

The Reservists

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Prologue - Beyond the Wall

“Just trust me,” Aiden said, leading Jade and Kaleb down the streets of Xadia toward the Northern Gate. Their small footsteps were barely heard as they quickly ran down the concrete roads; hugging the shadows to the right. Aiden was still small enough to hide behind the parked cars with ease. He could feel the same excitement, and anxiety coming from the other two.

“Aiden, I’m not sure this is a good idea anymore.” Jade voiced her concerns quietly, only loud enough for him to hear.

“Don’t you want to see what’s out there?” Aiden countered.

“We know what’s out there!” Jade responded sharply, panic in her voice.

“If you’re scared, Jade - stay here.” Putting on a brave face, Aiden moved ahead of the others.

It had only stopped raining a few minutes ago, forcing them to avoid the puddles as they ran. The humidity was thick in the air, so thick Aiden could taste it. Summer was ending, but it was still hot enough for the water on the ground to evaporate, adding to the thick fog that helped conceal their movements.

Aiden stopped at the last car on the corner, putting his hand up to halt the others behind him. It was a tactical hand sign he had seen on TV not long ago. Jade and Kaleb stopped instantly, slightly impressed by his professionalism.

“There it is,” Aiden said, pointing past the edge of the car.

The Northern Gate was significantly less impressive than the others. It was simply a small door made of solid oak, only large enough for one or two people to pass through at the same time. The size of the entrance seemed nearly comical compared to the gigantic Wall it allowed passage through.

The Wall stretched over a hundred feet high, and ten feet thick. Built of solid concrete and steel, it was meant to keep the Veils out. The young ones of this era, never having seen a Veil, were starting to think it was meant to keep them in. That's how it felt. Someone had once explained to Aiden that his generation hadn't had the same experience as their elders, making them doubtful of the dangers outside the city's main defense. They were right.

Jade stared upwards, admiring the monumental man-made structure, while Aiden was focused on the door to the Outlands. There were two guards sitting in small booths on opposite sides of the door, both of them fast asleep.

"It's just like they said - look." Kaleb pointed at the sleeping security.

Gate guards in Xadia were known to be objects of ridicule. There hadn't been a Veil attack since the walls went up, yet the Ministry of Defense insisted on having fully qualified soldiers stationed at the gates at all times. It was a complete waste of talent. The soldiers posted at the gates got fat and lazy, constantly mocked by their peers and passing civilians.

Kaleb looked to Jade and Aiden. "Last chance to back down."

Both of them shook their heads. None of them having ever left the city, they all wanted to see the Outlands. Some of the older kids from their school did this on a weekly basis. They had never been caught and they hadn't encountered the rumored creatures. With that in mind, the three emerged from the shadows at a sprint. They ran under the faint yellow glow of the street lights, past the sleeping guards and made it to the door.

Aiden couldn't remember a time he had ever experienced adrenaline like this. Grabbing the handle on the door, his hand nearly slipped off; he was so nervous, sweat coated the palms of his hands. He could feel his own heartbeat in his throat and, for a second before he pulled on the handle, he thought he was going to throw up from the excitement. Aiden could see similar adrenaline in the others, or was it anxiety?

It was only for a moment, but for a quick second, all his emotions of exhilaration were replaced by an acute sense of ruination. Aiden second guessed himself, and the idea of leading

the others into the Outlands. Before he could truly reflect on his actions, his concerns were overpowered by his strong sense of purpose. The others were depending on him – they had talked about this for weeks, maybe months – and the next task at hand was getting this door open, not worrying about made up monsters and rules.

The door, though small compared to the Wall, was still too large for him to open without a struggle. Aiden had no choice but to place his foot on the Wall next to the handle. Pushing and leaning back with all his weight, the door suddenly swung open. Losing his footing as the door opened could have been the end for them. Luckily, Kaleb managed to stop the door before it slammed into the Wall. Surely it would have woken the sleeping guards.

“Come on, let’s go!” Kaleb shoved Jade and Aiden out the door following immediately behind them.

He slowly pulled the door shut, leaving no sign that it was ever opened. The guards left the Northern Gate unlocked at all times. It was a security measure in case a patrol in another location got locked out. It was a long walk around the city, but there would always be a way back in.

Jade, Kaleb and Aiden stood mesmerized, gazing into the Outlands. The fog hung thick in the distance, blocking most of the scenery. The little that they could see took their breath away. The bridge towers emerged from the mist in front, guiding them to their destination. Through the floating condensation, Aiden saw the overpass stretch out further than he could have ever imagined. With fog this thick, even if the guards on top of the Wall were paying attention, they could make it across unseen.

Aiden had learned in school that the Outlands were anything outside the Twelve. With only twelve fortified cities left on the planet, he knew he was lucky to live in Xadia. It was one of the most technologically advanced cities in the world, having maintained itself nearly perfectly after the Wall went up. Xadia was an island, which is why this was made possible. Two large hydroelectric power plants were constructed on the east and west rivers. The facilities have their own fortification, providing constant electricity to the entire population.

One of the stations supplied power to the city, while the other focused most of its resources to the greenhouses on the immediate outskirts of the Wall. This was how Xadia supplied food to the population. With the ability to manipulate environments, the Ministry could grow anything they wanted.

“The bridge is a lot bigger than I thought,” Aiden said, mostly to himself.

“The others said it would take fifteen minutes to cross. The forest should be on the right side, right after the bridge,” Kaleb explained showing no signs of hesitation.

“Let’s go then.” It was Jade’s turn to be brave, parting the smog ahead as she moved through it.

The three of them walked quickly over the bridge, only taking hurried moments to glance at the water far below. There wasn’t much to look at because of the mist, but the excitement was overwhelming. With large rebellious smiles, they spotted the large patch of vegetation their peers had spoken of before stepping off the bridge.

Over the past years, the Ministry of Defense had been cutting down the woodland around the city. This was done for many reasons. First, Xadia needed building materials. The constantly expanding city needed to continuously build homes to match the ever-growing population. Second, the idea was to cut down any potential cover for roaming Veils. The guards on the Wall would be able to easily spot the threats from a distance without the ancient flora blocking their line of sight.

The large plot of forest in front of them was the only remaining greenery surrounding the fortified city.

“What if there are Reckless hiding in those woods?” Aiden asked, with sudden concern.

“Then they’ll most likely eat you up!” Jade poked him in the ribs playfully, instantly changing his fearful mood.

Aiden smiled wide at Jade who always seemed to know what to say. He may not believe in Veils, but it’s a known fact that there are people who live outside the walls. Citizens of

Xadia were being exiled daily for crimes so little as theft. They became known as Reckless. Aiden remembered Kaleb's father saying the Ministry was doing this in order to control the increasing population. Soon, there would be too many people to live inside the city.

The three of them ran forward through the open field as fast as their feet could take them. Aiden had never seen tall grass like this; the amazed looks on the others' faces confirmed they hadn't either. Having grown up in an urban environment, the only grass they ever saw was properly maintained in small parks throughout the city. The rain from not long ago clung to the individual green blades, wetting the small team as they ran past. The light from the crescent moon above reflected off the individual beads of rain littered throughout the grass field giving everything a delightful glow.

By the time they reached the forest, all of them were soaked from the waist down.

"It's so beautiful out here," Jade said, partially mesmerized by the quantity of trees she was about to venture through.

"It's also really dark," Kaleb added, peering between the trees to their front. "Aiden, can you give us some light?"

Without responding, Aiden snapped his fingers and whispered, "Illuminate."

A small ball of light conjured out of thin air, hovering in the palm of his hand, casting shadows throughout the woodland. He allowed himself a small smile, trying to stay modest. Aiden couldn't help but be pleased with his work. It wasn't everyone who could control magic at such a young age.

"It's so cool that you can manipulate Lumen. I wish I could." Jade stared at his magic globe, her mind overflowing with the possibilities of manipulating the building block of magical aptitude.

"Maybe you can. It takes a lot of practice." Aiden pointed into the forest, commanding the small ball of light into the distance.

The glow of the magic created shadows in the trees as it moved, changing the atmosphere completely. Thoughts of Veils, monsters with the sole purpose of killing humans, ran rampant through Aiden's mind as his imagination started to deceive him. Following the light deeper into the forest, the shadows started to look like faces. The glow of the moon made leaves look like fangs, and the absolute silence played tricks on his hearing.

They started to move faster through the forest, passing through branches and stepping over stones. No one said a word, but Aiden could tell fear had started to form in all of their minds, not just his. The fear replaced the initial excitement they had felt, and physical discomfort started to wear down their courage. The branches scratched their skin as they passed, and the water on the leaves drenched their clothing even more.

"Kaleb, I'm getting chilly. I want to go back." Jade finally spoke the words Aiden was hoping for.

She tried to hide the fright in her voice and failed. Her words trembled along with the rest of her body from the cold. Aiden, on the other hand, didn't want to look weak in front of Kaleb; he admired his confidence, even his impulsiveness. He decided to stay strong, to hide his fear from the others.

"Let's at least find the hangout," Aiden urged the others, "so we know where to go next time."

As soon as he finished the sentence, they pushed through a bush, breaking through the tree line into a sizeable clearing. The three of them had finally become habituated to the green environment, only to stumble upon something completely new once again. The new area had a different type of allure, an overwhelming sense of broken beauty. They continued to advance, their feet no longer stepping over branches and streams. They now showed caution, stepping over rusted steel, and shattered concrete.

Aiden couldn't help it. He ran ahead of the other two, carefully but quickly climbing a large mound of crumbled building materials that once used to be a solid structure. He shivered

from the cold as he made it to the top and gazed out in front. The moonlight continued to light the large area, allowing him to fully realize where he was standing.

“This used to be part of the city,” Jade said, startling him. Aiden hadn't heard her come up behind him.

The two of them analyzed what they were seeing. Some buildings still stood, but the walls were visibly falling apart due to harsh weather and time. Having studied a bit of history in school, Aiden managed to grasp the significance of what they were looking at. Sadness filled his eyes, temporarily making him forget his fear and discomfort.

“People used to live here,” Jade whispered with more than a hint of sorrow.

“We should go back...” Aiden responded, deflecting the comment. “We made a mistake coming out here. Where's Kaleb?”

They turned their heads to the rear; Kaleb was gone.

“Where did he go?” Jade asked, panic forming in her voice.

“We've only been up here for a minute, he couldn't have gone far.”

A sound suddenly drew Aiden's attention.

He slowly took another couple of steps until he was standing on the very top of the mound. His heartbeat had quickened. Jade, feeling frightened, stood directly behind him. Aiden squinted his eyes trying to find the source of the noise. He had to focus hard on what he was hearing; it was faint. It sounded like someone small repeatedly stepping in a puddle, but there was something else. *Tearing fabric?*

Focused on the source of the noise, it was too dark and a little too far to see. Curiosity overwhelmed him, forcing his body to act without thinking. Aiden pointed towards the sound, ordering his conjured globe of light to float harmlessly towards the target. Jade and Aiden held their breath, not saying a word as their eyes followed the glowing orb.

The sound of clothing being torn was getting louder, as if someone or something, was being progressively less careful. Splashing continued as the light moved in on the area in question, but it became harder to hear because of their own pounding heartbeats. Overwhelmed with anxiety, Aiden unknowingly held his breath as the light finally found the source of the noise.

Kaleb lay in a pool of his own blood. His abdomen was being torn open by a creature Aiden wasn't familiar with. It was a Veil, it had to be. On all fours, it stomped its paws victoriously in the pooled liquid as it ripped out Kaleb's insides. The dark fur that covered the monster glistened red with the boy's lifeblood.

Aiden's body tensed up, he couldn't move, and even if he could he wouldn't have known what to do. His concentration broken, the conjured light dimmed and turned to dust, vanishing into the darkness surrounding them. Completely losing control of his body, Aiden's fingers began to tremble as his mind raced for a solution. He could no longer see Kaleb's body, but the images were seared into his memory.

The initial shock of the situation started to wear off, allowing Jade and Aiden to crouch down. They started to move backwards, slowly, to avoid detection. Without speaking, they both began retreating through the forest. The adrenaline of their flight response was overwhelming, making them clumsy and impatient. Jade was the first to make a mistake. One of her feet kicked a stone, causing it to tumble down the mound of debris. Jade immediately frowned and closed her eyes; she went extremely still, waiting for the creature's reaction.

The Veil let out a purr in curiosity. The earlier light didn't seem to bother it in the least, but the sound drew its attention immediately. It was too dark to see Kaleb's body, or the Veil's silhouette, but they knew the monster had noticed their presence. The moonlight lit up the Veil's eyes for just a moment before it charged in their direction.

Aiden wanted to conjure a defensive spell his father had taught him. Jade looked like she wanted to dive out of the way. Neither of them had battle experience or adequate stress response to deal with the situation. The Veil sprinted up the mound with terrifying speed and

wasted no time assaulting the source of the noise. Jade covered her face reflexively as it leapt through the air, jaw wide open, catching her windpipe between his fangs.

She didn't even have time to scream. With a twist of his neck, the Veil tore her throat clean out. Blood gushed out of her main arteries covering Aiden in his friend's blood. He watched motionless as the life faded from her eyes. Jade tried to mouth words, but no sound would come out. Her lungs convulsed, forcing the liquid out of the open wound before eventually going still.

The Veil turned its attention on Aiden, the last one standing. The monster still held a part of Jade in his mouth. It let the cartilage that used to be her larynx fall to the ground and readied itself for the next attack. It snarled at him, bearing its fangs and taking a wide stance, preparing. In truth, Aiden was no longer concerned with the Veil.

His attention was on Jade. Her body lay awkwardly on the rubble. Blood covered her face to the point where he could no longer recognize her. Her eyes were frozen with the fear she displayed right before dying. It didn't matter what happened to him anymore, how could he live after this? Aiden felt no more fear, no anxiety - he felt nothing at all. His mind went neutral and his body limp.

Decided, Aiden moved his eyes to the beast, challenging him, inviting him. He was no longer contemplating an escape; instead, he contemplated suicide. There was no other option really - he just hoped his death would be quick, like Jade's. He hoped his family wouldn't blame themselves, it had been his own choice to venture outside the walls.

The Veil only took one step forward before pouncing. Its jaw opened wide, aiming for Aiden's jugular. It lunged through the air, blood stained teeth reflecting in the moonlight, right before a spear struck it through the head. The glowing bladed weapon exploded through the air, catching the Veil through the eye, pinning it to the broken concrete that formed the mound. The Veil struggled against the strike. Even with a pierced brain, the monster tried to escape the hold for a moment, but could not..

Aiden couldn't think, or move. He was still genuinely unsure if he was awake, and not having a nightmare. Could this be real? He had witnessed things that no human should ever see. Slowly he turned his head to identify his savior. There was a man at the edge of the forest. He was obviously a skilled fighter to have hit his target from that distance in this light. As he approached, four other men followed him out of the tree line.

They all held glowing weapons of different colors; conjured weapons created with Lumen. The men seemed ready for a battle. When they got closer, one of them conjured a light, brighter than the one Aiden had created earlier. He recognized the uniforms; guards from the Wall. They must have seen them cross the bridge earlier. He expected the guards to be mad, furious even; they had broken the rules. Instead Aiden saw something else. Pity. Sorrow.

He stood there, soaked to the bone with the rain that hung on the forest leaves, and with Jade's blood. Covered in scratches from the branches, bumps and bruises from climbing the rubble, Aiden was the only one left. Tears ran down his face, before he had even realized he was crying. His body shook from the cold and the fear as one of the guards approached. The guard picked Aiden up with ease, glancing down at the defeated Veil, then at Jade's corpse.

One of the other guards approached the Veil. He crouched down and took a good look at the monster. "It's a Garou."

"There hasn't been a Shade reported this close to the Wall in a long time," said the man holding Aiden, "times are changing."

One of the other guards gently picked up Jade's corpse. "Poor kid. We could have saved her."

"It's been so long since we've actually had to do our job. Our response time was shit," said another man in the darkness.

"I found the other one!" A guard yelled from the other side of the mound.

"Alive?"

"Definitely dead."

The guard holding Aiden let out a deep sigh. “Why would you come out here?” He asked the question, but he didn’t expect an answer.

The guards carried Aiden back through the forest, and over the bridge. They spoke softly among themselves, keeping the conversations secret. He wasn’t listening anyways. Aiden lay limp in the arms of the guard, unable to close his eyes. Whenever he did, he saw Jade’s lifeless body, with the look of fear permanently on her face. He saw the Veil pulling out Kaleb’s intestines.

Most of all, he saw himself, and his inaction.

The citizens of Xadia had been safe for so long, they had begun to forget the dangers outside the Wall. Children no longer feared the Veils, unlike those that came before them. The memories of death and misery passed on and disappeared with the elders. Only the ones who bothered to read about the past were reminded of the struggles, and even then, they failed to grasp the severity of Xadia’s history. For so long, the people of Xadia tried to protect their newborns from the hard truths of the world. It was on this day, the day that three children ventured out and only one came back, that the population decided to take a different approach.

September 13th, every year after the incident, the population would participate in a day of knowledge. They named this day the “Call to Mind”. It was a specifically designated day centered on educating the young children of Xadia, of the dangers outside the Wall. Year after year, the “Call to Mind” made it very clear that the Veils were not creatures from the storybooks. They weren’t myths created to keep the children inside the Wall.

The Veils were indeed humanity's greatest threat -- and they always would be.