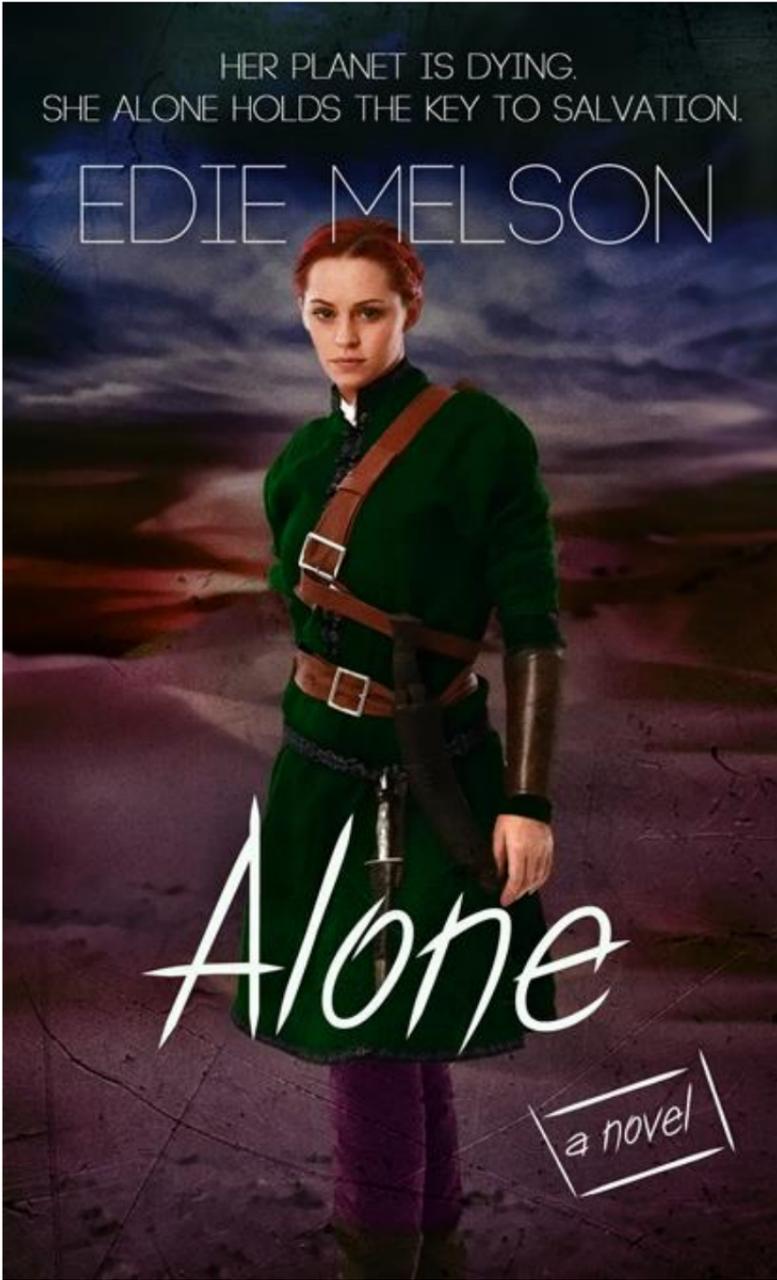


HER PLANET IS DYING.
SHE ALONE HOLDS THE KEY TO SALVATION.

EDIE MELSON



Alone

a novel

Alone

Edie Melson

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Alone

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Dedication

In loving memory of my father,
Jim Mahoney,
Daddy, you shared your love of books with me and fed
my soul.
You encouraged me to follow my dreams and helped
me find God's path for my life.
I miss you every day, and I'll love you forever!

**PART ONE—
FREEDOM**

1

Only the chimes, oddly sweet, told the passing of time. This far beneath the surface, day and night were arbitrary, dictated by necessity, not nature. Bethany looked around at the other workers, some in standard issue coveralls and others, like her, in the tunics of slaves. Only she and Elisheba carried the mark of Seeker. They were the last two left in this worker block, both of them female, one too old to bear children and herself just entering adulthood.

Slave or free, the designation didn't really matter. Their lives were all governed by someone else. She tried not to fidget as she waited for the supervisor, and Elisheba gave her a half smile from the opposite end of their shared station. The refuge of the chest-high worktop provided a place to lose herself in the tedium of work. Bethany nodded back at her friend, unwilling to speak and draw attention to them.

"I'm no seeker-slave." The old woman at the next workstation glared in Bethany's direction. "They shouldn't force *me* to stand here waiting."

Elisheba tapped the hardened steel worktop with her broken fingernail three times. It was their personal code for patience. Bethany didn't need Elisheba's caution. She wouldn't answer the angry woman. She might have laughed had there been any energy left in her body. These people could label her anything they chose. She wasn't here to please them. Her purpose

was to endure—until the One finally called her home.

Elisheba edged closer. “We’ve little output to show today. The supervisor won’t be pleased.”

Bethany frowned at her. Conversation was strictly forbidden. Once they’d been dismissed and reached the safety of their sleeping cells, they’d discuss the day.

“The Behavior Board called me in for another hearing. It’s my seventh.” She looked up and met Bethany’s eyes. “I won’t deny the One.”

Bethany reached out and covered Elisheba’s hand with her own. They didn’t need words. The board had summoned Elisheba a few days earlier. They both knew what happened at the seventh inquisition. Bethany had been called before the governing board four times herself. No, there’d be no discussion tonight. This would be their final time to await inspection together. Tomorrow, Bethany would stand alone.

She stiffened her spine and searched for the strength to continue. Controlling her emotions at the end of any day was a struggle. Now this? The cavernous environment didn’t help. Intense task-lighting and poor circulation led to the ever-present odor of sulfur mixed with leaching compounds. Few chose to remain in these conditions long. The agonizing headaches and recurring respiratory problems ensured a short, miserable lifespan. At almost two clicks beneath the metropolis, the noxious haze, unable to dissipate, burned the throat of any unfortunate worker. Wrinkling her nose, she remembered the smell of earlier times, when she roamed above ground in the sweet ragoon fields of Sintue.

The supervisor stopped at their table. “Worker

456, is this your total for the day?" Simon, always correct in his address to Bethany, had adopted a strange formality that denied the fact they'd grown up together. He didn't even glance at Elisheba.

"Yes, sir." Bethany kept her head down, unwilling to be drawn into his game. She concentrated, determined to keep the tears that pooled in her eyes from falling. She couldn't afford to irritate him. Early on, she believed he'd found her in the slave pens and recommended her for this job, in spite of her Seeker affiliation, because of their past bond. Now she wasn't so sure.

Simon inspected the small amount of assembled electronic components on Bethany's workstation. It didn't matter that the tedious work called for intense attention to detail, with almost two hundred different connections required for each tiny unit. Every worker's quota was based on the need of the talarium dealers—and nothing else.

"And once again, your output falls short."

Bethany could feel his lingering look as his pale hand brushed hers. An accident or on purpose? His height had never bothered her before, but now, he always seemed to loom over her, dark eyes flashing with an avarice she tried to ignore.

"We must come to an understanding." Simon stepped closer, and she tensed her muscles to keep from taking a step back. "I would consider it a personal favor if you'd see that your totals are a little higher in the future." His voice, though low, contained the hint of a purr underneath.

She willed herself not look up. "Uh...yes, sir." Why didn't he leave? Give her a moment with Elisheba. They must solidify their plan. They needed

time. Elisheba must not attend the hearing.

"All right, then." Simon turned, slapping his hands together and rubbing them. "All workers in this section may leave." He held up a finger. "Except, I wish to see numbers 142, 301, and 456 in my office." He strode back down the aisle, workers making room for him to pass in the tight space.

"He called you." The urgency in Elisheba's whisper colored her words. "Number 456 is your number."

Bethany shook her head. Her inadvertent gasp at hearing her name called had given her lungs a large concentration of harsh fumes that made her throat close and eyes water. She grabbed Elisheba's hand. "Wait for me." She glanced around. "Go to the designated place. I'll meet you." She'd do whatever it took to save Elisheba. In spite of the older woman's pushy ways, her friendship had been just what Bethany needed, fresh to the rank of slaves. She'd never have survived those first few months without Elisheba and her managing ways. She owed this woman so much and she'd do everything she could to ensure her safety.

She sensed Elisheba's whispered prayer following her as she dodged through the throng of dismissed laborers to answer Simon's summons.

"Hope they're getting rid of that snotty Seeker."

"Thinks she's better than us, does she? I'll wager the supervisor will soon change her mind." An ugly laugh followed.

Other, similar remarks dogged her steps as she crossed the immense workers' block to the area of cubes reserved for those with rank and authority. It would be so easy to hate, but the Text, the Book of

Truth, stated clearly what her response must be. *Love your neighbor. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemy.* Such simple instructions, but so difficult to follow. Times like these made her wish she'd never heard the Truth. But she had, and now, those responsibilities outweighed any temporary difficulties. She shook her head. Temporary difficulties indeed. What cruel, cosmic joke labeled her fight to survive in such an innocuous way? When would the One have mercy on her and just take her home?

She hurried down one cramped gray row and into another. This particular block contained almost five hundred workstations, designed for maximum speed of assembly and not the comfort or needs of workers. High-yield light fixtures, necessary for the detailed work, hung low over the tables and left the ceiling in hazy darkness, giving the area an oppressive ambience. Was this her future, a world always in shadow?

~*~

Inside his office, Simon consulted the chrono set in the cuff on his arm. All those associated with the Organization were presented with one. The tiny keypad allowed them to reach necessary information almost immediately. Of course, ordinary supervisors like himself weren't allowed access to the upper levels of the database.

That little Seeker was too stupid for words. But she always had been. His father had offered her father an honorable arrangement when she was still a child—a chance to become his lifemate. But the “oh-so-important” Dr. Amariah Randolph would have

nothing to do with him. The Randolph's had judged him and his family and found them wanting. But that wouldn't stop Simon now.

These religious fanatics had no idea what actually went on when one of their number disappeared. But Simon did, and he'd found a way to cash in on their ignorance. Thank the One for the Organization. He snorted at the irony—the One had nothing to do with this Organization.

For a substantial fee, this enterprising group supplied personal workers to the luxury class on Sintue. The arrangement benefited many. The Organization quietly took care of the government's problem with the Seekers and, in the process of getting rich, fulfilled a need. Simon, and everyone else, knew exactly what these servants did. He wasn't wealthy enough to own one himself, but his supervisors didn't mind if he sampled the merchandise before delivery.

He settled behind his desk. Everything must be perfect when she came in. Bethany had seemed pathetically grateful after he searched her out and offered her this position. The little simpleton had even tried some of that Seeker jargon on him, spouting something about the Creator using him for the Creator's own purpose. Simon let her know right away what he thought of that. At first, her blue eyes had flashed in a hint of anger, but she had quickly lowered her head and thanked him for finding her—nice and humble.

Bethany was a pretty one, always had been. Her tall frame with dark auburn hair set her apart from the crowd and was a perfect fit for his own unusually tall frame. Now, she kept her hair short, as required in this position, but he often wondered what it would have

looked and felt like heavy and long against her neck. He'd even gone so far as to offer her his protection when he first found her. Of course, taking her as a lifemate had been impossible by then. But again, she refused his generous offer. Not this time. This time, she'd have no choice.

He looked up, glaring when 142 and 301 entered his cube.

"Yeah, boss, what do you want?" The Organization planted employees like these at all their facilities to keep track of the workers—and the supervisors.

"Watch outside the door after 456 comes in." Simon raised a black eyebrow. "I don't want to be disturbed for anything short of a true emergency."

The men exchanged looks and left.

~*~

Two workers stood outside Simon's door when Bethany approached. "He's waiting for you." The taller of the massive men turned and winked at his partner.

Their attitude added sand to the rocky lump Bethany tried to swallow as her wariness crystallized into certainty. It was time—her time had come. Simon was about to demand something she couldn't—wouldn't—relinquish. Only the One could provide escape. But she had to hang on long enough to let Elisheba make her way to safety first.

Please...protect me...give me strength to see this through.

She raised her chin and pushed open the door.

"Bethany." Simon came around his desk, smiling. "Have a seat. I know you must be tired."

Her nerves turned to pin-pricks, racing up and down her body as she struggled for control. She must give Elisheba time to get away—then she could make good her own escape. Her lips tightened as she lowered herself into the offered chair. Reticence would be her best ally.

“We go a long way back.” Simon perched on his desk in front of her, swinging one foot. “And I’ve always thought of you more as a cousin than a friend.”

“You’ve always been in my prayers.” Bethany kept her hands clenched in her lap and her gaze on him. “I do appreciate this job and will try to increase my production. I don’t want you to get into trouble with your supervisors because of me.”

“Oh, don’t worry about me.” He stilled his foot. “I know how to handle the higher-ups.” He winked at her. “But it’s you I’m worried about. Are you still sold on that Seeker nonsense?”

She teetered on two levels, forced to carry on a civil conversation while waiting for the right moment to flee. “It’s not nonsense.” She fought the urge to explain, to tell him all that being a Seeker meant. He had warned her against that. The world only saw what she’d given up. Besides, Simon made his position clear when she began working for him. “And yes, I am still completely sold out to it.”

“I really hate to hear that.” He came to his feet, towering over her in an instant. “Because it means you’re out of a job.”

Bethany’s nails cut into her palms as she fisted her hands tighter. Had she waited long enough—or too long?

He circled around behind her. “The word came down from my supervisor today. He gave me no

choice but to terminate all employees with known Seeker affiliation. I wanted to offer you one more opportunity before I let you go, just for old-times' sake." Bethany flinched as he put his hands on her neck and began massaging her shoulders. "I wish you'd give up this insanity. There is no future for you as a Seeker."

"My future comes later." A sense of peace from another time and another place rushed through her.

"No." He pulled her tight against the back of the chair. "Your future has been decided, and it's about to begin now."

Bethany gasped, but before she could speak, the room filled with noise. The screech of the emergency sirens amped up the adrenaline already flooding her system. Simon flinched back from her and rushed toward the door. Before he reached it, one of the guards exploded into the room.

"What's going on?" Simon pushed the man aside, peering out.

"Sir, we're under attack. The boards are flashing '*no drill*.'" The man gestured toward the surface. "It has to be an invasion."

Simon stood immobile, and Bethany sprinted from the chair to the door. She pushed through the men to freedom.

2

Bethany forced her way through throngs of people to the main exit in the corner of the underground block. It opened onto a dark corridor leading to the trams that carried the workers up or down several levels to the many substantive living quarters and sleeping cells. The passageway rang with questions as tension played on the faces of the people surrounding her.

“Why are the sirens going off?” A woman rushed by, one hand covering her mouth and nose, the other outstretched, pushing through the crowd.

A man, obviously searching for someone, tried to stop people as they ran past. “What’s happening?”

“Is this a riot?” Another woman’s voice crescendoed and broke, ending in a wail.

Bethany bumped into the man in front of her as he came to an abrupt stop. Most of the time, she tried to hide her taller than average frame, but today, she used it to find the bottleneck.

That’s when she saw them.

They jogged in from a little-used tunnel. The beings became a line of warriors, each at least seven feet tall, loosely cradling powerful weapons. Full body armor left them invulnerable, while opaque face-plates rendered them anonymous. Their lack of expression brought Bethany’s breathing to a stop as her blood turned cold. These were the nightmares from her childhood. She remembered the tales so well. The Book of Truth told of a future populated with such beings

before the end of time.

The crowd became a mindless sea, intent on escape, forcing Bethany to move with them or be trampled. She fought against the relentless current of their panic as they surged toward the express tram. Fighting to free herself, she elbowed those nearest. She must not enter that train.

But the hysteria of the crowd was too much, and they swept into the open maw of the nearest tram. Once inside, their panic became hers. Slaves, especially Seekers, weren't allowed on the express cars, and yet here she was. To be caught on one meant severe punishment or even death.

Her heart thundered in her chest as she forced her way back to the door. *Stay open. Please, stay open.* She was close enough to freedom to hear the whisper of the mechanism as the doors slammed shut, trapping her inside.

As the train began its ascent, Bethany froze, unwilling to draw a breath lest she bring attention to herself. Surely, in their fear, those around her wouldn't notice she was there. The crowd shifted, still restless, but with the rise to possible safety, individual voices began to babble. A couple standing close to her voiced her own thoughts aloud.

"Who are they?" The woman wore the orange of a tech worker.

"I don't even want to imagine." The man, barrel chested and more of a size for an on-ground worker, put his arm around her. "They'll probably be waiting on the tram topside. I'll try to cause a distraction when we get nearer to the surface. Keep close and follow my lead."

Discussions broke out as the crowd's panic

receded and those in the tram settled into small clumps of individuals. Bethany held her collar high on the side of her neck, careful to hide her Seeker's mark.

What had happened to her world? She'd known the Book held Truth, but the idea that it pictured a literal future? No, surely not. She searched her memories for details, specifics about the coming times. It had foretold a race of giants. But these? The urge to sink to her knees almost overcame her resolve to stay hidden. Could the monsters she'd seen been the ones foretold to *save* Sintue? Surely not, they looked more like planet-devouring R'hobans than something the One would have provided. *Save us...please save us.*

The tram continued its ascent and Bethany began to breathe, her heartbeat settling into a normal rhythm. Only seconds remained until the car arrived at the surface and she could escape.

The barrel-chested man to her right stared at her. In her reverie, her hand had relaxed and her mark been exposed. He smirked, and his look told her she'd become the diversion he'd been waiting for. "Hey, what's a Seeker doing here?" The crowd, already nervous and agitated, began to morph once again into a beast with no conscience as their pent-up tension found release.

The first blow caught her in the stomach. She couldn't keep back a cry as she doubled over with pain. Bethany fought for breath and tried to straighten, feeling the tram slow as it reached the surface. Angry words came at her from all sides, but there wasn't time to react as another fist connected with her head. She reeled from the force of it, light and stabbing pain exploding through her temples. Only the crush of people kept her upright.

The tram doors opened, and the sound of a stunner firing rang in her ears. Had she been hit? The acrid odor of a weapon filled her nostrils as those inside the tram froze. Several of the giants entered the tram and surrounded her. One of them took her arm and shoved her behind him. She wanted to sink to the ground, but he gripped her arm like an iron band. *No, please. Just let the crowd kill me.*

"The next one to move will die." The stranger delivered his threat in a low voice but with such authority, no one moved. He'd quieted the agitators, who were now more afraid of his weapon than upset by a Seeker in their midst. Other strangers waited outside the tram. They herded the now docile crowd—including the barrel-chested man and his companion—toward makeshift pens that stretched across the rockcrete commons and into the dirt fields as far as Bethany could see. Immense cruisers hovered everywhere, casting insect-like shadows on her world.

Bethany gasped, and the warrior who still held her arm gave her a shake.

She twisted her head to gaze up at him.

"Are you a Seeker?" The man's voice, though still low, seemed kinder somehow.

"Yes, I am." She raised her chin.

"Then you have nothing to fear from us." He led her from the tube, slowing his long stride, and signaled to another captor. "Manaen, see to her wounds and take her to the captain's holding area to await processing."

Manaen removed his helmet, and Bethany saw that he was a she. The warrior's height, along with the helmet, had misled her. But as she caught sight of the giant's eyes, surrounded by sooty lashes, Bethany

knew no one could never mistake her for anything but a woman.

“Yes, Josiah.” Manaen brought her fist to her shoulder in a gesture of respect. Turning, she touched Bethany’s arm. “What is your name, child?”

“I’m Bethany.” She looked up at this strange warrior woman. Bethany’s head didn’t even reach her shoulder. “Who are you, and why are you here?”

“We are the R’hobans, and your world has been chosen.”

Bethany’s terror returned in waves that threatened her sanity. She closed her eyes, her stomach roiled, and her center of gravity tilted. R’hobans. She’d been right, but hearing the name gave the nightmare life. Everyone in the galaxy knew them by reputation. They were monsters, conquerors that overtook worlds and enslaved the inhabitants. They left few alive to recount the stories of their domination. Why had the One chosen now to abandon them? Abandon her?

“Don’t be afraid.” Manaen caught her before the dizziness took Bethany to the ground. “Things, for you, are going to change for the better.” She set Bethany upright. “Let’s get you patched up.”

Manaen loaded her into an aircar, the engines purring to life before they lifted off to another part of the city. As they rode, Bethany looked down on Sintue. The landscape sped by, sunset illuminating the inside of the aircar with a reddish glare. Just above the horizon, a deep haze hung like an invasion force of darkness, threatening to obliterate her world. She closed her eyes against the dark omen in the sky and the nausea building in her throat.

“Tell me about your personal dwelling. Is it close by?” Manaen’s voice held no threat.

Bethany opened her eyes, glancing at her captor. "I live below the city, in a block of housing ten clicks down."

"Have you always lived in such a place?"

Bethany's mind raced through her memories, to a place of light and air. She swallowed back the pain and subdued the images. Difficult, because her captor's eyes were the exact color of the grass that once grew in abundance on Sintue. "I've been there for nine years. Ever since my parents died."

"What happened to your parents?"

Could this monster actually be interested, or was there another reason for her questions? "They were killed during the Seeker cleansing in 2580." She kept her voice even, practiced at keeping all emotion at bay. "I was away at the time."

"And the authorities?" Manaen's amazing eyes widened. "What did they do?"

"They didn't *do* anything." Wasn't she aware of how the government had ruled their beliefs an act of terrorism? Did these invaders learn nothing about a world before they conquered it? "The government doesn't sanction Seeker beliefs."

Manaen frowned and sighed. "I knew of the Seeker persecution here on Sintue, but didn't realize it occurred to such a degree or with the government's blatant approval."

Once again, her Seeker affiliation had set her apart. For better or for worse?

A sad smile played across Manaen's lips before she turned her attention to the outside. The aircar landed, and Bethany arrived at an unfamiliar destination—silence and worry her two familiar companions.