

PROLOGUE

*Lindiwi says that Sister Enuncia is stealing the children after dark. She ties them up in the cellar, drains their blood, then takes the bodies into the desert for the nightbeetles to snip to pieces. I want Lindiwi to be wrong, but why are the dorm beds stripped, as though they aren't coming back? And why do I dream of the schaduw stalking the empty corridors after curfew, making Sister Enuncia do the things she's doing?*

I

Two sections of the perimeter were down. Wind hissed through the Kevlar mesh either side of the gap. Beyond, the Cinderlands slid away into infinity, the dunes scarred by struts sticking out of the sand like stripped bones. Anything could've been staring back at us from underneath the bombed-out metal.

'Why would somebody remove the boundary?' I said to Mo, who stood to my right, one foot on a lump of blackglass.

He shrugged. In silhouette, his features were sharply cut, like a beautiful Old World sculpture, the kind that spends its entire life in a vault somewhere while the public get to gawp at a reproduction.

'This job came in as code amber. That's low alert, in case you've forgotten your basic training, Miss Green.'

Mo and me hadn't got off to a good start, but if there's one thing you don't do, it's piss your handler off any more than is absolutely necessary.

'Look, Mo, I know you've got more field experience than me, but-'

'You have *no* field experience at all, Miss Green.'

He turned to face me, the setting sun glancing off one dark cheekbone. Mo wouldn't admit it, not straight out at least, but since the day Oxtan pulled him from the senior guardians and gave him to me, he'd found various ways to let me know he had a problem with the status quo.

I turned my back on him and ran my fingers along the broken edge of Kevlar.

'The cuts are neat,' I said. 'This was no accident. Plus they've taken the fence, just to be

sure we can't do a quick patch-up job.'

I scanned the earth around my feet, the black stuff they say is some kind of ash that blows off the Disaster Zone and gives the Cinderlands its name.

'See these vehicle marks?' I squatted down. A breeze scattered the dust, and the marks began to disappear. 'They're recent, made by an old fashioned hop - the sort that hovers rather than flies.'

Mo snorted.

'What?' I stood up. 'I recognise the pattern. The nuns had an old hop that left tracks just the same.'

'It isn't the hop. I'm wondering why the Unit brought in an empath to tell me what I can see with my own two eyes.'

Before the Unit, I'd had some pretty tricky customers, but I'd been a fool to think I could handle anything in trousers. Mo glared at me, his eyebrows taut over his shades. I wished he'd take them off, just once, so that I could see his eyes, but he never did. They were always there, melded to his face. He probably even slept in them. And he thought *I* was weird.

'I need a little longer.'

I faced the Cinderlands and closed my eyes. The vehicle had passed through the perimeter several times, carrying some kind of cargo. Whoever drove it slipped away fast into the dunes, carrying me along on his thought-stream. The driver was older than me, but not much, unkempt, and unfit. He resonated desperation, the kind that usually signifies somebody in over their head, somebody who's on the edge of losing it. Don't ask me how I know things like this - I just do. You could be scientific and say that something inside me responds to the displacement kinetic energy, or you might prefer the spiritual angle, whatever that might be. It doesn't make much difference to me. All I know is, this is what I am, and this is what I do.

The sense of black earth and spent metal told me the vehicle was deep in the dunes, until, like a light that'd been turned out, it vanished.

I swore softly, and opened my eyes. Our driver was using the Cinderlands as a cover. Even the shifters wouldn't set foot over the boundary. But if I told Mo, he'd laugh in my face. He'd tell me he could've worked that much out for himself. I tried to focus in on the cargo, but all I saw was blackness, the kind of blackness that signifies something with no life signature.

As the last trace of the sun vanished, the temperature plummeted. Mo slid his foot off the blackglass and turned towards the hop, which was parked on the edge of the bone-yard behind us. Its landing pads stood leg-deep in a sea of half-submerged Old World headstones that pushed like broken teeth through the detritus.

'We should go,' he said, pulling his jacket tight around his body. 'We'll report back to Oxton and request a repair team.'

Mo stalked off between the stones. Beyond, throughout North Side, night lights were flicking on, fragmenting the expanse of darkness with chains of colour. It was almost curfew.

'Just give me another minute,' I said.

I switched my awareness, scanning the broken fence for life-lights. The faintest glimmer of the last living person to touch the metal hung over it in a streak, so faint that in another few days, it would vanish completely. The life-light belonged to a single male, most likely the hop driver. He'd laser-clipped the fence open three and a half weeks ago, four at most, and hadn't touched it again since. The kind of laser needed to cut through Kevlar wasn't something you could get hold of on the street; it was strictly Unit issue.

None of it made sense.

The wind tore my hair from its band and whipped it around my face in dark whorls. I held it back off my forehead and took a deep breath. Three months at the Unit, and the most

I'd achieved was basic training, which was virtually pointless, considering my one-and-only hop piloting lesson had almost ended in a crash, and that I still couldn't aim a laser weapon at a double-door and be sure I'd hit it. I stared out towards the horizon. The wind shrieked through the mesh, and wrapped itself around me like a shroud. At least at *Torches* I'd known the score. Sure, the guys got fresh from time to time, but security made sure everything stayed friendly. And now, after five years in a world I'd known, here I was staring into the dark and listening to the wind sift sand and roar off a landscape made of mutilated scrap. I pulled my jacket tight around my waist, and turned away.

Mo was already in the vehicle. The thrusters hissed softly, sending puffs of blacksand up around the landing pads. He put his headset on as I climbed into the passenger seat.

'How can you wear that thing over your shades?' I said.

He ignored me. I fastened my harness and we rose up.

'Did you get anything else?' Mo's voice was light, but the sarcasm bled through.

'Yes,' I said. 'The fence was cut down a month ago. The hop driver is a single male, and the cargo has no life signature. Our driver is using the Cinderlands as a cover for his operation. He also has access to a Unit issue Kevlar-cutter.'

Just for a beat Mo's block fell away and a sharp flash of shock burned through the space between us. A moment later, he'd stamped on it. It was an effort not to let the corners of my mouth twitch up. The guy wasn't as impervious as he wanted to think.

As the hop turned, we faced a fiesta of light garlands in every colour imaginable. They hung in chains, sporadic here, but further into North Side more dense, crawling up the tall houses and coiling around the courtyards. So pretty, it was difficult to believe that there were more unexplained disappearances in this part of the city than any other. Unless you understood shifters.

Across the boundary bridge into South Side, the buildings were bigger, and the street

lights hung in regular rows like little white pearls. The squares teemed with people, some at flash-food stands, others seated underneath heat lamps in pavement café bars or dawdling between the shopping arcades. Virtual childmoms shepherded groups of kids in neon jackets, and android enforcers clustered under the fake-trees, watching. After the solitude of the bone-yard, we might've been flying into a carnival.

'I suggest we see Oxtan immediately to report on the perimeter. If she doesn't want anything else, I'll take you home, Miss Green.'

We touched down on HQ roof top. Mo slipped the headset off and put it on the dash.

'Can't you cut the Miss Green thing and just call me Jess?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Protocol.'

'That's such bull, Mo. At least let's soften the boundaries a little so we don't have to pretend that I give the orders.'

Mo ignored me, and opened his side visor.

I laid my hand on his elbow. 'Can we at least try to-'

He pulled away and twisted round to face me in one quick move.

'I'd prefer it if you didn't touch me, Miss Green.'

*'What?'*

'The last empath I knew read by touch.'

'But *I* don't.'

'Even so.'

Mo slid out the door. I flicked down my side-visor, and followed him out onto the roof. An Eye shot past the landing lights, its lenses glittering. It saw us, then darted over the edge of the building and plummeted down into the square below.

We checked through security and took the lift in silence facing our reflections, Mo's dark face high above my own pale one. My shirt collar had fallen open to reveal the Old World button on a chain that I never took off, the only thing I had of my brother's. Instinctively, I reached up and tucked it away. The sight of my hair still shocked me - the hair I'd worn long at *Torches*, the hair that'd brought me extra tips, now cut to my shoulders and tied back, reduced to a dark smudge. Then, they'd called me beautiful; now, stripped of the artifice the *Torches* clientele seemed to love, I wasn't so sure. I closed my eyes and waited for the stomach-surge to tell me that we'd stopped moving.

The lift opened on floor Eighty Nine. Oxton was waiting for us in her office, her lips anus-tight and her eyes bloodshot. She shut the door.

'What have you got for me Miss Green, Mr Okoli?'

'The shifters' report was correct, Oxton,' I said.

'I suspected so.' Oxton sank into a plush swivel behind the desk, and slid her com into a rack. 'North Side might not be the Unit's favourite location, but the shifters would never lie about a perimeter breach. Please, continue.'

I opened my mouth to speak. Mo cut me off.

'Miss Green detected a possible single male driving some kind of cargo to and from North Side into the Cinderlands.'

*A possible* single male? What the hell was one of those, when it was at home?

'Whatever he's doing, it can't be any more than small-time,' Mo continued. 'It wouldn't be the first time a petty racketeer has made the mistake of using North Side as a cover. Let's plant the seed with the shifters, let them take him out, and then repair the breach. It should take forty eight hours tops.'

Oxton sat back and laced her fingers. Her nails were long and sharp, painted the same scarlet as her lips. She regarded us both in silence.

'I don't necessarily agree,' I said.

Mo twitched.

'With respect, Mo, you only saw what your eyes told you, and that wasn't an awful lot.'

He stiffened and looked down at me.

'I have an alternative recommendation,' I said to Oxton. 'If we operate a minimum-surveillance operation, we can find out exactly what this guy is up to.'

'Minimum surveillance is perhaps a term Miss Green remembers from her basic training.'

'No, I-'

'Which hardly makes up for almost crashing a hop, and discharging a laser weapon in a dangerous environment.'

'When a lone ranger rips open the perimeter in shifters-ville, and drives out into the Cinderlands carrying an unspecified cargo, then it isn't a code amber situation, Mo. There's more to it.'

Mo smiled. 'Thank you for your expert opinion.'

'Can I have exactly what you picked up in *your* words, Miss Green?' said Oxton.

She wasn't sitting any more. She stood, and leaned across her desk, her eyes so pale blue they were ghostly, the circles underneath cavernous.

'He travels alone when he crosses the border. This guy's stress levels are off the scale. Everything about him carries the hallmark of somebody who's in over his head. To me, that only means one thing: that somebody bigger is running him. And if somebody bigger is running him, then sooner or later, something bigger is going to happen.'

Nobody spoke. The water cooler in the corner hummed. Oxton's com bleeped, once, then kicked into messages. Mo bristled and didn't bother to block.

'And for the record, my assessment has nothing to do with my basic training,' I said.



‘It’s based on five years of watching the same thing happen over and again.’

*Torches* might’ve been a sexclub, but thanks to its dodgy reputation, it was also a racketeers’ hothouse. Subversives used the place as a front, and conducted their business behind closed doors. I guess the girls and the drink were just a light diversion. When you’ve worked a place like that for a while, you get a feel for the kind of guys who operate below the radar.

Oxton watched us closely, her eyes rolling in their sockets.

‘You are no longer a senior guardian, Mr Okoli. You are Miss Green’s handler. Your role is to support her work and not to question her judgement.’ Oxton turned to me. ‘How would *you* like to see this matter handled, Miss Green?’

‘Put a motion-sensor on the broken fence, and have all film footage forwarded straight to me,’ I said. ‘Once we’ve located this man, I only have to look into his eyes. He never need know I’m onto him. That’s better than taking him off the street and alerting his boss in the process.’

Oxton nodded. ‘I accept your recommendation. Keep me informed.’

She flicked through some holo-files, sending them out into the air around her head where they fluttered like little mirages. Seconds later, they vanished.

‘The arrangements are made. I have a team from Forty Three attending the perimeter before dawn. Footage will be sent to you both immediately the motion sensors are deployed. You are dismissed.’

My stomach turned itself over, that horrible, taut feeling you get when you find yourself praying you’ve made the right call.

Mo nodded stiffly and turned towards the door.

‘Oh, and Mr Okoli?’

He stopped with his hand stretched towards the handle.

The Eternity Fund, by Liz Monument

'Do you have a personal issue with Miss Green?'

Mo spun around on his heels. 'No, ma'am.'

'Good. Do you have a professional issue with Miss Green?'

He hesitated. 'No, ma'am.'

Like hell he didn't.

'Good. You may no longer be a senior guardian, but I expect you to employ the same level of professionalism. Dismissed.'

We stepped into the corridor. The door closed behind us with a soft sucking sound. When Mo's footsteps began to disappear in the opposite direction, I realised I'd turned the wrong way to the lift. I spun around. Light from the strips slid over the surface of his jacket as he loped away. I wanted to ask him if the leather was real, because if it was, he earned more than double what I was on, but I kept my mouth shut and caught up.

The Eternity Fund is due to be released in February 2015 by Audible.co.uk