

The Guardian of the Worlds

The Beginning of the End

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Book Four

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In a parallel universe, long ago...

Prologue

“Your Majesty!” gasped a figure, tall and youthfully gaunt, with a pallid complexion, eyes as dark as midnight that mirrored his cropped ebony hair, and a formidable set of shoulders, hurtling through the enchanting gardens of the palace.

Queen Ratra and her entourage of nobles, ambling idly near the palace, were abruptly jolted from their stroll, their gazes swivelling in unison toward the source of the approaching tumult. Within mere heartbeats, the dishevelled young servant, his once azure turban now tarnished and his threadbare coat a pale, unkempt canvas, closed the distance and caught up with them.

“I hope this is important. You know perfectly well I dislike being bothered when I’m dealing with crucial matters,” scolded the woman, casting a furious glance with her ashen, slanted eyes towards him as she furrowed her brow. Meanwhile, her servant breathed heavily due to the haste he had traversed the entire palace.

The servant, fearful of her expression and barely daring to utter a word, extended his hand, revealing a small circular device whose top illuminated as soon as he pressed the button on its side.

“Dear Queen Ratra, don’t even bother trying to figure out how I managed to find you,” came the feeble voice of an elderly figure through the device. “I know that, after everything that happened so long ago, you have no reason to trust me, and I don’t blame you for it. But in light of recent events, I’m starting to believe we were wrong. That’s why I’m willing to correct part of my mistake and help you obtain what rightfully belongs to you. I can assure you I’m not doing this for you or myself but for the

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greater good of our universe. Unfortunately, I can't provide more information at this moment. Get in touch with me as soon as you can. I'll give you further details of everything I know."

After those final words, the device fell into a haunting silence, casting a pall of unease over everyone present. The two nobles, their entourage, and the servant fixated their gaze upon the bewildered young woman, who got entangled in the remnants of the unexpected message that lingered in her mind like a spectre. Slowly, she emerged from the depths of her confusion, her focus shifting to the two figures flanking her. Yet, her eyes remained etched with the ghostly traces of disquiet.

"Do you think we can trust him?" she questioned the servant, her gaze locking onto his eyes, desperately seeking a flicker of reassurance amidst the encroaching shadows.

The young man, without a moment's hesitation, nodded. However, the queen remained unconvinced, prompting her to turn towards her two companions with an inquisitive gaze.

"Otherwise, he wouldn't have reached out to us; he would have commanded our obliteration," one of them stated, confirming the stance of the young servant.

"Indeed, indeed," she stammered. "Sir Mesnet and Sir Rentet, in that case, please excuse me, but I must attend to this unexpected matter as soon as possible," she bid farewell. Then, she turned once again to the young man as he straightened his attire. "Inform the boys to present themselves before me in the queen's chamber. Our time has come."

Chapter 1

The call

Not even the rays of dawn's light had penetrated the immense windows of Horus' elegant chamber when several resounding knocks on his bedroom door startled him awake.

Somewhat startled, the elderly man with long, silver hair sat up on his bed, using his frail hands to grasp the glasses resting on his nightstand, seeking clarity amidst the dimness of the room.

Surely, had there been clocks in that place, he would have yearned to know the hour. But time held little sway in his realm. It mattered naught, for there was scant to occupy him. Horus's sole concern lay in tending to his weekly ritual, an affair as monotonous as the passing days. And when he deemed the moment ripe to descend upon the Grand Chamber, a mere beckon to his entourage of wayward servants, drifting through the labyrinthine halls of his palace, would summon his twelve loyal subjects to gather swiftly at his side.

After placing the glasses on his sunken eyes, he stretched to grasp his precious golden staff resting against the headboard of his bed. Gripping the invaluable object, he rose and walked towards the door to see who dared to disturb his sleep. Barely had he taken a few steps when he heard the door being pounded again.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he responded, increasingly irritated with

each insistent knock.

The mere fact that dawn had yet to break, coupled with such relentless determination, made it clear that the person on the other side carried an urgent matter to address. Despite his limp, he hastened his steps as best he could, propelled by an unsettling curiosity to attend to whoever awaited him, sensing that there was more to this encounter than met the eye.

After the elder turned the handle, he found a young man of pale skin, short blond hair, and piercing ocean-blue eyes. The youth's gaze was vacant, while his face contorted with a terrible expression that sent shivers down the elder's spine.

"What troubles you, Racht?" he inquired, studying his disciple with concern and confusion, unable to comprehend what could have driven him to appear at such an early hour.

"Master, please forgive the disturbance, but King Lad has contacted me in great distress. It seems something grave has befallen them," the disciple explained, visibly nervous.

"Is it a matter so grave that it cannot even wait until tomorrow's meeting to discuss it with the rest of our colleagues?" the master inquired.

"I'm afraid not, master, but if you prefer, I can wait," the disciple replied, somewhat confused.

"All right, come in. Since you've taken the trouble to come, at least enlighten me about this important matter," Huros said, with arrogance, as he stepped aside to allow his disciple into his chamber.

Despite the countless times the young man had been in that room, he still found himself marvelling at its beauty, an admiration he couldn't quite comprehend but which prevented him from continuing his account. Among all the relics the master kept there, the enormous tapestry hanging to the left, above Huros' tousled bed, was the one that always captivated his attention. It depicted various historical events, but for a reason he couldn't fathom, at the centre, one particular scene always drew his gaze. In it, a multitude of creatures fought against each other as if embroiled in a war. Meanwhile, four individuals dressed in shades of blue, white, red, and black discharged a peculiar beam against a fifth being with red eyes.

"And then..." the old man whispered, his voice deep and filled with sinister anticipation. His eyes gleamed with a mixture of twisted curiosity and hidden knowledge.

“Master,” the disciple replied, turning towards him with an air of intrigue, setting aside his momentary fascination. “It appears that an army of some kind has laid siege to Dazbi.”

“And what makes that so grave, Racht?” asked Huros, somewhat annoyed, as he observed that paternal gaze with which he always addressed his most cherished subject whenever the Master believed he made a mistake. “After all, we’re all aware that our universe is rather tumultuous. It’s normal for planets to attack each other. It has always been this way. It’s not something that should concern us or interfere with our affairs.”

“It’s more than that,” the disciple interjected, aware that the comment stemmed from the fact that he hadn’t revealed everything he knew.

“Has something bad happened to King Lad?”

“The king is fine, but...”

“Then I don’t see the gravity of the matter.”

“The capital has been destroyed.”

“Wow,” the elder exclaimed, raising his eyebrows in a sharp display of surprise upon hearing the unexpected news. However, he swiftly regained his composure, determined not to let his initial reaction cloud his judgment. “Well, indeed, Dazbi is a crucial ally to us, but if some other planet has set its sights on attacking it, there is nothing we can do.”

“Master, you’ve hit the crux of the matter. No one in Dazbi has been able to determine the attackers’ origin, so I’m afraid no planet has carried out this offensive.”

For a brief moment, Huros averted his gaze to the floor, as if trying to find any explanation to reassure his young disciple and make him understand that there was nothing to fear.

“It could’ve been a pirate attack perfectly. There are countless ships of that kind wandering through the cosmos, and which, from time to time, attack a planet to make off with a good loot.”

“Master, with all due respect, do you truly believe that a pirate ship, or a fleet of them, can assail a planet as mighty as Dazbi and reduce its capital to ashes?”

Without giving him a moment to respond, the young disciple struck the dark marble floor with his golden staff. From the snowy volute that adorned it, he summoned a three-dimensional projection that materialized between him and the master.

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“Initially, there seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary in that image. The scene had been recorded in a sober white chamber made of stone, devoid of decoration. A second later, a man with pointed ears and long white hair positioned himself at its centre. With closed eyes, he raised his palms in a gesture that could be understood as a salutation in their society. As he opened his eyes, as white as his skin, he placed his hands behind his snowy cloak and began to speak.”

“Dear Racht, you know perfectly well that I would never dare to contact you for a trivial matter,” he said, noticeably nervous, as the thunderous explosions of the ongoing battle echoed in the background. “But I’m afraid this is of utmost importance. For several hours now, we’ve been under siege by ships and beings we’ve never seen before. We’ve reached out to our neighbouring planets, desperately seeking answers about our foes, but it’s all been in vain. I believe we’ll hold out, but I would like to warn you about the danger of this armada, as they possess weapons prohibited by the Council of Nuf.”

As the message ended, the recording device panned towards one of the three arches on the opposite side of the chamber, revealing a small balcony overlooking the expanse of King Lad’s palace.

From that vantage point, they gazed upon the majestic floating city of Belanar. The images unveiled a harrowing sight. While the palace remained relatively unscathed, a swarm of ominous black vessels, each varying in size, descended upon the city, unleashing chaos and destruction. The local fleet valiantly fought back, determined to fend off the relentless invasion that threatened to consume them all.

A moment later, Huros witnessed with horror as several smaller invading machines opened their hatches, unleashing a swarm of armoured beings. These merciless monsters lunged at the defending forces without mercy. Meanwhile, leaving the elder in a state of terror, a colossal cannon emerged from the hold of one of the larger machines. Suddenly, it unleashed a massive burst of fire, obliterating everything in its path. Enemy and friendly vessels, floating homes, and vehicles of those desperately trying to escape the area—all succumbed to the destructive power of that mighty beam.

“That’s...” Huros managed to stammer, with a trembling voice, as his gaze fixated on some unseen horror that had deeply unsettled him as if he

had come face to face with a spectre from the netherworld.

“Indeed. Do you grasp the true magnitude of the matter now?” the disciple said, his voice laced with an ominous undertone, while the projection dissolved into thin air.

“I’m afraid now it’s you who fails to grasp what is truly happening,” the elder replied enigmatically. “You have done well by coming so swiftly. Go and inform your comrades that I require them to prepare for an extraordinary and urgent meeting.”

“Now?”

“Yes, now. Wait for me in the Main Hall. I’ll be down in a few minutes,” he said.

Racht, perplexed by the sudden turn of events, hastily left the room, determined to fulfil his duty. As he descended the cold marble stairs, gripping the icy and rough golden handrail to prevent himself from falling, he couldn’t help but search for an explanation for Huros’ behaviour after witnessing the images of the attack. The haunting words uttered after the vision hinted at an extraordinary revelation that had eluded him. What could it be? That was the mystery he yearned to unravel in the upcoming meeting.

While he could hear his disciple knocking on the doors of his companions’ rooms in the background, Huros, who liked to attend those gatherings in his finest attire, began to prepare himself for the occasion. Crossing his spacious chamber and passing a multitude of dark shelves on his right, stacked one next to the other, filled with a wide variety of books, he entered a small room just beyond them.

Little did he imagine the day before, as he settled for sleep, that this utdag, the name given to the first day of the week, would unfold so differently from what he had planned. He believed that, as usual, he would rise and instruct one of his servants to notify his disciples for their customary gathering, where he would catch up on the events occurring across the universe and address any important matters concerning his loyal planets that required his attention. Then he would enjoy a light refreshment, followed by engaging in meditation for a while and finally taking a stroll around his abode. How mistaken he was!

After removing the long white silk nightgown, he wore to sleep, he stood there naked, his gaze lost in thought, haunted by the horrifying final scene his disciple had shown him. It triggered the dreadful memories of a

bitter past he believed he had buried deep within his soul. Those years when he endured countless battles across the universe. A time when not only did millions of beings perished throughout the cosmos, but he himself suffered the loss of his loved ones.

As he dressed himself in his elegant attire, memories of his family came flooding back, their absence still aching with wounds that refused to heal. His thoughts wandered to their last gathering, where they had all been together. During that fateful occasion, his father had spun a peculiar legend, one that delved into the very genesis of the universe and the forging of the inaugural Guardian of the Worlds by the progenitor of the creators. A wistful smile tugged at Huros' lips as he reminisced about his father's animated narration until he stumbled upon something that caught his attention.

“And that’s our duty,” Oris said, smiling, as he concluded his narration. “To ensure that peace reigns in the universe.”

“Wow! It must be amazing to be someone so important, father,” Huros' younger brother exclaimed, visibly in awe. “I also want to become the Guardian of the Worlds.”

Everyone laughed at Sef's remark, and both his father and mother would have secretly yearned for it to come true, but deep down, they knew it was nothing more than a futile dream.

“There can only be one Guardian of the Worlds, and since your brother Huros is the eldest, he'll hold the position.”

“Don't worry, Sef,” the young man interjected, seeing how sad the little one had become upon hearing those words. “You and I will rule together.”

“Are you sure you're not saying that just because Mom and Dad are here?” he asked mischievously.

“Of course not!” Huros replied with a laugh. “In fact, I promise you that we will not only rule the cosmos together, but I ensure that nothing bad will ever happen to you,” he declared as their fingers intertwined. “But, father, there's still something I don't understand,” Huros continued. “If, as everyone claims, you're the greatest guardian to have ever existed, why is the universe still in such chaos?”

“I don't know, my son,” Oris replied with an enigmatic smile. “Despite my tireless efforts, even I haven't been able to quell the differences that exist between planets and galaxies. However, there's a legend that speaks

of a time when knowledge will illuminate the universe, and a pure soul will bring order and peace to every corner of the cosmos.”

“You and your legends...” Huros remarked, his tone filled with a mix of curiosity and scepticism.

With a smile on his face, the master reminisced, wishing at that moment that he had been the hero foretold by that legend. What he was unaware of was the true significance that memory held. Once dressed, the elder looked at himself in the mirror to finish grooming himself. But what he thought would serve as a distraction proved otherwise. As he attended to the finishing touches of his attire, memories of those gruesome battles resurfaced, battles in which he himself had become entangled. Those harsh moments when, one after another, he witnessed the demise of his followers and disciples before his very eyes, helpless to intervene. It was all culminated by the haunting recollection of his parents’ death and the disappearance of his own brother. Images that lanced his heart, tormenting him like knives.

“I cannot allow something like that to happen again.”

Trying to cast aside all the thoughts that stirred his soul, he lingered, examining his immaculate attire, ensuring his appearance was impeccable. He wore a loose-fitting blue linen tunic that covered his body down to his ankles, adorned with a mantle of the same hue featuring various decorations. On top of these garments, he donned a silk ephod, dominated by beautiful shades of blue and purple. At the level of his chest, he placed a leather plate that hung from his shoulders, adorned with five gems and seven other cavities, hinting at the presence of the rest.

Satisfied, he picked up a splendid turban from the shelf below the mirror. A thin blue stripe in the centre contrasted with the white linen that crafted the object. However, the most striking feature was a gold plate on its front, positioned at the height of the elder’s forehead, on which was engraved the inscription: the Guardian of the Worlds.

After leaving his room and descending to the first floor, as he reached the entrance of the Main Hall, two elegantly uniformed servants grasped the golden circular handles and pulled, opening the enormous doors.

As the doors opened, the disciples, seated behind a glass table at the head of the hall, rose from their refined wooden seats, gilded with gold leaf, upholstered in red silk, and adorned with various floral motifs, to

welcome Huros. All those present wore garments similar to the Master's, but their mantles and ephods got decorated with different shades. However, none of them wore the extraordinary breastplate or the distinctive turban that he did. Also, each of them held a golden staff similar to the elder's, crowned with a precious sphere of a hue resembling their ephods.

On the immense walls of that spacious hall, painted in an elegant burgundy tone, hung exquisite paintings commemorating different events and personalities of that universe. Below them, numerous shelves held many objects that had been given as offerings to the various guardians of the worlds by the rulers of the multiple planets, carefully arranged with care.

Barefoot, Huros strolled across a sleek black silk carpet that stretched from one end of the hall to the other. Gracefully amidst towering Ionic columns, it cast a striking contrast against the lush green silk flooring reminiscent of a verdant meadow.

Reaching the distinctive U-shaped table, Huros headed toward his grandiose chair, positioned in the centre. Once seated, his disciples, eagerly observing, followed suit. The elderly master noticed the bewildered expressions on the younger ones while the more experienced disciples looked at him with a hint of nervousness. It had been so long since an extraordinary session had not been convened that only the seasoned disciples could recall a gathering of this nature. Thus, except for Racht, all eyes were fixed upon him, wondering what urgent matter had prompted such a hasty assembly.

“Please accept my apologies for gathering you in such haste, disrupting your well-deserved rest,” the aged master began, his voice carrying a sense of gravity. “As you know, for many years, the planets have enjoyed a peace and harmony that had long eluded us,” he continued, pausing briefly to gaze at his perplexed pupils, who struggled to grasp the purpose of his explanation. “However, I fear that this era of tranquillity may have come to an end. It would be prudent for us to prepare our forces for the possibility of war.”

All the disciples started whispering amongst themselves, with agitation, unable to comprehend the Master's words. The Guardian of the Worlds had a singular duty: to safeguard the harmony of the universe, and his intervention in its destiny was an exceedingly rare occurrence. Hence, everyone pondered what could have driven him to make such a declaration.

“Master, a war? Does anyone dare to assail us?” queried one of the

perplexed individuals, echoing the sentiments of the rest.

All eyes swivelled toward the elder, awaiting his response, but Huros opted for silence. Instead, he made a subtle gesture with his hand, beckoning Racht to reveal the dreadful images he had shown him moments ago. The young disciple, donned in pale robes, followed suit, clutching his sceptre and striking the ground with a resonant thud, summoning forth the ghastly projections sent to them by King Lad of Dazbi.

A collective gasp resounded through the chamber as the disciples beheld the raw brutality depicted in those haunting scenes. Once the spectral spectacle dissipated, an unnerving stillness enveloped the room, leaving tongues tied and minds awash with apprehension.

“That wretched recording was dispatched to us by our esteemed ally, King Lad of Dazbi, a mere breath ago,” the Guardian of the Worlds continued, his voice weighted with gravity. “From what we have gleaned, our valiant allies have managed to repulse the initial onslaught through great efforts. Alas, I fear the relentless armada we beheld shall not be sated. They shall set their sights on more worlds, and unless we steel ourselves against their aggression, even this very bastion may find itself in their crosshairs.”

“Master, if I may speak with utmost respect, strife among the realms is an ordinary affair,” interjected one of the disciples, her dusky garments mirroring the hue of her complexion and cascading tresses as she sought to assuage her comrades’ mounting trepidation.

“You speak the truth,” conceded the venerable sage, comprehending his pupil’s rationale. “However, on this occasion, I possess ample grounds to harbour the disquieting belief that we, too, stand on the precipice of peril.”

“That was the horrific recording our dear ally, King Lad of Dazbi, sent us just a while ago,” the Guardian of the Worlds continued. “As far as we know, our allies have managed to repel the attack with great effort. However, I’m afraid that that dangerous armada we all have witnessed will not stop there. They will strike more planets, and if we don’t confront them, this very see may become one of their targets.”

“Master, with all due respect, the worlds often clash with each other; it’s a normal occurrence,” intervened one of the disciples, clad in dark attire that matched her skin tone and lustrous hair. She sought to reassure her fellow companions that there might be nothing to fear.

“You speak the truth,” affirmed the elderly sage, understanding his pupil’s argument. “However, on this occasion, I have sufficient reasons to believe that we, too, are in danger.”

“What reasons are those?” Racht’s voice quivered with anticipation and trepidation as he dared to utter the question that loomed heavily in the air. His eyes focused on the aged master, searching for the truth that lay concealed behind the wrinkles etched upon his weathered face.

“In those images,” Huros began, his voice laden with an undeniable gravity as his eyes met Racht’s gaze with an intensity that sent shivers down the young disciple’s spine. “I’ve seen things I hadn’t witnessed in a long time. The horrors unfolded before my eyes were a chilling reminder of the terrors that once plagued our very existence.” Racht’s heart pounded within his chest, his curiosity mingling with growing unease. What had the master witnessed? What kind of forces could have been so dangerous that it instilled terror in the very Guardian of the Worlds?

The elder’s gaze drifted into the distance, lost in the haunting memories that had resurfaced from the depths of his consciousness. Each word he spoke carried the weight of a lifetime’s worth of experience, a testament to the darkness that lurked beyond the veil of their fragile reality.

“And yet,” Huros continued, with his voice tinged with a dread that permeated the air, “as you yourself mentioned, our allies, despite their valiant efforts were unable to discern the origin of that armada. It is this uncertainty, to believe that it would be best to prepare for the worst as soon as possible.”

Racht’s eyes widened, his mind racing to comprehend the magnitude of the impending danger. The master’s words hung heavy in the air, casting a pall of unease over the disciples who had gathered in the hallowed chamber.

“What do you propose we do?” inquired another disciple, dressed in dark violet garments contrasting with their greenish skin.

“We must act without delay. We shall reach out to all the planets seeking knowledge of their encounters with such a formidable armada or any semblance of their destructive might. Additionally, we must unveil their sinister intentions, their next malevolent target, so that we may confront them head-on, unleashing the full force of our formidable arsenal.”

“Can we truly face an armada of such magnitude with only that?”

questioned one of the subjects, clad in garments of fiery orange that sharply contrasted with their dark skin and cascading tresses.

“It may appear deceptively simple, but the path ahead is far from easy. I shall summon our allies to rally behind our cause. We shall not face this alone,” Huros proclaimed with a resolute voice.

“If I’m not mistaken, those ships resemble the ones we had to face in the Universal War. I recall that, back then, our enemies attempted to seize our gems. Wouldn’t it be prudent to gather them once again?” suggested one of the veteran subjects, with long grey hair and fair skin.

Huros fixed his enigmatic gaze upon Shaj, his mind entwined in contemplation of the words spoken. Deep down, he knew the truth in the suggestion. “If his fears proved true, collecting the stones must become a pressing priority. Yet, he knew all too well that seven of those precious jewels still eluded their grasp, scattered across the vast reaches of the universe. To reclaim them, they would need to call upon the magnificent warriors who had once fought valiantly by their side, their valour instrumental in the hard-won triumph of that fateful, life-altering battle.

“That would be a very good idea, but for that, I would need to gather the guardians once again,” the master replied seriously, as a deluge of memories from that era surged through his consciousness. “I have knowledge that some of them have passed down their lineage,” he continued. “Now, I’m not so sure they will be as skilled as their ancestors or that their presence will be as beneficial, but we can always give it a try.”

“And how will we find the rest?” questioned another of the veteran disciples.

“If they have inherited even a fraction of their ancestors’ might, it is conceivable that these individuals may possess strengths formidable enough to catch the attention of the very rulers of worlds,” reasoned Huros. “Racht, I shall entrust you with a rather intricate task. Delve into the archives and uncover any records listing the whereabouts of each guardian. Then, reach out to kings and presidents, seeking those among their ranks who may fit the description I’ve provided. If there are no objections,” he continued, turning to the assembled company, “let us consider this meeting adjourned, and let the work commence.”

The measures announced by the elderly master bore a striking resemblance to those taken over forty years ago, which led to one of the cruellest

and bloodiest wars the universe had ever witnessed. As the disciples listened to those final words, the more seasoned among them cast wary glances at the guardian. Despite their doubts and apprehension, none dared to oppose these decisions. Thus, they all departed the chamber, leaving the master alone, seated on his throne, his head bowed in contemplation.

After a moment of reflexion, with determined steps, he left the Grand Hall and ascended to his chamber on the top floor. However, as he stood before his own door, he turned and gazed at the adjacent room. Over its white door, engraved in golden letters, the word “Sef” shimmered.

Downhearted, he approached the door, turned the handle, and crossed the threshold into the room. His gaze swept over the chamber, momentarily fixating on the immaculate bed nestled against the wall. With a heavy sigh, his eyes shifted to the shelves adorning the walls, their surfaces adorned with an array of objects and books that held within them a wealth of memories, both haunting and poignant.

“Master,” a sombre voice broke the silence, and he turned to face Shaj, who had ventured up to the room to join him. I fear it’s ill-advised to venture into here. It will only summon painful remembrance.”

“I understand,” Huros replied, his voice cracking with anguish. “But it was the first thought that crossed my mind when I saw those ships...”

“Stop torturing yourself. It wasn’t your fault for what happened to him.”

“I know, Shaj, but I could have done more to prevent all of that. I promised him that I’d never allow anything to happen to him...”

“Don’t torment yourself, master,” the elderly man commented, wearing an elegant turquoise ephod that made his already pale skin appear even lighter. He gently placed his long-fingered hand on Huros’ back, offering compassion and understanding.

“How can I assist you?” he asked, turning to his disciple.

“That vision brought back a flood of memories. I couldn’t help but wonder if he has returned.”

“That’s impossible,” Huros replied, displaying a sad smile. “How can you be so sure? We never found his body. He could have survived.”

“Our guardians took him with them. I have no doubt about it.”

“Master, with all due respect, I hope that’s true. But if it’s not him, why

all these measures? “Do you really think there is someone who would dare to attack us?”

“Do you remember those two guardians who disappeared?” the master inquired, suggesting he had an inkling of who might be behind the armada. “Two extraordinary beings, surpassing the rest in power. It could be one of them. Perhaps even both.”

“Ket and Mont?” the puzzled pupil questioned. “That’s impossible. Why would they want to attack us?”

“I remember the chilling words he uttered during our last encounter,” Huros said, his voice trembling with a haunting intensity. “He claimed invincibility, proclaiming that life and death were his allies. Back then, I failed to grasp its significance, but now I believe I understand,” he continued, his words carrying a sense of gravity.

“That is the true reason why I think it’s important to gather the guardians once again. No armada will be strong enough to stand against even one of them, yet our four guardians could overcome them.”

“If that’s the case, wouldn’t it be better for you to intervene and put an end to all of this once and for all?”

“I wish I could, my dear friend,” Huros replied, casting a fraternal gaze at his disciple. “But I fear I’m too old for such endeavours. It is more convenient to entrust it to the guardians.”

After those words, Shaj, visibly disturbed, departed the room, leaving the Guardian of the Worlds alone amid that resplendent chamber. He wandered the cold and lonely space for a while, attempting to bury those memories deep within himself before retiring to his private room.

Oblivious to his surroundings, the aged man advanced towards the towering bookshelves, positioned just before the wardrobe, where he habitually donned his attire. With the measured agility that age permits, he approached the shelves and, adjusting his spectacles, embarked on a quest through the repository of tomes, his weathered fingertips gently tracing the engraved spines.

The vastness of his library was so immense that it housed a myriad of volumes, each offering its own unique aid. The subjects explored within were as diverse as the cosmos itself, spanning from the annals of history that chronicled the different worlds of that universe to the profound depths of the physics governing its very existence. They encompassed

diverse topics such as the different musical styles composed by various societies, the various architectural forms invented to create the magnificent buildings of those worlds, and subjects on biology, botany, and even philosophy.

Yet, his quest was not for a mere book; he was looking for a small wooden box adorned with meticulously crafted black leather. Upon its surface, embroidered in ethereal white, gleamed the word “Emblems.” With a restless heart, he cradled it in his weathered hands and delicately untied the cord to ensure that what he was looking for was still inside.

“Here you are,” he whispered, a faint smile forming on his lips.

Just then, the door to his chamber resounded with insistent knocks. Huros turned towards it, his mind filled with confusion. He thought it was too soon for Racht to have found any information, and the possibility of his disciples stumbling upon a clue about the armada seemed improbable.

“Master, with your permission,” a figure with sun-kissed skin and lustrous black curls spoke, clad in a cerulean mantle and verdant ephod, to the astonishment of the elderly sage. “I bring tidings of good news!”

“Nottun, come in and tell me what you’ve discovered.”

“I just made contact with the planet Tefes. They’ve told me that a couple of weeks ago, they spotted a large number of ships escorting another one of dark hue and immense size. President Duk himself was astonished and somewhat concerned when he witnessed all those machines with his own eyes, as he had never seen such a massive armada before.”

“Do you know where they were heading?”

“Yes, towards the northeastern region.”

“Towards the northeast...” Huros murmured, pensive. “Have you shared this with Goli, my pupil?”

“No, Master. I rushed to you as soon as I received this information.”

“Very well. If you find out anything else, let me know as soon as possible,” Huros said, concluding the interview. “Inform Goli that I need her to come,” the elder added before his disciple left the room.

Satisfied, he settled into a celestial-hued armchair beside a grand window, revealing a panoramic view of the planet’s lush foliage. There he sat, patiently anticipating the forthcoming meeting with his disciple. Yet, as the door swung open, Racht entered in a state of agitation, leaving Huros perplexed by his apprentice’s discomposd demeanour.

“What’s wrong, young man?” he inquired, swiftly rising from his seat, apprehensive that misfortune had struck their midst.

“Master, as you commanded, I went into the ancient archives and found this volume,” the young acolyte replied, presenting a weathered, time-worn book. “Within its pages, I discovered this.”

From it, he pulled out a rather crumpled paper, its corners worn and just few handwritten lines visible.

“Who wrote this?”

I’ve got no idea, Master. It’s not signed. But whoever it was, he knew the whereabouts of at least four of the descendants. The son of the Guardian of Darkness is in Heilt.

“Yakren...” the master interjected, lost in thought.

“Excuse me.” Racht questioned, taken aback by the interruption.

“Never mind, please continue.”

“The son of the Guardian of Water is on the planet Rig. The descendant of the Guardian of Fire resides in Ignis. And, to my astonishment, the Guardian of Light had a daughter in Baldis, who, according to these words, was once the heir to the throne.

“Deia?” he whispered, recalling the beautiful woman with whom Racht had often made contact. “And why is it underlined?”

Racht’s eyes met Huros’, reflecting a profound sense of uncertainty. “I cannot say, master. It remains a mystery to me as well...”

Huros’ expression hardened. “No matter, commendable work, Racht. But tell me, why do you come to me in such unease?”

Racht hesitated; his words weighed down by the gravity of his revelation. “Master... I fear we shall not count on all the warriors.”

Huros stood bewildered in the face of this unforeseen news. If true, it presented a setback he had not accounted for. He knew all too well that the retrieval of the gems would demand arduous effort, and the absence of even one of those extraordinary beings would inflict a delay that could imperil the very universe.

“How could this be? What has happened?” inquired the master, his incredulity tinged with a trace of desperation.

“I attempted to reach the king of Ignis, but I received no response,” confessed the disciple, burdened by the gravity of his revelation.

After those words, a persistent knocking on the door drew their

attention. In a swift motion, the door swung open, revealing the entrance of the captivating disciple, Goli. Her fiery locks cascaded around her, and her lips, with their alluring charm, formed a striking contrast against her intense emerald eyes. Adorned in a resplendent ephod of vibrant vermilion and regal violet, a perfect reflection of her ruddy complexion, she exuded an air of elegance.

“Excuse me, Master,” she said.

“Please, come in,” Huros beckoned, “Goli, a few minutes ago, Nottun came to me and informed me that a group of ships, commanded by a larger one, have been heading towards your area for several weeks. Do you know anything about this?”

“Master, unfortunately, I possess no first-hand knowledge of such a development,” she responded. “However, reports have surfaced from some planets in my region, recounting sightings of a vast armada.”

“What exactly did they tell you?”

“My contact on the planet Seth informed me about the appearance of a large number of ships in the far distance, heading southwest. They mentioned that one was considerably larger and seemed to carry weapons capable of destroying an entire planet. Moreover, all of these ships bore a symbol that caught their attention: three interlaced triangles.”

“The Valknut,” Huros murmured to himself in hushed tones.

“The same symbol that Abis has?” Goli inquired.

“Indeed,” replied Huros.

With purposeful stride, he turned toward the table, reaching for the sceptre. As his fingertips made contact, the symbol described by the disciple materialized before them.

“The Knot of Death, also known as Valknut,” the Guardian of the Worlds explained with solemnity. “This revelation confirms my suspicions. Mont, the Guardian of Death, stands among our adversaries. Alas, he possesses a lethal ability that none could withstand: his palm becomes dangerous, extinguishing the life of those he touches. Yet, one day, he vanished without a trace, as if swallowed by the ether, and we deemed him dead. We believed our enemy had accomplished the unthinkable: give dead to the Guardian of Death. Ironic, isn’t it?”

The two disciples got immersed in profound silence, fully aware that if this was true, they were now confronting an adversary of unimaginable

power, a force so mighty that not even they would be able to stop him. The weight of the situation left them grappling with the daunting question of how they could ever hope to stand against such a force.

“Did all the planets report the same?” Huros asked.

“Indeed, several planets did; however, there are also reports of sightings of smaller crafts...

Lost in thought for a moment, Huros tried to piece together all the information. As if struggling to grasp the true nature of what was happening, he struck the ground with his staff, and a mesmerizing projection of the cosmos materialized. Galaxies, stars, and planets danced before his eyes, a breath-taking tapestry of existence. His gaze intensified, scouring the vast expanse for clarity, desperately seeking to unravel the enigma of the ships’ destination.

“Racht, this is perplexing,” the elder mused as his gaze focused on the region they had just discussed. “As you’d pointed out, the planet Ignis has vanished, yet none of these ships are coming from or heading towards it...”

“I have had no knowledge of that planet’s concerning for some time,” Goli admitted, failing to retrieve the memory of her last encounter with King Tetol.

A profound transformation overcame Huros’ visage, etching lines of concern upon his features. For a fleeting moment, he entertained the notion that Racht’s failure to establish contact with Ignis was indicative of a merciless assault, but this revelation shattered his assumptions entirely. The elder found himself lost in contemplation, grappling with the enigmatic unfolding before him, while a gnawing fear took root within his heart, whispering that they were fast running out of time.

Not willing to surrender, he continued to scrutinize the map, trying to discern their next target. However, after several moments, he began to realize that the destination of those ships mattered little at that moment. Time was of the essence, urging them to rearm the planets while they sought out the remaining Guardians they could still rely on. They needed to train them to confront the fearsome Guardian of Death.

“Racht, I need you to return to your quarters and prepare for an imminent journey,” Huros commanded his young pupil.

“A journey?” Racht questioned.

“You and I are going to seek out the descendant of the Guardian of

Darkness,” Huros revealed. Initially, he had considered assigning this task to his more experienced disciples, gathering the descendants of the Guardians. However, after careful consideration, he dismissed that idea, believing it was more fitting for him to undertake this mission personally. Thus, he realized that after all these years confined within the magnificent walls of his home, the time had come to venture forth and take charge of this mission himself, even if it filled him with a certain trepidation. “Meanwhile, Goli, I need you to inform the rest of your companions to continue alerting all the planets to prepare their defences.”

After those words, both disciples withdrew to their respective quarters, leaving the Master once again alone, deep in thought, as he observed the cosmic vision, futilely trying to divine the ultimate fate of those fleets. Moments later, the elder could hear the voices of several senior disciples just before they knocked on the door of his room. After dismissing the projection, Huros approached them.

“Is there anything I can assist you with?” he questioned, surprised by this unusual visit.

“Master, we have been informed of the mobilization of warships in different parts of the universe.”

The Guardian of the Worlds’ face lit up, believing that he could finally discover the next target of his enemy. He invited them to his room to continue the conversation, hoping to glean valuable information.

“As far as I understand, they bear the imprint of the Valknut symbol,” the old man indicated, seeking confirmation of this detail.

“We have not received such information, but a large number of ships have been reported,” one of them replied.

“How many, Enk?”

“Enough to raze our planet with a single attack,” Yehut coldly stated.

Huros’ face suddenly changed. They all could see the shock on his countenance as he wondered how such a large and dangerous armada could roam the cosmos without his knowledge.

“Master, they’re everywhere,” stated one of the disciples, with short white hair, purple eyes, and bluish skin that, along with her purple garments, gave her a rather elegant appearance. “And we fear that we may not have enough time to carry out our plan. We should take further measures to help us and our allies neutralize our enemy.”

“Ter, I’m aware that all of you fear a war like the previous one, but calm yourselves, follow the established measures, and inform the planets to prepare their defences. I assure you that everything will be fine. Furthermore, in a few moments, Racht and I will depart for the planet Heilt in search of the Guardian of Darkness, and then we will gather the rest of the guardians.”

“Heilt?” questioned one of the disciples, intrigued by the familiar name.

“Indeed, the planet where Yakren resides,” he answered.

“You mean where you left Nitt’s son,” Yehut interjected angrily.

“We didn’t abandon him,” Huros corrected, “we merely fulfilled his mother’s wish. Besides, we gave him the opportunity for a better life.”

“A better life? He hasn’t been heard from since then,” reproached Yehut again, clearly not in favour of what she considered a ludicrous idea.

“We’ve got no other choice,” Huros replied firmly.

The five disciples exchanged helpless glances. They had witnessed the atrocities brought by the Universal War and feared that those hard times would return. However, they knew how determined Huros was, and realizing he was hardly willing to listen to their fears or advice, they returned to their respective rooms to continue on their assigned tasks.

“Master,” the veteran disciple added before leaving the room, “I personally ask you that if this war begins, do everything in your power to end it as soon as possible and thus avoid unnecessary deaths. Do not let more innocents die because of your mistakes.”

“Don’t worry, Astet, everything will be fine,” he reassured her before she left the room, leaving him alone.

Aware that Racht would soon return for them to embark on their journey in search of the first guardian, Huros walked towards the closet where he had left the small box. Just as he reached out his slender arm to retrieve it, he heard a voice that, despite not having listened to it for so long, he instantly recognized, leaving him completely petrified.

“Huros, once again...” the feminine voice, aged and worn, uttered, causing the Huros’ eyes to nearly pop out of their sockets upon hearing it.

“Bolupa...” he stammered as he grasped the small box.

“I can’t believe it, dear. After almost forty years, I thought you had learned your lesson,” the petite woman remarked, her short grey hair

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covered by a modest black scarf that matched her black attire. Her face conveyed disappointment.

“What have you come for?” he asked abruptly, passing by the little old lady without even looking at her.

“I’ve come to help you, Huros. Remember who you are! You are the Guardian of the Worlds. There is no one in this universe more powerful than you. But it seems you’ve forgotten,” she dared to say as Huros listened with his back turned. “Since your brother’s death, you’ve been locked up here, unconcerned about everything and everyone. Delegating your duties to your subjects as if they were your slaves.”

“You said it yourself! I’m the most powerful,” he retorted angrily, turning towards her. “I can do whatever I want. Neither you nor anyone else can come and tell me what to do.”

For a moment, the blind old lady, unable to open her eyes, remained silent, not uttering a single word. It created a tense moment that seemed like an eternity to Huros.

“I also came to warn you, my dear. Your plan will bring terrible consequences if you proceed with it. And not only for your allies or subjects, but even for yourself,” she retorted, pointing at the small box.

“And what do you want me to do?”

“You know perfectly well what you must do. Stop hiding here, in your lair. Step out and confront your enemies with your own hands and show them who you are.”

“Foolishness,” the old man spat out, taking her by surprise. “The very same foolishness you reckoned four decades ago.”

“It’s the truth, Huros! You’re the only one capable of ending all of this. But you must be the only fool who refuses to see it...”

“You said it, I don’t want to see it, and I don’t want to see you ever again!” he shouted furiously. “Go with your daughters to the valley of the underworld and leave me in peace. I don’t need your help. I can manage on my own.”

Chapter 2

The Guardian of Darkness

“Master, are you all right?” Racht asked, entering the room unannounced, his senses alerted by the piercing screams that echoed within. The elder, still trembling from the heated argument he had just endured, turned toward his pupil. For a fleeting moment, it seemed Huros couldn’t quite comprehend why Racht had burst in so abruptly or why he was there at all. However, he swiftly gathered his wits, remembering the urgent task they had to accomplish.

“I’m fine, just...” he explained as his gaze shifted towards the enigmatic woman who had disturbed his solitude. To his surprise, she was no longer present. “It’s nothing,” he concluded, exhaling a sigh of relief.

Racht regarded him sceptically, sensing that something profound had unsettled the maestro. Since the day Huros had unveiled that life-altering vision to him, Racht had never seen his mentor so agitated. “We should set off as soon as possible,” Huros continued, motioning for Racht to come closer as if determined to brush aside the turmoil that plagued him. “Time is ticking out.”

“How do you propose we reach our destination?” Racht inquired, his mind grappling to comprehend Huros’ enigmatic gesture. After returning to the maestro’s room, he had assumed they would proceed to the military hangar adjacent to the palace. There, they would board one of the ships

from the Guardian of the Worlds' fleet and embark on a long journey to Heilt. The voyage could take days or even months, but was there any other way he was unaware of?

"We shall teleport there," Huros replied with a smile, summoning the magnificent projection of the universe once again, his eyes ablaze with determination as he sought the precise coordinates of the distant planet.

"All the way there?" the young man exclaimed.

"Yes, indeed. How else do you want us to travel to such a far place?" the aged man responded, a gentle chuckle escaping his lips. "Now, touch the staff with one of your hands and don't let go of it for anything in the world."

Racht was genuinely taken aback by this unexpected revelation. Yet, a surge of exhilaration coursed through him, setting his delicate skin ablaze. After years of unwavering dedication, it would be his first time leaving the confines of Olimpis, the tiny planet where the Grand See stood. Despite his regular interactions with the rulers of various planets, like many of his comrades, he had never ventured beyond the boundaries of their sheltered abode. Thus, the prospect of witnessing the diverse worlds first-hand ignited a cascade of nerves within him, brimming with both excitement and trepidation.

Despite his agitated state, Racht positioned himself before the maestro, faithfully following his instructions, and firmly grasped the magnificent staff. Instantly, he felt a surge of power that left him momentarily transfixed. Huros closed his eyes, his focus honed on the precise coordinates of their intended destination, and within moments, the wondrous staff emitted a blinding white light, encasing them in a shimmering, translucent bubble. Racht marvelled as the boundaries of the room dissolved, revealing a deserted street where they materialized.

"Incredible!" he exclaimed as his voice filled with awe. "How did you accomplish such a remarkable feat?"

"Someday, my apprentice, I shall impart upon you the intricate knowledge of these wondrous journeys. But for now, let us embark on our mission without delay," Huros replied, his gaze warm and paternal, assuring Racht of the great adventure that awaited them.

As the two companions stood on that deserted street, surrounded by the unknown, they shared a moment of silent anticipation. The vast

expanse of the universe beckoned to them, promising wonders and challenges yet to be discovered. With determination etched on their faces, they set forth, ready to confront the mysteries that awaited them on their journey to Heilt. And as they took their first steps, Racht couldn't help but feel a surge of gratitude for the opportunity bestowed upon him, a chance to transcend the confines of their familiar world and become part of something far greater, guided by the wisdom and unwavering spirit of his revered master.

The serene day continued with a radiant blue sky devoid of clouds, and a refreshing breeze gently caressed their youthful faces. The pupil glanced around, observing the modest two-story houses with arched clay tile roofs lining the street. These humble dwellings had small windows, allowing slivers of sunlight to filter into the interiors and lending the dusty street a modest charm.

As they ventured further, they noticed a growing congregation of locals bustling along the road. People hurriedly moved in various directions, their attention focused solely on reaching their respective destinations. Huros and Racht knew that if they wanted to find the Guardian of Darkness, they would have to seamlessly blend in with the crowd, discreetly seeking clues to uncover his whereabouts.

After strolling for several minutes on the worn cobblestones, they arrived at a bustling area where the multitude converged. Pedestrians, alongside magnificent carriages traversing the wide avenue, moved with purpose. As they entered the open space, curious gazes from passers-by fixated upon them. Some even purposefully distanced themselves, seemingly averse to their presence.

While Huros felt unease under the scrutiny, Racht was enthralled by the diversity surrounding him. The young disciple openly marvelled at the appearance of these towering beings. He observed their bluish-tinted skin and their elongated faces adorned with large black eyes, replacing the need for a conventional nose. Two openings on either side of their heads served as auditory senses. Additionally, their mouths, spanning most of the lower portion of their distinctive countenances, housed two rows of sharp, white teeth.

“Strangers!” one of the locals exclaimed, pausing beside the two newcomers. The being brought his enormous, dark eyes uncomfortably close

to Huros' face, causing the old man to recoil. "You've come for the reward, haven't you?"

"What reward?" the elderly man inquired, leaning back to avoid the creature's invasive gaze.

"Oh, what a pity! I thought you were here for the monster that dwells in the mountain," the being responded, scrutinizing the Guardian of Worlds from head to toe. "Usually, foreigners come seeking the reward for his capture."

As Racht gazed at the individual with admiration, Huros took a moment to contemplate the proposition. He wondered why visitors from other planets would be drawn to this place with the promise of a reward for capturing someone from this world.

"Could you provide more details about this 'monster'?" Huros pressed, emphasizing the word 'monster.'

"I've never seen it myself, but they say its skin is as black as the night... Besides that, I don't know much," the local replied.

"Racht, I believe this may be our target," Huros stated, surprising his apprentice.

"The Guardian?" the young man questioned incredulously.

"Where can we find further information?" Huros inquired.

Exuding an air of undue confidence, the towering being placed its elongated arm around the old man's shoulder, further unsettling the Guardian of Worlds. Turning around, the creature extended its long fingers, pointing toward the end of the street they stood upon.

"If you continue in that direction, cross one of the streets, and you'll see a grand building with a red sphinx stationed in front. That's Kokbar's City Hall. Once there, just say that you've come for the reward."

"Thank you," the aged man expressed, cautiously stepping back, subtly distancing himself from the eccentric individual who had unsettled him so.

"Wishing you good luck," the local chuckled as he departed.

Huros looked at him with a perplexed expression, pondering the meaning behind the strange farewell. Nevertheless, he pushed aside the odd encounter, determined not to let it distract them. Taking Racht by his side, he led them forward, following the path indicated to them.

"Master, how can you believe that this supposed monster could be our target?" Racht queried, with scepticism laced in his voice.

“Consider this!” exclaimed the aged master, hastening his steps to reach their destination swiftly. “It’s a common occurrence for wrongdoers to flee their own planets and become entangled in criminal or pirate gangs, wandering the vastness of the universe,” he elucidated, his voice strained by the swiftness of their pace, “but in this case, the reward is still active. That means he hasn’t escaped, and no one has managed to defeat him. Why?”

Racht, gasping for breath due to the Guardian of Worlds’ unusual speed for someone of his age, fell silent for a moment, lost in contemplation, seeking an answer to the question posed before him.

“Perhaps they lack the training to overcome him?” he suggested.

“Or maybe he possesses immense strength. Just as one would expect from a descendant of the guardians.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“No, there’s something more. The colour of his skin.”

“The colour of his skin?”

“Yes. We’re searching for the Guardian of Darkness. What colour would you anticipate his skin to be if not?”

Having engaged in that brief exchange, they continued their journey along the dusty street, garnering suspicious glances from many passers-by. The maestro regaled his disciple with various tales he knew about the locale, aiming to make the journey more enjoyable. However, Racht paid little heed, still grappling to comprehend the enigmatic occurrences unfolding around him.

“Forgive me for interrupting, master, but there has always been a question troubling my mind, and I believe now is the opportune moment to ask: How is it possible for us to communicate with beings from other planets?” Racht inquired.

“My dear Racht, we’re not like them,” Huros responded with paternal warmth. “We are unique creatures, descendants of the creators’ progenitor, endowed with abilities that the rest of the universe’s inhabitants can only fathom in their dreams.”

“And how do beings from different worlds communicate among themselves?”

“For them, it is more challenging. However, when intergalactic trade became advantageous, the leaders of numerous planets approached my

father, Oris, beseeching him to devise a language that would enable mutual comprehension. Hence, my benevolent father fashioned what is now known as ‘koine’, a universal language facilitating communication for all.”

Racht, who had never met Oris, was captivated by the tales of Huros’ father, envisioning a figure of profound intellect and cunning.

As they continued their journey, the radiant and tranquil day gradually surrendered to the embrace of twilight. The descending star painted the horizon with a vibrant tapestry of violet and crimson, casting an ethereal glow upon the sky. The bustling streets began to empty as weary souls sought refuge in the sanctity of their homes, and the facades of the houses came alive with the warm flicker of lamplight.

At long last, Huros’ discerning gaze fell upon the distant street, on the opposite side, revealing the colossal edifice they sought. Determinedly, they crossed the road, drawing closer to the imposing structure.

Upon arrival, they beheld closed doors guarded by a crimson-red sphinx, emanating an air of mystery that unsettled Racht, leaving him with a sense of apprehension.

Ascending the circular stone steps that led to the entrance, they encountered a sentinel, cloaked in a sombre uniform, perched upon his post. Upon sighting the two strangers, he rose from his seat, lifting an arm to signal their halt.

“Strangers, Kokbar’s Hall is already closed. You must return on the morrow,” the guard declared, his voice tinged with authority.

“Young man, we’ve come in search of the reward,” Huros asserted, sensing that those words might forestall any unwelcome complications.

“The reward!” the guard exclaimed, his eyes widening with incredulity at the audacity of their late-night mission. “Follow me.”

Retrieving a weighty set of keys from his leather belt, the guard approached the lock, ensuring their clandestine actions remained concealed from prying eyes. With a deft twist, he swung the door open, granting them swift passage. The trio stepped into a peculiar circular chamber; its walls hewn from imposing stones. Arrayed along the circumference, Corinthian columns stood tall, their elegant forms connecting the checkered black-and-white tiles that graced the floor to the lofty expanse of the ceiling. Ahead beckoned a grand staircase, leading to a labyrinth of corridors, each veiled in secrets, branching toward different parts of the building.

The guard led them down a dimly lit corridor, lined with closed doors, their secrets hidden within. Yet, there was one room that beckoned them. A soft glow seeped from beneath its threshold, casting a warm hue on the passage. Eagerly, they quickened their pace, drawn toward the enigmatic light.

“Sir, these foreigners seek the reward,” the guard announced, stepping back and shutting the creaky door behind him.

Racht’s eyes widened once again as he took in the sight before him. The walls of the room were adorned in a deep, intense red, adorned with portraits depicting the figure seated in front of them. A substantial shelf dominated one side of the chamber, its surface brimming with trophies and miniature effigies.

“You’ve come for the reward?” the guard asked, astonishment colouring his voice. He, too, wore a dark blue uniform akin to the figure before them, yet he bore subtle distinctions

“That’s correct,” Huros replied simply, his countenance unwavering.

The colossal man reclined in his seat, his laughter booming through the room, disbelieving the audacity of their purpose. Eventually, he straightened himself, his gaze fixed on Huros, who remained steadfast.

“You must be kidding me!” the man declared, his voice laced with scepticism. “You wouldn’t stand a chance against that monstrosity.”

Racht found himself taken aback by the brashness with which the ordinary man spoke to the Guardian of the Worlds. Nevertheless, Huros remained unperturbed by the crude demeanour.

“Absolutely,” the master replied solemnly.

“Do you want to die?” the man retorted, incredulity etched across his face. “Countless individuals from across the universe have flocked to this planet, to these very chambers,” he emphasized as if to impress upon them the gravity of their situation, “in a bid to rid us of that accursed criminal. Younger and stronger souls than yourselves. It would be wise for you to turn back and return from whence you came.”

“What’s the reward?” Huros pressed on, undeterred by his remarks.

“A billion lares,” the guard responded, his tone icy. “That’s the sum the government is willing to pay to rid themselves of that wretched scoundrel.”

“Well, that certainly is a generous reward!” Racht interjected as his

curiosity piqued. “But why is he being hunted?” he inquired, struggling to comprehend the exorbitant sum offered for a single individual.

“Our region was once abundant and prosperous,” the guard began, a tinge of bitterness underscoring his words. “We boasted some of the most succulent livestock in the entire galaxy, attracting ranchers who would pay substantial sums for the privilege of grazing their herds on our lands. But all that changed when that infamous dark-skinned bastard appeared. He preyed upon the ranchers, pillaging their livelihoods day after day, without any means to stop him. The ranchers fled to other territories, leaving us mired in abject poverty.”

“The reward’s enticing, but it’s not your money that brings us here,” Huros interjected once again, his voice carrying a sense of determination.

“Didn’t you say you came for the reward?” the agent interrogated, a mix of confusion and curiosity in his eyes.

“Indeed, we did come for the reward,” Huros clarified, “but not to claim it for ourselves. We came for the creature himself. Tell us where he is, and we will take care of him.”

The police officer’s laughter erupted once more, unable to fathom the audacity of the aged man’s words.

“You think that damn creature will willingly go with you? That abomination’s a killing machine. It won’t hesitate to break each and every one of your bones.”

“We’ll see about that,” the elder replied, a proud smile gracing his lips.

“If you want to die at the hands of that monster...” the agent retorted gravely, reaching for a microphone-like device and securing a spherical object in one of the holes that served as his ears. “There’s a carriage waiting for you at the entrance,” he commented after making a brief call, “but I warn you, everyone who has gone hasn’t returned, ever! I wish you all the luck in the universe because you’ll need it.”

After their encounter with the sceptical agent, the master and his disciple exited the office and made their way back to the entrance of the majestic building. An elegant wooden carriage awaited them, adorned with four lanterns on each side, casting a warm glow along the path they were about to embark on. The coachman stood beside the carriage, next to four enormous beasts with towering legs, ready to pull the vehicle. These creatures were a sight to behold, their elongated bodies adorned with greenish

plumage, their long necks leading to small heads crowned with black crests.

As the coachman caught sight of Huros and Racht, he hastened to open the door of the carriage, revealing a sober interior embellished with elegant black leather upholstery. Once both were comfortably seated, the driver ascended to the coachman's seat, taking hold of his leather whip. With a confident flick of his wrist, he shook the reins, prompting the splendid creatures to set the carriage in motion.

The journey began, the carriage speeding along the cobblestone road, enveloped in a whirlwind of activity. Moments passed in silence as they left the city behind, venturing into a rugged path that wound through a dense and lush forest, nestled at the foot of a small mountain.

While Racht found himself captivated by the beauty of the abundant vegetation that populated the meadows surrounding the city, its vibrancy still visible despite the encroaching darkness, the master allowed his mind to wander, lost in memories of cradling a baby with an innocent smile. A pang of sorrow washed over him as he recalled the difficulty of relinquishing that dark-skinned child to a complete stranger, per the request of the child's mother, in the hopes of securing a better life far away from the imposing Grand See.

Unexpectedly, the carriage came to an abrupt halt after traversing the narrow path for some time. The coachman swiftly opened the door, gesturing for Huros and Racht to disembark. It became clear that the path ahead was impassable for the carriage, and from that point onward, they would have to continue on foot.

As soon as they stepped out, the driver offered a rough explanation of the supposed monster's whereabouts. With a final wave, he ascended to his seat, wielding the whip, and urged the magnificent beasts to pull the carriage back toward the city. Now alone on the eerie path that lay ahead, Huros and Racht steeled themselves for what awaited them in the darkness. In unison, they summoned their sceptres, causing an intense glow to emanate, illuminating the path that stretched before them.

As Huros and Racht ascended the mountain, the sounds of howling beasts reverberated through the air, harmonizing with the whispering wind that caressed the treetops. The melody they created wove a spell of awe and wonder around the young disciple.

After a steady climb, they stumbled upon a grove near the summit, its

Chapter 2 – The Guardian of Darkness

trees arranged in a deliberate circular pattern. This peculiar formation hinted at the proximity of the one they sought. Soon, their eyes fell upon a clearing nestled amidst the thick vegetation, revealing a solitary, weathered wooden cabin.

“There’s no one here,” Huros observed, his gaze fixed on the faint glow emanating from the humble dwelling. The stillness inside suggested an absence of life.

With cautious steps, they ventured into the cabin, their hearts pounding in anticipation. Along the way, the master’s attention was drawn to three enigmatic mounds of earth, their purpose shrouded in mystery.

Approaching the door, Racht noticed it was ajar, granting them entry to the cosy interior. A comforting warmth enveloped the room as their eyes met the sight of a fireplace crackling with dancing flames. Above it, a collection of decorative pieces adorned the wall—small sculptures and painted portraits. Among them, a painting depicting a couple and their two children caught the master’s inquisitive gaze.

In another corner, Racht’s attention was captivated by various wooden objects, seemingly carved by an inexperienced hand. The room also boasted a display of animal heads, suspended as trophies of the past.

“He must have gone to find his dinner,” Huros remarked, gesturing towards a circular table adorned with four chairs. Only an empty plate and scattered cutlery remained, hinting at recent use.

“He seems to be someone intelligent,” Racht added, retrieving a partially opened book from the worn armrest of an old armchair. Its pages beckoned him into a realm of contemplation, explorations of the afterlife and the mysteries that lay beyond.

Within the walls of the cabin, a story unfolded, a story of a solitary individual seeking sustenance and comfort amidst the wilderness. Yet, lingering questions remained, waiting to be answered. Their journey had led them to this threshold, where secrets whispered and truths awaited revelation.

At that moment, a sinking feeling settled in Huros, the Guardian of the Worlds, as his mind connected the dots between the grooves on the ground, the portrait above the fireplace, the four chairs, and the empty plate on the table.

“Huros, I fear...” the old man’s voice trembled, cut short by the sight

of the pendant box vibrating before their eyes.

Before they could comprehend the implications, the cabin door swung open. Their attention snapped toward the entrance, where a towering figure strode in, carrying a fresh kill on his broad shoulder and clutching branches in his muscular left hand. His dark skin and flowing black hair framed a face that registered confusion and a flicker of anger upon encountering the uninvited guests, causing him to drop his spoils and foliage to the floor.

“Who are you, and what brings you here?” he demanded, his brow furrowing. Though aware of their intrusion, he hesitated to attack, seeking understanding before unleashing his wrath, even if he had an inkling of their purpose.

“We have come to find you...” the old man started, attempting to explain.

“Oh no, bounty hunters again!” the warrior exclaimed, his indignation apparent.

“No, listen...” the anxious disciple tried to intervene, but before he could defend himself, the man lunged at Racht, his powerful fist connecting with the apprentice’s gaunt face, propelling him across the room to collide with the wall. Huros could do nothing to protect his pupil.

“You better leave right now!” the warrior roared, turning to pounce on Huros, the Guardian of the Worlds. “And tell the chief of the guards that someday he will pay for what he and his bounty hunters did to my family.”

Despite the warrior’s swift movements, Huros managed to strike the ground with his staff, conjuring a sturdy energy dome that materialized around himself, thwarting his assailant’s attack. The man’s fury intensified upon realizing his assault had been halted, and he was unwilling to let the unfamiliar shield impede him. He continued to pound on it relentlessly, seeking to shatter the elder’s defence.

“We need you,” Huros emphasized, desperately searching for a way to quell the man’s rage, fearing the impending destruction of the powerful dome repelling his relentless blows.

“But I don’t need you!” the warrior retorted, continuing his assault against the shield with unwavering force.

From within his protective sphere, Huros witnessed the man’s fury escalating, each strike growing in strength. After several harrowing seconds,

he noticed tiny fractures beginning to mar his shield, apprehension gripping his heart. While he harboured doubts about his combat prowess after years of inactivity, he realized there was no alternative but to confront his adversary head-on.

As the Guardian of the Worlds dispelled his protection, preparing to face the man with bare hands, the young disciple, refusing to succumb easily, rallied from the blow he had suffered. Seizing his staff, he delivered a forceful strike to the warrior's face, sending him hurtling several meters backwards.

Racht hoped the blow would temper the man's fury, yet it only served to stoke the flames of his anger. The warrior, now armed with his own weapon, charged at the disciple with lightning speed. Racht's agility enabled him to parry each onslaught with his staff, further incensing his opponent and compelling him to intensify his attacks. Still, the disciple remained elusive, eluding the warrior's reach.

"You're strong and fast, but I'm afraid you still have much to learn," Racht uttered, striking the man's abdomen with his staff. Then, with a swift motion, he directed the swirling staff towards the man's face, propelling him skyward before delivering another blow to his abdomen, hurtling him against the room's wall. Despite crashing into the hard surface, the burly warrior wasted no time, launching himself at the disciple without displaying any apparent pain. His movements were so rapid that Racht could barely defend himself, relying solely on his staff to parry the onslaught of lightning-fast punches.

Observing the futile clash between his disciple and the warrior, Huros concluded that words alone wouldn't sway the man. Perhaps a vision would serve as a catalyst. Positioning himself behind the warrior, the master seized him and encircled him with his staff. Despite his rage, the moment the magnificent object made contact with the warrior's chest, he was overcome by an inexplicable sensation.

"Show him," Huros instructed Racht, seizing the opportunity. "If he refuses to believe, let him witness the fate that awaits the universe," the old man implored, pointing as his disciple projected the harrowing scenes of the devastating attack on Dazbi. "The universe needs you, Yakren," Huros pleaded, hoping to sway his heart, concluding the vision.

The warrior stared at the old man in disbelief, his own name echoing

in his ears. Slightly calmer, he took a moment to assess them, grappling with the bewildering turn of events.

“Who are you?” the man inquired once more, his eyes reflecting a mix of sadness and confusion.

“My name’s Huros,” he replied, gasping for breath. “I’m the Guardian of the Worlds, and this is Racht, one of my twelve disciples.”

“What do you want from me?”

“We need you to accompany us. You’re the Guardian of Darkness,” the master clarified, extending his hand to reveal a magnificent dark amulet adorned with a celestial body and several stars, emanating a peculiar glow. “As I mentioned earlier, the universe needs you.”

Yakren stood dumbfounded by those words. In a matter of minutes, he had transitioned from a wanted individual, pursued relentlessly by justice on his own planet, to a sort of universal protector, sought after by the Guardian of the Worlds himself.

“I’m sorry, but they need me here too,” the tormented warrior coldly declared.

Perplexed by the enigmatic response, Racht couldn’t help but question, “Who needs you?”

“They do,” Yakren replied simply, gesturing toward the three mounds of earth that lay outside the inn.

Saddened by the memories of his family’s tragic demise, caused by a relentless bounty hunter determined to claim his life, Huros approached Racht. The weight of sorrow was evident in the elder’s eyes as he shared his own experience of losing loved ones. “I understand your pain,” he expressed, his voice tinged with affliction. “I, too, have suffered such a loss. But in the end, we must find the strength to carry on and honor their memory by embracing a path that would make them proud.”

Caught in a moment of inner turmoil, the valiant man wrestled with conflicting desires and obligations, uncertain of his own course of action.

“I empathize with your loss,” he acknowledged, his steps deliberate yet resolute as he moved toward the exit. “However, I’m afraid I cannot be the one you seek.”

Without hesitation, the warrior swung open the door, inviting his unexpected guests to depart from his dwelling. Racht turned his gaze toward his mentor, seeking guidance and awaiting his direction. To his surprise,

the aged man signalled him to go forth with a mere gesture of his hand. The young disciple found it difficult to fathom that Huros would not persist in his endeavour to convince the man to join their cause. On the verge of questioning his master, he reluctantly acquiesced, mindful of not contradicting him, and obediently followed his instructions.

“Do not forget, Yakren, that countless families will suffer the same tragedy as yours if no one takes a stand,” the old man expressed solemnly before venturing outside.

“Then let us ensure that tragedy is averted,” the stout-hearted man responded firmly, closing the door behind them and leaving the two of them standing on the threshold.

Outside, Racht stood in stunned silence, gazing at his master with a mixture of awe and bewilderment. He was uncertain of what he had anticipated Huros to do. Would they return home, defeated? Or would they explore alternative means to persuade him? However, when he observed Huros taking a seat on the soft grass that enveloped their abode, his restlessness could no longer be contained.

“What’s your plan, master?” Racht inquired, his voice betraying his curiosity.

“We shall sit here and wait,” Huros responded calmly, his demeanour unwavering.

“Wait for what?” Racht inquired, eager for an answer.

“You will see soon,” Huros replied cryptically.

As the night sky grew darker, Racht’s gaze remained fixed on the horizon, contemplating the unknown fate of his fellow warriors at the Grand Headquarters. With a sense of restlessness, he scanned the heavens for the familiar star that had always illuminated his planet, hoping to find solace in its comforting glow. However, his search yielded no results, deepening his growing concern that another planet had fallen victim to the devastating attacks that had haunted the universe.

Though the weight of uncertainty burdened his thoughts, Racht valiantly pressed on with his daily tasks. Taking hold of the deer-like creature he had hunted, he skilfully began the process of skinning it, intending to prepare a meal. Yet, the vision of destruction and loss persisted in his mind, relentlessly questioning his ability to prevent such calamities, just as the old man had foretold. What purpose did he serve in this place? While

grappling with his own self-doubt, Racht reluctantly acknowledged that he was powerless to change the past. His family, tragically taken from him, could not be brought back to life. But in that moment of clarity, he realized that if the universe was truly imperilled, his departed loved ones would have wanted him to fight for its salvation.

Without hesitation, Racht dropped the lifeless animal to the ground, the knife puncturing the wooden table with finality. Determined to catch up with Racht and Huros, believing they had already made their way back to the city, he hurriedly departed from his home. However, as he approached, an unexpected sight halted his steps: his companions were still seated outside, patiently waiting for him.

Steeling himself with newfound resolve, Racht addressed them with a mix of remorse and determination. “I will help you,” he declared, his voice filled with conviction, “but first, I need a moment alone with them.”

Huros smiled knowingly, sensing the weight of Yakren’s emotions. With a nod, he beckoned his apprentice to accompany him into the cabin, leaving Yakren to face his family’s resting place. Each step he took towards the three graves felt heavy, his heart torn between the pain of leaving behind a place that held so many cherished memories and the prospect of embarking on a new path.

Gazing at the markers before him, Yakren spoke softly, his words filled with a mixture of grief and determination. “I know you would understand,” he whispered, tears streaming down his face. “Leaving you here is the most difficult decision I’ve ever made. I remember the times when you inspired me to strive for greatness, to join the presidential guard and become the strongest warrior in the universe. Perhaps if I had heeded your words, you would still be alive today. But dwelling on what-ifs is futile. What matters now is that I honour your memory by fighting for a noble cause. Our mission, together, begins now.”

With a heavy heart, Yakren turned away from the graves, carrying within him the indomitable spirit of his family. The path ahead may be treacherous and filled with uncertainty, but armed with newfound purpose and the support of his comrades, Yakren set forth on his journey to defend the universe from the impending threat that loomed on the horizon.

As his words hung in the air, the warrior crumbled, sinking to his knees before the trio of graves. Tears streamed down his face, unleashed by the

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weight of his accumulated anguish. Unable to contain his sorrow any longer, he wept, his heart pouring out its pain.

“I vow to return for you, to never abandon you,” he choked out amidst his tears, pressing his lips to his fingertips and gently imprinting each mound with a kiss. The marks left behind bore witness to his unwavering love.

Having paid his respects, he strode purposefully towards the cabin, retrieving a sleek black leather vest to cloak his dark shirt. With steady hands, he laced up his boots, sealing his resolve. Finally, he approached the Guardian of the Worlds.

“Before anything else, I must warn you that the path of a guardian is treacherous. As you are aware, great power demands great responsibility. You shall acquire extraordinary abilities, but in turn, face foes far mightier than any you’ve encountered. Only through rigorous training can you hope to master the power of the Emblem of Darkness,” Huros explained.

“Save your sermon. Where are we headed?” the warrior retorted, his tone unyielding, his determination unwavering.

Huros grasped his staff, grounding it firmly as he closed his eyes. The object shimmered, casting an ethereal radiance that bathed the room in light.

“Place your hands upon the staff,” Huros instructed, as energy surged forth, causing their hair to sway gently in its wake.

Both Racht and Yakren, the latter still gazing mournfully at the graves of his kin, followed their master’s guidance. In an instant, a peculiar bubble materialized around them, enveloping their forms before gradually dissipating, erasing the room from their sight.