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RONIE KENDIG



SOUL

THE BOOK OF THE WARS - BOOK 3

RAGING

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Prologue

THREE WEEKS FROM NOW

“The devil was once an angel.”

The gritted-out words hung in the stillness of the crippled bunker, and Dru Iliescu hesitated. Finally, he understood the meaning of the phrase “be careful who you trust.”

Head angled toward the M4A1 tucked firmly into his shoulder, the operator was preternaturally relaxed, his finger resting with experienced calm along the guard. He had come to collect on a debt, repay a wrong done.

In Dru’s periphery lay the grim scene of what had happened only minutes after he sprinted through the hatch. Bodies laid out. Red emergency lights spinning across pools of blood. Coiled tension tightened the posture of the other operators in black tac gear, their anger and weapons also trained on him. A firing squad. It was appropriate.

It didn’t surprise Dru that he’d been found out. That truth had hurled itself all over this nightmare. As an agent, he’d done time in the field, worked in the shadows, lied straight to the face of many a friend and loved one. Done things he’d never repeat in civil company. Yet . . . he hadn’t been prepared for this.

Palms up, Dru followed the business end of the M4A1 to

the man leveraging lethal force against him. He drew in a slow, even breath as he focused on the lead operator, whose face was hidden behind a balaclava. “Hear me out.”

“No!” came an angry bark, the voice familiar. The anger familiar. “No more.” He charged forward a step. “Down!” He motioned to the floor. “On your knees, or they’ll be mopping your gray matter off the concrete.”

Swallowing hard, Dru assessed his options—at least, he tried to. It was hard to think past his heartbeat and the staccato grunts of injured personnel in the corner, holding bloody wounds.

“Let’s go, Ossi,” muttered one of the balaclava-clad men. “Time’s up. We got what we need to end this.”

The code name wasn’t necessary for Dru to know the man before him was Leif Metcalfe, but the confirmation gutted him. The kid had unnatural skills, had gone through things nobody should have to—and that told Dru not to break eye contact, not to make a wrong move, because Neiothen reaction time was fast and lethal.

He’d already failed Leif. But if he had a chance, if he could turn this . . .

How? They were watching him. He wasn’t going to give them a reason to interfere. “Please—”

He flinched when Leif’s finger flicked to the trigger as if itching to apply that subtle, dangerous pressure. But when Dru realized he was still standing and not bleeding out, he focused on Leif. On what had changed: his head angle. A simultaneous lift of his shoulder, spine arching. As if . . . he was in pain. Fighting it.

Growling, Leif tucked his chin. The heel of his hand thumped his temple.

Dru surged forward. A blur came from his right, and with it, pain exploded through his skull. Washed the world gray and buried him.

PART ONE

ONE

PRESENT DAY

CIA SAFE HOUSE, TAIPEI, TAIWAN

“Holy son . . . of a motherless . . . Caesar’s goat and fudgesicles . . . on frick frack.” Groaning through the hammering gong in his head, Barclay Purcell climbed onto all fours, the floor blurring and wobbling beneath him. He shook his head—only to spin his surroundings into a frenzy. Letting out a low moan as he wrangled the world back into its right-side-up position made his throat burn. He canted sideways.

“Cell!” Mercy caught and steadied him, then knelt beside him. “What happened?”

“He—”

“Where’s Leif?”

“He . . .” The incident careened through his mind in a kaleidoscope of colors and realizations. “Sugar honey iced tea, my skull hurts.” He slumped against the bed, head back as the team seemed to sense the 911 of this situation and crowded into the rear room of the CIA safe house.

“Where’s Runt?” Culver Brown demanded, scowling.

Cell snorted. “Gone.” He’d never forget that powerful arm coiling around his neck like a viper. The calm, even breaths against his ear a countdown that sent the world into nothingness. “He sleeper-held me.” A shake of his head reminded him not to do that. He touched his forehead. “He’s probably long gone. How long was I out?”

Mercy shrugged. “You came back to talk with Runt about a half hour ago.”

“Half—” Cell bit off his frustration. “And nobody came to check on us?”

“You’re grown men,” Mercy argued.

“Exactly. And how many men do you know who can talk for thirty minutes, especially Leif?”

Mercy arched an eyebrow in acquiescence. “I figured you two were working out something related to the Book of the Wars.”

“Yeah,” Cell grunted, struggling to his feet and giving Culver a nod of thanks when he assisted, “like the fact Leif is one of the Neiothen.”

“Back that crack truck up,” Culver said, pressing a hand to Cell’s chest and pushing. As if to squash his words.

“*Hai*,” Dai Saito chimed in. “Try that again—and choose your words and accusations carefully. This is our brother you’re talking about.”

“And it’s my neck he choked!” When the scowls went unabated, Cell nodded, his own frustration over Leif’s . . . whatever it was—he refused to call it a betrayal, though his pounding migraine begged to differ—hitting a tipping point. “I get it. I hear you.” He pointed toward the living area and started that way. “But it’s legit. Let me show you. But first, I need ibuprofen and a stiff drink.”

“We don’t have lemonade here,” Culver taunted.

“Ha. You’re a riot. Right now Atlas ain’t got nothin’ on the weight on my shoulders.” Cell banked into the hall and headed to the kitchenette.

Iskra followed. “What were you talking to Leif about?”

“Seriously?” Cell said with a groan over his thumping skull. “What you’re really asking is, ‘What’d you do to upset him?’”

“Well, don’t be rude. Give the lady an answer,” Saito teased.

“Doing something like this”—Iskra motioned toward Cell—“is not normal for Leif.” She had a fierce expression and a worse reputation, having gone from Viorica-the-notorious-assassin to Iskra Todorova, love interest of Leif Metcalfe, golden boy of team Reaper.

Why had Cell ever given the team *that* name? It suddenly seemed macabre and borderline prophetic.

“Right,” Culver said. “He’s never gone against his own—never will.”

“Hello? Sleeper hold?” Cell indicated his neck. From the small fridge, he retrieved a bottled water. “Look, I didn’t want to believe it either. Ever since I translated the first name from those scans Iskra brought us, I saw the signs. I’ve known but wanted to prove myself wrong.”

“Wait.” Baddar Amir Nawabi’s accent deepened when he was agitated, and it took a lot to agitate the former Afghan commando, who’d seen much and done more. “You know Runt was bad guy, but not tell us?”

“Give me a sec.” Gulping three ibuprofen, Cell powered up his computer and prayed to God he could salvage this nightmare.

Massaging the pain in his chest made him aware there wasn’t a wound there. Well, maybe a few inches below his skin lay the ache of betrayal. He’d gone to Leif out of an earnest desire to help. The former Navy SEAL had been searching for answers surrounding a six-month gap of his life, and Cell wanted to help solve that puzzle. Sadly, he *had* found the missing intel—hard truths neither of them liked. It wasn’t every day you told a friend *he* was the demon they’d been hunting. But they were friends . . . or so Cell had thought until an hour ago.

“Hey.” Eyes soft, Mercy touched his shoulder. “It wasn’t personal. He liked you.”

Cell snorted. “No, he didn’t.” And that was the rub, wasn’t

it? “To him, I was a punk comms specialist always up in his business.”

“But he was your *friend*.” Meaning radiated through her hazel eyes. “You know Leif wasn’t a guy to bro-hug, but he’d protect you and—”

“Sleeper hold.” He shrugged. “All I’m sayin’.”

“He could’ve snapped your neck,” Culver put in. “I can do that, too. Want me to show you?” The brawny guy, who’d attempted to become a country music icon with his swagger and deep voice, grinned through his reddish-blond beard.

“We have the same training, remember?”

“How did you know he was a Neiothen?” Iskra’s calm demeanor couldn’t mask the acid in her words. She had it going on a million ways from Sunday, but her dark expression said she wasn’t surprised by this turn of the Leif.

“How’d *you* know?” he asked.

Put on the spot, most women would shift, glance around. Not her. Very little ruffled her Bulgarian-Turkish feathers. And he remembered right then her former profession before Leif had jumped out of a perfectly good chopper to save her.

“You said something about the first name you translated,” Saito said, easing onto a chair. “Start there. Catch us up so we can brief Command, get back to base, and figure out what to do.”

“We’re *not* leaving without Leif.” Mercy glanced at the others. “Right?”

“He has a thirty-minute lead,” Culver noted, stroking his beard.

Baddar sighed, looking like Eeyore’s cousin. “And he is very fast.”

“Right—a Neiothen,” Saito supplied with a slow nod, thinking. “So that half hour might as well be an hour, since he has superpowers.”

“Enhanced abilities,” Cell corrected, still rattled at the truth

of what—*who* they were talking about. “At least, that’s what we’ve sorted out so far. I don’t have all the details, and I’ve been working very hard to keep what I know on the down-low so I don’t get deep-sixed. Then there’s the fact that I’ve been warned off digging into this.”

“By?” A shadow flickered through Culver’s eyes.

Cell probably shouldn’t have mentioned that, because now he had to come clean about Dru’s warning. But how could he do that without compromising intel?

A soft beeping from his laptop alerted him to an incoming call. “It’s the director.” His gut tightened.

Culver cursed, dropped back against a chair, and roughed his hands over his face.

“Answer it,” Saito said. “He has to know at some point.”

“But we should talk,” Cell said. “*Before—*”

“We’ve got about a twenty-hour flight to debrief,” Saito said, then nodded to the screen. “Do it.”

Cell glanced at Iskra, knowing she’d been warned off, too. Or had she? He was suddenly questioning everything and everyone. Just as Leif had, no doubt. Reluctantly, he accepted the call.

Deputy Director Dru Iliescu appeared on the screen. “Reaper.” His gaze narrowed. “Where’s Leif?”

“Gone,” Cell answered, expecting a deluge of questions and anger.

The director glowered for several long seconds. “How long?”

“Thirty minutes and change.”

Iliescu slid a hand over his mouth. “Okay.” He tightened his lips, shook his head. “We’ll start the hunt. Get wheels-up, and we’ll talk in the air.”

Cell blinked when the transmission ended. What, no shouting? No long diatribe? That meant one thing: the situation was a lot worse than he realized.

TAIPEI, TAIWAN

“Ossi. Ossi. Two. One. Nine. Initiate rise. Rise. Rise.”

Like a drill chewing steel, grating and shrieking, those nine words bored through Leif’s skull. He’d been fine one second, ready to take down Carlyn Sienna Gilliam, then drowning in pain the next. Lost in indecision and confusion. Yet something in him had shifted with those words. A terrible haunting washed through his consciousness, as if a ghost of himself had somehow freed itself. Paced with him through that kid’s amusement park and now infected his life.

Veins thrumming and head aching because of the code that had erupted from the loudspeakers, he’d missed the pivotal shot against ArC. And it hadn’t bothered him. No . . . it had. Just not the way he’d expected.

Sitting in that safe house and acting like nothing was wrong, as if his brain hadn’t been irrevocably altered, he’d felt an inordinate rage. An undoing. A million scorpions crawling beneath his skin, ready to strike. The buzzing had peaked while talking with Reaper, stirring his biggest fear that he’d go crazy and kill his friends.

Then Cell had called him on it, said he knew what was happening.

Restraint vanished. He hadn’t wanted to hurt Cell, but he couldn’t let them stop him. And staying meant being drugged, cuffed, and delivered back to Langley. A measure only taken if he resisted, but he would’ve. He’d been cuffed by the lack of answers for years. Too long had he left decisions to others.

No more. It was time to change that. Which meant shaking things up. Splitting from the complacency that had held him hostage.

In the black night, Leif sat on a rooftop, staring down at the safe house across the street that harbored his team.

No. They weren't his team. Not anymore. He scratched his jaw, wrestling with the betrayal that now sheathed his skin. They would see his actions differently. Only see that he'd acted against Cell.

What would Iskra think? She'd be many things—hurt, angry, confused—but not understanding. While she had the skills to stop him from leaving, it would've been the disappointment in her deep gaze and her frown that disabled him. He'd taken the coward's way out because he couldn't afford to get derailed.

He peered through the night and across Taipei to the amusement park, mulling over what had happened there. How was Devine? The memory of Lawe's raw howl when she'd been struck by the sniper bullet pushed Leif's gaze down. Made his conscience writhe.

"Pete! Pete! Peyton! Oh God—please, no! Coriolis is down! Repeat, Coriolis is down! I need immediate evac!"

Leif pinched the bridge of his nose. Because of him, she might've died. Probably had. The likelihood of surviving a sniper shot was slim at best. No doubt Lawe would hold Leif responsible and hunt him down.

On the street below, a black SUV glided to a stop at the safe house. Leif drew deeper into the shadows as Reaper filed out of the building and into the waiting vehicle. They wouldn't look around, wouldn't search the street for him, because they expected him to be long gone.

Which he should be. So why was he still here?

As the SUV swung back into traffic, he moved back against the concrete wall. A weight pushed him into a crouch. Cupped his hands over his face as his friends left.

"... you were supposed to say that you didn't have any other options, that you were maybe scared. . . That's you. You're Ossi."

Rutger Hermanns had told Leif he was integral in the fight against ArC, but hearing this from a friend made him sick.

Forced him to process the truth in a new way. It explained a lot—the missing time, the inability to remember six months. His unnatural speed and ability to heal quickly. His lack of fear.

He shifted and, at the far end of the street, spotted the taillights of the team’s SUV slipping away. It was like some massive symbol—all the good parts of his life being boxed up and shipped off. Like a soldier’s body coming home to be buried, forgotten.

What was left?

A man he didn’t know.

And yet . . . he wasn’t bothered seeing them leave. Knowing they’d get on the jet and be home inside twenty-four hours, he felt . . . relieved.

Something dark inside him vied for dominance. He didn’t want to face that monster, to become one who hunted and killed. If he was a Neiothen, it meant he was connected to the Armageddon Coalition. Essentially, he was the enemy.

He tugged out a phone and dialed.

“It is good to hear from you, Mr. Metcalfe.”

“I’m ready.”