

Prologue

Fire cascaded down from the sky like the driving rain.

Alaster pushed through the wild press, the city fleeing with screams and terror into the night. People clutching belongings, parents clutching children, widows clutching bodies. The buildings along Merchant's Way danced with flame, illuminating the broad cobblestone street in angry orange. Many of the residents had tried to fly away, only to choke in the lowering smoke that rose from the besieged city or be caught in the cascade of fire.

Chaos reigned. The street was normally crowded with the pleasant hubbub of merchants hawking their goods, buyers haggling down the exorbitant prices, bards telling tales of the exotic lands they had visited, wings flapping overhead of people trying to avoid the traffic. Today the sounds were different. Shrieks as more fire descended. Families desperately calling out for each other. A reedy cry from a collapsed shopfront, someone piteously begging for help. Worse than the noises was the silence from shadowy forms that lay unmoving in the recesses of buildings.

Alaster could feel panic rising in the primal parts of his mind, but he shoved it down. *Must get to Pinna, must get to Pinna and the baby, must get them out*, he thought, as he pushed past a young man frantically pulling his young wife behind him. The fire was spreading across Caelis, and Merchant's Way was almost entirely in ashes. The crowds were all headed for the same place: the looming Shrine of the Stonemason God at the center of the city. It was unsurprisingly intact – worshippers of Volla revered stone and built all of their churches from it. Alaster was a devout believer and couldn't help but thank Volla for his prescience. *The Shrine is a sanctuary*, thought Alaster. If he could get Pinna there, they would be safe.

Alaster ducked into a side street. The sounds of a city alight immediately subsided, though he could still hear a child tearfully calling for its parents and the omnipresent crackling of the flames. He sprinted down the alleyway, took a left, a quick right. He skidded to a stop in horror. His home stood in front of him. It was engulfed in a fiery halo.

Pinna, Alaster thought in horror. He dashed around the corner. The front door was a mess of flame. He glanced up at the upper levels, but thought better of flying up. The heat was oppressive on the ground. It would be unbearable above a burning building, not to mention the smoke. His feathers might even catch fire.

"Pinna! Are you in there? Are you all right?" Alaster called out, terrified.

"I'm here!" From around the corner Pinna came, looking sooty but unharmed. She held something in her arms, wings furled protectively around her to cover it. Alaster rushed up to her, saw baby Volara in her arms, reached out to cradle the baby's tiny body. Volara was wailing, eyes red, either from the smoke or the crying.

"Thank Volla you're all right. And Volara? She's okay?"

"Yes, she's fine. I heard the roaring and went up top to see what was going on, and as soon as I saw the fires we went for shelter. Alaster, Caelis is *burning*."

"I know," said Alaster haggardly, trying to shake off the images of Icarii aflame, wings flapping uselessly as they tumbled from the sky. "Quick. We have to get to Stonemason Shrine.

We'll be safe there.”

He and Pinna ran back toward Merchant's Way, him clutching Volara to his chest and shielding the infant with his wings as best he could. When they emerged on the anarchic thoroughfare, Pinna covered her mouth in horror.

“By Volla...”

“I know, I know! We need to keep moving!” shouted Alaster. He was watching the enormous silhouette outside the wall, outline illuminated by the eerie lighting but obscured by the smoke. From it spewed another gout of flame, which rained down on Caelis' Upper Quarter. The towering walls of the city were nothing in front of the silhouette, which rose hundreds of feet into the night sky.

The two of them joined the masses fleeing toward Stonemason Shrine. Alaster tried to both protect Volara and keep ahold of Pinna's hand as he was jostled by the panicked Caelians. It was difficult, but Stonemason Shrine was getting larger and larger. They were almost there.

From behind came an enormous *thud*, accompanied by the crack of shattering wood. Fresh screams arose from the outskirts of the city. The heads of the crowd, including Alaster's, whipped around. They knew that sound. It had approached from the distance right before the flames began.

The silhouette had stepped over the wall.

In doing so it had crushed the houses nearest to the wall, the modest ones on the Merchant's District side of Merchant's Way. The smoke still obscured the body of the form, but in the firelight Alaster could see the gargantuan limb attached to it. It looked like an impossibly thick pillar of stone, a veritable mountain descending from the haze.

The crowd, momentarily immobilized by shock, turned as one and rushed toward Stonemason Shrine with renewed vigor. A burly man lunged past Alaster, and in doing so broke his grip on Pinna's hand. Pinna shouted something, but she was quickly subsumed into the masses. In fear Alaster cried out her name and tried to unfurl his wings to rise above the press. He couldn't get the space to spread them, and someone cursed him as they brushed the feathers away.

Another *thud*. A second pillar crashed down on the city, turning buildings to matchsticks. Bitterly Alaster allowed himself to be carried away by the crowd. Pinna would know to continue on to the shrine. He just hoped he would be able to find her again.

As more booming *thuds* shook the ground, the Shrine of the Stonemason God drew nearer and nearer until Alaster was finally at its wide doors. With effort he broke free of the stampeding citizens and retreated a safe distance away on the temple's massive steps.

Alaster looked down at the precious bundle cradled next to his chest. Volara was silent now, wide-eyed and stunned. He felt the same way, but nonetheless spread his wings and took flight, Volara tucked tightly in his arms.

He skimmed a few feet above the crowd, staying below the smoke but high enough to scan for Pinna in the torrent of people. As he crossed back through the temple gates on to Merchant's Way, his head whipped back and forth, trying to spot her amidst the chaos. Despite

his best efforts, he could not find her.

Screams rose once more from below, and a massive gust of wind threw Alaster spiraling out of the sky. A deafening *BOOM* resounded in the street, and the world was for a second a blur of colors and flame.

Alaster shook his head. He was covered in ash and dust, and appeared to be buried in the splintered remains of someone's front room. He looked down. With the instinct known only to paternity, he had shielded Volara from the brunt of the crash. Her eyes were scrunched closed and her mouth was open in a bloodcurdling wail, but Alaster could not hear her.

He looked up. One of the enormous pillars had descended right where he had been flying, and the wind of its downward thrust had tossed him aside. He had landed about 40 feet away. From this distance he could see the stony skin on the pillar – or, he realized, the leg. Alaster followed up the leg with his eyes. Hundreds of feet above him, he could see a stony underbelly, stretching like a cavern ceiling across Caelis.

It's moving toward Stonemason Shrine, he thought blearily. His ears still rung with the nearness of the beast's footstep, and indeed he could see an enormous stone-clawed foot planted where he had been flying. Protruding from beneath the foot were the broken forms of those unlucky enough to have been standing there at the time.

Alaster forced himself to stand. *Must get to Pinna*. He extricated himself from the rubble with his free hand and leapt back into the sky, rushing with all his speed toward the temple.

He had barely alighted on the steps when another thunderous *BOOM* echoed off the shrine's granite walls. He turned and saw that the beast's feet had stopped at the temple gates. The last stragglers were rushing into the building, urgently hastened along by a priest standing beside the doors.

Alaster was one of the last in. As he dashed through the entryway, still clutching Volara tight to his chest, the priest threw a lever beside the doorframe and the stone doors began to swing shut.

From the murky heavens two red pinpoints, glowing in the night and the smog, descended on the Shrine of the Stonemason God. The priest stood watching, mouth agape, as a colossal head broke through the smoke and glowered down on the shrine. Alaster stood behind him, also awestruck. A gargantuan slate-gray maw. Two abyssal nostrils that exuded heat. Two cavernous sockets, with blindingly bright red suns for eyes. The dragon appeared to be expertly carved from stone.

The priest stumbled outside, fell to his knees, prone in obeisance. "Hail Volla's emissary," he panted, face to the ground. "We accept his divine punishment."

The doors slammed shut. On the inside, Alaster waited for nothingness.

It never came.

It was a few hours before anyone dared to look outside. The dragon was gone. So was the priest.

In the aftermath he found Pinna. She wasn't in the shrine. She was dead, crushed beneath a collapsed roof in a torched house off Merchant's Way. The people who found her said they also found the body of a young boy with a broken leg. They told Alaster they guessed she had gone in to rescue him, only to be caught when the house caved in.

Outside the ashen ruin, Alaster stood mutely, holding Volara. She had fallen asleep, exhausted by the night's events. He looked down numbly at her, innocent, ignorant. She would never remember the wrath of the Stonemason God, what Caelis would eventually call the Night of Fire and Stone, Volla's Retribution. Alaster envied her. She did not know the betrayal of faith.

She did not feel the agony of knowing that her god had killed her mother.

Bitterly, Alaster turned his head down toward her.

"He was supposed to protect us, Volara," he whispered. "Instead he has become the death of us."

"And, one day, child, we will be the death of him."