat against her sternum.

"Lynn," she said gently as Tundra's breathing slowed, his eyes refocusing on her. "Treaty," she added firmly, unsure whether the word found him.

Learn. This is the one—come on. Learn. Please. I know you can.

Tundra slowly pushed himself upright, his eyes moving to Kyral as if seeing him for the first time. He placed a hand over his heart. "Tundra," he said, introducing himself again.

Hell…

Kyral exhaled as he had before, turned, and climbed the slope, the familiar distance opening between them. His duel had claimed the prize, but the cost had put all their lives in danger. The meat stacked on the sled suddenly felt less like fortune and more like bait. Even worse, the delay meant they would return to Citrus at night, trailing noise, blood, and attention.

Her Divine senses flickered: a new, unfamiliar presence was in the distance, too close to ignore.

Whoa. That's… what the hell is that?

The birds above panicked and scattered in all directions. She reached out again. A sharp splinter of cold entered her mind, a needle-point of pain that snapped her eyes open and took her breath.

The soulless aren't giving up. They're not… running from Kyral. They're retreating from what's coming… they're fleeing for their lives. And… it… this thing… isn't a soulless or an exanimis. If we don't get moving… it'll be on us soon… or… even worse… follow us home…

C O N T I N U E T H E S T O R Y

Lynn’s story continues in Duel of the Chosen: Those Who Inherit Creation, available October 31, 2026.

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