

BETWEEN FADED LINES

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS:
BOOK ONE

ALLISON R. NAUMANN
ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



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Between Faded Lines
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by Allison R. Naumann

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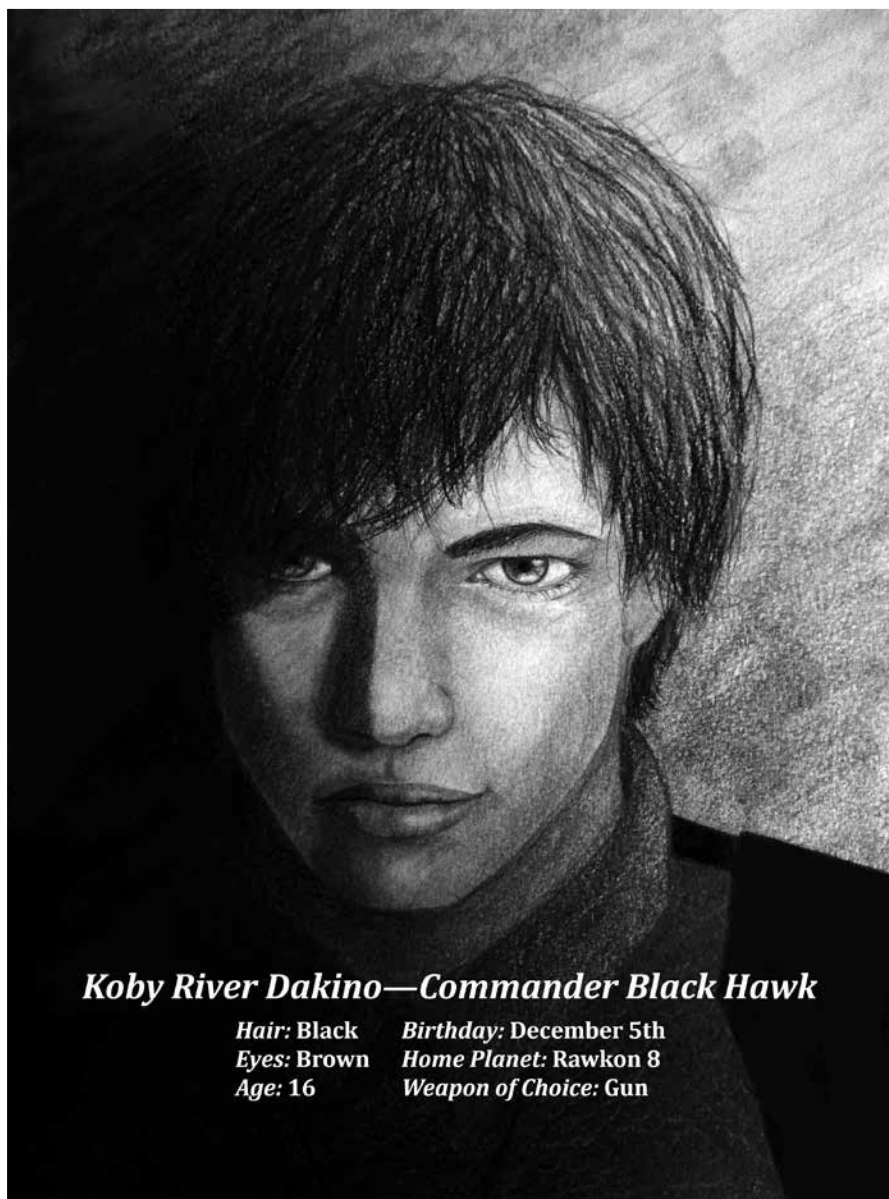
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For Savannah, who endured the dream
before ink dared to form faded lines upon a page.

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Koby River Dakino—Commander Black Hawk

Hair: Black

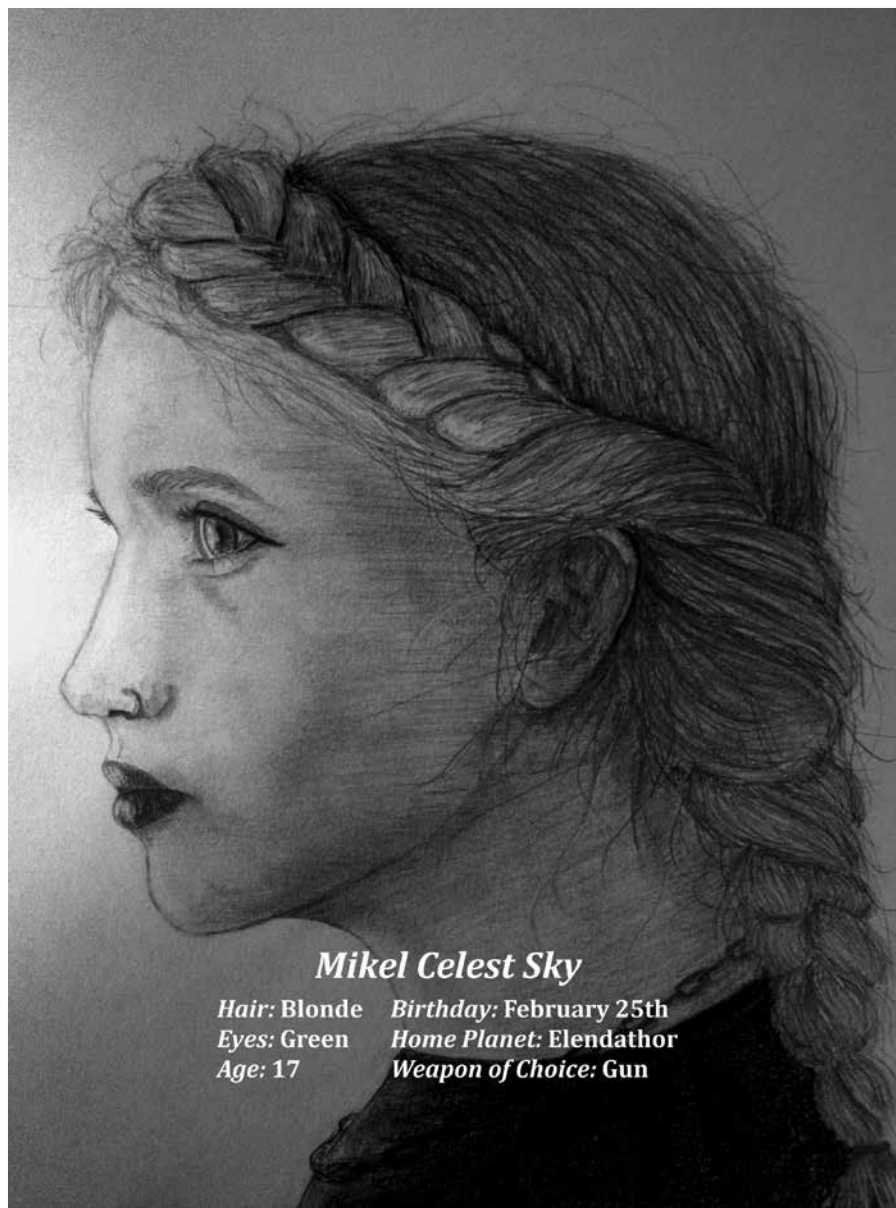
Eyes: Brown

Age: 16

Birthday: December 5th

Home Planet: Rawkon 8

Weapon of Choice: Gun



Mikel Celest Sky

Hair: Blonde

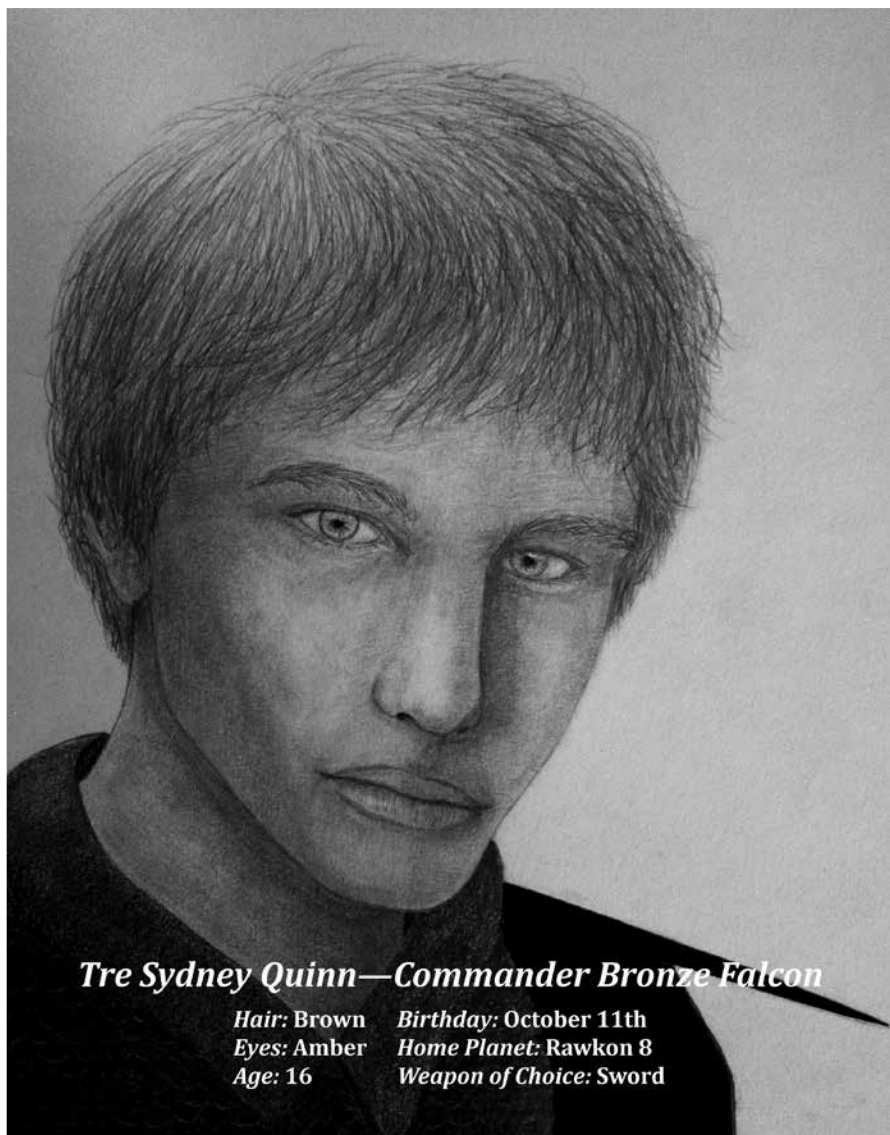
Eyes: Green

Age: 17

Birthday: February 25th

Home Planet: Elendathor

Weapon of Choice: Gun



Tre Sydney Quinn—Commander Bronze Falcon

Hair: Brown

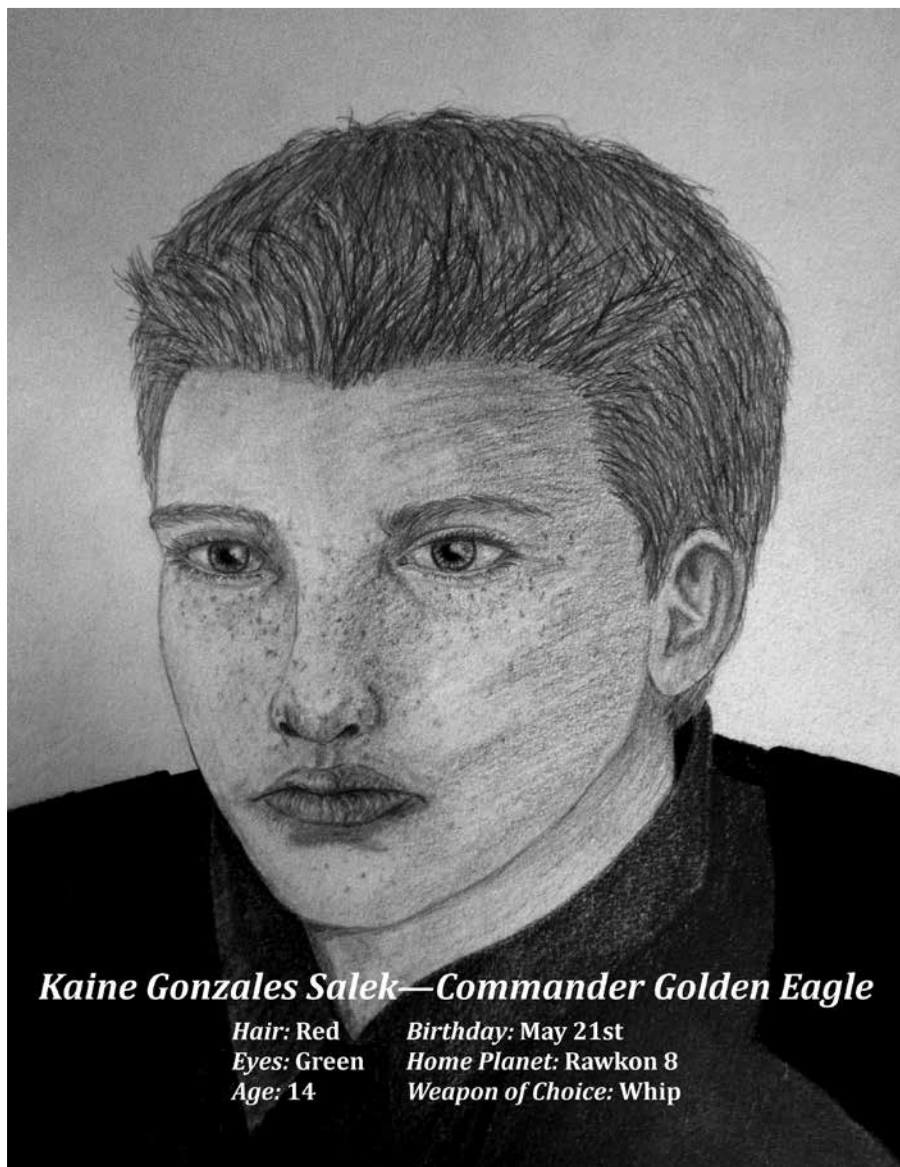
Eyes: Amber

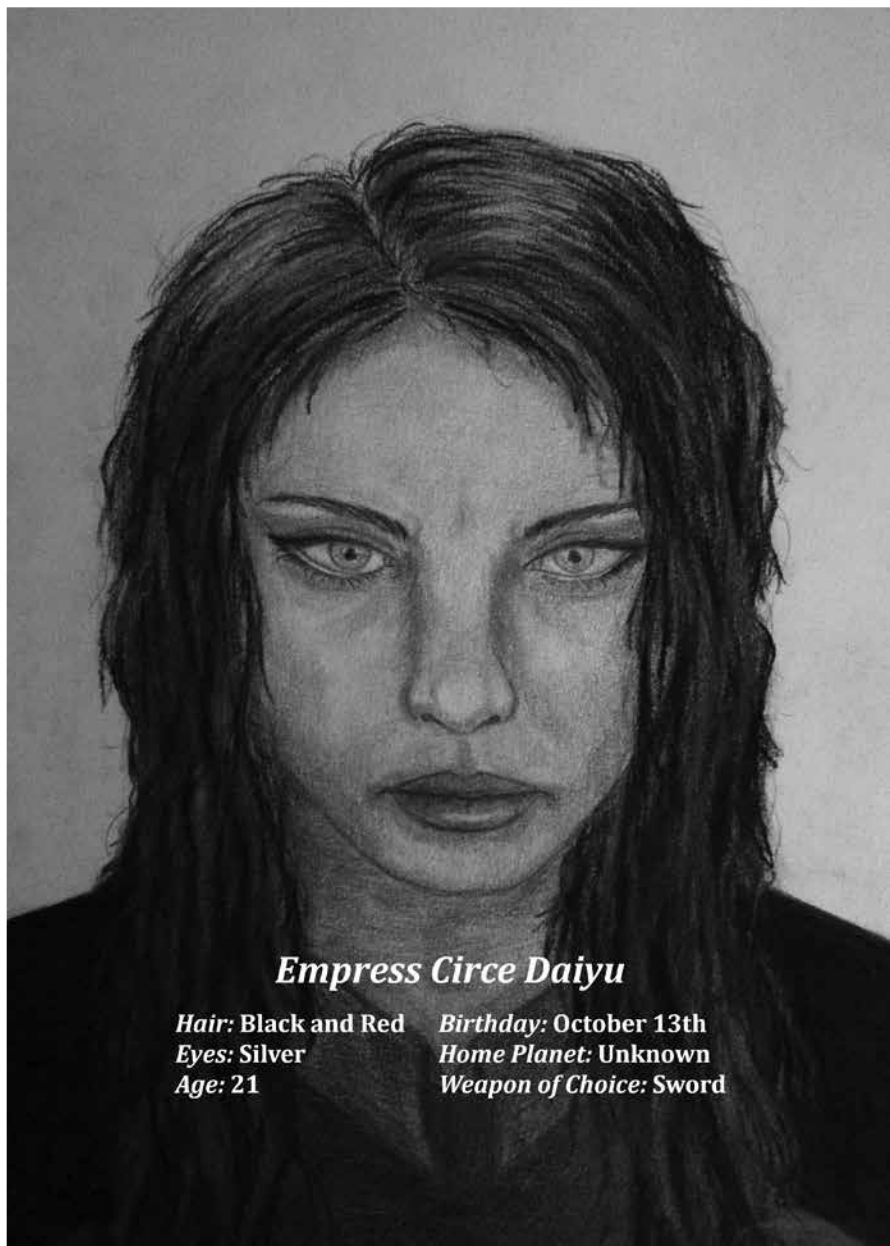
Age: 16

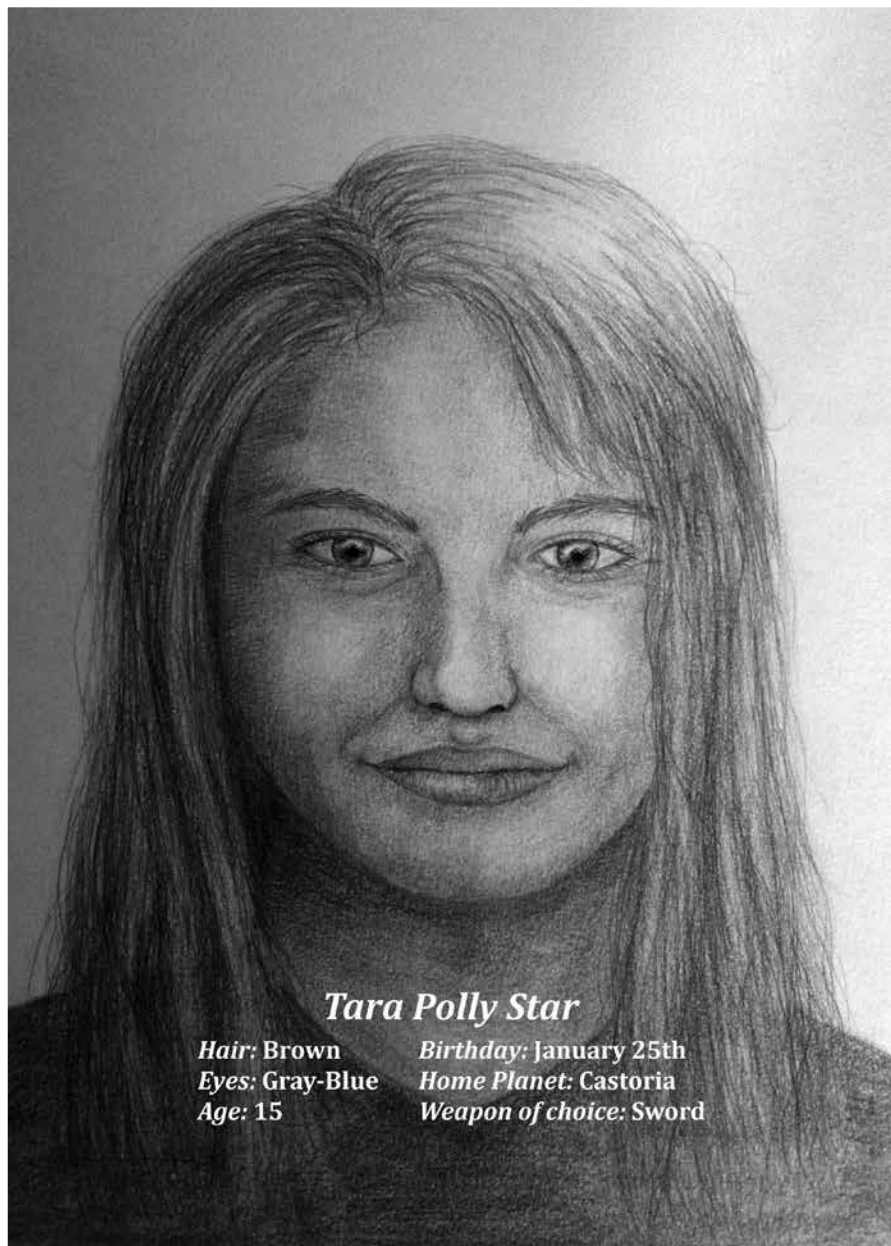
Birthday: October 11th

Home Planet: Rawkon 8

Weapon of Choice: Sword







Tara Polly Star

Hair: Brown

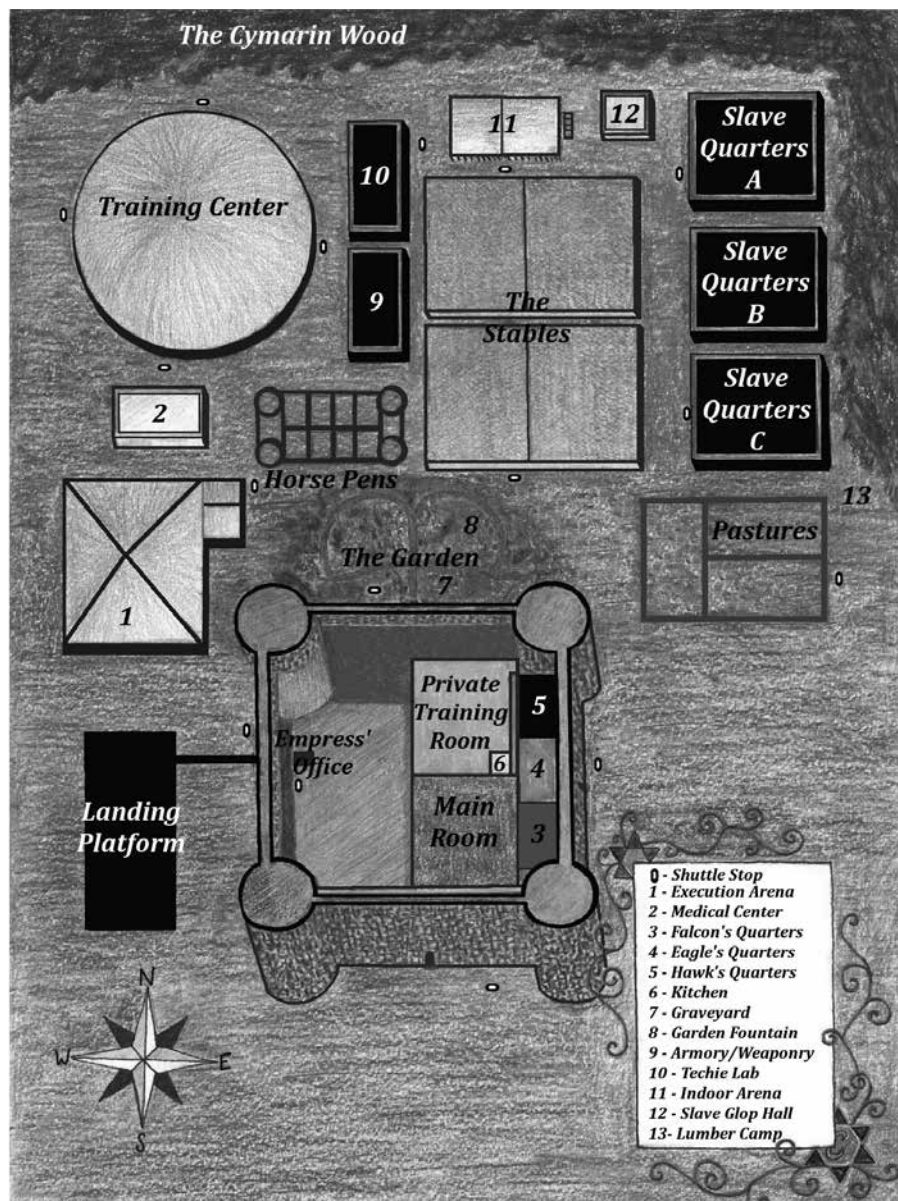
Eyes: Gray-Blue

Age: 15

Birthday: January 25th

Home Planet: Castoria

Weapon of choice: Sword



TO THE ONE WHO FINDS THIS MESSAGE,

I, Zachary River, send this letter praying it will find its way to my parents, Mille and Gydeon River of Houston, Texas. Please do whatever you can to send it on its way.

To family and friends, my time to write this letter is short, so I'll try to explain my disappearance quickly.

Eagerly you supported my wife, Amy, and me as we chased that "once-in-a-lifetime opportunity" in Germany in 2008. What I didn't tell you was that from there, we journeyed further to meet our crew. For their families' references, these are their names:

Polly and Georg Dale of Germany,
Margarita and Blake Gonzales of Brazil,
Elizabeth and Tyler Sterling of England,
Carmela and Demetrio Prieto of Spain,
Flo and Hunter Martin (Que and Jian Xiong) of China,
Aurore and Stephen Dupont of Canada,
Sydney and Peter Ree of Australia,
Kieran Heart (Fire in Night Sky) of America,
Celest and Isaac Sky of America,
Amos and Passion Harding of America,
Christi, Joshua, and Cord Whitley of America,
and our rich boss, Rodger Flye of America.

This crew was pulled together to construct a spacecraft fit to transport all twenty-five passengers and our equipment to Mars by Mr. Flye—who believed fleeing to Mars would save him from the "apocalypse" at

the end of 2012. (Guess if you're reading this you know that's not true). I couldn't say no when Mr. Flye offered me an incredible sum *and* a ticket to space.

On September 18th, 2012, we were ready. Rodger flew in with our pilot, and we set off. I watched Earth fade behind us, never thinking I might not see it again.

Later, in celebration of our smooth departure, a few of us unstrapped ourselves. That's when disaster stuck. We began to be slammed against walls like rag dolls as we tried to grab anything for support. Plating tore off the craft deafeningly. I prayed what I thought was my final prayer before blacking out.

Thankfully, I awoke. I'd broken a few bones, but it wasn't until I opened my eyes that shock set in. I'll never forget that moment.

Everything was washed in *gold*: the sky, the grasses, and the silver tree's fruit. The air that filled my lungs was thick and sweet, and a white sun set below the hills. We've discovered a new livable world, perhaps an entirely livable *galaxy*! However, there's no sign of Earth in the starless night sky.

My final note is this: I stand in strong faith that our King has brought me here for a purpose. I will hold firm to that, whether I am meant to return home or not.

Sincerely, and with all of my love,
Zachary River

PROLOGUE

September 23rd, 3014 G.Y. – Viorium, Castoria

The sound of hooves clapping musically against hollow wood filled Louisa’s ears as she leisurely rode her gelding, Philip, into the barn. Swinging off, she draped the reins over his neck and began to tug and loosen the straps to his saddle.

Philip nuzzled Louisa’s hair to remind her that it was dinner time. She batted his muzzle away with a laugh. “Patience, Philip,” she chided. As always, he only stopped fidgeting once he was fed.

Satisfied that he was safe for the night, Louisa breathed in Castoria’s late summer air with her hazel eyes closed happily. The breeze ruffled her brown curls as she strolled through the bristled grasses in her comfortable jeans, boots, and ivory blouse.

Vibrant hues of orange and yellow painted themselves across the purple sky as the brilliant sun, Kyrin, dipped below the slopes. Louisa’s spirits lifted at the glorious display, and she turned toward her countryside home. Directly before her stone porch, a lone sokah tree stood and rustled its wispy leaves against the ground.

Louisa paused, her eyes catching on a warm glow enveloping the flaky shields of bark behind the leafy curtain. *That’s odd*, she thought as she hesitantly approached the hearth of the dancing light. She pushed aside the sokah’s draping branches, and a chill jolted down her spine.

Fire!

Louisa almost cried out for help, but her vocal cords were strung tight in panic and confusion. The fire wasn’t *burning* her tree. Instead, like cold candle flame, it blazed swift words across the bark. Louisa’s rasping whisper evaded her cognizant will to utter the ardent lines.

*"Bright Castor plunged in darkest age,
The fighters fall in blackcoat rage.
Their ruler's image dark and cold:
One changed, one lost, one saved, one bold.*

*One chosen from Celesti brought,
Well veiled and kept, her worth known naught.
With gold the darkness will she purge,
Her faith alone shift river's surge.*

*The hawk withheld from his swift flight,
Dethroned and whipped in lost delight.
They rise in hate, souls steeped in woes:
The lost, his shadow—mighty foes.*

*At final strike and battle cry,
The bold one's choice to live or die.
The river's flow to drain or bend,
Its waters will control the end."*

As the words faded, a thunderous roar made the ground tremble like a drum in the hands of a percussionist. Flashes of light from two glorious figures sparkled in dizzying succession. Louisa covered her face, falling to her knees in fear.

"Do not fear us! We partake in delivering the message and its task," said a crisp female voice.

"Louisa Maria, remember what you have seen," a silky, masculine voice commanded.

The feminine voice sung out again: *"Bear the message of the Good King. Pass the words you have seen through the generations of your family in secrecy until the time is right. You have been entrusted."*

The words flashed through her mind. Every letter was seared into her as if a red-hot branding iron had stamped her thoughts.

"Long live the Good King!" they cried together. Then, as quickly as it'd come, the light disappeared. Night had arrived.

November 15th, 3293 G.Y. – Castor

Hanna Fletch peered warily from the outskirts of the city of Castor, shrouded in deathly gloom. Black-armored troops had swarmed in a few days before, callously seizing control of the city. Already they had established their base in what had once been a beautiful meadow.

The governor and his officials were dead. The capital was reduced to rubble. Castor held its breath fearfully, waiting for the new leader to declare his plan.

Hanna's dark-green eyes surveyed the troops in displeasure. Her lips silently mouthed:

*“Bright Castor plunged in darkest age,
The fighters fall in blackcoat rage.”*

Danger iced the autumn wind. Hanna drew her cloak tighter around her shoulders. Her beaded necklace felt like a dead-weight on her neck. The protection that her loving mother had promised swept over her. She'd felt it before, but this time it pulsed like liquid fire in her veins. It was time to reveal the Prophecy.

Following Louisa's example, the Prophecy had been passed through the nine eldest children of the generations until the responsibility fell upon Hanna. It had been thirty-seven years now, and she was the last of the line.

Hanna wished she could curl up in the shadows and melt away, but she glided down obsidian-stone streets, retreating to her modest home where the window's mourning panes stood in stark darkness.

Upon entering, Hanna activated a single orb and dragged a sokah chest from beneath her bed. She unclasped her necklace and yanked it apart. The once sacred charms scattered across the wooden floor. *The key.*

With trembling fingers, Hanna removed the lock. Inside was a paper curled with age, a voice recorder, and a paint bottle. The paper held the Prophecy she had pored over until it was a part of her. All she needed now was Louisa's recorded instructions. Hanna started the recorder, hanging on every word as if her life depended on it. Indeed, *every* Castorians' life did.

As Louisa finished, Hanna shakily grasped the paper and gold paint, and then departed for the center of Castor. When she reached the city square, gazing at the devastated capital, Hanna halted. Whispers

suddenly coated the air as brilliant beings—Stars—rained from the heavens. Hanna flinched back, terrified and blinded by the burst of light.

Where the Justice Building had stood beside the capital, an inky wall began to resurrect. Cracked stones rose from the ground in the guided hands of Stars. Awe overcame Hanna, melting the potency of her fear.

One Star, a stunning form clad in shifting shadows, approached Hanna boldly. The power of the King accompanied him, flaming in his gold eyes. Light radiated from his skin despite his dark garments.

Hanna fell on her face, his glory too much for her mind to bear.

“Hanna Fletch, descendant of Zachary River, guard of the Prophecy of the King, the wall of justice has been raised to bear the Prophecy. This wall shall not be felled until the chosen hour, standing to protect the hope of your people as they cry for justice to return. You shall live to see the day of your King.” At his final word, the Stars returned to the heavens.

Hanna remained shaking on the ground, her eyes shut in engulfing fear. Finally, the promise that she’d live to see the King gave Hanna the strength to rise and stumble to the flawless obsidian wall. She began to paint, the Prophecy glimmering against darkness.

Whatever lay before Castoria, the path to its restoration would be hard. People would die. Battles would be fought. An end would come. The brush quivered, but Hanna forced it to finish creating the letters.

Upon leaving the square, an unbearable desire to leave Castoria overcame her, and the protection she’d once felt evaporated. Terrified, Hanna burst into her home, gathered her possessions, and fled the city.

Every few seconds, she glanced back, feeling as if someone pursued her. Her sprinting legs tangled in the tickle of towering grasses and her feet stumbled over scraping stones. Fleeing to Louisa’s abandoned home in Viorium, her fear multiplied until she could almost hear pursuer’s shouts.

She rushed into the barn, unhinging the old wooden doors. They splintered against the ground, but Hanna’s frantic mind didn’t register the striking spikes of wood. Wildly, she swept away wisps of long-forgotten hay that coated the entrance to a hidden cavern. She descended into the darkness, orb in hand, and entered a safely stowed starship. Her responsibility to Castoria was fulfilled.

Vorium

The shadows of the silent stable drew together, composing a form darker than night: the Prince of Fallen Stars. His fiery glare tracked the ship's fleeing course, but he allowed Hanna to proceed. She was useless now.

Burning hatred embraced his heart. *You dare, King, to step into my realm so boldly? You dare to speak the Prophecy against me after centuries of cowering above? I will win this battle, just as I have won every other. Watch your bounds, weak King. I will not rest until you crumble in defeat.*

More shadows arose in formless lumps around their master, seething in hatred. *"What do you will, Lord?"* they asked in hissing streams of scorching wind.

"Burn my mark across the human souls. Do not let a single one slip from your hold."

"Yes, Lord," the shadows cackled.

"The river is already mine. When I am finished with it, its waters will surge so black that none can shift it."

More cackles of scorching air.

Finally, the awaited reptilian messenger slithered in. *"Lord!"* he hissed. *"Your dragon still fights! I fear she shall break free too soon."*

Growling in displeasure, the Prince kicked the cowering reptile. *"Secure her! Make certain the tools I have given are used to their fullest extent. She will succumb. Blood shall spill."*

"Of course, Lord," the reptile puffed. *"Her treatment shall be doubled."*

"Swell," the Prince sneered. *"Depart, and spread my mark. When the King makes his move, our legions shall counter. Castoria is where we shall make our stand."*

CHAPTER 1

~DARK ORIGINS~



April 13th, 3303 G.Y. – Katoria (Formerly Castor)

The hope for freedom was a dying fire in Castorian spirits. Ten years of oppression had ensued since the blackcoats established their empire. Everything was a constant battle: the hunger, the fear, the despair when families were destroyed, the emptiness when children were forced into slavery. Wails of inexplicable pain coated Castoria—the world of sorrows.

A fierce girl bent over her work as she thought of these truths. A sad twinge tugged in her gut as fire warmed her bowed back. In her fifteen years she'd never allowed her hope to perish; it was all she had left. "When it dies—I die," she was known to claim.

It's the blazing truth, the girl growled to herself as she straightened the glowing metal. *Everything withers to dust in the absence of hope.*

Striking her hammer at a dent, the girl smoothed it expertly. Firelight danced over shadows pooled in the stone, illuminating swirls of pearl and obsidian. Her nose stung from the smoke curling off the flames, but she couldn't risk opening a vent for fear that blackcoats roamed above.

Fire. Fear gripped her heart as screams of her past threatened to drown her. She fought them, hunching over to cough.

You share the hope of the Prophecy with the Fighters for Freedom. You fight anticipating the coming of a savior. She scanned her designs, a piece of her brown hair evading rusty clips. She didn't mind. The strand was rebellious, exactly like she was.

Turning the metal sheet, the rebel curled her lips into the beginnings of a devious smile. *And the hope that keeps you going? Taking*

revenge on the krike who killed your family. You'll tear him apart—piece by blazing piece.

The rebel continued her task, pleased with the drafted form of her weapon. Of course, she knew that no matter how long she stayed bent over the fire, the blackcoats wouldn't crumble. The Fighter's efforts were merely dents in a massive shield.

The Castorians needed the Propheted One.

It was only a matter of time before the blackcoats found a way to infiltrate the Fighters. They couldn't hold out forever. Sooner or later, someone would make a fatal mistake.

"One chosen from Celesti brought..." Well, that blazing chosen one better hurry! She slammed the hammer down. *Please do hurry.*



Serreconna, Elendathor

A harsh crackling rose from the remains of reptilian eggshells in the blistering sand as the third sun plunged beneath the horizon. Mikel Sky kept her bare bronzed feet moving. After seventeen brutal years on Elendathor, her soles were calloused to heat and her skin darkened by harsh rays.

Residences inlaid with white tiles shimmered in dazzling streetorblight. A final warm gust stamped up the road as the pink sky darkened, bringing night's chill. Citizens of the inner-city of Serreconna watched Mikel flash by disdainfully as they donned their cloaks.

Mikel patted her pocket, ensuring that her flicker-flare was still there from fighting class. Her elderly trainer, Master Tuma, had given her the harmless training weapon long ago, teaching her to treat it as if it were a real weapon. Though she'd never told him, Mikel knew he'd recognized her as a Shadow Reaper, and he knew their secret: flicker-flares could be altered to destroy.

The street trembled under Mikel as the inner-city gates began to close down the street. She threw herself forward in a sprint to slip between the hulking stones before she was trapped inside, tumbling to the earth. *Ouch*, Mikel grimaced, brushing grit from the scrapes on her hands and knees. Hilary, her irritatingly pompous class mentor, would be sure to make a disgusted remark about Mikel's wounds tomorrow.

At the thought of returning to class to face Hilary, Mikel scrunched the skin around her emerald eyes. *Someday, Hilary, you'll face the Shadow*

Reapers' wrath. You are not untouchable in your luxury, and no one will protect you from the shadows you despise.

Mikel picked herself up, relishing that thought as she entered the outer-city. Here, simple sandstone buildings sprawled low to escape the extreme temperatures, and streets were lit by occasional streetorbs. Not a citizen was to be seen with the night freeze arriving. Shuddering, Mikel sped through.

Crossing the second ring of Serreconna, homes made from broken sandstone appeared. *Inner-city, outer-city, then there's us.* Mikel joined the shadows of the ring too horrible to be named.

A few turns later, Mikel's feet squished into the damp clay of her home. She immediately squeezed her flicker-flare between her rumpled floor-bed sheets and a storage unit, remembering the fight with her father last night. She'd come in late, as she often did after a pack excursion. Her dad had risen to greet her, but his mouth froze mid-greeting. His eyes settled on the gun in Mikel's hand. It was too late to hide it. There was no reason for her to have her training gun when she'd claimed to be "going out with friends."

He had put the gun up in silence, finally looking back to Mikel to question who she'd been with.

Mikel had blurted out any excuse that jumped into her head, avoiding the truth. Thankfully, she had changed out of her pack gear, otherwise she would've been in serious trouble. Before long, her excuses had morphed into a fiery argument.

As her father's final judgment, he'd forbidden her to take the gun anywhere other than training.

Mikel remembered the pain flaring in her chest: shock at the mistrust glazing her father's eyes. She was seventeen, yet he treated her like an incompetent child! She had taken her *training* gun out with her friends, so what?

"You don't understand!" she'd yelled, running back outside. Only later, after she was sure her dad was asleep, had she returned. He'd left for the factories before she woke. Mikel was dreading seeing him again later that night.

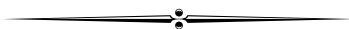
Tonight, however she wouldn't need her gun. The rest of the pack would be armed; she'd be safe with them.

Mikel brushed away the memory of the poorly handled argument. She knelt beside her bed to snatch her hidden Reaper gear, tugging on her warm shadow-camo shirt and dark jeans to blend her into the night. Peeking over into her mother's expensive mirror in the bathroom, Mikel

smears on dark eyeshadow and lipstick, slipped on her gray contacts, clipped her fake nose-ring in her left nostril, and secured the rusted chain with the Shadow Reaper insignia around her throat. For the final touch, Mikel balanced on a storage unit to reach the ventilation shafts. She snatched a handful of soot and patted it on her golden braid and face.

If her parents saw her like this away from home, they'd hardly be able to recognize her. She was no longer Mikel—she was Keli, a Shadow Reaper who fought for justice while Mikel waited silently for change. A smile cracked her coal lips with a shred of white. Revenge already injected sweet toxins into her veins.

Mikel jogged down the steps, embracing the night. Perhaps if she'd been vigilant, destiny's door wouldn't have opened so soon. She could've spent a final night with family, taking the opportunity to make amends with her father. Unfortunately, fate spun sunless shadows into its tapestry, ensuring the night would change Mikel for eternity.



Black Hawk stationed his gloved hand firmly on his gun as he finished his dinner and shut his helmet visor. Beneath his ebonized armor, his muscles tensed. Tonight was the night.

The sixteen-year-old fiercely shook away his fatigue as he monitored the ramshackle diner for potential trouble. Three days had passed since he'd last slept. The effort it took to conceal his exhaustion from his comrades, Golden Eagle and Bronze Falcon, drained him.

They only remained at the diner to await their empress' call, for it was near impossible to receive a clear MiComm signal anywhere else in the outer-city. *Where is she?* he wondered, suppressing a groan. *Hold fast, Kahibh. You are Commander Black Hawk, the third-in-command of the Castorian Empire! Fatigue cannot fell you.*

A waitress, whose badge read Hanna, swooped in. Thin blonde hair framed her age-creased face. As she hastily cleared the dishes, her dark-green eyes fixated on him.

Black Hawk uncomfortably dropped his gaze. Hanna reached for his plate, her hand clutching his glove for an instant to force his fist shut. Then she tossed the dish in with the others and hurried away.

Black Hawk, shocked, shot a glance at his companions. Falcon was still explaining a design to Eagle in fluent Argentinian; they hadn't noticed. Satisfied to their obliviousness, Black Hawk opened his fist. A crumpled receipt fluttered into his lap like a broken-winged bird. With careful

fingers, he smoothed it out, allowing his helmet to analyze it. Abbreviated words adorned the slip.

He was about to trash it, beginning to believe the waitress wasn't in her right mind, when a tiny blotch at the bottom right-hand corner caught his eye. He'd recognize that six-pointed-star anywhere, even as smeared as it was—the Castorian Crest.

Alarmed, Black Hawk flipped the sheet. Crudely drawn on the reverse side was a loose sketch uncannily like the hawk pendant he wore around his neck. Above the drawing scrawled words read: *Hope is never lost for the Hawk of Castor.*

Terrifying whispers of nightmares conquered Black Hawk's mind; his fingers trembled. As he discreetly stuffed the paper into his tool belt, Eagle glanced his way. Black Hawk froze until Eagle turned back toward Falcon, who continued talking. Luckily, neither of them suspected anything.

Black Hawk acknowledged his desire to force the waitress to explain. However, he couldn't accomplish such an interrogation without drawing unwanted attention to the situation and his own insecurities, so he banished the note from his mind and refocused his thoughts.

A few minutes later, his MiComm bleeped. Silently, Black Hawk thought to channel the sound into his comrade's helmets as well as his own. The boys cut their voices so they could only be heard in the interior of their helmets, and the live feed flickered onto their visors.

The remainder of Black Hawk's confidence evaporated instantly. The empress' silver eyes were outlined with swoops of coal merging into glittering red. She pursed her crimson lips as the feed came into focus. Locks of deathly-black and blood-red hair settled against her pale skin like ink strokes.

"My lady," he met her steel gaze, "surveillance has concluded. We shall intercept our target tonight." Black Hawk bit his cheek nervously. His relationship with the empress had been tense ever since the defeat he'd suffered only weeks after becoming the third-in-command. Letting the rebel leaders slide between his fingers was awful for his reputation.

Empress glared at him. "Do not allow her knowledge of her destination. If she finds out, we might have a problem on our hands. You shall be responsible."

Black Hawk swallowed painfully. *She still treats you like you shall fail her at every turn.* "I shall do as required, my lady. Ferro is in contact; he shall guarantee our target's clueless arrival." Laughing shortly, he curled his lips. "He is as oblivious as the girl—the perfect fool for the task."

"It is necessary to restrain her and make certain she knows nothing of Castoria. You have heard the Prophecy. Do not fail me again, Hawk, or you shall find yourself in a position you shall not fancy at all."

The broadcasted image died. Black Hawk felt like he'd swallowed a rock. He had flubbed the mission to capture the rebel leaders two months ago. By now, Empress' confidence in him should have returned. Instead, the expectation of failure was pressed against him tighter than ever. *You have to get this right tonight, Kahibh. You cannot face another failure.*

Eagle snickered.

Immediately, Black Hawk's anxiety was replaced by a recurring urge to strangle Eagle. He swatted it aside, though reluctantly. '*You heard Empress. It is time,*' he conveyed through their pendant-communicators, nodding curtly.

After sending Falcon, the eldest of the three, to pay for their meal, they departed from the diner. The trio kept to the streets' shadows, slipping over stone roofs to avoid commoners. The less people alerted of their presence, the better. Black Hawk led the way into the darkest ring of Serreconna. The sun's light waned, thickening the black.

Without warning, two beings emerged from the side of the alleyway and blocked it arrogantly. Black Hawk instantly recognized them as members of his target's pack by the Shadow Reaper insignia, a mark that looked rather like a squished number eight, displayed boldly over their shadow-camo shirts.

"Hey, freaks! You're trespassin'!" the shady boy hissed, distorting his soot-smudged hollow cheeks and flaring his golden cat-eyes. Dangling from a wire around his throat, his Reaper insignia captured each throbbing tick of imminent trouble in its hypnotic sway as it seemingly swung in time to Black Hawk's heartbeat.

The trio skidded to a hastened halt, sharing a look they all understood even from behind their visors: *Let them make the first move.* Still, Black Hawk didn't like where the encounter was headed. He inched his hand toward his tool belt. Eagle and Falcon sensed his movement, planting their feet as the Reaper boy swaggered forward another cocky step.

The teenage girl materialized from the shadow of the boy. With each step there was a scraping clink from her rusty metal socks, like chains dragging over the ground.

"What are you doin' here?" demanded the boy huskily.

"We are merely passing through. We intend no harm," Black Hawk claimed smoothly.

The girl narrowed her crimson eyes, flicking her ragged cut of hot pink hair. "This is Shadow Reaper turf. You'd best turn 'round and run. Tol'rating outsiders, 'specially non-Elan outsiders, ain't our thing."

Black Hawk pressed his lips into a thin line. "We shall go no other way. I suggest *you* move aside." His gloved fingers caught on a gun.

"Get off our—" the girl raised her flicker-flare.

Black Hawk wasted no time.

The Shadow Reaper's command ended in a chilling screech. She collapsed to the dusty street, blood blackening her shadowed shirt. She didn't fully grasp what had happened. Her shocked eyes fixed on Black Hawk, then his gun.

The boy rushed forward with a wrenched cry: "*Dare!*" He scrambled to her side and scooped her up into his arms, whimpering miserably. "You—you're okay!"

Black Hawk's gun cocked again. *No witnesses*, he thought coldly. With another muffled gunshot, the boy slumped over the shallowly breathing girl. His chest ceased to rise. Black Hawk shoved his gun into its holster.

Without another word, the trio took flight from the alleyway until they were safely away from the scene. Then the miscreants paused to catch their breath.

"Nice aim," Falcon clapped Black Hawk on the back.

Black Hawk nodded, ignoring Eagle's muttered comment that anyone could shoot at that range. "They should have backed off," he smirked. The crumpled paper in his tool belt felt like a lead block as murmuring accusations brushed his soul. Laughter, heatless and fluid, sluiced through his mind. He shook away the creeping sounds and feelings. "Ready?"

Falcon nodded. He fixed his careful amber gaze on Black Hawk, surely sensing something was amiss.

"I'm ready," Eagle affirmed. He also studied his leader with his shadowed green eyes, taking delight in Black Hawk's muted terror.

Black Hawk disregarded both stares, his chest tight with unease. "Swell. Move out."

Within the minute, the deadly trio was perched in position, ready and waiting to swoop in and snatch up their prey like the birds they were named for.

Mikel closed in on the rendezvous point. Her heart overflowed with freedom; this was why she'd become a Shadow Reaper. Heaps of

rubble—the remains of former homes—scattered the rugged path. Each stone was carpeted by soot, and the air reeked of factory exhaust.

Suddenly, the icy wind shifted. Mikel's senses electrified as shadows pressed in. Her heart pounded. Gold eyes peered from unnoticed depths. *Something isn't right.* Her feet faltered.

Three black forms dropped from the rooftops: one directly in front, two behind.

Mikel stopped dead in her tracks. *What in Midnight Way?!* Her hand strayed to her hip, and her heart sunk. She'd left her flicker-flare at home.

Shaking her initial shock, Mikel heard Master Tuma's words in her mind: *"Steady your breathing. Relax, and make your body smaller."*

Mikel squared her shoulders, bringing her right foot back. She consciously kept track of those behind her. *You're outnumbered, so you definitely don't want to fight. You need to run, Keli.* She narrowed her eyes at the being in front of her, hoping it could see her determination. *I'm not afraid of you,* she thought, daring it to come closer.

That dare withered within a split-second. Her stomach wrenching, Mikel saw the concealed gun. Fear unlike anything she'd experienced before became her assailant. Energy deserted her, and her breath quickened. Mikel wanted to scream for the Reapers, but her throat refused to permit a sound other than an undignified whimper.

The one with the gun nodded, and the others closed in. Mikel turned so she could see them all, her mind registering that they were merely boys as she struggled to bridle her fear. The short one dragged a rope behind him, and the tall one carried a metal mouth plate.

She couldn't run or call for help now or she'd be gunned down. Her best bet was to have them come closer so their leader couldn't get a clear shot.

Unfortunately, the tall one firmly grabbed her right arm and twisted it backward before she could retaliate. She cried out, instinctively landing a solid kick, but it was like sand against stone.

He pinned her to the sooty wall, pressing his helmet against her cheek. Mikel tried in vain to twist from his hold. She bit her lip as the boy slammed his knee into her side. She couldn't shake him!

Another gloved hand roughly tightened a rope around her left wrist. Mikel's heart dropped. *How could you have let this happen? Fight back!*

The boy released her second arm to be secured. Mikel took the chance, throwing herself against him. They hit the ground, and Mikel rolled behind him. As long as he was between her and the gun's barrel, she was safe.

Mikel yelped as the rope around her arm yanked her down. Her nerves charged by adrenaline, Mikel groped at the rope frantically and managed to slip the knot over her hand. She and the boy scrambled to their feet at the same time.

Mikel locked her gaze on the leader. It didn't matter how she moved; his gun never left her heart. "What do you want?!" she cried.

To her surprise, the leader answered. "It is none of your concern. You can choose to come with us willingly, or unwillingly, but you *shall* come," he threatened.

She pressed herself against the opposite wall, wincing as his gun clicked. Her heart thundered in the confines of her ribcage. Everything other than the gun and its master faded to black. "I—I will not come! You're wrong, *krike!*" Mikel's voice quivered.

"Unwillingly then," he said emotionlessly. "It makes no difference to me."

Mikel tried desperately to tame her fear, but she couldn't do it anymore. Her scream tore out: "*SHADOW REAPERS!*"

The trio wasn't surprised.

If it weren't for the wall behind her, Mikel would've collapsed. She stared straight at the leader, certain he was about to kill her.

Instead, he sighed. "Well, I did not wholly desire for it to come to these means, *Mikel*." He prodded her with the name tauntingly, jabbing straight through her heart.

How does he know your real name?!

"Eagle! Falcon! NOW!"

The rope snaked like lightning toward Mikel. She impulsively covered her face, and the rope looped around her wrist rigidly, yanking her to her knees.

The leader darted toward Mikel, his steps swift and confident.

Mikel tried to rise, but her muscles were drained. She barely managed to stand. Her eyes were on the leader, utterly powerless to stop his charge. She felt as if she'd sunk to her knees in sand. Her struggle was futile.

The leader flipped the trigger back. A thick puff of gas erupted into the air.

Mikel didn't register the vapor quickly enough. Her lungs filled with the sweet spray. The world spun, her body hitting the dirt. Then, everything disappeared into a black haze.

CHAPTER 2

~SOLD~



“**W**ake,” commanded a dazzling entity wreathed in lightning. Mikel’s eyes flew open, and the dream shattered. Sight didn’t follow as she’d expected; the world was a blinding blur. She clamped her eyes shut and moaned in pain. *Where are you?*

Mikel forced her eyes open again and allowed them time to adjust. Cold metal pried her mouth open, yet locked it in silence. Noxious pollution clung in her dry throat, but it was more than that—she tasted *blood*. Feeling weak, Mikel didn’t attempt to move. *What do you remember?*

She stared blankly at the orb above her. Her eyes must’ve been playing tricks on her, because she thought she saw a creature perched up there. *Is this what it feels like to die?*

Suddenly, a sharp-scented cloth clamped over her nose. Mikel squealed, but her struggle not to breathe in was unsuccessful. The strange scent revived her. Images rushed before her eyes: the leader steadying his gun, gas misting the air, captors leaning over her fallen body.

The cloth disappeared once Mikel became fully aware of the thick rope cutting off circulation to her hands and the gag’s hooks anchored inside her cheeks. She also noticed her contacts, nose ring, and chain necklace were missing.

“Get up!” A boy rudely jerked Mikel to her feet.

Mikel stayed limp to stare at the young, helmetless boy. *Which one of them is this?* His short rusty hair was spiked to a peak, and cute freckles sprinkled his fair cheeks. However, any good impression Mikel might’ve

had was vanquished when she beheld his hostile poison-green eyes. A pendant hung around his neck: a golden bird suspended in flight.

"The dizziness shall fade," came the familiar voice of the leader.

Mikel's eyes darted toward him, and her breath caught. Why did she know his face? Broken memories pricked her mind.

The leader's earth-colored eyes glimmered with intelligence and cruelty. His pale face was lined with experience and stress beyond his years, and a sooty coat of hair was swept across his forehead. A pendant lay atop his armor's scales as well—an obsidian bird, talons extended as it swooped to kill.

The red-headed boy released her, and she crumpled to her knees. The dizziness didn't fade as the leader had said it would. Taking it as an opportunity, Mikel became acquainted with her surroundings. She lay on the damp clay of an empty home much like her own. A cold whisper of night seeped in through a crack in the wall to her right.

The leader remained planted before her with an expression of boredom. Mikel wished she could punch his face; it needed a few dents to match his twisted personality. *What a disgusting creep.*

Then, he spoke again. "Eagle, remove her gag. Falcon, assist her in rising. Make certain she can stand on her own before you release her. Ferro shall not purchase a slave that cannot stand."

The red-headed boy, Eagle, knelt to extract the gag, then Falcon grudgingly helped Mikel up. His dark brown hair was shorter than the leader's, and his brilliant amber eyes evaluated her for what seemed like an eternity. Mikel dropped her eyes to his falcon pendant fashioned of bronze. He gripped the rope twined around her wrists as he eased his support away.

Mikel's legs steadily bore her weight now. Cold fury shot through her veins as she finally understood what they planned to do. *They want to sell you as a slave! That's banned on Elendathor!* "How dare you hold me here! Selling me into the illegal slave trade won't end well for you; I promise you that!"

The leader raised his eyebrows, amused. "*Please, Keli.*" He pronounced her pack name so the K sounded like a throaty H. "Let us start anew. My comrades and I intend no harm. It would be in your best interests to surrender any futile fight."

Mikel found herself believing his silky words, only finding strength to fight them by focusing on his aggravating word choice. *Is he trying to impress you, or was he just raised by a dictionary?*

"If my understanding is accurate, there is a considerable bounty resting on your head for your criminal activity. It is my duty to detain you and turn you in, Shadow Reaper."

Definitely the dictionary.

"Slavery may be illicit here, but I believe you prefer it to the alternative. You can either rot in prison with your unfortunate parents when their debts are called in, or you can provide them a fair chance and still live a decent slave's life." He paused to allow his words to sink in.

Mikel stared at him, dismayed. "Nothing you pose is fair! Let me go!"

The leader shrugged. "I only do what is in your favor, Mikel," he said casually as he turned to the one called Falcon. "Move out."

"Walk, Slave!" Eagle snarled, yanking Mikel onto a metal landing where a rusted starship rested.

Mikel winced; *please don't let them say you're going to be dragged onto that.*

"Well, what have we got here?" A balding man splotted with engine grease toddled out from behind the ship on stubby legs. Above his ugly stump-nose, his beady eyes hid beneath bushy gray eyebrows.

The rope bit into Mikel's wrists as she tried—and failed—to dart away from the repulsive man. Eagle yanked her forward. With no way to catch herself, Mikel plunged face-first into an oil puddle. She awkwardly forced herself back up as the concoction streamed down her face.

The leader stepped forward, ignoring the incident. "Greetings, Ferro. We contacted you about a slave earlier, remember?" His question was more of a statement, filled with absolute contempt.

"Oh, y-yeah! It guts hard to 'member things when you gut old like me sometimes," Ferro stammered feebly in horrid Essence, the tips of yellowed teeth peeking out from beneath his thin lips.

"Quit babbling and tell us how much you shall pay for her," Eagle spat.

Ferro hesitantly approached Mikel, edging away from the trio smartly. With her kneeling awkwardly, the man was only slightly taller. As he began to look her over, Mikel had to force herself not to recoil from the reek of starship grease.

He snatched her braid up into his slimy hands. "This won't do," he mumbled.

"Too long?" the leader inquired sneeringly. "I can deal with that." He drew a dagger, grabbed hold of Mikel's glossy locks, and hacked it off in one swift swipe.

Mikel whimpered, remembering what options the leader had presented. In a horrible way, he was right. *It's not fair!* If she tried to escape now, everything he'd said would become her reality. The jagged ends of her vastly shortened hair fell down in front of her face, hiding the tears spilling down her cheeks. *Why is this happening to you?*

"Five hundred," Ferro announced at last.

The leader's eyes narrowed. "One thousand," he proposed solidly.

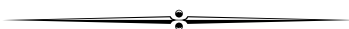
"Six-fifty."

Mikel hated them fighting over a price like she was an animal, her heart beating in fear. Against her will, a powerful presence of comfort wrapped around her. Mikel fought it: she couldn't relax when she was about to be sold into slavery!

"Agreed." The leader's gaze held a concealed meaning.

Ferro apparently understood the significance of the dark boy. When he dealt the *turi* over to the leader and shook his hand, his eyes promised not to fail. In return, the leader's glare assured the man if he didn't succeed, his punishment would transcend his wildest dreams.

Eagle handed Mikel over to Ferro with one last glare of derision. The three boys then turned and departed, their armor melding them into the night. With them, the strange sense of comfort also fled. Mikel was alone, entirely at Ferro's mercy.



Twilight's Gleam

Black Hawk pressed a cool cloth to his forehead. Silver globes of water plummeted onto his fresh black cloak. Eagle and Falcon, who were finishing the last bits of packing, had firmly told him to rest, but he was unable to obey.

In the solitude of his room onboard the *Twilight's Gleam*, his nightmares only worsened. The worst part about the dreams was that only snippets of words, shattered images, and feelings of horror stuck with him. He was unable to remember precisely what had terrified him so deeply.

Black Hawk studied his reflection in the oval mirror centered on an otherwise bare wall. The lines under his eyes were like bruises now, his complexion far paler than usual.

This torture had all begun because of a dream declaring Mikel as the Prophesied One. By hunting Mikel, he'd angered her protector, a

gold-armored Star—one of the beings that some believed created the galaxy. Koby had always believed the Stars were good, but his opinion had changed. He feared this Golden Warrior.

Long ago, he'd been forced to banish fear along with love, compassion, pity, and any other weakness, but still they lingered in the recesses of his mind. Sometimes they would surface, and he would fight to keep his grip on the image he had no choice but to portray. He was a blackcoat, the merciless third-in-command of the Castorian Empire. Commander Black Hawk, they called him.

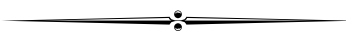
But your name is Kahibh River Dakino. He was Rawkonian-born, which meant he had a name that only his close friends and family called him by. Koby was the Essence form others knew him by.

Koby gritted his teeth as his head throbbed. He shouldn't have come to Elendathor, but he'd been so desperate to get away from Castoria and prove himself after his embarrassing failure. He'd been after three members of the Freedom Ring that winter's day. Unfortunately, he'd been caught off-guard and shot with his own paralyzing gun. The empress had lost faith in him, which was why he'd needed this mission.

Now, as long as everything else proceeded smoothly, he would regain Empress' favor. Koby wasn't certain it was worth the cost. Now a Star wanted him dead, and he'd have to watch Mikel's spirit shatter. He hated both.

You have obeyed Empress' orders to recover your reputation. That is all that matters. No more useless worries about Mikel or the Golden Warrior.

It was time to report.



Ferro's Starship

In the cargo hold, Mikel's shivering breath was a ghostly haze against a lightless canvas. She'd never been this cold in her life. Tears marked her face, the ability to brush them away no longer within her power. It'd been her choice to join a pack. She couldn't allow that choice to land her parents in prison with her.

After her captors had departed, Ferro led Mikel to the ship's cargo hold. He forced her to the ground between stacks of crates with happy things like *WARNING: EXPLOSIVES* stamped onto their wooden sides; then he'd secured her with chains. Mikel tried to make herself smaller, not wanting to touch the crates.

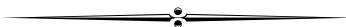
Within the main section of the ship, Mikel could hear Ferro scuttling around. His foreign mutterings reached her ears through the open door of the cargo hold, and the scuffle of his feet helped her track his location.

At last, the ship's engine rattled to life. The horrible grinding ruckus plummeted Mikel's confidence in the starship into a bottomless abyss. Her tongue ran over the slits in her cheeks, and she was relieved to find that they'd stopped bleeding.

Not long after that, the battered starship was airborne. More tears stung her eyes as Mikel felt the ship burst through what must've been the atmosphere. The home she had known for seventeen years was gone.

Hours passed, and Mikel began to dwell on possible chances of escape. However, she soon found that her head was nodding despite her desire to formulate a plan. The room had grown warm, though ice still formed on the sides of the crates. *Maybe, she thought with a yawn, if you rest a while, an idea will come.* With that thought in mind, Mikel bowed her head.

Shadows swirled around her, warding away the chill. Mikel didn't feel the gold gaze settle on her still form, nor did she hear the whispered voice against her ear. She was already sinking deep within a dreamless sleep, the shadows lulling her mind to remain at rest until the time was right.



Empress' Office, Castoria

The empress ignored her MiComm when it lit with an image of her third-in-command. Hard edges of her metal throne dug into her trembling body, but she accepted the call at last and directed it to display on her wall with a thought. The wet spray around her eyes was too small of a detail to notice.

The wall displayed Black Hawk kneeling in the center of his room aboard the *Twilight's Gleam*. "My lady," he lifted his emotionless brown eyes, "the target is en route for Castoria as we speak."

She breathed in and out quietly before she responded. "Swell, my Hawk. I presume all is well on Elendathor?"

"As well as conditions can be in a desert, my lady."

"As expected." She allowed the corners of her lips to turn up the slightest bit. Black Hawk was struggling to stay at attention—the stress lines under his eyes darker than usual. He didn't look well enough to continue his journey. "Is it your plan to depart for Quibar tonight?"

He nodded.

"Swell." The empress made no mention of Hawk's apparent exhaustion. They both knew he had a job to complete. "Ephram Martin and his daughters shall find you shortly after your arrival. Remember, under no circumstances may you upset them. Other information shall be supplied through your MiComm."

He dipped his head to accept the charge. "All shall be as you desire, my lady."

She smirked. "Call me by my name, Koby. Despite your *mistakes*, you are in my favor." She watched, amused as his face tightened at the word "mistakes." She would never allow him to forget that slip in his service. A form of shock also crept across Koby's steely disposition. "You are my third-in-command. The right is yours for your loyalty in our partnership, my Hawk."

"I..." Koby appeared unable to grasp what she'd said. "Thank you, Circe."

Circe ended the communication. She missed the boy's presence—it had been a long two months without his support at base. Soon, Black Hawk would be back beside her.

Any tears had long-since dried off Circe's face. She didn't even remember what had caused them. *The reffum stand no chance now. You are soon to have no other obstacles to overcome in maintaining your control. The one chink shall be within your grasp.*

Opening another communication link, this time to the emperor, Empress Circe waited for acceptance. She couldn't wait to share the news.