

The Prison of Angels

by David Dalglish

BOOKS BY DAVID DALGLISH

THE HALF-ORC SERIES

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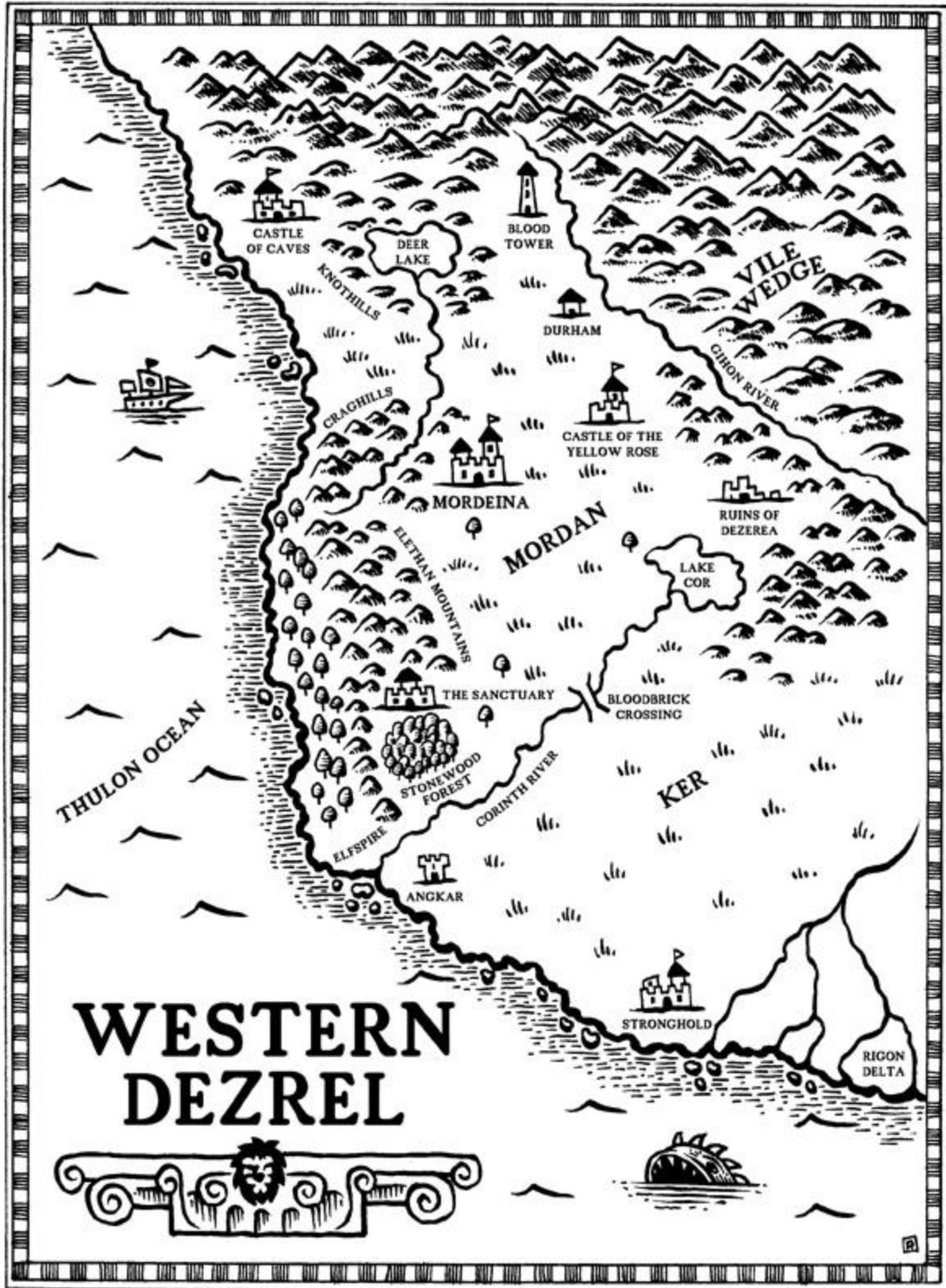
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Prologue



The entire town of Norstrom gathered around the rapist, yet they could do nothing. Three of the elders shouted in vain to keep the crowd calm. A fourth stood beside Colton, doing his best to console him.

“They know what’s right,” the old man said, rubbing his crooked nose. “Locke’s too far gone. They’ll kill him, quick and painless.”

Colton glared at the bound fiend. The man had been forced to his knees, his arms tied behind his back and a rope strung around his neck. Colton tied the rope himself, hoping no one would notice how tightly he’d been looping it until it was too late. They did notice, and Locke continued breathing, awaiting the mockery to come.

“What’s right, sure,” Colton said. “But what about what’s best?”

“Are they not the same?”

Colton shook his head.

“Right now they’re as far apart as the Abyss from the Golden Eternity.”

The signal had been given from the golden scepter, so it would not be long now. Together, townsfolk and rapist waited for the angel to arrive.

“I’m sorry,” Locke kept crying, his words shouted down by the hundred others in attendance, all so Colton would not hear. But he heard anyway, and the words put a knife in his gut. His poor Krista. Two years old. Two fucking years old.

The angel and his executioner’s blade couldn’t arrive fast enough.

“Colton!”

He turned, saw his wife Lily pushing through the crowd to join him. She held Krista in her arms, the child’s face pressed against her bosom. Krista’s eyes were shut, and she shook as if nightmare hounds howled for her blood. Reaching him, Lily leaned in close so she might be heard without shouting.

“Come with me,” she said. “Please, Colton, you don’t need to be here. You don’t need to watch.”

But he did need to watch. He had to make sure justice, *true* justice, was served.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He reached out for Krista, stopping when she flinched. Her innocence was gone, her trust brutalized out of her. Nothing could describe Colton’s rage, nothing, and he turned once more to where the man lay tied.

In Colton’s pocket was a slender knife, and he clutched it tightly.

“Here, at last,” said the elder, tugging on Colton’s sleeve while pointing to the sky.

Flying through the blue came the angel, his white wings the same color as the clouds he soared beneath. His golden armor shone, and when he dove for the town, Colton felt his breath catch in his throat. Despite his fury, despite the sickening nature of what was to transpire, he still felt himself swept with awe. Even though they had become increasingly commonplace, it did not diminish the awesome presence of an angel of Ashhur. The angel landed just outside the town center, and the people quickly gave way so he might approach. His hair was a deep white, his eyes a sparkling bronze. From his hip swung a long blade with a golden hilt.

“I am Ezekai, and I bring the blessings of Ashhur,” the angel said. His voice was deep, authoritative, the tone of a soldier. “I saw the signal in the sky and have come. What matter requires my aid?”

It was tradition, newly begun, that elders would describe the crimes, but Colton would have none of that. He pushed to the front, determined to hide how much he feared the celestial being before him.

“We have no need of your aid, just your sword,” he said. “I found this man in my barn atop my daughter, still attempting to remove his trousers. Cut his head off his shoulders, and let this be done with.”

Ezekai’s bronze eyes glanced to the bound Locke, then over Colton’s shoulders to where his wife and daughter stood.

“Your family?” Ezekai asked. Colton nodded. The angel approached, and his delicate features softened.

“You have felt a darkness no woman should ever feel,” he told Krista, reaching out his hand. She flinched, but it seemed not to bother Ezekai. “Especially so young. So very young.” His hand brushed against her face. Colton felt a lump grow in his throat as he watched Krista immediately relax. Her grip on Lily’s neck loosened, and then unbelievably, she smiled.

“No nightmares will follow you,” Ezekai said softly. “You will be happy, and you will know joy.”

“Praise be to Ashhur,” said a man beside Lily, and many others echoed the call. Colton felt his hands shake, and he fought to keep his rage strong. He told himself it didn’t matter if she’d been purged of the awful memories. What happened next did. Ezekai dipped his head in respect to Lily, then turned his attention to Locke. The rapist groveled, on his knees, his face pushed into the ground. Snot dripped from his nose, mixing with the dirt.

“Is it true what they say of you?” the angel asked. “Know that by your words, I will judge you, and that with my god’s blessing I will detect any lie.”

“Yes,” Locke said. “Ashhur forgive me, yes. It is.”

Colton’s jaw trembled. Ezekai knelt before Locke and lifted his chin so they might stare eye to eye. Locke was an older man, rail thin with a hawkish look to him. He’d never fit in well with the townsfolk, and now they all knew why.

“Do you understand the sin you’ve committed?” Ezekai asked.

“I do. I’m sorry, please, I’m sorry. I can’t help it. I’ve tried, I’ve tried, please...”

The angel stood.

“Locke, do you repent of your crime?”

“Yes, yes, I do!”

“Do you seek the grace and mercy of Ashhur, your god?”

“Yes,” Locke said, sobbing now.

Ezekai looked to the town. All eyes were upon him. Lily’s hand slipped into Colton’s, and he squeezed it.

“He speaks with truth and sincerity,” the angel said at last, and it was like a wind blew through the town. “Locke, I forgive you of your crimes. Go and live your life without sin.”

“No,” Colton said, pulling away from his wife and forcing his way to the front of the crowd. “That won’t work, not this time. He’s sick. He’s a danger to us, to our children! She’s only two, gods damn it, and still he tried to take her.”

“This is the law we live under, the law of Ashhur,” Ezekai said. Colton hated the way the angel looked down at him, like he was an ant or a child. “Locke’s repentance is real, his sorrow genuine.”

“Of course it is! A man would say anything, do anything, to save his life. He doesn’t mean it. That sorry sack of shit cries only for himself!”

“I would know if that were true,” the angel said, shaking his head.

Colton spun, addressing the crowd, almost daring them to look him in the eye.

“Do all of you accept that?” he asked them. “Do you feel we’ve seen what’s right? Do you think we’ve had justice?”

With the decree given, the men holding Locke released him for fear of the angel’s wrath. The man staggered to his feet, still tugging at the ropes around his wrists.

“Please, Colton, I beg of you,” Locke said, reaching out his hands for Colton’s shirt. “Forg—”

Before any could stop him, before any could even think of what he meant to do, Colton pulled the knife from his pocket and thrust it through Locke’s right eye. It had to be quick, he knew. Had to be fast, lest the angel heal him. Deeper and deeper he shoved the blade, and all around he heard screaming. Men tackled him, but he let out a laugh, for it was far too late. Locke’s body lay in the dirt, arms and legs convulsing.

“You damn fool,” someone whispered into Colton’s ear, but he didn’t know who. There was too much commotion, too much fear. Strong men lifted him to his feet, men he worked with in the fields and shared stories with at the tavern as they guzzled down Ugly Bett’s ale. When Colton looked up he saw the angel towering over him. His bronze eyes stared at the blood on Colton’s hand. He showed no sign of anger or frustration, only sorrow.

“I will not ask of your guilt, for the blood on you is free for all to see,” Ezekai said. “Before I execute you, tell me, Colton, do you repent your crime? Will you kneel and ask for Ashhur’s mercy and grace?”

A bitter smile tugged at Colton’s lips as he struggled against the men holding him.

“Repent?” he asked. “No. Not now, not ever.”

He heard Lily cry out, but his heart was pumping too fast, his mind lost in a whirl of exhilaration and terror too deep to feel regret. Locke deserved to die. It was the one thing he knew, the one thing he firmly believed with every shred of his soul. Looking upon the angel, he would not lie, would not disgrace himself with such pathetic sniveling.

“You speak your truth,” Ezekai said as he drew his sword. “And it saddens me greatly. You were a good man, Colton. Let there be no doubt.”

The gathered crowd, which had fallen deathly silent, let out a sudden roar. Colton’s smile grew as he heard it. In his mind he heard the chant multiplying, felt the anger spreading across Mordan like a wave. Righteous men and women, fists to the air, crying out against their prison of angels. He would be the spark, he thought, the flame that set the land ablaze.

“Stand away!” Ezekai cried, and his golden blade circled over his head. Colton saw the people step back, obeying despite their anger. Just a dream of change, thought Colton, but he clung to it anyway. He couldn’t think of Lily, couldn’t think of Krista growing up without him. What he’d done was right, was best...

Up came the blade.

“You’re killing the wrong man,” Colton said, his voice rising. “The wrong man, you hear me? The wrong man! The—”

Down came the blade, and though it ended his cry, it still echoed on and on through villages miles beyond.



“Are you sure we have to do this?” Harruq asked as Aurelia looked over his armor for what felt like the hundredth time. Her fingers brushed away dust noticeable only by the sharpest of elven eyes.

“It’d look bad,” his wife said, frowning as she adjusted the long red cloak that had been tailored just for the occasion.

“I don’t mind looking bad. I think I prefer it.”

“For Antonil.”

Harruq grabbed Aurelia’s hands, and when she glared up at him he smiled. Slowly she relaxed, leaning her head against his dark leather armor.

“You mean something to them,” she said as he held her close. “To *all* of them, and right now Antonil needs every bit of love from the crowds he can get.”

Harruq let out a defeated sigh.

“I know,” he said. “So do I pass inspection?”

“Close enough for human eyes. What of me?”

She twirled in her beautiful, elven-styled dress laced with gold. Her hair was looped into an intricate design, the braids across her forehead looking like a circlet. Seven emeralds hung from silver thread curled into the braids on either side of her face, and each time she twirled they sparkled with magic.

“Why’d you marry me again?” he asked.

“Stupidity. Now let’s go. We can’t keep them waiting forever.”

He extended his arm, she took it, and together they stepped out from behind the curtain, then hooked left down the crimson carpet. Standing about were dozens of guards in glimmering armor. Between them stood King Antonil Copernus.

“Large smiles,” Antonil said, and the amusement in his eyes made Harruq want to smack him, royalty or not.

“You owe me,” Harruq muttered. The way Antonil laughed made the half-orc worry greatly.

“That I do,” the king said. “You’ll find out how much soon enough.”

Before Harruq could enquire further, Aurelia pulled him along, across the last of the crimson carpet, over white marble stones, and emerged into the roar of the gathered crowds beyond the doors of the great castle of Mordeina. Thousands of people lined either side of the road that led down to the twin walls of the city. Harruq felt his throat constrict, and he forced himself to breathe. So many people...

“Walk,” Aurelia whispered into his ear, hiding the command with a pleased smile. Harruq forced one foot forward, then the other, and at last the spell brought on by the crowd broke. He grinned, feeling like a goof. With his free hand he waved to the people, guessing it the proper thing to do. Aurelia kept both her hands on his arm as they walked, looking as elegant as a princess. Down the steps they traveled, people hailing him a hero, cheering for the mighty Godslayer. The children in particular pushed hardest to the front, crawling if need be to see through the line of soldiers that held back the masses. They gawked at his armor, and he saw several making motions with their hands. Knowing what they wanted, he chuckled, drew Condemnation from its sheath, and held the black blade above his head to even greater cheers.

“I thought you didn’t want to do this,” Aurelia said, still smiling.

“I don’t,” Harruq said. “But I might as well enjoy it.”

“If you must,” Aurelia said. “But control your eyes. Some of the younger girls seem to have problems keeping their blouses on.”

To this Harruq sheathed his sword, kissed Aurelia on the mouth, and then hurried on. A second roar began, and he glanced back to see King Antonil exiting the castle, flanked by his handpicked guard. At first he felt pride knowing his cheer had been louder, but worry quickly washed away that feeling. It hadn’t been just a little louder...the cheer for Antonil was weak and fading fast.

“You weren’t kidding,” Harruq muttered. “I didn’t think it was this bad.”

The farther from the castle they went, the rowdier the crowd became, and the people’s shouts weren’t always so joyful. Catcalls mixed with the cheers, and as Antonil neared, Harruq heard them grow stronger.

“Traitor!” someone shouted.

“Coward! Murderer!”

“Foreigner!”

The worst, though, the one that echoed throughout the crowd, was the title that had haunted Antonil’s reign since his second year.

“All hail the Missing King!”

At the very bottom of the hill, where the road met the first wall, Mordan’s army gathered. Thirty thousand men, all enlisted to retake the east from the horde of orcs that had gone unchecked since the end of the Gods’ War. The parade was for their departure, the launching of Antonil’s second campaign to retake his homeland. Much of the celebration was bittersweet, but still the underlying anger surprised him. Was it because of how terrible Antonil’s first attempt at freeing the east from the orcs had gone? Or was there something more?

When Harruq and Aurelia arrived, the soldiers drew their swords and raised them high. He passed below them, a roof of steel above. At Antonil’s arrival the blades lifted higher, and they let out their cry.

“Long live the King!”

Echoed by the voices of thirty thousand, the words gave Harruq chills. He felt Aurelia squeeze his arm, showing she felt it too.

In the center of the soldiers, a wooden platform had been hastily constructed. On it were two seats. One was empty, waiting for Antonil to take his place. In the other sat Susan Copernus, his wife of five years. She was young and slender, her milky skin powdered into an almost ghostly white. Her brown hair was looped similarly to Aurelia’s, only with less intricacy and more jewels. Up the stairs of the platform they stepped, the two taking their designated spot beside the queen.

“Were you lonely waiting for us?” Harruq asked her as Antonil climbed the steps.

“I daily count the hours until you grace my presence,” she said. Her voice was deathly serious, but he could see the laugh shimmering in her eyes.

“It’s all right,” said Tarlak Eschaton, standing on the other side of the thrones. “I kept her entertained until your arrival.”

Harruq grinned at the yellow-robed wizard. His red hair and beard were neatly trimmed, but age lines had started to show across his cheeks and beneath his eyes. Still, his smile was youthful, and his hat pointy as ever.

“You got roped into this as well?” Harruq asked.

“Roped? Nonsense, you brute. I volunteered to spare the queen the indignity of begging for my presence.”

“Come now,” Susan said. “I love you both equally, though I fear I do not love you as much as the commoners do.”

“A shame you had to land the killing blow on the war god,” Antonil said to Harruq, having heard them. He reached out his hand, and his wife stood to accept it. “My life would be much easier had it been me.”

“You slew a dragon,” Harruq said.

“What’s a dragon compared to a god?”

“Enough,” Susan said, kissing Antonil’s cheek. “Do not belittle your accomplishments.”

“I’m not the one belittling them,” Antonil said, and the king’s words were tinged with frustration. Despite it, he turned to the crowd, lifted his arms, and smiled his best smile. The crowd cheered, but not long. The procession was not quite complete. Directly above the wooden platform, high amid the clouds, floated the golden city of Avlimar. From its tall arches, its silver buildings, and its thin, lengthy bridges descended hundreds of angels, their white wings filling the sky. They flung petals of flowers as they crisscrossed about, which fell upon the crowds like rain. As the pinks and violets landed atop his hair and shoulders, Harruq held out a hand.

“Little much, isn’t it?” he asked as petals gathered in his palm.

Aurelia leaned close.

“Antonil’s not the only one trying to win people over,” she whispered.

All along the walls of the city the angels landed, keeping their wings stretched to their fullest extent. Their skin was of all colors, their hair shining, the whiteness of their robes matched only by the feathers of their wings. A low moan came from their throats, a deep chant that reverberated throughout the city. Louder and louder it grew, and as one they drew their swords and shouted the name of their god.

“Ashhur!”

The force it nearly knocked Harruq off his feet. He shook his head as many others hurried back to standing.

“That’s one way to make an entrance,” he muttered.

The leader of the angels landed before them, just beyond the platform. He did not need its height to stare at them eye to eye, for he was a giant of an angel, his golden armor gleaming. His name was Ahaesarus, and it was at his side that Harruq and Aurelia had fought to slay the war god Thulos, preventing him from conquering the world of Dezrel. Beside Ahaesarus landed his war general, Judarius, and his high priest, Azariah. The two were eerily similar, with green eyes tinged with gold and their brown hair cut short around their necks. But where Judarius wore armor and carried an enormous mace upon his back, Azariah had only his robes and his soft hands, skilled at clerical magic. Together the three bowed to Antonil, who stood and bowed in return. Harruq dipped his head in respect.

“Heroes of mankind, King and Queen of Mordan, I greet you,” said Ahaesarus. His voice was deep, befitting one so giant. “This day you march against blasphemous beings. Know that Ashhur gives you his blessing, and with loving eyes he will watch over your homeland in your absence. You will always have a safe home to return to, King Antonil Copernus, and the arms of friends ready to embrace you.”

Ahaesarus drew his sword, a masterful construction of steel, gold, and diamond that was as tall as Harruq. He held it with both hands above his head, and he cried out, his words repeated by the rest of the angels.

“Ashhur bless the King!” they cried. “Ashhur bless the King!”

That was it, the last of the ceremony so far as Harruq knew. He let out a sigh, glad he hadn't screwed anything up. But Antonil stood, and he looked far from relaxed. Ahaesarus bowed to him, then stepped away so the crowd might see their king. Harruq shot Aurelia a glance, but his wife only shrugged.

“Tomorrow we march,” Antonil said. At first it was hard to hear him, but a quick twitch of Tarlak's fingers and his voice strengthened, magically carrying throughout the city. “With me march your sons, your husbands, your lovers and protectors. I swear to protect them, honor them, and let not a single life lost be in vain. In my absence my beautiful wife rules...at least, she would if circumstances were different.”

Susan smiled, and that smile filled Harruq with terror. He knew that smile, that glow. *Not good*, he thought. *Antonil you bastard, you better not be doing what I think you're about to...*

“My wife carries my second child,” Antonil told the crowd. Scattered applause accompanied his words. “And I would not burden her further during such a time. So now, before you all, I appoint my steward. He is a man well known to you, whose bravery is unquestioned and whose strength none would dare challenge. He will guard my throne in my absence, administering the king's justice.”

Harruq felt ready to explode.

“The Godslayer, Harruq Tun,” Antonil announced over the roar of the crowd. “Harruq, come stand before me.”

He felt Aurelia squeeze his hand, and he fought to remain calm. The eyes of the kingdom were upon him. The thought of messing up terrified him, as did ruling as a steward, but to reject Antonil publicly would be an insult the king's fragile reputation could not endure. So he stepped before Antonil, doing his best to hide his glare from hundreds of onlookers.

“Kneel,” Antonil said, and Harruq did. “Harruq Tun, I declare you Steward of Mordan and protector of the realm. Rise, and rule in my absence.”

Harruq stood, and he leaned forward so he could speak just to the king.

“I'm going to murder you,” he said.

“You have no need to repay me,” Antonil responded, “for there is no debt to repay. Just rule well, as I know you will.”

At first Harruq was confused by his words, but the spell was still on Antonil, and the king's voice carried throughout the city. The half-orc shook his head. Sly devil. He'd murder Antonil twice now for this.

“A fine choice,” Azariah said, putting a hand on Harruq's shoulder. “If there is anything you need, any question, my knowledge is open to you.”

“Thanks,” Harruq said, glancing around with wide eyes. He felt like a trapped deer with a crown placed upon his head by a pack of wolves. Unsure what else to do, he waved to the crowd. They cheered back, and he prayed he might live up to their jubilation. Did they really think he'd do any better than Antonil?

That was it, then, the last of the procession. The soldiers were dismissed to spend the night with their loved ones or get drunk one last time with friends. They scattered among the people, who hurried to one of dozens of carnivals set up as part of the celebration. The angels took wing, with only the ruling three remaining behind.

“I hope authority doesn't make you grow fat and lazy,” Judarius said, smiling at him. “You still owe me a sparring match or three.”

“I have bigger fears than that,” Harruq said, spinning on Antonil. “Have you lost your damn mind? Me, steward? Why not place a donkey in charge for all the good I’ll do?”

“He makes a good point,” Tarlak said. “Either way we’d have an ass sitting on the throne.”

“Don’t panic,” Susan said, leaving her seat so she might kiss Harruq on the cheek. “I’ll be here the whole time. You won’t be left to hang.”

Harruq rubbed his neck. A hanging sounded more preferable than sitting on Antonil’s throne and listening to hours and hours of complaints, pleadings, and accusations.

“Antonil, a word with you if I may?” Ahaesarus asked, and Antonil nodded.

“Harruq, come with us,” the king said. “Ahaesarus, up to that wall if you’d please.”

The angel grabbed each by an arm and with a flutter of his wings they soared into the air. Moments later they landed atop the inner wall of the city, which was now completely empty.

Suddenly free of the crowd, Harruq felt his stomach unclench for the first time in an hour.

“Much better,” Harruq said, turning on Antonil. “Now care to tell me what just happened down there?”

“I’m sorry, Harruq. I thought you’d say no if I asked you any other way.”

“Antonil, you know my place is with you and your army. I kill things with swords. That’s what I do. Just because your wife is pregnant doesn’t mean I should...”

“But she’s not pregnant,” Ahaesarus said, crossing his arms and frowning at Antonil. “Is she?”

Harruq’s jaw dropped. Antonil shook his head.

“No,” he said. “It’s just a ruse to justify Harruq’s appointment as steward.”

Two deaths wasn’t enough, Harruq decided. Now it was up to three.

“You tread dangerous ground,” the angel said. “You made us complicit in your lie, and neither I nor my angels appreciate this in the slightest.”

“What he said,” Harruq grumbled.

“I have my reasons,” Antonil insisted. “Harruq, please listen to me, not as your king but as your friend.”

The half-orc sighed, nodding at Antonil.

“Fine,” he said. “I’m all ears.”

Antonil turned, and from the wall he gestured to the grand city of Mordeina and its castle upon the hill.

“This isn’t my home,” he said. “I hoped otherwise, but nothing has changed over the past five years. My home, my heart, and my kingdom are all in the east, ruled by tribes of orcs. The people know this, and because of that they resent me. You’re not a fool. You’re not deaf. Surely you hear their rumblings better than I?”

Harruq crossed his arms and refused to look him in the eye.

“Of course you hear it,” Antonil said, and he let out a groan. “Too many resent my power, as do they resent the angels. This is the chance my enemies have been waiting for. I cannot leave Susan alone. I won’t risk her life, not now. So be the figurehead I need you to be. Susan will run all the important matters, and truth be told, that’s not much different than how it has been. But I won’t let her be intimidated. I won’t let others think she can be bullied or usurped. The people love you, respect you, even fear you.”

“You want me to take the danger while your wife rules in secret,” Harruq said. “Is that what you’re asking?”

“Will you deny it, Harruq? Who has less to fear from an assassin’s dagger, you or my wife? Who in my kingdom has the presence to intimidate you?”

“And what of my family?” Harruq asked. “What of my daughter?”

“Only a madman would dare harm the child of Harruq and Aurelia Tun,” Antonil said, and he smiled to hide his discomfort at the notion. “But your daughter will be with my son. They’ll be guarded together, protected together. I’m putting everything in your hands, Harruq—my family, my son, my entire kingdom. Can I trust you?”

“We’ll be here watching,” Ahaesarus said, trying to comfort the half-orc. “Avlimar is close, and if you are in need we will always be at your side. You have nothing to fear.”

Harruq glanced back and forth between them, then hung his head in surrender.

“If I’m a steward,” he asked, “does that mean I have to wear a stupid crown?”

“Nonsense,” Antonil said, smiling. “You’re in charge now. You’ll wear what you like. Or at least, what Aurelia will let you.”

Harruq laughed.

“A crown it is,” he said. “Now fly me down. I’m not ruling just yet, and until I am, I plan on finding out how much of your alcohol I can drink before passing out.”



The ax came down with a thunk, easily splitting the log in half. Qurrah Tun wiped a bit of sweat from his brow. He perspired not from exertion, but from the heat. Controlling the undead being with the ax required little effort on his part. With a slow but steady motion his undead servant pushed the split wood to the side, bent down for another log, and set it before him on the heavy stump.

“Qurrah?”

The half-orc looked up from where he sat leaning against a tree with a book in his lap.

“Yes, Tess?”

Tessanna came around the side of their cabin as the ax fell, splitting another log. Her long black hair ran all the way down to her waist. A single braid looped around her forehead, pulling her bangs away from her face. Despite her plain brown dress she looked like a goddess to Qurrah, with her pale skin, slender body, and eyes so black only a hint of white showed at the edges. The only mar upon her perfection were her arms, laced with dozens of scars, most of them self-inflicted.

“Someone’s coming,” she said.

“Well then, let’s meet him at the road,” he said, putting his book away.

“He’s not using the road.”

Qurrah let out a sigh. The arrival of an angel may not always bring bad news, but it did mean complications. They were stretched too thin across Mordan to dally with trivial things.

“Then let him come to us,” he said, taking her hand. “You aren’t nervous, are you?”

Tessanna smirked at him.

“With the two of us together? It would take many, many more angels to make me nervous...and only if I had a reason. Do we have a reason to be nervous?”

“It could be sad news, perhaps a death in the family.”

“I’d know before they.”

Qurrah took her hand and together they walked to the front of their cabin. He believed her. She’d always had a strange connection to his family, especially since the tragedy with Aullienna. The thought stung him, and he forced his mind to think of other things. If something bad had happened to Harruq, Aurelia, or especially his daughter Aubrienna, he’d have heard of it long before an angel could make the flight from Mordeina.

Mind distracted, he almost missed the landing of the angel, who softly curled about in the air so his feet touched ground with nary a sound. His hair was short, brown, and his green eyes sparkled with gold.

“Welcome to our meager home, Azariah,” Qurrah said. “You risk much coming to me. Your kind isn’t welcome within Ker’s borders.”

“I come as an ambassador, not an enforcer,” Azariah said. “Besides, when I am in the sky, who in Dezrel might harm me?”

“I could if I still had my wings,” Tessanna said, picking at the hem of her dress. “But I don’t need them anymore. At least I hope not.”

“No angel would dare pretend to know the goddess’s intentions,” Azariah said, turning to her. “But your power may have waned for a reason, and it might return with equal reason. Celestia would not leave you helpless should a need arise.”

She smiled at him so beautifully, but Qurrah sensed the daggers hiding behind it.

“Helpless?” she said, and a brief flicker of flame passed from her palm, across her knuckles, and back into her fingers, where she snuffed it. “I have forfeited my wings, and the power of a goddess is no longer mine, but do not think me helpless, angel. It would be poor sport watching you try to fly with your wings ablaze.”

Qurrah put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed as Azariah dipped his head low to show he meant no disrespect.

“It is wrong of me to be so careless with my words,” the angel said. “Especially since you and I are in such similar situations.”

Qurrah heard the thunk of an ax, and he turned around to see his pet flailing at the log, which he’d failed to fully split. Frowning, he waved a hand at it, ceasing all functions until he could deal with it later. When he turned back he caught Azariah frowning at him.

“Your power still wanes?” Qurrah asked, trying to prevent a conversation he had no patience for.

“It does,” Azariah said, walking toward their cabin. “It is strange, for I cannot decipher the reason. Not all of our kind suffer like I. The warriors and enforcers still retain their abilities, limited as they are. We can still calm troubled minds and sense truth from lie, but more and more our priests struggle to have our prayers answered. It is a humbling thing, Qurrah, to go from the mightiest priest of our lord to a mere winged man who even the lowliest scoundrel could pierce with his sword.”

“Humility in an angel?” Qurrah said, smiling at Azariah. “And to think you act like the age of miracles has passed.”

“It is with humility I can accept the coming changes and prepare for them. My priestly spells vanish. Perhaps it is our descent to this world, our proximity to its sin and corruption. Perhaps Ashhur slumbers, or Celestia’s control over him has increased in response to the war that sundered her land. None of these things can I change.”

He opened the door to their cabin, holding it so the two might enter first. Tessanna took Qurrah’s arm, hovering close beside him as if she were afraid. Normally Qurrah would think it an act, but there was never any knowing with Tessanna. Her mind, while worlds better than when he first met her, was still a fragile thing, and rarely predictable.

Inside the cabin was their bed, a small table, and a dormant fireplace. It wasn’t much, especially compared to the splendor his brother now lived in, but it was theirs. Given how he and Tessanna had nearly destroyed all of Dezrel, it felt like luxury enough.

“How fares my brother?” he asked as he thought of Harruq. He sat in a chair beside the table, and Tessanna sat next to him, her head leaning against his shoulder.

“I will speak of him soon enough,” Azariah said, flashing an indecipherable smile. “He is the reason I came, but I would first make a request before I lose my courage. I cannot change the loss of my power, but I can adapt. I can embrace this new world we are to rule. Qurrah...can you share with me your knowledge of the arcane arts?”

It took a moment before Qurrah could compose his thoughts.

“You want me...to teach you?”

“Is it so strange?” Azariah asked. “My hands were not meant to hold a blade. Tell me, could you take up your brother’s swords with any degree of skill?”

“Well, no.”

“Then why should others expect the same of me? I once wielded great power. I would do so again.”

“He would be the perfect pupil,” Tessanna whispered into his ear. “He is an angel, after all.” Her giggle showed her true opinion on the matter, however.

“There must be better teachers than I,” Qurrah said. “What about Tarlak? He even lives in Mordeina.”

“He travels with King Antonil on their campaign to retake the east, and I cannot afford to be away for such a lengthy time.”

Qurrah’s brain scrambled for other alternatives.

“The Council of Mages,” he said. “What of them?”

Azariah shook his head.

“If you think Ker carries a distrust of my kind, you should hear the opinions of the Council. No, they will not teach me. Neither will the elves, for those who still bear the gift of magic in their blood are closely guarded, and are not prone to sharing.”

“Not all of them,” Qurrah insisted. “I’m sure Aurelia would be willing to—”

“You must understand something,” Azariah interrupted. “I hold a position of great respect. Should mortals hear of my training, I would be mocked, or doubted. There are many of my own kind who distrust the learning of magical spellcasting, even a few who would declare it blasphemous. That you are here, acting the recluse, helps put my mind at ease concerning this matter.”

“I could teach you,” Tessanna said.

“Wait a moment,” Qurrah said. “Wait...”

“From what I know of you, I fear I would not be an appropriate student,” Azariah said. “Magic comes to you easily, and its very nature is unpredictable. But I will accept...should your husband have no objections.”

Their eyes turned on Qurrah, and he felt like a caged animal. Tessanna’s fingers played with the neckline of his shirt, and the tension in her shoulders told him she feared his rejection. Letting out a sigh, he kissed the top of her head.

“We will both teach you as best we can,” he said. “Though I fear you will have a lengthy flight between every lesson.”

“Perhaps not,” Azariah said. “But speaking of lengthy flights, do you have something I might drink?”

Tessanna retrieved a wood-carved cup from a cupboard, filled it with water from a pitcher, and then dipped her finger inside.

“Wine,” she said, handing it over. “Don’t worry, it is very weak.”

“Many thanks,” Azariah said. Putting the cup to his lips, he drank until it was gone. “Much better,” he said, setting it down. “Now, about your brother, and our training. I’ve come to ask you to return to Mordeina. You don’t need to live next to him if you would prefer some separation, but I think it would be helpful to have you two nearby in case something goes wrong.”

“Is Aubrienna in danger?” Tessanna asked. A bit of life leapt into her wide gaze.

“I do not know,” Azariah said. “And it pains me greatly to admit even that. The shadow of Avlimar should be a safe place, but Mordeina still bears many sinful hearts.”

“But why?” Qurrah asked. “What has he done to earn himself enemies?”

The feathers in Azariah’s wings ruffled.

“Antonil appointed Harruq steward over the kingdom in his absence,” the angel said with a sigh. “The king is not beloved, and those scheming against him will turn those schemes upon your brother. I fear his life will soon be in danger.”

Before Qurrah knew it, Tessanna's hand had slipped into his. He squeezed it tight, then met Azariah's green eyes with his own.

"We will need time to decide," he said.

"And time you will have," Azariah said, pushing back open the door to their cabin. "I'll be flying northeast to meet with the paladins, though I won't be staying long. When my business with them concludes, I will return here for your answer."

Qurrah nodded, but he did not stand for the angel's exit. Another dip of his head in respect, and then Azariah left the cabin. With a heavy gust of air the angel soared skyward, leaving them once more alone in their cabin. The tranquility they'd had before, though, was shattered. Qurrah said nothing, only sat at the table frowning as he tried to make sense of his jumbled thoughts. Knowing his brother might be in danger brought out the strong instinct in him to go to his aid, but things were just not that simple.

When the great betrayer of Veldaren traveled somewhere, he did not go unnoticed.

"You want to go, don't you?" Tessanna asked him as she stood from the table. "But you're also afraid."

"I am."

Tessanna stood before their bed and crossed her arms over her chest. She glanced over her shoulder, let her hair fall over her face.

"Would you like to have me?" she asked. "Help clear your mind?"

He rubbed his eyes, then blinked as she tossed off her dress.

"Sure," he said. "Why not?"

It did indeed help clear his mind. Afterward they lay naked together, the light of the cabin dwindling as the sun descended below the tree line. Tessanna's hands traced unseen runes across his chest, her eyes staring into nowhere.

"If you want to go, we should go," she said.

"If that oaf's a steward, then all of Mordan balances on a precarious peace," he said. "Our arrival might do more harm than good."

"You don't know that," Tessanna said, her fingers pinching the skin of his chest. "The angels forgave you. Everyone knows you slew Karak's prophet, and what of your stand at the Bridges? You gave your life for them, for all of them."

"No one survived to tell the tale."

"You and I survived."

"All the more reason not to tell stories. They won't believe it, and they won't care. I'm the man who helped burn Veldaren to the ground. I helped open the portal to let the demons in. To come to Mordeina and insist on aiding Harruq would be disastrous. My very presence will contaminate him."

"I'm the one who let in the war god," Tessanna said. "I'm the one who pushed you to Velixar. Do I contaminate you, Qurrah? Would you go alone, leave me here to protect the cabin from the forest's encroachment?"

He fell silent, trying to decide the right words to say.

"You are my everything," he told her. "If we go, we go together. But the angels' forgiveness means nothing, not to the people. I know they hate me, and they have every reason to. That's why we came here, Tess."

"Is that why? To hide?"

"To make a new life. To start over."

She sat up, the blanket falling away to expose her thin body, her spine faintly visible in the dying light. Her arms crossed, holding herself as if she were cold.

“If that is why we’re here, then it’s not a new life,” she said, her head dipping low, her eyes downcast. “It’s a prison. I ask you again...do you want to help Harruq?”

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”

“Then we’re going, old sins and angry peasants be damned. We’re not the enemy, not anymore.”

He took her in his arms and pulled her back down to the bed.

“If we’re not, then who is?” he asked her as he held her close.

“What if there isn’t one?”

“The people must always have a villain.”

She curled around so they lay face to face.

“If they must, then they’ll find another. And another. The orcs, the elves, the people of Ker...”

“The angels.”

Her dark eyes stared into his.

“Then Harruq needs our help all the more. I have watched him suffer enough. He won’t again, and not for that. Not for Aubrienna. Even if all the realm crumbles, she must live. She must.”

She slipped free of their bed, and naked she left the cabin. Qurrah lay there for a moment, almost giving her the privacy she wanted. But what if that wasn’t what she wanted? He didn’t know. He never knew. Tossing aside the blanket, he went to the door and peered out. The sight stole away his breath, and he was fearful of revealing his presence. Sorrow tugged at his heart, and he felt painfully helpless.

Tessanna stood in the glimmer of the rising moon. Her arms were raised heavenward, her head tilted back as if she might drink in the light of the stars. A soft wind encircled her, coming from nowhere and everywhere. Words of magic flowed from her lips, gathering shadows. For the briefest moment she lifted up, the grass touching just the tips of her toes. And then she fell, so softly, so gently, back down to the ground. No tears ran from her eyes, but the sorrow was there, as easy to see as her stark black hair. Qurrah turned away, feeling like an intruder. Into the cabin he went, shutting the door behind him. His lower lip trembled. In his head he kept seeing it, the image of her rising. Rising, as if she were still the goddess.

Rising, as if she still had her wings.



Lathaar was in his study when someone knocked twice on the door before pushing it open.

“Is he here?” he asked as Jerico, platemail armor finely polished and shield slung over his back, stepped inside.

“Well, it’s a flying visitor,” Jerico said. “But not Dieredon. Hurry. I’d hate to keep an angel waiting.”

Lathaar let out a sigh. Grabbing his swords, he followed Jerico down a single flight of stairs, into the main foyer, and then out the large wooden double doors of the rebuilt Citadel. In the building’s shadow the two paladins stood and looked to the western sky. Far away, looking barely bigger than a bird, Lathaar saw the angel.

“Where are the students?” he asked.

“I’ve got them around back, sparring. Figured the distraction would do them good in case any noticed the angel’s arrival. I’d like to hold a conversation without fifteen hundred questions interrupting it.”

“Discipline, Jerico, we need to teach them discipline. That you fear them acting unruly is a poor sign.”

Jerico laughed.

“It’s because they *are* an unruly bunch. Take heart, though. I don’t think we were so much better back when *we* were in the Citadel.”

Lathaar grinned.

“Speak for yourself. I was a model pupil.”

“No wonder you’re so bland.”

The angel neared, and now those white wings were greater than any bird that had ever lived. He wore no armor, just a robe tightly cinched due to the constant force of the wind. After a quick loop above the Citadel he banked downward, coming to a gentle stop before the two paladins. They both bowed low, humbled by a visit from the high priest of the angels.

“It has been too long, Azariah,” Lathaar said. “You haven’t graced us with your presence since the day the last brick was put into the Citadel.”

Azariah smiled at him.

“Indeed, and I was hardly needed then. You two had the energy of children, you were so excited.”

“Good thing, too,” Jerico said. “Because the children we took in had far more energy than us.”

Lathaar ran a hand through his brown hair, trying to hide his nervousness. Something about Azariah felt unsettling, as if the angel were terribly uncomfortable. But why?

“Do you come bearing news?” he asked, hoping to pry out the reason. “The best we receive here are rumors from traders, and they’re as consistent as the direction of the wind.”

“No news that would concern you,” Azariah said as he began walking toward the back of the Citadel, where the young paladins-to-be sparred. The two followed, and a glance showed Lathaar that his friend also felt similarly confused by the visit. “Just the usual politics in the capitol. Antonil has launched another campaign to retake the east, but I’m sure you already know of that.”

“Just that it was being planned,” Jerico said. “I was hoping he’d delay for a few more years. I’d love some of our students to be old enough to accompany the campaign.”

“Paladins would do well to lead the troops on the battlefield, but it seems Antonil could not be persuaded otherwise. Hrm, are these your students?”

Before them were thirty children, all fairly close in age. The youngest were twelve, the oldest sixteen. Jerico had grouped them by age, and they sparred with a variety of wooden swords and daggers. A few also held thin sheets of tin to use as shields. At sight of the angel many stopped and turned, several wise enough to also bow. Jerico clapped his hands at them, ushering them back to their practice.

“I should get to instructing,” Jerico said, tipping his head to Azariah. “If there is nothing else?”

“No, go. The infants in Ashhur are most precious to our future, as is their need for discipline.”

Jerico shot Lathaar a look, then went to the circle with the youngest children, pointing out the flaws in their stance as they ran their drills. Lathaar watched him for a moment, then noticed Azariah surveying the students.

“Have you come to inspect our recruits?” Lathaar asked him.

“More out of curiosity than anything,” Azariah said. “You drill them strongly in marshal matters, though I wonder if their faith is given the same testing of mettle.”

Lathaar let out a sigh. It’d been something he’d discussed repeatedly with Jerico, and over the years they’d not come to any sort of satisfactory answer.

“We try,” he said, figuring if there was anyone who might help them in this, it was Azariah. “We teach them the prayers, the lessons, beat into their heads the ferocious need for prayer. But this world we live in...it’s not the same, is it? How do I teach them matters of faith when Ashhur’s angels soar through the clouds? How do I teach them to remain on guard against enemies when Karak has been defeated and his followers scattered to the wind? How do I convince them they are beacons of light amid the darkness when there is no darkness?”

“But there *is* darkness,” Azariah assured him. “The world has not ended. It still moves on, filled with sickness, death, and despair.”

“I tell them,” Lathaar said, shaking his head. “I tell them, and I don’t think they believe me. Their faith is hollow, Azariah. I know it. I feel it in my gut. So few of them carry any true love for Ashhur. When they hold their weapons, only the slightest hint of blue shines. And if they were to be tested, truly tested? Ashhur save us if someone like Velixar should get their hands on them. When Jerico and I were in the Citadel, we were outnumbered. We were seen as a dying order, soon to be overwhelmed by Karak’s forces. In every prayer, every day of training, we knew deep down in our hearts that we were the last hope for a troubled world, the last stand against an encroaching evil. But we aren’t anymore.”

He looked to Azariah.

“You are.”

This took the angel back, and he paused.

“You give us a role we cannot have,” Azariah said after a moment of watching the students train. “Your paladins are what men must aspire to be. They are to be the light of our god manifested in mortal men, to show humanity’s full potential by embracing Ashhur’s commands. We angels cannot be that. We are not men, and mankind will never believe us, never understand us, until they themselves enter the Golden Eternity. A sickness runs through this land, and it must be cured. Convince them, Lathaar. Convince them their need is not yet over.”

Lathaar nodded, and he felt a little better hearing those words. Perhaps he'd been looking at things the wrong way. Rebuilding the Citadel had been a mark of honor for him and Jerico. They'd begged for every scrap of coin. With their close relationship to Harruq, the king's advisor Tarlak, and the angels, it should have been easy getting aid. But all of Mordan had been devastated, and the first year in particular had been one of frantic rebuilding and political upheaval. Through it all they'd fought, determined to have their home rebuilt in defiance to Karak's past evil.

But they'd rebuilt the Citadel simply to rebuild it, and now pressed with the functions, the responsibility, he and Jerico were struggling. Had their own aimlessness poisoned their students?

"You've given me much to think over," he said. "Thank you."

"I am glad I could be of some help. And do not be too difficult on yourself. I sense the faith of those here, and there are many who are stronger than you believe. To help ease your mind, I will show you."

Azariah stepped into the training arena and lifted his hands. Immediately all eyes were upon him. Lathaar watched, arms crossed, curious as to what the angel planned. His robe shimmered white, and from his mouth issued words of a prayer too soft for Lathaar to hear.

"Come to me, children," Azariah said afterward. "Come to me, faithful. I would see your hearts naked before the eyes of your god."

From the tips of his fingers flared a sudden brightness, coalescing into a shining ball of white, like a miniature sun hovering above his palms. It pulsed, and with each pulse a wave of light washed over the paladins and students. The force of it knocked them to their knees. Even Jerico fell to one knee, and Lathaar did the same. In his mind he felt a sudden closeness to Ashhur, a presence he'd not known since the last days of the Gods' War. Before it he felt naked and afraid. The light grew brighter, and he opened his mouth to speak, to cry out. All around the world had vanished, so that he saw only darkness where the grass and the rivers should have been. Piercing that darkness was Azariah, a being so unearthly that it filled Lathaar with awe.

Before a cry escaped his lips he saw a light burning from within his chest, where his heart should be. The bluish-white glow was strong, and as he knelt it continued to grow so that it nearly enveloped him. A thought struck him. He reached for his sword, and as he drew it the glow from his chest swirled down his arm and into the blade, manifesting itself again. Looking around, he saw his students, all kneeling, and from their chests emerged similar glows. Just as Azariah said, many were strong, bright, filled with life and devotion. Jerico in particular was nearly blinding to look upon. But also he saw dimness in many, emptiness. It hurt him seeing it, and he could not help but feel responsible.

The darkness broke, and the light vanished. It happened so suddenly Lathaar let out a gasp. How long had it been? He didn't know. What had felt like minutes may have only been seconds, so strangely that vision had distorted time. Colors rushed back into his eyes, the green of the surrounding hills, the gentle blue of the Rigon River rolling beside the Citadel. The students rose to their feet one by one, some muttering to themselves, others praying. Jerico shot him a look, but what it meant he couldn't decipher. And then he saw Azariah.

The angel knelt on his hands and knees, gasping for air. His wings shivered, and feathers fell like leaves in an autumn wind. Lathaar reached down for him, but his offered hand went ignored. With a loud groan Azariah pushed himself to stand. His bearing was unsteady, but with each passing moment the color returned to his face and the firmness returned to his voice.

"I hope you gained what you needed," Azariah said, turning to go.

"Wait," Lathaar said, hurrying after him. "Is something wrong? You look—"

“I am fine,” Azariah said, interrupting him. “I...no, Lathaar, you do not deserve such harshness. Ashhur’s power is fading from me, fading from all of us. When did you last talk to one of your priests?”

Lathaar frowned.

“High Priest Keziel stayed here a few months before returning to the Sanctuary, but that was not long after we first rebuilt the Citadel. A few have traveled here from time to time, but not recently, no.”

“They suffer, same as I. The world of Dezrel is fading, paladin, and the celestial magic I once possessed fades with it. Forgive me, but I came here to see if your kind felt it as well, but it appears the glow of your blades remains strong.”

“Praise Ashhur for that,” Lathaar said.

The angel fell silent, deep in thought. Lathaar stood there, giving him time. Shifting his weight side to side, he glanced up at the sky, then chuckled.

“It seems you’re not our only winged visitor today,” he said.

They both looked upward, to where an elf in dark green camouflage rode atop the back of a beautiful winged horse, her white wings the only thing that could match the splendor of the angels. The elf circled twice, then dove low, landing just before the two. With inhuman grace he leapt from the horse’s back, and in unison the creature and master bowed. The elf’s hair was long and brown, carefully tied so it would not interfere with his vision or movements. From his back hung a wicked looking bow, attached to leather straps that wrapped about his chest and shoulders.

“Greetings,” said Dieredon, Scoutmaster of the Quellan elves. “I come as requested, though forgive me for the delay. The Vile Wedge has gotten far wilder in the past few years.”

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” Lathaar said, bowing in return. He glanced at Azariah, noticed a hardness in the angel’s eyes that worried him.

“I must be leaving,” said Azariah. “I still have much to do. Trust your students, Lathaar, and have faith in them. Should Ashhur be kind, they will repay that faith tenfold.”

With a curt nod to Dieredon, Azariah spread his wings and then leapt into the air. Lathaar watched him go, careful to reveal nothing to his elven guest.

“Have I done something to offend?” Dieredon asked.

Lathaar shook his head.

“No, it just seems that even angels can have a long day. But let’s not think on that. I’m glad you’re here, Dieredon. I’m in need, and you’re the best person imaginable to help me.”

“Ask, and I will do what I can, my friend.”

Lathaar led him back around the Citadel, to where the students had resumed training. They passed through the various age groups, gathered together in small circles. Most wielded swords and shields, trading blows as they searched for openings in their sparring partner’s defenses. Further back they passed a few who wielded swords in each hand, and many others wielding maces like their trainer, Jerico. But at the very far end sat a young lady, her chestnut hair cut at the shoulders and then pulled into a ponytail. Unlike the others, she wore soft leather gloves, and in her lap was a bow.

“Jessilynn,” Lathaar said, drawing her attention upward. She smiled until she saw the elf, and then the smile fled her face. Immediately she leapt to her feet, fumbling through a bow. At sixteen she was one of the oldest students at the Citadel, but to Dieredon she was but a child, nothing compared to his centuries of life.

“You must be Dieredon,” Jessilynn said, her eyes staring at the dirt. “Jerico and Lathaar have told me so much about you. Consider me honored to be in your presence.”

“Well-spoken,” Dieredon said, crossing his arms. “Though I fear your teachers’ stories. Paladins may not lie, but I still believe they are prone to exaggeration.”

“Nothing of the sort,” Lathaar said, grinning. “Jessilynn, fire a few arrows at a target. Don’t be nervous, either.”

Jessilynn nodded, and without looking at either of them she grabbed her bow and turned around. Thirty yards away was a bale of hay, and leaning in front of it were several planks of wood that served as targets. For a moment Jessilynn dipped her head, closed her eyes, and began to pray.

“She was part of our inaugural class,” Lathaar whispered to Dieredon. “It was a big stink, too, our very first female paladin. Plenty of the priests were furious, but Azariah declared it good, and that ended the grumblings. Our younger classes have more now, and it isn’t the trouble or difficult matter we thought it’d be. As for Jessilynn, to be honest her skills with a sword aren’t very impressive, and neither can she wield a shield with any sort of grace. But the bow...”

Lying at her feet were a pile of arrows, and with her prayer finished Jessilynn leaned down to grab one. Pressing it against the string, she pulled it taut, then hesitated. As she did, a soft blue began to glow from the arrowhead. Then she let it fly. It arced through the air, leaving behind it a blue-white trail. The arrow missed the wooden targets, instead vanishing into the hay with a brief flicker of light.

Dieredon looked at Lathaar, an eyebrow raised. In response, Lathaar just shook his head.

“It gets crazier,” he said. “Jessilynn, another.”

She grabbed a second arrow, and this time she looked far less tight as she nocked it for flight. After another moment of hesitation she let it fly. Its aim was true, striking a thin board in the center of the hay bale. Upon contact the wood shattered as if blasted by an enormous hammer. Onward the arrow continued, vanishing into the hay. Seeing the explosion, Jessilynn hopped once in the air, her ponytail bouncing.

Now both of Dieredon’s eyebrows were raised, and his mouth dropped open a little.

Jessilynn spun around to bow, and she was unable to hold back her pleased smile. But at least she tried.

“I hope my demonstration was sufficient,” she said.

“Jerico’s shield gives us some precedence in dealing with this,” Lathaar said. “The problem is, neither of us knows what we’re doing with longbows. I’ve only shown her the most rudimentary basics, and even those might have been wrong. Basically, she’s self-taught.”

“Of that, there is little doubt,” said Dieredon. “Her stance is too narrow. She sights down the arrow while gripping it too tightly. Her follow-through is incorrect, and I cannot believe I must say this, but she even nocks the arrow incorrectly.”

Each critique made Jessilynn wince as if she were being stabbed with a dagger, but she remained quiet, her attention undivided.

“That’s great and all, but can you train her?” Lathaar asked, stepping away from Jessilynn and dropping his voice. “We can’t help her, and you’ve seen what she’s already capable of untrained. We can’t let such a unique talent go wasted. She could take down a bull with a single shot. What she needs more than anything is a teacher. That’s why I sent for you, Dieredon. Who else is better with a bow than you?”

“Flattery won’t help you here,” Dieredon insisted. “I can’t train her. The amount of time it would take to make her even proficient would be too much of a sacrifice. The Vile Wedge stirs, Lathaar, and orc armies surround our forests at all times.”

“Take her with you, then.”

Dieredon rubbed his eyes with his fingertips.

“What of her lessons here?” he asked.

Lathaar thought of what Azariah had said, as well as his own beliefs on the matter. His students had been coddled. They were out of the darkness of the world, living in safety and comfort.

“She knows the prayers, the lessons, the verses,” he said. “Everything else she’ll learn on her own, or from you. Please, Dieredon, she’s quiet, focused, and will take to your lessons well, I promise. I’ve talked with Jerico, and we’ve both prayed about this for months. This is the right thing to do, I’m sure of it.”

The elf let out a sigh.

“Six months,” he said. “That’s all I guarantee. And she’ll learn everything I teach her, not just about the bow. She’ll wear the armor I tell her to, move silently as needed, learn to forage, to craft her own arrows, anything and everything to survive out there with me. She won’t be a paladin when she returns, not in discipline or tactics. She’ll be a ranger. Can you accept that?”

Lathaar turned to Jessilynn, knowing without a doubt she’d been listening in.

“Can you?” he asked her.

Jessilynn’s green eyes sparkled, and she clutched her bow tight.

“Will I learn to shoot like you?” she asked.

“In six months?” Dieredon laughed. “Good gods, you humans. By the end of six months, my hope is you’ll know how to hold your bow without hurting yourself. Now do you accept? Know that we will soar to many places on my horse, Sonowin, so if you fear heights you should remain here and accept a more appropriate teacher. A human teacher.”

Lathaar watched as Jessilynn’s grin spread ear to ear.

“I get to ride Sonowin?” she asked. “I accept, of course I accept!”

And then she was off, calling out to her friends while rushing around the Citadel, to where Sonowin waited patiently. Lathaar watched her go, and when he caught Dieredon glaring at him, he smiled.

“I did say she was focused,” he said, and laughed at Dieredon’s exasperation.