

Chapter I The Cast

Character 3: Azrael

It is dark. There is fire, and shadow and pain. There are children, and there are screams.

“Why am I here?”

That is a question to which only you have the answer.

“If I knew, I wouldn't have asked the question.”

Yes you would.

“This place... haunts me.”

As it should.

“What do you know about it?”

I know what you know.

“Get out of my head. We shouldn't be here.”

Where else should we be?

“Anywhere. How did I get here?”

Through me.

“Why?”

Because you need to see.

“I don't see anything.”

Only because you do not wish to.

“I want to leave. Take me home.”

This is your home.

“No.”

This is your home.

“No!”

This is your home.

“No!!”

The remaining embers of the campfire crackled away to nothingness, and the warmth they afforded vanished in the wisps of smoke. The dreams of the dark figure lying next to them grew ever more disturbed as the chill air began to settle in. He spoke words and hardly comprehensible half-phrases into the gloomy forest that surrounded him. Those words grew more shrill and desperate, and the figure curled into the fetal position and began to rock back and forth. Suddenly, he shrieked as if his limbs were being ripped from their sockets. His eyes popped open.

Awake. We must be careful. His dreams torture him and afford him no rest. For fifteen years he has slept and seen nothing but them, and in fifteen years he still has not come to understand. He is a sinister figure, more dangerous than ten armed men. To be discovered by him would surely result in our deaths.

For now, let us retreat to safety. We have seen something inside that he undoubtedly does not wish us to see. A wise man once said that you can only learn so much and live. Wise words, and ones that we ought take to heart.

Character 2: Eva

What are you doing?
"I am fighting."
For what?
"For my survival and the survival of this city."
Is that so?
"Yes."
You have no doubts?
"Why should I? I'm doing what's right."
But what is right to you may not be right to others.
"Sometimes others don't know what is right."
You are so sure of yourself?
"Yes"
But you gave up so much.
"In times of war sacrifices must be made."
Is that what this is? A 'time of war'?
"Yes"
And that justifies your actions?
"I don't know what you're talking about."
You killed him.
"I...I had to."
Why?
"There are greater things at stake."
Greater than he?
"Of course! He was only one man."
But to him you were the whole world.
"He was naïve."
You reciprocated those feelings.
"I was naïve as well."
Perhaps not much has changed.
"What's that supposed to mean?"
Another time. Now you need to wake up.
"What?"
Wake up.

We come now upon a sleeping angel in a dirty motel. Her dreams, like the other's, haunt her, but she does not doubt the decisions she makes. She is a true beauty—lovely, compassionate, and confident—but there is something dark that she keeps locked inside. Perhaps she does not even know that it exists. Oftentimes, ignorance can be just as dangerous as iniquity.

Eva yawned and stretched out her arms. What time was it? Dawn.
Eva loved the mornings. She loved to witness the world come alive. The night was dark and cold and lonely, but in the day there was activity and warmth. People strolled

through the streets without fear. Each new day brought with it fresh opportunities. Whatever the mistakes one day could be fixed the next, and dawn was never far from the eastern horizon.

That morning proved no disappointment, either. A little ball of fire lazily climbed in the east and caused a wash of purples, reds and oranges to paint the clouds and sky. The ground was coated in light dew, and as the sun shone down the grass sparkled and appeared almost silver. It was spring, Love's season, and the birds were happy to sing her melody. The sparrows were waking with the rising star and their songs rang out through the world.

Eva rolled over, opened her hotel window and breathed in deep. She could almost smell the bloom of fresh meadow flowers and the budding leaves of the silver oak forests far to the west cut through the acrid stench of the city. She smiled and let the gentle morning breeze tickle her nose. As the sun's early rays lit upon her face, she felt her drowsiness washed away, and strength return to her wearied limbs.

She walked over to the side of her bed and pulled her knit pants, which had been cast in a heap on the floor nearby up, and around her waist. Bishop Mulciber had provided her with a fresh wardrobe. Eva tugged her scarlet shirt over her head and hugged it against her skin. She loved the feel of the elegant silk cloth that formed loosely to her slender curves, and she often found herself absentmindedly caressing the fabric with her fingertips. When she checked herself in her mirror, she saw that her light blonde hair was matted and tangled. Her bright green eyes stared attentively as she picked up her comb and worked at the knots.

Once she had returned her hair to its normal body and shape, Eva smiled at herself. Today was a big day. The king would be throwing his festival in just under a week, and preparations had to be made. Their plan was in full swing and nearing the time of fruition. There could be no mistakes now, but she was not concerned. She would succeed.

Eva gathered her things and made a quick, and rather unsatisfactory, attempt to make her bed. She then grabbed her key, left the room and bolted the door behind her. When she turned around, she was startled to find a short and fat little man awaiting her. His bulging belly was only inches from her waist.

"Orexis?" She coughed. "What are you doing here?"

"Why, I'm here to see you my dear," he said innocently.

"Why?"

"Is it so wrong to want to see a beautiful face in the morning?" He asked, his slight lisp slithering over the words.

"How long have you been waiting?"

"Long enough. I couldn't help but watch you sleep."

"You're a pig."

His lips spread into a crooked smirk and revealed a row of yellow, pointed teeth. "I was simply concerned about you."

"I can handle myself,"

"I know. That's what makes you so damn attractive."

He tried to take a step towards her, but Eva drew a dagger from her side and held it inches from his throat.

"In your dreams," she said.

He giggled. "Always."

She pushed him hard to the side and tried to storm past, but he caught her by the arm. "Going so soon?"

"Take your hand off of me or you'll no longer have one."

“Ahh, such idle threats, but you know you won't be able to resist me forever.”
Orexis drew her towards him.

“I beg to differ,” she responded, and with her free arm she threw a hard punch that connected with his jaw. Slime from his greasy cheek came off on her knuckle. Orexis lost his grip and fell against the hallway wall.

“Don't you ever touch me again.”

Orexis licked the blood on his lip as she turned and walked away. “Hate to see them leave, but love to watch them go.”

“Fuck off,” she shot back before she exited the hallway and walked down the steps to the tavern. Why did the bishop insist on keeping him with them? In a city filled with refuse, he was amongst the most pungent trash.

Eva entered the lower tavern where the rosy-cheeked innkeeper, Mr. Puggman, perpetually remained. He stood behind the dimly lit bar in a blurry haze of tobacco and candle smoke. She smiled a friendly greeting to him but did her best to pass quickly. Mr. Puggman had a pension for food and stories. He always said that his two greatest loves in this life were his wife and a good long chat with a stranger, and not necessarily in that order. In the brief time she had spent at the inn, Eva had come to quite enjoy the company of the portly old man, but today there was important business that needed attending, and she walked swiftly through the far doors and into the dining hall.

She entered into a small wing of the building that was still spacious enough to accommodate fifty or more travelers. There were three long, communal tables where the guests could eat, drink and socialize, and along the walls booths had been built for those who wished a more private and intimate setting. In the evenings the hall was usually packed with people, and destitute children would run to and fro collecting drink and food orders for the innkeeper. There was no shortage of the poor in Eridos, and Mr. Puggman could not afford to pay them any wage, but the children were more than happy to work for the tips given them by the inebriated patrons, or they simply took from the pockets of the unwary.

Presently, the hall was almost empty. Mrs. Puggman was at the far end taking orders for a small group who—judging from the beers in hand—had not left their chairs from the previous night. There were also a few early risers scattered throughout sipping fresh coffee and eating modest breakfasts of toast and eggs.

Eva saw the Bishop was also there waiting for her. He was sitting in a booth at the nearest wall, his dark purple cloak was pulled over his head and a long wooden staff rested against his shoulder. He appeared oblivious to what was going on around him, but when she took a few steps forward, he raised his head and peered knowingly at her through his dark, gray eyes.

“Good morning, my dear,” he said in a soft voice. “I hope you slept well.”

“I slept just fine,” Eva said as she approached. “But I could've done without that greeting from the scummy little toad that follows you.”

“Orexis? Just ignore him. All men want what they cannot have.”

“Why do we even need him?”

“He, like everyone else, has their uses.”

“And me? Am I here simply because I have my 'uses'?”

“Yes,” the Bishop said coldly, “but if it makes you feel any better, you are also my favorite of the company I keep. Please,” he motioned toward the chair opposite him. “Sit down.”

Eva smiled at his words and took the bench across from him.

“There is much that still must be done,” he said.

“I know. His party is in a week.” Eva raised her hand for Mrs. Puggman to bring her some coffee.

“Are you having doubts?”

“No.”

“Good,” Mulciber nodded. “We are doing what must be done. He is a liar and a murderer.”

As she approached and poured the coffee, Eva smiled a thank you to the aging hostess. After the woman walked away, Eva turned back to the bishop and asked, “What is it you want me to do?”

In Mulciber’s wrinkled face and gentle eyes Eva caught no traces of emotion. He simply sighed. “There is no other choice,” he whispered. “We must kill him.”

Character 1: Kafziel

“Why did she leave me?”

Does it really matter?

“Yes.”

Why? Will it bring her back?

“No... Well, I don't know.”

But you hope it will?

“I don't know.”

Yes, you do. You wish to change it.

“So? What’s wrong with that?”

What happens if you have to change for the worse?

“What do you mean?”

Would you fight for her, even if the fight were wrong?

“If she would love me.”

Would you kill for her?

“If I must.”

Would you die for her love?

“She is all I have! Death would be welcome. I would rather be with her and die than live my life all alone.”

Do you really think that she is your problem?

“No, I am a monster and a murderer. She is the solution to my problem.”

Does it bother you that you will live forever?

“Yes.”

Nobody wants an eternity of loneliness.

“No.”

But she is a human and a mortal. She will not always be at your side. How will you endure when she is gone?

“I won't.”

Would you believe me if I told you this pathetic creature was once a savior to the world? But time has a way of wearing down even the mightiest of us. Now all that remains of

our sad hero is this empty shell. Why in the grand scheme of things he is once again picked to fight is unclear, but life has a funny way of finding purposes for us all.

Kafziel ran his fingers through his hazel hair and tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. It was sunrise. Or was it sunset? Neither could he tell nor did he care. To him time no longer held any meaning. To sleep during the night or the day really made no difference. He often preferred the darkness. At night the world became cold and lonely. It was peaceful, and it was sad. There was comfort in that. The night was quiet and devoid of judgment. All were equals in the blackness. For those who wished to hide, the night offered nothing but shadows in which to escape. Kafziel wished he could escape there now.

Unfortunately, it was dawn's light that was streaming through his open windows. To most, it would have appeared a beautiful sunrise, but Kafziel took no delight in the intense arrays of purples and reds and yellows that painted the clouds and skies. There was no pleasure in breathing in the fresh spring air. The softened and dew soaked earth only made his feet cold, and the songs of the waking birds brought no blissful melody to his ears.

The world was cloaked in a gray veil. Existence was tedious. Nothing was new. Nothing was exciting, but the pain was always there. It had taken him hundreds of years of life, but Kafziel finally understood. People spent their entire existence seeking some purpose or reason for being. But life was little more than an endurance contest. Those who could withstand the pain the longest would live the longest, but they would also suffer the most. In Eridos those condemned to die were tortured, humiliated and ultimately destroyed. Kafziel could not help but see a striking similarity between this and what he perceived as life.

The elf heard a knock at his door.

"My Lord," a voice called. "The queen wonders if you would care to join her for breakfast."

"Tell her I am not well."

"She says she has a matter of some importance to discuss."

Kafziel sighed. "Alright, give me a minute."

He stretched his arms to the vine covered ceiling and let out a long yawn. His room was in disarray. He did not remember that to be its previous state. He remembered a simple and tidy area where his clothes once were folded neatly on nearby shelves. He remembered an immaculate mahogany desk against the wall containing meticulously filed governmental documents.

But on that bright April morning the majority of those documents were shredded and strewn about the room. Along with the once folded clothing, there were stains of god only knew what all over his carpet. The scenic paintings of groves and streams and valleys that once adorned his walls were now torn and defiled by red and black inks.

How had this happened? He looked around for any sign to explain the destruction. He found it in an empty liter of whiskey discarded on the floor. He remembered drinking a nightcap or two, but his memory was too hazy to recall anything more.

He sat up, and a horrible pounding thundered between his temples.

Kafziel leaned over and grabbed some of the nearby clothes tossed on the floor. After dressing himself, he left his small room and went downstairs to the dining hall. As he walked, he noted the murals along the walls depicting wondrous images of heroism and beauty. There was one showing his deeds during the second Great War, and he smiled with disgust at the painting of himself standing tall over his fallen enemies. Shaking his head, Kafziel took in the

image's broad shoulders and proud stance. Its muscles rippled, and its shining blue eyes stared stoically off into the distance.

Kafziel wanted to tear the mural down. He imagined with some delight taking a hammer and smashing the plaster into a thousand tiny fragments. The elf prince had become very different from the body on that wall. He no longer stood proud. He walked with his shoulders bent, and his gait shuffled. His body had paled and withered. He appeared as a grotesque caricature of his former self—nothing more than a wraith.

The painted figure's eyes sparkled. They were bold, sure and beautiful. But that poise and beauty had long since vanished. Today his eyes were glazed. They did not shine or captivate. They held nothing but pain.

Kafziel was crumbling. As a decrepit citadel, all could see the former glory he once held, but years of neglect and decay had allowed him to fall into disrepair. The paint was chipping, the foundations were cracked, and it was only a matter of time until he weathered away to nothing.

Kafziel continued to regard the mural and recalled the war. He had tried to forget, but it was always there, lurking in the shadows of his mind. The fact that the elves preserved such depictions of that time did not help matters. If ever he needed a good reminder of the battlegrounds or the bodies or the Fallen God that started it all, he needed look no further than the walls of his own home.

The elf turned from the image and continued to walk. He strolled past vine draped walls and resplendent glass windows. He came to a massive set of intricately wrought wooden doors. Carved within each were thousands of wilderness images ranging from snow crest peaks to flourishing glades to the boundless depths of the great oceans. He pushed back the doors and stared into the massive dining hall. The ceiling arched far overhead, and the patterned tile floor stretched out hundreds of feet before him. Vines and frescoes again covered the walls, and beautiful stained-glass windows transformed the streaming light of the dawn into a wash of soft pinks and blues. Sweet smells of rose petals and lavender filled the air.

He stepped forward, and he saw his mother waiting patiently for him in her appointed spot at the head of the massive royal table in the center of the room.

"Good morning, Kafziel," she said as he approached. "You look horrible."

And he did. His hair was tousled and knotted, his clothes were wrinkled and stained, and his eyes were crusted with sleep. The pounding between his temples had turned his face a sickly pale-green.

"Well, you look lovely, mother." And she did. Queen Kybele was a pinnacle of beauty. Elves, as a people, were the fairest of the many races of the world. They were tall, with smooth, pale skin and shining eyes, almost like living porcelain dolls. But Kybele was different. She had soft, sunny red hair, a radiant smile, and eyes that appeared to hold the wisdom of the cosmos within them.

"Come and sit with me. Breakfast is almost ready," she said.

"Yes, my Queen." Kafziel walked over slowly and sat at the middle of the long table, far from his appointed spot at her side.

"You know I do not like it when you refer to me by title," she said.

"But that's what you are."

"Not to you."

"Yes, mother."

"That's better." Kybele sniffed the air. "You smell."

"It was a rough night."

“I can tell.”

“What is it you want?” Kafziel glanced around the large dining room. It was cavernous, and it was totally empty. Something was going on.

“I would like to talk with you for a while,” she replied gently.

“Is that why you called me down?”

“There is another reason, but for now it is unimportant. How are you feeling?”

“Horrible.”

“Perhaps you should not drink so much?”

“It wouldn't change anything.”

Kybele did not respond. She simply watched him and waited. Kafziel tried to avoid her stare, but little could escape those eyes.

“You're in pain,” she said.

“Obviously.”

“Do you know what happens to an elf when they lose all love for life?”

“Yes.”

At that moment, a young squire came in carrying a large tray filled with various foodstuffs including pancakes, eggs and fruits. He moved gracefully and set it along with two plates before the queen.

“Thank you, child,” Kybele said to the boy, who then bowed and walked away. “I love pancakes. Don't you, my son?”

“I don't know.”

“You used to.”

“Things change.”

“Yes they do. Such is life.” She forked a bit of food onto her plate, and then she grabbed his dish and shoveled a few of her favorite selections upon it.

“And if I refuse?” Kafziel asked.

“Change? Then you will fade away, and I will lose my son just as I lost my husband all those years ago.” Kybele stood and brought her son his meal.

Kafziel's stomach stirred at the sudden manifestation of a breakfast, and a voracious hunger gripped him. He greedily took a bite of the pancakes. It was true, he did love them. As he chewed, he thought of his father. “How did you endure when father died and the kingdom fell?”

“I found a purpose in rebuilding that which was destroyed,” Kybele said when she had again taken her seat. “Our people needed a leader, and I was all they had.”

“And me? Am I not their leader?”

“No.” The coldness of the response startled Kafziel. Kybele paused to take a bite of food before continuing. “There are responsibilities and hardships you cannot even imagine. How do you intend to guide our people when you have no direction yourself? You are not ready to carry the burden of ruling a people. You cannot even carry your own. There is much worth loving in this world.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Then you are a fool. Was there ever a time when you were happy?”

Kafziel thought for a moment. “No.”

“You are lying.”

Kafziel smiled sardonically.

“You have lost much,” Kybele said softly, “But you can rebuild. You can make a new life for yourself.”

“I have no desire.”

“Grow up, Kafziel.” Kybele chastised. “If what you had was meant to last, she would be here right now.”

An old but familiar anger welled up inside, and Kafziel began to feel his world go white with rage.

Kybele smiled. “The amulet you carried has left you some of its effects, I see. Good, it will help you survive.”

“I don’t want to fucking survive!” Kafziel spat. “And don’t you dare judge what you don’t know!”

“I’m sorry,” Kybele soothed. “Love is timeless, and it will endure long after the lovers have passed. I can still feel his presence. Why did yours end?”

“I... don’t know.”

“Really? Is it that you do not know or that you do not wish to?”

“You’re testing my patience, mother.” Kafziel had not touched his food since his initial bite. “She left, but she never gave a reason.”

Kybele shrugged. “The reasoning of a woman will always be a mystery to a man.”

Kafziel’s anger abated slightly and a morose smile crossed his face.

“And what about me?” Kybele asked. “Do I mean nothing to you?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“You need to remember that there are, and always will be, people who care about you.”

“Is that why you summoned me? Platitudes?”

Kybele waved dismissively. “I have long since abandoned that approach,” she said. “No, I am sending you away. You need to rediscover your place in this world, and you will not find it here.”

“Where am I going?” Kafziel asked indifferently.

“The King of Eridos has summoned emissaries from all the nearby lands to join him in some great gala.”

“What’s it for?”

“The trade agreements. He claims to have a new system which will benefit all parties involved. I know little more. He is playing this one close to the chest.”

“You sound skeptical.”

“There is a delicate balance that Eridos must maintain.” Kybele said. “It would be no mean task to alter something as large and far reaching as the trade system. Besides, the king has a history of throwing huge parties on false pretenses. That man has always had an insatiable lust for money, woman and food.”

“So why are you sending me?”

Kybele smiled. “Because the king’s parties are world renowned, and I want to hear you laugh again. You are my son, and you have no idea how much it hurts me to see you in pain.”

Kafziel had no idea from where it came, but he felt a chill immediately crawl up his spine. “You’re not telling me something,” he said coldly.

“No,” Kybele said with an amused grin. “Things are not right in this world, and you have a part yet to play. I wish I could tell you more, but our gifts do not extend so far. I can sense; I cannot see.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Our world is on edge. You must feel it. A darkness is spreading in which you will have a role, but to what end I do not know.”

“Wonderful.” Every syllable dripped sarcasm. He could sense no threat on the horizon, and he had no intention of involving himself in anything. “When do I leave?” he asked, pushing his nearly untouched plate of food away.

“Tonight,” she replied. “Are you sure you will not eat something? You are going to need the strength.”

