

# Against The Beast

A Terraunum Origins Novella

R.J. Batla



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*AGAINST THE BEAST: A Terraunum Origins Novella*

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## **Dedication**

**Thanks to God, my wife and kids, my  
family, and all those who have  
encouraged me along the way.**

**And to you the reader, thank you!**

**This is just the beginning...**

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**Against The Beast**  
**A Terraunum Origins Novella**

# Map of Terraunum



# Chapter 1

“Private Crowell, get over here!”

Royn Crowell dropped his shovel, abandoning the latrine he’d just been digging, and hustled to stand at attention in front of Captain Crane. Great, what can he have me do now? Snapping to attention, he said, “Sir, yes, sir!”

The husky captain put his hands behind his back and paced in front of him. “Crowell, my company had been here for six months before you showed up. We didn’t ask for any Ranger help, yet here you are.”

“Sir, I was assigned this post. I didn’t—”

Captain Crane scowled. “Nonetheless, private, you’re here trying to help us when we don’t need it. We have Senturians here with all of the Six Powers. I don’t need some snot-nosed Ranger who thinks he’s better than the rest of us gumming up my carefully run company. Tell me again what your special abilities are that qualified you to be here?”

Here we go again. “Sir, my Quantum Powers are Mindspeak and Teleportation. I’m also an accomplished Air user.”

Captain Crane stopped his pacing and stared at Royn. “And when did you finish your Ranger training? How many assignments have you had?”

Royn barely kept from sighing and rolling his eyes, “Two months ago. This is my first assignment.”

The captain grunted, “Exactly. Green. Untested. But since you’re here, I may as well put you to doing something other than digging privy holes.”

*Holy cow, am I going to get to do some actual Ranger work instead of manual labor?*

He started pacing again, “Private, the locals are restless. They don’t like us, but they do like the goods we have, and we need the food they grow. Recently, when they’ve come Fort Highway to trade, we’ve heard talk that people are dying. As stupid as I think this outreach mission is,

we're supposed to help the people here on the West Side of the Breaks. I'm not wasting the valuable time of my men, so this falls to you. Seems like a good job for a half breed anyway." Royn let the insult slide.

"They say something evil is lurking in the forest southwest of here, toward the Shadow Mountains. I want you to go root it out." He stopped nose to nose, his rotten breath almost gagging Royn. The captain grinned maniacally with yellow stained teeth and two-day-old stubble, "And I want you to do it now, private."

"Sir, yes, sir! Who will be going with me, sir?"

"Why, no one, private!"

"But, sir, Rangers usually work in pairs—"

"Did I stutter?" he said, the grin dropping and his familiar scowl coming back as he turned to leave. "And don't come back until you've figured out what's got them stirred up, rambling on about death and devils walking around. Now get going, soldier!"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Royn said, about-facing and running to the supply shed, snatching up his sword as he went and strapping it to his hip. He grabbed as much gear as he could, putting some in his pack and others on his belt pouches: rations, water jugs, spare knives, first aid kits—anything needed to survive in the wilds around Fort Highway for the foreseeable future.

Pack loaded down, he draped a cloak around his shoulders as he stepped through the wooden gate in the stone wall and walked the thirty feet to where the trail entered the Wald Forest. Eyeing the mangled trees, he had no idea how anything lived there. But beneath those bent, dark trunks there was abundant life, well adapted to defending itself. If it didn't bite, sting, or prick you, it didn't live there.

*Here you go, Royn. Your first real Ranger mission. I don't know if the captain just wants me out of Fort Highway or if he wants to get me killed, but this is my mission. This is what I trained for.*

Taking a deep breath, he stepped in.

Instantly, Royn was in his element. Sucking in the mustiness, the damp air put a spring in his step. Angling toward the Shadow Mountains to the west, he caught glimpses of the snowcapped peaks in the many breaks in the treetops, the beauty of the majestic mountains diminishing some of the creepiness of the Wald Forest. Eyes seeing everything and nothing, scanning for danger and signs of...whatever he was looking for, Royn moved stealthily, making almost no sound.

Ranger training had been hard. Brutal, in fact, but it prepared him. Honed him like a knife, where he was one with the forest, moving from shadow to shadow, searching, barely a creature aware of his presence.

*"Your job is to be a ghost,"* his trainer always said. *"Get in, get the job done, get out."*

Speaking of the job—the captain didn't say where he needed to go, or gave him much direction at all, so he moved with caution and speed, always angling southwest toward those mountains. They'd set up Fort Highway on the north edge of the Wald Forest where it first intersects the Wasser River, so it was at least a day's travel to the base of the Shadow Mountains. Numerous villages dotted the area—any one of which could be where the rumors started—though none were friendly to Easterners. Especially a Ranger.

After two hours weaving through the trees and picking his way between the thorns and stickers, he'd found nothing. Then the smell hit him.

## Chapter 2

Royn bounced into a jog that ate up ground while being quiet at the same time. The stench of rotting flesh and scorched timber grew stronger as he ran until it was almost unbearable, so he slowed to a creep, drawing his sword. A clearing in the brush ahead brought the Ranger to a stop. Odds were whoever did this was gone, but there was no sense in walking into a trap. Easing to where he could see through the trees, Royn almost lost his lunch.

Bodies. Bodies everywhere, in various stages of what could only be described as being eaten. The entire village lay wasted before him—buildings decimated, everything smashed, hundreds of dead left for the vultures. *What would do this?* Easing out from the protective cover of the trees, Royn inched toward the first corpse—a young female. Or what was left of her. Skin and flesh were ripped off the bone by jagged teeth, judging from the wound. Several chunks of flesh were missing from all over her body. Whatever did it wasn't particular on where it took flesh.

This could have been Royn's friend. His family. If this were the East Side...

Trying to shake off the image, Royn worked his way through the entire village, coughing and gagging on the stench. Assessing the extent of the damage and decomposition, he calculated the time frame: three days. This happened three days ago.

On top of a pile of ruined wood—what once was a building—a white object stood out against the brown. He bent down to pick it up. It was some sort of bone, but it didn't belong to any human. It looked like...

His face went pale. "Mother of God." Royn pulled out his badge, sending a tiny bit of energy into it to activate the com link. "Captain, I've found something big. Coming in to report." Then in a flash of blue light, he teleported.

A moment of bright light—along with the sensation of being pressed on all sides—and Royn appeared out of thin air in another blaze of blue, back at the Ranger base. *Hub, I meant to appear in front of the command tent, not the privies. Need to work on that.*

“Crowell!”

*Oh no.*

The captain stormed toward him pointing his finger, a couple of the lesser ranked Senturians trailing behind him. “Crowell, what did I tell you when you left, soldier? I said don’t come back until you’ve figured this out. You’ve barely been gone a few hours!”

Everyone around stopped what they were doing and made their way over to them. *They must have heard the communication. Or they want to see me get humiliated.*

Royn snapped into a salute. “Sir, but I found something, sir.” He held out his hand. “I found this bone—”

Captain Crane walked up, leaned over and examined the bone for a full second before he launched into a tirade and slapped Royn’s hand, the fragment skidding to a halt right in front of the crowd of onlookers.

They all backed up.

“Do you see that?” one whispered.

“Is that a...”

“Son of a...”

“That’s a Skeptor bone!”

Everyone around jumped, flinched, or frantically looked around, as if the mention of the name might bring fire down upon them.

“What is the commotion?” Captain Crane said, turning to see the stunned crowd shying away from a dried up bone. “Did they stick me out here with a bunch of pantywaists?”

Stomping over, he snatched up the bone, slicing his finger in the process. He waved it at the crowd. “You’re scared of *this*? You call yourselves *Senturians*? Why, this is just a nice decoration! Maybe a rib bone from a wild boar. As a matter of fact, I think I’ll keep it.” Pulling out a

leather strap, he tied it around his neck, red blood staining the perfect white of the bone fragment.

One of the soldiers braved, “Sir, I wouldn’t do that! They say if your blood touches the bone of a Skeptor, its owner will hunt you down and take it back!”

“Nonsense,” Captain Crane said, “those stories are nothing but make-believe meant to keep little kids from wandering around at night. Now all of you get back to work.” The others started meandering back to whatever task they’d been doing. “Ain’t no company of mine gonna be caught believing in any ghost stories. What are you still doing here, Crowell? This isn’t proof, and you still have a job to do.”

Maybe not proof enough for you, but it’s proof enough for me. “Sir, what about the people in all the other villages around here? Shouldn’t they be warned? I mean, Skeptors are—”

The captain was on Royn so fast he’d barely had time to register the movement. Grabbing him by the shirt and yanking him close—spit splattering Royn’s face every word—he said, “Now you listen here, private! You come back and cause all this trouble and commotion in my camp with your frilly powers and ridiculous notion of Skeptors on the prowl, and I ain’t gonna have it. You get back out there and find some real proof or the source of all this.”

He shoved Royn hard, sending him back a few steps. “Do what you want about these people. They’re worthless anyway. I don’t even know why the Senturian Corps commanders sent us over here. Waste of good resources trying to build a relationship neither side wants. What a waste.”

Royn mentally steadied himself – he’d decided he couldn’t let this go. “Sir, I’ll figure this out. And I think it’s only right to alert the villages. We have the resources, so I’m going to do it.”

Captain Crane shook his head and said, “Fine, private, but know this. You are on your own. You embarrassed me in front of the entire



company. No one will back you up. No one will be sent to look for you. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now get outta my sight."

"Sir," Royn said, saluted, turned and hurried back to the gear shed. If he was going to do this, he needed more supplies. Damn it. The captain didn't deserve the salute from Royn. He had to respect the position; that was without question. But the man...Royn reviled the way he was treated, and the complete lack of respect for the people here! Why would the generals send such a man to build relationships?

He shook his head to clear it. *Can't be helped. Right now I've got to find this creature. I have the means to fix it, which means I have the responsibility to do so. To do otherwise wouldn't be right.* Zipping and shouldering his bag, he stepped out of the shed and into the forest as the sun slipped below the horizon, sending the world into darkness.

Fearing the varied nighttime dangers of the Wald Forest, Royn shimmied up an oak tree, found a flat spot to lie down, and ate a cold dinner. Settling in, he remembered his parents back on the East Side. Human father and Aeren mother. He smiled. For a long time he thought everyone's mom had green skin and a tornado tattoo between their eyes. Royn hoped he was doing them proud, acting how they raised him to. Doing what was right.

Some people didn't like people like Royn, with parents from two different races. Half breeds. Royn sighed. He didn't care; people fear what they don't understand. And his parents were amazing.

A slight smile on his lips, Royn said a quick prayer and fell asleep. Every so often the sounds of something dying—something *eating*—would rouse him from slumber, and he would pop up, sword halfway drawn, air swirling in his left hand, ready for a fight. But each time it was nothing—at least nothing coming for *him*.

He was up with the first rays of the sun, the dew moistening his clothes as he ghosted through the forest, looking for signs of the mon-

ster. Several times he found odd tracks, or branches broken in ways they shouldn't have been. At noon he found the first skeleton—set back in a bush—clean of all flesh. Soon after he found the first body hung in a tree.

The next few hours he found more and more of the dead hung in various places, stuffed under logs, and wedged between rocks, flies buzzing all around them like miniature vultures feasting on the rotting flesh. Each carcass had puncture marks and large chunks of missing tissue. Whatever was doing this liked killing. *Please don't be a Skeptor! Anything but a Skeptor!*

"Help!" croaked a voice from behind a bush, causing Royn to jump out of his skin and send a wave of air defensively where the sound came from, blowing back the trees. "Someone, please help!" the voice pleaded, barely more than a whisper.

Flicking his wrist, Royn sent another blast of air, this time clearing the leaves enough for him to find legs sticking out from under a bush. Bloody legs. Racing over, Royn pulled the man out, grabbed the medical kit out of his pack, and started dressing wounds.

Though there wasn't much of a point: two huge sections of his stomach were missing, as well as most of his shoulder. The man's wounds were very recent. Royn was working on his third bandage when the man said, "Don't bother with it, son. I see now it's all over for me; it's written on your face. But you still have a chance - you need to get out of here." He winced in pain. "Someone needs to warn the others."

"Sir, I'm sorry, I don't have Healing Powers, and I'm not an Elf. They could help you, but I just don't have the power."

The man grabbed Royn by the shoulders, pulling him close. "Leave me, boy! Those...*things* could come back to finish me at any point. You need to run, kid. Get out of here while you can!"

"I can't do that, sir; I'm going to stop whatever is doing this. Can you tell me who it was—what did this to you?"

All color left the man's face. "I don't know what it's called, but the devil himself is afoot."

The leaves rustled slightly ahead of him. The man convulsed, grabbed Royn's collar, then whispered, voice shaking, "It's come back! Flee! Run for your life!"

Royn teleported in a flash of blue fifty yards up into one of the nearest trees, the leaves hiding his reemerging blue light. Breathing hard, he searched the foliage, finally finding the dying man, crawling as fast as he could away from the noise, trailing a line of blood, staining the ground crimson. Seconds ticked by when nothing was heard but labored breath, the rest of the forest gone silent.

As if it knew an alpha predator was present.

Draped in the shadow of a dark cloak, the creature emerged, appeared in an instant, stalking its prey. Sniffing the air like a hound, it zeroed in on the now-frantic man, a forked tongue flicking in and out. Royn sucked in a breath.

Its head snapped his way. Holy crap, Royn had made no sound! Just breathed! He didn't dare let it out as he stared into the empty eye sockets of the Skeptor. A dog-like mouth overflowing with teeth stuck out of the hood of the cloak. Royn could hear its rattling breath as the menacing creature searched for him, head twitching left and right.

The injured man groaned. With a snarl, the Skeptor turned back, leaping on the man from where it stood, teeth sinking into his neck. The man let out a garbled scream. With a quick twist and a snap from the beast, the man's limbs fell still. The Skeptor released him, and then shot his gaze back at where Royn hid. *He knows something's here—but he doesn't know what.*

The canine-like creature took its time eating its meal while Royn was forced to watch. He had no choice; any move or sound would alert the apex predator below to his presence. Blood and bones slowly scattered around the body, the ground stained with the life of the villager. Every so often the Skeptor would jerk his up and look in Royn's direc-

tion. When the moment passed, the Skeptor went back to eating. Royn waited a long time for the thing to finish, nerves on end. When it did, there wasn't any flesh on the bones.

Apparently satisfied, the Skeptor licked the blood off its teeth.

And it screamed. Leaves fell to the ground, the branch under Royn vibrated slightly at the sheer volume. "Bubble," Royn thought, forming a small pocket of air around his head to keep his ear drums from exploding. The Skeptor stopped its wail after twenty seconds and looked around, disappointed that nothing had shown itself.

It made like it was walking away, then suddenly rounded a tree and faced its back trail. Royn never moved.

Turning, it made to leave again, but reached down and grabbed some rocks, throwing them in all directions.

That was the last straw for a nearby rabbit. It jumped up, darting between the brush in a frantic rush to escape. But the Skeptor was quicker, thrusting its hand, sending a pulse of yellow energy which exploded on the poor bunny, blowing it to smithereens.

Grunting, it turned to follow yet another trail. It ambled along, seemingly unaware. *It's baiting me again. It knows someone is here, but he can't find me.* Royn let it go. Just before it rounded the bend, it shot one last look his way, then swept its black cloak around itself and was gone.

*Holy cow, that was close—too close. So what now? Go back to base? No, that's out of the question. Follow it?* That's what a real Ranger would do. But could he? This was his first assignment, and now he planned to tail the most dangerous thing on the West Side of the Breaks? Could he actually do it?

Maybe so. Maybe he could. Maybe all he needed was a chance. Or maybe he'd get killed. But hey, you only die once.

Decision made, Royn teleported to the last location he saw the Skeptor.

## Chapter 3

For the better part of two hours, Royn followed the creature, always using his teleport and always keeping out of sight in the treetops. More than once the Skeptor heard the slight popping noise when Royn reappeared, and more than once it had set a trap, lying in wait for the Ranger. But somehow each time—by either luck or skill—Royn remained undetected.

The whole time Royn's mind was racing, constantly moving, wondering, despite his focus on stealth. Where was this thing going? What was it doing? For the life of him, Royn couldn't remember his training on Skeptors. Even if he could, he knew there wasn't much anyway; their existence was shrouded in mystery. What motivated these things?

One more flash of blue, and the Skeptor stopped in front of a sheer granite cliff, a hundred feet wide. With wild jungle on one side and a roaring waterfall on the other, the sound of crashing water drowned out the sound of the teleport. *What's it doing?* The Skeptor looked around. Even with the hood, it couldn't conceal the animal-like features, the skeletal frame, and those teeth gleaming in the afternoon sun.

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.

Royn tensed, hand going to his sword.

Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.

What *was* that? How could he hear it over the falls...

Hmmmmmmmm. Hmmmmmm. Hmmmmmmmmmmmm. Hmmmmmm.

The Skeptor touched the cliff gently with its clawed hand, then with its left, tapped out a pattern on the rock. Three left, two right, one right, two left—*damn, I've already lost the pattern!* An entire minute of taps and humming later, and the cliff disintegrated, revealing two large caves. The openings were identical: black maws like nostrils sucking the air from the little cove. With one more glance around, the creature disappeared into the cave on the left.

Royn settled down to wait in the fork of a big spruce tree. Odd sounds and light came from the cave, too far back and too faint for him to make out. After ten minutes, the Skeptor emerged again. But something was different. It was slow, leaning heavily on the stone around it, like it was tired or hurt, ready to fall over any second. It made its way to the second cave entrance and disappeared into the blackness again.

This time there was no light or sound. Just silence in the empty blackness.

The seconds oozed by, the minutes moving at sloth speed as Royn waited. And waited. Should he risk it? Should he go in the cave with the Skeptor and face it now, while it looked vulnerable? Or was that another trap? Or should he go into the other cave to see what the creature had done? If he found something, who would he tell? Captain Crane? What difference would it make?

*Get over it, Royn. It's not worth risking your life over. For all you know, the lights could have just been a trap—it knew it was being followed. Don't be stupid!*

After an hour of debating with himself, he shook his head. He couldn't not know. With the creature asleep or otherwise preoccupied, this might be the only chance Royn got to figure out what was going on. The thought of going blind into a dark cave to face a Skeptor—even a wounded one—was just too much. First cave it is. Let's see what the light show was all about.

Securing anything in his gear that might make the slightest noise, Royn shucked his boots and donned buckskin moccasins. With a deep breath, he ghosted out of the tree.

Moving at a snail's pace, every sense turned up past eleven, Royn made his way toward the entrance of the targeted cave. Mouth dry, muscles tensed for action at the slightest hint of danger, he closed the distance until he was at the mouth of the cave. Moist air blew from within, slightly stale, and he hesitated only a second before stepping in.

The first dozen yards went without incident, until the first bend in the road shot the place into complete darkness.

*Great. I didn't want to touch or disturb anything. But a light would be worse. Like a "Come eat me" sign.* He had no choice and reached out for the walls. Rough stone met his hands, and he felt his way along for...damn, he didn't know how long or far! Then a faint light showed further down the tunnel. Royn got closer and closer, and just before he could really see well, something crunched underfoot.

Flinching and cursing himself, he pressed on, each step making the same noise.

Slowly the light got brighter and brighter until he saw what he was stepping on. *Bones. I'm crunching bones!* They covered the floor like a blanket—human and animal mixed without distinction. How long have the Skeptors been here?

Accepting the unavoidable noise of his footsteps, he looked up to see the source of the light. Jewels. Hundreds and hundreds of them—egg-shaped, the size of a cantaloupe, flawless, and in a rainbow of colors. *What are these?* The brightness blinded and disoriented Royn after the darkness of the cave, but he made his way closer, eyes fixed on the stones. Each had a swirling center—a constantly spinning vortex that changed speeds randomly. Mesmerizing.

He cocked his head. He wanted to touch them. Like they were calling to him.

Royn shook his head. *No, bad idea. Bad idea.* But he looked again. Hypnotized by a blue stone, he reached out, and ever-so-gently touched the top of it.

Instantly he was bombarded with images—thousands of images—enough for an entire lifetime. A man. His wife. Kids. Happy home. Screaming. Trying to pull away, he found his finger stuck. He panicked, fear racing through him as the images continued, flashing in front of his eyes like a super-speed movie.

Then, just as suddenly, they stopped. Royn fell back with a crash and a crunch of bone, both hands on the floor, panting. *Memories!* Those were the memories of...someone. Good Lord, this thing is stealing people's energy—their life force—and putting them in these stones. *But how?*

Assuming he was right, Royn eyed the closest stone, and a face appeared in the vortex. He did the same to the next. And the next. Each representing a life stolen.

He looked at one more stone and almost fell over backwards again. *It's James!* Royn looked closer, and the face of one of the Army privates swirled into view again. *I just saw him this morning! When could this have happened?* James was now locked in a stone, unable to get out, unable to move—

An odd clicking noise froze Royn where he stood. He gulped. *This ain't good.*

Turning, he saw the Skeptor at the entrance to the room, blocking the only exit. The Skeptor looked at Royn, looked at the stones, then back at Royn. It let out an ear-splitting shriek and charged the Ranger.

Royn himself screamed and teleported just before he was impaled on the lunging Skeptor's claws. Just like that, he was back at Fort Highway, breathing hard and shaking.



## Chapter 4

Bursting through the captain's door, Royn slid to a halt and saluted. "Sir, I found it, sir! The Skeptor is real. I was in its cave. It had a bunch of stones with people trapped in it. It was stealing people's—"

"Private," Captain Crane said, folding his papers and gently laying them on the large wooden desk he sat behind. "I don't care what you think you saw. I don't believe you. I think you're full of it, trying to put fear into my company when really you're the scared little boy out here in the woods and afraid of the dark!"

"But, sir, I was in its cave! And one of the stones had James' face in it!"

The captain's eyes bulged, "James? Private James?"

"Yes, sir."

Captain Crane hit a button on his desk, "Corporal, where is James?"

The radio blinked as the corporal responded, "Um, well, we haven't seen him in a couple hours, sir."

"Find him corporal," the captain said, "Private, take me there."

Royn was taken aback, "Sir?"

"You're a teleporter right?"

"Well, yes sir, but—"

"And we have a missing soldier, right?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"Then take me there. Right now," he said, standing up and strapping on his sword.

"Yes, sir." Royn stepped to the captain, grabbed his shoulder, and teleported...

To the original spot he'd found the dying villager. Now there was nothing but a slight scorch mark. The captain raised an eyebrow, "No caves?"

"Sorry sir, this isn't it. I'll take you there now."

Another flash of blue, and they reappeared in a treetop. But no cave in sight.

Before the captain could speak again Royn teleported yet again, and again they ended up in a treetop with no cave in sight.

Ten more times he teleported, and ten more times they came up empty. Finally the captain said, "Enough Ranger, take us back to base."

Royn hung his head, "Yes sir." The world turned blue and they were back in the captain's office.

Captain Crane didn't say anything, he just walked to the closet and said, "I don't know where James is, but I don't think he's trapped in a stone in some cave." He thrust a mop, bucket, and sponge at Royn. "Now get outta my sight and go clean the latrines until I decide what to do with someone who disobeys a direct order."

"Sir?" Royn said, fumbling with the items tossed at him.

"I told you not to come back till you knew what was out there or took care of it. Yet here you are, with proof of neither. So now I have to decide if I ship you back to the East Side or just court-martial you here. Dismissed."

Royn's face tightened as he saluted. "Sir!" He turned on his heel and walked straight to the latrines, dropping his gear at the door, and set to cleaning them.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid. *Why* didn't I just grab the stone? It's so easy – there it is, reach out, grab it," Royn said aloud. "Then I can't even teleport back. Now I'm here cleaning toilets while that thing runs around killing people, stealing their energy, putting it into stones to use for who knows what. *What* is his problem? Why can't the captain just listen to me? I saw it, was almost killed by it—how much more proof does he need?"

The doors swung open and Royn stopped his cleaning and saluted. "Lieutenant, sergeant."

"Private, as you were," the lieutenant said. Royn went back to cleaning as the two men relieved themselves. "Private, we heard quite a story about you."

"Yes, sir?" Royn said, continuing with his duties.

"That you found some kind of Skeptor nest or something?"

"Yes, sir," Royn said.

"Well?"

So Royn told them the story. They listened with rapt attention, and when he was done, they looked at each other with grim faces.

"You're sure of what you saw, private?"

"As sure as I'm standing here, sir."

"Then we might be in big trouble. We should triple the guards. Be ready. But don't tell the captain what we're doing."

"Don't tell the captain, sir?"

The lieutenant laughed. "Too right! He'd have our heads if he knew we talked to you and took action on it without consulting him." He squeezed Royn's shoulder. "Take heart, private—not all commanders are as...well, are like the captain."

Just then, the bell sounded for mess, and the officers left. Royn quickly followed after storing the cleaning supplies. Gathering food, he sat down at a table alone. The Senturian Corps avoided him after the scene with the captain, so he finished his meal by himself and left for his tent. Entering the forest on the way, he tried to scout a little but his heart wasn't in it and he found nothing.

Plus he kept hearing that rattling noise every five seconds, and he was jumpy as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs. Royn sighed, gave up, and went to his quarters to sleep.

The next day, he dressed and booked it to one of the nearby villages. The captain might get mad, but he hadn't given an order to actually stay in the fort or discontinue his mission. And there was no way Royn could sit there and do nothing. The people around here were in danger, and they didn't know it. He had to warn them. He wasn't sure what

they could do against such a creature, but it was better to be prepared than caught unawares.

Arriving at the edge of the mass of wooden shacks, he tried talking to people and got nowhere. "Ma'am, who's the leader here?" he said to a lady walking by in dirty clothes.

"Go away, Easterner. You're not welcome here."

Try as he might, the people wouldn't respond. Despite their ragged appearance, they seemed genuinely happy, and were making an existence here in this harsh land. Just trying to live.

Royn shook his head; he had to keep pushing. Something would happen. "Sir, could you point me to the leader, or whoever is in charge here? There's a Skeptor around, and you need to..."

The crowd around him froze, then started talking frantically in a foreign language. Once of them shouted and they went silent. A tall female strode toward him, her cloak still managing to show her curves. But her face...scattered scars gave her an odd look. "What did you say, Easterner?" she said with a slight accent. Her clothes were cleaner than the rest, and an array of weapons stuck out around leather armor. Soldier.

"Ma'am, there's a Skeptor on the loose. I've come here to warn you and the other villages in the area."

The woman nodded. "If a Dealer is indeed here, then we will take care of our own."

She turned to the crowd. "Alert the town, rouse the guards, send runners to the next village in line. Have everyone secure their homes. We've dealt with them before, and we will weather this storm. Let's move." The people nodded and calmly set about carrying out her orders.

She turned back to Royn. "Thank you for your warning, Easterner, but you are not welcome here. Goodbye." She swung her cloak and walked away.

"Dealer?" Royn asked.

She stopped, turning her head just enough where Royn could see her profile. Mouth tense, brows pulled together, she said, “Yes. One who deals out Death.”

## Chapter 5

The Skeptor waved his hand and the telestone lit up. A man picked up after one ring. “Yes?”

The Skeptor bowed, despite the Master being unable to see him. Even his voice deserved respect. The Skeptor couldn’t believe he was taking orders from a human. If his grandfather could see him, the punishment would be severe. But the Master was no ordinary human. He could do things the Skeptor had never seen before. His power was unmatched, even among his people. He bowed again. “Master, it’s working. The energy is holding steady in the stones, and it’s becoming easier and easier to siphon from the humans. They are viable, and we’re able to use them to fuel anything we wish.”

“Excellent job. That’s what I like to hear! Tell me, how exactly does it work?”

“Once I devour their flesh, I’m able to concentrate their energy into the stones. After they have stabilized, I regurgitate them.”

“An amazing ability. Truly your people are one of the most powerful in all of Terraunum. How do you like your assignment?”

“It’s glorious, Master! The killing, the blood, the fear in the feeble humans as they cower before me. The slaughter is exhilarating, just as you promised.”

“Perfect! Let’s proceed with the plan. We need many more stones to power the army we’re creating if we’re to bring down the Wall.”

The Skeptor bowed again. “Yes, Master, it shall be done.”

“Have there been any issues?”

The Skeptor shifted slightly, “There’s a Ranger snooping around. He found our cave, saw the stones—”

“Then he must be eliminated. Find him. Destroy him.”

“Yes, Master.”

“And take it out on the villagers. They should know better than to let the Easterners intervene. Make. Them. Bleed.”

## Chapter 6

Royn retraced his steps back to the cave—or where he thought it should be—at least a dozen times. Each time, he ended up someplace different, someplace he'd never been, and he'd have to teleport back and start all over.

“Damn,” he said, scattering a few birds out of the bush next to him. He hadn't gotten a good enough read on the cave to teleport back to it! Apparently he couldn't even get close. The damn Skeptor'd scared him so bad he'd totally lost himself. Forgot all his mental training and preparation. Always be able to teleport anywhere. That was a key advantage of his Quantum Power: go anywhere once, get back there anytime.

*I'm only a private, damnit! I've only had a few months of training and a few months more of deployment. Maybe I'm not cut out for this. Maybe I'm not as good as I thought I was.*

His stomach hurt. But he couldn't let that distract him.

Yet, it did. A lot. This wasn't a normal stomachache. His vision was blurry. His head hurt. He was going to...pass...

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Gasping, Royn tried to raise his head but couldn't. His whole body ached, sore and dehydrated. The sun was low on the horizon. Hours. He'd been out hours, stuck in the forest, vulnerable. But what had happened? Was he sick, some sort of West Side virus? He'd never felt like this before. But something about it reminded him of something.

Rubbing his head, trying to clear it, Royn searched his memory.

Then suddenly it hit him. Another Quantum Power! The stomach pain, the loss of consciousness, it all fit! That's what happened when you got a new power without the aid of the Awakening Stones. It was rare, yes, but not unheard of.

Here was the issue: there was no way of knowing what the new power was. Without the Awakening Stones, a Senturian has no idea. He'd just have to figure it out on the way. But first, he had to get out of this funk, out of this state of mind—and out of the damn forest. Checking his map and using his Ranger badge as a beacon, he found his location. Thank God there was a village not three miles north of his current location.

Hitching up his pack, he hobbled there, falling several times, using the trees as support. The pain was constant, burning a hole inside. Emerging from the forest, the small, ramshackle village might as well have been the grandest palace in all of Terraunum. And outside one building were the three words he needed badly: “Bar and Inn.”

Shuffling more than walking in—barely sliding his feet across the dirt floor—he grabbed the first grubby barstool he found and heaved himself upon it. “Water, beer, food,” he managed to get out. “Please.” The bartender nodded and served the drinks, then went to the kitchen, bringing out meat and cheese. Not great quality, but Royn didn’t care, and he slapped down payment and tucked in. He was just happy they served him at all, being an Easterner. Maybe the mud and sweat covered it up. Or he looked so pathetic the bartender felt sorry for him.

Several different groups of people milled about—some old, some young—of various descent talking amongst themselves, paying him little mind. Like it was common for someone to amble in barely alive. Royn savored the food and drink, feeling more like himself with each bite, as if each bite removed some of the hurt.

The old man next to him told his fellows: “This has happened before! Jim, you remember—people disappearing, rumors of Dealers roaming the forest dispensing their death sentence on any they came across.” The man grabbed a glass of water, and it frosted as he brought it to his lips. The man was a Senturian. He could manipulate water. The West Side was full of people who’d been kicked out of the East as



punishment for crimes or failure in the Senturian Corps. That they survived, reproduced, and continued the Senturian line made total sense.

Royn grabbed his own glass, and it frosted too. Whoa... This had to be it—his new Quantum Power! But that was odd—usually these extra powers weren't elemental. Fire, Air, Water, Earth, Healing, and Energy. The Six Powers you either got or you didn't. They were the consistent, main powers of any Senturian. Quantum powers could be anything—like his Teleportation and Mindspeak—and few people got the same ones if they got any at all. But no matter. Now that he knew what it was, he could learn to use it, incorporate into his arsenal.

"Aye," Jim said, "I remember! That was right before all those other monsters showed up."

Royn froze mid-bite.

"Monsters?" one of the others asked.

"Loads of them," Jim continued, taking a long draw from his beer. "Werewolves, orcs, goblins, trolls—you name it, they showed up. And stronger than normal too, like they had some kind of power boost."

*The jewels! Had to be!* Royn reached for his glass again. But this time it moved away. He cocked his head. Two Quantums? That doesn't make any sense.

"And then another Dealer showed up..."

Royn spit his water and tried to stand, but the dirt floor stuck like glue to his boots, rising with his foot and causing him to fall to the floor in a heap. *Earth too? Three new powers? This is too weird!* And it had never happened before, as far as he knew.

"You all right, sonny?" someone asked him, extending a hand to help Royn up.

"Yes, sir, thank you, but if you'd beg my pardon, did you just say *another* Skeptor showed up?"

"You ain't from around here are you?" A huge man covered in tattoos reached down, picked Royn up, and set him on his feet. With one hand.

“No,” Royn said, “but all this talk about Skeptors... er, Dealers has me a little worried.”

“And right they should,” a creepy old man said. “They devour people, steal their souls, and use it to fuel some kind of dark power. These glowing stones that burn you to ash if you even look at them! BOOM!”

Royn jumped, literally crashing into the ceiling boards fifteen feet up, where he became stuck, feet dangling and kicking. *Water, telekinesis, Earth, and strength? No way. Not possible. Has to be something else...Mimic! My Quantum Power is Mimic!* The people on the floor had to jump up and grab him to pull him down again. Dusting himself off, he thanked everyone and hustled out the door, as revived as he was going to get after the meal.

Mimic. The copy power.

Turning onto the main road, he oriented himself and headed toward the Ranger base.

## Chapter 7

As soon as he was in the forest, Royn teleported, emerging in the forest right outside the base. *At least I appeared where I wanted to this time.* Taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders and headed to the captain's office. The secretary looked up, then immediately looked down, talking into the mic attached to his headset. Royn never stopped, opened the door and saluted. "Permission to report, sir!"

Captain Crane's eyes narrowed, but he waved his hand. Royn stepped forward, closed the door, and stood at attention, waiting. "Proceed, private."

Royn launched into a detailed depiction of everything he had found, seen, or heard. Everything from the first time he ventured to the forest to the new information he'd just found out in the bar. "Sir, if they're right, we're in great danger! We have to do something—try to kill this thing, at least evacuate—"

"That's quite enough, private," he said, slowly standing from behind the desk, fists clenched. Stepping around the desk, he walked straight to Royn, staring down at him, eyes ablaze with fury. Oh no. In his hurry, he'd forgotten how much the captain didn't like him. And that he was not a rational man. "Private, I've told you several times now that you'd better not make a mistake, that you'd better clean this mess up. Well you've failed, private! And now, since you have disobeyed no less than three direct orders, I'm going to have to—"

The secretary popped his head in the door. "Um...sir, there is an, um...situation, sir."

"Not now, Jones." The captain turned back to Royn, the Skeptor bone just visible, still hanging on his neck. "I will not tolerate this made up mumbo jumbo from a half breed who thinks he's better than everyone else just because he's got two Quantums—"

"Sir, there really is something. The sentries are saying they're detecting movement on the perimeter, and—"

"Jones, I said not now—now get out! You, Crowell! If you think for one second I'm going to let you disrupt my unit, disregard orders, demonstrate a complete lack of skill, well then you'd better—"

"Captain!" the secretary yelled.

He spun on the secretary, fire blazing in his hands, then swirling through the room. "Jones! You'd better have a damn good reason to—"

The secretary had his hand on the headset speaker covering his ear, listening to the radio chatter. "Sir, we just lost a...no, make that three sentries. Something is out there, sir. Something is killing our men."

The fire in his palms died immediately, the captain regaining his poise. "Then let's go figure out what it is. We'll continue this later, Private Crowell."

"Sir," Royn said, following him out the door, drawing his sword and sending energy into the steel, encasing it in power. A slight hum issued from the blade, and it glowed a faint yellow. All Senturians—no matter what their powers—could energize their weapons, making them stronger and more powerful.

They heard the screams just as they exited the building.

Explosions and fire lit the dwindling sunset so it was almost as bright as day. All around him men ran calmly to their posts. Battle roars echoed all around the camp, and flashes of yellow energy on weapons sparked as steel rang on steel. "Orcs," the captain said, "and a lot of them from the sound of it. To the perimeter!" He drew his own sword—the yellow energy glowing brightly—lighting up the night around him. Any Senturians within earshot dropped what they were doing and launched themselves toward the edge of the encampment, Royn in the middle of the pack. Rounding a building, he knew he had to be getting close to the front lines.

But he wasn't ready for it.

Orcs—their grotesque bodies puffed up with power from the glowing jewels stuck inside their chests—were engaged in mortal combat with the Senturians. Normally orcs would be no match for even a

novice warrior, but these had been altered, been given power. They were stronger, faster, and uglier than they should be.

Just like the old man said in the bar. Now he knew what the stones in the cave were used for.

Royn dove in, beating down his fear as the first orc approached with a hiss. He went for Royn's throat, but a quick teleport directly behind the creature caught it off guard. Royn kicked one leg out from under it, stabbing it with his sword as it went down, the sword blazing bright white as Royn issued the killing blow.

He jumped off, parried a battle ax, and said, "Air Spear!" He punched, sending the missile directly through the orc, splattering those behind with blood. Teleporting again, he came down on top of another, impaling it in a flash of yellow. Turning, he said, "Air Ram!" Thrusting his arm out, he bowled over three orcs with a blast of solidified air that were on top of another Senturian. Crushed by the impact, the orcs didn't move.

An ear splitting screech echoed through the base, and fear crept into Royn's heart. By the looks of the others, it had the same effect on them. The Skeptor had arrived.

Royn saw the creature as the horrifying mass of teeth and claws stalked through the battling orcs and Senturians. One tried to attack it, but a swift claw swipe decapitated the soldier. Another Senturian dove in, only to be slain just as quickly, the Skeptor punching through his chest, spewing lifeblood everywhere. It paused to take a couple of bites, and Royn teleported.

Coming in from above, sword first, Royn braced for impact. At the last second, the thing looked up, sidestepped Royn and backhanded him, sending him spinning into a mass of wooden buildings. His armor took the brunt of the hit, but there would still be a large bruise where he'd been struck. The splintered wood collapsed on top of Royn, pinning him down, leaving him only a limited field of view once the dust settled.

He tried to teleport, but immediately regretted it—blue flashed around him, but nothing happened other than a splitting headache that latched onto his brain, and a searing pain in his leg. *What the hell?* He couldn't move much, but then found the problem: he'd been skewered by one of the pieces of wood, right through his calf muscle. That piece must still be attached to a lot of other pieces. And all that mass meant Royn couldn't teleport. Normally he could teleport himself and another person thousands of miles, two people hundreds, three people a couple dozen. But the more mass he had to move, the more his power was limited. All that debris attached to him in his weakened state meant he was trapped.

The sounds of battle were dying down around him. Through his porthole he saw the Skeptor taking bites of random dead Rangers, while it allowed the orcs do the final killing. So many bodies! How many Senturians were dead? Were there any even alive?

Suddenly it turned, and there was the captain, decked out in a full suit of armor. Royn didn't like him, but he had to admit he was intimidating. Twice as big as the Skeptor, he was clearly a formidable opponent.

With a step and punch, the captain launched a fireball at the creature, which it dodged swiftly before attempting to close the distance. But the captain threw up a stone wall with a spinning kick, the Skeptor smashing into it when it couldn't stop in time. Seeing an advantage, the captain launched several more fireballs, each slamming into the creature, sending it backpedaling until it was up against another building.

Keeping it pinned with fire blasts, the captain grabbed a spear lying on the ground, preparing to throw. *He's gonna beat it!* As he threw, the creature *ate* the last three fire blasts, caught the spear just before it pierced him, closed the distance in a blink to the stunned captain, and stabbed him in the throat. Blood oozed from between his lips, a horrible squelching sound the only noise he could make before he was slammed to the earth.

The Skeptor cracked its neck, then looked oddly at the captain. It reached down, grabbed the bone fragment from the necklace that hung around the captain's ruined throat, and reattached it to its own forearm.

Then everything was suddenly silent. *Oh crap. That's never good. Where are they?*

He caught movement through the small opening—one of the sergeants had survived! He was making his way out of camp, trying to dodge the vast number of creatures milling about after the slaughter, bleeding in several places.

But the Skeptor was directly in his path. If he moved now, he would be caught! *What can I do? Wait!* "Sergeant!" Royn said in his head, projecting the thought to the other Senturian, who recoiled slightly but composed himself quickly.

"This is Sergeant Brady. Identify yourself."

"This is Private Crowell, sir."

"Thank God you're alive!"

"Barely. I'm buried under some debris. Listen, don't move! The Skeptor is just around the building you're hiding behind, and if you go now, you're dead. Don't make a sound!"

"Confirmed. Get me out of here, private. I've got to report what happened here."

"Understood, sir! Go to the next building on my mark. Three...two...one...NOW! Then stop again at the next building." Royn cut off the communication for a couple seconds, breathing hard. His vision was tunneling, and he was having trouble staying awake. His leg hurt, and his foot was wet with blood.

The sergeant leapt to action, clearing the opening just before two orcs came around the bend.

Reestablishing the connection, Royn said, "All right, move in three..." Royn guided him all the way off the base to the forest, second by agonizing second. If he had any hope of survival, it was with the

sergeant getting out and sending help. "Good luck, sir!" Royn said as he slipped into the concealment of the trees.

"Thanks, private. I'll send help as soon as I can. We will avenge the loss here today. Stay safe, son."

Thoroughly exhausted, Royn passed out.

Suddenly the weight was lifted off him, and Royn found himself awake, with a throbbing leg, surrounded by snarling beasts.

"There you are, Ranger," the Skeptor said, throwing aside the entire debris pile that had Royn pinned. "Attack!"

With a snarl, smaller badger-like creatures launched themselves at Royn. Where were the orcs? He slashed with his sword, cutting down several of the fiends. Others roared. Royn said, "Air Wall!" and pushed with both hands. Condensed air shot out from him in a burst, flinging back his attackers, giving him room. Blood clouded his vision as he tried to see an escape route, some way to get out.

But there was none. He was hemmed in.

*Think, Royn, think! Teleport!* He could teleport! He tried, but his power failed, and nothing happened. *No, no, no, not now!* His head was too clouded to do it correctly, too beat up and weak. He couldn't concentrate.

The creatures leapt into another attack, and again Royn repelled them, their bodies lying all around. "Air Slice!" Sword thrusts kept them at bay, until so many were dead they buried him to the waist. Then to the shoulders. Then he lost his sword.

"Halt!" another eerie voice echoed from his left, and the badger-things stopped in their tracks, then backed away, leaving Royn with only one arm and his head above the dead. Then the Skeptor was directly in front of him.

From around a building stepped a second Skeptor. Holy crap, there were two of them!

"You fight well, Ranger. It's always a pleasure when our prey shows so much spirit. It makes it much more sporting for us, don't you think?"



You will make an excellent addition to our collection.” It looked at the other Skeptor. “The stones aren’t working exactly right; we need to tweak the formula. This one”—he pointed at Royn— “will make an excellent test subject.”

*It’s over. I’ve failed. Failed myself. Failed these people. Failed everyone.*

Both the Skeptors walked toward him, then leaned over to grab him. One of the badger-creatures got spooked and bolted in front of the first Skeptor, tripping it. The Skeptor stumbled and very slightly touched the second on the shoulder as it regained its balance.

The second Skeptor came unglued, screaming and flailing his harms. “Idiot!” he said, flames covering his hands as he blasted the other Skeptor with such force that it knocked him thirty feet away, “You know the dangers! Be careful!”

Bleeding profusely, Royn hardly cared what they were fighting about. He wasn’t going to live to find out anyway.

The second Skeptor started walking back toward him, then stopped. Both creatures whipped their heads to the north, some inaudible sound drawing their attention. One whistled, and both of them and the other creatures immediately set off at a trot.

*Odd.* Bloodied, battered, and bruised, Royn passed out again.

## Chapter 8

“Hurry, before they come back,” someone said. “That distress call won’t keep them busy for long.”

“Shut it, he’s heavy. I can’t lift him by myself! Come on, help me!”

“Dash it all, do I have to do everything?”

Royn couldn’t even groan. Drifting in and out of consciousness, he sensed he’d been placed on a bed. Someone fed him. A healer was brought in. They weren’t very good, but the purple energy from their hands eased the pain enough for Royn to sit up, catch a blurred glimpse of female forms tending to him, then crash back down on the bed.

He couldn’t tell how much time went by. Sleeping was broken up by small bouts of awareness, where he was fed, watered, bathed, then went right back to sleeping.

Finally the haze cleared, his strength started to return, and he sat up. He looked around for the first time at the room he was in: bare planks of wood for walls, simple wooden bed, a chair, nightstand, and dirt floor. That was it. In fact, the room appeared to be the entire building.

Suddenly the door burst open, and three extremely dirty women came in, one with food, one with water, and the other with shaking hands lit up with purple healing energy. “Ah, he’s awake! Only took two weeks. Fragile Easterners...can’t take a little monster coming to town.”

“Ethel, it was a Dealer. *Two* Dealers, actually. Lucky for him we know their distress call...”

Royn said, “That was you? Thank you, thank you very much. I thought I was dead.”

“You would have been,” Ethel said. “We almost didn’t make it out with you anyway. Damn things came back too fast, almost walked right over us.”

“Not sure it matters,” the healer said, getting to work on Royn. “After taking out that Easterner Fort, they will have everything they need.”

“Um...everything they need to do what, ma’am?”

“Why, everything they need to create their army. Lord knows why they need it, but they’ve tried this before, and it almost worked. Killed a lot of people before they were stopped by some powerful Senturian round about Sior Lake.”

Oh no. “What will your people do? Surely you can leave, get out of here, get away...”

“This is our home. Here, eat this. Besides, we don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“So what will you do?”

The healer shrugged. “Die, most likely. But, you never know, something might happen. The good Lord might send a miracle our way.”

Royn started to get up.

“And just where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m going to stop them,” Royn said.

“Not on my watch! You’re half dead!”

“That means I’m half alive.”

All three put their hands on their hips at the same time. “Are you seriously considering going after these things?”

Royn walked over to his clothes—freshly cleaned and pressed—and started dressing and strapping on gear. They’d even grabbed his sword while they were pulling him out, thank God. “Who else is going to? A good man has to act to prevent evil when it’s in his power to stop it. Protect those who are weaker than yourself. Or at least try.”

They all exchanged looks, then one said, “Then you’re gonna need this.” They loaded him down with food, supplies, water, and weapons. “Take these,” the healer said, handing him some beans. “They’ll replenish your energy supply plus some. But you’ll have a splitting headache when they wear off, so don’t take them all at once.”

Royn cracked a smile. “Thanks, ladies.” He unfolded a map and spread it on the table, talking to himself. “Now where was that cave...”

“Oh, you mean their hideout?”

“Wait, what?”

Another laughed. “Yeah, their hideout—you know, where they *hide*? Here.” She pointed, and Royn marked it just at the foothills of the Shadow Mountains, not five miles from Fort Highway. Or where Fort Highway used to be.

“So they must’ve been here around a lot if you know where their base is?”

“We done told you they’ve tried this before. And most times there’s always one lurking about somewhere anyway. You live out here, you learn to steer clear of them if you value your hide being attached to your body.”

“Do you know why can’t they touch each other?” Royn asked.

They all shrugged. “We’ve never seen them try. They mostly work alone, but when they’re in pairs...come to think of it, they hardly ever get close at all. Interesting. Ranger?”

“Yes?” Royn said, strapping on his last bit of gear and turning toward the door.

“Why are you doing this? You don’t owe us nothing. Doesn’t make sense—helping people you don’t even know? People who—for the most part—wouldn’t care if you were dead or alive?”

Royn scratched his now two-week-old stubble. “It’s the right thing to do. Doesn’t mean it’s the easy thing. But it’s the right thing. That’s reason enough for me.”

They nodded. “You’d better hurry. You haven’t got much time. Tonight’s the full moon. That’s when they launched their attack last time. Good luck, Ranger.”

“Thank you again, ladies. I’m going to need it.”

Stepping outside, Royn still felt a little weak. *Time for a bean, I think, before I get started. Let’s see if they know what they’re doing.* He

popped it in and swallowed. Nothing happened. Then his eyes went wide, insects crawled all over his skin while burning irons were pressed on his hands and feet. It burned! It burned! But the burst rejuvenated Royn, pumping up his power. He grinned. *I think I have a chance now.*

He shook his head, bouncing on his heels. *All right, Royn. You've held to your principles. To what the Good Book says. Now you have to live it.* He took a deep breath. Then another. And in a flash a blue, he was gone.

The power boost from the bean and the coordinates from the ladies honed his teleportation, and he popped back into reality just where he wanted. His lungs filled with moist air, the waterfall casting droplets onto the whole area. Mist covered the upper branches where he'd teleported as well as the ground below, leaving an open space sandwiched in the middle. Scanning, he found nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing moving. It was quiet. Too quiet.

If he was going to have any kind of success, the ground needed clearing. Seeing where he was stepping could mean the difference between living and dying. Smooth Breeze! He pushed his hands gently, alternating left to right, as a soft wind picked up at dirt level, rolling the mist slightly but doing the job of clearing it, revealing moss covered soil, flat as a pancake.

And still nothing moved.

Sliding down the tree as quietly as he could, he used air to cushion his landing as he dropped soundlessly to the earth. Tiptoeing—taking extreme caution with each step—he worked his way through the forest, using every piece of cover available to make it directly in front of the caves. Still nothing moved. The dark maws held no answers for him, staring back with its emptiness. Two big eyes watching him.

Daring him.

Royn shifted again, moving ever closer, ghosting behind a large boulder. Checking the cave mouths again, he took one more step, repositioning slightly.

A stone shifted under his feet, making an almost inaudible noise. A horn sounded. Damnit.

Three power-infused orcs burst into the clearing, bearing down on his hiding spot, roaring and waving their weapons. Ugh, of course. Royn drew his sword, energizing it as he went, and teleported, appearing low and in front of the left orc, already swinging, taking out its legs with a hiss of burning flesh, sending it tumbling. Teleporting on its back and thrusting down, the orc died as his blade pierced its heart.

It must have pierced something else, because the damn orc exploded, flinging Royn off and into the trees in a spray of red light and innards. Grabbing branches, he brought himself to a halt, frantically searching to find the other two.

They weren't on the ground. Scrambling noises from below redirected his attention. They were climbing the trees! One on either tree next to him, they would be there in seconds. Royn dropped to the ground, falling between the orcs.

"Air Blades!" he screamed, extending his arms. Four-foot razor sharp swords of air emerged from his fists, slicing right through the leather armor, skin, and bones of the orcs, setting off two more explosions. But he was well past them.

"Cushion!" he said, thrusting his arms down, blowing a pillow of air into existence, slowing his fall enough to make the landing relatively soft. Branches and trees crashed behind him as he ran. Waiting until the noise stopped, he turned, facing the caves again.

When he saw what awaited him, he popped the second bean in his mouth and chewed. Again there was a rush of power, almost intoxicating as he readied himself. He had a feeling he was going to need the extra power coursing through his veins to win this fight. Even that might not be enough.

Two figures stood, one in front of each cave. "This one has caused us enough trouble, brother. I think it's time we rid ourselves of this pest." The nightmarish creatures threw off their cloaks, reveling entirely

bone-covered bodies, like their skeletons were on the outside. Hundreds of bones ground and clanked together as they reached behind their hideous tooth-filled heads to their backs and drew huge broadswords, each made of bone and sinew, the blades a foot wide at the base and arcing up to a sharp point. They growled and leapt at the Ranger.

## Chapter 9

Royn parried the sword from the left Skeptor and threw up an air shield on his right. Steel clanged against bone as the two traded blows. The second one broke through the air shield quickly and thrust at Royn's midsection.

Royn teleported at the last second, the creature's sword hitting nothing but blue light. Growling, they advanced on his new position, circling around again. Clearly they meant to keep his attention divided. The left one started in again, and Royn counterattacked, matching the strikes with his own as the second one circled and jumped in again. Thank God for his Ranger training, or he wouldn't have lasted ten seconds against these things.

"Flying Knives!" Royn called, arcing his arm and sending dozens of daggers of sharpened air at the Skeptor. They imbedded themselves in the bone, but didn't penetrate, didn't even slow the thing down. Again Royn teleported away at the last second.

They continued to circle, and this time Royn put everything he had into his sword work, until he found an opening. "Aha!" he said, driving his blade right into a Skeptor's chest.

It clanged and bounced harmlessly off the bone armor, the force prying the sword from his hands. "No!" he said, teleporting away, then right back to get his sword and away again too fast for them to react. *Damn that was close.*

Five more times they circled and advanced, each time Royn throwing a different attack at the second Skeptor, and five more times Royn teleported away. But there was a problem. Royn's energy was draining quickly—the second bean was wearing off, his reserves already depleted. He was weaker than he thought. He hadn't fully recovered. He shouldn't have come. The Skeptors circled again. Like vultures. Might as well be. One of these times they were going to get him. Just a matter



of time. How could he win this battle? His attacks fell right off of them, nothing stuck. He was severely out matched.

*What is that blasted buzzing?* Royn dodged a sword attack and deflected a fireball with an air blast.

“Now.”

From behind him the second Skeptor launched another fireball. Diving away, the heat singed his clothes as he tucked and rolled on the landing, immediately jumping up before he was blasted again.

“Now.”

Another attack from behind him! He dove away, this time narrowly avoiding a hurled boulder. What the heck was going on? Where were these voices coming from?

“Circle around. I’ll distract him, you come in from behind silently, and skewer him.”

*Mind speak! They’re using Mind speak! And I can hear them!*

The first one attacked again, drawing his attention.

“Get ready,” he heard. OK, this was it. He stepped in closer, the smell of the thing gagging him, but he could stand it for a minute. The Skeptor increased the speed of its attacks until its sword was just a white blur whizzing around Royn. “Arg!” Royn said, cuts appearing on his left arm and right leg. Nothing deep, but they slowed him slightly, and he heard the second Skeptor advance.

*Wait for it...*

Royn got even closer, the creature snapping its jaws at his head.

*Wait for it...*

“Kill him now!”

The second Skeptor leapt in, blade first.

Royn teleported.

The Skeptor’s momentum was too much and carried him into his counterpart. The bone sword succeeded where the steel had failed, penetrating cleanly through the Skeptor’s armor and through its heart. A toe-curling scream burst from the doomed beast, so loud leaves fell

from the trees around them, rocks vibrated, and the water in the river rippled violently. The Skeptor crumpled to the ground slowly, still twitching and clawing, like a snake when its head was chopped off but the body refused to believe it was dead. Finally the motions stopped, and the creature was still.

The surviving Skeptor hadn't moved, but stood frozen with its sword thrust out.

Royn was bleeding in three places now. Damnit, if he only had some kind of healing ability! Or if there were an Elf around. He pulled supplies from his belt pouches and taped the cuts shut as quickly as he could, he kept a wary eye on the Skeptor, who still hadn't moved. As bandaged as he could be, Royn took a tentative step toward the creature.

Royn froze as it bent over and picked up the dead Skeptor's sword, slowly turning around, its body convulsing as if it were breathing hard. Its black eyes met Royn's. "You killed my brother. No one touches a Skeptor. No one kills a Skeptor and lives! You will die, Ranger, like all the others. But your death will not be quick. It will be drawn out. It will take time. You will die from a thousand cuts, a thousand torments, as many as I can subject you to until your soul leaves your body. You should run, but you won't. And it wouldn't matter. I'd find you. I'd kill you. I'd eat your bones."

Royn gulped, and ate the last power bean. He might not get another chance. The surge of energy was muted by the sheer force in the Skeptor's voice.

With a high-pitched scream, the Skeptor attacked, flailing both swords with even more speed than before. Pulling heavily on his renewed energy, Royn blocked them, but he was instantly on the defensive, backpedaling, barely throwing up air shields and his sword in time to slow the flurry of blows. With a burst of power, the Skeptor threw Royn back, put both swords in one hand, then cocked its empty hand back, muttering in a foreign language.

A ball of crimson formed around its hand, molten lava-like, building in heat and intensity. Royn could feel it from several yards away. "Time to die, Ranger!" it said, thrusting its arm forward in a burst of light and heat. The trees and ground around Royn were incinerated, burnt to less than a crisp. But Royn wasn't there.

He'd teleported, right behind the creature, stabbing up with his weapon, trying to get through the armor... *Please God...*

A backhand sent him sprawling.

Their only weakness was each other, but there was only one left! Maybe he could use the second sword, if he could get it away from the Skeptor. Which was unlikely.

Another lava blast and it closed in again, raining blows down as fast as it could, Royn barely blocking, giving ground. Then he tripped. A root made the Ranger fall flat on his back, leaving him vulnerable! He tried to teleport, but he couldn't move. No flash of blue, no void, nothing! I'm trapped!

The Skeptor said, "Not this time, slippery snake. No more blue flashes." It pressed one blade toward his neck; Royn pulled a knife from his belt, catching the Skeptor's sword in the cross of his own sword and knife. But it wouldn't hold. The Skeptor was too strong, and they both knew it. It...smiled... "You see, Ranger, you humans are too frail, too puny, too weak to even think of standing against us. This wound will not kill you, only bleed you enough to make you weak. Then you will know what true pain really is!"

The sword got another inch closer to his neck, Royn straining with all his might to keep it back, and the creature barely exerting effort to slowly move the razor-sharp tip of the bone toward his neck. "You won't stop us this time, Ranger. First, the West Side will know our fury. Then that pitiful defense you call the Breaks. Then the whole East Side will be at our mercy. Everyone you've ever known, everyone you've ever cared about, everyone you've ever seen will bow before us, do our bidding, or die like the vermin they are."

The bone sword moved another inch. Then another. Royn couldn't hold it any longer; his arms were giving out, his sword slick with some kind of secretion from the Skeptor. If he could only penetrate that armor. The creature was inches away from the tip of his...sword...

"You're wrong, beast. You'll never see another day. You'll die like your companion. And you'll be thwarted by a weak...human..." The blade slid another inch, cutting into his neck slightly.

"Never!"

"Mimic!" Royn screamed, letting go of his knife and rotating as fast as he could. Blood burst from his neck where the bone blade found its mark, flowing too fast. Royn clamped his left hand over it, pressed as hard as he could to try and stop the bleeding as he took some ragged breaths.

But so did the Skeptor. In complete shock, the creature looked at the Ranger—Royn's extended right arm and sword had turned into the same bone of the Skeptor's. The one thing that could penetrate their defenses. The one thing that could kill them. He smiled despite himself, the smell of iron mixing with sweat filling his nose. Using his new Mimic Power, his plan worked – turning his own sword and flesh into that of his enemy, then stabbing him with it.

"Impossible," the Skeptor said, coughed several times, bringing up a black substance that had to be blood. Dropping to its knees, it breathed its last then collapsed to the ground next to Royn with a loud hiss.

The thing was dead. It couldn't hurt anyone anymore. He'd killed two Skeptors, something no one had done before. But it didn't matter to Royn—there was too much blood pouring from his neck. He wouldn't make it, wouldn't live to tell the tale. But that was OK. What was important was that he'd stopped the attack. Stopped the loss of innocent life.

That's what drove him to join the Rangers in the first place. Protect those who couldn't do it themselves.

He smiled to himself as the world faded to black amid the shouts of men and the screams of monsters.

## Chapter 10

Royn woke up in the same damn healing house he was in before.

But this time the chair was occupied.

"I'm sure you have a headache," the man said. Where did Royn know that voice? His vision swam before him, clearing ever slowly as the man spoke. "A rather rambunctious lady told me to tell you that you weren't supposed to take all three that close together. That you're lucky it didn't kill you. I assume you know what she's talking about. Oh, and she said thanks too."

Blinking one more time, Royn's vision finally cleared and found himself looking into the face of Ames Talco. *General* Ames Talco, the leader of the combined Army, Senturian Corps, and Rangers, arguably one of the most powerful Senturians alive.

"Sir!" Royn said, sitting up and trying to salute but only managing to smack himself in the head with the cast on his right arm and falling back down on the bed. Apparently turning your arm into that of a Skeptor severely hurts your bone structure.

General Talco laughed. "At ease, private. Though you won't be private for very long. A field promotion is coming, if I'm not mistaken."

"Tha-thank you, sir!" Royn said. *Incredible. The head honcho of the armed forces is here. Talking to me. Thousands of miles from the East side. It must have taken an insane amount of resources to get him here.* "Um...if you don't mind me asking, how am I alive?"

"Those healers you befriended arrived just in time to see you kill the second Skeptor. Their warriors fought off the monsters that came out of the woodwork when it died, defeated them, and managed to bring you back here. A young sergeant had managed to warn us, so we'd sent reinforcements and they arrived a couple days later. Luckily there was an Elf with them, and she managed to get you set on the path to healing. Took a fair amount of doing, if I do say so myself. After being under the care of the Elves, you've since awoken, and here we are."

"But why? Why did the villagers come to help me? I thought they hated all Easterners?"

"You must have done something right. You've inspired them. Gave them courage. Made them open up their hospitality to you. Impressive, to say the least."

Royn tried to move quickly again, but a bolt of pain sent him crashing back down. "Sir, the Skeptors, they were making these stones, using them to power up the orcs..."

"We know, private, we know. We've already been to their cave—the villagers told us where they'd found you."

"How many did you recover?"

"About ninety."

Royn's eyebrows shot up. "When I was in the cave there were at least five hundred."

Ames rubbed his chin. "Then it seems someone managed to collect them before we arrived. I have a feeling we will be seeing these stones again."

"Sir, what will happen to the people in the stones?"

"What do you mean, private?"

"Well, sir, when touched one I got a flash of memories from someone's life. Almost like their soul was trapped inside. It was their life energy for sure, but was it their soul? Are they stuck there for eternity?"

Ames shook his head. "No. It isn't their souls, just an imprint of what their lives were, attached to the energy associated with this world. Nothing can steal your soul—it isn't something you have, it's what you are. Your soul either goes to heaven or hell, depending on where you place your faith."

"Well that makes me feel better," Royn sighed. Then a thought struck him. "But, sir, why are *you* here? Surely you've got better things to do than check on an injured Ranger private on the other side of the world?"

He grinned. "When I heard that one of our Rangers had killed two Szeptors, I had to see him for myself. And shake his hand." Ames reached out, and Royn shook it awkwardly with his left hand, as his right was in the cast. "Good job, Ranger."

"Thank you, sir."

"I've been looking for Senturians like you."

"Sir?"

"I'm in need of a select group of individuals with special talents to carry out missions of the top secret variety. And I think you'd be a great addition to the group. What do you say?"

Royn was astounded. "T-thank you, sir! You bet I'm in."

The general smiled. "Then I have one more question for you: how do you feel about scrutiny and the adoration of strangers?"

Royn cocked his head. "What do you mean, sir?"

Ames let out a loud laugh. "My friend, you're the only one to ever kill a Szeptor. Ever. Not one, but you got two! You're going to be famous."



**Black**  
**An Edgewalker Story**

**R.J. Batla**

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Dedication

Other Books by R.J. Batla

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

I hope you enjoyed BLACK, I know I loved writing it!

Other Books by R.J. Batla

About R.J. Batla

## **Dedication**

**To my daughter, who first came up with  
Felma.**

## Other Books by R.J. Batla



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Smalltown hero gets his new powers and they almost kill him for it. Then they ask him to save them all. Figures. Can Jayton survive the journey?

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Jayton's story continues in DEATH CLOUD. He's made it to the tournament. Each victory brings him closer to his goal. But will Jayton

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1. <https://www.rjbatla.com/books/fire-eyes-awakened/>
  2. <https://www.amazon.com/Death-Cloud-Senturians-Terraunum-Book-ebook/dp/B07KG-GMRNB/>

and his crew find a way to beat the Uland, keep the weapon out of Malstrak's hands, and save Terraunum? Or will they be struck down in the attempt?



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Sword and Sorcery, Superhero, Military, and Steampunk elements combine in the fast-paced, action packed adventure in Terraunum, where monsters and men clash in a battle for survival.

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3. <http://eepurl.com/c-YTUb>

4. <https://www.amazon.com/Against-Beast-Terraunum-Origins-Book-cbook/dp/B01N3MNY64/>



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A vanishing ship and an invisible adversary lurking below the surface sends new captain Celeste Dumas and the crew of the Ajax into uncharted waters fraught with danger as they uncover a much more sinister plot.

Pirates, action, and amazing powers combine in the second novel in the *Terraunum Origins Series*, chronicling characters from *Fire Eyes Awakened*.



## **Edgewalker: The Terraunum Origins Series**

### **Book 1**

Get me the book!<sup>6</sup>

We protect you from things you didn't even know existed.

Gunner Hext. Being a detective for the Unseen world has its challenges. My informants are goblins and giant rats. Headquarters doesn't give me the support I need. And creatures cross over and start attacking Normals. All in a day's work.

---

5. <https://www.rjbatla.com/books/tempus/>

6. <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07C4HGG2J/>



To stop a dangerous drug from killing more unsuspecting Normals, I'll have to use all my wits and powers to stop the criminals and rescue the hostage.

I'm Gunner Hext. I'm an Edgewalker.

**Black**  
**An Edgewalker Story**  
**R.J. Batla**

# Chapter 1

Stepping lightly through the mesquite and oak thicket, sweat dripped down my back in the midday heat of the central Texas summer. The shade of the smaller trees offered little reprieve from the sun and I wished I could stop under one of the bigger ones and take a break. The grip on my Springfield XD .45 pistol was slick from my perspiration, but I preferred the gun to the phase sword strapped to my back for the particular quarry I pursued. Mosquitos buzzed around my ears – annoying things. Why God created them and fire ants, I'll never know. Devil creatures if there ever were any.

The seven-pointed star tattoo on my left wrist shone with a light golden glow, the magic casting a cone of silence around me, completely eliminating the heavy footfalls of my combat boots and the scrapping of my black duster on the brush as I snuck along the cattle trail I followed. A rain shower last night had muddied the ground and only served to raise the humidity, and thus the heat. *They had to be here somewhere...*

There were hoof prints in the mud – not livestock, unless they'd suddenly grown an extra toe per hoof. I bent down to double confirm my suspicion, and caught a whiff of earthen rot, not unlike peat. Yup, this was them.

Porcus. Wild boars mutated by contact with something from the Unseen World; they were ferocious predators that killed anything they encountered, in either the Unseen or Seen realms. And there was a whole herd of them here – at least twenty judging by the muddy prints. Which meant there were a lot of people in danger.

Edgewalkers like me protected people from things in the magical world. That was the job. The Unseen peoples and creatures generally kept to themselves and interacted with the Seen without the notice of normals, but those that stepped out of line had to deal with the Edgewalkers.

Touching the tattoo on my wrist, I whispered, “Blast.” A slight red glow joined the gold – I’d now be able to fire a pulse of pure energy from my left hand. Along with my .45, I hoped it’d be enough to stop the herd if it came to that. I’d much prefer an ambush, but sometimes you didn’t get to pick how you fight the battle.

Easing forward, still silent because of my magic, left palm and pistol were raised in front of me, ready to fire at the slightest provocation. Left hand, magic use; right hand, sword or gun. I slowly crept around a bend in the trail, nerves on end and eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary. The smell intensified, but I heard nothing. Peeking around the corner, I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding and stood up straight.

I’d found the porcus. They were all *dead*. They’d been slaughtered – deep gashes all over their bodies, some torn completely in two, blood and guts strewn everywhere. Scratch that. Blood covered *everything* in this hundred square feet of pasture. Whoever – or probably *whatever* – did this, took out some frustration on the monsters by the looks of it. Each porcus had to weigh over three hundred pounds, hair mutated into bristling spines, and mouths full of metallic teeth and tusks.

Touching my wrist, I turned off both magics and felt a drain on my energy. Side effect of using magic: it drained your chi, manna, soul, or whatever you named your inner well of energy. It drained it faster if you used more than one type of magic at a time.

Holstering my .45, I huffed out a breath. *Well that was anticlimactic*. I was glad I didn’t have to fight the brutes, though now I had to figure out what *had*.

I’d gotten called in because a farmer had found a herd of cows – full grown, mind you – all torn up and eaten down to the bone. If you don’t know cows, they may be docile normally, but if you threaten them, they bring half a ton of mean at you, including horns and hooves. The farmer’d called it in, and our intelligence team back in New York

had flagged it and sent in the local Texas Edgewalker – me – to investigate.

I bent down to examine the nearest porcus and almost gagged – porcus already smelled terrible on the outside, but they smelled even worse on the inside. I ran my finger along several of the wounds. A sharp blade had made many of the cuts, but the biggest of the gashes looked to be created by a jagged edge, like it was stabbed and then ripped open. Those slashes appeared to have been made after the porcus were already dead. Whatever did this was strong, fast, and nimble. It had to be to take out twenty porcus without apparent injury, it –

I saw black hair on the tusk of the next porcus. *Maybe not completely injury free.*

Stepping around the large hog-like animal, I bent down to examine the hair stuck to its tusks. Pulling out my pocket knife, I pried it from the tusk and examined it closely. Slightly coarse, like horse hair, with a light sheen to it – definitely from the Unseen.

Looking down at the mud, it was easy to see now that I knew what to look for. Horse prints were clearly mingled in with the three-toed prints of the porcus, and there were hoof prints around every single dead porcus.

Oh no. Very few horse or horse-like creatures were from the Unseen, and any with black hair were bad news.

Standing up, I eased back to the edge of the clearing, drawing my phase sword and switching the setting to fire. The sword hummed with latent energy, ready to burst into flames at a mere thought from me. The blade was three inches wide at the base, and extended three feet to end in a needle point. The small cross guard had flying V shapes on it. The sword was a more efficient use of magic than my own body, converting my inner energy into the desired magic, which I selected by turning the dial set in the cross guard. Most of the time, it was the best weapon against Unseen hostiles.

Walking around all the dead porcus, I touched my Edgewalker badge, bringing it to life, along with the earpiece in my ear. “Headquarters, this is Gunner Hext – I mean Agent 2401 – calling in to report.”

“Agent Hext, confirmed. Glad to see you’re remembering protocol. Go ahead,” Amy Hale said. Our HQ dispatch operator was a stickler for the rules. People who’ve met her say she scares them. I’ve never met her personally, so I didn’t have that fear.

“Amy, I’ve found the porcus as we expected, except they’re all dead. I’ll need a clean-up crew at my current location.”

“Clean-up crew confirmed. They’ll be out in a couple of hours, Agent Hext,” Amy said curtly, the sound of typing coming through the connection. “How many were there, and do you need anything else?”

“Twenty. All confirmed dead. And yes, yes there is,” I paused. “I’ve also got a suspected rogue unicorn on my hands. Requesting backup of at least three Edgewalkers.”

“Suspected or confirmed?” Amy said.

“Suspected. I’ve found horse-like hair and prints, but if it’s a rogue, we don’t have time for analysis.”

There was silence on the other end, other than the keyboard tapping. “Corporal Hine is asking for more evidence.”

“Black horse hair on one of the porcus tusks, hoof prints around *twenty slaughtered porcus*. Ma’am, what else does he need?” I wasn’t mad at her; I was just tired of always being questioned. My boss didn’t like me very much. You show him up *one* time...

“Corporal Hine says you need visual conformation before backup will be sent.”

“But that’s not protocol, that’s bull –”

“Just repeating his orders, Agent Hext. Call back when you have the conformation. Good luck.” The line went dead.

I huffed out a breath – disappointing, but not unexpected. Oh well. Gunner Hext, Edgewalker, alone and reporting for duty. I wasn’t

sure if the whole state of Texas was lucky or unlucky to have me as it's resident protector.

Continuing my circle of the porcus, I found where my suspected dark unicorn exited the slaughter grounds. Sword still drawn, I reactivated my silence magic with a touch to my tattoo. Edgewalkers received new powers every morning, and they could mostly choose what those were. The powers lasted twenty-four hours or until you fell asleep, and an entirely new set could be loaded the next day. Once loaded, a small sigil appeared on a point of the star tattoo, indicating which power you had, and couldn't be changed once selected. The number of powers we could store at any one time was based off the number of points on our star tattoos when we passed our qualifications. Most averaged three – I had seven. It was supposedly based off how much raw power we had, but I wasn't so sure on that.

Either way, after getting the call for what I was doing, I'd loaded Silence, Blast, Variable Vision, Fire, Earth, and Air, thinking I'd be in the woods all day.

Sometimes I hated being right.

## Chapter 2

Moving out, I crept along the trail, following the hoof prints until it became increasingly hard to follow, then touched my tattoo and activated Variable Vision. Sending energy to my eyes, I blinked to change my vision until I got the setting I wanted. The world took on a slight gray tone, and anything magical was illuminated in a bright blue outline. The hidden traces of the hoof prints, their magic slowly fading into the air as they aged, jumped into view, and the trail was much easier to follow after that. The Haze, the barrier between the Seen and Unseen, was like a thin fog with this vision set – there but not there.

It was dangerous to use more than one power at once – like I said, it used your energy much faster and sometimes they had adverse reactions to each other. Luckily, I wasn't most people, and was willing to risk it when necessary. Like now.

Still sweating and swatting at mosquitoes, I moved cautiously through the mesquite thorns, live oaks, and prickly pears, wary of my quarry... and fire ant mounds. Five minutes of stalking revealed nothing but more fading hoof prints. Finally, as I moved slowly through the trees, the roof of a house appeared between the higher branches.

Not good. If I was right, and a black unicorn *was* here, humans were in more danger than any other creature. White unicorns, full of rainbows and goodness, were another story. But black unicorns hated humans.

The hoof prints lead all the way to the tree line and stopped. The unicorn had paused here, and judging by the age of the prints, hadn't left more than five minutes ago. I looked out over the manicured lawn at the red brick two-story house that could have been found anywhere in the US. Why had it paused here? In several places the hoof prints were deeper, like it had stomped impatiently. But why? Following the prints, I found where the unicorn had eventually moved on from this



spot, though it felled a two-foot diameter oak tree on its way out with one strike.

As I turned back toward the house, a little girl, maybe five years old, ran across the yard in a pink dress, laughing and playing. No way the unicorn would have missed her, and it was clearly waiting here for something, so why didn't it attack her or her parents? Black unicorns weren't known for restraint, and indiscriminately killed anything they came across.

The girl moved again, revealing a roaring fire pit full of logs being burned down for coals, probably for a barbeque of some kind. I had my answer, and was also thankful for my choice of powers this morning.

The one thing all unicorns were afraid of was fire. They wouldn't go near it. It had saved that little girl, who now sat on a swing singing to herself and seeing how high she could go. Turning off my powers with the expected drop in energy, I sheathed my phase sword and stepped from the trees, finding her parents sitting at a picnic table not far from where she swung.

They didn't panic at a strange man in a big black coat suddenly appearing in their backyard, but they definitely tensed up. The dad stepped toward me, right hand close to his hip. Probably had his concealed handgun license and was packing – this was Texas, and honestly I'd do the same thing. "Can we help you, partner?"

Yes, we still talked like that sometimes.

I pulled out my badge and showed it to them. "Name's Gunner Hext. The local sheriff called me in to investigate some livestock being killed."

He eyed my badge cautiously. "Edgewalker? Never heard of that branch of law enforcement. You with the Game Wardens or something?"

I grinned. "Something like that, sir, though I'm not affiliated with those fine officers."

When I didn't elaborate, his eyes narrowed and he stared at me again for a few seconds, then seemed to think I was OK. Thank God for that perk of the Edgewalker badge – since it inclined people to trust you, even when they shouldn't per se, like if a stranger suddenly appeared in your back yard. It was almost like a seal of approval, allowing us access where we needed it without much fuss. People gave us the benefit of the doubt when we were on official business. "All right. I heard about those cows being killed, but that was several miles away. We even tried to find what did it with no luck. But since that was a ways away, why are you in *our* backyard?"

"Following the trail of something big, looks kinda like a horse. Ya'll seen anything like that around here lately? I mean one that isn't normally around." Again, we were in Texas, and there were a lot of horses.

"No," the mother said quickly, but her daughter chimed right in.

"Oh, you mean like a unicorn?" the little girl asked, still swinging. "My friend Felma's a unicorn, and she comes here all the time. I haven't seen her lately though."

"Now, honey," her dad said. "We've talked about this..."

"Well it's true, and you told me never to lie to a police officer!" she said, lip stuck out.

I said, "I'm not your normal investigator, folks, so I'm interested in any information...*abnormal* or otherwise. The smallest detail might prove to be critical. Would you mind me asking..." I shot my gaze to the little girl and back.

"Grace," the dad supplied.

I nodded a thanks. "Could I ask Grace a few questions?" Kids were naturally more inclined to see through the Haze – probably something to do with still being innocent and able to believe in the impossible.

They laughed, and mom said, "Go ahead, if you think it'll do any good. Grace, please come talk to Edgewalker Hext."

Grace smiled and leapt from the swing, running up to stand next to her mom.

I knelt down to her level, though still keeping my distance. "OK, kiddo, tell me everything you've been seeing."

She scowled at me. "You're not gonna make fun of me?"

I grinned. "I've seen a pink elephant being ridden by a purple gorilla, kid. And then it threw flaming poop at me! I'm the last person who's gonna laugh at you."

She giggled, then got serious again. After a second she decided I was legit and her face lit up in a smile. She ran forward and grabbed my hand. "Let me show you!"

Pulling me along like a reluctant Labrador, her parents right behind us, she led me to the edge of the trees on the other side of the house where there was a slightly *too* circular opening. "Here's where my friend Felma, the white unicorn, comes to see me!"

"And is he nice?"

"Yes, *she* is very nice. She makes me feel all warm and fuzzy, and is so funny!" Good, white unicorns did that. The kid had actually had an encounter with one. Pure goodness and joy, that was what made up the white ones.

"When was the last time you saw..."

"Felma."

"Right. Felma. So you last saw her..."

"A week ago. And I'm *really* worried about her; if she doesn't get her apple, she'll have to go to the doctor and she's scared of doctors."

I had to stifle a laugh. Her parents probably thought Grace was just being an over imaginative kid, but she'd actually been in contact with one of the most amazing creatures of the magical world – they left a telltale glow on the people they encountered, and it was all over little Grace. The signature was all over this little clearing too: the plant life too green, too perfect, too much in bloom. But if Felma had disappeared...

"Then just a little bit ago I saw a black one standing on two legs like a person, over there in the trees close to where you came from. Except

her face looked all funny, almost like she was a lady and not a horse and her horn was shorter, but then she looked behind me and ran away.”

Oh damnit.

“Can you find her, Mr. Hext? Can you find Felma? I’m really worried. Momma said that animals have been disappearing, and I don’t want anything to happen to her.” Her sincerely concerned face would have melted the hardest heart. And I didn’t have it in me to tell her that Felma didn’t disappear at all. That Grace had seen her this morning. That Felma had turned dark.

“Me neither, kid. I can’t promise I’ll find her, but I can promise you I’ll do my best. Mind if I look around a little?” I asked the dad.

“Take your time,” he said. “I hope Grace didn’t fill you too full of it. Thanks for looking into...whatever you’re looking into.” I urged Grace back to her parents and all three turned to walk away. Suddenly she turned back around and ran and gave my leg a big hug. “Thank you, Mr. Hext.”

She turned back around and joined her parents and all three disappeared around the trees.

## Chapter 3

OK, time to do some investigating. Unicorns only turn black when they are wronged, and the wrong must be corrected or adequately compensated for to turn them back. And there was only one way to figure out what that was going on.

I had to go talk to the Council of Unicorns.

I shit you not.

My Edgewalker badge gave me another special power – I could open Doors. Capital D. Touching my badge, I extended my left hand toward one of the bigger trees in the area. A white light started from the ground and rose in a line, spreading out to form a roughly square shape of sparkling energy: A Door. Instant transportation for Edgewalkers from one place to another.

I calmly stepped right through the energy – it felt like a cold shower – and found myself in a literal land of rainbows, pink flowers, puffy white clouds. The greatest joy you could possibly imagine filled my heart. Think of when you were a kid at Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and your birthday, all rolled into one and multiplied a thousand fold. That's what the presence of the five most powerful unicorns does to you. So much joy and love that it almost hurts.

Directly in front of me, standing around a silver table layered with every sweet imaginable on it, were five dazzlingly white unicorns, their twisty horns blinking with magic as they enjoyed a meal, birds flittering around them incessantly and attending to their needs. Mounds of pastries, candies, and things I didn't know the names of were piled on the table, and they dug in like their life depended on it.

And it probably did – these five, and this place, provided the power for all the unicorns in the world, and most of those helped provide happiness to those in their immediate area. Among other things.

"Thank God you made it back here again, Edgewalker," the one in the center said. Not with her mouth, but in my *head*, her horn pulsing

with every word. Her words in my mind were like a shot of caffeine and sugar together, firing every synapse in my brain, and suddenly dread and worry pushed against the euphoria in the air.

I got on one knee and put my right hand in the grass, which was soft as a pillow and smelled like green apple candy. Out of respect, I didn't look at the five directly while kneeling. "Councilmembers, I suspect that one of your herd has turned black. I need your help to find her, and turn her into her old self. Would you happen to know what caused her to turn?"

A high-pitched series of neighs and whinnies assaulted my ears. "We know of who you speak, and she has been wronged, her territory attacked, and her token has gone missing."

The sound was deafening in my mind, and I had to fight to keep from throwing my hands to my ears, even though that wouldn't do any good. "Token? Councilmembers, I've never heard of that."

I managed to look at the five now, and saw that each had a string around their neck which was tied to a small metal object. Each object was different – one a model of grass, one a tree, one a wagon wheel, one a sword, and one a bird. The lead unicorn, the one in the center, calmed down enough to speak to me again. "Yes, token. Every unicorn gets a token when they come of age and leave to explore the world. It's their link to our power here, to Unicorn Land, so they can do good in the world. If they lose their token, or it's taken, they start to turn to dark thoughts. When that happens, we can no longer connect to them or see them. This leads to mayhem for a unicorn."

That was the first time I'd heard of that, but you learned something every day in this job. "So what should I do? What's her token?"

Their horse noises stopped, and the head unicorn addressed me again, this time calmer. "Felma must be returned to the light. Her power is still being pulled from this place, but we have no connection to her. She's the guardian of her area. We can't tell you what her token looks

like. Unicorns can't see each other's tokens – so none are tempted to steal from their herd mates.”

“Can you do anything from here? Or call in another unicorn to help her?” It would be much easier if I had some inside help.

“Unfortunately not. The Five cannot enter the Seen anymore, and we must keep our strength up to provide power to the unicorns of the world. Plus, whoever has stolen or has possession of the token must freely give it back, or it will explode, causing even more damage. It's your responsibility, Edgewalker, and your burden. This task falls to you.”

“What happens if I can't turn her back to the light?”

The unicorns neighed again loudly, another feeling of dread warring with the pure joy in the atmosphere. “She must return; there is no alternative! If she's killed, or stays in the black, plants will shrivel up for miles, animals will wither and die, people will lose all hope, faith, and love. She will *kill* and *destroy* everything until her token is returned.”

“So bring her back but don't kill her?” Sounded like this was shaping up to be the hard way to do things again.

“Exactly. But there is one thing we can do to help. Take these.” The center unicorn nodded her elegant head and a dozen red berries rose from the table and floated over to me, along with a yellow rope. Grabbing my magically infused clean white handkerchief out of a pocket of my duster, I wrapped the berries up and stuffed the roughly thirty-foot-long rope – surprisingly only a few braided strands thick and heavier than it looked – into my pockets. “The moon berries will lure her into the open – she will recognize their scent, even as a black, and all unicorns crave the berries. She will come to them. The rope is made from the tail hairs of a thousand unicorns, and will be able to hold a black unicorn when nothing else will.”

All five nodded to me, and the entire area took on an eerie stillness as the weight of their gaze bored into me. “Thank you for your help and your guidance,” I said, bowing again.

“You’re very welcome, Edgewalker. Now hurry – you only have an hour before Felma does something irreversible.”

Oh great, so now they’re telling the future – or maybe they just suspected what will happen. I simply nodded, extended my left hand, and opened another blazing white Door back to the circular grove of trees I came from.



## Chapter 4

The sudden withdrawal of joyful emotions from my body sent me crashing to the ground, my body urging me to go back to that place of euphoria. It took me a second to recover and shake it off.

I put in a call for backup, but again, Amy Hale said the corporal wouldn't accept the testimony of a little girl or the Council of Unicorns since the council hadn't sent in any official documentation along with me. Like a horse signed papers. If it was any other Edgewalker but me, he'd have mobilized an entire MTAC unit – the magical equivalent of SWAT – but *nooo*. Sometimes I almost regretted beating him in our training classes and graduating ahead of him.

Almost.

I wish that was the only issue he had with me.

I put in a call to a couple of my Edgewalker counterparts and friends, but all were knee deep in their own missions and couldn't come to help.

OK, still a solo mission.

Looking around, I determined this was as good a spot as any to stage an ambush, and got to work. Pulling out my sword, I dug a slight trench, just enough to bury the hair-rope in a larger circle around the middle of the clearing, and then trailed the end around the edge of the trees where I could hide, the theory being I could jerk the rope, pop the slack, and have me a black unicorn at the end of a rope. I continued turning up the dirt with the tip of the blade, making all kinds of patterns so my trench wasn't easily detected. I didn't want to spook Felma.

When I was sure the rope was as concealed as I could make it, I pulled out my cloth full of moon berries. This wasn't just a cotton handkerchief – I'd had this specially made by some very friendly wood elves so that I could touch magical items that would normally kill me. It kept anything wrapped inside perfectly sealed, and protected the user from any magical effects of skin contact.

And it's a good thing I did too – as soon as I opened the last flap, my nostrils were filled with the sweetest, ripest fruit scent I'd ever smelled. It must have been diluted in Unicorn Land, because as it is, I was getting a headache from the overwhelming aroma.

Immediately, the sounds of something big crashing through brush and heading towards me hit my ears, and I scrambled to place the berries down and get around the edge of the trees in time.

Just as my duster cleared the last tree, Felma burst through the tree line, breathing hard and eyes darting every direction. She looked like a faun on steroids. Standing nine feet tall, the elegant horse-creature stood upright on two legs that ended in dark black hooves. She was heavily muscled with smooth black hair. The hair turned to gray skin at her bellybutton, and a very attractive nude female upper body was mostly covered by a long, thick mane of black hair that went all the way down her spine and was draped around her, covering all the important bits. A beautiful female face with horse like ears – which swiveled, searching for anything abnormal – was framed by that mane, fang-like teeth protruded from her mouth, and a six-inch, onyx-like swirl of horn protruded at a 45-degree angle from the top of her forehead. Her left hand held a four-foot wavy sword, with a black blade and a black hilt that ended in a point as fine as a pen.

She was the most beautifully deadly thing I'd ever seen, and I had to fight myself to keep from either rushing to her or soiling myself.

In seconds, she'd determined that she wasn't in immediate danger and locked onto the berries, drool oozing from the side of her mouth, her face contorted in sheer desire.

Then her ears twitched, her head snapping in my direction and she snarled, her voice smooth as silk. "You might as well come out, Edgewalker. You're making so much noise, you couldn't sneak up on a deaf elf."

Well, so much for all that prep work. She wasn't standing anywhere near the hair rope, but she was directly across the clearing from me.

Maybe I could get her to step forward. I shrugged. "Sorry. Thought you might like some moon berries. A friend told me you'd like them," I said, drawing my sword, energizing it with fire and stepping out of the trees.

She took two steps toward me. She was closer to the rope, but not yet in the loop. With a fluid motion, she reached out and stabbed one of the walnut-sized fruits with the tip of her blade, tossed it in the air, and caught it in her mouth, the purple juices spilling out the sides of her mouth and running down her chin and neck. Pure pleasure hit her face as she chewed and swallowed. She shook with delight. "Those are good, Edgewalker, though you're a terrible liar." She looked down. "Looks like you have six more berries left until our conversation is over and you die. What is your business here?"

"I'd like to stop the killing, ma'am, if it's OK with you. I've come to help you. I know you've been wronged. I want to help you get your token back –"

"Lies!" She hissed, eating another berry. "The council wants me dead, don't they? Those peace-loving fools can't see the damage *humans* are causing on this earth...overgrazing their animals, plowing up perfectly good pasture to grow – what? Cotton? Corn?" She ate another berry, still working herself into a frenzy. Four left.

This was not at all going as I'd hoped. I touched my tattoo and readied fire – maybe I could slow her down enough to fight her. "Please, ma'am, let's just stay calm. What happened to you? Where's your token?"

"Stolen!" she screamed, black energy racing down her arm and into her sword, the grass withering underneath it. "Stolen from me, and I *will* get it back." Two berries at once. Damn it.

I stepped forward, touching my tattoo and shouting, "Blast!" A burst of fire and pure energy leapt from my hand, heading straight for her chest. Much faster than I could react, she took a step and batted the strike away, which shattered a tree into a million pieces.

But she'd taken a step forward, so I yanked on the rope, praying she was far enough.

"Arg!" she screamed as the thin rope grazed the hair on her leg but didn't catch – she'd moved too fast, and now stood there smirking at me.

"That was a nice trick, Edgewalker. Too bad you couldn't execute. The council give you that rope? They had to; no one has pure unicorn hair just lying about."

I gathered the rope back to me and formed a loop. I hadn't thrown a loop in years, but I was from Texas, and I'd learned enough to be semi-competent with a rope.

I played my last card, as my left hand burst into flames I could manipulate with my will just by thinking about them. "Look, Felma, I don't want to fight you. We can work this out. We just need to talk about it."

She popped the last berry in her mouth, though she eyed my flaming hand. "Well, at least you know how to play. But it looks like I'm out of berries, and that means you're out of time. It was a lovely chat but –" She dropped into a crouch and let out a hiss. I heard a door slam shut behind me and running footsteps.

"Felma!"

I whirled toward the sound of Grace's voice. No, not her.

"Stay back, Grace! It's not safe –"

It was too late; the little girl rounded the corner, then skidded to a stop, a scowl on her face. "You're not Felma. What'd you do with her?"

You'd have thought she'd poked Felma with a red hot iron. "You! You stole it! Give it back! Give me back my token!"

"I didn't steal anything!" Grace said, unfazed by the huge monster standing in front of her. Kids were incredible. She put her hand on her hips. "Felma *gave* it to me!"

“Liar!” Felma screamed, shaking, eyes darting between my flaming hand, flaming sword, and the girl. “She wouldn’t do that. It’s *hers* – no one else’s.”

Grace had tears in her eyes. “No, you’re the liar! Felma’s my *friend*! She told me to keep it safe for her while she took care of intruders around here. She did it to protect me! To keep us safe!” She sniffled. “You’re no Felma. You’re just a lying meanie.”

That was it! Felma had turned into a black unicorn to take care of the Porcus, something she wouldn’t be able to do in her normal form, but then the darkness had proved stronger than she’d anticipated and she forgot herself. Now *I* had to deal with her.

“Grace?” I said, stepping between the two females. “Can you –”

“Felma is dead and you’re going to join her, thief!” Felma said, launching towards us, sword first.

“No!” I screamed, slicing to block the strike and managing to deflect it slightly. But with Felma’s full weight behind the strike, the point still drove into Grace’s shoulder, knocking her back and pinning her to the ground. I didn’t stop my swing, and with a backhand strike, I hit Felma full across the chest, slicing upward. The blade laced in fire cut deep. Where normal steel would have done nothing, my fire sword exposed bone and cut blood vessels.

Felma stared at me, then at the three-foot-long deep gash in her chest. Slowly she let go of her sword and toppled to the ground, coughing violently and spasming.

“Grace!” I said, tending to the girl first.

She lay on the ground, crying, the point of the sword stuck in her shoulder. I touched my tattoo and said, “Vision – X-ray.” My vision switched to allow me to see through her skin and into her muscles and bones. “Oh no. It’s hit an artery.”

Grace would bleed out soon if I didn’t do something. There was only one way to save her, but I had to act fast if I was going to save everyone – and we needed that token!

Grace coughed and winced, tears streaming down her face. "It hurts, Mr. Hext, it hurts! Why would she do that? Where's Felma? *Where's Felma?*"

"Grace, the thing – the token – Felma gave you, do you know where it is?"

Through heavy tears, she nodded and reached in her pocket and pulled out a smooth silver bear paw print on the laciest ribbon I'd ever seen. "I – I kept it safe for Felma, Mr. Hext. Mr. Hext, my shoulder really hurts. I'm scared!"

"I know, Grace, I know. Just stay with me a little while longer. Listen, Felma's in trouble right now, but you can help her."

"Ow! I can't, Mr. Hext. I'm hurt too bad."

"Grace, you're the only one who can. This...creature, right here?" She nodded. "She can bring Felma back, but you have to put the necklace around her neck."

"N-no. She's mean and scary, and it hurts so bad. Can't you do it?"

I could feel her energy dwindling, getting weaker. We were running out of time. I shook my head, "I'm sorry, Grace, that's not how the magic works. The one entrusted with the token must freely give it back. And it's the only way to save Felma and yourself! Can you do it?"

I watched a little five-year-old girl screw up her face and be braver than anyone I'd ever seen in my life. She sniffled once more, though tears still came down her face. "I can do it for Felma, Mr. Hext."

"OK, Grace. I'm going to pull this sword out of your shoulder, and it's going to hurt. But you can do this. Once it's out, you've got to run and put Felma's necklace back on the lady there. You ready?" The black unicorn struggled for life behind me about three yards, blood pooling on the ground around her.

"No."

She never would be. "OK, Grace, you can do this. Let's go – one, two, three!"

I jerked the blade free, and Grace screamed, but that was all the sound she made. She jumped up quickly, stumbled over to her friend, and put the necklace on the neck of the black unicorn. The poor, injured girl struggled to put the token over the unicorn's neck, carefully avoiding the horn and showing incredible resolve as her own strength faded and blood poured from her shoulder.

A burst of power erupted from the spot where the token contacted her skin as soon as it was around Felma's neck, and both Felma and Grace were wrapped in a ball of pure white light and lifted ten feet in the air. I watched Grace's wounds knit back together, and then she was dropped gently from the light into my waiting arms.

She smiled up at me. "I – I feel better! That felt like *Felma's* magic! Is she here?" Grace frantically looked around, trying to find her friend.

I smiled back. "You did good, kid, and yes, she's here. She's almost back to how you know her." I pointed up. "Watch."

We both turned to see the light pulse above us in all the colors of the rainbow. Felma's black hair and gray skin turned white, then everything knit itself back together like my sword strike had never happened. She looked to be suspended in water, slowly rotating. Bit by bit, her hands started turning into hooves, her head and horn elongating, until after a full minute, a pure white unicorn, four feet tall at the shoulder with a one-and-a-half-foot-long horn, hovered in the air above us. Slowly she was lowered to the ground and stood in front of us.

Grace's eyes lit up as the unicorn opened hers. "Felma!"

She leapt from me and threw her arms around her friend.

I will neither confirm nor deny that a tear rolled down my face. Pretty sure it was a stray rain drop from a cloudless sky.

## Chapter 5

Grace pulled back from her hug, and Felma neighed, her horn pulsing. Her voice sounded in both of our heads. “Thank you, Grace, for keeping my token safe for me. I’m sorry I hurt you, and wasn’t able to return to you sooner.”

“It’s OK, Felma. You’re my friend. You didn’t know what you were doing. And we’re both better, so it’s all good!”

Ah, youth. I wish it were always that easy.

“Edgewalker,” she said turning to me. Suddenly *I* was enveloped in a white light. Every injury I’d ever had instantly vanished – every scar, every ache, every small pain, everything. My hair blew back and my clothes ruffled in a wind that wasn’t there. Then the light was gone, and I felt better than I’d ever had in my life. “Thank you for saving me from doing something terrible. I’m sure you’ll understand that I did what I felt I had to do to protect my lands.”

“Yes, ma’am, Ms. Felma, but maybe next time you have some porcus trouble, you could just call me? I’m the local Edgewalker around here, and I don’t want to see anyone get hurt when you...take care of your land. Or maybe I could be here to help bring you back if you need to go full black again?”

I swear she smiled, if a horse could do that. “I think I’ll do that, Edgewalker. Would you mind – I feel a thorn under my mane, and I can’t get it out in this form. I feel like it’s draining power from me somehow. You think you could remove it for me?”

I nodded and stepped forward, running my hand over her mane and coat to find the thorn. I’d never felt anything so smooth and perfect, and her magic radiated through me, giving me a burst of energy and happiness. Quickly, I found the thorn she felt and pulled it out. It was a nasty barbed green *metal* thorn.

Green magic. I’d met a sorceress who’d used the evil magic against me once already. My bet was this thorn was her doing, and she was the



one siphoning off the unicorn's power for her own means. Something I'd have to look into later.

"Thank you, Gunner Hext. May you go in peace. Grace?"

"Yes, Felma? I'm so glad you're back." The little girl bounced on her feet.

"I'm glad to be back, Grace. You be good, and I'll be around. See you soon!" She reached down and tapped Grace on the head with her horn, then vanished in a puff of flowers.

Huh. Interesting. I wrapped the thorn in the magic handkerchief and put it in a pocket just as several Doors opened in the middle of several of the bigger trees, and ten men and women in black coveralls carrying various types of orange painted equipment stepped through the Doors.

The magical cleanup squad had finally arrived. "Porcus are over there, boys and girls," I said, pointing. "Thanks."

"Thanks, Gunner. You always provide the most interesting clean-up jobs."

"Ha, tell me about it. Thanks again."

"Anyone need their memories adjusted?" one of the cleanup crew said.

I looked down at Grace, then back up. "Nah, we're good here."

He waved a hand. "All right then, we'll be over here."

Grace and I watched the clean-up crew head off into the trees, their equipment powering up and emitting small bursts of light.

When they were out of earshot, I looked down at the little girl. "You can keep a secret, right, Grace?"

She giggled. "You bet, Mr. Hext. Will Felma be all right?"

"She will be now, thanks to you."

She cocked her head to the side as she asked me, "Why did she turn all bad and dark? I didn't like that Felma."

"We've all got a little darkness inside of us. We have to fight against it to keep it at bay or it'll take over, but that's how you beat it back."

With goodness, kindness, and love. Felma thought she needed to be in her black form to protect others, but that wasn't the answer. She just needed to ask for help from her friends."

"Like you?"

I nodded. "And you."

I heard her dad call her name.

"I got to go, Mr. Hext. Thank you for saving Felma!"

She gave me a big hug then turned to run off.

"You're welcome, kid." The same magic that kept her parents from seeing the unicorn had kept them from hearing the entire battle take place in their backyard, despite them being only half a football field away.

Probably better they didn't.

Sweat poured down my back, but I wasn't worried about it right this second. The day was a little over halfway done, and it had been saved at least once.

I patted the spot where the handkerchief held the thorn.

Now I had a sorceress to catch.

Opening a Door, I stepped through and disappeared from the – unofficially named – Grace Ranch to continue my job.

We protect you from things you don't even know exist.

I'm Gunner Hext. And I'm an Edgewalker.

**I hope you enjoyed BLACK, I know I  
loved writing it!**

## **Other Books by R.J. Batla**



**Fire Eyes Awakened: The Senturians of Terraunum**

### **Book 1**

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Smalltown hero gets his new powers and they almost kill him for it. Then they ask him to save them all. Figures. Can Jayton survive the journey?

The first in the Senturians of Terraunum Series, FIRE EYES AWAKENED combines epic fantasy with fantastic powers. Join the action and adventure!



**Death Cloud: The Senturians of Terraunum**

### **Book 2**

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1. <https://www.rjbatla.com/books/fire-eyes-awakened/>

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Jayton's story continues in DEATH CLOUD. He's made it to the tournament. Each victory brings him closer to his goal. But will Jayton and his crew find a way to beat the Uland, keep the weapon out of Malstrak's hands, and save Terraunum? Or will they be struck down in the attempt?



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Roy Crowell's first assignment is a tough one. With the situation getting worse by the minute, can Roy find a way to defeat the monsters, or will his death mark the first in a long line and threaten all humans on Terraunum?

Sword and Sorcery, Superhero, Military, and Steampunk elements combine in the fast-paced, action packed adventure in Terraunum, where monsters and men clash in a battle for survival.

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2. <https://www.amazon.com/Death-Cloud-Senturians-Terraunum-Book-ebook/dp/B07KGGMRNB/>

3. <http://eepurl.com/c-YTUb>

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We protect you from things you didn't even know existed.

Gunner Hext. Being a detective for the Unseen world has its challenges. My informants are goblins and giant rats. Headquarters doesn't give me the support I need. And creatures cross over and start attacking Normals. All in a day's work.

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5. <https://www.rjbatla.com/books/tempus/>

6. <https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B07C4HGG2J/>

To stop a dangerous drug from killing more unsuspecting Normals, I'll have to use all my wits and powers to stop the criminals and rescue the hostage.

I'm Gunner Hext. I'm an Edgewalker.

# About R.J. Batla

R.J. Batla is a fantasy author and fan of the genre. He's working on series in both epic and urban fantasy, and likes to write fast paced books that take the reader on an adventure that they can see in their mind. His books reflect influences from novels, comic books, manga, and other cartoons/media, and he joys in blending in these elements in his books.

Author, Christian, Husband, and Father, R.J. Batla enjoys everything outdoors and takes as much time as he can with his family. When he's not writing, you'll find him outside (thinking about writing), working out (and thinking about writing) or various other places (all while thinking about writing).

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Facebook Group (Higher Interaction and more updates): Kickass Readers Guild<sup>4</sup>

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Podcast: Coming soon, links will be found here – Kickass Readers Podcast<sup>9</sup>

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Thank you so much for reading *Against the Beast* and *Black!*

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9. <http://www.rjbatla.com/podcast-and-youtube/>

10. <https://twitter.com/RJBatlaAuthor>



## **Preview of Fire Eyes Awakened**



# Chapter 1

“Cobra Seven to Base, over,” the big operative whispered into his mic, mouth barely moving. It’d taken three weeks to get this close. Three weeks of gathering intelligence, crawling through thorns, and hiking up mountains to get into this position. His platoon mates had paid dearly to get him here, where he could confirm the rumors. Sweat soaked through his shirt and ran down his forehead, dripping down into his eyes, but he couldn’t dare move – too many eyes, too many watchers...

“Go ahead, Cobra Seven.”

“I’m in position. Conformation pending, over.”

“Affirmative, Cobra Seven, awaiting report.”

A door burst open from the side of the rocky outcropping he’d been watching, spilling firelight into the darkness for only a second before the stone doors slammed shut again, dropping the world back to the night. “Standby,” Cobra Seven said, straining his eyes till they hurt. Was this him? Was this the... the....

A hooded figure turned, and Cobra Seven caught that unmistakable profile – hawk nose with a chunk missing on the bridge. Malstrak. The one who killed thousands. The one who scarred the wall. Speaking to someone unseen, Malstrak said, “The lords have conferred, they agree with the terms of the plan. It’s time to implement the next step.”

Cobra Seven reached down and keyed his mic. “Confirmed. Repeat: confirmed. I have visual on...” The figure snapped his head in his direction – damnit! No way he’d been heard; no way he’d been seen! What Power had he used? “Cover blown, cover blown!” he yelled, turning and running, legs burning with effort. Dodging trees, he ran with all his might. Suddenly fire struck him in the back like a fist, sending him sprawling, the jagged rocks slicing his hands and face as he slid to a stop against a boulder.

Rocks shuffled behind him, and he pulled his bloodied head up from the rubble. A figure stalked toward him – a black mass of swirling, whispering death in one hand and a ball of blue fire blazing in the other.

“Repeat: confirmed, confirmed, con–”

The night erupted in a fire so hot the boulder melted into a pool. No scream was heard, only the sound of the hot, bubbling stone and the roar of the fire. The cloaked figure lowered his hand, killing the flame. The Ranger’s body was no more, melding with the stone or blown away in the slight breeze. Too bad the Ranger got his report out, but no matter. The Easterners would find out soon enough anyway. And even when they did, their fate was already sealed.

He strolled back to the mountain, the door sliding open at his approach.

An aging ogre bent low, he said, “Master, one of your spies has contacted you.”

Malstrak nodded, stepping past the foul-smelling creature to pick up the telestone just inside the doorway. “Yes?”

“Sir, the Northern Awakening came back negative,” the voice on the other line said.

“Understood. It must be the Southern then. Get there and report back,” Malstrak said.

“Sir!” and the line went dead.

Smoothing his black robes, Malstrak walked back into the cool night, the door slamming behind him. Stopping to take a breath, he gathered his thoughts. His intelligence said a Senturian of great power was to be Awakened. And he fully intended for that Senturian to aid him in his plans. Whether they wanted to or not.

Turning, cloak whispering on the rocks, he strolled away, and in his wake, large shadows detached themselves from the dark to follow him into the night. There was an invasion to plan.

## Chapter 2

“Excuse me! Pardon me! Coming through!” I said, weaving my way through the crowded Portland Train Station. *Come on, move! My train leaves in ten minutes!* I’d taken too long closing out my jobs this morning, too long pulling money from the bank, and too long getting here. “Excuse me!” Hustling as fast as I could, my green duffle bag flapped behind me, carrying the few clothes I owned.

“Watch out, young man!” an older lady said as I scrambled by, scattering her groceries all over the concrete and sending her sprawling.

“Sorry, ma’am!” I said, turning to go. I got three steps. “Ahhh!” I turned around, helping her gather her stuff. “I’m really sorry, ma’am, but I’ve really got to run.” I handed her the last ear of corn, and took off again as fast as I could.

“Thank you, sir!” she called after me.

The large clock in the station chimed once – five till eight. *Crap!* Taking my spot in line, I tapped my foot. The ticket taker punched each ticket with turtle-like quickness, the clock ticking by as I waited. And waited. The guy in front of me read his paper with the headline, “Ter-raunum: How Earth Changed Its Name Two Thousand Years Ago.” Must have been a history piece. Much like I would be if I didn’t get moving.

The line to my left was moving much faster; the Earth Senturians who operated the train were checking in to do their jobs, dressed in light brown coveralls. One of them must have been new, as his coworker said, “Don’t be nervous! Just use your powers to magnetize the right rails at the right time to keep the train moving and you’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?”

He waved his hand. “No worries. Just make sure you stop the train before we run into anything.”

Two ahead of me. One minute left. One person left. Thirty seconds – my turn.

I handed the guy my ticket and ID. "Let's see. Jayton Baird, six foot, green eyes, brown hair. Here you go, sir," he said, punching my ticket, "but you'd better hurry! The train doesn't wait for anyone."

"Thanks!" I said, bolting past him toward the only train on the tracks.

The announcer said, "Last call for the eight o'clock to Bayou Vista. Last call for the eight o'clock to Bayou Vista!"

Crap!

They started closing the doors!

"Wait, wait, wait!" I screamed, but they didn't hear me, and the doors didn't stop. *Oh no!* Pumping my strained legs faster, with a burst of speed, I hit the end of the boardwalk and jumped across the now gangway-less gap, crashing on the floor of the car as the doors slammed shut behind me.

A skinny train officer gave me an odd look as the car lurched forward, the engine beginning its work. "I suppose you have a ticket?"

"Yes, sir," I managed to huff out, handing it to him.

He verified that it was legitimate, and as the train lurched into motion, asked me to, in his words, "Please use the showers before you sit down. The other passengers would not appreciate the smell of hog manure quite as much as I do."

Well yeah, if you're feeding several hundred pigs, you're gonna smell. Just one of my several jobs to pay for this whole thing. It was the middle of March, but we'd had an unusually hot spring so far in Portland. I took a deep breath. *I'm on my way. I did it. I'm going to get my powers Awakened. I'm going to be a Senturian.* The Southern Awakening in Bayou Vista, then on to Harlingen for my training. Assuming it all goes right.

After my Manure Smell Removal Operation, I checked my ticket and found my aisle seat in the coach section, among the rows and rows of others. Coach was in the middle of the train, with the nicer compartmentalized cars in the back. Settling in, I watched the Tasche Moun-

tains out the left window slowly ease by as we followed the Paluxy River to Bayou Vista, the site of the Southern Awakening. This was the second of the two Awakenings, where normal people had the powers inside them unlocked.

Closing my eyes only a second, I heard, "Jayton, you made it! We couldn't find you, and we were afraid you'd missed it."

It was Gilmer Borger. He reached down and shook my hand. The Mayor's son, he was a born politician. His long blond hair was slicked back in his usual style, with his pressed suit and tie putting my nicest red polo shirt and khakis to shame. He was slightly shorter than my six feet, so as I stood, I could see over his head to the other two guys with him. With a grand gesture, he said, "I believe you have met my colleagues, Gordon Moody and Joshua Omaha?"

Gordon was a big dude, almost seven feet, and he made my two-hundred-pounds look even smaller as I shook his hand. "Cutting it close, eh, Jayton? How goes it?"

"I'm on the train, so I'm great now. How are you, Joshua?"

"Good, good. Jayton, what are you doing over here?" Joshua said.

"Well, uh, this was the best ticket I could get and still pay for the Awakening."

"Oh right, sorry, Jayton," he said, looking down.

"Say, we've got plenty of room in our car, fellas," Gilmer said. "What say you to joining us in our car, Jayton?"

"That'd be awesome!" I said. "As long as it's no inconvenience to you guys."

Gordon clapped me on the back. "None at all. Let's go! I'll have someone come get all your bags."

"No need," I said, shouldering my duffle and tailing behind my friends to the back. The only reason I knew them at all was from school, where they let me hang out with them despite the differences in wealth. Good people.

“Let’s sit down already,” Joshua said as we found the right car and piled in. Four bunk beds lined the inside walls with a booth for a table against the windows. “We’ve got three days and twelve-hundred miles to travel, so we might as well get comfy. Jayton, you can have that top bunk there.”

I threw my bag up and joined the others at the booth.

“Hey, look at that!” Gilmer said, pointing.

Two Reka, the River Water-Senturian race, stood knee deep in the Paluxy River, their light blue skin reflecting off the water. They were going through some flowing movements, tossing a steady stream of water between them, manipulating it easily, their motions directing the water where to go. In seconds, they were lost out the window as the train sped on, propelled forward by the Earth Senturians, following the winding river through the Tasche Mountains to Bayou Vista on the other side. “Man, I can’t wait for this!” Gilmer said. “What powers do you want, Gordon?”

“Oh, I’d take anything, but earth or fire would be really cool. As long as it’s more than a level one. Level ones never get picked for anything, and half of them end up on the West Side of the Breaks.”

I shivered. The West Side. Nothing but bandits, thieves, killers, and outlaws who couldn’t toe the line on our side and were banished, for whatever reason, either breaking a law or insulting the wrong person. Or they got so frustrated with the lack of respect and jobs that came from receiving a low power number that they chose to abdicate to the West Side. And then there were the monsters, sealed there hundreds of years ago. “Joshua, what about you?”

“Energy or air for me, gents. Healing’s too boring; I don’t know why anyone really wants that power. And what about a Quantum power, eh? Get to train with the Rangers?” Joshua said.

Gilmer said, “An extra power? How cool would it be to have a non-elemental one! And then training with the Rangers – they’re the best of the best.”



“Yeah,” Joshua said, “but what happens if your levels are too low and you aren’t chosen? What will you do if no one will train you?”

I gulped. Joshua just voiced my biggest fear. I’d busted my butt for years getting the money together to pay for this thing. My dream. To have powers and all the luxuries that came with it. But it’s not a guarantee. If you don’t score well enough, or at all, or they don’t like you, you get nothing. No training. No support. Sure, you could go back to your old life and work on your powers by yourself, but what good was that? Not to mention the shunning you’d get from everyone...

“I’d just go back to fishing,” Gordon said. “I’ll always have a job with the family business.”

Joshua said, “I guess I’d work at my dad’s lumber yard. It’d be a shame to waste all the good money we’re paying to go to this thing though. Jay, what would you do?”

“I guess I’d join the Army. They’d at least give you a skill and pay you for it,” I said.

“Yeah, barely pay you to risk your neck – either police work, patrol, or defending the wall. Low-tier jobs. Even the lowest level Senturians get some rank above the Army blokes,” Gordon said.

Gilmer said, “Too bad we weren’t just born with them like any of the other races. I mean, come on, the Phoenix, Dwarves, Elves – they all have it easy! Their powers are there from birth; they just have to develop them!”

Joshua said, “Too right! Have you guys heard about the weapons? I talked to one of the Senturians at the station in Portland, and he said you had to fight a dragon bare-handed before they let you even *sniff* a sword.”

“Come off it,” Gilmer said. “They tell that to scare kids. But getting a weapon is amazing – that means you’re really in. That they respect you, that you’ve trained hard enough that they’ll invest more time and energy in you. It’s an honorable day, the day a Senturian gets his weapon.”

Gilmer always seems to know more about all this than the rest of us. Must come from living in the mayor's house and hearing about everything going on. I know all the other guys had been to an Awakening before as a spectator, but this would be my first.

"Hey, Jayton, I was wondering...how *did* you raise enough money to pay for the Awakening? No offense meant, but..." Gilmer said.

I jangled my bag. "Working my tail off, that's how. Everything I've been able to scrap together the last four years was barely enough, but it's all there."

"I'm impressed, Jayton," Joshua said. "Most people in your... situation... don't have that dedication. They just join the Army right off the bat."

"Yeah, well, I guess I'm not most people."

Gilmer chimed in. "Nope, most people wouldn't do that. But that's what's going to make you a good Senturian. All right, enough talk, let's get something to eat."

The day went by pretty fast, as we alternated our time between sleeping, chatting, and eating the meals brought by three times a day and once at night. There were a couple of stops between Portland and Bayou Vista, and a few people exited, but many more got on. The Awakenings were big events – one in the North, one in the South. They paid a small fee to watch, but the Awakenings were open to anybody who wanted to see the spectacle. People came from all over to drink, party, eat, dance, and see the drama. Who gets selected, who doesn't, how strong the new Senturians are. In general, it was an excuse to get together and socialize with people from all over the south. Hopefully I didn't look too lost or fall down or something. That would suck.

After the first day, I decided reading was a better use of my time than looking out the window and watching the mountains creep by. I picked up a history book from one of the shelves in the cabin called *Where We are Now*. Most of it I already knew – natural disasters two thousand years ago almost destroyed the human race. We emerged

from the rubble, but to a different world entirely, with monsters lurking everywhere. If it wasn't for the discovery of Awakening stones that gave humans supernatural powers, we might have ceased to exist right then. After a battle for our lives, we managed to push all the monsters to the west side of the mountain range we knew as the Breaks, and sealed them off. People with different powers started grouping together until they were their own race, with their own physical and social characteristics.

Two days later, I was just getting to the part where Hammod Gardon, the most powerful Senturian at the time, about nineteen hundred years ago, erected the Wall between the East and West sides. Tensions had been growing ever since (it was a *very* big book).

Then, over the intercom, I finally heard: "Pulling up to Bayou Vista station. All those to be Awakened, please exit the train first; the rest please remain in your seats."

We grabbed our bags and headed toward the exit. Stepping out onto the platform, steam swirling around our feet, I got my first look at the city – and it was a lot bigger than Portland. The train station rested on the western edge of town, carved out of a small hill by some Earth Senturians at some point, the city spread out before us with the Paluxy River bisecting from north to south. Cattle or other animals dotted the rolling grasslands on the hills. Literally a crossroads of the southland. This was the farthest I'd ever been from home. No money, a few friends, and a *whole* lot of opportunity. I sucked in a big breath. Tasted like destiny.

Maybe two hundred of us got off the train, and most looked somewhere between scared and mortified. Well, at least I wasn't the only one. There were kids as young as seventeen, and even a couple of people older than me – an equal mix of human men and women.

A Dwarf, his long beard swaying in the breeze, walked by with a Helion of the ice race. They couldn't have been more different – the Dwarf short and brown skinned, the Helion eight feet tall and with a

blue-white skin tone. Eying us as they walked, the Dwarf said, “Why they let women get Awakened is beyond me.”

The Helion nodded, long white hair trailing behind him. “Agreed. If they aren’t born with their Powers, as our women are, they don’t need them.”

“And even then,” the Dwarf said, taking two steps to his companion’s one, “once they get their powers, they shouldn’t be trained to *fight*.”

“Candidates, follow me!” My attention jerked back in front as a big burly dude, who I swear shook the platform as he walked – bigger and wider than Gordon even – made his way down the boards to us. “The Awakening is in one hour; three p.m. sharp. Leave your bags: they’ll be taken care of. I’ll take you to the staging area, and there you’ll get further instructions.” He reached us just as he finished, gave us a gruff look, turned around, and swung his trash can lid, I mean his hand. “Follow me.”

Gilmer fell in step beside me as we followed the hulk of a man off the boardwalk and into a tunnel lit by glowstones. “Since I’ve been here before – not as a candidate mind you, as an observer – would it help if I give you the play-by-play, since it’s your first go-round and all?”

“That’d be great – I’d rather not look stupid if I can help it.”

He nodded curtly, smoothing a hair that had somehow fallen out of place despite his perfect cut and style. “The ceremony is on the north side of town. This tunnel cuts right under the city to the amphitheater. We’re lucky we got here when we did; all the other candidates who arrived on the earlier trains had to wait. They’ll meet us shortly.”

We entered the tunnel just as he finished, glowstones on the walls illuminating our ten-minute walk before the tunnel opened again right into the staging area. About a million columns jutted from the floor to hold up the ceiling, each with a painting or carving of a Senturian using their power, or maybe a Dwarf or Elf performing theirs.

"Excuse me for a minute," I said, ducking into a bathroom. I used the facilities, and stood for a second looking in the mirror, taking deep breaths and huffing them out. Twenty-five years. Seems like twenty-four of those were spent working toward this day. Dreaming of it, more like. I never doubted it could be done, yet every little failure worried me.

My breath came faster, my thoughts racing, palms sweating: now that it was almost time, it really hit me. I was going to be somebody! No more crappy jobs, no more endless work, and struggle just to survive – now my whole life would change. Sure, there will be a lot of training and it would be hard work, but at least I'd have a skill, an occupation, and power! *If* they let me in...

I grinned as I grabbed a quick drink and turned to face my fate.

Gilmer waited for me, and in the five minutes of my absence, a small army had assembled. I whistled lightly. "Holy cow, that's a lot of people."

"Four thousand, two hundred and fifty candidates. They just announced it," Gilmer said, grinning. "Come on, we have to get our number." He led me to a huge bin filled with identical hexagonal stone plates, about the size of my palm. Waiting our turn, we saw people were just reaching in and grabbing one, so we did the same. We turned them over: "All right, four thousand, two hundred forty-eight for me, what about you?" Gilmer said.

"Four thousand, two hundred forty-nine!" Almost last. Good, maybe no one would notice me then.

"Ha, this is great! We get to relax and sit till the end, *and* see where everyone else goes!" he exclaimed, grabbing my arm and turning us around, smacking me on the back. "This way. I'll get to... Whoa."

The column in front of us had a highly detailed painting of a Senturian dressed in white, battling both a dragon and a rogue Senturian in a black robe. It was too small to tell, but there had to be fear etched

onto his face. I gave a shiver. “Whoa, I’d hate to be that guy. No way you’ll ever see me doing that.”

“You never know, Jayton. You might get an assignment on the West Side of the Breaks. Supposedly dragons are still all over that place.”

“Seriously, Gilmer? You know dragons are so rare that—”

“Candidates!” boomed an amplified voice from somewhere I couldn’t see. “Please proceed in number order to the west exit. The next number is shown above the door.” A large, red 1 appeared on the western wall. It quickly changed to a two, then three, four...

I popped my knuckles. Here we go...

## Chapter 3

Slowly the room emptied, and when our numbers came up, we followed the line out the door, through a short stone tunnel, and out onto the floor of the amphitheater, blinded momentarily by the sun almost directly overhead. The one person left who fell in line behind me was a very cute girl with a gray cloak and hood, about five-foot-seven. I didn't have time to look much after that – there was too much to see.

“It should be blazing hot right now, what gives?” I whispered to Gilmer. It was March, but we had a sudden heat spell in the Southland, so the cool amphitheater took me by surprise.

Gilmer said over his shoulder, “Aeren changing the air temperature. They're the air masters, remember. You complaining?”

I shook my head as two Senturian corpsmen, identified by the star power symbol on their clothes, checked our numbered stone plates, then unceremoniously tossed them into a big bin behind them. Another Senturian corpsman pointed us to one of the last seats in the first row of one of two large sets of folding chairs on the floor of the stadium. All four-thousand-plus of us took our places and stood in front of our designated chairs. The crowd noise was immense – I had never seen so many people in one place. At least a hundred thousand eyes started down. Ever feel like a fish in an aquarium? The arena was shaped like a horseshoe. We faced the open end, taken up by a large stone stage with an even larger black stone wall behind it.

A couple dozen of the same metal folding chairs sat onstage, situated in a semicircle around a large wooden crate front and center.

As soon as we all sat, a wispy looking old man stood and stepped to a podium on the far right end of the stage, long white robe and beard swaying in the slight breeze. Picking up a small, thin cylinder of what looked like rock on the podium, his strong voice was suddenly all around us. “Greetings, Southland!” he exclaimed, and the crowd erupted into cheers again.

"I've never seen an amplistone that big," I said.

Gilmer said, "Yeah, the Dwarves must have been working on that for weeks. Hooking up the master block to all the speaker stones around here must have taken a lot of effort. Masters of the earth element, indeed." He pointed to a much larger black stone with holes all over it, several of which were scattered around our area and could be spotted throughout the whole theater.

I grinned, despite myself. Soon I'd know what I'd be working with – fire, water, earth, air, energy, or healing. No way would I be lucky enough to get two or three elements, but I didn't care – last time I checked, one was more than zero.

The emcee continued and the crowd hushed as he did. "Welcome one and all to the Southland Awakening for the year four thousand, eight hundred and two! This is the six hundred and fiftieth Awakening in the Southland, and this is the largest number of candidates we've ever had!

"Now, rules. You should know them, but they bear repeating. When your number is called, walk up, put both hands on the Awakening Stone, and wait for your score to appear. The stone will 'awaken' the dormant parts of your brain and body, the parts that can control one of the Six Powers: fire, water, earth, air, energy, or healing.

"Once it does, the level of that power will be shown on the scoreboard behind me for all to see. And don't worry, that level is your raw ability, not your actual skill level. Even then, through training, hard work, and discipline, you can increase your maximum power level.

"Depending on what level you receive in each element, you'll either be chosen or not. If you Awaken one element only and the level is higher than three – or five for the Helions – one of the Races might choose you. You will train for three years with them, mastering your element, then re-assimilating into the Senturian Corps and assigned accordingly.



“If your levels are below a three with only one element, or any multiple elements, the Senturian Corps will decide if they want to train you. If not, you have the option of joining the Army, though you’ll be forbidden from using your Powers. Any violation would be punishable by banishment to the West Side of the Breaks.

“A candidate who receives a Quantum Power – one *not* of the six elements – you’ll join the Rangers, should they choose you.”

*That’s pretty much a guarantee. The Rangers always pick up those with extra powers. They’re too useful.*

“If no power is Awakened,” the emcee continued over my thoughts, “you’re free to join the Army or go back home.”

So that was it. That’s what was at stake: even after all this effort to get here, I still might get sent home. I took a deep breath. Judging by the sound of hundreds of exhales, I wasn’t the only one.

The emcee continued, “Candidates, here are your judges. First, the Dwarves, masters of the Earth!”

Two Dwarves rose from the metal chairs in the front row and walked up the few stairs to the stage, waving and smiling to polite applause, the mountain symbol of the Dwarves emblazoned on their cloaks. They were short, but not abnormally so, around five-and-a-half-feet tall – but *all* dwarves were five-and-a-half-feet tall. Each had a very dark tan, black hair, wore full-length leather armor, and had a battle ax swinging from their belts. Dwarves, as the earth and metal gurus, were excellent smiths. All the best weapons and most ornate jewelry was Dwarf made.

“The Elves, our Healers!” Two Elves, tall and slender, with high cheekbones, thin faces, long purple hair, and pointed ears, glided onto the stage. They looked so elegant and regal, I almost gagged. Light purple skin was accented by dark purple robes tied at the shoulder with a caduceus broach that glimmered slightly in the bright sun, matching the metal caduceus pinned on their chests. Elves were masters of healing, but were also excellent woodsmen – partially hereditary, partially

from the training they received throughout their lives since their lands were entirely taken up by the Eav Forest. Both Elves paraded to their seats next to the Dwarves and sat down as a king would on his throne.

“Aeren, with the power over air!” They actually *did* glide onto stage, hovering inches off the ground, wind pushing them upward, keeping them afloat. They had a green tint to their skin, of which you could see a lot – the man shirtless with light green shorts, the lady in a green bikini top and shorts. This drew stares from all the guys – myself included. Their long, bright green hair flowed behind them like a cape, and right between their eyes was a bright green tattoo of a tornado. Air was their element, and they could push, pull, and manipulate it in any way, including – evidently – changing the temperature as they had done in the arena.

“The Masters of Fire, the Phoenix!” They wore almost the exact same clothing as the Aeren, except theirs was bright red, almost perfectly blended with their skin tone and hair color. It was like they had a permanently bad sunburn. Able to create, manipulate, and extinguish fire at will, the Phoenix always emitted a larger amount of heat than the normal person – nice on a cold day, torture on a hot one. Or so I’d been told. Dark red flame tattoos on their shoulders showed their master ranks.

“Manus!” The energy masters ascended the stairs, lightning symbols flashing on the big screen. Their race could control energy, shoot beams from their hands and feet, and lace their weapons with a sheath of energy that could cut through normal materials. Two-piece robes, yellow on top and orange on bottom, hid everything but their hands and heads, where their orangey-yellow skin almost glowed.

“Able to manipulate water – The Helion, Tempus, and Reka!” Six people walked up waving. Two for Ice, two for Sea, two for River, with corresponding snowflake, wave, and waterfall symbols adorning their outfits. Their skin, icy blue-white, deep blue, and light blue respectively, stood out against the black stone, light dancing off their blue armor.

There was a long history on why there were three expressions of water, and while each branch naturally thought their version superior, they mostly got along.

“And finally, the three representatives from the Rangers, Senturian Corps, and Army!” The normal men walked on stage, each with a tan shirt, matching tactical pants, black combat boots, and a sword on their hip with a leather-wrapped scabbard. The Army rep led the way, recognizable by the shield and crossed-spears patch on his shoulder under his colonel rank. Made up mostly of non-Senturians, they still picked up a few recruits through Awakenings. They were the detectives, soldiers, police, peace keepers, and anything else needed in Terraunum to keep society civil and fend off the evils on the West Side of the Breaks, alongside the Senturian Corps.

The Senturian corpsman looked almost identical to the Army colonel, except for the patch on his shoulder with the Corpsman Star. Underneath that were three more symbols – fire, water, and earth. That meant this particular Senturian could use those elements – every corpsman had their available powers displayed as such. Most candidates ended up being in the Senturian Corps after their training.

The Rangers were the Special Forces in the Senturian world. They had all the Quantum Powers, the unique abilities that allow them to do things even other Senturians couldn’t do. Each Ranger had their own varying combination of the Six Powers in addition to their Quantum abilities. Silver badges, like a miniature shield with an eagle and maroon gem in the center, shined from the Ranger’s belt.

Once they sat down, the emcee gestured toward two Dwarves I had not seen on stage left. “Gentlemen, the scoreboard, if you please.”

They put their palms on the stone, and instantly, as if drawn by an abnormally large teacher on a chalkboard, appeared the scoreboard on the huge black stone, outlining each power and a score associated with it. Looking it over, I leaned toward Gilmer. “Wait, why are there five spots for Quantum Powers?”

He shrugged, waving his hand. "It's just in case. Most people don't have any, and most who get a Quantum *only* get one. But every now and then someone will get more, other than the enhanced strength and speed that all Senturians get when compared to normal people, that is."

I nodded. OK, that made sense. How cool would it be to have one more ability than everyone else? Couldn't help but give you an edge. Maybe I'd get one. Either way, I couldn't wipe the grin off my face – I was on the floor, about to be Awakened! I could practically feel the blood rushing through me, my adrenaline spiking. This was it.

Without regard for my inner monologue, the emcee started talking again. "Candidates, please take your seats." We obliged, and he continued. "Gentlemen, please remove the covering!"

Two men removed the top from the wooden crate, revealing a clear square stone, about the size of a watermelon, halfway embedded in the black stone of the stage, but raised about three feet so it would be waist level on most people. This brought oohs and aahs from the crowd.

I asked Gilmer, "Have you ever seen anyone break level ten at an Awakening?"

He shook his head. "No, that's very rare. The last one to do it was Royn Crowell."

I nodded. Royn Crowell was the commander at the West Gate. He single-handedly defended the gate against a horde of werewolves. He destroyed so many monsters they quit keeping track. Basically, he was the baddest dude ever.

"And now, candidates," the emcee said, "before your powers are Awakened, do a final check of yourself. Are you ready? Do you really want to Awaken these powers? Awesome as they are, that power comes with accountability – you will be held accountable for every energy burst, every fire blast, every thrown stone. Also know this: your training will be hard. Harder than anything you've ever done before, and some don't survive it. Are you ready to join the prestigious ranks of Senturians who serve as our police force all across the East Side of the Breaks?"

Are you ready to join the soldiers who protect us from the horrors sealed on the West Side?" He paused. Had to be for dramatic effect. "All right, if you insist. Let's get started! Number one, if you please!" he shouted, and the crowd erupted, as some guy in the far back made his way to the stage.

He was shorter than me, skinny with a plain shirt and pants. When he reached the stage, the emcee said, "State your name, and place both your hands on the stone. Then wait."

The man took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and said, "John Smith." His name appeared on the scorecard behind him as he spoke. *Seriously? John Smith? How original. Originally boring.* He stepped forward, placing his hands on the stone, which erupted into a bright white light. John closed his eyes, and all his muscles tensed, like he was straining to lift the stone. About ten seconds later, the brown earth bar crept to level three and stopped. Instantly, the light faded from the stone, and John let out a grunt and almost collapsed, but caught himself at the last second, shaking his head. The crowd clapped politely. The two Dwarves deliberated a bit as John recovered, looked at the emcee, and nodded. They stepped forward, raising the guy's hands. "The Dwarves chose John Smith!" The crowd cheered as they walked John to one of their retainers, who then ushered him off stage.

He hadn't even stepped down yet before the emcee shouted, "Number Two!" and the whole process started over again. Each time was the same: state the name, place the hands, the numbers would move, and the person would be ushered to their respective group, a bit worse for the wear.

*If they were chosen.* Number five, a weasely-looking guy, was the first to get no powers. After taking his hands off the Awakening stone, the crowd was silent. He gulped, and turned to the scoreboard to see the results. Face turning white, he looked lost as he slowly made his way offstage. Alone. People avoided him like the plague. I gulped. *Did that fate await me?*

Number fifty-seven, a smaller girl, came up and got a one in water. None of the water Senturians moved. The corpsman talked briefly with the Army rep, but then both shook their head. Tears started forming in her eyes, but she held her chin up as she was at last escorted offstage.

The procession of perspective practitioners kept moving; it seemed endless. Each one held the tension in the arena – would they get a high enough level? Would they be shunned? It was a little disheartening, actually, to see those who got no powers treated like they stepped in something. I didn't really understand it – did they suddenly stop becoming a person?

The crowd was game enough, celebrating after someone was chosen. Number seven ninety-nine became the first to break the level seven barrier, coming in with an eight on the red fire bar. It took a good five minutes for the cheering to die down and the Awakening to continue. It also took him a whole five minutes to recover. It seemed the higher the number, or the more powers you had, the more the stone took out of you, the longer it kept your fingers glued to it, and the more time you needed to recover.

"Number fifteen-hundred!" the emcee said, all attention focused on a robed, hooded figure making its way to the stage flanked by two Reka soldiers, their armor glinting in the sun with a waterfall on the shoulder guard. Not only was the figure hooded, but covered head to toe. OK.

"Gilmer, what's going on?" I asked out of the corner of my mouth.

"Not sure. Never seen this before."

Once the girl – I was sure it was a girl, judging by how the robe fit – reached the stone on the stage, she waited with her head down, cowl covering her features. Reaching up, her *blue* hands drew back the hood, and I about hit the floor. This was the prettiest girl I had ever seen – she looked around my age, with an oval face, full lips, deep blue eyes, curves in the right places, white hair streaked with light blue, and light blue skin. She squared her shoulders and proudly stepped forward. "Princess

Aurora Helotes of the River,” she said before placing her hands on the stone. Everyone else looked at the scoreboard, but I couldn’t take my eyes off *her*.

Gilmer elbowed me and pointed up, where I saw the water bar had already shot to a ten, but she was still glued to the stone. And the princess wasn’t doing so well. Her whole body was taught and sweaty. The Elves were out of their seats, clearly waiting to catch her. Was it draining more from her because she was a Reka? And why did she need powers Awakened anyway? I’ve never heard of one of the Races needing to.

Two more minutes went by, everyone’s eyes trained on the girl, who progressively got worse. Everyone was on their feet when across the scoreboard in the Quantum section, the word “Shimmer” appeared, the black bar moving to six. The light of the stone died and the girl fell into the waiting arms of the Elves.

The other masters quickly surrounded them, blocking the view for the murmuring crowd. Another few minutes went by before a much paler princess stood. The Reka representatives on stage burst into an animated shouting match with the Rangers, Dwarves, Elves, and anyone else who would listen. After a couple of minutes, the emcee stepped over and acted as mediator, finally calming everyone down enough to chat. An agreement was finally reached, and with a slight look from the Rekas on stage, Princess Aurora turned and exited behind the Rangers. To which the crowd erupted. Interesting...

I was clapping right along with them, Gilmer clapping and whooping too. He turned and said, “That’s the craziest Awakening I’ve seen yet! You could tell the Rekas didn’t want to let her go, but the rules are pretty clear: the Rangers have the first choice on the Quantum powers! Dude, you OK?”

“What?” I was still watching the back of the girl as she descended out of sight.

"You're practically drooling. She's out of your league, man. Get over it," he said, rolling his eyes. "You never paid much attention to girls back home, what's the deal now?"

Still fuzzy, I said, "I was working to pay for this. Didn't have time to date properly. Plus, they don't make 'em like that at home...."

Close by, someone coughed.

Gilmer just laughed and shook his head as the Awakening continued.

Number sixteen eighty-four, Anton Bowie, a tall man built like a tank, got an eight on the Earth bar, a three on Air, and a four on Fire. The corpsmen were about to stand, when suddenly the Ranger stood up. "We'll take Mr. Bowie." The corpsmen sat down quickly, and Anton was escorted off by the Ranger.

"Interesting," Gilmer said, "I wonder what's special about him? The Rangers hardly ever pick anyone without a Quantum power. You think he's that good, or is he from an important family?"

I just shrugged and pointed. "Look, it's Gordon's turn! Good luck, buddy!" I yelled.

Gordon Moody stepped up, and we watched the Water bar rise to a two. And nothing else. *Oh no.* My eyes snapped to the corpsman and the Army representative. They both shook their heads, and my heart sank. Already drained from the stone, Gordon made the long silent walk offstage. I wanted to call out, to tell him it would be OK, but I couldn't find my voice in the silence of the arena. *Damnit, your friend needs you and you're sitting here silent. That's not right, Jayton.*

The Awakening went on while I beat myself up, with just as many people selected as not.

Then came Joshua Omaha's turn. He grabbed the stone, and instantly healing and energy went to one. Five seconds later, the light from the stone died. *Oh no, not again.*

Joshua looked stunned. He'd expected much more. Jerking his head to the selection committee, he saw them shaking their heads. "Come



on!” he bellowed. They sat in silence while he glared their way. When no one moved, he straightened himself up and walked off stage. “You’ll regret this.” He jumped off the stage to the floor and kept walking, never stopping, never looking back. We heard a door open and slam closed.

Right after him was a pretty girl who looked about my age – Katy Lavernia. With a seven in Energy, a three in Healing, and a level five in Speed – a Quantum power – she brought a big cheer and earned a ticket to the Rangers.

The crowd was louder now, not because of any particular candidate, but because they were talking and laughing amongst themselves. It was a long ceremony and they were starting to get restless from sitting so long. Plus, the wine and beer that flowed freely was clearly getting to a lot of them. Before I realized it, they were calling Gilmer up.

“Go get ‘em, Gilmer!” I hollered, clapping him on the back as he walked past me with a wide grin. He said his name, placed his hands, and the scoreboard lit up – four for Fire, four for Air, and a four for Healing. His hands stayed glued to the stone for a little longer, everyone watching the scoreboard. For half a second, a Quantum bar lit up to an eight, but then disappeared. But it was enough to get the Ranger’s attention, and they claimed my friend as he dropped his hands from the stone.

He shot me a wink as he was escorted off, and my nerves jumped up about a thousand notches – I could hear my heart in my head, going ninety to nothing, my arms and legs got numb, and I started breathing heavy.

“Second to last, you’re up!” the emcee shouted, pointing my way.

I gulped, and made my way to the stairs. “Excuse me,” I said to the girl behind me, the only one left on the arena floor, who gave me a quick smile.

Seven quick steps and I was on the stage. Seven more and I was at the stone, almost shaking – I had waited for this moment for so long; I couldn’t believe it was here!

“Jayton Baird,” echoed all over the stadium as I said my name. Just in front of the stone was a miniature scoreboard that only I could see. I took one more deep breath and grabbed the stone with both hands.

Fire shot through my veins – I couldn’t believe anything could hurt so much. Every muscle in my body clenched tight as a snare drum. My brain felt like a horse was sitting on it, skin started to boil, toes curled up inside my boots, my mouth and lungs trying desperately to scream, but nothing was coming out.

Despite the pain, I could still see and was intently aware of everything happening around me. The lights in the entire place dimmed slightly – that got the crowd’s attention. All eyes shifted my way. On my little scoreboard, the red Fire bar jumped to four. Then Water to six, Earth to seven, Air to five, Healing to three, Energy to ten. *Yes! I’ll be picked for sure!*

A flashing timer came up in the right-hand corner of the scoreboard. It said one minute. Holy cow, it felt like an hour, muscles all still tight and my hands gripping the stone like it was the last food on Terra-num.

The Quantum section came to life. “Strength” flashed up and went to five, “Transition” to six, and “Telekinesis” went to seven. Now the clock read two minutes. I had to force myself to breathe, each lungful a huge effort.

The clock was now at five minutes, and turned yellow. *That can’t be good.*

Why wasn’t this thing letting me go? What did this mean? The stone strobed brighter several times, each time bringing the lights in the stadium down, and each time the faces of the crowd grew more concerned. At seven minutes, the clock started flashing.

At eight, it turned red.

“Ignis Oculus” appeared and shot to ten. The crowd went nuts when it popped up on the main scoreboard.

*Oh. My. God. Fire Eyes.* This was a momentous event. Huge.

So why wasn't the stone letting me go?

At nine minutes, the clock started flashing, and switched to one minute, counting down.

I knew if you were on this thing for more than ten minutes, you'd die. It had happened before. But it wasn't like I had any control over what was happening. I jerked my arms, trying break free, but I might have well been trying to pick up an elephant for all the good it did.

Thirty seconds.

Twenty.

The Quantum section lit up again. Morsenube: fifteen.

That was bad. That was very, very bad. Morsenube: the Death Cloud.

Ten...my skin was red, my whole body convulsing.

Nine. My brain went fuzzy.

Eight. Thoughts erupted everywhere, sounds that weren't – couldn't – be there, visions of all sort of crazy things, smells of smoke and ash and flowers, dirt, and the taste of hamburgers crossed my tongue.

Seven. I didn't know how long I could take this.

Six. It was starting to go black.

Five. Beside me, somewhere, there was a bright flash of blue light.

Four. This was it.

Three. I couldn't see.

Two. Goodbye. Strange – there was no tunnel, no bright light.

One.

The stone blackened suddenly, the lights in the stadium flared back to life, and I fell backwards into oblivion.

