

THE PROPHET'S GAP

(Ezekiel 22:23–31)

Beloved ground that calls for rain,
That cries for flooding wrath below;
Consume the priest, restrain the beast,
And raze the land with cleansing flow.

For lions tear the witless prey,
Conspiring prophets fill with dread;
The widows plead, their hearts still bleed,
While prophets' fingers drip with red.

They lie, they steal, they whitewash sin;
Obtaining visions straight from hell.
They rob the poor and shut their door
To strangers seeking ports to dwell.

A gap is torn within your hedge,
The pile of stones you trust to shield;
Protective wall becomes a hall
That channels wrath unless you yield.

I search for souls to seal the gap,
For holy ones to build the frame;
O come and stand before the land
Become the stones that block the flames.

Alas! No mason could be found
To set the stones the rampart needs;
The flames must rage upon this stage
And purge the land of choking weeds.

A final call I make today,
Will you become the stone that seals?
Will you command and take a stand
And call upon your friends to kneel?

The devil's darts awake to fly;
His priests repel the truth with scorn.
Yet still make haste, no time to waste,
For wrath will come upon the morn.

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CHAPTER

RED DAWN

A winged shadow flitted by the motel room window, first one way, then the other, like an animated silhouette painted on the drapes. Matt lifted from his pillow and propped himself on an elbow. Was it a bird? If so, it had to be a big one, maybe an owl sweeping past. Yet, bird or not, something had ignited the danger alarm in his gut. No more sleeping, at least not until the sensation eased.

From the partially closed bathroom, a narrow shaft of light illuminated the area, revealing a TV, desk, dresser, and two beds. Matt lay in the one closer to the window, while his mother and Darcy slept in the other. The pairing seemed odd—a winged woman of incomparable faith slumbering next to a young prostitute fresh from a street corner—strange bedfellows indeed.

Thumps from the room above, squeaks from springy mattresses, and indiscernible whistles and clicks created a haunted-house sensation. Blown by the room's heater, window drapes shifted, making the persistent shadow undulate when it passed by,



and muted light from the waning moon created an even spookier feel. If he were not well past the age to hide under a blanket on this cold Nebraska night, he might invent an excuse to awaken his mother. But after breaking into and out of a military prison, surviving a volcano eruption, and getting shot by an insane demon, a shadow was nothing to fear. It probably really was just a bird searching for crumbs or shelter from the wintry air.

Matt's danger sensors spiked. The bathroom darkened. The heater's fan fluttered to a stop. He sat up and stared at the window. The glass shattered. A winged beast burst through the drapes and leaped on him. He grabbed its neck, keeping its snapping jaws away. As the two thrashed, dark scales flew from the creature's skin, and thick fluid dripped from its sharp fangs to Matt's forehead.

Mom jumped out of bed. Darcy screamed. The door crashed open, sending wood shards flying. A dragon's head shot inside. Fire roared from its mouth and engulfed the beast's wings and back. A squeal erupted. Matt threw the attacker to the floor, leaped up, and flipped the light switch, but the wall fixtures stayed dark.

A man wearing a flannel shirt pushed past the dragon and burst into the room. "Stay calm," he said as he pulled a blanket from the bed and laid it over the flaming beast. "These creatures are dangerous, but fire kills them pretty quickly. We mustn't burn down the motel."

The first rays of dawn spilled in through the broken door, providing a good view of the man as he mopped his brow and brushed his hand on his faded jeans. "In any case ..." He bowed his head toward Mom. "It's good to see you again, Bonnie."

Mom straightened her shirt, having slept in the only clothes she had. "It's good to see you, Enoch."

Darcy rose from the bed and pulled Matt's cloak around her. "Hello, sir."



"Hello, Miss." Enoch bowed his head to her as well. "You must be Darcy."

"I am." She smiled, shivering. Although drapes again covered the broken window, frigid air seeped through.

"I'm Matt." He extended a hand. "Thanks for the help."

Enoch shook his hand firmly. "We were more than happy to offer assistance."

"Your timing was perfect," Mom said.

"Not quite perfect." Enoch picked up a long strip of wood from the floor. "If we had arrived earlier, we might have prevented all this damage. The innkeeper won't be pleased, especially when he sees the stain that foul beast will leave on the carpet."

"Your dragon friend looks familiar." Mom squinted. "Abaddon?"

The dragon's head bobbed. "I am able to appraise appearances, so I assume you wonder why I wandered from my world."

Mom crossed her arms and smiled. "Abaddon the alliterative angel has arrived."

"Pleased to be present," Abaddon said. "I was delighted to dispatch the demonic drone, but duties demand that a death-dealing dragon depart at dawn."

"Since dawn is nigh," Enoch said, "we must hurry with our explanations and purpose."

Matt pulled the blanket from the smoking carcass and picked up one of the scales the drone had shed during their battle. Slick and leathery, it smelled like burnt rubber mixed with wet dog and motor oil.

"You were being followed by a drone," Enoch said. "It is of demonic origin, one of Tamiel's minions. My guess is that it saw us and assumed that you had called for our help, which Tamiel would not allow. I suppose that he assigned it to track you, so others might be lurking."



Darcy scowled at the drone as it jerked in death throes—twisted and smoking. “It looks like a half-dragon, half-vulture ... thing.”

“And a dangerous *thing* it is.” Enoch inserted the wood strip into the drone’s mouth and pushed up its leathery lip, exposing one of its fangs. “When it bites, it injects venom that in low doses causes temporary paralysis, and in higher doses, death. A few drones have a different form of venom that slowly brings about irrational thoughts and behavior and finally insanity that cannot be cured by any medicine or therapy known to man.”

Matt rubbed his neck. “Good thing you showed up before it got me. Thanks again.”

“You are quite welcome. And now to explain why we are here.” Enoch leaned outside, lifted two hard-shell suitcases into the room, and set them on the floor. “Clothing and other essentials. The heavenly grapevine told me that you are all in need of toiletries and proper attire, including something you can sleep in so you can launder your daytime clothing at night.”

“Thank you!” Darcy touched a rose-colored suitcase. “This one?”

Enoch nodded. “That one contains your clothes as well as toiletries for all of you. Get dressed quickly while I talk to Bonnie and Matt, assuming, of course, you are able to do so without lights.”

“No problem.” Darcy picked up the suitcase and hurried into the bathroom.

When the door closed, Enoch lowered his voice. “No time for detailed explanations. The spiritual realm is bursting with frenetic commotion. Because of the weakness in Bonnie’s song, demonic activity has escalated, and the vast majority of people have become your enemies, so you are in constant danger.”



“And darkness will definitely dominate.” Abaddon’s tongue darted out and in. “As archangel of the abyss, I determine the day to distribute doom from my domain based on a barometer of barbarism. Calamity is coming quickly unless you conquer the corruption.”

“Doom from your domain?” Mom said. “Aren’t Sir Barlow, Tamara, and the Second Eden refugees still there?”

“Your comrades are currently commuting to Second Eden along with the returning refugees.”

Enoch patted Abaddon’s neck. “We have called upon Listener to help with evacuating the women and children. Although Abaddon’s Lair will close, and resurrections to this world and to Second Eden will soon cease, I think combining Listener’s diligence with Sir Barlow’s strength will assure a good result overall. In the wake of Valiant’s death and the volcano’s destruction, Listener has taken a leadership role in Peace Village and has coordinated the rebuilding efforts. She has already proven to be a brilliant organizer and motivator.”

Matt’s ears burned. Just hearing about Listener brought a surge of mixed feelings. Such an amazing girl. But probably too old for him, and her wisdom and maturity definitely put her out of his league.

Abaddon blew a smoky sigh. “The interruption of my industry is inevitable, so I finished facilitating my fold. Now only a solitary statue stands by the streams.”

Mom lowered her voice to a whisper. “Anyone I know?”

“For the moment it is merely a monument,” Abaddon said, “a soulless slab of stone, though a symbol can be stirred. Still, a single statue is a satisfying situation. You see, Second Eden’s birthing bed now blooms with babies, so it behooves Bonnie Bannister to bid for finer fates for her friends. Fatalities are frowned upon.”



Enoch chuckled. "My dear, my draconic ally is saying that it seems of late that if someone you love dies, his or her soul ends up in Abaddon's Lair, though very few from the general population are resurrected. This revolving door, however, will soon stop turning, and resurrections will no longer spring from Abaddon's Lair. I do not know, however, when that change will take place."

Abaddon's eyes flashed blue. "Hear this admonition, unalliterated and unveiled. I have recently learned the reason for the many resurrections associated with you and your loved ones, but it would be impossible to explain in the brief time we have remaining. Suffice it to say that there is a reservoir that supplies the life energy for resurrections, and you and your friends have been among its suppliers in a way that I did not expect. A time will come when my realm will crumble and vanish, and this reservoir will be the only means of bodily resurrection." As his eyes faded to normal, he shifted his gaze to Matt. "If more information becomes necessary, then experience gained during your journey will provide what you need to know."

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Matt averted his eyes. Abaddon's stare felt like a piercing knife. Why would he be so probing when he was obviously talking about Mom and her gifts? "Okay. Thanks for the info."

"Yes, Abaddon. Thank you." Mom gave Enoch a pensive look. "But what I really want to know is if you've seen Billy or Walter or the others."

Enoch shook his head. "The twisting spiritual planes have disabled my viewer. If not for Abaddon's keen sense of smell and excellent memory regarding your scent, we would not have been able to find you."

"My scent?" Mom asked. "Is it that strong?"

"Not strong. Distinctive. You have been in Heaven, Hades, and the Bridgelands, and you have collected a blend of scents that

no one else has, an aroma that can never be washed off. The drones are trained to follow scents, which is likely why this one could follow you.” Enoch pulled back a curtain and peered outside. “Much has happened since you’ve been gone, even overnight. You will find that the sun and moon aren’t as bright as before. They both appear to be wearing a scarlet shroud. Plagues have killed millions, and most people cower in their homes in fear of a multitude of contagions, though some looters boldly steal whatever they can lay their hands on. The chaos is such that local authorities are useless. Most communications are down except for some that access satellites, so you can imagine the turmoil that is causing.”

Matt glanced at the room’s telephone. It hadn’t worked ever since they arrived. “How about where we’re going? Are things chaotic there?”

Abaddon spoke with a growl. “Mayhem is moderate in the Midwest, but chaos creeps from the corners as time ticks tenaciously. Soon the savage situation will spread from sea to sea.”

“Correct,” Enoch said. “It makes me wonder if the four horsemen are riding, and the trumpets are about to sound.”

“The ones in Revelation?” Mom asked. “The end of the world?”

“Perhaps. If Earth’s spiritual condition continues to deteriorate, I assume we are seeing the four horsemen of the apocalypse. If you don’t stop Tamiel’s plan to complete the corruption of mankind, at some point the great abyss will open and release a force that will torture the human race, and more calamities will follow. Then no one will be able to prevent the end of the world as we know it.”

Matt blew out a low whistle. A real apocalypse. It all seemed too bizarre to be possible.

“No time to tarry,” Abaddon said. “The sands are spilling as we speak. I must, however, take time to tell you this. If I arise from



the abyss with my avengers, I will be waging war, and I will forsake friendliness.” He withdrew his head from the room and shuffled away.

For a moment, everyone stared. Then Enoch waved a hand. “Don’t worry about him. He’s always filled with mysteries.”

“That much I know,” Mom said. “Sapphira and I had some, shall we say, heated conversations with him.”

“To be sure. I will tarry for a little while, but since he is not a patient dragon, I will have to join him soon.”

“So ...” Mom sat on Matt’s bed. “If I go on this quest and hurt my song, I might hasten the calamity, and if I don’t go on the quest ...”

“Then calamity is a certainty.” Enoch’s face took on a melancholy expression. “When I see the corruption that the people of this world have freely chosen, a battle rages in my heart. In one light, I feel sorry for them, and I wish to do whatever is possible to help them escape from their own foolishness. In another light, I long to deliver retribution, to punish them for their rebellion against the light.”

“I feel that,” Matt said. “How do you resolve the battle?”

Enoch sat next to Mom and patted the mattress. “Matt. Please.”

When Matt joined them, Enoch continued. “I resolve it by realizing that desires for mercy and for justice are both motivated by love. Love for our fellow man desires rescue. Love for God desires justice. The conflict is resolved whether our efforts bring about repentance or are instead rebuffed. In the former case, our sorrows are eased, and joy results. In the latter case, only justice remains, and we are called to accept it, though sorrow and satisfaction are blended in a confusing whirlpool of emotions.”

Enoch grasped Matt and his mother by their wrists. “Both of you have wondrous gifts from God. Bonnie, your eloquence will



allow you to sing with words that will pierce even the most hardened heart, but they must spring from your own heart of love. Otherwise, your song will bounce off wooden ears. The lost and wandering people have heard it all before—lyrics without substance, poems without purpose, lofty platitudes that they assume no one really believes. Words of love must be matched with actions that demonstrate love. These souls must witness love in your outstretched hands as well as from your lips. Only this is true integrity. Words alone are not really love at all.”

Enoch opened Matt’s hand and ran a finger along his palm. “You have healing hands that will seal horrific wounds, and you have seen them work even for an enemy like Semiramis. Yet that miracle occurred in the relative purity of Second Eden, not on Earth. Unfortunately, the corruption in this world has diminished the range of your ability. Here, in the midst of depraved beings, your touch will be of no use unless all barriers to love are broken down. If there is the slightest stain of contempt for your patient, love will be squelched, and your touch will be nothing more than the abrasive scrape of a hardened callous.” He released Matt’s hand and sighed. “I hope you will ponder these words as you continue your journey.”

While Enoch paused, Matt let the words sink in. They were deep and profound. Time would tell how they could be put to use, but for now they swam in a pool of scattered thoughts, adding yet more mysteries to the turmoil.

Enoch rose from the bed and nudged the other suitcase with a sandaled foot. “For reasons I am not at liberty to explain, this clothing is the only physical help we can provide, but I can give you one more prophetic word.” When Mom joined him, he looked her in the eye and whispered, “Remember who you are and the seven trials you have already conquered. Your memories will be a shield of defense.”



A light sparkled in Mom's eye, like a tiny flame that burst to life. "I'll remember."

"Do you have any questions for me?"

"Just one. When Tamiel kidnapped me, he said that he was able to see me because he was open and honest with me. Later I figured out that he must have been referring to the king's cap Billy applied to make me invisible to demons. Do I still have that covering?"

"That is highly unlikely. You were separated from Billy for too long. Perhaps you are semitransparent to demons now, and Tamiel meant that he could see you clearly. For practicality's sake, you should assume that you are visible."

Darcy emerged from the bathroom wearing hiking shoes, camouflage pants, and a thick long-sleeved pullover shirt—beige and closely fitting her slender, toned frame. She set the suitcase down and smiled. "I did the best I could in the dark. Do I look okay?"

Matt got up and fidgeted. "Um ... yeah. You look fine." Assessing her appearance felt awkward. With freshly brushed shoulder-length auburn hair, a clean angular face, and bright eyes in spite of the dim room, she really was attractive, in a good way, more like a neatly groomed college student than a tramp hunting for a victim.

"Well ..." Enoch clapped his hands together. "I'm glad everything fits."

"Are you sure they're not too tight?" Darcy ran her hands along her hips. "I don't want to look ... you know ..."

"Like bait?" Enoch nodded. "Fear not. This is a practical design. Because of the physical obstacles you will likely encounter, baggy clothes are not advisable."

She lifted her legs in turn, stretching the camo material. "Then they're perfect. Thank you."

"I almost forgot." Enoch reached into his jeans pocket and



withdrew a string of beads, each one a different color. "I recovered this for Bonnie." He draped it around Mom's neck and tied it in the back.

Mom touched a blue bead at the bottom of the arc. "Thank you. This is a precious heirloom."

"Yes, I thought so." Enoch nodded at each of them. "I have to go. My dragon transport is likely getting perturbed at my delay."

Mom hugged Enoch. "I hope to see you again soon."

"That is a certainty, though I know not if our next meeting will be in this world." Enoch backed out and swung the door to a closed position, though it wouldn't latch. The broken jamb created a three-inch gap that allowed a shaft of dawning light into the room.

Matt sat heavily on his bed and looked up at his mother. "An apocalypse?"

"Looks that way, but maybe it's an avoidable one."

"So what do we do?"

Mom picked up both suitcases. "We get dressed and go to the first destination." Without another word, she walked into the bathroom and closed the door.

"Wow!" Darcy scooted to the bed and sat next to Matt. "This is really scary sh—" She cleared her throat. "Uh ... scary stuff, isn't it?"

"Pretty much." He looked away but watched her out of the corner of his eye. Sitting next to her felt like cozying up to a serpent. "And don't worry about cleaning up your language around me. I've heard every word in the book."

She folded her hands in her lap. "With all that's going on, I thought maybe I'd better ... I don't know ..."

"Change your ways?"

She bent her brow. "You're really quick on the draw, aren't you?"



“What do you mean?”

She touched herself on the chest. “You assume the worst about me; you’re half cocked and ready to shoot.”

“When you give me a good reason not to, maybe I won’t.”

She pressed her lips into a line. “Look. I did some terrible things to you. But that was years ago. And I’m sorry. I was a stupid kid. I was jealous because I wanted my parents to myself.”

“Years ago? Tamiel said he picked you up off the street corner. Did jealousy drive you to that?”

“I had to walk from place to place.” She crossed her arms tightly. “I play piano and sing at a couple of nightclubs. And I’m pretty good at it, if I do say so myself.”

“Are you saying you never sold yourself to someone with a wad of cash?” Matt huffed. “Give me a break.”

She looked away. “I don’t have to sit here being interrogated. I said I’m sorry about what I did to you, and that’s all you need to know.”

“Yeah. Just what I thought.” Matt rose, stalked to the window, and pushed the drapes to the side. Cold air wafted through the jagged hole, but that didn’t matter. Darcy needed to cool off.

In the distance, a truck drove from left to right, framed by a layer of clouds painted red by the dawning rays, a bloody hue that seemed unearthly. The drill sergeant’s words echoed—*Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning*. That maxim had proven true many times, and Enoch’s warnings added a nightmarish mask to the horizon. Sunrise held no hope. Doom lay ahead—complete annihilation of the entire world. Only he and his newfound mother could stop it, and their efforts might even make things worse. It was like trying to disarm a time bomb by forcing the clock to tick faster.



Not only that, they had to worry about Darcy. She could be on Tamiel's side, pretending to be friendly while secretly plotting to destroy their efforts. Her presence would surely hurt Mom's song more. What other reason could Tamiel have for sending her along? Even now it seemed that she stared daggers into his back. She probably didn't like getting exposed as a cheap hooker. But that issue wasn't important enough to worry about. The end of the world was coming. He had to drop everything else and figure out how to stop it.

He let out a silent sigh. But how? The apocalypse seemed like a freight train, impossible to stop. And what would happen after that? Who would go to Heaven? Mom, for sure. Darcy? No way. But what about a skeptical military student who never really thought about faith until a truckload of reality smacked him in the face? It seemed that he balanced on a fragile boundary between Heaven and Hell, not knowing which way he would fall.

He closed the drapes, sat on the bed opposite Darcy, and stared at her. She stared back, her cheeks red and her eyes expressing a blend of fear and sadness. Pitiful. Pathetic. Mom would probably say that even Darcy could change. Maybe so, but she had yet to prove that she wasn't playing a part in Tamiel's drama.

Matt averted his gaze. It was better to assume that she remained the soulless, evil sister she had been before. And her presence could even be a benefit. The most obvious way to Heaven was to do the opposite of what a Hell-bound prostitute would do. Maybe, just maybe, her darkness would be his guiding light.



