

# **FRACTURED**

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SAMPLE CHAPTER FROM THE FIRST DRAFT

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## NO WAY TO PROTECT THEM ALL

RAFFA

### *What have we done?*

Personal diary of Seraph research assistant La'lael Ish'tem, final entry

IT WAS GOING TO BE ANOTHER BAD DAY IN THE FRACTURE. AFTER TEN years, Captain Raffael Izar had learned to read the bastard by the way it moved. Its surface, more like a shattered pane of glass, rippled in a way that promised death and destruction within. And somewhere, deep inside the expanse of broken reality, the reason for it all. A way to end this.

If he could live long enough to seize it.

“Captain Izar?” a nervous voice said, a few paces behind. Raffa had met the young man this morning. A green boy, with glassy brown eyes and a habit of stumbling over his words. “Um... are we going in, Sir?”

Raffa raised one eyebrow and glanced over his shoulder. His team fanned behind him, framing the green lad with an array of bemused expressions. The boy looked so young, his uniform unblemished. Trained by someone who'd never taught him how to

get it dirty. Amaeya Fraxes, no doubt. A woman nine tenths impulse, and one tenth good taste in whiskey.

“What’s your name, boy?” Raffa said, ignoring the withering expressions on the faces of his most loyal squad members.

“Arakho Oyo, Sir.”

Raffa frowned. One of the Sheol?

“You’re from Narroch?”

The boy gulped. “Yes, Sir.”

“How long have you been in Rakar?”

“Since my Manifestation, Sir.”

“Which was...?”

“Three weeks, five days, and three hours ago, Sir.”

Damn it, Amaeya. Raffa turned away, rubbing the back of his head as he stared along the surface of the Fracture. The rippling patterns glistened in the sun, carving a jagged path across the plains towards the mountains and beyond. A wall that stretched the entire continent from ocean to ocean, from soil to stars, from this realm to another.

No one had given this boy enough time to adjust to his new condition, let alone develop his Trait enough to survive in there.

“What did you manifest?” Raffa said, turning on the lad.

“Cross-Species Transformation, Sir.”

“You’re a Grunt?”

The boy blinked.

“Oh, for the love of reality, send him back, Raffa,” an exasperated voice rose behind him. “Unless you’re planning on carrying him? Because that’s the only way he won’t get us all killed.”

Raffa glanced over his shoulder to meet Kaelir Rix’s gaze. A mountain of a man, he stood out amongst the rest of the squad for his impressive girth and long auburn hair curling the length of it. Though he wore a smirk—he always wore a smirk—this one conveyed the warm undertone to his insubordination. Insubordination Raffa was in no mood to entertain.

He raised a hand, and Kaelir's mouth snapped shut, the playful challenge in his eyes fading. Kaelir might enjoy a good argument, but he respected the chain of command.

Turning back on the boy, Raffa indicated the shattered glass. "You've never been inside before, have you?"

Arakho shook his head, jaw quivering.

Raffa's brow knitted together. "You've never even seen it?"

"Not this close." He sounded so afraid.

Raffa closed the distance between them, exhaling a plaintive sigh. Three weeks into his new life as a Riven, this boy wasn't ready for what lay ahead. A fledgling, fresh out the nest. His undeveloped wings useless. But he deserved to know, *had* to know, what the rest of his life entailed. He lunged at Arakho, catching him around the shoulders as he recoiled. Gripping tight, Raffa yanked Arakho through the long grass, right up to the boundary, forcing his head within inches of the surface.

"Tell me what you see," he said.

Arakho stammered, his words clipped by panted breaths. "Darkness— and—and— impossible— Zoraël's Wisdom! What is that place?"

"Zoraël." Raffa's brow twitched. "You follow the Fool's Path?"

"The F— F— Forgotten P—P— Path, Sir."

"So you believe in the Abyss?"

Under his firm grip, the boy trembled.

"Y—Y— Yes, Sir."

"Well, Arakho, what you see is worse than the Abyss." As Raffa pushed the boy closer to the crackling surface, his own muscles tensed, urging him to pull away. Ten years, and that instinct still caught him off guard. Every damned time. "This is the Fracture, where the boundaries between the Real and the Surreal have shattered. It's where you will die. It's where all Riven die."

When the boy let out a whimper, Raffa let him go. Arakho stumbled several paces, hands flying to his collar to loosen it,

struggling to catch his breath. His wide eyes turned to Raffa, demanding something he couldn't give. How easy it would be to fill this boy's head with empty promises.

Instead, he winked. "If you're lucky, it won't be today. Stay close, and you'll probably live."

Far from reassured, Arakho sank to his knees, wrapping trembling arms around himself. Alone for only a few seconds before a woman strode up behind him and pressed her wrinkled hand to his shoulder. Arakho stilled. Within seconds, his breathing returned to normal, and though he'd looked ready to burst into tears moments ago, a relaxed smile spread across his face. His fear removed.

Raffa glanced up at the short woman to find her staring at him with narrowed eyes. Everything about her oozed reproach, from her taut, weathered face to her tight bun.

"I might remind you, Captain," she said, her voice faintly accented with a Narroch twang, "only a fool refers to our Saviour's path in such terms." Her brow hardened. "And I might also remind you that scaring the shit out of this boy is the true fool's path, when we all know you have no intention of taking him in with us."

Orro Larez, a woman of singular fortitude and good sense. And the only member of his team Raffa would allow to chastise him and reward her with a smile. The corner of his mouth lifted in a lopsided grin, and he shrugged.

"What are we waiting for?" Kaelir asked, breaking formation to stand beside Raffa at the boundary.

"Common sense to prevail." Raffa folded his arms, turning to stare past the shattered surface to the storm inside. "The bastard's more volatile than we thought."

"Why don't we return to base?"

"General Dara is on his way. He had a—" Raffa ground his teeth, "vision."

Kaelir's right eyebrow lifted. "Oh."

“Another one?” Orro joined his other side, leaving the boy sitting in the long grass, a dazed smile painted across his face. “Someone needs to remind him he isn’t a Glimpse. The only futures he sees are the daydreams of a fractalling mind.”

Kaelir tutted. “It happens to us all in the end.” Then he cocked his head to one side and glanced Orro up and down. “Present company excluded, of course. A pity we don’t all have the benefit of regeneration.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m looking forward to the day you go fractal. You might finally start speaking sense.” Ignoring Kaelir’s haughty utterance, she turned on Raffa. “Is the general bringing a team?”

“I couldn’t say. He wasn’t in his best frame of mind when I left.”

Beneath their feet, the ground rumbled. A warning shot. A loud bellow to stay on this side of the boundary, to not throw their lives away. Raffa rocked on his heels, frowning. Today wasn’t going as planned. He’d left a pair of new Riven in the recovery centre, still shaking from their Manifestations, unable to cope with the mutations taking hold. Youngsters, like Arakho, their lives forever changed.

With no Fracture runs scheduled, he’d set aside the morning—as he often did—to assist newcomers through their transformation, applying his wide-ranging traits to ease their suffering. When he arrived, he found the pair, a young man and woman, writhing on the padded floor of the Nest. But as he began the intense process of siphoning their fear, General Dara cornered him.

And now he stood here, at the edge of it all. One fool’s decision from oblivion.

“You’re not going to argue with the general again, are you?” Kaelir asked, wary.

“That depends.” Raffa shrugged one shoulder. “Do you want to go on living?”

“Oh, it’s not that bad.”

Lightning flashed across the underside of the glass.

“What did he see in his vision this time?” Orro asked.

“Nothing less than himself entering the Singularity and seizing the Resonite.”

“Saving the Real?” Kaelir shook his head, chuckling to himself. “Why not? Stranger things have happened in there.”

A monstrous shadow swirled behind the surface, raging against the shattered seams, desperate to escape, to destroy, to spread chaos. It burst alight, streaks of iridescent fire radiating outwards. Each shard caught the light, sending it ricocheting in every direction at once. The surface of the Fracture turned into a kaleidoscope, forcing Raffa to avert his gaze. He found Orro beside him, frowning quizzically.

“Except that,” she said after a long moment. “Three hundred years, and no one has entered the Singularity. Though I have the utmost respect for the man General Dara once was, he won’t be the one to restore the border between the realms. There is only one who has that power, and He has not yet returned.”

“Not this again,” Kaelir said under his breath. “Orro, I’ll never understand why you waste your time praying for the return of some wanker who lets everyone suffer when he has the power to end it. What sort of prophet does that?”

“It wouldn’t be much of a Path if we skipped straight to our destination, would it?”

Raffa came between them, shaking his head. “Alright, that’s enough. Of all the things I have time for today, dead religions are not one of them. Look lively, Dara’s here.”

They all would have felt it, that compression in the fabric of space. Raffa turned around as the air fizzled above the long grass, ten yards away. A glittering path zigzagged across the sky, sparks crackling along its ragged edge. Raffa’s forehead pulsed with a build-up of pressure, but just as his right eye began to twitch, the



jagged path tore open into a round opening about two yards in diameter. On the other side, lay a marble chamber.

A Shifter stood in the opening, her eyes closed in concentration as she folded the space between the Fracture's edge and that chamber, two hundred miles away in the capital. She was a powerful Riven, her bridges capable of transporting dozens of troops. By comparison, Orro could only transport their squadron of eight.

But Orro did so with a smile. The woman in the opening glared at Raffa with the demeanour of someone who'd suffocated on their own hot air.

"Stand to attention," Raffa said, and he straightened his back, clasping his hands behind it.

His squad followed orders, and by the time an armour-clad General Dara stepped through the bridge, they had formed ranks, ready to greet the leader of the Rift Guard.

Once, he'd been the sort of man you wanted to stand to attention for, a man you would expect to hold such an esteemed title. Tall, handsome—in a broken-nosed sort of way—and broad-shouldered. Once, he'd been a hero.

But the man stalking across the grass was an old lion. Grey hair framed his stubbled face like a mane, and his eyes gleamed in wild defiance at a world fast leaving him behind. He bore down on Raffa, flanked by a small squadron of wide-eyed Riven. Children, all of them. The oldest no more than seventeen.

Raffa's jaw tightened. What was the madman up to now?

"General Dara," he said with a curt nod.

"Captain Izar." Since Raffa had known him, Dara's voice sounded like a rusty water wheel. Too many years hooked on the steam pipe. "Is your team ready?"

Ready, yes. But willing? Raffa ground his teeth together and ignored the urgent way Kaelir tried to catch his eye.

"General, may I speak freely?"

“Do you ever not speak freely, Izar?”

“Sir, the Fracture is more volatile than the scholars led us to believe. Stepping foot inside would be suicide.”

General Dara turned slowly to meet his eye. “To save humanity, sacrifices must be made.”

Raffa lowered his voice, eager for the others not to hear. “We’re not the Narroch, Sir. We don’t throw lives away. I cannot allow my team to—”

“Are you disobeying direct orders, Izar?”

“Sir—”

“I asked you a question, Captain. Will you follow orders?” His hoarse voice bounced off the Fracture, scattering booming echoes across the plain.

Raffa closed his eyes. Damn this man. After serving him for ten years, he knew the power that word held over Raffa.

Orders.

Raffa steadied his breathing, his lips pushing into a hard line. When he could trust his voice, he said, “No, Sir.”

And when he opened his eyes, he found four young faces behind the general, begging something of him. Three girls and a boy, their maroon coats pristine and their terror tugging at Raffa’s senses. Of all his Traits, he’d devoted the least time to developing his Empathic Sense. Rifling through another’s emotions didn’t just feel like crossing a line, it seemed... messy. But though he made a conscious effort to suppress that Trait now, their fear barrelled into him. He couldn’t defend against it, against them.

Like Arakho, none of them had seen the Fracture before. Damn it, none of them should be here. No way to protect them all.

“May I ask why—” He gestured the children, but the general cut him off by striding to stand in front of the shattered glass.

“They will get me to where I need to go.”

Raffa cleared his throat. “To the Singularity?”

“Where else?”

“Do any of them have the Sight?”

“That won’t be necessary.”

A haughty sound rose from the ranks, where Kaelir no doubt stewed in this dismissal of his Trait. And though Raffa understood—after all, the ability to perceive the broken reality inside the Fracture was a bare minimum for setting foot inside—he silenced any further dissent with a brusque wave.

“We have Navigator Rix,” Dara said. “He will guide us. And before you ask, Izar, Transporter Larez will open the bridges we require to reach the singularity.”

Raffa ignored the urgent glares on his team’s faces and glanced at the teenagers. They were looking at him in a way that made his stomach ache. What was it about a young face like that? They could manipulate with one glimpse of innocence. A powerful weapon. Even on someone like him, probably only ten years older.

Raffa exhaled a laugh through his nose. Ten years? Time had no meaning to Riven. Their lives were hard and short. Twenty-eight, and he felt like an old man.

He turned his back on the children to face the general.

“What are their Traits?”

Dara muttered under his breath, either unsure or unwilling to part with this information. So Raffa glanced at the last member of his team. A man—of sorts—who went by the name Rael. He was over a hundred years old, the details of his life before Manifestation lost, even to him.

“Rael?” He drew the tall man’s glowing eyes, then jerked his chin to summon him.

“Captain?” Rael tilted his head. “Do you mean to communicate with me? Processing... ah. A summoning gesture. You wish for me to join you.”

He strode over, his steps rhythmic and mechanical, like the beat of his voice. As he neared, sunlight gleamed off the gears beneath his translucent skin. Whenever he moved, the sound of

pistons and gears emanated from deep inside, powered by a source no one understood.

Gearheads were rare even among the extraordinary ranks of the Riven. More contraption than man, these pour souls had the misfortune of Manifesting in the vicinity of machinery. When Rael Manifested, over a hundred years ago, he would have watched himself slowly turning into this, gradually losing what it meant to be a man, both inside and out. Raffa often hoped fear was the first emotion Rael lost.

As he stopped beside Raffa, steam hissed out of the vents along Rael's neck. His white gaze snapped onto Raffa, only the faintest remnant of his iris visible on the waxy surface of his eyeballs. "How may I be of service, Captain?"

"These four. Tell me their Traits."

"Certainly."

Rael jolted around and stared at the teenagers, who backed away, clustering together. A beam of light shot out of Rael's eyes and travelled the teenagers up and down. They flinched, as if stung, but within seconds the light dissipated, and Rael turned to face Raffa again.

Undeterred by the trembling youngsters, he pointed at them as he explained, "This one acquired Language Acquisition. This one Hyperintelligence. That one Realistic Reproduction. And this young man manifested both Psychic Projection and Temporal Velocity Manipulation."

Useless. Raffa shook his head. Frack it.

"Sir," he said, turning to face Dara, who still stared into the Fracture, inches from the border, "I don't see how their Traits can help us reach the singularity. They're too young. They need to be trained. Why not—"

"Do you know the words they brand on Riven in Narroch?"

Raffa's breath snagged in his throat.

The general smiled. "For the Greater Good." So calm as he said

those words. If he knew what they meant, what they really meant, he would never utter them again. "I've spent my life mocking them for such outdated beliefs, but..." He turned around, eyes glazed over. "I understand now. When I retrieve the Resonite and present it to Prince Xathanael to restore the borders of the realms, I will honour those who fell for that Greater Good. You have my word, Izar."

The word of a madman. Raffa gulped. A madman with a general's insignia. A madman he would face a court-marshal to disobey. A man whose orders came with the authority of rank. Authority Raffa didn't trust himself to question.

For the Greater Good?

Damn.

"You four—" He spun to face the teenagers. "Stay two paces from me or you're dead. You, Grunt." He snapped his fingers at Arakho. "At the first sign of danger, take your fastest form and stay close." As the wide-eyed boy nodded, Raffa turned on the rest of his team. "The rest of you had better keep these children alive. That's an order."

"Yes, Sir," they said in unison and formed up behind him.

"Ready, Sir," Raffa said, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice as he stood beside the general.

Past the shattered film, chaos swirled, hungry, writhing, ready to make them regret their next move. Raffa shook his head, his mouth twisting into a snarl. This felt like a bad day to die.

General Dara laughed. The guttural sounds struck the broken surface, reflecting in countless directions, sending laughter spilling across the plains. Raffa held his nerve as he forced three deep breaths, readying for the Abyss.

"Advance!"

