

THE DROWNED REALM SERIES

RISE OF THE RED HARBINGER

BY
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Rise of the Red Harbinger
Book One of
The Drowned Realm

By Khalid Uddin

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CHAPTER 1

THE NIGHT OF FIRE AND WATER

From *The Book of Orijin, Verse 3*

Every man must burn at a given juncture of his existence.

The righteous man burns within for justice and for peace.

The creative man burns within to inspire.

The indecisive man burns his potential out of fear to act.

The wicked man burns in Opprobrium to rid the evil from his soul.

Rain intruded upon the mountain village of Haedon, tucked away in the northwestern corner of Ashur, the Drowned Realm. This rain had no business there and had not been seen by the Haedonians in generations; it was an ocean falling from the sky. In another town, any other town, this would be an omen to stay in and pray for sun and tranquility. But then, Joakwin Kontez was not scheduled for execution in any other town. The entire village filled Haedon Square, growing angrier and more belligerent by the second. Even the frail, sickly, and old held their ground against the deluge. Every person, to a man, refused to retreat until they knew for sure that Kontez's life ended tonight.

Hundreds occupied the square and its outer alleyways: men and women, young and old, packed in shoulder to shoulder and surrounded by the two-story wooden buildings in which they worked during the day. They were indifferent to the rain that soaked their robes and cloaks. Visibility was minimal, but it would suffice. Metal lanterns surrounded the perimeter of the hanging platform. There was nothing else to see in Haedon. And nothing else to care about. It only mattered that Kontez be raised into the noose, then dropped. Every voice pleaded for a gruesome, torturous death to come to Joakwin Kontez, the kneeling man on the lonely wooden platform before them. Every voice except one.

A cloaked figure stood among the crowd. Silent. Vigilant. His jaw and face clenched tightly; he resembled more a sculpture than a man. He knew any recognition of his face would mean that his life would end

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tonight as well. Although only seventeen years of age, Baltazar Kontez felt like the only sane person in Haedon this night. While the world prayed for his father's death, he pleaded for common sense and rational thought. Yet, futility gnawed at the back of his mind.

Be brave. There is no other way. Orijin, my God, please protect him.

Oran Von, the Chancellor of Haedon, walked gingerly up the wooden steps to the left of the platform, cane in hand, his knees creaking as loudly as the wood. Titus, Von's bodyguard and the anointed executioner, escorted him onto the stage. Titus needed only to stand over Von to shield him from the downpour, as he easily doubled any Haedonian in height and weight. In his hooded grey robe, Von, once a tall man, hobbled to the middle of the platform where Joakwin knelt. It wasn't the rain that made him so slow. The man was a walking corpse; most wondered how he managed to still rule. His deep booming voice, the only one in Haedon capable of drowning out this rain, was the only part of him that didn't reflect his age.

Von limped to face his people, coughing and hocking. "Joakwin Kontez, you have been formally charged by the people of Haedon for the practice of black magic." He stopped to cough. "The sabotaging of shops and goods with the intention of attracting more business to your farm, for the malicious destruction of your fellow townspeople's homes, and for murder."

Clearing his throat, he continued, "You are a disgusting excuse of a man, and it has been determined that you shall hang until dead. Have you any final words?" Von gazed upon him as a cat would look upon a lame mouse, toying with it before the kill. "I'm sorry; you'll have to speak up Master Kontez. You do understand that the sack over your head, along with this cursed rain, drowns out your voice?" He waited, stroking the long white beard that hung to his knees. "Nothing to say? Very well, let us carry on."

Baltazar struggled to keep from shaking, to stifle screams, to stand idly while a village cheered and watched his father die. The deluge flooded through his hood to the point that it clung to him, each drop another second of time pounding against his head. The rain soaked his short, jet black hair, washed his unshaven face, and caused his feet to squish in his boots. Baltazar was too focused on his father to let any of it

affect him. He yearned for an escape plan. For any possible way to rid his father of this torment. To get his father's head out of the thick, black, opaque sack, normally used to haul small animals back up the mountain after a hunt. His father was probably drowning in that thing. To attempt a rescue would be futile. It would only mean that Baltazar would be kneeling up there with his father, which was the reason for the cloak in the first place. Baltazar readjusted his cowl and wiped the cascade from his eyes with a soaked sleeve.

The rain helped. Nobody would take the time to look under the hood to see who it was. Baltazar had gone deep into the forest with his twin brother, Bo'az, when they learned that their father had been fated to hang. The entire town of Haedon assumed they had run away weeks before anyway, so Baltazar only had to make sure he didn't draw attention to himself. Every step he took would have to be calculated and precise in order to keep his cover. No looking into people's eyes, no conversations, no incriminating movements. He could not bring himself to celebrate like the other villagers, but he knew he must blend in. He needed to be here. While Bo'az remained hidden as always, Baltazar understood that the world he knew would end tonight. It was a reality he hadn't accepted until a moment ago.

Baltazar knew his father would not want him to risk his life in some foolish attempt at bravery. Guilt already began to haunt him for doing nothing. One day he would avenge this.

Stay strong. Stay brave. This is what he would ask of you.

"Hang him! Hang the bloody fiend! Let him hear the song!" screamed Fallar Bain. Bain most likely was the first villager to arrive, considering he was the first to accuse Joakwin of committing these crimes years ago. "Kill that bastard! End his bloody life! Put an end to the fires!"

"Patience, my friend, let us all savor this moment, as it marks an end to our suffering and dismay! And most importantly, an end to the fires!" Von was milking this for all he could. Baltazar realized that Von was making this his legacy. In the decades Von had governed Haedon, there had never been a major conflict, only minor squabbles.

However, concern had formed about Von's age. People worried that, should Von die, there would be no successor who shared his views and methods. Conversely, others grew irritated from rumors of Von hoarding

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their taxes. In time, no evidence confirmed these claims, but Von never provided any proof to dispel the rumors. Claims became more and more frequent so that, if not for Von's personal soldiers, he would have been attacked.

The execution of Joakwin Kontez would earn Von the undying fame and popularity he sought. Haedon would remember Oran Von as the man who drove out the dark magic, who didn't blink at the thought of using one man's death, or life, as an example to hundreds of others. Von turned to Titus, the mammoth standing at the back of the newly-built hanging platform, who inspected the beams to ensure their sturdiness. "Titus, let us begin with the ceremony!"

The crowd's screams reached new levels. If the executioner didn't do his job soon, the villagers would storm the platform and assume the duties themselves. Emotions burned through Baltazar's veins, adrenaline filled his body, urging him to move farther back. Yet his mind told him differently. His father was now standing, but not of his own accord. Titus pulled the sack from his father's shaggy head, and fastened the noose around his neck. Titus shoved him over to stand on the trap door, which would open beneath his feet in a few moments. The villagers screamed their approval through the rain. They yearned to see Joakwin Kontez's death. Yearned to see him suffer and struggle. They waved hands and fists in the air, fired curses and insults like arrows. The Haedonians ached to see the agony in Joakwin's face during his last moments. Even though the rain limited their sight, Baltazar knew the exaggerations would be limitless on the morrow. People would contrive stories about how Joakwin cried and pleaded for mercy. Yet, Joakwin stood tall, proud, the look of a martyr in his eyes.

Oran Von limped down the stairs, looking like a wounded bird with his long hooked nose, so distinctive that Baltazar could recognize Von by that alone. Another of Von's soldiers escorted him now, as Titus gripped the lever that would release the door beneath Joakwin. Knowing Von, he likely wanted to be far away enough from Joakwin to not have to see Joakwin's eyes as he hanged. Baltazar knew Von didn't wholeheartedly believe that his father was responsible for all the fires, destruction of homes and crops, injuries, and especially the murder. He couldn't. Baltazar remembered Von coming to visit often when he and Bo'az were

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small. He remembered Von's friendly, candid conversations with his father. But the visits became less frequent and eventually stopped. Baltazar assumed it was a ploy to distance himself from Joakwin once the accusations began.

Titus violently threw the lever down. The floor dropped beneath Joakwin; the rope constricted around his neck. Baltazar's anger roared inside him. His father flailed wildly, resembling more a puppet on a string than a man. Eyes bulged from their sockets. Hands scratched furiously at the murderous rope as he continued to sway before the applause. Baltazar held his own breath, anticipating success in his father's attempt to break free. More anger. Hatred. Even in the rain, he clearly saw the blue in his father's twitching, spasming face. His father's arms slowed, barely lifting, and ultimately dropped. They twitched with a hint of life left in him; his eyes had completely forced themselves from his face.

Emotions shattered in Baltazar like broken glass, cutting and stabbing his mind as he wrestled to push them into darkness, nothingness, oblivion.

His father, a tattered and bedraggled figure, writhed for a few more breaths of air. Joakwin squirmed and convulsed in mid-air, desperately gripping the smallest grains of life. His mouth gaped, searching for air, but the rain intruded instead, only drawing out the process of dying.

And then the stones flew. Mostly of a small and medium size. Like a volley of arrows, the crowd thrust them upon Joakwin, most pelting his limp body while a few strays managed to bloody his face.

Baltazar clenched his eyes tightly shut to fight back the impending tears because he could not run. In the hours leading up to this moment, he'd tried to prepare himself for it. Yet, as he stood there, hiding in plain sight among the entire town, Baltazar understood that the man who raised him had lost his life in the most dishonorable way. White-hot anger and hatred coursed through his veins, overpowering the sadness and helplessness that had resided there previously.

As his father swayed from the pendulous rope, the life draining from him, a fire ignited beneath the platform, quickly spreading to, and engulfing Titus, who shrilled like a eunuch as the flames charred his clothes and skin. The hulking brute, normally deliberate in his movements, flailed wildly as the mysterious fire burned through his breeches and

leather vest and boots, searing his flesh. The crowd gaped and gasped, first unsure whether to believe its eyes, then too frozen from fright and amazement to help Titus.

The blaze roared, moving to the rope from which Joakwin dangled, and then to Joakwin's head and body. As the breath drained from Joakwin's lungs, the rope broke, sending his flaming body crashing to the ground, seemingly giving him new life as his blackened arms and legs violently rolled and flailed.

Although the crowd had not expected this turn of events, it cheered and whooped more loudly as the fire encompassed Joakwin in a smoky shroud.

You cannot sit here and take this. You need to help him. You need to stop the fire.

What? No. I must be strong. They'll give me a fate worse than his if I interfere.

You shall regret this for the rest of your life if you do not interfere.

I have more to live for than to die for right now. I can right this. I can atone for this.

How? You are a coward. How can this be made right? You cannot bring him back after tonight. You can make this easier for him right now.

What is this madness? Get out of my head!

You are a coward.

Joakwin Kontez was not completely dead; he lay on the ground screeching like a madman in front of the entire village, his flesh burnt and seared. His incredible stench grew tendrils, spreading through the square. He was yelling something, but Baltazar could not understand the words. It was drowned out by the raucous cheering of the townspeople and the unending downpour.

Baltazar watched as the fire engulfed the villagers nearest the platform and realized it would be wise to retreat. Villagers began to run amok, darting and dashing like horses terrified of a predator. Baltazar turned and fled, tears finally streaming from his eyes. He could not fathom how a fire could ignite and rage so violently during such a torrential rain.

As Baltazar fled, the fire completely conquered the square. He was sure it would eventually burn down the surrounding buildings, and he

didn't care. It could burn the whole damn town for all it mattered, especially Oran Von. The man had conveniently disappeared before the onset of chaos.

His father was dead. Hanged. Then scorched. As an entire town watched and celebrated. *Why did we even stay in this cursed town for so long? Why didn't we just leave when they accused father of these crimes?*

Baltazar ran southeast as fast as he could, towards the outer parts of the town, through the farms and into the forest. He wouldn't be noticed if he could escape that way. But too many people filled the streets for that to work. He snuck down muddy roads and alleys, past houses and shops, many belonging to people who had turned on his father.

He came upon Fallar Bain's house and produce shop, resplendent and pretentious at three stories high. Baltazar vividly remembered the spectacle that had occurred at Bain's store over six years ago, when it was a humble shop, no bigger than a shack. Bain, the little bald man who was as wide as he was tall, never possessed a smile. He'd sold fruits and vegetables that he grew in the garden behind his house. Baltazar and Bo'az had gone there with their father shortly after sunrise to get the best selection of apples, Baltazar's favorite. His father and Bo'az browsed other baskets of fruits and vegetables while Baltazar inspected the apples. Although he hadn't tasted many varieties, his favorite were reddish-yellow apples, because of the sweet-tart taste.

Baltazar had felt Bain staring at him from behind the counter. Watching his hands and movements, watching his face and eyes especially. Baltazar had a vertical black scar intersecting his left eye from the time he was a small child, the result of a house fire that had also killed his mother, though he'd been too young to have any memory of it. Throughout his life, Baltazar had grown accustomed to others' tendencies to stare at his face. Bain was no different. However, Bain's intense gaze caused more discomfort than others', as there seemed to be an essence of hatred behind it. Regardless, Baltazar had gone about his business, loading his own basket with apples. As Bain's ogling continued, a fire sparked from one of the baskets. Before Bain or anyone else could react, the fire spread to other baskets and shortly engulfed the entire shop. Baltazar, along with his father, brother, and Bain, managed to escape with no injuries, but Bain's shop was completely destroyed. In the

aftermath, Bain had appealed to Oran Von and accused Baltazar's father of burning down his shop and home. Because nobody could testify that Joakwin *didn't* cause the fire, Von decried that Joakwin was responsible for rebuilding Fallar Bain's house and shop, in whatever manner Bain wished for it to be rebuilt. That manner just happened to be an excessively large three story house, with the new, larger shop on the bottom level.

Baltazar added Bain to his list for revenge, after Oran Von. Down the road, past Bain's house, a crowd had gathered outside the school on the left. The brick school spanned a length of four blocks, and had all of its outside torches burning. It would be futile to stay on this road, as Baltazar would find little to keep him from being seen.

He turned right at the road behind Bain's house, staying close to the dark wooden fences. Mud caked his boots, breeches, and cloak, causing him to lift his knee to his chest every time he took a step. Luckily, because of the rain, it simply looked as if he was walking carefully to avoid slipping and falling, rather than sneaking by.

Keeping himself cloaked and clinging to the fences on his right, Baltazar realized that the third house on the left side of the road belonged to Harold Joben and his wife, Carys. About two years ago, the couple had invited Joakwin and the two boys for dinner after a meeting at the Town Hall at the end of the street. They had wanted to betroth their daughter, Lea, to Bo'az, and as a result, they would always find reasons to talk to Joakwin. Baltazar had wondered why they liked Bo'az and not him, but he figured the black scar on his face had probably turned them towards his brother. Bo'az had reciprocated the interest in Lea, two years his younger, but always grew nervous around her and never spoke.

The Jobens had served a feast including four game hens, rosemary roasted potatoes, sweet yams, onion soup, stewed beef with carrots and peppers, bread, and fruit pies. Carys was known as the best cook throughout Haedon, and she loved to live up to that reputation. She was a pleasant enough woman, always polite and smiling, and her love of talking encompassed everything from the correct way to butcher various animals to the intricacies of religion and the Orijin, their god.

How she ended up with Harold, Baltazar could never understand. Carys had amassed hoards of money from her talent and had plenty of suitors, even as a girl. While she maintained a slender frame and soft,

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beautiful features, Harold was physical evidence of his wife's cooking prowess, and his protruding gut expanded every year. Over the years, he had more and more difficulty standing while teaching at the school. He grew so fat that even his chairs were replaced every few months.

At dinner, Bo'az had constantly looked down at his plate while Carys and Lea tried relentlessly to prod him into conversation. It had annoyed Baltazar how timid Bo'az acted. Mid-meal, Harold, bits of food stuck to the sides of his mouth and soup dripping from his chin, shot up from his chair yelling, "Smoke! Smoke! There's smoke coming from the kitchen!"

Sure enough, when they'd looked toward the kitchen, black smoke billowed through the doorway. The men had rushed to extinguish the fire. They had raced from the kitchen to the well behind the house, carrying bucket after bucket of water. After over an hour of drenching the kitchen and stamping out flames, the men had prevailed over the fire. However, all that remained of Carys' beloved and famous kitchen was a small piece of burnt wooden counter top and a few piles of ash. Even the walls had been partially burned down.

At the time, Harold and Carys had considered the whole event a terrible accident, but in the months that followed, Fallar Bain paid daily visits to them, repeatedly imparting his beliefs of Joakwin's involvement with black magic. Ultimately, Bain managed to convince Harold Joben. Oran Von had been skeptical of any foul play, especially considering Joakwin had been sitting and eating with them and would have no motive. However, Bain and Harold Joben managed to rally the townspeople behind them, all supporting the decision for Joakwin to be either confined to his farm or exiled from Haedon. The town's support came easily. Bain had simply appealed to them, explaining that Joakwin desired Carys for himself and, if he could not have her, would burn down her kitchen to deprive her of her livelihood. Once the masses demanded justice, with no opposition, Oran Von had to appeal to them or it would have cost his own head.

He had at least given Joakwin the reasonable punishment of being confined to his own farm. Von also restricted Baltazar and Bo'az to curfews, they would only be allowed to leave the farm to run necessary errands, such as trading. The Haedonians were wary that the twins might also know the dangerous magic their father practiced, and therefore, kept

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Baltazar and Bo'az under close watch whenever they were in public.

Bo'az took things with difficulty, constantly wandering off to sit under a tree for hours. He'd felt embarrassed about their situation, especially because he'd missed his chance with Lea Joben. Often, Baltazar ended up running his father's errands alone, because Bo'az had run off and couldn't be found.

The street rematerialized in front of Baltazar. He could not keep having these flashbacks if he wanted to reach the forest safely, and he didn't have much farther to go. Baltazar passed the Joben house, then the next house, and turned the corner again. On his right, the enormous Town Hall building towered above. As a child, it had been modestly sized, but Oran Von ordered expansions to it every year. These days, the building was as long as half the town. During town meetings, even if everyone in town showed up, they'd still only fill up about three quarters of the building. Baltazar realized how little he would miss Haedon and Oran Von's need for pointless structures. With his father dead, and his closest friend having left Haedon over a year ago, there remained no soul in this town who would treat him kindly.

Baltazar passed one last row of houses and reached a clearing by the forest's outskirts. Looking down the muddy road to his left, he could faintly discern a score of people running in his direction. Judging by the distance and severity of the rain, they wouldn't see him from where they were. Baltazar sighed, separated from the fence, and sprinted toward the trees and shrubs that waited ahead. The last house he ran past belonged to Dirk and Mila Samson. The occurrences on an autumn night in that house, over a year after the Jobens' kitchen incident, affected his father more than anything Fallar Bain had done. His father had never told Baltazar what happened. Baltazar saw the agony and regret straining his father's eyes and face for months after, although he never brought up the situation. Many people started calling his father a murderer after that, so it became easy to assume what happened.

From then on, his father wore a melancholy countenance every day. He'd never revealed the whole story to Baltazar or Bo'az, but Baltazar knew it had all revolved around the Samsons' four-year-old daughter dying. He'd just assumed that his father had been accused of it. Once Von dubbed Joakwin a murderer at the execution, his assumptions only seemed

truer.

Baltazar shook his head. He had to focus. Aside from the falling rain, the trees had cast too many shadows for him to be seen now, and no one would dare step foot into the forest.

He ran through rows and rows of trees, past all the trail markers that he and his brother had set to find their way back and forth to the camp, deeper into the thick forest. They had agreed to camp as deeply as possible, as an attempt to keep the townspeople from investigating their campfire. Most people in Haedon were too afraid to walk more than a few feet into the forest, as they'd all believed childhood tales about monsters and demons. They called it "The Never" for more than one reason. They believed that anyone who went in never came back out. They also swore to never go in, believing the forest never ended. Baltazar had stopped concerning himself with such nonsense when he was about five. There were more important things to spend his time worrying about than scary stories. Besides, he and Bo'az had been hiding in the forest for weeks, and they hadn't been spooked by a single thing. Aside from the swaying of the trees overhead and the occasional animals running around, things had been very quiet.

Baltazar turned to check how far out of sight he was. The clearing was half a mile behind him and barely visible. Satisfied, Baltazar turned back around, stepped gingerly, and collapsed to the ground.

The events of the night had drained his body of the strength to do anything except cry. Baltazar lay, for what seemed like hours, where he'd fallen. His face trembled while warm tears and rain gushed down his face and mixed into the mud he lay in. He felt no desire to get up and had no idea what to do with himself from this point on. Baltazar had no real memory of his mother; his father was all he knew. And now the man was gone.

Hours later, Baltazar realized he hadn't even gotten to his camp yet. And that the rain had stopped. Arising, wiping the mud and tears from his eyes and face, he noticed two small red dots in the distant underbrush. He blinked to clear his vision and they were gone. Perhaps it was just the light.

A thought boomed in his skull like a kick from a horse. As far as he knew, his father's body still lay in Haedon Square, mangled and burned. If

left there, it would only be desecrated once people saw it still lying on the ground. And Von was the type of man to leave it there to be vandalized.

Looking at the sky, Baltazar realized he still had nearly two hours before the sun would begin its ascent. Baltazar ran back to the edge of the forest. By now, everyone in Haedon would be sleeping. With the rain having stopped and darkness still prevailing, his mission could prove easy. The biggest difficulties lay in getting his father's body out of the wide open square, then carrying it through the mud back to the forest.

Baltazar sprinted to the outskirts of Haedon, stopping only to relieve the ache in his lungs and sides. The houses that lined the perimeter were dark and quiet. If he walked toward the school now, Baltazar knew he could get to the square undetected. By now, the lanterns and torches would be out and there would be fewer houses for him to pass.

It took him nearly half of an hour to cover the remaining distance to Haedon Square, a distance that he could walk in a few minutes, given normal conditions. As he walked out into the wide open square, Baltazar's eyes groped through the darkness to find any evidence of his father's body. Plumes of smoke danced from each of the buildings on the south and east side of the square. The moonlight shed some light into the giant courtyard. Searching across the square, he noticed a lump lying on the ground in front of the hanging platform. It was the only mass on the ground of the courtyard. When he'd fled earlier, bodies had littered the square amidst the chaos. Only one mass remained.

However, what he saw was too large to be his father; it was almost big enough to be two people. And then he saw movement. Baltazar froze, unsure of what he was seeing. Before worrying about the rational choice, he ran toward his father's body. Despite the mud, he kept his footing and dashed faster and faster ahead.

Something or someone arose beside his father's body. Another person. Baltazar clumsily slid to a halt in the mud and found himself staring up into the eyes of a stranger. The man's chest met the level of Baltazar's face; he stood taller than Titus the executioner, who until now was the largest man Baltazar had ever seen.

I have to...No. Don't think. Just act. Lunging, he butted his head hard into the man's ribs and attempted to wrap his arms around the massive tree trunk-sized body. The man pulled him off with one hand and threw him to

the ground next to his father's corpse. Baltazar landed on his back with a thud and, for once, felt grateful that the rain had left the ground so soft.

"I am not here to fight you," the towering man whispered to him. "Stay calm. The last thing either of us needs is for attention to be drawn to us."

The man wore a long dark cloak, similar to the one Baltazar himself had donned, except that it had no hood. "Then why in the name of Orijin are you standing over my father's body?" Baltazar managed to keep his voice low, despite the anger that drove it.

"You speak of Orijin. Good. Then you know religion. I was simply checking to ensure there remained nothing of value on him; nothing that someone else could find that would lead to you or anything else."

"What? I don't understand."

"We have never met," the man said. "But I have known of you for some time. Your father and I worked for the same people."

"Your words are nonsense. My father has been a farmer his whole life. I'm warning you now, I have a weapon. I don't know who you are, but if you leave now, I will not attack. I give you my word." *Don't let him see your fear.* He hadn't realized it, but he'd gotten up and was standing and facing the other man.

"Boy, your threats mean nothing. If I wanted, I could kill you. Save your breath and your energy. Where you're going, you'll need it all."

"Where I'm going?"

"I would assume, considering you have the Descendants' Mark, you would be going to The House."

"You're not making any bloody sense." Thought fragments pulled Baltazar's mind in every direction.

The man shook his head, "There is much you have to learn. Let us move behind the platform. We risk too much by talking out in the open." Behind the burnt and blackened hangman's platform, they sat beside each other, leaning against the wooden posts. "It seems you do not understand the significance of what is on your face," the man said. "That line on your face represents an honor bestowed upon generations of Descendants."

"It's a damned scar from being burnt as a child. My house burned down and the fire killed my mother. It's not some stupid line."

"I imagine that's what Joakwin told you. He lied. The only reason you

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live in Haedon is because he was trying to protect you. He assumed that if he tucked you away in the middle of the Never, he could raise you as a normal child and you would never question anything.”

“This doesn’t make any sense. What makes you think I believe anything you have to say? My father has just been killed in front of my whole bloody village, and you think that I will believe you just because I found you here in the middle of the night? I’m not some little child who’s going to hang at your every word just because you’ve come with these bloody stories about my father.”

“Then let me tell you more. If I cannot manage to convince you with what I know, then you are a fool.”

“Look, I don’t know what you want here, but I’m not going to sit here and listen to you. I have to leave before they kill me as well. I only came to bring his body back with me. My only concern now is finding out why my father was falsely accused of black magic, and then getting some type of justice on those responsible for this.”

“Think about it, boy. That scar, as you call it, is a perfectly straight line down your face. How is it that you would only be burnt on that little piece of your face? Are you really that much of a fool?”

Baltazar was losing his grasp on what to believe. “Fine, and supposing you’re right. I’m supposed to just believe you? If I hadn’t come back to get my father we would never have met, and you wouldn’t have been able to tell me anything. If I had stayed in hiding, what would you have done?”

“Trust me, Baltazar Kontez, I would have found you.” Baltazar’s eyes widened. “Yes, I know your name. You’d be surprised about how many people outside this forest actually do. I was given this mission because of my abilities to find people. I am the best tracker in the world. After searching your father’s body I was coming to find you next.”

“Y-you could have just asked someone in the town. They would’ve told you my name along with my father’s and my...”

The man cut him off, “There’s a voice inside your head that does not seem like your own.”

“Wh...” *How could he know this?*

“You do not know when exactly it got there or how, but it speaks to you like it has known you, like an old friend. It tells you the things you do

not want to hear, but perhaps need to hear from time to time.”

Baltazar now stared at him, his mouth agape. He had never mentioned that to anyone, not even his family. *He's right; I don't even know when it started talking to me. Was it tonight? But even then, it felt familiar, like I'd known it before.* “How...”

“Perhaps now you believe. In fact, there are people in this world who can actually help you with that, help you find the source, or even get rid of it for you, if you desire.” Baltazar was hooked. There was no possible way that anyone could know about the voice in his head. Yet now, this man before him revealed knowledge of it and that there was a possible cure. “Baltazar, I understand that Joakwin was executed on false accusations. Yet, his death was necessary, perhaps the only thing that could have set you free. This world is much larger than your little hidden town. There are people in this world you need to meet. People who can set your life in the right direction.”

“And what direction is that?”

“Did your father never teach you of the original Harbingers? The messengers of the Orijin?”

Baltazar struggled to understand what connection any of this could have to God, but then, he barely had any idea about anything he'd been told during this conversation. “We learned of the Orijin as children, and my father instilled in us a devotion to Him throughout our lives. But he never spoke of any messengers.”

“Pity. Look above us, candles are being lit in the windows. I do not have the time to say everything on the matter of your father, your past, or the mark on your face. There are others in the world who can help you. If you really want answers about your father, you must go to the House of Darian. The Headmaster there is a man named Marlowe. If there is anyone in this world who knows about your father and your past, it is he. And if, after speaking to him, you still have doubts, there are others there who are quite capable of helping you. Now we must part ways.”

“That's it? You have not finished explaining things to me! Why did you bloody come here if you would only give me half of a story and then leave?”

“I am a regular man. You are a Descendant. You have a manifestation, use it to help you. People on this side of Ashur will

welcome you.”

“Every time you say something, you put more questions in my head. Manifestation? I am not asking. I am telling you. You have to stay here and explain. Or let me go with you.”

“My only priority was to find you and make sure you would find the House of Darian. Not to bring you with me. To come with me would mean almost sure suffering and death for you. Trust me. There is no time to argue any longer. You will have to begin your journey without me, but I trust you will have success. The mark on your face will grant you certain privileges once you leave this forest.” The statuesque man arose. “Your days as a witless farm boy are over, Baltazar. Whatever you had planned for your life before meeting me, it cannot be. Our entire world will be at war soon; it is time you removed the veil from your eyes.”

“I hadn’t really planned anything. And now, I’m even less sure, as you’ve given me piss for a story, with barely much of an explanation. It seems my only choice is to leave this place; I will not be welcomed back.” More lights shone through the windows, and voices could be heard above.

“Travel southeast. The only name I can really give you is Marlowe, the Headmaster of the House of Darian, but most people will not recognize that name. Mention Darian or the House of Darian and people will guide you in the right direction, especially with the Descendants’ Mark on your face. Just over a day’s ride southeast of your camp in the forest is the city of Vandemar. Once you are out of the forest, it is about an hour’s ride. Make that your first stop. The people there are generally helpful and respectful towards those of you who have the Mark. Use it to your advantage, but do not overstep your boundaries.”

“Help me pick up my father’s body; I need to bring him with me.”

“Leave him. If you remember anything of your father’s teachings, you know that his body is now just an empty shell. To carry the body would slow you down. To give it a proper burial would set you back at least a day. There is no time to waste. War and death threaten this world, Baltazar. It is very important you to reach that House. Promise me you will go there.”

Baltazar shrugged and deeply exhaled, then nodded. “I will. My word is my bond.” He stood and clapped the mud from his hands. “What is your name?”

“Slade.”

“Slade. Thank you. I hope our paths cross again. You have much more to explain.”

“If you reach your destination you will not need my explanation. Good luck, Baltazar.” With that, Slade walked toward the buildings surrounding the square and disappeared into an alley toward the north of Haedon. As more and more lights appeared through the windows surrounding the Square, Baltazar ducked and scampered across it to the narrow roads leading back to the forest. Once again, he sprinted through the mud, sliding and slipping. Guilt poked at the back of his mind about leaving his father’s body behind, but he knew Slade was right.

Shortly, he returned to the camp he and Bo’az had set up. Bo’az was gone, but Baltazar thought nothing of it. He was probably hunting. Finding the flint and some small branches, he started a small fire and sat down against a thick tree. It was only after he lit the fire that he realized the camp itself was completely dry. It must not have rained this far into the forest.

Baltazar was exhausted, the night had felt eternal, but he was not ready to sleep. Too many thoughts traversed his mind for him to be at peace. He twisted his mouth and rubbed his beard as he contemplated; it had become a habit as of late. Since they’d begun to hide, he and Bo’az hadn’t shaved.

Thoughts of his father flooded his head first. Baltazar knew how simple-minded the people of Haedon were, so it was only fitting that his father would be charged with practicing magic. Baltazar never understood the vendetta towards his father. He had raised Baltazar and Bo’az to be respectful, humble, and to stay out of trouble and out of other people’s business. The Haedonians’ contempt contradicted everything for which his father stood.

His father had never paid any attention to magic. Baltazar couldn’t remember his father mentioning it even once in his life.

Fires were connected to the Kontez family for as long as he could remember. According to his father, when Baltazar and Bo’az were small boys, a great fire had burned down their first home, killed Baltazar’s mother, and left a black scar down the left side of Baltazar’s face, a straight black vertical line running down his forehead, intersecting his left

eye, and ending just below his cheek.

Bo'az had gotten through the fire unscathed. Baltazar had always been curious as to why his eye had not been affected by the fire, and why the scar hadn't felt any different than his unaffected skin. He'd never had the courage to ask his father about it, for fear that it might remind his father too much of his mother's death. According to Slade though, none of it was true.

Baltazar had felt scars before. And burns. But none had ever felt like the one on his face. The more he considered Slade's words, the more they seemed to make sense.

Baltazar wanted revenge. He wasn't sure who had made the accusations against his father besides Fallar Bain. But Oran Von was the one who sentenced him. One day, when he was ready, ready to make another man suffer, Baltazar would avenge his father's death.

I needed to see all of that. It was the only way I'd be able to avenge his death. As much as the memory will haunt me, it'll drive me to get back at them. I know it.

You will not do a thing and you know it. You will pretend for now that you are angry and vengeful, but you will get over it and then move on with your life. You and your little craven brother.

Shut up! Stay out of my head! I'm so tired of having to listen to you!

I am part of your mind, fool. But if you ever decide to be a man and avenge your father, I shall talk less.

Talk less now! The last thing I need is an argument with you.

Then stop arguing.

Please, I'm begging you. Let me be, at least for now. Until I can rest.

Very well. Expect my return.

The voice finally stopped. Still, questions littered Baltazar's mind. *How did that fire start tonight? The fire started from the ground, and nobody was close enough to have started it, even Fallar Bain. I was near enough to the front of the crowd that I would have seen if anyone had thrown a torch. And how did it grow so wild in a downpour like that?*

He needed answers. And nobody could give them to him any time soon. *Worse yet, if Slade was right, who is...was...my father? Better yet, who was my mother?*

Baltazar knew he would need to leave the forest to find his answers.

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He wasn't sure how long he would have to search or where this 'House of Darian' was, but he would gain nothing by remaining in the forest. He and Bo'az hadn't really discussed what they would do after their father's death, but this seemed like the best course of action. Without his father or the farm, there was nothing in Haedon for Baltazar and no reason to stay. His best friend had disappeared over two years ago without a word to anyone. And then there was her. Yasaman. He thought they would have eventually gotten married, but she'd shunned and avoided him since his father had been charged. Yasaman suddenly became busy all the time. She would pretend to sleep when Baltazar snuck to her window in the middle of the night. She'd hardly spoken to him since his father's confinement, but Baltazar didn't blame her. Her father didn't know of their relationship and she was deathly afraid of telling him, given the status of Baltazar's father in Haedon. She told him as much. And that as long as her father was around, they couldn't have a real future.

Still, it left a canyon in his gut that he couldn't fill. He'd hoped that eventually he'd be able to come back for her; that maybe the situation would ease. But he knew better. It was another change in his life that he had no control over and would have to accept, just like with his father.

He wished Slade could have stayed to guide him. Bo'az wasn't the type to be a leader or mentor. He was immature and paranoid about everything. The voice in Baltazar's head didn't stray too far from the truth. Chances were that Bo'az wouldn't be willing to do anything about their father. Baltazar looked up and saw his brother nearing the camp.

"Where were you?"

"I couldn't sleep; I've been walking around for the past few hours. Just trying to clear my head." Bo'az's eyes were red and bloodshot, his face pallid from tears.

"You should have come, it was important to be there."

"For what? To watch him die? You really think he would've wanted us to see that?" Bo'az dropped down next to the fire, rubbing his hands together. He had looked as tired as Baltazar felt. Baltazar guessed that he must not have gotten any sleep at all.

"He was our *father*. It would have made it easier for him."

"And what about for us? He was going to die no matter what. We couldn't change that, and if we'd tried to, we would have died along with

him. Going there would only have put our lives more at risk! We only have each other now, Tasz. We have to do whatever it takes to stay alive. And we have to be safe while doing it.”

“Whatever it takes? Be safe? What does that mean? That you’re just going to stay in the forest for the rest of your life?” Anger grew within him again.

“I don’t know, maybe for a while. It’s not safe for us in Haedon and we can’t trust anyone. We should stay here for at least a couple months before heading back into the town. Maybe then we can sneak back to the farm and hide out there for a little while.”

Coward. You’re driven by fear and nothing else. “Go back there? What, by the light of Orijin, would we do that for? No matter how long we wait, we’ll never be welcome. Anyone who sees us will either kill us or find someone else who’ll kill us. And the farm? The farm will be destroyed by tomorrow, if it hasn’t been already.” Baltazar stood and walked to look Bo’az directly in the eyes. “We can’t go back and we can’t stay here. We have to leave the mountains and forest and go somewhere else. Somewhere new. Our lives are going to be completely different now; we can’t expect to be able to do the same things as before.”

“You’re saying to leave everything we know? Everything we’ve known our whole lives? For what? You’re even going to leave *her* behind? You’re an ass to do that, this isn’t her fault.”

“*She* hasn’t wanted to speak to me or see me since all this started. I’m not leaving her behind because she’s made it clear that she’s not mine to leave. We have to start over now, whether you like it or not.” Baltazar hung his head, unsure of whom he was trying to convince. “I’m going to rest today, make up for all the sleep I’ve lost in the past few weeks. Tomorrow we’re gone; staying here is not an option. Like you said, we need to stick together and look out for each other.”

“I-I can’t. Tasz, we’ve never been outside of Haedon. We don’t know what the world is like. What if the stories are true and there’s nothing but forest out there? Maybe there’s a reason that father never took us anywhere else. Maybe it’s too dangerous out there for two seventeen-year olds who don’t know anything but farming.”

“Bo, if we go back into Haedon we’ll be killed. But if we go in the other direction, there’s a chance things could be better. I’d rather go where

at least we have a chance of surviving.” Baltazar returned to the tree and sat down, then took a deep breath. “Look, I spoke to someone when I went back for father’s body. There’s a town southeast, not far out of the forest. That’s where I’m going once I wake up.”

“Spoke to someone? A town? What are you talking about? There’s nothing out there, Tasz. At least not for us.”

“I’m going to sleep now. You should too. When I wake up later, I’ll wake you and we’ll pack. It’ll be better to leave at night, less chance we’ll be seen.”

Bo’az continued to plead, “Why do you need to get away so bad? What’s so wrong with waiting a little while? And if you swear that everyone in Haedon hates us, why would you trust someone with advice about where to go?”

Baltazar had hoped he wouldn’t have to explain the whole story, but realized it was only fair to tell him. Maybe it would convince Bo’az to leave now, too. “The man was at our father’s body, searching for us. He knows who we are and he’s not from Haedon. He spoke of things that he shouldn’t have known about, things about us. And he said we have to find a ‘House of Darian,’ that the name Darian would guide us. We have to find Darian.”

“So you want to leave to find something you’ve never heard of, just because a random stranger told you a story?”

“It’s something. I can’t explain why, but I know he’s right. He even told me that this thing on my face isn’t a scar, it’s a special mark. Something about me being a descendant of someone.”

“So you and I are twins, but you have a mark on your face and I don’t. And that means you’re a descendant of someone but I am not? You’re a bloody stupid bastard, Tasz. I’m not going. You can go without me. When you wake up, let me sleep, I’m staying here.” Bo’az stretched out, turned away, and closed his eyes. It was clear now he would not give in. He’d always been stubborn as a goat.

Baltazar decided that when he woke up, he would gather both of their clothes, food, and supplies. Once he was finished, he would wake Bo’az up and threaten to leave with everything, unless he agreed to come along. He gave in to his eyelids, which had been fighting to close for hours now. As he submitted to sleep, he prayed that his dreams would be kind to

him. He'd been afraid of what might plague his mind once he drifted off.

Baltazar heard a deafening roar in the forest and began to run. He could not tell whether he was running towards or away from something, but he felt compelled to run. Around him, the blackness conquered his vision. The trees and shrubs clawed, scratched, and ripped the skin from his arms and legs.

Red lights floated in the distance, menacing and welcoming at the same time. Despite his unending flight through the forest, the lights neither grew closer nor diminished. Racing through the jungle, Baltazar collided into trees, tripped over roots and rocks, and suffered cuts to his limbs, until finally an enormous root caught his foot and sent him hurtling down a slope of dirt and stones. He lay on the ground; face up, his body tangled with the forest floor, his eyes fighting off cloudiness.

Once his eyes triumphed, the dark red spots grew larger until the forest disappeared and he could see nothing but red. The color filled the air. Made it cloudy. Then invaded his eyes, nose, mouth, lungs. The redness burned him from the inside out. Blood oozed from him, black with char. The deafening roar erupted again, louder and louder until it seemed as it was right in front of him. So close that he wasn't sure if the roar came from him.

Baltazar awoke in a panic, drenched in sweat, unsure of his surroundings. The multi-colored sky approached dusk, darkness not far off. The dream made no sense, but he remained content to let it stay that way, for now.

Baltazar arose from the ground, ready to pack the sparse clothes, food, and supplies he and Bo'az had remaining. He turned to Bo'az, only to see that his brother was no longer there. All of his belongings remained, yet Bo'az was nowhere in sight. Baltazar packed both of their things and waited for Bo'az to return.

Baltazar organized his pack: clothes at the bottom, then supplies, and then food at the top. He did the same for Bo'az. His only weapon was the curved blade he'd taken from the farm. But it would be enough to scare away anyone trying to steal from them. He hooked the blade to his belt.

Baltazar sat back under the tree, awaiting Bo'az's return, and wondering whether any logic existed in anything Bo'az had said. He

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waited for more than an hour, nothing on his mind except that the sun was more courageous than he, because at least it was moving. He realized the longer he waited, the more likely he would be to continue stalling and put off leaving.

Baltazar stood up once more, slung the packs around his back, patted the wooden knife handle with his right hand, and realized he was doing the bravest thing he'd ever done in his life. He started walking away from Haedon.

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