

The book cover features a dramatic scene set in space. In the foreground, a man with a thick brown beard and long hair, wearing a heavy brown fur coat with a circular metal emblem on his chest, looks intensely forward. Behind him, a woman with dark hair pulled back and a serious expression is visible. To the right, a large, dark, mechanical structure, possibly a piece of advanced technology or a weapon, is partially visible. The background is a vast expanse of space with a bright, glowing celestial body on the right and a smaller, detailed space station or satellite in the upper left. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, purples, and oranges, creating a sense of mystery and adventure.

STARFALLEN

A Lost Stars Novella

Brandon Clark

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BRANDON CLARK

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Sara, we're making a habit of this, aren't we?

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CHAPTER ONE

KAIRK SWORE as another wave of Gentori crashed against the line of shields.

“Hold,” he yelled to the men and women straining beneath the assault. four rows of soldiers stood tall, pressing their overlapping turtle shell shields back against the mass of bodies battering them.

“Strike!”

The wall shifted, and Gentori screamed in pain as a storm of razor-sharp spears pierced their flesh.

The Gentori recoiled, but the respite was short-lived as they surged forward again.

Kairk’s force held firm against the renewed attack, then struck again.

From the back of the Gentori formation, Kairk saw a swarm of arrows launch into the air.

“Shells!” Kairk shouted.

The Travani raised their shields in unison, those in back pressing close to cover the man or woman in front of them with part of their shield forming an overlapping armored shell.

Kairk felt someone press up behind him, covering his shield. A second later, hundreds of arrows pelted down on their shields. A cacophony of arrowheads bouncing off shells swallowed the whole formation, but the none made it through.

“It’s almost romantic,” Cora whispered in his ear. “Sounds like rain.”

Kairk glanced back at his wife. “I’m a little preoccupied here.”

“Got to take our pleasure when, and where we can,” she said. Despite the hundreds of men wanting to kill them, her voice was somehow playful.

The wave of arrows stopped.

“Lower,” Kairk yelled, and the formation reverted to its original shape.

In the shuffling of shields, Kairk felt something pinch his neck. He looked over his shoulder, and Cora licked her lips and winked at him.

He grinned at her, but the sound of Gentori screaming brought him back to the task at hand. He looked past his wife and saw their village through the steep sides of the canyon where they’d intercepted the raiders.

Behind their line, a light dusting of snow was almost pristine. Only a thin line of footprints where the Travani had marched to meet their enemies marred the ground. Below the line of shield’s though, the white snow had turned dark brown, as the dirt mixed with the blood of the dying.

Fortunately, it had mostly been Gentori blood so far.

Kairk grunted as the wall was pushed back another step, and the man in front of him bumped into him. The hill rose behind them, but if they had to fall back much farther, the Travani would be forced back past the canyon’s natural choke point. If that happened, their line would be stretched thin, and the Gentori could flank them.

“Where is Jawn?” he said instead.

Cora’s face slipped back into the icy focus of a soldier ready to kill.

“Should be here any minute,” she said. “They acknowledged the signal the same time we did.”

“Hold the line,” Kairk hollered. “No one loses their dawnstone today!”

The Travani soldiers screamed as one, and they surged forward. The Gentori staggered back, slipping on the semi-frozen slush and blood slick rocks on the canyon floor.

They continued to fight, Kairk dispatching Cora and her reserve spearwomen where the fighting was fiercest. Occasionally, a Gentori sword would find an exposed bit of flesh, and a Travani fighter would stagger out of formation. The Gentori tried to rush through the gaps, but more Travani were quick to fill in. Most of the wounds were not fatal, and the injured Travani stumbled to the back of the formation.

The fighting was brutal, and even though the Travani were outnumbered, they held firm.

Unfortunately, so did the Gentori.

And there were enough of them to crush Kairk and his squad in a mountain of human bodies.

“Step,” Kairk called.

After the next flurry of spear thrusts, the Travani took a coordinated step

back, but the Gentori quickly swarmed to fill extra space. One of the spearmen in the front line slipped as he stepped back up the hill, and before anyone could react, three Gentori grabbed him and started dragging him backward.

The two soldiers next to the man stepped forward, spears thrusting into the bodies of the assailants.

The third man dodged the spears and reached out, a dagger in one hand.

Kairk watched as the dagger fell toward the downed man. He twisted at the last minute, and it plunged into the earth.

The momentum of the strike carried the Gentori forward, but he landed on the fallen man. There was a brief scramble, and the Gentori pushed himself up.

He held a glowing gem in his fist, his eyes wide and lips curled up in a triumphant smile. He turned and started running back through the ranks of attackers, many of whom whooped and cheered as he ran with his hand held high.

The man he'd stolen the gem from rose and tried to jump after him, but his companions grabbed him and pulled him backward. He howled in protest and tried to wrestle free. His friends dragged him back to the line, letting three others from the second line fill in.

For a moment, the fighting stopped as the Gentori around turned to watch. Several Travani stepped forward and killed the gawkers.

The screams of the dying snapped the Gentori back into action. They rushed forward with a renewed aggression, emboldened by captured dawnstone.

"Hold," Kairk called again. He pushed his way through to the man who'd fallen. He stood behind the lines, a blank look on his face as he stared down the hill. Kairk knew he was following the thief by the glowing dawnstone still in his hand as he weaved through the darker mass of Gentori. A medic was slathering a wet paste over a cut on his thigh, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Raab," Kairk said.

The man blinked several times and dropped his chin.

"Don't pull that with me," Kairk snapped. "I need you."

"I lost my dawnstone," he said. "My father will never forgive me."

"You're alive," Kairk said. "Which is more than I can say for a lot of them."

He pointed back toward the Gentori, many of whom were pushing forward over the bodies of their comrades.

“I’ll never find it,” Raab said. “I’m a disgrace.”

“You let any of your battle brothers or sisters die because you’re back here moping, and you will be.”

Raab finally raised his eyes to meet Kairk’s.

“Get back in there,” Kairk said. “Finish this, and we’ll all help you.”

Raab’s face hardened, and the muscles in his jaw tightened. He nodded once, then looked down at the wound on his leg for the first time.

“Good?” He asked the medic.

“Good enough,” he replied.

Raab nodded. “I won’t let you down.”

“Shells!”

Kairk, Raab and the medic dropped to a knee and raised their shields as another wave of arrows pummeled them. As the thunder of arrowheads stopped, Kairk put a hand on Raab’s shoulder.

“You’re more important than a stone,” he said. “Even a dawnstone.”

Raab’s confident mask faltered for a moment, but he set his jaw, nodded once, and rejoined the others.

“Cora,” Kairk yelled.

She spun from the far side of the line. Kairk motioned for her, and she finished giving her second in command instructions before jogging over.

“I need you to find Jawn,” he said. “We’re dead if he doesn’t get here soon.”

“I’m not running,” she said. “You’re not sending-”

“Find Jawn,” Kairk said. “Go.”

Cora’s lips pressed into a thin line, but she took off at a jog up the hill without another word. Kairk felt a small weight lift as he watched her go.

He wheeled as another set of screams rose from the front line. The Gentori had renewed their attack.

The sun was starting to cast shadows over the canyon, but the rocks had been baking long enough to make sweat pool against Kairk’s chest and stomach beneath his turtle shell armor. A slight breeze rolled up the hill from behind the Gentor, carrying the smelled of blood and death into the Travani’s faces.

Kairk’s feet ached as he ran up and down the line, encouraging his men, or giving orders. He was about to turn and head back down the line when he

heard a fresh scream from the center. Spinning back; he saw a gap emerge as one of his men fell in a spray of bright blood.

A massive man strode forward, smashing a club the size of Kairk's leg sideways into the soldiers on either side of the fallen Travani. The force of the blow sent the man on the left flying back into his fellows, opening a more massive hole in the wall.

Kairk leapt forward and drove his spear toward the giant. But the man saw him coming and stepped sideways with extraordinary speed Kairk hadn't expected.

Kairk's spear met only empty air.

The giant's hand snapped out and grabbed the shaft and yanked.

Rather than fly back into the middle of the Gentori mob, Kairk let the spear go. The men to his left were still scrambling to their feet, trying to fend off the normal-sized enemies while covering their comrades, leaving Kairk on his own.

The massive Gentori bellowed again and brought the club back.

Kairk reached to his belt and tugged his hatchet free.

Unlike the silvery, rough-cut spearheads, the hatchet's blade was pure black that seemed to swallow any light that hit it. And instead of polished, leather-wrapped wood, the shaft was made of a pliable material that molded to the palm of his hand perfectly and stuck to his skin no matter how wet it was.

His opponent laughed, and swung the club down, trying to smash Kairk into the ground, and he likely would have succeeded if Kairk had attempted to catch the blow on his shield.

Instead, Kairk slid forward and brought the hatchet down.

The blade cleaved through the giant's ankle like it was a newly forged blade slicing through snow.

There was an explosion of red mist, and the stump of the man's leg slid sideways, leaving the foot still firmly planted in the muddy snow.

Surprise lit up the man's face, but before the pain registered, Kairk reversed his swing and buried the hatchet in the man's side.

Once again, the blade cut through flesh and bone with ease. The man's ribs separated, and Kairk felt a hot spray hit his face.

He tried to pull the hatchet back, but it was too deep in the man's chest, and he couldn't free it before the man fell sideways.

He was dead before he hit the ground, the hatchet's handle sticking out of

his chest like a new sapling just starting to grow.

The men on both sides of the shield wall saw the giant fall. The Travani screamed in triumph and rushed forward around their Captain, while the Gentori shrank back. The Travani pushed the attackers back down the hill.

Then Kairk heard another war cry, but it wasn't from his men or the Gentori.

He looked up and saw Cora and Jawn standing on the edge of the canyon walls. Behind them, a hundred men and women stepped up and drew their bows.

The Gentori recognized the danger, though Kairk wasn't sure whether it was from the war cry or the first arrows that streaked down from above.

For a moment, they seemed enraged, pushing forward in one last desperate attempt to overwhelm the Travani.

But the line held, and finally, the Gentori lost their nerve.

It started as a whispered call but swelled to full-throated screams for a retreat. Those at the back of the formation broke and ran, some managing to keep their wits about them enough to back away with weapons raised to discourage pursuit.

Arrows continued to rain down. Gentori died and rolled down the hill, knocking their fellows down as their momentum carried them.

The Travani cheered at the retreating Gentori, and Kairk smiled up at Cora. She blew him a kiss before turning and disappearing behind the cliff's edge.

Kairk stepped forward and gripped the handle of the hatchet. He pulled it free with a wet crunch, then wiped the black blade on the fallen giant's ruin clothes before replacing it in his belt and letting out an exhausted sigh.

Another day then.

CHAPTER TWO

“TO JAWN,” Kairk yelled, the Jeeva slopping over the sides of the mug. “Your timing was as impeccable as your navigation is terrible.”

The men and women in the hall laughed as they raised their mugs. Most were carved wood, with varying degrees of ornamentation, but a few were dented metal with colorful handles. Kairk’s was one of those, handed down from his father and his father before that. The original owner's name was etched into the material, barely legible after all the years of use.

The big man at the other end of hall laughed and raised his cup, a semi-transparent metal that allowed Kairk to see how much of the purple Jeeva he’d had.

“Only thanks to Cora,” Jawn replied. “Thank the Starfallen she found us.”

“No one could miss your stench,” Cora said from the side of the hall where she stood with the spear woman in her squad. Her teeth had a reddish, purple tint, and Kairk heard her slurring her words ever so slightly.

Jawn laughed again; this time, the whole hall joined him.

Kairk smiled as he drank. The hall was ancient. The liquid stone his ancestors had used to build it, and many of the other buildings in the village, had started to crumble in places and he could see the browner patches where they’d made repairs over the years. Tapestries of woven reeds hung from the rafters, but the only other decorations were racks of spears and shells lining the walls.

A long table made from the trunk of an ancient tree dominated the center of the room. Kairk didn’t know how the thing had made it into the building. It wouldn’t have made it through the door, so he could only guess that his forefathers had built around the thing. Men and women sat on either side,

eating and drinking as they recounted the battle.

Each of the four corners had metal boxes where they'd made fires. The heat warmed the room, warding off the night's chill and giving them a place to cook.

The smells of grembal meat and roasted corn wafted through the hall, and Kairk's mouth watered as he watched the men and women eat, even though he was already stuffed.

The fireboxes in the corners threw orange shadows across the hall; the majority of the light came from the glowing dawnstones of the Travani.

Most the stones were small enough to fit on necklaces or bracelets, and almost all the attendees wore at least one glittering gem. Cora's betrothal necklace had six of the glowing stones.

Larger gems dangled from the wood beams overhead by lines of rough cord, throwing small pools of blue light throughout the room.

But the majority of the light came from the Morning Star.

The massive, glowing rock hung in a web of straps and ropes, like a ghostly chandelier. Slightly larger than Jawn's head, it cast a pale blue light over the hall, and the light pulsed and twisted like a caged animal that sent swirling patterns across the walls like they were several feet underwater.

"Travani... Travani... Lukas Travani... Where is my brother?"

Kairk turned to face his father. The older man was rocking back and forth in his seat, his grey beard dangling from his chin at various lengths where he'd tried to trim it himself. His eyes were milky, and scars and sunspots pocketed his skin from a lifetime spent outdoors.

"It's ok, Dad," Kairk said. "You're ok."

He put a hand on his father's arm, and the man's head snapped toward Kairk like he just realized that he wasn't alone.

"Lukas?"

Kairk's heart nearly broke, just like it did every time his father had a bad day. He looked back and caught Jawn's eye.

His brother put his mug down enough to look at their father, then back to Kairk, a question in his eyes.

Kairk shook his head, then pitched his voice low.

"I'm here," he said. "You need to eat."

His father grinned.

"You left me some, did you?" he asked. "Just like you to take all the meat from the grembal I killed."

Kairk sighed but continued to play along.

“That you killed? Only after I’d worn it down. You’re lucky I felt sorry for my little brother.”

“Bah,” his father waved a hand dismissively. “You wouldn’t know which end of the spear to poke it with.”

“Spoken like a boy,” Kairk said. “You going to eat that or not?”

His father snorted and grabbed the shank of meat with his hands and started to devour it in a frenzy. But after a few bites, he slowed to a more sedate pace.

Kairk sighed and leaned back. He closed his eyes and relaxed as the sound of conversation and drinking washed over him. His muscles ached, and he knew he didn’t have much longer before the exhaustion took him out for the night.

He felt Cora slip into the seat next to him. She smelled like fire and Jeeva, with a little sweat and dirt thrown in for good measure.

“You’re one to be talking about the stench,” Kairk said without opening his eyes.

“Oh, Captain, my Captain,” she said. “You wound me with such words.”

He laughed and opened his eyes.

She was tipsy, but even purple teeth couldn’t take away from her beauty. She’d wiped the dirt and grime from her face, and her brown eyes danced in the dawnstone light.

He smiled. Reaching up, he touched his wife's cheek.

“I wish we lived in simpler times,” he said.

“More boring times?” she replied.

“There’s something to be said about boring,” he said. “Not having to fight, getting to enjoy each day without worrying about what will happen tomorrow.”

“Spoken like a true Captain,” Cora said. “And kind of dark thoughts for a celebration.”

“Someone has to think about it,” he said. His eyes roamed across the table, where several full plates sat in front of empty seats.

“How’s he doing?” Cora asked.

His smile faltered as he glanced at his father. The patriarch was still working on the grembal leg, but his eyes were focused on something in the distance. Even if he couldn’t see anything.

“He’s eating,” Kairk said. “So better than most days?”

Cora frowned.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t mean to upset you.”

Kairk smiled.

“Thank you, Starlight,” he said. “I know you’re as worried about his as I am. How are they holding up?”

He nodded to the group of women.

Cora’s face fell.

“We lost Astra,” she said quietly. “They’re taking it about as well as you’d expect.”

Kairk took another sip of Jeeva and nodded slowly.

“How many others?” she asked.

“Fifteen,” he replied. “Twenty more are wounded, but the medics say most should be ok.”

They sat quietly for a moment. Cora reached out and squeezed Kairk’s hand.

“You did the best you could,” she said.

Kairk shook his head.

“If I hadn’t sent Jawn to the western ramp,” he started. “Maybe we-”

“Don’t play that game,” Cora interrupted. “The scouts only said people were approaching from the west. You had no way to know they weren’t Gentori.”

Kairk took another sip instead of answering.

“You are our captain,” she whispered. “But you are also human. You’ll make mistakes. But this wasn’t a mistake. You made a call. It’s part of the job.”

He sighed.

“And besides,” she continued. “It gave you a perfect excuse to get me out ‘danger’ once again. Don’t think I didn’t know what you were doing.”

Kairk laughed.

“I had a perfectly legitimate reason for wanting you out of there,” he said. “It was just a happy coincidence that I got to see your cute little butt safe and sound.”

“And rob me of a chance for glory,” Cora said. “Don’t think I’m going to let you get away with that.”

“Oh? And what are you going to do about it?”

She leaned in closer. He could smell the Jeeva on her breath.

“Something that would be highly inappropriate for your men to see.”

She squeezed his hand again and slowly started pulling him to his feet.

He looked back at his father, who was sitting and muttering to himself again. Kairk motioned to Jawn, silently asking if he could stay. Jawn gave him a thumbs up.

A few of the men saw Cora leading him out of the hall and started clapping and whistling. Kairk grinned sheepishly and gave them the finger as Cora weaved through the crowd.

They made it to the door, then turned to give the crowd one last wave, which saved them from having their faces bashed in as the wood swung inward with enough force to rattle the hinges.

Everyone turned, and several yelled as the cold draft blew through the opening. The man standing in the doorway ignored them. His cloak swirled around him, and dark hair whipped over his face.

His eyes were wide but narrowed in small relief when he found Kairk.

“Captain,” he called.

“Jeriah?” Kairk said, his eyes straining to make out man’s features. The Jeeva could have had something to do with his struggles as well. “You’re not supposed to be back for another three days.”

“The Gentori will be here in two days.”

Kairk sighed.

“You’re a bit late friend,” he said. “We repelled the raiders today. But why don’t you sit-”

“No,” Jeriah said. “Not a raiding party. War bands.”

Kairk frowned. “They haven’t put together a full war band since before I became captain. You’re sure?”

“Not a War Band,” Jeriah said. “War Bands. The Gentori have allied with the Clevons and Rospeltons.”

He held Kairk’s eyes, pausing to give his words the proper weight.

“They’re coming to wipe us out.”

CHAPTER THREE

HE'D HOPED his last sunrise would be beautiful.

In his more optimistic moments, usually after several pints of Jeeva, Kairk permitted himself to dream. His people were free, able to live without the silhouette of the Nightbringer looming over them. They weren't afraid to have children.

Then he woke up, and reality bore down against his mind astride a blinding headache.

And today, the dream would end.

His eyes scanned the men and women before him. They were ready. The turtle shells strapped to their chests were polished to a shine, and every spearhead was sharp enough to shave with. Dawnstones twinkled in the darkness, casting ghostly shadows across faces and armor. Nearly every man and woman had at least one of the shimmering rocks.

He touched the one that hung around his neck. It was larger than most of his people's, but it wasn't the size that calmed him. His father had given it to him the night he'd promoted his son to Captain, and its familiar weight reminded him of his hero.

"How's my favorite idiot today?" Cora's tone was light. The string of dawnstones he'd given her on their wedding day glowed around her neck.

"You shouldn't speak like that in front of them," he scolded, jerking his head to his soldiers.

"They're too polite to remind you how stupid you are."

This time the smile reached her eyes. "But I'm your wife, so it's my duty to make sure that head of yours doesn't get too big."

A random fit of coughing sprang up from the assembled warriors,

many raising hands to cover their mouths, or turning to check on equipment that had been triple checked already.

He wanted to kiss her.

Instead, he turned to the men and women before him. Their muffled laughs settled into silence.

If they'd only been fighting the Gentori, Kairk would have still liked their chances. Their ancestors had built the town on a defensible plateau, accessible only through the maze of narrow slot canyons the Travani had fought to defend over the last few days. The Travani knew those goat trails better than anyone, and the Gentori didn't have enough warriors attack through more than one or two at a time.

But with the Clevons and Rospeltons, their victory was assured.

Even if they held half the paths, the enemy would stab them in the back.

Kairk had ordered his people to flee up the mountain, but even that was only a delaying tactic. There wasn't enough food, and the fires they would build to face the cold winds would be a beacon for those hunting them.

He'd arrayed his forces at the entrance to the trail. Behind them, the Morning Star glowed from the perch high above. Kairk knew the Gentori would swarm towards it like bugs to a flame; in fact, he was counting on it to give the survivors as much of a head start as possible. With every enemy hoping to claim the Morning Star for themselves, the remnants of the Travani may slip away.

There was no hope for Kairk and his warriors. The Gentori would crush them, but they would pay for each step toward the Morning Star in blood.

Not that they cared about the price.

The Travani had won battles, but after the slaughters, they had found few dawnstones among the enemy dead. The Gentori had given farmers spears, and let his warriors waste their energy and blood killing smaller men.

They were going to do the same thing today.

Kairk could barely see the Gentori's clan captains, their dawnstone jewelry twinkling as they sat on their eight-legged grembals. He knew they would wait and let his men tire themselves slaying the peasants who had been lured to this fight by the hope of fame and wealth.

It would never happen. A farmer with no training and only a rusty spear could not break his people, but they would try, and the Travani would send them to the stars like cattle to the slaughter.

But eventually the Gentori's true warriors would join the fight, and it

would be Kairk's turn to ascend to the stars.

"You all know how this will end," Kairk said. "We didn't start this, but I refuse to let it end as a slave to those Gentori butchers. We've lost our homes. We have nothing left to protect. Except them."

He pointed a spear at the line of figures plodding into the mountains. Most were hunched over, or too small to hold a weapon. There were a handful of warriors in that line as well, the unlucky few who had pulled the shortest straws. They would live, but Kairk knew the image of their brothers and sisters assembled for a battle that they could not win would haunt them for years to come.

"We fight, so they survive. We die so the Travani can someday return and reclaim our dawnstones." It was a lie, and they all knew it. But it was the lie of hope. "I could not ask for better men to lead." That was not a lie. "We return to the stars tonight. Take as many of those Gentori bastards with you as you can. The Tribe is greater!" He finished with the motto that had been passed down from the first Starfallen.

A deep, throaty cheer rose from the ranks, and Kairk smiled at the warriors, though the number smiling back at him gave him pause.

Half were already on their way to the stars. They'd taken three times that many Gentori with them, but that was little solace. After all, the strength and skill of his people had never been the problem.

The first enemy troops, little more than a bloodthirsty mob, attacked just after dawn. Orange sunlight blinded the men assaulting the hill, and the Travani cut them down without losing a single warrior.

The mob recoiled briefly, but then drew itself back up and threw its fists of men back into Travani lines.

Travani blood mixed with the Gentori as the sun rose to its peak. Kairk looked on with despair as he saw one of the lines start to buckle. He began to turn when a flash of golden hair raced past him toward the failing men.

"Cora!" He raced after her, jumping past his startled men. A part of his mind scolded him for being so reckless. But it was quickly silenced by another voice, screaming to move faster and kill anyone who came near his bride.

He was next to her, stabbing anyone not wearing a red shell over their chest. The men and women around them recognized their chief and pushed forward with a renewed fury. Slowly, the Gentori wilted. Kairk grabbed Cora's shoulder and yanked her back when she tried to join the front ranks.

For a moment, he thought she might try to cut off his hand.

“Who’s being an idiot now?” He managed a tight smile.

“We need everyone upfront,” she said.

“I need you.” He put his arm over her shoulders. “I can’t be directing our people and watching your back at the same time.”

“We’re all dead,” she said quietly. “We both know it.”

He started to reply when green lights sprang from the trees at the base of the hill. The lights streaked through Gentori, sometimes hitting two or three without slowing. The lucky ones died.

Realization and horror swept across the Gentori. Their captains turned tried to turn their assault from the enemy on the hill to the murderers behind.

The hill became an island in a sea of sickly green light and Gentori corpses.

The men before the Travani decided they’d rather face the spears before them, than the destructive beams behind.

They threw themselves at the Travani with wild abandon. They leaped at the Travani line, only to be impaled by raised spears. The dead stood against the shields, held up by Travani spears and the press of terrified Gentori.

From his perch above the field, Kairk saw a group of figures emerged from the forest and continued killing any Gentori standing. A few threw down their spears, but the demons burned them with the green light. More fled, only to die as emerald lightning sliced through their backs.

Kairk saw one of the lights race toward one of the Gentori captains, only to disappear in a blinding flash that was accompanied by a boom that rattled Kairk’s teeth. Bodies flew hundreds of feet away from where the man had been, and when Kairk blinked away the purple ball in his vision, he saw a crater at least forty paces across in the center of the Gentori formations.

There were only five beasts, but they had dismantled an army of at least a thousand with ease.

“What are they?” The quiver in Cora’s normally fearless voice shook him more than he cared to admit. “And what do we do when they come for us?”

Kairk was glad she wasn’t deluding herself either.

The lights stopped. The things turned as one to come up the hill. Kairk’s chest swelled with pride as his men leveled spears at this new enemy, even if they were now the cattle being driven to the stars.

The five figures stopped a dozen paces before the spearheads.

“Leader,” the one in the middle said. His voice sounded like he was

shouting from deep within a cave.

“I.” Kairk gently pushed between two of his warriors and stepped forward, strangely calm. He had expected to feel fear at the prospect of his ascension.

The demons were all shorter than he’d first thought, his chin nearly touched his chest as he looked at the top of its head, which was a glossy, smooth black ball. Their skin was grey, with black discs, similar to the turtle shells his people wore on their chests, running from the neck to where their legs, each of which had several smaller bits of turtle shell armor, came out of their torso. Each held an odd grey weapon, like a spear without the head and with two smaller sticks attached. The same killing green light they had unleashed on the Gentori glowed softly on the side of the weapon.

“Name?”

“I am Kairk. Descendent of the Starfallen Maxima. Captain of the Travani. What are you?”

In response, the demon pulled his weapon up. Kairk sucked in his breath.

The demon didn’t fire. Instead, it pushed the odd spear onto its back. There was a click, and the weapon stuck on its back by another bit of sorcery. Then it grabbed its chin and pulled its head off.

Kairk gasped.

The woman’s hair was black, but short, not even covering her ears. Then there were her eyes — almost the same color as her shell.

“I am Master Chief Petty Officer Xiao, of the UEAF SS *Yukon*.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WOMAN'S voice sounded harsh to Kairk's ears. He understood the words, but they didn't make any sense the way she said them.

"I have not heard of the Yukon tribe," he said cautiously. "But from your weapons, you are not from this place."

"You could say that." The woman smiled. "We're searching for something."

She nodded at the soft glow of the Morning Star. "And we just found it."

Kairk stiffened. "I'm sorry. Your journey has been in vain."

"Captain, I could kill all of your people and take the Rugium."

"I do not know what 'Rugium' is, but while a Travani takes breath, the Morning Star is ours. Without it, there is no hope of returning to the stars. These are the words of the Starfallen."

A chorus of agreement rang out from behind him.

"You have seen what we can do. Your people are going to die. Don't..." The woman raised a hand to her ear. "Sir?" She looked up. "My captain would like to speak with you."

Kairk looked at the woman carefully. "When?"

"Now."

She smiled again, and with a flick of her wrist, a small ball raced toward him. He reached up to catch it, but it stopped a pace before his hand. He gasped and took a step back as it burst into a cloud of stars. The cloud of light hung in the air for a moment, then the bright dots darted forward and transformed into a ghost of a man sitting in a chair. Kairk could still see Xiao through the man's body.

"Captain Kairk? I am Miles Dawson, Captain of the *Yukon*. Good day."

“Is now the proper time to discuss the weather?” Kairk asked. “Your warrior has threatened to destroy my people.”

“I apologize. Master Chief Xiao can be a bit, aggressive, at times. It seems to me that rather than destroy each other, we could help on another. I propose a truce and trade.”

“What do you want?”

He motioned to the dawnstone that hung around Kairk’s neck. “For that, I’ll give you the ability to protect your people. I understand that you still have many enemies, even if we did thin them out a bit for you.”

Kairk throat tightened at the thought of giving up his father’s dawnstone. He would never have considered the offer, except that this could be what his people needed to survive. And if he had to choose between giving it to this man while he was alive instead of it being taken off his body by some Gentori butcher...

“We would get your weapons?”

“For a start. We can discuss future deals as well. But I am willing to part with two of my people’s energy rifles.”

“You will give us all five.”

“I cannot leave my people unprotected. Three.”

Kairk frowned. These people could have wiped out the Travani as effortlessly as the Gentori, but they hadn’t.

“These are not your only weapons. It would have been foolish to send all your warriors. You can use the ones you didn’t send to protect yourself. Four.”

Miles’ lips twitched upward. “Fair point. Four it is.”

He motioned back to the Master Chief.

“As a show of good faith, I’m going to send the Master Chief to show you how to use them. She’ll report back to me and reequip, then come to your camp. We’ll be in touch. It has been a pleasure to meet you.”

The man exploded in a colored dust cloud, which faded in the afternoon light as the sphere retreated to Xiao’s hand.

She nodded at the four others, and they laid down their weapons in front of Kairk. He lifted the stone over his head and handed it to Xiao before the guilt overcame him, and he changed his mind. Her eyes had a wild gleam, like a child given their favorite treat after being denied. She placed the stone in a small box at her waist, letting her hand rest atop the closed lid. With her other hand, she pulled the black headpiece back over her head.

As one, the five grey and black figures turned and jogged into the woods.

Kairk knelt to examine the “rifles.” They were a bit shorter than his arm, and the green light on the sides cast a sickly shadow over the trampled grass. He let his eyes drift to where a Gentori corpse lay at the base of the hill. Smoke still rose from the hole in the man’s chest.

“It could have been us,” Cora said loud enough so only he could hear. He saw her looking over at the field of smoldering death. “What have we agreed to?”

He was starting to wonder the same thing. “Gather the ascended and send a runner to catch those going up the mountain. Jawn, get some food going for the men.”

He stared after the retreating figures.

“I want everyone rested when our new friends return.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SOUND of celebration and drinking wafted through the open door behind him. Kairk knew he should be inside with his people, but after facing ascension, he only wanted to watch the sunset.

The stone steps were cool under him, and he was thankful for the furs that insulated him from the winter wind. But the view of the orange, purple, and pink sunset was worth the momentary discomfort.

“How can we adequately celebrate without our captain?” Cora said as she came through the door.

Kairk looked back with a smile and accepted a steaming bowl. The smell of spiced meat made his mouth water and his nose burn. He dug the wooden spoon into the bowl, mixing the orange sauce that covered the grembal meat with the bed of Raiss underneath. The long white grains absorbed the flavorful sauce and the meat practically melted as Kairk scooped it a bite out.

His eyes watered as the flavors danced on his tongue, and he raised an eyebrow at Cora.

“Roasted cresha?”

“I thought it was a special enough occasion to break into my private stores,” she said. “What with almost ascending and all.”

Kairk chuckled and took another bite. He let the spice linger on his tongue as he chewed the meat.

“Why do I feel like everything has changed?” She asked quietly.

He looked down at the rifles lined up in a neat row before them.

“Because they have.”

She sighed and put her head on his shoulder.

“I’m beginning to regret asking for less boring times to live in.”

Kairk chuckled again. "You have no one to blame but yourself."

She laughed with him this time. Then they settled into a comfortable silence as the sun fell. Kairk finished the meal and set the bowl on the steps next to him.

The sun had almost set when a sentry skidded to a stop in front of them.

"She's here, Captain."

Kairk nodded.

"We've got plenty of food. Have her join us."

The sentry nodded and waved near the perimeter of the camp before running inside the hall.

Two warriors "escorted" Xiao, though she couldn't have looked more unconcerned. Her rifle strapped to her back, and helmet hanging from her waist. She carried a large pack over one shoulder.

"Captain," she stopped and touched four fingers to an eyebrow.

Kairk assumed it was a greeting and touched his fist to his heart in return. The first scout returned with another bowl, which Kairk took, then held out to Xiao.

"Join us."

Xiao dropped her pack and accepted the bowl.

"You brought much." Kairk eyed the bag.

She shrugged. "It takes a lot to teach someone how to use an energy rifle."

"When do we start?"

Xiao looked at the darkening sky. "Tomorrow morning."

Kairk motioned to sentry. "Spread the word. I want everyone ready when the sun crests the mountain."

There were a mournful number of empty huts, and Kairk assigned Xiao to one for the night. She touched her brow again and disappeared through the door.

Kairk and Cora made their way to their own home; a simple hut, thatch roof and log walls filled in with mud. Cora lit a small beeswax candle with her flint. A small fire pit was dug in the center when it was cold enough to freeze a man's breath, which was more often than Kairk preferred. Their pine needle mattress was in one corner, and their limited clothes hung on pegs along the far wall.

"What do you think of her?" Cora asked.

"Xiao?"

“No, the other stranger that came to our fire tonight.”

“I think she’ll give us a chance to save our people.”

“I hope that’s all they give us.”

Kairk arched an eyebrow at his wife. “You think it is a trick?”

“Be careful. You saw what their weapons did. They could crush us if they wanted, but they didn’t. Something isn’t right.”

Kairk nodded, then tapped his chin thoughtfully.

“You think she’ll try to steal the Morning Star.”

She smiled. “I asked Deruk to watch her hut just in case. If she does try, I’ll roast her over the cook fire to demonstrate how what a poor choice it was to take advantage of our hospitality.”

Kairk’s shiver was only half feigned. “I’m glad I’m on your good side.”

“You think so?” She glared at him. “I was about to kill a Gentori when you pulled me away.”

“It was to protect you!”

“That doesn’t mean you’re in the clear. However,” Cora turned around so he could reach the knots holding the turtle shell to her chest and grinned at him, “get me out of this and show me how sorry you are, and I may stay my hand another day.”

He missed the sunrise the next morning, enjoying a more beautiful view instead. Finally, they left their hut and made his way to the mess hall. He wondered if he’d have to wake Xiao, but the woman was already up, wandering around the village. He spotted her between two of the huts and called out.

“Xiao!”

The woman stood and offered another greeting, which he returned. “Morning, Captain.”

“Are you ready?”

“Of course, sir.”

She fell into step behind him and Cora.

“I don’t know if we’ve been introduced,” she said.

Cora looked back in confusion.

“Xiao.”

She held out a hand.

Kairk and Cora stared down at her outstretched hand in confusion.

“I know,” Cora said.

Xiao's lips pressed into a thin line.

"Where we come from, when you meet a stranger, you tell them your name and shake hands," she said. "It's a polite gesture."

Cora glanced at Kairk, who only shrugged. Cora hesitantly took Xiao's hand and shook it.

"Cora," she said.

"Pleasure to meet you," Xiao said, her smile not quite touching her eyes.

Cora pulled her hand back, gave Kairk one last look, and started toward the mess hall.

The square in front of the mess hall was filled with warriors milling around. The four rifles still lay on the ground in front of the steps.

Kairk lifted one of the rifles then looked back over the assembled warriors.

"Cora, Jawn, and Raab."

Raab looked up in surprise from where he was leaning against a hut on the edge of the square. He looked around, jaw open, but saw others staring back at him.

"Sir?"

"A rifle," Kairk said. "Grab one."

"I, sir?"

"Now," Kairk said.

The man walked forward, not looking up from the ground. He stopped short of where the last rifle lay.

"Sir," Raab started. "I lost my dawnstone. I'm not-"

"Did losing your dawnstone take away your ability to shoot a bow?" Kairk interrupted.

"I don't think so," Raab said.

"Well these things shoot light arrows," he said. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Xiao frown, but he ignored her. "And I'm going to need my best archers to weld them. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and grab it."

Raab's chest swelled slightly, and he met Kairk's eyes for the first time. Kairk gave him a little nod, which he returned before bending to lift the rifle.

"How many do we need?" Kairk asked Xiao.

"You can make do with what you have," she said. "But I'd recommend more just in case. I can probably teach about twenty today."

Kairk selected sixteen more men and women. Those whose names were

called stood a bit straighter.

Kairk would have taken all of them if he could.

Kairk brought twenty men to a cornfield with a low hill on one end. Xiao showed them the parts of the rifle, how to eject something she called a “heat sink,” and hold the weapon while running.

The Travani took turns with the weapons until everyone had demonstrated the techniques to Xiao’s satisfaction. Xiao asked them to collect and stack bundles of dry stalks near the base of the hill. She dug her heel through the dirt about fifty paces from where they were setting up the stacks.

The sun was directly overhead when she finally gave the last man a nod of approval.

“Now that I don’t think you’re going to shoot yourselves in the face,” she said. “It’s time for the fun part.”

Then she stepped up to the line she’d drawn in the dirt facing the bundles of stalks.

“Range is hot,” Xiao pressed her face to the side of the rifle. A green flash leaped from the end of the gun toward the bundle of stalks. Several more bolts of light raced away before she lowered the weapon.

“Shall we?” Xiao gestured toward the stalks. Kairk’s eyes widened as they drew closer. Tendrils of smoke rose from fist-sized holes burned through the thickest part of the bundle. His warriors crowded around, each gaping at the damage before Xiao waved them back to their original position and held out the rifle.

”Your turn.”

Kairk cradled the weapon against his shoulder, looked down the grey length of the “barrel,” and pulled the “trigger.”

The weapon hummed. The bright green haze overpowered his vision for a moment. It took several seconds for his sight to clear of the purple lines, but there was a jagged hole in another bundle.

Kairk smiled and lined up another shot. Then another.

Most of the shots went into the side of the hill, leaving black pockmarks in the grass. But some also hit the bundles, and he felt a thrill imagining it was Vespa, the Gentori Captain.

He looked up as the stalks collapsed into a pile of ash. His head snapped up when a firm hand landed on his shoulder.

“Not bad for your first time.” Xiao sounded surprised. “Who’s

next?”

One by one, the men and women accepted the rifle and sent green lightning “downrange,” as Xiao instructed. Some were better than others, but there were soon twenty piles of ash at the foot of the hill.

They gathered more bundles of sticks, and Xiao had them repeat the process. By the time Kairk had burned through the third bundle, more of his shots were hitting than not.

“Kairk,” Cora caught his arm as he accepted the weapon a fifth time. “We need to go. If we stay much longer, we won’t be ready to honor the ascended.”

Kairk looked up. The sun was halfway to the horizon, but more worrisome were the dark clouds cresting over the mountain. He sighed and powered the weapon down as Xiao had shown them. He motioned for the others to do the same.

Xiao frowned.

“There is still plenty of daylight,” she said. “I can’t promise that my captain will let me come back again.”

“Then we will learn on our own,” Cora said. “We have important matters to attend to.”

Xiao cocked her head.

“What is more important than learning to defend yourself?”

Cora started to reply, but Kairk put a hand on her arm.

“Remembering those who have gone to the stars so we may continue here,” Kairk said. “Thank you for your assistance.”

He turned and started back. There was a shuffle of feet and the crunch of ice and snow as they headed back.

“May I join you?” Xiao said, her tone softer but loud enough to be heard.

Cora stiffened at his side, but Kairk turned back.

“Why?”

“I would pay tribute to those we couldn’t save.”

Kairk met his wife’s eyes, and she gave a subtle shake of her head.

“We will leave when the sun is about to touch the horizon,” he said.

CHAPTER SIX

AN HOUR LATER, they were back in the village preparing to leave. It had started snowing, but the air didn't smell like a storm yet. It would be tricky getting up the mountain, but everyone, except for Xiao, had been climbing up the narrow paths since they were children.

Over a hundred men and women had formed a column in the center of the village.

Families stood together, and the head of the house carried a small clay pot. They were all wearing thick furs but left their faces uncovered, so the black paint on their foreheads was visible. The warriors had painted their turtle shell armor black and carried two shields instead of a shield and spear, while the others held small gifts of meat or flowers.

Xiao looked oddly out of place in her black and grey armor which didn't look thick enough to handle the fall nights, let alone a winter blizzard. Even one as mild as Kairk was expecting.

But if the cold did bother her, she didn't give any hint of it.

"You shouldn't let her come," Cora said. "She doesn't have a place here."

"I want to keep an eye on her," Kairk said. "And I think there could be value in finding out if she is genuine about paying her respects."

"She's not," Cora said.

"You're so sure?" Kairk said, raising one eyebrow.

"How can she be?" Cora countered. "She didn't know any of the ascended."

"You do not need to know someone to grieve for them," Kairk said. "Empathy can be as great a weapon as a rifle."

Cora bit back a retort.

“Aye, Captain,” she said, touching her brow in an exaggerated fashion similar to Xiao before turning to take her place at the front of the line.

Kairk sighed but joined her at the front of the crowd. He took a deep breath and gave her a tight smile before he faced the assembled crowd.

“From the Stars, we came,” he shouted.

“To the Stars, we will return,” they responded.

He turned back to Cora, who smiled and reached out to squeeze his hand, though she pointedly didn’t look at Xiao at the back of the column.

Kairk set off at an easy jog. Hundreds of feet pounded up the mountainside after him. He let his mind wander as they climbed, trusting his feet to find the path. His lungs burned in the cold air, but the sound of footfalls behind him spurred him on. They wound up and up, crossing switchbacks and small streams and bridges as they climbed.

He caught sight of Xiao on a few of the switchbacks. She was breathing as heavily as the others, but she appeared to be sweating despite the lack of layers.

An orange sliver was still visible above the horizon, and below the clouds when they reached their destination, the Chariot of the Starfallen.

At least twice as tall as he was and a hundred paces across, it seemed to shift, and shimmer as the dying sunlight hit the black skin. It was the same metal as his hatchet, and he could only imagine what kind of magic had protected the chariot through its fall from the heavens. There was a layer of snow on top, but otherwise, the metal was unblemished.

The shimmering shell was unbroken except for a short hole that Kairk had to duck his head to pass through.

Soft white and red lights raced by under his feet like ants trying to escape through the hole Kairk had just entered. Rows upon rows of benches lined the sides and ran along the middle of the Chariot. To the right and left were ladders that went to higher, and lower, levels that held identical lights and benches. The air smelled fresh, but not like the mountain air outside. There was a tang of citrus, like ground-up Grupe fruit rines, that seemed out of place amongst the snow and pine.

The chariot hummed with the souls of his ancestors, and he heard them whispering on the breeze that always greeted him when he entered through the passage.

Travani men and woman followed him through the hole and split off to different sections of the benches. They pulled the corks on their pots and

dipped thin brushes into the liquid before starting to write with precise, purposeful strokes.

“The names of those who joined their ancestors,” Kairk said to Xiao. He took Cora’s hand and led them both up a short flight of stairs to a single chair.

‘CAPT TRAVANI’ was emblazed in gold lettering across the back of the chair. Beneath the gold letters, rows of names were printed in black ink. Kairk pointed to the last one.

“My grandfather,” he said softly.

“Well that explains a lot,” Xiao said.

Kairk and Cora both looked up.

“We come from the same place,” Xiao said with a sad smile.

“This,” she gestured around the Chariot, “is a lifeboat — one of the earliest ever made if I’m not mistaken. I’ll hazard a guess and say that if you can go up one more floor and down three more. And that if you counted up all of the names like the one there.” This time she pointed to Kairk’s ancestor. “You’d end up with just over seven thousand names. Am I right?”

“We’ve never counted,” Cora said. “How do you know about this?”

“I told you we come from the same place.” Xiao shrugged. “Do you know what your Morning Star is?”

“It has been passed down from the original Starfallen,” Kairk said slowly. “It is a gift that will return us to the stars when we leave this world.”

“That is partially true,” Xiao said. “I bet I know why you think that, though.”

“Are you calling our ancestors liars?” Cora hissed.

“Peace,” Kairk gripped her arm tightly, unsure if it was to remind his wife he was there or to hold her back. “You have helped us. That does not mean I will tolerate disrespect.”

Xiao held up her hands. “I meant no offense. Where I, we, come from, is a planet called Earth. Hundreds of years ago, some smart people figured out that we could leave the planet and go to other planets. But it wasn’t until we discovered Rugium, a type of rock that you call a Dawnstone, that we were able to go very far. I’m just a marine, so I don’t know how it works, but I do know it creates a hole in space that you can travel through to get to another world. And if you try to split it into smaller bits, the results can be... messy.”

“You have your own Morning Star?” Kairk asked.

“A much, much smaller one.” Xiao sighed. “According to the history

books, we found the one you have on another planet called Pluto. Earth had too many people and not enough space, so some other really smart people found another planet they thought would be able to support life and we put a bunch of people on a ship, er, a chariot a million times the size of this one called the *Mayflower* and sent a billion of people on it. They went through the hole created by the Rugium, then disappeared.”

“How do you lose something that big?” Cora asked.

Xiao shrugged. “Space is bigger.”

“They didn’t come back through the hole?” Kairk said.

“Something must have gone wrong. And this,” she waved to the Chariot again, “suggests it went really wrong.”

Kairk looked around the cavernous Chariot with new eyes. He tried to imagine his ancestor, Maxima Travani, in Xiao’s place. It seemed wrong.

“Why didn’t they send someone else to find out what happened?” Cora said.

Xiao winced. “Our smart people weren’t as smart as they thought. They tried to send another ship, a much smaller ship, but they didn’t find the *Mayflower*. The effects of the Rugium can vary wildly based on the stone, and since they didn’t have the original sample that was on the ship, there was no way to tell where it went.”

“How’d you get here then?” Kairk asked.

The marine shrugged.

“Mostly luck. We’ve been making short trips for the better part of ten years. When we arrived in the system, we picked up a distress ping from the remains of the ship your ancestors came on. We got closer and found a bustling planet.”

“One that’s doing fine without your help,” Cora said.

Xiao smiled. “Really? Because if I remember correctly, you were about to be turned into pin cushions.”

“It would have been better than having our souls burned by your weapons.”

“Enough,” Kairk cut off further argument. He put an arm around Cora’s shoulders before addressing Xiao. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying we can help you. Your sick could be healed. You could protect your children.” Her dark eyes danced in the dim light. “You could travel the stars.”

Kairk glanced at Cora, who was glowering at Xiao in the flickering light.

“And what would the cost of that be?” He asked though he thought he knew the answer.

“To get a ship big enough for all your people, we’d need the Morning Star.”

“Absolutely not,” Cora snapped. “You’re not getting anything with empty promises of maybe coming back for us someday.”

Xiao shrugged.

“I’m just telling you what it’ll take,” she said. “You’ve seen what we can do. It’s up to you to decide if it’s worth joining the rest of your species or if you want to stay on this backwater planet.”

“This planet is our home,” Cora said. “You are a visitor. We welcomed you with open arms, shared our food, and now you insult us?”

She took a step forward, one hand reaching for the knife at her belt.

Kairk grabbed her wrist.

“Not here,” he said. “You fight, do it out there.”

He thrust his chin toward the hatch at the end of the Chariot.

Cora’s eyes burned, and she jerked her wrist free of his hand, but her knife stayed in its sheath.

Xiao watched, arms folded and a small smirk on her lips.

“It’s late,” Kairk said. “We have a long trip home. Can you two avoid killing each other until then?”

“No promises,” Cora said, eyes shooting daggers at the Xiao.

“Just try,” Kairk said with a sigh.

He looked at Xiao, who only nodded and raised her hands before turning sharply on a heel and striding toward the opening.

Cora started to follow, but Kairk put a hand on her shoulder.

“Starlight,” he whispered. “I know you don’t like her, but we can use their help. The Gentori will recover, and they’ll be back.”

“I know,” Cora said. “But I’d rather face a thousand spears than give that demon in a woman’s body a single dawnstone.”

Kairk sighed.

“Just try to be civil,” he said. “We don’t know what we don’t know. Maybe there’s another way.”

Cora jaw tightened.

“Please?”

He thought she was going to protest further, but her eyes softened. She reached up and cupped her hand around his cheek.

“I’ll try,” she said. “But only because I’m so fond of my favorite idiot.”
Kairk laughed.

“Never pass up a chance to slide in a dagger, do you?”

“I wouldn’t be the love of your life if I didn’t,” she said.

Kairk kissed her. It wasn’t the most scandalous kiss they’d ever shared, but nor was it the most chaste.

When they broke apart, he took her hand, and together they walked out of the Chariot.

The sunset was in its death throes, lines of dark purple and blue overwhelming the last bits of orange on the horizon as they tried to escape under the clouds one last time.

Kairk could see over the valley below, with a few fires dotting the otherwise grey-black landscape.

The wind was cold this high up, and even though he’d been climbing through these passes his entire life, he felt like he couldn’t get enough air.

Most of the Travani had finished paying their respects and gathered in small groups outside the Chariot.

Kairk and Cora made their way around, the fresh snow announcing their approach to each group. For all her bluff and bluster, Cora seemed to know exactly what each person needed most. For some, it was a soft, sympathetic word. She took the small cups of Jeeva and raised a toast with others. And a few just wanted a hug.

Kairk hung back, letting her take the lead in most groups. He never seemed to want to have the right words to say, and when he did try, there was often an awkward silence that Cora filled with whatever he should have said.

“I hate this,” he said. “I’d rather face two thousand Gentori spears than face another orphan. You always know what they need. I just make things worse.”

Cora looked over at him, her lips smiling sadly.

“Two thousand?” she said. “Now you’re just showing off.”

Kairk chuckled and shook his head.

“I know what you mean though,” she continued, her smile disappearing. “I wish I didn’t have this much practice.”

When they finished their circuit around the people, the sun was completely gone. The wind had picked up, and despite his layers of fur, Kairk hugged Cora closer to stay warm.

Xiao stood on the edge of the cliff. She’d put her helmet on, the only

indication that the cold air had affected her and was staring out over the valley.

“It’s beautiful,” she said without turning as Kairk and Cora approached. Her voice had the gravelly tone Kairk had heard when they’d first met her. “I’ve been to a hundred worlds, and each one is unique.”

She glanced up.

“And this view never gets old.”

Kairk looked up.

Millions of tiny dots filled the sky. Some twinkled, a few were red or yellow, and others flashed across the black expanse then disappeared. But they were all there.

She finally turned, the plate in front of her face went from black to clear, and soft blue lights inside the helmet lit her face.

“Our ancestors wanted to go to the stars,” she said. “They couldn’t always see them from Earth. Even back then, there was too much pollution to see them from the cities, so they had to travel hundreds of miles to see a clear night sky. It’s worse now. Most people will never see a star.”

“Never see a star?” Kairk whispered in disbelief. “How?”

There was a hiss, and Xiao removed her helmet. She hooked it to her belt and ran a hand through her short hair.

“Earth is dying,” Xiao said. “And for all our technology, our attempts to terraform the other planets in our solar system have failed.”

“Terra what?” Cora said.

“Change the planet to make it this,” Xiao said, gesturing to encompass everything around them. “A place where humans can live. We tried to change one planet in our system, Mars, but it was too expensive. The smart people couldn’t get it close enough where people didn’t need specialized equipment to go outside, so we could never build the infrastructure to get enough people there to relieve the stress on Earth.”

“Why not?” Cora asked. “You have your rifles, and you claim to have built the ship that brought us here. Surely you could fix things.”

Xiao laughed.

“We’re much better at killing one another than fixing problems,” she said. “But then we found Rugium.”

“The dawnstones,” Kairk said.

Xiao nodded.

“Suddenly, we could find places that already supported life and go there.

All we had to do was build the ships. Still not a small expense, but compared to transforming a whole planet, it was minuscule. Including you, we now have two colonies.”

“So, you already have plenty of ‘Rugium’ without ours,” Cora said.

“We have enough for two ships,” Xiao said. “One is the colonist ship, which we still need to take supplies back and forth between Earth and Hope.”

“And the other?”

“The *Yukon*,” Xiao said. “You would not believe how much political wrangling there was over who got to be on the crew. When you’re the only other hope for finding new planets or sources of Rugium, everyone wants to make sure they have a say. The nerds fine-tuned the engines based on the limited data we got back from the *Mayflower* before it disappeared, then we scoured the planet for the colonists.”

“I can imagine,” Kairk said. “I can also imagine that you’re not telling us this because you just want to give us a lecture.”

“I think she’s trying to tell us how badly they need the *Morning Star*,” Cora said. “Make us feel bad for the people of ‘Earth’ for ruining their planet.”

Xiao sighed.

“I’m not going to lie to you; we’re desperate. We can’t split Rugium, so we’ve had to put all our eggs in one basket with the ships we’ve built. It was a huge risk to send the *Yukon* out, even with the data from the *Mayflower*. We have to be careful and can’t push the *Fortune* or *Yukon* too hard because the colony, and Earth, will likely die if they can’t share supplies.”

“But if you had the *Morning Star*, you could build another and everyone lives,” Kairk said.

“We’re talking about three billion people on Hope and another twelve billion on Earth,” Xiao said. “I know what we’re asking, so please just think about it.”

“We have,” Cora said. “And the answer is no. We don’t know any of those people. They shouldn’t have broken their home.”

“We’ll see if we can find a middle ground,” Kairk said. “One that helps both our people.”

Cora glared at him, but he pulled her closer.

“For now, let’s go home.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FRESH SNOW made the trek down the mountain more treacherous than the ascent, and it took almost twice as long to get back. The wind wasn't helping, as it whipped the snow over rocks and newly frozen puddles.

Kairk breathed a sigh of relief, which he immediately regretted as the freezing air burned his lungs when he stepped off the trail and back into the village.

The column slowly broke apart, with each family drifting back to the warmth and comfort of their homes. Most already had fires lit thanks to the neighbors who hadn't needed to make the journey. Kairk smiled at the smell of roasted meat and stew, his heart swelling with pride at the generosity of his people.

"Xiao," he said as they reached the mess hall. "You are welcome to stay another night. You will be in the same cabin as before."

The woman bowed her head. "Thank you. Please consider what we discussed."

Cora's jaw tightened as she spoke, but she remained silent.

"We will," Kairk said. "But I make no promises."

"That's all I can ask," Xiao said. "Goodnight."

She walked off, Cora watching every step like she was worried Xiao was trying to steal the dirt on the bottom of her boots.

"Let's go," she said when Xiao disappeared. "I'm ready for bed."

"Go ahead," Kairk said. "I'm going to check on Jawn and my father."

"Don't be long," she said. "I'm going to need my personal heater tonight."

Kairk laughed and kissed her forehead.

She kissed him back, then headed toward their cabin.

Kairk went the opposite direction, toward his father's home. He pulled his furs tight, feeling the hatchet pressing into his side.

He pushed the door to his father's cabin open, and the wind immediately died down.

The cabin was nearly identical to Kairk's, which wasn't a surprise since almost all of the cabins were of the same design.

The room was warm, even though the fire had mostly burned down to embers. There wasn't enough light to see clearly, but there was a lump on his father's bed.

On the opposite side of the room, Jawn snored in his fur-covered bed. There was a half-empty pitcher of Jeeva, and even in his sleep, Jawn managed to hold a wooden cup.

Kairk walked over, biting back a curse as he bashed his shin into a wooden stool. He looked up, but the bed didn't move. Kairk made his way more carefully to his father's bed.

As he got closer, he realized the lump on the bed wasn't as large as it should have been.

"Dad?"

His whisper was barely audible over the howl of the wind outside and the crackling embers.

The lump didn't move.

"Dad?" he said louder.

He reached the bed and put a hand on the lump. It collapsed under his hand.

He yanked the furs and blankets off, revealing an empty bed.

Kairk's eyes darted around the room, his heart starting to beat fast. Abandoning any attempt to be quiet, he rushed to Jawn's bed and shook his brother awake.

"Jawn," Kairk said. "Jawn, wake up."

"Another round?" Jawn said. He held up his cup without opening his eyes. "Why not?"

Kairk slapped the cup away, sending it flying and coating the wall with dark purple.

"Wheres dad?"

"In bed," Jawn said. "Hey, you spilled my-"

"He's not there," Kairk said. "You were supposed to be watching him."

Not drinking yourself into oblivion.”

Jawn blinked several times, his mouth working in bizarre ways as he tried to form a rebuttal.

“Worthless,” Kairk muttered.

He pushed out the door and back into the night.

“Dad?” he yelled. “Pekard Travani? Dad?”

Several people looked up at his voice, only to look one away.

It wasn’t the first time his father had wandered off after all.

Kairk raced up and down the street, calling for his father and hoping he'd at least had the presence of mind to dress warmly, but he wouldn't bet on it.

He left the relative shelter of the cabins and scanned the open ground for any tracks. Unfortunately, the light dusting of snow hadn't sent, so any footprints had already been swept away by the wind.

“Dad?” He yelled again.

The rush of wind was the only answer.

He stared out desperately at the expanse in front of him. The forest started three dozen paces from the farthest cabin, but if his father had made it that far, there would be no way to find him alone.

Kairk dashed back into the village and burst through his own cabin's door.

Cora sat up in surprise, one hand holding the furs up to cover her breasts.

“My father is missing,” Kairk said.

Cora's jaw dropped, but she was out of bed and pulling her furs back on a second later.

“Where's Jawn?” she asked.

“Passed out drunk,” he said. He tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice, but the look Cora gave him told him he'd failed.

“This isn't his fault,” she said.

“He was supposed to watch him,” Kairk said.

“He also lost his best friend,” Cora said as she pulled her belt tight. “And instead of honoring him at the Chariot, he had to stay back and babysit his father. Cut him some slack.”

“And if dad dies out in the cold?” Kairk asked.

Cora didn't answer.

Kairk turned and was back in the cold a moment later.

They gathered a few other warriors that were still making their way home and formed a small search party. Kairk led them back to his father's cabin,

then split the group to cover different areas. He focused the groups on the forest around the edge of the village where he suspected his father would have wandered.

He was about to join the last group when he heard a gravelly voice from behind him.

“What’s going on?”

He turned and saw Xiao standing in her grey and black armor, her helmet clipped to her belt again.

“My father is missing,” he said.

“Kidnapped?”

Kairk shook his head.

“He wanders,” he said. “His mind isn’t what it used to be.”

Xiao cocked her head.

“Forgets where he is? Who he is? Mistakes people around him for people from his past?”

“Yes,” Kairk said. “Can you help us find him? I’ll take all the boots I can get.”

“I can do better than boots,” Xiao said. She pulled her helmet on, the blue lights illuminating her face. Kairk saw her say something, but no sound came out.

Instead, he heard another hiss, and a section of her armor on her upper arm popped off.

Kairk moved to catch the falling metal, but there was a high-pitched buzzing sound, and the piece hovered.

Kairk leaned in close to get a better look, but the buzzing grew louder, and the odd metal shot up into the air. Kairk twisted to follow as it went flying toward the forest.

“Drone is picking up heat signatures for eight adults,” Xiao said. “Seven are within expected parameters. There’s one to the west that is dropping below eighty-five degrees. Looks like he’s down in a snowbank.”

“Cora,” Kairk yelled.

The three took off together, Xiao leading the way. Kairk tried to push his legs faster, but he nearly fell and busted his face on the semi-frozen ground.

They scrambled forward, climbing over fallen trees, around boulders, and through day-old snowbanks that the sun hadn’t managed to melt because of the dense foliage.

“How much farther?” Kairk asked.

“Twenty yards ahead,” Xiao said. “We have three minutes before his temperature drops below standard body tolerance.”

Kairk didn't know what that meant, but he didn't want to find out.

Xiao skidded to a stop in front of a snowbank and reached in. Kairk pulled up next to her and saw his father's body sunken into the snow, a depression in the white where he'd fallen.

Together, they pulled the older man out.

His lips were a dark blue, and his eyes were frozen shut. He only wore a light nightgown that covered his chest and extended down to his thigh, leaving his arms uncovered. One foot still had a slipper on it, but the other was bare. He didn't shiver, but he felt deathly cold under Kairk's fingers.

“Dad?” He screamed. “Dad? Can you hear me?”

His father's lips twitched, but no words escaped.

“We need to get him warm,” Cora said. She was already undoing her belt and pulling her outer fur layer off.

Kairk fumbled with his belt to take his own off as well.

There were two quick hisses, and two of the bumpy ridges on Xiao's back popped up. Two glowing orange tubes the length of Kairk's forearms rose over her shoulders. Heat shimmered off the cylinders as she reached back and pulled them out.

Cora wrapped Pekard in her fur, his frail form disappearing beneath the garment.

“Give me yours,” Xiao said.

Kairk handed it to her, and she tucked the glowing tubes into them before wrapping it around Pekard as well, so only his face was visible.

“Those should help,” Xiao said. “Get him home. I'll meet you there.”

Kairk nodded and scooped his father up, and Cora tucked the extra fur around his feet. Kairk nodded his thanks, then took off.

“Go,” Xiao said behind him. “I'll be fine, but you're going to freeze if you don't get back inside.”

There was a quiet curse, and Cora caught up to him a second later.

“Stubborn woman,” she muttered as she ran next to Kairk.

He didn't respond, saving his breath for running.

Even through the layers of fur, the bundle in his arms grew warm. There only spared an occasional glance down, but each time he did, he swore his father's lips grew less blue.

As they neared the village, Cora sprinted ahead, yelling for the others to

return.

Kairk's legs felt like lead, and his arms cramped from holding the same position for so long, but he kept pushing forward. Raab and a few others drew around them as they passed into the outer ring of cabins.

"Whose fire is still going?" Kairk wheezed, lungs burning.

"Aye," Raab said.

He didn't wait for Kairk to acknowledge him, instead simply turned and ran toward his cabin. Kairk followed on his heels.

They burst through the door, and a rush of warm air met them. Kairk stumbled on the fur mats and nearly came crashing down on his father.

The fire at the center of the room was roaring, and Raab's wife, Meluni, was adding another log. She looked up as they came in, then pointed at a pallet of blankets and pillows so close to the fire Kairk was shocked they weren't on fire themselves.

He set his father down, then started rubbing the furs to warm him. Cora knelt next to him and started doing the same. Sweat poured from Kairk's face as he worked, and an unfocused haze drifted over his mind.

At some point, his father stirred and started mumbling and muttering.

"Dad?" Kairk said quietly. "You ok?"

Another string of unrecognizable gibberish came out.

"That's probably about as good as it'll get for now," Cora whispered. "He needs to rest."

Kairk squeezed his father's shoulder again. Reaching under the furs, he searched for the glowing tubes that Xiao had given them.

His fingers brushed one, and he yanked back.

"Hot?" Cora asked.

Kairk sucked on his fingers and nodded.

"Use this," Raab said, handing Kairk a pair of heavy wool mitts.

Kairk accepted them and fished the tubes out gingerly.

"Thank you," he said, standing. "He would be dead without your help."

Raab shrugged. "Meluni knew you'd need a warm place. You should thank her."

"And you went out in the night again," Kairk said. "We owe you both our thanks."

He set down the mitts, then took the hatchet from Cora. With one quick slice, he cut the cord holding his necklace and slipped one of the dawnstones off.

Raab's eyes were wide as Kairk held it out.

"You saved his life," Kairk said. "It will be my honor to someday ascend with you."

Raab looked at Meluni, who's eyes were just as wide.

"Kairk, I can't," he said softly. "We don't know if he will make it."

"Even if he Ascends tonight, you are my brother now."

Raab reached out, plucking the dawnstone gingerly from Kairk's palm with two fingers. He turned to his wife, who covered her mouth. In the soft blue-green light, Kairk saw tears welling up in both their eyes.

"I need to go," Kairk said. "Thank you."

Raab and Meluni nodded but didn't say anything.

Kairk tucked the hatchet back into his belt, then glanced from Cora to his father. She nodded and made a shooing motion out the door.

Kairk grabbed the mitts and glowing tubes and headed back into the night.

His body ached, protesting being back in the cold and moving. Every step hurt, and he knew if he stopped moving again, he wouldn't start again.

The tubes cast an orange glow over the trees, brighter and more consistent than a torch but not quite as warm as sunlight.

Fresh snow drifted down between the branches. The large flakes blocked the rays of amber light, limiting Kairk's sight to the few feet around him and making the forest seem more claustrophobic. He tried to retrace his steps, but as the snow continued to fall, it was harder to see where their footprints had been.

Branches and vines grabbed at his legs, and the snow made the forest floor slick. He stumbled several times as he made his way through the woods. His eyes played tricks on him as he walked, and he realized how naked he felt without his spear.

"Xiao," he yelled into the night. "Master chief."

The woods were quiet. Only the sound of his rasping breath and the crunch of snow under his boots reached his ears.

He yelled again, with the same silence following, and continued. He didn't remember going so far to find his father, but he hadn't been paying attention to the distance.

He was about to turn back when he heard a crash off to his left.

Sprinting, he saw a fresh snowbank next to a splintered tree trunk. A cloud of snow still drifted and swirled in the wind. A single black-gloved

hand stuck up from the pile.

And around the snowdrift, a six-legged snow demon circled.

Kairk's heart stopped as the demon looked up at him. Its red eyes flicked from him to the hand; then it seemed to smile, exposing three rows of razor-sharp teeth.

Kairk backed up until there was a tree between him and the demon. He threw the glowing tubes and mitts forward. They hissed as they hit the snow, which instantly melted around them. Pulling his hatchet from his belt, he dropped into a defensive stance.

The demon slowly approached cautiously. Its eyes kept scanning back and forth; trying to see if Kairk was alone.

Kairk wished he wasn't. It usually took at least three well-aimed spear thrust to kill a demon, and that was if it was reckless or dumb enough to leave itself exposed.

But this one didn't look reckless or dumb.

And he didn't have a spear.

Kairk forced himself to breathe, his mind calming as the familiar weight of the hatchet settled in his palm.

The demon licked its chops and took three cautious steps forward. Then it reared up on its back four legs.

Kairk cursed. The thing was now twice as tall as he was, and the front two legs, which ended with powerful three-pronged claws that could crush and sever a limb as easily as he could snap a twig. The thing's white fur rippled in the cold wind, making it impossible for Kairk to watch its muscles for hints of a possible attack.

He backed up farther. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally get Xiao killed by a careless rake from the snow demon's claws, though he knew there was a good chance he wouldn't be around to worry about that much longer.

The demon scuttled forward and took a swipe at Kairk. He ducked behind the tree and tried to bring the hatchet down on the outstretched limb. But the beast was too fast, and he missed.

His momentum carried him forward, and he stumbled out from behind the tree.

Which saved his life.

The wood exploded in a shower of splinters, and partially frozen sap as the demon's opposite claw punched through.

Kairk spun and tried to make a backhanded slash. Whether the demon was still trying to figure out if it had killed him, or just wasn't as quick, Kairk wasn't sure, but he somehow managed to clip the demon's arm.

Purple black blood sprayed the remains of the tree and Kairk's exposed skin. It burned where it hit his face, and he dropped the hatchet in his rush to wipe it off.

The demon also howled in pain, and they both drew back.

Kairk scrambled to get his hatchet, but it had gotten kicked around in the scuffle and lost in the churned-up snow.

For its part, the demon regarded its arm, then howled in pain and fury. It glared at Kairk, red eyes practically glowing, and started toward him again.

Kairk shifted through the loose snow frantically, less worried about cutting himself on the blade than wanting a weapon.

The demon sensed that he was defenseless and lunged forward.

Kairk was forced to abandon his search as a pair of claws dove down like twin spears.

Rolling sideways, he got up and sprinted away.

The demon howled again and tore after him. Kairk dodged around trees and bushes. He could hear the beast behind him, smashing through trees as thick as Kairk's waist like they saplings.

Kairk tried to wind his way back toward where his hatchet was buried. The sounds of the demon grew more distant with every turn.

Being small and nimble had its advantages.

He finally made his way back to the clearing where Xiao had fallen and skidded to a stop next to the snow pile where she lay buried.

The demon stood over where his hatchet should have been.

It seemed like it was grinning at him, and his heart sank.

The demon stalked forward; this time, confident.

Kairk thought about running again, but his legs felt like lead, and he didn't think he could outrun the thing a second time. Besides, even if he did get away, he would be leaving Xiao to die.

Her hand was still sticking out of the snow. He crouched down and grasped it. It was cold and rigid.

If she was already dead, maybe he should leave her.

The thought was cut short by another howl.

The demon charged, its front legs held up and ready to strike.

Kairk dove forward as it drew closer.

There was a searing pain in his right calf, but he somehow rolled through the demon's legs and came up near his original position.

But before he could search for his weapon, the demon had wheeled back to face him. This time, it eyed him warily and held its injured claw low, blocking the path through its legs.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kairk saw the orange tubes.

When the demon lunged forward again, Kairk launched himself at the tubes. He rolled over them, the flash of heat singeing the hair on his back.

Before he overthought it, he grabbed one, his hand screaming in pain as the skin burned, and threw it at the demon.

The thing was still turning toward him, and it snapped at the projectile hurtling toward its face out of instinct.

The tube disappeared, and Kairk saw a lump in the demon's throat.

Then the demon's eyes went wide, and it clawed at its throat.

Kairk watched in horror as the demon retched and tried to dislodge the tube. It didn't help, and the creature let out an ear-splitting screech as it fell.

It tried to eat mouthfuls of snow, but the swallowing motion only made the tube go farther down its throat.

The demon staggered back and started to cough up the dark blood. Then hit fell, wheezing and gasping.

Kairk tore his eyes away and found his hatchet in the snow. The handle had broken off, but the blade still glittered in the dull light.

The demon collapsed next to Xiao. It lay still, each gasp of breath wet and accompanied by a soft whine.

Despite their struggle, Kairk felt sorry for the creature. It didn't know why it was dying, and as bad as his hand throbbed, he could only imagine the pain pulsing through it.

He walked around it, careful to watch its claws, and stood over the thing's head.

It looked up at him with one red eye, and he could see a single black tear running down its otherwise white fur.

It closed its eye and let out one more pathetic whine.

Kairk buried the hatchet blade through the base of its skull.

The beast shuddered, then fell quiet.

Kairk quickly cleaned the blade and his hands on the animal's fur, his hands only a bit red where the blood had splattered, then stumbled back to the other tube.

He grabbed it with the mitts and walked back to Xiao, praying she was still alive.

He dug her out quickly. Her black helmet was still on, and a layer of fog on the faceplate prevented him from seeing if she was breathing.

He knocked his knuckles on the faceplate, but there was no response.

Grabbing her outstretched hand, he pulled her onto her stomach, a more difficult task than he'd expected. She shouldn't have been as heavy as Jawn, but he could barely move her.

She didn't lay flat, but instead was propped up by her outstretched arm and uneven legs, like they were rigid spear shafts.

He found the two holes in her back and carefully slid the tube into its socket. It clicked home, and there was a small whirring sound.

Kairk stepped back, and there was a series of pops and clicks, and Xiao's body slowly fell to the ground. Several seconds later, she managed to roll over, and her helmet popped up.

"Little help," she said, her voice hoarse.

Kairk darted forward and got hooked his fingers under the lip of the helmet and slowly eased it off.

"Thanks," she said. "Your father?"

"I don't think it's his time yet," Kairk replied with a smile. "Thanks to you."

Xiao nodded once.

"Systems are still booting up," she said. "But looks like there was only one power core."

"About that," Kairk glanced over his shoulder at the snow demon's carcass. "Not sure you'll still want it."

"I definitely do," she said.

She tried to sit up, there was a grinding, then a pop and she fell back.

"You may need to help though," she said.

"That thing's blood will burn your skin off," Kairk said. "It's not going to be fun to get it out. Why don't you just get another one?"

"I can't just get another," Xiao said. "Even if I could raise the *Yukon* on comms, we don't have enough as it is."

Kairk sighed.

"And I'm guessing that means you need me to get it for you?"

"I mean, you can wait until the weather clears and I can reach them, but I'd prefer not to wait out here in the snow if we could help it."

“That would not be an honorable way to repay you for saving my father,” Kairk said, though the idea had crossed his mind since the cold was starting to make his fingers and toes tingle.

Instead, he moved next to the demon’s corpse and pushed his hand against its throat. He could still feel the warmth of the tube emanating through the beast’s fur. He made a precise cut from the thing’s chin to its chest, being careful to avoid the blood that spilled out.

The snow hissed and melted as the dark liquid spilled out. Kairk held his nose, but the demon’s last meal was half-rotted in its stomach and he still nearly vomited.

He found a long stick and trying not to breathe, poked into the open throat. He fished through the flesh until the tube finally popped free with a sickening squelch.

He rolled the tube in the fast melting snow to clean it, then used the mitts to put it in the demon’s fur to dry off.

When he couldn’t see any more black specks on the tube, he headed back to Xiao. She rolled over again, and he slipped the glowing cylinder in the other socket. There was another click, and lines of white and blue lights lit up along the sides of her back.

“Ah,” Xiao said, pushing herself up from her knees to stand. Grabbing her helmet, she pulled it back on. When she spoke again, her voice had the metallic tang. “All systems green. Power core integrity intact. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Kairk said. “Now if you don’t mind, I’d love to get back to a fire.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SUN GLISTENED off the fresh snow, making the ground look like it was on fire.

Kairk blew out an exhausted, foggy breath. There were only a few others awake and about the village, so he was able to enjoy the sunrise. He nodded to a few men and women as they went about their morning from where he leaned against the open-door frame.

He knew he should be asleep, in fact, his body was screaming for him to lay down. But the sunrise was a gift he hadn't been expecting as they faced down the Gentori, and he was loathed to waste it.

Besides, Cora had only gone to bed a few hours ago, and Jawn was still passed out, and he didn't want to leave his father alone.

The storm had cleared halfway through the night, and Xiao had jogged off into the darkness. She seemed a bit sluggish and said something about needing to get an insect out of her system. Kairk had chuckled at the thought of such advanced armor not being able to handle a few buzz flies, but he was too tired to argue with her.

There was a rustling behind him, and Kairk turned from the door. His father had sat up and was bending over, looking for his shoes under the bed.

"Morning, Dad," Kairk said quietly. "How are you feeling?"

The older man jumped at Kairk's voice. He shook his head and wagged a finger at Kairk.

"Don't sneak up on me like that," his father said. "You're lucky you don't have a hatchet buried in your chest right now. Especially not when I feel like this. How much Jeeva did we have last night?"

He frowned. He patted his bedding, then quickly looked left and right.

“Where is my hatchet?”

“Right here.” Kairk patted his belt.

“Ah, thank you,” his father reached out for it.

Kairk gaze at his father’s outstretched hand, a wave of disappointment crashing down on him as hope died within him.

“You gave it to me, remember?” Kairk said.

“That’s grembal crap,” his father snapped. “I wouldn’t give that to anyone but my son. And he’s, he’s, he’s not even old enough to wipe himself.”

His dad’s green eyes grew wider with each word, and his voice wavered.

“Now,” he said, his hand starting to tremble. “Give it.”

Kairk knelt and took his father’s hands in his own. They were bony and thin, and the skin felt like leather that had been stretched too far. He put his father’s palm on his cheek, then looked up into his cloudy eyes.

“Dad,” Kairk whispered. “It’s me. Kairk. I’m not a kid anymore.”

His father started blinking rapidly like he was trying to clear his vision.

“Eva,” he yelled. “Eva! Where are you?”

“Mom’s not here,” Kairk said. “It’s alright, I’ve got you.”

“But... But I... Where’s my Eva?”

“She just ran out to gather some fruit,” Kairk lied. “She’ll be back before too long. Why don’t you lay back down?”

“You’re Kairk?”

“Yes.”

His father pulled a hand out of Kairk’s grasp and touched his son’s cheek.

“You have her eyes,” he said. “You are my son.”

Kairk smiled.

“You got so big.”

Kairk laughed.

“Mom has been making me eat all my halesh,” he said.

“You listen to your mother,” his father said. “She’s a wise woman.”

Kairk only nodded.

“Why don’t you lay back down for a bit,” he said. “I’ll wake you when mom gets back.”

“I need to make you breakfast,” he said. “My father always told me it’s the most important meal of the day. Can’t let my boy go hungry.”

“I’ll be fine,” Kairk said. “I promise, I’ll take care- “

The door swung open, and Cora walked in, a basket of misshapen fruit

and a steaming chunk of grembal meat in her arms.

“Eva!”

His father sprang to his feet before Kairk could stop him, and wrapped Cora in a hug. He tried to kiss her, but she managed to twist away.

“I brought breakfast,” she said, giving Kairk a sad smile. “Thought you boys may be hungry.”

“Your timing is as perfect as you are,” Kairk’s father said. “I was just saying I was going to make Kairk breakfast. Have you seen how big he’s gotten?”

“I know,” Cora said. She poked Kairk’s waist playfully. “A little too big in some places. We’ll need to cut some of those extra helping out.”

“Nonsense,” his father said. “If he’s going to be captain one day, he needs to be big and strong. Can’t swing a hatchet if you’re a scrawny little welp.”

Cora started to say something, but Kairk shook his head.

“Whatever you say, Dad,” Kairk said.

“Can you all keep it down,” Jawn said from the opposite side of the room. “My head is killing me.”

“You’re lucky that’s the only thing trying to,” Kairk said.

Jawn rolled over and cracked one eyelid.

“Little early for you to be on your high horse.”

Kairk stomped across the room to strangle his brother, but Cora grabbed his arm.

“Not now,” she hissed.

“He’s lucky dad is still making noise.”

“We all are,” Cora said. “But your brother isn’t the only one who indulged last night. Or had reason to.”

Kairk glared at his brother, who had rolled back over and pulled the fur over his head.

“Get some air,” Cora said. “I’ll bring you something to eat.”

Kairk nodded and strode out the door.

The air was crisp and cold, burning Kairk’s lungs as he took deep breathes. A few yards from the hut, one of the trees had snapped under the weight of the snow and ice, releasing a sweet, piney smell into the morning air.

He could hear the clattering of pots and the crackling of fires behind him, but it was more muted than usual. Cora was probably right, and Jawn hadn’t been the only one to overindulge the night before.

Movement to his right caught his eye, and his hand went to the hatchet.

A moment later, he realized it was only Xiao, her helmet off and clipped to her belt and a black canvas bag slung over one shoulder.

“Morning, Captain.”

“Master Chief,” he said as they grasped forearms. “Did you get the insects out?”

Xiao cocked her head, then laughed.

“Yes,” she said. “All the bugs are out. How’s your father?”

Kairk shrugged.

“He’ll live,” he said. “But he’s not having a great day. Better than last night, but not great.”

Xiao nodded, then set the bag at his feet. There was the clink of glass and metal as it settled to the ground.

Kairk looked down, then raised an eyebrow.

“Wanted to say thank you,” she said. “My armor may have stopped that thing last night, but I’m glad I didn’t have to find out.”

“It was the least I could do,” Kairk said. “You saved my father.”

“And I’d like to do more,” she said. “I think I can give him more great days.”

“I don’t think- “

“Just let me try,” she said. “We don’t have a full Rothenburg suite, but this may be able to help the symptoms at least.”

“I don’t know what any of that means,” Kairk admitted.

“It means if I’m right, your father will remember who you are. At least for a while.”

“Just awhile?”

Xiao nodded.

“It’s probably too late to reverse everything,” she said. “At least not with what we have. But it may work.”

Kairk looked back at his father’s home, then nodded.

Cora’s eyes narrowed as Kairk led Xiao inside, but she didn’t say anything. His father looked up and give her a toothy grin.

“You look like something out of a dream,” he said. “How did I get so lucky to have two visions of the Starfallen in my home?”

Xiao smiled.

“Dad,” Kairk said. “She’s, a doctor. She wants to see if she can help you feel better.”

“I’ll have some as well,” Jawn moaned.

Kairk ignored him as Xiao bent down and pulled two glass tubes from her bag. She pulled the top off both and poured the clear liquid into two cups. She handed one to Cora, nodding to the Kairk’s father, and stood to give the other to Jawn.

“This will help you sleep it off,” she said.

Cora looked up at Kairk. When he shrugged and nodded, Cora frowned but coaxed his father to drink.

“Mmmm...” he said. “That’s good. Almost as good as you.”

He winked at Cora, who rolled her eyes.

“I’m glad your parents loved each other so much,” she said to Kairk.

“Could I have another of those?” Pekard said.

“Not right now,” Xiao said. “Are you getting tired?”

“I’m always tired,” he said.

“Why don’t you lay down for a minute?”

“That’s-“ he interrupted himself with a yawn. “I think...”

He fell sideways, and Xiao caught him and laid him back gently. She straightened his legs and crossed his arms over his stomach.

“Help me with this,” she said to Kairk as she pulled a curved bit of metal and a larger black box from the bag.

“What is that?”

“Mobile Rothenburg unit,” she said. “It’s meant for early-onset Alzheimer’s, more something to buy time to prevent permanent damage until the patient can get to a full unit, but it should help some.”

“So...” Cora said.

“He should get better for a bit, but it’s probably too late for him to make a full recovery.”

“Any bit helps,” Kairk said.

They untangled the cords, and Xiao hooked them into the box before placing the curved metal around his father’s head.

“Will it hurt him?”

“Are you asking if it will cause him pain?” Xiao said. “No. Could it damage his brain long term? Possibly. But his brain is already so addled with the disease that he probably won’t live long enough to for this to matter.”

“This could kill him?” Cora asked.

“Anything could kill him,” Xiao said. “This will at least improve his quality of life.”

“Says you,” Cora said.

Xiao sighed.

“If you’d rather have your father in law continue to try to kiss you, I can stop. Otherwise, let me help.”

“Why are you helping at all?” Cora said.

“Can’t I just help my fellow man?”

“You can, but I don’t think that’s what you’re doing.” Cora’s eyes narrowed, then shot to Kairk. “You didn’t promise her anything?”

“She’s doing this because she is grateful I saved her life,” he said.

Cora’s jaw clenched, but she didn’t push the point further.

Xiao turned back to the box and pressed a few buttons. A smaller lightbox started glowing, and Xiao tapped it several times. Then the room was filled with a soft humming sound, and the curved bit of metal around his father’s head started vibrating.

“Is it supposed to do that?” he asked.

“It’s scanning his brain and finding the damaged areas,” Xiao said. “In a minute, it will start trying to repair them.”

“How long will it take?” Kairk said.

“I don’t know,” Xiao said. “I’d guess maybe a few hours to start? I’ve never had to do this on a late-stage case.”

“But he’ll remember us?” Cora said.

“We won’t know until it does its work, but hopefully.”

Kairk looked at his father. Without all the furs, covering him, he looked even thinner and frailer. But his chest rose and fell smoothly, and he had a small smile on his lips like he was dreaming.

“What is he seeing?” Kairk asked.

“Hell if I know,” Xiao said. “Looks like he’s enjoying himself though. Let him rest. We’ll know more in a few hours.”

“The drugs should be wearing off about now,” Xiao said. She held a small scanner over his forehead. “Brain activity looks normal. Well, as normal as can be expected. He’ll have gaps in his memory, but it looks like the worst areas were at least contained.”

Kairk nodded. Jawn had woken up a bit earlier, claiming to have slept

better than he had in years. Cora was there as well, though she was leaning against the wall with a spear propped next to her. Kairk had a feeling that if anything went wrong, she wouldn't hesitate to skewer Xiao.

The remains of lunch were burning in the fire, giving the room a smoky haze that smelled of charred fruit.

Xiao tucked the scanner back into her bag and stood.

"Why don't you wake him," she told Kairk.

He nodded and took her place by his father's bedside. Gently, he placed his hand on his father's shoulder and shook him.

"Dad?"

The older man inhaled sharply and tensed. Kairk withdrew his hand and sat back.

His father pushed himself up onto his elbows and slowly opened his eyes.

"Kairk?"

"You remember me?"

"Of course, I remember you," he said. "I taught you to ask better questions than that."

Kairk smiled at the rebuke. It was the first one he'd heard in years.

"Who in the Nightbringer is that?" His father said as he saw Xiao. "Is she the Nightbringer?"

"Possibly," Cora muttered.

"She's a friend," Kairk said.

"Doesn't look like anyone I know," his father said. "What tribe is she from?"

"I'm from the USS *Yukon*," Xiao said.

"Haven't heard of them."

"No reason you would have," Kairk said. "What's the last thing you remember? The last event?"

His father was still staring at Xiao, but he frowned and furrowed his brow.

"I remember giving you the hatchet," he said. "And promoting you to Captain."

"That was over five years ago," Cora whispered to Xiao.

"Anything else?"

"Your," he shook his head then pointed to Jawn. "No, your wedding. What's going on?"

"You were sick," Kairk said. "Your mind, well, it wasn't working

properly. That was why you promoted me early. You knew that you couldn't take care of the crew."

"But I'm better?" he said.

"For now," Xiao said. "We'll monitor your brain, but hopefully you'll be able to function normally."

"What does that mean?" he asked. "I'm perfectly normal."

"You weren't," Kairk said. He put a hand on his father's arm and smiled, his vision growing blurry. "But now you're back."

CHAPTER NINE

“I CAN’T BEGIN to describe how much it means to have him back,” Kairk said. “It’s like, he died and came back.”

“I’m glad I could help,” Xiao said. “I know it’s a lot for him to take in.”

“I’ve always said, I just wanted one more meal with him,” Kairk continued. “Hear his laugh once more. And now? I have many more to look forward to.”

He stared back through the door in wonder. Inside, Jawn was cooking over the flame, and Cora and his father were laughing over some story Kairk probably wouldn’t have wanted to be shared under other circumstances.

Cora had never really known his father, only the shell of himself. When they’d met, his father had already promoted him to Captain, and though he wasn’t too bad, it made Kairk’s heart smile to see them talking and getting to know one another.

The night was growing colder every second, and Kairk was glad he’d gotten his fur cloak while his father had been healing.

“I need to report back,” Xiao said. “I’m glad I was able to help.”

Kairk nodded.

“Thank you.”

Xiao saluted, but when Kairk returned the gesture, she didn’t immediately turn to go.

“What is it?” he asked when she stood for a moment.

“I just,” Xiao frowned, searching for the right thing to say. “I don’t want to ruin this moment for you, but I want you to know that this all could have been avoided. The medical facilities we have, even just aboard the *Yukon*, would have spared you the years of heartache and pain. Your people don’t

have to suffer like this.”

“Is this where you ask me to give up the Morning Star again?”

“Just think about it,” Xiao said. “We’re both trying to help our people. And we can do that together. You don’t have to give up who you are. It doesn’t have any special powers or magic. It’s just a rock.”

“A rock you were willing to come across the stars to get.”

“I said it wasn’t magical, not that it wasn’t valuable.”

“And what happens if we do give it to you?” Kairk said. “You build more ships, you send more people here, and you ruin our home like you ruined yours?”

“You get medicine for your sick, peace for your warriors, and comfort for your crew,” Xiao said.

“And when will those promises become reality?”

“As soon as we can make it back with a larger ship,” Xiao said. “We’ll pack it with medicine and food, and bring all your people with us. Or let them stay here and help you build the Travani into the most prosperous people on this planet.”

Kairk crossed his arms and put his weight back.

“It’s a good offer,” Xiao said.

“Possibly,” Kairk said. “If you can make it happen.”

“I’ve delivered on everything I’ve promised so far.”

“You weren’t the one to approve the rifles,” Kairk pointed out. “And we’re talking about a lot more than that.”

“That’s different,” Xiao said. “And after everything we’ve been through if you think I won’t keep-“

“Xiao,” Kairk’s voice was low as he cut her off. “I’m not questioning your intent to keep your word. I know you will do everything in your power to. But I know you’re not the Captain of your tribe. If I’m going to make a deal like this, I want to talk to him.”

“That can be arranged,” Xiao said. She tapped her wrist, and the small compartment popped open.

“In-person,” Kairk said. “I want to look him in the eye if we do this.”

Xiao’s hand fell from her wrist.

“Very well,” she said. “I’ll set something up. Tomorrow?”

Kairk nodded.

“Until then,” he said. He put a fist to his chest, then turned to rejoin his family inside.

CHAPTER TEN

SNOW CRUNCHED under Kairk's boots as he followed Xiao through the forest. Jawn and Raab were two steps behind, hands clutching spears.

Cora walked beside him, though he wondered if bringing her was a mistake. He was going to pay for even going to this meeting, and if she decided to sabotage it, she probably could.

Despite the scout's best efforts to follow Xiao, they hadn't been able to find where she was going every night, and he would have been lying if he said he didn't feel a touch of nervous excitement at the prospect of seeing the "ship."

Less than half an hour after they left the village, they got to a clearing approximately a hundred yards wide. Xiao stopped and turned back to face him.

"Ready?"

Kairk looked around the clearing.

It was completely empty.

"Is this a joke?" he said.

Xiao didn't reply but instead raised her wrist to her mouth.

"Come on in."

There was crack like thunder, and Kairk and Cora spun, so they were back to back, spears raised. He glanced back and saw that Jawn and Raab had done the same.

They looked back and forth, but there was no one else around. Xiao stood watching, an amused smirk on her face.

Cora broke rank before Kairk could stop her. She dashed to Xiao and held her spear to the other woman's throat.

“What’s going on?” She yelled. “What was that?”

“I would appreciate it if you’d unhand the Master Chief,” a robotic voice boomed out. “We are all adults here.”

Kairk looked up, and his jaw dropped.

Coming out of the sky was a dark shape. It had a long black body that seemed to swallow all the light around it, and two wings that shot out from either side. The head came to a point like a snow demon’s, and blue flames shot out where arms and legs should have been.

“I’ll repeat one more time, please unhand the chief.”

“Starlight,” Kairk said softly. “Let her go.”

Cora dropped the spear and reluctantly stepped back.

The giant birdlike ship descended smoothly and almost silently. For how large it was, Kairk was surprised it didn’t make more noise.

When it was close to the ground, legs grew out of the bottom of the thing, and the flames died down as they touched the ground. The whole ship settled down as the legs sunk into the snow.

“Let’s go,” Xiao said. “And please don’t kill anyone.”

“No promises,” Cora muttered but followed.

As they drew closer, Kairk saw that there was a large, sweeping pane of glass on top of the bird’s head. Inside, he saw people walking back and forth, and colorful lights danced in the air between them.

“You ride that thing?” Raab asked.

“You could say that,” Xiao said. “It’s been our home for the last few years.”

When they got to within a dozen paces of the head, there was a hiss and pop, and the thing’s mouth opened. Kairk’s hand gripped the head of his hatchet, but he knew if the creature decided to eat them, there wasn’t much, he could do to stop it.

But instead of teeth, it was only a metal ramp.

Xiao didn’t hesitate and quickly strode up it.

Kairk glanced at the others, then followed nervously.

At the top of the ramp, there was a small room with a solid wall at the end.

“The door behind us is going to close so we can decontaminate,” Xiao said. “Don’t kill me.”

On cue, an orange light flashed through the room, and a blaring sound that grated on Kairk’s ears sounded through the room. Behind them, the top

and bottom section of a hidden wall slid toward one another until they met with a clang.

“Decontamination in process,” a soothing female voice said.

“Close your eyes,” Xiao advised.

Kairk did, but even through his eyelids, the bright white light was nearly blinding.

“Decontamination complete. Proceed.”

There was a hiss in front of him, and Kairk opened his eyes in time to see the wall splitting. Through the gap, a man in a grey shirt and pants stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Welcome to the *Yukon*,” he said. “I’m Commander Blays.”

“Where is Captain Dawson?” Kairk said.

“We’re to join him in the conference room,” Blays said. “But you got here sooner than expected, so he needs a few minutes to finish up a briefing. He suggested we give you a tour while we wait.”

Kairk glanced at the Cora, but she was too busy craning her neck to see around Blays to look at him.

“We would appreciate that,” Kairk said.

“Of course,” Blays said. “If you would please leave your weapons here, we can begin.”

He motioned to an open black box on the left side of the room.

“You didn’t say we’d be unarmed,” Kairk said to Xiao.

“Its standard procedure,” she said. “You’re safe here.”

“Easy for you to say,” Cora said. “We didn’t make you give up your weapons when you were among us.”

“I was bringing you weapons.”

“You know what she means,” Kairk said.

“You have to trust us,” Xiao said. “You’ll get everything back. Just put your spears in the locker and place your palm over it. No one else will be able to get in.”

Kairk gave her a long look.

“We’ll trust you,” he said.

Kairk walked to the side and placed his spear inside. It barely fit, and he had to angle it sideways. He put the hatchet in as well.

Cora looked like she would revolt but slowly joined Kairk in putting her spear in the locker. Jawn and Raab followed suit and placed their weapons in a second locker next to Kairk and Cora’s.

“Thank you,” Blays said. He looked to Xiao. “Master Chief, please get comfortable and join us in the conference room.”

“Aye, sir. I’ll be there shortly.”

She walked past Blays, her boots clicking on the metal deck.

“Since we’re here, why don’t we start with the bridge?” Blays suggested.

“A bridge to where?” Cora asked.

“Different kind of bridge,” Blays said. “It’s where we Captain commands the ship.”

His voice was even, but Kairk thought the corner of his mouth twitched as he corrected Cora.

Before Kairk could defend his wife, the man turned on a heel and started walking. Kairk and the others followed down the grey hallway.

A dozen steps, a ladder, and another sliding door later, and they were in the most magical place Kairk had ever seen.

Displays floated in the air that changed as men and women in grey uniforms touched them. There were flashes of blue, yellow, and colors Kairk couldn’t even describe. The walls of the room were clear glass, and even though Kairk could see out, the green and yellow forest was overlaid with even more colors, numbers, and writing that transformed before his eyes.

In the center of the room was a large chair with an open spot on the floor.

“That’s where the Captain sits,” Blays said, following Kairk’s gaze. “Want to see what he sees?”

“I won’t break anything?”

“Maggie, lock functions from the helm,” Blays said.

“Aye, Commander,” the same robotic female voice said

“You won’t now,” Blays waved a hand toward the chair. “Go ahead.”

Kairk eased down tentatively. The chair molded to his body as his weight settled back. Behind him, there was a humming, and lights appeared on the arms of the chair.

“Maggie, bring up the map,” Blays said.

“You’re not very polite in front of our guests.”

“Not the time,” Blays said.

“Aye, Commander.”

The floor in front of the chair exploded.

Kairk tried to jump back, but the chair held him firmly. He heard a crash and saw the Cora and Jawn had managed to get back, straight into a man sitting on a bench by the window.

In the empty space where the floor had been, millions of tiny dots floated in the air, like bits of dust in the evening light.

There was a chuckle from the side, and Kairk glared at Blays.

“Sorry,” the commander said. “That never gets old.”

“Glad you enjoyed yourself,” Cora snapped as she stood.

Kairk was thankful she’d left her spear below.

“This is the Milky Way,” Blays said, apparently unaware of the near-death experience he’d escaped. “Maggie, please mark our location along with other points of interest.”

“Who do you keep talking to?” Kairk said.

“Maggie? She’s the ship AI. Her actual name is Magellan, but apparently, she decided she was a woman and didn’t want to be named after a man. AIs can be funny like that.”

“If they had asked me before giving me a name, I would have saved my creators the embarrassment.”

Blays sighed.

“As I said,” he continued. “She can get a bit touchy. Those points?”

Four dots, two green, one yellow and a red one, the last two practically on top of one another, appeared in the floating dots. The green dots were about an arm’s length apart on the far side of the room, while the red and yellow dots were right in front of Kairk’s face.

“What’s an AI?” Kairk asked.

“She’s kind of like our, um, guiding spiriting for the ship.”

“Ah, so she protects you?” Raab asked.

“Yes,” Maggie responded.

“It’s a bit more complicated than that,” Blays said.

“How do you appease her?” Jawn asked. “What do you offer her to ensure her continued protection?”

“Not nearly enough,” Maggie said.

“As I was saying,” Blays said. “This is where we are. The red is the *Yukon*, the yellow is your planet.”

He walked through the dots to the opposite side of the room and pointed to the first green dot.

“This is Hope,” he said. “And this is Earth.”

“Is it close enough to see?” Kairk asked.

“Not in your sky,” Blays said. “But Maggie can help with that. Enhance.”

“What is your offering, puny human?”

Blays rolled his eyes.

“See what you’ve done?”

“Maggie, I’d love to see Earth,” Kairk said. “If it pleases you.”

“See, that’s not so hard, is it?”

The stars fell away, then the green dot slowly flew from the other side of the room to the center, growing until it dominated the space.

Kairk’s jaw dropped at the mixtures of green and blue. White clouds swirled around the globe as it turned. He stood from the chair and walked closer. As the sphere rotated, the colors grew darker, but then orange lights lit up in a spider web pattern that crisscrossed what had been the green blobs.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” a deep voice said behind him.

“Captain on deck!” Blays said.

Everyone in a grey uniform scrambled to their feet and saluted.

“As you were,” Captain Dawson said.

Kairk pulled himself away from the projection. The Captain was taller than Xiao but still shorter than Kairk. Otherwise, he looked exactly like he had when they’d first met with Xiao.

“Captain,” he said, holding out a hand.

Dawson took it and shook.

“Captain,” he replied. “I hope Blays has been treating you well. My apologies for the delay.”

“He has been very hospitable,” Kairk said.

“Mostly,” Cora mumbled.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Dawson said. He walked to the side of the room, admiring the spinning planet. “It’s amazing how far we’ve come. We’ve been to hundreds of planets, but there’s no place like home.”

“We feel the same of our home,” Kairk said.

Dawson smiled and waved at Earth. “This is your home. Understandably from a long time ago, but as they say, you can always go home.”

“And if we don’t want to?” Cora said.

“You don’t have to,” Dawson said. “But before we get too far into this, why don’t we move to the conference room? Maggie, please have some refreshments sent up.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Excellent,” Dawson said. “Now, if you’ll follow me?”

He pivoted on a heel and strode out of the bridge, Blays on his heels. They led Kairk and the three others through the door and into another room

immediately off the bridge.

The room was barely large enough for a table with six chairs on either side. Dawson walked to the end and took his seat at the head of the table. Then he motioned to the chair at his left.

“Please, be seated.”

Kairk pulled the seat back and settled in. It wasn't as comfortable as the seat on the bridge, but it fit his body in a way even Joeshuff's best works of art could only dream of.

Cora took her place next to him, and Blays sat across from him. Jawn and Raab sat at the other end of the table.

The door hissed open again, and Xiao walked through wearing a grey shirt and pants that had a grey, black, and white checkered across the fabric.

She was followed closely by a small, floating robot carrying a tray. The robot glided silently onto the table and landed in the center of the dark wood.

Kairk's mouth started watering as the smells from the food wafted up.

“This is Texas ribeye,” Dawson said, pointing to a char-grilled bit of meat, then to an orange soup in small white bowls. “That is Panang curry. We also have bluefin tuna sushi, barbeque pork slides, and at the end, grilled pineapple.”

“Maggie broke out the good stuff,” Blays muttered.

“And we'll let our guests eat first,” Dawson said.

“You honor us,” Kairk said. “What do you recommend?”

“I'm never going to turn down a steak,” Dawson said.

Kairk reached for the meat, but a plate popped out from robot's side, and another arm swung around its body. Kairk watched, mesmerized, as the arm skewered the meat and placed it on the plate, then set it before him.

“That's service,” Jawn chuckled.

Kairk took the fork and knife and cut a bit off.

His eyes went wide at the flavor of the meat.

“This is incredible,” Kairk said as he started to cut another piece, which he held out to Cora. Her eyes lit up as she chewed. “You must give the people of Texas my thanks.”

“I will,” Dawson said. “The rest of you, please. Help yourselves.”

The others did, each trying different dishes and trading bites until they were all stuffed. Dawson, Blays, and Xiao took their turns as well, though they seemed more amused by the reactions than interested in the food itself.

“Down to business,” Dawson said when they had all cleaned their plates,

and the robot had collected the dirty dishes. “I appreciate your rescue of the Master Chief. She is a vital member of our crew, and losing her would have been catastrophic.”

“I was only repaying a debt,” Kairk said. “She saved my father’s life.”

“Well, we are both better for having her alive. Thank you.”

Kairk nodded.

“I know she has told you what we’re looking for.”

“The Morning Star,” Kairk said.

“That’s right,” Dawson said. “I hope we can come to an accommodation that helps all of us.”

“We’re not giving you the Morning Star,” Cora said.

“We can offer you medicine, weapons, food.” Dawson looked at the departing robot pointedly. “We need what you have to offer, and you are in the same boat.”

“We manage just fine,” Kairk said.

“Would your father agree?”

Kairk’s jaw clenched.

“Our father will go to the stars one way or the other,” Jawn said quietly. “We all will.”

“I am thankful for the time you’ve given us with him,” Kairk said. “But soon he will need something you cannot give him. He can’t go to the stars without the Morning Star.”

“We don’t know what happens when we die,” Dawson replied. “Many have spent their lives trying to solve that mystery. Some ended in despair. Others in madness. But you’re not the first to hope for the afterlife.”

“We don’t have to hope for it,” Cora said.

“You’ve been?” Dawson said. “You know what’s beyond the veil? Please share, because that would be worth more than all the Rugium in the galaxy.”

He pinned Cora with his stare. She only stared back.

“Look, I don’t want to waste any more time,” Dawson said. “If you are not going to make a deal, that’s your prerogative.”

“We’re not,” Cora snapped.

“But we can help your people,” Dawson continued. “We can heal your sick. Protect your children. Things you will see with your own eyes. You have nothing but stories handed down that you may ‘go to the stars’ when you die.”

“If there is nothing after this, then you have no hope,” Kairk said.

“I didn’t say there was nothing,” Dawson said. “There are hundreds of religions that say otherwise, and give you a map to heaven, or nirvana, or whatever else you want. We have all the sacred texts in our data banks. I’m happy to share them with you.”

“What do you believe?” Kairk asked. “Where will you go when you die?”

“Hopefully a little lake with a boat and fishing pole.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I,” Dawson replied. “Heaven can be anything. I just hope mine includes the water. But what’s more important than what I believe is why I believe I’ll be there. We’re all judged by our actions, pretty much every religion agrees on that. And when the scales tip for me, I hope that whoever that judge is will see that I loved my crew and the people around me, did my best to care for them, and put a thumb on the right side for me.”

He leaned in, his blue eyes staring into Kairk’s.

“The question for you,” he said softly. “Is if you don’t do everything you can to help the people you can, will you be judged the same?”

Kairk stared back silently. The silence stretched, but when he replied, his voice was quiet but heard through the room.

“And if you’re wrong, I condemn my people.”

“That is a risk,” Dawson said. “And one I will not minimize. Take your time, but make a decision. You know what we offer. And I hope your soul can live with whatever you decide.”

“His soul will be in the stars,” Cora said. “Looking down on his people and knowing their souls are safe.”

Dawson’s lips pressed into a thin line as she spoke. The quiet lingered for several seconds before Dawson spoke again.

“I had hoped we wouldn’t get to this point,” he said. “I’ve offered the carrot.”

He looked at Kairk again. His eyes grew hard.

“Now here’s the stick.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I TOLD YOU THIS WOULD HAPPEN,” Cora snapped. She stalked around the mess hall, reminding Kairk of a caged snow dragon.

“Nothing has happened yet,” Kairk said. “We still have a choice.”

“Do we?” Jawn said. “Sounds like they’re going to get what they want no matter what. The only question is if we are alive or ascended when they do.”

“They’ve played you like an idiot,” Cora hissed. “You let her in. Now they know exactly how to destroy us.”

“I’m the idiot?” Kairk said, his face getting hot. “You seem to forget that they destroyed three warbands with five soldiers.”

“But they couldn’t kill us because we have dawnstones,” Cora said. “Dawson admitted as much himself.”

“You think that would have stopped them?” Raab said. “Dawson also said they hadn’t expected to find this many dawnstones, so they weren’t ready. But all it will take is a trip back to earth to get the right kind of weapons, and we’ll be dead.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” Cora said. “After all, what else should I expect from a pathetic warrior who lost his dawnstone.”

Raab was on his feet instantly. He lunged at Cora, and the two tumbled to the dirt floor in a heap. Kairk and Jawn waded into the scuffle, but not before Cora landed a blow on Raab’s face, and he buried a fist in her stomach.

When they managed to pull the two combatants apart, blood ran down Raab’s face, and Cora was trying to catch her breath.

Kairk had both arms wrapped around Cora, but she thrashed and nearly broke his grip.

“Stop it,” he hissed into her ear. “This does nothing.”

She slowly calmed down but glared at the Raab.

“Let me go,” she fumed.

“You’re not going to take another run at him?”

He could hear her teeth grinding, but she nodded. He let her go but moved between the two.

“Whether you want to admit it or not, he’s right,” Kairk said. “If they have the rifles and everything else, they can take the Morning Star if they want it.”

“We’ll be ready,” Cora said. “This is our home, and we can make it hell for them.”

“And how do you plan to do that?” Kairk snapped. “By hiding in the bushes and hoping they run into your spear? Xiao found my father in the middle of a blizzard before we had time to even get a proper search going.”

“There are other ways to fight,” Cora said. “They’ll be gone for a while. We get them to come to us like the Gentori.”

“And we all end up among the stars,” Raab said.

“They won’t stop,” Kairk continued. “You heard how valuable this is to them. Even if we kill a few, they don’t have any problem bringing more warriors. Eventually, we’ll all be dead, and they’ll have the Morning Star anyways.”

“Not if we destroy their ship,” Cora said. “If they can’t get back, they can’t tell anyone we’re here, and no one else will come.”

“What are you going to do?” Raab said with a laugh. “Throw rocks at them? That thing was made of the same metal as the Chariot, and even Kairk’s hatchet can’t scratch that.”

“We steal their Morning Star,” Cora said. “Kairk just has to say he’s made a decision, and while he meets with the Captain, the rest of us sneak in and take it. They’ll be stranded here, without the weapons to fight us.”

Raab started to laugh again but stopped himself.

Kairk frowned.

Cora stepped forward; her eyes glued to Kairk.

“We can do this,” she said. “We’re warriors, survivors.”

Kairk stared into her blue eyes. They were earnest and pleading. But also confident. She knew she could do it.

He wasn’t so sure.

“It could work,” Raab said.

Kairk looked at his wife a second more, then slowly shook his head.

“It could,” he said. “But there is too much that could go wrong. If we fail, we condemn the whole crew. Dawson won’t leave us alone.”

“You don’t know that,” Cora said. “And if we kill Dawson then-“

“We’re not going to kill anyone,” Kairk said. “We’re going to fight for the best trade we can get, so our people live and prosper. I’m not going to start a war we can’t win.”

Cora’s face fell, then hardened.

“You’re not going to even try?”

“I have to balance the lives of the entire crew against the chance that we pull this off,” he said. “There are too many unknowns. Too much that could go wrong.”

Cora stepped back.

“You’re giving up.”

“I’m making the best of a bad situation,” Kairk said. “We survived the Gentori by the skin of our teeth. This way, we can protect ourselves and help our people without making a new enemy. One we can’t beat.”

He stepped forward and put his hands on her shoulders.

“This is the best possible outcome,” he said. “We’ll be able to save our tribe.”

Cora pushed her hands off his shoulders.

“You’re a coward,” she spat. “You give them the Morning Star, and you find a new bed.”

“Starlight...”

“Don’t ‘Starlight’ me,” Cora said. “You do what you have to, but you’re damning our souls. I love you, and I swore I’d never leave your side. But you do this, and you’re not the man I married. You do this, and you’re not a Travani.”

She spun and pushed out the door before he could say anything else.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HE WOKE up feeling more tired than before. Violent dreams had fought through the restful oblivion that usually took him. He woke up several times in a panic, reaching for his wife, but he was always alone.

The rising sounds of the tribe stirring finally convinced him to give up his quest for sleep and face the day.

While his arms and legs moved to get dressed, his mind did somersaults trying to think of ways to convince Cora to see reason. He turned every argument over to see it from her perspective, looking for the way to the counter each one.

Then his hands ran out of things to lace, or wash, or do, and he faced the reality of testing his arguments.

Squaring his shoulders, he pushed through the door into a sea of bubbling humanity. He nodded to some as he walked to Xiao's hut. It would be easier to deal with Cora if he had already made the deal. She wouldn't like it, but she would stand with him in the end.

Xiao pulled the door open at his knock, with a "Good morning, Captain."

"I've made a decision," he said. "I'm willing to offer the Morning Star, but only under the right terms."

"I am authorized to give you eight more rifles, two hundred pounds of various medicines, and five hundred pounds of foodstuffs. Plus, room for five passengers aboard the *Yukon*."

"Twelve rifles. My people are more likely to poison themselves with the medicines without training, so we'll take seven hundred pounds of food and fifty pounds of medicine. And I want 20 Travani to go with me, and five of your people to stay with the rest of the crew."

“I can probably do ten rifles. Six hundred pounds of food. Seventy-five medicine and we’ll show you how to use them. And I’ll include the mobile Rothenburg unit for your father. But for the passengers, our ship is not large enough to carry more than 5 additional personnel, and we need all our people. I’m sorry.”

“It would comfort my people to know you are coming back.”

Xiao shook her head. “You don’t understand. There are only sixty of us, to begin with. Everyone is needed to fly the ship. If we leave anyone, we may not be able to get home.”

“And if one of you had been killed when you fought the Gentori?”

“That wouldn’t have happened. And-“

“Anything can happen on the battlefield.” Kairk interrupted. “You must be able to fly the ship if you had lost a few men or you are following an idiot, which I do not believe to be true.” His tone softened. “Master Chief, I am offering to give you our connection to our ancestors. You claim that we are of the same origin, but if your people are not willing to be part of our tribe, we cannot give you the Morning Star. I will agree to 7 passengers, with two of yours staying with the tribe.”

Xiao’s lips were a tight line. “I’ll need to speak with the Captain.”

“Understood. Until then.”

Kairk touched his heart and left.

He started walking back to the center of camp. He didn’t know where Cora would be, but the Morning Star was the object of her irritation, so it was an excellent place to start.

He turned the corner and almost bowled over Raab.

“Ho, Captain!” The man took a step back and touched his heart in a salute. “Don’t worry, it’s safe.”

“What?”

“Cora said you two made up. For what it’s worth, I think you two came up with a good plan.”

Kairk barely suppressed a groan. “When?”

“Last night, pretty soon after you turned in.”

“Do you know where she took it? It is safe now.”

“Didn’t say where she was going.”

“We need to find her. There are still Gentori out there.”

“Wouldn’t be too worried about that,” Raab smiled. “She took the rifles with her, about fifty warriors too. They’ll be able to handle anyone who

comes close.”

“I’m sure they will,” Kairk stifled another groan. “We need to change the plan though. We need to bring her back home. Get a hunting party together.”

“Sure you do,” Raab grinned and winked at him, then hurried off before Kairk could smack him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, there were over a hundred men, armed with spears Kairk hoped they wouldn't need, in the center of the village.

Xiao stepped up beside him.

"Let me guess, Cora didn't like you making a deal?" Her voice was soft, so that only he could hear her.

"She was following orders," he muttered.

"Because she's definitely the follow orders type," Xiao's lips quirked up in a smile to take the sting out of her words, but then turned serious. "I can help you find her."

"And what will that cost me?" Kairk spat.

"Nothing. We want what you want."

"You want the Morning Star. I want my wife."

"Right now, that's the same thing," Xiao put a hand on his shoulder. "What you said about the Gentori isn't wrong. We picked up at least three hundred around the base of the mountain. And if one of your people accidentally shoots the Morning Star..."

She put her hands together in a fist, then mimicked an explosion like the one he'd seen when they'd first appeared.

"How bad would it be?" Kairk said.

"Let's just say that the *Yukon* is holding orbit a thousand kilometers above the planet."

"I'm guessing that's really far away," Kairk said. "Let's just make sure that we find her before anyone starts shooting."

"I can tell you where she is," Xiao pulled another ball from her belt and tossed it to the ground. Kairk knew it was coming, but the explosion of colors

still startled him. A map of the area, complete with small figures moving around translucent huts where they now stood. Kairk squinted and bent forward and saw one of the tiny figures do the same.

“Here,” Xiao said, pointing at a group of figures slowly moving south. Kairk looked over and thought he saw his wife’s golden hair bobbing as she walked. “Less than a thirty-minute ride.”

Kairk looked down at the terrain displayed by Xiao’s magic and shook his head. “They are already to the Falls of Dorian. It would take several hours, even on flat, clear ground for our grembals to cover that distance.

Xiao smiled again. “We won’t be riding a grembal.”

She pressed another button on her wrist.

For a moment, nothing happened, and Kairk looked at Xiao with one eyebrow arched.

Then there was a whooshing sound and dust, and dirt flew up into Kairk’s face.

He blinked and wiped his eyes furiously to clear them.

When he did, a smaller version of the *Yukon* sat hovering over the edge of the forest. It was made of the same black metal but was thinner and had a little bubble over the nose instead of the larger glass viewports. It looked vaguely like the Chariot, though on a smaller scale.

Xiao jogged over, and the thing descended until it was only a few inches above the ground. A hatch at the back lowered, similar to the one on the *Yukon*, and Xiao disappeared inside. She reappeared in the bubble on top a second later.

“Got room for three more,” she said, her voice taking on the gravelly tone again. “Hurry up.”

Kairk nodded to Jawn and Raab, and the three of them raced to the back of the craft.

The interior was very similar to the Chariot but on a much smaller scale. A web of straps like on the Chariot covered two seats on the right and another to his left. A long black box like the one they’d used to store their weapons aboard the *Yukon* had replaced a second seat on the left.

Kairk took the seat closest to the door, and the other two stepped around him to take places farther into the strange bird.

“Ready?” Xiao yelled from the front. Kairk could see her sitting upon a small shelf above the benches.

“Does it matter if I say no?” Jawn muttered.

“Go,” Kairk replied.

The ship rose from the ground. The back was still open, and more than a few of the assembled Travani gasped as it rose with their captain.

The black ramp swung back into position as they flew into the air, turning the interior of the box they sat in darkness, like the sun setting on a moonless night.

Then the world exploded with light.

The three Travani screamed and yelled as the metal disappeared, and they were suddenly floating above the forest canopy.

“Sorry!” Xiao shouted. “Hang on.”

The walls and floor reappeared, but the ramp was still transparent.

“What was that?” Kairk shouted over the blood, pounding in his ears.

“Holographic projections,” Xiao said. “The skimmer does it automatically when the ramp closes. Supposed to help soldiers get oriented before they drop in.”

“I’ve got a spear I’d like to orient through you,” Jawn grumbled.

Kairk didn’t disagree. He’d forgotten breakfast in his rush to find his wife, and after the “skimmer” had tried to give him a heart attack, he was glad he had.

They were also without any dawnstones. Kairk felt naked without his necklace, but he would rather die alone than risk Cora or the others being consumed by the explosion if they accidentally shot him.

The metal box bounced around as Xiao brought them through the treetops to the ground. Kairk’s teeth rattled in his head as he saw the field rise to meet them through the back ramp. As the skimmer’s feet sank into the soft ground of the clearing, the ramp grew cloudy and started to lower.

Kairk tugged at the web of straps, but they refused to come off. He started to wiggle his hatchet free, but Xiao came down from the shelf and hit the red button in the center of the webbing, and it slithered back over his shoulders. She did the same for the others as he pushed himself up on shaky legs.

“You didn’t lose your guts. I’m impressed.” Xiao held out a hand.

“Despite your best efforts,” Jawn said.

“Where’s Cora?” Kairk said.

“They’re about five clicks up from here. You sure she’ll come this way?”

Kairk nodded.

“There is an old fort that our ancestors built close by. If she makes it inside, we won’t be able to get her out without a fight.”

“Then let’s make sure she doesn’t,” Xiao said. She held out a small insect with a looping tail that curled around its body.

Kairk eyed the thing suspiciously.

“This will let us communicate,” she said. She held it up to her ear, then back to Kairk.

He took it hesitantly. As he held it to his ear, the tail squirmed over the cartilage and its body pressed against his ear.

He flinched as the thing situated itself, resisting the urge to grab it and throw it as far away as he could.

“How will I know it works?” He said.

Xiao held a hand up to her mouth.

“You’ll know.”

Her voice had a twinge of the metallic tone, but more disturbingly, it felt like it was right in his head.

His eyes grew wide, and Xiao grinned again.

“You’re never going to get tired of doing that, are you?”

Xiao’s grin turned into a smile, and she shook her head. But the amusement quickly transformed into seriousness.

“I’ll be on station for the next few hours. Let me know if you need evac.”

“I don’t know what ‘evac’ is, but if we need help, I’ll say so,” Kairk said.

Xiao grunted and headed back up the ramp as it slid closed behind her.

Kairk watched the skimmer rise into the sky before setting off in the direction Xiao had given them. They walked for a few hours, Xiao’s accented voice coming through to his ear, as they shadowed his wife’s band.

“Looks like they’re settling in for the night,” Xiao said as the sky turned orange. “Your wife just told everyone to get some rest for a few hours. This maybe your best chance.”

“Where?”

“A click south.”

It was dark by the time Kairk saw dawnstones twinkling through the trees.

“Did she post guards?” Kairk whispered.

“I see eight. They’re all looking out though. There’s a hollow tree trunk big enough for you to crawl through on the opposite side of camp. It’ll take you right into the camp.”

“Can you get me there?”

“Start by going south another four hundred meters.”

Kairk turned to Raab and Jawn.

“Stay here,” he said. “If you hear an Owel call, do something to create a distraction.”

The other two nodded, then moved through the underbrush. Kairk watched them go, then started the other way around the camp.

Kairk let Xiao’s voice guided him through the forest before he made it to the log.

“Stop.”

Kairk froze.

“Sentry to your left is looking your way,” Xiao said.

Kairk lifted his head above the brush and saw Deruk two dozen paces to his left.

The man turned and started toward where Kairk was crouching.

Kairk ducked and pulled himself forward with his elbows, slithering along on his stomach.

He made it past Deruk and around a fallen log big enough to hide his bulk. He peeked over the wood and saw Deruk standing a few feet from where he’d been crawling, staring out at the forest.

Kairk breathed a sigh of relief and continued crawling forward until he found the fallen log Xiao had mentioned. It wasn’t as big as he’d expected, and his shoulders sent an avalanche of rotted wood down the trunk of the once-mighty tree.

He slipped out of the rotten wood in the heart of the camp. Cora had had the presence of mind to cover the Morning Star, so its light didn’t paint a trail to their location, but the flimsy cloth thrown over it still glowed.

In the soft blue light, he saw his wife sleeping with her back to the stone. Her blonde locks were beautiful, and the light danced like it was being reflected in a rippling pool. His throat clenched and his resolve wavered. What good were the blessings Xiao offered if he lost her?

“She’ll forgive you,” Xiao whispered, reading his mind. “She’ll realize this is for the best. We can heal your people. Feed them. Take them home.”

Kairk’s stomach turned at the last words. His head knew that what he had done was for the good of the tribe, but Cora, a pained, betrayed expression painted across her face, dominated his heart.

He gently lifted the Morning Star from its cradle and wrapped it under his cloak. The bundle weighed against his side as he started back up the log.

“There’s a clearing two clicks south. I’ll meet you there.” Xiao said.

“Then we can swing around and get the others.”

They made it to the clearing as dawn crested over the trees. The strange ship stood in a clearing, Xiao’s bulbous black and grey figure standing at the base of the ramp extending from the grey belly of the winged beast.

He was halfway across the clearing when an angry, familiar voice rang through the still air.

“Kairk!”

He froze. Knowing what he would see if he did, his body refused to turn.

“How could you?”

Gritting his teeth, he turned to face his wife. “How could I?”

He didn’t know how she was there, but she was. Gorgeous, strong, and somehow able to make his heart beat faster even as he was furious with her.

“You stole it from the tribe,” he said. “It wasn’t yours to take.”

“And it is not yours to give,” She said. She took one slow step and then another. Her face and voice relented. “It is our people’s. You are Captain, but some things are bigger than you.”

“I do this for the good of our people,” he said. “They won’t be sick. They’ll be safe. It is just a rock.”

Her face hardened again. “A rock?”

She was half a dozen paces from him now. “That is how you view the gift of your heritage? She may take your body to the stars, but what of your soul? Do you think they will help you when you ascend?”

“If they can perform the miracles they claim, who is to say that our souls wouldn’t go to the stars regardless of if we have a stone or not?”

“I do,” her voice barely carried to his ears.

Kairk realized it was a plea.

“Please don’t do this.”

He wanted to run to her, take her in her arms, and tell her he wouldn’t. That for all the miracles in the world, he only wanted her love.

But the Captain was at war with the man.

His people needed medicine, weapons, and food more than a stone. They were sick. They were dying on Gentori spears.

“The tribe is greater,” he whispered. “I’m sorry, Starlight.”

He turned and resumed his trek toward the waiting ship.

“So am I.”

Kairk heard a snap and spun.

Cora held the string of dawnstones, the leather cord broken where she had

ripped it from her neck.

“You may be my Captain,” She said quietly. With the tip of her spear, she cut the largest of the stones away from the others.

“But you are not the man I married.”

She tied a lovers’ knot where the stone had been and slipped the leather cord around her neck again. The pigeon sized stone glowed in her hand as she gazed at it one last time.

She flung the stone at his feet. It skipped across the dirt and hit his shin, sending a lightning bolt of pain up his leg.

He tried to ignore it as he watched her turn and disappear back into the forest. This time, the man nearly won. It was only Xiao’s voice in his ear that stopped him.

“I’m sorry, Captain.”

Clawing for every inch, the Captain regained his footing and beat back the man’s assault.

Kairk took another deep breath, then nodded. He made his way up the rest ramp and, not trusting his voice, handed the Morning Star to Xiao, before walking up the cold, metal ramp.

And the future.

If you enjoyed Starfallen, [please click here to go leave a review!](#)

And if you want a free copy of my novella from my Killchain Chronicles series, head over to www.CBrandonClark.com/Starter and let me know where to send it!

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To the poor saps in my ECE Class way back in the day who read the original short story, thank you for the feedback.

And Mike, you said you wanted more so really this whole book is your fault...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brandon Clark is a Thriller, Science Fiction, and Fantasy author from Denver, Colorado. He left his corporate job in 2018 to write full time and hasn't looked back. In addition to writing, he also does freelance IT Security work, which also serves as inspiration for his thriller series, The Killchain Chronicles.

When he's not writing or protecting the world from hackers, you'll likely find him on a trail with his camera, rooting on his hometown sports teams (He'll happily respond to a loud "Go Dawgs," "Unite and Conquer," "Chop On," or "Rise Up"), or planning his next adventure in some far away land.