

CHAPTER ONE

1876

Twelve years later a man would be shot, leaving him to recollect this very day and his actions from it, but at this point of time, nothing less than absolute peace filled his thoughts as he gazed upwards from his window. Wisps of thin clouds gently scattered themselves across the dawning spring skies, like chimney smoke fading away into the rising sunlight of cold winter mornings over the last few months. The serene scene of the heavens' pristine azure forewarned of the marvel soon to come.

A vast expanse of grasslands stretched on for a seemingly endless time, marking on maps the mostly uninhabited area known as the Eleurian Plains. At a time of great advancement in society, there were the few individuals who would move to these fields, still left untouched by civilization, longing for peace. On this day though, the peace was short to last.

As the tall pastures of grass wavered in the soft winds, a glint of light red slowly radiated through the lands. Flashes of crimson burst out from a single source in the sky, sure to be seen by onlookers miles around. A low hissing in the air gradually increased as seconds went by, followed abruptly by a deep and resonant boom that vibrated in all directions.

Suddenly, a streak of brilliant red shot through the sky, plummeting past the atmosphere and towards the earth. A fiery meteorite blazed down with unfathomable speed, tearing apart the very air it traveled in. The wind violently hissed behind it as it flew, strands of smoke trailing in its trajectory. Flickers of red pulsed out sporadically from the center of the comet, illuminating the plains with the bright flashes and the booms that followed in its wake. From a far-off distance, almost gracefully, the anomaly arched over the fields below for near four minutes. Though a magnificent sight, it descended bringing a terrible and powerful secret.

At last, the meteorite slammed unforgettingly into the unsoiled ground, releasing a deafening rumble like thunder that reverberated leagues away. The impact impounded a large crater as dirt, grass, and debris scattered in all directions. A ripple of fire and smoke surged out, igniting everything in a sphere around.

Within minutes, all vegetation had burnt down to the bare dirt. The rising column of smoke pointed out from above this unique spot of desecrated land amongst the peaceful Eleurian Plains. The phenomenon ended as quickly as it began though; the sky had returned to its former blue and state of bliss, with the clouds drifting along as before. The fumes dissipated revealing the meteorite, five feet across its diameter. As expected, its previously spherical shape had now been cracked and disfigured with fragments and chunks pointing randomly.

From inside the meteoroid though, a sliver of red light glimmered out through the fissures mysteriously for a few seconds before dying out into the fast-approaching dusk.

The sound of rapping broke through the morning silence. A rough hand impatiently knocked on the polished wood door outside. The knocking intensified until a drowsy voice called out from inside

another room, "Hold on, I'm coming!"

A grey-haired man stepped into his front room, slugging towards the door wearily. His disheveled hair and clothing suggested that he had been working all night and morning. It was overexertion and stress like this that brought forth such grey hair when he was in his middle-aged years, though by now Hiram Johnson worried least of all about his physical appearances. An eager and talented scientist in his day, Hiram had been working in the hub of society. Wherever technological advancements or scientific discoveries were made, one would find him scurrying around nearby, always searching for new opportunities.

His commitment to cause drove him to excel in his work no matter the project, but his zealotry knew no bounds. Though he was already respected in the scientific and hierarchal community, he expected to continue and rise in rank without trouble, perhaps even fancying an audience with the Emperor one day, a satisfaction rarely granted. Life for Hiram only seemed to improve with each coming day. At he passed into his thirties his eyes by chance fell upon a young woman whose charm easily enchanted him; his heart had at last found a new passion. One year later, they were betrothed and soon introduced a son into the family.

For years they raised the child up in the city as Hiram progressed to advance in his career, albeit at a slower but sure and steady pace. Before long, the boy himself had grown into a young man looking to forge his own life. Curiously enough, the beginning of that new life in a way brought the end of another. Over the long years and then at the height of his work, Hiram's mind began to steer slightly off from sanity. During the development of a grand invention for the betterment of society, his luck took a sudden change.

Whether from jealousy or disdain at the fervent old man, several of his colleagues sought to remove him from his position. Sabotaging his plans, they wound up having him decommissioned and ridiculed. It seemed all grace had abandoned him at that point as his beloved wife fell ill from a plague pervading through the lands. Disheartened and without a job, Hiram gazed on helplessly while her health declined until the scourge took her life and those of hundreds of thousands in the Empire. Sadly enough, completion of his contraption could have prevented or helped the people against the infection.

Infuriated, bitter, resentful, powerless - he resigned himself in his mind as a failure. His son, now starting his own family, could do nothing to soothe the forlorn man. Hiram desperately desired peace, a peace the cruel and familiar Empire could not provide. He began to travel afar without telling anyone, back and forth from the city, before settling in a tranquil and undisturbed field out in the middle of nowhere. Slowly by himself over a few years, he built himself a new home in the Eleurian Plains until finally moving all of his belongings there. Since then, Hiram had lived alone there, tinkering about and enjoying the newfound peace the surrounding nature brought, maintaining minimal contact with his son's family and others in the civilized world.

"Blast," Hiram grunted with a scowl as his fingers reached to unlock the door, "what business have you at this time of day!"

Almost deliberately, the hand banged demandingly on the door another second, even as Hiram pulled it in. The entrance revealed three men standing straightly at attention. All three were garbed in

decorated blue uniforms and small kepis, with a pistol hanging at each of their waists. Though the designs were newer, he recognized those suits belonged to soldiers of the Empire, and the fact that they came equipped indicated they meant business.

The one in front, presumably the other two's superior, stared at Hiram with piercing blue eyes. Before Hiram could utter a protest, the soldier pushed him aside and stepped into the front room and looked around. The area was cluttered with gadgets, designs, and junk in a mess befitting of the old man. After a second's thought, he pointed at a table by the side. The other two soldiers followed into the house, carrying between them an ornate wooden box about three feet wide. The leader of the three leaned over the desk and with two arms roughly wiped everything off the surface, sending an assortment of items crashing onto the floor.

"What," Hiram muttered in shock, "you can't- what are you doing?"

He confusedly approached the table, arms stretched out as if to stop the soldiers. Without uttering a word, the two carrying the box stepped towards the cleared area. With a heave, they gently swung the case up onto the table before stepping back. The superior pulled out a metallic key from his side pocket and inserted into the keyhole. He, too, took a step back, ushering Hiram forward.

Hesitantly, Hiram neared the box. There was no doubting the strangeness of this visit which surely brought trouble, but restrain from curiosity was never one of his strong suits, nor did he seem to have a choice in this matter as a result of the weapons the soldiers held. Frail fingers wrapped around the key, a cool and smooth touch. He turned the key clockwise, causing a click sound as it unlocked the box. Even from just the smallest of spaces deep inside the mechanics of the lock, a low humming emulated from within.

His two hands spread over the top of the box, eyes fixed intently on the tiny opening. Hiram pushed the top up instantly and a red light burst upon his face. Still completely focused, he did not move in the slightest even as the mysterious drone loudened. He peered inside to behold the item that would bring about his doom and legacy. A chipped shard, glowing red, rested on a soft cushion. Its crystalline structure was somewhat opaque, yet no source of light could be identified. While he gazed at the shard, one of the soldiers handed the officer in charge a large pair of tongs. Stepping in front, he picked up the object and held it up in the air before Hiram.

Before long, Hiram had dressed himself in his lab attire, eyewear and mask, anxious to study this oddity. The shard had been moved to one of his workspaces, sitting on a metal frame that supported it several inches off the table. Never before had he seen such an object; who knew what possibilities it could account for? All of his melancholy sifted away at the sight of this marvelous fragment - the magic had entered his life again.

CHAPTER TWO

1888

Dark clouds covered the night sky above, casting the shadow of a wild forest canopy over the Empire, as the people tried to rest. A maddening downpour of rain fell upon the lands, making it near impossible to sleep amidst the roaring droplets of water. Travellers either stopped for the time being or carried on blindly in the thick, soaking mud roads.

Deep in the heart of the city stood one of the military's primary barracks, housing many of the commanders and elite soldiers. Except for the few patrols pacing the walls of the fort, most of the personnel stayed inside. The halls stretched on endlessly in the menacing darkness, lit only briefly by torches every now and then.

The sound of footsteps gradually appeared, echoing down one of the long hallways. An officer briskly walked down, struggling to keep a professional composure. His kepi hung loosely on the side of his hair, barely staying on top as he reached the end of the path, leaping onto the stairwell. With hurried steps he went up through the many turns and corners of stairs before finally coming face to face with a large, wooden door. Stopping for a brief second to catch his breath, the officer repositioned his hat and tightened his uniform.

Bang! the door slammed open as the soldier burst into the captain's office. A man at the other end of the room turned around from his desk, interrupted from his work. He stared sternly at the soldier, sending him to a complete stop. The officer gulped uncomfortably as he scanned the environment. A variety of weapons, designs, papers, and inventions cluttered the room, all which seemed to make him feel quite small.

Following procedure, he stood at attention and saluted the man in front of him, steadily shouting, "Sir!"

The man - Benedict Bennett - placed the quill in his hand down. Captain of the military post in the city, his was known to be rough and strict in his commanding. His presence always brought forth a silence from those serving under him, the utmost discipline expected at all times. Still, he held himself in a very shrewd and sophisticated manner. His demeanor impressed many of his superiors and though his rank was nothing too remarkable, he remained content as he often attained what he wanted through his guile. Proving far more intelligible and ambitious than other comrades of similar positions or even higher, he stood out as somewhat of an enigmatic eccentric, chasing after new and foreign ideas in his spare time. No matter where he went, he would surround himself with strange designs and papers of different weapons and contraptions. By now, most knew not to question his personal pursuits.

"What is it?" questioned Benedict evenly.

The officer put down his hand and breathed out in a relief.

"We may have found it," he said, "a man, here, says he has seen it."

Bennett's eyes widened at the response, "What?"

"He came in, beaten and broken up it seems," continued the officer, "started babbling about some strange lights he saw - red, bright."

“Who,” cut in Benedict with a growing eagerness, “where is he?”

“Says his name is McArthur. Down the hall. His condition is not too well; probably would do well with some food and sleep.”

Benedict touched his lips with his hand, thoughts racing quickly through his mind. The officer breathed out again, awaiting his orders. The captain’s eyes rose up and stared seriously at the soldier, “Bring him in - now.”

With a nod, the officer turned around down the stairs and hurried back to the entrance of the barracks. Benedict paced around the room, deep in thought. This could be it, he mused.

A few minutes later, several footsteps sounded from the stairwell and into the office. Slowly, three men came into view. First, the officer from before, whose kepi once again flopped to the side from all the running. Trailing behind stood another soldier who lightly held the wrists of a cold, shivering man.

The wanderer cautiously sat down on a chair set before him by Benedict. He looked to be in his thirties and in a terrible state. Covered in shaggy hair, torn and bloodied clothes, and bruises all over, he had clearly not bathed or shaven for days.

“If I may,” the man gasped nervously, “some water would be much appreciated.”

Benedict placed himself directly in front of the man and spoke steadily yet encouragingly, “If you tell me what I need to know, you can get whatever you want.”

Though he had no intention of actually following through with the man’s requests, he turned to the soldier in the back and instructed him to fetch him some food and water.

“What is your name,” he resumed, “tell us what happened?”

McArthur’s eyes darted around the dark room, frightened by the entire situation. Hesitantly, he began to recant his tale, “Well, I was on my way to the city here. Off a good bit into the forest, riding, I was alone with me and my wagon and horse, and out o’ nowhere these bandits come and attack me! Next thing I know, I’m in their camp or something and - well during this big storm, I got out of me ropes and ran as far as I could. Couldn’t get far of course, with the ran and all. Ended up takin’ shelter in these caves, huge they were! And then I saw it...”

His eyes gazed up at the ceiling, lost in thought. The rain pouring outside placed him back in his memories, just like the night he was describing.

“What did you see?” Benedict urged on.

“...a bright, red light. Coming from inside the cave, just for a second. It flashed a few times, and that with the thunder scared the living daylights out of me! I-I got out of there as fast as I could.”

“Sir,” the officer interjected, “a patrol group found him wandering around the road and brought him here immediately.”

McArthur closed his mouth, unsure of what to do next. Benedict began pacing the room again, taking in the story. “Do you remember where the caves were,” he asked, spinning around to face the man, “could you lead us there?”

“Well, I mean I couldn’t see much,” McArthur began stuttering apologetically, “it was raining hard and I wasn’t in the best shape then... or now...”

His voice trailed off as Bennett walked over to the window, gazing outside at the treacherous

downpour.

“If I could ask, sir,” he continued, “be there any water I could drink?”

“Of course,” Bennett said, before turning to the soldier, “Put him in the cells.”

McArthur stood straight up in fear, “What? Sir, please!”

The two soldiers at the door grabbed the man by the shoulders, forcing him up. His body slumped down in their arms, too weak to resist. His cries of protest faded out as they dragged him out of the room. The door closed promptly, leaving the officer alone with Bennett.

Standing to attention, the officer spoke out quickly, “Sir, we can find it, just give me some men-”

“No, you wouldn’t last out there,” the captain said lowly while pacing around the room, strategizing in his head, “soldiers here haven’t been out of these walls even once. No, we need someone who knows the land, who knows how to find things, find people.”

He stopped in his track and looked hardly at the officer, “Get me Leonard.”

CHAPTER THREE

1888

Like most of the cities under the rule of the Empire, a large division existed between the different classes of people. While luxurious manors, ballrooms, and theaters entertained the prosperous in the northern sectors, the rest of the populace carried on their lives in the smog-ridden streets of new-age industrialization. Colossal factories shadowed over most of the city grounds with a plethora of merchant stores and taverns surrounding them.

Even at the morning hour, the streets bustled with activity. Traders, artisans, and laborers woke up early to prepare for the long and difficult day ahead. Though the majority of customers were people living in the city, a steady flow of travellers passed through every day, either looking to find and purchase some exotic goods, or try for a job at the factories. Life for the middle and lower class repeated as a dull routine, especially during these times of peace. Occasionally, some foreign tradesmen and their caravans would make their way into the city bringing grand stories of the far lands; those infrequent visits livened up the atmosphere for a short while.

Among a line of buildings near the front gates lay a small, gray house settled in between two antiquated apartments. The sole window in the front was closed shut with wooden boards, adding to the gloomy and lifeless appearance. Inside, few streaks of light poked through holes in the walls, while a few candles in the halls dimly illuminated the rooms.

An impatient banging suddenly echoed through the house.

“Amos Leonard,” a voice announced loudly from outside, “Open your door immediately!”

After a second of silence, the banging on the front door continued, “By the order of the Empire, open this door now!”

Still no response.

With the sound of crackling wood, the door caved and fell inwards off its hinges. A dark boot pushed through the broken door as the man outside kicked it further in. Light instantly dispersed through, brightening the room. Three soldiers stepped in slowly, glancing around. Silence filled the house.

“Mr. Leonard!” the man again shouted.

They looked to each other briefly and nodded before the two soldiers in the back spread out into the rooms, searching for this Mr. Leonard. The one who spoke remained as their lookout, and curiously observed the quarters surrounding him. Clothes and tools were scattered messily on tables and chairs in every corner.

Outside the house, a man approached the open doorway with a confused look. He was dressed in casual, brown clothing and a black top hat. Holding a chicken leg in one hand, he stepped up to inspect the broken door frame. The man walked into his home, and upon seeing the three soldiers shuffling about, chuckled amusedly.

“Gentlemen, I would like to say I really do appreciate you breaking down my door,” Amos Leonard stated sincerely.

The soldiers turned around and scurried towards Amos, stumbling to assume their formal positions.

“Mr. Amos Leonard,” the first soldier spoke out, “we have need to speak with you.”

Walking past them, Amos continued to eat his chicken. The soldiers subsequently trailed behind him, trying to catch his attention.

“I can see that,” he reflected aloud, “though I hope you’ll pay for my door, I was getting quite attached to it.”

“The Empire requires your services,” the soldier expressed firmly.

“Oh?” Amos said between bites of the chicken as they coursed through the hallways repetitively, “can’t your soldiers do it?”

The soldier impatiently began, “Captain Bennett would like you to lead an expedition-”

“-an expedition-”

“-to find an object of great value to him-”

“-to him?”

“-and to the Empire.”

Amos abruptly stopped walking and turned around, causing the soldiers to bump into each other clumsily. His free hand reached up to rub his chin as he squinted at the soldier.

“Why?” he questioned.

Rotating around again, Amos proceeded to go into the kitchen. Several cabinets and a wooden table made up this cookery, and it was unsurprisingly just as cluttered and littered as all the other rooms. The soldiers stepped in as he tossed the chicken leg into a garbage can.

“You would be rewarded for your efforts,” the soldier pointed out, “quite generously.”

“Well, I do enjoy a little funding for my-” Amos paused, searching for the right word, “-hobbies. Tell me, where might this venture be?”

“Somewhere in the Wayword Forest, but beyond that I do not know.”

Placing his hand upon his chin, Amos headed towards the front room. The soldiers grudgingly kept behind him, eager to complete their task.

“Captain Bennett requests you come with us to his-”

“Thank you very much but I will have my answer for you later,” Amos peremptorily stated as he walked over to the entrance, extending his hand outwards, “you know where the do-”

He stopped, looked at the doorway to point it out, and turned back to the soldiers both confused and amused at the missing piece, “-the door is...”

The three men watched him for a second longer before stepping outside and back onto the busy street. Without any further waiting, Amos stooped down to pick up the broken door and place it back onto the hinges. The wood weakened wood and hinges shifted about as he tried to keep its balance.

“Sir, again,” the soldier requested, leaning from side to side to follow Amos’ movements, “we would like you to come with us.”

“And I would like my door to be fixed, goodbye,” Amos said with finality. Finishing his sentence, he slammed the door shut as best as he could, sealing most of the light and holes. Before it fell

down again, he grabbed hold of it and gently left it at an angle where it rested and stayed up.

“How rude,” Amos exclaimed to himself, brushing his hands together as he admired his temporary handiwork. An air of quiet once again lifted around the home. Amos began pacing back and forth, contemplating what to do next.

I wonder, he thought, is it worth getting mixed up with him?

After a brief moment, Amos shrugged nonchalantly and walked off to another room.

On the other side of the doorframe stood the three soldiers, mulling over their failure. They leisurely turned around to face the streets and crossed over to the other side. A small but homely tavern lay directly across Amos’ house, making clear one of his reasons for selecting his specific house. Even at this early hour, a steady flow of weary and grumbling patrons made their way in and out of the public bar, many exiting in a drunken stupor. The soldiers leaned on some barrels and tables that were set out front.

“Well,” the lower rank cadet asked curiously, “what do we do now?”

The first soldier relaxed, stretching his shoulders and sliding his gun back to a more comfortable position.

“Our orders,” he said between stretches, “are to bring back Amos Leonard to the barracks, so we’ll have to just wait for him here. And when he comes out, we’ll lead him there.”

“What if he doesn’t come out,” the cadet questioned, “or you know, he takes a long time?”

“He will come out, eventually,” the soldier responded, trying to believe his own half-hearted assurance, “just keep an eye out on his door and watch for when he looks out or-”

“Gentlemen,” a voice suddenly called out to their side, “I’ve made up my mind. I’ll be going on this little expedition of yours.”

Out of the blue, Amos stepped in next to the soldiers, who snapped up attentively, slightly startled. They quickly stare at the figure before them and back to his door in bewilderment. Clearing his throat, the soldier regains his posture and stands straight up.

“Sir, thank you, sir,” he fumbled out in relief, “we’ll take you to the barracks. Captain Bennett eagerly awaits you.”

Amos chuckled lightly, “I’m sure he does.”

CHAPTER FOUR

1888

A mere several minutes later, Amos arrived at the barracks. Already familiar with its location, he quickly made his way as the three soldiers struggled to keep up and maintain that they were in charge. Ignoring their requests to stay behind them, he casually strolled through the military halls, simply walking past any of the guards who confusedly tried to stop him. This continued on as he went up the stairs leading to Benedict's office.

The officer by the door perked up when he noticed Amos approaching.

"Go right in," he whispered with a wave of his hand.

Amos stepped into the room with a wide smile. Benedict, leaning on his desk with palms open on top, did not bother turning around.

"Amos Leonard," he announced with a slight edge.

"Benedict!" Amos cried out with mock enthusiasm, "long time no see."

Walking over to a nearby table, he picked up a sharp hunting knife to examine. Cleanly polished, the blade protruded out three inches, perfectly balancing out with its leather-vested grip. As he began playing with the knife between his fingers, Benedict turned to face his requested visitor.

"Indeed," he returned with equal sincerity, "the Empire has missed your great services."

"Really? I can't say that the feelings are mutual, though I do have some fond memories of my earlier days with the regime."

"Ah, yes," Benedict mused, replaying in his head the past, "you as a young corporal if I recall correctly. Never did quite follow your orders, but you certainly got the job done. Not to mention how you often came back with a large sum of money."

A grin slowly spread over Amos' face as he placed the knife down on a table by the open window. An assortment of papers lay scattered across. Picking up one of the blueprint designs, he recollected his former years, stating absentmindedly, "Yes, I somehow did. And you! A sergeant back then, and now a captain! You've done nicely I see."

Benedict snorted lightly, "Yes, well, after serving the Empire so long, it's nothing less than I deserve."

Inspecting the many designs and sketches found on the tables, Amos asked, "Tell me, does serving the Empire involve coming up with strange devices?"

Smiling coldly, Benedict walked over and looked through his work with Amos, "Simply hobbies for my spare time."

"More than just a soldier I see, but anyway," Amos placed down the papers and faced the captain, "what about this venture of yours? Your goons didn't tell me much when I asked them about it."

"As they do not know much about it themselves, nor need you."

Benedict walked towards the window to gaze outside, and spoke choosing his words carefully, "I am looking for an object, an artifact if you will. It once belonged to us, but someone stole it and escaped;

since then it has been lost. Recently however, we came upon a man who says he saw something that could lead us to this object that I need.”

“For your spare time.”

“For the Empire.”

Returning to his desk, Benedict opened one of the drawers underneath and pulled out a scroll. He deftly unwrapped the old, brown parchment, revealing a general map of the surrounding area. The city lay to the right, enclosed by undetailed patches of trees representing the forest. Following the main road that lead out of the gates, the ink and smudges of trees darkened, with a caption that read “Wayword Forest”.

“The Wayword Forest has never been explored much,” Benedict spoke as he observed the already familiar map, “It’s filled with bandits, thieves, castaway, much of the scum we rid from this city. That is where you must go. Our soldiers will take you to where they found the man. From there, you’re on your own.”

He rolled up the scroll, bound it with its seal, and held it up towards Amos. Hesitantly, Amos took the map and put it away into his pocket.

“Not telling me much are you?” he grumbled.

Once again Benedict went back to his desk, taking out another scroll from the drawer. He handed it to the officer this time, while assuring Amos, “The less you know, the better. Officer Caville will explain more to you on the way. Do this service for the Empire and you will be rewarded.”

“I don’t do this for the Empire,” Amos responded curtly.

Turning around back to his work, Benedict shrugged, “Regardless, leave as soon as you can. Your crew and my men await outside.”

After staring at the captain’s back for a few seconds, Amos nodded, “Very well, we’ll leave at first light, tomorrow.”

Early the next morning, the city again began its daily routine and life. Through the cold and wind, people already crowded the streets, merchants continued setting up, and everyone carried on their work.

Outside the barracks, a military field carriage linked to two worn-out horses stood waiting. The driver on top lazily conversed with the soldier by his side. A group of four other soldiers covered the entrance step of the barracks. The older and more seasoned two - though not by much at the age of thirty - talked to each other. One leaned on a wooden post, looking to the streets as he rubbed his arms to keep warm. The last, a younger soldier of about twenty, sat on the side ledge and similarly tried to warm his hands.

Finally, the steel-reinforced wood doors swung open from the barracks entrance. The soldiers all turned to attention at the door. Amos and Officer Caville stepped out from within and stopped at the sight of the others.

“Well,” Amos began, “I guess you’re all coming as well.”

Walking down the steps, Amos perused the four soldiers, curiously inspecting everything about them. He started with the two sitting together, scanning them up and down, muttering to himself, “Hmm, some fighting I see.”

Moving on to the one leaning on the post, he shrugged nonchalantly, “Eh, only in the city.”

At last he came across the young man. Staring into his eyes, Amos could tell that the boy held no real experience. Slightly amused, he chuckled and turned around, “Shouldn’t be surprised though. Not much goes on these days by the city.”

Amos headed towards the horses post, saying suggestively, “If you boys want something more, you want to get out to the front lines. Much more exciting.”

The officer mounted his horse and cleared his throat, “Mr. Leonard, if you could, the sooner we leave, the sooner we get back.”

Reaching his horse, Amos swung up onto the saddle effortlessly, “Of course. Let’s go then.”

Officer Caville and Amos gently tapped their horses to begin trotting forward. The soldiers quickly followed suit, getting into the carriage or on their own horses. The two older soldiers picked up a large wooden case with two handles and loaded it onto the moving vessel. The convoy of eight slowly made their way through the packed streets. Not a word was spoken as they all mulled over the journey they were embarking on.

After navigating around, they arrived at the entrance of the city. A large steel door, twenty feet high and engraved with metal designs of the Empire’s insignia, extended out open. Nodding to the guards posted on watch duty, they passed through the vigilant gates and into the wilderness.

To be continued...