

*Every great mistake has a halfway moment,  
a split second when it can be recalled  
and perhaps remedied.*

~ Pearl S. Buck ~

## Chapter 1

THE LIGHT WAS FADING FAST. Start of sunset was when she always left, and she was well past that. The rules were clear: *Never* remain inside the Keep during twilight when gateways unlock.

Nevertheless, Brune landed in front of a massive stone arch, smashed on one side. She flicked off the ignition, silencing the whirring wings of her aeronaut pack. Kneeling down to read the Old Norse runes surrounding the empty indentation beneath the archway, a quick glance told her the immense and immovable hammer of Thor had sat there for untold ages. There could be only one explanation for its disappearance.

Another scavenger.

Anger burned hot in her chest. A weapon that used to level mountains had become spare parts for a walking scrapheap. “What a waste,” she fumed.

Generally, scavengers were easily dealt with. They were really nothing more than hairballs coughed up by the Keep whenever there was too much magic congesting the pipes. Scavs were more

pests than anything else. Voracious eaters of whatever element they first came in contact with. The last one had been a small, porcupine-shaped creature made of crystal, seemingly harmless until it laser-beamed her in the ankle. Stomping it under her boot and disintegrating it with her pistol had taken care of that. Though judging from the damage this new scavenger had already caused, dining on Thor's hammer had given it a scary amount of strength.

Uneasiness squirmed in the pit of her stomach as she looked up at the dwindling light. Tangerine hues bled across the blue expanse of the Keep's artificial atmosphere. The revolving hoops of the titanic armillary sphere sweeping round and round high overhead, grazed the firmament with crackling golden tracers. The only sign of the force field protecting life and precious cargo against the exposure of deep space. The cargo being countless vaults, each of which held something far too powerful and dangerous for ordinary realms. The very reason the enormous storehouse had been chucked to the ass-end of the universe. But to Brune, the Keep was more of an enclosed city, like a snow globe wrapped around a tiny jewel of a metropolis.

Where the sky had deepened to indigo, she could just make out the sickly green and clotted red of the Hades Nebula and the smoldering, molten surface of the planet, Titus, looming large against the glittering backdrop of distant stars. She had forty minutes before total night descended, but only fifteen before twilight.

She lowered her gaze, briefly registering a pearlescent cathedral and copper pyramid rising into view beside where she stood under the broken arch. Miles of architectural wonders stretched out on all sides—new from one day to the next—the landscape always in constant motion. An ancient, magically infused technology powered the complex system of underground cogs and wheels with clockwork precision. Each unique structure slid

into view, while others returned into the Keep's mysterious depths in completion of a century long cycle. It still boggled her mind as to why this design of perfect orderliness would have a flaw that could bring about its own destruction.

Tension knotted her shoulders as she teetered on the edge of indecision. Her instincts urged her to get out, but her devotion to the Keep made her stay. A scavenger, possibly more dangerous than any she'd encountered before, was loose. She couldn't just allow it free rein for the next hour to devour other priceless instruments of magic *and* grow even more powerful. Not to mention, if it damaged even a single gateway during the gloaming, all hell would break loose.

Her job as Guardian was to prevent that from happening at all costs.

"Damn the rules," she said, sliding back the compass ring on the navigation watch strapped to her left wrist. She set the timer for twelve minutes, allowing three minutes to get to the breaching door of the sanctuary. As the bronze ring snicked back over the clock face, the ticking began, loud and urgent. The marks measuring the seconds lit up a bright red path that was already building fast.

Tugging her goggles down over her eyes, the amber tint of crystal lenses turned her world a dark gold. She dialed back the controls, bracing for the nausea-inducing sensation of her retinas adjusting to high frequency particle emissions. As the initial queasiness subsided, feathery streaks of blue vapor revealed the scavenger's telltale path.

Brune sprinted after the vaporous tracks past a gilded chapel. The elaborate Byzantine-style structure sank steadily into the subsurface, a jade mausoleum advancing in its place. With everything in perpetual motion, she feared the scavenger's tracks might've shifted too much from where they originated. She jumped onto a moving walkway, maintaining the same rapid

pace. As it snaked to the right and rounded a sprawling panel of silver filigree, the vaporous trail thickened. She was close.

Skidding to a stop, she scanned for any movement out of sync with the rhythmic motion of her surroundings. The clock ticked. The red path lengthened. Only nine minutes left.

She continued on, forcing herself to slow down, to move cautiously along the winding walkway. A crepuscular blue glimmer emanated from behind a massive glass clock tower. Easing down behind the low wall bordering the walkway, she fixed her gaze on the tower's base, refocusing the lenses of her goggles. Visibility sharpened, cutting through the structure's multilayered glass cogs and wheels until she saw it on the other side.

"Gotcha," she muttered, flipping another set of lenses down over her goggles. The magnified view tightened in on a hulking shape of twisted metal shrouded in a dense blue haze. Slowly, she gripped the handle of her disintegrator pistol, pulling it from the holster.

The walkway circled the other side of the clock tower, moving her into the scavenger's corrosive cloud. The stench of crude magic always burned her nostrils and made her eyes water. But the result was further intensified when used to animate metal, especially iron, which this one was seeking out and consuming.

The seconds ticked incessantly, pushing her nerves to the edge. Six minutes left.

Realizing her jaw ached from locking her teeth, she unclenched and sucked in a shaky breath. Fear sat on her shoulder like a vulture, ready to swoop in and pick her clean of courage.

Pushing off the goggles, she brought her target into the cross hairs of the pistol's scope. The air was growing more caustic the closer she got, making it hard to see. Wiping her eyes,

she screwed up her face. “Lousy scav.”

She saw its misshapen head jerk up and around. Adrenaline shot up her spine. This one had excellent hearing. Its eyes flamed ice blue and fixed on her. Then it lunged, its blade-like claws grappling the tower and breaking glass. Shards rained down over the bronze steps encircling the structure. Wincing from the damage it wreaked, she kept her pistol aimed.

“Come on...a little closer.”

As if in answer, the scavenger leaped from the tower and shot toward her.

“No...no, too close.” She reared back in a panic, pulling the trigger too soon.

The pistol kicked hard in her hand, emitting a gaseous red cloud. Had she held her aim, the gas would’ve engulfed the creature. Most of it missed, hitting only its legs. The particles went to work fast, oxidizing metal limbs into crumbling rust. An angry shriek resounded throughout the Keep as the creature spun out of control. Before hitting the ground, the twisted metal in its back reshaped into razor-sharp wings. The scavenger righted its fall with surprising agility, swept up and circled overhead, its gleaming eyes fastened on her.

With shaking, sweating hands, she removed the pistol’s purged canister. Feeling for a new charge, she pulled it from her belt. The ticking counted down, drawing her gaze to the watch face. Two minutes left. Perspiration dripped in her eyes as she fumbled with the cartridge.

The scavenger plunged. It was on her just as she loaded the next charge.

The hot slice of its claw drove into her shoulder, sending her hurtling through the air, the pain excruciating. Fighting to stay conscious, she lifted the pistol with her good arm and pulled the trigger. The shot reverberated through her, ringing in her ears. Red gas filled her vision as a cloud of rust choked her lungs,

a sure sign she'd hit the mark.

Then she heard the scavenger's shriek and realized she'd failed.

She crashed to the ground, the air slamming from her lungs. Pain exploded throughout her body. Her head swam as impending darkness pressed in.

The timer rang, a clamorous sound in her muddled mind. She had three minutes to get out. Dull panic badgered her to get up. She tried to move but her body wouldn't respond, the connection to her brain severed as she sank inexorably into a depthless black.



Searing jolts burned up her left arm. Brune woke gasping and slapping at her wrist where the prongs from the watch dug into skin, shocking her with short bursts of electricity. Pressing the button, she shut down the alarm's built-in safety mechanism—designed to initiate if the timer wasn't turned off after the first ring of the alarm. Why had she set it?

Disoriented, she squinted at the watch, trying to remember past the last minute. Her vision was blurred, her head thick. Struggling to sit up, she cried out from a knifing pain in her shoulder. She unbuckled the aeronaut pack, putting her hand over the open, throbbing wound. Blood gushed between her fingers.

Nauseating fear welled up inside her. What had happened? Eerie, unfamiliar sounds echoed all around her, sending cold shivers up the back of her neck. She gulped, realizing she sat in darkness beneath a pale-lit sky. Twilight was upon her. She grabbed for her pistol, only to find the holster empty.

Then it all came back to her. She had shot the scavenger and missed.

Clicking on her light ring, she pointed her fist, shining its

radiant beam over the floor. Her pistol was nowhere to be seen. Her first thought was that the scavenger had devoured it. But if that were the case, she would've found the wooden grip and its empty cartridge with traces of deducting fluid left inside. No, this scavenger somehow had the foresight to take the pistol before it flew off to restore itself—a worrisome notion in and of itself, but something else bothered her more.

Why had it left her alive?

Brune rose to her feet with difficulty. A deep, bone-weary fatigue nearly overwhelmed her again. She'd never experienced such weakness before. This was just a stab wound. She'd been through worse than this before.

A dreadful fear reared its ugly head, a demon she'd thought she'd conquered long ago. Her mind shrank from it.

"Focus," she said, brushing the fulvous dust from her clothes.

She checked her punctured shoulder. Pus and far too much blood had soaked into her tank top and canvas corset. She was almost relieved by the sight. Blood loss would account for the fuzzy thinking and severe drag. Pulling her leather skirt aside, she tore a strip of cloth from her petticoat and bound it round her shoulder.

That done, she briefly considered pursuing the scavenger, more out of habit than anything else. But her rapidly failing energy decided the matter. She needed to get through the breaching door and patch herself up before she could come back to finish the job.

She turned her attention to inspecting the aeronaut pack. One of the wire dragonfly-shaped wings was bent, but the netting was still intact and the fuel pump and storage cells glowed green with ample energy. She straightened the wing and turned on the ignition. Satisfied it would hold, she cut the motor long enough to gingerly slip the pack onto her back. Searing pain brought stars to her eyes as soon as the strap pressed

down on the wound, but she had to keep it on. Walking was out of the question.

She was just about to lift off when her slowed senses registered the sound of rushing water behind her. An archway flanked by gilded Atlantean seahorses had opened to reveal an inner chamber with a pool fed by waterfalls. Now she knew why the scavenger had left her lying where it had dropped her. Water, even in the form of mist, destroyed all iron animated by crude magic.

A shadow moved across the wet tiles of the interior, a human shadow, but the footsteps sounded more like hooves. As the shadow neared the entrance, a magnificent set of horns preceded the bent head of a gazelle, followed by quivering wings of aquamarine. The graceful creature had round liquid eyes promising pure gentleness, yet nothing could be further from the truth. Brune froze when she recognized the creature. A peryton with a human shadow craved one thing only: the taste of human flesh.

Dizzy with terror, she stepped backwards, hoping it hadn't seen her. Then its eyes met hers. Revving the gears of her aeronaut pack, she launched skyward. After covering a fair distance, she glanced back. The peryton was nowhere in sight. Relief flooded through her. She faced forward and cried out in shock.

The creature had flown with silent swiftness over her head, now charging straight at her. She shot up but not fast enough. Its horns ripped through the flare of her leather skirt, ramming into her shins with bone-shattering pain. She tumbled through the air not knowing up from down, only hearing the beating of its wings. Panic hammered in her heart. She didn't stand a chance if she stayed airborne. In the terrible blur, she spotted a nearby turret. Righting herself, she sped towards it and landed.

The peryton dove from a great height, its soft muzzle gaping with fangs. Shuddering, she unsheathed her sword, probably a useless gesture but it made her feel better. The sword's blade glanced off its back like a butter knife against rock. She swerved to one side to avoid being impaled by its horns. Her weak legs buckling, she hit the wall as hooves clattered over the stone behind her.

Her unreliable legs forced her to take flight again, but not soon enough. A horn caught in her skirt, flipping her directly onto its back. She was stuck, flat on her belly with her legs straddling its muscular neck. Never had she felt so helpless as she struggled to free herself.

A terrifying roar rumbled from below. The peryton gave a violent buck, or so she thought. Something had seized it out from under her. She hovered in place, confused by the sight of huge, flapping bat wings, a serpent coiled around the peryton's body and a lion's jaws crushing its neck. It took several seconds to realize this new beast was one creature, not two.

"Oh God, a Chimera!"

As the lion half of the Chimera gorged on the peryton, the serpent part abandoned the bloody feast, locking eyes with her.

"Note to self," she muttered, "less thinking aloud. And no more skirts."

Jetting in the opposite direction, Brune searched for the breaching door, but her wondrous city was lit with a confusing gleam of open gateways, some shooting out ensorcelled flames, others oozing with glowing plasma or sparking clouds of faery light. More disturbing than any of these were the thick shadow forms made of glinting stardust, which blotted out large sections of the Keep.

At last she saw the breaching door about a mile away. As she flew toward it, a movement from below caused her to drop her speed slightly. A small band of deformed humanoids crept close

to the walls. One had the head of a dog and another was more like an upright eel, while most of the others were grotesque distortions of humans, slithering and crawling within the deep shadows.

Revulsion and terror pooled alongside increasing exhaustion. She speeded up, hoping the Fomorians hadn't seen her. The last thing she needed was to draw the attention of an ancient race of chaos-makers.

She was about a half-mile from the hatch when she heard the Chimera's roar behind her. She glanced back, only to see the lion's flaming maw less than a hundred yards away. Cranking the gears into full throttle, she weaved between two spires, almost crashing into a bell tower. The beast gave chase, both leaping and flying from one structure to the next, the more fragile ones collapsing under its great weight.

Brune didn't have to look back to know it was gaining on her. She sensed its closeness by the raised hairs on the back of her neck. The escape hatch was only moments away, but she wouldn't get there before she was either incinerated or clawed out of the air. She struggled to think, her instincts clouded by desperation. Years of close calls shouted at her to take cover. So she dove into the shadowy depths, dipping under a wrought-iron bridge before skimming through a series of narrow passageways.

Behind her, the behemoth's angry roar and the shrieking crush of the bridge echoed throughout the expanse. She stayed close to ground level, hoping it would pursue her on foot at a more hindered pace. Looking back, she caught a glimpse of leathery wings fighting the restraint of narrow confines. The head and body were cloaked in darkness except for the glistening scales of the serpent's head and those awful, staring eyes.

Forcing her gaze straight ahead, she ducked into the courtyard of a fortress to buy more time. She passed through the

gate, shooting straight up but heard smashing stone as the Chimera burst through the cramped passage only seconds later. She raced to open the hatch, bashing into the wall as she punched the button. The sliding sound of iron against iron as the door opened like the dilating iris of a camera lens was music to her ears.

*“Come on!”* she screamed, her heart pounding in her throat.

Growling flames and scorching heat surged at her back as she shot through the opening and tumbled across the floor. As the iris spiraled shut behind her, the Chimera crashed against the solid barrier with a resounding roar that shook the sanctuary walls.

Choking back the acidic tang of adrenalin flooding her system, Brune lay there like a limp rag. Her body begged to lose consciousness, but rest was the furthest thing from her mind. After seventy-five years of keeping order in the universe, she couldn't believe such a small mistake could very well unleash an eternity of chaos throughout the cosmos.