

## Chapter One

### The Prophecy Forgotten

One week earlier...

Maurice wiped the Treetop Inn's bar for what felt like the fiftieth time. The lacquered counter already sparkled, but Maurice preferred wiping to gazing across the tavern of empty tables that should have been full of patrons talking or playing jalonga. The usual twinkle in Maurice's brown eyes had dimmed. Even the smile that once greeted all of his customers—including his least favorite—had disappeared.

A drop of sweat trickled down Maurice's cheek and into the folds of skin between his chin and neck. He glanced across his tavern and shook his head. Though the sweltering weather kept him from lighting fires in the fireplaces, his Treetop Inn still felt cold. He filled two mugs of honeywine and flew them to two textile merchants who talked quietly in a booth across the way.

Maurice forced a smile. "How are you fellas doin' this fine day?"

"I'll be better once the senate votes in favor of a king tomorrow, and the people start buying cloth again," muttered one of the merchants. He raised his mug to Maurice and gulped his honeywine. The other merchant raised his mug in agreement.

Maurice hid his frown. Scandal after scandal had characterized the late Prime Minister's term, souring the Elysian people on the democratic process. Most of the senators were now urging a vote to eliminate the office of the Prime Minister and reinstate a monarchy, which they believed would help Elysia win the Tri-Millennial War against their enemies, the mornachts. Although Maurice understood the Senate's logic, he disagreed with their timing, and he especially disagreed with the Senate's choice for king.

"People will start buying again," said Maurice. "With or without a king. It'll just take time."

"Ah, but it will take less time if we've got a king, and my family needs food," said the first merchant.

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“No argument there,” muttered Maurice. He wished otherwise. “You two call me if you need anything.” He returned to the bar, grabbed his rag, and furiously wiped the counter.

The Treetop’s door swung open, then shut. A brief chill flowed into the tavern. A tall cherubian dressed in white robes and a white cloak flew inside. The cloak’s hood was pulled over his head, hiding everything but his nose and graying goatee.

“Good day, stranger,” Maurice said. He strained to catch a peek at the stranger’s eyes but saw only a shadow. “I assume you’ll be wanting a place to stay tonight.”

“I need no room.” The stranger’s voice rang clear and strong.

*Stronger than most cherubians, nowadays,* thought Maurice.

The stranger reached inside his cloak and pulled out a scroll. “Seraph Davian will be arriving in less than half-an-hour.” He handed the scroll to Maurice. “Give him this.”

Maurice frowned, caring little for the visitor’s curt tone. How did this stranger know Davian’s comings and goings? “If you’re that sure he’s coming, you might as well wait for him.”

“I’m short on time.” The stranger turned to leave. “Make sure Davian gets that scroll.”

“What’s your name, so I can tell the seraph who this is from?”

The stranger looked over his shoulder at Maurice, and Maurice caught a glimpse of his eyes—bright blue with pupils that resembled a multi-pointed star. “My name is of no consequence. Tell him the message on the scroll is from Cassadern.”

Maurice raised his eyebrows. “Cassadern? That doesn’t sound like a cherubian name.”

“It isn’t. And I have a message for you, Maurice. Davian will request your help in the future. Do not hesitate to give him what he asks.” The stranger spun, and with a shove of the door flew out.

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The summer sun’s rays bounced off the crystal Palace of Ezzer, which sat atop the trees in the center of the city. It illuminated the charred trunks and branches, burned during the Third Battle for the City of Ezzer only three months earlier. Upper-class cherubians, dressed in their finest robes, talked and laughed, but fear, possibly of Elysia’s economic future, clouded their eyes.

The talking continued until a cherubian who wore a black breastplate and a silver kilt barged out the palace’s gates. His sea-green

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eyes flashed with anger, and his lips snarled, accentuating the scar on his clean-shaven chin. A ring of white metal on the fifth finger of his right hand flashed in the sunlight. Elysian citizens on the streets stopped and stared. Women blushed; children watched with wide eyes. Men tipped their hats, and soldiers saluted as he passed. The seraph nodded back, silently wishing he could fly the streets of the City of Ezzer in anonymity the way he could before the Third Battle.

“Are you all right, Seraph Davian?” asked a herald, who sat next to a blond boy in a light-green robe.

Davian landed and forced himself to smile. “Just fine, young Bradford.”

The other boy whispered something to Bradford.

“Ask him, not me,” Bradford told him.

The younger boy shook his head and turned red.

Bradford sighed and turned to Davian. “My brother wants to know why you aren’t wearing any of your medals.”

The boy hid his head behind his brother’s back.

Davian knelt on one knee and looked around Bradford into the boy’s eyes. “I don’t wear my medals because I don’t like them clinking against my breastplate. Don’t want to let the mornachts know I’m coming, do I?”

The brothers shook their heads.

The younger boy took a deep breath. “Did you really kill all of those mornachts during the Third Battle?”

“Of course he did,” said Bradford. “Seraph Davian saved the City of Ezzer.”

Davian shifted his weight. He hated discussing the Third Battle, and he especially hated people saying he saved the city. “The army of Elysia saved the city, lads.” He patted the young boy on the head. “Lots to do today. No time to rest.” He spread his chestnut-colored wings, and with a few flaps, lifted into the air.

A breeze blew through the city, temporarily cooling it and making the blackened trees sway. Davian hated the trees; they reminded him of how his best friend Eric formed a conspiracy of soldiers and tried to take over Elysia’s government. Eric and his soldiers joined forces with the mornachts and attacked the City of Ezzer, assassinating most of the senators and military officers. Eric himself slaughtered the Prime Minister, High Seraph Octirius, and Davian’s close friend and mentor, Arch-Seraph Zephor.

*At least the city doesn’t smell like smoke anymore,* Davian thought. Only now, three months after the Third Battle, had the smell of damp

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soil after the morning rain replaced the smell of burnt wood. Pale green leaves—leaves that usually showed themselves in early spring—started poking through the blackened branches, covering the city like a green mist. Only one tree in the City of Ezzer, the tallest and oldest tree, retained its large, pre-battle leaves. The Treetop Inn, a tavern made of wood darkened with age and stained glass windows that had warped over time, lay nestled in the top of that tree, and Davian headed directly for it.

Davian removed his helmet and burst through the carved wooden door, barely noticing its creak as it swung back and forth. Usually, the Treetop's wood-paneled walls made him feel cozy and comfortable, but not today—especially with the sterile aroma of soap instead of food filling the inn. He flew to the bar and hopped on a perching stool, ignoring the two merchants who strained their necks to peek at the Treetop's newest patron. Davian glanced at Maurice, who wiped the far edge of the bar's counter, muttering to himself.

"How many times are you going to clean this counter, Maurice?" asked Davian.

"Till after tomorrow's vote." Maurice looked up, startled. "Um... You don't usually come around this early, Seraph."

"No, I don't. But that's not why you're surprised to see me, is it?"

Maurice sighed. "No foolin' you." He reached under the counter and pulled out a scroll. "A cherubian arrived about fifteen minutes ago and said you'd be in. He told me to give you this."

Davian's brow wrinkled. "That's strange. I didn't tell anyone I was coming." He took the scroll. "What was his name?"

"Wouldn't give me his name. Said the message on the scroll was from someone named Cassadern."

Davian's heartbeat quickened. Cassadern was a seer—a unicorn who knew the future. Davian met Cassadern before the Third Battle but had not seen the unicorn since.

"You look worried, Seraph. If this Cassadern's loony messenger returns, should I make sure he doesn't bother you?"

Davian pocketed the scroll. "No need for that. Cassadern is just an old friend." He set his helmet on the bar. "How's business?"

"Good. But I don't think that's so good."

"How's that?"

"Cherubians used to come to this tavern to enjoy a good time with their friends. Now it's a watering hole they flock to so they can drown out that scandal you've been uncovering." Maurice sighed. "Elysia may have rebuilt this city, but its residents still need repair. Your usual?"

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Davian nodded.

Maurice grabbed a mug and filled it with Davian's favorite drink—a dark lager with a splash of amber. He set the honeywine in front of Davian. "You look like you could use more than one of these."

"I could. And maybe a good many more." Davian sipped the honeywine and smiled, savoring the lager's sweet, smooth tingle. His frown returned the moment he set the mug down.

Maurice eyed Davian, turned to the back room, and yelled, "Halden!"

A freckle-faced boy flew out. "Yes, sir?"

Maurice pointed to the two merchants. "Check on those customers while I entertain the seraph here."

Davian nodded at the boy. Halden immediately looked at the floor.

"It's just the good Major in a seraph's uniform, Halden. Same cherubian who used to help you switch the labels on my honeywine barrels as a joke. Now go help those customers." Halden flew to the merchants, and Maurice turned to Davian. "Bet you didn't know I knew you did that."

"I didn't, but I'm not surprised." Davian sighed. "Majors can have more fun than seraphs. It will only get worse after tomorrow."

"The idea of a king doesn't thrill you, does it?"

Davian shook his head. "The senate's proposal gives too much power to one cherubian—more than even Ezzer had. I know the Runes tell us we will have a king again, but I don't like it."

"I think you and I are the only ones who still believe the Runes, Seraph," said Maurice.

Davian's frown deepened.

Maurice raised his eyebrows. "So you think the senate's motion for a king will pass?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Maurice."

"Ah, but I trust your perceptions better than—"

"You should know better than to trust my perceptions by now. All the senators who would have voted *against* a king were killed in the Third Battle because of my misplaced perceptions. Because I chose to trust *him*." *He* was Eric, the name Davian refused to let escape his lips.

A splash of cold liquid hit Davian's leg, and plates, mugs, and silverware crashed against the floor. Davian turned and saw Halden standing next to the bar, holding an empty tray, looking as though he wanted to throw up. "I'm sorry, sir."

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“What do you think you’re doin’?” bellowed Maurice. “You should pay more attention, and—and you even spilt honeywine on the good seraph, here!”

Davian placed his hand on Maurice’s arm. “It’s all right, Maurice.” He hopped off the perching stool and helped Halden pick up the mess.

“It...it wasn’t your fault, Seraph,” Halden whispered.

“Now don’t you go troubling the seraph,” said Maurice. “He knows he had nothing to do with you droppin’ this. He’s just helpin’ you because that’s who he is.”

“I, I mean, the Third Battle,” said Halden, placing the last shard of ceramic on the tray. “It wasn’t your...” Halden’s voice trailed off. He picked up the tray and scampered into the honeywine cellar.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into him,” said Maurice. “Been shaky ever since the Third Battle.” Maurice turned back to Davian. “He’s right, though. It wasn’t your fault. You trusted your friend. No crime in that. Sometimes, the people we’re closest to can fool us best. Eric had all of us fooled—not just you. And the rest of us are still alive because of you. I’ve heard at least a third of the Senate—possibly more even—are trying to name you king instead of—”

“I’m no king, Maurice.”

“Well you’d make a better one than—”

Davian held up his hand. “A few senators already mentioned it to me, and I told them the same thing. I don’t want the crown. I belong in battle. Not wasting away on a throne.” Davian rubbed the four-pointed seraph star on his helmet. He scowled and turned the helmet around, facing the star away from him. “And I certainly don’t belong inside the palace, researching a battle I should never have let happen.” For the past three months, Davian had been investigating Eric’s conspiracy, all while the mornachts were taking advantage of Elysia’s weakened forces in the south. *I should be fighting mornachts instead of our own people.* Davian took another swig, set down his mug, and sighed.

Maurice grabbed Davian’s mug and refilled it. “Well, let me tell you, a lot of folks around here, myself included, don’t exactly feel safe knowing you’re here while all the lieutenants Salla promoted to seraphs are leading the fighting. Bad use of resources if you ask me.” He set the mug in front of Davian. “You should ask Salla to let you return to battle. Especially since the two of you are finally getting along.”

Davian lifted an eyebrow and took a quick sip of honeywine. He and Salla were two of the few high-ranking officers who survived the Third Battle. Salla became high seraph over all Elysia’s military, and he promoted Davian to arch-seraph. The two of them vowed to work

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together for the good of the nation, but those peaceful days only lasted six weeks.

“Oh. That’s what’s bothering you,” said Maurice. “Things are back to normal again between you and Salla.”

*Is it that obvious?* Davian thought. He took another gulp of honeywine. He had stormed into the Treetop just after a discussion with Elysia’s high seraph. Salla had told Davian his patience with the investigation had worn thin and threatened to assign Davian to another project if he failed to turn up any new evidence. That prompted Davian to let a few of his thoughts escape, and the two engaged in their most bitter argument .

Davian set the honeywine mug down and wiped his mouth. “You have the best honeywine in all Elysia, my friend.”

Maurice laughed. “You still don’t lie as well as Zephor.”

“No one could hide his feelings as well as Zephor.” Davian hopped off the perching stool and grabbed his helmet. He glanced at the seraph’s star and scowled again. “The only thing that keeps me from going crazy as I rot away in that palace is my promise to Zephor on his grave that I would track down his killers.”

“Oh, that you’re doin’, sir. The magistrate’s just letting them go on petty loopholes—and don’t you think the rest of the country hasn’t noticed. We have. I’m hearin’ people talkin’ about it daily. It frustrates us just as much as it frustrates you.” Maurice sighed. “I guess that’s one of the reasons they’re clamoring for a king. They want the politics to stop.”

Davian donned his helmet. “Politics never stop, Maurice.” Only Davian knew Salla was actually the force holding the magistrate at bay. He suspected that Salla hesitated to file charges for fear of the powerful senators, officers, and businessmen on Davian’s list of traitors. “Just keep the honeywine flowing. And if you’ll excuse me, I have a policy meeting I have to attend.”

Davian flew out the tavern door and stood in the shade of the Treetop’s porch. He reached in his pocket and fingered the parchment scroll from Cassadern, wondering why the unicorn chose to send him a written message through a cherubian. He pulled the scroll out and opened it. *The time we spoke of before the Third Battle is at hand. Do not give up your faith or your hope.*

The message sent chills down Davian’s wings. The Runes’ *Book of Prophecy* foretold of a cherubian dictator who would rise to power and enslave Elysia. Davian leaned against the balcony, running the prophecy through his head. *During a third battle for the crown city,*

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*there shall be a great tragedy. The public will cry for change, but the one who answers it will not be the one the people thought.*

“The great tragedy was the death of our leaders,” Davian whispered. “And the public is crying for change.” He groaned, wondering how he had missed it. Before the Third Battle, Cassadern had even told Davian that the dictator would soon arise. *But how soon? And who is he?* wondered Davian. *And will anyone else figure it out?* Davian knew even those cherubians who still believed in the Runes either ignored or forgot that particular prophecy.

“Um, excuse me... Uh, Seraph?”

Davian turned around and saw Halden looking at his feet. “What can I do for you, young man?”

Halden wrung his hands. “Are you still investigating that...the Third Battle, sir?”

Davian gave Halden his full attention. “I’m still investigating.”

Halden glanced back and forth. His hands started to shake, and his voice fell to a whisper. “I need to speak with you, sir. Now.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Please.”