



## CHAPTER ONE

THERE WAS NEVER A BODY.

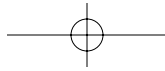
Not even at a funeral. Mourners sat angled toward one another in the stiff pews to avoid looking directly at the empty casket and the destiny hanging over them all. They all knew that only one of two things happened when the body died, one outcome more likely than the other.

The terrible outcome, of course.

Rom, the twenty-four-year-old son of Elias Sebastian, sat in a back pew by himself. He was a plain man by any measure. Not unattractive, but neither was he truly beautiful by the standards of the Order, which reserved true beauty for royalty.

He'd sung earlier in homage to the dead man's life. It was a humble yet noble job, singing for the dead. Humble because any artist's life was humble—only by the grace of Sirin, who'd written about the educational merits of the arts, did artisans find work at all in a world unmoved by creative gifts. Noble because being near the dead was fearful business for most. But Rom didn't mind. He needed the work, and the dead needed their service.

Finished with his job here, he folded the funeral program lengthwise as he waited for a good moment to slip away. There, on the upper flap, was the name of the deceased: Lucas Tavor. Rom folded it again. There was Tavor's age: sixty-eight. Not so old in this



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advanced world where one might live to 110 or 120.

He glanced at the man's empty coffin lying atop its metal carriage between the front pillars of the great basilica. It was one of the finer basilicas in the city, in Rom's opinion—not because of its size, as it was far from the largest, but because of the intricate stained glass above its altar.

All basilicas boasted their treasures, but this depiction of Sirin, the martyred father of the Order, was more exquisite than the rest. The numbered, compass-like marks of his halo spread like a fractured sunburst above his head, even on a dull day. It was the universal picture of peace, an inspiring image of the man who had preached freedom from the excesses of modern life and from the snares of emotion.

Sirin's right hand cradled a dove. His left rested on the shoulder of a second man: Megas, holding the bound Book of Orders, canonized under his rule. Every basilica housed the same image, but none as intricate as this.

The priest stood behind the altar, the ordinal rays of Sirin's halo reflecting faintly upon his shoulders. Two clerics flanked him on the dais as he smoothed the pages of the Book of Orders upon its stand.

"Born once, into life, we are blessed."

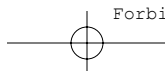
"We are blessed," echoed the assembly, perhaps fifty in all. Their murmurs rose like specters to the arched vault overhead.

"Let us please the Maker through a life of diligent Order."

"Let us please the Maker." The mouths of the clerics moved with the congregation. Beyond them on the dais, the silver censers that exhaled incense through normal assembly hung empty upon their chains.

"We know the Maker exists by his Order. If we please, let us be born into the afterlife, not into fear, but Bliss everlasting."

Bliss. The eternal absence of fear—or so it was said. Though Rom was less given to fear than most, it took some abstract thinking to imagine being forever untouched by at least some tinge of it.





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## FORBIDDEN

It was said other emotions existed before the human race evolved, but they, too, were difficult to imagine. These sentiments of a baser age, like excised tumors, never reappeared; humanity finally resisted the black plague that had almost destroyed it.

Rom wasn't sure he even knew the words to describe them all. And those he did know were meaningless to him. That archaic word passion, for example. Try as he might to grasp this thing, he could only conjure up thoughts of varying degrees of fear. Or another: sorrow. What was sorrow? It was like trying to imagine what his life would be like if he'd never been born.

No matter. Humanity's one surviving emotion granted Order in this life and the possibility of Bliss beyond. Trying to imagine such a future, though, was enough to make his head hurt.

In front of Rom, a curly-haired boy turned around in the pew. Sticking his fingers in his mouth, he stared bug-eyed as Rom continued to fold the paper program. Rom held up the small project so the boy could see the thing taking shape between his fingers.

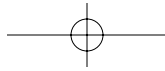
A eulogist approached the podium, printed page in hand. The heads of those assembled were now fixed on that empty coffin, no longer able to look away.

"Lucas Tavor was sixty-eight years old," the man read.

"He fell," a young woman two pews up whispered. The basilica's unrestrained acoustics carried her words to Rom. "Broke his hip. One of his children found him a day after it happened."

It was easy enough to surmise the rest of the story. Society had long embraced the custom of transferring the infirm, the severely injured, and the feeble to an asylum under the auspices of the Authority of Passing. There, humans closer to death than to life might live out the minority of their days, sparing their peers the caustic reminder of death's inevitable pall. Thus, there was never a body at a funeral, because the one for whom the funeral was held often had not yet died.

Not technically, at least.



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Rom stood and adjusted the strap of his shoulder bag. Slipping from the pew, he handed the finished paper crane to the boy, who accepted it with wet fingers.

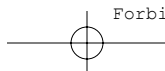
Outside, on the steps of the basilica, the city spread out before him, concrete-gray beneath the ominous clouds of late afternoon. On each of the city's seven hills, the spires and turrets of centuries-old buildings stabbed at the heavens like so many lances piercing a boil.

This was Byzantium, the greatest city on earth, population five hundred thousand, home to three thousand of the world's twenty-five thousand royals, who had come from every continent to serve in her government and state-run businesses. It was the center of the earth, to which all eyes turned in matters politic and religious, social and economic. It was the seat of power to which all earthly dominions had deferred since the end of the Age of Chaos five centuries before, when the world had bowed to the great powers of the Americas and Russia.

Chaos. It had nearly killed them all. But humanity learned from her mistakes, and Null Year had signaled a new beginning for a new world cleansed of destructive passions. Peace had ruled in the 480 years since, and Byzantium was the heart of it all.

The city was more crowded than normal as it prepared to host the inauguration of the world Sovereign—Feyn Cerelia, daughter of the current Sovereign, Vorrin, of the royal Cerelia family. Never before had a future Sovereign been the direct descendant of a ruling Sovereign, and yet the random hand of fate was about to change history. And so Feyn Cerelia's inauguration was considered a particularly auspicious event, one that would swell Byzantium's population to nearly one million for days.

Her image had already graced the banners on streetlamps and city buildings for months. For weeks, train cars had brought construction equipment, barricades, and food from all parts of the world to supply Byzantium for the occasion. The black cars of the





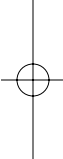
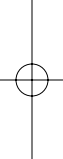
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Brahmin royals and those in service to them had become a common sight on streets unaccustomed to motorized congestion. There had been no mass production of automobiles since the Age of Chaos, and no roadways beyond the city were intact enough to justify the vehicles' exorbitant cost. Businesses carried out their trade by rail, subway, rickshaw, or private courier. Rom himself had never driven a car.

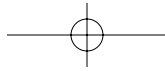
Rom glanced up the street to the west. In five days, all traffic would be blocked within a one-mile radius of the Grand Basilica near the Citadel. Construction crews had already spent a week erecting the high stands on either side of the Processional Way, which the new Sovereign would travel atop one of the royal stallions. All other attending royals and citizens alike would approach the inauguration in sedate order, on foot.



Beyond the city to the east, the hinterland stretched all the way to the sea. The territory had been reshaped by the fallout of the wars, testament to Chaos. What was once a land of agriculture was now arid and unsuitable for producing the food Byzantium's population lived upon. Erosion had etched new canyons on the barren face of a countryside previously lush and fertile. And so the city relied on the provisions of Greater Europa to the north and her more fertile sisters—Sumeria, to the east; Russe to the northeast; Abyssinia, to the south. These ancient territories, once better known as Europe, the Middle East, Russia, and Africa, provided willingly for Byzantium, the city once called Rome. Their imports were the tithe of Order, a small price to pay to live in peace.

To the south of Byzantium lay the industrial towns that nearly reached the coast, connected only by rail, her roads as broken as the landscape itself.

Only in the last century had the land shown signs of true recovery. Trees grew along scraggly creek beds, and in some places grasses had reclaimed the soil. Today the countryside was sparsely dotted by the estates and stables of royals wishing to escape the con-



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finest of the city for a scrubby patch of green. It offered only meager peace, but anything that reduced fear was a welcome respite.

Rom had heard the city was a place of light at one time, of sun by day and city lamps by night, like sparkling gems strewn against a backdrop of velvet. Televisions and computers connected everyone. Planes crisscrossed the sky.

Citizens owned weapons.

Now personal electricity was rationed. Televisions existed in public spaces and for state use only. Many had phones but computers were restricted to state use. Planes, reserved for royal business, were a rare sight in Byzantium's overcast sky. And the only firearms in the world existed in museums.

A streetlight sputtered overhead, and Rom turned his head to the sky. No, not a streetlight, but lightning, striking out toward the Tibron River. Rom snugged his bag close and hurried down the sweeping steps to the street.

By the time he reached the underground, it had begun to rain. He hurried down the concrete stairs into the stale subterranean warmth and was greeted with the electric light of the station, the shuffle of foot traffic, the squealing brakes of an oncoming train.

His route home included a five-minute ride to the central terminus, and then a twenty-minute journey southeast. It was enough time to take out his notebook, lay pen to new lyrics for the funeral he was to sing at next week. But even after he had returned the pen to his pocket, they seemed inadequate, too similar to the song he had sung today.

That was to be expected. If there was one thing that had not evolved since Null Year, it was art. Art and culture. As an artisan, Rom understood that the creativity of both had been squelched by the loss of their emotional muses. Even the subtleties of language had remained relatively unchanged. A small price to pay for Order. But a price, nonetheless.

He exited the underground six blocks from home, making his





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way past the distracted, worried expressions of those descending into the station. A steady drizzle issued from the lighter gray sky above; to the north, the hard edges of the skyline he had just left were obscured by the veil of a proper downpour.

Foot traffic was thin. Those who were out darted to their destinations beneath umbrellas and newspapers. In the street, the lone dark car of a royal sped by, sending an arc of water toward the curb.

Rom ducked his head, rain already running off the wet spikes of his hair into his eyes, and pulled his jacket more tightly around him. He kept to storefront eaves before turning into a narrow alleyway between the broad brick backs of an old theater and an out-of-use hostel.

Today he had done his work diligently. He had earned his modest living. He had been in assembly three times already this week, but he would go tomorrow, a fourth time, for Avra.

Avra, his friend since childhood, who avoided basilica. Avra, with her quiet gaze and fearful heart. His attendance had been their pact for several years now, and why not? It cost him nothing to go for her, and though it might not be condoned by the priests, it might make a difference to the Maker. It was her only chance, anyway.

He was thinking of her troubled brown eyes when a voice sounded behind him.

“Son of Elias!”

The cry echoed against the lichen-spangled brick, over the patter of the rain. Rom turned and stared through the drizzle. A lean figure lurched through the alley’s narrow file, his long, ragged coat flapping wetly behind him. His gaze was locked on Rom.

Son of Elias. Rom hadn’t been called that in years. He squinted against the rain. “Do I know you?”

The old man was now so close that Rom could see his grizzled brows and sunken cheeks, the gray hair plastered to his head. Could hear his wheezing breath. The man closed the distance between them with surprising speed and seized Rom by the shoulders. The

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thin lids of his eyes were peeled wide.

“It’s you!” he rasped between panting breaths. Spittle edged the corners of his mouth.

Rom’s first thought was that the man had managed to escape the Authority of Passing and was fleeing the escorts of the asylum. He was certainly old enough. And obviously crazed.

But the man knew his father’s name. A sliver of fear worked its way beneath Rom’s skin. What was with this old fellow?

“It’s you,” the old man said again. “I never thought to lay eyes on Elias again, but by the Maker, you have the look of him!”

Two men rounded the corner at the end of the alley and sprinted toward them. In the dull splatter of the rain, it almost appeared that they wore the silver and black of the Citadel Guard. Odd. The jurisdiction of the guard was the Citadel itself—on the other side of the city. Perhaps because of the inauguration . . .

The man tore his gaze away to look over his shoulder. At the sight of the two men, he tightened his grip on Rom’s shoulders and spoke in a rush.

“They’ve found me. And now they’ll come after you, too. Listen to me now, boy. Listen well! Your father said you could be trusted.”

Rom blinked in the rain. “My father? My father’s dead. He died of fever.”

“Not from fever! Your father was murdered, boy!”

“What? That can’t be true.”

The man let go of him and fumbled with his coat, tearing at an inner pocket that didn’t seem to match the rest of the garment. It bulged with a square shape the size of two fists put together. He tore it free.

“He was killed. As all the other keepers were killed. For this.” He shoved the parcel at Rom. “Take it! There’s no one else now. Take it, or your father died for nothing. Learn its secrets. Find the man called the Book. The Book, do you hear me? He’s at the Citadel—find him. Show him you have this!”



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Displays of fear were not uncommon, but the old man was clearly demented with it. In reaction, the sliver of Rom's own fear wormed its way to Rom's heart.

A third man had appeared at the entrance to the alley. One of the first two shouted back for him to go around. And now Rom could see that they did indeed wear the colors of the elite Citadel Guard. All for an old man?

Rom felt his fingers close around the parcel, damp and still warm from the man's body.

"Swear to me!"

"What—"

"Swear!"

"I swear. I..."

The guardsmen were no more than twenty paces away, running far harder than their aged quarry warranted.

The old man's voice rose to an unexpected roar. "Protect it! It's power and life—life as it was—and grave danger. Run!" The guardsmen were only a dozen steps away. "Run!"

The sound of that scream startled Rom so much that he took five or six long strides before he faltered. What was he doing? If the guard were after the man, for whatever reason, he should stop and assist them. He should give them the bundle, let them sort it all out. He pulled up hard and spun back.

They had the old man, sagging in their hold. Something flashed in the rain. The serrated blade of a knife. Not the ceremonial variety Rom was accustomed to seeing in pictures, but a weapon strictly forbidden.

"Run!" the man screamed.

As one guardsman held the flailing old man, the one with the knife ripped the blade across his wrinkled throat. The old man's neck opened with a dark, yawning gush. His last cry devolved into a gurgle as his knees gave way.

And then the gaze of the restraining guardsman locked on Rom.

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The old man was no longer their quarry.  
He was.