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NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



HOW ABOUT A SNEAK PREVIEW OF

THE KNIGHT

THE LAST HORIZON

BOOK THREE



THE
KNIGHT

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BOOK THREE

WILL
WIGHT

THE KNIGHT

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CHAPTER ONE

IN THIS LIFE
FIVE YEARS AGO

RAION STOOD BEFORE the other four Titan Knights, his friends, and gave them a brilliant smile. “Tomorrow,” he said, “we kill one of the Seven Calamities. The galaxy will be safe once again!”

Parryl, the Green Knight, raised her hand. She was a Lichborn girl who had grown up in the Titan Knights, though Raion still thought of her as the youngest of the group. “Do you have any new information to share?”

Raion put his fists on his hips. “I can share my resolve!”

The other four started to leave.

“Wait! We can’t go into battle unless our hearts are as one!”

Kherius, the White Knight, sighed and turned back around. He was a large human, the tallest of the whole team, and he had the rough and grizzled look of an inner-sector asteroid miner. In fact, he was an accomplished Aether Technician, but he looked like he’d never seen the inside of a lab.

“Let’s splatter the bugs!” Kherius shouted, and Raion beamed.

The Blue Knight shot a longing glance at the door, but she didn’t

leave. As an Aethril, Laraena's skin was powder blue and her pale hair glistened as though set with stars. Like many of her species, she was an adept wizard, an Archmage of ice elementalism.

"Let's get them," she said in a monotone. "Woo. We can do it."

Even if it was sarcastic, that was the most emotion Raion had ever heard Laraena express. He looked over her proudly and she blushed.

Javik Leed, the Yellow Knight, closed his eyes and visibly counted to three. Raion was proud of him too. His therapist had insisted he learn to control his temper, especially in team scenarios.

"I can't do it this time, Raion," he said. "I'll be ready, but I can't pretend to be excited."

Raion cocked his head. "You don't have to be excited. But isn't it better to focus on victory?"

"This is serious."

"Do you think it's better to imagine what will happen if we lose?"

Javik struggled with himself, and his lips even moved as he counted silently. Raion waited for him to come to a conclusion.

For the first year or so of working together, Javik had thought Raion didn't take his role seriously enough. He had learned better, but he still didn't understand Raion's attitude.

That was all right. Raion was happy enough that Javik had made an effort to understand him.

Finally, Javik clapped his hands together and looked around the circle, meeting all their eyes in turn. "No matter what happens tomorrow, we will face it together. And as long as one of us remains standing, the people will have someone to protect them."

That got a genuine cheer out of Raion, and even the Green and White Knights joined him. Laraena gave a polite clap.

"I never doubted your resolve," Raion said. "I never doubted any of you. I can feel your commitment, and the universe could have no better protectors. There is no one I would rather fight beside than you."

That improved their mood. He could feel it in the bond they shared.

They might not see friendship in the same way he did, but

they *were* his friends. They would fight together, and they would die together.

And, once the others had left and Raion was alone in his room, he stared into the darkness and tried not to think about how likely it was that they *would* all die together.

The D’Niss had been increasing their activity lately, and they weren’t the only threat in the galaxy that required the Titan Force. Not only were the Knights stretched thin, but the D’Niss were only getting stronger.

The next day, they would face the most powerful foe yet, and their enemies were up to something. The Seven Calamities were trying to gather enough power to summon Esh’kinaar, the Swarm-Queen.

Even should they succeed, Raion wouldn’t give up. The galaxy needed him.

But he didn’t want his friends to die.

With no other option, Raion decided to get some sleep. The best thing he could do for the other Knights was to trust them. They could take care of each other, and only with the power of their unity could they hope to win.

Just when he had resolved to go to sleep, his console buzzed. His wrist-computer sat on the folded strap that usually held it to his arm, plugged into a socket on the wall next to his bunk.

He glanced at it and checked it with his processor. The feed streamed into his eyes directly. That hadn’t been an emergency alert—nothing that required him to leap to his feet and go summon his Titan—but it was high-priority enough to get through some of his automatic filtering.

Most of the people who could call him with such urgency were the other Titan Knights, and they were in the same building.

It began with a video message from Doctor Janbell Cryce, inventor of the Divine Titans.

Raion’s feed filled with Doctor Cryce’s voice. She was an older Lichborn woman, and she looked like she was facing down the end of a long week in the lab. There were smudges he couldn’t identify

on her gray skin, her hair was a tangled mess of black that she'd halfheartedly tied back, and her coat was wrinkled and stained.

Exhausted as she must have been, she positively beamed with energy. She was perched at the edge of her chair, staring into the camera, and she began speaking as soon as the call started as though she could wait no longer.

"They're retreating!" the Doctor shouted. She rubbed her hands together eagerly. "We got word yesterday but we only confirmed it now, thanks to Subspace delays that—Well, that's not important. The D'Niss are *retreating*, Raion. We've done it."

Raion didn't remember getting out of bed, but he was standing, eyes wide.

"That last battle was too much for them. Every D'Niss you killed is irreplaceable, and the Seven Calamities have decided to cut their losses. At least three of them have returned to their universe, and most of the others took their swarms and headed back to Dark Space."

They'd fought for years to defeat the D'Niss, all in the hopes that they could make the alien incursion too costly. Their leaders, the Seven Calamities, were the greatest of their kind besides the Swarm-Queen herself.

Doctor Cryce and Titan Force intelligence had always hoped they could make the D'Niss retreat without engaging the Calamities, but that was the best-case scenario. It was much more realistic, they estimated, to expect that they'd have to kill off three or four of the Seven before the rest left the universe behind.

Somehow, it seemed, they had ended up in the best of all worlds. The Aether had blessed them.

"We did it," Raion muttered. It didn't feel real.

Cryce cackled. "Doesn't feel real, does it? Well, that's the good news. The bad news is, you're still flying out tomorrow."

She tapped her console and an extra image appeared on Raion's feed, floating in the air next to her: a three-dimensional model of a moon-sized beetle. Neth'terith, least of the Seven Calamities.

"Our beetle friend is the one who decided to stay behind," she

continued. "If we don't take him out, he could grow his swarm until it's a self-sustaining threat to galactic security comparable to the Iron Legion, so we still need to get rid of him. But we were going to do that anyway. The difference now is, once you beat him..." She leaned back in her chair and spread her hands. "...That's it. We win."

Raion steadied his breathing as he looked into the joyful green glow of Doctor Cryce's eyes. He couldn't hold off any longer; he began a call to her, but it cut off immediately.

In the video, the Doctor held up a hand. "Don't try calling me! The second I finish recording this, I'm sedating myself. I need to get at least a few hours of sleep, or I won't be any good during tomorrow's fight. But I'll leave you with one last bit of good news.

"Now that we've made visible headway, the Galactic Union is suddenly willing to cooperate. They've sent us all the intelligence they've gathered on Neth'terith. Half of it is pure speculation and most of the other half dates back to Esh'kinaar's first incursion, but I've sent you the good bits. With this, our odds tomorrow have gone *way* up."

Cryce's energy suddenly faded and she blinked back tears. "One day left, Raion. Go tell your friends."

Raion had already bolted down the hallway.



CHAPTER SIX

IN THIS LIFE
FIVE YEARS AGO

RAION PUSHED HIS Divine Titan past its limits, shouting as he slashed through the last of the D’Niss.

The seventh of the Seven Calamities resembled a fat beetle bigger than a colony, but the Dance of a Burning World sliced it down the middle with a blade of crimson flame. Raion emerged from the other side just in time.

His Divine Titan screamed warnings at him from every direction, something was wrong with his central eye, and he couldn’t feel his legs.

Even so, he let out a cry of triumph. It went out over the local Subline even as his Divine Titan vanished from around him, its energy spent.

“We did it!” he cried into his helmet’s speaker.

He drifted in space, surrounded by oceans of insectoid blood, but his starship was already on the way to pick him up. It would be drawn by the emergency beacon on his suit.

The other three Knights didn’t respond.

Their fight against Neth'terith had cost them Javik, though fortunately he'd survived the destruction of his Divine Titan. It would take years to repair the Yellow Titan, and the best medical care in the galaxy to restore Javik to perfect condition.

He was out of the fight, but at least he'd made it out alive. And victorious.

The long war was over.

Titan Knights would still stand as guardians of the galaxy, and they would be far more effective without the D'Niss looming over them. Raion had long dreamed of what they could accomplish with their greatest enemies gone, and soon, he would see those dreams come to life.

The broken body of Neth'terith drifted in an ocean of its own blood, a cracked and leaking moon. Raion's gaze sharpened as he saw motion.

A cloud of smoke drifted toward him, out of the slain monster's body. He assumed it was an attack and ignited what was left of his energy, setting his red aura to burning.

The cloud surrounded him and began eating away at that aura, giving him a chance to inspect the 'smoke' more closely. It was a cloud of insects, tiny hard-shelled biting things that had no business surviving in space.

Raion flared his aura and killed the bugs, but they gave him a bad feeling.

"Knights, check in," he said into his helmet.

His red starfighter slid a moment later and he flew inside, connecting to its more powerful transmitter. When he sent the message again, he finally received a response.

"No problems here, Red!" the voice of Parryl, the Green Knight, came through. She sounded cheery and younger even than she was, rejuvenated by excitement.

The Blue Knight, Laraena, rarely expressed anything, but even she laughed as she spoke over their connection. "Thought we'd lost you there, Red. Does that mean this is mission accomplished?"

The White Knight didn't respond verbally, but he sent the all-clear over the computer.

Raion was initially relieved to hear their voices, but on further thought, his unease deepened. "Is everyone all right? I had a bad feeling."

"You were swimming in bug guts," Parryl said. "That's not going to feel *good*."

They sounded like his friends, but there was something missing from their voices. He sped for the carrier, the vast mobile base that docked their fighters and served as their home while they were on missions.

He saw their starfighters flying in ahead of him, and the sight gave him another wave of relief. Raion hoped he was being paranoid. Maybe he didn't know what to do now that their fight was over.

But he'd never had trouble celebrating after a fight before.

When he docked and hopped out of his fighter, he saw his teammates gathered together laughing, helmets dismissed. Parryl was gesturing, shining Lichborn eyes alight with excitement.

Raion stared at them for a long moment while the hollow feeling in his gut only deepened.

He felt no friendship from them.

Laraena waved to him and jerked her chin, inviting him to join them. Raion removed his helmet in time to vomit on the floor.

The other three hurried over, concern in their face, but Raion ignited his force-blade while only half-standing.

"Stay...stay back!" he insisted. His voice shook.

While they were asking for explanations, Raion activated the communicator in his console. "Doctor Cryce, I need readings on the others."

"Come again, Raion?"

"Give me their bio-readings *NOW!*" Raion shouted. He never raised his voice like that.

The other three Knights moved closer again, their concern turning to fear.

"They're fine, Raion," the doctor's voice came into his ear. She sounded puzzled. *"What are you...Huh. That's weird."*

Parryl reached toward Raion with a green-and-white glove, but her hand found the edge of a plasma blade.

"No closer," Raion said, but his voice and hand both trembled.

"*Oh, worlds. No. Raion, they're...*" A retching came from over the audio as Cryce lost control of her own stomach.

She managed to croak out two more words. "*...parasites. Run!*"

Two things slid into place for Raion at that moment.

The first was something he *hadn't* heard. Every other D'Niss they'd killed had gone out with a psychic death cry, usually an attempt to shake their resolve or swear vengeance. He hadn't consciously noticed, occupied as he'd been with killing the enemy, but this one had remained silent.

Which suggested it had been talking to something else.

Second, that cloud of insects. Those hadn't been mentioned by the Galactic Union's report. No one knew anything about any clouds of buzzing, biting insects.

Thanks to that report, the Titan Force had enjoyed a huge tactical advantage in their final fight. They'd known all the tricks the D'Niss had, and the information had proven accurate.

No one knew about the card the D'Niss had held in reserve.

Parasites.

Neth'terith had never intended to rule the galaxy without the rest of the Seven Calamities. He had been left behind as a sacrifice. One last, spiteful act before the D'Niss abandoned the universe.

Their revenge on the Titan Force.

"Can we save them?" Raion asked, but his helmet wasn't on. The other Knights could hear his end of the conversation.

They stopped acting like his friends immediately.

Parryl's face went blank and she shoved her hand into his force-blade. When it began to cut her, she didn't flinch, but Raion did.

It was one thing to threaten impostors, but it was another to cut his friend.

Her other hand went to her hip and came up with a gun. With a green flash, she shot, and Raion barely dodged. That one shot blasted a hole in the ceiling of the docking bay, instantly breaching the hull and greedily sucking the air from the room.

This thing could still use her Combat Art.

Kherius, the White Knight, pulled a weapon of his own and fired a blast of energy at Raion. At the same time, Laraena chanted. Ice formed behind her as she called her element.

Raion knocked the blast into space, but he had been at the end of his rope since the battle. He'd already gone past his limits.

And he'd done it for his friends.

He fought on autopilot, but he couldn't bring out the full extent of what little strength remained to him. What if they could still be saved? By fighting them, was he giving up on them?

Every exchange devastated the carrier. If they had been deeper in the ship, it would have exploded by now. Alarms still blared from all directions.

Raion was in worse shape even than the ship. Each exchange burned him, cut him, broke his bones. Icicles stabbed into him, but he had to keep moving. He couldn't kill his friends, and he couldn't let them kill him.

Finally, the teary voice of Doctor Cryce came over his audio implant one more time, *"Could you... For me, keep Parryl's... body as intact as you can. I want to bury her in one piece."*

The Dance of a Burning World ignited around Raion's sword.

He blocked a shot from the Green Knight, sliced through an icicle, and cut through a thick barrier of energy to cleave the White Knight in half.

Raion didn't look at the man's remains, but he couldn't help hearing the buzzing as flies left the body.

He ignited them all with such intensity that the floor beneath him glowed red-hot.

"There is no life for you," a dead insect said from Parryl's body. "In victory or defeat, there is only death."

Raion didn't make the mistake with the Blue Knight that he'd made with the White. He didn't cut her into pieces but cremated her on the spot.

Only then did he address the Green Knight.

"Don't worry, Parryl," Raion said. "I'll save you."

How great was that?

You can get the whole book on June 11, 2024!



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