

Empyrean High Court in the not so distant past...

It was raining on Empyrean that day. It always did when there was a judgment court in session. The haze outside the windows of the chamber, coupled with the pitter-patter of raindrops on the roof, made the atmosphere inside very tranquil. It helped to calm my nerves a little while I waited for the Authorities to return for me.

What could possibly be taking so long? Hours had passed since I was escorted from the chamber so the judges could deliberate. This could not be good sign. Whenever the judges deliberated for more than a few minutes they were at odds on levying the sentence. The last case I remember was Naasir, and his sentencing was very harsh. He was stripped of all duties, functions, and privileges that came with being a Throne because he had abused his authority as the dispenser of Yah's judgment. He was banished indefinitely from the Inner Court, no longer able to provide direct access to Yah, or able to dispense further judgment on his behalf. He was reduced to the absolute lowest rank of the angelic court.

Naasir was sentenced to serve time at Sheol as both an escort and a guard. Sheol was the place where destroyed immortals were confined. The only judgment worse was complete exile with the fallen angels. These were the Dominion who were destined for Yah's eternal lake of fire.

Knowing who the Ruling Judge was today was most important. It didn't matter what anyone else on the court decided, my final fate would be in the hands of whoever sat on the cathedra now. Though, it was rare that the ruling judge would go against the majority.

What I was hoping for was a pronouncement from one of the judges that would be less sympathetic to the human cause. Unfortunately, of the eleven that sat on the court, there were only two that fit this description—Qadhi and Rashnu. The odds were not in my favor. Qadhi stood for justice and Rashnu for judgment. Neither of these judges would dare levy a verdict taking into consideration the human plight. So I needed either Qadhi or Rashnu to be on that cathedra today.

A favorable decision would be hard enough to pull off because of the Advocates—Enoch and Elijah. They were the only two mortals who sat on the high court. They were marked by Yah as “deserving”—some would say perfect. “Too perfect to die”, that is. Whatever.

Honestly, I can't stomach much more of either of them. They're humans for Christ's sake. I just don't understand what Yah was thinking—mortals sitting on the high court? And by Yah's ruling, they were now part of the judgment of every trial involving the Guardians. All of the other mortals lived in Erehwon. The mortals couldn't cross to our side, and the Guardians never bothered to go over there; although, as immortals, we could if we had any desire.

The Advocates' job was to defend the human race. What irony. I was always taught that it would be humans who would be judged in the end. Where is the justice in this madness?

Waiting for the verdict to be decided was wreaking havoc on my sanity. What was the worst that could happen—demotion? Demotion would not be so bad. It's not like I had achieved the rank I wanted any way. But what if the decision was exile? Very few made it back to their original state after being exiled. Exiled angels received indefinite sentences to be guards at Sheol. The exiled usually wound up bitter and joining the Dominion in an attempt for revenge against Yah.

I had only been allowed into the courtroom to tell my side of the catastrophe which had been my assignment and was then dismissed for the others to deliberate. Now that I was allowed to return, the atmosphere had shifted, and not in my favor. The chamber was dark. The only source of light in the room illuminated from the jury box, where a congregation of my peers sat, motionless. The Advocates sat at the far right of the box—their usual place. Everyone looked to the cathedra waiting for the ruling judge to break the silence.

Twelve sets of eyes were now glued in the direction of the cathedra, and mine on them. I turned slowly to face my final adjudicator. Reuel's eyes were piercing—blazing with disappointment. Anger I could handle, but disappointment was unexpected. Sarcasm didn't work on disappointment. I couldn't absent-mindedly brush off disappointment. I felt like a child who had just let his father down in the worst possible way.

Reuel had not been part of my plotting. He was the archangel that sat as the protector of mankind. It was Reuel's job, his duty, to protect the sanctity of the office of the Guardian. It was his mission to make sure that all angels operated peacefully with mankind. Reuel had the responsibility to pass judgment and to issue punishment to all transgressors. Was this just really bad luck, or had Yah done to me on purpose?

Reuel said nothing as I took the final steps to the foot of the cathedra. He cleared his throat, and the sound echoed off the marble walls.

“Kendi, do you have anything to say before I begin?”

The walls began to wobble, and my legs felt numb. Was there anything I could say that would fix this? Elaborating on the fact that I was never interested in being a Guardian, and that I absolutely hated having an earthen pet to watch over would probably be detrimental to my current cause. The bottom line was I had failed to protect Jason, and it had cost Jason his life. Most importantly, this court saw his death as unnecessary and senseless.

This was the second time that I had lost an assignment to Abbadon, and I was beginning to think that he had a personal vendetta against me. Why did Abbadon always seem to go after my assignments? He was one of five regime heads for

the Legion forces. Didn't Abbadon have more important things to attend to? No one else seemed to be subject to this level of interruption during their assignments.

Abbadon was once a part of the angelic Host of Empyrean but had lost his way and was sentenced to exile. Yah would have allowed him to reclaim his place in the celestial guard if he would have accepted his sentence, served his time at Sheol, and gotten back in line. Instead, Abbadon became bitter and chose to join the fallen angels who were on a "seek and destroy" mission. If Empyrean had a gang, the Dominion were it—definitely the bad seeds.

The Dominion rebellion was the foundation of all of the problems in both Empyrean and on Earth. At the height of the rebellion, the Dominion came together and formed a militia group—the Legion. The Guardian have been battling against them ever since. The battles were deadly, frequently resulting in some immortal becoming a Shade and forever confined to Sheol. Becoming a Shade was worse than the mortal equivalent of death. At least dying allowed for an afterlife. Being a Shade meant being confined to a state of nothingness; losing all essence and strength. This was the greatest fear of all angelic beings.

Most immortals simply tried to steer clear of the Dominion. They were bitter, dark creatures—very subtle and extremely cunning. Mortals never know what hit them until it is too late . . . like Jason.

The last time a seed was lost, I received a good tongue lashing, as I was only a Junior Guardian at the time. It was my fault that the seed was lost, but Malachi was held directly responsible since he had been given the charge. As my trainer, Malachi had put a lot of faith and trust in me. I let him down and Malachi was demoted from a Lead Guardian because of the debacle. Malachi's anger towards me was justified.

Reuel slammed the gavel on to the arm of the cathedra breaking my reverie. "Kendi, do you have anything you would like to say?"

"No, sir," I answered a little too sharply, shrugging my shoulders in an attempt at genuine disinterest. Since this was blunder number two, I hoped Reuel would remove me from the ranks of the Guardian altogether. Certainly my behavior had proved me "unworthy" of such a call. Removal was unquestionably my goal of my behavior; however, the last time I messed up, I was promoted to the rank of full Guardian. Utter nonsense.

"Well, if you have nothing to say in your defense, Kendi, I will make my ruling," Reuel continued. In his glare, there was some emotion in his eyes I could not recognize. Pity maybe?

"Kendi, you were hand chosen by Yah to serve in the ranks of the Guardian, and yet you continue to treat the vocation with disdain. Man is Yah's principal creation, and you choose not to protect that which has been placed in your hands. You have

made a conscious effort to repudiate the intent for which you were created. Your rebellion has bred a disjunction among this court that I have never before witnessed—a great dilemma that is unprecedented. The question is how do we respond?”

He paused briefly further examining my countenance.

“Jason is the second seed that has needlessly been lost in your charge: the second seed whose potential will never be realized because you don’t understand the consequences of your vocation. Your nonchalant attitude persists in the most juvenile manner without regard to the eternal weight that your actions affect. And simply because Yah will not allow you to have your own way!”

As Reuel spoke, anger stirred in the atmosphere. “The assignment of the Guardian is not a game! It is the very breath of existence to the human race. Without the Guardian, mortals don’t have a fighting chance against the Dominion. And yet you trample that purpose underfoot.”

The chamber was no longer silent. There was a crescendo of murmurings from the other ruling judges and the Advocates. The argument concerning my fate had resurfaced. I expected Reuel to bring down his gavel to regain control. Order should exude from this type of setting; however, Reuel carefully ascertained the tone of the room, and decided against calming the crowd.

“Reuel, it was blatantly obvious that Kendi was not going to disclose the full truth to us, and I knew that Ophan was with Eloa and Kendi on the night that he was taken into custody. There had to be a reason, and now we have discovered the intent of his deception.”

“Your antics could have proven to be very costly, Haamiah. You put us all at great risk to get that information. Each of these seated judges wants to arrive at the same destination on today—which is the truth. Please refrain from the use of this kind of extremity in my courtroom, as I know you are not capable to deal with the fortuitous consequences,” Reuel countered. His tone was calmer, yet full of disapproval.



The Crime

At that moment, Enoch cleared his throat in an effort to get Reuel’s attention. His hand had been raised. There was an audible grasp from somewhere in the chamber. The Advocates were never given the liberty to speak freely in an open session of

judgment court. They were only allowed to give their input during the deliberation. Everyone turned to Reuel to gauge his response. I met his eyes just long enough to see his shock transformed to resignation. Reuel nodded ever so slightly to acknowledge that he saw Enoch's raised hand.

"Your Grace," Enoch began carefully, "may I speak? I would like to address Kendi directly if I may."

Are you serious? This should be good. Did the universe suddenly turn upside down? What would give any mortal the authority to question me? I came into today thinking that this court date would be a mere formality—something to be endured so that I could move onto the next phase of my existence. I was totally unprepared for what was presently unfolding.

Enoch began slowly, cautiously. "Kendi, do you even care why Yah put the Guardian in place? Do you realize the importance of the task to which you have been assigned?"

He paused and looked at me sternly. I didn't answer because I thought his question was rhetorical. More than that, I refused to make myself subject to this creature, on any level.

Of course, I knew the reason. I had been told the purpose a countless number of times. I just didn't understand the rationale around the entire concept of the Guardian. So I stared blankly at Enoch waiting for him to go on.

"Kendi! Everyone here would appreciate a response. You stand there as if this is not a judgment hall. As if your very existence is not dependent on what you say, or don't say, in the next few minutes. We are not here to placate your bad attitude or your preconceived ideologies about the lot that you have been given. This IS a judgment session, and you are on trial for having lost yet another seed. To make matters even worse, we, a jury of your peers, have to make a decision as to what to do about that!"

Enoch bellowed at me from across the chamber. The judges and even EliYah seemed completely taken aback by Enoch's tirade.

I originally had no intention of answering Enoch. However, I didn't think it would be wise not to engage in a conversation with him at this point.

"Yes, Enoch. I know why Yah implemented the office of the Guardian," I said, letting a little too much of my disgust leak into my voice.

The gavel came down then: the sound of it echoing throughout the chamber. I flinched. "You will address this court appropriately, Kendi." Reuel scowled. "The appropriate response is 'Yes, sir'."

Are you freaking kidding me? Now I'm supposed to grovel to this mortal because he dared to address me directly? This was getting totally out of hand. The aura in the

courtroom had become quite tense. Everyone was on edge because the proceedings had veered so far from the norm. No one knew what was going on, or what to expect. I believe that Reuel was the most nervous because he was the ruling judge on today. What would Yah think of the way he was expediting his duty as the head of this proceeding?

I quickly corrected myself. “Yes, sir, I do understand.” I allowed my voice to flatten out. I didn’t want to draw further criticism.

“Kendi, if you really do understand, I need for you to explain to this court what happened the night that Jason died. We have heard the statement that you gave; however, since you claim to have a level of understanding concerning the responsibilities and the call of the Guardian, your statement is obviously missing some pertinent details.”

I felt as though I had been kicked in the stomach. The last thing that I wanted to do right now was to rehash this entire incident in front of these fifteen individuals. No one else was allowed in the chamber except the ruling judges, the Advocates, and the Authorities. It would have been comforting to have Eloa here for support. I felt like this was turning into an execution rather than a verdict. The flavor of the chamber was colored with so much tension that I felt as though I would be crushed by the weight of it. The judges glanced nervously at one another, Elijah was still looking at Enoch in utter disbelief, and the Authorities seemed to be having way too much fun at my expense.

What was there left to tell? Jason had been assigned to me, I didn’t protect him adequately, and Abbadon used my complacency to slip in and kill him.

The day that Jason died, Abbadon had him all worked up. He and his wife had fought over something very trivial, and Jason just went to pieces. He always thought that he would never be able to live up to the potential that Lynn expected of him. So, when Jason called me, he was extremely upset. To be honest, I was quite irritated with the call. It was the same old ledge that I was trying to talk him down from—again. I had had a terrible day myself and was planning a quick trip to Empyrean to see Eloa. Jason’s call was delaying my departure. I got rid of him quickly and left to see Eloa. Apparently, my little speech to Jason did not work, and he went looking for a different quick fix.

By the time I got to Empyrean, Eloa was in a complete panic. The Authorities had been there looking for me. Yah had dispatched them. She told me what was happening; Jason had found the wrong kind of trouble this time. He needed my help, but the bullet had already been fired. Jason was dying, and I would not make it back in time to change what was unfolding. If I had been there, I would have felt the trouble that was coming and would have gone to intervene on Jason’s behalf. I could

have stopped the robbery, the fight, or at the very least, changed the direction of the bullet that had gone straight into his heart.

At this point, I didn't see the need to play "shoulda, coulda, woulda." Yes, I should have been there. Yes, I could have prevented what occurred. Yes, I would have if I were there. This was all pointless because by the time I was back into my human form; Jason was in a life flight helicopter on the way to the hospital. I changed back into my natural form and joined him in the helicopter, but I was too late. He was already crossing over. I came back to Empyrean to tell Eloa what had just happened, and the Authorities met me there.

I looked up to see everyone glaring at me, waiting for me to respond to Enoch's last assault.

"Sir, I have given my statement to the Authorities. I have nothing further to add."

I did not know where Enoch was going with his line of questioning, and I certainly didn't want to give him any more ammunition than he had at the moment. My best assumption is that he wanted me to fill in the gaps that I had intentionally left in my story. That was not going to happen. I knew very well the law that I had broken. I was not the only one who often broke this law; however, as usual, I seemed to be the only one that got caught.

Enoch let out an audible sigh of resignation before he continued. I guess that was my last chance to cave, and now that I hadn't, the onslaught would begin.

Enoch started to continue but was quickly cut off by a deeper more exasperated voice from the other side of the jury box. I turned to face the voice, on reflex, and instantly wished that I had not.

"Kendi, you can't seriously think that this quorum of judges would not want an explanation concerning your foray into Empyrean on the night in question, especially when you know astral travel is strictly forbidden when on assignment." Haamiah peered at me from his seat in the judgment box.

This was turning into a free for all. I guess everyone was going to have the opportunity to take pot shots at me now. Haamiah glared at me from his seat in the judgment box. Haamiah's eyes seemed to burn into my very existence. Even without the advantage of telepathy, Haamiah could sense a half-truth, or an omission without hesitation. He was the set judge of integrity, and certainly he was judging not only the validity of my story, but also the totality of it in this instance.

The ambience of the room shifted once again, and I was momentarily distracted by the storm that was beginning to pick up force outside. The wind was whistling through the trees, and I could hear the branches bending against the windows. The rain hammered on the roof of the chamber with new determination, perhaps a warning from Yah. The judges shifted in their seats to get a better view of the front of the

chamber and of my face. This was the question that everyone wanted to be answered, but did not know whether they would be permitted to ask. The Advocates reengaged in their previous deliberation, and the Authorities edged closer to the cathedra so that they would be within earshot of my response. An answer to the question was now unavoidable; however, I knew that my answer would open up a floodgate for other questions.

I swallowed hard before beginning. "I travelled to Empyrean on that night in order to speak with Eloa."

Although I did not wish to involve her, everyone knew that I was taken into the custody of the Authorities in her presence.

I continued. "It was late in the evening, and I had already spoken to Jason. I did not plan on being in Empyrean for an extended period of time, so I thought that he would be okay. However, I did not properly anticipate the events that unfolded in my absence."

"Exactly why you are not to leave your assignment uncovered for any reason!" Haamiah interrupted. "Stop stalling and tell us the real reason that you came to Empyrean the night that Jason died."

Of course, Haamiah would sense the one thing that I didn't want anyone else to know. Damn! Empyrean is bigger than the Earth itself, and nothing around here was confidential? I promised myself that I would not let Ophan get him involved in this mess if I got caught. He was only trying to be a friend to me. Ophan was a newly created Throne that Eloa had introduced me to on one of my last excursions home, and I had convinced him to take me into Yah's inner chamber. I was dying to see it, and I could not gain access without a Throne. I just had to get in there. The curiosity was killing me.

The only other Throne that I knew was Scorpio, and he would never do such a disservice to his office. Ophan didn't know any better—yet. I had to strike while the iron was hot. Some would say that I was taking advantage of him, but I saw it as doing research for the duty that I really desired to have. I wanted to be an adjutant for Yah. We should all have been created to serve him directly instead of pet sitting mortals.

"It sounds as though you have some theories of your own," I retorted. "So why bother with the inquisition?"

"Because Jason is dead, and you are culpable!" Haamiah thundered.

"In all honesty, Jason did this to himself," Qadhi chimed in from the corner of the jury box. Rashnu nodded in agreement. "Jason got what he deserved."

The chamber was quickly disintegrating into chaos. The storm outside was raging now: thunder, lightning, and wind. It was discomfoting. There were several angry

conversations going on across the room. Most of them were simply a low mumbling; however, some of the judges were irate beyond being reverent now.

Haamiah pushed his chair away and stood up now. He was clearly very perturbed.

“Since Kendi is clearly not going to share the rest of his story with this court, why don’t we bring in Ophan to tell us what happened? Reuel, I would like to bring in Ophan to expound on the matter, if you have no objections?”



The Throne

Reuel was visibly shaken, but simply nodded without moving from his place on the cathedra.

What in the hell was Ophan doing here? I really didn’t want him to be involved in this mishap any further. It was bad enough that I had already taken advantage of his ignorance, and now he was being dragged into the high court to face this quorum of adjudicators who were quickly descending into an angry mob.

The double doors banged open, and the Authorities were leading in Ophan.

Poor kid. He didn’t have a clue what he was walking into. He glanced at me apologetically and then quickly returned his eyes to the floor as he was led to stand before the ruling eleven. It was obvious that Ophan was confused as to why his presence had been requested on today.

Ophan was very small in stature and the Authorities towered over his slight frame. His dark locks hung loosely to his shoulders. The black luster was quite alluring against his contrasting white robe. Ophan’s caramel-colored skin was luminescent and his green eyes were brilliant in the dim light of the chamber. Ophan was beautiful—a magnificent creature to behold—not unlike the rest of the Thrones. Their luminous persona had everything to do with being in the direct presence of Yah. All of the Thrones took on a certain incandescent aura that was somewhat mesmerizing.

Thrones were such mystical creatures. They rarely ever spoke unless directly spoken to, as the majority of their time was spent in worship. The level of worship that the Thrones personified took on a musical nature. As the winds of Empyrean blew, we could often hear the chimes that rang out from every Throne that was in earshot. It was the Thrones that fill Empyrean with the beautiful music of Yah.

Haamiah came to stand at the front of the room in front of Ophan. He appeared to be extremely anxious to hear what Ophan would have to say. Until this very moment, I thought that he already knew and was just trying to coax me into an audible confession.

“Ophan, I know that you are rather uncomfortable in this position, and I apologize to you for the necessity of your witness. However, would you please tell me and my fellow judges the nature of your relationship with Kendi?”

Ophan looked up at me and smiled graciously. “Kendi is my friend. He and I were introduced by Eloa, the angel of compassion.”

Wow, I have not heard Eloa referred to this way in over a century. It is amazing to me that every newly created being is hardwired to start at the very beginning of our existence and work their way forward. Eloa is one of the older celestial beings that still operate in a capacity that allows her to interact with both mortals and immortals. It was said that she was created by the tears that Yah shed for his people. His level of compassion was so great that it was sealed into her heart for all eternity.

Ophan continued, “Because Kendi is Eloa’s friend, he is also my friend.”

I could hear the rumbles of disagreement from behind me. Haamiah simply shook his head and continued. “Can you please share with me the request that Kendi asked of you prior to his being taken into custody by the Authorities?”

How could Haamiah possibly know about my request! No one knew about this . . . or so I thought, except Ophan and myself. I didn’t even tell Eloa. First of all, because she would have talked me out of it. Second, because Eloa would have explained the rules to Ophan so that he would not be used by the likes of me.

My body began to tremble involuntarily. I don’t think that I was so afraid for myself, but for Ophan. He was so innocent, so trusting. He did not know that the request that I had made of him was illegal. In this very moment, I realized that his innocence was about to be completely obliterated, and it was entirely my fault. I had completely and shamelessly taken advantage of him and that was about to be revealed.

“Yes, Haamiah,” Ophan chimed. “Kendi asked that I allow him to accompany me on my next assignment into Yah’s inner chamber.”

He didn’t have a clue what was coming.

Haamiah leaned forward toward Ophan in anticipation. “Ophan, did Kendi not tell you that it was against the law for a celestial being other than a Throne to visit the inner chamber without being summoned by Yah himself? Did he tell you that it was your job to guard the entrance to Merkabah, and to only grant access according to Yah’s command?”

Ophan’s countenance fell. Understanding lit his expression quickly followed by the pain of betrayal. Ophan slowly shook his head as if he were trying the escape the

thoughts that now flooded his mind. From his place at the foot of the cathedra, he purposefully turned to meet my stare. I could see the agony in his eyes. The brilliance of his liquid green eyes had now hardened as if frozen in time. His aura had changed so fiercely by Haamiah's one statement that I wanted to crumble. I wanted to run, to hide, but his glare would not release me. I peered back at Ophan yearning to retract the betrayal that had forced him into this reality: not all immortals were decent.

Ophan turned back to Haamiah and spoke through clinched teeth. "Sir, is anything further required of me?"

Ophan's face was stoic, as he constrained himself to remain in his current form. The brilliance that we could see illuminating from Ophan's skin became a fiery semblance in Yah's presence. It was somewhat frightening to consider what he could do in this courtroom right now if he were not restraining himself, for there was an astonishing amount of power contained in this being, and it was only out of reverence for Yah that he had humbled himself at the request of the judges.

Thrones were the closest to Yah, and therefore endowed with authority that no other celestial being could even imagine. In order to walk among the rest of us, the Thrones had to harness the majority of their power. This is the reason no one dared to tamper with a newly created Throne. It allowed us a peak into their existence while they came into the knowledge of their true essence.

Awareness now filled Ophan's space. He had a full understanding of who he was, and felt the apprehension that other Thrones had regarding coalescence with the rest of us. His heart was changed forever by my one exploit. The glimpse into the mysterious had once again been closed off to the rest of us.

Everyone could see the visible change in Ophan's countenance. The courtroom had become absolutely silent as we took in the physical change that was taking place in Ophan. The temporary cage in which he had harnessed his power was wearing thin. We could see that he was at his breaking point. No one dared to move or to speak as we could feel the power that exuded from this incredible being—potentially explosive. It was quite unnerving.

Ophan's patience was depleted. He turned around now to face Reuel.

"If nothing else is required of me, Reuel, I will take my leave." Reuel simply nodded once without speaking.

Ophan turned to descend the center aisle. He stalked past me, the seated judges, the Advocates, and the Authorities without a single glance. Our existence was no longer of consequence to him. Ophan pushed through the double doors and was gone. There was an audible sigh of relief from several places in the courtroom.

"Haamiah, have you lost your mind? What would make you summons a Throne into this proceeding?" Reuel bellowed when he was certain that Ophan was gone.



Chaos

Only I could piss folks off like this...

By bringing Ophan into the high court, Haamiah had successfully gotten the information that he wanted, and exposed my secret in the process. There were not many immortals that would dare toy with the likes of Thrones. It is just so unfair! Why should there be such a level of separation between our ranks? What made a Throne any better a creature than I? So what if I had tricked him because he was inexperienced and didn't know any better? I never got into Yah's inner chamber anyway. All hell had broken loose the night Jason died. I was unsuccessfully trying to repair the breach and had missed my chance to get into Merkabah. Before I could figure out another angle with Ophan, the Authorities had shown up to take me into custody.

"Kendi, your actions have proven to be even more reprehensible than even I could have imagined. Your depravity is certainly unprecedented. I am at a loss as to how I am to perform my duty on today," Johoel said as he placed his head against his closed fists in anguish.

"What are we waiting for then? Kendi doesn't even have the integrity to admit what he's done and worse yet, seems to feel no remorse for his actions. Levy the judgment," huffed Sraosha.

Ramiel interjected. "This is Kendi's second offense. Exile is certainly in order. He has no respect, no reverence, and no honor for his office. He has become a disgrace to his appointment."

Exile, really? Come on. Surely exile was a little extreme. Exile was reserved for those beings that had committed offenses directly against Yah. Jason was a stinking mortal for Christ's sake. This was such bullshit.

"Such a waste. He doesn't even recognize that he has become what he claims to hate. His job was to draw his assignment closer to Yah; not allow himself to be transformed into one of them," Maion shook his head scornfully.

The room seemed to grow darker and colder as conversations continued among the judges as if I were no longer in the chamber.

What was Maion talking about? How could he think that I would allow myself to be influenced by this vermin?

Maion continued, “Kendi is prideful, selfish, and irreverent. His lack of honesty is absolutely reprehensible. Look at him! Listen to him! His language and mannerisms are more human than either Elijah or Enoch!”

“So, let him be judged as a mortal,” Micah agreed.

“Insanity! We can’t really be considering this line of logic?” Rashnu rebutted. “Kendi is not a mortal and we should not treat him as such.”

“Hear! Hear!” I looked up in time to see Qadhi slam his fist against the banister of the jury box.

At least, I had these two rulers in my corner. Maybe . . . just maybe, I would avoid being burned at the stake. However, right now, the odds were still not in my favor: two against ten didn’t make for a great cheering section.

“Good heavens! Will you two just shut up already! Everyone here knows that you would never pass judgment against an immortal. It would not matter if he tried to take out the entire northern hemisphere. I don’t believe that it would seem of any consequence to the both of you. The last thing that anyone in this room expects from you two is objectivity,” Haamiah hammered.

All of this banter would have been very amusing—if they were not talking about me. Maybe I should have just come clean. I should have known that I would never be able to get away with trying to get into Yah’s chamber, but the very possibility totally consumed me to the point that I would have done just about anything to get in there.

Now what? If I say nothing, all of this speculation continues, and it was quite possible that I would never have the opportunity to set this straight. Rashnu and Qadhi attempting to speak on my behalf was not currently beneficial. What the hell? Here goes everything.

“Reuel, sir, I would like to say something now, if I may?” The entire room fell silent the instant that I began to speak.

“Now he wants to speak! Now, after we have gone to such lengths to obtain the truth? Surely you will not allow this Reuel. We are ready to levy our judgment!” Sraosha wailed.

“You had your chance Kendi. It’s our turn now,” Haamiah agreed.

“Kendi has a right to speak. He IS the one on trial after all,” Qadhi retorted.

“Enough!” The gavel came down. “This is still my chamber. I am the presiding judge, and I will decide who will speak, and who won’t,” Reuel thundered.

“We have more to consider here than just bad attitudes and overly inflated egos. I personally am interested in what Kendi has to say right now. And we will stop interrupting these proceedings long enough to actually listen. Is that clear?”

And with that, order was returned to the courtroom. All of the side conversations and arguments came to an abrupt halt. All of the judges returned to the box, and took their sits. The Advocates slid their chairs back into the proper position, and the Authorities reclaimed their post in front of the double doors.

“Thank you.” Reuel said quietly, and then nodded to me to begin.

I suddenly had the floor; however, now, I wasn’t certain that I really wanted it. But they were discussing exile! Excluding Sheol, exile was the only thing that I could think of that would be worse than continuing in this role as Guardian. I had to say something. I would never survive being cast away. My only remaining option would become joining the Dominion. At this moment, the Dominion was probably the only celestial creatures that were despised more than me. I would have to be brilliant to pull this off.

The room was silent waiting for me to say something . . . anything.

I wished Yah would stop the damn storm raging outside. I got it already. He was angry, but the tempest was beyond distracting. The thunder, the lighting, and the wind set an eerie enough tone in the chamber. The rain only added to the unsettling atmosphere of the room—a room that appeared to be growing smaller with each passing second. And, since Ophan’s angry departure, the sound of the Thrones and their chimes rang loud in the distance as he rejoined his assembly in Yah’s inner chamber. As I stood in front of Reuel, “alone” took on a brand new tenor.

I had my audience . . . so it was now or never.

“Your Grace, let me start by saying that I know what I have done is inexcusable.”

“It’s only inexcusable now because you got caught. Very noble indeed Kendi,” Paschar grumbled. The gavel hammered against the cathedra once again, and Paschar straightened up further in his seat regaining his composure.

“I know that this court feels as though I have disregarded both the office of the Guardian, as well as taken advantage of another immortal that was willing, yet unknowing. For this, I would like to apologize to the court. I fully agree that Jason’s death was unnecessary, senseless, and would have been prevented if I had been in place that night—if I were not so distracted. I agree that taking advantage of Ophan was divisive and deplorable, and I should have never resorted to such tactics to get what I wanted. Again, I apologize to the court for my behavior.”

I sighed and took a long breath to steady myself before continuing.

“Reuel, this is my second blunder as a Guardian. I tried. I really have. In two assignments, I have not managed to figure out what it is that I am supposed to do, or

what anyone expects me to learn. All that I am doing is spinning my wheels. I just don't belong in this office. I was forced into this position again, and this is the result. And now this court is throwing around words like exile and justice? How is any of this fair to me? I have requested Empyrean duty more than once, and I have been shot down every time. Why is no one listening to me? I don't care to be anywhere near Earth or the vermin that resides there."

At that moment I remembered the presence of Enoch and EliYah. Damn!

"No offense to the Advocates." I looked up in time to see the grimace on Elijah's face as he shook his head in obvious disapproval.

Why were they even here? It was absurd that I had to tiptoe around them.

"I don't get it. What is man that Yah is so mindful of them? I need someone to help me to understand! At this point, I just don't know what else to say."

The grumbling in the courtroom began again. What now? I was just being honest.

Maion was the first to interject.

"Just listen to him Reuel . . . me, me, me, I, I, I . . . Kendi is just plain selfish. Never once has he considered Yah's ultimate plan. He doesn't understand because all he thinks about is himself and what he wants. It is rare to see this egotism among our kind, but we all know what happens when this type of behavior is identified. We don't need to prolong this travesty any longer."

"What other decision is there to make other than exile?" Haamiah added.

I felt like my knees would buckle. Maybe that is what this court wanted—me on my knees begging for my life.

"Kendi will appreciate what he once had when he is running with the Dominion." Sraosha agreed.

"My brothers, let's pause a minute to consider the consequences of our final action today. Kendi was created, hand chosen, and appointed to the office of Guardian by Yah himself. His knowledge is far greater than any of us can possibly fathom. Can we just cast that aside so easily? There would be certain repercussions from a decision to exile."

Micah stood quietly in the far corner of the jury box facing me as he continued to speak to Reuel.

"There must be a higher purpose for Kendi that this great quorum is failing to recognize today . Yah knows it because he placed it there. And though we can't see it, we will have to put our trust in the one that we serve and not lean on our own understanding."

"So, you think we should just let Kendi off the hook . . . again?" Maion retorted.

“It is not about letting him off the hook, Maion,” Paschar began. “We mustn’t fail to consider the greater purpose that Yah wants us to see and to cultivate in Kendi. It is our responsibility to nurture the very purpose for which he was created.”

“This is ludicrous. It’s time to pass judgment. I refuse to listen to future epilogue in defense of this rogue,” Maion continued.

“I concur. We are just wasting time here. The majority agrees with a sentence of exile.” Haamiah quickly added, “I say it is time to put this to a vote and get this farce over with. We all have duties to which we should be attending.”

I turned now so that I could see the ruling judges and the Advocates. Haamiah was standing so that he was facing the other judges.

“Brothers, all those in favor of exile it is time now to state your intent.



The Verdict

This was it. My fate was about to be sealed by a jury of my peers. Only the eleven judges would be allowed a vote. The Advocates would not have a say now: which was probably a good thing. Not only had I carelessly lost another assignment, but I had also insulted them and their entire race on more than one occasion. I was definitely not in their good graces.

Haamiah stepped out of the box and began pacing in front of the other judges as he continued. “We cannot allow Kendi’s irreverence to go unpunished any longer. He escaped retribution once before, and the consequence is that another seed has perished. Furthermore, Kendi stands here today with no remorse, having learned nothing from being given a second chance. It is the burden of this court to rectify Kendi’s transgression. The time for speeches has passed. We should act now. All those who feel that exile is in order, please join me.”

Maion, the judge of self-control and discipline, rose from his seat immediately and went to stand with Haamiah—the judge of integrity. Ramiel, the watcher, followed him. After a brief pause, Sraosha, the judge of obedience, stood and joined them.

The remaining seated judges looked anxiously at one another. Johoel, the mediator, turned to look at me. I could not be sure what I saw in his eyes. Regret, maybe? After a long glare, Johoel shook his head and slowly rose from his seat to join Haamiah and his lynch mob.

This was really happening. Exile? Suddenly, I could feel the weight of my predicament crashing down upon me. Was I really that bad? Had my actions warranted this kind of punishment? Would I survive this so that I could someday be restored, or was my ultimate destiny the lake of fire? My knees buckled and I collapsed on to the floor at the foot of the cathedra. Reuel reached out to assist me, but I held out one hand in protest. I needed a moment to regain my composure. I placed my face on the hard marble floor, as I could not bear to watch any longer.

“Kendi, you have said nothing in your defense today that has changed my mind about your character. The attributes that Yah created in you seemed to have been all but aborted. I escorted Jason to Erehwon on the night that he died, so I felt his pain and his loss. I cannot see that activity go unpunished.” I heard the scraping of Sammael’s chair against the marble as he stood also to join Haamiah’s delegation.

That was six now—more than what they needed to render the judgment of exile. I slumped forward so that my face was buried in the floor. I would not confront the remaining judges. It no longer mattered what their decision would be—Haamiah had his quorum. Although there was always a presiding judge, it was rare that the presiding judge went against the majority rule of the high court.

“Are these all that will stand on the side of justice today?” Haamiah asked in a critical tone. I heard no response. I dared not lift my head to ascertain the situation.

“Brethren, can we not find some middle ground concerning our responsibility here today? This does not have to turn into an all or nothing scenario. We should explore other options,” Micah pleaded.

“Yes, my brothers. I agree that we should examine our alternatives further. Although we don’t like to think of exile as finality, we don’t know of any that have recovered from such a sentence. There is certainly a slim chance of rehabilitation if we make this decision,” Paschar added.

“Rehabilitation? Are you kidding me?” Maion bellowed from across the chamber. “Do you sincerely think that Kendi wants to change?”

“Brothers, don’t be deterred based on this obvious demonstration that you see here. Kendi did not display one shred of remorse for Jason today. He never professed to any shame brought to the office that he should revere, and not one of his apologies was for his transgressions. His regret is that he got caught, and that he is now facing the sentence of exile.” Haamiah agreed.

I could not move from my position on the floor. The truth of the words that Haamiah had spoken were overwhelming. The shame seemed to bury me deeper in the marble tomb in which I had encased myself. Maybe the floor would just open up and swallow me; at least it would be an escape from this torment.

“I’ve heard enough. Haamiah, Maion, Ramiel, Sraosha, Johoel, and Sammael, please return to your seats. There is no need for further display.” I could hear slight grumblings among the crowd, but everyone quickly complied as Reuel continued.

“Agat, Bahram, please assist Kendi to his feet,” Reuel called to the Authorities.

Although I could sense their approach, I could not gather the strength to lift myself from the floor. I could feel the heat of the presence of the Authorities on either side of me as they forcibly lifted me to my feet. I did not resist; however, my legs did not seem to want to hold me erect. I swayed the instant that I was released. Reuel reached out and steadied me by the shoulders.

“Are you able to stand Kendi?” Reuel said obviously concerned. I nodded unable to speak, but the entire room seemed to be shaking. Reuel marked my unsteadiness, and beckoned for Agat and Bahram to stand with me.

“If you are able to stand momentarily, I will be brief. I have considered the testimonies, the witness, and the counsel of my fellow judges today, and I am ready to make my ruling. Without equivocation, I find that you are indeed guilty of willful misconduct; furthermore, I believe that it has been your intent to deceive not only Ophan, but also this court in an attempt to escape judgment. Your actions have been contemptible, and for this, you will be adjudicated accordingly.”

I felt myself begin to sway again, but Bahram caught me by the arm to keep me upright.

All I wanted right now was to be back on the marble floor—to hide so that the judges would no longer see my face. I didn’t want anyone to see the utter shame that was now bubbling to the surface. It was the shame that was crashing down on me—making it almost impossible to stand under its weight. I closed my eyes tightly trying to shut out the damnation that was coming. If both Bahram and Agat were not holding me tightly, I would have crumbled into a small heap at the foot of the cathedra.

Before Reuel could continue, the doors to the chamber opened, and Shopar entered. Shopar was one of the guards at Merkabah. He held his position in the aisle until Reuel acknowledged his presence.

“Your Grace. May I approach?”

Reuel looked away from me and nodded.

Shopar ascended the aisle to the foot of the cathedra. He passed the Authorities and me without yielding. He leaned into Reuel so that he could speak confidentially. Reuel motioned to the Authorities, and I was moved back several steps out of earshot of Reuel and Shopar.

Reuel listened intently for a few seconds, and then nodded. He seemed to make some kind of inquiry of Shopar, and this time it was Shopar who acknowledged with a simple nod. He then turned and descended the aisle, leaving the chamber as quickly as he entered.

Reuel paused momentarily seeming to consider whatever information to which he was just made privy. He then signaled the Authorities to return me to foot of the cathedra in order to resume the proceedings. I didn't know how much more of this I would be able to stand. Reuel quickly examined my disposition, and then continued though he could see that I was at the breaking point.

“Kendi, I have consulted with Yah and just received confirmation, your sentence is fixed.” I sucked in another deep breath and closed my eyes in an effort to ease my anxiety.

“Open your eyes and look at me,” Reuel stated firmly.

It took everything in me to accomplish this task, but I forced open my eyes to face my final adjudicator. The room that just seemed dark and gloomy was now blinding.

I examined Reuel's expression through squinted eyes. I did not see what I expected to see in his countenance. Instead of contempt and shame, I saw concern and compassion. There was also something hidden just beneath the surface. Uncertainty?

Reuel rose from the cathedra and stood directly in front of me. His gesture caused me to look up in order to meet his gaze.

“You will not be removed from the office of Guardian, for this is not what Yah wants. Instead, you will be given another assignment during which you will be bound by a stringent code of conduct. You will adhere to the limitations and boundaries set forth by this court without challenge. Do you understand?”

The courtroom erupted.

“This is an outrage!” Haamiah boomed. “So Kendi goes unpunished . . . again!”

“What do you mean unpunished? He has been sentenced back to Earth Duty—the very thing that has caused him to be judged in this court today!” countered Rashnu.

“That is not a sentence! It is a stay of execution. Kendi is inevitably going to wind up in this same situation again. He does not have a teachable spirit. Kendi will not embrace the office of Guardian,” Ramiel added.

“Awfully harsh words from a creature of vision,” Micah retorted.

Reuel reached back and grabbed the gavel and pounded the side arm of the mahogany cathedra. The sound echoed throughout the chamber, effectively quieting the argument.

I stood silent. I think I was in shock. Certainly disbelief. I was not being exiled, a relief, but I was going to have to return to Earth? What the hell?

“Kendi, do you understand what I have said thus far?” Reuel repeated.

I tried to find my voice. “S–s–so, I am not being exiled?”

“The sentence of this court, by overwhelming majority, is exile. However, Yah has extended an alternative to exile, and you can make the decision regarding your fate.”

I shook my head in an attempt to clear my mind. I was not sure that I understood what Reuel was saying—an alternative to exile? That would be a no brainer. Why would I even have to make a choice . . . unless?

Reuel continued.

“You can return to Earth and be given another assignment. However, you will not be allowed to function in your office unsupervised. You will be stripped of the privileges that you have both taken for granted and also taken advantage of as a Guardian.

Kendi, you will not have the ability of astral travel or of telepathy. You will only be allowed those extra abilities that are necessary for the protection of the assignment. You will look, feel, and become more mortal than you ever thought possible. These terms are not negotiable. You will have to agree to these boundaries in order for us to proceed.”

Hell, this was not a choice. It was blackmail in every sense of the word—exile, or complete humiliation? A baby sitter, no way to escape the sheer monotony of earthen existence, which inevitably meant no Eloa, and what does he mean “become more mortal”? The lake of fire may be an easier alternative.

What in the world did Yah expect me to gain from doing this? Obviously, I am not going to say no. They must know that I am being forced into this, and the outcome is not likely going to be pretty.

“Do you understand?” Reuel asked again.

“Yes, Reuel. I understand. May I ask questions before I make a decision?” I asked making every attempt to sound sincere and not thoroughly irritated.

“You may, although I am not at liberty to divulge Yah’s entire plan to you.”

Well that answered a large portion of my questions. This was Yah’s plan. It would certainly be a doozy then. Yah’s plans were always very intricate, complicated conundrums that no one could figure out. I better keep this simple.

“Not function unsupervised?” I said. I noticed just enough of a hint of sarcasm in my voice to make sure that I checked it before speaking again.

“So will I be assigned a partner?”

“No, Kendi. You will be assigned to work as part of a team.”

A team? Wait a minute. This was getting worse by the second. There were currently only two teams operating in the office of Guardian in the earthen realm. One was Uriel's and the other was Reuel's.

Uriel would never have me as part of his team. He was very no nonsense and never gave second chances. Unfortunately, my reputation had preceded me. Uriel was commander over Malachi's team at the time of my first mishap. As a result of my actions, Uriel swiftly demoted Malachi and removed him from his team even though the loss assignment was clearly my fault. He was ruthless. Uriel would never take me on.

Reuel was known as the compassionate one: very firm, but benevolent. He often gave second chances. But his team had the reputation of being the screw-ups, the misfits, the renegades, so this is likely where I would wind up. The only problem is that Reuel had taken Malachi under his guide when Uriel got rid of him. Was Yah crazy? He wanted me to work with Malachi? Not that I had a problem with it. Well, yeah . . . I kinda did. I would have to sleep with one eye open. Malachi certainly had not forgotten what I had done to him; nor did he have any intention of forgiving me. This had the potential to go wrong on so many levels.

"Whose team?" I finally choked out though I already knew the answer.

"You will be a part of my team, Kendi. Can you handle that?"

"Yes, no problem." I lied, trying to hide my chagrin.

"Any other questions?"

"I will not be able to visit Empyrean at all?" The thought of not seeing Eloa for an extended period of time made me instantly anxious.

"You will be able to come to Empyrean with an escort only. That being myself or one of your other team members, and then only for just cause."

"How will I be able to communicate with the team without telepathy," I wondered.

"You will talk. Like any other mortal," Reuel said through what I interpreted as a smirk.

Like any other mortal? What in the hell was that supposed to mean. I didn't think I needed to know any more of the details. I would certainly go with the exile option if I did. Seems to me that exile would be far less excruciating than what this bunch had planned for me. I couldn't stomach any more enlightenment at the moment.

"Any other questions?"

"No, Reuel."

"Do you agree to the terms and the conditions of the alternate choice that you have been given?"

“Yes.” Monosyllabic answers were going to be my safest route at this point. I could feel the anger starting to percolate in my belly.

“Then, it is so ordered by this court that Kendi be remanded to my custody for an indefinite term in order to carry out his next assignment in the office of Guardian. I also hereby reaffirm that Kendi has agreed to give up certain liberties that not only are reserved for the office of the Guardian, but also to immortals at large.”

The words rang with a real finality, and once again, I felt sick.

“And it is so!” Reuel brought down the gavel one last time, and my legs gave out once again.



The gates of Sheol...present day

Sheol, the land of the dead. The place where destroyed immortals reside. Only a half-step above hell as no torture takes place in this realm. There is no need. Dying and becoming a shade was hell enough, as shades were immortal beings trapped in a state of nothingness, a loss of all essence and strength. Becoming a shade was being relegated to a state of internal torment and hopelessness, and Sheol was the place that these mindless shells were housed. And Yah in his "loving-kindness" assigned guards at the gate to make sure no living creature would have access. Let the dead bury the dead takes on new meaning in a place like Sheol. Except for the unfortunate souls that are punished with a sentence of guard duty and shade escort.

Lightning ripped across the sky striking something in the far corner of the field bringing an uncommon luminescence to Sheol. The flash was quickly followed by boisterous thunder that shook the ground under Naasir's feet.

Naasir clenched his teeth glaring at the sky with contempt. "I play lap dog for no one. Enjoy it now. A change of the guard is closer than you think old man." Naasir's disdain for Yah was growing by the second. The usually still air was stirred as another being entered the atmosphere.

"Talking to yourself? The dead don't usually answer you know." Naasir spun to face Ophan. "What are you doing here? You can't just pop in whenever you get good and ready. I'll be the one on the other side of these gates if Yah finds out I ran my mouth."

A rhythm thumped in Ophan's jaw as he tried to hold his temper. "Well then, we'd have something in common, won't we?"

"What are you talking about Throne?" He spat the title at Ophan like an expletive.

"I was the one in Yah's inner chamber when the new Shoer was chosen. The only person I told about that appointment was you. And now Zuriel and Isda are dead. Someone is going to have to answer for the death of two of Yah's Guardians.

Uriel wants blood. The battle at Charon was not supposed to have happened yet. Yah will have Tabbris riding herd on the rest of us until the leak is found. And if I go down, I'm not going down alone my brother. Understand?"

"The only ones out in this god forsaken place are me and the Shades. I talk to myself out here Ophan, remember? It's not like Yah sends visitors by from time to time. Who would I tell?"

"Cut the shit Nassir. You and I both know you've learned how to slip in and out of here whenever you get ready to. You put on a good face, but I know that you're just pissed off enough at Yah to take your chances with the Dominion.

Ophan circled Naasir, studying him as he spoke.

"Sorath's been bragging about an informant. Someone's been straddling the line, playing his hand in both camps."

"Sounds like you should be speaking to Sorath then. What he does is none of my concern." Naasir tried to back away.

Ophan threw out his hand towards Naasir and with an invisible force, Naasir was drawn into Ophan's grasp. His grip tightened on Naasir's throat as he incapacitated the rogue. Without mercy, Ophan pulled him within inches of his face so that he could make certain that he was not only heard but obeyed.

"My plan for the Shoer has nothing to do with you or the Dominion. And I will not let you renegades get in my way. Kendi is off limits! If my plan is interrupted again, you won't have to worry about Yah. I know just where to find you, and so you know, I won't be nearly as pleasant as I've been today. Are we clear?"

Naasir gasped trying to catch his breath as Ophan released him.

"Sorath is now Abaddon's second in command. Stay out of my way, and control your boy, or I'll make sure that there are two new additions in Sheol...on the other side of the gate."

Ophan vanished.