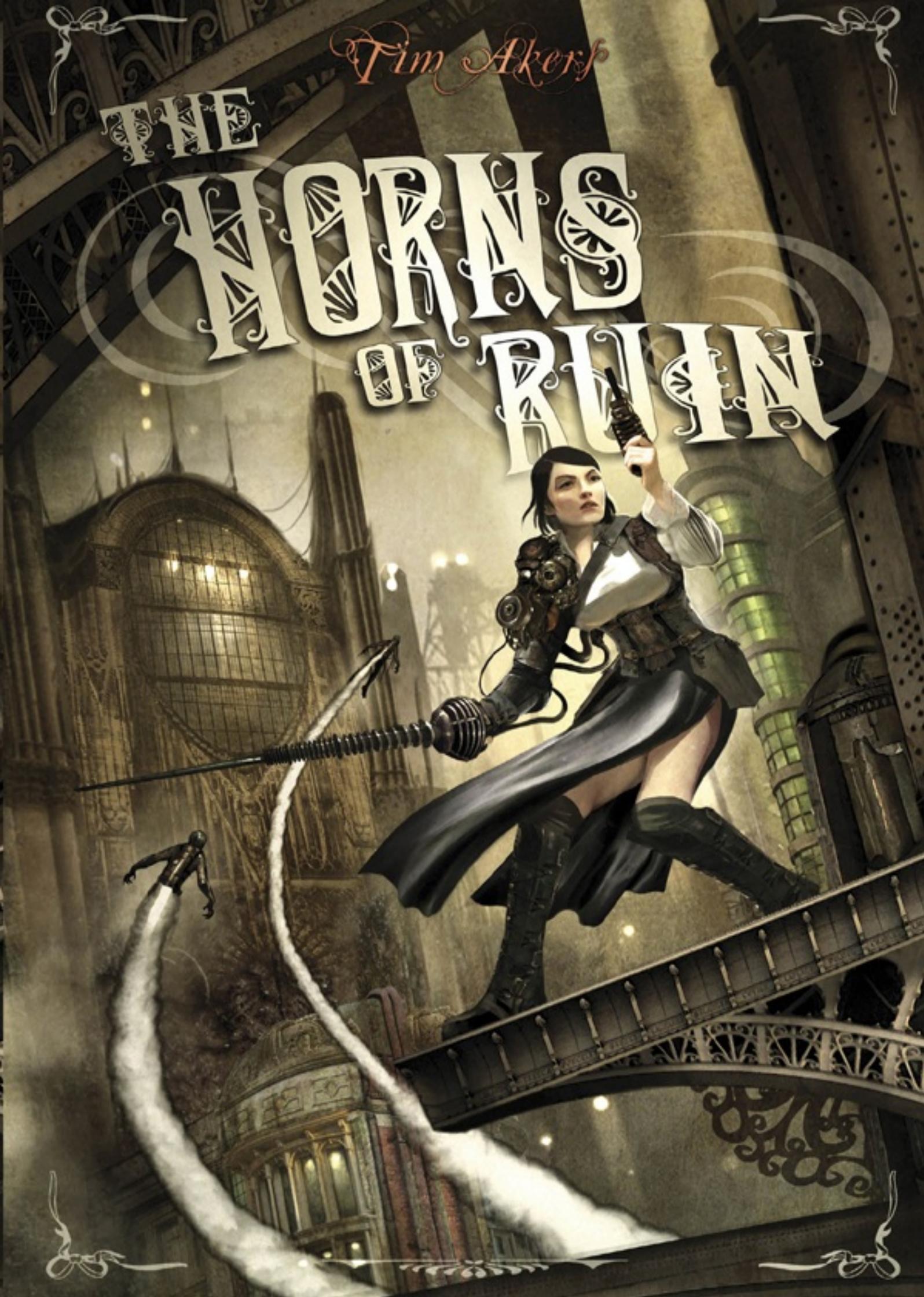


*Tim Akers*

THE

# HORNS OF RUIN



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*To my own Bloody Jennifer, who fights like a girl*

# CHAPTER ONE

**T**hey came for us one at a time, came to kill the last servants of the dead god Morgan. I had lost brothers and sisters before, to battle or old age. Scions of Morgan die all the time. We're warriors. Now we were going to die in alleyways, in our homes, in crowded theaters and empty hallways. They came to kill us, and we didn't know who they were.

They came for me and Barnabas while we were walking through the city, on our way back to the Strength of Morgan from an errand at the Scholar's prison, the Library Desolate. Well. Mostly they came for Barnabas. I just happened to be there, escorting him. It was me. I'm the girl who let the old man down.

He looked good that morning. Healthy. He always looked better out of the monastery. Those old, empty stone halls did little more than weigh him down. Open air, even the dirty air of a crowded street in the city of Ash, always put a smile on his face. He was smiling that morning. This was before the hidden deaths, before the murders and betrayals. Before we knew what was happening. He was the first one they came for, and we didn't know they were coming. Not yet.

We walked down the road, and the crowd parted for us. Barnabas was in his formal robe, a deep maroon hemmed with gold thread, and carrying the staff of his office. Symbolic armor clattered on his shoulders, and the cuffs of his robe were stamped with golden scale mail that shimmered in the morning light. His knuckles bore the calluses of a life spent fighting and working, the twin paths of the scions of Morgan. White hair and wrinkled face sat on a frame thick with muscle and iron hard. Even in the waning days of our Cult, there was glory in the office of the Fratriarch, and Barnabas Silent looked every inch the part.

As proud as I was, I wished he'd left the formal robe at home. I was dressed in my battle-day simples. Pride was fine, and glory was better, but both of those things were bought with attention. As the Fratriarch's only guard, I could have done with less attention. Of course, whatever attention I avoided by dressing simply, I gave up with my holster and sheath. But a girl shouldn't go out half dressed.

"It's a matter of state, Eva," Barnabas said, his voice as gentle as mist at the foot of a waterfall.

"I said nothing, my Elder."

"You did," he said, nodding. "In the way you stand, in the movement of your eyes. In the weight of your hand upon your bullistic. You do not wish to be here."

"It's not my fault you like to get dressed up, old man. No, no, I'm happy to be here. Thrilled to be walking through the city with the holiest man I know, just me as a guard. Not like we have any enemies, Barnabas. Not like the Rethari are massing at our borders, or their chameleon spies have been dredged up in the collar countries. No, not at all. This is ideal." I sped up a little to intercept a group of children who had blundered into our path. The Fratriarch smiled and patted their heads as we passed.

They stared at us, whispering. “I just wish you'd brought more guards. Maybe an army or two?”

Barnabas watched the children, his face equal parts gentle happiness and melancholy. He turned back to me.

“The Rethari are always massing. It's what they do. And as for their spies? We used to make stew of their spies. Besides, we have no other guards, Eva. It's a matter of state. We go to seek the aid of our godbrother. Only Elders of the Fist and Paladins may attend. Among the Elders, Simeon was busy, Tomas and Elias are napping, and Isabel cannot be more than ten steps from her library, for fear that one of her books go unread.”

“I saw Tomas, just before we left.”

Barnabas nodded absently. “Yes, yes. Not napping. Tomas does not...” He smirked and shrugged. “Tomas will not be involved in this. And of the Paladins, Eva?”

I grimaced and looked around at the passing crowd. A pedigear weaved past us, its clacking engine momentarily drowning out the perfectly good awkward silence.

“You are the last Paladin of the dead god Morgan, Eva. There are no more, and likely never will be,” he said, patting my hand. “I am the Fratriarch, and you are the Paladin. Let us attend to our business.”

He walked off. I sighed and followed.

“Yeah, let's just make a parade of it. You and me,” I said quietly, adjusting the hang of my revolver at my hip. “Maybe I should have rented an elephant.”

“Elephants don't belong in cities, Eva,” the Frat said, gesturing broadly to the crowded streets and towering glass buildings all around. “It's not humane.”

“To the elephant? Or the city?”

He laughed deeply, and I smiled and caught up. In younger years he would have pinched my cheek or patted me on the head, as he had those children. But now he was the Fratriarch and I was the Paladin. We walked side by side through the city of Ash.

“If it's a matter of state, then we're going the wrong way. Alexander will be at his throne today, in the Spear of the Brothers.” I pointed across the road. “That way, in case you've gotten senile.”

“It is,” Barnabas nodded, “and we are not going there.”

“You said—”

“Morgan had two brothers, Eva. We are going to visit the scions of Amon.”

I stopped walking, frustrating the crowd. Barnabas continued on, nearly disappearing into the throng before I snapped out of my shock.

A whole column of elephants wouldn't be enough, nor stone walls. Nothing would make me feel safe in the halls of Amon the Betrayer.



Ash is a funny city. Not funny, like rag clowns and puppet shows. Funny like it shouldn't exist. Funny like it should collapse in on itself in a cloud of shattered glass and burning streets. My kind of funny.

It goes back an Age, back to when the Feyr were the race-ascendant rather than mankind, when the Titans ruled the skies and the earth and the water all around. Before there were people, maybe. I don't know. But it goes back to the Feyr.

What is today the city of Ash was once the capital city of the Titans. Their throne, their birthplace, a city of temples and totems and grand technology. The name of that city is lost to us, but it nestled in a crater, like a giant bowl of stone sprinkled with buildings and roads and carved riverways. We really don't know why the Titans and the Feyr fought their little war, but they did, and that war came to the city in the crater.

The Feyr were masters of the elements. They made water out of nothing, fire out of air. They could sink mountains and freeze the sun in the sky. That's the story my momma told me, at least. Scratch that. That's the story my nanny told me. So the Feyr came to the crater, to the city of the Titans.

They burned it, then they drowned it. Two deaths for one city. It was enough to win the war, and more than enough to scar the Feyr forever. They filled the crater with a lake of cold, black water, and that lake was choked with the slick ash of the dead city below. It was a wound on the soul of their kingdom, the greatest sin they ever committed. In time they tried to atone. They built temples of wood that floated on the lake of ash, trying to suck the sickness out with their prayers.

And when war came to them, when mankind rose up and named their gods and came marching with swords and totems of their own, this was the last place the Feyr stood. Afterward, mankind made a city on that lake, built up from what was left of the charred temple-rafts of the Feyr. Amon the Scholar crafted engines that supported more and more structures, more buildings and roads and people. It became the capital of the Fraterdom, the impossible engines always churning against the lake to keep us dry.

It's a crazy way to build a city. Three hundred years, and that lake is still black as night.



I escorted the Fratriarch into the shadow of the Scholar's ominous prison. The Library Desolate was a dark wound on the city, its stone and steel walls still blackened from the arcane battle that washed across it generations ago. Whenever rain or time cleaned off some portion of its edifice, the citizens of the city of Ash would gather to ritually scorch the stone black again, as it had been burned when the outraged legions of Morgan descended upon it to slaughter the priesthood of Amon the Betrayer, for the murder of their god. That was a tradition we kept. The roof sprouted a cancerous rash of glass domes, their panes smeared with ash and chipped black paint. The last House of Amon the Betrayer lived in permanent night. The Cults of his brothers Morgan and Alexander saw to it.

We were met at the gate by a servitor of Alexander. Morgan had held this guard a century ago, until our numbers dwindled and the godking Alexander stepped in. He had ordered all records of our time in the prison destroyed. Security, he insisted. As though a scion of Morgan would sell those secrets. As though he couldn't trust the servants of his own brother. Though trust is what got Morgan killed, so I suppose it wasn't without reason.

The servant was a pale man, whiter than his robe, his bald head shinier than the dull silver of the icon around his neck. Not the cream of the crop, here at the prison. He looked us over with lazy interest, then spun up the clockgeist beside him and pulled

the speakerphone to his mouth.

“Names?” he asked over the clockgeist's quiet howling clatter. I stepped in front of Barnabas.

“Eva Forge, Paladin of Morgan and sister of the Fraterdom. I demand entry to the house of my brother by my right as scion of Morgan.”

He looked up from my breasts, then down to my holster, then up again to the two-handed sword slung over my shoulder.

“You'll have to leave your weapons at the gate.”

I sneered and snapped out the revolver, flipped it once in my hand, and spun the cylinder open. I presented the clacking wheel of bullets to him and began to invoke.

“This is Felburn, heart of the hunter, spitting fire of the sky. Morgan blessed the revolver as a weapon of his Cult at the towers of El-Ohah, when the storm cracked the stones of that place and the cannons of his army cracked the sky. This weapon was beaten from the iron of the mountain of the Brothers, the land of their birth. The bullets are engraved with my soul's name, and blessed by the Fratriarch of Morgan on an altar of war.” I snapped the cylinder shut, passed the barrel across the pale man's heart, and slammed it into my holster. “I carry it, whether I live or die, through fire and fear and foes. I leave it nowhere.”

“Well, I...uh.” The Alexian grimaced and shuffled his feet. Barnabas leaned out from behind me.

“Don't ask her for the sword,” he said, then banged his staff against the narrow stone walls all around. “It's a much longer show, and there's not really enough room for the full production. If we step outside for a moment, though, I'm sure she'll be happy to demonstrate. Eva?”

I reddened and chewed my jaw, then glanced over my shoulder at the old man. He was beaming. He stepped around me and tapped his ceremonial staff to his forehead, like a fisherman hailing a passing boat.

“I'm Barnabas, Fratriarch of Morgan and First Blade of Alexander's dead brother. If you don't know who I am, then you can be damned. I have an appointment.”

The color, what little of it there was, left the servitor's face. The clockgeist chewed out an answer that he didn't really hear. He nodded and the gate opened.

The pale-headed man locked the gate behind us, shuttered the cowl on the clockgeist, and escorted us into the library-prison of Amon the Scholar. We followed a long brick tunnel deep into the complex, the way lit by the Alexian's gently humming frictionlamp. There were no other guards, no other gates, but suddenly the tunnel opened up into the mitochondrial complexity of the Library's stacks. We were among the Amonites. I bristled, and the articulated sheath on my back twitched with insectile anticipation, like a spider testing its web. Barnabas sensed the change and put a broad hand on my shoulder.

“Silence,” he whispered. “These are the tame ones.”

“It's the tame ones I don't trust,” I answered, but left my blade where it was and tried to relax.

They moved among the stacks in absolute silence. Their black robes looked like wrinkled shadows, and they kept their heads down. A few paused in their grubbing among the books to turn our way, but the sight of a Paladin of Morgan sent them scurrying.

“They wander around like this?” I asked. The servitor nodded his bald head, though he did not turn to look at me.

“They are bound to this place, my lady. Their books, their equipment. The shrine of their god, fallen though he may be. They would not leave.”

I looked around at the close walls, the wooden ceiling, and the stinking, pulpy stacks of books on their sagging shelves.

“I would. First chance I got.”

“Well. Perhaps they don't have that, either.” The servitor fingered a loose coil of chain that hung from his belt and chuckled. It looked like a woman's necklace that had lost its stone. There was carving on the links, but I couldn't make out the pattern.

“I would prefer *they* wore the chains, servitor,” I said, resting my hand on my revolver. The stacks were narrow and close, like a maze of wood and leather. It felt like an ambush. “Better to have them in cages. If we still ran things, it'd be cages.”

The servitor stopped walking and faced me. The Fratriarch walked another half-dozen steps then idled to a halt. He flicked a hand through a book that was resting on a nearby podium, his eyes distracted. So old, in that moment. He looked like a forgetful grandfather. I pushed the thought aside and faced the servitor. He stared at me with barely veiled contempt. No, not veiled at all. Just contempt.

“In chains, madam? In cages? Tell me, are all the scions of Morgan so nuanced in their approach?” He whipped the coil of thin chain from his belt and held it at shoulder height. “What was the escape rate when Morgan held these halls? Do you know, even?”

I held the smaller man's gaze, leaving my face as dead as possible. He fingered the chains with idle malice. The Fratriarch ignored us. When it became clear that I wasn't going to answer, the servitor continued.

“We have had none, my lady. Not one. Chains rust. Cages can be shattered. The bonds of this world fail us. Faith in metal and stone is inevitably faith squandered.” He sneered, his tiny eyes wrinkling over his ugly nose. “You should know that, Morganite.”

I would have struck him, if the Fratriarch hadn't been there. The flat of my blade or the barrel of my bullistic, he deserved nothing less. Patience. It was a speech I heard a lot from the Fratriarch. From all the Elders. Patience. I put my hand flat against his chest and prepared to invoke. He grimaced and clenched the chains in his fist, then spat out something arcane. The stacks erupted in screams, all around, echoing between the rows of books like thunder in a canyon.

My sword was in my hands without a thought, the pistons and hinged arms of the articulated sheath pivoting it over my shoulder and into my ready grip. I dropped into a guard position and began invoking Everice, Mountain among Streams. The servitor laughed. The Fratriarch looked on with grim disappointment.

Black-robed Amonites stumbled from the stacks, spilling to the floor in shrieking agony. They writhed at the servitor's feet, their eyes wide with terror and pain. I stared at them in horror, then fascination. The Amonites had chains of their own, thin and flat, made of some dull gray metal and arcanelly etched. Our guide loosened his grip on his chains, and the screaming stopped.

The servitor stood over them, the coil of chains dangling loosely from his open palm. The Amonites lay in a heap, panting and mewling. The room smelled of offal

and disgrace.

“Cages rust. Metal fails.” He returned the coil to his belt. “We bind the soul, my lady.”

He turned and walked away. The Fratriarch looked sadly down at the pile of Scholars. There were old men among them, and children. He gave me a look, then followed the Alexian. I surrendered my sword to its sheath, then left the Amonites to struggle to their feet and disperse. There would be words from Barnabas for that provocation.

“Not my fault he's a jerk,” I muttered. He ignored me.

The small corridors and tight stairways continued for a while. I lost track of our turnings, though it felt like we were going higher. Groups of Amonites watched us from the shadows, eyeing the heavily armed woman and the old man with his fancy staff. The servitor they ignored. He hurried ahead of us, opening doors and securing locks. Well, at least they used locks sometimes.

“How did that work?” I asked the Fratriarch as we crossed a broad chamber. I kept my eyes on my feet, only daring to glance quickly over at the still furious Fratriarch. “How did he do that to them?”

Barnabas did not answer immediately. When he did, it was with a deep sigh and a quiet voice. “How does your armor work, student?”

I stumbled to a stop. Student. He had not addressed me in that way since...since I was a child. I hurried to catch up.

“Master, I meant no—”

“I asked a question, and I await an answer.”

“I...Master. The symbol of the armor is the armor.”

“The idea of the armor, you mean. The soul of the armor,” he corrected. He let out a long sigh and looked around at the dingy walls. His eyes held distaste, even pity. “We draw on the noetic power of Morgan's armor, and it protects us. We draw on the noetic power of his strength, the greatness of his deeds, the collective memory of his courage.” He waved a dismissive hand. “This is the same. The Healer has built a prison into each of them. Chains would bind the flesh. The noetic power of chains, the memory and symbol of chains, though—that binds their souls.”

I thought about that. It troubled me. The strength of Morgan, his courage and his bravery, his victories in battle—these were the things that gave us our power, our invocations. Each of our powers had its basis in some part of Morgan's story. Everice, Mountain among Streams, for example, is a defensive stance. When invoked, the scion of Morgan can face multiple threats at once, her attention divided equally in all directions. It draws its power from Morgan's actions at the Battle of Everice, when his line had been overwhelmed by the Rethari hordes. Morgan had stood alone against waves of scaled Rethari warriors for a full day, striking each of them down with a single blow. To the rest of the army, heavily pressed and unable to relieve their god, Morgan had looked like a mountain in a flood, battered from all sides but unyielding.

I wondered what bit of Alexander's history the power of the chains came from. Nothing widely known, it would seem. All the gods had their secrets, of course, revealed only to the highest scions. Still, it was a strange power for Alexander the Healer.

“Master Barnabas, I beg forgiveness for my actions. The presence of so many of the

Betrayer's scions—”

“Forget it,” he said wearily, and then smiled. “There is a duty here, and a purpose. These people do not serve Amon the Betrayer.” He stopped and fixed me with his pale eyes. “He did many things. It is by his hand that this city was raised, and by his servants’ hands that it still stands. His tools drove back the Feyr and forged the Fraterdom. The Betrayal was one act, as horrible as it was. One act. They worship the god that he was. Not the murderer he became.”

“Is that supposed to be enough?” I asked.

“It must be. Amon is dead. Morgan is dead at his hand. Of the three brothers, only Alexander remains. There is nothing more we can do.”

We stared at each other, master and student, elder and orphan. The Fratriarch sighed and turned to the servitor, who was waiting at the foot of a staircase. I followed, as I always follow. The Cult of Morgan was not mine to lead.

We continued in tense silence up a tightly coiling spiral staircase, dusty shelves of books on all sides, until we emerged into a much larger room. The Fratriarch and I stumbled to a halt, wide-eyed.

We were on a broad terrace that was, itself, part of a cavernous space of books and dappled light. This single room was a gash that ran the height of the building, steep walls that stepped outward in terraces and narrow walkways, polished wooden railings and trestles arching across the gap, their paths illuminated by warm frictionlight and, amazingly, the natural sun in delicate patterns. I followed the thin light up to the ceiling. Several of the domes that we had seen outside yawned over this grand chasm, their chipped black paint letting in a bright constellation of sunlight. And everywhere I looked, the walls, the rooms that opened onto the cavern, the walkways that wound treacherously across, all of them were lined with bookcases. They seemed to burst organically from the wood and stone, like strata of musty intellect crushed into gilded pages by the weight of the building.

The servitor hurried to a cabinet by the edge of the terrace. It was a dark wooden contraption with many tiny doors, each one cryptically marked with letters of the Alexians’ secret language. The bald man ran a finger along the cabinet, then snapped open one of the doors and drew out a long wooden dowel, jangling with loops of chain. He looked up and saw us in rapt distraction.

“The Grand Library. Surely there are records of this place in your monastery?”

“The godking had our records burned when his Cult took over the prison a century ago,” Barnabas whispered, then looked at the servitor. “He didn't trust his brother's church to hold the secrets.”

“Trusting his brother Amon led to Morgan's downfall, eh?” the servitor said tersely. “Perhaps Alexander did not wish to make the same mistake.”

I stepped to the bald man and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You should watch your words in the presence of people like me.”

“You should watch your hands on the body of your godking's servant, woman.”

The Fratriarch placed his staff between us, and we parted. I went to stand by the railing. This guy was getting on my nerves more than he should. Something in the air of this place made me uncomfortable, like a battle shifting under your feet before you can do anything about it. I put my elbows on the railing and stared down into the shelved chasm.

The floor of the library was dark and far away. A bristling forest of frictionlamps cast a ring of dim light around the perimeter, but the center of the floor was a slippery shadow of darkness. That void seemed to writhe with shivering currents. I struggled to focus on that strange expanse. Suddenly there was a disturbance and something smooth and gray rose from the floor. It slid quietly to the edge of the darkness, casting out ripples. I saw a pier, then, and tiny figures casting lines. A depthship, surfacing from the water.

“They have access to the lakeway?” I asked.

“No, no. There are wards. The lake is there for our use.” The servitor shook his head. “They could no more travel it than they could fly out that window. Settle down.”

The city of Ash was unique in the world, in that it floated on a great lake. Ironically, the many fabulous machines, each as large as a country town, that churned and lifted and stabilized the city were the design of Amon the Scholar. In this he had not betrayed his brothers, for those engines still kept the city afloat all these centuries later. But as much of the city lay below water as above it. This submarine section was linked by long passages of steel and stone, known collectively as the lakeway, navigable only by depthships. In places it emerged in underwater chambers, or let out into the black deeps of the lake itself. To have an open passage to this network in the middle of a prison...well. I found it strange.

“I don't care if you've nailed their tongues to the floor, Baldie. I don't care about your chain tricks or the fact that these bloody bookworms probably can't even swim. The second we're out of here I'm filing a motion with the Council to have that 'way sealed and your access suspended until such time—”

“Are you here to add anything of value to these proceedings, or is your sole purpose in this matter to run your mouth and lose your temper and make pointless threats that you have no ability to carry out?” he snapped. He left the open cabinet and stuck one pale, thin finger in my face. “Because I'm beginning to suspect that you're nothing but a good sword and a great rack!”

“Yeah,” I said, thoughtful. “Yeah. That's all of your wisdom I'm going to take.”

I flared invocations: the Sundering Stone, the Wall of the World, Hunter's Heart. My sword was in my hands, bleeding light and smoke and fire. The Alexian took a step back, and his form was fraying at the edges as he chanted the defensive invocations of the Healer. Barnabas stepped between us, then cracked me across the head with his staff. My invocations dropped.

“Child,” he said, and nothing more. Over his shoulder, the servitor of Alexander looked on with amusement. I returned the sword to the tiny, clasping hands of the sheath and took a stance of meditation.

“You should teach your children better, Fratriarch. A servant of Alexander knows his place in the presence of Elders.” The servitor whipped his hands and the invocation fell, his body snapping back to wholeness like a spring. Barnabas rounded on him.

“A servant of Alexander should know his place,” he snarled. He poked the pale man in the sternum with the staff. “Wet nurse, or bed maid, or hearth servant.” Poke. “Not provoking the scions of Morgan.” The Fratriarch crowded the servitor, stepping in too close and then following him as he retreated. “God of War. Champion of the Field. Heart of the Hunter. Do you understand?”

“That woman is...she is—”

“She is a warrior, an anointed Paladin, a scion of Morgan. She is a dangerous person.” He put an old hand against the servitor's chest and gave him a slow, powerful push. The pale man stumbled back. “As are we all, dangerous people.”

The servitor trembled against the cabinet, staring at the Fratriarch. He looked between us, then picked up the chained dowel that had tumbled from his hand.

“We have business, Fratriarch. There's no need for this to get complicated.”

“It always is, servitor,” Barnabas said. His voice was tired. “It always is.”

The bald man scowled but returned to the cabinet. He fingered the dowel, then unclasped a length of chain and handed it to Barnabas.

“Some of the chains express an aura of restraint, drawing on the souls of any who have been bound. We use those for crowd control. Other sets are attuned to specific individuals. Since your request was for a single subject, this is probably the best.”

Barnabas took the chain. It was a narrow loop, not more than six inches in loose diameter. He twined it around his fingers and squinted. “How does it...Ah.” The old man looked disoriented for a moment. Startled, I stepped forward and put a protective hand on his elbow. Slowly he regained his bearings. He looked at the servitor. “You didn't have to hurt them at all, did you?”

The bald man shrugged.

“Well, where is he?” Barnabas looked around, then stopped. “She. Yes, I see. Like this.”

He raised the chain, his fist clenching around the flat, dull links. A figure rose from a table on a nearby terrace and crossed over to join us. She was a young woman, a girl really. The dark robes of the Cult of Amon hung loosely on her frame, but she had her hood down. Her hair stuck out in thick, black curls, startling against her pale skin. She kept her eyes lowered. The chains that hung around her shoulders looked very new.

“A child? Did our request not stress the importance of our need?” Barnabas asked.

“This one is...gifted. Unique. Have faith in Alexander, my friends.”

“My knee will bend to him, sir,” I said, “but my faith belongs to Morgan.”

The servitor shrugged again, laughter dancing in his eyes. “As you say. If this girl will not serve, I'm sure we could reprocess your request. It would take some weeks, of course.”

“Don't toy with us, Healer.” I looked the Amonite up and down. A pretty thing, if frail. Battle would break her. “What's your name?”

“Cassandra,” the girl said. Her voice was quiet.

“You can incant the histories of Amon? The rites of the Scholar?” Barnabas asked.

The girl looked between us, then raised her arms and locked her fists together in front of her small breasts. Her voice, when it rolled into the quiet of the Grand Library, was a different creature from the timid ghost that had given her name as Cassandra. It was rich, resonant, touching in the deep places of my mind. The words spoke of stress lines and inertia, gear periods and energy reserves. It was the language of clockwork, the language of machines and engines arcane. It had a rhythm to it, smooth, churning, driving forward from beneath my skin and through my bones to a peak of momentum and mass and energy.

“Hold,” Barnabas barked, and the girl stopped. I came out of a stupor I hadn't realized I was in. The room was changed. A table by the cabinet was disassembled, the

old form cut away into gears and chains of wood. It was some sort of machine now, clockworks and cranks and long pistons of polished maple that gleamed in the half-light of the glass domes above. A gentle cloud of sawdust hung in the air around us.

“Do you see, now, the futility of locks, Lady Paladin?” the servitor asked. I stared at the wreckage of the newly made engine.

“What's it for?”

The girl shrugged. “It goes around,” she said. “It is an engine merely for the sake of engineering.”

“We've seen enough,” the Fratriarch said. “She will do.”

Our departure had none of the idle tension that marked our arrival. The servitor chatted happily with the Fratriarch as we made our way through the book-hemmed labyrinth. I walked beside the girl Cassandra, my hand on my revolver.

“So, what is the purpose of your request, Frat Barnabas?” the servitor asked. “One hundred years, the Cult of Morgan doesn't step foot in the Library Desolate, and suddenly you make a request for one of our guests. Some project, I assume?”

“What business is it of yours? She will be returned to your charge, brother.”

“As you say. Though, to be honest, with your companion I wouldn't be so sure. Small matter to me. I love the Amonites no more than you do. A matter of curiosity, is all.”

“Then curiosity it must remain.” Barnabas folded his hands at his waist, indicating resolve. The subtlety of his action was lost on the servitor.

“Plumbing trouble, perhaps? The Chamber of the Fist is hip deep in used toilet water, eh?” The servitor beamed and chuckled. He looked back at me. “We have plumbers in the city of Ash, you know. No need to deal with the folk of Amon for that.”

“As much as I appreciate the assistance of the godking in this matter, I'm afraid our reasons must remain our own,” the Fratriarch said.

“Have the scions of Morgan so lost faith in his brother Alexander, then?”

“As you said,” Barnabas stopped and turned to the bald man, “it was faith in our brother Amon that cost Morgan his life. And gained Alexander a throne.”

The servitor smiled stiffly, then nodded and led us out.

## CHAPTER TWO

The streets outside were busy. We began the long walk back to the Strength of Morgan, leading our black-robed charge. The girl kept her head down as we walked. I stayed in the front, my eyes on the crowd.

“Eva, we should speak about your outburst in there,” Barnabas said after we had walked several blocks. Took him longer than I expected. Old man must have been tired, from all the talking and the making nice to that bitch servitor.

“Which one?” I asked without looking back. Didn't like having the Fratriarch out in a crowd like this. I liked it even less as his only guard, but he hadn't wanted the sort of scene that an armed convoy would have caused. I didn't care about the scene. Hell, I just wanted more swords, more guns, and more eyes on the crowd. The Frat was probably right, though. Too much attention. Besides, the Cult of Morgan was spread awfully thin. The days of armored columns were behind us. I stopped daydreaming about a glorious caravan of fellow Paladins and snapped back to the conversation. “That man was trying to piss me off. I obliged.”

“Not much of a task, Eva. Listen.” He plucked my sleeve and I stopped, but I wouldn't look at him. These talks were bad enough without having to see the expression in his watery old eyes. “The Cult is waning. We need to preserve our relationship with Alexander and his scions. He's the last of the brothers still alive. Without his support, we'd be adrift. We'd be dead.”

“Is it too much to ask that he honor the memory of his dead brother?” I turned, glaring at the Amonite before settling my gaze on Barnabas. His eyes were old and tired. “That his scions treat the Cult of Morgan as something more than a curious relic from antiquity?”

“He honors us. Without him—”

“Honor? He drags us out for parades and holidays. He has his court jester write poems in Morgan's memory, then he steals our recruits and dedicates them to his own Cult. He's strangling us with bloody honor, Fratriarch.”

Barnabas winced. The crowd around us had slowed, gradually becoming aware of who was standing in their midst, and what these rare individuals were arguing about. The Fratriarch bent his head to me and spoke in a furious hiss.

“He does not steal recruits, Eva. Morgan is dead. Amon is dead. Of the three Brothers Immortal, only Alexander remains. Parents do not dedicate their children to the service of a dead god.”

I looked around at the silent crowd.

“Mine did,” I said, then marched off. The pedestrians melted away from me, anxious and afraid.

“Aye, girl. We know,” Barnabas said quietly, then glanced at the Amonite and motioned her forward. “Come on. She'll leave us if we let her.”

I made them struggle for a minute before slowing so they could catch up. I was a

little embarrassed to have walked away from the man I was supposed to be guarding, but I was a little more pissed that he'd lectured me in public. We walked in tense silence for a while, then I drew up next to the Fratriarch.

"So why are we doing this?" I asked, nodding at the quiet girl in her black robe and dull chains. "We've had no need for an Amonite for one hundred years. Why now?"

"It is a matter for the Elders, Eva."

"Well. Let me know if this one is lacking. I can be persuasive."

The girl looked up. Her face was impassive. "I will serve you, scion of Morgan. But not out of fear."

I snorted. "As you say. Just keep in mind that—"

"We're being followed," Barnabas said under his breath.

And we were. Of course we were. Damn Barnabas's fault for calling me out, and that damn Alexian's fault for being a windbag and giving me a good reason to get in trouble. That was my first mistake of the day, I think. Probably not the worst. I pulled our little group to the side of the road, grabbing the girl by her thin shoulders and pretending to shake her. Like we were arguing.

"Where are they?" I asked. The girl kept staring at me, indifferently. Barnabas pulled my hands away from the girl.

"They've passed us now. Probably more around and they're just handing off the tail." I looked up at his face, then followed his eyes down the street. Two men in bulky overcloaks, the hoods up, were strolling casually along. They turned a corner and one of them spared us a glance. His face was cowed, a ventilated metal mask covering his nose and mouth. His eyes were much older than his body suggested, and there were strange markings around them like tattoos. The pair disappeared behind a building. I looked back at Barnabas and the girl. She was still staring at me.

"Distinctive couple," I said. "Not terribly sneaky."

"They snuck up on you," Cassandra said.

I grimaced, but ignored her. Barnabas was looking up and down the street.

"They were pretty obvious. Maybe just trying to spook us?" I asked.

The old man shook his head. "There was something different about them, right up until they passed us." He twisted his staff in his hands like he was wringing a towel. "I didn't see them either. Not at all. For all that they stuck out, I didn't see them."

"Invocation of some kind?"

"Something."

I looked at the girl again. "Maybe the sworn rites of Amon the Betrayer?" I asked. She flinched, but her eyes did not leave mine. "One of your assassin friends, come to collect his girl?"

"The Betrayer's invocations are proscribed," she answered. "They are not recorded, they are not practiced. They are not known, to me or any of my brethren."

"Sure, honey. Everyone believes that. You're all innocence and knowledge. We get it." I turned to Barnabas. "What do we do?"

"There won't be any more. The Amonites' shadowkin work alone, or in small teams. If those are truly Amonites of the Betrayer..." He trailed off. "We should find a Justicar's post. Get an escort."

"What happened to not causing a scene?"

"That was to avoid attention." He gathered himself up, holding the staff in front of

him like a plow. “We seem to have attracted attention.”

“Nearest post is five blocks. North, north, west, follow the iron stairs,” Cassandra said, as though reciting scripture. “We can be there in two minutes.”

“You just happen to know that?” I asked.

“We maintain the city. We know the streets.”

“Very well,” Barnabas said. I put a hand on his shoulder, then made my second mistake.

“North is out of our way,” I said. “The Strength is east and south.”

“The nearest post—” Cassandra began.

I interrupted her. “We’re going south and east. There are posts along the way.”

Barnabas shrugged. I unholstered my bully and quickly invoked the Long Reach, the Iron Teeth, and Balance of the Songbird. The cylinder hummed as the etched rounds in the revolver glowed with power. Weaker invocations, but they were the only bullistic rites I had. I was a girl of the blade, but this wasn’t the place for that much steel.

“We’ll move fast. Elder Frat, you and the girl move side by side.

Stay ahead of me. If I yell, you drop. Unless I yell something about running. Then you run.”

“Shouldn’t you be in front?” Cassandra asked. “Leading us, or something?”

“Bitch Betrayers come from behind. If I can see them, I can shoot them. It’s a pretty simple system, really,” I said, then crossed the bullistic over my chest and nodded. “Let’s get going.”

We moved out into the crowd, which was rapidly dispersing. Crowds smell trouble. In this case, maybe the crowd saw a heavily armed Paladin of Morgan with her bully out, escorting an old man and an angry girl, all of them looking nervous and a little trigger-happy. Barnabas invoked as we went, something I didn’t know. An almost invisible force washed out in front of us, lapping around our legs and trailing in our wake. I had no idea what he was doing, but it made me feel better to hear the old man chant and see the blessing of Morgan around us. It made the crowd nervous, but that was okay.

Four blocks, six, then ten. The old man’s voice was faltering. There really should have been a Justicar’s post by now. Barnabas finally stopped invoking and just moved, taking long, deep breaths that shuddered as we walked. I hadn’t seen any more of the Betrayers, but I didn’t expect to. The crowds were pretty much gone. I kept looking up at the buildings we passed. Betrayers were blade-men, but what if they hired help? What if they hired a sniper? I was jumping at shadows now, and the empty streets were not calming me down.

We stumbled into an empty square and the Fratriarch stopped by the dry fountain at its center. He leaned against the concrete and hunched over. His breathing sounded bad. The girl stood next to him with her hand on his shoulder, looking for all the world as if she cared. He couldn’t go on, though he would try if I asked him.

“We aren’t going to make it like this,” I said. Barnabas didn’t answer, his thick shoulders heaving as he tried to get his breath. I looked at the girl. “Where’s the nearest post now?”

“Same post. It’s just twice as far away now.”

“There’s got to be one closer. Why the hell am I asking an Amonite where I should

go to hide from another Amonite?” I started to pace around the fountain. The buildings surrounding us were part of the old district, tired and stone and settling into themselves. Faces in the windows quickly disappeared. “This is ridiculous.”

“There have been a series of post closings in the last six months, mostly for maintenance issues,” Cassandra said, again as if she were reciting holy writ. “The southern horn of Ash has been particularly hard hit, as the base level of that part of the city has been settling into the lake at an unusual—”

“Stop it. You don't say two words together all the way here, and now you're giving a lecture. I don't need a lecture on city infrastructure. What I need—”

There was a roar that filled the square, and the ground shook. I dropped to one knee and aimed my bully before I realized it was just the monorail line. Tracks ran across the northern edge of the square, the elevated rails held up by rusty iron trestles that seemed to grow out of the brick of the surrounding buildings. The train rumbled past, filling the square with clattering noise and a wind that smelled of hot metal and burning grease. When it was gone I looked at the girl.

“The nearest mono station?” I asked. She nodded, and we helped the old man to his feet.



The mono lines of Ash travel the city in wide, sweeping arcs, like the cogs of a giant clock. Riding one is never the most direct way to your destination, but it is certainly the fastest. I ran up the stairs at the nearest station while Cassandra and Barnabas struggled to keep up. I caught the car just before it was leaving, kicking everyone out of the forward compartment and holding the door while the Fratriarch got on. Some of the passengers grumbled and then got on one of the other cars. A lot of them took one look at my bully and just waited for the next line. I watched everyone who got on the other car after us, then pulled the compartment shut. We rolled out of the station with a groan.

“I used to ride the train, when I was a boy,” Barnabas said. He sat with his eyes closed, his head leaning gently against the car window as we bumped up to our full speed. “My mother and I would take it to the northern horn, to visit the docks. She made a brilliant fish chowder, every Sunday.”

“They had trains back then, old man?” I asked. “I always pictured you growing up in a cave, maybe with a mule or something to carry you down to the rock store.”

“We had trains, Eva. And revolvers and elevators and hot water.” He smiled, and his face filled with wrinkles. “We were very civilized people back then.”

“These lines were laid by Amon the Scholar, in the hundredth year of the Fraterdom,” the girl said. She was standing, leaning against the wooden frame of the window, one hand on a leather loop that hung from the ceiling. “He laid the lines and built the centrifugal impellers that power them with his own hands.”

“Was this before or after he murdered his brother Morgan on the Fields of Erathis?” I asked. “Oh, right, it must have been before. Because afterward we hunted him down, chained him into a boat, and burned him alive. So it must have been before that, right?”

She didn't answer at first, swaying with the movement of the train, her eyes on the

city as it ripped past.

“Yes,” she said eventually. “It was before all of that. But not much before.”

We rode in silence for a while, the Fratriarch breathing quietly in his seat, the girl watching the window. I paced the length of the car, my boots wearing down the already heavily worn carpet. It had probably been nice carpet, once. I cancelled the invocations of the bullistic revolver and just paced. I kept looking back at the other passengers in their cars, but they made a point of not raising their eyes from their newspapers. I was glancing back when the light hit, so at least I still had my eyes when it happened.

It was a fast shot, traveling from my left and going toward the front of the car. It came in through the windows like a lightning flash, first behind us, then keeping pace, then ahead of us and nearly gone. I was just glancing over my shoulder to see what it was when the sound came. Tearing, like ripped cloth. The tracks shook and then everything was washed in red and gold and a terrible, terrible sound.

We fell. I hit the carpet hard and slid all the way to the front of the car, slamming to a stop with my shoulder against the wall. The girl slid into me, screaming. Barnabas ended up against the benches. He was the first to his feet. I pushed the girl away and stood. Cassandra lay on the floor, burbling and wailing. When she rolled over I saw that her right hand was a mangle of skin. There was no blood, but the bones were broken, and there were long, angry friction burns across the palm and back. Her thumb was pointing in several wrong directions.

Outside the car, there was smoke and metal. Something had hit the track. The creosote-smearred wooden spars of the tracks were burning with chemical brilliance, thick black plumes of smoke rolling off in heavy waves to the street below. The rails themselves were as tangled as the girl's hand. We were off the tracks and leaning in dangerous ways. The other passengers were screaming. I was screaming, too.

“Get up and away from the windows. Get off the car!” I yelled. In the cars behind us, people were slapping open the emergency hatches and riding the telescoping chutes to the ground. I started toward our own chute just as the car torqued under some unseen force. All the windows popped, then the ceiling peeled open like a scroll. Fat coils of rope, three of them, landed on the floor around us.

They landed in a rough semicircle. I turned my back to the Fratriarch, pushing the whimpering Cassandra behind me. The girl stumbled to the ground, cradling her limp hand against her chest. I hurriedly invoked armor and strength, sketchy bindings that I could snap out without thinking. I didn't have time to think. Gold lines traced the edges of my greaves and pauldrons, and the air around me tightened. The runes of my noetic armor settled down to a warm glow. As invocations went, they were weak, but there wasn't time for anything fancy.

Our assailants wore armor, actual armor, though it was roughly formed. Their faceplates were flat and plain, two bulbous gogglelike eyes over a voxorator grate. The metal of their breastplates and pauldrons was dull gray, sheened like oil on water. Wickedly barbed blades snapped out from their armguards. They attacked without saying a word.

I laid into them. My opening strike was to the left, scything past the first brute's guard with the weight of my attack. The blade struck his shoulder, denting metal and drawing a staticky shriek from his vox. He collapsed to the floor, and I followed the

force of the blow, letting my sword swing low. My momentum rolled me over the fallen warrior. I came to my feet. This separated me from the Fratriarch, but their attention was fully on me. *That's right, watch the dangerous bitch. Don't worry about the old man.* The two remaining guys were nicely lined up. I turned the flat of my blade toward them and invoked.

“Morgan stood at the gates of Orgentha, broken city, broken wall. He stood in the stones and bones of the defenders; he stood before the spears of the invader.” My voice was flat and quiet, grinding like stone in the grist. This was a new invocation for me, and I had to focus to draw into the past and pull out the power of Morgan's story. Hard lines of energy danced around my legs, light cutting in spirals through the train's dusty interior. The attackers stared at me impassively with their glassy eyes. I hurried, binding the invocation as quickly as I could. “Three days he stood against them, alone, shield as a wall, sword as an army. The city stood. He stood. The Wall of Orgentha.”

The long, complicated length of my sword flashed, the power springing from the floor and coalescing against the blade. I swept it down and a brickwork of light traveled across the train, cutting the Fratriarch and Cassandra off from the attackers. The bug-eyed men looked the wall up and down, its light winking brightly off their lenses. When they looked back in my direction I had moved. I stood at the rough opening that had been torn in the car, swinging my sword in the slow circles of a balanced guard.

“Wall behind you, sword before you,” I snarled and smiled. “Nowhere to go, boys.”

The fallen attacker stood slowly. He moved his arm sparingly, and the dents around his shoulder leaked blood. He watched me warily. Odd curls of cold fog wisped out from under his mask.

“Three to one?” I asked. Their absolute silence was getting to me. “I am comfortable with those odds, now that I don't have to worry about the Fratriarch.” I slid from balanced guard into a more aggressive stance. “Let us settle our differences, as warriors do.”

The air filled with the roaring drone of engines. Behind the shimmering wall, Cassandra's eyes went wide, even around the shock. The Fratriarch grimaced, then put a hand on the girl's shoulder and began invoking. Reluctantly, I glanced behind me.

A dozen more, their bulbous green eyes bright as they arced toward the train from the ground on columns of black smoke. These men wore two barrel-wide burners on their backs, flame flickering around the turbine blades as they whined forward. Couldn't hold off this many. I looked back at the Fratriarch.

“Go!” he yelled. His voice was muffled behind the wall of light.

“If I leave you, the invocation will unravel.”

“Girl, I have my own tricks.” He planted his staff and leaves of metal began to tear through the ruined carpet from the car and swirl around him like a tornado on an autumn day. The leaves slapped together into a rough, hollow column around the Fratriarch. He drew the girl close to him. “Morgan on the Fields of Erathis, Eva Forge. Remember.”

The last metal flake fell in place, and I dropped the wall. Light continued to flash from the column. Other invocations, other wards. The Fratriarch was Morgan's First Sword, his greatest scion in the world, I reminded myself. One of the framework towers that held the monotracks up over the city was nearby, and I jumped to it from