

1

‘I’m here. I actually made it!’

Kaspar Wilding shouldn’t have been grinning, but he couldn’t help it. In full dress uniform, he stood to attention with his fellow graduates of the Guardian Academy. Seated dignitaries, selected visitors and family members surrounded them on three sides, but none of them were there specifically for Kaspar. Uncle Jeff, the only family Kaspar had left, couldn’t make it.

‘I can’t just up and leave the farm, not when there’s work to be done,’ said Uncle Jeff’s holo-message in response to Kaspar’s invitation. ‘I haven’t got the time to spare to attend your . . . ceremony.’ Uncle Jeff had spat out the last word as if it burned his tongue.

Kaspar didn’t even bother to argue. Conclusive proof – not that any was required – that Uncle Jeff still hadn’t forgiven him for leaving the farm and signing up to be a Guardian. Kaspar doubted that his uncle ever would. But was he about to let that ruin even one minute of his big day? No way.

Brother Simon stood with his back to the graduates as he made his speech. It was a real honour to have a

member of the High Council officiating over the graduation ceremony and it was the first time Kaspar had seen anyone from Council up close and personal like this. This was meant to be a solemn moment full of import and gravity, but for the life of him, Kaspar just couldn't keep a straight face.

Keeping his eyes front, he whispered through rigid lips like a ventriloquist to the tall, red-headed girl with dark blue eyes on his left, 'Hey, Janna, if Brother Simon waves his arms any harder he'll take off.'

'Shut up,' Janna hissed in reply. 'Or Voss will kick you so hard *you'll* be the one who leaves the ground.'

Voss was not only one of the most senior Guardians at the Academy, but also their formidable new boss. At well over two metres, their commander was a lean, mean fighting machine. He'd regularly taken them through a number of exercises during their training and the man took no prisoners. No way would Kaspar like to get on his bad side. He was bald as an egg, the only hair on his face being his jet-black eyebrows which framed his piercing brown eyes. His laser-beam gaze was renowned for missing nothing. Kaspar quickly stowed his smile and resumed his fixed stare at the horizon.

'... such a fine body of young people who have sworn to protect our way of life here in the Alliance and our communities from those misguided Insurgents who would seek to deprive us of everything we hold dear...' Brother Simon droned on, still watering his dry words with the frenzied flailing of his arms. Kaspar found it more

interesting to concentrate on the High Councillor's active limbs than his arid words.

'I still can't believe they made a melon farmer like you Honour Cadet,' whispered Dillon from Kaspar's right. 'You must have compromising photos of someone very important doing something really embarrassing with barnyard animals.'

'Jealousy. Pure jealousy,' replied Kaspar, but his grin was back with a vengeance.

Dillon had a point, though. To think that until eighteen months ago, Kaspar had been working on his uncle's farm on the edge of the Badlands. But after brooding and stewing and agonizing about it for months, he'd applied to be a cadet at the Academy behind his uncle's back . . .

He remembered every moment of his interview . . . 'Congratulations on making it this far,' the Inducting Officer had said. 'But I warn you now, I'm not here to rubber-stamp your application. We only take those with the potential to become the best, the elite. So what makes you think you could be a Guardian?'

The IndO's unexpectedly brusque manner threw Kaspar for a moment. He took a deep, steadying breath. 'As you can see from my medical report, I'm fit. I regularly run and swim. And I'm strong. I'm used to hard work on the farm. Plus I scored nine hundred and eighty-four on the aptitude test,' he answered, prickles of heat lancing his skin as he spoke.

He wanted to join the Academy so badly he could taste

it sharp and sweet on his tongue, reach out his hand and almost touch it. *Almost*. If he were to fail at one of the first hurdles . . .

‘It takes more than that,’ the IndO continued, distinctly unimpressed. ‘I see from your application that you’ve spent most of your life on your uncle’s farm. Even visits to Capital City have been rare. To put it mildly, you lack experience of anything but farm life.’

‘That’s true, sir, but I’m a very fast learner, I think quickly on my feet and I’m eager to serve,’ said Kaspar.

‘Blah, blah, blah! You seriously think you could face a mob of homicidal terrorists intent on death and destruction and still keep it together? Well, farm boy?’

The IndO turned away before Kaspar could even reply, his finger heading for the REJECTED icon at the bottom of the data screen.

‘Runs in the family, sir,’ Kaspar shot back defiantly. ‘My father was R. J. Wilding and my mother was Kristin Jaeger.’

The Inducting Officer froze momentarily before slowly turning to face Kaspar. For the first time since he’d entered the room, Kaspar had the IndO’s full, undivided attention, just not the way he wanted to get it.

‘Rob and Kristin were your parents?’

Kaspar nodded.

RJ and KJ, as they were known, had been paired up straight out of the Academy. Two years of stellar performance had followed as they had gelled into one superb unit that protected and served along with the best of the veteran Guardians. Their name and fame had spread

further and faster when they'd saved Sister Elena, one of the High Council, from an assassination attempt. Less than two years later they had got married, and Kristin became pregnant – but on the night she went into labour, RJ had been killed. Ironically, Kaspar knew it had been an accident – on his way to the hospital to be with his wife, a truck had slammed into RJ's car and he'd died immediately. After Kaspar was born, Kristin had returned to work and successfully juggled being a mum and an Academy Instructor for seven more years until she too died. That death *hadn't* been accidental. A terrorist attempt to sabotage a nuclear power plant had led to a release of lethal radiation. Kristin, her partner and two of the terrorists had been so badly irradiated that it hadn't even been safe to recover their bodies. The Radiological Protection team had just poured in tonne after tonne of concrete and entombed them all together. After that, Kaspar had been sent to live with Uncle Jeff.

The Inducting Officer's hand returned to his side as he sat back in his high-back chair and scrutinized Kaspar. 'That's quite a pedigree to live up to.'

'Yes, sir.' Kaspar tried desperately to keep his expression neutral. He sighed inwardly. So much for his promise to himself not to use his heavyweight parents as a battering ram to open doors. He had barely warmed the seat he was sitting on, before his famous parents were practically the first thing out of his mouth.

'You seriously reckon you're up to the task?' the IndO persisted.

‘Absolutely, sir. I know I am. I’ve never wanted to do anything else or be anything else. All I need is a chance.’

The officer gave Kaspar an appraising look, then turned back to Kaspar’s application. ‘Congratulations, Cadet Wilding. You’re in.’ He stabbed at the APPROVED icon decisively.

Kaspar should’ve been happy, but he wasn’t. He headed for the door, but then lingered. The IndO was scrolling through Kaspar’s application. Kaspar could see his own 3D image projecting from the screen, turning slowly through three hundred and sixty degrees.

‘Sir?’

‘Yes, Cadet Wilding?’ asked the IndO, turning to face him.

‘Sir, could you not put down who my parents were on my application form?’ asked Kaspar.

‘Why ever not?’

‘I’d like to do this on my own merits, no one else’s,’ said Kaspar carefully.

The IndO studied him for several seconds. ‘Have you thought this through? Your parents’ names could open a lot of doors.’

‘Sir, if I can’t open those doors for myself, I’d rather they stayed closed.’

‘Cadet Wilding, your mother was a very good friend of mine. I see you have inherited her . . . spirit of independence.’ A trace of a smile tugged at the IndO’s lips. ‘Very well. If you’re sure that’s what you want.’

‘Yes, sir, it is.’

‘Good luck, Cadet.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

And the IndO had been as good as his word. Not once had his famous parents been mentioned in the entire time Kaspar had gone through Guardian training.

Today, gazing over the heads of the assembled crowd to the northern mountains in the distance, Kaspar could actually see the hydroponic towers of his uncle’s farm and of the neighbouring ones. The afternoon sun glinted off the tinted glass panels and the computer-controlled aluminium shutters. Uncle Jeff’s farm was only about fifteen kilometres beyond the Capital City boundaries, but it was light years away in attitude.

And now look at me, Kaspar thought with satisfaction. Nearly nineteen years old, a fully fledged Guardian – and Honour Cadet to boot.

‘No more skulking in the agric shelters at the first hint of trouble,’ he muttered.

He was ready to fight for what was right, just like his parents before him.

‘What?’ asked Janna.

‘Nothing. Sorry. Just thinking out loud.’

Only then did Kaspar notice Voss glaring at them. Both Kaspar and Janna clamped their lips shut.

What was that?

A sudden movement off to his right caught Kaspar’s eye. Nothing specific, no obvious threat – just a few casually dressed latecomers emerging from the woods and

starting across the lawns. Keeping his head straight but his eyes trained, Kaspar watched them advance. Visitors cutting through the woods wasn't unusual. It was the fastest route from the road to the ceremonial grounds at the Academy. Taking the official route more than doubled the journey time. But somehow the pattern of their movements was wrong, simultaneously furtive and purposeful. They moved like hunting snakes.

Not good.

At the Academy, cadets were taught to trust their instincts, but Kaspar hesitated. He was on parade at a very formal occasion. He wasn't even officially on duty yet and he certainly didn't relish the idea of launching his military career by interrupting Brother Simon's speech to cry wolf. Another group emerged on the other flank. Same movement, same feeling. Definitely not good. Insurgents? His mind made up, Kaspar started to move, but the decision to interrupt Brother Simon was taken out of his hands. A soft whooshing sound filled the air.

'THERMAL GRENADE! TAKE COV—'

A colossal explosion and a licking tongue of flame erupted in front of the platform before Kaspar could finish his warning. The heat from the blast seared his face and the backs of his hands. Both ears felt like they'd been simultaneously hit by a wrecking ball.

Lucky for my eardrums that I had my mouth open, he thought fleetingly.

But hearing loss wasn't the biggest problem right now. He and everyone around him still had an excellent chance

of being killed. Kaspar hurled himself at Brother Simon, flattening him behind the limited safety of the podium just as another grenade exploded close by.

Kaspar rolled onto his feet. 'Janna, Dillon, with me,' he bellowed at the other recruits, wanting them to follow him.

He knew he was shouting, but his voice sounded muffled and far away. It was like trying to hear underwater. Some of the recruits were still standing on the platform looking around like tourists, not even seeking cover. Did he have to draw them a picture?

'It's an attack. Take cover,' Kaspar yelled. At least he hoped it was yelling. His voice still sounded stifled.

But the warning did little good. Another thermal grenade landed near the left-hand end of the reviewing stand. The colossal boom that followed was probably heard in the Badlands. Shock waves rocketed through Kaspar's head, their intensity threatening to split his skull open. He shook his head several times to try and clear it. Shrieks and screams resounded. But now at least some of the other recruits were getting organized. Kaspar had Janna and Dillon with him and could see on the other side of what used to be the platform that Voss was leading another group across the lawn towards the trees.

Kaspar had already stripped the ceremonial cover off his rifle and now, as he thumbed off the safety catch, he shouted to his colleagues to do the same.

'Targets at Green-Two, by the lake.'

He scanned the grounds through the telescopic sights

and immediately saw a man crouching in the middle of the lawn, reloading a grenade launcher. Kaspar took careful aim, inhaled sharply, held his breath and squeezed the trigger. There was a powerful crack and a brilliant blue bolt shot out of the gun, striking the man in the chest, dropping him twitching to the ground. Hitting actual people was far more dramatic than when using the simulators. Far more satisfying too. One down. Kaspar swept the sights across the lawn, looking for more targets. He caught sight of another running past the memorial and tracked him with the rifle scope.

‘Wait for it,’ he told himself. ‘Don’t fire too soon. Wait for the full charge to build.’

The ‘max charge’ tone sounded in his headset and he immediately fired. The running man was instantaneously bathed in a blue glow; his legs folded beneath him and he violently somersaulted into a heap. Another one out for the count. Off to his right, Kaspar saw Janna and Dillon bring down a couple more. He could hear the fizzing crack of more firing from the other flank too. Kaspar took out another Insurgent who was running in an erratic pattern hoping it would make him harder to take down. It didn’t. Voss and his group had forced what was left of the attackers back towards the edge of the woods. Now that the explosions had stopped, Kaspar snatched a glance at his watch.

Three minutes? He couldn’t believe it. All this had happened in only three minutes? Kaspar turned to peruse

the injured around him. The walking, sitting and lying wounded surrounded him. The occasional groan, moan and anguished cry split the otherwise stunned silence. With his hearing returning, he looked around again, more slowly this time. Though there were a number of injured, he couldn't actually see any prone bodies that weren't moving. Could it be that, by the grace of some divine power or pure luck, no one had been killed? If so, then it was certainly no thanks to the terrorists. And to attack here, at the Academy, when the place was swarming with Guardians, was a new level of bold and stupid combined.

Fury, hot and devouring, flared within Kaspar. The full import of what had happened hit him now that the adrenalin coursing through his body was beginning to subside. The ones who had done this were nothing more than low-life, cowardly scumbags. Kaspar's grip on his rifle tightened as he found himself wishing that it could do more than merely stun.

But his job wasn't over yet. Nor would it be over until the last of the Insurgents had been hunted down. The Insurgents were a small but deadly force of terrorists made up of the fighting elite from those living in the Badlands – *the Crusaders*. The number of Insurgents who had based themselves among the Alliance population, within the pockets of Crusaders allowed to live in Capital City, were limited. Less than one hundred, according to the last official estimates. But they believed in making their presence felt, to say the least. Another look around and

Kaspar made himself a promise. He wouldn't rest until every last one of them had been rounded up and held accountable for their actions. He owed it to his mum if nothing else.

This was turning out to be one hell of a first day.