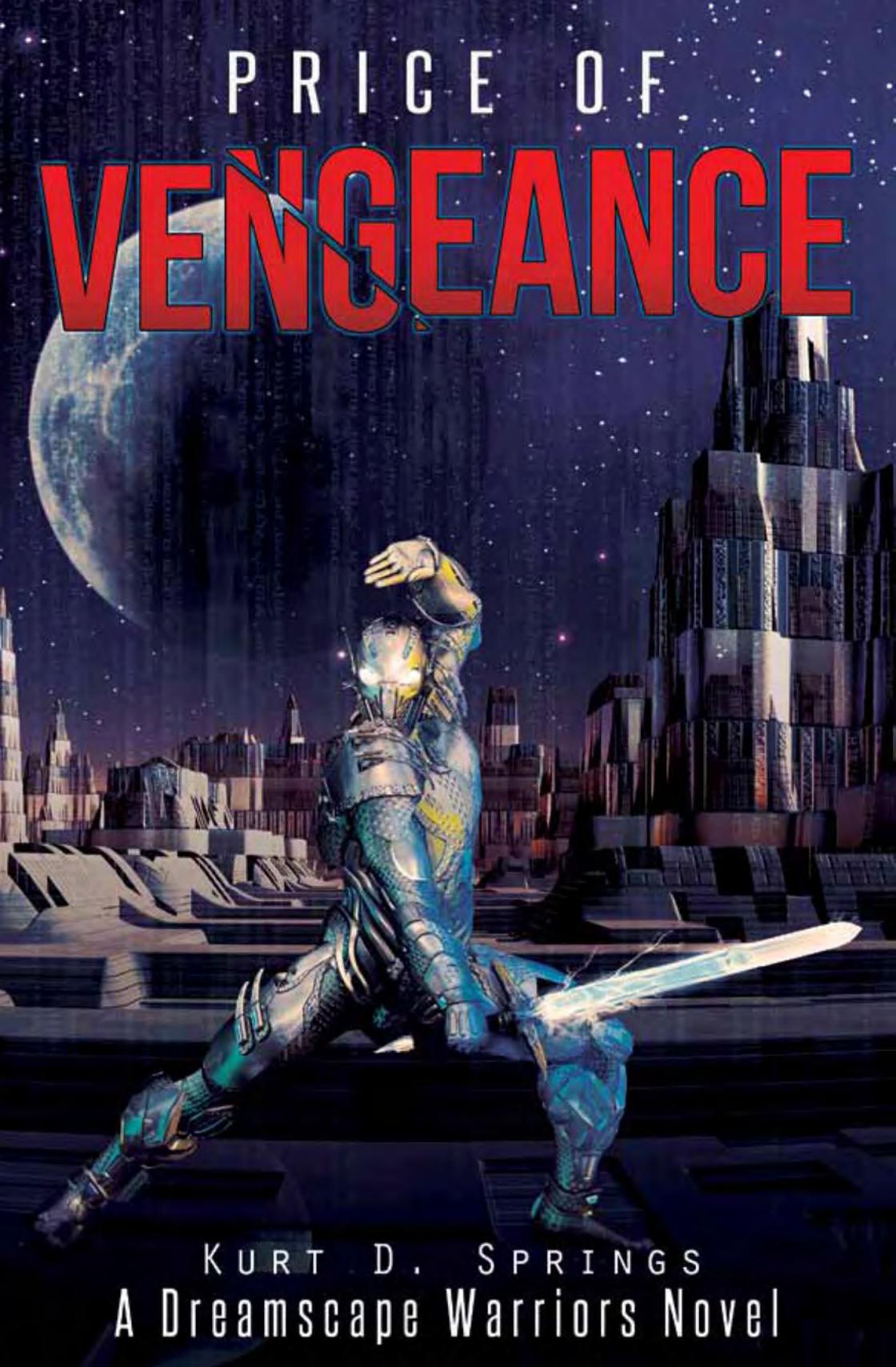


PRICE OF  
**VENGEANCE**

A futuristic warrior in blue and yellow armor with glowing eyes and a glowing sword, standing in a futuristic city at night with a large moon in the background.

KURT D. SPRINGS  
A Dreamscape Warriors Novel

**PRICE OF  
VENGEANCE**



# PRICE OF VENGEANCE

KURT D. SPRINGS  
A Dreamscape Warriors Novel



TATE PUBLISHING  
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*Price of Vengeance*

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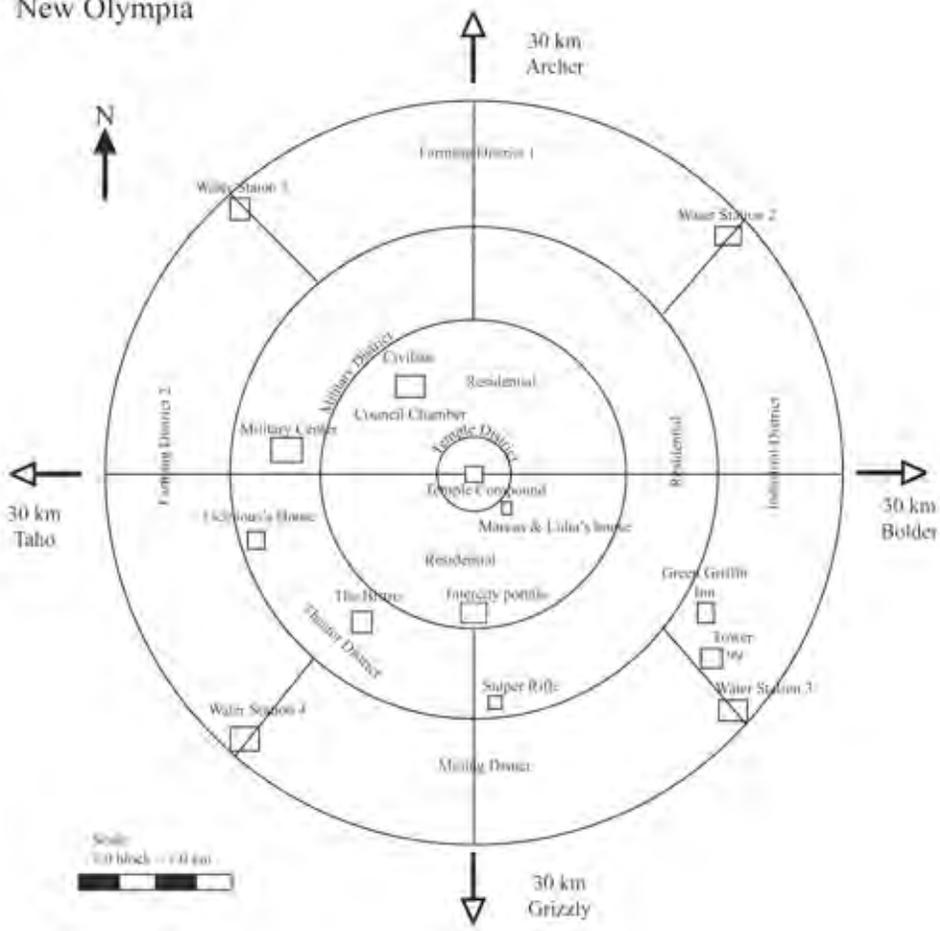
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# New Olympia







## DEDICATION

**T**HIS BOOK IS dedicated to the memory of my high school English teacher, Stanley M. Gorski (June 20, 1942–August 17, 2013). For over fifty years, students of Trinity High School in Manchester, New Hampshire, have learned to appreciate your words of wisdom on grammar, your recitations of and commentary on William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and on *Beowulf*. Rest in Peace, Mr. Gorski.





## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

**I** WOULD LIKE TO thank my family for their support and efforts in this endeavor. I would like to especially thank my mother, brother, and sister-in-law for their editorial input that so vastly improved the telling of this story. I would also like to thank Donncha Ó hAodha, former lecturer at NUI Galway's *Áris na Gaeilge* for his assistance with getting the Irish/Finnian right.





## PROLOGUE

**L**IDIA LOOKED UP as her husband came through the door. “Marcus,” she said, “what happened?” Then she saw the child in his arms. “Dear Creator!” she exclaimed. “Is that—” Marcus nodded. “Seámus and Deirdre are dead,” he said softly. “We arrived just in time to save Liam.”

The child, no more than two-and-a-half-years old, whimpered and clung to him, still in shock at what he had just experienced.

“Mommy, Daddy?” came a voice from behind them.

The two turned as their seven-year-old son, Randolph, came in. Randolph’s eyes fell on the child. He looked confused.

“The bugs killed his parents, Randolph,” Marcus explained. “Liam doesn’t have anyone else to take care of him.”

Randolph’s face darkened, and he turned away. Lidia went to go after him.

“No, Lidia,” Marcus said. “It’s as much a shock for him as it is for us.”

“What about the other farmsteads?” Lidia asked.

“They seem to be okay for now,” Marcus said. “But the problem is the pro-Founder’s group still won’t allow them into the city.”

“But they will be butchered by the chitin,” Lidia said.

“I agree.” Marcus sat down. “I sometimes wish I could just order the Council to do the right thing. Unfortunately, I’ve read history. When one man forces others to do what he thinks is

right, democracies fall. But the Council has no say on who we adopt. At least we can save Liam.”

Lidia took the child from Marcus. Tears came to her eyes. She held the poor child to her. She looked up and saw Randolph again. He frowned and turned away.



That night, Marcus and Lidia woke to the sound of Liam screaming in terror. Both leapt from their bed. As they raced down the hall, the screams gave way to frightened whimpers. When they got to the boys' bedroom, Randolph was not in his bed. He had climbed into his old crib—which they had set up for the little one—and was cradling Liam in his arms as the child clung to him like a lifeline.

Randolf looked up at his parents, his face full of concern. “I think he had a bad dream.”

His parents looked relieved and, after a few moments, quietly left them alone. Randolph looked down at Liam, who was looking up at him desperately.

“Don't worry, Liam,” Randolph said gently. “You're my little brother now. I'll take care of you.”



# CHAPTER 1

*Twenty years later.*

**L**IAM STRAPPED DOWN his armor and slid a knife into his shoulder sheath. Around him, soldiers in the locker room were in the midst of donning armor and weapons. Some were heading to the interdimensional portals in the Military Center in preparation for transport to the city's defensive outposts. He considered his sniper rifle but decided to use the one at the outpost. Instead, he took his assault rifle. It was specialized enough to sharpshoot at medium range. He checked his ammo and power pack then slung the rifle onto his back and slipped his pistol into its holster.

He heard footfalls approaching the locker room and smiled. He knew those footsteps well.

"Hey, little brother!" Randolph began putting his gear into his locker then cast a concerned look at Liam.

Other soldiers were coming into the locker room, having finished their tours at the outposts.

"Hi, Randolph," Liam said as he strapped a larger blade to his thigh and straightened. He turned in time to see Randolph's face. "How are things at the outposts?"

"All quiet," Randolph said. "You volunteered for extra duty again?"

Liam sighed and nodded, looking up at Randolph, who at two meters was a full head taller than he was—like everyone else in

the city. Randolph was handsome. He had dirty blond hair and ice-blue eyes. He cut a fine figure, especially when he wore his dress uniform. Liam had a more gracile build—slim and lethally agile. His hair was dark brown and curly, but his eyes were gray. Their mother referred to them as steel gray.

“I was hoping we could go into the plaza together this weekend,” Randolph said. “Festival Day will be in a few days. I was hoping you would take part this year.”

“You know I’m not comfortable with celebrations,” Liam said. “I don’t fit in, Randolph. You know that. People aren’t comfortable with me. So I guess it’s mutual.”

“You don’t even try.”

Liam didn’t have the will to argue. “I know what I’m good at, big brother. I can do my part to protect the city so the celebrants are safe.”

“But Father—”

“Father understands.” Liam turned back to his brother, reading the profound disappointment on his face. “Besides, if Councilor Licinius sees me, he’ll make trouble.”

Randolf clenched a fist involuntarily. “Is that fool still talking about you?”

Liam laughed bitterly. “That would be a relief. Usually, he’s shouting about me.” Liam scooped up his helmet and holstered his plasma blade. “I sometimes wonder if he’ll ever accept the truth.”

“By the way, I’ve been meaning to tell you. I met a priestess last month,” Randolph said. “And we have been seeing quite a bit of each other. We are planning to meet again this evening—”

“Then you definitely don’t need me along.” Liam grabbed his rucksack with a laugh.

“Actually,” Randolph said, “I do want you to meet her.”

Liam stopped and looked thoughtfully at his brother. “This sounds serious. Have you introduced her to Mom and Dad?”

“I was thinking of doing that during Festival,” Randolph said. “Maybe she has a friend.”

Liam shook his head. "I promised Jorge I'd cover for him so he can be with his family for Festival Day."

Randolf opened his mouth but shut it. Instead, he put his arm around Liam and squeezed his shoulder. "Take care, little brother."

With that, Liam turned and walked to the portal room for Tahoe sector.

Randolf watched Liam go and stood staring after him, lost in thought.

"Problem, Lieutenant?"

Randolf turned with a start. "Sorry, Captain."

"Problem?"

"Just my brother," he said. "He knows those outposts better than his own bedroom at home."

Captain Targus nodded.

"I remember when Father first brought him home after his parents were killed," Randolph said. "I was jealous at first. He was about two years old. That first night, we all had to rush to him because he was screaming. After that I couldn't leave him. I guess I became his big brother that night."

"Can't get use to the fact he no long needs protecting?" the captain asked.

Randolf gave a grim chuckle. "I guess he's grown up. I used to protect him when kids picked on him. He was always small. They used to wonder why he didn't blow away."

"What he lacks in size, he makes up for in agility," the captain said. "And he's a lot stronger than people give him credit for."

Randolf thought back to that incident in training when Licinius's son attacked Liam. Jochan didn't live long enough to regret it. It was one more reason Liam brought out the worst in that old fool.

"Licinius has been calling him a threat ever since," Randolph said out loud.

The captain looked up. "That matter with his son? The boy was a bully and not fit for military service. We made our views on the

matter clear. While we wish Liam had just knocked him out, he was attacked when he was vulnerable—with a real knife.”

“Now Liam just hides at the outposts,” Randolph said. “When he should be...”

The captain nodded sagely. “Like a light hidden under a basket.”

“And he’s going to miss Festival. Again.”

“I won’t order him to stay here,” the captain said. “It’s his choice. If we try to force him, we could make things worse.”



Liam stepped out of the portal. “Hi, Jorge.”

Jorge looked back at his replacement.

“Hi, short stuff,” he said.

Liam knew the man well enough to know he meant no malice. Jorge was a good-hearted man with the gift of laughter. He was also big, even by the standards of his people.

“Any trouble here at Tahoe?”

“Not a sign,” Jorge said. “It seems as if the chitin have given up. Funny, there’s been no sign of them in the past three years.”

Liam switched his com to the Military Center’s headquarters. “Taho-331, on station at Taho number three outpost.” He lifted his binoculars and did a quick scan. “Shield barrier force field between Taho and Archer functioning normally. Shield barrier force field between Taho and Grizzly functioning normally.”

“HQ to Taho-331, confirmed from Archer-077 and Grizzly-010. Barrier is secure.”

Liam switched back to local as they went into the outpost’s locker room. He checked the ammunition locker and made sure everything was in order. “I wouldn’t get my hopes up. They never leave. Once they get your scent, you can’t escape—even in sleep.”

“Still having nightmares after all these years,” Jorge said sympathetically.

Liam turned back to his friend and nodded. "At least Father taught me a trick to control my dreams."

They stepped back out onto the platform, and Liam did a quick check of the other four outposts of his sector. Each was constructed against the cliff face and had a semicircular wall around its portal and heavy weapon emplacement.

"Well," Jorge said, "I wish we still had aircraft capability. It would certainly give us a useful advantage."

"My father still wonders why we can't find what's generating that mysterious force field around the planet," Liam said.

"How is Marcus?"

Liam was glad to change the subject. "Very well, considering the burden he carries as high councilor. How are Sharina and the kids?"

"Fine, all looking forward to Festival." Jorge looked at him. "You know, I have been lucky. For the past several years, you've taken my place when it's my turn to be on watch during a holiday. Sharina understands. Maybe I should take my watch this year, and you should celebrate Festival."

Liam smiled and shook his head. "Festival Day is a time for family, my friend. You have a wife and the twins. You should be with them."

"Just because you aren't married doesn't mean you don't have a family," Jorge said. "You've been a diligent soldier, Sergeant. Everyone who's worked with you knows you're tougher than you look—brave and as ferocious as a bear-lizard. You work hard. You should also play hard."

Jorge picked up his gear. "By the way, Sharina has been after me to get you to join us for dinner. Justin and Sylvia are eager to meet their 'Uncle Liam.'"

Liam looked sharply at the man. "'Uncle?' What have you been telling those kids about me?"

"Only that you're one of the best," Jorge said with a laugh. "And if it weren't for you, they wouldn't have their daddy on holidays."

With that, Jorge went through the portal, back to the city.

“Maybe I should see if I can stay out here permanently,” Liam said to himself.



Randolf felt lucky to have met Teresina. The lovely blonde was flirtatious and fun to be with. She was dressed in the robes of a priestess. Not full ceremonial robes but robes that displayed her rank among the priestesses. This also marked her as an empathic healer should an emergency arise.

“How about some dinner before we go to the theater?” Randolph asked.

“Yes, I’d like that.”

“I know a good bistro near here.”

Holding hands, they made their way through the crowded theater district until they reached the cafe and found a seat. Peter, the owner, came over to them.

“Good to see you again, Randolph,” Peter said.

Teresina looked up at Randolph and smiled. Randolph felt a thrill go through him. Then he thought of Liam and suddenly felt troubled. He looked down into the glass of water in front of him and tried to see his brother in it.

“Hey!” Teresina snapped her fingers.

Randolf looked up and blushed.

“You know, it’s not polite to ignore your date,” Teresina said with mock crossness. “Especially a priestess.”

“I’m sorry,” Randolph said. “I guess I am a little distracted.”

Teresina’s face softened with concern. “You want to talk about it?”

“It’s my brother,” Randolph said. “Adopted brother really. He might as well be my true brother.”

“It sounds like you’re very fond of him.”

“Teresina!”

Both of them were startled at the greeting.

Two priestesses approached. "So this is your soldier. We've been looking forward to meeting him."

Teresina gave Randolph an apologetic look. Randolph politely stood up. Both priestesses were as attractive as Teresina. One wore the robes of a high priestess.

"Sorry to barge in, but we decided to eat here and just saw you," the high priestess said.

Teresina gave them a sharp look. "Please join us. This is Randolph," she said, trying to hide her annoyance. "Randolf, this is Kia," indicating the brunette. "And this is High Priestess Celinia."

Celinia was slender and not quite as tall as Teresina. She had a mane of red hair and eyes as intensely green as emeralds.

"Randolf is worried about his brother and was just about to tell me about it," Teresina said pointedly.

Randolf gave her an uncomfortable look. She returned the stare, saying without words, "Trust me." Celinia picked up on this right away. She took a seat and indicated to Kia to do the same as Randolph reclaimed his seat.

"Then perhaps the Creator sent us here for a purpose other than embarrassing a friend on her date," Celinia said, her tone now official. "Please, start at the beginning."

Randolf felt uncomfortable with this turn of events but did feel the need to talk about it. "I was just telling Teresina that while Liam is my adopted brother, I can't help thinking of him as my little brother."

"Liam is not a name of our people," Kia noted.

Randolf shook his head. "His family was part of the farmstead people who lived in the plains outside the city."

All three gave a visible shudder. The massacre of the farmstead folk over twenty years ago meant that the story they were about to hear was not a happy one.

"My father—"

"High Councilor Marcus," Teresina supplied.

Randolf nodded. “He had dealings with them. I was very young at the time. Sometimes, he used to bring me with him. They were somewhat shorter than our people but not stocky. Petite, I guess, is the word. They were always very kind, and the wife was a good cook. Even my own mother admired her ability.”

Teresina smiled encouragingly.

“They had a baby named Liam. I saw him just after he was born. Being a typical five-year-old, I was curious but not overly impressed. He was too small to play with. Then, about two years later, Father got a call and went to see them. When he came back, the baby was with him. Chitin had attacked the farm. I didn’t learn the details until I was older.”

The three priestesses braced themselves. Chitin were an unusually large, colony insect that stood four to five feet tall and were seven to eight feet long. They had formidable pincers, and when they reared up, their first pair of legs was armed with wickedly sharp claws. They had appeared on the planet Etrusci around forty-five years ago, and no one was sure where they had come from. Then, forty years ago, they suddenly started attacking cities. This was around the same time aircraft began crashing on take-off. By thirty years ago, all of the other cities on the planet had been abandoned. New Olympia was all that was left. The planet’s population had been decimated. Those remaining had retreated to New Olympia.

“Father and some troops arrived to find the farm destroyed. They killed the chitin but were too late to save Liam’s parents or the other farmhands. They found Liam hiding in an outbuilding. They buried the dead, and Father brought Liam home. My parents decided to adopt him legally. Since then, he’s been my little brother.”

All three reached out and placed their hands on his. It comforted him.

“That first night, he had a nightmare and woke up screaming. Any resentment I had of him intruding into my family died that

night. How could I hold on to it? I appointed myself his protector then and there.”

“He couldn’t ask for a better big brother,” Kia said.

“He’s always had trouble with nightmares. When he was older, Father taught him a trick for controlling his dreams. He doesn’t wake up screaming anymore, but...” Randolph searched for words. “He became grim.”

Celinia shook her head. “He will carry those emotional scars until the day he dies.”

“I know,” Randolph said. “Then he entered school. He was always a head shorter than everyone else his age, and that marked him as different.”

Teresina grimaced. “Children can be cruel, I know. As his protector, you had something to say about it?”

Randolf gave a bitter laugh. “I was sent to the headmaster for fighting more times than I could count. He understood but tried to impress on me that there were better ways. Father had a friend in the military, who was an expert at exotic fighting arts. When we were old enough, he offered to give us lessons. We both enjoyed that. Liam took to it more quickly than I did. After awhile, I think he would have been protecting me if I’d been bullied. The next time anyone tried to bully him was the last.”

The three chuckled at this.

“You know Councilor Licinious?”

Celinia grimaced. “Only too well. Ambitious and cunning that one.”

“He and Father were always rivals,” Randolph said. “He started trying to find ways to use Liam against Father. When Father took Liam in, he called Father a sentimental fool and said he should have left him to his own kind. Liam joined the military a few years after I did. What he lacked in size, he made up for in skill. Licinious’s son joined too but wasn’t cut out to be a soldier.”

“Jochan was more like his mother than his father,” Kia said. “You know she died when he was quite young.”

"I imagine that Licinius influenced Jochan's views on the farmstead people," Celinia said.

Randolf nodded. "I think his father pushed him into joining the military because of Liam."

"I heard about that incident," Celinia said. "What I heard was Jochan attacked a fellow soldier while that soldier was holding a hatch cover in place for Jochan to fasten. Jochan attacked him with a knife, cutting him across the ribs. The soldier used the cover as a shield, and it broke Jochan's neck."

"Licinius tried to have Liam charged with murder. Luckily, Jochan was fool enough to attack where there was surveillance, and it was ruled self-defense. He may have done it to please his father. Licinius is still trying to convince everyone that Liam is a 'dangerous foreigner,'" Randolph said. "He also throws the term *misborn* around. Liam was never comfortable in crowds. Now he's a virtual hermit. He volunteers for the outposts whenever he can. He goes especially during holidays. The people he takes over for are always grateful, but our parents would like to see more of him."

"And so would you," Teresina said, squeezing his hand. "Do you think he's trying to find peace at the outposts? A peace that he can't find here?"

Randolf nodded. "He doesn't wake up screaming anymore. But..."

"He lives his life with passion but no joy," Celinia said. "I have a thought."



Once again, Liam raised his binoculars. He scanned across the plains to the wooded hills beyond. How long ago was it since he had lived on those plains? Twenty years? Or maybe it was twenty lifetimes.

He checked the outposts on his flanks. On his right, Devon noticed him checking and waved. Micha, on his left, was scanning the horizon with his binoculars. Liam dialed in his com.

“Anything?”

“Nothing,” Devon reported. “How about you, Micha?”

“I thought I saw something move.”

Liam frowned and focused his binoculars to where Micha was looking. “Stay sharp. If it’s chitin, they are clever. They won’t advertise their presence. I am going to alert HQ.”

“What? Because Micha saw—”

“We don’t know what he saw,” Liam said. “Anything peculiar should be reported.”

“It may have been my imagination, Sergeant,” Micha said. “I am nearing the end of my shift.”

“Noted,” Liam said. “Keep your eyes peeled.”

Liam switched channels. Using his personal designation, he called. “Taho-331 to HQ.”

“What is it, Sergeant?” Captain Targus answered.

“Taho-333 says he saw something,” Liam said. “He concedes it might be nothing but sleepy eyes, but—”

“Logged it,” the captain replied. “He might be right, but we’ve had some reports of movement from outposts in other sectors. I hope it is just sleepy eyes.”

“I am going to look through the sniper scope,” Liam said. “I will advise if we get contact.”

Liam switched the com back to local. “Anything?”

“Not so far.”

He walked into the locker room and went to the ammunition locker. This sniper rifle wasn’t as good as his personal one, but it was here, and it worked. He checked the magazine, took some extra clips, and checked the power pack—full charge. He cycled on the magnetic coil and went back out to the edge of the outpost. He opened the bipod, set the rifle up, and began to scan.

“What are you doing?” came over the com.

“The sniper rifle has better optics. It also has high velocity projectiles propelled by a magnetic coil—just in case.”

There was quick laugh.

Liam scanned to where Micha had been looking and slowly traced in. Then, he saw it. A surge of hatred and revulsion went through him. A large, straw-colored insectoid, almost perfectly camouflaged in the dry grass, was slowly making its way toward them. In an instant, he took in its flat body, crouched to present a low profile, and its four antennae waving as it tested the air. He fired, and the creature collapsed.

He snapped on his com to general broadcast. “Taho-331! Contact! Contact! Contact!”

He lined up another shot and fired. Another chitin stiffened and fell.

“What?” he heard Devon shout. “Crap!”

A burst of three shots came from Devon’s position. “Taho-330! Contact! Contact! Contact!”

Micha’s shots rang out. “Taho-333! Contact! Contact! Contact! We have a big bug problem!”

Taho-332 and Taho-329 both shouted contact.



“So Liam will be required to attend,” Celinia said with an impish grin. “In full dress uniform no less. Better still, even Councilor Licinious will know better than to make trouble for a high priestess’s escort for Festival Day.”

Randolf’s spirits began to rise as he heard Celinia’s idea. His brother would enjoy this in spite of himself.

Suddenly, an alert came over his com. He checked the message, planning to ignore it. Then he froze. His blood went cold. Chitin were moving in on the Taho outposts.

“Randolf, what’s...?” Teresina started as he leapt to his feet.

"I'm sorry," Randolph said. "This is the one thing that could pull me away. Liam's sector is under attack."

Teresina's eyes opened in shock.

"We'll come as far as the portals," Celinia said. "We may be needed."

Kia and Teresina nodded.

Peter was just approaching with their tray. "I'll bag it up, Randolph. You can pick it up when you can. I hope Liam's okay. Tell him we miss his business."

"Thanks, Peter."

They rushed away toward the ground transports.

"Interesting," Teresina said. "For a hermit, a lot of people seem to like your brother."

Randolf smiled. "I hope we can convince him of that."

Randolf and the three priestesses ran to the street and dialed in a local transport. The automated cab stopped in front of them, and they got in.

"Military Center," Randolph said. "Lieutenant Randolph, priority code Epsilon."

"Epsilon priority accepted," the voice on the computer responded. Soon, they were on the street. The other vehicles automatically moved aside.



Randolf didn't wait for the transport to stop before he leapt out and ran to the locker room. Teresina and the others would alert the support people to their presence. He threw his armor on and grabbed his weapons. Then he went to Liam's locker and grabbed his brother's sniper rifle. Swinging his own assault rifle over his shoulder, he dashed to Tahoe's portal room. Teresina was waiting for him.

She squeezed his arm. "Take care," she whispered, her lips brushing his cheek.

He joined his platoon at the portal.

"Checking clearance," Captain Targus said over the com.

Randolf waited with growing impatience. He knew that if they opened on an overrun position, it could let chitin into the city. He also knew his brother could be dying—or worse.

"We've got an opening! Go! Go! Go!"

The portal opened, and the platoon dashed through.



Liam was lining up and firing as quickly as he could. The chitin knew they had been spotted and abandoned stealth. The chamber clicked empty, and he reloaded. They were getting closer. Not for the first time, Liam wished he had taken his own sniper rifle. It was going to be hand to claw soon.

"Forces are gathering," the captain called. "Hang tough."

Liam swept the field with the scope on his rifle. He had time. So did Micha. The chitin were almost on top of Devon. He lined up and fired on the closest and kept firing, hoping to buy his teammate some time, and his rescuers some space.

"Liam! Look out!"

Liam turned and saw a chitin leap at him. He swung the sniper rifle and knocked it aside, recovered, aimed, and pulled the trigger. The chitin stopped moving. He couldn't bring the gun around fast enough. He dropped it as the next one jumped over the wall, grabbed the knife on his shoulder, and flung it in one clean motion. It imbedded itself in the creature's head. The chitin slumped to the ground as another attacked. It was between Liam and his assault rifle. He whipped out his pistol and fired three shots. This chitin went down, as did the next two, but there were more behind it.

The portal flared, and he heard, "Go! Go! Go!"

Shots rang out, and the chitin fell back.

Liam looked over his shoulder and nearly cheered as his brother and thirty men charged through.

Randolf tossed Liam his own sniper rifle at a run.

“Good to see you, big brother!” Liam shouted.

“I hope you left us some,” Randolf said as he came up beside him.

More shots rang out as the platoon engaged the enemy.

“No worries there!”

“Taho-330’s position is overrun!” Devon screamed. “Don’t open the portal!”

Liam swore. “Permission to take a squad over to clear Taho-330’s position.”

He saw his brother hesitate then nod.

“Third squad!” Liam shouted, scooping up his assault rifle. “With me!”

He leapt the wall and headed to Devon’s position. He didn’t look to see if third squad was following. He didn’t need to. As he ran, he slung his sniper rifle over his shoulder and cycled his assault rifle.

Liam and third squad made their way across the ridge to the next outpost. Liam saw Devon fighting like a madman, plasma blade in one hand, dagger in the other. Then out of the corner of his eye, Liam saw four chitin closing on his own squad. He signaled to the man next to him. They turned and fired several bursts, and the chitin went down. Now he had time.

“Keep going!” he shouted.

He dropped the assault rifle and unslung his sniper rifle. He knelt and aimed. It felt good in his hands—like an old friend. He saw Devon trying to keep five at bay. He aimed, fired, reset, and fired until all five were down. Devon didn’t waste time resting. He grabbed a grenade, pulled the pin, and threw it toward the advancing bugs. The grenade wiped a hole in the line. That bought him time and distance to grab his assault rifle and start firing.

Liam slung the sniper rifle over his shoulder and grabbed his assault rifle. A chitin crashed into him. Liam shoved his rifle into the bug as he went over. He landed hard but could still fire. The bug went down, but there were more behind it. He kept firing and tried to struggle to his feet. Shots rang out, and he found he was clear. He looked back to his outpost and saw his brother flanked by sharpshooters, waving him on. Liam rolled to his feet and ran to catch up with his squad.

He looked ahead and saw third squad had reached Devon's position. The chitin were driven back.

"Taho-330's position is secure," came the call. "Send reinforcements."

"On their way."

"We're getting heavy weapons set up," he heard Randolph shout. "Move, little brother!"

Liam ran as fast as he could, trying to catch up with his squad.

"Liam!"

A horde of chitin was almost on top of him. He dropped his assault rifle and shrugged off his sniper rifle. He grabbed his plasma blade and ignited it. This was where he excelled. Time around him slowed but had no effect on him. "Stepping out of time" his teacher had called it. He closed with the bugs who were startled that he was now on top of them. The first went down in a blur. He rolled under a strike by a second, taking half its legs out. The third's head sailed from its shoulders. The fourth and fifth tried to flank him, but he was past them and had killed the sixth. He took down the fifth with a back swing. The fourth died as time began to resume its normal course. The remaining four were out of position and scrambling to recover. He pulled his pistol and fired. One came at him. It went down with a blade of white-hot plasma through its thorax. He shot another just as a pincer closed on his arm. The armor was the only thing that kept his arm from being crushed. He was lifted and flung down the hill. Hard.

Liam saw stars and tried to get back up. A chitin landed on him, and its claw found the weak joint in his armor under the right shoulder. Liam screamed, grabbed his thigh dagger with his left hand, and shoved it into the bug's neck. The bug stiffened and slumped to the side. Liam tried to roll to his feet, but the last chitin would be on top of him before he could bring the knife around. A shot rang out. The chitin stiffened and fell.

"They're falling back," someone shouted. "They're falling back."

"Liam!"

He heard frantic footfalls coming for him. He couldn't pick out his brother's but felt his presence. He remembered no more.



Liam regained consciousness as he felt himself transitioning through the portal.

"Devon?" he gasped.

A familiar hand closed on his. "Devon's fine, little brother. He, third squad, and you bought time for the other platoon to come through."

Liam winced at the pain in his shoulder.

Strange hands touched his temples. The headache eased. Other hands moved to his wound. The pain in his shoulder dulled.

"How bad?" Randolph asked.

"Soft tissue damage," a female voice said.

"And a concussion." Another female voice.

Liam opened his eyes. The swirl of faces slowed and stopped. Two lovely women in priestess robes looked down at him.

"So," said the redhead, "you're Liam. Your brother told us about you."

Liam threw a withering look at Randolph then dropped back to the stretcher. "I thought my brother had better manners. I hope it wasn't during dinner."

“Hadn’t arrived yet,” the blonde said with a laugh. “I think he’s feeling a little better.”

Liam looked back at his brother.

“Liam, this is Teresina,” Randolph said. “The one I told you about earlier.”

“And I am Celinia,” the redhead said. “Our friend Kia is helping with other injured. Your friend Devon for one, though he just had some scrapes and bruises.”

“Did we lose anyone?” Liam asked, afraid to know the answer but determined to face it.

Randolf’s smile fell. “We lost four in our platoon—Samuel, Titus, Jamie, and Quinticus. We also lost Micha.”

Liam felt his heart constrict.

“The platoon came through, but they were still nearly overrun.” Randolph told him. “Micha was killed during a counterattack. It gave us time to use the heavy weapons.”

Liam felt tears coming.

“I’m sorry, little brother,” Randolph said.

“No!” Celinia said firmly. She pressed a finger between Liam’s eyes. Her voice softened. “Not now. Grieve later. Sleep.” The voice went lower still. Liam felt himself sinking into sleep’s arms.

“Teresina and I will get him to the Temple infirmary. His wounds will heal quickly.”

“Thank you, for everything,” Randolph said. “His attending the Festival will do him a world of good.”

“Huh?” Liam thought as consciousness sped away.



Licinious was scared. He was also angry. He was meeting with one of the most dangerous creatures he knew—a creature that could grant him great power or tear him to pieces without breaking a sweat. After the attack, he’d arranged for his own people to be on station at Archer sector. So he was able to quietly get out

of the city, taking only two armed men with him as an escort. The walk to the meeting place in the hills seemed interminable, and he wasn't as young as he used to be.

His escort nervously waited at the entrance as two chitin escorted him through the tunnel, deep into the hillside cavern. He'd been here several times before but could never shake the feeling he was entering his execution chamber. He had told Azurius about the defenses. Would he be pleased? Azurius had just tested them. Pity, they hadn't managed to kill Marcus's adopted brat.

Licinious seethed just thinking about him. They all thought he hated the brat because he'd killed Jochan. While his son had turned out to be a disappointment, he certainly wasn't happy about it. However, that wasn't the main reason. That Finnian farm family had been providing information to Marcus. He'd arranged to have them killed. The misborn brat should have died with them. He hated loose ends. If that fool, Marcus, had only given the boy to another farm family, he would be safely dead by now. If Liam ever discovered his role in his biological parents' deaths...He suppressed a shudder as he entered the main chamber.

It hadn't changed much since his last visit—comfortable but with mismatched furnishings scavenged over time. Licinious sniffed derisively. Azurius apparently didn't care about decor.

"Well, Councilor," a voice said, "we have tested the defenses. They seem impressive to me."

The voice seemed cheerful. It was deceptive. Licinious knew better than to let his guard down. "I told you that the sabotage wouldn't be detected this time around."

A shadow detached itself from the darkness and came forward. The master of the chitin was not chitin himself. Azurius looked like a human but was covered in fine black scales. He wore a military-style tunic with pants and boots. There was a plasma blade at his side, though Licinious didn't understand why he would even need the weapon. His eyes glowed with his mood—red at rest, green when amused, yellow when angry, and black. He

suppressed another shudder. He didn't know black could glow. He'd only seen that once. He never wanted to see it again.

Azurius sat down in a comfortable chair. Even in these sparse surroundings, he allowed himself a few luxuries.

"And I did see the energy signatures that indicate that the sabotage is in place," Azurius said. "It will suffice. When the true attack comes, we will activate it remotely."

"What of that brat?" Licinious asked stiffly.

Azurius fixed him with a look. Green. He thought it was funny.

"Liam, the Finnian boy from the farm?" Azurius asked. "You do seem obsessed with him."

"He is a danger," Licinious said. "He looks small and weak, but—"

The glow turned to yellow. "Weak? Your kind put too much importance on size. I know this Liam's race. They were an experiment. Bred to be warriors. I know what they can do. Liam is just beginning to feel his power. He has capabilities you can't begin to guess."

Licinious tried not to tremble—to show weakness.

Azurius continued, "I watched him today. In spite of his youth, he is already a skilled fighter. I don't underestimate him. I also suggest you don't obsess over him. That can be more dangerous than ignoring him."

Azurius looked blandly at his treacherous ally. "Allow me to paraphrase the ancient human Bard. If you prick them, do they not bleed? If you tickle them, do they not laugh? If you poison them, do they not die?" Azurius's eyes turned to an almost stern red. "And if you wrong them, do they not revenge?"

Licinious nodded and closed his eyes. Outwardly, he showed respect. Inwardly, he continued to seethe.

After a moment, he said, "Liam usually mans an outpost during Festival."

Azurius nodded. "Make sure he does this time. Watch carefully, and mark what post he goes to. We don't want any surprises. It is your job to make sure there are none."

"He will be there," Licinious said. "If it looks like he might alter his habit, I know how to bring him back."

"Very well." Azurius waved his hand in dismissal.

Licinious left to face his long walk back to the city.



After Licinious left, Azurius stood up, stretched, and walked to the mouth of the cavern. He glanced up at the setting sun. Looking around, he noticed that much of the vegetation was beginning to change color. Interesting how seasons change on planets that orbit around yellow stars. He felt the old excitement before the beginning of a battle. This brought to mind the opening of a play by that ancient (and his favorite) human playwright, William Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

Oh for a Muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heaven of invention:  
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!



Liam struck out at the chitin that killed his parents. He cut with his plasma blade again and again. His teeth were bared with fury. He would have used them as a weapon if he could. They all had to die, but it still wasn't enough.

"It is enough, Liam," a voice said in his dream. The chitin melted away. The burned out home dissolved and was replaced with a garden and a fountain.

Confused, Liam spun around. Celinia was there. She smiled, and with her hand, bade him look.

“There are much more pleasant things to dream of.”

Her voice came again.

He looked and saw that the garden was indeed beautiful. A mixture of wild and tame. More than just a pleasure garden. Oddly familiar.

The bushes rustled. Liam whirled, blade ready as a chitin burst forth.

“Enough!” The chitin vanished.

“I can see I am going to have trouble with you.”

Celinia took his hand. He felt her pull and opened his eyes.

He was in a bed in the Temple hospital. Celinia was still holding his hand.

“You’ve controlled your dreams to a point,” she said. “You’re no longer helpless in your nightmares, but you still can’t defeat them.”

He looked at her. “Why?”

“Because you insist on keeping them nightmares,” Celinia told him.

Her other hand came up and closed around his hand.

“I know that you will always carry the emotional scars of that day,” she said. “No child could forget something that horrible, but you don’t have to let it have dominion over your life.”

“I don’t understand,” Liam said.

“With those words, you take the first steps on the path of wisdom,” Celinia said. Then she squeezed his hand and said, “Dreams are what we make them. Your parents’ deaths hurt. It hurts so much that you feel you will bleed to death because of it.”

Liam nodded.

“When you were young, your nightmares were night terrors,” she went on. “You would struggle against your tormentors until you awoke. Still struggling.”

“Waking my family in the process.”

“They didn’t mind comforting you,” Celinia said. “Though, they wanted a decent night’s rest.” She arched an eyebrow meaningfully.

“Father taught me to control my dreams,” Liam said. “Look at your hands and feel strength come into you. Then you can defeat your opponent.”

“And your family could sleep better,” she said. “But you found you could now battle your tormentors, even torment them yourself. Make them pay for what they did.”

He nodded again.

“And that is the trap, Liam,” Celinia said. “Vengeance is always a trap. You are trapped in a dream that won’t give you peace. Rather than fighting foes every night, why not just change the scene, banish the chitin, and have dreams you can enjoy.”

She touched between his eyes, and he fell back through the arms of sleep.

He was back in the garden. Celinia was beside him. He heard the chitin rustling as if confused by the garden.

“Remember,” she said, “this is your dream. I can help, but you are in control. And they”—she pointed to the advancing horde—“are only a nuisance.”

Liam turned to the horde, which now seemed completely confused.

“Get lost!” He ordered.

The chitin vanished like smoke on the wind. He couldn’t even sense their presence.

“Where is this place?” Liam asked.

“Perhaps a place you were taken to as a child,” she suggested. “A place where you were once happy? You can explore it whenever you want.”

He turned to her and was shocked. Her priestly robe was gone and replaced with a sheer, diaphanous gown that showed her shape. He was even more shocked and embarrassed to see that he was robbed in something similar. Like everyone else, she was taller than he was. He realized where he was staring and looked away.

Her laughter rang like silver bells. “I am not without power over dreams. A brave warrior—yet so bashful.” She reached out with her thumb and forefinger on his chin and turned his head to face her. “I find that remarkably charming.”

“Uhm,” he said intelligently, his eyes flashing downward.

“I don’t mind,” she whispered. “This is, after all, your dream. After so many bad dreams, you need a good dream for a change.”

With that, she drew his lips to hers. Her kiss woke something in him. Yet he didn’t want to treat her as a hungry man treated a steak. She sensed his concern as they separated.

“I understand. Let me lead.”

He surrendered to her arms as they embraced.



Liam had dozed the rest of the day. When awake, his thoughts turned to Celinia. He also grieved for his friend Micha. Micha was methodical and brave. He died a soldier. Liam was slow to make friends, but when he did, the bond was strong. He didn’t even want to think about losing his brother.

A knock distracted him from his brooding. The door opened, and Jorge popped his head in. “Hi, short stuff.”

Jorge pushed the door open, and Liam saw that he wasn’t alone. He was accompanied by Sharina and two children—a pair of four-year-old twins, Justin and Sylvia.

“Uncle Liam!” The two charged forward before their parents could restrain them. The bed was only a small hindrance. They clambered up opposite sides, burrowed under the sheets, and snuggled under each arm, all without hurting his injured shoulder.

Their parents gave him an apologetic look.

“Well, I guess it’s official,” Jorge’s wife said. “You’re their Uncle Liam.”

Much to his shock, it felt good. An innocence and love radiated from both. There was plenty of mischief, but they restrained it for now.

“How’s the arm?” Jorge asked.

“Much better,” Liam said.

“After Festival Day,” Sharina said, “you will come to have dinner with us.” It didn’t sound like a request.

Liam relented and nodded.

The door opened again. Celinia entered and stopped when she saw Liam wasn’t alone.

“Oh.”

Liam recovered his wits enough to make introductions. “High Priestess, this is my friend, Jorge; his wife Sharina; and their children, Justin and Sylvia. Everyone, this is Celinia.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Jorge said.

His wife extended her hand.

Celinia took the hand warmly. “I’m glad you’ve come. I don’t like to see my patient moping around without company.”

“Children,” Sharina said. “Manners.”

“Hello,” the two said in unison.

Then Justin announced, “This is our Uncle Liam.”

Sylvia piped up, “Are you going to be our aunt?”

Liam nearly choked. Jorge and Sharina turned red.

Celinia laughed that silvery laugh of hers. “That remains to be seen. It is as the Creator sends.”

The children nodded solemnly.

Celinia turned to the parents. “Are you related to High Councilor Marcus, or is Liam an adoptive uncle?”

“Adoptive, I guess,” Jorge said, flustered.

“We love him,” Sylvia announced.

Celinia smiled at the parents. “She certainly is forthright.”

Sharina smiled back. “She is that.” She looked at the twins. “Come on children. We need to get home. You will see Uncle Liam in a few days.”

Reluctantly, the children obeyed. They each kissed him on the cheek and got off the bed. Liam felt reluctant to let them go.

"I hope you weren't too embarrassed," Jorge apologized.

"Not at all," Celinia said. "Children can sometimes see what adults don't. It has been a pleasure meeting you."

"Likewise."

Jorge closed the door behind them.

"Interesting," Celinia said. "So beloved and yet you still try to live at the outposts."

Liam had no answer for her.

She took a chair, pulled it next to him, and took his hand.

"You looked good with the children by the way. You should have children around you."

"I—"

She pressed a finger to his lips. "I know what I saw, Sergeant. There is no point denying the truth."

Liam laid back and enjoyed the feel of her hand in his. "I wonder..."

Celinia cocked her head.

"Perhaps after my parents' death...", he started. "I don't make friends easily. The friends I do make, I feel responsible for them."

Celinia smiled. "I would like to think of you as a protector rather than a hermit."

"Perhaps that's why I switch with Jorge," Liam said. "I don't want his family to think of the Festival, or any holiday, as the day their father died."

"I think you're finally looking for an answer," Celinia said. "However, you are off this Festival Day. You need time to recover."

Liam looked at her. "I thought I'd be healed."

"The wound will be closed," she replied, "but healing will be more than physical. Jorge told your captain that he would take his spot back."

"What!" Liam tried to jump out of bed.

Celinia easily restrained him. “Even if you didn’t need more healing, you’re still very weak.”

“Don’t you understand?” Liam said. “The chitin are on the move again. They may well strike at Festival. If Jorge—”

“He is a skilled warrior himself,” Celinia said. “Moreover, he knows and accepts the risks. They are taking extra precautions—full platoons at the outposts and all heavy weapons ready.”

Defeated, he lay back in his bed.

“Besides, you will have another duty this Festival Day.”

Liam looked at her.

“You will be escort to a high priestess.”

Liam stared at her in surprise. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to.” She smiled at him. “Your brother is escorting Teresina. I think he will be happy to have his brother with him.” She smiled impishly. “You might need to protect him from her.”

Liam finally laughed. However, he still felt troubled.



Licinious looked up as his agent entered. “Yes, Colonel?”

“Sir, the person in question has been requested by the High Priestess Celinia as her escort for the Festival,” the man said. “The sector captain approved.”

Licinious grunted. This would be more complicated than he thought. “The sector captain, Targus, is due for a promotion?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well,” Licinious said. “Accelerate it. Move him to HQ front desk and give him the next three days off to celebrate during Festival.”

That solved that part of the problem. He couldn’t just put his own man in. If Liam saw someone he didn’t know, he would be on guard and wary.

“Tell Major Thomia that he is being temporarily rotated in,” Licinious said. “Then give him orders to recall the sergeant. They won’t be able to discover the deception until after Festival. By then it will be too late.”

“Major Thomia is highly skilled,” the agent pointed out.

“Thus there is no reason to doubt him, Colonel,” Licinious said. “That makes him perfect. He won’t realize he’s been used until there is nothing he can do to stop it.”

Still, he needed to be put off his guard. “The orders should read that the sergeant is very familiar with the Tahoe sector outposts, and his skills will be needed. Also Liam is up for promotion too. Accelerate that as well. He will be put in charge of the sector. He will feel the full weight of responsibility when the sector falls.”

“Very good.”

“Also time the orders for his recall to be at the last possible moment,” Licinious said. “The less time anyone has to think, the better.”



Festival Day finally arrived. Liam had seen Celinia several times since being released from her care. When he was away from her, she seemed to fill his mind.

Liam’s parents and Randolph had gone out early that day. Councilors usually met for a morning breakfast on the day of Festival. He was alone with his thoughts.

There was a knock at the front door. Liam went to answer.

A man in uniform stood there. “Message from command, Sergeant.” He handed a sealed envelope to Liam.

“Thank you.”

The messenger turned away as Liam closed the door and opened the envelope.

From: Military Council  
To: Sergeant Liam, Foster Son of Marcus

The Military Council has given orders that you are immediately promoted to the rank of lieutenant with all duties and privileges. Due to your experience with the Tahoe sector, you are ordered to report immediately to the Military Center for duty, which includes command of Tahoe Company's sector.

Contents of these orders are not to be discussed with anyone. They are to be destroyed upon reading.

By order of the Military Council.

Liam read through the orders again to make sure he hadn't misinterpreted anything. He wondered at the secrecy but decided to get going. He wished he could contact Randolph to let him know. For once, he'd been looking forward to Festival Day, in spite of the itchy dress uniform. Celinia was going to be upset, but orders were orders.

He went back to his room and changed into fatigues. Then he caught a transport to the Military Center.



He saluted the officer at the front desk. He nodded and waved Liam through, picking up the com, only to say: "He's here, sir."

Liam went to the locker room to armor himself. He finished strapping down his blades. This time he would have his personal sniper rifle with him.

Major Thomia walked into the locker room.

"Sorry to disrupt your plans, Lieutenant," the major said as he removed the sergeant's insignia from Liam's shoulders and replaced them with the lieutenant's insignia. "And congratulations. You've earned this."

“Thank you, sir,” Liam said. “What happened to Captain Targus?”

“Major Targus now,” the major said. “Off. They recalled me almost the same time they recalled you. I just wish you had time to share this with your family before being thrown into the bear-lizard’s den.”

“A lot of people were making plans,” Liam said.

“They may forgive us, eventually.” The major frowned. “This doesn’t feel right. Any of it. Why sealed orders and secrecy for a holiday patrol?”

“I agree,” Liam said. “I’ll keep my com on general, and keep everyone alert. Permission to give Jorge the day off at least.”

The major shook his head. “You’ll need your full platoon. Orders. You’ll be in charge of the entire company at Taho.”

Liam nodded in resignation. “I’d better get going then.”



Liam stepped out onto the outpost platform.

“Company Commander on deck.” Everyone came to attention.

Liam was startled but remembered the proper response. “As you were.”

He walked up to Jorge as everyone returned to his duties.

“I’ll never get used to that. Report.”

Jorge shook his head. “Nothing so far. So much for our plans.”

Liam sighed. “To be honest, I would normally feel better out here, but I just can’t shake the feeling that something is wrong.”

Jorge nodded. “Neither can Major Thomia—nor me for that matter.”

“Stay close,” Liam said quietly. “Whatever happens, I want to make sure I send you back to your family.”

Jorge pulled closer. “Sorry, Lieutenant. You can’t show favoritism.”

Liam felt his heart constrict. Jorge was still a corporal. Yet, he had helped break in his share of officers.

Jorge softened his voice. "What you can do for me is, if anything happens, make sure they're okay. I know that if the worst happens, everything is up in the air. Just spare what you can to see they're taken care of."

Liam nodded.

"Movement!" Someone shouted.

Liam raced to the embankment and swept the plains with the scope on his rifle. He saw the chitin horde almost immediately.

"Taho Leader to HQ. Contact! Contact! Contact!"

Liam sighted his rifle and fired.

"It's a full-scale attack!"

Calls of contact rang out from the other Taho outposts.

"I am sounding full mobilization," the major's voice came over the com.

"Heavy guns aren't firing," one soldier cried.

"Check the connections."

Liam started shooting at will. "Fire as they come in range! We have to hold until we're reinforced."

A man grabbed the other sniper rifle and began shooting.



Randolf was waiting at the Temple of the Creator. He was annoyed with his brother and worried. It wasn't like him to be late.

"Where is Liam?" Celinia asked.

Randolf shook his head. "He should be here. He's not at home."

An alarm sounded. Then a general announcement came over the public system. "We are under attack! All fighting teams report to your portals!"

Randolf exchanged horrified looks with Celinia and Teresina. His com chirped.

He activated it as the others gathered around.

“Yes?”

“Lieutenant,” Major Thomia said. “I need you back here on the double. It looks like the chitin have organized a mass assault.”

“Yes, sir,” he said. “Sir, my brother—”

“He’s trying to hold the Taho outposts together. The heavy guns aren’t working.”

Randolf swore.

“I’ll explain when you get here.”

The com went dead.

Randolf didn’t even address the priestesses. He just started to run for the transports. Celinia didn’t hesitate. She followed, pulling Teresina with her.



Randolf was rushing through his weapons and armor as Major Thomia walked in.

“Sir?”

“Lieutenant,” the major said. “The short story is the captain got promoted, and I was ordered here. I had secure orders to promote Liam to lieutenant and recall him to take charge of Taho sector. With everyone at Festival, I had no one I could confirm with. It didn’t feel right. Now, I believe this was a setup. There is a traitor somewhere, but it doesn’t make sense.”

“I’ve got to get to my brother.”

The major nodded, and they both rushed to the Taho portal room.



Liam had switched to his assault rifle. Jorge and several men were trying to get the heavy weapons back online.

“Sir!”

Liam looked back at Jorge.

“Sir, these weapons have been sabotaged. If we keep poking they’ll—”

A huge explosion rocked the outpost, followed by a second and third. Liam shook off his shock and cursed under his breath.

“This is Taho Leader. Hold off on the heavy weapons. Someone’s rigged them to explode if you tamper with them.”

Liam looked across the ridge. Three of the five Taho outposts were destroyed.

“Taho Leader,” Major Thomia called. “What the hell is going on?”

“Sir, we’ve lost three outposts,” Liam reported. “The heavy weapons have been sabotaged.”

“We’re getting ready to send reinforcements.”

Liam was about to thank him, then froze. “Negative. Leave those portals shut.”

“But—”

Ten chitin made it to the wall and leapt over. Ten of Liam’s men fell before the platoon managed to kill them all. Liam saw that the next wave would soon be on top of them with many more behind them.

“They’re focusing on my position!” Liam called. “Without the heavy weapons, we need to fight in numbers, but this is precisely what they want. They want us to open the portals.”

“Liam, let us pull you out!”

Liam felt the pain in his brother’s voice.

“Sorry, Randolph, there’s no time,” he said. “Look after Father.”

He walked up to the portal and smashed the controls.

His remaining troops looked at him in shock.

“We’re it!” Liam shouted. “Jorge, figure out how to make the heavy gun go bang on command. When we’re about to be overrun—”

“I understand, sir,” Jorge said, nodding with grim approval.

Liam returned to the embankment. His people set down a withering fire against the chitin, but the chitin were undeterred.

The next wave was almost on top of them.

“Grenades!” Liam ordered.

Liam and his men hurled the grenades as the chitin closed with them. When the grenades were gone, they returned to the assault weapons. More chitin had reached the wall as the last of the ammunition was used up. Pistols and plasma blades were the order. By the time Liam and the survivors were pushed back to the dead portal, only five remained out of a platoon of thirty. Liam looked at Jorge, who was hidden in the heavy weapon’s access bay. Liam nodded.

“It’s been an honor, Lieutenant.”

The heavy gun exploded, and Jorge vanished with it. Liam and the others were slammed against the wall. Liam felt as if he had been shoved through the wall. As the world faded away, Liam thought of Celinia.