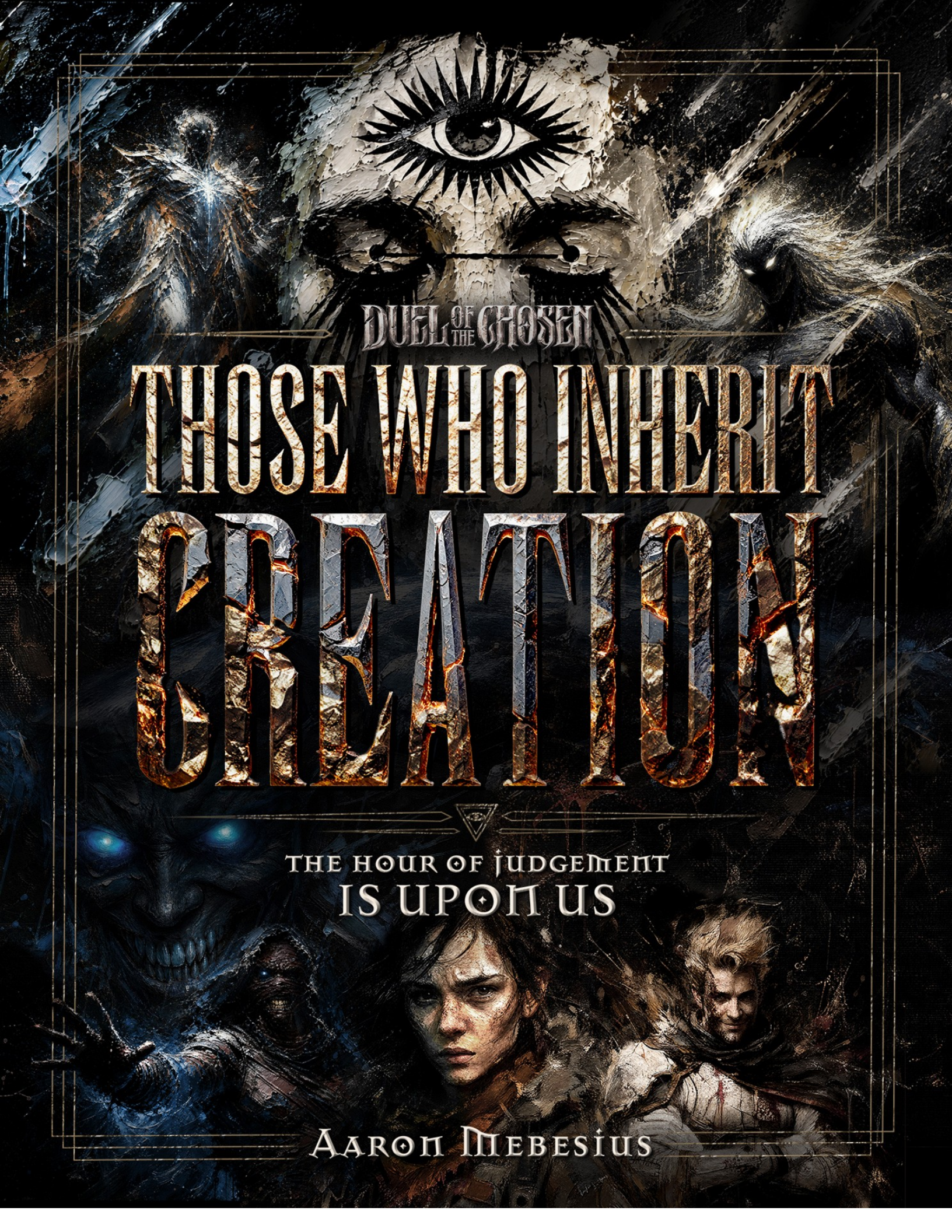
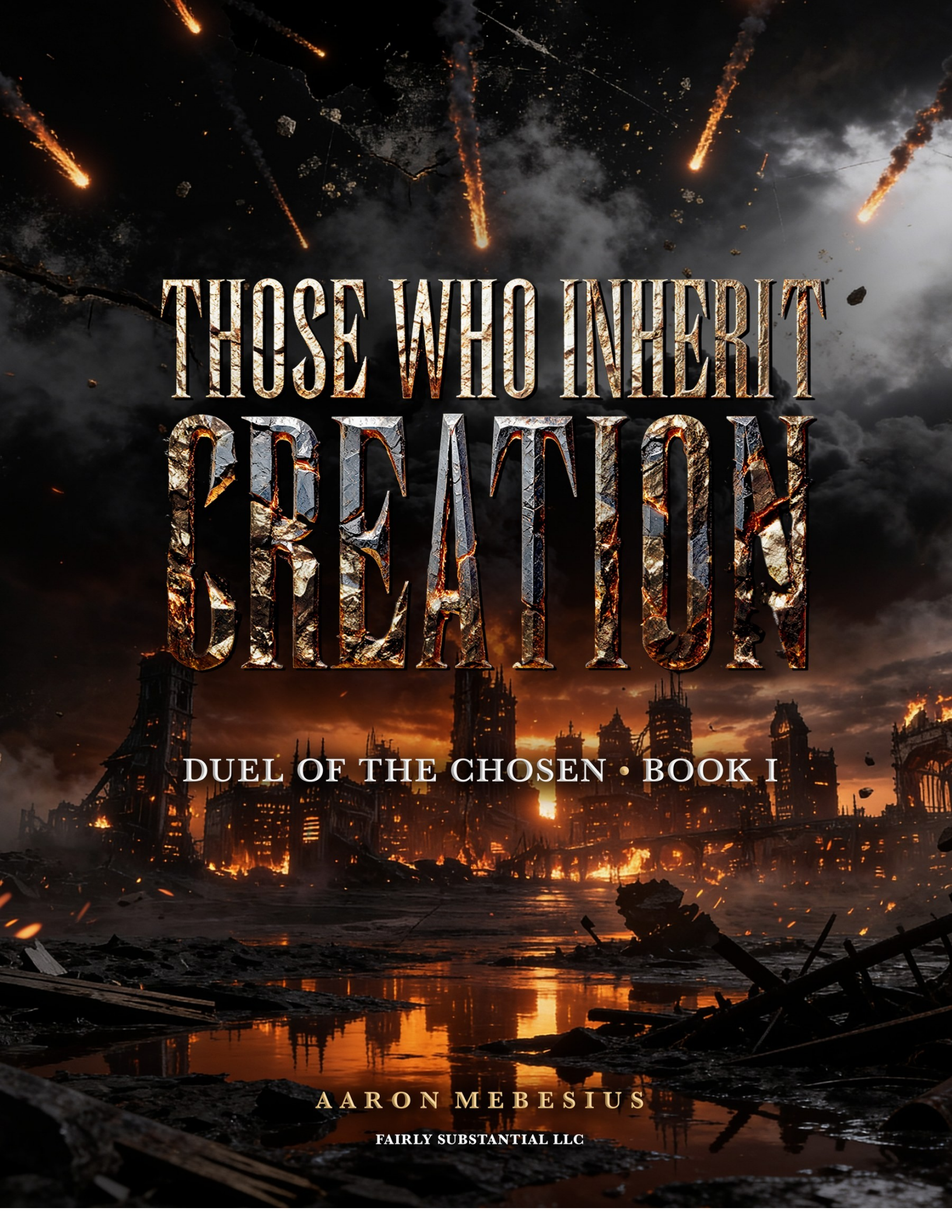

DUEL OF THE CHOSEN
THOSE WHO INHERIT
CREATION
THE HOUR OF JUDGEMENT
IS UPON US
AARON MEBESIUS


THOSE WHO INHERIT
CREATION
DUEL OF THE CHOSEN • BOOK I
AARON MEBESIUS
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PREVIEW: CHAPTERS 1 – 3

Thank you for reading. What follows is the prologue and the first three chapters 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 is available now as a Kindle eBook on Amazon. Join the mailing list at duelofthechosen.com for bonus material and the first word on Book II.

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…

CHAPTER 2

The Adversary

The journey back to Citrus had been overtaken by a storm that churned like a wet, chaotic nightmare. Rain pounded the cratered countryside in heavy sheets, saturating the ash-covered ground into a dense slop of mud.

It's worth it. It was worth it. We got it. Just keep moving. Everyone is going to be so happy, Lynn thought.

The earth softened until it turned treacherous underfoot, each step sinking and dragging through the wet road. Thunder rolled across the plains in long, overlapping bursts that never faded as lightning split the horizon in irregular flashes, making the world visible for an instant before it drowned again in darkness. A flash revealed the broken spine of an old radio tower, cables hanging loose like torn sinew before the dark swallowed it again.

Never gets old—seeing that. Nearly there. Nearly home.

It marked the outer reach of Citrus; they were an hour from the gates. With eyes on the collapsed tower, she slowed her pace. The sled, stacked high with hard-fought meat, bumped into her back. It creaked and groaned against the wind, sliding over the mud as the scavengers pushed it. They wore goggles clouded by water and steam. Their breath showed in the cold as their muscles strained, faces streaked with rain and grime.

These guys did great, actually. It's never easy—never is.

Their gifts were small and practical, suited to this work, and gave them place and purpose at Citrus.

Finally, a little luck. Finally. It's been weeks since we got something this good.

"Easy," Kyral shouted from well ahead of the group. "If that axle snaps, you're workin' in the shit until it's fixed."

Lynn walked just ahead of the sled, hands tight around the orange scarf at her throat.

Does he just not respect me? Is that it? Am I just my gifts to him? I guess… he did try at least—in the beginning.

The cold had numbed her fingers, yet they would not let go.

Kyral soldiered through the downpour, his own scarf now dark and sodden, clinging to his neck. She caught him only in fragments: a flash of his shoulders or the faint outline of his back when lightning cracked across the sky.

Even when the rain hid her, Kyral glanced back over his shoulder from time to time. His gifts let him sense her emotions, though he hardly needed them; the disappointment in her silence was obvious.

Suddenly he was beside her, his movement masked by the sounds of the storm.

"We should trade some of this for horses this time," he called.

Should we? They die fast and eat a ton.

Her silence hung between them louder than the booming overhead. Whatever was on his face faded when the lightning came again. For a moment, the hills around them were bright as day, and Lynn caught the shape of something far off—a shadow, tall and still against the wind. The rain erased it before she could name it.

"They're a luxury, sure, but if we had 'em, we'd probably be home by now," he pressed, his voice raised over the rain. "I fucking hate traveling at night. Always feels like temptin' fate."

In the distance, a faint flicker of light broke through the rain. The walls of Citrus were barely visible on the horizon. The road beneath them grew firmer as scattered fence posts and half-buried markers emerged from the mud, signs they had left the open countryside and entered the city's territory.

"But I suppose all's well that ends well," he said with a hint of sarcasm. "I wonder how long this rain will hold. I know the orange trees back home are thirsty."

"You didn't have to take it that far," she shot back without looking up.

He sighed. They'd had this conversation before.

"The soulless aren't people, Lynn," he warned, cold and final.

"You always say that, but I saw something human… in his eyes."

"Did you?" he muttered. "Your empathy's going to get you killed. I wonder if that twinkle's there when he's eatin' people's guts and—" The next thunderclap swallowed the rest of it.

“A weakness, right?” she cut in, her voice sharp.

“Wouldn’t go *that* far.”

“Colton would. He *does.*”

“He’s a guardian of a city. He can’t forgive weakness—just as the world doesn’t,” Kyral countered, irritation creeping into his tone. “Your hesitation’s expensive, and it *always* comes as a surprise, no matter how obvious the choice to let things die.”

“It wasn’t—isn’t *obvious* to me.”

“Others are going to pay for your kindness. All you had to do was let him die—*again*. You keep hesitating to do what the world demands, and it’s becoming a problem. How many carcasses have we had to let go because the soulless arrived moments before? Never mind the fact that those fucking things will devour anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves alone.”

You’re wrong. I don’t care how strong you are. You’re wrong—I know you are. I… I… know…

Lynn slowed her pace until she stopped altogether.

Kyral took a few more steps before realizing she was no longer beside him. He turned to her, confused; her face had gone pale as she stared down at their intended path. The sled was now several paces behind her, and Kyral stood ahead on the narrowing road, the open ground between them.

Following her gaze through the rain, he saw it too—an unnatural fog rolling toward them, thick and low, moving against the wind. Its motion was wrong and heavy as it crawled over the broken earth, spilling into a roadside ditch before climbing back onto the road and spreading wide across it. From within, a shadow took shape: tall and upright. A human outline.

What… what the hell… is that? I… can… barely stand… it… its energy… it’s like… a nightmare…

It raised one arm toward the scavenging party, and the air vibrated. Before either of them could react, the night shrieked.

A cold pressure passed between them, cutting through the rain and echoing in their chests.

One of the scavengers gasped. “Sss…soulless?” he stammered. “Lynn… help me—”

He dropped backward into the mud. Lynn spun, boots sliding, and ran to him. He was on his back, twitching, hands clawing at his chest. A hole the size of a fist ran through his torso, the edges blackened and fractured, the flesh shattered from

within. Cold rose from it, and the wound breathed frost. His ribs splayed open like broken fingers. The cavity was hollow where his heart should have been. Blood pooled beneath him, mixing with the rain into thick crimson sludge.

Behind Lynn, Kyral didn't move. His eyes were wide, fixed on the figure in the fog.

He's afraid… I've never seen him like this…

She knew the look on his face. It only came with danger he knew.

"Not a soulless," Kyral breathed, his voice hollow. "A ronin. A warrior without a settlement."

The fog pulsed faintly, glowing from within. The shadows of the gloom parted, and a man patiently stepped forward.

A second shriek tore out of the fog, followed by another cold blast, sharper and closer. Lynn felt it tear past her cheek, a bright shock as her skin split open. Blood ran down her face, hot against the rain. She turned just in time to see the second scavenger jerk violently, his body arching away from her. Lynn's hand instinctively went to her wound, and when she pulled it away, she saw dark blood on her fingers.

This is it, isn't it!? This is how—

A snap came from the ronin, and the scavenger clutched at himself. A wet crack followed, and his ribs burst outward. His mouth opened, and a soundless scream caught in his throat as his body came apart. Flesh, bone, and blood exploded into the storm, spattering Lynn from head to toe.

The fuck…!? What the fucking fuck!?

She staggered backward, choking, staring at the carnage. Her stomach lurched, and the rain slanted sideways in her vision. She fell into the mud, hands sinking into the cold earth.

Kyral stepped in front of her, every instinct turning from caution to survival. He planted his feet, lowered into a battle stance, and drew on the Divine gifts within him. The rain around him began to change. Drops slowed, hanging in the air. Mud and blades of grass lifted from the ground and trembled as gravity shifted. An unseen force pulled upward from within him, a faint hum filling the space.

Kyral's eyes flickered with brilliant golden light. A pale-yellow glow spread from his palms, tracing thin lines along his arms. The air thickened and shimmered, forming a telekinetic

barrier—invisible at first, then outlined by the rain as it curved around him and Lynn. His power rose, the light pulsing stronger as he concentrated.

He's going all out—he must sense it too. The depth. The rage. The cold.

The shadow in the fog stepped forward, and a third shriek came. A pressure tore through the downpour and struck Kyral's barrier dead center. The field rippled once, then shattered like glass. The impact knocked him off his feet.

His glow died as he hit the ground and slid backward through the mud, coming to rest near the collapsed radio tower. He dropped to one knee, gasping. Something had given way in his chest. Blood filled his mouth, and he coughed hard, the sound lost in the storm.

Kyral. Get. Up. I can fix you—just get up. Get up!

Dark splatters hit the mud between his hands. He forced his head up, blinking through the wet.

Through the fog, the ronin came farther forward, still wreathed in shadow. His steps were slow. Gravity bent differently around him. The rain froze in midair near his form, droplets hardening into ice and swirling in faint spirals at his feet.

"You? You're alive?" Kyral managed.

Kyral began to remake his barrier, but before he could manifest anything meaningful, the ronin stopped and calmly lifted one hand.

Pressure closed around them like a fist. Lynn's chest could not expand, and her feet left the ground. The sled behind her splintered—its contents of meat, cloth, and bone rose into the air around them.

Kyral, Lynn, and the debris hung suspended, caught in an invisible grip of will.

Kyral strained against it, veins standing out at his neck, teeth clenched hard enough to crack.

"You don't need the girl," he managed. "Colton and I… are the only ones who matter."

The figure's hand began to close, and Lynn heard the sound before she understood it—a slow, sickening series of cracks as Kyral's ribs popped one after another, his body folding in on itself.

It fucking hurts… fuck! I feel like… I'm going to puke… My ribs… I… can't… breathe… can't exhale… FUCK!

"An ambush?" Kyral gasped, the pressure crushing him. "That's really how you're gonna do me? I always knew you couldn't hack it in a proper duel, Zidane."

Zidane? Who is…? Fuck… How… the… fuck… how… is… he… doing this to us?

The ronin paused. His grip loosened and broke entirely, and Kyral and Lynn fell hard into the wet mud. Lynn hit the ground first; the air was driven from her lungs. She coughed violently, clawing at the earth, fighting to breathe. When she looked up, the figure stood only a few meters away.

For an instant, Lynn glimpsed his features in the lightning. The air bent around him, warping with Divine energy. His entire body was wrapped in deep-crimson bandages, frayed and darkened with blood and rain. What little flesh showed beneath was scarred and blackened, marked by something frostbitten and healed a thousand times. Torn layers of black fabric hung from his waist, tattered and wind-beaten.

His Divine gifts… his presence… a cold and merciless rage barely under control. It's like… contempt filling my soul…

Under a frayed hood, a single, inhuman eye burned electric blue, radiating through the storm. The other remained hidden beneath the wrappings, faint scar tissue tracing the edge of his cheek. His teeth, broken and uneven, flashed yellow as he exhaled, the faintest curl of a mouth forming beneath the cloth.

Kyral made it to his knees, each shallow breath breaking wetly against his throat. The wound in his chest was wide and deep. He turned to Lynn, eyes dim but steady.

"Warn him," he said, his voice ragged and thin. "Warn Colton. Don't let him fight… in a duel… not alone. Not. Alone."

"Please," Lynn begged, shaking her head. "Don't leave me alone! Don't make me carry your last wish!"

Kyral's eyes remained locked on Zidane, steady and unflinching. The rain hissed louder as the air around him shimmered with heat. Steam rose where droplets touched his skin. The mud cratered where his knees had been as he rose to his feet. Stones lifted in slow, spiraling orbits as a golden light surged along his right arm, condensing into a radiant gauntlet of raw

Divine energy. At its edge, the glow narrowed into a single, sharp point.

He's been holding this back the whole time!? I knew he was strong… but this!? I've never felt Divine energy used with this much power, from him or anyone else.

The sky boomed with thunder. Kyral lunged, and his glowing fist collided with Zidane's barrier in a flash of blinding gold. The air split, the falling rain vaporized, but the barrier held firm. Zidane's head turned slightly from the force of the blow. Kyral screamed through clenched teeth, forcing every last fragment of power into his attack. The ground gave way beneath him as he pushed forward, desperate to feel his enemy's flesh pierced by his Divine weapon.

Zidane's hand shot forward, closing over Kyral's face. With the other he pressed his palm flat against Kyral's stomach. The sound that followed was low and tearing. Kyral's torso exploded, ripped apart by Zidane's telekinetic grip. His legs landed first, then his upper body, in an unceremonious collapse.

Lynn's scream died in her throat as Kyral's pieces fell around her in a bloody shower.

No… I'm… I'm next…

The glow faded from Zidane's eye as he exhaled, tension leaving his shoulders. Around him, the rain that had frozen midair fell again, tapping against the mud and what was left of Kyral.

Zidane stood among the carnage, relaxed.

"How many sentinels does he command?" He glared at Lynn with a cold, unflinching stare and waited.

Shock held her. She could not move.

"Think carefully before you speak," he hissed. "I can't stand a liar."

She snapped out of her terror just enough for her voice to crack and tremble. "Sss…seven," she whispered.

Zidane studied her face, then nodded mockingly. "Sss… seven? Colton must be quite the guardian now."

He gestured at her. Her pack slipped from her shoulders and fell open, its straps tearing as it hit the mud.

"Tell that self-righteous slave from me," he continued, his tone darkening. "Alone. Together. It won't matter. I just want *his* best. Understand?"

He's really letting me go?

Lynn looked down at Kyral's shredded flesh; shock and grief washed over her as the rain worked through his gore and viscera, turning the soil into crimson-black muck.

"Or," he added coldly, "I could just gut you here."

Lynn forced herself to stand, every motion shaking. She swallowed and took one last look at Zidane's face. She began to run toward the distant lights of Citrus, her boots splashing through the mud, the tears streaming down her cheeks lost in the rain. She would reach Citrus ahead of him—time Colton would need to prepare, time that would decide whether anyone survived what was coming.

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Zidane watched her until the rain swallowed her completely. A small, fragile sound broke through the storm, followed by a pale-golden glow rising behind him.

"Sheppard is cruel," he said, almost thoughtfully, turning toward the noise. As he expected, a Divine knelt beside Kyral's broken torso, radiating through the storm. The figure's armor gleamed, shimmering like molten glass, transparent and radiant. Its surface was alive with veins of light that pulsed with a heartbeat: a Divine soul-armor, incorruptible and foreign to the world before The Falling. Its helm was smooth and featureless, reflecting nothing and absorbing everything. There were no wings, nothing beyond the soft hum that filled the air, a steady rhythm of Divine energy breathing in time with the rain.

"Isn't He, Haeviel?" a second voice asked, smooth and amused. Colder and darker, its arrival drained what little light remained in the air. The rain no longer fell where the shade moved; it vanished. Steam rose where drops met its shadow. It was vaguely human: a tall, lean silhouette draped in darkness, its edges unraveling into black smoke that coiled and twisted with each faint motion. From the gloom, two blue orbs burned where eyes should have been, round and unblinking, their light slicing through the night. Its face was half shrouded in shadow, the rest skeletal, smiling wide in a fixed, predatory grin. Its teeth were sharp and pale as frost, catching the reflection of Haeviel's glow. The air shuddered around it, its form wavering between solid and

spectral, a thing that existed in the spaces where light refused to remain.

"He is," Haeviel answered, his voice strained.

Haeviel's arm was raised, his hand hovering above Kyral's ruptured chest. The golden light in his palm deepened, pulsing with effort. Molten radiance spilled from his fingers in long strands. They wove through torn flesh and shattered ribs, binding what remained of Kyral. The strands were failing, each filament flickering against the inevitable.

"Even Divinity fears death," Zidane mocked.

The air trembled with Haeviel's strain. The glow began to sputter and falter.

Across from him, the blue-eyed shade tilted its head and watched with a predator's patience, taking in Haeviel's desperation as a hunter savors the last breaths of a dying animal.

"I warned you," it whispered, its voice full of pleasure. "You cannot say I didn't."

Haeviel rose slowly, his form wavering between flesh and light. "Your offer?" he asked.

"You fucking coward," Zidane spat.

The blue-eyed shade cackled. The sound was a scrape layered with cruel, ancient echoes.

"Unfortunately," it replied, savoring each syllable, "that was a *time-sensitive* arrangement. How could I *ever* trust you with a knife to your throat?"

Haeviel's body straightened, and the tremble in his form vanished. Acceptance settled over him as his right arm lifted and the golden light condensed, folding in on itself. The soul-armor along his arm thickened, reshaping and hardening, forming a blade of radiant glass, sharp as thought and pure as judgement.

Zidane stood opposite him, his posture casual, his single blue eye pulsing faintly in the dark. "That for me?" he mocked. "For beings supposedly dedicated to order, you have little respect for the rules, do you?"

Haeviel′s helm tilted slightly, the light within him intensifying. Lightning flashed, and thunder cracked overhead as he lunged, the blade cleaving through rain and shadow, leaving a burning trail of gold in its wake.

A blur of red light tore through the storm and appeared behind Haeviel. The tip of Haeviel's sword hung just shy of Zidane's face.

"But Reapers do. They *have* to," the blue-eyed shade cackled.

The red being's blade struck first, driving clean through Haeviel's back, bursting through his chest in a flash of searing light. The impact halted Haeviel's strike mid-swing. The Divine energy within him faltered.

Haeviel staggered as the golden armor fractured outward from the wound, the light within his form flaring violently against the invading red. Cracks spread like veins of lightning across his chest, up his neck, and down his legs. The soul-armor—perfect, unbreakable—split and shattered. Haeviel's light turned wild and unstable, flaring for kilometers in all directions. The Divine screamed as his body ruptured, the armor splintering into shards of molten glass that exploded outward in a radiant shockwave. The sound was deafening, a roar that tore through the storm. Grass flattened and trees bent to their roots. The shockwave tore through the atmosphere into the dark beyond, and the sky answered. Streaks of fire cut through the clouds, transforming the orbiting debris into a storm of falling constellations.

Zidane looked at his hand, slick with Kyral's blood to the wrist. He flexed his fingers once, and the blood jumped away, scattering across the earth.

He glanced once at the shade. It grinned and vanished into the dark, and he started walking in the direction the girl had run—toward the settlement flickering on the horizon.

CHAPTER 3

The Victor

A soft veil of mist hovered above the lake, lavender and silver in the day's first light. The crater's jagged rim rose sharply against the sky. Thin streams trickled down its slopes and wove through blackened rock and pale reed. They fed the lake with a sound so delicate it could have been mistaken for breathing. Its surface was a flawless mirror reflecting the debris-strewn rim above. There was no wind, no ripple, nothing but the fragile breath of the world before sunrise.

Across the still surface, life stirred. Blue and green damselflies drifted above the water, their wings flashing iridescent. They hovered and darted, and the air hummed with their movement. Some had only just emerged from their underwater cocoons and clung to reeds slick with dew, drying in the early light. Insects and small creatures had come through The Falling largely unchanged. Fewer in number, they survived where many larger beings had not.

A single orange damselfly drifted low across the lake's mirror. It landed softly on the surface, dimpling the water in perfect circles, and rested there, still and weightless, testing the quiet.

A flash of silver, a sudden ripple, and the surface broke. The insect was gone—taken by the predator below.

Gotcha, Aiden thought.

Aiden's eyes tracked the widening ripple, and he raised the rod with care, feeling resistance build through the handle. With a firm yet gentle jerk, he set the hook, mindful not to snap the delicate line attached to his self-tied fly.

Easy. Number one hundred—no problem. No problem at all.

The reel clicked softly against the morning, the only disturbance in the stillness.

How much salt do I have left? I use it so fast, but they always taste better with more salt. Or maybe… just a quick fry? No. Worth celebrating this one.

He leaned back slightly, guiding the fish, careful not to pull too hard. Under the surface, the trout thrashed, its strength countering his, testing his patience and mastery. His focus sharpened—hands precise, shoulders stable, breath even. Controlled yet playful, the ease of a man seasoned by victory.

The line snapped.

It swayed in the still air, as if mocking. The tension left the rod, leaving it straight and lifeless in his hands. The coveted bend, the pulse of the struggle—gone. A sting of disbelief cut through him.

That was my best damselfly. I was ninety-nine for ninety-nine…

Disbelief gave way to a hot flash of irritation as he exhaled through his nose. His eyes narrowed, and he pointed two fingers toward the water where the fish had bested him. The lake stirred, parting with a low hiss as the trout rose. It twisted violently, fighting an unseen force. The fish hung above the water, quivering, the broken line still dangling from its mouth.

He snapped his fingers once, and a sharp crack sounded from the fish's spine, echoing gently through the crater. The trout went limp, dropping through the surface with a muted splash. Ripples spread outward from where it floated, distorting the lake's perfect mirror. The mist drifted low over the water. Quiet returned as though nothing had happened.

Aiden watched the water and smiled faintly.

A beautiful morning. A beautiful death for a lowly creature—a fine meal to start the day. One hundred for one hundred.

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The air smelled faintly of ash, pine, and smoke from the small fire that burned near the lake's shore. A trout, skewered on a smooth branch, sizzled softly above the flames. Its skin split, curling back to reveal tender white flesh beneath, the scent mingling with the cold air.

Nearby, Aiden's horse grazed among the sparse reeds. Its coat was pure white, an impossible rarity in this age, shining faintly in the morning light. The animal stood calm and steady, its breath forming soft clouds. Its saddle was heavy with supplies,

each strap neatly tied. Every piece of gear was placed with careful precision—an extension of his obsessive order.

Aiden sat close to the fire, legs crossed, watching the fish cook.

Smells good—nearly done. Worth it. Had to be done.

His white gloves glowed faintly. They were immaculate except for faint smears of blood on the fingertips and palms.

Fuck. I gotta get these cleaned soon. They're starting to smell.

He would not let the filth of the world or the gore of any animal touch his bare skin. Cleanliness was conviction, the one personal commandment he never broke.

His armor gleamed in the low light, layered leather and white-painted steel. Stitched with precision and trimmed in muted gold, it was made for violence, yet it looked ceremonial. The snug fit made it seem more like an extension of him than protection. Even the scuffs at his knees and boots looked like they didn't belong.

His thick, golden hair caught the firelight, glinting as he moved his head. Each strand was seemingly perfect. His face was sculpted, untouched by the years of ruin that marked most survivors, his mouth poised between confidence and contempt. His bright blue eyes drew the world's attention—sharp, calculating, accustomed to admiration. In a world of ash and ruin, Aiden had come to see beauty for what it was—a Divine signal. His reflection felt to him like confirmation of something he had long known to be true: he was exceptional.

Across from him sat a Divine named Gabriel, a living expression of the Seventh Divine Pillar of Order and Righteousness. His soul-armor was fully manifested, though it was not a Divine's natural state.

Overprotective. All that energy and focus to sit by a fire. But he's known the Divine War longer than I. No ambush from the Sixth gets past that. I guess it's reassuring. Still… the radiance… the heat… I'd like to eat in peace just once.

Like all soul-armor, Gabriel's took a form unique to the Divine who manifested it, shaped by the alignment of a specific Divine Pillar, his design, and nature. Gabriel's soul-armor reflected the strength of his will, his being, and the power of order and righteousness. His was shaped for combat, honed through

millennia of duels within the Divine War. The tight edges were a reflection of the Divine Pillar he served. Every curve and line mirrored discipline and symmetry, shimmering like tempered glass; each surface was translucent. Veins of golden light flowed within the perfect geometry. Where human armor would creak and shift above the wearer's skin, Gabriel's armor moved in silence, for it was both his flesh and his being, his will and consciousness made visible. And though he had no need to breathe, the armor seemed alive, sending ripples of light across his body that illuminated the mist around him.

Not much longer now—the skin is starting to peel. Used the last of my salt but it'll be delicious now… Gabriel. He's not going to let me enjoy this, is he? I did break his rule… but it had my fly. I needed it back. It was my prototype.

The fire crackled softly, its warmth paling against Gabriel's brilliant glow, its light bending toward him until the color faded into gold.

Gabriel's familiar silent judgement settled upon Aiden.

"I worked hard tying that fly," he said defensively.

Gabriel turned toward him, and the soft hum of his being deepened in response, a faint resonance carried by all Divines. There was only a smooth, featureless helm, no human face visible.

"And I need to eat," Aiden muttered, reaching toward the fire.

"You need to respect Our rules," Gabriel said.

Fuck, here we go… No peace again. Always some lecture. Always something wrong. I don't care. I'm hungry. He doesn't know what hunger is—can't relate.

Gabriel's voice never reached Aiden as mere words—his will traveled through The Chorus of the world itself, rising from beneath the skin of Creation before entering Aiden's being. Melodic hums, vibrations, and various tones stretched into infinity while pressure built and released, echoing like distant whale songs across a sea. Their cadence filled his chest and rattled his thoughts, a language of contradiction, both possible and impossible to comprehend, the very definition of Divinity itself.

To the unchosen, the unattuned, as he called them, the exchange would have seemed entirely one-sided—a man talking to himself. Only those bound to a Divine, the chosen, could

understand the language within the resonance, and Aiden had become accustomed to its Divine nature.

Done. Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

He took the skewered trout off the fire and began eating, biting through the crisped skin.

"Delicious. What if I run into him on the road, and I'm not at one hundred percent?"

"I have been assured that will not be the case. Your duel with The Adversary will not begin with an ambush," Gabriel said, his voice rolling through the air. "I have informed you of this *many* times."

Too many.

Aiden looked up from his meal, his expression brightening. "So we're close?"

"We are on the right path."

Aiden's mouth curved into a slight, smug grin. He sensed a subtle ripple in Gabriel's aura, the steady rhythm increasing just enough to warn him he had pushed too far.

"Aiden…"

"What?" he said, feigning innocence. "I'm just sayin', what if we run into him on the road? As in, a surprise? You told me Sheppard has a sense of humor."

The fire popped between them, small against Gabriel's light, and for a moment, Aiden thought he might have escaped reproach.

"No," Gabriel said, the word landing with finality.

Aiden frowned. "No? Just no?"

Gabriel's tone deepened; authority resonated in Aiden's chest, a familiar signal that this was no longer a moment for pushback. "Shall I inform Michael of this and your other abuses when you meet him?"

Aiden sighed and looked away.

"I can't wait for that threat to stop working," he muttered under his breath.

Gabriel's head tilted slightly. "What did you say?" The air tightened with the question, and a vibration passed through Aiden's chest, heavy with judgement.

"Nothing," Aiden answered quickly. "A suspension, then?"

Gabriel remained silent, but the light within his armor swirled like molten gold beneath glass. His aura rippled softly; the rhythm of its glow slowed.

"How long do you think is fair for taking a life in such a dishonorable fashion?"

Aiden poked at the trout's remains. "A fish's life."

"But a *life* nonetheless," Gabriel said, his tone softening. "If Aniel were here, she would tell you its precise value."

Why would I want to meet her? She's of the Fourth.

A low hum settled in the air around them.

Aiden glanced toward the horizon. "Dawn, master? Or is that not severe enough?"

Gabriel's attention snapped elsewhere; the light within his armor dimmed, then flared in a slow, rippling pulse. His aura shimmered into a faint, layered harmony.

"I accept your terms," Gabriel declared. His voice rolled outward, deep and resonant, vibrating through the mist. The sound gathered weight, echoing softly through the crater. "And I will hold you to them."

Aiden turned, following Gabriel's implied gaze, and froze.

That's fresh. Black. Still burning maybe.

He scrambled to his feet, boots sliding in the dirt, and rushed toward his horse. Within seconds, he was mounted, the animal's white coat flashing in the firelight as he kicked it into a gallop. The rhythmic strike of hooves broke the stillness, carrying him across the crater's rim until both rider and horse vanished into the pale horizon.

Gabriel remained motionless, his glow settling into a steady pulse. The aura around him returned to silence.

In the distance, vultures wheeled above a rising column too thick and black for any single impact. Along the horizon, the approaching dawn bled red. Its light spilled across the cratered countryside like a gash reopening. The two blended together, smoke and sunrise—an omen of violence for the day that was about to begin.

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Yesterday, maybe. The fires haven't finished, Aiden thought.

The valley below smoldered. Distant fires crackled, and heat hissed from the blackened earth.

Shimmering red smoke drifted upward in thin, trembling columns. A settlement's form could still be traced through the wreckage—the remnants of walls, the hollow outlines of metal towers, the faint suggestion of streets that might once have carried laughter and market noise. Only the wind moved between them now. The ruin was absolute: a city raised upon the bones of the old world, shattered once again, now a grave of smoke and ash.

Overrun maybe? This isn't some random fragment strike. Their defenses failed. And… their gate's bent inward—don't see that often.

The air was heavy with the stench of fire and blood. Farmland, the most precious resource left in the world, was reduced to soot and cratered soil. Fruit trees splintered and burned to their roots, their skeletal remains reaching toward the sky. Dismembered bodies lay scattered among the fields, shapes of what might have been livestock, charred beneath a fine layer of ash.

Whatever happened here came swiftly. No mercy. An exanimis probably—the devastation is too complete. If anyone survived, they're long gone.

Non-human scavengers of all kinds moved through the settlement without urgency. Birds gathered where the ground had been opened, swooping down to feed in uneven bursts. Between them came warped beasts, shaped by generations of Divine corruption, four-legged forms twisted beyond recognition.

There they are. They're always first. Soulless.

Soot clung to their human-like bodies, limbs rigid, skin split and dry. When they stopped, it was only to lower themselves, to lean in and feed.

One crouched over a charred corpse. A methodical wet sound came. Others followed, gathering around the body in silence, their teeth clicking softly as they fed. Soulless, carrion birds, and beasts alike shared the fresh bounty of death, bound by an unspoken truce. The feast before them was plentiful, and hunger made all creatures equal.

Atop his horse, he watched the movement among the smoldering ruins below, the wind tugging at his immaculate coat. The smell of blood drifted up from the valley, faintly sweet and

metallic, not so different from the fish he had cooked for himself earlier. He blinked and shook his head.

Disgusting! Fucking soulless. I can't enjoy anything. Nope. Not gonna… not gonna let that one settle.

He dismounted and stepped toward the ridge's edge.

"It appears they have grown tired of merely scavenging," Gabriel said, manifesting beside him. Aiden turned his head slightly, catching the faint golden shimmer of his master's aura.

Below, one of the soulless reached for a blackened fruit, a scorched orb half-buried in the ash. It turned the fruit over in its skeletal fingers, studying it for a moment before letting it drop. Then it took a severed human hand from the ash and lifted it to its mouth, pressing the charred digits between its pale gums. With slow effort, it sucked the remaining flesh from the bone.

"I've never known them to be killers on this scale," Aiden said with revulsion. "They're maggots—they usually prefer *rotting* flesh. Not… cooked."

Gabriel's form brightened, the rhythm of his light quickening. "Maybe before."

Aiden began descending toward the ruins.

"It is not worth the risk," Gabriel continued, his voice edged with warning.

"I heard their fruit was especially delicious," Aiden said, cracking his knuckles. "I'm not going to let a few ambitious soulless stand in my way of enjoying that delicacy."

"Your suspension until dawn is still in effect," Gabriel said flatly.

Aiden stopped, glancing back over his shoulder at his master, then toward the red dawn, still slow to reveal the full sun.

"Extenuating circumstances—"

Gabriel's aura brightened, cutting him off. "Dawn. I accepted your terms. Remember? If you must go—think of it as training."

Aiden exhaled and resumed walking down the slope.

"Slaughtering lambs isn't training," he said, his grin widening as he began to stretch and flex.

But it is a good time.

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The soulless worked methodically, drawing what remained of the dead toward the settlement's center and arranging the pieces with crude intent. They moved without urgency, passing through smoke and broken stone. When they spoke, the sounds came out wrong, pressed from damaged mouths, each utterance a mangled attempt at speech.

"Bodies," one rasped, the word drawn out and broken, almost proud.

"Many," another answered.

"Gather," a third added as though repeating a learned order.

The words came again, staggered and overlapping. Echoes answering themselves. One of them, barely taller than the rest, pushed over a half-burned beam. It uncovered a body caked in ash and soot, then crouched and sniffed the air around it.

"A…live," it said. The word rasped from its throat, carrying a hint of surprise.

Another leaned close, neck creaking as it tilted its head with insect-like movement toward something beneath the ash. Its nostrils flared once.

"Living," it murmured, the word fumbling from its throat, warped and twisted. Behind it, a third lingered, face twitching, trying to form an expression. It shifted its weight, staring at the faint rise and fall of the body before them.

"Gath…her?" it asked, the tone hesitant, like a child unsure whether it had spoken correctly.

"No," Aiden declared. His voice cut through the smoke, sharp, clear, and unmistakably human. It carried weight, the kind that silenced everything else.

He emerged through the haze a few meters from the soulless. His white armor caught the light of the burning ruins, the fabric stark against the blackened ground. He stood with arms folded, smugness plain in his expression. The soulless staggered backward from the body as Aiden stepped forward and knelt beside it.

He brushed away the thick layer of soot, uncovering the face beneath. Pale living skin emerged, then the outline of a young woman he had never seen before. Her lips were cracked, her

lashes clumped with dirt, but she was still breathing. Aiden studied her in silence.

Rare to find survivors of anything. Oh—wait a second!

Beside her, half-buried, he noticed a strip of bright orange fabric and plucked it free from the soot, turning it in his hand, smiling as he admired the color against the gray.

This orange—the threads would make a fine fishing fly! Outstanding! I wonder if there's anything else of value here.

"Sheppard is generous today," he said.

From behind him came the sound of heavy footsteps, moving through the ruin.

Aiden rose to his feet as the ash slid from his gloves. He turned toward the approaching sounds. A single soulless stepped toward him, inadvertently crushing ripe oranges beneath its feet with an obscene sound. The scent of sweetness cut through the thick stench of death as Aiden stared down at the ruined fruit. His eyes darkened, and his lip curled into a scowl.

"That… was likely… the last of its kind," he sneered, revolted. He lifted his head, locking eyes with the soulless that had stepped on it. "And you… just crushed it… with your fucking foot."

"Ours. Fair. Treaty," the first soulless said.

"Treaty. Fair. Ours," said another.

"Understand?" the third echoed.

Their words grated against his nerves, each sound a failed attempt at imitating a human being.

These fucking things. They're endless. They deserve violence, even if they didn't end this place. Fuck them. Fuck them all. I see no reason to restrain myself.

His irritation settled into something hot, until his anger broke into a calm, simple smile—the kind that came from certainty.

"Treaty. Understand?" the third said again.

"I do," Aiden said, his tone sharp. "I understand completely."

His first strike shattered the nearest soulless' jaw, the sound echoing through the ruins like a distant explosion. Its decayed teeth burst from its mouth and scattered across the ash. One embedded itself in the leather of his glove. He paused, gripping it

between his fingers, and tore it free. A thin strand of nerve still clung to the root, twitching faintly. He flicked it aside.

"Disgusting!" he shouted, his voice high.

"Violence!" it wailed, the alarm fumbling from its broken mouth.

"V…iolence! Vio…lence! Viole…nce!" the others screeched, until the words spread like an infection through their ranks, changing tone with each repetition.

Here we go. Haven't seen this up close in a while.

Their fear hardened into purpose—a declaration of what they would do, what they always did. Their words swelled until they ceased to be speech and became a single, rising roar that fouled the air. Their bodies twitched and cracked with corrupted Divine energy. Eyes that had once been pale and hollow flared with a brilliance that seared through the smoke. Their mouths stretched wide, gnarled teeth jutting from blackened gums as they screamed together, a sound ragged and piercing, forms warping and lengthening. Their bones shifted beneath the skin until they stood monstrous and skeletal; their flesh was drawn thin, trembling over the sharp edges of their frames.

Aiden took an instinctive step back as he felt their corrupted energy surge with the presence of the Sixth Divine Pillar. Fear stirred in his chest, quick and cold, then faded.

Gabriel was right—this was training.

He straightened his posture, rolled his shoulders once, and waited. His breath slowed. Then, as if commanded by the same unseen will, they came for him.

Their attack became a frenzy, snarling and shrieking, ash spraying beneath their feet. The first attacker met his fist mid-scream, and the jaw shattered. Its head snapped back, its body folded. He turned, pivoting with elegant precision, driving a knee into another's chest, and its ribs gave way beneath the blow with a wet, splintering crack. The ruin filled with the pounding of flesh, the crunch of bones, and the hiss of breath forced from wrecked lungs.

He turned to the next soulless and smashed a hook across its temple. The body spun and crashed into the dirt as a third clawed for his eyes, but he caught the wrist, twisted it, and broke the elbow with a short, merciless snap. It hung before him; he stepped in close and drove a punch into a rotting mouth. They bled freely,

their thick blood black, steaming as they hit the ash. Aiden's coat, once immaculate, now bore dark stains across its white surface. His violence became unhurried, graceful, almost serene. The rhythm of his movements was the result of countless training sessions with Gabriel and hard-fought victories over far greater opponents.

One raked a filthy nail across his cheek. He reset and brushed the wound with a single finger.

"You FILTH—how fucking dare you!"

He seized the creature by the throat, yanking it close enough to smell its rotting breath. His knee rose, driving into its guts, shattering its spine, and the soulless gave a pitiful wail as it crumpled in a twitching heap.

The rest recoiled, and Aiden straightened, a smile of smug delight at the corner of his mouth. He smashed his boot into the temple of the groaning crawler. Its skull crunched beneath his heel, giving him a satisfaction he didn't bother to hide. The ground darkened around Aiden in shadow. Hands clamped over his neck, lifting him clean off the ground. He twisted against the grip, startled by the sheer size of his captor. The giant's flesh was packed with soot and ash, a monstrous exanimis skull hanging from his chest.

Half of his head is missing. But the stench—the corruption… No doubt about it—this is the strongest and biggest of the horde. Damn it—how'd I not see him when I was walking down here?

"Violence! Violence! TREATY! BROKEN!" he roared, his voice echoing through the chaos.

Aiden drove his knee into the giant's guts.

Nothing. Fuck!

The soulless sneered and slammed him into the dirt hard enough to rattle the stones nearby. He barely rolled clear as a two-handed strike crashed down, leaving a crater where his head had been. The soulless champion advanced, swinging in heavy, wind-churning arcs.

Whew—that was closer than I'd like. But now that I'm free—no problem.

He slipped one blow, ducked another, and felt the third brush his hair. The giant's pace was relentless, but Aiden kept moving, breath tight, feet light, waiting for any mistake.

Aiden slipped through a narrow gap of weakness, planted his feet firmly, and drove an uppercut into the giant's mouth. The impact rang through the ruins, a deep, resonant crack as blood sprayed and a single tooth spun into the air.

How's that—

The soulless steadied himself, tilting his head with a crack that carried a taunting rhythm, as if mocking the effort. A red-slick grin spread across his face as he spat blood and shattered teeth at Aiden. Most struck his armor, but a few warm drops found his face.

Oh you… it's really on now.

Aiden gritted his teeth in rage. "That's going to cost you," he growled, wiping the blood from his face.

Golden Divine power rose up his spine as Aiden's eyes kindled with yellow light. The ground gave a soft, answering tremble as the ash and debris from the wreckage lifted. The rising pressure stopped. Aiden blinked and turned his head, sensing his Divine's presence.

Gabriel stood over the unconscious girl, uninterested in the violence unfolding around him. "Dawn," he said without looking up. "I was clear."

The soulless followed Aiden's glance but saw nothing. Aiden turned toward the horizon; the sky was brightening, red giving way to gold. He looked back to the giant, but another sound caught his attention before he could refocus.

Across the ridge, a white shape struggled: Aiden's horse. They had journeyed for years together, and now the horse was fighting for its life. Hooves flailed, and a chorus of desperate shrieks filled the air.

"Justus! Get out of there, damn it!" he shouted.

Aiden's heart sank as his beloved animal was dragged down by a swarm of soulless. It screamed and kicked, its head jerking against the hands that tore into it until it went still, the only motion the faint twitch of dying limbs.

Aiden clenched his jaw.

I toyed with these things, and it's cost me. For fuck's sake, Gabriel—now I'm going to have to fucking walk everywhere.

"Two minutes, then I'm going to rip out the other half of your brain—you soulless fuck," he snarled.

The giant's eyes bulged. He lunged forward, seized Aiden by the throat with both hands, and lifted him high into the air; his grip tightened until the sound of straining flesh filled the space between them.

"SSS…SOUL!? SOUL…LLL… LESS!? LESS!? LESS!? YOU! YOU!" he bellowed, his roar ripping through the ruins, reverberating until even the fires trembled.

"Unwise, Aiden," Gabriel said, his aura humming like a weary sigh from a teacher forced to repeat a lesson.

Gabriel extended two fingers toward the girl's brow, and her eyes fluttered open. The woman rolled onto her side, dazed, as if waking from a heavy dream. She turned toward the noise, toward the sounds of strangling.

"Tundra!" she called, her voice hoarse, raw from the ash and blood in her mouth.

Tundra turned, his face contorting in fury. He saw her but did not loosen his grip. Aiden drove a thumb into the giant's eye. The giant roared and squeezed harder, enraged.

Fuck. Just gotta… hold on… dawn… is coming…

"Tundra, stop! Treaty!" she shouted, forcing herself to her knees.

Tundra!? She did… name it… everything… going black… Gabriel…

"Challenge. Violence. US!" the giant roared, never looking away. Aiden's world collapsed under pressure, and as his vision darkened at the edges, his hands began to fall limp.

Gabriel… you and I… are going to have words… after this…

She staggered toward a wailing, paralyzed soulless. It lay twisted, spine arched wrong beneath the skin. She pressed her hand to the jut of bone and closed her eyes. The air stilled. A clean warmth spread through the ruin. Before their eyes, vertebrae slid back into place under her palm, tendons realigned, and the body straightened and filled with life. The soulless on the ground gasped and drew a steady breath.

"Mercy-giver…" Tundra said, his fury breaking in an instant as he released Aiden, who hit the dirt hard and ungracefully, choking on dust. Aiden rose to his feet, gasping.

The first ray of dawn broke over the horizon, spilling gold across the ash. He smiled, ready for more, eager to hold nothing

back. Divine power glinted behind his eyes and the earth gave a soft tremble beneath his feet.

"The lesson is over, Aiden," Gabriel said firmly, his words rippling through the air, vibrating in Aiden's chest.

He pretended not to hear him, and his power still rose, craving vindication.

"Be still. Control. Remember who you are," Gabriel said patiently, the tone of his aura deepening and melodic.

Aiden's eyes darted to his Divine and, reluctantly, he exhaled, his anger leaving with his breath.

Always the mentor. Fine.

He swallowed hard as his jaw loosened. The storm inside him dispersed, and he wiped his mouth with the back of his glove.

He looked up at the massive soulless with hot contempt. "That girl just saved your life."

Tundra turned without reply, lumbering toward his kind, and the soulless resumed their grim work, gathering the dead with reverent precision.

The girl stirred weakly, rubbing her eyes. Her movements were slow and uncoordinated from shock as her gaze swept over the char and smoke, lingering on the ruin in a way that told him she had lived inside this destruction.

Her body locked in place as she took in Gabriel's form. The light seemed to burn her as the Divine slowly turned to meet her eyes.

"Another one!?" she gasped.

She sees him? Interesting—and yet she's reacting like this is her first time.

The air around Gabriel shimmered, making the world waver. She stumbled back, dropping to a crouch, hands raised instinctively, as if facing an open flame. His Divine stood unmoving before her, his light steady.

Gabriel began to move toward her. The glow around him bent smoke and shadow.

He's curious too—more than curious.

"Mortal," Gabriel said. His voice boomed through the air, its resonance vibrating in the stone and the hollow bones of the dead. The sound layered, harmonic, each tone echoing into the next like the groan of ice fracturing in deep water.

The pressure of his voice was unbearable. She nodded, barely able to breathe, her eyes shut in a way Aiden could only interpret as pure terror.

"You bear witness to my form? Only chosen may do so."

Aiden straightened, his expression moving from confusion to intrigue as he watched Gabriel approach her.

This is no ordinary woman. Finding her alive among the ruins—witnessing her heal the soulless—her reaction to Gabriel… It can mean only one thing.

Aiden took a deep breath and felt the pieces of Creation align, leaving only one explanation.

Sheppard. He's intervened. He's made His play at last. His Hour of Judgement is upon me. Finally.

"I am Gabriel," his Divine said, his tone softening. "First Disciple of Michael, leader of the Seventh Divine Pillar of Order and Righteousness. The one beside you is Aiden—"

"The Victor," he said, interrupting his master.

Her eyes opened a fraction, glancing toward him, and Aiden gave a faint nod in confirmation.

"My chosen," Gabriel finished.

"Lynn," she managed. She shut her eyes again, trembling as Gabriel leaned closer.

Gabriel's Divine radiance washed over her, a shifting gold that pressed against her closed lids until they seemed to glow with white fire. The hum of his aura filled the space between them, layered like a thousand distant voices whispering to her.

She clutched her head, and Aiden knew the question that followed was more terrifying than his master's unfiltered, looming presence.

"To which master do you bow?"

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

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