**Chapter 1**

**Willka**

*Vika, The Empire of Kial*

*876 H.D.*

*3 years into the war*

The General pressed the mold over the hot wax, sealing the classified documents inside the folder. He handed the folder to Willka thinking it would be kept safe in the records department. That is the advantage of being a reshk, no one thinks you are capable of anything.

Including theft.

“Will that be all, General?” Willka said, looking at the clock on the wall above the general’s head, two hands ticking the time away. Willka tapped his toe on the ground and his forefinger against his thigh. He still had a few hour’s before the meetup, but time was going fast, he might not make it. No, he *needed* to make it. He had waited too long to miss this opportunity, and he might not get another.

The general noticed Willka staring at the wall and turned his chair to see it too. The chair groaned under the plump man’s weight. His decorated brown military uniform bulged out of his waistband, his peppered mustache curled unnaturally with a waxy substance that glistened in the orange lamplight. The wall was covered with medals and framed pictures of him with other parliament members. He almost didn’t recognize his father in one of the pictures, shaking hands with the general who had been significantly thinner then. Had it been that long since his father looked…happy?  They each smoked a cigar as the parliament members signed the declaration of war. That same pen hung framed underneath the picture.

Matixus smiled. “That was a good day. Your father and I drank ourselves halfway to Halmuti celebrating.”

Willka smiled an awkward smile, it was all he could muster as he thought of the latest casualty report. More than fifty-thousand Kial soldiers died in the latest assault. He could have been one of them. Thank Halmut he wasn’t.

“As one does when you’re a part of history.” The general said, turning back to his desk. “No, Willka, that will be all.”

Willka bent his head and saluted with his right arm extending up.

A matte silver metal prosthetic replacing his two missing fingers hung in the air. The doctors called it a hand, but between that and the scars along his arms, chest, and face it might as well have been a grokling’s claw.

Matixus looked up at the hand and frowned. The general looked pitifully at Willka, as most people did. It made people uncomfortable having him around, knowing how he had received the deformities. *Thinking* they knew. But many just pretended to ignore him. The general darted his eyes down as if embarrassed to be staring.

Matixus saluted back half-heartedly, releasing him from the room.

Willka pulled his arm back, tucked his prosthetic hand into the suit pocket, and left.

Five Ytvey guards wearing yellow upper-arm bands and khaki button-down shirts stood guard at the room's entrance. They watched him go, glaring with stabbing eyes and scowling faces, some scoffed and shook their heads. Most were younger than Willka by a few months, their day of conscription would be coming soon, as his had three weeks ago. It was supposed to be an honor to go and fight for Kial, an honor every true citizen would gladly pursue. But he was still there in Vika, exempt from conscription as requested by his father. The reasoning: his injury made him ill-fit to fight. The truth: He was a coward.

Willka didn’t mind staying behind. He had always known that war wouldn’t suit him, running through trenches, a rifle to his shoulder as he slugged fifty-pound packs of ammunition to the various gun positions. He would be a pack mule, not because he was strong, but because he was useless doing anything else. He *should* be here in Vika, doing something useful like filing documents into the records department. Something that would keep him away from people… just in case. Besides, putting him on the battlefield wouldn’t help Kial. He was best suited staying behind. Still, the consequences of not going were growing beyond what he had prepared for. The stares had been getting worse, and people spoke to him less and less. As if they had before. Still, Willka missed having someone to talk to. He missed Brieka.

They watched him walk down the white-marbled hallway leading out of the military wing.

He rounded the corner away from the Ytvey guards.

The evening had sent most of the parliament home, and the remaining members mostly stayed in their offices. He stopped and listened for any trace of movement. No one was there.

Willka ran, clutching the folder in his useful arm. He slid on the slick marble floors as he rounded corners.

The steps to the lower levels were hardly used, people usually took the elevator. The cleaning staff would come, but only to wipe the dust off the walls and buff the floor.

Willka hurried down the steps. Regardless of the perceived silence, if anyone saw him it would arouse suspicion. Suspicion of what? A reshktaking files down to records? He was just doing his job, and no one would question that. Right? Right.

Unless they knew about the meetings.

He descended eight flights of stairs before arriving at the bottom, four levels below the main lobby. The *Parliament Records Department*.

Willka opened the heavy double-pane doors. They slammed shut behind him as he stood on the linoleum floor. His mouth awed, as it did the first day and every day since.

The room looked endless.

Rows upon rows of black metal shelving rose nearly three stories high. Large oval-shaped light fixtures hung from the ceiling casting a wide, yet soft, orange hue onto the floor. Each shelf stored boxes and crates piled on each other, containing documents, artifacts, and anything else important enough to keep a record.

It was gigantic, aww-inducing, and to Willka, it was home. The one place he could be free of every expectation placed on him and his inability to meet them. In here he was powerful. It was a world of knowledge begging to be seen, to be understood, and *he* was the only one who could satisfy that purpose. Well, not the only one.

Eishmer stamped the log books at the front desk. Writing down a file code by hand into his logging system—a piece of paper with horizontal lines.—and verifying it was in the previous logging system—also a piece of paper with horizontal lines. He stamped the file entry and grunted satisfactorily. He had slogged through the task since Willka had left him that morning,  standing in the same place doing the most menial task one could. His wrinkles made him frown, but in truth, Eishmer was trapped in utter bliss.

“Eishmer it’s getting late, go home,” Willka said, flipping out the swing door to get behind the  wide front desk.

The old man groaned, a sound he mastered over his eighty-seven years of life. The interruption made him stutter from his task. Eishmer darted his gaze back and forth between his log pages, the rounded bottle glasses magnifying his eyes to an extraordinary size. “Ahh,” he grumbled, “I’ve lost my place.”

“You can pick it up again tomorrow. I need the key for the lockbox, please.” Willka lied, holding out his hand, hoping Eishmer wouldn’t ask why.

Eishmer scowled at Willka, but reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a large ring of keys. Willka took the key ring and said, “Thank you, Eishmer.”

The old man groaned.

“I bet Maible is wondering what you’re still doing here,” Willka said, pressing the issue.

“She’s probably hoping I don’t come back, that kook of a woman. I’ve half a mind to put a cot under this desk and log while I sleep. Don’t think I won’t do it either.” Eishmer wagged his finger in the air.

Willka smirked.

Eishmer’s eyes went back to the log books, his focus glued back to his work as if he had forgotten anything else existed. Eishmer was a grump but also a good man, he had always treated Willka right, never staring at his hand, his scars, or whispering behind Willka’s back. If he had a problem, he would say it to Willka’s face, like a gentleman.

How could Willka make Eishmer leave?

Willka picked up the telephone off the desk and pretended to answer a call, the yellow-cream colored connecting cord dangled from the microphone to the dial box.

“Records, Department how may I help you?” Willka paused waiting for the nonexistent reply, “Oh hello *Mrs.Uhlka* how are you this evening?” He folded his arms, looking directly at Eishmer.

The old man had turned his head to Willka at the mention of his wife, his eyes wide.

“I’m sorry to hear that, he has been very busy today. I believe he’s almost done with—…No, I suppose he could finish it tomorrow… That’s a fair point Mrs. Uhlka…” Willka nodded in agreement, “Absolutely I will send him home immediately… Yes, thank you, Ma’am… Yes-yes I’ll be sure to let him know… Okay…bye now,” Willka hung up the phone.

Eishmer’s face had flushed, “Did she sound angry?”

Willka shrugged. “I would recommend you buy her some flowers in the morning. She said something about feylillies being particularly lovely this time of year.”

“Oh, dear.” Eishmer closed his log book and began packing his satchel. “Feylillies. You’ve really done it now Eishmer. Where are you going to get feylillies?” The old man, in an anxious rush, packed his things as quickly as a moss slug.

Wilka looked at the watch on his wrist. He tapped the side of his thigh waiting for Eishmer to finish. He could tell the man was trying to sprint, but as the seconds ticked by, Willka’s patience crumbled.

Eishmer looked around uneasily, “Now where did I put those glasses?”

“Here they are.” Willka took Eishmer’s glasses off the old man's face and returned them.

“Ah,” Eishmer said.

“You have your coat? Your schedule book? Your documents?” Willka stepped closer to the old man and peered into his satchel. He quickly spotted everything Eishmer might need and proceeded to take the satchel from him, hanging it over the old man's shoulder. “That looks right to me. Alright, Eishmer, you hurry home and tell Maible I said to go easy on you.” Willka tapped Eishmer on the back with his good hand leading him towards the door.

“Wait, the keys. Where are my keys?”

“Remember you asked me to lock up tonight?” Willka lied.

“Ah.”

Willka lead Eishmer to the front door and then to the elevator in the hallway lobby. He pressed the call button and patted Eishmer on the back. A ringing sounded from inside the elevator shaft four floors up.

“You’re a good boy,” Eishmer said, “but you’re a terrible liar.”

Willka looked at the old man stunned. “What do you mean?”

Eishmer turned, looking up into Willka’s eyes. “I know what you’re doing. I can’t say I blame you, after everything you’ve been through. But I would be careful if I were you, boy,” Eishmer put his leathery hand on Willka’s shoulder. His touch was delicate, but the residuals of what was once a powerful man hid in the grip as the old man squeezed.

What did he suspect? How did he know? Willka thought he had been so careful, so precise, but in truth, he was careless, taking for granted the one thing he thought he could take advantage of; Eishmer’s age. In the end, he would be undone by his hubris, thinking he could outsmart a man as intelligent and thoughtful as Eishmer. And now, he was caught, like a fly in a bull-wasps web. It was over, Willka had failed.

“Your mother wouldn’t like you sneaking out with that girl,” Eishmer smirked.

“Huh?” Willka said.

“I like Poppy, but that laugh wakes up the whole damned building. Maybe save the jokes for after the engagement, when you have a roof to yourself.”

Oh, Eishmer thought he was talking to his grandson, Erlik. The one who didn’t make it back from the front. Willka smirked.

“Yes, sir.” He said, trying not to take Eishmer from that happy place in his mind.

Eishmer tapped him on the cheek and said, “Good boy.”

The elevator bell dinged as it arrived. It had a set of doors like a metal cage enclosing the inside of the elevator, and each level had a separate set of metal doors that closed off the shaft. An attendant opened the doors before helping Eishmer inside.

“Evening Mr. Uhlka.” The attendant said, his arm outstretched to assist the older man in stepping into the elevator. The gap between the ground and the elevator floor had become challenging for Eishmer, he had aged years since Erlik didn’t come home.

“Good evening.” Eishmer said, “Do you know where I can get some feylillies?”

“Feylillies?” The attendant said, slightly baffled at the request.

The elevator closed.

Willka ran back to the records department, closing the doors and locking the bolt. He turned and peeked around the front of the room, listening for footsteps, sounds of breathing, anything that would indicate someone else was there. But the room was silent. Finally, he was alone.

Time to open the folder.

Willka walked toward the lockbox. The corridor was long and narrow, he passed by hundreds of boxes labeled in a numeric code system, containing piles and piles of documents.

The corridor ended at the back of the room, the lights there were dim and not frequently replaced. Willka turned right and followed the wall until he reached a wooden door with a single bulbed light above it, hanging loosely from a rounded wall fixture. The orange light flickered.

He sorted through Eishmer’s ring of keys, opened the door, then pulled the metal bead cord on the inside lamp illuminating the tiny room.

It was quaint inside, an empty desk amongst two small metal racks containing similar document boxes as those outside. But these boxes had a yellow and black stamp on the front next to their number code. The stamp had the *black antlers* of Kial overtop the yellow word, *Confidential.*

Willka took one final peak into the main room. There was nothing but dust falling through beams of orange light. He closed the door and locked the bolt.

He set the folder from general Matixus on the desk, then pulled out a document box from a metal rack and set it on the ground.

The wall behind the rack looked flush and blank, only the chalky white plasterboard that covered the insulation was visible. Unlike the rest of the building the Records Department wasn’t designed to be beautiful, it was designed to be useful. One of the reasons Willka felt so drawn to this place was the simplicity of achieving its goal. No posturing, no masquerading as something holy. It was a room that stored boxes, and that was enough.

Willka reached out his good hand to the wall and pushed, pressing his fingertips on the gritty white paint. A small perfectly cut square of plaster went into the wall and popped the hidden compartment out of its lock. The mechanical click sang beautifully in his ears. Every time he heard the click, his mother’s voice played in his head. *Ingenuity at its finest is simplicity mastered.*

He stopped for a moment, remembering her smile. Her lips had once curled sharply at the edges and when she was really happy her gums would show. She would rub between his shoulder blades as they sat on the train riding to Nilvalavova, using her nails to scratch that part of his back he couldn’t reach. She was kind and lovely. She hid the pain well, for his sake.

Willka looked at his prosthetic hand. She used to hold it—when it was normal—leading him along the cobblestone roads of Vika returning home from the market. Would she have thought the prosthetic to be simplicity mastered? Or would she have seen it like Willka, a reminder that her son was an Aleathian, a monster.

He grabbed the now exposed edge of plaster and pulled out the hidden box compartment. The compartment was small, a perfect place to hide his tools. Willka set the compartment on the desk and displayed the tools in a line for their use: A short medical knife, a makeup brush, two vials of silver and black dust, one empty vial, a thin metal wire, and a cigarette tin filled with wax.

Willka took off his brown cotton suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves. The leather suspenders that had dug into his shoulders all day unhooked with welcome relief. He needed to be relaxed to make usable copies.

First, he had to cut the wax seal. The medical knife had a tiny blade that was dangerously sharp. His hands moved delicately as he lifted the folder’s flap just slightly to give room for the knife. The knife felt sturdy in his prosthetic hand as if that was its purpose all along. He couldn’t manipulate the fingers in any delicate way, but their stiffness gave him a reliable foundation to hold the knife as his wrist guided the blade through its cut. He sliced the seal perfectly, separating the wax along the grooves of Matixus’ mold.

The folder opened.

Willka feathered out the documents taking extra care to not cause any creases. He separated the top sheet of the document and set it alone on the desk. He then fished out a blank piece of parchment from the desk drawer and laid it on top of the document.

His laser-focused gaze took hold, steadying his breaths, relaxing his thoughts into a numbness that allowed precision. If this was all he was good for, then Halmut be damned, he would be a master.

He grabbed the brush and the two filled vials. Carefully he lined the edges of the blank paper to the document and dabbed the brush into the vile labeled, *Leadesium.* Willka brushed it along the top of the paper moving in smooth strokes from left to right, top to bottom, coating the paper evenly with the black dust. Then he carefully poured the silver dust in the vile labeled, *Alcitite*, over the paper, making horizontal passes. As he did so, the silver *alcitite* magnetized to the ink from the original page underneath, pressing the *leadesium* into the parchment, leaving a precise copy of the letters. The process jostled Willka’s insides every time. It was as if he could summon the words from the page, calling upon them like the ancient Theto summoners conjuring rain from grains of sand that once covered the continent. Only this was real, something tangible.

Now the tricky part.

Willka set down the brush and pealed the pages apart. Starting from the bottom he lifted the top piece of parchment from the original document, taking care to watch for any inconsistent lead transfer. His heart pounded but his fingers kept steady. If he lifted too fast he would risk the alcitite demagnetizing too quickly, falling off the page, and re-magnetizing to the original document. If anyone glanced at it, they would know it was tampered with. His eyes were wide with focus.

He felt it again, that moment on the edge. Either success or thousands of innocent people could die. It was not a game, he couldn’t afford to lose. It was one of the reasons he did it; to feel the rush of failures precipice at the tips of his fingers, but more so to be a part of something important. To be part of something… good for once. A surge of panic drove his blood to the surface. The ecstasy brought on by the chance of perfection resting on the tip of a needlepoint. The hourmation of failure.

The top of the page separated.

His pupils dilated.

Willka dumped the excess leadesium and alcitite into the empty vile labeled, *Used.* Then, he looked over the page and compared it to the original.

The transfer was perfect.

A bead of sweat dropped from his brow onto his lips as he formed a grin.

Willka worked for the next three hours carefully copying each page from the document.

Then, it was done. With nearly a hundred pages of transferring completed, his eyes glazed over as he gave himself a moment to relax. He wiped his hands with a handkerchief from his pocket. A short rest had reset his mind, but his watch kept ticking, like a bird's beak stabbing at his skull. It was time to get back to work.

Next, he had to reseal it.

The thin metal rod needed to be hot to apply the wax, so Willka sparked a flame with his square pocket lighter and heated the rod. He dipped the rod into the opened cigarette tin containing red wax, and carefully applied the hot wax to the cut seal. That part was like painting, adding small strokes at a time to create a larger image.

There were flickers of fear that sparked in his mind, reminding him that precision was a requirement for safety. If he gave them a reason to suspect, he would put not only himself in danger, but Eishmer too. It was the old man’s responsibility—being the head record keeper—to keep the records safe. What Willka was doing was a death sentence. But there was something else, the pressure, and intricate precision brought him to a new place, far away from himself, a state of utter bliss. The world faded as his body focused wholly on mending the seal. Success, a needle’s tip within reach, an ocean of failure everywhere else.

A few minutes passed until he finished.

But when he was done, he had reached it. Perfection.

Willka stood back examining his work and grinned. No one would suspect a thing. The seal was flawless. His focus returned from that world of numbness to the small room. Willka slumped in the chair, it had ended too soon. The feeling after the trial, that feeling of victory was fleeting. He wanted to capture it again.

Then, for the first time, Willka looked at the words on the copied document.

**Operation Burgador**

**Subject: Shellback siege of Theto trench line.**

**Note: Spear assault on Theto line sections 6 and 7 to be executed at 0400 hour on 7-4-876.**

**Objective: Capture command post, Hisha, 1.35 clicks NW of Kanlindimat. On successful capture, fortify the position for the siege of Kanlindimat. Capture the city and establish a base of operation.**

**Force Required: 15th Infantry Division as Spearhead, 8th and 12th Infantry Division as Second-Wave,  9th Division on Sweeper /Bracing.**

**POW Protocol: Termination**

**Civilian Protocol: Termination**

The hairs on Willka’s nape stood up. He stopped, blinking a few times as if that would make the words change. They didn’t.

“Brieka,” Willka whispered. She was there, in Kanlindimat. The force Matixus was sending was enormous, nearly a third of the entire Kial Army. Would it be enough to break through? It hadn’t before, what would make Matixus willing to risk such a huge assault? Such a large number of soldiers? So many *people*?

Willka rifled through the pages, skimming for something that would explain it. Why assault now? What had changed?

His eyes stopped on page twenty-two, his hands trembled.

**Aleathian power found to be diminishing. Reported power outages from Theto conductive grid and a decrease in A/ml^2 indicate a failing energy supply for Theto military. Measurements show front-line air is losing 0.762% Aleat per day, projections show power grid failure within 3 weeks.**

**Scouts report Llagow, Fiutia, and Sharkarad denied Theto supply requests.**

The Aleathians are losing their power…

Their entire economy, agriculture, transportation system, energy grid, *way of life* came from Aleathian energy. Without it, they wouldn’t stand a chance against the assault. Which meant that Brieka was at the end of a rifle’s barrel.

He had to tell her, she needed to leave *tonight.*

Hurriedly he put the folder into a document box, then cleaned the desk of the supplies, placing them back in the compartment. He reinserted the compartment into the wall. The click it made as it flushed with the wall didn’t bring joy this time. It lined up with the tick of his watch, reminding him the window to tell Brieka was closing.

“You better wait for me,” Willka said through gritted teeth. His body was tired, and his mind had not fully come back from the hours spent in extreme focus, but none of it mattered.

Brieka needed him.

Willka covered up the hidden compartment with a document box, then took the copies and tucked them into the button fold of his briefcase.

He left the room as he came, locking the door behind him.

In his hurry, Willka forgot to turn off the lamp.

Sprinting back towards the front desk, Willka clutched the briefcase tightly against his chest. His legs didn’t move as fast as they should, his breath uneven, and his lungs burning. Willka’s body performed well with precise delicate movements like forging signatures or altering documentation, but it revolted against running.

Willka pushed through the front desk side door and ran to the Department entry, but he stopped at the door. He took three deep breaths and slapped on a smile. “Don’t be suspicious.”

He didn’t take the elevator, his legs hated him but allowing the least amount of eyes this late at night was vital. His lungs burned, and his long legs tightened as he strode two steps at a time.

Willka made it to the main lobby, sweat running down his back, and headed toward the front door. All he had to do was pass the guard post and walk through the spinning doors. Once he got through, he would be free. Maybe he couldmake it in time. No, he *had* to make it in time.

The guard post at the entrance only had a single Ytvey on duty. Perfect, they were in the middle of a shift transition. But then he walked closer.

Willka’s knees locked, his body stiffened, a rush of nightmares flooded his mind. Looking at the guard, his skin tightened making tiny bumps raise all across his body. He remembered the bruises and blood. The broken bones.

Faustus was on duty.