

RECLAIMERS

FIALA CONTINUED, “THEY’VE REACHED the alarm perimeter we set before we came here, Malank. We have less than five minutes.” She closed the curtains and blinds, asking Alan to do the same. Surprisingly spry, the old man jumped up and bounded upstairs without questioning her.

Malank calmly stood and addressed the room. “Reclaimer tactics are simple. Fi, can you provide a visual?”

Fi sighed. “Sure, if you think it’ll help,” she said. “But we don’t have much time.”

His eyes still focused on Malank, Lucas perceived that the lights briefly grew dim. Then, the living room was filled with a miniature replica of a neighborhood similar to his own. A cluster of six human figures radiating with prismatic light hung in the sky overhead. Malank continued his explanation.

“They work in teams of six. As they approach, they’ll put up a concealment perimeter.” In the conjured model, a reflective dome materialized over two adjacent houses. Inside of it, as if a switch had been flipped, the light became incredibly bright. “Once they touch down, they’ll go house by house within their chosen radius until they achieve their objective. Shock tactics are their default—expect blinding light and extreme heat.” The Reclaimer team huddled in front of one of the homes. After breaking down the front door, they stormed inside in single file. They emerged moments later with three captives and, their mission apparently successful, flew away. The scene vanished.

Malank took two steps and stopped in front of Lucas’s mom and dad. “Off please, Devlins.” As they stood, he bent down and grabbed one end of the sofa, quickly dragging it to the main entryway. “They’re arrogant and they don’t know Fi and I are here, so they’ll use the front door.” His right hand reached up to hold the fate charm

through his shirt. "I knew luck was on our side, Fi. If we hadn't come early and set that alert perimeter, they might have had us." Like they were paperweights, Malank grabbed the chairs he and Fiala had been sitting on, one in each hand, and tossed them casually atop the sofa. He addressed the Devlins again. "You Darktouched folks have a hidey hole or escape route in that shack out back, right?"

Tara nodded. "We have a private doorway into the Abzu Hub. But Lucas isn't travel licensed yet and won't be able to go anywhere. Our plan was to surprise him with a trip to fix that. We thought we had a few more days." She massaged her temples with both hands. "It's like being able to enter the airport without identification, but not pass security to access the terminals. Or, even if you do, getting to a foreign country and being turned around. There are no exceptions." Her eyes opened wide suddenly. "If we can get to the Abzu Hub's outer ring though, we could at least gain distance by exiting at the Flagstaff station. This is a small city, but our region is the jumping off point for a lot of higher-end Darktouched thrill seeking." She looked up at Asante. "Can you arrange for a car to be waiting once we get there?"

"I already put in the order last week as a contingency. I'll call now to make sure." He grabbed a flip phone from his pocket and hit a number on speed dial, walking into the hallway.

Alan returned to them as Malank began speaking again.

"We'll escape by other means. But you're going to need us to conceal and shield you between the house and that shack. The Reclaimers could end you before you get halfway otherwise. There are four of you and three of us, which means multiple trips." He stroked his beard with his right hand while clutching the fate charm around his neck with his left. "Someone has to be last. For us, that'll be Alan. Fi and I can't afford to be caught. We're not at full strength—we can't fight them and protect you all."

Addressing Tara, he asked, "What's the rest of your plan?"

"We can use the Lava Tubes. It's not ideal, but—"

"But it's insane!" Darren exclaimed. "Even with experience and full KALM gear, it's like skydiving without a parachute."

Tara gave an exasperated sigh. "We don't have time to argue! The hatches will slow them down, but they'll still be able to follow us until we reach the Hub's outer ring. Besides, we used to shoot the Tubes when we were younger."

“Fine,” said Darren, shoulders slumped. “I can leave last. I’ll guard the door.”

Alan interjected forcefully, “Luc needs to be the first out. I’ll take him and then come back for whoever’s left. It doesn’t sound like he can survive without help. Who’s going second?”

“Survive what?” asked Asante as he returned to the room.

“Asante can go second, Alan,” Tara said decisively, then turned her attention to Asante. “Darren and I are going to help Lucas enter the Infra through the Lava Tubes. You have to go back to the Abzu Complex. We can’t lose you right now. Lucas will need to be granted asylum.”

Asante’s eyes widened and then returned to normal as he shrugged. “I trust your judgment. The car will be waiting at the station exit. Pick up the keys from Maggie—she’ll be on guard duty until midnight. I’ll make sure Lucas is taken care of. You just get him to safety. I hope you’re as quick of a learner as your parents said, kid.”

“I guess we’ll find out,” said Lucas. “But, what about Mai?”

He saw his mom roll her eyes again and shake her head. Fiala tapped her foot louder this time, and Malank took the hint.

“I’ll grab her... even though the Reclaimers have no interest in domesticated animals,” he said, then paused and guffawed. “Well, not most of them.”

Fiala was progressing to stomping.

“Anyway, we have a plan. When the Reclaimer oven turns on, with any luck they’ll start at the Linzers’. On my signal, Alan and Lucas will sneak out back and into the shed. Then me and Asante, Fiala and Tara. I’m sorry, Alan, but you’ll have to come back for Darren without support from us. We’ll sneak out the figurative back door while the Reclaimers do their thing. Good luck, my friend.”

Alan smirked and gave a wink. “Don’t worry. I’ve still got it.” And with that, the entire group moved to the back of the house.

Lucas knew exactly when the Reclaimers arrived. Even with the blinds closed and curtains shut, the entire house was illuminated with piercing light. He pressed his hand against the sliding glass door that led to the backyard. It was noticeably warmer than a moment before. The display unit on the wall for the digital thermometer outside read 150 degrees Fahrenheit—its max limit. *It could be 200 outside, for all we know. I wonder what these Repo-men look like.*

Fiala snuck on padded feet to the east-facing kitchen window and lifted a slat in the blind ever so slightly. “Good,” she said. “It looks like they took the bait. Let’s go. A group every five seconds. Malank, grab the mutt.”

Mai growled in disapproval when Malank’s giant arm swept her up and onto his shoulder.

Alan waved Lucas over. “Stay within arm’s reach of me. No matter what.”

The older man closed his eyes, concentrating. This time, Lucas paid close attention as the Lightborne used his abilities.

For just a second, Alan’s entire body looked different; Lucas struggled to process what had happened. *It’s almost like he was more... there. Like the background faded to one dull layer, and he popped forward, his body shimmering slightly.* While Lucas tried to understand what he’d seen, a dark tint went up around them, forming a bubble. Malank’s huge hand penetrated the barrier and tapped Alan on his shoulder.

Alan said, “Here we go, Luc. Be fleet of foot and calm of mind.”

Alan crept forward, and to Lucas the events seemed to happen in sequence and at once, the beginning and the end occurring at the same time. One second they were leaving the doorway, and the heat blasted his face, the light baked any exposed skin, and the sky was a concave reflection of the land below it. The next, he looked to his right and saw nothing, because the white light made it almost impossible to see; even the fence was nearly washed out. By the third second, they had made it less than a quarter of the way across the backyard, but on the fourth Alan picked up his pace and entered a trot. On the fifth, as Lucas heard Malank and Asante step through the back door, he realized it was difficult to stay in step with Alan, whose head only reached his chest level.

Six. He looked back to see... exactly nothing except his house. But he could hear footsteps following them. *Amazing.*

Seven. He and Alan were over halfway across his backyard. *Maybe we’ll be okay.*

Eight. Lucas almost stumbled on rubbery legs but caught his balance just in time to not send himself and Alan tumbling.

Nine. They were only four or five steps away from the shack.

Ten. He knew all three groups were in the yard and his dad was alone in the house.

Eleven. Alan reached for the shack door handle.

Twelve. His fingertips were only a few inches away.

Thirteen. Alan wrapped his hand around the metal handle and began to pull.

Fourteen. Lucas heard Alan wish him luck as he pushed him inside, telling him not to stop until he had gone as far as he could go without Asante or Tara.

Fifteen. He looked back and saw Mai's front paws hit the ground.

Sixteen. He saw the rest of Mai heading back to the house and heard a bark. The sweat had already begun to pour down his face.

Seventeen. Malank shushed the dog and whispered angrily, "You idiot mongrel. You'll kill us all!"

Eighteen. Asante leapt into the dark room's antechamber next to Lucas and told him to keep moving.

Nineteen. He was turning away when he saw his father falling backward through the back door of their house, a person clad entirely in white approaching him.

Twenty. When the white-clothed figure stepped outside into the unnatural light, the brightness became even more blinding. *Reclaimers are almost angelic.*

Twenty-one. He heard a voice speaking, deep and terrifying. It was saying something about paying a debt. As twenty-two became twenty-three, Lucas distinctly heard the words: "Sins of your Forebears."

By twenty-four, he was being pulled into the dark room. A faraway voice was telling him to collect Darren's gear and leave the training equipment. At twenty-five, he was a step from his father's locker with Asante shoving him forward, a sinking feeling sapping his strength and tears welling in his eyes.

And then an explosion of light burst from seemingly nowhere. Behind the shielding of only his arm, Lucas could make out Tara scrambling for cover. She ran the rest of the way, leaping into the dark room between him and Asante.

Near the western fence appeared two glowing orbs that transformed into massive eagles made of light. As though on fire, hues of white, yellow, and orange undulated ceaselessly. The winged familiars stood half again as tall as the six-foot fence boards. Malank and Fiala were silhouetted within the body of the raptors. They lifted into the air, a rush of wind pushed out behind them, and then they were gone into the distance.

A roar burst out from near where Darren lay on his back, and Alan appeared, rushing toward the white figure. Mai growled and leapt at her enemy, the one attacking her family. Lucas heard a scream and a yelp. And then the world went black.

ESCAPE

CLICK. FOUR WALLS BLED crimson.

Without thinking, Lucas opened his dad's wardrobe cabinet and grabbed the bin containing his KALM bands. Asante was already stooping down to open the first hatch. Faintly, through the shack door, Lucas heard the din of a struggle—shouting, growling, rending, breaking.

No time to think. He willed himself down the ladder, hearing but not processing the words Tara spoke behind him; he only realized when he reached the bottom what she was trying to tell him. No light. He found his way to the opposite side of the room by memory and knelt down to fumble in the dark.

The box was snatched from his grip. Then, there were hands on his. One held his left digits still and the other placed something into them. Tara's voice sounded wrong in the small room.

“Stand up. Put that around your neck. Quick, hold out your wrists. Asante's getting the belt.” Lucas felt her hands shaking. “Suit up. Let's go!”

Suddenly, white light flooded in from above. It was much dimmer than before but no less terrifying. The Reclaimers might be weaker underground, but Lucas knew instinctively that testing their strength today would be his last mistake. Dashing through the door, he veered to the right to avoid the simulator and then tapped his wrists together.

The KALM suit encased his body, fulfilling another boyhood dream. *Finally, a real KALM suit and not just training gear. This feels like wearing the wrong skin though.* His every movement felt awkward and strained.

It struck him that the forbidden door—the portal he had pondered for seven long years—was finally allowing him passage. And now, he couldn't have cared less. Reacting

to his father's KALM suit, the door unlocked and swung outward on its hinges. Lucas moved further in as Tara's voice called out, "The Hub's outer ring is still six hundred yards ahead. You'll see the indicator on your HUD."

He heard the hatch slam shut and the locks slide back into place. The word HUD reminded him of his dad. *When you're training, it stands for Hope You Don't. Hope You Don't need it, because if you do, something is wrong. It actually stands for Heads-Up Display, but my version is just as accurate.* He shoved the thought aside.

"Hurry!" Tara urged. "We don't know how determined they are."

The path rounded a bend to the right and then fell away suddenly and sharply before continuing on the other side of a twenty-foot divide. Without hesitation, Lucas leapt and landed safely with more than five feet to spare. He marveled for a second—compared to the KALM suit, his training gear was basically useless. As he moved two steps further down the path, he heard someone land behind him. Asante. His mother was quieter, landing a second later. The only sounds were their footfalls on cement and labored breathing.

Lucas felt his guard dropping. It was peaceful to be this completely in the dark. Quiet and calm, like driving down an empty highway at two in the morning under a new moon.

But behind them, a loud crash shattered any illusion of sanctuary. Lucas ran ever faster without tiring, aided by adrenaline and the KALM suit.

Tara spoke again. "Through the door. Right fork."

They had covered half of the distance to the outer ring when they reached another door. Lucas slowed as it swung open, and then turned right when the path split in two.

"Keep running. We've gained some distance ahead of them, but they're only a half minute behind at most."

Two hundred yards to go. Lucas summoned all of his willpower and surged ahead. The cement turned to gravel beneath his feet as the walls fell away on both sides. Lucas trotted into blackness, his world reduced to a narrow strip of earth. Automated caution warnings in his HUD alerted him that the remainder of the pathway hung over a wide, deep cavern. He cautiously approached the edge and stopped to check his HUD for a way forward. A square icon with bidirectional arrows caught his attention. It was one hundred yards away, and about the same distance below his position. Lucas reached

out with his mind, feeling a rush of joy when he latched onto a Darktouched machine. He gave it a command, and soon the HUD showed it was moving closer.

Tara and Asante were next to him now. The lift appeared out of the darkness from below, slowing as it neared where they stood, before settling silently in front of them. Lucas had told it to descend before they were even all onboard. The machine slipped smoothly into the blackness until they were enveloped.

The group took a moment to recover their breath. Asante fully extended his right leg in front of him, heel on the ground, and leaned down over it. Tara breathed in deeply and slowly, her right hand trying to work out a side stitch. Lucas flipped through HUD settings to distract himself from thinking about Dad, Alan, and Mai.

The overlay indicated they were halfway across the chasm. "I don't see anything up top," he said. "Maybe they gave up."

Abruptly, Tara burst into laughter. "You look ridiculous in your dad's gear, Lucas," she said. "It's too wide and too short at the same time. When we get to the Abzu Complex, get your KALM gear as soon as they'll let you. *Please.*"

Lucas, glad for the diversion, laughed along with her. *Everyone has to be alive. We'll get them back.*

No one spoke about his dad or Alan. Silently, they agreed to save the topic for later. Speculating about what happened now would only distract them.

Seconds later, the platform reached the other side. As they stepped off, the area above them was illuminated by a floating light orb. It crept along, mesmerizing them, until it was directly overhead.

Then Tara suddenly screamed, "Run!"

The orb plummeted into their midst and burst, revealing a Reclaimer kneeling where it had landed. Without the KALM gear, they would have been blinded and disoriented; the Reclaimer appeared to have counted on this, because he didn't move with urgency.

While his enemy stood unmoving for a moment, Lucas searched for a weakness. Based on height and body type, he assumed the Reclaimer to be male. The enemy wore full-body tactical gear, including a long, hooded cloak and face mask that left only his eyes and the bridge of his nose exposed. The KALM tech told Lucas it was made of a reflective weave intended to amplify light.

So that's why they turn into camera flash bulbs.

Lucas was also able to see the palms of the Reclaimer's gloves. Embedded in the tips of each finger and the center of each palm was a patch of hexagonal scales. The toe of the Reclaimer's right boot looked the same.

Useless, I can't see enough. I'll just hit him from behind. He tensed his body for the attack.

Asante's voice touched his thoughts. "Don't, Lucas. Just run. I've got this." The Reclaimer remained oblivious.

Asante tapped his right hand to his waist. Like a cephalopod, blackness jetted from his body. It struck and clung to the Reclaimer, who screamed and began rubbing his eyes. Asante took advantage of the moment to flee, and Lucas shouldered the disoriented Reclaimer to the ground as he and his mom followed.

Finger-length needles of green light flew past them in bursts as they ran. One caught Asante in his left leg, and he fell to the ground on his next step. He took in a pained breath and exclaimed, "Paralyzed! He's trying to capture, not kill us. We're almost to the outer ring. Keep going."

Lucas kneeled and put Asante's left arm around him, lifting him upright. "We're right behind you, Mom," he said as Tara ran ahead.

"I'll open the gate," she told him. "Don't think—just jump through it."

More green needles flew by. Lucas felt his right-hand sting and then go limp. The Reclaimer was drawing nearer, but there was no time to look over his shoulder. The final door was within view, calling them to safety. *A few more steps now.* Lucas heard a low humming sound and saw the entire entryway rippling. Tara had already gone inside. As one final burst of needles flew harmlessly past, peppering the door frame, he threw himself and Asante over the threshold, hearing nothing as deep water closed around him and the door slammed shut behind them.



Above, below, and all around without end. Swirls and eddies of deep purple and pink surrounded Lucas, like streams of dinoflagellates hidden inside the earth. Behind him,

the metal door was hidden among several large rocks. With no light to catch or reflect, the stone remained a gray color. He suspected that, if he were without the KALM gear, the blackness would be insatiable, swallowing nearly all light no matter how bright. A Lightborne or anyone else unfortunate enough to make it this far would almost surely die. That was if they could make it through the passage and past the barrier in the first place.

Lucas flexed his hand instinctively, but it would only partially close. The feeling, stolen away by the green needle, was coming back slowly.

Tara floated next to Asante, checking his leg. “There’s no damage to your suit,” she said, continuing her ministrations. *How are they still able to talk? How can I bear them?* “Thankfully, it absorbed some of the light needle. If it hadn’t, you’d be hard pressed to swim.”

Asante snarled. “Damned Shepherds!” Lucas assumed he meant the Reclaimers. “We’re lucky that one was cocky or stupid. He could have had us. We were dead to rights.”

Tara beckoned Lucas over. “There’s something I forgot to tell you. You’ve probably been hearing us talking in your noggin, right?” She tapped the top-left side of her head; he tried to verbally confirm, but nothing came out. “Eventually, this becomes second nature, but you should have a display in your HUD that looks like a half sphere with three nested layers. Ignore the other symbols for now.” Lucas flipped to the correct HUD view and gave the thumbs-up sign. “Mentally select the second circle. The suit will read your intent and transmit directly into the auditory cortex of anyone within thirty feet, as long as they’re also wearing Darktouched gear. Right now, you’re muted.” Lucas spoke again, but only his own voice echoed in his mind. “No—wrong setting. That was the first layer. Now you’re talking to yourself.”

“Does it work now?” Lucas asked, again giving a thumbs-up and then tilting it downward questioningly; Tara signaled the affirmative. “There we go! Wow, that’s really weird.”

“Yep. But it’s normally the only way we can talk in the Abzu and Infra, so get used to it. You can also open a direct line that has a range up to a mile. The suit uses compiled data and other metrics so we hear what you mean to say. Just know that it maps and transmits not just words but also pitch, inflection, and so on.”