

Randolf Klein

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Chapter 1

Lonnie sprinted through the hallways of the destroyed senate building, twisting her arm behind her every so often to fire a few random las-blasts. There were too many coming after her to stop and take aim. She probably would have escaped by now if it weren't for all the debris to navigate. Her armor was severely damaged, and her energy shielding was no longer active. If she didn't find the members of the order soon...

Just when she feared all hope was lost, she saw Juan waving at her from the cover of a large statue that had fallen across the hall. Juan started firing at the abominations that were chasing her. A return blast from one of the creatures caught her right ribs as she dove over the statue to crash near Juan.

Juan jumped up, tossed a flash grenade, and put himself over Lonnie. The blast of blue energy shook the damaged building, causing dust and ceiling pieces to rain down on them.

Lonnie pulled herself to a seated position and leaned against the wall. She could smell the burnt flesh emanating from the hole in the side of her armor. Luckily for her, Juan was the medic of the order and quickly poured something on it, causing Lonnie to arch her back and bite down on her bottom lip.

"You'll thank me later," said Juan.

"That's what you think." Lonnie gave a slight chuckle, shifting herself into a better position to reload her las-pistol.

"Since you're still here, I assume our escape is blocked?" asked Lonnie.

The sounds of scraping claws in the distance made them both peek from cover.

"Yup, and they're going to attack again. Your boyfriend screwed us big this time," said Juan.

Lonnie pursed her lips. "We're just...good friends, but you're right. He did it again. God's freaking grace to the order."

"So I'm allowed to hit him the next time I see his overconfident face?"

"Absolutely, he—"

"Greetings, Order of the Blue Flame. It would appear you're trapped down there," said a voice from the hallway Lonnie had come from.

They both looked over their defenses to see a familiar-looking cloaked head peering around the corner. The figure was tall and lanky, and the cloak covered his oddly shaped head.

The order had met this individual on numerous occasions, and the explosion they set off the last time they met should've

killed him, but here he is leading another band of underworld creatures and things they called 'The Abominations'.

Lonnie raised her las-pistol and fired a shot that grazed the top of the cloaked creature's head, forcing him to duck back around the corner.

"I was ready to offer you a choice of surrender...mild torture compared to the horrors of nightmares. I guess you made your decision."

Humanoids that were contorted and inhuman-looking turned the corner. Some were bent sideways and dragged a leg, while others had multiple heads. They carried a variety of different weapons and opened fire on their position. In between them crawled smaller hunched creatures with long arms ending in sharp claws, yellow eyes, and a body outlined in wavering blackish fire.

Lonnie and Juan looked at each other with blank stares.

"I have one grenade left. I could...You know—"

Lonnie put her hand on Juan's hand. "I know. Just wait till the last minute."

Juan picked up his las-pistol and nodded. Both of them popped up and started firing. Some abominations fell, but it didn't slow them, and a volley of las-blast's exploded against the makeshift defense, spraying pieces everywhere.

Lonnie put her hand on Juan's shoulder and moved closer as Juan moved the grenade to their center.

"3...2—"

The shattering of the outside wall ripped through the abominations and creatures in the hallway.

Randolph Klein, the *left hand of God* as he referred to himself, was hovering on a small hover transport disk. His glowing blue las-rifle firing without mercy. The blue las-blasts disintegrated any creature it hit.

Randolph was the leader of a small group from the Order of the Blue Flame. They were a religious organization with abilities they believed were bestowed upon them by God or the divine good in the universe.

These individuals could pray and meditate to endow weapons and items with a blue flame that was cool to the touch but burned as hot as the sun to any underworld creature touched by it. However, Randolph was different. He was one of the rare chosen that didn't have to pray or meditate. He could endow and call upon the blue flame at will.

"Come on! Let's go!" yelled Randolph.

Lonnie and Juan bolted for the opening.

"Aaahhh!" screamed Juan as Lonnie made the jump.

Juan's leg was blasted off below his right knee. He rolled to his stomach and started firing at the yellow-eyed creatures

exiting the darkness of the rubble. Lonnie fired as Randolph moved the hover disk closer.

Randolph leaned his right arm out. "Juan, crawl closer!"

Juan waved him off and smiled as he dropped the grenade in front of him.

"Hold on!" yelled Randolph, putting the disk in a dive. Lonnie grabbed Randolph to keep from falling.

The explosion tore through the structure. Randolph banked the disk hard to the left to avoid the collapsing structure and skidded into an alleyway, crashing into some debris. Both he and Lonnie went flying and bounced around on the ground as parts of the old Senate Building crashed down behind them.

Randolph got up and ran over to Lonnie.

"Lonnie, you OK?"

Lonnie turned herself over, sat up, and smacked him across the face. "You son of a bitch. Don't touch me."

Lonnie got up and spun around. Dust from the collapsed building filled the air. She held her head and screamed in rage.

Randolph put his hand over his heart. "There was nothing we—"

"Don't give me that shit. This time I've had it. Juan is dead because of your arrogance! Dead because of you!"

"I was only tr—"

"No, not this time. We're done...I'm done..."

Lonnie stormed off past Randolph. He tried to grab her arm, but she yanked it away and headed back to their base.

Randolph caught something on the ground and picked up a cloth scrap. It was a medic patch—Juan's patch.

He traced over the patch insignia with his thumb. "Your sacrifice will be noted."

Randolph squinted his eyes as they adjusted to the bright light. He wanted to shade them, but his hands were bound to his side.

Woozy, he tried to lift his head, but it hurt, and the taste of blood in his mouth didn't help. Taking a few deep breaths, the pain in his head eased, and he could feel blood dripping down his leg. His mind was a jumbled mess, but after a few more easing breaths, his memory started to return.

He had received a coded communication about an Abomination encampment and went to clear it out on his own. His compatriots were still angry at him over Juan's death, so he decided he didn't need them. He would handle this on his own and—

"Well, well, well...Randolph Klein...The so-called *hand of God*," said the disembodied voice.

Randolph knew that voice all too well. The faceless leader of the Abominations that his group can't seem to kill. He yanked

on his bindings. Even tried to summon his blue flame but was unable to escape or summon anything.

The voice from the darkness laughed. "Still a lot of fight in you. Those bindings will not break, and the circle you are in no longer allows you to communicate to whomever to summon your precious blue fire."

A tall and lanky figure stepped into the light that illuminated Randolph. A gray cloak covered its face. Two Woland flanked each side of him.

"Woland?" said Randolph. "The war with the humans ended ages ago. We're supposed to be allies."

"Silly little Randolph, always so arrogant that you miss the minute details."

Randolph struggled again to break the bindings. "Once I get free. You will burn, you unholy creature of—"

"Let's not resort to name-calling. I thought you were above that. How about we make things more civil...shall we? You can call me Uphir."

"The physician to demons?" asked Randolph.

"No, I am not him, but I like his work. So let's go with it. I prefer formality, and now that we are on a first-name basis, you will tell me the location of your allies?"

Randolph laughed. "I will not give you that information."

"I figured as much."

Uphir moved closer to Randolph and injected something into his arm. Randolph felt his body paralyze. He could no longer blink, move his hands or legs. His eyes darted back and forth as he tried to see what was going on.

He could feel Uphir petting his hair like you would a pet.

"Since you will not tell me anything, let's see if I can persuade you."

Uphir leaned over him, and Randolph watched the thin device hover over his left eye. He tried with all his might to move his head, but it would not budge. Then the device moved like lightning.

The pain was excruciating as it dug in and dislodged his eyeball to hang just out of the socket. He wanted to scream, but the drug didn't allow him to. His body wanted to pass out, but he couldn't even do that. He got dizzy as one eye looked to the side, and the other tried to focus on Uphir. His mind tried to adjust, but blackness engulfed the left eye as his body convulsed from the pain.

Uphir dangled the left eye over Randolph's right one and then injected him with something else. Randolph's body stopped convulsing as he let out an agonizing scream and blacked out.

Randolph was dragged back to consciousness by the agonizing moans and people screaming. He felt nauseous and could sense that his face was swollen. Randolph tried to lift his head, but he no longer had the strength to do so.

He jumped as a woman let out a god-awful scream and then gurgled into silence. He closed his one eye, praying for this to end, but a cry from a man forced him to close his eye harder.

"Poor, poor, Randolph. Can't take the sounds of tortured souls. How many do you think have died behind you?"

"Stop it! Stop it! Leave those people alone."

"Well, you refused to give up your friends, so we resorted to asking the local folk. I am sad to report they didn't know anything."

"Damn you! They will come for me, and you will pay."

Uphir laughed.

"Oh, my dear boy. This has been entertaining. No one is coming for you."

"Lonnie won't leave me to this fate."

Uphir moved in close to Randolph's face and petted his head. With the last of his strength, Randolph pulled his head to the side and spit on Uphir's cloak.

Uphir snickered, grabbed Randolph by his hair, and lifted his head up to meet his.

"You will die," said Randolph.

"Such defiance." Uphir leaned in close to Randolph's ear and whispered, "She's not saving you." Uphir turned Randolph's head to face the opposite direction.

"Dear God, no," said Randolph at the site of a Woland holding Lonnie's head by her long, blood-drenched blonde hair.

Uphir let go of Randolph and backed away.

"You see, *Randolph*. Your friends came for you, and they failed. If it gives you any solace, she was dead before she lost her head."

Randolph screamed and cried out.

"Release him," said Uphir.

The Woland dropped Lonnie's head, letting it bounce to the side before moving forward to release the restraint lever.

Randolph tried to take a swing and fell off the table.

"Oh, poor Randolph, the hand of God, this entire exercise was for my amusement and to see if I could break you. It would appear it took longer than I had planned, but in the end...I win. If you're interested, I took your eye as a memento of the occasion. I would have taken two, but then I would not get the effect I wanted when you saw your lover's head."

Randolph crawled around the table. His mouth dropped at the bloodbath of tortured civilians and the head of the only person he ever loved. He pulled Lonnie's head close to him and held onto it as he wept.

"It's been a pleasure, Randolph Klein, but I must depart. However, I like when people make their own choices, so I will give you one. Live your life with the pain of your eye being removed, the sounds of the tortured echoing in your mind and the site of your dead lover, or end your existence and your nightmares."

Randolph looked up at Uphir and then put his head back down.

"Good. You are paying attention. Now that sound you hear is me placing a las-pistol on the table. It has one las-blast left. You can end your life and the nightmares, or use it on the guard just outside the door and live the rest of your life with these wonderful experiences. Your choice. Have a...pleasant day."

Uphir laughed as he and the Woland left the room, leaving Randolph lying on the floor clutching the head of his lover.

Randolph sat against the table with the las-pistol tightly gripped in his left hand. He had no idea how long he had been staring at Lonnie's head on the floor. He reflected on the memories of caressing her golden blond hair and the times he stared into her azure eyes. Now all that was lost...gone because of his arrogance.

Randolph moved the pistol up, his hand trembling. His face cringed with despair as tears rolled down his cheek from his remaining eye. The pistol moved closer to his temple. His finger tightened on the trigger—

"So you screw up, and this is how you deal with it. End it, just like that?"

Randolph looked up to see a woman in a white cloak and veil standing amongst the dead civilians. She stepped through their corpses. No blood or dirt stained her cloak.

"Begone vision or whatever you are."

"So arrogant you were. So naïve you were. You caused all this!"

"Don't you think I already know this! Let me be!"

"You have a choice, child. She is dead, and so are your friends, but you have a choice to honor them or fail them again."

"What would you have me do? I have...nothing."

The woman moved closer and knelt next to him.

"A field gives nothing until it is plowed and seeded. It takes work to harvest its rewards, but, in the end, it's your choice to plant the seeds or let the people starve."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Anatia, and I am a friend." She smiled at him and stepped away.

Randolph looked at the pistol and then at Anatia. Slowly turning, he reached up and pulled his trembling body up and flopped his upper body on it.

Taking a few deep breaths, he forced himself to stand straight and shambled to the door. Looking back, his eye made contact with Lonnie's azure eyes, and he drooped his head.

Pursing his lips, Randolph turned back to the door, raised the las-pistol, and pulled the door open. The eyes of the Woland guard opened wide before it fell dead. Randolph tossed the las-pistol and squinted at the sunlit opening at the end of the corridor.

"Seek OTKE corporation when you are ready. You will find friends there," said Anatia.

Randolph turned around, but the woman was gone. He took one last look at Lonnie before heading towards the light.