

# 1 THE GREAT PROTECTOR

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The sun set on the last day of Dylan Peterson's final summer in high school. The rays of gold and red shone brightly on the horizon, the sign of an ending. He sat on a stump atop a hill overlooking his family's property. It was here Dylan often sought out solitude. Having six younger brothers meant there were no quiet places to be found inside the house.

His attention was diverted by a car kicking up a cloud of dust at the opposite end of his street. As the vehicle neared, he recognized it as the McGowan's Escalade. They'd been gone most of the summer, traveling through Europe. Dylan figured he ought to return their keys, as Mrs. McGowan had paid him to take care of their cat and water the plants in their absence.

Dylan hopped off the stump and headed down the hill. He made his way down to the front and through the gate. The first one out of the SUV was Alvin. His Egyptian complexion and golden eyes was a trait that made him and his family unique in this town.

He shuffled his too-large feet across the grass as he ran straight to Dylan's house, giving him a hurried wave as he passed by.

"Figures," Dylan muttered to himself. He should've known the first thing Alvin would do when he got home would be to tell Dylan's little brother, Tyler, everything about his summer abroad.

"Hey, welcome home! How was the trip?" Dylan called out to Mr. and Mrs. McGowan, as they started to unload some luggage.

Mrs. McGowan turned to look at him. Her exhaustion was evident through her kind smile. "Aw, Dylan... It's good to see you. It was wonderful! I'm sure the kids will tell you all about it. How'd housesitting go?"

"Good... Your cat is still alive, so are most of your plants. After performing CPR on the Boston fern I had to call it." Dylan handed Mrs. McGowan her key.

"Aren't you the one for jokes," she said with a chuckle.

"Dude, that was terrible," Roger piped in.

Roger was a couple years older than Dylan and starting his sophomore year at the University of Idaho, where both his parents worked.

The two boys shook hands. "Roger, good to see you. You're looking nice and tan!"

Roger released his grip and ran his hand through his dark brown hair. "Yeah, the summer in southern Europe will do that to

you. Hey want to help me with these bags?”

“Sure.”

Dylan grabbed a couple of suitcases, and they both headed inside.

“You should go to Spain sometime,” Roger continued, as they dropped the luggage in their oversized great room. “It was awesome! We were in Pamplona for the running of the bulls. Mom wouldn’t let me anywhere near the streets, but we got to watch from a rooftop. Man, it was the best part of the entire vacation. I am so going back there on my own to run with the bulls one day!”

Dylan shook his head and grinned. “I’ll leave the running away from crazed beasts to you. I’d like to make it through life without taking a horn to the backside, thank you.”

“Hey, that one was almost funny.” Roger playfully punched Dylan.

Dylan punched him back a little harder. “Home for five minutes, and I’ve already had enough of you!”

Before Roger could retaliate a stern, yet beautifully melodic voice interrupted their banter. “Boys, there is a lot more stuff to bring into the house. Why don’t you make yourselves useful?”

Dylan turned to see Naomi, and had to literally stop his jaw from dropping. He couldn’t believe it. The last time he saw her, she had braces in a mouth that was much too large for her face, and she had the worst acne.

Now, *wow!* She looked like a woman! A very beautiful, enchanting woman.

At that moment, Dylan realized he was staring. Embarrassed, he quickly looked away, but not before Naomi saw him gawking at her. She blushed, and the added color in her face sent a heat wave through his body. Naomi grabbed one of the suitcases Dylan had laid on the floor and hurried into her bedroom. He couldn't help but watch her as she left. The subtle curves of her body, the tawny golden tan of her muscular legs...it all made some primordial part within him roar to life.

"Dude, that's my sister!" Roger said, bringing Dylan out of his stupor.

Mortified, Dylan quickly excused himself and went home.

That night he couldn't help but think about Naomi, and how both of them would be graduating in about nine months. Dylan wanted to go to college somewhere far away, anything to get away from here. He wondered if Naomi would be staying in town and attending the University of Idaho. It would certainly be the easy choice for her.

Later that night, just before bed, Dylan's mom started storytelling. He always loved listening to his mom's stories, so he settled into a beanbag chair and listened.

"Long ago, back when much of the world still believed in multiple gods, there was a

great war. The forces of Life and Death clashed. Death was a collector of souls, and there was no soul Death valued more than that of a human's," Catherine Peterson started in a well-practiced storytelling voice, as her sons listened with rapt attention.

"Overcome by greed, Death released minions on the human population," she continued. "There was great carnage. Death was mighty pleased as the number of souls in the Halls of Misery increased tenfold.

"However, the humans weren't without protection, and Death's plans were soon threatened. The agents of Life set out to restore the balance. They were more powerful than that of Death's minions, but they knew the minions were without number for they were infinite."

Catherine paused and gave a wise smile to her sons as they stared at her with curious expressions. She took a small sip of her hot chocolate before continuing.

"Caught in a stalemate that could last for eternity, one of Life's agents marched straight to the gates of Hell. It was a battle that was said to have shaken the very foundations of the Earth. Every living thing felt the rumble beneath its feet. In the end, the agent of Life crashed through the gates and demanded an audience with Death. Death, impressed with the agent's efforts, agreed and invited him into the Death House.

“It was there negotiations started. Two moons passed before an agreement could be made. It was decided that Life would do its part to greatly increase the population of mankind. Death would keep its minions away from the world above, and the higher number of living humans would eventually increase the number of deaths... leading to more souls in the underworld.”

She smiled again, and leaned back in her chair. “Death was pleased with this deal. Though it would take many generations, Death was immortal. Time meant very little to immortals, so Death sunk back into the chasm from which it came awaiting the human souls promised to him.”

Dylan glanced at his brothers. Their eyes were wide as they listened to their mother speak.

“Life was less pleased with the cost of this deal. The increased human population meant an unbalance. Other life forms would have to die to make room. Entire ecosystems would be put into jeopardy. But Life feared the unknown consequences most of all...The unknown was a great Abyss, dark and more terrible than death. Life knew that this unbalance could potentially lead to oblivion.”

At this Catherine rose from her seat, a signal for the boys to head to bed.

There was something eerie about his mom’s stories. Now, at the age of seventeen,

he realized just how unfit they were for children.

After his mom finished, she gave each of her six sons a kiss and a hug and ushered them to bed. Jared, who was only a year younger, thought he was too cool to listen to their mother's stories and was already in the room he shared with Dylan.

Exhausted, but eager for what tomorrow would bring, Dylan quickly got changed and was fell asleep, but not before thinking of Naomi's beautiful face one last time.

The next morning, Dylan awoke to a loud buzzing.

"Turn that stupid thing off!" Jared moaned as he rolled over.

Dylan got up and turned off his alarm.

"Morning, Mom," Dylan yawned out as he walked into the kitchen moments later.

"Oh, Dylan I meant to come tell you before you got out of bed. School is cancelled today. A major pipe burst in the boys' bathroom, so they had to shut down the water to the whole school. I guess you'll be starting school tomorrow instead."

"What rotten luck," Tyler muttered, as he walked in the kitchen, showered, dressed and ready to impress.

Dylan rolled his eyes. "Weirdo, missing a whole day of school is a good thing!" He

poured himself a bowl of cereal and sat at the counter.

"I can't start high school by missing the first day!" Tyler said, joining him.

Shaking his head, Dylan spoke through a mouthful of Chex. "You won't miss anything. They'll just start tomorrow and tack on an extra day during winter break. No big deal."

"Good."

Dylan looked incredulously at his brother. "How could that possibly be a good thing? You can miss one day of school. It won't ruin your dream of one day becoming President of the United States."

Tyler shrugged. "Why take any chances?"

After breakfast, Dylan returned to his spot atop the hill. He looked down at his gangly body... somewhat pathetic looking, like it was too stretched out, yet he was barely six feet tall. His disheveled dark-blond hair was similar to his six brothers. Unlike them, Dylan was the only one to inherit his mother's brilliant blue eyes. She'd always told him, "The eyes are the windows to the soul, and your clear, colorful eyes mean you're destined to be a great man, Dylan."

He didn't share his mother's high expectations, however.

Tomorrow he'd start his senior year in high school, and after that... well he'd just have to wait to see. Dylan gazed in the distance at downtown Moscow, Idaho and



then over to Moscow Mountain behind him. The best part about this spot wasn't just the beautiful view but the trees surrounding the hill, ensuring his privacy. He was alone. Just how he liked it.

His thoughts returned to Naomi... he still couldn't get over what a beauty she'd blossomed into over the summer.

"Like an angel from heaven," he murmured.

"Funny you should mention angels," came a voice from behind him.