

The magnificent Phoenix is consumed every 500 years in a cloud of flames. Afterwards, a new Phoenix arises. This legend is dead wrong, and the awful abomination will decimate millions, if it isn't stopped by a Hunter of the Cloud.

Hunters of the Cloud II - Early Years

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# **Hunters of the Cloud II**

## **EARLY YEARS**

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# **Hunters of the Cloud II**

## **EARLY YEARS**

**L. S. Dusty Miller**

A special note of appreciation goes to the talented author,  
Margaret W. Bonanno.  
Without her gracious encouragement – my writing would never have  
made it to book form.

**For my small niece, Mikel - future Hunter of the Cloud**

## **BEGINNINGS**

*In the beginning there was the universe, and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep....*

In a season of time, man was walking the earth, building cities, and making great scientific advances. Catastrophes that brought man to the brink of extinction were blamed on nature, or the will of a spiritual being. After each major disaster, mankind started again. One such time was recorded by a famous philosopher.

He described the people as great engineers and architects. The unique beauty of their city was enhanced by brilliant gardens, fertile farmlands, and innumerable sparkling fountains. Great universities, observatories, libraries, and academies for people of all ages proved to be the well-spring of human arts and sciences.

For many centuries, the advanced metropolis was the center of the world, and the people enjoyed long lives of achievement and prosperity. But the society began to decay. The people started to worship the false ideals of wealth, idleness, and luxury. It was during this era of corruption that the people embarked on a war of world conquest, launching against the neighboring lands, terrorizing and enslaving the inhabitants of other settlements.

The philosopher wrote: "When the divine portion began to fade away, and became too diluted with the beastly admixture...they behaved in an unseemly manner. Afterwards there occurred violent earthquakes and floods; and in a single day and night of misfortune, the entire continent disappeared into the depths of the sea."

Atlantis became the first Earth civilization destroyed by the ancient malevolence.

## **Sand Storm**

The sun was masked by churning dust and rock. The sensation of needles pelting their skin sent the four Tol children scrambling.

“Come on!” Kima urged. Noj’s protest was cut off when he inhaled the fine powder. He choked and coughed. Kima was small, but did her best to help support Noj’s lanky frame as they struggled against the brutal sandstorm. Jin Rei brought up the rear, keeping the group together and pushing them forward. He was confident that his little sister would remember the coordinates to the refuge. They pulled themselves along the sheer rock, sand-blasted and breathless.

“How much farther?” Barrik stepped up to help Noj.

“There!” Kima yelled above the roar. She pointed out the vertical fissure, and with a few more painstaking steps, they made it in. The nasty, dark crevice was a welcome haven from the stinging blast. Jin Rei reached into his pocket for a signal device, pulled the activation tab, and tossed it outside.

“Noj, lean against the wall!” Jin said. It took the load off little Kima, and straightened Noj’s airway. Jin stayed near his distressed friend, as Barrik kept an eye on Kima.

She looked at him, and giggled. Barrik’s dark hair was powdered tan by the dust of the planet. His two eyes were stark circles in a mask of dust. “You look like a sandman!”

“Oh yeah?” He responded by fluffing her hair, and sending up a small cloud. She rolled away laughing.

It was like having three brothers. Barrik and Noj were the only other children in the expeditionary unit of forty. Kima’s brother, Jin was the oldest. Nearing two decades, Jin was the average height for their species of two meters. Barrik and Noj weren’t quite as tall, but they were taller and older than Kima. Measured in Earth years, the Tol lived over five hundred. Kima

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was just ten, but she worked as hard as the boys...when they let her work.

At unit headquarters, the tempest had locked-down ground team search efforts. The sandstorm was unexpected, and the winds were strong enough to whip small stones into lethal projectiles. Anxious parents waited for word of the children.

“Good Boy, Jin!” Commander Purdokk announced, as a small light flashed urgency on the monitor. Jin Rei’s signal had sent a smoke flare that no one could see through the canopy of sand, but it also activated a tracking beacon. Purdokk read its coordinates. He breathed relief, and looked over his shoulder, “Doctor, do you want to assist?”

Dako Rei nodded; glad his son had remembered to take along a signal device on the outing. The two officers dressed in protective environmental gear, and headed to the Overland Cruiser.

*....The swirling crimson vapors crackled and lit the sky with energy. It had a frightening and disorienting effect. After breathing the infective molecules, the unlucky ones staggered, choked, and became dizzy. The Hunter woke up, sweating the nightmare.*

*Peaceful beings were enjoying the day, laughing and playing. With stunning speed, the brutal creations pounced. Enormous Beasts tore into their victims with knife-sharp talons, and chased the terrified. The unfortunate screamed as they were ripped apart and their children became shared meals. The ground around them was littered with entrails, dismembered limbs, and blood.*

*A brutish blow hurled brain matter through the air like rain. The Hunter killed the Beast, but another one appeared, and another. More monsters poured from the hills to join the*

*L. S. Dusty Miller*

*bloodbath. As the Hunter fought to stop the slaughters, sweat poured down his face. The dribble down his lip tasted of brains and blood....*

## **Rescue**

The four children were dressed in lightweight protective armor. It resembled the soft tan buckskins of Earth's early Native Americans. The Tol clothing and choice of weaponry had been imitated on more planets than just Earth. Their expeditionary unit was on "619", a planet on the outskirts of a spiral galaxy with over a hundred billion stars.

A populated planet in a nearby system was losing its star. The Tol went there, and took away samples of life forms from that planet. When they located a suitable and uninhabited planet, it was tested for crust stability and other characteristics. The Tol would seed, cultivate, and care for the transplanted organisms on "619" until the higher life forms could be relocated. The group's first task was to bring more of the underground water sources to the surface, and begin rudimentary planting. Until more of the surface was covered by water and foliage, the sandstorms were a hazard.

"Jin, do you think they'll find us?" Noj asked. The storms could last for days.

"I threw a signal - Commander Purdokk will find it," Jin said with more assurance than he felt. "Kima, where are you going?"

She was creeping farther into the cavern. "This goes back a long ways, Jin, maybe we should look?" Kima was adventuresome to a fault.

"I think we should wait until the Commander comes after us," suggested her older brother.

Kima returned. The children had exceptional intelligence, compassion, and sense of duty. The characteristics were carried into maturity, and hallmark to the Tol. Kima worshiped Jin, and was going to miss him when he was selected for one of the Cloud Hunter ships. He would go away for Training, and she'd

never see him again. At that thought, she ran and squeezed her arms around him.

“What’s wrong?” Jin was alarmed.

Barrik looked back at the fissure where she came from, wondering if the planet was still uninhabited. Kima kept Jin in a hug, saved from a ridiculous explanation when they heard the Cruiser’s whine.

“Yay!” Noj and Barrik whooped. They edged into the storm to flag down the ship.

Kima let go of Jin and started after the boys, but Jin held her back. “Hey, are you okay?” he was unsettled by her behavior. He was her protector, and would never let anything happen to her.

“I’m fine, Jin – let’s go!” she said.

Jin was unconvinced. He’d ask her again later. They watched the cruiser land. Soon enough, two suited individuals came out from the shuttle. Jin recognized the Commander’s huge form, and second officer wore the insignia of the group’s physician, his father.

“We got your signal Jin,” said the Commander, as the two men arrived at the sanctuary. “Nice place you have here,” he commended the boy on his resourcefulness.

“Kima led us here,” Jin redirected the compliment.

“Well, good job,” Purdokk told the little one, while he and the doctor passed environmental suits to the boys. Kima helped her brother into his, while Purdokk and her father helped Noj and Barrik. Kima was too small for the heavier suits; it was never expected that she could be in an environment requiring higher protection. Her lightweight gear wouldn’t have shielded her from the blast of debris.

“Come here, Captain Kima,” Commander Purdokk teased. He had another large suit, and tucked her into it. “Keep your head inside,” he instructed. Purdokk held her inside the sack

over his shoulder, as the group made their way back to the shuttle.

The Ladarans were a peaceful species of saurians with brown scales, and a thick tail. Their planetary focus was aquaculture and land farming. The Tol Cloud Hunters had not detected the presence of the Phoenix on Ladara in time. In just a few days, the Ladarans were a sad addition to the extinct species list in Galactic archives.

The Ladaran ship, *Soria*, launched to escape the attack, oblivious to the malevolent molecules they'd taken aboard.

*The brown dragon stood, as it was replicated. Pink energy and proteins from the Cloud were contributed, and a second Beast stepped away. Another was created, and another. The two-legged reptilians looked as if they had brown tree bark for skin. Thick, dark syrup dripped from angular jaws, and scores of elliptic eyes were flashing as they took the Soria back to space....*

The infection spread, and the peaceful *Soria* flew off to become a ship of marauders, and vicious dragon Beasts.

As soon as Kima was set on the deck of the Cruiser, she shook out of the suit and ran to the controls. She loved space flight, and followed every movement at the command console.

“Okay, where now, Captain?” Commander Purdokk asked her.

Kima squinted at the chart display, and read the panels for speed. “Course change here,” she pointed, “twenty degrees.” Purdokk chuckled, and tapped her directions into the console.

Dr. Rei ran a medical scan over Noj, concerned that the dust had infiltrated his deep airway. He set the infuser to send a painless jolt of medication into the boy's system, and Noj felt

immediate relief. Dako ran a quick med-scan over the other children, relieved that they were well, and uninjured.

Dako and Lia Rei had been assigned to this mission as a special favor from Tol High Command. Dako was a renowned physician. Lia was an accomplished physicist. The remote assignment was a little odd considering their past postings. But they were both aware of High Command's logic, and appreciated the assignment.

Dako had been a decorated Hunter and Captain of a Tol ship for over a decade. As Jin grew older, Lia couldn't stand the thought of Dako going off to a mission where he could be killed by Beasts. He'd been hurt on several missions, and some injuries were near-fatal. As Lia became more anxious, Dako worried for her emotional well-being. Without reservation, he relinquished command, and returned to his calling as a physician.

As the Overland Cruiser neared headquarters, Kima went back to help the boys into their suits, and then hopped into her over-sized one. Dr. Rei grinned as he watched her, a mimic of his own adventuresome spirit. The Cruiser set down, and they dashed through the protective tunnel into headquarters.

The relief was overwhelming. Parents and friends rushed to the children. Kima gave her mother a quick hug. Dako gave Lia a nod that things were well, and went over to Noj's parents. He explained that Noj's treatment, and that he'd follow-up with the boy in the morning.

Dr. Rei's eyes tracked back to his own family. Kima had disappeared. He scanned the area to see where she'd gone, and spotted her in a chair next to the Operations technician.

"Hi Kima," the technician greeted, "coming to look for more caves?"

Kima brightened, "You remember area fourteen, grid B?"

He drew out his answer, “Yes, uh-huh.” He had no idea what was in grid B.

“That’s where we hid from the storm. We went to that big crack in the rocks, and...Umph!” Her father scooped her from the chair with an apology.

“Thanks,” Kima waved as they left. The technician looked up area fourteen, and shook his head in amazement. Kima’s memory of charts was phenomenal.

The storm waned, and the Reis took the children back to their shelter. “Shelters” for the expeditionary unit were well-constructed homes. They were expected to be on the planet for years at a time. The camp was a small town with storage buildings, greenhouses, and a large recreation area.

Kima begged to go to the archery range. “Father, if I go to sleep when we come back, can I go?”

Jin shook his head. He was tired, and couldn’t believe that she wasn’t. Before his father had to tell her no, Jin tried a compromise. “Father, I can take her first thing in the morning.”

Dr. Rei looked at Lia. If she didn’t need Jin to help her with geological studies, that would be a good solution. Lia nodded consent, and Kima skipped all the way home.

The Cloud used the buffers aboard the *Soria* to create more Beasts, until circuits overloaded, and burned. The ship was overcrowded, and scores of Beasts were left behind, before the ship traveled on.

The *Soria*’s monstrous crew ate everything. They ate the food from the mess, the plants in the horticultural gardens, and the half-finished snacks in the dining hall. When there was no more to eat, they searched for another planet or ship to satisfy their voracious appetites.

They resorted to cannibalism.

## The Phoenix

“Focus on the draw, arm straight, back muscles, breathe, smooth release,” Jin repeated for Kima. Jin was excellent at archery. His skills caught the attention of Tol High Command, and helped mark him for future service.

Both Kima and Jin trained with masters of the art when their parents were posted to Command ships. It was one of their favorite pastimes. Kima straightened her bow arm, chanted the checklist and released. The arrow hit dead-center. Jin was impressed. Kima was using a draw-weight above her expected ability.

“Good, Kima! Excellent,” Jin complimented.

Kima beamed. She’d gotten up in the morning, dressed, and fixed breakfast for two, before Jin woke up. She didn’t want to disappoint him with her performance, and was relieved that her first shot hit the target. The small archer notched and fired several more perfect shots before her head started to hurt.

She tried to ignore the headache, and her next shot was well off target. She set the bow down, and pressed her head hard between her hands. Jin was saying something she couldn’t hear.

“Kima - are you all right?” Jin would go get his father, but he suspected the event would pass, and it did. Kima sat, sweating. Her brother held her, and waited.

*The Beasts raced down on the village, and the innocent didn’t have time to run. Scores of natives, their pets, and their livestock lay in heaps. A mother held her child in a last embrace...A father shielded an infant from a terror he could not overpower or prevent, and he was eviscerated by the claws of the Beast. The baby tried to crawl away, and became a victim too...*

“Oh, that’s awful,” Kima whispered.

“Did you see anything?” Jin asked.

“Yes. The same monsters that time,” she said, as if seeing monsters was a normal event.

Jin knew that it *was* a normal event. But exclusive to a Hunter - someone who could sense the projected neural energy of the dreaded Phoenix Cloud and the Beasts that it produced. Not all Tol Hunters had this ability, but everyone who had the ability was a Hunter.

He worried for her future. A Hunter was a living weapon used by Tol High Command to exterminate the Phoenix. It was dangerous work. The word was that a Hunter spent more time in Medical, than anywhere else on the ship.

Neither of them told their parents. They didn’t want to worry them, and ever since Dako gave up his Hunter status, Lia steered conversations away from Beasts. Whenever Kima had the nightmares, she’d find Jin. He would tell her stories until they went away. She asked him to tell her one.

Jin made a selection from his own feelings of urgency. “Okay, how about the Phoenix?” he asked. She nodded her throbbing head, and Jin sat beside her.

“The Phoenix Cloud used to appear every 500 years in this galaxy. The first occurrence was unforgettable. The populations of two inhabited solar systems were wiped out. The Cloud disappeared and was considered a one-time tragedy. But it came back. It attacked more worlds, and expanded its range.”

“Tol science academies went to work, researching the anomaly. They discovered that there are two parts – Beasts and Cloud. The Cloud is a bio-neural protein carrier for combined DNA.”

“Like a big virus?” Kima asked, as her headache dissipated.

“Yes - except a virus uses the capability of the host to reproduce. The Phoenix uses artificial means, like the buffers

of molecular teleporters. The Cloud enters hosts that breathe its particles. The host's neural pathways become a transmitter so that the Cloud can communicate to the individual - a Beast."

Kima worried, "Then if I breathed the particles – I'd be a Beast?"

"That'll never happen," Jin assured.

"But how would you know it's me," Kima pressed, "Would the Cloud make me look different?"

This was a difficult concept, but Jin felt it was important for her to understand. In his heart, he knew the information would be critical to her...soon. "The original victim does not change appearance – they look the same."

"It could look like Mother, Father...or even you?" She was alarmed.

"Yes - but remember," he emphasized, "You'll know a Beast by its actions."

"How?"

"Most beings have immunity. It's giving in to the negative energy and emotions that seals their fate. You won't be fooled by a Beast's gesture of good faith, because it will be wrapped in dark motives." He simplified, "Even if it seems nice, you'll sense its nasty nature."

"Oh," Kima was learning fast. "What other monsters can the Cloud create?"

"It can't create. But it can use an artificial means to pull energy and matter together. The Cloud uses an infected Beast as a template, and makes another. This is called a Replicated Beast."

"When it makes a replication, the Cloud injects its collection of its matter. This is why the copy looks different - the Cloud carries genetic material from more than one species. To give a Replicated Beast its 'brain', the Phoenix transfers its knowledge through energy conversion. The Cloud uses molecular buffers

to align its scattered neural energy into coherent concepts before transfer.”

Jin looked to see if Kima was lost in the explanation - she was spellbound, and asked, “So it keeps making Beasts until all its material is used up, and the Cloud disappears?”

“Yes,” He was pleased with her fast comprehension, “And when the Replicated Beasts die or are killed, they forfeit their energy and aerosol remnants. As the Beast population decreases, the Cloud increases. The energy doesn’t die.”

He took a breath, “Two things bring the Cloud back together: Live victims and a compatible neural buffer – like the kind in teleporters. The huge storm swirls with bright, sparking energy.” He ended the narrative, “When it manifests to a visible cloud, it can be eliminated by a neurotoxin.”

Kima thought for a moment, “That’s what you’re going to do on the Hunter ship - chase Clouds?”

Jin hesitated. He didn’t want to distress her, but she was getting old enough to see through his deceptions, “Yes.”

“I want to do that too.”

Jin knew that she’d grow up to hunt Clouds. He just didn’t want to think about her doing it. “Come on,” he prompted, “let’s go home. You can rest, or do some exploring while I help mother.” Kima gave him a hug. They collected their gear, and trotted home.

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