

Smite Evil

A Covenant Against Barbarism

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The Paladin

Chapter One

Leoval had no one to inflict his anger on, so he dug his fingers into the dry soil next to the dead body. He wished he could strangle the earth itself.

The dead man lay face-down in the yellowed grass beside the trail. Leather straps bound his wrists behind his back, and he wore only a sheer linen wrap around his waist, far too little for the coming cold of winter, even this far south. Whoever had cracked his skull had lacked the decency to end his misery. The man had lived long enough to crawl a few dozen feet, smearing his own lifeblood along the ground and through an anthill.

He had been here long enough for annoyed ants to start making plans of how to dispose of him from their territory, but not long enough for them to enact those plans, or for the vultures to aid them. Which meant the killer was still close.

Leoval was not sure if he had reached the lands called Ostalin yet, so he seethed without speaking, not wanting to choose the wrong language for his prayer and offend whatever gods might be listening. But he knew his own god would understand his prayer, words or no.

There was a chance he could grant this dead man his vengeance.

The fire of Leoval's anger pushed away the morning chill, and he was ready to leap on his horse and tear off after the murderer when he felt his mastiff Nebo step up beside him. The dog sniffed near the dead man's face, and his drooping ears twitched eagerly.

The mastiff's somber amber eyes met Leoval's gaze for a moment, as if to say, I need you to look closer.

Leoval tried to calm himself, sighing abruptly through his nose.

He freed the leather around the man's hands, and was struck how small his own hands looked compared to the victim's. He tried turning the body over, but it had gone rigid. It was a struggle to roll the dead weight onto its back, but he managed it, and then brushed away some tenacious ants to consider the lifeless face.

They looked so different. Even dead, the corpse looked like someone the gods had placed on this world with love. Surely he had never faced hatred from strangers, never been called devil. Who had killed him, then? A thief? A zealot?

They were perhaps the same age, about twenty years old, but the man was stout, well-fed, more a farmer than a warrior. Leoval's face was narrow, his jaw hairless, smooth except for the jagged rust-colored scar he had earned in his escape two years ago. The dead man had a broader chin and a short dark beard, neatly-groomed. His hair was long, braided, oiled.

Until two years ago, Leoval had not been allowed to grow his hair out, to keep lice from spreading within the prison.

This corpse had not truly seemed like a person to Leoval at first, but now he thought of the man taking pride in his appearance, being surrounded by others who cared for him.

It was then that he noticed the man's lips were stained with blood.

Biting back revulsion, Leoval probed open the man's mouth with his fingers. Wincing, he used the necessary force to widen the jaw, and he tilted the head so sunlight gave him a clear view.

The man's tongue had been cut out, recently enough that the wound had still been fresh when he had died.

Leoval felt bile rising in his throat. For a moment he felt detached from his own flesh, his mind awl with thoughts of death, of solitude in this foreign land, of cold winds and a persistent nightmare where masked faces tormented someone he could not save.

But then he felt Nebo nuzzle him. His best friend was offering him strength, and Leoval dug his finger into the mastiff's fur: black but speckled with white like stars in a night sky.

He took several long breaths. He watched his fingers scratching, paid attention to his knees on the dry grass. After a moment he lifted his head to remind himself where he was.

In all directions, out to the horizon, the ground was dry and dotted with scrub brush and patches of acacia trees that had already shed all their leaves. Flocks of field birds skimmed low over hills, thousands of wings moving in unison, casting a single shadow like a sinuous dragon looking down on the world. There was life here, but somehow it felt desolate, like how a roaring fire at night could become mere ashes by dawn, their lingering warmth only a memory of the former blaze.

But for a moment, as a breeze gusted the morning's last reserves of chill across his face, and every scar and old wound across his body ached, Leoval felt a shiver of joy that he was here to see it at all.

He needed to focus. Where had the killer gone?

Not far ahead, the dirt trail he had been riding down turned south toward some hamlet whose mud-packed buildings he could barely make out. Drovers were likely out grazing small herds, picking out which ones to slaughter for whatever manner of winter rituals the Ostaliners had. Leoval had passed similar communities every few miles, though he had seen more sheep than people, and he had not felt the courage to test their hospitality.

Nebo nudged him again, and Leoval nodded, silently apologizing that he could not stop to bury the dead man. But when he looked down, the dog's attention was not on the victim, nor aimed at the hamlet, but rather westward, off the well-trod trail, to where the ground turned rocky and high.

Miles away, great outcroppings of gray stone towered above the landscape, tall enough that from atop them one could shout to the gods.

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Nebo took the scent eagerly, and Leoval rode behind at a steady trot. His horse Zhitevo could sprint like a gray streak when the need demanded, but until he spotted the killer, Leoval saw no reason to risk its legs on this rough terrain.

The walls of stone reminded him of a canyon, but instead of the ground sloping down, irregular spurs of sharp-edged granite rose twenty or forty feet overhead on all sides of a path that was mostly sand and gravel. And these stones were only the outliers. From afar, Leoval had seen some monoliths in the center of this formation that were hundreds of feet across and nearly as tall.

The columns ascended in almost straight lines, like the rods of a cage. Many were separated by only narrow alleys, but the path Nebo followed was wide enough for a half-dozen

people to walk abreast. Few green things grew here, as the stone plinths draped the ground in striped shadows.

He trusted Nebo and Zhitevo to lead him to the killer, and so he fussed over his equipment, ignoring his sense that the stone was choking the light and warmth from the air.

The coat he wore of red-dyed goat leather would slow a knife, and he liked the way it flared when he swung his sword. It hid his real shape and, he hoped, might trick an attacker into thinking he was wider than he really was, and so they might stab clothing instead of flesh.

He protected his abdomen with a bronze plate, or he would if the straps held it correctly. He had been so pleased with the black dyed wool when he had traded for it a month ago that he had neglected to consider how the fabric stretched.

Errantly he wondered if he should have found someone in the past two years on the road who could have made a helmet to fit over his horns. But no, he would not hide who he was, neither to avoid wary glances nor strikes to his head.

So thrilled he was with the idea of how terrifying he would look as he rode down the murderer that he did not notice Nebo growing more anxious until the dog veered toward a side path. Leoval leaned back and tugged a rein to slow Zhitevo. He put his other hand on the hilt of his sword.

A woman's voice shouted, "Halt, demon!"

Leoval would sooner have charged than stopped, except he could not tell quite where the voice had come from. He brought his horse to a halt before he crashed into one of the granite pillars.

Nebo was still alert, sniffing the air. The mastiff bristled, but did not yet growl or bark. Leoval had long learned to trust the dog's instincts, so he waited to draw his blade.

Instead, he focused on his second sight.

His vision shimmered as he sought to see beyond the physical. The contours of every solid thing grew weightier, while their textures faded. For a moment the world was translucent, like water, and Leoval swept his gaze, looking for something *cold*, something solid – like ice refusing to melt in a dark crevasse while the sun warmed everything else around it.

Seeing this way was unclear, and it burned like trying to keep his eyes open in sea water. Stories he had heard as a child had always used flowery language to describe what those with this gift could see, but he used a simpler word for what it revealed to him: evil.

When he had pledged himself two years ago, it had taken him weeks to understand the powers his god had granted him. His bond with Nebo and Zhitevo had come easily. The sacred strength and health he had felt early too. But it had been after weeks of riding – weeks of loyalty from his dog and his steed, weeks of enduring cold and hunger that he had been sure ought to have killed him – that he had dared to brave a fish market on the shore of the Tar Sea, and had for the first time since his escape been surrounded by more strangers than he could count.

Back then, the crowds of unfamiliar faces had seemed more like masks than people. And there, desperately wanting to know who posed a threat to him, he had recalled one of those flowery stories, and had tried to see beyond.

In that second sight, a man's hand had appeared frozen for a few moments after striking some child who had offended him. Two drunkards had brawled, and they looked lightly coated in ice until their tempers cooled. A smirking man's lips had turned pale blue as he bit into a carrot Leoval suspected he had not bought. A frost invisible to others had dappled the apron of a fishmonger, though when others had traded strings of beads for a bushel of his fish, some of the frost had faded from the fishmonger, and none appeared on the buyer.

Always the sign thawed quickly. Try as he could to see abuses from more than a few moments prior, and no matter how his eyes had burned from the effort, every act of cruelty or selfishness left only a passing mark.

But once on the journey south, somewhere in the ageless thickets of Qazvin, a man had shown up just after dusk and asked to share Leoval's fire. A bristling growl from Nebo then had prompted Leoval to use his second sight, and instead of a man he had for a moment looked like a sculpture of fractured ice. And hidden in a sheath in the man's armpit, concealed behind a fur cloak, Leoval had seen a shard twice as long as a lion's fang, so dark as to be nearly black.

Leoval could have cut down the man immediately, but he had not trusted the blessing then, not wholly. And he certainly had not trusted himself to judge a man for something none but he could see. But he had been forewarned. He feigned sleep. And when the man had crept over him, reached under his cloak, and pulled out the knife twice as long as a lion's fang, Leoval had struck first.

Now he searched for the woman who had called him a demon.

His sight revealed faint cracked patches on the ground: frosty footprints of the killer they pursued. For them not to have faded yet, Leoval must be close on his heels. The woman had called from another direction, though, and he saw no sign of evil near her hiding place.

Another voice called out, this one a man's.

"Don't shoot him. Can't you see our guest's noble bearing? This is not a demon."

Both strangers were speaking Ostalinian, but the man had a different accent, something Leoval thought he must have heard in his travels southward. The voice had a cheerful burn to it, like the glowing ember tip of a twig pulled from a fire, smoldering and leaving a dancing mirthful wisp of smoke.

A man emerged from behind one of the rocks, his steps short and cautious. He had a crooked nose, and smile lines traced a path from his thin mustache to a tiny strip of a beard. Strands of gray were creeping into the sweep of brown hair atop his head.

He held one hand up and extended as if to present Leoval to an audience.

"My loyal hirelings," he said, "this is a paladin."

Leoval was too surprised to respond, and his eyes were straining from the second sight, but this man was certainly not the murderer. Leoval let the second sight fade, and then he considered the stranger again, and the stranger looked at him.

In most first encounters, people could not look away from Leoval's face. His horns: triangular black nubs jutting two inches up from either temple. Or his eyes especially: deep red in a field of pale yellow.

Or perhaps they looked to his weapons: an iron sword more than a yard long hanging sheathed at his right hip, and a small hunting bow atop a pack at the rear of his saddle. He also had a knife twice as long as a lion's fang, sheathed under his armpit.

But the smolder-voiced man instead was looking at the symbol Leoval had stitched into the left breast of his coat: a white wing crossed by a red spear.

The man's expression turned intrigued for a moment, but then he flicked a smile onto his face and met Leoval's eyes.

"Pardon my companions," the man laughed, "but the last strangers we greeted decided to chastise us. I don't suppose I could avail myself of the famed healing hands of a paladin?"

The man glanced down at himself. Leoval had not even noticed the cracked arrow shaft sticking out of the speaker's belly. The hand he was not using to gesture with was holding it steady to keep the wound from coming open again. Leoval gasped and stammered.

“Oh, ah.” Leoval looked askance. “I don’t *know* how to heal. Yet.”

“Eh.” The man tilted his head in a shrug. “I’m sure it’s not urgent. Morgin Pyrates, currently of the Free Wayfarers. And you?”

He hesitated. “Leoval? Leoval Raga-”

Morgin’s eyes fluttered and he started to sag backward.

A woman who had been hiding behind another stone dashed out and caught him. She still managed to hold a long staff in one hand, which aimed roughly in Leoval’s direction, though he was sure he could easily bat it away if he wanted to.

She was younger than Morgin, but perhaps a few years older than Leoval. A fleece dress of the sort the Ostaliners called a kaunakes covered her from collar to ankle. Its cascading fringes – dyed in green and yellow and red – reminded Leoval of a forest’s leaves turning and falling in autumn. Around her neck gleamed a large brass medallion inlaid with stones to depict a beetle holding up the sun in its forelegs.

Another two men emerged from deeper in the forest of rocky columns, the first armed with a wood axe, while the one behind him had an arrow nocked on a small bow fit for hunting rabbits, not men. Both wore simple linen mantles and skirts, with more skin exposed than covered.

Now that Leoval could see them all together, these two and the woman with the staff looked Ostalinian, with the same hearty features and tanned skin as the dead man Leoval had found. The injured man Morgin, though, was paler, and not just from the blood loss.

None of them were dressed for a fight. The archer was not even wearing sandals.

“What happened to you?” Leoval asked.

The woman spoke in almost the same jesting tone in her voice as Morgin, but used far more formal Ostalinian forms.

“Morgin,” she said, “must we speak with this rider? If they also seek the tomb, then their path leads to death. We have sufficient of such already.”

While Leoval worked through the meaning of what she was saying, the man with the axe found the courage to take a step and make a shooing motion.

“I must ask you demon to take your leave,” he said.

Leoval angrily straightened in his saddle. “*I’m* not the one who murdered a man this morning and left his body on the trail a few miles back. And you not answering me is letting the killer get away.”

“Killers,” Morgin said, emphasizing the plural. “There were four of them. And don’t mind Bia and Nimot. They’re Ostalinian. They all talk like that.”

“I’m sorry?” Leoval said.

“Oh, greetings Sorry.” Morgin chuckled. “I thought you’d said your name was Leoval.”

Despite himself, Leoval bit his lip in amusement. But a man had been murdered, and he needed these people to start taking him seriously before the killer – or killers – got away.

“I am Leoval Ragathanios,” he proclaimed, “paladin of Artyr, the red lion of vengeance, and I vowed to avenge a man’s death.”

He took his hand away from the hilt of his sword and swung himself out of his saddle. He had expected the three Ostaliners standing around Morgin would have relaxed – either because he was intentionally putting himself at a disadvantage against them, or because, once he was out of his saddle, he stood barely taller than five-and-a-half feet. But they stayed on their guard.

“You were attacked too,” he added. “Tell me where they are, and I will catch them and kill them.”

“I certainly believe,” Morgin said, “that you’re brave enough to try.”

Morgin’s face had lost the joviality from just a moment earlier. He politely extricated himself from the support of the woman named Bia and sat down on a patch of grass, groaning with the movement.

Nebo padded over and gracelessly began licking Morgin’s face. He laughed and coughed and laughed more until he managed to push the dog away. Leoval patted his hip, and the mastiff came to his side.

“Alright,” Morgin said, a smile back on his face. “His dog is friendly, so I say we trust him.”

Bia set down her staff against the nearest rocky pillar and extended a hand in greetings. Leoval stepped up and shook it. As he did, Bia muttered a word he did not understand. When he did not do the same, she hesitated and glanced down to Morgin.

“It’s a Herethim word,” Morgin wheezed in explanation. “‘*Halliha*.’ It’s an old tradition. It’s like a promise that you’re not lying.”

“No,” Bia corrected, still holding Leoval’s hand. “It is invoking El the Truthful that your locution shall signify your perlocution.”

Morgin chuckled at Leoval’s confused blink, though his laughter was threaded with sighs of discomfort.

“Just say it back. ‘*Halliha*.’ Well, say it back if you’re honest.”

Leoval looked Bia in the eye, shook her hand, and said, “*Halliha*.”

She gave him an encouraging nod. He repeated the ritual with the axe-man Nimot, and the bowman whose name he had not heard yet.

“Good?” he asked.

“That’s a loaded word,” Morgin said. “But we can work together.”

“You’ve got an arrow in you,” Leoval laughed. “Just tell me where they are, and I’ll handle it myself.”

“I cannot let an amateur paladin get himself killed without helping.” Morgin scoffed. “I am genuinely wounded by the suggestion. No wait, that’s the arrow.”

Leoval scoffed back, “‘Amateur’?”

“Oh, did I miss when you pulled this damned thing out of me and cured my punctured-. Agh, nevermind.”

Bia offered, “A more formal title is ‘paladin gallant.’ They shall not become a ‘paladin champion’ until they are received atop the Palace Hill.”

Morgin waved her off. “You care too much about labels. My concern, Leoval, is there is one of you and four of them.”

Bia huffed quietly.

“I can handle four,” Leoval said.

“Well good,” Morgin said, “because we have a great deal of supplies at our camp that we had to leave in a hurry. I’d love you to fetch them for us.”

“Thus,” Bia said, “*and* they have three hostages.” Her tone was mock chiding.

Morgin nodded, his glibness undaunted. “Yes, in addition to the bandages and ointments that might avert my gradual agonizing demise, they also have three hostages.”

Leoval held his chin in consternation.

“Were their hands tied behind their backs? Were their tongues cut out?”

“Um, hands? Maybe. I did not check that last bit. We were busy running away.”

Bia cleared her throat. "You were being *dragged* away by the people you had hired as your bodyguards." She turned to Leoval as if seeking his help dealing with Morgin. "This foreign fool was preparing to retaliate with his wizardry."

Morgin shrugged. "I hadn't broken my fast and wasn't thinking straight."

"You're a wizard?" Leoval asked. "Wait, that's not important. Camp? How far away is it?"

"Not far. Let's just say I didn't bleed out on the way here. There's a promenade of sorts, in front of a massive carving of a face, in the largest cliff here. The mouth is the opening to a tunnel big enough for you to ride your horse down. Kibuzu saw them waiting outside it."

Leoval glanced at the man with the bow. "Kibuzu?"

The bowman had been staring and his mouth fell open in surprise when he realized Leoval was speaking to him. He inclined his head to Bia, who nodded back, as if giving the man permission.

"After we fled," Kibuzu said, "I doubled back to see if they would follow, but they were stopped near our camp site. The hostages had been seated on bare ground, and the men holding them stood apart. They spoke at a volume I could not hear, for I was hidden some seventy cubits away."

Morgin must have seen Leoval squinting in uncertainty, because the wounded wizard chimed in from the ground.

"A cubit is about a foot and a half. From elbow to fingertip, or perhaps the length from King Nitath-Dun's knee to his asshole."

Three sharp intakes of breath told Leoval that the Ostaliners were shocked, though their smiles suggested they did not especially respect the king.

"So they are just waiting there with their hostages?" Leoval asked. "Why?"

"Clearly," Morgain said, "because this was their destination."

"By the mount," Bia said, "you think the kidnappers intend to send their hostages into the Scream?"

Morgin nodded. "Should have figured it sooner. But when our paladin friend here asked about their tongues being cut out. . ."

"That is a clever conclusion," Bia said, "with a foul implication."

Leoval leaned in between them. "What are you talking about?"

"Ah," Morgin said. "I trust it's safe to assume that you're bound for No-Ostalin? But you've never climbed the steps to the city's Palace Hill? You've never seen the great tablets of law, each proclaimed by a Logos, whose names are all recorded and revered and so on and so on?"

Leoval ever so slightly shook his head, wanting Morgin to go on but not wanting to look ignorant. Morgin obliged, enthusiastically.

"They say the first Logos lay the foundation for No-Ostalin a thousand years past. He spoke as the voice of El the Eternal, whose word is inviolable law-

"Oh," Morgin paused here with a matter-of-fact aside, "there's quite a bit more to that if you're interested in the nuances, but you seem like a man of deeds not linguistics. Anyway.

"-and so," he continued with grand theatricality, "each Logos had to use caution with his proclamations, lest a poorly picked pronoun provoke plague and peril.

"Legends tell of one Logos, reckless and arrogant, who abused his power and earned the condemnation of the hierarchs of the Palace Hill. They built a prison for him, far from the city,

but when they moved to capture him, he made one last dictate, his words so vile that none dared record them to history.

“They could not erase all record of his legacy, but they sought to conceal the shame he had brought to the kingdom. And so they buried in his prison all the treasures the Logos had greedily hoarded, all the scrolls and dictates that bore his name, all depictions of his countenance.

“They even tore down the tablets of his commandments, an act which condemned forty men to eternal damnation, for even though this cruel Logos had twisted El the Infallible’s voice, it was the highest heresy to destroy the written word of a god.

“No notes were left of the prison’s location, but the hierarchs faced a quandary. For a time, surely, they could assign guards to keep people away, but once these hierarchs had all died, and the generation after them had forgotten why the guards had been placed, how could curious people be warned of the dangers they had buried without repeating the deeds of this nameless Logos?

“In time, all but the barest contours of this dark chapter in Ostalin’s history have been forgotten. But there have always been rumors of the Scream.”

Leoval blanched. “The face, carved in the rock?”

“So it seems,” Morgin said. “In the promenade not far from here, the stones have been cracked into jagged shards, each taller than your horse. You look at them, and you hesitate as you would to reach into a nest of brambles. And at the base of each of these petrified thorns a warning is carved in Ostalinian, in Herethim, even in Chathan, Othari, and Kalosian:

“Do not speak here.

“This is not a place of honor.

“Nothing valued is here.

“There is a danger within.

“If it hears you, it will eat the words from your tongue.”

Morgin let the silence linger as Leoval took in the story.

“Wait though.” Leoval shook his head. “Kunuzu here-”

Morgin winced. “Kibuzu. Please, good paladin, the Ostaliners take names very seriously.”

“My mistake. Kibuzu. He said the killers were talking in front of the face.”

“You can converse quietly. Or at least, I still have my full lexicon despite being rather loquacious last night.”

Bia blew a loud puff of a sigh at the memory.

Morgin said, “Now, not that you asked, but the reason for our little outing to these cursed rocks was a rather ignoble hunt for treasure. The king has decided his reign is going to be the one where Ostalin reclaims its lost glory, and in his wisdom that is certainly not driven by greed, he has encouraged his magisters to permit a, let’s say, ‘lax’ interpretation of the laws around grave-robbing.

“And while he has his agents out digging up his great-uncles and prying golden relics from their bony fingers, the Wayfarers are consigned to tracking down myths and rumors and hoping they stumble upon something the king wants.

“In their archives I found a story, decades old, that people who walked into a certain cave mouth came back feverish. They could not talk, only scream, until it killed them. Usually magic like that means kelma gone wrong, which means lots of abandoned treasure from when people panicked and fled.

“It was *not*, to be clear, my intention to unearth the grave of an accursed holy man. But this grave is what we stumbled upon. And that’s the last thing I need.”

“Oh?” Leoval asked. “Why’s that?”

“Well,” Morgin said, “it’s a grave. You don’t need it until you’re dead. So, you know, it’s the last thing you-. Nevermind.”

“I understood it,” Bia said, “but it was not one of your best.”

Leoval scowled and realized he was pacing. He patted his thigh, and Nebo walked over and nuzzled him. The mastiff’s presence helped him think.

“Are we done talking?” he said. “Your jokes won’t help a murdered man get his vengeance. You’ve told me everything I need to know, yes? Don’t talk too loud there. Don’t go in the cave. Three hostages. Four kidnappers. How many of them are armed?”

Kibuzu answered. “The one who I took to be their leader had a bow. I saw they all had stone or wood cudgels and some sort of knife in sheaths at their hips.”

Morgin held up a hand. “Leoval, please, I can help. Maybe *we* can help?”

He looked meaningfully to Bia.

Bia considered Leoval and slowly twisted the staff in her hands. Her eyes lingered on his. She spoke to Morgin without turning her gaze.

“Are you having us risk our safety for camping supplies, or for the lives of three strangers?”

Morgin answered flatly, “I also need to recover some of my incantation scrolls. And don’t judge me. The paladin is doing this to punish the wicked, not save the innocent. We all have our own goals.”

Bia seemed about to make a decision when Nimot took a step back.

“I beg you not to ask us to go,” Nimot said, “The old hierarchs hid this place away for a reason. I fear we could all become cursed.”

Morgin waved a hand like it was no great matter. “I have more important things to do before I die than go mad screaming. But worry not. Leoval here is a paladin, and the gods protect paladins from plagues, curses, and other maledictions.”

Kibuzu shook his head. “Let them face it alone, then.”

Bia looked from her countrymen to Morgin and Leoval. Her expression was apologetic.

Leoval hid his disappointment with a shrug.

“I said I can handle four.”

Morgin sighed. “And I said I’d help. Friend paladin, help me on my feet?”

Leoval was already turning and about to leave on his own when Morgin held up his hand for aid. But the words ‘friend paladin’ stuck in his mind. He pulled the man to standing.

As he released Morgin’s hand, it struck Leoval that the wizard was the only one who had not said ‘halliha’ earlier.

“ZHITEVO’S saddle doesn’t hold two,” he said.

He started to turn to mount up, but Morgin grabbed his sleeve and leaned in to talk quietly.

“Yes?” Leoval asked, annoyed.

“They’re not wrong to be scared,” Morgin said. “Before we do this, you really *are* a paladin, right?”

Leoval’s smile was not as confident as he wanted it to be. He answered under his breath so the others couldn’t hear.

“Maybe I should ask you for the, you know, definition. Just to make sure we’re talking about the same thing.”

Morgin thought about it. “Well, why do *you* think you’re a paladin?”

“Two years ago, I climbed atop the highest hill, as far as the eye could see out to the horizon, and I shouted to the heavens: I am Leoval Ragathanios, paladin of the god Artyr.”

“And how did you know to do that?”

Leoval glanced down at Nebo.

“A messenger of my god told me.”

A pause, and then Morgin gave a sideways nod of approval. “That sounds legitimate. Well, let’s go then.” Louder, he asked, “Bia, would you lend me that walking stick you have?”

Bia gave him a dubious look. Her wooden staff had multiple sections of carvings along its length, each patch stained in red or painted white or scorched black. She looked loath to part with it, but nevertheless handed it over.

“Its kelma is depleted,” she warned.

“I don’t need it for magic.”

Morgin gave a fatalistic smile and leaned on the ornate staff like it were a simple crutch.

Leoval stepped into a stirrup and swung himself into his saddle atop Zhitevo. Nebo fell in beside him, and they set out at the slow pace Morgin could manage. He was still keeping a hand on the arrow shaft.

After a minute, Morgin asked, “One more thing: are you an only child?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“No-Ostalin takes its often-arbitrary rules very seriously. Someone told me paladins had to be only children.”

Leoval hummed. “Are you going to bleed to death before we get there?”

“No. I have a styptic charm.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“There’s a tablet, up on the Palace Hill, that describes what punishments are permitted for different crimes in No-Ostalin. In a passage about stealing food, it includes a phrase – in Herethim – that translates to ‘shall not shed the offender’s blood.’ I used soft clay, pressed it into that tablet, and now can create little duplicates of the inviolable word of El the Merciful. Or at least of the portion of the commandment I care about. All I need to do is perform the right incantation, steal some of Bia’s food. I become ‘the offender’ and thus my blood shall not be spilled.”

“That doesn’t sound like magic. That sounds like . . . cheating. Are you really a wizard?”

“Eh, what even *is* a ‘wizard?’”

Leoval rubbed a spot on his chest over his heart. “You know: someone who curses people, treats with devils, summons the dead.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Chapter Two

Wind moaned, covering the crunch of hooves and feet. The sun above was nearing noon, and Leoval's pulse quickened to finally see the object of his vengeance only a few hundred feet ahead.

The kidnapers and hostages had their attention focused on each other, and even if they had looked Leoval's way, the ringed cluster of jagged stone plinths were designed to hide the rest of the world and turn all eyes upward.

The Scream towered sixty feet tall, sculpted out a rough gray granite wall. The rock it had been carved from was just one of several natural edifices, looming hundreds of feet on all sides, framing the three-hundred-foot-wide promenade. The nature of the face was minimal, more an impression of a nose and furrowed brows and tightly shut eyes. But the mouth had almost too many details. Leoval expected it was intended to daunt explorers, but if it were to at this very moment breathe in and bellow out a roar, he felt like he had enough anger crackling in him that he could match it.

One of the kidnapers held a wood-hafted, stone-headed club. Even from this distance, Leoval could see the red stain of blood on one side.

He clicked his tongue to put Zhitevo into a slow and quiet walk. His route went around the circumference of the promenade, outside the petrified brambles that each had the warning carving Morgin had recounted to him. The wizard was limping his way to one of those warning markers, Nebo at his heel, so they could approach from a different angle and flank the kidnapers. Once Leoval saw they had reached cover, he kicked his horse into a faster trot. The clops and scrapes of hoof on gravel began to echo.

He glanced down at a marker and read, *Do not speak here.*

Behind him, he had lost sight of Morgin and Nebo as they snuck closer to the kidnapers. He had ridden a third of the way around the edge of the promenade, and now he turned inward and drew his sword. He had to keep his pace measured, weaving Zhitevo around sharp-edged column after sharp-edged column. But when the stone forest ended and he saw the killers less than fifty feet away across open ground, he did not give them time to react. As loudly as he dared, he gave a 'ya' to his steed and launched forward.

Leoval set his feet into the stirrups, let his legs bend with each of his horse's strides to keep him steady, and drew back his sword in his left hand. His right hand held both the reins and the horn of his saddle.

He was upon the first kidnapper before any of them could react. Leoval's sword came down as he rode past, and the man spun a bloody pirouette to the ground behind him.

Leoval, eyes forward, flicked his attention across the three hostages, on their knees, heads bowed, arms behind their backs, wrists bound. Already one of the kidnapers was tugging the nearest hostage up, dragging him as a shield as he backed away to the nearest ring of jagged columns. But he was not the one with the bloody cudgel.

That one – the killer – was fleeing at full sprint toward cover.

It was the third, however, their bow-wielding leader, that he had to worry about. That man wore a coat that looked to have two layers of animal pelts woven together, and he stood squarely behind the remaining two hostages. He had nocked and drawn, and it was only a question of whether he could kill Leoval in one shot.

Leoval did not hear the release of the arrow, but the clang of it striking the bronze plate over his belly was like music. Before the archer could nock a second arrow, Leoval had raised

his sword for a second killing blow. But Zhitevo's hooves came within a handsbreadth of one of the hostages, and the horse stepped aside just as Leoval's sword would have cloven the archer's head in two. Instead, his blade only clipped the bow and knocked the archer back.

The cudgel-wielding killer was getting away, and Leoval almost screamed that he was a coward, but he caught a glimpse of Morgin and caught his tongue. Morgin and Nebo were still moving through the stone brambles, staying hidden but matching the direction the killer was fleeing.

He could catch up with them later. First, these two.

He tried to spin Zhitevo and get a second strike at the leader, but the hostages began to push themselves to their feet to run. Zhitevo stamped and pranced to avoid the living obstacles. The first kidnapper shoved his human shield directly into the horse's path, and Leoval yanked the reins to the side. Zhitevo narrowly missed trampling the hostage, and then decided to buck and leap away from the chaotic tangle of people. It had taken Leoval twenty feet away before he got the animal under control.

The second arrow tore through the flaring fabric of his coat, to the side of Leoval's chest. The tip snagged and grazed into his underarm, but fell out instead of sticking in flesh.

Realizing he had no chance of managing Zhitevo in this mess, Leoval freed a foot from a stirrup and leapt to the ground, leaving the horse behind him. He would not risk using the animal as a shield. He was better than these killers. Unfortunately, he was not close enough to either of them.

He saw the archer was carefully aimed at him. The other kidnapper now had a knobby wooden cudgel in hand, and he pointed it at Leoval.

"Begone!" the man hissed. "We have killed no one, but you may be first!"

Leoval smiled. They thought he was at their mercy. He tilted his head down and mirrored the man's gesture, aiming the iron tip of his sword for the man's heart.

The first of the four accolades of the paladin was divine health and protection from magic. The second was a bond with an animal servant, to ride or fight beside. The third was the ability to see the taint of evil.

The fourth he called upon now, and the flat of his blade began to glow white hot. Within that glow, red threads etched their way from the guard to the sword's tip, tracing a pattern of feathered wings. Fire burst along the sharpened edge, and Leoval leapt forward and brought down his god's wrath in a holy smite.

The kidnapper tried to block with the wooden cudgel. Leoval sliced through the weapon and dug a gash into flesh from collar bone to heart. The man wailed and toppled backward, and fire roared from Leoval's sword and into the wound, burning and smoking as the man writhed and gurgled blood.

A part of Leoval was relieved. He had not waited to use the sight to make sure this man deserved punishment, but his god would not have shown favor through the flames if he had attacked someone who had done no wrong.

As he turned to press the attack on the archer, he heard a distant thud of stone bashing into stone, over closer to the Scream. Then he felt a whoosh as the archer's arrow cut the air just beside him.

Something was wrong with the shape of the bow. After Leoval's sword had clipped it, it had only taken two shots for the wood to snap.

To his surprise, though, the archer simply tossed the bow aside, released a grief-filled scream, and met him with a charge of his own. Leoval brought his sword in, but the man was

inside the arc of the swing, and instead of slicing through him, Leoval's sword just struck dully against the man's hide coat, drawing blood but not striking true.

The kidnapper's hand closed around Leoval's wrist. He was wrenched off balance. A fist swung for his face. He put up his off hand to block it, but up close he realized that the man was half a foot taller than him and far stronger. He was being punched, kicked, and thrashed about faster than he could make sense of.

His left arm was in a vice grip, unable to swing his sword, so he reached his right hand for the knife in his armpit sheath, only to have the man grasp that wrist too and finally swing him fully off the ground and onto his back. The kidnapper then dropped onto Leoval's chest with his knee.

The sword fell from his fingers. He rolled back and forth, trying to get free. He felt his hand holding the knife get tugged so as to maneuver the tip so he would impale himself. He let go of the knife too, and earned a punch in the eye for denying the man his expected kill.

He had one last weapon that might save him. But every time he tried to use it for years, he quailed in fear. Long ago Leoval had been able to call upon the fire in him, born of his unnatural blood that got him called demon and fiend. But he needed rage to bring it out. And the man was beating him into the dirt.

Fear reigned here, not rage.

Nebo growled savagely as the mastiff rushed in. The dog snapped his teeth into the man's back and pulled him away.

Leoval kicked across the ground to get distance. He fumbled for the handle of his knife, but a clumsy touch just knocked it away. Gasping shallow, desperate breaths, he rolled onto his hands and knees and scrambled for where his sword lay.

Behind him, Nebo and the leader of the kidnappers were wrestling. The fight was savage. Both man and mastiff rolled on the ground, Nebo gnawing and the archer grasping for arrows that had spilled from his quiver to the ground. He jabbed one into Nebo's back. Nebo yelped in pain.

Leoval got his sword in hand. He wiped his eyes, trying to clear his vision.

What he saw was Morgin, limping toward the brawl. He held a chunk of an imprinted clay tablet in one hand, and the blood-soaked broken arrow shaft he had pulled from his belly in the other. The wizard spoke unfamiliar words and then crumbled the clay chunk between his fingers. As the bits fell away from his palm, he pointed that hand at the man wrestling with Nebo. Then Morgin reared back and hurled the broken, bloody arrow toward the stone brambles.

As if a giant invisible hand had picked him up, the man who had shot both Morgin and Leoval and then stabbed Nebo was flung into the air. He yelped in terror, reached the top of his arcing path, then fell and stopped abruptly as his body landed on one of the rocky shards that ringed the promenade. The jagged tip tore through the man's chest and pierced out his back. His limbs continued to sway for a moment as silence fell again.

Leoval got to his feet and pulled himself up as tall as he could. Morgin looked like he was ready to topple, but when Leoval put an arm around his waist to help support him, the older man gave him a questioning look.

Leoval gave a weak wave to dismiss his concern. Instead, he gestured up at the stone visage of the Scream, and then wiggled a bit. He hoped his meaning was clear. *Is it safe to talk?*

Morgin wobbled his head from side to side, an inconclusive response, but he put a finger to his lips and then pointed back in the opposite direction. Leoval looked and spotted the three hostages huddled at the outer edge of the warning markers.

They wept with disbelieving relief.

Unsteady and softly groaning, Morgin began to walk for them, but Leoval snapped a finger to get Morgin's attention. He pointed to the kidnapper he had cut down in his charge, and he held up a finger. *One*. He pointed at the one he had smote, whose wound had stopped smoking, and he held up a second finger. *Two*. Then he pointed at the gruesome spectacle of the archer shrieked on a stone plinth. He lifted a third finger. *Three*.

With exaggerated curiosity, he looked in all directions, then wagged a questioning fourth finger. *Where did the fourth guy go?*

Morgin scowled, did a one-handed clap like a talking sock-puppet, and then vigorously cocked his head away from the Scream. With a sigh, Leoval obliged, and together they limped to join the hostages. They left the three dead kidnappers behind.

A minute later they had fallen back beyond the outer ring of the stone brambles.

"Set me down," Morgin said quietly. "Untie them. Gentlemen, please tell me that if we ask you questions, you can write an answer?"

One of the men nodded, and so Leoval set to freeing his hands first.

"Morgin," he asked. "I saw one run off. Did you catch him? Deliver vengeance to him?"

The squint Morgin made meant Leoval clearly was not going to like his answer.

"What even *is* 'vengeance'?" Morgin asked.

"Morgin."

"He was about to break out of the warning monoliths," Morgin huffed. "Then he'd have run off to who knows here. So I toppled the stones in his path. He changed course, and ran into the mouth."

"Usi nezlichenni pekla!" Leoval cursed.

"Keep your voice down. Look, you wanted to punish him for murder. Well now he's gone and run himself into a horrifying cursed pit that's as *good* as a hell. If he's not dead now, in a few days he'll come out and scream himself to death."

The hostage whose hands Leoval had freed spat on the ground in approval.

"See," Morgin said. "Good to be rid of the bastard."

Leoval squeezed the hand of the hostage and looked him in the eyes. He had a face much like the dead man back on the trail, and about the same age. He guessed they were brothers. He also had blood staining his lips. Indeed, all three of the surviving hostages did. None had said a word this whole time, and Leoval was quite sure they never would again.

The dead man's brother – if that's what he was – overcame his confusion about Leoval's red and yellow eyes fairly quickly. He considered the horns too, but after his ordeal, he simply shrugged.

"Pardon me sir," Leoval said. "I found a man dead by the side of the trail earlier today. Your brother perhaps? Cousin?"

He nodded at cousin.

"I swore I would give your cousin vengeance. The man who struck the killing blow: he fled, yes? He wasn't any of the three we killed?"

The cousin agreed grimly. To his surprise, the man turned to the other two hostages and embraced them. The trio moaned in sympathy for each other, not needing words. Or maybe they did need them, but would do what they could without them.

Leoval noticed Morgin had put his hand to his belly again, and he heard the wizard chant something.

"I am going after him," Leoval said.

The cousin released his hug, then looked warily up at the Scream. He averted his eyes and instead began to untie his fellow hostages.

Morgin said, "My friend, Leoval—"

"I swore to Artyr," Leoval insisted. "I will make his death quick if he lets me, better than what he did for this man's cousin."

"No. Don't do it. Hear me. If you had cut him down with your sword, would you say that you had killed him? Yes. Yes, even though it was a tool in your hands, not your own flesh doing the deed. So how is this different? Let the screaming curse be the tool you used to kill him. Or fine, let it be me. I drove him in there, and I was fulfilling your will. He is going to be dead, all the same."

It was tempting. Leoval's body ached. He was only now feeling the sting of the wound the arrow had sliced into his arm. He could see these three men to whatever counted as safety for them, and tell himself he had made his god proud.

But yet.

"I don't even know that this curse is real." He sneered at the Scream hanging above them. "It's just a scary looking rock. He's just hiding in there, waiting for us to run away. He hopes we're too frightened to go finish him."

The cousin touched Leoval's shoulder to get his attention, then held up a hand and shook his head. He still kept his eyes averted from the Scream.

"Let's see what these three have to say first," Morgin said. "I have a wax diptych in my bags. Can you go fetch them? It'll be faster than him writing in the dirt."

Leoval frowned and looked away to think. He wondered if Morgin would try to stop him, or if he even could.

"I'll bring them to you when it's done," he said.

Morgin muttered a curse in a language Leoval did not know. Neither of them said anything else.

Leoval put a hand out to tell Nebo to stay with the group. He looped Zhitevo's guide rope around one of the stone brambles too. Then he walked back to where he had dropped his sword and knife beside one dead kidnapper.

Standing in the center of the rings of warning stones, indeed Leoval felt it impossible not to tilt his head up and face the Scream. But instead of cowering at its fury, he gave it an agreeable nod. Then he looked down to the gaping darkness of the mouth, to the too-finely-detailed texture on the granite lips. Now, alone before it, he thought he heard murmured words drifting on the wind of its breath.

He tightened his grip on his sword's hilt in his left hand, then grit his teeth and held his right palm up. With no fuel, no source other than his own anger, a ball of fire the size of a pomegranate sprung to life. He took a moment to recall the man who years ago had terrified him into never using this gift, and — as the hostage had earlier — he spat his hate out onto the ground.

The fire in his palm burned brighter. He held it aloft like a torch, and walked into the mouth of the Scream.

Past the depiction of teeth of the lower jaw, any semblance of matching anatomy had been abandoned by whoever excavated the tomb. The tunnel beyond was roughly rectangular, with a ceiling high enough that if he reached up with his sword he might not even be able to scrape it. A rutted path on the floor sloped downward perhaps twenty feet, and he could tell where the builders had cut into the stone to run sledges in and out.

Painted writing in Herethim adorned the walls, but he had never learned that language. He also saw graffiti in Ostalinian.

Penis, it read, accompanied by a crude drawing of the Scream's face recast as having its mouth open for a very different reason.

Leoval guffawed at the absurdity, and in an instant the tunnel reverberated with hundreds of voices saying words he could not tell apart. Or maybe not even words, but just syllables, sounding like speech but meaning nothing. The volume faded slowly, but hovered just above a whisper.

He pressed onward, surrounded by the sounds of speech coming from thin air and dissolving to maddened gibbering. The ramp downward leveled out, and after only a few more steps stood a brick wall, cracked and knocked inward, with enough dust that Leoval guessed it had been breached years ago. He remembered Morgin's story about people decades past emerging from here, cursed to scream until they perished.

If the rest of Morgin's legend were true, somewhere ahead would lie terrible treasures surrounding some entombed priest.

The dust around the breach in the wall was disturbed from recent passage. He stepped slowly across the threshold, seeing the hall beyond extend farther than his handheld flame could illuminate. The flood of voices grew louder here but no more coherent, like the chatter of a teeming marketplace.

The old grooves on the floor continued forward, then turned into chambers on the left and right. Hefty tablets of baked clay, each as tall as his waist, leaned against the walls. In one side chamber, an array of reddish stone monoliths loomed at the edge of the darkness. The hair on his neck prickled as he picked his way past them, and he tried not to read the words impressed into their surfaces. But his eye caught on a shape extruding from the wall next to one of the smaller hallway tablets. It was as if the stone had grown outward, just the depth of a fingertip, but it had taken the form of a complete sentence in Ostalinian.

Can you read this?

In the moment his eyes took in those words, a single voice rose above the din around him, saying the same. It belonged to a young woman, and in the span of just those four words her tone twisted from curiosity to concern to horror.

He leaned closer, held his flame by the wall to reveal the relief pattern clearly with angular shadows. There were many more words here, too many, piled upon each other, all of them spanning less than arm's length.

What's wrong? Alesa? Do not speak, Nev. It hurts. My tongue. Help me. Feels like fire, and I may not say. Took the words. Why no? Stop! Run! Danger. Must go deeper. Mean opposite. But calls us.

The voices spun around him like a tempest, and he shook his head to be free of them. But when he happened to look at another part of the wall, more words had been sealed into the stone. And he heard them too: the desperate confusion of every fool who had come here before him. Every word they uttered had been pulled from their mouth, striking them mute by fractions until they had no more words to use to pray for salvation.

No, more than that. Somehow Leoval could feel the people themselves in these walls. A sliver of a soul had been stripped away with every utterance. The idea, the meaning itself was torn from the essence of the speaker so not only could they never say it again; they could never conceive it again.

He tried to turn his gaze down, to just look for the path in the dust the killer had left, but the ground too was a mosaic of last words. Certain ones recurred over and over again, crawling across themselves like rats drowning in a pit.

I. What? Me. Help! Why?

How many people had come down here? He heard hundreds of voices, spiraling further down the hall, where everything ended in void.

He clenched his right hand into a fist, snuffing the fire. Darkness surrounded him, and with it, silence. The voices ceased the moment he could not see their words written out of the granite.

Or so he thought. He still could hear one voice, faintly.

He shuddered and put his hand over his mouth, just to be sure it was not his own lips speaking. But the voice was farther ahead, in the direction that led to the end of this tomb. Barely even speech it was, more a moan, in a deep male pitch, but whimpering as if tortured.

In the lightless black, Leoval called upon his second sight. He expected the whole world to be suffused with evil, but all he saw were footprints of frost, leading away in the direction of the voice. He took fitful steps in the dark, sometimes probing with his sword, but the trail of the killer's evil was clear to follow.

Forty feet on, he felt some change in the air around him, a wideness. The speaker's droning echoed differently, like he had entered a larger room. The killer's trail was strange here, coming to a stop only a few steps ahead. What looked like a thin veneer of ice in the shape of a mask floated around waist-height above the floor.

Another few steps, and Leoval's sword tip clinked against stone beside the mask.

The speaker's voice rose louder.

"Flee. Impossible. Monster. Forever. Escape. Abandon! Judgment. Deserved."

The man did not move, except for his mouth. Leoval reached out with his other hand, and first touched stone, ridged with complex textures. He moved his fingers toward the thing that looked like a mask, and realized he was touching skin, but he could not say when the stone had stopped. His fingertips scraped across stubble as the man's jaw worked to continue its stream of nonsense.

"Touching face. Withdraw. Caged. Melting. Stranger. Rescue?"

Leoval sneered at the idea he could be here to rescue the killer. As overwhelming and strange as this place was, nothing would turn him from his pledge.

He leaned closer, focusing his sight to make sense of the man's shape uncannily flowing from the stone. He reached out and worked his hand down to a throat. The man gulped but kept talking.

"Yes. Plunge. Strangle. Suffocate. Slice."

He dropped his second sight. Bracing himself for what he might hear, Leoval tightened his right hand into a five-taloned claw and conjured the fire in his palm again. The red-orange light revealed the face of the killer, but that was almost all that was left of him.

The killer had fallen backward upon some sort of altar, but he had begun to merge with it, like the stone was pulling him in and growing into his flesh. Only his chest, neck, and face still looked human, and with every word he spoke more of him turned to dead rock, upon which the word was imprinted. His knees had already crumpled beneath him. Minutes worth of his curses and fury had sapped the life from his legs and dragged him into the stone, and moreover transformed him into that same granite. His arms had petrified as well.

The chamber was too large for Leoval to take in all at once, but squat columns faded into the gloom, and carved nooks held a gloriously shining bounty of gold and silver and bronze wonders, and the petrified faces of hundreds of interlopers leered lifeless from the walls, and countless wooden fragments of the torches they had carried littered the ground, and words threaded every surface, words in every language, words Leoval had never heard, every thought possible in a human mind torn from these people as they died here and were trapped by what power he prayed he would never understand.

And every word screamed in Leoval's mind.

The man he had come here to kill met his eyes, and he whispered, "Mercy!"

*

"The name of the man you found this morning," Morgin said, "is Immasi-immadiriga. Took me a few tries to get it right."

Morgin was trying to be jovial, but Leoval could not muster a smile. He just nodded and looked away down the sloping fields to the nearest hamlet. The maze of stones that concealed the Scream and the tomb beneath it was a mile behind him, and he hoped he never came back here.

Morgin continued, "As the cousin told me, it's really the most pointless thing. His family and the family the kidnappers were from both graze sheep in some of the same pastures. They've always argued over petty things. But a few weeks ago, some of the animals started to go missing. The kidnappers blamed their neighbors.

"Imrua – that's the cousin – says it happened to his family too. Animals missing. Could have been jackals, maybe khabesh."

Leoval gave Morgin a sidelong look, questioning.

"Oh, khabesh?" Morgin stroked his small beard. "People call them beast men. They're not one thing, but a jumble of different clans and tribes that all live on the edge of civilization. They do not particularly like the law of El the Definer. It wouldn't surprise me if they were stealing sheep.

"Whatever the truth of it, Imrua's neighbors blamed their fellow shepherds."

"Why kidnap the other family?" Leoval asked. "Just kill them cleanly."

"Ah, why else but that aforementioned law of El the Forgiving. Imrua heard the kidnappers encouraging each other, insisting that they could seek absolution if all they did was abduct their neighbors. If they killed anyone themselves, their lives would be forfeit, and their lands would be given to Imrua's family as compensation. Apparently, if you just cudgel people somewhere so wild animals kill them or, say, toss them into a cursed tomb, oh, that's just proof they deserved to die."

"That's stupid."

Morgin smiled. "Your eloquence humbles me."

When Leoval had returned from the tomb, Morgin had not asked him for details. Perhaps seeing blood on the tip of his sword was answer enough. Leoval wondered if he wanted Morgin to force him to talk about it. If he did not put it into words, he could push it aside, but he knew it would linger and find him in dark places.

He wished he could just charge headlong at the memory and kill it somehow.

"I'll find the khabesh, then," he said.

"Eh," Morgin shrugged. "I don't think your sense of justice will be gratified by hunting starving people who have to steal to survive. And don't go after any jackals, either."

“Paladins are supposed to smite evil.”

“Leoval, you can’t kill ignorance, superstition, starvation and want. And that’s not your role, anyway. That is, after all, why we make laws. We need them to build things together, or else we’re all just alone in this world.”

Nebo sat a short distance nearby. Leoval wished the mastiff would come so he could bury his face in his star-like fur and hug him until the world felt safe. But the dog always gave him space when he was talking to other people.

Leoval hunched and rubbed his arms to push away the chill.

What he did to the killer in the cave, he thought, was not vengeance. It set nothing right. The wicked were supposed to fear the divine retribution he threatened, but he would never tell anyone what had happened. If he had been true to the path of his god Artyr, he could have left the man to his agony.

Or perhaps his failing was that he had let the killer get away at all. If he had been faster, stronger-

His thoughts were interrupted as Nebo bayed at the sky.

“You have earned some hospitality from Imrua’s family,” Morgin offered. “They could host you for a week. And if you wish to continue to brood, Imrua certainly won’t blather at you like me.”

He heard Bia scoff at the poor-taste comment. She and the other two Ostaliners were setting up a campsite. Leoval was glad she had not been quiet, but he did not have the energy to tell Morgin how he felt. He just sighed.

Morgin stood up and brushed the dying grass off his shins. He groaned a little, but the dressing over his arrow wound was holding.

“Don’t worry,” Morgin said. “There are plenty of villages between here and No-Ostalin. I’m sure I’ll find a healer to cast out any foul spirits that have taken nest in my wound. You are of course welcome to come with us. Visit the Palace Hill. Learn more about what being a paladin really means. Stop being an amateur.”

Finally Leoval let out a small laugh.

“Eventually,” he conceded. “But I don’t deserve it yet. It’s still warm enough for me to do some good out here on the road.”

“Well, find me at the Wayfarer’s Enclave. And for now, at the very least, rest with us for the night. I’ll steal a bit more of Bia’s food for you while she sleeps, and we can part ways in the morning.”

Astoundingly, there were still a few hours of daylight left. Leoval felt an itch to be moving on. He would leave his doubt here and ride away as fast as he could.

“I’ll leave now before you have time to inflict more wordplay on me.”

Within a few minutes, he was mounted on Zhitevo, his saddle bag provisioned enough with the kindness of these Ostaliners – food and other necessities – that he would not have to worry for a few more days.

He called out to the group as he started to ride away.

“Stay safe. And remember my name! I’ll be a legend some day.”

Morgin clapped in approval. “I will expect nothing less, Leoval Ragathanios, amateur paladin from Kequalak.”

“Kequalak?” Leoval felt a chill and he looked over his shoulder at the wizard, wondering how he knew.

“Your saddle,” Morgin said. “Almost no one here knows how to make stirrups.” He paused a beat, then added, “And I commend the konyushy who was gracious enough to *lend* you his horse.”

“Yeah.” Leoval looked ahead to the trail. “If I see him, I’ll let you know you said so. Stay warm, wizard.”

“Stay good, paladin.”

Meeting at the Crossroads

Chapter Three

The temple guard held up a perfunctory hand to halt Farron before she could knock. She responded with a doubting quirk of her mouth, but then relented. This was No-Ostalin after all, and the Palace Hill no less, and rules were rules, here more than anywhere else in the world.

Once she had stepped the prescribed six cubits back from the door, she planted her hands on her hips and gave the guard a sarcastic smile of encouragement. He shrugged as an apology, then heavily cleared his throat and pounded a fist on the thin wood to Eneb's official quarters.

"Don't tell him it's me," Farron whispered.

Eneb's voice came from the other side of the door. "Badruk, for what matter do you bother me?"

The guard Badruk bowed his head in apology to the gods. "A petitioner of a low class and distant county seeks your attention."

Farron snickered at the insult to her station. She held out a fist and squeezed it twice – normally a sexual insult, but she meant it as approval for Badruk playing along.

Eneb gave a disinterested, "If they bothered to climb this high up, I may as well meet with them."

He would probably take his time putting on all the formal adornments of the priesthood before he answered the door, so Farron sauntered across the terrace to the nearby railing and gazed out across the city from on high. After all, she *had* climbed so many steps she had lost track. She may as well enjoy the luxury of this view.

No-Ostalin looked golden in the light of the setting sun. Today had been one of the last warm days of the year, and she could see people hurrying about along the banks of the Quatil, streaming to the markets before nightfall, basking in their safety and bounty. Tens of thousands were protected by the two palaces: the king's Painted Palace with all his worldly might, and the gods' Palace Hill with all their temples and blessings.

Blessings Farron helped ensure.

She knew that the citizens below saw the great ziggurat every day and probably never paid it mind outside of holy feasts. But for right now, today, she let herself imagine all those people turning their eyes upward to her.

Even in her breastplate and leathers, she was slender like a reed, and she wore her brown curls up like a cluster of flowers. She had cheeks angular enough that children had called her goat-faced when she was growing up, and it was insults like those that had taught her to keep a mischievous sparkle in her brown eyes, so those who had done her wrong would assume she was scheming their punishment.

The door opened, and Farron reveled in Eneb's shocked intake of breath.

She resisted the impulse to stand up and meet him as protocol demanded. Rather, she afforded him a casual glance and tossed her head so her neck would be exposed. The golden thread she had woven in her hair would be obvious in the setting sunlight. Otherwise, though, she had not bothered to adorn or beautify herself.

She knew he liked her still rugged from the wilderness.

He of course looked quite impressive in his priestly regalia – long dark hair hanging about the tassels of gold around his shoulders, chest hair boldly exposed above the creamy woolen kaunakes with dyed lavender tufts that hung from his waist to his calves, and above it all

a stiff white tower of a headpiece fronted by a golden face that marked him an En-Shuba, a proclaimer who could act with all the authority of a temple.

“Abgal’s spit,” he cursed. “Farron, where have you been? I thought you must have died out there.”

She swaggered over to him. He let her drape a hand on his arm, but his expression vacillated between tantalized and anxious. She gave him a smile like she might eat him.

“Interesting story, that,” she said.

She flicked her eyes downward to direct his gaze to the jagged puncture hole in her breastplate. She had not bothered to clean the bloodstains off the bronze.

Eneb lingered on the spot, looking stricken.

With a playful flick of her fingers, she tapped his chin upward so he could look her in the eyes. He gulped.

Sing-song and sarcastic, she bobbed her head side to side as she said, “You almost got me killed.”

Eneb smiled hopefully. “Would you like to tell me about it over dinner?”

She put her hands up on his shoulders like a lion pouncing on a gazelle and started to guide him back into his room.

“Badruk,” she called over her shoulder, “he’ll be safe with me.”

This was the Palace Hill, and even simple guards here were usually paladin gallants. Luckily, she had the authority to dismiss the guard to get some privacy.

“But oh, Badruk,” she added, “before you leave, do a service to your temple and bring up some hot water and a kaunakes? Protocol demands I get out of these dusty clothes.”

She gave Eneb a love nibble on his lip and swung the door shut behind them with her foot.

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Moonlit steam wisped off her bath water. Farron sighed in contentment, head tilted back, taking in the night sky. The shutters of Eneb’s quarters were open on the windows and roof, and she gave a prayer of thanks to Nasda for the cold draft and the dancing starscape above.

She was scraping dirt from under her nails when a heavy gust blew in, strong enough that she could hear the trees swaying in the garden on the next higher tier of the Palace Hill. Movement caught her eye, and she watched the spiraling descent of a winged seedpod through the skylight. She reached out and let it land in her palm.

This late in fall it was dry and brown, but she could make out hints of a red fringe, a green spine. Some red ash, she guessed, from the Hedral Woods to the north. The pod was shorter than her thumb, but meant to carry the seed a few dozen cubits, beyond the shade of its parent so the child would not compete for soil.

No-Ostalin was a city where, for the sake of splendor, a tree from hundreds of miles away could be given a place of honor for all the public to marvel at, but where its seeds would never find purchase in rich soil. The tree might think it had done right by its ancestors, traveling so far from home, but it did not know its line ended here.

Farron climbed out of the tub, dripped her way to the door, and stepped out onto the terrace.

Slivers of lamp light peeked out through shutters of other priests’ quarters on this tier. Somewhere in her youth she recalled hearing that nudity offended the eye of El the All-Seeing,

but she saw no sign of Him, only the moon and stars, the tens of thousands of Ostaliners preparing for sleep below, and the little seed pod in her palm.

She let the cold shock her senses as she walked over to the railing at the edge of the terrace. Eneb resided on the second of six tiers, with the gardens and their trees on the third, the hierarchs above those, and above that their mystical chambers that held the commandments, and finally the tetrad temple at the summit. Each tier was fronted by a terrace precisely twelve cubits in depth, and each terrace rose precisely twelve cubits above the one below it, like massive stair steps. The first terrace, though, sat atop an awe-inspiring seventy-two-cubit-high wall of gleaming white gypsum. There was nothing taller in any direction out to the horizon, not even the king's own Painted Palace.

The geometric perfection had pleased El the Immutable, everything in neat batches of twelve.

Early in their courtship, Eneb had confided in her that the railings were not original, and over the centuries a few clumsy priests and petitioners had toppled off the edges every year. The tablet that memorialized their tragic deaths even sorted them in neat batches of twelve, to appease El the Accounter.

But when, ninety-nine ago, the hierarchs had realized El the Dependable had gone silent, and that never again would a Logos speak law into stone, one of the first things they had ordered was a handsbreath of those divinely-perfect terraces be sacrificed for the sake of basic safety.

Whether or not it was an offense to the gods, it was a compromise, and in No-Ostalin that was practically the same.

But then, Farron had always found very purpose as a paladin to be a compromise. It was her faith to Nasda that made her worthy to receive the four divine accolades, and those were gifts from the gods of the Palace Hill, but her duty was to enforce the law – law which had been decreed by the line of kings in the Painted Palace.

Farron had once admitted her confusion on the matter to a fellow paladin. His answer had been that Ostalin's law was a covenant against barbarism, as holy as any commandment from the highest priests. The people of the nation were always under threat from those who did not adhere to that covenant – both foreigners without and criminals within. To protect the nation, the law must be unquestioned.

Whether that man had ever questioned the law, Farron could only guess, but he no longer ventured to the frontiers to hunt lawbreakers. These days he guarded one of the city's gates.

She rolled over so she could lean her back against the sacrilegious railing and look higher. She admired the flowers and fruit trees on the next tier, but the angle of the stairstep terraces blocked her view of the higher tiers, all except at the very summit of the Palace Hill. There the bronze figureheads depicting the four high gods gleamed like beacons beneath the moon.

She had only been up there once, for her pledging nearly a decade ago. Even though the hierarchs had long ago disassembled and moved El the Most High's original temple down to a much shorter hill beside the river, the sheer density of wealth and comfort in the four remaining shrines – to Beshel, Abgal, Jetwan, and Ixon – had whetted her appetite.

That hunger had lasted across dozens of missions, outings, expeditions, and exterminations as she had guarded her nation and smited its enemies. But she had told herself that it was good to deprive herself so she would focus on service. Hers had been a life of the rough road and blood-chilling battles. Even after Eneb had begun to woo her with little bites of

the Palace Hill's splendor, she had thought of it as a temporary indulgence, not something she could ever really have.

But she had nearly died two weeks ago.

Let me stay here, she prayed, and enjoy the safety I have done my part to protect. Let someone else risk their lives for the damn covenant. Let them bloody their hands at the edge of civilization to keep the power of the Palace Hill from being challenged.

Another heavy gust blew across her, and Farron opened her palm to let the seedpod's wing take flight. It spiraled out of sight.

That done, she crossed her arms and hurried back inside. As much as she enjoyed thumbing her nose at the Absent, she was freezing.

Inside, she dressed in the kaunakes Badruk had provided – sandy brown, trimmed with blue and red fringe down to her knees – then shut the windows and used a rod to close the roof shutters. In the darkness, she could hear a scritch sound in Eneb's bedroom.

Eneb had lit two oil lamps and was sitting up on his jewel-adorned platform bed, naked but buried up to his waist in linen sheets and lion furs. The headboard was mostly hidden by wool cushions, but two large rearing lions stood out, their wooden features gilded and set with polished stones. The feet of the bed too were ebony carved in the shape of lion's paws.

"I have kept it warm for you," Eneb said when she entered the room, though he did not look up.

She leaned her head against the door frame and smiled at the sight of her handsome, hairy, soft-bodied paramour. His thick brows furrowed in focus as he reached out a feather quill to a jar of Othari ink on the stand next to the bed, dipped it, and then scritch another line onto a small sheaf of vellum sheets.

She walked over, planted a kiss on his earlobe, and plucked the vellum from his hand. They were bound by threads down one side, with the first several folded around the back so he could write on a later sheet.

"I ask that you not close the codex," Eneb said. "It will smudge the ink."

"Codex," she repeated, unfamiliar with the word. Then she read aloud a segment on the current page. "The temple that stands atop this hill is not the true temple. The building is not the people, and the people are not the actions of the people. When you pray, these walls do not. This is numbing, Eneb. Do you prepare all your sermons in these?"

"I draft them." He spoke in a huff, defensive. "It is faster to edit than having to roll a scroll to the needed segment."

"Did someone tell you they promote priests based on how long you can ramble? How many poor calves have been skinned for these things because you can't be concise?"

"Maybe it would sound better if you sang it?"

Now it was her turn to huff. She had grown up at the southern edge of Ostalin's lands, a region called the Umut. In stories, the people of the Umut were always frivolous singers and dancers, too busy cavorting to grow their crops or tend their flocks. Since coming to the capital, Farron had avoided mockery by avoiding those old simple joys. She sometimes let loose around Eneb, but he knew she was easily provoked by alluding to the jokes about her homeland.

"No one takes singers seriously," she said. "You're going to read this to a crowd on midwinter?"

"The midwinter exhortation teaches community and obedience to authority." Eneb shrugged. "Enduring my tedium so they can get to the feast is, yes, the point of the lesson."

She blew on the still-drying ink and held the codex near the lamp. Eneb idly leaned over and kissed her hip. He had been quieter than usual all night, and had filled the silence with these small flutters of affection.

“Always a lesson, hm?” She climbed into bed beside him, still holding the codex as a prop. “I suppose it wouldn’t serve the temple to let me lead one of these festivals some time. Who knows what I’d tell them?”

“My sermon needs an ending,” he said. “I speak of vanquishing evil through generosity and acceptance of authority, but if you would see it as a gift, I could conclude with a tale of a hero vanquishing evil with her blade.”

Eneb leaned over and kissed her shoulder, then moved a hand to the spot over her right breast where she had her newest scar.

He asked, “What is the story about that?”

“What if I tell you and you don’t like it? Would you share it anyway? Or lie to the feast crowds and give them the story you want them to hear?”

“I cannot lie,” he said.

“On the dais, yes.”

When priests in No-Ostalin spoke to crowds, they stood on platforms fronted by a stone whose words had been dictated by a Logos – a remnant from when El the Inviolable still had a voice. Within twelve cubits of those stones, no one could speak a lie.

Farron tried her best never to go close to one of them.

“I have been,” Eneb started, “terrified these past days, fearing what had befallen you. Since you departed, messengers brought word that two others I sent out were killed on their missions. I thought perhaps I had angered Beshel somehow.”

“Gods, who?”

“Dan-Em of Jetwan and Ipto of Beshel. Did you know them?”

“Not well enough, now that they’re gone. What happened?”

“Later,” Eneb said. “What I want to know is what happened to *you*?”

She had hoped he would ask all night, but now it took her a moment to find the words.

“This last hunt,” she started, “the nau-hereth man you sent me after, Durek? He was going by the name ‘Foulfist,’ but he matched the description you gave. Short and squat. He had just the thickest, most stinking beard, and he only shaved around his mouth. It made him look like a boar with those two tusks of fur on the side of his face.

“And his horse had the burn scars all across its side, like you’d said. But it was just strangely obedient to him. And my sight found no trace of transgression, but I had my suspicions of what he was.

“If he was working with someone, I wanted to catch them in the act. My story was that I was just a mundane guard, riding at the back of the camel train.

“We were in the savannah of the Thirin Gap when I figured out he knew I was watching him. That was the second worst part. He had been rude before that – Foulfist isn’t exactly a subtle name – but I felt like every time he looked at me, he was planning how to kill me. And he wasn’t in a rush.

“The next night we camp, I tell the rest of the guards that he is planning an ambush. We tackle him in his sleep. He hasn’t made his move, so when Foulfist demands a priest judge him, the caravan master insists we leave him at the next settlement.”

Eneb rubbed his stubble. “You could have done it.”

“I know.”

It took an effort for her not to growl aloud at the regret that welled up in her throat.

“We pass a few tiny edurus, but none have a priest, so we turn for a village, Kukus. Huge wheat fields. They had filled their granaries for the winter. The village had an ox-wheel mill. I honestly think they were grinding enough flour to feed this entire city.

“Anyway, before we get there, a couple times we spot people shadowing us in the savannah grass. They have gray fur. From afar, they almost look like hyenas. I assume the khabesh normally would attack, and he’d kill the caravan guards in the confusion. But these khabesh must have seen that Durek wasn’t in any condition to help them.

“So we make it safely to Kukus, and the priest takes a day to make his auguries. Durek does himself no favors. His blasphemy against Chebas was especially inspired.”

Eneb muttered a prayer of forgiveness. It made Farron smile.

“We decide to hang him. They mount him on his horse, put a rope around his neck. But just as they’re tying the knot to the branch,” she clapped her hands together as loudly as she could, “the millhouse popped open from within with black fire and a roar that knocked people to the ground.

“Durek isn’t startled at all, though. It’s like he knew it was about to happen. He’s already kicking his horse, and it carries him off at full speed, out to the east, trailing the rope from his neck. He’s going to try to get back with his friends.

“I leap on Rathus and give chase. This curse he brought down on the granary had been impressive, but he still has his hands tied, and he has no weapons. I catch up, and I’ve pulled my falcata. And even then, I decide to test him with my sight so I can be sure. And now, yes, he has a black, burning mane trailing from his rancid beard.”

Eneb tensed. “That is a sign of Allatu.”

Farron grinned manically. “Oh just wait. I’m drawing back to swing, but that rope around his neck comes alive with smoke, like a serpent. And the rope is longer than my sword. It coils up, then snaps at me. Hit me right here.”

She tapped the scar on her breast.

“Just a rope, but it struck with the force of a spear. He smote me. *That* was the worst part.”

“So he still lives?” Eneb’s tone had more curiosity and less concern than Farron would have liked.

“Of course he lives,” she said. “He had pierced my lung. And I fell off Rathus and broke my arm. Beshel’s accolade saved me, and I thank Nasda that he was set on riding away instead of having his horse trample me, but I spent the next three days coughing up blood.”

She slid deeper into the covers and closed her eyes.

“So, a paladin, pledged atop the Palace Hill, bearing the divine will of Nasda, protector of dreamers, she of the owl and the star, was struck down. And the one who did the striking had the blessing of Allatu the dread lion. The dread lion is cruel, but he’s also of the pantheon. If I recall, the second Logos was a speaker of Allatu before his ascension, right?”

Eneb cleared his throat in uncomfortable acknowledgment.

“What story are you going to tell from that?” Farron asked. “Do you tell the people that an anti-paladin has twisted the anointed blessing of one of our gods and turned it against No-Ostalin? Oh, the fire from the granary killed a young boy, by the way. I don’t even think Durek intended that. Just another random casualty. Maybe, ha, we just say that I’m an incompetent rider who lost control of her horse, and that villages need to be more attentive to stopping fires in granaries?”

“Or do you say nothing at all? And if you don’t tell the story, then does that mean what happened to me was meaningless?”

Eneb took his time before responding.

“I would wait,” he said, “until that story is complete.”

“Hm. And when’s that?”

“I would like a more satisfying ending. Perhaps you could-”

She opened one eye and saw he was giving her a smile he probably thought was encouraging.

“Could what? Durek’s trail led east. Let the khabesh deal with him. I serve the Palace Hill, but it helps no one if I’m dead.”

“That is true, and I know you want to have land and station in the city,” Eneb said.

“People judge stories by their endings. I ask what chance you will have if your time as a paladin ends with this failure?”

So that was it. He meant to send her back out. Because what value was she as his companion if he could not use her heroics to elevate his prestige?

“There are always other people threatening the order of No-Ostalin.” He spoke like he was trying to cheer up a child who had broken their toy. “Do not worry, Farron. I will find you one in the morning.”

She snapped the codex shut tightly and rolled onto her side, putting her back to him. They did not speak again for the rest of the night.

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Steam danced on the river water. Stars danced above. Farron danced between.

The gusting wind carried away the seedpod from her hand, and it spiraled upward on its owl wings until it vanished among the legends in the sky.

Four stars shone brighter than the rest, red across from blue, green across from purple. They pulled at each other, drawing nearer in a cross.

Just before the stars met, the night sky rippled, revealed as a reflection on the water as the seedpod splashed down between Farron’s feet.

And where that seed was planted, her shadow on the water grew to become a great tree.

Farron awoke, feeling a cold draft. The dream lingered in her head as she blinked away the gum in her eyes. Eneb’s half of the bed had no Eneb, just an empty lion’s skin. The room was dark, but she thought she remembered rising light and the soft clatter of a door left to close on its own in a hurry.

She did not hurry, and drifted back to sleep for a time. When she awoke again, Eneb stood over the bed. He offered her an uncut pomegranate.

“Eat well, paladin. I have found your quarry for your final mission.”