

*Book One of The Orbs of Power*

# OMNIPRESENCE: The Rise of the Gatekeeper



D. S. Quinio

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The Rise of the Gatekeeper**

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By  
D. S. Quinio



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*For Elisha*



# Table of Contents

Prologue—The Devil’s Wrath .....	1
Chapter 1—The Beginning .....	12
Chapter 2—Pandemonium Strikes.....	20
Chapter 3—Aftermath .....	24
Chapter 4—Kyle .....	32
Chapter 5—Peru.....	65
Chapter 6—Satch.....	91
Chapter 7—The Journey to Dethmorra .....	110
Chapter 8—Into the Shadows .....	123
Chapter 9—The Blacksmith .....	135
Chapter 10—The Admirals Emerge.....	155
Chapter 11—The Village .....	169
Chapter 12—A New Leaf .....	188
Chapter 13—Into the Shamans’ Lair They Go.....	207
Chapter 14—Dolmens .....	267
Chapter 15—The Trail .....	300
Chapter 16—Scarred.....	304
Chapter 17—A Nightmare Come to Life.....	326
Chapter 18—The Abandoned .....	349
Chapter 19—Unexpected.....	358
Epilogue—The Rise of the Gatekeeper .....	388



## *Prologue—The Devil’s Wrath*

The stillness of the Meqthrorian Cave within the craggy mountain was shattered by a thunderous bellow echoing across the forked caverns and the unsteady flapping of two pairs of wings. A demon, followed by a black winged angel, came through the mossy entrance by the surface and landed roughly on the cave’s damp floor, wobbled a little, and walked through the dark antechamber leading to the throne room, which was lit only by torches on either side of the wall. The angel attempted to support the demon, but he was turned away angrily. They both walked with difficulty, limping, and on the demon’s left hand rested a piece of a dull golden glow.

“We wasted our time planning for nothing!” screamed the Unforgiven.

“My Lord, we can always attempt to harness its power while we look for the others. We managed to steal a big chunk while the archangel got nothing,” the angel said hesitantly.

“You do not understand, Nero,” the Unforgiven whispered, shaking his head. “This shard is useless if it isn’t whole. I have to get all the pieces back and complete the Orb, or these attempts are all pointless!”

He winced in agony as he stopped walking to rest for a short while. Between the two of them, his wounds were worse; the great archangel had inflicted so much injury on him when he fractured the Unforgiven’s right wing. Flying through the sky, lopsided, it was all he could do to escape the wrath of the archangel’s army. But though severely hurt, all the demon cared about was bringing the fragment of the Orb to the pedestal he made for it.

He rested a few more times against the rough wall before they reached the end of the long, twisting hallway. From

## 2 Omnipresence: The Rise of the Gatekeeper

this point, the cold, hard ground descended downhill to the deepest pit, which made it more difficult for him to walk. By now his bat-like wings—the right one almost torn from his back—were hanging limply because of extreme pain. This time when Nero offered to support him, he no longer refused. He leaned on the angel and felt Nero flinch in pain as he shifted his body to accommodate the Unforgiven's weight. Looking at the angel—his white hair almost matted with sweat and blood—the demon noticed that he was missing a gauntlet, which possibly fell from the sky as they escaped. A deep gash across his left arm bled copiously, and bruises were scattered from his face down to his neck. Nevertheless, the angel's wounds were altogether superficial, nothing that wouldn't heal in an hour or two.

At last they arrived at a massive stone archway—the entrance to the throne room—in the bottommost section of the cave. The throne rested at the north end of the enormous chamber; a concrete limestone structure shaped like a king's seat and elevated from the rough ground. Wooden torches ran along the coarse walls, while the ceiling was laden with stalactites that hung dangerously above the rutted floor. In the middle of the throne room rested a huge, rectangular-shaped limestone table, with the Unforgiven's seat at the head.

The demon looked at the soft glowing crescent on his hand. Then he hobbled towards the dais that supported three crudely formed pedestals, each of them as tall as the demon himself. He placed the shard on top of one of the pedestals to the right of the seat, where it automatically adjusted itself and slowly floated in mid-air.

He stared at it for a few minutes. Never had he seen something as glorious as this slice of the Orb. Although it was only a small portion compared to the majestic sphere as a whole, this piece still illuminated the shadowy throne room, no matter how dismal the gleam. He then sat on the throne, grimacing in pain.

Nero knelt in front of the demon and waited for instructions.

“You know why we are doing this, don’t you?” The Unforgiven’s hoarse voice suddenly resonated in the large chamber. “We were cast out because I was beginning to learn things which I was not supposed to know. I was gaining power, and the Mighty One rejected the idea that I will be as strong as Him,” he sneered. “We were created to worship and obey, regardless of whether or not we believe in what we were told. And when I came to the point of discovering what was hidden from us, I was banished, along with those of you who follow my lead.

“Those three Orbs are special. A fraction of His absolute power is embedded in those spheres to sustain the life on all realms where mortals were made. When He made the universe, He left a portion of each of His potent powers within those orbs. They are Him, in material form. And if I absorb the power of those Orbs, then we will have a chance to get back what was taken from us and be as powerful as He is who has disowned us.”

“My liege, forgive my insolence,” Nero said, bowing low, “but isn’t it that your domination is already beyond measure? What do those Orbs have that is still not within you?”

The demon looked at him with eyes full of disdain. “The Maker is all knowing, eternally present, and completely powerful. Each Orb embodies those forces that are in His innate self. Omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent,” he said, and then paused, deep in thought; the pain on his back was growing excruciatingly painful as the minutes passed by. “I rule this place and all those who are in my dominion and then some who may not be here but have confidence in what I believe in. But if the Orbs are in my possession, upon these three pedestals, I will be infinitely powerful, not only in this territory. All will fear me—worship me, as they blindly worship Him. No one will ever have to be above me. I will never be trampled on again. And you, Nero, as my

right hand, will relish the same power, second to none but only to me.”

He stood up and looked again at the shard, completely mesmerized by its divine beauty. Suddenly, his expression became menacing.

“But the Orb was shattered because of that meddling, irritating filth, and now I am left with a completely useless piece. Doesn’t he know me? I used to be one of them!” The Unforgiven roared again and pounded on the stony wall, which caused the cave and the mountain above to tremble.

Nero kept silent. He was there when the archangel and the Unforgiven battled for the Orb in mid-flight. Then the Orb of Omnipresence exploded, leaving the battered demon with only a shard to get away with. He saw the cataclysm that resulted instantly as the Orb shattered, bursting into tiny pieces. The two realms below vibrated and merged together when the Orb had burst; lives were extinguished, and almost all of the creatures were incinerated, pinned to death, or just simply vanished.

He seemed to remember the locations where the shards had fallen. He stood up. “My Lord, with your permission, I will take it upon myself to gather all the splinters and make the Orb whole again. You were blinded by the explosion, but I saw where the shards have fallen. Give me your approval and I will not fail you.”

The demon smiled. “I knew I was never wrong when I chose you as my second in command. Gather your best men and proceed immediately.”

He stood up and limped towards the shard shimmering with golden light. He gently placed his palm on top of it to distress the energy within, and then fragmented a piece and gave it to Nero. “Take this with you. You will never absorb the Orb particles in your body because it can only latch to a mortal being, but this will pull and fuse them from those individuals. And leave no stone unturned. Before I can harness its power, all the pieces must have been completed.”

“Yes, my Lord. I will assemble the Admirals and present them here to you.”

Nero flew towards the archway, sore but determined to begin the quest. His wounds are slowly healing, and the deep gash on his left arm had become nothing but a shallow cut reduced to a dull, pulsating ache. He thought about which among the finest tormentors could be recruited for the search. He needed ruthless demons with raw strength and cunning, those who can destroy and deceive, and at the same time slaughter those who defy them.

Immediately to the right of the archway was a narrow winding passage ascending to the great assembly hall. Nero alighted on the entrance and proceeded to walk uphill—the passage being too narrow and constricted for him to fly through it. He emerged through the hollow fissure on the south wall, opening to an immense hall, where stalactites as large as humans protruded from the high ceiling. The hall was as dark as a starless night, but high on the wall, a great crevice burned with a red orange glow. He then spread his wings and flew towards the light, towards the entrance to the tunnel leading to the quarters of the Dreaded Minions—the most vile and brutal tormentors of the realm, cruel executioners of the damned, and Admirals of the Unforgiven's army under Nero's command.

At the end of the tunnel lay their bowers. A sentry was stationed at the entrance to the chambers; no one could easily access the Admirals without their consent. As high ranking army officials, they were separated from the ordinary condemned inhabitants that dwelled in the underground settlement—a sign of importance and honourable privilege.

“Sir . . .” the guard acknowledged Nero's presence.

“I need to speak to Atos at once.”

“Right away, Lord Commander.” The guard turned and disappeared in the winding passages of the chambers.

In a moment, Nero heard the heavy, lumbering thud of the beast's footsteps and felt the heat coming from the fiery ten-foot giant. Then the brute appeared from the west bend, his head a stallion's and his monstrous torso a human's, while his hind legs were that of a horse. Billowing smoke surrounded him as he walked, and it emanated from his entire

frame as lava flowed within him like blood flows in others. Brown hair covered his body, except for his long braided mane that was as black as coal. And while always afire, Atos was capable of containing the extremely scorching temperature, controlling the release of the lava like a flowing dam through his massive, spike-laden mace.

“You called, Nero?” His booming voice rolled as he bowed to his commander, his blazing orange eyes alight with fire.

“We have an order. Summon Fassaro, Solinne, and Brugg; their presence is also required. Meet me at the throne room when you have spoken to them. The Unforgiven is waiting.”

Nero turned away to go back, but stopped when he heard Atos speak.

“The Supreme Demon wants to speak to us? From the sound of it, I’m guessing we’ll be going to war again,” Atos said, his eyes burning with malice.

Nero turned around to face Atos once more.

“We are commanded to retrieve the pieces of this splinter,” Nero said, showing him the Orb’s shard from the demon. “I will let you know more as soon as we are in the throne room. For now, get the Admirals and go there.”

“No war? Now, now, this is disappointing . . .” Atos shook his head. “I will never forget how that insufferable Grigor threw me out of the portal; I cannot wait to return the favour,” he said, crunching his fist as he recalled how the enormous archangel manhandled him, his eyes looking away distantly.

“You may just get your chance with an archangel, Atos. Matteo has injured the Great One severely. And knowing how much of a pleaser he is, he might already be well on his way to finding the pieces. No more questions now. Carry on.”

Nero walked back to the mouth of the tunnel and flew back down to the fissure from which he had come.

\* \* \*

The Unforgiven, seated at the head of the asperous limestone table, looked around the assembly and he was pleased.

His Admirals had gathered around the table about an hour after he and the black angel reached the cave. To his right sat Nero, his second in command, whose appearance was faring better than when they arrived earlier.

Next to Nero sat Atos the stallion, staring blankly at the table, his thoughts obscured from his expressionless face. Across from Atos sat an old silver-haired man, Fassaro, who was engaged in deep conversation with Brugg, the infiltrator, stroking his long white beard. Known as the realm's invoker, Fassaro could summon the infernal creatures with ancient spells and incantations at any given time. Although he appeared to be all bones and shrunken, he was a master conjurer capable of both raising the dead as his puppets and animating objects with his ancient scythe.

Brugg came out only during council meetings, and the only thing that anyone could say about him was that he was a spy, an infiltrator who could morph into anyone or anything to penetrate the security of the defences he is spying on. He came to the council heavily shrouded, as he always did, with only the tip of his nose and mouth showing through his tattered brown cloak.

The council meeting had already started, as the hour was getting late, when a fiery red flame illuminated the passage to the archway, startling everyone and hushing them into complete silence. Thrash metal music unexpectedly began playing from the entrance, growing louder by the moment. The silhouette of a perfectly formed female came into view, slowly moving towards the throne room. Even Fassaro and Brugg, who earlier had been locked in a heated argument, stopped their squabbling, confused by what was happening at the entrance.

As the booming, distorted riff transformed into an eerie guitar melody, a tall voluptuous woman suddenly emerged from the archway.

Solinne the Torturer slowly crossed the threshold; slashing a whip through the musty air while the woman gyrated to the beat of the haunting music, mouth agape in complete

ecstasy. Swaying lustfully—touching herself with her whip’s handle—and gazing at her spectators eye to eye, she captivated everyone with her grandiose arrival, with only her long black hair covering her milky smooth but filthy body. Her pitiless black eyes were filled with malice and brutality, and her full red lips smiled scornfully. Several ancient inscriptions of her torture and execution devices were tattooed all over her body, and a symbol decoding to “punisher” was inked down her right arm. She quickly tossed her hair around her back, exposing herself further, and stuck out her round full breasts upon noticing that all the men were ogling her.

Throwing her bloodied whip upward, she muttered an inaudible word, and then the whip broke into a million specks. Twirling around on her toes, she caught the fragments with her right ribcage, where it transformed to an archaic tattoo of the word “lasher.”

“Slayer . . . Seasons in the Abyss . . . Now unforgettable,” was all Atos managed to say, as his throat had gone dry. He swallowed with difficulty; the bulge between his legs was growing unbearably painful. Solinne smiled at him sweetly, but her eyes remained savagely wild.

“Sorry, boys, have you been waiting long?” she asked, faking apology. She stopped at the other end of the table, basking a little more in the attention of those assembled, before curtseying clumsily in a crude attempt to exalt the Unforgiven.

“My Lord . . .” she said in her signature throaty voice, bowing down low. The Unforgiven looked at her as though he wanted to ravage her on the table right then and there. “Forgive my delay, kind sirs,” she said, turning to the others and speaking in a scornful tone, “I have been . . . busy.”

“What was that flame by the archway about?” Nero asked her.

“And what is it with the music?” Fassaro chimed in, annoyed by the interruption of his intense battle of words with Brugg, for he seemed to think that he was winning.

“I had to hurry for this meeting, so I just burned the son of a bitch to cinders without skinning him first,” she explained,

referring to her recent victim. “But he was destroyed so fast I never got to cumming, so it wasn’t all that fun. You know how I like to play with my toys before disposing of them.”

Pouting her full lips impishly, she winked at Nero and slowly walked towards her seat beside Atos, who still couldn’t take his eyes off of her nakedness. She playfully rested her left hand on his bare hairy leg, stroking it. His nostrils began to steam.

“And it is pointless to explain the music to you, Fassaro,” she said, without taking her eyes off of Atos. “The only Slayers you know are those who kill and murder, and if I explain to you what ‘Seasons in the Abyss’ is, your wretched head will surely explode.”

“What could have kept you away from an important assembly such as this?” Fassaro ignored her retort, shaking his head with impatience. “You were summoned to be in the presence of the Supreme One; is it really that hard to obey?”

“Ancient Fassaro, what are you still doing up? It is, after all, past your bedtime,” the woman hissed. Her voice was calm and composed, but her eyes were giving way to a frenzied anger.

“Enough!” Nero roared. Fassaro and the woman stopped bickering, but continued to look scathingly at each other. The commander stood up from his seat and walked around the table.

“Solinne, I don’t know if you were already briefed, but we are to leave immediately. Just to fill you in . . .”

“Oh yes, fill me,” she replied and laughed maniacally.

Nero disregarded her. “. . . We are to depart before dawn and head to Earth. The shards that look like this,” he raised up the fragment that the demon handed him earlier, “have to be collected and fused to this one in my possession. From my understanding, they have latched onto living creatures—could be a plant, human, creature, or animal.” He looked at the Unforgiven for validation that he received through a simple nod from the demon. “You will not miss those creatures when you see them; they will appear brightly from afar

because the shard will give them an unmistakable radiance that will set them apart from other beings.”

Then he turned to the infiltrator. “Brugg, your task is to spy on Matteo; see if he is also searching for the splinters. Chances are he will be hunting for them, too. If you can penetrate his ranks, then do it; otherwise stay hidden and report to me all you see.”

“Yes, sir,” Brugg acknowledged.

“We will all leave at the same time, travel together, with the exception of Brugg who will set forth to find Matteo. I am counting on all of you to see this done. Show no mercy to those who will refuse us. We have to complete all the pieces in the soonest possible time.”

With that, Nero tucked the shard—which he kept inside a small pouch hanging around his neck—inside his tunic. “Once you are all prepared, we will meet here again before daybreak. Bring all your best weapons with you; we do not know yet if an attack is forthcoming. The Supreme One will let us out of the portal to get to Earth. And follow my lead at all times,” he looked intentionally at Solinne, as if to remind her that she was under his command.

The Unforgiven walked towards Brugg. “Infiltrator, among all these present here, you are the most cunning; the most . . . scheming. Find a way to get into Matteo’s good graces; make him believe that you are aiding him in his mission.”

“It is my honour to serve you, my Lord,” said Brugg. Bowing as low as he could, he replied in reverence, overwhelmed by the confidence that the demon bestowed upon him.

Fassaro seemed uninterested. He stood up and walked around, using his scythe as a cane. At last he stopped and spoke to the council, “Would it be too much of a trouble if you tell this old man why this—thing—was broken and why do we have to go on a mission to find it? I just want to know what I am getting myself into.” He looked at Nero with dark, piercing eyes, searching for answers.

“I suppose there is still time to tell you of how we came across the Archangels earlier,” Nero said. “But before I forget to say this later, Solinne, when we leave tomorrow, put on some clothes.”

With that, he took a deep breath. Then he sat back on his chair and narrated the story.

## Chapter 1—The Beginning

It was sunrise when the young gate watcher stopped in mid prayer because of an unfamiliar sight at the Pearl Entrance. The sudden presence of an angel with black wings standing outside had frightened her. He was a fallen one, that much she knew, cast out during the purge billions of years ago; and for him to reappear here at Kleiustin—his home before he was condemned to be cast out to the deepest bowels of the Meqthrorian Cave—much more to remain motionless by the realm’s gate, was an ominous sign that there was trouble brewing somewhere. At once, she pondered whether to speak to him or not, for it was obvious by his persistent vigilance that he was waiting for someone from inside to speak to. She had only been a watcher for about a decade and this was the first time she had ever seen one of these, only having heard about them from the stories of the Elders, stories that both fascinated and terrified her at the same time. Braving her fear, she stood up quickly, finding that she was sore from kneeling for several hours, and got out of her cottage in the middle of the garden. She spread her immaculate white wings and flew downhill across the vast flower garden towards the unmoving black angel beyond the gate. He was standing in the rain, unflinching, his silver white hair in intense contrast to his jet black wings, which were drenched heavily because of the downpour that fell overnight.

*For how long was he standing there?* she wondered. She walked towards the gigantic gate until she was near enough to be able to talk to him, but far enough to get away if he suddenly attacked. Sensing neither animosity nor evil intentions from this Fallen One, she began her inquiry, “You were cast out. What are you doing here?”

The black angel moved forward, as though eager to deliver his news. The watcher stepped a few paces backward.

Seeing this, he sighed and stayed where he was. “My name is Nero, and I have come to warn you of an impending attack.”

“And why should I put my trust in your words?” the watcher replied, skeptical. “You are banished to a life of eternal torment; why should I believe you?”

“Because I have come in peace, and at my own risk, to redeem myself. You are putting the whole of Kleiustin in danger if you do not listen to me, so listen well. I did not arrive here alone. There are thousands of us, and we were sent by the Unforgiven to attack and lay siege, to avenge our downfall eons of years ago. But I have agonized and regretted my deeds from the moment we were cast out, and in my conscience, I cannot deny that this is what turned me away from His grace. That is why I am here now. They are marching by the River Ismus, forty legions; not one less and more are coming. I was sent to scout the area to see where the weak spot of the fortress is, but unknown to them, I have another order to follow: my own, to save my soul. So now I come to you, and it is up to you to save your realm. Don’t say you were not warned.”

The watcher looked up at him, doubting his sincerity. He was undeniably divine with short white hair framing his serene face, adorned by deep set azure eyes that were the same exact shade of the ocean. He exuded a quiet sense of peacefulness, like an angel in tranquil meditation. What made her unsure was his shiny black wings—a reminder of their betrayal, the fallen angels’ white wings were transformed to black as they were cast off during the great war—and the armour he wore, which hinted to a threateningly hostile battle looming somewhere in the realm. His chain mail rustled with every move he made, his body and arms covered with jewelled plate and gauntlets, and a mighty sword rested inside a gilded scabbard hanging on the left side of his waist.

Not knowing what to do, the watcher decided to call for help.

“Wait here,” she said. “I’m going to call someone.”

“I am afraid there is no time,” Nero said, exasperated. “I am expected to be back immediately. I was only told to scan the area and report back to the legion commander. My prolonged absence would be much suspicious, and I cannot risk it. Send them out if you will, but please, for both our souls, hurry up.”

And with that, he flew away.

The watcher, unnerved by this ominous presence, proceeded to the Fortress. She flew past the extensive garden where her cottage was and descended on the cobblestone pathway that led to the mammoth stronghold. She pushed the double doors made of impenetrable redwood and crossed the immense hall that housed the artefacts and relics of old. In a hurry to deliver the news to the Archangels, she flew directly up the winding staircase, landed on the third floor corridor, and walked past the sentries’ quarters. She turned to the door to her right, the Sphere Room, and went inside.

The Sphere Room was an enormous, circular apartment with a retractable oculus on top of the domed ceiling, and walls lined by the shields and armours of the Ancient Ones. The room was perpetually illuminated by the Orb of Omnipresence, a sphere the size of a large man’s fist, glowing brightly with a metallic blue hue. It was suspended in mid-air, high atop a large circular oak table in the middle of the vast room. The First Order of Angels, or the Archangels, guarded the Orb.

Once inside the room, the watcher saw that the council of the First Order was in a meeting at the round table directly beneath the Orb. They were the only angels in the whole realm to have brown wings, a symbol of their status as the Ancient Ones. They were so deep in conversation among themselves, that no one noticed her when she came in.

“Where is Matteo?” she asked the first brown winged angel she saw. “It is imperative that I speak to Matteo, sir.”

“You are speaking to him now, child. How can I help you?”

“I have very alarming information from a fallen angel,” she gushed in one breath. At once, all ears were on her. She

told them about how she saw the Black Angel by the Pearl Gate, relaying the information he passed to her, and how help is immediately needed by the River Ismus, the abode of the water angels.

Matteo stood silent for a moment.

Turning to his lieutenants, his voice echoed throughout the room when he spoke. “Ivar, sound the trumpet for the Second Order immediately. They are to replace our post here. Once we are sure that the Orb is safe and secure, we soar to the River Ismus to investigate. And gather a few of your men with us.”

“Matteo, with all due respect, wouldn’t it be more prudent to send out the guards of the Second Order first?” Ivar asked.

“I thought of it, but judging from the watcher’s description of the black angel, I suspect that he is not an ordinary one. If I am correct, it could be Nero, and his presence alone is worrisome enough by my standards, so this matter should be dealt with by us.”

Without a word, the thin but spirited angel flew swiftly out through the Oculus. Ivar was a fast flyer, able to cover a great distance more rapidly than any angel in the realm could. As he left, Matteo turned to the others.

“Rufus, prepare the legions; advise all the legion commanders that we might be going to war. I would not have wanted to stir them into consternation, but if this is the case, then so be it.” Rufus bowed to his chief and followed Ivar through the oculus.

Matteo turned to the burly angel, Grigor, who stood towering at twelve feet. Grigor was a guardian and carried a large hammer with him at all times. His colossal body served as a shield to the powerless ones. “Grigor, check the armoury. See to it that all weapons are ready; have the smithy inspect every sword, plate, mail, and shield. It’s been a long while since we last went to battle; make sure that the armoury is prepared.”

Then Matteo faced the rest of the First Order; only three of them were left. “The rest of you, get some of your agile

soldiers and fly out to the gate. We'll meet with the others there in a few minutes." One after the other, the Archangels flew outside the oculus.

Then Matteo turned to the watcher. "After you have opened the gate for us, I want you to abandon your cottage; it is no longer safe to be out and about. Proceed to the sanctuary beneath the fortress, and take as many angels with you as you can find. Gather all the cherubs; they will be needing help first."

"Yes, sir," nervous but determined to follow orders, she set to work.

Matteo flew through the oculus as soon as the Host of the Second Order arrived and settled around the table to guard the Orb hovering above it. Their number was greater than the First Order, because their skills were not as seamless as the Archangels'. Coming out from the oculus, Matteo inhaled the fresh morning air as he glided past the gatekeeper's garden and continued to fly to the gate. The others were already there waiting for him. He blew his horn to signal for the gate to be opened, and as soon as the watcher heard it, she started cranking the lever to let them out.

Slowly, as the towering entrance pushed outwards towards Draccoria, the forest covered by mist, the others stretched their wings for the long flight. The River Ismus was a great distance away from the Fortress, surrounded by the Calax Highlands, a vast stretch of stony mountain range, once they got past the forest. Ivar ascended higher to see if their way was clear, and finding no hindrance to their path except for the gusty wind, he shouted down to Matteo, "All clear for flight!"

They all flew out into the open, Matteo at the lead. The forest stretched for miles and miles, and even as Matteo searched the scenery for anything amiss, he couldn't help but feel something was wrong. He could not understand where this uncertainty was coming from; he was an Ancient One and doubt was not a part of his character, or at least it

hadn't been in the longest while. He soared silently, but every minute, his unease gnawed at him more.

Halfway through the journey, he suddenly stopped.

"Is everything all right, Matteo?" Rufus asked.

"I feel ill at ease about leaving the Fortress. I am sensing that the real trouble is there," he confessed. He hovered in the air for a few more seconds. "Ivar, Grigor," he called out above the whistling wind, "Take some soldiers with you and proceed as planned. Report back to me as soon as you confirm that the information is accurate."

"Yes, sir," Grigor's booming voice sounded in the air without difficulty. They chose the fastest angels to come with them and disappeared through the clouds.

"Rufus and the rest, follow me; we go back to the Fortress." Matteo soared past his men and flew back towards the citadel.

About a kilometre from the gate, Matteo blew his horn with all his strength. The watcher, anxiously gathering the mischievous cherubs, heard the distant alert and sighed with relief, thinking that there was really no trouble at all. She then left the cherubs with another angel and proceeded to the lever to reopen the entrance.

When the gargantuan gate opened, Matteo's portentous feeling became anxiety as he felt a dreadfully malevolent presence somewhere. Suddenly, he thought about the Orb.

"My God," he whispered. "I have been deceived!"

He zoomed towards the Fortress and flew high above the oculus, where he noticed that the Sphere Room was dark. It was never dark inside; the blue glow of the sphere eternally illuminated it, night or day. In his rage, he rushed in and landed on the floor, followed by the others who had come back with him, and what he saw disconcerted him.

The Second Order, all forty of them, stood frozen around the great round table like statues. Their eyes were milky white—glazed and cloudy—staring up at the oculus, their mouths wide open. Neither their great white wings nor their

blood red tunics were ruffled. Clearly, they were hypnotised even before they could move; by what, he still did not know.

And the Orb of Omnipresence was missing from the pedestal. Stolen.

Matteo and the others surveyed the room, carefully searching for the orb within the apartment. For a split second, he saw a red shadow dashing across the oculus. He rapidly flew upwards to follow the shadow. It was the Unforgiven, the demon with whom he had clashed billions of years ago, and he was clutching the Orb in his clawed hand.

The red skinned demon was startled upon recognizing Matteo, and hurriedly soared away to make his escape. Matteo noticed that this once exulted angel was now in a disgraced, forsaken form with sunken yellow eyes, sharp crooked teeth, and a tail on his rear end. His once majestic brown wings were now black and bat-like, a shape that he used to loathe due to the crooked and dreadful form.

Matteo flew after him, but his pursuit was cut short when the black angel appeared out of nowhere and slashed at the archangel with his long sword.

“Nero! Why are you doing this?” Matteo shouted, as he defended himself with his own sword, managing to duck the black angel’s lurch every time. Nero ignored him, his earlier calm face now frightening and venomous, and continued to attack Matteo with so much hate. Suddenly, Rufus emerged from behind him, joined by the soldiers and the Host of the Second League who had been awakened by Rufus from their hypnosis. Matteo veered away from the path of the black angel as the other archangels swarmed to attack Nero, and then he flew away to chase the Unforgiven.

He caught up with the fiend after several hours of searching. By then, dusk had already set in. The sky glowed red and orange, and darkness started to cover the horizon. He noticed that the Orb had started to change colour. It used to be eternally blue, but due to the fierce energy coming from both the demon and Matteo, it had quickly become unstable,

beginning to shift from blue to silver, to intense shimmering gold.

Without saying a word, Matteo lunged towards the demon, which slashed his face with its tail. Unfazed, he grabbed the demon by its right wing and tore it, and tried to snatch the Orb with his free hand. The Orb vibrated violently and started to emit a high pitched, whizzing sound. Then, as abruptly as it began pulsating, it exploded.

Both Matteo and The Unforgiven were momentarily blinded by the blast. Realizing that he still had a chunk of the Orb, the demon flew away to the darkness, while Matteo tried desperately to focus his vision. As soon as he was able to see clearly, he saw the shards falling down, iridescent slivers of light scattered, dropping towards the blue planet below which itself had started to tremble and change colours.

“Lord, help me,” he uttered, as he plummeted down to follow the splinters.

His wings were set ablaze when he entered the Earth’s atmosphere. Losing altitude as he came closer to the Earth’s gravitational pull, he plunged overwhelmingly faster. Screaming in extreme agony, Matteo realized that he was in a free fall. His wings were both gone, reduced to two futile stumps sticking out from his singed back. He pulled his weight with all his might, and directed it to follow the brightest, most brilliant splinter of all, bracing himself for impact.

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